

Fascination/Frustration: Slash Fandom, Genre, and Queer Uptake

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# Fascination/Frustration: Slash Fandom, Genre, and Queer Uptake

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines contemporary television slash fandom, in which fans write and circulate creative texts that dramatize non-canonical queer relationships between canonically heterosexual male characters. These texts contribute to the creation of global networks of affective and social relations, critique the specific corporate media texts from which they emerge, and undermine homophobic ideologies that prevent authentic queer representation in mainstream media. Intervening in dominant scholarly and popular arguments about slash fans, I maintain a rigorous distinction between the act of reading homoerotic subtexts in TV shows and writing fiction that makes that homoeroticism explicit, in every sense of the word. This emphasis on writing and the circulation of responsive, recursive texts can best be understood, I argue, through the framework of Rhetorical Genre Studies, which theorizes genres and the ways in which they are deployed, modified, and circulated as ideological and social action. I nuance the RGS concept of uptake, which names the generic dimensions of utterance and response, and define my concept of queer uptake, in which writers respond to a text in ways that refuse its generic boundaries and status, motivated by an ideological resistance to both genre and sexual normativity. To complement and further develop queer uptake, I draw on Queer Theory and Affect Studies to propose a wholly new theoretical approach to understanding slash fandom as a site of queer subversion, in which writers critique heteronormativity and homophobia – ideologies that are, to

varying degrees, perpetuated by their chosen source texts. Central to my argument is the increase in fan-canon interaction and communication that largely defines our contemporary convergent mediascape, as well the heightened visibility of slash fandom in mainstream media discourse that demands producers acknowledge their slash fandoms in some capacity. I explore two of the most popular relationships in contemporary fandom, Sterek (Stiles/Derek) from MTV's *Teen Wolf* (2011 – 2017) and Destiel, (Dean/Castiel) from the CW's *Supernatural* (2005 – present) for how they embody different dimensions of queer uptake. My analysis of Sterek explores how the canon's initially positive responses to the slash fandom ultimately proved to be blatant queerbaiting, and, how as a result, the fandom has largely rejected the canon – but not the characters, still creating art and writing fics that offer pointed criticisms and celebrate the queer relationship. My analysis of Destiel focuses on *Supernatural*'s unique use of metanarrative and self-referentiality, as together with a nuanced understanding of genre, to canonically respond to its fandom, resulting in a much more positive and productive fan-canon dynamic. I also consider how slash fandom's preoccupation with sexual explicitness rejects heteronormative politics of shame in order to imagine male intimacy and the male body unbound from traditional masculinity. I conclude that the texts produced by fan writers are at once complexly critical of the corporate media texts that motivate them, and that the queer uptakes fan writers perform are rich with possibility for understanding the increasingly-important dynamics between producers and audiences, and as a site where those who are not fairly represented in popular media can offer each other sustenance

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I hope that all slash writers realize how meaningful their work is as well, and how their dedication to characters, smart critiques, striving for queer representation, and unabashed love of love has given so many hope and comfort. Always keep fighting, always keep writing.

*For the fans*

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## INTRODUCTION

### “Ever More Complex Relations:” Slash, Genre, and the Canon

*“Convergence represents a paradigm shift – a move medium-specific content towards content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture.”*

– Henry Jenkins

*Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*

In March of 2015, MTV revealed that fan-favorite actor Tyler Hoechlin, who played werewolf Derek Hale on *Teen Wolf* for four years, would not be returning to the show for the fifth season. As one half of Sterek, the non-canonical queer pairing of Derek with the human character Stiles Stilinski played by Dylan O’Brien, Hoechlin and his portrayal of Derek have been a fundamental part of one of the most popular slash relationships in fandom history.<sup>1</sup> Fans were not upset, as one might have expected, upon hearing that Hoechlin was leaving the show. Instead, most Sterek shippers celebrated the news that the actor they had come to admire and the character they had co-created with him would no longer be a part of a show that has continually

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<sup>1</sup> As fanfiction and fandom have evolved, so have their definitions and various subgenres. I define a *fantext* as any work that reimagines and repurposes a media text outside of the corporate marketplace. Fantexts generate *fandoms*, communities of readers and writers who consume, circulate, and create these works; fandoms tend to be centered on relationships, commonly called *ships*, and those who are invested in a relationship, *shippers*. Shipped relationships of all kinds populate fandom today, thanks to the Internet, but the subgenre of *slash*, in which two male characters are paired, such as Stiles and Derek from *Teen Wolf*, are overwhelming dominant (the term *femslash* is used to describe female-female pairings). Always a site of inventive language play, fandoms typically name ships with portmanteaus of character names, i.e., Sterek. There is less agreement amongst fans when it comes to defining *slash* in relation to the *canon*, the source text’s narrative universe as well as the nexus of writers, producers, actors, show-runners, et cetera, that produce a corporate media text. Some maintain that slash only refers to relationships between characters who are not together in the canon, and/or are heterosexual in the canon. As there has been an increase in queer representation in recent years, however, others use the term more loosely to describe any male-male relationship, regardless of its canonicity. My analysis of slash tends more towards the former, and is anchored in a definition of slash as one in which canonically heterosexual men are romantically and sexually paired in fantexts. For more on how fans have defined themselves and their genres over the years, see “Slash” on Fanlore.

frustrated and insulted them<sup>2</sup>. After years of queerbaiting and ridicule from the canon, many Sterek fans had already abandoned the show, and Hoechlin's departure was the final nail in the coffin for any chance of an onscreen romance between the characters as well as the Sterek fandom's relationship with the show. Just a few months prior to this, in November 2014, another fantasy-themed television show that boasts a large and productive slash fandom – the most popular slash pairing ever, in fact<sup>3</sup> – aired an episode titled “Fan Fiction” (10.05). *Supernatural's* landmark 200<sup>th</sup> episode is a remarkable piece of television that continues the show's fascination with genre blending and breaking the fourth wall; it also continues the series' metanarrative preoccupation with its own status as a cult show by representing its fandom. “Fan Fiction” features a young, female fan writer producing a musical based on her *Supernatural* fanfiction and who is ultimately granted full ownership and authority of the canon. Fans celebrated the episode for its nuance and insights, and *Supernatural* continues to play with genre and self-referentiality, while enjoying a mostly positive relationship with its slash fans.<sup>4</sup>

Sterek and *Supernatural's* Destiel – the pairing of demon-hunter Dean Winchester and rogue angel Castiel – may be two of the most popular ships today, but they are certainly not the only, nor the first. The genre was invented in the participatory and transformative fan practices that emerged in response to the original *Star Trek* television show, which debuted in 1966. Fans of all demographics formed the zine-based fandom, in which, in addition to analytical and critical essays about the show<sup>5</sup> circulating stories that developed and explored the *Star Trek* universe and its indelible characters. Some of these fans – most of them, but not all, cisgendered, heterosexual

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2 In addition to the myriad Sterek bloggers expressing this view about Hoechlin's departure, see Aja Romano's “How to Kill Your Slash Fandom in 5 Easy Steps.”

3 As of this writing, Archive of Our Own, the primary site for hosting and collecting fanfiction today, indexes 64,180 Dean/Castiel fics, the most of any pairing of all sexualities.

4 In January 2017, *Supernatural* was renewed for a thirteenth season, while MTV announced that *Teen Wolf* would be cancelled after its sixth season (Abrams).

5 In today's fandom parlance, these essays are known as *meta*

women – also wrote and shared stories that explored homoeroticism between the series’ two male protagonists, Kirk and Spock.<sup>6</sup> Abbreviated to K/S, the genre became known for the punctuation – the slash – that united the characters’ names, and rapidly proliferated throughout the *Star Trek* fandom.<sup>7</sup> Slash was not born without conflict, of course; as soon as slash started circulating, fans, and then canon representatives, immediately began debating the merits of this form of writing. Henry Jenkins writes that “slash was initially met with considerable resistance from fans who felt such writing was an improper use of program materials and violated the original characterizations,” and that as early as 1977, some fans were rejecting slash as ““character rape”” and ““bad writing,”” in addition to all manner of objection from various canon representatives, including a number of copyright and legal battles (*Textual Poachers* 187).<sup>8</sup> Despite the shame and taboos from seemingly all directions associated with slash, many continued to read and write it, and the phenomenon has spread ecologically and discursively.

Today’s fandom landscape would perhaps be as foreign to the slash writers of the 1970s as *Star Trek*’s 23<sup>rd</sup> century – but slash fic, despite all manner of technological changes, would look remarkably similar, if infinitely bigger. Once limited to the realm of mimeographed zines exchanged via mail and at fan meet-ups, fanfiction was revolutionized by the Internet and social media, allowing for global connections between fans and the rapid, constant production and circulation of texts. In the late 1990s, fandom established itself on early social media sites like

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6 The first known publically shared Kirk/Spock story– the first slash fic – was “A Fragment Out of Time” by Diane Marchant, published in a zine in 1974. The first zine dedicated solely to K/S appeared two years later (Grossman xiii). For an oral history of *Star Trek* fandom in the 1970s and 1980s, see Nancy Kippax’s “Reminisce with Me” on Fanlore.

7 For more on the history of Kirk/Spock, the *Star Trek* fandom, and the invention of slash, see: *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins; *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America*, Constance Penley; *Fic: Why Fan Fiction is Taking Over the World*, Anne Jamison, ed.; *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, Camille Bacon-Smith; “Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and *Star Trek* Zines,” Patricia Frazier Lamb and Diana L. Veith; “Pornography by Women, for Women, with Love,” Joanna Russ.

8 Fanlore, a fan-run wiki run by the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), features a thorough history of the legal battles over fan fiction in the articles “Fandom vs. the Courts: Fan Fiction and Fair Use;” “Is Fan Fiction Legal?;” “Fandom and Profit;” and “Legal Analysis.”

LiveJournal and FanFiction.net, moving away from fandom-specific sites and chatrooms.<sup>9</sup> The social media and blogging site Tumblr was founded in 2007 and quickly became a home for fandom; in 2008, The Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) introduced Archive of Our Own, a non-profit, fan-run website that archives and indexes fic, a non-commercial space “where fannish creativity can benefit from the OTW’s advocacy in articulating the case for its legality and social value” Ao3, as it’s commonly referred to by fans, has over one million registered users (both readers and writers) and countless other non-registered readers; the site collects works in over 22,000 fandoms and currently has over two million fanworks (“Archive”). Slash fandom has proliferated apace with the expansion of globalized mass media since the days when K/S fans chose to boldly go forth and create this new genre. Myriad subgenres, tropes, and fandom-specific quirks and kinks have emerged and migrated amongst and between fan communities and their canons in the half-century since. But the “archetypical K/S plot” that Henry Jenkins articulated in 1992 and posited as “the basic premises” of slash remain the organizing structure of the genre today: “the movement from male homosocial desire to a direct expression of homoerotic passion, the exploration of alternatives to traditional masculinity, the insertion of sexuality into a larger social context” (*Textual Poachers* 186).

This continuity of slash’s generic contours despite – and in relation to – its explosive expansion and revolutionized means of circulation suggest that, at its core, slash is about exploring relationships between men in their infinite possibilities, particularly intimate and erotic possibilities that are foreclosed by traditional masculinity. Some of the earliest works in academic fan studies, however, preoccupied with the largely female demographic of slash fans and uncritically assuming heteronormative ideological frameworks, interpret the genre to be

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<sup>9</sup> The section “*The X-Files, Buffy, and the Rise of Internet Fic Fandoms*” in Anne Jamison’s edited collection *Fic: Why Fan Fiction is Taking Over the World* offers an excellent glimpse into this period of fandom history.

fundamentally concerned with straight female desires for straight men.<sup>10</sup> I reject this presumption in favor of a more nuanced, updated, and accurate orientation within and towards slash fandom that recognizes that not all of its participants are cisgendered, straight women. One recent survey of Ao3 readers conducted by a fan-scholar found that only 32% of respondents who read M/M fic identified as female and heterosexual; thus, not only is assuming the heterosexuality of slash fans inaccurate, it erases a huge swath of identities and sexualities (Centrumlumina).

This erasure is part of a larger pattern of elision that has oversimplified the dynamics of slash fandom as a whole. Equally frustrating as the failure to acknowledge the queerness of slash fans is the reliance on a canon-based interpretive framework that is woefully insufficient to account for the complexity of writing slash and participating in slash fandom. Working with one of the defining theories of Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of audience-text interaction, scholars have debated and continue to debate the subversion of slash based on the 'accuracy' of fan interpretations of the canon. In his 1980 essay "Encoding/Decoding," Hall provides a useful theory, based in Marxist cultural production, through which to analyze the production and reception of television texts, particularly their ideological investments. "Production and reception of the television message...are not...identical," Hall writes, "but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole" (130). This process is structured by the encoding of semantic codes and discursive meanings by textual producers, "from within the dominant frame or dominant global ideology, by media personnel who operated professionally from within the hegemonic order, often reproducing messages associated with political and economic elites" (Abercrombie and Longhurst 14). Viewers then decode – interpret and make meaning of –

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<sup>10</sup> Patricia Frazier Lamb and Diana L. Veith argue this in "Romantic Myth," an essay I critique in both Chapter One and the Conclusion. Constance Penley assumes this as well in *NASA/Trek*.

these messages based on their particular subject positions and experiences. Complicating Marx's notion of false consciousness, Hall proposes that while audiences may uncritically accept these messages and thus occupy a "dominant-hegemonic position" in relation to a text, they can also decode messages from an "oppositional code," or a "negotiated" position that navigates both. Crucial to both Hall's theory and how it's been deployed in studies of slash is the severely limited and narrow boundaries of the dominant position and its encoded messages that function precisely to maintain the status quo and reproduce oppressive ideologies: "the definition of a hegemonic viewpoint is (a) that it defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings, of a whole sector of relations in a society or culture; and (b) that it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy – it appears coterminous with what is 'natural', 'inevitable', 'taken for granted' about the social order" (Hall 137). A viewer who occupies an oppositional position toward the hegemonic messages of a text, however, "detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference" (138). The relevance to slash is obvious here, with many scholars exploring the ways in which slash is – or is not – an instance of viewers adopting an oppositional stance to the canon's encoded, preferred heterosexual messages.<sup>11</sup> A wealth of scholars across disciplines have adopted, critiqued, and complicated the encoding/decoding paradigm. Nichlolas Abercrombie and Brian J. Longhurst, in 1998's *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*, "re-christen" Hall's model the "incorporation/resistance paradigm," in order to both expand its theoretical reach and reflect an "emphasis on the role of media as a site of *struggle*" in which they place Hall's three reading positions along a spectrum of codes and responses that acknowledge nuances, complexities, and tensions within and between dominant, negotiated,

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11 See *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins; "Keeping Promises to Queer Children: Making Space (for Mary Sue) at Hogwarts," Ika Willis; "The Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters," Sara Gwenillian Jones; *Enterprising Women*, Camille Bacon-Smith; *NASA/Trek*, Constance Penley.

and oppositional positions (15). Abercrombie and Longhurst define two poles of this spectrum: the Dominant Text, in which the “text is seen as monolithic” and “the audience is passive, the prisoner of the text, and is bound, therefore, to be very heavily influenced by the preferred meaning” and the Dominant Audience approach, in which the text is regarded as “polysemic, containing a number of possible meanings” and that the audience “is not passive in front of this more loosely organized text, but is active, discussing, analysing, ignoring, or rejecting the text” (18). Scholars of slash tend to lean more towards the latter, and argue the complexity and specifics of subversion present and possible within this paradigm.

While not rejecting encoding/decoding and the incorporation/resistance paradigm entirely, I refuse it as the only, or even the primary, mode through which to analyze slash, and fanfiction as a whole. While it does emphasize reader/viewer interpretations of texts, it still prioritizes the text as the locus and source of meaning. As it’s often been deployed, it still places motivation for fic writers squarely in the canon with analyses that pivot around perceived homoeroticism in the canon and whether or not it’s “actually” there or “intentional.” Viewers determine their relationship to a text via what is uncritically assumed to be a “true” meaning of the text, as determined by the creator. This assumption is problematic for a number of reasons, particularly in regard to television texts, which are produced a vast of network of creators, from writers and network executives, actors and costume designers – each an individual agent of creation imparting, to various degrees and via a number of modes, their meaning into the text. But even with the collaborative nature of television, texts can speak with a somewhat-unified voice, and how viewers incorporate, negotiate, or resist those dominant messages certainly play a role in shaping their responses to the text, and thus affects the contours of any given fandom, but this is not the only motivation or factor at work in the formation and function of slash fandoms,

and we must be wary of analyses that posit it as so. My refusal of the incorporation/resistance paradigm is informed by a poststructuralist and rhetorical insistence on textual instability, particularly Roland Barthes' 1968 essay "Death of the Author." Barthes removes authorial intent and other author and text-centric modes of interpretation, arguing that, "a text is not a single line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" and that "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (146-7). He relocates the text's meaning to the reader: "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering in mutual relations of dialogue... but there is one place where that multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author" (148). A Barthesian notion of textuality and reading opens up a wide array of possibilities for reconceptualizing fan fiction outside of the limiting encoding/decoding paradigm, something Ika Willis has developed quite productively in her essay "Keeping Promises to Queer Children: Making Space (for Mary Sue) at Hogwarts" (2006). Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as well, she argues that, "fan fiction should be read with all the rigor and complexity of which poststructuralist and queer literary/textual criticism is capable" because fic "intertwine[s] the pleasure of queer textuality with a deeply political project of resistance and *in*-sistence that people must have the right to make and circulate meanings outside the circuit of ideologically or institutionally guaranteed transparency, provability, and, ultimately, enforceability" (156, original emphasis). Heeding this call as both a writer and scholar of slash, my analyses take this multi-vocal, queer nature of slash fandom as a given.

The encoding/decoding framework also assumes a very limiting form of fan-canon interaction. This is another fundamental problem with the incorporation/resistance paradigm:

it assumes that the only, or the primary, channel of communication between a television show and its fandom is the *content* of the canon and the *content* of fic. Even prior to the Internet and social media, this assumption was reductive in regard to slash. Not only are viewers bring the experiences of their subject positions and their larger habits modes of reading to a television show like *Star Trek*, once a viewer becomes a participant in fandom, their readings are forever shaped by their membership in that interpretive community.<sup>12</sup> Fan writing is often collaborative, and so is fan reading. The texts produced and circulated that interpret and reimagine shows offer a wealth of readings, and “fans’ understanding of the source is always already filtered through the interpretations and characterizations existing in the fantext,” Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson argue in their Introduction to the 2006 anthology *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (7). But even a Kirk/Spock shipper, using her typewriter to write an explicit *pon farr* fic that was mimeographed and mailed to a subscriber list, engaged in a relationship with the canon that included more than watching and interpreting the show. Today’s slash writer has exponentially more moments of connection and interaction with the canon – and is more in control of when and how she accesses it, not to mention infinitely more texts from which to choose – and thus the need for theoretical rubrics that attend to the multiplicity and complexity of these dynamics is even more exigent.

My analysis of slash thus looks beyond the incorporation/resistance paradigm, then, to find an alternative framework through which to reexamine some of the most persistent questions about slash fic. Central to this inquiry is the insistence on maintaining a focus not just on the content of the canon and fic, but on the various paratexts<sup>13</sup> and canon-sanctioned utterances that don’t just affect how fans read the show, but also how fans choose to respond to it. I explore both

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12 Stanley Fish, *Is There A Text in This Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*.

13 For an insightful exploration of paratextuality, see Jonathan Gray’s *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*.

the fandoms' and the canons' responses to each other as an absolutely necessary consideration for today's revolutionized producer-audience relations and the correlating increased cultural visibility of slash fandom. Fans today create and share their work with the full knowledge that the canon is aware of its existence, for better or worse. No longer operating in relative obscurity, fandoms now have a certain degree of cultural presence, as well as unprecedented access to the canon, thanks to various media technologies. This new fandom landscape is in near-constant flux and presents a wealth of new questions, challenges, and opportunities for fans, fan studies scholars, and the media texts that inspire transformative fandoms. The divergent relationships between Sterek fans and *Teen Wolf* and Destiel fans and *Supernatural* are indicative of this emergent fandom-canon paradigm, one in which how a show responds to its slash fans plays a fundamental role in shaping the fandom and the increasingly-important affective relationship between fandoms and their canons. Having chosen to respond to the show in a particular way, slash fans thus create the necessity of a response from the canon. One of the most common mainstream misunderstandings of slash fandom is the belief that the response fans want is for their ships to become canon – for the queer relationships to be realized onscreen. And while this is certainly something slash fans do want, it's not the only goal, nor the only motivation, of writing and reading fanfiction. Indeed, a fair contingent of slash fans are likely to express reservations and hesitancy about their ships going canon, for fear that the relationship and queer identities will not be adequately and sincerely represented, or that the relationship will be written in such a way to diminish the collaborative, fan-created dynamic that thrives in fic.

The responses slash fandoms seek have more to do more with recognition, respect, and queer representation; *Teen Wolf* and *Supernatural* illustrate the importance of canons demonstrating an awareness of these complexities, nuances, and motivations. *Teen Wolf's* failure

to respond to Sterek in such a way has not only had a marked effect on the fandom, but on the show's overall ratings and commercial success. Indeed, the canon's overt attempts to quell the fandom once it began to overshadow the show has had the opposite effect, with fans still enthusiastically writing and reading Sterek fics while largely ignoring the show, using it for raw material and little else. And while *Supernatural* has had its share of tension with its slash fans, its ability to, for the most part, welcome and support them in a variety of ways has not only created a space for fandom within the show itself, but has most certainly contributed to the show's ongoing commercial success and popularity.

We find ourselves then, as scholars, needing to reconceptualize and refine our analyses of fandom and fanworks. In addition to rejecting the belief that the ultimate 'goal' of slash is to see the relationship become canon, we must also reject the related notions that the primary inspiration for slash is based in interpretative readings of the canon, and that a slash fandom's potential for subversion is determined by how 'accurate' those interpretations are. These reductive assumptions foreclose a range of inquiries and severely circumscribe explorations of fandom, intellectually stifling the field and misrepresenting the communities and works they seek to explicate. The question that drives much of fan studies – how subversive or not slash is in relation to the canon's denied homoeroticism, how queer slash is, if at all – remains relevant and in constant need of revisiting, but through theoretical and critical lenses that can attend to the full complexity of slash fandom and their expanding roles in shaping the shows to which they are attached and vice versa. With this in mind, I pay particular attention to the heightened dynamics of utterance and response that are emerging in contemporary fandom, and theorize the relationship between slash fandoms and television canons via the complementary lenses of Rhetorical Genre Studies, Queer Theory, and Affect Theory. Taking a cue from fandom, I poach

from these fields selectively to find the pieces most useful to my interests and questions, and weave them together into something new.

In Chapter One, I explicate this new approach to slash fandom, which I name queer uptake, reflecting the theory's lineage in Queer Theory and the Rhetorical Genre Studies. A concept that "refer[s] to the inter- and intrageneric relationship between texts, in which one text...prompts an appropriate response or uptake from another...in a particular context or ceremonial," uptake, names "the social, ideological, and subjective vectors that are always at work in any given discursive event. It is the 'bidirectional relation that holds between' texts and genres: the murky, obscure ecology of individual agency and social motivations that occur between utterance and response and thus shape the form and content of the 'echoing speech.'" As such, uptake is an ideal rubric through which to theorize the relationship between canons and fandoms – between texts that recurrently prompt responses from one another, creating an archive of reciprocal exchange. Equally important is Queer Theory's insistence on resisting heteronormativity, a fundamental ethos of slash fandom. From Affect Theory, I draw primarily on notions of reparative reading and writing that offer insights into the ritualized romance of slash. My turn towards Rhetorical Genre Studies is also prompted by my insistence on maintaining as clear as possible the distinction between the acts of reading the canon and the act of writing slash fic. Too often, scholars and mainstream commentators alike will conflate the two, as if there were no difference between interpreting the show a particular way and *writing* that interpretation into textual existence, using the show as a starting point for something else, taking the characters and inventing an entirely new universe for them, placing them in a world more familiar to our own, or a combination of all of these and more. Reading fanfic and reading "unintentional" homoeroticism in the canon can be considered disruptive, if not outright subversive acts; but to

*write* slash is to actively participate in the fandom's queer uptake in response to the shows – it is to *create* those queer uptakes. Thus, maintaining a distinction between reading the canon and writing slash fic allows for more thorough and fresh insights into the perennial question of why women write slash. This distinction also removes the question of slash's subversion from the realm reading the canon, the meaning of which is never stable, completely knowable, or definitive; thus arguments that pivot around the "accuracy" of slash fans' readings of homoerotic subtexts will always be conditional at best, irrelevant and contradictory at worse. But we can more firmly situate the inherent resistance and subversion to dominant power structures and ideologies in the much more concrete and knowable act of writing; once thus situated, a vast array of new questions and possibilities emerge regarding just precisely *how* slash's subversion functions and what it (a)ffects are and might possibly be. This project rests firmly on the assumption that the resistance and subversion inherent to slash isn't in the reading of the canon in a certain way, it's in the *writing* of fic that performs these readings, enacts a disregard for canonical authority, celebrates romantic and erotic intimacy between men, and rejects sex and gender normativity.

After defining queer uptake, I then use the theory to examine the interactive dynamics between two of the most popular – and uniquely complex – fandoms today. Chapter Two explores the immensely popular Sterek fandom from *Teen Wolf*, MTV's reimagining of the 1985 film of the same name as a male-oriented fantasy-drama for the post-*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, post-*Twilight* cultural landscape. While focused on the misadventures of the eponymous teen wolf Scott McCall, the show is most well-known for Sterek, the slash ship that pairs werewolf Derek Hale (Tyler Hoechlin) with human Stiles Stilinski (Dylan O'Brien), characters who are canonically heterosexual. Many viewers read the chemistry between the two characters as

homoerotic, and the Sterek fandom boomed immediately, helping the show gain popularity in its early seasons; the pairing quickly became one of the most popular in modern fandom, currently approaching 50,000 titles on Archive of Our Own. Initially, Sterek fans were optimistic, both about the welcome they received from the show and about the possibility of a romantic relationship between Stiles and Derek becoming canon – in large part due to paratextual moments and interactions between the fandom and the canon, rather than the canon itself. The most infamous of these is creator and executive producer Jeff Davis’ statement in a 2012 interview, in which he boldly claimed to be creating “a world where there’s no racism, there’s no sexism, there’s no homophobia” because “if you can create a world like that on TV, maybe life starts to imitate it” (Juzwiak). Despite the many flaws of this promise, Sterek fans took this to heart, and thus felt momentous betrayal after this early support of the ship was proven to be a ratings and buzz-generating gambit that involved egregious queerbaiting and numerous affronts, canonically and paratextually. In a *DailyDot* article from July 2014 tellingly titled “How to Kill Your Slash Fandom in 5 Steps,” fandom expert Aja Romano writes that “*Teen Wolf* once seemed like slash fandom’s best hope for a slash pairing to be integrated into the main storyline purely because the fandom loved it so much” and that Sterek fans, like many other slash fans who have experienced similar frustrations, feel “led on and betrayed by a show’s initial dalliance with and ultimate retreat from” them and the relationship. This betrayal, for a wealth of reasons, seems particularly unforgivable to Sterek fans. After examining in detail how the canon has responded to the fandom, I explore how Sterek writers use slash to critique and subvert the show’s heteronormativity and cultural homophobia more generally. Ultimately, analyzing the Sterek fandom through the lens of queer uptake illuminates how the canon’s response to Sterek has created an insurmountable rift between the fandom and the show that challenges many of our

preconceived notions about slash shipping and fandom as a whole.

I employ queer uptake differently in Chapter Three with my analysis of *Supernatural*, focusing on the canon's unique response to its slash fandoms rather than fanworks. Uptake emphasizes the ideological, affective, and discursive relationship between texts and genres, and any worthwhile investigation of it must attend to this bidirectionality. Having established that slash fic across fandoms functions subversively in relation to genre, I then ask what we can learn from a text like *Supernatural* that acknowledges and embraces slash fans' genre redefinitions, an ability to recognize the complexity of fandom and fic writing is made possible through the show's own expansive and creative use of genre. Debuting in 2005 on The WB (which soon after became The CW), *Supernatural* follows the many adventures of Sam and Dean Winchester, demon, ghost, and monster hunting brothers who have a tendency to die for each other and come back to life. Currently going into its thirteenth season with its original cast intact, the show has found remarkable success largely due to its very passionate fans, many of whom ship Wincest – the incestuous pairing of Sam and Dean, or the much more popular Destiel, the pairing of Dean and the angel Castiel, who joined the show in the fourth season. Initially a fairly straightforward horror/fantasy drama, the show has developed to include dizzying array of genres and intertextual references; most notably, it has developed a fascinating level of metanarrative and self-referentiality that can be productively explored by the concept of metamodernism. Proposed as the cultural and historical successor to postmodernism by theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, metamodernism “oscillates between modernism and postmodern.... a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity” (“Notes on Metamodernism” 5 – 6). An emerging structure

of feeling,<sup>14</sup> metamodernism is a compelling notion through which to explore *Supernatural*'s ontology, which combines the aesthetics of postmodernism with the affects of (meta)modernism. This ethos "inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism" and "impossible possibility," together with *Supernatural*'s investment in genre flexibility, equips the canon to recognize and embrace their fandoms in exciting new ways. *Supernatural* accepts fans' redefinition of the show as an archontic text – one without "definite borders that can be transgressed," where "all texts that build on a previously existing text are not lesser than the source text, and they...add to that text's archive, becoming part of the archive and expanding it" – and they respond in turn by performing genre redefinitions of their own to incorporate the fandom into the canonical narrative (Derecho 65). My analysis of *Supernatural* thus reveals the connections between genre, responsivity, and ideological critique, and how the show's genre dexterity allows for the metatextual, metamodern response to its fandom. Often, this metatextuality is deployed to comment directly on the subtextual homoeroticism slash fans read in the text; that is but one of dimension of *Supernatural*'s queerness. The show is fundamentally concerned with the emotional bonds between men absent the presence of women and without the all-too-common heteronormative love triangle that functions to obscure male homosocial desire.<sup>15</sup> It repairs this spectrum by expanding notions of intimacy between men who repeatedly fail at and refuse heterosexual normativity. And not only does *Supernatural* challenge common

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14 Cited as a foundational text for Affect Theory and studies of the political, literary, and social functioning of transpersonal emotions, Raymond Williams' notion of "structures of feeling," from 1977's *Marxism and Literature*, refers to "affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a 'structure': as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis... has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics" (132). Structures of feeling, as demonstrated by Vermeulen and van den Akker's use of the concept to conceptualize metamodernism, is also a compelling rubric through which to explore slash fandom and its affective attachments.

15 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* is eminently useful when analyzing slash.

narratives of male homosociality, it also, following the addition of Castiel's character and the emergence of Destiel, has tentatively explored Dean's potential queerness via his increasingly ambiguous sexuality. I conclude the chapter with a gloss on "Fan Fiction," illuminating how *Supernatural's* unique response to its transformative fans, including its slash fans, demonstrates the centrality of genre and uptake in fandom, as well as its role in creating a wholly new fandom-canon dynamic.

In the Conclusion, I discuss an element of slash fandom that is fundamental to both its genre and its subversion. Often overlooked in analyses and commentaries of fic, a preoccupation with pornographic queer sex and a celebration of an expansive, liberatory sexual ethos is central to slash fandom.<sup>16</sup> I argue that the emphasis on explicit sex is a deliberate rejection of heteronormative politics of shame and the obscuration of queer desires. Part of these desires, I propose, is a delight in eroticized masculinity and the male body that does not concomitantly sustain a correlating misogyny and homophobia. Slash fans rewrite the male body in order to revise masculinity, inventing and rehearsing tropes that dramatize and exaggerate in order to dismantle. This critique and revision cannot be separated from erotic pleasures; thus we can regard slash as a kind of critical erotica. I then conclude by reiterating the importance of reconceptualizing our understandings and analyses of slash through the Genre Function and emphasizing slash writers.

In *Convergence Culture: Where New and Old Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins writes that "fandom, after all, is born of a balance between fascination and frustration: if media content didn't fascinate us, there would be no desire to engage with it; but if it didn't frustrate us on some level, there would be no drive to rewrite or remake it" (258). I've named this project *Fascination*

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<sup>16</sup> More than a third of both Sterek and Destiel fics on Ao3 are rated Mature or Explicit; in addition to fics, the fandom communities are rich with complex discussions of sexuality, sexual identity, gender, heteronormativity, and queerphobia.

*& Frustration* in order to prioritize this tension that defines slash fandom – affective fascinations and attachments to characters and their relationships that function alongside and in relation to frustrated desires for sincere queer representation. Slash writers revel in the shows, characters, and relationships that captivate them, but they also grapple with “the oppressive ideologies and the unsatisfactory circumstances of everyday life” that shape their experiences and the heteronormativity that prevents queer representation (Lewis 3). As such, they navigate a tension between responding to the shows affectively and critically; their responses are thus affective critiques, critical affects, which can be illuminated by queer uptake.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Queer Uptake: A New Theory of Slash

*In fandom, the Author may be dead, but the writer – that actively scribbling, embodied woman – is very much alive.*

– Francesca Coppa  
“Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fanfiction as Theatrical Performance”

The curious demographics of slash fan fiction writers and readers – predominantly women, cis- and transgender, of all sexual identities – partially explains both the genre’s marginalization as well as fan studies scholars’ fascination with it. In a normative framework, women - lesbian, bisexual, straight, asexual – who write and read erotic romance about two fictional men are confusing, strange, and possibly even pathological. These reactions to slash have generated a wealth of both popular and academic arguments about why fans create and read slash, ranging from the mocking to the celebratory, the insightful to the misguided. Central to these arguments is the underlying question of how slash functions as a resistant, possibly rebellious act against the reading norms of dominant heterosexual culture. Indeed, the subversive potential of slash fans reading queerness in canonically heterosexual character dynamics has been of fundamental importance to Fan Studies since the field’s inception. Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith’s 1985 article “Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and *Star Trek* Zines,” one of the earliest forays into these questions, offers an argument that has greatly influenced the field. Veith and Lamb investigate the genesis of the genre in the creation of *Star Trek* fan zines in the 1960s, and ultimately conclude that Kirk/Spock stories – the first modern slash – are simply wish fulfillment fantasies for heterosexual woman who are unable to imagine a truly equal, romantically transcendent relationship between a man and a woman. This early analysis

is problematic for its unexamined reproduction of heteronormative ideologies and assumptions, such as when they assert that “masculine sexuality is appealing to most women, as are the physical and sexual attractions of the male body” and assert that “most women are heterosexual. Kirk’s and Spock’s loving behavior toward one another is a behavior many women presumably yearn to share with a man” (113). Their analysis of the mothership of slash fandom makes valuable insights about the rescripting of gender norms via male bodies and female slash fans’ desire for egalitarian sexual and romantic relationships that real-world patriarchy denies. But the conclusion they draw from this observation – that Kirk/Spock fics “are not about two gay males and should not be categorized as examples of homosexual literature – either male or female” – evacuates the earliest iterations of modern slash of its queerness (112). By arguing that Kirk/Spock slash is merely idealized heterosexuality and thus not “homosexual literature,” Lamb and Veith effectively erase the vast implications of and complex possibilities for resistance and subversion that occur when fan writers respond to corporate media texts and their normative sexual ideologies via their invention and circulation of slash fic.

Another essay from 1985 that investigates Kirk/Spock fic, “Pornography by Women, for Women, with Love” by Joanna Russ, falls into some of the same heteronormative traps ignored by Lamb and Veith, but it also “supplements a mere textual analysis with the cultural force that is slash fandom: a community by women, for women” (Busse and Hellekson 77). Russ acknowledges and celebrates slash’s sexual explicitness and its anti-heteronormative tendencies, asserting that slash fans want “sexual intensity, sexual enjoyment, the freedom to choose, a love that is entirely free of the culture’s whole discourse of gender and sex roles” and that slash writers “put forth an emphatic claim to experience that radically transcends the conventional” (89). A compelling description of slash, but frustrating for the way in which it assumes that a

rejection of gender roles equates to a freedom from or disinterest in gender discourse, as opposed to allowing for the possibility that slash is an alternative, eroticized engagement with and interrogation of these gender discourses. Similar to Veith and Lamb, Russ argues that “the writers and readers of these fantasies can do what most can’t do in reality (certainly not heterosexual reality), that is they can act sexually at their own pace and under conditions they themselves have chosen” (89). Crucially though, in addition to exploring the sexual and social desires that generate slash, Russ looks beyond readings of the source text as the primary motivation and purpose of writing slash fic, and appreciates the sexual desires and pleasures of slash.

Russ’ essay is unique in early fan studies for both its attention to carefully differentiating slash readers and slash writers, and for its exploration of slash outside of the incorporation/resistance paradigm that dominates much fan scholarship. This paradigm offers “limited and clumsy models that do not account for the deeper textual strategies of cult television,” according to Sara Gwenllian Jones in her 2002 essay “The Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters.” Jones astutely argues that the incorporation/resistance model of analyzing reader/viewer textual responses “rests upon an understanding of the text as an inviolable and discrete semiotic surface;” when scholars apply this model to slash, this they assume that the canon’s “‘preferred’ or ‘dominant’ textual meanings are accepted, negotiated, or opposed by the reader,” and that, “by this rationale, slash fiction, which contradicts the source text’s preferred meaning of heterosexuality, must be the product of subversive or ‘deviant’ reading” (118-9). Jones challenges this and instead suggests that the source texts that generate slash fandoms are in fact queer in their own right. Citing Alexander Doty’s *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993), which argues that mainstream horror films and melodrama “encourage queer positioning as they exploit the spectacle of heterosexual romance, straight domesticity, and traditional gender roles gone awry”

(15). Slash is not a subversive practice because, Jones argues, it is the fantastical narrative forms and “the failures of heterosexual romances” of cult television shows that inspire slash shipping.

She asserts that

the exotic erotics of slash fiction look much less like instances of ‘resistance’ and much more like extensions of cult television’s own contra-straight logics. Slash arises out of cult television’s intrinsic requirements of distance from everyday reality, its related erasure of heterosexuality’s social process, and its provision of perceptual depths that invite and tolerate diverse speculation about characters ‘hidden’ thoughts and feelings. (127)

Jones’ point about the latent queerness of cult TV is compelling, as is the to find a way out of the oversimplified incorporation/resistance paradigm; however, her argument ultimately fails because it is a reproduction of that paradigm obscured by an attempt to challenge it. Arguing for the “contra-straight” narrative logics of cult TV that supposedly motivate slash is not a refusal of or replacement for the incorporation/resistance paradigm – it is merely an alternative deployment of it. Relocating queerness from the fan’s interpretive practices to the source texts themselves is an important, productive move that has continued relevance, particularly in regard to current shows that exploit audiences’ desire for queer characters, such as *Supernatural* and *Teen Wolf*, which both traffic heavily in overt and subtle queerness. Acknowledging and investigating the canon’s queerness complicates our understanding of slash’s subversive potentials, and is imperative to conducting nuanced and accurate analyses. The queerness of these texts complicate our understandings of slash’s subversive potential and must be accounted for, but unfortunately, Jones’ reiteration of the very theoretical rubric her argument claims to challenge forecloses those possibilities.

“The Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters” also commits a frustratingly common conflation in fanfiction scholarship in its tendency to collapse reading the source text as queer

and writing slash fic into the same act. While we can and must consider slash fandom as critical, engaged readings of the source texts, it does not automatically follow that these readings can be mapped onto an incorporation/resistance model. Moreover, the myopic focus on slash fans as critical readers of the source text – incorporated, negotiated, resistant, or any combination thereof – does not fully account for fan *writers* and their complex motivations and intentions when they write fic, nor the formation of fandom’s complex discourse communities and their various functions. Jones points out that “that slash fiction continues to be theorized as ‘resistance’...is a testament to both a notion of text/reader engagements as interpretative rather than interactive and to a continued refusal to acknowledge where and how queerness manifests itself.” But her argument perpetuates this reductive theorization of fan writing as merely interpretive when she asserts that “it is the cult television series itself which implicitly ‘resists’ the conventions of heterosexuality; the slash fiction stories written by some of its fans render explicit this implicit function” (128). She also then performs an iteration of the very refusal to acknowledge “where and how queerness manifests itself” that she critiques by ignoring the subversive possibilities in the act of rendering the “implicit function” of cult television’s anti-heteronormative elements explicit and then sharing that creative work in the unregulated queer space of slash fandom, particularly when she writes that slash stories “*simply* extend certain narrative logics into the realm of sexuality” (118; my emphasis). Not only does this assume that these “narrative logics” are not, in the first instance, in the realm of sexuality – which contradicts her argument about the latent queerness of cult shows – this argument completely ignores the complexity of slash. As Jones argues about the “contra-straight” narratives of cult television and as shows like *Supernatural* and *Teen Wolf* demonstrate, queer narratives and queer subtexts do reside in the source texts; but the act of writing within the rogue genre of slash fic in order to render explicit

– in all senses of the word – any implicit homoeroticism is hardly as simple as Jones and others have made it out to be.

Henry Jenkins warns about this oversimplification in 1992's *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* when he writes that works “produced by fans are not simply the tangible traces of transient meanings produced by other reading practices. To read them in such fashion is to offer an impoverished account of fan cultural production” (50). Jenkins also emphasizes the complexity of fan cultures, adding that fan texts, “are shaped through the social norms, aesthetic conventions, interpretive protocols, technological resources, and technical competence of the larger fan community. Fans possess not simply borrowed remnants snatched from mass culture, but their own culture built from the semiotic raw materials the media provides” (49). Fan studies must never lose sight of the fact that it is the writers who craft these semiotic raw materials; indeed, the very phrase “raw materials” is illustrative here, reminding us that media is not simply something to be consumed as-is, but shaped, modified, reworked to fit the audiences' needs – work done by writers (and artists), a crafting of raw materials that both reflects and shapes the communities. This complexity demands theoretical approaches to fic that can attend to this complexity and that do not conflate reading, resistant or otherwise, with writing, and thus privilege readings of the source text as the primary motivation and function of slash. While never losing sight of the relationship between interpreting the canon as homoerotic and writing slash fic that renders that homoeroticism explicit, I propose a new theory of slash that I name *queer uptake* that locates the subversive potential of slash not in interpretive readings of the canon, which is never stable or definitive, but in the acts of writing and circulating slash fanfiction. This re-orientation towards slash prevents another “impoverished account” of fan production by recovering the complexities lost in the oversimplified analyses of slash that tend

to ignore not only the labor that fan writing entails, but the various motivations that compel that writing, as well as the discursive, affective, and political functions of slash as a dialectic, genred, and discursive practice. Firmly situated in Cultural Studies as well as Rhetorical Genre Studies and embracing those fields' complementary loci of sociality and the political nature of the text-audience dynamic, queer uptake takes slash's non-normative, and therefore, resistant and subversive, responses to texts.

Regardless of where on the incorporation/resistance paradigm scholars place slash and the methodologies employed, questions about slash fic often pivot around inquiry into why people (typically cisgendered women, but not exclusively) write this genre. Why do these people respond to television shows with the production of texts of their own that transform the source text in particular generic modes, imbuing them with content and ideologies utterly impossible in mainstream media? The questions that preoccupy slash studies, then, are at their core about the intersections of subjectivity and writing, writing as social action, and the matrix of factors that motivate textual responses to corporate texts. Maintaining a distinction between the act of reading the canon and the act of writing slash fic also reconfigures the question of slash's resistance, or lack thereof, outside of the entrenched binarism of the incorporation/resistance debate. Isolating the act of writing sets aside the question of source text readings and refocuses inquiry on the texts created by fans, regardless of the perceived or actual "accuracy" of their interpretations of the canon. Each textual iteration of slash within a particular fandom bears a unique relationship to the canon and holds within it a spectrum of possible readings of and relations to the source text(s) that must be attended to, but the complexity of fan communities and the sheer volume of the fantexts produced demand that our inquiries into and theorization of fan activity take a more expansive approach than most fan studies scholarship

allows by limiting their analyses to the incorporation/resistance paradigm. I do not argue for a complete abandonment of the canon as a loci of slash communities' investments, interests, and motivations, but rather, for a de-centering of the canon. Even in the case of *Sterek*, in which a significant portion of the fandom has rejected *Teen Wolf* for various reasons, the interactions between the show, its nexus of creators and paratexts, particularly the hostile and antagonistic ones, are still in dialogue with the fantexts and the fandom community. Indeed, queer uptake rests upon the interactions between fans and the canon, and my writing-and genre-focused inquiry into slash does not dismiss the canon or fan interpretations. Rather, it acknowledges that there is so much more at work, and at stake, when fans write fic, far beyond the oversimplified interpretive framework that is assumed in scholarship that privileges reading the canon and that collapses reading and writing into indistinguishable acts. This approach demands a rethinking of where we locate and how we describe the resistant potential of slash. Analyses of the subversive possibilities of slash have been too closely bound to interpretive readings of the canon, that in order to develop a new paradigm for examining slash as a primarily writing and genre-inflected form of cultural production, we need a redefinition of subversion that is not so closely wedded to the source text and questions of textual interpretation. Fans absolutely do respond to the canon when they're writing slash – but those responses are motivated by more than a simple interpretation of queerness. As both *Teen Wolf* and *Supernatural* demonstrate, canonical queerness – and the lack thereof – do indeed motivate slash fans, but in ways that are far more complex and resistant than simple extensions canonical narrative logics. We need a reconceptualization of subversion in relation to slash fandoms as discursive communities that can account for not just slash writers' canon-inspired motivations, but also for the multi-vocal critiques and resistances enacted when queer readings generate queer writing, an alternative

theoretical orientation towards slash that prioritizes writing and the multi-directional dynamics of responsivity.

In *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*, an analysis of the discursive functions of genre that emphasizes the social dimensions of writing and invention, Anis Bawarshi builds on the work of Carolyn R. Miller and her articulation of genre as social action, which proposes “an understanding of genre [that] can help account for the way we encounter, interpret, react to, and create particular texts” by articulating a definition of genre that is “centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish,” describing genres as “typified rhetorical ways of acting in recurring situations” (151). Miller’s definition of “genre as social action” is part of the larger social turn in composition studies, a recognition “that there is more at work on the text than the writer’s seemingly autonomous cognition; there are also various social forces that constitute the scene of production within which the writer’s cognition as well as his or her text are situated and shaped” (Bawarshi 5). These scenes of production constitute discourse communities, within which “the social and rhetorical environment within which cognitive habits, goals, assumptions, and values are shared by participants who employ common discourse strategies for communicating and practicing these cognitive habits, goals, assumptions, and values” (5). In this rubric, the defining features of a genre are not its contents, but rather, the forms that content takes and the what the deployment of that content accomplishes discursively – its effects and affects – both within and, to a lesser extent, outside of its respective discourse community. This privileging of the social dimensions of textual production allows for more politically relevant considerations of the various forces at work upon and within writers, and the discursive situations to which their writing responds and of which it becomes a part. In this framework, genre is much more than a taxonomy of content descriptors fraught with cultural

norms and hierarchies; it becomes an incredibly valuable rubric through which we can theorize and analyze the dynamics of responsivity at work when fans choose to write slash fanfiction, and what social, affective, and political action this writing performs.

Extending Michel Foucault's concept of the Author Function, which "delimits what works we recognize as valuable and how we interpret them at the same as it accords the status of author to certain writers" and creates a discursive and ideological construct that provides "a text and its author with a cultural identity and significance not accorded to texts that exist outside of its purview," Bawarshi identifies the Genre Function, an alternative model of discursive and textual analysis that "can account not only for how certain privileged discourses function, but for how all discourses function, an overarching concept that can explain the social roles we assign to various discourses and those who enact and are enacted by them" (20 – 22). The Author Function, however fragmented or displaced in postmodernity, is subsumed under the Genre Function, which accounts for the constitutive power of genre as well its regulative and taxonomic purposes. Miller asserts that as "a recurrent, significant action, a genre embodies an aspect of cultural rationality" (165), and Bawarshi recognizes that cultural rationality as the dominant organizing principle of communication, as "typified rhetorical strategies communicants use to recognize, organize, and act in all kinds of situations, literary and nonliterary" (17). Regarding genre as the primary regulator of discourse, not just literary and media texts, emphasizes its constitutive ideological power in all dialectic and discursive scenes. Typified by historic and culturally-specific norms and social obligations and expectations, genres are "dynamic discursive formations in which ideology is naturalized and realized in specific social actions, relations and subjectivities" (7). It's this realization and naturalization of ideology at the level of genre – and the inherent possibilities for ideological resistance therein – that allows for our relocation of the

subversive and critical work accomplished by slash fic. Genres are thoroughly ideological, and not just in terms of conveying content, but in how they co-constitute and reproduce ideologies embedded within the various generic rules, hierarchies, and boundaries through which their content is articulated and circulated. Genres are structural sites of ideological production, reproduction, and transformation; “in their social practices, human beings reproduce the very social structures that subsequently make their actions necessary, possible, recognizable, and meaningful, so that their practices reproduce and articulate the very structures that consequently call for these practices,” and “genre is a site in which this dialectic of agency takes place” (Bawarshi 87). Genres are “both the ideology and the enactment of the ideology,” thus conceptually “fram[ing] what its users generally imagine as possible within a given situation” (88; 22).<sup>17</sup> The Genre Function’s displacement of the Author Function as the primary regulator of discourse is not only more compatible with a cultural studies approach to texts, but also with the driving ethos of fandom and fan writing, which de-emphasizes traditional notions of authorship and function according to highly specific generic modes and discursive expectations. Further, theorizing fic, and slash specifically, via the Genre Function allows for the privileging of writing as the site of subversion and resistance, emphasizing the ideological dynamics of discursive, genred performance.

Fundamental to the Genre Function is *uptake*, a concept adapted from speech-act theory by Anne Freedman. Uptake “refer[s] to the inter- and intrageneric relationship between texts, in which one text...prompts an *appropriate* response or uptake from another – the echoing speech – in a particular context or ceremonial” (Bawarshi 95; my emphasis). More than simple utterance-  
and-response, uptake names the social, ideological, and subjective vectors that are always at

<sup>17</sup> For more on how genres permit what they make possible, see Dylan B. Dryer’s “Taking Up Space: Genre Systems as Geographies of the Possible” in *JAC: Rhetoric, Writing, Culture, Politics*.

work in any given discursive event. It is the “bidirectional relation that holds between” texts and genres: the murky, obscure ecology of individual agency and social motivations that occur between utterance and response and thus shape the form and content of the “echoing speech.” Uptake names a complex web of factors that involve individual agency, “but it is not a directly causal form of agency;” rather, uptakes are “informed by learned inclinations and embodied dispositions, attachments to prior successes and failures, one’s sense of authority and cultural capital, one’s perceived sense of stakes, motivation, and task relevance, as well as other affective factors and historical-material influences, such as access to certain tools” (Bawarshi, 2012).<sup>18</sup> One’s uptakes – dialectic responses to all manner of utterances, textual and otherwise – are shaped by the genre of the original text, which demands responses in particular genres in order to solidify that text’s genre and status. Whether one chooses to respond in the corresponding “appropriate” genre is determined by one’s position in relation to the ideological, material, political, and social norms that govern and are governed by the uttering genre. Freedman argues that any given text “is contrived to secure a certain class of uptakes, and...the uptake text, confirms its [the text’s] generic status by conforming itself to this contrivance” (“Uptake” 40). It’s within this dynamic that I find uptake incredibly productive for theorizing slash fic. If a given text is contrived, via its rhetorical situation, content, paratexts, and cultural hierarchies – all determined by genre – to secure responses that validate and confirm the text’s genre and thus its cultural status, then those uptakes that respond “appropriately” – in a mode dictated by the source text meant to secure a “certain class of uptakes” – function normatively. These uptakes are hegemonic responses (in form, even if not in content) to the source text and reproduce dominant ideologies as dictated by the text in that particular situation: respondents craft their uptakes, the

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<sup>18</sup> Uptake shares many similarities and overlaps with Mikhail Bakhtin’s *heteroglossia*, which argues that all texts are multi-vocal and composed of other, preexisting texts and utterances. The main difference, which is crucial to my work on fantexts, is uptake’s emphasis on specific instantiations of utterance and response.

echoing speech, within the expected genre and mode of address that confirms and conforms to the source text's generic boundaries, intentions, and status.

Freadman also asserts that “the uptake text has the power not to so confirm this generic status, which it may modify minimally, or even utterly by taking its object [the source text] as some other kind,” and it's within this potentiality that I locate queer uptake, and more specifically, slash. To uptake queerly is to respond to a text *inappropriately*; to craft one's echoing speech in an unsanctioned genre that resists an appropriate, normative response, motivated by a resistance to genre boundaries and to heteronormative ideological content – the hierarchies and politics of respectability, sexuality, and gender that narrowly circumscribe possibilities for meaningful queer representation in mainstream media. A slash fic writer performing queer uptake activates non-normative significances of recognition shaped by her “learned inclinations and embodied dispositions, attachments to prior successes and failures, [her] sense of authority and cultural capital, [her] perceived sense of stakes, motivation, and task relevance, as well as other affective factors and historical-material influences, such as access to certain tools;” these factors, among others, compel her to respond to a TV show in a genre that does not conform to that show's generic contrivances (Bawarshi 12). Slash fic takes its object, the TV show, as something *else* – not a text to be passively enjoyed, but as a text that's ripe for selective harvesting and in need of queer revision, critique, and proliferation.

Freadman further elaborates on the implications and possibilities of uptake the 2014 essay “Where is the Subject? Rhetorical Genre Theory and the Question of the Writer.” Wary of the determinism implied by genre as social action, she argues that if “genre is social action, the consequences and effects of that action would always be predictable from the generalised characteristics of the genre and would always be the same” and “it is the discursive event itself

that has effects and consequences,” as opposed to a regularized instantiation of a genre. Further, Freadman warns of the evacuation of agency potentially implied by “the ‘action of a genre’” that subsumes subjectivity by locating it wholly in genre, “a serious reduction of the power to act of real social agents” that risks “eras[ing] the human embodied subject.” (A-2 – 3). Uptake offers a productive and necessary intervention in this possible erasure of agency as it privileges the “power to act of real social agents” by interrogating the dynamics of responsivity and discursive subjectivity. Freadman continues:

If we do not occupy it, then the genre does not act. The genre does not speak, or write; we do. The genre provides us with strategies for doing so. My conclusion here is that it is misleading to speak of ‘genre as social action.’ The action is accomplished by the use of the genre, but that use is never merely an instantiation of general rules or conventional forms. This is broadly the conclusion of my work on uptake. If action there be, it occurs in a specific, occasioned, discursive event, and that event includes its effects and consequences. (A-5 – 6).

Genres do not act independently; they are activated by individual respondents, each with their own varied and complex positionality in relation to dominant culture and the particulars of the discursive scene. Genres alone do not have agency, yet they are crucial tools through which writers find and enact their agency; as ideological formations and conduits, genres, and the modes through which they are yielded and circulated, recursively shape the discourse in question, as well as those who participate in that discourse.

The conceptualization of genre as routinized speaking strategies that enable action in relation to the specific material and social dynamics of utterance and response allows for a fundamental revision of how we can theorize the social and affective functioning of slash fanfiction. Locating fic writers’ agency and the action achieved by their respondent texts in their uptakes – the genre dynamics of their chosen speaking positions in response to specific discursive events – definitively places slash’s subversive potential in the act of writing and

sharing these rogue genres, rather than – and as a distinct practice from – resistant readings of the canon.<sup>19</sup> Dylan B. Dryer further emphasizes responsivity and textual production when he defines uptake as “readers’ and writers’ *enactment* of acquired dispositions toward recurrent textual forms” (“Taking Up Space” 503, my emphasis). Exploring the ways in which genres “enact institutional activity through the practical production of generic readers and writers” and thus “enact oppressive power relations,” Dryer calls for the fashioning of “physical and discursive spaces where people can work together to develop resistant knowledge of genre knowledge” (527 – 8). He argues for the important of resistant readings, but not solely of textual content, but rather, resistant readings of *genre*: an orientation towards texts that critically interrogate the “ideological interstices that configure, normalize, and activate relations and meanings within and between systems of genres” (Bawarshi, “Originality” 80). One might even consider this an expansion of the incorporation/resistance paradigm into the realm of genre per the Genre Function – the ideological work of texts that readers/viewers must constantly negotiate and grapple with is not confined to content, but operates perhaps even more forcefully (if more subtly for its relative invisibility), at the level of genre. The boundaries, rules, and cultural status of genres determine who and what can be represented, and attempt to determine how the intended audience is supposed to respond. Resistant readings of genre demand that we do not accept generic particularities at face value, but rather, as ideological structures. Studying and theorizing uptake – the ways in which viewers and readers respond to these ideological structures – illuminates the ways in which these ideologies are perceived and negotiated by viewers, particularly when some respond in ways that challenge not just the content, but the

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19 Bawarshi’s essay in *Genres and the Performance of Publics*, “Between Genres: Uptake, Memory, and US Public Discourse on Israel-Palestine” presents the notion of *uptake sponsors*, “who work to maintain and broker dominant (or resistant) uptakes.” These sponsors can be “individuals or institutions that work to condition, secure, and distribute certain uptakes in ways that can traverse and exceed genre and context” (56). We might consider members of the canon who actively show support for slash fans to be sponsors, but also fans themselves who encourage and promote the creation of slash texts.

generic status as well. Uptakes affect and modify genres and their corresponding cultural status, a dynamic process in which texts and genres are redefined by virtue of audience responses, shaping what exactly that text/genre *is*, what it means, to whom it speaks and why, and what needs it serves – or doesn't serve. Queer uptakes, then, reorient these relations, making new genres and interactions between canon and fandom possible, as well as facilitating the creation of queer, affective communities<sup>20</sup>.

Slash writers refuse normalizing generic contrivances, and reject closed textual borders and the capitalist, sexist, and heteronormative ideologies those contrivances enact and reproduce. The reproduction of these ideologies depends on viewer acquiescence to and acceptance of the show as a stable, static text with definitive boundaries in which the creators' intent and hegemonic readings are privileged and accepted at face value. Thus, when fans reject these contrivances by uptaking non-normatively – responding to a text in ways that do not confirm its generic status – they are performing resistant, subversive acts of writing. Operating from this particular disposition, fan writers claim authorial and affective ownership of characters and regard their source texts as malleable, always incomplete, and in need of revision on a variety of levels. “Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction” (2006) by Abigail Derecho, is quite helpful in further specifying and historicizing the generic rejection and revision fan writers perform. Implicitly drawing on the Genre Function to explore how and why transformative fan writing compels the socially and politically marginalized,

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20 Jennifer Nish, in her essay “Spreadable Genres, Multiple Publics: The Pixel Project’s Campaign to Stop Violence Against Women” discusses the relationship between spreadable genres – the wide dispersal of content across genres and media through authorized and unauthorized communication networks (Jenkins, et. al) – and uptakes, compellingly arguing that, “the visibility of [spreading a genre enactment] has been amplified by the technological affordances and social contexts that facilitate this uptake. Alongside the increased visibility of spreading as an uptake process is an increase in genres designed with this uptake in mind... genres designed for spreadability have also become more widespread across diffuse publics and social contexts. Spreadable genres invite both kinds of uptake: they invite people to spread a genre enactment (i.e., an individual text), and they invite the creation of new texts designed to spread” (243-4).

Derecho builds on Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*, writing that:

all texts that build on a previously existing text are not lesser than the source text, and they do not violate the boundaries of the source text; rather they only add to that text's archive, becoming part of the archive and expanding it...an archontic text allows, or even invites, writers to enter it, select specific items they find useful, make new artifacts using those found objects, and deposit the newly made work back into the source text's archive. (64 – 65)

The term “archontic” privileges the “intertextual relationship at the core of the literature” and rejects the hierarchies and ideologies of ownership and authorship reproduced by the commonly used descriptors *derivative* and *appropriative*, similar to other scholars' and fans recent move towards *transformative*. Regarding corporate media as archontic texts productive for how it bridges fan studies and rhetorical genre studies; Derecho gestures towards this when she further differentiates archontic literature from the more general concept of intertextuality, pointing to the “specific relation between new versions and the originary versions of texts, the fact that works enter the archive of other works by quoting them consciously, by pointedly locating themselves within the world of the archontic text” (65). She continues, arguing that “fanfics tie themselves overtly to preexisting texts; this annunciation is a convention of the fan fiction genre” (66). Derecho's emphasis on the various ways in which fic positions itself, both textually and paratextually, evinces the centrality of the genre function even when it's not referenced or named as such; indeed, Derecho's entire analysis is in dialogue with Bawarshi's articulation of genre as the “the regulator of the fictive,” arguing for a reconceptualization of the generic boundaries and status of source texts and their fantexts. Slash fic enacts this generic redefinition by uptaking queerly, rejecting the generic contrivances of the source text, and this refusal to confirm or conform is not a violation of the text's boundaries; rather, it's a rejection of the very notion that the text has such boundaries at all. Derecho asserts that “archontic texts are not

delimited properties with definite borders that can be transgressed,” and it’s this understanding of genre that slash fans bring to texts, one of the “learned inclinations and embodied dispositions” that Bawarshi names as one of the dimensions of uptake. Slash writers’ uptakes take source texts as archontic: as malleable texts that are in a “constant state of flux, of shifting and chaotic relation...never solidified” (Derecho 76). Fundamental to the definition of archontic is the act of writing, for it’s the writing of new texts to add to the archive that achieves a text’s archontic redefinition. It’s the creative production – the writing of fic – that ensures the instability and open-boundaries of the source text, fan’s textual responses to the shows – their uptakes – that redefine the show’s boundaries and status, taking them as infinitely open texts that can be poached, harvested, expanded, and manipulated. And it is an act of redefinition – generic redefinition – because corporate media texts, for the most part, do not deliberately fashion themselves as archontic or boundary-less, and are certainly not regarded as such in mainstream discourses. Thus, Derecho’s argument that “the genre [archontic literature] is intrinsically against ‘cultures of the dominant’” for how it “undermines conventional notions of authority, boundary, and property” firmly situates fanfiction as a subversive *writing* practice rather than a reading practice.

For as historically thorough and insightful as Derecho’s essay is, it does not account for *how* a source text produced by the “cultures of the dominant” becomes archontic in the hands of fic writers and the communities constituted by their writing. For this, we can turn to Michael Warner’s “Publics and Counterpublics” (2002), in which he explicates the social and discursive processes through which texts produce certain audiences – publics. Warner defines “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation,” and outlines how a given discourse can come to constitute and represent *the* public, as well as the social effects of

this phenomenon, including “stranger sociability,” the social, affective, and political dialogues that connect strangers in powerful and sometimes intimate relations, inherited by texts and the discourse they facilitate. This kind of public is self organized around a speech address that is “both personal and impersonal” and is “constituted through mere attention;” these publics are “social space[s] created by the reflexive circulation of discourse,” of “poetic world making” that acts “historically according to the temporality of circulation” (422).<sup>21</sup> Television fandom – global communities of strangers brought together through the reading and writing of fanfiction, by a fascination and frustration with a particular show – is exactly this type of public. Some publics, however, Warner elaborates, come to represent *the* public; they will, for an indefinite amount of time, function as representative of the collective social body of a nation (or even in this era of globalization, the world). This process “depends on arbitrary and social closure (through language, idiolect, genre, and address) to contain its potentially infinite extension,” and a “particular language ideology” that presupposes and then works to maintain a normativizing model of textual interaction that precludes alternative modes of reading and responding to texts, and “the stylization of the reading act as transparent and replicable.” It also “depends on institutionalized forms of power to realize the agency attributed to the public and...on a hierarchy of faculties that allows some activities to count as public or general, while others are thought to be merely personal, private, or particular. Some publics, for these reasons, are more likely than others to stand in for *the* public, to frame their address as the universal discussion of the people (423).

Slash fandoms are a type of public that are quite unlikely to stand in for *the* public; indeed such a transposition is not possible, given fic’s definitional dependence on open textual

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21 For further reading on women and reading publics, see Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*.

borders and the rejection of “arbitrary and social closure.”. Warner accounts for some publics’ inability to, refusal of, and disinterest in standing for the public, naming them *counterpublics* and identifying them as communities “that make no attempt to present themselves” as representative of or a stand in for *the* public (423). Slash fandoms’ lack of fungibility with the collective whole of the public emerges from the fundamental incompatibility with and rejection of the modes of reading required in order to maintain “the performative dimensions of public discourse” in this particular mode (422). The generic redefinition of texts that fans enact when they read, write, and circulate fanfiction – the transformation of television shows into archontic texts – is possible only through a rejection of the “particular language ideology” that presupposes rational-critical, replicable, static, and abstractable readings of texts across a diverse reading public. Slash fandoms reject the “arbitrary and social closure” placed on texts and readers precisely in order to liberate and test the limits their “potentially infinite extensions” from normativizing containment. Counterpublics are “constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public” because they are “structured from different dispositions or protocols that obtain elsewhere in the culture,” and this conflict “extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public, or the hierarchy among media” (423). Fic communities, particularly slash, are structured by this conflictual relation to the dominant. The discursive field of counterpublics, while never fully independent of or in polar opposition to the dominant, is nonetheless fundamentally constituted by a non-normative orientation towards dominant discourses, texts, and reading and response protocols.

Much like Derecho’s essay offers a productive theoretical rubric through which to understand the generic redefinition fans perform when they write fic, but lacks an analysis of the material action by which this occurs, Warner’s “Publics and Counterpublics” provides

an incredibly valuable lens through which to theorize slash fandoms' relations to their source texts and dominant discourses, but also does not specifically account for the more specific processes through which counterpublics are constituted. This is where the Genre Function, and more specifically, uptake, is eminently useful for re-mapping our navigations of slash fic. As communities that “come into being only in relation to texts and their circulation,” publics are formed via uptake – by how audiences read and respond to the texts; it follows then, that counterpublics are formed via non-normative uptake, and that, slash fandoms are queer counterpublics that are formed via queer uptake. Warner links counterpublics to a rejection of the “particular language ideology” that holds texts as static, privileged sources of discursive meaning via various forms of closure. As “the inter- and intrageneric relationship between texts, in which one text...prompts an *appropriate* response or uptake...[or] echoing speech – in a particular context or ceremonial,” the “bi-directional relation that holds” between texts and genres, uptake names the dynamics and social formations that occur when a public or counterpublic interacts with its focal text. Reading fic via theories of publics and counterpublics, with an emphasis on uptake and the Genre Function, thus resituates the canon in fan studies. Rather than replicating the oversimplified, limiting, and politically problematic incorporation/resistance paradigm that prioritizes the canon as the locus of fic and writerly invention, queer uptake includes the canon and fan interpretations of it as part of a much larger constellation of motives and desires that make up the discursive scene within which slash fic is written and circulated (and thus also constitutes). Exploring fic through the critical lens of queer uptake allows us to see how, within a specific slash fandom, and even down to individual writers and their fics, the canon – and the writer's interpretations of it – is always present as one loci of inspiration, but does not privilege it as the sole or even primary motive or source of invention.

This approach is more accurate in representing the complexity and critical work of slash, and allows for more flexibility in theorizing and understanding this complexity; it also functions to de-privilege the canon while still acknowledging its crucial role in shaping slash fic and slash counterpublics, always cognizant of the fact that response to the canon narrative is merely one of many possible motivators and functions of slash. Furthermore, theorizing queer uptake requires an equal acknowledgement of the larger discursive and generic scene, expanding and complicating traditional understandings of the canon itself as a hierarchical source of definitive readings while simultaneously expanding the very definition of the canon, a necessity dictated by social media and the resulting collapse of conventional boundaries between fandom, canon, and those who create it (writers, actors, producers). The resulting network of paratexts and discursive events – tweets, fan conventions, interviews, obscure network statements, promotional materials, et cetera – while partially independent from the canon narratives, are nevertheless crucial for understanding slash counterpublics and the texts they produce, for they significantly inform slash fic and how slash counterpublics function. My analyses of slash via queer uptake position fic as not directly responses to the canon, but rather, as interconnected utterances within this particular discursive scene; these conversations include the canon paratexts as much, or even more, than the canon narrative itself, and fic writers use the canon strategically to respond to the heteronormative ideologies from which the canon emerges and the affective realities created by them.

Defining a counterpublic as constituted by its reading practices might suggest that the subversive potential we seek to locate resides in this renegotiation and rejection of normative reading acts. While acknowledging the centrality of reading for counterpublics generally, it is still not sufficiently adequate to fully account for the complexity of slash shipping and slash fic or

slash fandoms' various intersections with the hegemonic cultures and ideologies that marginalize them, nor the queer identities and experiences that fans write into and out of heteronormative texts. Not only do slash fandoms deploy alternative reading practices in their interactions with dominant discourses, they do so in ways that further reject normativizing impulses that demand critical attention and nuancing. Equating this counterpublic reading orientation towards dominant discourses with slash fandoms' insistence on the presence of homoerotic (sub)texts in their source texts also risks another elision and oversimplification of what it is fans actually *do* when they choose to write slash, and what kind of critical, affective work is achieved by this writing. While the counterpublic rejection of normative reading certainly allows for and contributes to fans' interpretation of a text's putative queerness, it is a fundamentally different act and discursive contribution to *write* this interpretation into textual existence. Rigorously maintaining the distinction between these too-often conflated acts reminds us of some important differences that are crucial for moving the field of fan studies forward in order to accurately account for the full complexity of contemporary slash fandom. It reminds us that the interpretation of homoeroticism in a TV show, regardless of the "actual" presence of such an erotic, remains just that – an interpretive gesture that will always be subject to canonical/corporate authority and validation in order to "prove" or "disprove." Theories of slash that privilege reading practices are dependent on the content of the source texts – the canon – in order to substantiate their analyses, a problematic reiteration of the very ideologies and power structures that fandom resists. Indeed, this model of fan studies often inadvertently performs one of the ideological deceptions at work in those hegemonic attempts to transpose a public as *the* public, as "it depends on institutionalized forms of power to realize the agency attributed to the public" (Warner 423). Thus, while how fans read and interpret texts is an important an important dimension of the

motivations and effects of slash, I maintain that, first and foremost, slash is a non-normative interpretation of a text's genre and generic status. As various shows and their corresponding fandoms demonstrate to varying degrees, popular texts that inspire passionate slash fandoms do traffic in queer possibilities – possibilities that are severely circumscribed by heteronormative respectability politics and that are often blatantly baiting – and fans are astute, critical readers of these dynamics. But fan studies' tendency to conflate the reading textual homoeroticism with writing slash fic denies the complexity of fan motives, desires, affects, and critical strategies when fans choose to write slash as a mode of response to these texts. In other words, slash fans' rejection of *how* to read a text does not equate to what they *do* with the texts once they've read and re-read them. This act of interpreting the genre non-normatively – taking the source text “as some other kind” in order to reject the containment of its “potentially infinite extension” – and then crafting and circulating textual responses that enact this disruption of normative genre conventions while simultaneously violating normative content conventions, is the truly subversive and resistant work of slash.

The co-constitutive nature of genre and content – how the rules of genre delimit what can be represented within a specific discursive scene – presents a possible contradiction for defining queer uptake and slash fic's critical resistance; reconfiguring our understanding of the subversive function of slash as a resistant genre/writing response rather than a resistant reading practice risks suggesting that fan interpretations of source texts' queerness, subtextual or otherwise, are inconsequential to queer uptake. On the contrary, slash fans' readings of the shows' content (related to but still necessarily distinct from their genre readings) are an essential element of their dynamics of responsivity, and the tension between genre and content in this sense is actually quite productive. The typical understanding of slash fic through the incorporation/

resistance paradigm problematically assumes that fans are scavenging source texts for any hints of homoeroticism in order to generate inspiration for slash ship(s). While not denying the truth that slash fans do in fact read source texts with keen eyes for queerness, shifting our focus to the ways in which slash fans reject the normative genre ideologies of corporate media texts allows for a more nuanced and nimble understanding of what slash fans are reading for when they critically interpret their source texts. The discursive and generic ideologies of capitalist heteropatriarchy regulate what experiences and identities can be meaningfully represented in corporate media texts; as feminist and queer theorists have abundantly proven, “heterosexuality is an institution that organizes more than just the sexual: it is socially pervasive underlying myriad taken-for-granted norms that shape what can be seen, said, and valued,” (Hennessy 36). The Genre Function reminds us that these “taken-for-granted norms” are enacted, embodied, and reproduced at the level of genre, rendering these texts inherently heteronormative regardless of the degree to which queer experiences and identities are represented. Thus, fan rejection of these generic boundaries rejections of capitalist heteronormativity, and fan textual interpretations that help motivate slash are but one element extension of this critical stance against heteronormativity. In other words, in defining queer uptake, I theorize fan readings of shows not as a search for queerness, but as a recognition of the *absence* of authentic queerness. Queer uptake’s impetus is a two-pronged resistance to both the heteronormative generic status and generic content limitations of corporate media texts. Slash fans write into being the queer identities, experiences, and possibilities denied by the heteronormative genre protocols of the source texts. Slash is a rogue, counterpublic genre that imagines fields of social relations not dictated by the hetero-homo binary and the ideological sleight-of-hand that naturalizes fixed gender binarism, heterosexual desire and relationships; slash imagines worlds where

heterosexuality is merely one of many dynamic and contingent sexualities, where sexuality is not necessarily constitutive of identity, and where queer sexualities hold the same cultural status as heterosexuality.

Preserving distinctions between slash's generic forms and functions and its content is, admittedly, a tricky proposition to navigate, given the overlap and interdependency on one for the other; but it offers productive insights for both revising our orientations towards how we theorize and locate the resistance and subversion of slash and for further understanding slash fandom's dynamics with their source texts, particularly in regard to *Supernatural* and *Teen Wolf* their divergent canonical responses to their slash fandoms. *Supernatural*, already a deliberate hybridization of genres, fundamentally redefined itself and its relationship to fans in its fourth season (2008-09) with the introduction of the in-universe *Supernatural* book series and its corresponding fandom that serve as a direct metacommentaries on its cultural status, essentially dissolving the illusion of the fourth wall and further expanding its own generic boundaries. After three years of Wincest and J2, three years of fans' continual redefinition of and expansion of the show's genre and possibilities, the canon writes itself, its fanfiction, and its slash fandom into the narrative structure of the show in an embrace of its archontic status as embodied by fans' queer uptake. It's this incorporation of slash fandom that allows for the eventual welcoming of fans as co-creators of the show's archive in the show's 200<sup>th</sup> episode, season ten's "Fan Fiction."

In contrast to *Supernatural*'s relative flexibility and acceptance of their slash fandoms' manipulation of the show at the level of genre, *Teen Wolf*'s response to the enormous popularity of Sterek fixated instead on the *content* of the fandom's textual production, rather than the disruptions of the normative processes of the genre function. Demonstrating a fundamental but-all-too-common misunderstanding of slash, the show responded to Sterek fans as if their

only desire was to see the relationship realized in canon, and as if the only purpose of their fic was to sexually exploit the characters and actors. Like any slash fandom, those desires are indeed present in Sterek, and the desire to see Stiles and Derek develop a canonical romantic relationship was fueled by the show's early promise be a sexually inclusive universe. But the canon fundamentally misrecognized and misunderstood the complexity of and affective attachments embedded within slash fic and the communities it co-constitutes, leading to the manipulation of Sterek and the fandom for PR purposes, textual and paratextual queerbaiting, and then finally a rejection of the ship and fandom in order to pursue a more normative (straight white male) audience. The result has been hostility towards and downright hatred of *Teen Wolf*, its writers, and MTV that has come to define the Sterek fandom, and, to a large extent, *Teen Wolf's* entire audience. Where *Supernatural* responds to their fandom's queer uptakes with non-normative uptakes of their own and welcomes fan transformations, *Teen Wolf* rejects the transformative possibilities and accomplishments of fans' queer uptakes while exploiting slash fans' desires for meaningful queer representation.

I have been arguing that queer uptake can account for what slash writers do with the shows and why, and what effects those genred and affective performances have as they continually expand and replenish the texts' archives and speak back to the corporate media culture that attempts to manage their ideological and affective interactions with the shows. Situating slash fandoms as Warnerian counterpublics emphasizes the centrality of the Genre Function and uptake in the formation of these communities, linking rhetorical genre studies to queer theory and revealing how queer uptake constitutes the queer counterpublic, where, as Warner asserts, "no one is in the closet: the presumptive heterosexuality that constitutes the closet for individuals in ordinary speech is suspended" (424). The normative reading protocols

that counterpublics reject are also *heteronormative* – they presume, often with dense obscuration, that the public addressed will recognize themselves within and accept a binarized gender/sexual schema; thus the rejection of normative epistemologies of reading can be productively linked to a rejection of heteronormativity more broadly. I have also argued that queer uptake’s imperative is a rejection and critique of the heteronormative ideologies at work within and upon the source text, and that in slash counterpublics, the choice to enact this rejection by writing in this rogue, archontic genre constitutes a subversive, queer act of resistance.

My naming of slash’s particular critical and generic functioning as queer is framed by two crucial texts by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), from the inception of the field that came to be known as queer theory, and “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You” (2003)<sup>22</sup>, an essay published more than twenty years later and motivated by a reflection on and a critique of the methodology *Epistemology* helped define. Bookending my definition with these two texts does more than provide a neat symmetry to my theoretical rubric; the evolution of Sedgwick’s work, from the paradigm-defining *Epistemology* to the paradigm-redefining “Paranoid Reading,” is rich with potential for studying slash fandom, precisely because slash is a site where the very questions and continual redefinitions of queer theory and queer identity are under constant negotiation – despite the claim by some that queer theory fails to “travel... beyond the university,” and that the “theoretical undoing of [heterosexuality] and gender stability has had so little impact out in the real world” (Halberstam 121). In slash fandom, the undoing of heterosexuality isn’t just theoretical; it’s a vigorous, unruly, creative, contradictory and endlessly proliferating effusion and circulation of affectively-inflected critiques and deconstructions of heteronormativity made possible by uptaking queerly. But what does it mean to unsettle and

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22 From *Thinking, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, and Performance*.

deconstruct heteronormativity? What, for that matter, does it mean to be queer, to read and write queerly?

In “Paranoid Reading,” Sedgwick critiques her earlier work for its reliance on the hermeneutics of suspicion when she writes that “the mutual inscription of queer thought with the topic of paranoia may be less necessary, less definitional, less completely constitutive than earlier writing on it, very much including my own, has assumed” (146). Nonetheless, her articulation of the “homo/heterosexual definition” and its world-shaping power remains materially accurate and theoretically productive as a foundational approach to anti-homophobic inquiry – but crucially, not exhaustive or totalizing. In *Epistemology*, Sedgwick traces the logics by which the categories of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” came to name not just an individual’s sexual-object choice in relation to binarized gender, but how, beginning in the late nineteenth century, epistemological and ontological world-mapping came to pivot around the specific historical discourse wherein “every person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable to a homo- or hetero-sexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications, however confusing, for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal existence” (2). The expansive, insidious reach of the homo/hetero definition inflects nearly every element of Western thought and is transmitted and reproduced via all manner of discursive/material apparatuses and ideological maneuverings, producing a binary “master term” that masks both its asymmetry and its capacious reach into virtually every aspect of public and private existence. Fundamental to this is the oft-observed fact that the homo/hetero binary functions not as equally opposing forces where never the twain shall meet, but as a codependent dyad in which heterosexuality’s intelligibility as an identity category (as opposed “simply” describing the sex or gender of one’s sexual object choice) rests on homosexuality’s simultaneous and much

more visible construction. Heterosexuality's normative power emerges from the simultaneous "subsumption and exclusion of" homosexuality, a contradiction that creates homosexuality as a perverted deviance while eliding over the very necessity of homosexuality as an ideological construction for heterosexuality. Sedgwick points to how this uneven and co-constitutive dynamic makes both of these categories and their attendant ideological implications "irresolvably unstable" and "makes it possible to identify them as sites that are *peculiarly* densely charged with lasting potentials for powerful manipulation – through precisely the mechanisms of self-contradictory definition" (10, original emphasis). The categories of heterosexual and homosexual are inextricably intertwined and mutually constitutive, despite the epistemological obscurations that work to conceal this codependency; this relational contingency thus makes both categories inherently unstable and up for continual redefinition and exploitation – for both social violence and social liberation. Sedgwick's elaboration of the particular definitional binaries that the homo/hetero thus inheres is worth quoting at length for how it maps some of the most consequential sites where heteronormativity operates:

I'll argue that the now chronic modern crisis of modern homo/heterosexual definition has affected our culture through its ineffaceable marking particularly of the categories secrecy/disclosure, knowledge/ignorance, private/public, masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural/artificial, new/old, discipline/terrorism, canonic/noncanonic, wholeness/decadence, urbane/provincial, domestic/foreign, health/illness, same/different, active/passive, in/out, cognition/paranoia, art/kitsch, utopia/apocalypse, sincerity/sentimentality, and voluntary/addiction. (11)

Disclosure, public, feminine, minority, artificial, noncanonic, decadence, different, passive, out, kitsch, sentimentality: all subordinated sides of the heteronormative binaries that also describe fandom and slash fic, in various registers of accusation and evaluative judgment from various positions in relation to these categories. This mapping also makes visible the hidden centrality

of sexuality (and more often than not, sexuality as co-extensive with fixed gender) that informs even the most seemingly ‘non-sexual’ beliefs, acts, emotions, self-knowledges. It exposes how and social interactions, ideological allegiances, and their infinite repercussions hierarchize and thus marginalize those subjects who, for an infinite array of intersectional considerations, recognize themselves on the wrong side of the slash.

*Epistemology of the Closet* complicates our dangerously reductive tendencies to view the homo/hetero binary as fundamentally oppositional, requiring that we acknowledge and attend to the interactive and conditional nature of these hegemonic configurations that are under constant negotiation via specific articulations and exploitations of their definitional instability. This articulation of the homo/hetero definition – what becomes, in the parlance of Queer Studies, heteronormativity – thus provides another rich analytical link between queer theory and rhetorical genre studies. Sedgwick rejects “an idealist faith in the necessarily, immanently self-corrosive efficacy of the contradictions inherent to these definitional binarisms” and instead argues that “contests for discursive power can be specified as *competitions for the material or rhetorical leverage* required to set the terms of, and to profit in some way from, the operations of such an incoherence of definition” (11; my emphasis). In any given rhetorical situation, power is wielded by those best positioned to set the terms of the definitional scope and status of these inherently unstable categories. Thus, anti-homophobic inquiry and subversion, on both abstract and material planes, is a struggle for ideological destabilization, denormativization of the homo/heterosexual definition, and rhetorical control – struggles that occur via uptake. *Epistemology of the Closet* “attend[s] to the performative aspects of texts, and to what are often blandly called their ‘*reader relations,*’ as sites of definitional creation, violence, and rupture in relation to particular readers, particular institutional circumstances” (3; my emphasis). Uptake – the

bidirectional hold between texts and genres, the echoing speech that may or may not respond appropriately and thus reproduce, or not, desired ideologies and hierarchies – is the site of these reader relations, and the queer uptakes performed by slash writers – particular readers responding to particular institutional circumstances – are especially vibrant with definitional creations, violences, and ruptures that subvert the homo/hetero definition along a multitude of critical axes.

Of course, any thoughtful deployment of *queer* must attend to the term's intractability, and in particular, to the critical conversations and developments regarding the term's theoretical and political possibilities after the institutionalization of queer theory in the 1990s, the mainstream liberal movement collectively called "gay rights," and subsequent responses, revisions, expansions, redefinitions, and reclamations. As a critical lens and social/political position, queer's explanatory and political power emerges precisely from its conditional flexibility, and this categorical instability thus requires continual redefinitions and clear articulations of how it's being used – what historical, material, subjective, identity, sexual, and discursive referents and contingencies are linked to its usage, what claims it seeks to make, what bodies and behaviors it strives to name and theorize, what affective attachments it activates. Hailing Judith Butler and Michael Warner, among others, the authors of the 2005 essay "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?," remind us that "the assertion of 'queer' must never purport to fully describe those it seeks to represent" and that "the operations of queer critique...can never be decided on in advance nor be depended upon in the future. The reinvention of the term is contingent on its political obsolescence, one necessarily at odds with any fortification of its critical reach in advance of or any static notion of its presumed audience and participants" (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 3). This contingency is the foundation upon which scholars have posited the "subjectless critique" of twenty-first century queer studies, which positions 'queer'

discursively in order to “mobilize a broad social critique of race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, as well as sexuality. This deployment “disallows any positing of a proper subject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent.” Fundamental to this broad mobilization is a deconstruction of and even abandonment of “the tenets of positivism at the heart of identity politics....despite the historical necessities of ‘strategic essentialism’” (5). This critique of identity along the politicized axes of sex, gender, race, nationality, religion, and socioeconomic status constitutes a queer epistemology that sets its sights on a on “‘a wide field of normalization’ as the site of social violence,” and seeks to expose and disrupt “those hegemonic social structures by which certain subjects are rendered ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ through the production of ‘perverse’ and ‘pathological’ others,” a thorough rejection of a “minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet* xxvi.) This repudiation of identity politics and the assumptions upon which they rest extends to a deconstruction and disruption of the organizing rubric of liberal LGBTQ studies and activism, the notion that all human beings have something that we name “sexual identity;” that, through some obscure transubstantiation, one’s self-conception, subjectivity, and relations to others is inherently linked to, and even determined by, one’s genitals, genital activity, and the desires so-named sexual. The disarticulation of sexual acts from identity and the concomitant disavowal of politicized identity more broadly has expanded the reach of *queer* to encompass epistemological and ontological rejections of regulatory discourses that uncritically reproduce positivist, co-constitutive ideologies upon which an entire social schema of hierarchized identities is mapped and manipulated for the benefit of capitalist control and proliferation.

The expanded deployment of queer theory’s inherently non-normative and subversive

potentials, while vital for resisting the ever-increasing pressures of global, neoliberal state oppression, has also decentered sexual behavior and sexuality from queer theorizing. This distancing, while providing a politically and theoretically exigent position from which to interrogate the widespread rejection of the “regimes of the normal,” presents something of a challenge for theorists and scholars who still find critical and material relevance in maintaining sex and sexual identity’s privileged position within queer discourses. Carla Freccero, responding to this, writes that the “vagaries of identity and identification...have been crucial sites to rework,” but reiterates that the theoretical and political possibilities of identity haven’t been wholly exhausted or rendered totally complicit in the perpetuation of heteropatriarchy; the wholesale rejection of identity politics, particularly in relation to sex and gender, forecloses these possibilities, and currently, “the gendered implications of queering are producing ever richer analytical work in the areas of intersex, transgender, and transsexual theorizing....[where] the focus has been on identification and on critiques (or reinstatements) of identity” (22 – 23). I posit that, precisely because they are constituted by subjects grappling with the political and material effects of a social schema that still epitomizes sexual identities and regulates sex and gender in all manner of ways, and because participation in these counterpublics is largely generated by and generative of desires to challenge and destabilize these assumptions, slash fandom is one site of such theorizing and non-normative reinstatements of sexual identity in queer political and social thought. Thus, to wholly abandon sexuality and corresponding identity-based critiques and subjectivities in relation to slash as potentially relevant and even subversive strategies for negotiating and surviving regulatory heteronormativity would be both theoretically unproductive and ethically problematic.

The same expansive flexibility that allows for queer’s deployment beyond identity and

sexuality in favor of broader anti-normative inquiry also allows for its evolution and adaptability to best meet the needs of the communities and subjects it seeks to describe. As Judith Butler asserted in 1993, “if the term ‘queer’ is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (19). Thus, my use of queer to describe slash communities and their constitutive uptakes brings together these parallel lines of thought, and, much like fic itself, revises and recombines them to best meet the needs and most effectively describe the complicated discursive and affective functions of these counterpublics. Slash fandom proves that queer political and social engagement as it is embodied and enacted by subjects – who may or may not claim queer identities, who may only be able to so in the queer counterpublics of slash fandom, who locate slash fandom as a site of the development and evolution of their sexual desires and identities – is neither the wholesale rejection of normative discourses and their attendant essentialist identity politics nor an uncritical embrace of them. In slash fandom, we find a complex, ever-shifting, and highly contingent negotiation between various modes and strategies for surviving and resisting heteronormative oppression. Linda Alcoff, writing about the precursor to this debate in feminist theory, essentialism versus positionality, argues that “the concept of identity politics does not presuppose a prepackaged set of objective needs or political implications but problematizes the connection of identity and politics and introduces identity as a factor in any political analysis.” She also asserts that, “if we combine the concept of identity politics with a conception of the subject as positionality, we can conceive of the subject as nonessentialized and emergent from a historical experience and yet retain our political ability to take gender as an important point of departure”

(433). I argue the same for retaining sex and sexuality's centrality to queer thought and queer experience, maintaining queer as a conceptual analytic that "intersect[s] with, touch[es], or list[s] in the direction of sex – the catchall word that here refers to gender, desire, sexuality, and perhaps anatomy" that is committed to disrupting heteronormativity (Freccero 22). While bound by this consideration, admittedly in ways that may be too limiting for those more committed to subjectless critique, Sedgwick's delineation of the insidious and expansive reach of the hetero/homo binary assures that discourses, texts, and affects nominally out of the realm of the sexual and strictly identitarian – such as genre – do, in fact, fall under the purview of heteronormative ideologies and are thus ripe for queering.

Sedgwick's subsequent work on affect and reparative reading provides my final definitional description of queer uptake. Drawing on the psychoanalytical work of Melanie Klein and the affect theory of Silvan Tomkins, 2003's "Paranoid Reading" acknowledges that the "paranoid imperative" with which "queer studies in particular has had a distinctive history of intimacy" has, if not exhausted itself, has at the very least, become "coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds" (124). Intervening in this with a call for scholars to explore and embrace other modes of engagement and critique alongside our "paranoid" imperative, she argues that "for someone to have an unmystified, angry view of large and genuinely systemic oppressions does not intrinsically or necessarily enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences" ("Paranoid Reading" 125 – 126). Sedgwick does not advocate for a disavowal of the hermeneutics of suspicion or for paranoia as a productive critical rubric; indeed, she allows for its inevitability and necessity to queer thought, particularly in relation to the oppressive hegemony of heteronormativity. But she de-emphasizes it as the

only productive critical queer practice, and instead offers an alternative, reparative reading and writing: creative spaces, critiques, and forms of agency and action in which affective and ameliorative investments can flourish queerly. Sedgwick argues that now that the “suspicious archaeologies of the present” have been thoroughly excavated and that the systemic patterns of violence intrinsic to a capitalist heteronormativity exposed, we must embrace methodologies and practices that are restorative and nourishing, that can heal the damage caused by such violences in order to create politically viable modes of critique and survival. Turning to the “flexible to-and-fro movement implicit in Kleinian *positions*,” to further explore what this might look like, Sedgwick discusses “paranoid and reparative critical *practices* not as theoretical ideologies...but as changing, and heterogeneous relational stances” in which:

the paranoid position – understandably marked by hatred, envy, and anxiety – is a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects into, carves out of, ingests from the world around one. By contrast, the depressive position is an anxiety-mitigating achievement that the infant or adult on sometimes, and often only briefly, succeeds in inhabiting: this is the position from which it is possible in turn to use one’s own resources to assemble or ‘repair’ the murderous part-objects into something like a whole – though, I would emphasize, *not necessarily like any preexisting whole*. Once assembled to one’s own specifications, the more satisfying object is available to be both identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn (128).

Sedgwick then reminds us that “among Klein’s names for the reparative process is love,” and one only need to remember the centrality of love to slash fandom, it is abundantly clear that the generic subversion and invention performed by slash fans is thoroughly reparative. Love – reparative, nourishing, ameliorative – is one of, if not *the* defining motivations of slash: love of the original text (a love that often fades), love of the characters, the unyielding belief in the characters’ love for each other, love for that love, love of favorite works, love for each other. The “murderous part-objects” – homophobia and heteronormativity both within the canon text and

infinite other sites – is disarticulated and disempowered in slash fandom, the canon dismantled and reassembled into more satisfying objects from which fans can find fulfillment and partial reconciliation with dominant culture and the texts to which they are affectively bound.

These more satisfying objects are more than just the texts produced and circulated; the communities, the affective mattering maps, the counterpublics where “no one is in the closet,” *where there is no closet* – these too are the products of the ecological growth made possible by the reparatively-motivated queer uptakes of slash fic. Where paranoid epistemologies and ontologies seek to expose the entrenched workings of systemic oppressions, deploying an “x-ray gaze of the paranoid impulse...[to see] through to an unfleshed skeleton of the culture” and lay bare its various aggressions and complicities with broader structures of oppression, reparative practices seek alternative modes and strategies for accruing resources from which to recover from this oppression (148). Thus exposed and hollowed out, these structures and their traumatic wounds nevertheless linger and fester, in the psyches and upon the bodies of those oppressed by their violence, however mundane they may seem. Much like Abigail Derecho’s articulation of fic and fandom as archontic, texts and communities that seek and welcome continual enlargement and expansions of its archives, “the desire of a reparative impulse...is additive and accretive... it wants to assemble and confer plentitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate self” (148). Sedgwick acknowledges that “paranoid exigencies are often necessary for non-paranoid knowing and utterance,” something we can certainly see at work in slash, which does not abandon the paranoid optic, but instead weds it with more generative impulses as a mode of response, critique, and healing; as affective, communal nourishment, as dynamic interplays that heap plentitude upon hegemonic, heteronormative texts that circumscribe authentic and meaningful queer representation. This impulse does not negate the critical

potentials of slash, but rather allows for more nuanced understandings of how these critiques – embedded in the generic form and structure as well as the content of slash fic – works in tandem and tension with “a wealth of characteristic, culturally centered practices, many of which can well be called reparative, that emerge from queer experience but become invisible or illegible under a paranoid optic” (Sedgwick 147). Under a reparative rubric, for example, one can read slash fandom’s obsessive performance of many a heteronormative romance trope not as a mere reproduction of these ubiquitous cultural forms, but as an affective reworking of them that evinces “a pull towards normative symbology without assuming that those so drawn in [are] stupid or brainwashed, or [do] not wish for non-normative worlds even as they [use] seemingly banal materials to build them” (Freeman 29). Reparative criticism allows us to see how fans deconstruct these narrow romantic codes while simultaneously imagining what it might be like if their normalizing boundaries and hegemonic intelligibility included queer sexualities, bodies, and identities. Sedgwick concludes “Paranoid Reading” with the urgent and necessary reminder that “no less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks.” She reminds us that “what we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many way selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture...whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (150 – 151). Thus, reparative criticism, a mode I both employ as a scholar and argue is at work in slash fandom, is recuperative and cathartic, productive, enriching, and empowering. Taking cues from slash fandom’s energetic and flexible poaching of the most useful bits and pieces of culture, I’ve woven together and sketched the rough edges of a theoretical rubric that will provide the framework for richer, more productive, and I hope, more authentic and accurate

investigations into slash communities constituted by the inchoate selves and subjects that, in deeply meaningful and critically nuanced ways, extract sustenance from hegemonic cultural texts and critique heteronormativity while striving to repair the damage it does, interrogating and rejecting homophobia while affectively and reparatively offering sustenance to themselves and to each other.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “Yes Homo:” *Teen Wolf*, Sterek, and a World Without Heterosexuality (and the Canon)

“*Sterek is its own wonderful thing, it does not belong to Teen Wolf. Kill this idea, kill it with fucking fire.*”

– hoechlindylan.tumblr.com

In 2012’s *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal*, J. Jack Halberstam articulates the frustrations many queer theorists and activists have with the mainstream gay rights movement, particularly its focus on gay marriage and how it expands the heteronormative institution rather than dismantles it. This dedication to expanding state and social apparatuses to allow their normalizing boundaries and impulses to include queers as opposed to challenging and undoing these formations and the homophobia they recursively co-constitute often functions to reify heteronormativity. Halberstam writes:

As we entered a new century, mobile devices firmly in hand, we did not chose to dial up a brand-new world of connection; instead we began to ask whether we could expand the old world of marriage to accommodate more people and whether we could extend the old notion of family to include more and more intricate relations. This is akin to old episodes of *Star Trek*, in which we are seen to have traveled years and miles from earth, we are in completely new solar systems, and yet, when aliens appear, they still take the form of men and women and follow heterosexual modes of intimacy. A few wavy lines on the forehead or an extra nose or something signals difference, but the actual scripting of human sexual relations is left completely untouched. (16)

While *Star Trek* itself did not overtly challenge heterosexism, the genre-defining (of both television sci-fi and slash) show broke ground on a number of progressive issues, such as the stereotype-resisting roles for a black woman and an Asian man, and TV’s first interracial kiss, but it did not, as Halberstam points out, overtly challenge heterosexism. But within Halberstam’s *Star Trek* metaphor is an unwittingly embedded reference to how *Star Trek* has contributed to

the creation of non-normative spaces in which fascinatingly complex revisions of human sexual relations flourish, queerly. His critique of the show's reproduction of heteronormative sexual norms, while salient, elides one of the queerest effects of *Star Trek*: how the perceived sexual and romantic tension between Captain James T. Kirk and Spock (Kirk/Spock) was generative of the genre of slash for the modern era. Named for the punctuation – the slash – used to categorize stories in which writers paired the two men romantically and sexually, the almost exclusively female Kirk/Spock fandom invented a new, queer genre, via Queer Uptake. These fans responded to the show non-normatively by choosing an “inappropriate” response, thus redefining its generic status into an archontic text; they created a queer counterpublic in which they explored and even rescripted sexuality by imagining and celebrating sexual and emotional relations between men, emphasizing affective, reparative responses to the show's heteronormativity and the heterosexism in their lives.

Slash writing and art proliferated wildly since the 1960s, undergoing various transformations and evolutions, but many of the tropes and subgenres invented by Kirk/Spock shippers remain popular in contemporary slash: Hurt/Comfort, Heats, Fuck or Die (inspired by Spock's canonical Pon Farr), Soulbonding. The prevalence of these early tropes and their continual expansion into a variety of fandoms and slash pairings not only speaks to Kirk/Spock's enduring legacy, but also to the genre's flexibility and cultural stakes. The ever-expanding, yet strikingly similar, worlds of slash also evinces the genre's, and the communities it co-constitutes, relevance not only in regard to the dynamics between producers and audiences, but also its significance to its writers and readers, meeting their needs in ways that mainstream media does not. The sheer number and popularity of slash fandoms, and the millions of fics written in the genre since the days of mimeographed and mailed fanzines, are indicative of so much more than

pathologized obsessions with romance and queer relationships, obsessive adoration of the text, or fans “misreading” the canon; rather, these queer uptakes suggest much more complicated motivations and functions of slash, and that slash fandom is a site of critique and the rescripting of sexual relations that Halberstam seeks and that Queer Theory advocates.

In this chapter, I analyze one of the most popular and complex ships in contemporary fandom, Sterek from MTV’s *Teen Wolf* (Figure 1), in order to illuminate some of the ways in which slash functions as critiques of queerphobia and heteronormativity by rescripting sexual relations through queer uptake and rogue genre production and circulation. Every queer

fandom, both slash and femslash, has a particular and ever-evolving dynamic with its canon, shaped by the textual representation of and the paratextual relationship with queer sexualities.

Whether or not the ship is canonical (in the case of most popular M/M ships, not);

if the characters are canonically queer;

how the show’s nexus of producers,

writers, network executives, actors, social media team, etc., respond to the ship; how the show

portrays queer characters, if it does at all – all of these factors play a role in not only the tenor

of the relationship between slash fans and the canon, but also in how, why, and what kind of fics

are written. I’ve chosen Sterek both for its enormous popularity – countless Tumblr blogs and

nearly 50,000 fics on Archive of Our Own (second only Destiel from *Supernatural*, a fandom



Figure 1. Sterek, the pairing of canonically heterosexual characters Stiles (left) and Derek (right), has come to largely define the Teen Wolf fandom – and perhaps even the show itself. (“Wolf’s Bane”)

twice as old as Sterek) – and for its uniquely hostile relationship to its canon show<sup>23</sup> *Teen Wolf*'s queerbaiting and eventual hostile rejection of the Sterek fandom, did not, as one might expect, lead to fans abandoning the ship. Rather, the fans abandoned the show; Sterek writers and readers further embraced and popularized the ship while refusing to watch the show, with some fans even campaigning for its cancellation. This dynamic between the show and its fandom that has, for all intents and purposes, rejected the show – is complex, fraught with tension, and often contradictory – is a fascinating and richly productive opportunity to investigate Queer Uptake for how fan writers utilize slash to critique queerphobia and heteronormativity.

Promised a “world without homophobia” by series creator and showrunner Jeff Davis, fans who recognized the potential of a romantic relationship between the canonically heterosexual Stiles and Derek, once had high hopes that, even if the relationship was never going to become canon, that they were still welcomed by the show. But the “world without homophobia” promised by *Teen Wolf* – itself a deeply flawed premise – failed to come fruition in the canon or the in the show’s paratextual discourse – which has proven to be homophobic in its treatment of slash ships and fans. But the space of Sterek fanfiction goes beyond the impossible promise of a world without homophobia and offers something even more radical and socially relevant: a world without heterosexuality. This absence of heterosexuality does not equate to the absence of heterosexual characters, or that sexual and romantic intimacy coded as hetero is nonexistent in Sterek fics, even though queer characters and queer sex are predominant. Heterosexual characters still populate these worlds, and hetero sex, when present, is narrated in as much explicit detail as queer sex; nor does this mean that homophobia as it is

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23 Perhaps only the Clexa (Clarke/Lexa) fandom of *The 100* is comparable in disdain and outright rejection of its canon. A canonical femslash relationship between bisexual Clarke and lesbian Lexa, fans were outraged in March 2016 when Lexa was killed off immediately after physically consummating her relationship with Clarke, in an instance of the tired “Bury Your Gays” trope. Fans were – and still are – outraged and mobilized against the show. For further reading, see “The Clexa Fandom’s Fight Continues to Receive Global Attention” by Lindsey Marie.

commonly understood and experienced in the real world is absent from these fictional worlds. Rather, the world without heterosexuality created by Sterek writers is a world without the oppressive *ideologies* of normalized heterosexuality; a field of social/sexual relations not dictated by the hetero-homo binary and the naturalization of heterosexual desires and relationship formations. These are worlds in which the “models of masculinity and femininity that have been established as ordinary and normal and good” are challenged and the infinite varieties of social and sexual relations that are made possible when the paradigms of naturalized heterosexuality and the heteronormativity are rejected (Halberstam 10). A world in which genitals are not imbued with the power to determine gender identity and sexual-object choice; a world in which heterosexuality is not compulsory, but merely one of countless dynamic sexualities and relationship formations. The ideal of a world with heterosexuality stands in opposition to the “world without homophobia” and the mainstream progressive discourses of “tolerance” from which it emerges – concepts that more often than not recapitulate and reinscribe heterosexual norms rather than dismantle them. Rather than “tolerating” deviations from the norm, Sterek and other slash writers disregard and abolish the concept of norms altogether, resisting the “wide field of social violence enacted by normalization” (Warner xxiv). This is akin to José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of “*queer utopia*,” a continually strived-for future in which identitarian markers of difference are not erased, but celebrated in a queer “field of utopian possibility...in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity” (20). Muñoz identifies “performances of queer citizenship” that “contain...an anticipatory illumination of a queer world” – worlds created by Sterek writers that are “a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility in the stultifying heterosexual present” (49). Crucially, these worlds are queer primarily due to the absence of heterosexuality, rather than the presence

of homosexuality.

In Sterek fics, a world without heterosexuality is one of the most common – and deceptively subtle – responses employed in response to canonical/cultural homophobia. It is a disregard for conversations about sexuality altogether. This may, at first, seem like a passive non-engagement with heteronormativity and the homophobia it cultivates, but in fact a fascinating form of resistance. Compulsive heteronormativity is present in its absence, in the lack of discussions about sexual orientation: Stiles and Derek are attracted to each other and they get together without either character identifying as gay, bi, or otherwise queer. As the blogger hoechlinteeth puts it: “I love how in Sterek fics they don’t ask each other if they’re gay or straight or bi. They just bang.” This is a world without homophobia/ heteronormativity in the most literal sense: same sex attraction is represented as natural and normal – so normal that doesn’t need to be commented on at all, just like heterosexual representation. The critique of heteronormative sexual relations appears in a variety of other modes in the Sterek fandom, such as the extremely popular Alpha/Beta/Omega subgenre that imagine a three-tiered sexual schema based on wolf pack structures rather than gender or sexual orientation, and bottom!Derek, in which the more traditionally masculine and aggressive werewolf is the receptive sexual partner. There are also many Sterek fics that challenge entrenched ideologies of heterosexuality reproduced in the canon by directly engaging with and critiquing its queerphobia. *Teen Wolf*’s hypocrisy – claiming to be a progressive leader in queer representation while failing to represent queer characters in any meaningful way, while also actively shaming its queer fandom, is indicative of mainstream corporate media that “invoke[s] mass culture queerness only to deny/dismiss/contain it in order to maintain straight culture’s pleasures and profits.” In *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, Alexander Doty further asserts that if “mass culture remains by, for, and about straight culture,

it will be so through our silences, or by our continued acquiescence to such cultural paradigms as connotation, *subcultures*, *subcultural studies*, *subtexting*, the closet, and other heterocentrist ploys positioning straightness as the norm (Doty 104). Sterek writers refuse to be silent in response to the canon's ploys of manipulation of connotation and subtextual gestures towards an always-unfulfilled representation of queerness, as well as the shame perpetuated by paratextual discourses regarding slash shipping. Sterek writers reject these heterocentrist ploys and their attendant queerphobia, uptaking queerly not just in response to what they read as homoeroticism of the canon, but to the canon's homophobia. As opposed to simply reading sexual chemistry between Derek and Stiles and rendering it explicit, Sterek writers are, in part, motivated by the canon's refusal to develop that chemistry, the cultural homophobia that denies the possibility of a romantic/sexual relationship between them, and the aggressive queerbaiting in *Teen Wolf's* first three seasons. By crafting their echoing speech to be deposited in the text's archive and insisting on the characters' queerness and love for each other, Sterek writers reject the canon's claims to authority to determine characters' sexualities, its supposedly-closed textual borders that authorize appropriate readings and responses, its generic status as an inviolable, discrete text.

Of *Teen Wolf's* many insults towards Sterek fans, perhaps the most egregious and frustrating is the way it blatantly queerbaited Stiles as potentially bisexual. Defined by fandom wiki Fanlore as "the attempt by canon creators...to woo queer fans and/or slash fans, but with no intention of actually showing a gay relationship being consummated on screen," queerbaiting was a defining characteristic of Stiles' portrayal in the show's early seasons. It began early in the first season, when the Sterek fandom was just beginning to form. In the third episode, "Pack Mentality" (1.03), Stiles, without any narrative explanation, is suddenly very concerned with whether or not he's attractive to gay men. First, he asks, Danny, the show's token gay character,

if he finds him attractive, and then in the same episode, he asks his straight best friend Scott, “Am I not attractive to gay guys?” When Scott ignores the question, Stiles presses him on it: “You didn’t answer...am I not attractive to gay guys?” In a season two episode, Stiles, semi-jokingly tells Scott, “Your newfound heroism is making me very attracted to you. You wanna make out for a little bit, just to see how it feels?” (“Ice Pick” 2.03). And again, in the sixth episode of season two, Stiles’ father discovers that he’s been at Jungle, the town’s gay club, and asserts “you’re not gay,” to which Stiles replies, indignantly, “I could be!” Reproducing a tired cliché, his dad responds, “Not dressed like that” (“Frenemy” 2.06). This particular exchange is not only yet another moment of queerbaiting, but also a reiteration of the tired stereotype of all gay men as “fashionable,” and by implication, the stereotype that all men who dress fashionably are gay. The fandom’s response to moment was swift, offering a multitude of responses ranging from enthusiastic optimism about Stiles’ potential queerness, to sharp, savvy criticism of both the bisexual erasure and the stereotyping of gay men, such as this rewriting of the scene from a series of blog posts titled “Things Stiles Stilinski was actually thinking” (Figure 2):

And a few episodes later after this one the show expands its queerbaiting to tease Sterek, when Stiles and Derek, temporarily paralyzed, are lying on the floor together, Stiles strewn across Derek’s body. When Derek tells Matt, the season’s villain, to get Stiles off of him, he smirks, “I don’t know, Derek. I think you two make a pretty good pair,” a scene that the actor later tweeted about, declaring, “I gave you Sterek. You’re welcome,” (Ford).

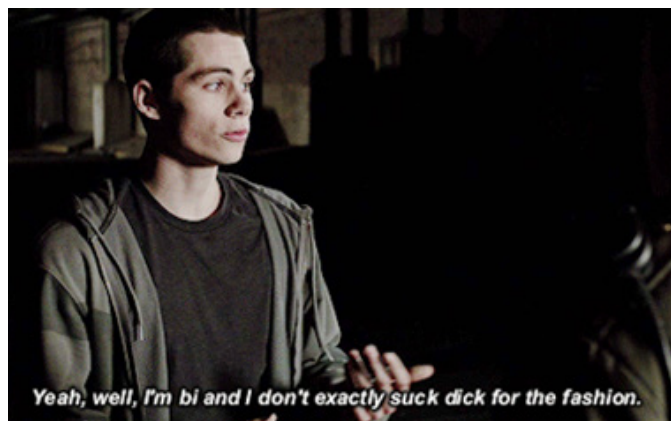


Figure 2. Sterek fans rewrite scenes to both critique and queer the canon (prettiestcaptain)

In season three, when the Sterek fandom was approaching the height of its zeal, the baiting of Stiles' possible bisexuality became even more overt. In the episode "Unleashed" (3.04), Stiles is desperate to have sex because a mysterious supernatural creature is sacrificing virgins. Agitated, he makes a declaration in the boys locker room:

STILES: Someone needs to have sex me, like today. Someone needs to sex me right now!

DANNY: Alright, I'll do it. Come by my place at nine. Plan to stay the night. I like to cuddle.

STILES: That's so sweet.... Are you kidding?

DANNY: Yes, I'm kidding.

STILES: You don't toy with a guy's emotions like that Danny. It's not attractive!  
("Unleashed" 3.04)

Later that same season, during a party, the minor character Caitlin, reappears; in a previous episode she was about to have sex with her girlfriend, who was a victim of virgin sacrifice. Stiles has assumed, that because Caitlin has a girlfriend, she is a lesbian, so, at the part, when she kisses him, he's confused:

STILES: I thought you liked girls.

CAITLIN: I do.

STILES: So you also like boys?

CAITLIN: Absolutely. Do you?  
("Illuminated" 3.16)

Fans hoping for confirmation of Stiles' repeatedly hinted-at bisexuality held their collective breath, hoping that the show's choice to have Caitlin directly ask Stiles if he's bisexual

meant that he was finally going to come out as queer. But instead of answering Caitlin's question, Stiles looks off into the distance with a questioning, puzzled look on his face. He then, quite conveniently, is distracted by the supernatural crisis afoot, and walks away from Caitlin, question unanswered. This scene is a remarkably apt metaphor for *Teen Wolf's* disingenuous LGBTQ politics: it is an obvious attempt to appease fan demands for meaningful queer representation with no follow through, an utter lack of depth, or any real commitment to exploring queer experiences or the possibilities of the promised "world without homophobia." Stiles' implicit heterosexuality is repeatedly challenged, only to have that challenge erased, ignored, and played for humor, rather than any sincere exploration of his potential queerness. For many fans waiting patiently for these canonical feints towards a bisexual or gay Stiles to eventually develop into an actual acknowledgement of his queerness, these scenes are not only disappointing, they're insulting and damaging. Much of the enthusiasm that initially motivated Sterek shippers' support of the show had to do with Davis' promise of a world without homophobia, and for Sterek fans, this promise rang with possibility that the relationship could, maybe even *would*, become canon, something encouraged by all these "Stiles might be gay or bisexual" moments that have proven to be manipulation of the fandom for the sake of media attention and ratings.

This queerbaiting and subsequent rejection of Stiles' frequently hinted-at bisexuality extend beyond the canonical narrative, and was perpetuated in the show's paratextual discourses. Jeff Davis often made vague comments about Stiles' potential bisexuality (saucefactory). In response to a fan question about the possibility of Sterek becoming canon, tweeted "Well if enough fans demanded it, who knows? I could be persuaded :)" (berry-muffin). As many fans have remarked in a variety of responses, one would think that the sheer number of Sterek shippers and the abundance of fic and art that celebrate the pairing would be enough to

persuade the writers and network to explore this relationship. This enthusiasm in support of the canonization of Sterek included avid participation in various online polls about favorite ships from media outlets, with Sterek often winning by large margins, with one tallying more 300,000 votes (berry-muffin). Several of the show's actors, including Tyler Hoechlin and Dylan O'Brien, have also been enthusiastic about Sterek. In 2013, fan writers and artists qhuinn and sinyhale self-published *The Sterek Book*, which includes fanart from forty artists alongside various explanations for shipping Sterek and celebrations of the relationship, both canon and fanon. They gave copies to Tyler Hoechlin at a *Teen Wolf* convention, and according to sinyhale, he was impressed with and enthusiastic about the book (sinyhale, "Jeff Davis").

Typically, the actors' support of Sterek has walked the fine line of tacit, vague support with a heavy dose of wink-and-nod teasing. In response to a fan question at a con asking if he thought Derek had ever considered giving Stiles the bite to turn him into a werewolf, Tyler Hoechlin once jokingly responded, "What kind of bite are we talking about? Where is this question going?" When the fan clarified that they meant the wolf bite, a laughing Hoechlin continued "What kind of wolf bite?" much to fans' delight, and then, still laughing, "Oh, I'm teasing too much" (mayyoualways). And at the 2013 San Diego ComicCon, when a reporter asked Hoechlin and O'Brien how they would like to see their characters develop, the pair responded with a wistful, soulful look at each other (Figure 3).

The most notable moment in the fraught relationship between Sterek fans and the show is the most simultaneously one of the celebrated and notorious moments in the fandom. At San Diego Comic Con in 2012, O'Brien and Hoechlin – who later admitted to being intoxicated, at the time – filmed a promotional video encouraging Sterek fans to vote for *Teen Wolf* in the Teen Choice Awards (hoechloin) (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Tyler Hoechlin and Dylan O'Brien respond to an interview question about how they'd like to see Stiles' and Derek's relationship develop. ("Tyler Hoechlin and Dylan O'Brien").



Figure 4. Dylan O'Brien and Tyler Hoechlin tease Sterek for an MTV promotion (hoechoin).

Hoechlin and O'Brien promised to "take more naps together" and "put them on Ustream," much to fans' delight. Seeing their favorite actors who portray the characters they're incredibly passionate about not only lend their vocal support to Sterek, but to enthusiastically cheer for it while displaying physical intimacy with each other sparked a frenzy in the fandom, which of course, coordinated a dedicated campaign to vote for *Teen Wolf* for "Choice Summer Show," which it won, both in 2012 and 2013.

But this seeming support of Sterek was not to last, much to the anger and frustration of fans, who were soon realized that the encouragement from the creators, network, and canonical gestures towards Stiles' possible sexual fluidity were manipulative queerbaiting for media attention and ratings. With the airing of the second part of season three in early late 2013, in a sudden departure from their pro-Sterek strategy, there was a marked shift in both the show's character dynamics and the paratextual discourse regarding the ship. Gone were the hints of a possibly bisexual or gay Stiles, and both he and Derek were thrust into hetero romances that felt forced and made little sense to fans. Derek and Stiles' on-screen interactions were significantly reduced as well, in an obvious – and failed – attempt to suppress Sterek shippers, as if giving them fewer Stiles and Derek scenes would damper enthusiasm and dedication to the relationship by giving fans less canonical material to work with. Not only does this indicate a fundamental misunderstanding of fandom and shipping on the part of the creators – the deeply flawed belief that slash shipping is primarily rooted in interpretive readings of the canon – it evinces a growing hostility towards the ship's popularity that has overshadowed the show. "Sterek became a 'bad' word by Season 3 and most definitely a 'taboo' one by Season 4," writes Farid-ul-Haq in an article tellingly titled "Why Are *Teen Wolf*'s Season 4 Ratings Slipping?" Ul-Haq continues:

Ever since the promotion for Season 4 started, fans have noticed a different approach in PR. It's as if TPTB [The Powers That Be] are trying to control the fandom, something no show can do no matter how much they try.... It's a fact that the famous gay ship Sterek (Stiles and Derek) has played a vital role in promoting *Teen Wolf* when it first started.... Jeff Davis himself courted the idea of Sterek and shippers rejoiced. It felt good to be respected by the creator of the show relating to a ship consisting of two male characters that wasn't canon.

This article was followed up six months later with “Why Are Teen Wolf’s Season 5 Ratings Dropping Hard?” which, amongst many other explanations, affirms that TPTB (The Powers That Be) “hasn’t been treating Sterek shippers well.” Evidence of this poor, even hostile treatment, abounds. MTV and the showrunners, which had previously been very Sterek-friendly, began to stifle public discussions of Sterek, even going so far as changing Hoechlin and O’Brien’s seating arrangements at the 2014 ComicCon panel after a Sterek fan had tweeted a picture of their original seat assignments, which had been together (Romano). And, reportedly at the request of the network, third-party conventions prohibited Sterek questions; at one such convention, when a fan asked Tyler Hoechlin to sign a copy of *The Sterek Book* and a fan-made Sterek t-shirt, he refused, explaining that he was no longer permitted to sign Sterek material (Romano; Undie Girl). That same summer, there was the erasure and dismissal of the Sterek Campaign, a fundraising drive organized by qhuinn, co-creator of *The Sterek Book*, in which fans raised \$25,000 for Wolf Haven International in honor of the ship. The achievement was voted Fandom Feat of the Year at MTV’s Fandom Awards, yet the Sterek Campaign was not mentioned at all in the award ceremony broadcast; rather, it was awarded to the *Teen Wolf* fandom as a whole, and actor Tyler Posey gifted the statue to a member of the award show audience rather than to the campaign’s founder, who reacted to the insult with shock and disappointment (Figure 5).

Tyler Posey – the putative lead actor of the show – is, to many Sterek fans, a villain, and one of the worst offenders when it comes to shaming Sterek. He maintains a reputation in

the fandom for being jealous over Sterek, Tyler Hoechlin, and Dylan O’Brien for overshadowing him, the ship dominating the conversation about the show if which he’s purportedly the star, and his slight against the Sterek Campaign at the Fandom Awards was, unfortunately, not his first hostile reaction to the Sterek fans. At the 2014 ComicCon, when a fan asked the cast about relationship pairings that weren’t currently canonical – not mentioning Sterek or queer relationships specifically – Posey responded with “Can you ask a better question?,” angering many for both his obvious resentment and for disrespecting the fan. This slight followed on the

heels of the most egregious of his comments, made in a filmed interview with the show’s cast. When asked about their thoughts on the possibility of Sterek becoming canon, he replied: “I think Sterek is a bizarre, weird, twisted thing, and anyone who pays more attention to it than the show isn’t watching the show for the right reasons.” Sterek fans reacted quickly and with anger, and frustration at being chastized for reading the canon “wrong” and responding with “inappropriate” uptakes. Further, Posey’s choice of words – *bizarre*, *twisted*, and *weird* – is yet another moment in a long history of shaming slash shippers of all fandoms, using the “the kind [of language] that has long been used to keep fans, particularly female, slash-loving, fanfic-writing fans, ever on the outskirts of mainstream culture” (Romano). Many fans felt attacked



Figure 5. Sterek Campaign founder and Sterek writer qhuinn reacts to the fandom not being mentioned in MTV’s Fandom Award broadcast, at which it won Fandom Feat of the Year for the Sterek Book, which collected Sterek fanart and raised \$25,000 for Wolf Haven International. (Quinn)

by the comment, taking to Tumblr to express their anger:

I don't care that Tyler said that watching Teen Wolf for Sterek is wrong. There is so much more to the show, and I've never watched it for a ship that I've always known would probably never be canon. What bothers me is the way he had to shame shippers beforehand. Sterek is a bizarre, weird, twisted thing, Posey? Then what am I for shipping it? What am I for loving it and wishing that it would happen on the show? Even while acknowledging that there's probably no hope for it ever happening? Am I bizarre? Am I weird? Or am I just a twisted thing? (bizarre-weird-twistedthing).

So, watching the show bc Stydia is a right reason? watching the show bc Scira is a right reason? watching the show bc Scallison is a right reason? watching the show bc Allisaac is a right reason? But watching the show bc Sterek is a big no-no? (stormyhale)

These responses and the thousands other like them not only speak to the continued frustration of being treated poorly by many of the show's creators, but they also demonstrate fans' astute critiques of the implicit homophobia embedded in Posey's remarks – naming the queer pairing bizarre, and thus those who ship Sterek “weird” and “twisted,” and recognizing that the canon emphasizes heterosexual pairings for its main characters - Stydia, Scira, Scallison, Scallisaac<sup>24</sup> - but that those pairings and the fans who ship them are welcomed and embraced by the creators while Sterek is not.

Sterek fans were dealt another blow just a couple of months later, when an interviewer asked Dylan O'Brien about the scene with Caitlin that directly confronted Stiles' potential bisexuality only to leave the question unanswered. O'Brien responded:

That was nothing, really. Stiles isn't gay, and he knows that, but what I love about him is that he's even open to reacting that way to a question. He doesn't have to jump into a defensive thing; he's just so honest. He's clearly not gay — I've never thought the character was — but he also looks at people as people. He doesn't associate gay and not gay, but he knows he likes girls. (Romano)

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<sup>24</sup> Stydia = Stiles/Lydia, Scira = Scott/Kira, Scallison = Scott/Allison, Scallisaac = Scott/Allison/Isaac. Of these ships, only Scott/Allison and Scott/Allison are canon, although Stiles/Lydia is expected to become canon in Season Six.

Fans reacted with confusion and frustration – to O’Brien’s conflation of bisexuality with homosexuality, his repeated affirmation that Stiles isn’t gay, and the contradictory statement that he “doesn’t associate gay and not gay,” and of course, calling the moment with Caitlin “nothing.” Not only does this statement confirm that all of those previous suggestions of Stiles’ possible queerness were blatant baiting, it also struck many fans as almost as insulting as Posey’s “bizarre, twisted, and weird” comment:

don’t let them think it’s okay to treat us like that. I am so disappointed that the writers of this show were okay with baiting about a queer, non-binary sexuality and then dismiss it as if it were nothing. As if *my* identity were nothing. He used that word ok, he called it *nothing*. (chasingshadows)

Other reactions defended O’Brien, placing the blame on showrunner Jeff Davis and calling out the years of queerbaiting, encouraging angry fans to abandon the show:

Now, if you feel like you were used, if you feel like you were baited, if you feel angered and down about this, don’t be afraid to speak out, don’t be afraid to simply *stop watching*. I know I will. You can still come read fic, you can still come and create AUs and headcanons with the rest of the Sterek fandom, that, in some cases, certainly understands more about writing and pacing and character development than the creators of this show do.... if you do feel like you were used– **Stop**. Make a stand. Don’t let them play with you anymore, seriously. We are not here for their entertainment. (varkazani)

Heeding this call and many others like it, in true slash fandom form, many Sterek shippers responded to these insults and rejections with reaffirmations of their dedication to Sterek, turning “bizarre twisted and weird” into a celebration and rallying cry. (stormyhale)

boy, have we been hit hard the last few months. Sterek is eternal, and will never give up and we aren’t going away. No matter what they do on the show we have you, our fandom, and that is enough.... We are **not** gone and I am sure as hell not going anywhere! Sterek might be bruised, but we’re still alive. (hopeless-ships)

A significant number of fans – Sterek shippers and non-Sterek shippers alike – had already given

up on the show prior to these insults, for a variety of reasons: an increasingly nonsensical plot, poor writing and characterization, and the reduction of screen time between Stiles and Derek in an obvious attempt to squash the Sterek fandom. But the multiple insults towards and shaming of the Sterek fandom between seasons three and four rapidly accelerated the separation of the fandom from the canon, affirming Sterek as a distinct entity from *Teen Wolf* largely due to the manipulation of its queer and queer-shipping fans.

This manipulation reached its zenith in September of 2014, with the publication of an article titled “Teen Wolf Cast Weighs in on LGBT Inclusion,” on the same day as the airing of the fourth season finale, after a season of continually-declining ratings. The article appeared in the mainstream gay-rights publication *The Advocate*, and featured suspiciously formulaic responses from the primary cast about working on a show that imagines a world “in which homophobia is nonexistent,” and that has “gained...a loyal pack of LGBT fans:”

Tyler Posey:

“We do it in such a natural way. It’s not forced or over-the-top or anything like that. I think it’s perfect and natural, and I think the kids that watch the show really do respect the way we include gay characters. That’s why Charlie (Carver) and Keahu (Kahuanui) — the characters they play are so popular. We love it and we’re happy to be able to show kids that it’s OK to be who you are.”

Tyler Hoechlin:

“I love that it’s a freedom that we’ve had with MTV, and Jeff (Davis has done a great job of keeping that a central part of the show. It’s an important thing that the demographic that’s watching the show is being introduced to that and is able to see it. I think it’s a fantastic thing that we’ve been able to integrate into the show.”

Dylan O’Brien:

“It should be represented this way, and it makes me happy to be a part of a show that represents so well. To even think that some shows don’t or just don’t promote it as being a part of their show or don’t have time for it blows my mind. I’ve come to be very grateful for the fact that our show does, and it sets a good example. It’s important for [LGBT kids] to know it’s all good.” (Peeples)

Given the self-congratulatory and celebratory tone of article, a reader unfamiliar with *Teen Wolf* might have rejoiced at learning about such a progressive mainstream show on the television network synonymous with youth. That is, of course, until this reader made it down to the article comments, which echoed what Sterek fans have been saying for quite some time: despite claims to be “an orientation-blind utopia,” or “the gayest show on TV,” *Teen Wolf*'s queer representation – and its treatment of Sterek fans – is nowhere near the idealized picture painted by the article and the actors' comments (Peeples). Nearly every reader comment on the article pointed out – some with lengthy analyses and some with incisive snark – just how problematic *Teen Wolf*'s attempts at queer representation is, as well as the article's misinformation.

*Teen Wolf* is the opposite of inclusive. They are homophobic. And I say that as a fan of the show for many years. They responded to a huge fan outreach for two male characters [Stiles and Derek] to become a couple by making sure those characters never shared a scene again. They also hastily pushed both male characters into trumped up heteronormative relationships so that we would all get the message that even a hint of homo was too much for the show to bear.

As a member of the LGBTQ community, I find it offensive and irresponsible that you would post such an article without exercising due diligence in researching the authenticity of these outrageous claims. If you are truly the voice of the LGBTQ community, then you would be wise to report appropriately, and without prejudice. I am disgusted with this article.

I don't watch the show, but I admit to reading the fanfic because there is a LOT of it and whenever there's a LOT of something, there's a greater chance of finding \*good\* stuff than in smaller fandoms. I have to admit, I was considering watching the show after reading the fanfic because the fanfic made it seem as though LGBT characters were more included (Danny seems popular, but as you haven't even mentioned him here, I can see that it's just a fanfic thing), but now I know not to bother.

This attempt to recuperate the show's pro-LGBTQ image failed; rather, it further evinced the show's hypocrisy – not only in its fundamental misunderstanding of what authentic, meaningful

queer representation looks like, but by also featuring only interviews with actors who identify as straight and play straight characters on the show. The show's three canonically gay male characters, Danny, Ethan, and Mason, and the actors who portray them (Keahu Kahuanui, Charlie Carver, and Khylin Rhambo, respectively) are glaringly absent from the article – nearly as absent as they have been in the show. The barely-there attempts at representing gay or bisexual women are so miniscule that one imagines that queer women either do not exist in this purported “world without homophobia,” or do not warrant inclusion. All three gay male characters are relegated secondary roles defined almost exclusively by their homosexuality; two of these characters, Danny and Mason, are portrayed by actors of color, further complicating their tokenization. These same two characters also fulfill the stereotypical best friend role of the more prominent heterosexual, white characters. In response to this canonical and paratextual homophobia masquerading as inclusion and tolerance, the Sterek Campaign, once again began selling the Sterek Book, this time raising \$1000 for the Ali Forney Center, a nonprofit organization that provides support services for LGBTQ youth, while other fans maintained their aggressive activism against the show. Thus, after four seasons of broken promises, queerbaiting, and insults, Sterek “fans have learnt their lesson when it comes to ship-baiting in *Teen Wolf*, and are now leaving in droves – but, crucially, have not abandoned the ship. Rather, the fandom has aggressively worked to keep the ship thriving, in fic, art, meta, and headcanons while wholeheartedly abandoning the canon. “Their love [of] the characters [has grown] into a separate entity from the show. If the show couldn't give them what they want, then they were better off without it” (ul-Huq). Between seasons four and five, it was announced that Tyler Hoechlin was leaving the show to pursue other roles, ringing the death knell for any remaining hope that there would be a canonical romantic relationship between Stiles and Derek, but many Sterek fans

celebrated Hoechlin's departure, thankful that one of their favorite actors would be free from the shown they had come to despise.

Sterek fans did not just keep their critiques to Tumblr and Twitter; frustrations and anger at the canon's treatment of slash fans ignited a rededication to the relationship between Stiles and Derek, and writers and artists continue to write Sterek into existence. Sterek writers' non-normative uptakes create and sustain the queer counterpublic, which not only celebrates queer identities and queer sexuality, but also critiques heteronormativity and revises sexual norms and paradigms. Writers imagine the infinite possibilities of Derek and Stiles' romantic relationship, and, like the vast majority of slash across fandoms, almost always give them a happy ending despite the angst, miscommunications, and various barriers to their happiness that the characters must endure on the way to happily ever after. This emphasis on providing the characters the romantic fulfillment and happiness denied by the canon is more than simply a reiteration of romantic tropes and fantasies; it is a recuperation of the pain and frustration created by canonical and cultural queerphobia. Sterek fics embody the paranoia and hermeneutics of suspicion that Sedgwick asserts is necessary for reparative reading and writing – recognizing and responding to the homophobia and heteronormativity of the canon – and uptake queerly in response, writing and sharing fics that maintain an affective dedication to and emphasis on reparative writing. These texts help heal the emotional wounds inflicted on the fictional characters and the fans who ship them in order repair the damage done by an anti-queer culture and canon.

Examples of this critique and affective recuperation abound in the Sterek fandom, and to explore how the fandom has utilized slash fic to critique homophobia, I briefly gloss two extremely popular novel-length Sterek fics for how they use the genre of slash to reject queerphobia and repair the damage it does. My choice to analyze "No Homo" by

RemainNameless and “Play Crack the Sky” by WeAreTheCyclones in particular has to do with both their massive popularity as well as their insights into heteronormativity and homophobia. The fact that these fics are two of the most read<sup>25</sup> and celebrated fics in the fandom speaks to not only their quality, but also affirms the Sterek fandom’s stakes in Queer Uptake’s recuperative possibilities. Both fics were published as works in progress, averaging about one chapter a week over the Summer of 2014, when season four of *Teen Wolf* was frantically heterosexualizing Stiles and Derek, to crumbling ratings and increasing hostility between the fandom and the canon. Both are Alternative Universes (AU) that remove magic and werewolves, placing the characters in more realistic worlds to imagine Stiles and Derek, to differing degrees and in differing registers, struggling with their queerness and the challenges of being queer in a homophobic world.

The title “No Homo” is inspired by the saying amongst men as a reassurance of their heterosexuality after behaving in a way that could be interpreted as gay, an expression that reinforced the ruptured continuum of male homosocial desire. An extended study of how heteronormativity divorces male homosociality from homoerotic desires and reinscribes homophobia, the fic begins with an ironic critique of these modes of male homosociality. Stiles, a college freshman who identifies as stridently straight, is lonely after his best friend Scott leaves for a semester abroad. He decides to go looking for a new male friend by posting a Craigslist ad seeking another straight man to with whom to masturbate, something he decides is the ultimate test of true, manly friendship. His ad reads:

“str8 dude - m4m - strictly platonic - str8 dude looking for another str8 dude to JO with. i can host. no pics. i don’t give a fuck what u look like and u shouldn’t care what i look like either. STR8 PLS. do not want gay hookup. no weird touching. just 2 dudes jerking it. thx.”

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25 As of this writing, “No Homo” has a staggering 330,480 hits, and “Play Crack the Sky” has 125,427 hits.

Derek, a sophomore, responds to the ad without knowing it's Stiles', and the two of them, drunk, watch heterosexual porn and masturbate together, and then play the hypermasculine video game Call of Duty. Thus begins their friendship focused around alcohol, marijuana, and escalating sexual contact, all under the ruse of "no homo," and "practicing" with a guy for the "real thing" with a girl, making it "not gay." As his friendship with Derek develops, Stiles' understanding of the spectrum of human sexuality beyond the straight/gay binary develops as he dismantles his internalized homophobia.

The fic switches between Stiles' point of view and Derek's, offering both of their perspectives on their relationship and their relative comfort with their sexuality. In the sections from Derek's perspective, we learn that he's bisexual, out to his family and a few friends, but not to Stiles. We also learn that Derek has had feelings for him since high school, and that he agrees to the "no homo" ruse as a way to be with him. Of course, he doesn't tell Stiles about his feelings or his bisexuality because of Stiles' homophobia, afraid that he would not want to continue their friendship if he knew. Throughout the fic, Derek offers commentary on Stiles' homophobia, such as this moment, when he's anxious about Stiles discovering some of his more "feminine" interests, like reading love poetry and watching romantic movies:

[H]e's pretty sure Stiles would freak out a little if he knew what kind of stuff Derek's into. He's not *weird* or anything, but some of his interests are considered kinda feminine by a lot of people's standards. People like Stiles. People who conflate "femininity" with being into dudes.

While Derek is indeed "into dudes," he feels he must hide that fact and anything that might imply it. The conflation of femininity with sexual desire for men is, of course, a master fallacy of heteronormativity: it obscures female-female desire, shames – and thus polices – male-male desire, and gender performance for both men and women. Derek also offers wry commentary on

the willful cognitive dissonance Stiles uses to justify and explain their sexual relationship. “**Let’s get high**, is all the text says, which, in Stiles, means *Let’s pretend to be straight while we get each other off for a couple hours.*” And again, when deciding what to wear when he knows he’s going to see Stiles, “who likes it when he goes commando. Easier access. To the heterosexual delights of another man’s penis.” Derek grows increasingly frustrated with Stiles’ refusal to acknowledge that their relationship and sexual escapades are more than “practicing,” and with his homophobia that’s so deeply internalized he refuses to accept that his sexual attraction to Derek is in fact, homo. Stiles repeatedly insists that he is not homophobic, assertions that become increasingly absurd as his sexual liaisons with Derek intensify; Stiles’ homophobia and his undeniable chemistry with Derek that challenges his supposed heterosexuality are a neat distillation of the canon’s representation concomitant denial of, authentic queerness.

“No Homo” also critiques the canon, when it directly references and rewrites the Stiles and Caitlin kiss scene from “Illuminated” (3.16), in which she asks him if he also bisexual and he does not answer. Up to this point in the fic, Stiles has been quite ignorant about bisexuality, steadfastly adhering to fixed hetero-homo binary as he pursues his queer desires and enjoys queer pleasures while refusing a queer identity. Caitlin’s kiss catches him off-guard, because he had earlier seen her kissing a woman. When she tells him that she’s attracted to women and men, and asks if does as well, he’s utterly confused:

Like, what? He literally just said he liked *girls*. That doesn’t even make sense. That’s not even an option. *Both*. That’s weird. She kisses him, just lightly, but he feels kind of off-kilter.

Thrown off completely, Stiles doesn’t answer the question and leaves Caitlin at the party - but unlike the canon, instead of forgetting about the exchange and going on as if it never happened, Stiles finds Derek and they leave the party to have sex. Afterwards, he watches Derek sleep and

reflects on the conversation with Caitlin:

Maybe he always wants to kiss Derek, which isn't shocking but it is, isn't it? Because you want to kiss people you like, and he can't like Derek. No, he likes girls. That's for sure. He likes *girls*. But that girl tonight, what she'd said, it was almost like she liked boys, too. Actually, he's pretty sure there's no other conclusion to draw from that conversation, but can people even do that? Don't you have to choose one?

Where the canon teased Stiles' bisexuality to bait Sterek fans but then utterly failed to follow through, the fic corrects. Caitlin's question prompts Stiles to honestly reflect on his romantic feelings for and sexual attraction to Derek. Eventually, Stiles is finally able to acknowledge and accept his bisexuality, and he orchestrates a romantic declaration of love for Derek and his own public coming out. After reciting a Pablo Neruda poem, Stiles presents him with a homemade cake: "But then Stiles turns around, cake held out in his hands. And in a sloppy, crumb-studded icing rainbow read the words *YES Homo*. 'Get it?' Stiles asks, eyebrows waggling." Derek accepts his apologies and his assurances that he's come to terms with his queerness, and they, of course, live happily ever after in bisexual bliss.

The canon's contradictory and hypocritical queerphobia, personified by this particular version of Stiles, is exposed and corrected. In *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins describes slash as "explicit critique[s] of masculinity" that rehabilitate the ruptured "homosocial-homoerotic continuum as an alternative to repressive and hierarchical male sexuality" (219). "No Homo" embodies this recuperative impulse; the homosocial tensions between canon Stiles and Derek that Sterek shippers read as homoerotic are salvaged from the indeterminacy of subtextual connotation to be affectively, erotically explored and celebrated. "Play Crack the Sky," also a human AU, imagines *Teen Wolf*'s characters as an internationally famous rock band fraught with very-public drama and difficulties, in large part due to Derek and Stiles' tumultuous romantic relationship that their record label forces them to keep hidden. Where "No Homo" examines

internalized homophobia that canonically prevents Stiles from accepting his bisexuality, “Play Crack the Sky” critiques the queerphobia of the entertainment industry that keeps celebrities closeted and inhibits meaningful queer representation in popular culture. A remarkably complex and compelling narrative told largely via non-chronological flashbacks, “Play Crack the Sky,” like “No Homo,” switches between Stiles’ and Derek’s point of view, offering multiple perspectives on recognizing one’s queer sexuality, coming out, and rejecting corporate media’s heteronormativity.

The fic begins two years after Derek has quit the band, Smokes for Harris, because he no longer wants to hide his sexuality or his relationship with Stiles, which also ended when he left the group. The band achieves even more popularity and success despite his departure, and after two years of no communication, he arrives at Derek’s door unannounced to ask him to rejoin the band for a short European tour. Derek agrees, and soon he and Stiles resume their secret romance, which again brings them into conflict with the rest of the band and their record label, particularly as the in-universe Sterek fandom grows more vocal and fervent. Eventually they publicly announce their relationship – by kissing on stage – and then leave their record company for an up-and-coming indie label that allows them more personal and creative freedom.

In a flashback, we learn that it was a conversation with a record label executive that prompted Derek’s decision to quit the band. Derek and the exec, Brunski, argue over a song that he and Stiles wrote about their relationship that they want to include on their new album. Brunski tells Derek that the song “doesn’t have a place on the next record,” because “there’s no way for us to spin this as anything other than what it is.” He also lectures him about maintaining the band’s image, arguing that Derek’s putative heterosexuality is essential to the group’s mass appeal: “You have a very important role in this band. You are the bad boy, the dark and

mysterious man at the bar who drove up in a Maserati and takes the most beautiful girl in the whole place home when you go. Your band works because it's chock full of those music idol stock characters, you know?" Regarding the band's other "music idol stock characters," he tells Derek that Stiles is "the charismatic front man. Who knows what he's into, but when he smirks at the camera... hey, he might be into me! Me as a teenage girl, me as a college frat boy, me as a secretary, me as a chemistry teacher, who knows! That's his pull." Not only does this statement from the fic's villain echo the queerbaiting that essentially defines Stiles' role in the canon, this exchange is a perfect example and critique of mainstream media's manipulation of "safe" sexual ambiguity, in which sanitized and packaged queerness is "invoke[d] [by] mass culture...only to deny/dismiss/contain it in order to maintain straight culture's pleasures and profits (Doty 104).

.. Derek's conversation with Brunski ends with the executive lying to him about Stiles agreeing to shelve the song. Consequently, Derek leaves the band and breaks up with Stiles, because "he [doesn't] value his career more than he value[s] his beliefs.... He just wanted a little integrity,". Later, after Derek has rejoined the band and he and Stiles have renewed their relationship, band manager Allison explains Brunski's lies, calling the label executives manipulative evil masterminds" and "self-serving assholes [who] only care about [the band] as long as [they're] making them money," thus further condemning homophobic corporate media.

The fic also includes a flashback to Stiles' meeting with Brunski about the song and the financial importance of remaining closeted. He shows Stiles a magazine article speculating on his relationship with Derek, who has been photographed by the paparazzi wearing Stiles' high school cross country t-shirt. Stiles' last name, Stilinski, is emblazoned on the back, and the photo the caption reads "'GOING STEADY? Not quite a letterman's jacket, but we'll take it. How bromantic!'" Stiles, of course, sees no problem with the photo, but Brunski most certainly does."

“Fan speculation is one thing, media speculation is another.”

“It’s harmless. It’s the only shirt I had that The Incredible Hulk over here can fit into.”

“I understand that, and I understand that your relationship with Mr. Hale is important to you and that you’re both committed to keeping things under the radar. I respect that. But here’s the thing. You have an image, as a member of a band that is very image-driven, that is bankable. When you two accidentally let things slip, your image is tarnished.”

Stiles really did roll his eyes at that.

“I know it’s a shame. But if you were dating Lydia, we’d be having the same conversation.”

“Suuure we would,” Stiles snarked back.

“Hey, decorum is written into all of our contracts here. In order to make you marketable and profitable, we need you to adhere to the guidelines. It’s for your own good, you know that.

“Fan speculation” about a romantic and sexual relationship between the two of them is acceptable – profitable – only to a point. When mainstream media begins to embrace and encourage that speculation (for their own profits), sexual ambiguity and queerness must be reigned in, lest the blurred lines that separate profitable queerness from costly queerness be crossed. Brunski’s callous manipulation and hypocrisy is a clear indictment of the canon’s attitude toward and treatment of the Sterek fandom. When the queer uptakes of slash fans start to inform and dominate mainstream media discourses, essentially agreeing with the fandom, the band (the canon), their image, and their success – financial gain for the label (the network) – are threatened; queerness must be subdued and contained, heteronormativity must be reaffirmed. Further, Stiles’ sarcastic agreement when Brunski tells him that they’d be having this same conversation if he were dating Lydia, the band’s female drummer, is a further reiteration of this critique, directly referencing *Teen Wolf*’s support of the heterosexual Stiles/Lydia (Stydia) ship in contrast to its rejection of Sterek. Indeed, now that a romantic relationship between Stiles and

Lydia has become canon in the show's sixth and final season, this commentary criticism seems particularly incisive and prescient.

Like "No Homo," "Play Crack the Sky" concludes with a public declaration of love: Smokes for Harris debuts their new album at a sold-out concert in their hometown of Beacon Hills, ending the show with the song Stiles and Derek wrote about their relationship. These two fics are demonstrative of the driving impulses of the Sterek fandom: Stiles' and Derek's eternal love for each other, and rejection of the queerphobia that keeps them apart. Unsatisfied by the promise of a "world without homophobia" – a promise that ignores the social violence and oppression all too often endured by queers and erases the ideological and political flaws inherent in mainstream discourses of tolerance, Sterek writers create queer uptakes to respond to the canon's and to culture's homophobia and hypocrisy. Sterek are dedicated to writing infinite happy endings for Stiles and Derek, to public declarations of love and queer sexualities, to the triumph of love over homophobia – to the triumph of Sterek over the canon.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **“You can’t spell subtext without S-E-X”: Genre, Male Homosocial Desire, and Queer Uptake in *Supernatural***

*“The Supernatural fandom has developed along with the social networking sites and new media. Our fandom has capitalized on this infrastructure, and it has facilitated the growth of a dynamic, global fandom that now also encompasses the cast and crew of the show, in what we call the Supernatural family.”*

– Jules Wilkinson

“Post, Reblog, Follow, Tweet: *Supernatural* Fandom and Social Media”

Early in its tenth season, *Supernatural* presented its fandom writers with what can perhaps best be described as a love letter. “Fan Fiction” (10.05) is an episode dedicated to a sincere exploration of why fans write fanfiction that culminates in a touching and radically insightful celebration of fic writers. This episode builds on several seasons of meta experimentation and genre hybridity, features for which the show is well-known and that have developed as direct effects of and responses to the show’s slash fandom. In the episode, the show’s landmark two-hundredth, Sam and Dean investigate suspicious disappearances at an all-girls school; they discover that the Drama department is producing a musical fanfiction of the in-universe novel series *Supernatural* that chronicle the adventures and tragedies of the demon-hunting Winchester brothers introduced into the show’s mythology in Season Four. The fan production is fraught with tension between writer/director Marie, her fellow students, and their teacher, who sees no artistic value in the “genre dreck” of *Supernatural*. Those who interfere with the production – the teacher, and a student who argues that, “if it’s not canon, it shouldn’t be in the play” – are abducted by the god of epic poetry, Calliope because they are trying to shut down the production; the only way to stop her from killing them all is for Marie’s vision to

be realized. Thus, the show must go on, and Marie's version of *Supernatural*, with the help of the real Sam and Dean, is successfully performed for an enthusiastic audience. Marie even gets to embody her fic when she steps in to perform the role of Sam and ultimately vanquishes the murderous god onstage before taking a bow next to Dean. In this chapter, I gloss "Fan Fiction" for how it engages in with the fandom, particularly its slash writers, and how it functions as a reparative gesture of appreciation; prior to this exploration, I analyze how *Supernatural's* uniquely nuanced genre knowledge and adaptability creates a fascinating producer-fandom dynamic that demonstrates alternative possibilities when the canon responds productively to queer uptake rather than dismissively. The show's understanding of the Genre Function and its willingness to modify and transgress genre boundaries is bound up with its preoccupation with male homosociality and non-normative male intimacies rife with erotic subtext; I examine some of these key moments from the series in order to explicate this dynamic that culminates in "Fan Fiction."

In a departure from my approach to exploring the Sterek fandom, I investigate the *Supernatural* fandom not through fics or other fan responses to the show, but rather through the show's response to the fandom. In an effort to expand my understanding of queer uptake and its innumerable a/effects, it's necessary to slightly re-orient my analytical scope and framework to include a closer examination of the canon. After all, uptake is the "bidirectional relation that holds between texts;" thus, it follows that we should explore both – all – directions of response in our inquiries of uptake, particularly queer uptakes. This approach may, at first glance, seem to be a focus on the canon that I argue against in Chapter One. While I do emphasize the canon in my investigation of Destiel and the *Supernatural* fandom more generally, I do not do so for the purpose of determining the "accuracy" of slash fans' readings or definitively locating

their motivations. Rather, I look to the canon for how it has responded to its slash fandoms, because, like *Teen Wolf*, *Supernatural* has a complicated history of encouraging and frustrating interactions with slash fans. But unlike *Teen Wolf*, and indeed unlike most other television shows, *Supernatural* has, and continues to, respond to its fandom not just paratextually, but canonically, by writing its fandom into the narrative. The result of this is a fan-canon dynamic, a series of bidirectional responses, that are quite unique and fascinatingly complex. Where the Sterek fandom and *Teen Wolf* demonstrate the effects of a slash fandom being used for publicity and the rejected by its canon, Destiel and *Supernatural*, and even Wincest to an extent, demonstrate the effects of a slash fandom being accepted by the canon. This acceptance is, of course complicated and full of contradictions, but it remains an acceptance nonetheless; furthermore, it is an acceptance that emerges from and through a sophisticated understanding of and experimentation with genre. Crucially, *Supernatural* seems to understand slash fic as a genred writing practice that serves many purposes and has varied effects for those who write it; it also seems to understand that its own responses to fans do not have to operate along normative genre relations and hierarchies. This is a crucial difference between *Teen Wolf*'s response to Sterek and *Supernatural*'s response to their slash fandoms; where *Teen Wolf* responded to Sterek with an utter lack of awareness of the nuances of shipping and writing slash, *Supernatural* has responded, to its slash fandoms by accepting its generic redefinition of fans' queer uptakes, and allowing that redefinition to shape the canon.

“The love story of Sam and Dean.” “Friends who are brothers with...an unstated homoerotic subtext.” “Toxic codependency:” two creators of the show and a popular fan writer, respectively, describing the Winchester brothers.<sup>26</sup> *Supernatural*'s preoccupation, even obsession

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26 See “The Epic Love Story of Sam and Dean: *Supernatural*, Queer Readings, and the Romance of Incestuous Fan Fiction” by Catherine Tosenberger; and “The Epic Love Story of *Supernatural* and Fanfic” by Jules Wilkinson.

with, emotional bonds between men and its privileging of male homosociality over heterosexual relationships provides ample fodder and inspiration for slash fans. In this instance, Sara Gwenllian Jones' argument that slash fans "simply extend the contra-straight narratives" of texts is quite accurate – although that does not lessen the critical and subversive work of *Supernatural* slash fans, who still interrogate queerphobia, define the show's genre via their uptakes, and who still queerly eroticize the show's putative heterosexuality. Beyond the incorporation/resistance paradigm and in regard to uptake, we find a much more complex and fascinating fandom-canon dynamic that has just as much to do with genre than with (sub)textual queerness. Indeed – it's in the realm of genre – just as ideological a space as incorporation and resistance – that we see *Supernatural* responding to slash fans with queer uptakes of their own. The show is equipped and inclined to do this due to its genre awareness and genre knowledge and its expansive genre ethos. In addition to exploring the brothers' relationship with homoerotic subtext, Eric Kripke has also said that he initially imagined the show as "*Star Wars* in truck stop America," an aesthetic blend that speaks to the show's mélange of genres and inventive intertextuality (Wilkinson 310). Combining elements of crime procedurals, horror, fantasy, sci-fi, and dramatic serialized narratives, *Supernatural*, just like fanfiction, borrows from a wealth of texts, mythologies, and histories for its world-building and storytelling. As the series has progressed, it has expanded its use of genre, often creating entire episodes in distinct genre forms. Season Four's "Monster Movie" (4.05), for example, is filmed entirely in black and white in the mode of classic Hollywood horror movies; it includes the old-fashioned credits at the beginning of the episode and a shapeshifter who appears as the Wolf-Man, the Mummy, and a Bela Legosi-esque Dracula. In the sixth season episode "Frontierland" (6.18), Sam and Dean time travel to the Old West, where they meet Samuel Colt (maker of their magical demon-killing gun), and have a gunfight

outside a saloon at high noon. In an extra layer of textual collage, the episode ends with a riff on a plot device used in the Western throwback movie *Back to the Future Part III*; after returning to the present, a package from Colt that's been held at the post office for 150 years is delivered to Sam.

The show's most inventive and ambitious play with genre aired about a year prior to this. Season Five features the Winchesters and rogue angel Castiel battling Heaven's angels and Hell's demons, each side vying for the brothers to accept their pre-destined fates as the human vessels for archangels Michael (Dean) and Lucifer (Sam) in the coming Apocalypse. In "Changing Channels" (5.08), recurring character, The Trickster, eventually revealed as the archangel Gabriel in disguise, wants to convince the brothers that they have no choice but to play the roles that they have been given in this cosmic struggle. He uses his reality-manipulating powers quite creatively, forcing the brothers to participate in various television show genres – to follow their generic codes and scripts – in order to prove the inevitability of fate and destiny. Sam and Dean thus perform in the melodrama *Dr. Sexy, M.D.* – a *Grey's Anatomy*esque show that happens to be Dean's guilty pleasure; a procedural crime and forensics show à la *CSI* (that Dean hates), complete with puns about dead bodies and unnecessary nighttime sunglasses; a seemingly nonsensical Japanese game show; a *Nightrider* spoof, featuring Sam transformed into the Impala; an advertisement for genital herpes medication; and a classic three-camera sitcom complete with a live studio audience and a *Laverne and Shirley*-style theme song and opening credits. These vignettes paint their respective genres with a broad, exaggerating brush to further emphasize and satirize their defining tropes and features, a creative play that expands the canon's repertoire of generic moves and stretches its generic boundaries, all while advancing the season's narrative arc.



Figure 6. Sam and Dean play various television roles in the Season Five episode “Changing Channels.” (“Changing Channels”)

Sam and Dean initially play along with their expected generic roles, but then, with the help of Castiel, break free of Gabriel’s altered reality and trap the archangel in a ring of holy fire. Invoking Dean and Sam’s troubled relationship and their battles with their own father, Gabriel insists that they have no choice but to follow the script written for them by God.

GABRIEL: There’s not stopping this, because this isn’t about a war. It’s about two brothers who loved each other, and betrayed each other. You think you two would be able to relate.

SAM: What are you talking about?

GABRIEL: You sorry sons of bitches. Why do you think you two are the vessels? Think about it. Michael, the big brother, loyal to an absent father, and Lucifer, rebellious of Daddy's plan. You were born to this, boys. It's your destiny. It was always you. As it is in Heaven, so it must be on Earth. One brother has to kill the other.

DEAN: What are you saying?

GABRIEL: Why do you think I've always taken such an interest in you? Because from the moment Dad flipped on the lights around here, we knew it was all gonna end with you. Always.

But despite the overwhelming odds stacked against them, Sam and Dean refuse Gabriel's insistence on their pre-determined fates just as they refused his attempt force their genre compliance. Indeed, they refuse the destinies Heaven has written by refusing the expectations of the genre, choosing to respond in unsanctioned and decidedly inappropriate ways. This episode is a fascinating study not only of individual genres, but of the Genre Function itself. It explores how genres govern social interaction and how they determine what roles, behaviors, and responses we are expected to perform. Initially, Sam and Dean perform their roles in the various TV shows as required – they respond in ways that confirm the genre's norms – but then, with the help of Castiel, they reject Gabriel's mandate that they must play the roles required of them and assert their own agency. Ultimately, the brothers' rejection of Gabriel's ideological genre manipulation signals their final rejection of God's plan and their defeat of both Heaven and Hell. Dean eventually names their anti-predestination trio of misfits "Team Free Will," further reiterating this episode's and the entire season's allegorical use of the Genre Function and Uptake: to resist genre expectations is to resist control. To uptake in non-normative, unexpected ways is to assert one's agency and to reject, to a degree, ideological manipulation. Indeed, the Winchesters' rejection of their prescribed roles and refusal to follow the cosmic script written

for them, their staking of their free will and freedom to rewrite that script, is a neat distillation of Anne Freadman's insistence on the necessity of individual agency to uptake and genre as social action.

The Biblical Apocalypse story arc of which the episode "Changing Channels" is an essential part is first introduced in the previous season, along with one-half of Destiel, the angel Castiel. Central to this plot are the in-universe *Supernatural* books, a series of pulp novels that narrate Sam and Dean's lives, one for each episode of the first three seasons of the series, thus re-creating the show within the show. This development evolves the series' penchant for self-referentiality to a whole new level, adding yet another layer of genre awareness and dexterous genre play. Writer Chuck Shurley writes the *Supernatural* novels under the pen name Carver Edlund (a combination of two actual *Supernatural* writers' names), and publishes dozens of novels about the brothers, and even continues to write about them after the publisher goes bankrupt and ceases publication ("The Monster at the End of This Book" 4.18). Sam and Dean find the *Supernatural* books in the bargain bin of a comic book store, where they're mistaken for LARPing super fans by the store clerk, who tells them that the books "didn't sell a lot of copies...[but] kinda has more of an underground, cult following." They track down Chuck, who is shocked to be confronted by his characters – even though he was writing that very scene when Sam and Dean knock on his door. Eventually, Castiel informs them all that Chuck is actually a Prophet and that his novels are the result of visions of the Winchester brothers he's been receiving from God. When a shocked Dean is further aghast that Castiel has not only read Chuck's novels, but that he's a "big fan," the angel tells hem that the *Supernatural* books "will one day be know n as the Winchester Gospel." From commercially unsuccessful "genre dreck" to literal Gospel, the *Supernatural* novels are a bold reminder that genre definitions and cultural

status are historical and wholly contextual. Further, this narrative arc is an extended study of writing and how texts come to have lives and functions independent of their writers' intentions in relation to how audiences respond. Central to this exploration is, of course, fans and the transformative works they create. The innovative and risky move to introduce this complexity of metatextuality and self-referentiality is yet another iteration of *Supernatural's* genre dexterity, an expansiveness made possible by its sophisticated genre knowledge and emerging in direct response to its queer fandom. It is a literal acceptance of fans' redefinition of the show into an archontic text, one in which fans and their responses to the show are written into the canon itself, enriching its storytelling and its archive, continuing even after the resolution of Season Five's Apocalypse and reaching its zenith in Season Ten's "Fan Fiction." This genre self-reinvention further demonstrates the show's thoroughly metamodern sensibility, a "resurgence of sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths, whilst not forfeiting all that we've learnt from postmodernism," a postmodern pastiche that "understands that we can be both ironic and sincere in the same moment; that one does not necessarily diminish the other" (Turner). This genre redefinition is a direct response to fans' queer uptakes, and is often strategically deployed in order to engage with and speak to queerness – particularly the queerness that slash fans' read in the canon and explicate in their creative works. Essentially, the canon responds non-normatively, and sometimes even queerly, to the fan's queer uptakes.

And just like fans' uptakes, the canon's are a mixed bag of reproducing and challenging sex and gender norms. After learning about the *Supernatural* books, Sam and Dean investigate the series' active online fandom and of course, discover fan fiction and slash fans. At the time of filming, Destiel had yet to become the overwhelmingly dominant *Supernatural* fandom, and Wincest was notoriously popular. Thus, Sam explains that a slash fan is someone who reads and

writes about Sam and Dean “*together together*”). Dean responds, “they do know we’re brothers right,” and when Sam answers that “doesn’t seem to matter,” Dean says “oh come on, that’s just sick.” This earliest iteration of metatextuality is used to directly respond to its slash fandom, and disappointingly, it’s a decidedly shaming and negative response played for laughs. Dean’s insistence on the fact that they’re brothers and thus a romantic/sexual relationship between them is “sick” not only pathologizes Wincest fans, it is also yet another invocation of the brother relationship that the show repeatedly relies on to deny queerness. This genre shift to speak to back its fandom is, in this instance, a corrective to viewers who read their homosocial bond as queer.

As a text that is fundamentally about the eternal, transcendent relationship between two men, *Supernatural* is an extended study in male homosocial desire. Eve Kosofsky Sedwick’s foundational study *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) explores the intersectionality of sexuality, gender, and class eighteenth and nineteenth century English novels, arguing that homophobia restricts non-sexual male relationships as well as sexual ones. Male homosocial desire and its correlative sexism emerge from the homophobic cultural logic of heteronormativity. The term “male homosocial desire” names a phenomenon in which heterosexual men, in order to establish and maintain social and emotional relationships with each other, route their interactions through a sexualized woman, neutralizing the potential for homoeroticism. A contemporary literary iteration of this is the two men/one woman love triangle ubiquitous across genres and media. Sedgwick argues that in these erotic triangles, “the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved [...and] the bonds of ‘rivalry’ and ‘love,’ differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent”(21). Sedgwick does not argue that all male

relationships are inherently homoerotic, but rather, that male relationships are abundant with denied possibilities – emotional, intellectual, sexual – that are part of a larger spectrum of desires that are obscured by the normative forces of compulsory heterosexuality. Sedgwick explains that

“[h]omosocial” is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with “homosexual,” and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from ‘homosexual.’ In fact, it is applied to such activities as “male bonding,” which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality. To draw the “homosocial” back into the orbit of “desire,” of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted. (1-2)

Increasing the visibility of the continuum of possibilities between the homosocial and the homosexual can expose and weaken heteronormativity, and open up a spaces for alternative relationship formations to flourish. Male homosociality as routed through women and the objectification of the female body in order to preclude homosexuality is a phenomenon that manifests transhistorically in a myriad of texts and cultural practices, making the theory of male homosocial desire a productive analytic through which to interrogate complex representations of gender and sexuality in contemporary popular culture, particularly for texts like *Supernatural* that privilege relationships between men. Indeed, *Supernatural* is unique in that its primary heterosexual male relationship does not function via a rivalry over a sexualized woman; the erotic triangle between two men and a woman that affirms the heterosexuality of the male characters while allowing for their homosocial attachments is not in effect here. Thus, the absence of such a dynamic squarely places the focus on the bond between the two men, revealing oft-obscured facets of the spectrum of male homosocial desire.

This recuperation of male homosociality may be the narrative and emotional center of the show, but it but still remains only partially realized and fraught with contradiction. *Supernatural*

is preoccupied with relationships between men, subverts hegemonic masculinity, and rejects heteronormative romance. But it also reifies certain gender and sex norms – in some cases, precisely *because* of its investments in male homosociality. The expanded exploration of the intensely intimate relationship between two men invites homoerotic interpretations, in part due to the lack of an erotic triangle and a sexualized woman through which to route their feelings and deny queer attachments. Thus, the show depends on other tropes to deny queer readings: the constant reminders that Sam and Dean are brothers, a celebration of Dean’s enthusiastic heterosexual flings, objectification of women, lampshading Wincest for laughs. I read these denials of queerness as a product of the show’s negotiation of the spectrum of male homosocial desire that, despite its partial expansion, is still limited by homophobia and incest taboos. This demonstrates the extent to which masculinity is dependent on and intertwined with homophobia as well as the complexities and contradictions that come with representing relationships between heterosexual men, particularly those that do not pivot around a rivalry for a woman.

As early as Season Two, the show has regularly confronted, always with a humorous bent, its deviations from heterosexual relationship norms and its non-normative representation of homosocial intimacy between the two men. In the episode “Playthings” (2.11), the brothers visit a historical New England inn that seems to be haunted. When checking in, Susan, the owner, asks if they’re in town to go antiquing, a stereotypical hobby of gay men; Sam answers in the affirmative to in order to establish their cover, while Dean asks “How’d you know?” She explains that “they just look the type,” to which Dean responds with a confused, uncomfortable expression. Susan then assumes they want a room with one king-sized bed, and they realize what her antiquing assumption means. Sam corrects her with a flustered “What? No, uh, no, we’re, we’re...two singles. We’re just brothers.” A perturbed Dean asks, awkwardly, “What’d

you mean that we look the type,” a question Susan chooses not to answer. Moments later, when the elderly clerk Sherwin arrives to show them to their room, he takes one look at the brothers and says, “Let me guess, antiquers?” much to Dean’s chagrin. Later, when the brothers are alone in their room – with two single beds – they begin to question the hotel’s mysterious deaths, and Dean remarks that, “of course, the most troubling question is why do these people assume we’re gay.” Sam, always the more open-minded of the two, teases his brother, suggesting that it’s because he’s “kinda butch” [and they] probably think you’re overcompensating.” These exchanges are representative of *Supernatural*’s metacommentary on its own reputation and slash fandoms (which, at this point, were Wincest (Sam/Dean) and J2 (Jared Padalecki/Jensen Ackles), as well as its commentary on the heterosexist assumption that two men who spend most of their time together without women must obviously be gay. Further, Sam’s comment about Dean’s hypermasculinity as a cover for an unacknowledged homosexuality speaks directly to fan theories about Dean’s potential queerness.

Without the consistent presence of a sexualized woman to mediate their intense emotional connection, the show acknowledges and then rejects the seemingly heightened potential for homoeroticism between the brothers and then repeatedly rejects it. But the show also refuses heteronormativity in some key ways; for instance, it does not simply reject the normative love triangle as a mode of safe homosociality, it queers it, and whole-heartedly embraces and prioritizes non-normative relationships and alternative intimacies. This is accomplished by the consistent the privileging of Sam and Dean’s brotherly devotion over heterosexual romantic relationships, rejecting it as the ultimate emotional connection. The embrace of alternative relationship models is overtly queer with another of Season Five’s meta episodes, “The Real Ghostbusters” (5.09). Sam and Dean attend a *Supernatural* convention celebrating Chuck’s

books that features a murder-mystery ghost hunt,, and the panels “Frightened Little Boy: The Secret Life of Dean,” and “The Homoerotic Subtext of *Supernatural*.” When the fake ghost hunt turns out to be an actual haunting, the brothers team up with two avid male fans who are cosplaying as Sam and Dean, and with their help defeat the evil spirits. At the episode’s end, it is revealed that the cosplayers, Demian and Barnes, are lovers who met in a *Supernatural* chat room. This revelation is another metatextual wink at Wincest, and another moment of Dean displaying discomfort with the suggestion of an incestuous relationship with his brother, but it’s also interesting for how it represents a version of Dean and Sam’s relationship that allows for homosexuality. Demian and Barnes offer an alternative to heteronormativity that acknowledges the show’s homoeroticism by featuring a loving, romantic, queer version of Sam and Dean’s relationship. The couple only appears in one episode, however, and function mostly for comedic effect; once they’ve saved the day by pretending to be Sam and Dean, they are revealed to be unheroic and tragically normal: Demian is a photocopier repairman, and Barnes sells stereo equipment. Demian sums it up succinctly when Dean asks why they pretend to be fictional characters: “our lives suck, but to be Sam and Dean... well who wouldn’t want that?” They are reduced from heroes to hero-worshippers, despite their contributions vanquishing the ghosts. “Once the *mask* of masculinity (in performing Sam and Dean) is dropped, homosexuality is once more associated with passive, feminine traits. While this may offer a critique of all masculinity as performance and reveal the gay man’s potential to be heroic, in the case of Demian and Barnes, heroism can only achieved via the masquerade” (Elliot-Smith 115). As one the few queer relationships ever represented on the show, their place in the narrative is ambiguous – are they affirmative explorations of alternative sexualities and masculinities that may include Sam and Dean? Are they actually another iteration of the show’s rejection possible homosexual desire

between the two brothers? Are they a celebration of the non-normative relationship Sam and Dean share? They are all and yet not quite any, a combination of these possibilities and thus indicative of the show's complex negotiations of masculinity and sexuality that function in relation to and via its generic responses to slash fandom's Queer Uptakes.

Sam and Dean's non-normative relationship is further explored and explicated a few episodes after "The Real Ghostbusters," in "Dark Side of the Moon" (5.16). With some unwelcomed angelic assistance, they visit Heaven, which is initially a procession of their happiest memories. They find Ash, a long-deceased character, who explains the rules of Heaven: each individual soul enjoys eternity alone in their idea of perfect happiness. For Ash, it's The Roadhouse stocked with his favorite cheap beer and no hangovers; for the psychic Pamela who died helping the brothers, it's "one long show at the Meaowlands." Sam and Dean have been sharing each other's memories, and Ash explains just how unique this is. Ash explains that Heaven is as "a buttload of places all crammed together – like Disneyland, but without the anti-Semitism:"

ASH: See you got Winchesterland. Ashland. A whole mess of Everybody-Else-Lands. Put them all together: Heaven, right? At the center of it all? Is the Magic Kingdom. The Garden.

DEAN: So everybody gets a little slice of paradise.

ASH: Pretty much. A few people share – special cases, whatnot.

DEAN: What do you mean, "special?"

ASH: Aw, you know. Like, uh, soulmates. [beat]. Anyway, most people can't leave their own private Idahos.

The men momentarily silently and somewhat awkwardly acknowledge the revelation that Sam

and Dean are soulmates, and then quickly move on to trying to find The Garden. Typically, a soulmate relationship is a romantic one, something perhaps suggested by Ash's reluctance to use the term in relation to the Winchesters. Thus, the show's deliberate naming of their bond as such is quite curious; it's fascinatingly non-normative and even queer for the way it rejects heterosexual romance as the most meaningful relationship formation, and perhaps even references slash fandom's love of the soulmate trope.

Another complicated subversion of heteronormativity via the invocation of the brothers' bond occurs in Season Four's "Sex & Violence" (4.14), in which Sam and Dean hunt a Siren. In *Supernatural* mythology, Sirens are "beautiful creatures who prey on men, [and] entice them with their song...their call, their allure." The Siren is desperately in need of love, and its metaphorical "song" is its ability psychically know what a man wants and then appear to him in the guise of his sexual ideal. She seduces him and drugs him with her bodily fluids – a venom that appears in the blood as oxytocin, "a hormone that appears during childbirth, lactation, and sex" and that is often called "the love hormone," according to the town's medical examiner, Dr. Cara Roberts. The Siren eventually convinces its victims to commit murder as a show of devotion, and this particular Siren happens to be working at a strip club, disguising itself as a dancer to the four men who have thus far fallen under its spell. In the course of their investigation, Sam and Dean, under the pretense of being FBI agents, encounter an actual FBI agent investigating the murders. At first he is wary, but Dean quickly takes a liking to Agent Nick Monroe, who he agrees to team up with so Sam can interview the doctor. Nick is impressed with the Impala, loves classic rock, implicitly trusts Dean, and is eager to help him solve the case. While Dean bonds with Nick, Sam is seduced by and has sex with Cara, suggesting that she is the Siren and that Sam is her next victim. However, it is ultimately revealed that Nick

is the Siren, and that he targeted Dean by appearing in the guise of what he wants most – not a beautiful woman to have sex with, but a loyal, trusting, and trustworthy brother. Eventually, Nick infects Sam too and forces the brothers to fight over who gets to be with him. Fortunately, Bobby shows up to save the day just in time.

The revelation that Nick is the Siren explicitly sexualizes his relationship with Dean. Up until this point, the Siren has been presented as a hyper-sexualized woman whose power resides fully in her sexuality. The Siren *is* sex, and her victims are men desperately in lust with her. Dean describes the Siren as a “dream girl,” “perfect, everything [the victim] wanted;” the victims are described as being “under a love spell.” The Siren-victim relationship is inherently sexual; thus, when the Siren adopts a male, brotherly persona in order to lure Dean, Dean’s heterosexuality is explicitly challenged, and his relationship with Sam is sexualized. In the episode’s climatic scene, the Siren, still in the guise of Nick, tells Sam: “Dean’s all mine now. I gave him what he needed, and it wasn’t some bitch in a G-string. It was you.” This is perhaps the most unequivocal exploration of the homoerotic elements of Sam and Dean’s relationship, making this episode remarkably subversive: the potential for homosexuality is not expunged or mocked, but acknowledged, embraced, and deployed to add depth and tension to the brothers’ relationship. This episode is also subverting the erotic love triangle paradigm: it’s a *man* who functions as the object of emotional and erotic rivalry between the two male heroes.

In her essay “The Epic Love Story of *Supernatural* and Fanfic,” Jules Wilkinson writes, “it is a truth universally acknowledged that whenever there are two hot men in a TV show they must be slashed” (309). This necessity to ship these two hot men was complicated, however, by the fact that Sam and Dean are brothers. While a significant number of slash writers weren’t going to let that stand in the way of their shipping (indeed, many Wincest fics integrate and

explore the nature of incest rather than ignore or deny it), other fans were deeply uncomfortable with writing and reading about brothers in a sexual relationship. Thus, rather than crossing this cultural taboo, they turned to crossing a major fandom taboo – Real Person Slash (RPS), in which the actors themselves are shipped. RPS, also called Real Person Fic (RPF), has long held a position in fandom as “ethically dubious,” premised on the assumption that slashing real people rather than the fictional characters they portray is a violation of personal boundaries and even insulting to the actors, particularly those who publicly identify as heterosexual. J2, the shipping of Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles, nevertheless became nearly as prolific and popular as Wincest, with the fandom splitting along the lines of which taboo one was willing to violate in order to fulfill the need to realize and imagine the queer possibilities between these two men. This division was so fraught with tension and conflict that one of the most well-known descriptions of the fandom was the sarcastic, “*Supernatural* – where RPF is the moral high ground” (Wilkinson 310).

This was the general state of the fandom by Season Four, when two crucial and connected changes occurred: the introduction of the in-universe *Supernatural* books and fandom, and the introduction of the character Castiel, both of which have generated significant revisions to the show’s homosocial and homoerotic dynamics. The Season Four premiere (“Lazarus Rising” 4.01), takes place several months after the Season Three finale in which Dean was taken to Hell as payment on a demon deal to bring Sam back to life. It begins with his mysterious resurrection from the grave with a perfectly restored body. He reunites with Sam and Bobby, and ultimately they meet the angel Castiel, who informs them that, upon orders from God, fought his way into Hell to rescue him assist him in the coming Apocalypse. Castiel’s addition to the show is fascinating for a number of reasons, but especially for how his character complicates

the homoerotic dynamics, and correspondingly, can be regarded as a response to slash writers' queer finally had the opportunity to ship two hot men that did not require a violation of powerful taboos, that is rich with homoerotic subtext, and heavily coded as romantic. Given the fact that this could have been a chance to introduce a recurring female character – as there is nothing about Castiel's character that is "inherently" male – the creators instead chose to add a third male character. Crucially, Castiel is not related to the Winchesters, he does not disrupt the brothers' relationship, and he immediately forms a "profound bond" with Dean ("The Third Man" 6.03). Yet another rejection of the standard male-female-male triangle to obscure male homosocial desire, the incorporation of Castiel into the show suggests a deliberate choice on the part of the creators' to provide slash fans with a less problematic queer ship that can flourish without the taboos and tensions of the previous three seasons. And flourish it did; in "Lazarus Rising," Castiel introduces himself to Dean as "the one who gripped you tight and pulled you from Perdition" – a line that didn't just launch a new ship, but the most prolific one in contemporary fandom. Within hours of the episode's initial airing, the first Castiel/Dean fics were published to LiveJournal, and soon thereafter, the portmanteau Destiel was coined and entered into fandom



Figure 7. The angel Castiel joined the Winchesters' fight against evil in Season Four, immediately launching the Destiel fandom. ("Lazarus Rising")

lexicon – and eventually, as we will see in “Fan Fiction,” the canon itself.

Even with the addition of Castiel and the popularity of Destiel, *Supernatural* remains fundamentally concerned with the bond between the brothers, continually developing plots and character developments that fracture this relationship to its breaking point, and then recuperate it, reconfirming it as an inviolable bond that repeatedly saves the world and the brothers’ souls. Following the addition of Castiel and the genesis of Destiel, the canon not only regularly incorporates and explores potentially homoerotic desire between the two men, but also continues to negotiate homosocial desire via all-male triangles. In Season Eight, while banished to Purgatory, Dean allies and befriends the reformed vampire Benny. Their friendship is coded romantically, complete with Sam’s jealousy and distrust of the rival for his brother’s attention, and a breakup, when Dean tells Benny that they can longer see each other for the sake of his relationship with Sam (“Torn and Frayed” 8.10). Notably, while Dean is fighting for his life in Purgatory with Benny and Castiel, Sam is alive and attempting – and ultimately failing – to have a normal heterosexual relationship with Amelia.

As the show has continued to develop its study of male homosociality in the later seasons, there has also been a marked difference in the representation of Dean’s putative heterosexuality. Earlier seasons reveled in Dean’s sexual prowess with women, often showing him to be sex-obsessed and insatiable, effortlessly picking up women at bars and having enthusiastic one-night stands. His traditional masculinity was also confirmed several times through his clear discomfort with male homosexuality, such as his awkwardness and unease with discovering the true nature of Demian and Barnes’ relationship and his frustration with people assuming he’s gay. But as the show has progressed after the addition of Castiel and the explosion of the Destiel fandom, there are significantly fewer moments like this; instead, we see several moments that are easily read

as Dean's increasing comfort with, and possibly even interest in, queer relationships with men. There's the joking interaction in Season Five's "Point of No Return" (5.18) when, Castiel, angry with Dean, gives him a smoldering glare. In response, Dean quips, "Well Cas, not for nothing, but the last person who looked at me like that, I got laid," followed by a wink – the exchange immediately sending the Destiel fandom into a frenzy. In a Season Eight episode, Dean is in a bar posing as an FBI agent to investigate a mysterious death; during an interview with two sorority girls, he spots a man across the bar watching him. The man shyly waves and smiles; the gesture distracts Dean, who becomes so distracted he has trouble finishing his interview with the two women. He then approaches the man, who he's seen twice before that day, and demands to know why he's following him. The man makes his sexual interest in Dean quite clear, flirting and asking if they had had an "eye magic moment." Flustered and flattered, Dean responds, "uh, no moment...uh, federal investigation" – denying the romantic moment not because he's straight, but because he's working. He slowly backs away, and with uncharacteristic clumsiness, stumbles into a table. Later, when he and Sam discover that the flirtatious young man was in fact following Dean in order to investigate the same case and that he only hit on him to avoid discovery, Dean appears quite disappointed and insulted. In the DVD commentary that accompanies this episode, executive producer and episode writer Ben Edlund remarks that Dean reacts with a "romantic comedy kind of fluster." Episode director Phil Scriggia regards Dean's reaction as one that accepts the "potential for love in all places," and says that Jensen Ackles chose to play the scene "right down the middle" ("Commentary on 'Everybody'").

Dean's encounter with a man flirting with him occurs amidst several other episodes throughout the later seasons in which he seems to be attracted to Castiel, with the angel and hunter often exchanging souldful looks and sharing intensely emotional moments. There are

also a number of scenes in which other characters comment upon their relationship; there's the archangel Uriel, who, when visiting Dean in a dream to castigate him, tells him that Castiel is not there as well because "he has this weakness – he likes you" ("Heaven and Hell" 4.10). And then Balthazar, another angel, who, after Dean demands his help, replies "you have me confused with the other angel, you know, the one in the dirty trenchcoat who's in love with you" ("My Heart Will Go On" 6.17). Dean's romantic desire for Castiel even further suggested in a scene that strongly hints at Dean coming to terms with his potential queerness. "Paint It Black," (10.16) from Season Ten, features him, in a rare moment of emotional vulnerability that's not with Sam or Cas, but in confession with a priest. He begins the conversation by confessing to his poor treatment of women in order to bait a ghost who kills unfaithful men. At first he speaks with his usual bravado and confidence, not taking the sanctity of confession seriously; after the priest advises him to pray for forgiveness and prompts him to do some soul-searching and introspection, Dean drops the façade and honestly admits his fears, troubles, and desires.

DEAN: What if I said I didn't want to die...yet, that I wasn't ready?

PRIEST: Are you expecting to?

DEAN: Always. The life I live, the work I do, I pretty much just figured that's just all there was to me, you know? Tear around and jam the key in the ignition and haul ass until I ran out of gas. I guess I just thought that, sooner or later, I'd go out the same way that I live. Pedal to the metal and that would be it.

PRIEST: But now?

DEAN: Now, um, recent events, make me think that I might be closer to that than I originally thought. And...I don't know...there's things...people...feelings that I want to experience differently than I have before...or maybe even for the first time.



Figure 8. Destiel quickly became and remains the most popular ship in contemporary fandom.

It doesn't take Destiel shipper to read this confession as possibly, maybe even likely, about Castiel. The two men have shared a deeply profound and intimate bond for six years, fighting side-by-side and dying for each other; Dean has failed at every attempt to have a heterosexual relationship; the text presents no female long-term love interest for him. It is not a far cry to assume that he when he admits that "there's people I want to experience differently," he's referring to the most consistent and meaningful relationship he's ever had with someone other than his brother. Indeed, without all of the contextual information, a casual viewer might easily assume that this confession is leading to Dean coming out as queer, similar to how the romantic coding of his relationship with Benny suggests queer dynamics.

Like *Teen Wolf* and *Sterek*, there have been some key tense moments between the creators and fans regarding Destiel, although not to the degree that we see with the former. The crucial difference is how each text has uptaken in response to their slash fandoms; where *Teen Wolf*, both canonically and paratextually, responded primarily to the *content* of *Sterek* fics and art, *Supernatural* has responded to the *genre* of slash itself. This fundamental difference creates a much more positive and productive canon-fandom dynamic. Despite the inevitable tensions and conflicts, the actors and other creators have supported the Destiel fandom and repeatedly

acknowledge fans' role in the show's success and longevity. Indeed, Castiel himself, actor Misha Collins, regularly discusses the ship with positivity, supports fan campaigns, and even reads fic. When asked about Destiel in a fan meet-and-greet in 2012, he answered candidly, "We know what it is, what's going on. We don't talk about it. The actors don't, Jensen and I don't. But we're all perfectly aware of how the relationship is, the writers are completely aware of how it's being written. It may be unspoken but that doesn't mean it's not there or not true" (fandomdebunker). And when Destiel was up against Sterek in the fan poll Ultimate Slash Madness ran by the gay pop culture site *After Elton*, Collins jokingly tweeted, "This homonormative poll makes me sick! No one could seriously think those *Teen Wolf* jerks are gayer than us" (Collins). Of course, these paratextual affirmations and partial affirmations of canon Destiel – a dynamic added to the show very likely in response to fans' desire for a non-taboo queer ship – together with the myriad canonical (sub)texts that explore the intimacy of their relationship, the challenges Dean's putative heterosexuality, and consistent suggestions of romantic and sexual bonds between them without, as of yet, explicitly manifesting them – certainly sounds like queerbaiting, a charge many fans and mainstream publications have levied against the show. Misha Collins has also responded to this:

I don't like the characterization of teasing around Destiel or around any kind of homoerotic subtext that might appear around the brothers as queerbaiting. I think that that's really unfair. Because I don't think that – well, first of all that's sort of a new and strange term to me – but I don't think that's what's going on. I also don't think that the same kind of aspersion would be cast toward someone who is teasing a heterosexual relationship, like the tension that builds between male and female characters on any give show that's never consummated. I understand where they're coming from, but I don't think it's a fair characterization either. ("Fandom, Passion")

Collins' defense of the show against those who levy the queerbaiting charge, while somewhat, compelling, is quite problematic for the how it conflates heterosexual representation with

queer representation. To equate representation of queer identities and relationships with hetero representation is suggests a lack of understanding of the importance of, and the need for, meaningful queer representation, particularly for queer audiences who crave to see their identities given the full dignity and presence that heteronormative media disallows. His admission that he doesn't fully understand the complexity of queerbaiting is quite evident in this conflation, although his acknowledgement of the validity of the queerbaiting charges regarding the portrayal of Cas and Dean's relationship queerbaiting demonstrates a partial understanding of fans' frustration.

Collins' flawed defense is further indicative of *Supernatural's* complicated relationship with Destiel. In the most literal definition of the term, it is, at this point, too soon to definitively find the show guilty of queerbaiting; it's still being produced and aired, both actors/characters are still featured, and thus, arguing that the show is teasing Destiel without ever consummating the relationship is premature. Admittedly, the likelihood of Destiel ever being anything more than subtext and playful teasing is small; however, as the *Supernatural* writers has proven time and time again, anything is possible given the show's resilience, creativity, and genre flexibility, so it's not completely out of the realm of possibility that Dean and Castiel's relationship might eventually develop into a romantic one. But it also seems fairly clear that the portrayal of Destiel and teasing of their romantic chemistry is, to an extent, a strategic move to attract and keep fans, although it's likely that the creators underestimated the fervor with which slash fans would respond. But to dismiss the repeated challenges to Dean's apparent heterosexuality and the subtextually romantic moments between he and Castiel as simple queerbaiting is reductive and elides the show's negotiations of masculinity and intimate male relationships, a level of complexity and nuance that is largely lacking from *Teen Wolf*. And while *Supernatural* delights

in aggressive (sub)textual teasing of romantic Destiel, it does not commit the sins of *Teen Wolf* that so many Sterek fans find unforgivable. Rather, *Supernatural* develops and explores the relationship between the two men in ways that serve both the narrative and the characters, allowing their homosocial connections to expand and flourish – to a degree.

This (sub)textual queerness continues to provide inspiration for slash writers, who, as of this writing, have produced nearly 60,000 fics on Archive of Our Own. And the show continues to deploy its metanarrative framework to engage in a dialogue with the fandom and incorporate them into the text – sometimes successfully in episodes like “Fan Fiction,” but at other times to much less impressive results. After finding out that he’s a Prophet, Chuck continues to write the *Supernatural* novels, even though his publisher has gone out of business. The new novels, which narrate Sam and Dean’s adventures through the end of Season Five, are eventually put online by avid *Supernatural* fan and Wincest writer Becky Rosen<sup>27</sup>, who we first meet in the Season Five premiere, “Sympathy for the Devil” (5.01). Becky is a troubling, frustrating character due to her representation as a “bad” or “inappropriate, something that seems to have been intended as a playful teasing of the emotionally unstable, overly excited Wincest fangirl who only cares about sex (her penname is ‘samlicker81’; she’s the “webmistress” of morethanbrothers.net), Becky reads instead as an insulting reinscription of these stereotypes. Although she does organize the *Supernatural* convention in “The Real Ghostbusters” and offers Sam and Dean crucial information gleaned from her obsessive knowledge of the books, and even dates Chuck for a bit, Becky’s ultimate fate is quite shameful and disturbing. After disappearing for two seasons, Becky returns in Season Seven – dumped by Chuck and desperate for love, she has an emotional breakdown, poisons Sam with a love potion, kidnaps him, forces him to marry her,

<sup>27</sup> We learn this two years after Becky’s last appearance, when Charlie tells Sam and Dean that someone with the user name “beckywinchester176” published Chuck’s later books online; Charlie also adds that “I thought it was fanfic at first, but it’s clearly Edlund’s work” (“Slumber Party 9.04). These are the “unpublished” works that Marie refers to in “Fan Fiction” (10.05).

and nearly rapes him (“Season Seven, Time for a Wedding!” 7.08). She is ultimately brought to her senses and forgiven, but it’s little comfort to devoted fans, particularly Wincest writers, who are rightfully insulted by this portrayal.<sup>28</sup> With the shadow of Becky resting uneasily in the collective fandom memory, many fans watched Season Ten’s “Fan Fiction” with trepidation, worried that they would again be mocked by the show to which they have devoted so much emotional, critical, and creative energy. Instead, the episode presents a thoughtful exploration of fan investment in the show and its queer ships, a corrective to the show’s missteps with Becky and its own paratextual tensions with its slash fandom.

The metanarrative framework is used to its fullest here, with an entire stand-alone episode, the series’ landmark 200<sup>th</sup>, devoted to fan appreciation that demonstrates an in-depth understanding of fandom, and in particular, fan writing. The episode achieves this by portraying Marie and her fellow *Supernatural* fans not as manic fangirl caricatures who can’t tell the difference between fiction and reality, but as intelligent, mature, creative, resourceful, and talented. It also demonstrates an insightful understanding of the complexities of transformative fandom and the genre dynamics of such participation. The all-female cast and crew of Marie’s production reflects the fandom’s largely female demographic; Marie and her friend and stage manager Maeve, are representative of fic writers and readers. The cadre of young women playing male characters might also be read as a literalization of theories that posit slash as women writing their desires via male bodies. The production is also queer in its troubling of gender, both as a drag performance and in its reversal of Western theatre’s men-in-drag history, a historical and textual (dis)continuity further emphasized by Dean’s nickname for Marie: Shakespeare. A far cry from the caricature of slash fandom embodied by Becky, this episode and the fan characters who

<sup>28</sup> In her essay “I See What You Did There: *SPN* and the Fourth Wall” in *Fan Phenomena: Supernatural*, Lisa Macklem suggests that this “curiously bitter version of fandom” was a direct result of Seasons Six and Seven show-runner Sera Gamble’s frustration with fan complaints and critiques about the direction the show was going under her leadership, further proving the importance of the fan-producer relationship on the canon as a whole.

populate it, particularly writer/director/actor Marie, demonstrate a fundamental re-orientation of *Supernatural* towards its fans and a nuanced, insightful rumination on how fan writers are of fundamental importance to the canon. In addition to dramatizing the theories of Lamb & Veith and Russ, “Fan Fiction” also cleverly dramatizes another, more compelling theory of fan fiction, Francesca Coppa’s “Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance.” Similar to how Abigail Derecho’s essay about archontic texts implicitly relies on the Genre Function, Coppa’s essay makes a compelling argument about fic that pivots around genre. Also drawing on Derrida, as well as performance studies, she argues that fic ought to be regarded as “more a kind of theatre than a kind of prose,” citing the various features of the genre that align it more with Drama than traditional prose texts, such as its repetition, supplementation of the original text, collaborative nature, emphasis on the body, and role as a “a cultural performance that requires a live audience” (239). She ultimately concludes that “if traditional theatre takes a script and makes it three dimensional in a potentially infinite number of productions, modern fandom takes something three-dimensional and then produces an infinite number of scripts” (243). In stark contrast to Becky, Marie is not portrayed as an obsessive, delusional sex offender, and her passion for writing fanfiction – including slash – is celebrated, and her emotional investment in the *Supernatural* books is treated with respect and appreciation.

The friendship that forms between Marie and Dean serves as the structural and emotional core of the episode. Dean, as we know, is not a fan of the *Supernatural* novels that narrate his life, and if we read Marie as representative of the *Supernatural* fandom, we can read Dean as representative of a perspective that regards the canon as a closed text whose creators are the only legitimate owners and arbiters of its interpretation. Marie is *Supernatural* as an archontic, non-normative, queer text, and Dean is *Supernatural* as a normative text with closed borders that

abides by traditional genre boundaries. Indeed, many of Dean's problems with the production have to do with how it violates his genre norms. "There's no singing in *Supernatural*," he forcefully asserts upon learning that the play is a musical, an objection contradicted by his own canon, as many fans were swift to point out, flooding Tumblr with meta, gifsets, and vid edits detailing all of the times Dean has sung over the years. Dean is resistant to the genre hybridity that Marie employs to tell her *Supernatural* story, because he believes that the genre of his life – aggressively masculine thriller – holds higher value and status than a musical, and because he believes that he is the only owner of his story. Maeve immediately corrects Dean's "there's no singing in *Supernatural*" the way many fans would: "well, this is Marie's interpretation," she tells him, the *duh* heavily implied. This dissonance between Dean's interpretation of the books/his life and what has actually occurred on the show subverts Dean's anti-fanfiction attitude. Dean goes on to declare that "if there was singing, and that's a big *if*, it would be classic rock, not this Andrew Floyd Webber crap," so flustered by and disdainful of the wrong genre's intrusion into his narrative that he misnames the synecdochic composer. Even when he acquiesces to the possibility of a *Supernatural* musical, he still tries to enforce genre rules and boundaries – classic rock only, no show tunes or other Broadway nonsense. But Dean and Marie soon find common ground when she tells them that, the second act of the play includes a cover of Kansas' "Carry on Wayward Son" – the show (and fandom's) official anthem that plays over the every season recap prior to the finales. Unimpressed, Sam responds, "Really?" Dean and Marie, however, defend the song choice: "It's a classic," they say in unison. This is a pivotal moment in their budding friendship – united in their irritation that Sam does not appreciate the song and in agreement that it should be included, it marks the beginning of Dean's evolution towards understanding and appreciating *Supernatural* fanfiction and Marie as a writer. This exchange also foreshadows

the episode's most emotionally resonant moment, in which the play cast – the fans – perform the song as Sam and Dean look on, a scene remarkable for its narrative effectiveness, its understanding of fans' intertextual and reparative writing practices, and its fourth-wall breaking gesture of fan appreciation.

Marie takes Dean on a backstage tour that Marie that is decidedly pedagogical: the fan writer explains to a resistant canon authority why she writes fic and why it matters. She offers a brief explanation of how she composes her transformative works; when Dean asks



Figure 9. Supernatural fan Marie teaches Dean about fanfiction. ("Fan Fiction")

her where she got the props for the production, she answers, “some parts remade, some parts repurposed, all of it awesome,” – a pithy distillation of the ur-text of academic fan studies, Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*, indicating that both she – and thus the show's writers – have nuanced and informed understandings of the vast complexities and creativities that go into creating fan works. As Marie educates Dean, she demonstrates her careful attention to details and recurring themes of the books, as well as her queer readings. When Dean sees the actresses playing the Winchesters and asks about them, she explains that they're rehearsing the scene inspired by the canon's frequent, romantically-coded “boy melodrama scene[s],” in which “the boys get together and they're driving or they're leaning against Baby, drinking a beer, sharing their feelings, the two of them, alone but together, bonded, united, the power of their –” Dean interrupts and demands to know why Sam and Dean are standing so close together:

*MARIE: Uh...reasons.*

*DEAN: You know they're brothers, right?*

*MARIE: [rolls her eyes] Well, duh. But...subtext.*

*DEAN: [to the actresses] Why don't you take a sub-step back there, ladies?*

Dean's response to Marie's reading of a romantic relationship between him and his brother echoes his disgusted reaction to learning about slash fans back in Season Four – “they do know we're brothers right?” – but this moment features a key difference from his response to his first introduction to Wincest. Rather than mention Sam-slash-Dean fans and then dismiss them with disgust, this acknowledgement, even as Dean rejects Wincest with his exasperated reminder that they're brothers, nonetheless partially validates Wincestuous readings. Marie has incorporated one of the most frequently cited subtextual features of their relationship in her fic: Sam and Dean, in remarkably close physical proximity to each other, emotionally vulnerable and intimate, invoking their singular bond. Wincest remains taboo, the canon nevertheless acknowledges and accepts that there is rampant (sub)textual evidence for it.

Marie's backstage tour for Dean then moves to the drama teacher's office, where the camera initially focuses on a poster of William Shakespeare: a Elizabethan-costumed and bearded Bard holding a horned animal skull that looks suspiciously devilish, over the nonsense caption “Theatre is Life.” This satirical aside pokes fun at the deification of Shakespeare critiquing both those that dismiss popular culture as inartistic, unliterary, irrelevant – as well as those who revere Shakespeare as the ultimate Author, the epitome of the Author Function and the Western Canon that gives fandom its use of the term. In the following scene, Dean, always quick to bestow a clever nickname, sarcastically calls Marie “Shakespeare,” derisively at first,

attempting to emphasize the perceived difference between the “good” writing of Shakespeare and the “bad” fic writing of Marie and her fandom ilk. But again, Dean’s criticism lacks any real weight or importance, undermined this time by historical fact: Shakespeare’s works were considered popular entertainment before they were elevated to The Canon; he drew heavily on the works of his predecessors and contemporaries; he wrote collaboratively – essentially, he was a fic writer. Thus, even before Dean calls Marie “Shakespeare” with affection and respect at the episode’s end, hierarchical distinctions between canon and fan texts have been thoroughly blurred and challenged.

Dean’s fandom education continues upon finding another prop, a space robot, and he immediately claims another genre violation:

DEAN: There’s no space in *Supernatural*.

MARIE: Well not canonically, no, but this is transformative fiction.

DEAN: You mean fan fiction.

MARIE: Call it whatever you like, okay, it’s inspired by Carver Edlund’s books, with a few embellishments...as you know, Chuck stopped writing after “Swan Song.” I couldn’t leave it the way that it was, Dean not hunting anymore, living with Lisa, Sam somehow back from Hell but not with Dean? So I wrote my own ending.

DEAN: You wrote your own ending? With spaceships?

MARIE: And robots. And some ninjas. And then Dean becomes a woman...just for a couple of scenes.

Marie demonstrates her awareness of the generic flexibility and archontic nature of the canon text and even uses the inclusive, academic-savvy descriptor *transformative* to describe her work. She asserts her refusal to accept the closed nature of the canon, just as she asserts her interpretive

right to read and write homoerotic subtexts. Her wildly varied fic – robots, ninjas, gender swapping – speaks the vastly complex and eclectic creativity of fic and fandom, a world in which fans don't simply write their own endings or make implicit subtexts explicit, but produce dynamic texts and corresponding counterpublics that constantly blurs, redefines, and destroys genre boundaries. And if there were any doubt at this point that *Supernatural* has fully embraced its fandom and fan writers as both valid arbiters of the canonical interpretation and as valued writers, we only have to look at the scene in which Dean tells Marie “what really happened” after “Swan Song,” the last of Chuck's books, the Season Five finale that marked the departure of Eric Kripke and the five-season arc he had planned as the complete series. The show was notably inconsistent in quality in the seasons immediately following Kripke's departure, a frustration many fans explored via fic. Dean summarizes the post-Kripke seasons of *Supernatural* for Marie, right up to the episode immediately preceding “Fan Fiction.” Unimpressed with what Dean calls Carver Edlund's “unpublished unpublished” books that a “friend hooked [him] up with,” Marie laughs and says, “that's some of the worst fanfiction I've ever heard.” She asks him where his friend got that “garbage;” and, in true fan form, offers to send him links to good fics. More than simple self-awareness and poking fun at itself, the show here is acknowledging and welcoming the writing of fans like Marie, embracing her uptakes as not only valid additions to its archive, but as potentially better than the canon itself.

We'll never know if Dean takes up Marie on the offer to read her fic recommendations (until someone writes that fic at least), because Dean once again changes the conversation upon becoming distracted by the play's apparent homoeroticism. He spots the play version of himself in a loving embrace with the play version of Castiel, and asks Marie if “that” is in the show. She answers no, and explains that the actresses playing Dean and Castiel are “a couple in real life”

– perhaps a nod to Cockles, the RPS of Misha Collins and Jensen Ackles? Marie also informs Death that they “do explore the nature of Destiel in act two” of the play. Dean once again reacts with disgruntled confusion, this time to learning about Destiel. Marie responds once again with a common fandom shorthand for explaining the complexity of queer shipping: “it’s just subtext,” and then quips, “but then again, you can’t spell subtext without S-E-X.” In response, Dean breaks the fourth wall and looks directly at the camera with a ‘you’ve got to be kidding me’ expression; a reaction that, according to a tweet from Jensen Ackles during the episode’s initial airing, was unscripted. When Sam learns about Destiel, he has a much more open-minded reaction; his primary concern upon learning that fans imagine his brother in a sexual and romantic relationship with their angel ally is confusion about the ship name’s pronunciation. “Shouldn’t it be *Dee*-stiel,” he asks, then goes on to brainstorm Sam/Castiel portmanteaus: “How about Sastiel? Samstiel?”<sup>29</sup> Dean vehemently protests Sam’s enjoyment of Destiel, especially when Sam suggests another popular Dean/Castiel ship name, CasDean. He reacts with fluster and bravado, repeatedly tells Sam to shut up, and, as many fans were quick to point out, behaves like someone who’s being teased about his crush; as Shakespeare might say, perhaps the hunter doth protest too much. Eventually, Dean welcomes and even encourages Destiel shipping, an acceptance and embrace of fanfiction that emerges directly from the education he received from Marie and his newfound understanding of her as a writer. Dean, the canon authority, realizes that Marie is a valid and valued composer of his story because he sees her emotional investment in *Supernatural* and how being a both a reader and writer of the text fulfills and meets her emotional needs. Marie teaches Dean why fans write fic and what that writing does for them beyond obsessive indulgence, and shows him the canon’s infinite possibilities for expansion and how fan-composed explorations of the characters enrich the source and provide sustenance and

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<sup>29</sup> Sam’s first guest was correct, as the much smaller but no less creative Sam/Cas fandom does indeed ship Sastiel.

emotional catharsis for fic writers and readers.

In order to vanquish Calliope, Marie's vision must be realized – the show must go on. Because the actress playing Sam has been kidnapped, Marie herself must step up and play her favorite character. Dean helps Marie battle her fears, and, using the courageous Winchesters as inspiration, she goes on stage and enacts her fic. Before the curtain goes up, Dean gives a rousing, inspirational speech to the rest of the cast: "*Listen up, girls. You're all here because you love Supernatural.... I know I have expressed some differences of opinion regarding this particular version of Supernatural, but tonight, it is all about Marie's vision. This is Marie's Supernatural.*" The once-resistant canonical authority declares the validity of the fan writer's work and grants Marie ownership of *Supernatural* and acknowledges that the text is just as much hers as it is theirs. Remarkably, Dean not only asserts that *Supernatural* belongs to the fans, he also goes on to give his blessing to slash. He stands face-to-face with the play version of Castiel, and orders, "I want you to get out there, and I want to stand as close as she [Marie] wants you to, and *I want you to put as much sub into that text as you possibly can.*" *Once exacerbated by fan writers' fascination with subtextual homoeroticism, Dean now embraces it; his recognition of Marie's ownership of Supernatural extends to her queer readings and queer creations; and it's all because he has come to understand and respect her as a writer – a writer who has given him a*



Figure 10. "I want you to put as much sub into that text as you possibly can," Dean tells the play version of Castiel and himself. ("Fan Fiction")

new perspective on the genre of his life story and what it can mean to others.

“Fan Fiction” not only sanctions Marie as a writer of and participant in the archontic *Supernatural*, it also *acknowledges fans’ intimate knowledge of and in-depth understandings* of the show and characters. Fic is deeply invested in deepening canon characterizations, and exploring the myriad motivations and effects of characters’ actions, emotions, personality traits, and interpersonal dynamics. Fan writers take it upon themselves to plumb the depths of characters, employing all manner of aesthetic and literary tools, which “Fan Fiction” further demonstrates with great insight and beauty via the three original songs Marie has written for the play. There’s Castiel’s plaintive solo that declares his devotion to Dean; “The Road So Far,” the opening number that summarizes the first few seasons of the show; and a duet titled “A Single Man Tear,” which features both Dean and Sam’s perspectives, and like *Supernatural* itself, is a blend of the humorous and emotionally resonant. Jokingly titled for Dean’s one-single-tear style of emoting, the song is a rumination on Dean’s fragile masculinity, his emotionally abusive relationship with his father, and the brothers’ devotion to each other. Marie’s lyrics interpret and rewrite scenes from the throughout series, beginning with Sam’s reflection on his brother’s repressed emotions:

A single man tear slips down his face / he shows emotion without a trace  
He hides behind a mask so strong / worried that he could be wrong  
I wish that he see the way I see him / the perfect brother, a man without sin  
‘Cause underneath the manly sheen / it is my brother, a boy named Dean.

Then, from Dean’s perspective:

A single man tear / that’s all I’ll spare  
Even though I’m haunted / must be the man daddy wanted  
Wish I could be as strong as Sam / blaze my own trail, be my own man  
But *underneath this broken mask / it is my father, with all his wrath.*

Marie's fic delves into the hearts and minds of the characters and enriches the source text, adding further depth and complexity to Sam and Dean's relationship and how it's inextricably bound up with their father's violence, their unstable masculinity, and their fractured selves. By representing Marie as a fic writer with this kind of insight and skill, the episode celebrates fan writers' engagement with and affective investments in the show, as well as their insight and creativity – a far cry from Becky and her obsessive, manic infatuation.

*At the play's climax*, in a further collapse of the fan-canon divide, Dean inadvertently ends up on stage while fighting Calliope. He and Marie deftly fold the fight and eventual vanquishing of the monster into the performance, much to the audience's impressed delight. This nubile act of improvisation and textual revision by both Dean and Marie is yet another significant boundary crossing: Dean, the canon, becomes part of the fan text, while Marie, the fan, kills the monster, fully integrating her into the canon. This is further reiterated when, after Calliope has been vanquished, Marie and Dean share another moment of mutual respect, and Dean repeats his new acceptance of fanfiction:

DEAN: This has been educational, seeing the story from your perspective. You keep writing, Shakespeare.

MARIE: Even if it doesn't match up with how you see it?

DEAN: I have my version and you have yours.

This remarkable shift in Dean's attitude about fanfiction is a direct result of the education Marie has given him. He has come to understand her as a writer of his story whose emotional and creative investment invigorates and enriches his canon while simultaneously fulfilling her needs. Once fully recognized and accepted as a Supernatural writer, Dean now uses the previously

mocking ‘Shakespeare’ appellation with affection and sincerity, and even encourages her to keep writing. Marie then extends recognition to Dean, accepting him as the actual Dean Winchester and calls him by his name for the first time. Marie’s realization that her favorite books and characters are real does not generate an obnoxious squeal like Becky, but instead a thoughtful gesture of appreciation. She gives Dean the prop amulet – the Samulet, as the fandom calls it, “the symbol of the Winchesters’ brotherly love,” a mystical token from their childhood that Dean had previously discarded in frustration (“Dark Side of the Moon” 5.16). Marie tells him that he never should have thrown it away, and Dean responds that he doesn’t “need a symbol to remind [him] of how [he] feels about his [brother].” But, nevertheless, moments later, he hangs the fan-made Samulet on the rearview mirror of the Impala, and shares a meaningful glance with Sam before driving off into a sunset that mirrors the play’s road scenery, all while the instrumental version of “A Single Man Tear” plays non-diegetically. This reaffirmation of their bond, as represented by the prop Samulet and Marie’s song, is made possible by fans’ creative engagement and transformative works – by fanfiction.

Before the Winchesters drive off into the sunset, Marie gives them one more gift: the cover of “Carry on Wayward Son” that Marie promised Dean in the episode’s beginning. The all-female version of the show’s masculine anthem is led by Mary Winchester, Sam and Dean’s long-dead mother whose death spurred their father’s vengeance quest and their lives as hunters. Despite being the show’s anthem, “Carry On” has never actually been featured in the narrative itself, diegetically or otherwise. This rendition of the song then, is the first time Sam and Dean listen to the song onscreen, and it touches them and touches them deeply – there’s even almost a single man tear from Dean. *Real-world Supernatural* fans however, know this song quite well, and have heard it many times, as it encapsulates The Road So Far at the beginning of every season

finale. Thanks to Marie and the dedicated fandom, the brothers are able to incorporate the song into their own lives as an anthem of encouragement and comfort, just as it's been for the fans. It's crucial to remember here that in the show universe, *Supernatural* is a book series, not a TV show, and thus we can reasonably assume that there is no in-universe connection between "Carry on Wayward Son" and the *Supernatural* books Marie loves so deeply. It follows that it was Marie's original addition to the universe, and she's not only performing another intertextual gesture of transformative creativity, she also gives Sam and Dean the gift of this song and its many resonances with their story. A further blurring of textual boundaries, the chorus of female voices singing this particular song is a gesture of comfort and encouragement for the brothers precisely because it resonates as such with fans. This rendition of the show's (un)official theme song is a gift from Marie to the brothers, but it's also *another of the episode's* gifts to fan writers. "Fan Fiction" presents a much more nuanced and accurate representation of fan writers than its previous attempt with Becky. It acknowledges, with keen emotional depth and insight, how fan texts and fans' emotional investments invigorate the show. This is elaborated even further when Sam tries to tell Dean they need to keep hunting, but stops short when the play version of himself, speaking to the play version of Dean, says the same. Sam then allows Marie-as-Sam to speak for him: "We need to be back on the road, Dean, doing what we do best." Sam, who missed the earlier lesson on the "boy melodrama" scenes, asks what's going on, and Dean tells him to listen to the fans. Marie-as-Sam sends the scene into the closing song by reiterating the show's core theme – "just the two of us against the world" – and Sam looks to his brother and says, "what she said," the canon once again unequivocally granting Marie the right to speak for them, *as them*.

The appreciation and validation of Marie's fic doesn't end there. After the Winchesters

drive off into the simulated sunset, we return to the theater to see that Marie has had another special audience member in attendance: Chuck, who has not been seen onscreen since his mysterious disappearance in the season five finale “Swan Song,” in which it was heavily implied that he was God. Thrilled that her favorite author has shown up for the performance, Marie excitedly asks Chuck what he thinks of her play, to which coyly he smiles and replies, “Not bad.” This final blessing – approval from the Author, God himself, the ultimate canon authority – is a touching moment of fan appreciation that borders on the unnecessary, given the intimate love letter to fan writers that is “Fan Fiction, the zenith of nearly a decade of dialectical and dynamic interaction between the *Supernatural* canon and the *Supernatural* fandom. Remarkable for how it integrates and speaks back to its avid and productive fandom, this episode, and indeed, all of the show’s representations of its own fandom, demonstrate a sincere interest in and appreciation for those viewers whose investments in the show motivate creative transformative works. Unlike many of its peers, *Supernatural* welcomes its fan writers into the text and acknowledges and accepts them as co-curators of the show’s infinite archive. This unique and thoroughly metamodern integration of its fandom and the development of the fan-canon relationship emerges from and is facilitated by the show’s complex and nuanced understanding of genre and the Genre Function, particularly Uptake. The canon recognizes the queerness of fic at both the levels of content and genre, and responds in kind, crafting non-normative, and sometimes even queer, responses of their own. The result is an essentially positive and encouraging fan-canon relationship that is central to the show’s continued commercial and critical success, despite various dips in quality and problematic moments over the years.

One only need look at the numbers in comparison to *Teen Wolf*. *Supernatural* has just been renewed for a thirteenth season – with the original core cast intact – and has produced, as

of this writing, 258 episodes; *Teen Wolf* has limped to its sixth and final season with abysmal ratings, barely more than 100 episodes, and only a fraction of the original cast – and a fraction of screen time for its increasingly unavailable breakout star, Dylan O’Brien. Crucially, Destiel and Sterek, are first and third most popular relationships, respectively, on Archive of Our Own. Both fandoms are incredibly productive and popular, yet only one enjoys a positive relationship with its canon. While many *Supernatural* fans may have abandoned ship for various reasons throughout the show’s run, there certainly has not been the widespread and near-wholesale rejection of the canon that has come to define the Sterek fandom. While the Sterek fandom has come to function independently of the canon, the Destiel fandom, and even the much-maligned Wincest fandom, are welcomed into and embraced by the canon. Two of the most popular slash fandoms with two radically different fan-canon relationships – largely, if not completely, due to the different ways in which each canon responded to their queer fandoms. Where *Teen Wolf* fundamentally misunderstood, and continues to misunderstand, why and how fans write slash fic and tried to control fan interpretations, *Supernatural* has long understood that the fandom-canon relationship is an ongoing series of utterances and responses structured by uptake and the Genre Function and uses that knowledge to engage in more productive, authentic, and radical conversations with its fandom.

## CONCLUSION

### **Fucking, Fascination, and Frustration: The Critical Erotics of Slash**

*“The idea of sexual equality, which will necessarily require a renovated masculinity, is taking a long time to become a lived reality and is hard to imagine, much less write.”*

– Constance Penley  
NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America

Slash fandoms and the relationships they co-create with their respective canon texts, are complex counterpublics with myriad motivations, affective attachments, and ideological investments. Slash is also preoccupied with explicit sex, and any project about slash fandom that does not seriously engage with this defining element of the genre is lacking an essential piece of the puzzle. Slash is genre disruption. Slash is an interrogation of gender norms and the relationship dynamics they inhere. Slash is a critique of source texts’ queerphobia and heteronormativity. Slash is also sex. Erotica, pornography, romance – whatever descriptors and genre boundaries one places on slash, it has always and remains obsessed with sex between men. Explicit- and Mature-rated stories across fandoms abound with detailed, graphic descriptions of making love and fucking, of muscled and lithe male bodies and the infinite ways (realistic and not) of getting off, of out-of-this-world, life-changing orgasms – all between men who are utterly in love with each other. Thus, one of the most frequent questions posed by both mainstream and academic observers of slash has to do with this apparent obsession with not just sex, but gay male sex, on the part of people who, according to the logic of heteronormativity, should not be interested in such things, who shouldn’t even *know* such things. Why do women of every gender and sexual identity write, read, create and re-create, this gay sex-saturated genre?

It’s when confronted with this crucial question about the fascination with and celebration

of male-male sex in its endless iterations and possibilities that it is crucial to return to Queer Theory's renewed emphasis on sex and sexuality. Arguing for the importance of sex in analyses of queer texts and queer counterpublics does more than "justify" the serious and thoughtful exploration of pornographic fantexts; it allows for the theorizing of these explicit works as critical engagements with heteronormativity and the politics of shame that refuse queer sexuality. Elizabeth Freeman's essay "Still After" in *After Sex: On Writing Since Queer Theory*, offers what the collection's editors call "a queer doxa" (Halley and Parker 6). "Wasn't my being queer, in the first instance, about finding sex where it was not supposed to be, failing to find it where it was, finding that sex was not, after all, what I thought it was" (32). A queer doxa, and a slash doxa, as slash fandom is defined by seeing sex and love where it isn't meant to be. Freeman also speaks to the centrality of genre, the nuanced deployment of generic forms, and the power of genre disruption in efforts to utilize queerness and queer critique to subvert normativity. She describes her possibly "anachronistic" investment in aesthetics as experiencing "a genuinely erotic friction among various genres, modes, literary techniques, allusions, and so on in any given cultural event or object, a way of confronting the historicity of subjects and politics that finds its queerness in method rather than in object," and it's within this generic friction and aesthetic interplay that we can further pinpoint the anti-normative subversion of sexually explicit slash (Freeman 31). Just as maintaining a discreet distinction between reading the canon and writing slash fic is theoretically productive yet not entirely possible given the co-constitutive nature of reading and writing; a distinction between method and object, between "sex as technique, rather than topic" is also theoretically useful while simultaneously impossible (32). We cannot fully divorce the content of slash from its form, as the form, the genre, is partially defined by its content; we can, however, find useful ground in which to stake and position analyses of slash and

the critical work it accomplishes by embracing these productive contradiction. Gay sex, realistic and fantastical, explicitly imagined in great detail, is absolutely fundamental to slash fandom – one of the defining pillars of the genre, and in these particular queer uptakes, the non-normative deployment of genre, that a further dimension of the critical work of slash is accomplished. The sex in slash is both technique *and* content, method *and* object. When we read pornographic slash in this way, we are better equipped to grasp its critical possibilities and subversive potentials, as well as its reparative, affective work. We can better see how uptaking the canon queerly and how these sexually explicit works challenge heteronormative ideologies both content and form.

The emphasis on narrating queer sex in explicit detail is a rejection of the politics of sexual shame that regulate what kind of sex is culturally permissible and what can be represented in fictional texts intended for widespread public consumption. Michael Warner argues that these politics of sexual shame severely circumscribe the representation of, conversations about, and knowledge of queer desires and queer sex; thus, the the ideals of sexual autonomy are “impossible for variant sexualities” (*The Trouble with Normal* viii). Warner points out that “queer culture has long cultivated an alternative ethical culture that is almost never recognized by mainstream moralists as anything of the kind,” largely due to its celebratory sexual explicitness. Slash fandom is one of these alternative ethical cultures that cultivates a variety of alternative intimacies and non-normative sexualities, as well as discourses about sexuality and bodily autonomy that mainstream moralist culture more often than not elides, such as the importance of consent, safe sex, and equal power between partners. Far more than a prurient obsession with blowjobs, anal pleasure, and semen, slash relishes in the “shameful” delights of variant sexual experiences and pleasures as a mode of working through and rejecting that shame. Slash fandom allows its writers and readers, both queer and not, to experience, to a degree, those

pleasures without reprisal. And while the embarrassment that often comes with participation in slash fandom abounds in mainstream spaces, slash counterpublics are defined by a refusal to acquiesce to the shaming of queer identities and desires that constitute heteronormative culture. Further explicating how heteronormativity functions via the politics of shame, Warner writes that “although nearly everyone can be easily embarrassed about sex, some people stand at a greater risk than others. They might be beaten, murdered, jailed, or merely humiliated. They might be stigmatized as deviants or criminals....they might simply be rendered inarticulate, or frustrated, since shame makes some pleasures tacitly inadmissible, unthinkable” (3). Warner continues:

The politics of shame, in other words, includes vastly more than the overt and deliberate shaming produced by moralists. It also involves silent inequalities, unintended effects of isolation, and the lack of public access. So sexual autonomy requires more than freedom of choice, tolerance, and the liberalization of sex laws. It requires access to pleasures and possibilities, since people commonly do not know their desires until they find them....

Individuals do not go shopping for sexual identity, but they do have a stake in a culture that enables sexual variance and circulates knowledge about it, because they have no other way of knowing what they might or might not want, or what they might become, or with whom they might find a common lot.” (7)

Desires once thought inadmissible and unthinkable are articulated in queer texts; this knowledge of queer desires and the possibilities of their fulfillment thus represented, the circulation of these texts that generates a queer counterpublic, allowing readers who harbor these queer desires to find others with whom they share “a common lot” – all threats to heteronormativity that are an effect of the circulation of queer texts.. Slash and its preoccupation with all manner of queer sex is thus a space where once inadmissible, unthinkable desires can flourish and be celebrated, enjoyed, and shared with other who have similar interests and desires. The queer counterpublics created by non-normative readings and rewritings of the canon – by slash writers uptaking

queerly – function in direct opposition to the politics of sexual shame.

The rogue knowledge of queer sex, desires, and identities that slash circulates via explicit fic and art exists with a larger schema of a rigorously gendered politics and ideologies that attempt strident control both public and private sexual expression, particularly for women. Cultivating and deploying politics of shame, the heteronormative matrix links a woman's cultural, social, and political status to her body and her sexuality, assigning her value according to how successfully she meets the demands of patriarchal sexual culture: embodying the narrow physical ideals to appeal to heterosexual men, enjoying sex but not too much, having sex with only socially acceptable partners, having sex for the “right” reasons, maintaining privacy about her sex life. These strictures for how women must regulate their sexual activity extends to their sexual desires and fantasies as well, and the degree to which she indulges them and keeps them private, or even the degree to which she allows herself to explore non-normative desires. Slash counterpublics are anchored not only in sex, but in queer sex that flips the various normative scripts and hetero assumptions about female desire and agency. In slash, women unabashedly share their fantasies with each other and openly embrace sex for themselves, on their terms, without the suffocation of misogynist politics of shame and the alienation and anxiety of the male gaze. Slash readers and writers not only enjoy pornography, they do so semi-publicly with “like-minded folks” who share their “deviant desires.” Slash fandom's creation of a queer reading public that refuses the politics of shame not only rejects dominant narratives about female sexuality; it also disrupts traditional masculinity. Sterek, Destiel, Wincest – indeed, all ships that pair canonically heterosexual men, by their very generic existence, challenge heteronormativity; they also critique it via plot and characterization, and the genre's sexually explicit delights and tropes. This genre disruption is both the redefinition of the canon and the deployment of the

erotic/pornographic genre(s) to decidedly non-hetero ends, a critical erotica.

In slash fandom, as both writers and readers, women are in control of male bodies and how they are represented, penetrated, ejaculated in and on – in ways that are both similar to and crucially different from how the female body is treated in pornography created by men for men, and even mainstream erotica for women by women. The specifics of the kind of sex that these texts invent and explore demonstrate that this constitutive element of slash fic functions in complex opposition to heteronormative ideologies. Masculinity and its social anchor, the male body, are revised and rewritten in order to undermine and dismantle traditional gender norms. Penetrative versatility and an interrogation of norms about who's on top; knotting, in which lupine biology is mapped on to werewolf sexuality in the form of an engorged penis that ties the pair together during and after sex; Alpha/Beta/Omega sexualities; male pregnancy. All of these popular subgenres/tropes offer radical revisions to gender norms and the male body that in mainstream culture, is wedded to physical dominance over weaker, feminized bodies, both male and female. Rejecting this, slash imagines the male body released from masculine normativity. Taking full advantage of the far-reaching freedom slash allows, writers revel in fantastical extremes with vast spectrum of accordance with reality, not to mention their respective canons. Crucially, these tropes dismantle traditional masculinity and reconstruct it, thus creating queer paradigms that refuse gender and sex hierarchies. It's also crucial to remember that these disruptions of and revisions to masculinity are not distinct from the pursuit of erotic pleasures that contribute to slash's motivations; rather, it's an essential component of those pleasures. As erotic critique, the queer sex of slash thus titillates and disrupts, turns on and turns over, eroticizes traditional masculinity while eradicating it.

This argument is an update and corrective to theories of slash that have dominated

fan studies, in particular, Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith's 1986 "Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and *Star Trek* Zines." Lamb and Veith argue that Kirk/Spock slash, even sexually explicit works, "are not about two gay males and should not be categorized as examples of homosexual literature." They reason that, because K/S readers (and default, writers, as they do not differentiate between the two acts) enjoy slash because it's the only way they can imagine a loving, intimate relationship between equals. "The myth of female passivity," they write, makes it impossible for these readers – all assumed to be heterosexual and seeking a lifelong heterosexual relationship – to imagine a romantic relationship based in equality and mutual sacrifice that includes women – heterosexual or lesbian (102). Thus alienated from a romantic ideal that they can never achieve in their lives – a dream so impossible, they argue, that it can't even be imagined in science fiction or its corresponding transformative works – women simply imagine these relationships occurring between the only true equals they can imagine, heterosexual men. Assuming that "most women are heterosexual" and that "masculine sexuality" and the "physical and sexual attractions of the male body" appeal to most, if not all women, they analyze Kirk/Spock fics and argue that they neutralize gender difference by allowing both characters to exhibit traditionally masculine and feminine gender characteristics and roles. Lamb and Veith ultimately conclude that,

Kirk's and Spock's loving behavior toward one another is a behavior many women presumably yearn to share with a man... [and] [t]hese novels, stories, and poems are not about sex or gender; they are certainly not about male homosexuality as such; and, despite appearances, they are not even commentaries on the romantic love story. Rather, they provide a vision of new possibilities for women. They are about the possibility of joining integrity to the self with fidelity to one's partner. This investigation of possibilities occurs in the vast arena of fantasy and science fiction, where anything is possible. (113 – 114)

The claim that Kirk/Spock fic revels in and takes advantage of the infinite possibilities afforded

to science fiction and fantasy is especially frustrating, given how circumscribed their argument actually is in regard to both science fiction/fantasy and transformative fan works.

Despite the fact that they're analyzing texts about love and sex between two men, Veith and Lamb outright reject any queer theoretical rubric that may allow for the recognition of slash's anti-heteronormative ethos, which functions essentially as a further erasure of queerness and queer desires that motivate slash writers in the first instance. Just as troubling, they remove gender and sexual difference from the equation completely, asserting that "K/S removes the question of romantic love and the difficulties of a committed lifelong relationship from the arena of gender discourse altogether" (102). Shackled by heterosexist assumptions and a mainstream liberalism that maintains a dangerous insistence on the erasure of difference as the goal and indicator of equality, this argument essentially ignores both the cultural and personal misogyny, homophobia, and sexism that slash writers endure and grapple with via their writing and reading of slash. In this vein, Veith and Lamb detail Kirk and Spock's "androgynous qualities...[that] have been extrapolated from the television series and given more substance in the K/S zines," and argue that the tendency for "many of these qualities to be reversed...[in fic] underscores the existence of this masculine-feminine balance" (103) but that "K/S writers reject the polarities defining the male-female personality myth" (105). Rather than acknowledge this rejection for its subversive nature and engage with these masculine-feminine reversals as potentially indicative of a revision to binarized gender and sexual norms, they instead reify those norms by insisting that any revisions to gender slash writers produce are motivated by and in the service of heteronormative desires and relationships. Their argument that slash fic provides new visions for new possibilities for women thus rings politically and affectively hollow, particularly when they claim that "it is the nature of the relationship [Kirk and Spock] share, not their gender or

even so much their specific identities as unique characters” in which slash fic readers and writers find pleasure (103). Their attempt to prove slash’s visionary possibilities for women within a framework that assumes gender difference automatically means gender inequality proves to be both ethically and theoretically flawed; by arguing that gender doesn’t exist in slash because the male bodies are inscribed with traditionally feminine characteristics, they fall into an ideological trap in which the erasure of gender difference in hetero romance is the pinnacle of women’s desire.

A more complex and accurate reading of slash’s gender reversals does not view these revisions as erasure of gender or as a removal of “the question of romantic love and the difficulties of a committed lifelong relationship from the arena of gender discourse altogether,” (102), but rather as a rejection of notions of gender fixedness and gender hierarchy. Slash fandom’s preoccupation with writing male characters imbued with traditionally female characteristics (physical beauty, emotional openness, intuition, a desire to be penetrated, etc.) does not cancel out gender difference like Veith and Lamb argue; rather, it *rewrites* gender, rejecting the notion of inherently male and female characteristics tied to specific bodies. Just as the “world without homophobia” promised by *Teen Wolf* fails to recognize the complexity of sexual difference and is little more than a creative and political cop-out, to argue that slash’s motivations and achievements are a world without gender ignores and denies the creative, political, and critical work achieved by slash writers. Slash does not create a genderless world – it creates worlds in which the social, cultural, and political *values* associated with gendered characteristics and behaviors are interrogated and equalized, and in which gender norms and notions of deviance are dismantled and rewritten. Slash does not reverse and revise gender in order to do away with it; rather, it rescripts gender in order to do away with normalizing

ideologies that privilege traditionally masculine characteristics and the male body at the expense of the female body. Lamb and Veith's argument pivots on the unexamined warrant that women's sexual fantasies and desires operate according to the tenets of normative heterosexuality. In their paradigm, the fictional male body is merely a stand-in for the female reader's – hence the assertion that K/S fic is not “homosexual literature” (112). In this schema, women read and write erotic stories about men because they cannot fathom, even in the worlds of science fiction where anything is possible, a female body and identity that is fully equal to a male. Lamb and Veith accept this hierarchized gender binary and its attendant norms and assume that the slash readers they're describing do as well. In their effort to make slash palatable and non-threatening, they myopically misread the complex nuances of the genre, its readers, and its writers. They fail to consider that slash writers have motivations and erotic desires in relation to the male body that are not so closely linked to a heteronormative romance and gender paradigm. They do not allow for the full spectrum of possible motivations for slash, nor the various effects and affects that emerge upon its circulation; they fail to consider that reading – and especially writing – slash can be and often is a critical gesture aimed at dismantling the very sex/gender norms that their argument uncritically assumes and reproduces.

Our analyses must of slash recognize not only the complexity of the genre and its various motivations, but they must also refuse an ideological rubric in which gender/sex equality requires the erasure of difference. We must insist, following the manner of slash fandoms, that it's the governing hierarchy of heteronormativity that needs to be dismantled and erased rather than gender itself. We must acknowledge that women's engagement with these texts – indeed, everyone's engagement with erotica and pornography – is shaped by a vast matrix of cultural and social influences. Of course, these influences combine with individual experiences

and psychology and are ever-evolving, making it impossible to neatly untangle these webs of motivations and desires; thus, all arguments about why women of all sexualities read and write gay male erotica are by nature incomplete and provisional. Nonetheless, any worthwhile investigation of the genre must allow for the sheer complexity and intractability of motivations – conscious and otherwise – of those who write and read it. The phenomenon of women imagining two men together, particularly fictional characters who are canonically heterosexual, cannot be reduced to a wish-fulfillment fantasy of idealized heterosexual romance.

Slash writers and readers find erotic, affective, and political pleasure in rewriting the male body and masculinity. Crucially, these revisions to traditional gender norms do not exist in spite of their pornographic and erotic nature, but *because* of it. There is erotic pleasure in asserting textual control over masculine bodies, the pleasure of revising the male body in such a way as to reject the gender norms that define and confine that body and in turn, how those norms rely on the oppression of women and femininity. Underlying Lamb and Veith's argument is the assumption that female slash readers (and by default, writers) are so irrevocably alienated from their bodies, so fraught with internalized misogyny, that an imagined male body and its desires are more accessible to them than their own. Constance Penley reiterates this belief in her 1997 book on *Star Trek* fans, asking, "why are the women fans so alienated from their own bodies that they can write erotic fantasies only in relation to a nonfemale body" (125)? Certainly, most women, to varying degrees, experience this alienation as an inescapable effect of living under patriarchy, but basing a rubric for analysis of slash on this wildly variable affective experience is at once too vague and far too-limiting an oversimplification.<sup>30</sup> Instead, we can acknowledge this as one of many motivations and factors that pivot around a fundamental concern with disrupting

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30 Penley's question also assumes that female fans *only* read and write M/M slash, which is certainly not the case in today's proliferative fandoms and the abundance of ships they offer.

the forces that cultivate the sexism and misogyny that cause this alienation. Heteropatriarchy attacks the female body and femininity on countless fronts, and women and activists wage their answering battles accordingly. Slash fans wage their battle, using genre as one of their most powerful weapons, on one the most vitally important yet oft-forgotten fronts: the male body. In order to eradicate heteronormativity, the traditional, toxic masculinity that inheres misogyny, that defines manliness as the vaunted polar opposite of womanliness, must be destroyed. Masculinity's dependence on sexism and misogyny must be dismantled as an essential strategy of feminist and queer liberation. Slash undertakes this battle and bucks respectability norms that govern sexual expression, particularly queer sexual expression, by deploying eroticism to rewrite the male body not in relation to the female body, *but in relation to itself*. In slash, male bodies are snatched from the grip of the gender binary, poached alongside pieces of the source texts that fic writers find useful, and, just like the canon, rewritten to suit the needs and desires of the queer counterpublic. Those desires are many and diverse, yet bound by a common thread: the rejection of poisonous heteronormative masculinity and the creation of alternative masculinities that celebrate the male body and its many erotics, without a concomitant misogyny that spurns femininity and sentiment, thus redefining the most visible site and signifier of heteronormative masculinity, the male body.

In his essay in *After Sex*, Richard Rambuss names this alternative masculinity “male masculinity.” In his theorizing of the relationship between queer studies and sex/sexual identity, he posits that “there may be something gained – descriptively, analytically, affectively – in keeping open some space (highly motile space, to be sure) between ‘gay male’ and ‘queer’” and that this space is possible without “resutur[ing] gender or sexuality to nature and biology, or endeavoring to reinstall an identarian gay studies” (193; 201). Queer theory and activism,

he argues, “has been very good for thinking about some things,” such as the affects and effects of drag, gender impersonation, and female masculinity, but has been “less good (so far) for thinking about others,” specifically the possibilities of a male masculinity that does not reproduce masculinist ideologies.

Might we even allow for – might some of us even be turned on by – a masculinity that *is* masculinist in places: say, inside the homotopia of gay male porn, or a certain kind of gay bar, or most male sex clubs.... Sometimes – not always, but I’d venture often – the particular eroticism of such sites is keyed to their homoeroticism, their particular sociality a function of their marked male homosociality. These domains are masculinist insofar as they substantively depend on some form or degree of single-sexedness. I say some form or degree of single-sexedness because the male exclusion of women or of femaleness (not, we know, necessarily the same thing) isn’t always as utter as it may first seem, especially in the register of our complexly gendered imaginaries. (200)

Certainly a challenging terrain to navigate given the depths of our ingrained gendered imaginaries, this space of male masculinity, in Rambuss’ vision, is a masculinist celebration of maleness without a corresponding denigration of femaleness. This vision accepts that “male masculinity sometimes sustains misogyny” but allows for the possibility that it is not “reducible or has any necessary relation to it” (201). Masculinity’s inherence of misogyny is not necessarily a given – as an ideological construction that buttresses gender binarism and heteropatriarchy, it can be refused, rejected, and dismantled. “Virility – as feeling, as sentiment, as performance, as manners, as comportment, as role, as position, as power, as hierarchy, as fantasy, as an erotics – need not be coextensive with a patriarchy that enjoins a political gendered inequality,” Rambuss further argues (201). Male masculinity provides a remarkably accurate and productive analytic and descriptor for slash. Multifaceted expressions of male virility in a world marked by a degree of single-sexedness, slash, as a genre, is fundamentally about men and masculinity; its creation and consumption by the largely single-sex world of female writers and readers allows for a

unique expression of male masculinity that refuses the particularly virulent but often-observed vein of misogyny that exerts itself on the vilified, feminized male body. Indeed, in 1987 when writing about Kirk/Spock fic, Joanna Russ claimed that they were “the only literature I’ve ever seen in which women do describe male beauty – not masculinity, mind you, but the passive, acted-upon glories of male flesh” (90). Her distinction between masculinity and passive male beauty is quite telling: masculinity and the male body is so heavily loaded with aggression and dominance that to conceive of it otherwise removes it from the realm of ‘masculinity’ altogether. The post-subjectless critique Queer Theory that recuperates sex that Rambuss and others propose refuses this and insists upon the erotic celebration of the “the passive, acted-upon glories of male flesh” that expands and redefines traditional masculinity.

Reading slash as a rescripting of masculinity in order to redefine it, rather than as an inherently female fantasy for a heterosexual relationship of equals that sexism does not allow, is a fundamental paradigm shift for fandom studies, and a wholly necessary one, given the vast expansion and flourishing of queer fandoms since the original publication of Lamb & Veith’s “Romantic Myth.” Today’s generation of slash writers and readers, facilitated by the Internet and building on the foundations of Kirk/Spock zines, are socially aware, critical media consumers that can not only imagine equal relationships between men and women, but who *demand* that all relationships – in both the media they consume and for themselves – be based on equality and fundamental respect. They demand that romantic relationships, regardless of the gender identities and sexualities in play, do not default to heterosexual dynamics or gender norms. This paradigmatic difference is evinced both in the critically engaged discourses and debates that abound in fandom spaces, as well in the renunciations – both subtle and not – of heteronormative gender and sex roles that abound in contemporary slash fic. Rambuss writes that, “mainstream

gay male porn runs on the desire for masculinity, on the erotic intensification of it,” (202) and we can most certainly say the same of slash fic, with the key difference that, in slash, it’s an intensification of *male* masculinity – a performance of masculinity uncoupled from misogyny – that drives the erotic desires and satisfactions. These revisions to masculinity appear in myriad forms throughout slash fandoms, but three tropes in particular stand out as especially indicative of this fascination: penetrative versatility, Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics, and knotting.

Traditional masculinity demands physical dominance over women, and this dominance is exerted most unequivocally in the realm of sex, specifically penetration, as the epitome of masculinity. In this normative schema, women are inherently weaker because they are penetrated, and thus men who are penetrated are negatively feminized to the degree of sacrificing the very essence of their masculinity. To penetrate is to be powerful, to be male; to be penetrated is to be weak, to be female. This binary is further entrenched by the notion of penetrative fixity, the belief that gay men are either exclusively a top (penetrator) or a bottom (penetrated). These norms uncritically map heteronormativity onto to queer bodies and relationships, and much slash recognizes and rejects them by enthusiastically emphasizing penetrative versatility, writing the more traditionally masculine character as a bottom, and divorcing penetrative preferences from gender. Crucially, many of these revisions to masculinity occur alongside a commitment to celebrating equality, romance, and emotional intimacy as an essential part of sex. The relationship of equals and true love that Lamb and Veith identify as the primary motivation for K/S stories lives on in contemporary slash, with the key difference that these imagined, highly eroticized relationships between men dismantle gender hierarchies (a world with heterosexuality) rather than erase real-world gender difference (a world without homophobia). Consider the ever-growing popularity of Bottom!Derek in the *Strek* fandom, in which the werewolf – often much

to Stiles' surprise – prefers to receive rather than give. The epitome of traditional masculinity in both physical appearance and demeanor, physically larger and stronger than Stiles, Derek has most often been written as a top in explicit Sterek fics, particularly in the early years of the fandom. In recent years, a large and ever-growing contingent of Sterek fans rejoice in reading, writing, and illustrating bottom!Derek and/or versatile!Derek. Much of the erotic pleasure stems from imagining such intense masculinity in a more vulnerable and submissive physical and emotional state, that Derek trusts Stiles to not take advantage of this perceived vulnerability. Derek does not lose any of his traditional masculinity – his is still physically larger, well-muscled and sculpted, bearded, terse, closed-off, stoic, werewolf. He is still fundamentally, a *man* – a man who just so happens to like receiving anal sex, and that fact of his sexual desire is utterly irrelevant to his gender identity or performance. A similar trend occurs in the Destiel fandom with Bottom!Dean. Notably, the naming and categorizing of these tropes is quite telling. It's not top!Stiles or top!Castiel – the emphasis, the defining aspect of the subgenre, is not to emphasize who's on top, but who's on bottom – who's receiving, who's vulnerable, who's occupying the traditionally female role and thus subverting masculine norms.

Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics imagine an alternative sexual schema in which everyone, regardless of the presence of werewolves in the universe, or physical sex, is biologically categorized as a dominant penetrative Alpha, a neutral Beta, or a submissive, receptive Omega. The particular rules and norms governing these worlds vary, of course, but consistent across them is the disruption of gender binaries. Heteronormativity has no place in these worlds – ones genitals matter little when it comes to choosing a sexual partner, or even a permanent mate. Rather, partners choose each other based on pheromones, physical attraction, and biological compatibility. A/B/O fics tend to feature biological heats, in which the Alpha or Omega, or

both, are in need of a satisfactory partner with whom to have near-constant sex with during the period of their nearl out-of-control lust lest they suffer miserably or even die, a trope inspired by Spock’s canonical *pon far* from *Star Trek* and invented by K/S writers. Some A/B/O fics are feature male pregnancy (mpreg), the most extreme of biological reversals. In her essay on the subgenre in *Fic: Why FanFiction is Taking Over the World*, Katrina Busse writes that A/B/O fics explore “gender and sexuality as well as sexual orientation and cultural assumptions. And when successful, these stories are not only hot and allow our beloved sex objects to get and stay together in bonded bliss but they also interrogate some of the issues and prejudices of our day” (322). Like fics that emphasize and celebrate penetrative reversals and versatility, A/B/O rewrites the male body with traditionally female characteristics without a corresponding misogyny. The most complex – and often most popular – of these fics, while still maintaining the eroticism of intensified masculinity, are also insightful ruminations on power dynamics between sexual partners, consent, intimacy, and navigating the intersecting terrains of biology, culture, and desire. A trend that began in A/B/O fics and that has grown popular enough to develop into its own subgenre, knotting is fascinating for its juxtaposition of exaggerated physical masculinity with emotional intimacy. First invented in the *Supernatural* fandom, knotting imagines canine/lupine sexual biology onto werewolves and even humans sometimes. Upon orgasm, the base of the penetrating penis engorges and expands to ‘knot’ the werewolf to his partner. Thus tied together, post-coital intimacy is now a physical requirement and demand. The pair cannot separate until the knot has subsided – anywhere from twenty minutes to hours, depending on the fic. Often, the werewolf can only – or will only – knot with his mate, or someone he loves and trusts deeply further emphasizing the emotional and romantic dimensions of this erotic trope. Knotting, perhaps more than any other of the explicit subgenres of slash, most thoroughly links

erotic male masculinity with an unfettered and unashamed male intimacy.

Slash sex is critique, its erotic pleasures both personal and political. The cadres of mostly women that continually create slash and the queer counterpublics that develop in response to its circulation embody the very notion of genre as social action. They use their rogue writing for personal fulfillment as well as social commentary, to wield control of male bodies that are, more often than not, insistently represented as aggressively and traditionally masculine. And just as slash fans reject the generic boundaries of the canon by claiming a stake in its creation, they also reject the masculine male body as impenetrable and inherently oppressive, violating that genre convention as well. Slash writers claim a stake and creative power in the rescripting of the male body, its misogynist significations neutralized through erotic queerings that simultaneously subvert genre conventions. When arguing for the conception of fic as a type of theatre, Francesca Coppa writes that fic's "concern with bodies is often perceived as a problem or flaw, but [theatrical] performance is predicated on the idea of bodies...as the storytelling medium" (222). Slash does indeed share this predication on bodies, albeit in a different register; the screen actors' bodies are less storytelling medium, more critical method, a fundamental site and tool for slash's erotic critiques. These critical revisions to masculinity is an intrinsic element of its anti-(hetero) normative ethos; it functions in concert with plot, character, and genre as part of an affective and reparative, yet astutely critical, response to corporate media texts. With Sterek and *Teen Wolf*, we see how slash fans' critical responses speak back not just to the homoeroticism of the canon, but to the heteronormativity and queerbaiting that marks canonical reactions to the fandom itself. The massively popular Sterek fandom that has continued to flourish despite the canon's many attempts to thwart it evinces more of a loathing for *Teen Wolf* than anything that resembles what we commonly think of as typical fan adoration. With Destiel and *Supernatural*, we see a much

more positive dynamic between fans and the canon that has struggled through many missteps and insults, but nevertheless remains mutually respectful and affirmative. *Supernatural's* canonical responses to their fandom, made possible by its genre knowledge and metamodern spirit, has radically altered how a television show can respond to its fandoms, creating a wholly new type of fandom-canon relationship.

These diverging canonical responses and their respective fan-canon dynamics speak to the vast complexity of transformative fandom and the strength of fans' affective bonds to characters and ships above and beyond their attachments to the canon as a whole; they also speak to the necessity on the part of fan studies scholars to fundamentally change how we approach our investigations into these texts and the counterpublics they constitute. We must intervene in the uncritical reproduction of norms about fandom, sexuality, and female desire that limit understandings of slash fandom to a stand-in for and facsimile of heteronormative intimacies. As two of the most popular and productive fandoms in the past five-plus years, Sterek and Destiel demonstrate just how complicated and non-normative slash fandom is, as well as just how important genre adeptness and knowledge is to both participating in fandom and understanding how and why women write slash fic. They reveal just how fundamental the relationship between slash fandoms and their canons are, and how the dual lenses of the Genre Function and Queer Theory can offer a wealth of possibilities and insights. Regarding slash fandoms as counterpublics, as interactive and recursive scenes of discourse and dual exchange, allows us revise the place of the canon in fandom. No longer simply the source text that may or may not deliberately or not deliberately flirt with male homoeroticism, the canon is revealed to be one of many loci of slash inspiration. And while the canon's role in slash is reduced somewhat in this paradigm, it takes a larger, newer role that emerges in our contemporary fandom

landscape of media saturation, social media, Archive of Our Own, and more frequent fan-producer interactions, both virtually and physically. The canon is no longer (if it ever was) the discrete narrative that appears on our screens once a week; it's the entire nexus of creators and their public utterances regarding and in relation to the show that we can access at any time, as many times we want. The canon is not just a site for possible homoerotic inspiration and textual poaching, but one of dialogue and reciprocal exchange, and the Genre Function provides a compelling framework for explicating how this dialogue functions, its various affects and effects. In this analysis, the vital role of Uptake becomes readily apparent. Slash fandom's queer uptakes that resist genre, heteronormativity, and the politics of shame demand recognition and response; how the canons respond – their own Uptakes – play a significant role in shaping the fandom and the nature of its relationship to their respective canons. Ultimately, prioritizing an understanding of slash fans as *writers* – not just readers, and certainly not as pathological, uncritically adoring consumers – illuminates the complexity of their creative works and communities, and the powerful effects they can have on the corporate media texts that fascinate yet frustrate.

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