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Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are: Sexuality and Gender Exploration in Contemporary Slash Fanfiction

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**COME OUT, COME OUT, WHEREVER YOU ARE:
SEXUALITY AND GENDER EXPLORATION IN CONTEMPORARY SLASH
FANFICTION**

A Thesis

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Abstract

In recent years, slash fanfiction has become a place for trans and non-binary inclusivity in romance narratives. Slash creates a safe space for queer and non-binary fans to express their sexuality and gender identity, thus encouraging the normalization of non-heteronormative people and lifestyles. The first chapter of this thesis, dedicated to the slash fanfiction author, examines the interwoven relationships between the fan, the piece of media (or, canon), and contemporary social outcries for LGBTQ+ inclusivity in romance narratives. Combining both Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author" and Kristina Busse's *Framing Fan Fiction*, I define the fluid relationship between author and reader, and who actually has authority over the text at hand. The second chapter analyzes what these fan authors are writing and how they have methodically created worlds that not only show trans and non-binary characters, but normalize their lives, bodies, and relationships. Through the fan-generated genre known as the Omegaverse, or A/B/O dynamics, heteronormative standards for sexuality and gender are left aside, as the world features men who can get pregnant, woman who have phalluses, and some characters who have both a penis and the ability to get pregnant. Using Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" and Eve Ng and Julie Levin Russo's "Envisioning Queer Female Fandom," I prove how the Omegaverse directly validates trans and non-binary bodies and how fanfiction has lead to the integration of queer bodies in contemporary media.

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Introduction

Slash fanfiction is an established place for trans and non-binary inclusivity, where it rejects heteronormativity and redefines gender roles. Shifts in fan authorship has led fanfiction writing to become a predominately queer space, encouraging more authors to explore gender and sexuality outside of the male/female and heterosexual/homosexual binaries; as of March 2021, approximately 57% of all published fanfiction on *Archive of Our Own* was tagged with some kind of queer pairing. Slash pioneered these societal shifts in fan communities by giving the writers freedom to explore gender and sexuality, and the readers accessibility to positive interpretations of transgender and non-binary relationships. In recent years, it has become a place for trans and non-binary inclusivity in romance narratives. In her essay “Homophobia, Heteronormativity, and Slash Fan Fiction,” April S. Callus, the Associate Director of LGBTQ+ Initiatives at Miami University, writes, “Slash becomes a lens through which readers can view a decrease in both homophobia and heteronormativity in U.S. culture over the past several decades” (1.2). Slash fanfiction’s methods of gender and/or sexual alterations—such as changing a character’s anatomy/sexual organs—are an example of these exploratory spaces, and its longevity and increasing popularity proves that there are fans who relate or respond positively to it. With its portrayals of male pregnancy (Mpreg) and women who have penises (among other non-binary people), it has room for not only gender exploration, but trans inclusivity as well. Slash fanfiction is unique because it allows authors to explore gender and sexuality without the imposed boundaries of heteronormativity and homophobic social standards, which are further enforced by popular media; slash continues to encourage more positive portrayals of queer relationships and leads to more LGBTQ+ inclusivity in fan studies.

Although more recent scholars, such as Kristina Busse and Carola Katharina Bauer, have given careful consideration to slash fanfiction, fanfiction studies as a whole still focuses more on the hetero-centric pairings, as well as psychoanalyzing the phantom heterosexual women who are supposedly writing it. I must emphasize the word “phantom,” because pseudonyms and internet anonymity make it nearly impossible to identify an author’s gender and/or sexuality—a topic that is later addressed in the first chapter of this thesis. Shoshanna Green et al discuss this in their essay “The Normal Female Interest in Male Bonking: Selections from The Terra Nostra Underground and Strange Bedfellows,” where they write:

Academic accounts of slash seem preoccupied with the question of why straight women write stories about gay male characters, seeing slash as a heterosexual appropriation of queerness. In fact, lesbian and bisexual women have always participated alongside straight women in slash fandom, and people of all sexual orientations have found slash a place for exploring their differences and commonalities. (64)

There have always been queer voices in fanfiction communities, but they were not the primary focus when scholars analyzed fan authorship. In turn, scholars like Camille Bacon-Smith, author of *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, focused primarily on the heterosexual author and the heterosexual perspectives that those authors were applying to the canonical text. Naturally, problems arose from these assumptions and made slash scholarship rely too much on internally praised scholarship to accommodate a diverse perspective critically—constantly trying to decipher *why* these (supposedly) heterosexual, cisgender women were writing romantic (and often pornographic) fics about two men. Scholars were so focused on why it was being written that they completely missed what slash actually was in the first place: viewing a pre-existing text through a queer lens—a theoretical lens applied to literature,

challenging the assumption that cisgender heterosexuality is “normal,” leaving room to explore potential queer themes in the text.

In her talk at the 2006 Cultural Exchanges Conference at de Montfort University, Sheenaugh Pugh stated, “One major reason that a slash fan and an anti-slasher can look at the same TV show and see two different worlds is that slash, as a way of writing, depends so heavily on subtexts, and... non-verbal subtexts... The slash gap is arguably unlike any other, in that some fans see it very clearly, while for others [the slash gap] simply doesn’t exist.” Slash is created from queer readings of texts—something that cisgender, heterosexual fans may not necessarily think about from their positions of empowered privilege. One idea is presented as the norm, and people who identify with that one idea (in this case, heterosexuality) may not see the need to apply a different lens. It is also possible that cisgender, heterosexual readers/viewers won’t use this queer lens simply because they don’t have to; they can relate to the (hetero-presenting, cisgender) characters and the emotional connections they build throughout the story. Callis defines heteronormativity as:

the positioning of heterosexuality as default, normal, or natural within society. Within a heteronormative system, heterosexuality is privileged, while nonheterosexuality is marginalized. Societal norms of marriage and kinship are based around assumptions of heterosexuality, romantic love is depicted as natural chemistry between men and women, who are “made for each other.” In fact, the entire system of masculine/feminine can be read as heteronormative, as it is assumed that to be masculine is to sexually desire women, and vice versa. (3.6)

The imposed heteronormative gaze, one that implies that heterosexuality is the default, misconstrued the analysis of slash fanfiction. Queer spaces face the imposition of

heteronormative ideology and are forced into the role of “other,” because they are different. There is a common misconception that queer romance and heterosexual romance are synonymous in contemporary fanfiction studies. In their book *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels*, Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan write, “Implying that heterosexual romance is easily substituted with gay romance is slightly insulting to the GLBT romances we love... To put it another way: the love may be the same, but the heterosexist archetypes that often display it are not, and it’s unfair and inaccurate to assume that the same tropes in heterosexual romance apply to gay romances” (195). While it may be valuable to observe parallels between heterosexual romance and queer romance, it is important to remember that they are *not* interchangeable; therefore, it is wrong to assume that fanfiction scholars are including slash fics in their discussions of heterosexual romance and heterosexual relationships.

Outside of the slash fanfiction community, queerness still faces prejudice from the largely homophobic views of American Romance. Wendell and Tan write, “The real controversy over gay romance is the number of people who insist it doesn't belong in romance at all” (197). This homophobic argument was originally focused on the distinction between gay romance and heterosexual romance and how the books should be labeled and presented in store. The homophobic notion behind this comes from separating the subgenres and placing gay romances in a completely different section. Gay erotica and romance tend to be found in the LGBTQ+ section of most bookstores—a section that also contains autobiographies, history books, and queer theory. This section is often considerably smaller than other major genres in bookstores, and it lumps all facets of the queer experience together under the umbrella term “LGBTQ+ studies.” The majority of gay erotica belongs in the romance section, but instead is outside of the section (like it is “outside” of the genre) (197). There is no definitive “heterosexual” section in

bookstore because it is assumed; it is the norm. By labeling minority romance as “gay romance,” while not changing the title of the “general romance” to something more specific, turns the minority romances into outsiders compared to the larger romance genre.

Contemporary romance narratives, especially those sold in more mainstream bookstores, are still in the early stages of all-encompassing LGBTQ+ narratives, but there is still room for criticism. Some of the most popular contemporary queer romance novels—such as *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli, and Casey McQuiston’s novel *Red, White, and Royal Blue*—all feature cis gay men, excluding both queer women and trans voices. And, while these stories feature positive depictions of gay men falling in love, very few of them actually follow through with the story, shortly ending after the couple first gets together and rarely showing the couple’s happy, stable partnership, which are often included in hetero romance stories. These stories are only one type of queer romance.

In the same talk cited earlier, Pugh also notes the distinction between contemporary slash and older slash. She says:

Its subject matter of same-sex relationships—in the earliest definitions of slash, same-sex relationships between characters who were not initially aware of their feelings for each other... Slash these days is about a lot of things, but looking back at early texts, one cannot doubt that when it began, it was very much about men being surprised by feelings they had never admitted either to another or, more importantly, to themselves. (“The Erotic Space”)

Contemporary slash has evolved from formulaic, heteronormative romance tropes to wide-spread queer cultural work, focusing less on the the sexual encounters and more on the emotions and relationships that the characters build together.

Moving forward, as fanfiction studies began addressing slash more openly, the heterosexual gaze remained prevelant, equating the queer gaze to “otherness.” Shoshanna Green et al. state, “Academic accounts of slash tend to deal with isolation from the larger framework of genres within fanfiction” (63). This isolation encourages fanfic scholars to take a step away from slash when discussing other facets of fanfiction. This not only leaves out more than half of the fanfiction genre, but also silences the queer voices that are using it as a response to the lack of queer diversity in popular media. It causes the scholar who is not familiar with fanfiction to believe that slash is a small and insignificant portion of the fanfiction genre as a whole.

Applying a queer lens, and accepting that it is a valid form of textual analysis, allows fan scholars to understand *why* slash authors are so inspired by the canonical text. In doing this, cishet fans who do not have to search for representation in the subtexts would have the opportunity to understand why slash writers want to create queer narratives about their favorite characters. Queer romance and partnerships are underrepresented in media, which complicates the relationship between queer fans canonical cishet couples when those couples do not encounter the same challenges queer couples face, such as: external and internalized homophobia, acceptance from family members, how they’d go about having/adopting children, whether or not they can get married, health care benefits (or the lack thereof), and many other obstacles queer couples encounter on a daily basis.

The current genre of queer romance is still primarily focused on one type of queer relationship: that of cisgender gay men. This is still an important step to inclusivity, but it is only

one step. Slash fanfiction went through a similar phase where it centered cisgender men and left out most other kinds of queerness. I contend that this is because cisgender gay male romance in contemporary fiction is more palatable for an audience who may have some internalized homophobia/homophobic tendencies than queerness that steps outside of the gender binary (or even pushes it's boundaries) like trans and nonbinary narratives do.

Slash fanfiction is not without its own share of problems, particularly in regards to femslash, or slash fanfiction about f/f pairings. The rise of femslash has been many years in the making. Queer women (mostly those who are attracted to other women) have fought endlessly for more representation in the slash community, as well as in the mainstream. While slash has begun to include more femslash ships¹ and fics, there is still minimal exploration into lesbian relationships in the canonical text. In their essay “Envisioning Queer Female Fandom,” Eve Ng and Julie Levin Russo write, “As we might glean from the primacy of slash as the unmarked term (denoting same-sex couples in general and male-male couples in particular), F/F remains underrepresented not only in scholarly research but also arguably in fandom overall (compared to M/M)” (1.13). These numbers have gradually increased over time, but queer women and transfeminine individuals are still less common in slash fanfiction. In recent years there has been an influx of cis women narratives, and we are beginning to see the start of transwomen narratives through Omegaverse fics—also known as A/B/O dynamics. In Omegaverse fanfiction, characters have at least two genders, the first being their gender identity and the second is their assigned gender (alpha, beta, or omega). Regardless of their gender identity (also referred to as their primary gender), all alphas have a penis and are able to impregnate anyone with a uterus, and all

¹ The term “shipping” or “ship” is derived from the English word “relationship.” When someone ships two characters, that means they want the two characters to be in a romantic relationship; these people are called “shippers.”

omegas have uteruses and are able to get pregnant. This will be further explored in the second chapter of this thesis.

There are, of course, outside factors impacting women characters in fic as a whole. Ng and Russo speculate why femslash is so far behind m/m stories, stating, “Presuming that femslash does lag behind other genres, the abridged history above suggests that contributing factors may include its late blooming within media fandom and the dearth of significant female relationships in popular media. (This deficit has been gradually decreasing)” (1.15). Until recently, well rounded female characters were few and far between, and they were portrayed as foils or enemies, rather than developing a close bond with one another. The lack of well-developed women characters and emotional connections between women in media was highlighted in Alison Bechdel’s serial comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1985). In “The Rule,” a character describes what later became known as the Bechdel-Wallace Test, which measures whether or not a text adequately represents women characters. The rules are 1) there must be two women characters who 2) talk to each other 3) about something other than a man (*Dykes to Watch Out For*). While the parameters seem simple enough, the Bechdel-Wallace test revealed that few texts actually have positive portrayals of female characters, let alone lesbian relationships. Criticism like Bechdel’s was one of the many factors that led to more well-developed women characters in media. As female bonds and queer women characters were introduced to media, femslash readers were able to find more fics and more ships. Ng and Russo continue:

If we infer that femslash equates only to an identity-based call for and investment in portrayals of queer women, then we might overlook an important dimension... that is not reducible to a politics of visibility. Even if queer female fandom has repeatedly talked

back to mass media in these terms, demanding explicitly lesbian characters and relationships on screen... they are still engaged in slashing—a creative intervention in these characters and relationships before and beyond their explicit visibility. (Ng and Russo 2.12)

This emphasizes that femslash (and slash overall) will not cease to exist should there be more representation in popular media. While queer fans want characters that are relatable and depictions queer-specific situations, there is still the desire to continue those narratives outside of the canonical text, especially once the canon has concluded.

Fans' relationship with fanfiction is (and has always been) deeply personal. Like all forms of writing, producing a fanfic takes thoughtful composition and several editing sessions; but, unlike works that only contain original characters and concepts, fanfiction is a form of appreciation born specifically from the fan's devotion to a pre-existing text. At its very core, fanfiction is a form of "writing the book you want to read," beginning with their favorite texts and characters, continuing those characters' stories and exploring every part of their relationship with one another, whether they are canon compliant or not. Fans want representation and they want it in their favorite texts and through their favorite characters. Once they have that visibility, they want to continue the character's stories and explore every part of their relationship. Of this relationship between author and canon, Pugh states, "But character, of overriding importance in most fan fiction—after all, it was our love of the characters that got us reading fiction about them in the first place—does seem to me to be even more crucial to slash writers" ("The Erotic Space"). That bond between fan and text can't truly be understood by someone who isn't the same kind of fan—the type who loves the text so much that they want to continue the story, whilst typically weaving personal narratives and emotions into the story. The difference between

writing original characters and writing pre-existing characters in fanfiction is this: when writing original characters, the author creates them with no limitations. The author applies their emotions and ideals on the character and it is built up around that. However, with fanfiction, the characters already exist. Instead, the fanfic author works in reverse. They see a character that they can relate to, and develop their narrative around the given information. Fanfic authorship is not about creating a new character to represent the author's ideology; it is about taking a pre-existing character they already relate to and continuing that character's story in the way that best suits the fan author's needs. Pugh states "In fanfic it works because of a shared knowledge: both the author and the reader know these characters intimately and because of this, when both agree that the voice is done right, it has a greater and more immediate impact ("The Erotic Space"). Before the fic's inception, the fan-author had already formed a bond with the character. Fics present an opportunity for fans to address their own personal issues through the characters they have already connected with.

Fanfiction scholarship is entirely intertextual, as it can be both cultural studies (as previously mentioned) *and* literary studies; as scholars we are responsible for looking at the works' cultural significance, as well as what is happening within the text itself. The following chapters examine this relationship and how it provides fic authors with a safe space for exploring gender and sexuality. The first chapter addresses authorship, specifically focusing on who the fan author is and why it is significant. Fan authors continue to step farther away from heteronormativity and, in doing so, have left behind or adapted homophobic tropes in favor of more inclusive queer narratives. The second chapter addresses the fictitious alternate universe known as the Omegaverse, which creates new opportunities for trans and non-binary inclusivity, validation of trans bodies, and an understanding of sex for trans individuals. Together, these

chapters examine the importance of slash fanfiction in both cultural and literary studies and how it has led to more inclusivity in canonical texts—by creating spaces for queer and non-binary fans to express their sexuality and gender identity, thus encouraging the normalization of non-heteronormative people and lifestyles.

Chapter 1: The Author as Fan

Slash has become the largest subgenre of fanfiction on the internet. It is not just an adaptation of a piece of popular culture—it is the manifestation of a fan’s thought process. The fan absorbs the original concept, analyzes both the text and the subtexts, applies their queer lens to it, and reproduces it in a way that can be consumed by other fans. It is not just rewriting a story, or creating a world where their two favorite characters fall in love and/or have sex—it is a methodical process of gathering and analyzing information, becoming its own form of critical analysis. Its ever-growing popularity is rooted in the fans’ quest for queer representation and character relatability in popular media as a whole. This begs the question: who is writing slash fanfictions?

The concept surrounding the role of the author has been dissected countless times. Most notably, Roland Barthes’ essay “The Death of the Author” removes the authority once tied to the authorial figure. He conceptualizes that texts are language, that new language is made out of existing language, and that new texts are made from existing texts. He writes, “We know now that a text is not a 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” (146). All authors’ narratives are based on more than their ideas alone; it is the intertextual pool of linguistic and cultural ideas that circulate and recombine. He continues, “The truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original” (Barthes 146). The author will never create new content and will only reproduce unoriginal ideas in a different format.

Another important distinction Barthes makes in his essay is that the author is not the commander of the writing; instead they are an outlet. He writes, “As soon as a fact is narrated no

longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into [their] own death, writing begins” (Barthes 142). The author is just a conductor for the writing to flow through; they never had any authority over the text. This ideology is the basis for the more contemporary idea of separating the art from the artist and allowing a text to exist on its own, without any connection to the author and their decisions outside of the writing itself—however, fanfiction’s very existence contradicts this idea. In order for something to be a fic, there must be some form of canonical text that the fanfic author draws inspiration from; if not, the work cannot be considered fanfiction. Fanfic authors rely on a canonical text and how they personally interpreted it. They then present that information as such—their specific interpretation of the text.

This calls into question, then, why fanfiction studies are so concerned with identifying the author and questioning their motives for writing in the first place. If the author is truly dead, then there would be no need to analyze *who* is writing slash fanfiction. In the first chapter of their book *Framing Fan Fiction*, Kristina Busse writes:

The very moment when women and other minorities finally began to enter the canon, the concept of canonicity came under attack and the privileged position of the author got dismantled... It is here that I want to locate the return of the author, not as authorial intent maker but instead as a position, the place where authorial identity gives the writing an ethical impetus, a moral authorial character. (26-27)

In fanfiction, the author cannot be the authoritative figure, because the characters and original storyline were created by someone else. However, their position as the author is still vital to fanfiction analysis because they are that “moral authorial character.” Their relationship with the

canonical text is the most significant part of fanfiction writing; they act as a critic, a theorist, an analyst, and, above all else, a fan.

Busse implies that the author's identity must become relevant yet again if the text relies on the author's life experiences. Both of these are applicable to fanfiction authorship, but the author can not be easily analyzed because of the use of pseudonyms and the anonymity of internet publishing. Busse writes, "The often pseudonymous nature of both authors and readers within fan communities offers insight into the complicated role of authorial ethos within the public sphere" (*Framing Fan Fiction* 20). Unless the author gives themselves explicit identifying characteristics in the text, there is no real way for fanfiction readers and scholars to know their true identity. Therefore, we should stop focusing on the author's possible identifiers and invest in the one characteristic we already know: the author is a fan.

A fan, in this context, is someone who has dedicated time and energy to engage with a text that they thoroughly enjoy to the point where they are able to identify with the characters enough to continue the story in their own image. Fan authors are not "casual fans" or people who simply enjoy the text for what it is; they are fans who enjoy the content to the extent that they want to continuously engage with the characters, even after the text has concluded. They care about the characters enough to either continue their stories or take them out of the canon world and place them in an alternate universe (AU). That is the minimal identification every reader is provided with—and it is the only identifying factor that we *need* to know. By knowing the author is a fan, the reader *knows* that the fanfic is a reinterpretation of canonical events; it is inspired. All fanfiction is written as some form of response to the original text—and we, as fanfiction readers, know that. These responses come in many forms, such as the previously mentioned AUs, where characters from a specific show are placed in a different setting, such as taking

characters from a fantasy show like *Merlin* (2008-2012) and placing them in modern day New York City; or as canon divergent fix-it fics, designed to fix a decision from the canonical text that upset a large number of fans. Readers are also fans who understand *why* the author wants to write about the canonical text. Readers see the outside forces that impact the text (for better or for worse), like something that was removed due to budget cuts or an actor deciding to leave the series—not to mention the homophobic tendencies present in mainstream television, like hinting that a character “might possibly” be queer without explicitly stating it, or reducing queer characters to stereotypes and side characters; this is also referred to as queerbaiting, where a canonical text consciously includes homoerotic undertones without actually confirming the characters’ sexuality as anything other than heterosexual. We don’t need to know personal details about the author to understand such stereotypes, or the stigmas forced onto queer characters in media. Whatever information the author chooses to share afterwards simply aids both fanfic authors’ and readers’ interpretations.

Misinterpretation and Assumption of the Author

The earliest explorations of fanfiction authorship identified the fanfiction author as “heterosexual women” and proceeded to use that in the genre’s analysis for the following decade. When scholars refer to women writing slash, there is almost always a general assumption that the author is heterosexual instead of someone who could just be hetero-performative, or a queer individual presenting heterosexual traits without actually being heterosexual—such as a bisexual man who is dating a woman. His sexuality does not change because his partner is someone of the opposite sex. Two major problems arose with this classification, the first being authenticity. As Bauer emphasizes multiple times throughout *Naughty Girls and Gay Male Romance/Porn*,

emphasis on heterosexual women authorship comes with little to no evidence backing up that claim. The only scholar to cite an actual survey of authors was Joanna Russ in the 1985 essay “Pornography by Women for Women, with Love,” where she states that her statistics come directly from fan *zines* editors (Bauer 66). Bacon-Smith and Jenkins both make similar claims without providing any evidence other than citing Russ’ outdated article. Slash, like all fanfiction writing, is contemporary and constantly changing with society. By relying only on Russ’ article, scholars are analyzing contemporary texts with little to no consideration for contemporary authorship. Societal understanding of queerness and sexuality have drastically changed since the 1980s; applying Russ’ study to contemporary authorship causes scholars to miss key pieces of slash writing, and the relationship between the author and the text.

Another burgeoning issue arose when gay scholars began criticizing the “obsessive” nature of women writing homoerotic stories, thus introducing fan studies to the idea of “hags.” “Fag hags”² is the virulent term created by homosexual men, referring to (heterosexual) women that show any interest in gay male culture or romance (Bauer 21). Bauer specifies that “hags” were allegedly trying to do two things: be the “femme fatale,” who would successfully override male homosexuality and make the gay man fall in love with her; or as a sexually confused woman, who expressed their “unconscious desires” for sexual agency through gay sex (21). The term was applied to women who wrote gay romance, especially erotic slash fanfiction. Authors such as Anne Rice and Marion Zimmer Bradley were criticized for their use of homosexual relationships in their texts, despite a lack of authenticity—they were (presumably) straight women, who, according to the gender stereotypes at the time, could never understand what love

² I will be referring to this term as “hags” for the duration of this essay, as I do not see any benefit to using a slur for emphasis. This term was in use long before Bauer was writing her essays.

between men was like. Bauer states, “The portrayal of “cross-writing”³ women in academia still occasionally depend on a gender stereotype... The cliché of the asexual female, who is only interested in male gayness because of her sympathetic and compassionate nature” (31). With this assumption in mind, women authors were seen as overstepping boundaries and invading a queer space. There was no room for queer women authors who wrote gay male romance in this analysis, even though some authors, like Mary Renault, had same-sex partners. Bauer continues, “Most of the early analyses based their hypothesis about the ‘falseness’ of female-written gay fiction on the sexual orientation of these women, which they implicitly assumed to be ‘heterosexual’” (34). This ideology relies almost entirely on the existence of a gay/straight binary, with no consideration for people who do not fit inside of that structure. This imposed binary is a complete misrepresentation of the various ways gender and sexuality are experienced, completely ignoring how gender and sexuality function on a spectrum and that there are various sexual orientations.

Authorial Shifts

With the growing digital age, fanfiction shifted from being privately shared stories, reliant on *zines*—Fan-made magazines that shared fanfiction and fanart that were only accessible through a specific mailing list—and conventions, to a widely accessible community via web sharing. By the year 2007, major fan sharing sites like *Tumblr*, *Livejournal*, and *Archive of Our Own* had launched, making fanfiction as a whole more accessible worldwide. By 2010, online access was becoming readily available to not only the original adult demographic, but to young adults new to the world of fan authorship and searching for a community of other fans. Given the combined internet accessibility and surge in YA literature’s popularity, it is only logical for the

³ Bauer refers to slash fanfiction authors as “cross-writers” throughout her research, as they are relying on intertextual analysis to create their stories.

fan writing community to further expand; thus, the general audience of fanfiction shifted and began to include youth readers and more progressive LGBTQ+ values.

Due to user anonymity on their websites, there is no definitive way to know the exact age of the fanfiction authors, but there are enough context clues to imply younger authorship. For example, fanfiction archives have recognized the existence of a younger audience through their ratings. In their essay “Writing Harry’s World: Children Co-authoring Hogwarts,” Ernest L. Bond and Nancy L. Michelson state, “Writers on these sites also benefit from reviews by their peers but in contrast to early fan fiction sites, newer sites tend to be password protected and the fiction rated for appropriateness” (315). The addition of ratings alone recognizes that the audience is no longer made up of only adults. There would be no need for distinguishing between explicit and non-explicit stories if the people in charge of the domain were not concerned about the appropriateness of the content on the site. For example, *Archive of Our Own* uses the following ratings, which are readily accessible on every fic:

G: General Audiences

T: Teen and Up Audiences

M: Mature

E: Explicit; Only Suitable for Adults

The final rating, which explicitly states that there are parts of the site meant only for adults—requiring users to agree to terms and conditions before reading mature content—meaning that the domain handlers *know* their users vary in age. It's not as if young authors snuck into the fanfiction community undetected; it is pretty obvious that they are participating in it. For the first time, young adults are able to read stories written by teens, for teens. Fic ratings act as a liability safeguard for the domain, but they still rely on the honor system. These ratings acknowledge the

possibility that younger readers/authors are present without forcing them to directly state their age. This provides authors of all ages with the privacy necessary to write without boundaries and censorship.

Technological advances, particularly internet accessibility, made it significantly easier for younger fans to explore fan communities and publish their own fanfiction, thus bringing a new mindset to fan writing. Bond and Michelson continue:

Rogers et al. (2000), find technology to have a potentially transformative function that could level the playing field for children. Young people whose cultural histories are influenced by literacies such as storytelling or the visual arts, may find that technology, with its emphasis on diverse modes of communication, can actually encompass and extend their language and story experiences. (315)

Young adults are finding their own voice as they carve out a place for themselves in fandom. Much like their fanfiction predecessors, they want to expand upon a text they love—they want to be a part of it—and their writings create a new perspective and form of textual analysis. That provides a safer space for adolescents to explore the spectrum of sexuality and continually encourages the acceptance of non-heteronormative relationships. Authors are not required to stay within specific parameters, such as guidelines from major publishing houses or whether or not their fic is marketable. In her essay “Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction,” Catherine Tosenberger writes that Harry Potter slash fanfiction “operates outside of the institutional paradigms that controls children’s and YA literature; unlike the Potter books themselves, it is not bound by publishing conventions that obligate it to contain sexuality within parameters of age (of both characters and readers) or of pedagogy” (188). Slash in YA fanfiction provided a place for creative liberties and sexual exploration—one where the fans writing it

would not have to be concerned with the censorship of human emotion and sexual desires. It also gave adolescent fans in particular a way to share their own literature without input or ideals from adult generations (i.e. the authors of mainstream, published, contemporary YA fiction). Bond and Michelson write, “Until recent years it could be argued that there was no real “children’s literature”—published narratives written by young people for young people. However, Internet browsing and published software have made this genre a reality. Many of these narratives are even edited and peer reviewed” (316). This gives adolescent authors a new freedom and space to share their own ideas with other young fans, without relying on adult approval.

Tosenberger notes that the early 2000s introduced a shift in fan demographics with the ever growing popularity of the *Harry Potter* franchise (185). *Harry Potter* was one of the many franchises geared towards adolescent readers that made way into the adult-run world of fandom. There was a series of heavy criticism from the Harry Potter fandom in the late 2000s, specifically for the lack of queer representation in the magical world. In 2007, Rowling announced that Albus Dumbledore was in fact a gay character, though his sexual orientation was never clearly represented in the text. Many queer fans saw this as a pseudo-progressive attempt at inclusivity, rather than the author’s genuine desire to have queer characters represented in her texts. Dumbledore’s sexuality thus became the ultimate defense against LGBTQ+ criticism, particularly those who thought there should have been more concrete representation in the actual text. This led queer fans of all ages to create their own Harry Potter narratives, particularly those that featured queer characters and/or couples. Tosenberger writes, “Because of the controversial nature of the stories, slash was available only to those who knew the right people in order to be put on mailing lists, and who had the financial resources to order zines and attend conventions—in other words, adults” (188). The *Harry Potter* series, being directed towards a

younger audience, invited adolescent queer readers to join the world of fanfiction as both readers and authors. This combined with the growing popularity of the internet allowed people of all ages access to these fan communities—ones that were previously available to adults only. She continues, “The advent of the Internet and the popularity of the Potter books, which allowed for an influx of actual teenagers into participatory fandom are forcing a reassessment not just of fandom in general, but of slash in particular—and expansion of the potential liberatory benefits of slash fandom to young people” (Tosenberger 189-190).

The shift in authorship has not only introduced younger audiences, but introduced what would be considered progressive convictions—specifically around informed LGBTQ+ representation in slash fanfiction; it now features so much more than two previously heterosexual men realizing they are attracted to each other, a trope fueled by heteronormativity (Pugh “The Erotic Space”). Contemporary slash confidently addresses social issues and its authors are more willing to make the characters openly homosexual, rather than “only gay for each other.” The trope of characters being “only gay for each other” erases the validity of gay romance, and individuals who only felt attraction to the same gender. It presents gayness in a way that is still socially acceptable, because the characters otherwise conform to heterosexual norms; the characters aren’t *really* gay, they are just attracted to each other because of some greater emotional bond. The “only gay for each other” trope is rooted in heteronormativity and internalized homophobia, yet sometimes manages to pass as pseudo-progressive representation because it “allows” the characters to perform queer actions without explicitly stating that they are queer. This trope is very similar to the “I love you, not your gender” trope, which focuses primarily on the character’s emotional bond and bypasses sexual attraction altogether. It, again, “allows” a queer couple to be together without stepping outside of the heteronormative standards

that have already been created for them. The characters never have to say they are attracted to someone of the same gender, because their emotional bond surpasses all physical desire. And while the notion of “I love you, not your gender” is arguably romantic, it completely misses the actual conflicts that queer relationships struggle through and continues to uphold homophobic ideologies.

These tropes (especially the latter of the two) show up in older slash fanfiction, especially *Star Trek* slash featuring Kirk and Spock as a couple. Their relationship is defined solely by their homosocial bond, as if it somehow transcends beyond their genders, never really stating that the relationship wouldn't fully work if there wasn't some form of physical attraction to the other man. It allows the characters to cling to their heterosexuality, because they wouldn't be attracted to the other man if they hadn't developed the deeply-rooted emotional bond. These conflicts should be addressed (especially if the text intentionally introduces them), but they are completely overlooked due to the power of “true love.” And while fans want queer relationships to get the same recognition that heterosexual ones receive, the approach had to evolve; queer relationships cannot be equated to heterosexual ones, because of the challenges queer people face in the current homophobic society—something heterosexual couples never have to consider.

In Callis' analysis of m/m slash fanfiction written from 1978 to 2014, she found that acceptance of homosexuality and the rejection of heteronormativity have become more prominent in contemporary fanfiction, “When instances of homophobia/heteronormativity were compared, I found that stories written between 1978 and 1987 were twice as likely to contain heteronormative content and three times as likely to contain homophobic content as stories written from 2005 to 2014” (1.2). The shift from heteronormativity and homophobic-led

narratives to more open-minded explorations of queer couples is a direct result of the gradually advancing societal perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community.

Slash authors are filling a void that is otherwise unaddressed in popular media by creating new identities and genre tropes and taking well-rounded characters and presenting them in queer relationships or having them question their sexuality, rather than being a one-dimensional character, whose only defining characteristic is that they are gay. In slash fanfiction, dynamic queer relationships are brought to the forefront, and they are given the time and dedication that they are denied in canonical texts.

An example of this can be found in *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014; rated Y7 for ages seven and up) fanfiction, specifically fics that focus on the canonical relationship between Korra and Asami Sato, which is not confirmed until the final episode. The show never shied away from romantic narratives—in fact, one of the side plots of the first two seasons centered around Korra's romantic feelings for her friend (and later, boyfriend) Mako, showing the progression of Korra falling for him, the happiness they felt in their relationship, and the aftermath of their breakup. In the third and fourth seasons, Asami replaced Mako as Korra's confidant and closest friend, implying that she could be the next main love interest. The series later actively denied the same exploration to Korra and Asami's relationship, only confirming it by the two characters holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes as they walked into the Spirit World in the series finale, thus leaving little room to explore their relationship further. Asami and Korra do not kiss until the first instalment of the franchise sanctioned spin-off comics, *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars*, which was released three years after the show's finale. This is also the first time Korra openly discussed her physical attraction to another woman, when she talks to her mentor, Kya,

about Aang's⁴ thoughts about same-sex relationships. She also comes out to her parents, who support their new romance but warn the couple about the public, who could be less accepting of the avatar's sexuality. In a way, the comics were making up for lost time, attempting to give Korra and Asami's relationship the same consideration as Korra and Mako, but did it in a way that still seemed like an afterthought. By waiting three years after the series conclusion *and* introducing these ideas in a different, less popular format, the creators were still adhering to heteronormative social standards and treated Korra and Asami's queer relationship as something that could only be addressed in subtext. Both the delay of officially making their relationship canon and how they presented that information struck a nerve with fans. Fans of this ship wanted to know how the relationship came to be and how it would be treated by the other characters in the show. Fanfiction thus filled in the gap, when authors like RaeDMagdon rewrote the later seasons to include a romantic subplot for the two women. Like many Korra x Asami fic authors, RaeDMagdon wrote a queer narrative that was implied yet never confirmed in the original text, giving it the same attention and devotion that *The Legend of Korra* gave to its heterosexual pairings.

Recognizing a queer relationship and treating it the same way media treats heterosexual romance are two entirely different things. By acting like they are the same, important facets of queer relationships—the reasons *why* fans want representation—is lost. If a queer relationship was identical to a heterosexual one (and only swapping the gender of one of the characters), queer fans wouldn't feel as underrepresented. The fact is, gender and sexuality are one of the most important parts of every relationship, and queer couples are going to have a different journey when it comes to addressing gender roles, sexual roles, societal expectations, and even

⁴ Aang was the previous avatar, who was reincarnated through Korra after his death; he was also Kya's father. Aang is the protagonist of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *The Legend of Korra*'s predecessor.

questions of identity. These are things that cannot be conveyed through heterosexual romance, because they are situations in which heterosexuality is the accepted norm.

Earlier slash relied on these norms because authors assumed that this was the end goal—that, at their very core, queer relationships were the same as heterosexual ones. This was perhaps not meant to intentionally harm the interpretations of gay romance, because authors just wanted queer characters to be accepted and represented. At the time, the only acceptable representation was what was seen in heterosexual romance, because it was the norm and anything outside of that was considered “other” and abnormal. Heteronormativity itself is rooted in homophobic and sexist concepts, particularly those surrounding what it means to be “masculine” and what it means to be “feminine,” greatly emphasizing that the two cannot coexist. Every relationship had to have one “masculine” partner and one “feminine,” or they simply couldn’t work, and this was applied to same-sex relationships; queer characters were forced into heteronormative boxes which greatly limited their voices and the apparent differences between queer and heterosexual couples. Popular romance tropes, particularly ones that were applied to the heroine of the cishet romance story, creep into slash fanfiction, such as the virginal heroine. In her essay “Male Pair-Bonds and Female Desire,” Miriam Cicioni addresses the unofficial formulations polluting the slash genre—often riddled with heteronormative coding or stereotypes about homosexual men; the most popular one was the “‘first time’ formula” (160-161). According to Cicioni, there are three main parts to this formula. More often than not, one character is usually a virgin (or has never had sex with another man), while the other character is more sexually experienced; the characters are just coming to terms with their attraction to each other; and their relationship is “intimately linked to a pre-existing partnership” between the two characters (161). Of course, this ‘first time’ formula, there was always one

character falling into a more feminine role, while the other remained masculine. With this formula came the top/bottom dynamics, or the obsession with assigning one male character the role of “top,” or the one who penetrates their partner, while assigning the other character the role of “bottom,” or the one who is being penetrated. These assigned roles would cross into the characterization outside of the bedroom, making the “top” character more dominant, and oftentimes more sexually experienced, and the “bottom” character submissive and virginal. This dynamic molded the characters into stereotypical heteronormative gender roles, where the one being penetrated was associated with traits that were assumed to be feminine. These dynamics are not necessarily representative of gay sexual dynamics, and act as an imposition, forcing heteronormative gender roles onto queer couples. Gay sexual dynamics are not the same as heterosexual ones, and they should not be portrayed that way. The ‘first time’ formula encouraged authors to put a heteronormative lens on queer relationship, particularly negating the character’s desire to have intercourse with someone of the same sex. Their romantic relationship was created by a pre-existing homosocial relationship—a term popularized by Eve Sedgwick and her essay *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, where she used the term to describe a form of non-sexual, intimate, male bonding. This form of bonding would often get misconstrued as “erotic,” but she emphasized that eroticism is subjective to each individual relationship. Tosenberger notes:

The sometime corollary “I’ve never been with another man before,” tend not to be loaded with the homophobic overtones sometimes present in earlier slash, where the implication was often that macho Kirk is assuredly not the sort of man attracted to other men, but his connection with Spock is simply too transcendent to ignore. (194)

The implication that two male characters are only attracted to each other because of a non-romantic, non-sexual bond further enforces heteronormative standards onto the characters, thus encouraging the canonical text and interpretations to adhere to those standards. With the newer, younger authorship comes the more contemporary interpretation and analysis of the original text. As queerness gradually becomes more socially acceptable—with more representation in popular media—authors are more likely to notice the presence of homoerotic undertones in the canonical text. It is the past reliance on homosocial bonds combined with the contemporary plausibility that two male characters could actually be sexually attracted to one another that produces contemporary slash fanfiction. There are now more authors willing to step outside of the parameters set by older slash fanfiction, and internet accessibility makes it easier to share those ideas with a wider audience.

What has come with the new age of the slash fic is the blatant rejection of queer canon relationships (or the lack thereof). More often than not, contemporary texts featuring homosocial relationships will weave in homoerotic undertones, with no intention of following through and making the characters openly queer—also known as queerbaiting. Although this was a factor in older Kirk/Spock fanfiction, contemporary fandoms are now more open with their criticisms towards their respective canon, and are more willing to address a text's queerbaiting.

Queerbaiting texts are no new concept, as many contemporary fans know. Television shows such as *Teen Wolf*, *Merlin*, and *Sherlock* have all been accused of baiting their fans, specifically for implying homoerotic undertones between two heteronormative, male characters without any intention to explicitly state that the characters were attracted to each other/were more than just friends.

Some texts have taken a step past queerbaiting and leapt into queercoding. Queercoding is in the same vein as queerbaiting, as the homoerotic relationships are often never made official, but it takes a step further. These texts will use subtle ways to imply that the two characters are somehow attracted to each other, such as creating parallels between their undisclosed relationship and another heterosexual, romantic partnership. A notable example of this is the television show *Supernatural*, and the discourse between fans and the showrunners about two main characters. Since the fourth season, there has been homosocial-turned-homoerotic relationship between the hunter Dean Winchester and the angel Castiel. As the seasons progressed, the homoerotic subtext became more prevalent, paralleling their relationship with other existing couples (like Sam and Eileen, or Cain and Colette), but the showrunners ultimately denied any romantic inclinations between the characters. In the final season, Castiel declared his love for Dean, but was promptly killed off before Dean could reply; this conversation was never addressed again in the remaining two episodes of the series.

Fans grew unsettled by the show's blatant attempts at pseudo-progressivism. The showrunner's attempts at gaslighting Destiel shippers (fans who shipped Dean x Castiel specifically) was not taken lightly, leading fans like Media Buzzkill to call out the show's treatment of queerness and the queer gaze. They openly critiqued the show's treatment of queer men and the refusal to make a protagonist have feelings for someone of the same sex. It is worth noting that Castiel is an angel and, in season 12 episode 10 "Lily Sunder Has Some Regrets," it is specified that angels are not gendered. Their vessels (or, the humans they possess to walk on the earth) do have genders, and tend to dictate what pronouns the angel uses. This is not set in stone. Because of this, *Supernatural* still would have had a "they're not *really* gay" loophole if

Dean and Castiel became a couple in canon. In “The Evolution of Destiel: A Video Essay,” *Supernatural* fan Media Buzzkill says:

Having the writers purposefully write [homoerotic subtext] into the story, while almost everyone involved then turned around and told [fans] that we were making things up, was infuriating and mentally taxing on a lot of fans... A lot of the fans were gay, and then having actors and creators of a series they loved turn around and treat them like they were delusional and creepy for wanting a gay romance that had a very real basis in the show itself, was an incredibly upsetting experience.

The blatant denial of any homoeroticism forced queer fans into the role of “other” and enforced the stereotype that the main goal of the LGBTQ+ community is to “turn” heterosexual people gay; this defense does not work in a world where heterosexuality is no longer the only option. This is where fanfiction steps in—it provided *Supernatural* fans a place to write and read about queer protagonists when the show outright refused to acknowledge the existence of homoerotic undertones. In their second video, “The Fiction of Free Will: A Supernatural Finale Video Essay,” Media Buzzkill stated:

People will always inevitably undermine people’s anger over the ending as ‘you’re just upset because you didn’t get your ship’ ... Gay people deserved to see a beautiful, slowburn romance treated normally and get that same satisfying ending that straight couples usually get, and I’m tired of people acting like the only reason people would be upset about this is something as trivial as shipping.

The heterosexuality of characters is no longer assumed by the fans, especially when characters only have emotional connections to other characters of the same sex; instead of presuming characters are only attracted to the opposite sex, there is more room for audience interpretation,

especially when a character's sexuality is not specified in the text. Tosenberger writes, "the insistence that slash must transgress the existing canon rather troublingly assigns to the canon a heteronormativity it may not necessarily possess. Moreover, it reinforces the assumption that queer readings are always readings "imposed" from the outside world... in a homophobic culture that attempts to police or censor expressions of non-heteronormativity, any depiction of queerness, especially a positive, sympathetic depiction, qualifies as such" (187). Fans are tired of the lack of representation in canon, particularly in those that have continually queerbaited their audience. Queer fans are ready for representation in canon and are instead fed homoerotic subtext that would only be explored in fanfiction. In doing so, fans have begun writing texts that show how the canon could have treated the character's relationship, like RaeDMagdon's *Omega's Gambit* series, which will be further analyzed in the second chapter.

Radical Lesbianism and Negating Queer Authors

There has been little effort made to examine a more contemporary version of the fan author, but that would be a difficult feat. Due to internet anonymity and pseudonyms, it is nearly impossible to know an author's sexuality and gender. That being said, there are still plenty of ways authors can allude to their sexuality and gender both in their text and when communicating with their readers. Unlike most officially published texts, fanfiction websites such as *Archive of Our Own* offer various forms of communication between the author and reader. The first being tags, which allow the author to tag specific content found in the piece. The second is the notes section, which allows the author to explain their mindset for the text they are writing. The third, and most interactive, is the comments section, where the author and reader can have a full conversation, if they so choose.

It is worth noting that Russ' study analyzing slash authorship was completed around the same time as the radical lesbian feminism movement, reaching its peak in the 1980s; a movement which was simplified to encouraging "anti-men" mindsets.⁵ Bauer writes:

The new 'lesbian feminism' [which] consciously put itself more explicitly in opposition to gay *and* heterosexual men by arguing for the 'primacy of women relating to women' (Radicalesbians 157; Jagose 44-58). With this gynocentric concentration on 'essential' feminine qualities in lesbian feminism, lesbianism was even occasionally celebrated as *the* 'ideal' realization of feminist goals, i.e. independence from male supremacy. (36)

This led to the assumption that the authors *must* be heterosexual, because there was seemingly no other reason why lesbian women would be interested in the relationships between men. It not only isolated authors of gay fiction, but it also actively debated the authors' understanding of their own sexual orientation; in an attempt to build up lesbian women, radical lesbianism effectively erased lesbian voices, neglecting any lesbian who showed an interest in homosexual men. Bauer continues, "The reluctance to even consider the fact in the 1990s that those homosexual women are indeed writing stories about gay *men* and interested in them *per se* is a symbol for this neglect of the 'queerer possibilities' of 'cross-writing' female novelists in academic studies" (39). Consideration of the slash fanfic author was left up only to uninformed assumptions—that it was written by straight women who were fetishizing gay men, and that there was no space for queer women authors in the genre. Both of these generalizations became destructive in the academic perception of the fan author.

Fanfiction sharing domains, like *Archive of Our Own*, typically only require a username and a password; there is no need for the author to share their legal name, and if there is, the

⁵ For more on this, read Susan Faludi's book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, which takes a closer look into the various facets of the feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s, and how reducing it to "anti-men culture" demonized the progressive nature of women's rights.

domain will hide it for privacy purposes. This calls the question of authorial identity into question because, regardless of the claims that slash authors are heterosexual women, contemporary fanfiction is filled with authorial anonymity. These pseudonyms are then put in place of the author on a published work and/or reader comments. The “notes” section at the beginning of every chapter allows a space for paratext and provides a brief explanation of the text or acknowledge any differences they want the reader to know about before reading. It is a simple way of sharing some of their intent without giving away their identity. Another, much stronger, form of sharing intent with the audience comes from tags, the searchable words or phrases that help readers find a certain type of fic.

Authors are able to tag anything they want the reader to know before they read the fic. Websites like *Archive of Our Own* allow the author to use tags to explicitly say what the story contains or how the reader should view specific characters. For example, the tag “crack” is used to describe fics that are explicitly and unapologetically meta; the author knows they are writing a parody and the reader knows that the fic is not meant to be taken seriously. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are pastiche fics that are written to be as close to canon as possible. The author again relies on tags such as “canon compliant” or “post-canon” to make their intentions clear, before the reader ever engages the actual text. In the case of fics having minimal tags (or no tags whatsoever), it still represents the author’s intent with their work—and that is to leave everything up to the reader’s interpretation. Although some may think it undermines the idea of authorial intent, the author still has to make a conscious decision to not include tags when they are posting their fic. Every part of the fic sharing processes is dictated by the fic’s author. Tags are a part of the exploration of fluid gender and sexual experiences, and make that exploration more legible to readers. By clicking on a specific tag, readers will be taken to a page of fics that

also include said tag, not only confirming the popularity of genderqueer narratives, but also inviting readers to engage with them; tags are the invitation into genderqueer fan spaces.

Demystifying the Slash Author

Bauer concludes, “the ‘heterosexual woman’ in gay academic and intellectual writing, who allegedly ‘mystifies’ gay relationships, or the ‘homosexual feminist’ in lesbian studies, who uses two male versions of herself to defy patriarchy, are perfect examples for the predominant neglect of the ‘queer’ female desire for/identification with homosexual males” (Bauer 41). There is little acknowledgement of the author's use of slash fanfiction as a form of sexual and gender discovery. Some authors have utilized the freedom and lack of censorship to explore not only sexual situations, but social ones as well. For example, the use of intimatopias in slash, which eliminate all prejudices and life struggles queer characters would realistically face; they also remove the binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Of this, Elizabeth Woledge, author of “Intimatopia: Genre Intersections Between Slash and the Mainstream,” published in 2006, says, “Much slash fiction has been criticized for its supposedly homophobic implication that its heroes are not gay but just two men who love each other” (102). This connects back to the same “only gay for each other” trope previously discussed, but differs, because this world is focused more on the “normalcy” of the queer relationship, rather than trying to erase it completely. Intimatopias do not remove homophobia for the sole purpose of ignoring prejudices, but instead focus on building a romantic, intimate relationship between characters—essentially giving queer characters the same time and consideration that heterosexual couples would have in mainstream texts. By removing that layer of prejudice, it gives the author freedom to explore the

relationship between two characters; it also gives queer readers a space to enjoy romance without the constant reminder of the prejudices they experience daily.

When this essay was written, gay marriage still was not legal in most U.S. states, so it would have been detrimental to not recognize the relationship between two men as a “gay relationship.” However, now that gay marriage has been legalized and there has been a push of equality for everyone, there has been less concern with the difference between homo and hetero relationships (the new movement being defined by the ever-popular phrase “love is love”). Woledge continues, “intimatopia is a homosocial world in which the social closeness of male characters engenders intimacy” and “it is clear that in intimatopia... homosocial bonding is depicted as directly supportive of homosexual activity. In intimatopic slash fiction, it is not surprising to discover that it is always derived from a media source that already emphasizes homosocial bonds” (100). These homosocial bonds have been the birthplace for emotional slash and the idea of a soul bond, or a bond that is stronger than any spoken words; a bond that connects the characters emotionally, mentally, and (oftentimes) physically. Busse (2013) writes, “given that a lot of fanfiction and particularly slash is about strong emotional bonds and eternal ties—about the love between partners—the predominance of bonding fic isn't a surprise... It presents readers with a couple whose love is not only unlimited and forever but trustworthy” (*Fic* 321). This idea of soul bonds and physical need to be with a specific partner created what we today know as the Omegaverse; or Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics, which will be further explored in the second chapter.

Chapter 2: Into the Omegaverse

The evolution of authorship in slash fanfiction has led to a wider understanding of genderqueer ideals in fandom. By changing the stipulations and tropes once set by slash in the late twentieth century, authors are creating a more inclusive space for sexual and gender exploration. They have stepped away from the heteronormative tropes continuously imposed on queer characters in popular media, giving those characters thoughtful romantic narratives. New perspectives of gender and sexuality are a result of the constantly-evolving fanfiction community, particularly the newer, younger authorship; they have impacted gender performance in fics now that younger, contemporary authors are entering the field with more understanding and acceptance of gender identity and sexuality. These new interpretations of queer romance have now stepped into trans and non-binary inclusivity with fanmade universes like the Omegaverse, a place where gender and sexuality have little to do with the character's genitals and everything to do with their identity. Slash fanfiction has introduced the world of male pregnancy (Mpreg) into the literature, defying typically cisgender, heterosexual assumptions that only women can carry children. These writings have begun normalizing the trans and non-binary experience in a way that is accessible to fans of all ages; they have also created a place for authors who are questioning their gender or sexuality a place to explore without the harsh judgments of the wildly homophobic and transphobic outside world. The evolution of slash is largely due to the newer, younger authorship; because these authors are so young, they can choose to not uphold the same societal norms as older authors. Slash fanfiction has changed from mainly displaying heteronormative gender roles to actively defying imposed gender and sexual binaries.

The most prominent (and arguably the most popular) examples of these fics are those which feature the Omegaverse, or Alpha/Beta/Omega (A/B/O) dynamics. The Omegaverse is a fictitious world where heteronormativity gets flipped on its head. It presents animalistic heat cycles, male pregnancy (Mpreg), and soul bonds formed through a sexual ritual—one character biting the other character’s nape or glands. These stories feature romantic narratives, usually focusing on two characters becoming involved, bonding, and possibly having children and, because of the sexual nature of bonding, these fics tend to be sexually explicit. The graphic sexual content may seem gratuitous, but it allows both the author and the reader a safe way to explore genders and sexuality outside of the imposed binary while simultaneously explaining how those sexual situations could work. There is still very little (easily accessible) information about non-binary and transgender sexual experiences, and these fics provide examples. A criticism mentioned in the previous chapter stand true here: a large portion of queer romance stories tend to end when the couple gets together and never really explores their dynamics in an established romantic relationship. These parts are significant, especially in coming-of-age narratives, because trans and non-binary relationships involve a lot of understanding from both parties. The couple will need to communicate how their bodies work, what their anatomy is like, and how they will go about having sex.

Need to Breed

Before getting into the details about Omegaverse fics, it is important to know where they came from. A/B/O dynamics are heavily rooted in the “fuck-or-die” trope that became prevalent in *Star Trek* fanfiction, particularly ones featuring Pon Farr, or the forced desire to mate (Busse, *Fic 318*). In *Star Trek*, Vulcans would go through a mating period, where they would suffer from

painful fevers (and possible death) until they had sex⁶. This inspired authors outside of the *Star Trek* fandom to interpret Pon Farr stories, creating new versions of the “fuck-or-die” trope. These include (but are not limited to) sex pollen⁷, love potions, hexes, and characters going into heat; these stories also notoriously feature dubious consent (dub-con)⁸, because the characters cannot control their sexual urges, even if they do not want to have sex with one another. “Fuck-or-die” fics are a product of the earlier heteronormative slash written in the late 20th century, which was heavily influenced by homophobic societal norms.⁹ The trope created a reason for the characters to have sex with each other, thus making it a form of “acceptable queerness.” After the initial “fuck-or-die” scenario is over, the characters are allowed to discuss their feelings and possible attraction towards one another because of the extenuating circumstances. This situation fits within the limits of heteronormativity because the reader can assume that the characters would have avoided any sexual contact otherwise, and that they would “choose” a partner of the opposite sex if the option was available.

In their fic *Pon Farr—Spock x Kirk—NC17*, freerunnercho provides a thorough example of a “fuck-or-die” scenario. As the *Enterprise* makes its way through deep space, the Vulcan Spock feels the beginning of Pon Farr. He requires a specific type of mate: either another Vulcan or someone with whom he has formed a deep, empathetic bond. In which case, the only character who meets the criteria is none other than Captain James T. Kirk, giving Spock an ultimatum; he could either have sex with his friend or die. The story is told from Spock’s perspective, showing

⁶ Because Vulcans felt no physical or emotional desire, the species’ survival relied solely on Pon Farr. It turns the phrase “fuck-or-die” into a double entendre, since the individual Vulcan will die and the entire species will die out if they do not mate.

⁷ Sex pollen: pollen from some sort of magical plant or other alien-like technology that infects one or more characters; acting as an aphrodisiac, it will cause the characters to have some sort of sexual interaction, which is the only way to reverse the effects.

⁸ Dubious consent is the step below non-consensual interactions, where (at least) one character is manipulated or pressured into having sex, whether it is caused by an outside force (like sex pollen or going into heat) or another character harassing them until they agree to copulate.

⁹ This topic is discussed at length in the previous chapter.

the reader how desperate he becomes due to his innate desire to breed. At the beginning of the fic, freerunnercho writes, “But as his biologically infused date grew nearer, it became evidently more obvious that meditation soon would no longer be enough. In fact, if he didn’t find a substantial alternative soon, it would be the very literal death of him.” Spock is aware that his biological need to mate could be deadly if it is not resolved. As his desire grows, his reasoning dwindles, making it impossible for him to focus on anything other than having sex. After Spock and Kirk have already shared a kiss brought on by Spock’s inability to control his lust, freerunnercho continues:

Spock barely managed to share a bewildered look with his Captain before pulling him in for another kiss as messy and desperate as the first, one that was all teeth and tongue and Spock could taste the bond in him, could feel himself in every inch of Kirk. But it wasn’t enough. He needed more, he needed closer, deeper. Finally succumbing to the maddening whims of Pon Farr left him hungry, and all he felt, all he saw, all he knew was that Kirk was there to satisfy those needs.

The two characters proceed to have rough, passionate sex on the floor of the holo deck, with Spock being released from the grips of Pon Farr as soon as they finish. The rough nature is typical for the “fuck-or-die” trope, because “the interaction is typically rough and instinctual, focused on raw, vigorous passion. While the scenario could be the catalyst for the characters’ romantic relationship, it never really focuses on the emotional bonds until after the deed is done. Unlike “fuck-or-die” stories that rely on sex pollen or love potions, Pon Farr stories tend to focus on the emotional connection required for the mating between Kirk and Spock. This bond is what makes Spock slip away from his typically logical and emotionless demeanor, transitioning into something aroused and desperate. Freerunnercho writes:

An empathetic bond. That was all that Pon Farr required. And somehow, one existed beneath Kirk's skin, a bond he himself hadn't put there but rather himself from a future no longer available to him. It thrummed beneath his touch, an unavoidable, intoxicating energy that Spock found himself quite literally unable to resist. The very basic, very unfortunate need within him suddenly had Spock gripping Kirk's collar with his free hand and pulling him in for a messy, unexpected kiss, the situation made even more awkward by the obvious erection he was mortifyingly sporting. (freerunnercho)

Pon Farr fics show a second side to the fuck-or-die trope, not only encouraging the characters to have sex, but encouraging them to develop some form of emotional bond before or during the mating process.

These fics created a gateway into the A/B/O universe, as characters are often affected by the primal desire to mate and reproduce; however, the Omegaverse showcases more than rough sex between two characters—it focuses on the deep emotional bond that comes with the mating process. Mating rituals function more as a plot device, as a way to initiate the actual sex scene. Fanfiction that features Alpha/Beta/Omega (A/B/O) dynamics are typically romantically charged narratives; they focus on emotional and sexual bonds between two characters, exploring gender roles, sexual situations, and the idea of soul mates. Omegaverse fics are breaking out of the imposed gender binary and heteronormative sexual roles and, in doing so, are promoting inclusivity of trans and non-binary individuals.

Breaking the Gender Binary

If there is one thing every A/B/O fic writer can agree on, it is that the details of the Omegaverse are up for author interpretation. There are certain aspects—genre tropes—that

remain the same, but each story is a little different. Some authors will provide readers with a guide to their specific interpretation of A/B/O dynamics, especially when the story is not focused solely on the couple's sexual relationship. In the Omegaverse, each character has at least two genders: their primary gender (which would be man, woman, non-binary, etc.) and their secondary gender (alpha, beta, or omega). Primary genders are actually less relevant than the secondary gender in Omegaverse stories, since A/B/O dynamics often change male/female reproductive system; this lets authors focus on the relationship between the two characters without addressing societal stigmas surrounding queer relationships. In its own way, the Omegaverse becomes an intimatopia—or a dynamic typically seen in slash fanfiction, where there are no prejudices or struggles based around the character's sexuality—although this world is not completely devoid of gender bias and conflict. Gender discrimination is sometimes a key element; there is a hierarchy of the three secondary genders, *not* the primary genders. At the top of the hierarchy are the alphas, who are portrayed as intellectual, physically strong, and have dominant personalities. Second are the betas, who are the average citizens. Finally, there are the omegas, who are mistreated because they can't control their heat and make things “inconvenient” for the alphas around them. This is not vital to all fics with A/B/O dynamics, but it appears enough to warrant exploration. Busse notes:

Many A/B/O stories posit societies where biological imperatives divide people based on wolf pack hierarchies into sexual dominants (alphas), sexual submissives (omegas), and everyone else (betas)...The genre has since adopted terminology “such as *heat*, *mating cycles*, *claiming*, *mounting*, *breeding*, and the ever-popular *knot* (a swelling at the base of the penis found in canines after ejaculation that forces the penis to stay inside to ensure pregnancy). (*Fic* 317-318)

Alpha's will be drawn by the smell of an omega's heat and lose all self-control, reverting to their beast-like need to breed. Omegas and alphas usually have a soul bond, or the alpha/omega they are uncontrollably drawn towards. In most fics, alpha and omega characters are so focused on their secondary gender, that it often defines their entire arc throughout the fic; they're (almost) always searching for their mate, or the person that they can have a soul bond with.

Soul bonds are reminiscent of the ever-so-popular soulmates trope seen in more mainstream romance. Two characters (alpha and omega) will feel some sort of pull towards their soul bond (also referred to as a fated pair). In some cases, being in close proximity to their fated pair can cause an omega to go into heat, or make an alpha go into rut. Most A/B/O bonding revolves around scent—specifically how different characters smell; once an alpha and an omega create a soul bond, the scents will blend together and they will produce the exact same scent. Jupiter_james has written three multi-chapter Omegaverse fics, all featuring characters from the television show *Supernatural* (2005-2020). Each fic focuses heavily on the emotional bonds formed between their characters, rather than just focusing on the sex itself. In their fic *No Righteous Path*, they provide a detailed explanation of their interpretation of A/B/O dynamic, particularly bonding. In their fic, there are two types of bonding A/B/O couples can do—scent bonding and blood bonding. In this world, blood bonding is very similar to the standard soul bond. They write:

It's the biting, knotting, etc. forever kind of bond. Both scents change noticeably, and everyone can tell the pair are mates. These bonds can be broken by choice, but almost never are, even in modern times. Blood bonding changes the body's chemistry, not just pheromone make-up like a scent bond does. It is not necessary to have a scent bond before a blood bond, though it is easier to establish a blood bond that way. Blood bonds

also do not require a heat and/or rut to establish, though again, it is easier. (jupiter_james, Chapter 22).

Typically, stories centered around soul bonds feature characters who are alphas or omegas; beta characters only seem to exist to show how special the bonds between alpha/omega couples are. Omegas go into heat at various points, attracting alphas with their scent. In some stories, an omega's heat can make alphas lose control, leading into dub-con or rape fics. That being said, not all A/B/O fics contain dub-con/rape elements; some will even go out of their way to condemn sexual assault and openly state that heat is no excuse, but stories without dub-con tend to be more focused on plot and emotional development.

Consent is the most important part of any sexual encounter and therefore an integral part of sexuality and personal actualization. Becoming aware of a subliminal desire like attraction towards the same gender—especially for someone who experiences internalized homophobia—is a complex situation and can make the boundaries¹⁰ of consent confusing.¹¹ Dub-con fics impose on those developing boundaries, implying that there is an expected submissiveness from one or more characters and that the sex can still be enjoyable, even if one party was not originally interested in it; it implies that the trans/non-binary readers (who identify with one of these protagonists) should expect this aggressive form of sex, and that they should just say “yes” when being pressured, inadvertently harming the very people these fics are supposed to represent.

This essay will focus more on the interpretations of gender throughout Omegaverse fics; however, it is important to note the treatment of consent in these fics and that Omegaverse fics are notorious for romanticising rape and are worthy of criticism for doing so. Some authors use

¹⁰ Sexual boundaries vary for every individual. There should be no expectation to perform sexual acts when they are hesitant or simply say “no.”

¹¹ Specifically knowing what their own boundaries are when it comes to consent, rougher sex, and what they do/don't want to experience. In no way is this condoning sexual assault.

an omega's heat as an excuse for an alpha to rape them, or even violently bond with them (such as biting their nape without consent). The emotional distress of that situation is downplayed due to "instinct," and (if it happens between the main couple) is overlooked for the rest of the story. A unique feature that the Omegaverse explores is the idea of a soul bond—where an alpha and an omega mate, the alpha bites the neck of the omega during sex, and they become bonded on a deeper emotional level. Soul bonds are often portrayed as serious decisions due to their permanent nature. In longer fics especially, bonding is usually something the characters discuss multiple times before actually going through with it. In most interpretations, once the bond is made, it cannot be broken. Should the characters split up, the distance put between that soul bond will cause them (but mostly the omega character) a great deal of emotional and physical distress. Omega's who are forced to bond during sexual assault experience the same despair as a separated couple, not including the resulting trauma from the assault itself. The fics I am focusing on—RaeDMagdon's *Omega's Gambit* series and jupiter_james' *No Righteous Path*—do not feature any elements of dubious consent.

There have been very few scholarly accounts discussing the Omegaverse¹², and those that do exist have focused primarily on their pornographic qualities, specifically the extreme nature of the sex portrayed. And, while the graphic elements of these fics is what makes them unique, scholars have a tendency to dehumanize the interactions, making the animalistic breeding paramount. Busse concludes, "This brings us back to A/B/O, where all of these tropes come together in a seemingly perfect storm, often with a heavy helping of raunchy sex: huge, knotted dicks; and enormous amount of fertile alpha semen; and wet, open omega assholes" (321). She presents A/B/O dynamics to be exclusive to m/m fanfiction and, although that may have been the case when the Omegaverse first appeared in the mid 2000s, it has since evolved to include

¹² All of which were published by Kristina Busse.

women and non-binary characters. Busse also only focuses on one side of A/B/O fanfics, which is the side focused on the animalistic “need to breed.” The wolf-like sexual dynamics are certainly front and center, but Omegaverse fics often explore deep emotional bonds between the characters—bonds that happen through mating, marking, and passionate intercourse. Focusing purely on the sexual aspect of the Omegaverse is a shortsighted approach. In doing so, fan scholars miss *why* these fics are so explicit. It is not porn for the sake of porn, something that continues to reinforce unrealistic sex dynamics; these fics use graphic depictions of sex to express gendered experiences—particularly those with trans and non-binary bodies—that can only occur during or after a sexual encounter.

A/B/O dynamics offer a unique doorway into gender exploration in sexual situations, something that is often overlooked due to the taboo nature of discussing one’s sex life. It often gets shoved under the umbrella of “kink,” or non-conventional sexual practices, because it challenges the norms of heteronormative, penetrative sex. The term “kink” is often used to negatively describe more “extreme” sexual fetishes (like BDSM and sexual role-playing), as well as sex that is not explicitly heteronormative. The terms “kink” and “fetish” are often used interchangeably even though they are two separate concepts. A fetish (in a sexual sense) implies that there is an inanimate object or a non-sexual body part that causes erotic stimulation. Using the words interchangeably therefore implies that non-conventional, non-heteronormative sexual acts are objectifying the persons involved, which is not the case. For example, anal sex is typically classified as a kink, even though it is the most common form of penetrative sex for gay men. This is another way of implying that queerness and queer sex both deviate from the socially acceptable forms of intercourse; penetrative sex between a cis man and a cis woman is rarely considered kinky because it is the heteronormative standard. A/B/O fics specifically provide a

place for queer, genderqueer, and non-binary people to explore possible sexual situations they could experience with a partner—such as trans women who have penises and trans men who can still carry children.

Much like the few essays written about A/B/O dynamics, Busse's article only addresses m/m Omegaverse partnership, and, while Omegaverse stories feature more m/m relationships, it has since expanded into the world of femslash (f/f fics). On the surface, it does not seem plausible—how can two women have the penetrative sex necessary for Omegaverse reproduction? In order for this to be possible, at least one of the women must undergo an anatomical change to make it possible to penetrate their partner. In most of these fics, all alphas have a penis and all omegas can get pregnant, regardless of their primary gender; this includes female alphas and male omegas. Female alphas (though rarely explored) often have a retractable penis in place of the clitoris, although whether they have a vagina or not is entirely up to the author's interpretation. In some fics, female alphas can still carry children, but that is not always the case. Male omegas are portrayed more often than female alphas, thus giving Omegaverse readers a better understanding of their possible biology. Typically, male omegas still have a penis but can be impregnated anally¹³; male omegas typically have self-lubricating anuses reminiscent of a vagina, making penetration and impregnation easier. The creativity in graphic sexual depictions is not simply for shock value; it is taking a non-heteronormative approach to sex and sexuality, explaining it in detail, and normalizing those actions. The generally accepted facets of the Omegaverse, such as the self-lubricating anuses, signify that male bodies can have body parts that function similarly (if not identically) to the female reproductive system without infringing on their status as a man. This is the same for women alphas who have penises and fertile sperm.

¹³ Omegaverse authors rarely narrate the specifics of *how* male omegas give birth, leaving it up to the reader's imagination.

Trans and non-binary people who have body parts not typically associated with their gender are validated through these depictions and through the characters' sexual encounters.

Gender Validation in the Omegaverse

In fanfiction studies, Omegaverse and Mpreg fics tend to be analyzed through a cisgendered lens. There is some cause for concern with Mpreg fics, specifically because they believe that it is a fetishized interpretation of gay male culture (Bauer 21). By adding Mpreg into fics, it could be interpreted as a form of heteronormalizing the gay couple—forcing one man to assume a “female” role, giving birth and acting as a mother towards their offspring. There is no doubt that these fics would cause concern for cis, gay men who are already considered “other” because they do not conform to the heteronormative societal expectation. They seemingly take an m/m story and applies (what were assumed to be) exclusively heterosexual situations; however, Mpreg actually opens the door to transgender and non-binary inclusivity.

The existing gender binary enforces polarity between man and woman; they are either/or and cannot be combined. However, Judith Butler's theory on gender as a performance breaks apart that binary. In her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” she writes:

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (519)

Being dictated by actions rather than sexual organs removes the polar constructs set by the pre-existing gender binary. It instead functions as a fluid line, with the ability to fluctuate between (what society has assigned as) male and female gender roles; the current gender constructs are entirely theoretical, with the assumption that biologically-assigned men and women will automatically adhere to their predestined roles. Gender is defined by the cumulation of various repeated acts, with each act having its own gendered assignment. Butler continues:

Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds.

(Butler 531)

Therefore, gender is not an abacus, where everything is black and white and the pieces can be forced to one of two sides; instead, it is a spectrum with an infinite number of possibilities and interpretations. Gender's performative nature makes room for more gender fluidity, allowing individual people to decide what traits they want to adopt/express without the pressure of assigned roles based on their sexual organs alone. Fanfiction stories, ones with A/B/O dynamics in particular, embrace that gender fluidity by having characters that break the existing binary and, in doing so, give trans and non-binary fans visibility in popular media. In a written interview on Discord, fanfic author and reader LAMA stated:

It wasn't until grad school that I came to peace with my identity as a transmasc enby¹⁴ and began to transition... While I didn't really care for the smut side of omegaverse, I was a sucker for m/m romance or found family A/B/O dynamics, and a variety of Mpreg fics. I

¹⁴ A nonbinary person who identifies more with masculinity.

found that I was constantly putting myself in the place of the omegas or male characters getting pregnant. I would think to myself ‘I wish I could be a male gay guy who could give birth.’ (LAMA)

Through the Omegaverse, LAMA found validation of an atypical form of gender performance, because a masculine-presenting character was still able to carry a child. This is a reality faced by many trans men or non-binary people who still have female reproductive organs. At which point, this representation found only in fanfiction was opening a door to a form of gender performance that hadn’t truly been considered. That being said, as this rare, anonymously written gendered experience grew in popularity, it also gained a large critical audience. LAMA elaborates:

Now, as I said earlier, I didn't really understand or come to terms with my identity until years after high school. I didn't even really understand what who or what transgender people were. So in my mind, I was approaching fanfiction and its tropes as a cishet girl... I did occasionally get exposed to posts and viewpoints that complained about girls/women sexualizing gay men in fanfiction and how tropes like Mpreg were just gross and wrong. And so while I enjoyed these fics and they made me feel good, I was also slowly internalizing that I was just fetishizing queer culture. (LAMA)

As mentioned in my previous chapter, gay men in queer studies had taken a strong stance against slash fanfiction because they felt it was a fetishizing gay men (Bauer 21). This is not meant to negate their feelings on the matter—there is some validity in such concerns because fetishization *does* exist in fanfiction, however they only make up a small fraction of published slash. Insisting that these fics were only capable of fetishizing queer culture and nothing else is harmful towards the non-binary people who use these stories to explore their gender and sexuality.

Unfortunately, past scholars like both Busse and Bauer have only analyzed Mpreg fics through the man/woman binary, never really considering how it affects non-binary folks. In the essay “Pon Farr, Mpreg, Bonds, and the Rise of the Omegaverse,” Busse writes, “Mpregs allows a female writer to play out themes of female bodies, concerns of gender in relationships, and issues of reproduction. And she can interrogate all these ideas in a setting that allows for a certain emotional distance by divorcing the pregnancy from the [cisgender] female body” (*Fic* 320). Busse uses the same assumption (mentioned in the previous chapter) that the writers (and subsequent readers) of such fanfics are heterosexual women and, while that argument has some validity to it, it completely overlooks authors/readers who view these stories through a queer lens.

In her essay, Butler states, “To guarantee the reproduction of a given culture, various requirements, well-established in the anthropological literature of kinship, have instated sexual reproduction within the confines of a heterosexually-based system of marriage which requires the reproduction of human beings in certain gendered modes, in effect, guarantee the eventual reproduction of that kinship system” (524). This implies that reproduction is presumed to only be possible through the copulation of a cisgender man and a cisgender woman, again giving little consideration to those who fall outside of that gender binary. Mpreg is viewed as “weird” or “abnormal” because it does not fit into the cisgender, heteronormative system of reproduction that we have been indoctrinated into. These ideals do not consider people outside of cisgender women who want to carry and give birth to a child. When a heteronormative society was approached with the *possibility* of something so different (and seemingly new), it went on the defensive, deeming this new trans-inclusive narrative to be something weird and taboo. Fans of Omegaverse stories were made to feel uncomfortable for enjoying something that deviates from

societal norms; and, if they do enjoy something that shows fluctuating gender roles (like the Omegaverse), it's automatically assumed that they are fetishizing gay culture. Instead, there should be wider acceptance of this subgenre and its readers because it can help trans and non-binary people discover who they are and who they want to be. LAMA continues:

I slowly learned there was an 'acceptable' amount of appreciating gay people and ships for a cis het girl and kept my public appreciation to these levels. And I NEVER¹⁵ brought up Omegaverse or Mpreg. That is, until I started to realize that I'm trans myself. And not only trans, but I can be a transmasculine man and still have my own children... I don't think it was until this past year when I joined some transmasc/enby birthing groups on facebook that I realized that when I was reading fanfiction as a teenager, I was actually reading fics about my idealized self. I wasn't fetishizing, I was fantasizing about a gender that I wanted to be but didn't think could actually exist (a gay man capable of carrying children). Now I'm generally more open in my fandom spaces about not only my queerness but my enjoyment of these tropes because of how validating they were for me growing up, even though I didn't realize it at the time. (LAMA)

In LAMA's case, A/B/O fics offered a sense of security and belonging, telling them that their feelings (their desire to possibly become pregnant) was valid, that their emotional journey reading these fics was valid, and that their identity as a whole remains validated.

Validation in F/F Omegaverse

Before jumping into f/f Omegaverse fanfiction, there is an important differentiation that needs to be addressed. There is a distinct difference between Omegaverse fics and girl penis (known as g!p) fics, particularly in how they depict genderqueer characters and situations. Girl

¹⁵ Author emphasis via written interview.

penis fics differ from typical genderswaps and transfics because the g!p character is a cisgender woman who just happens to have a penis. This trope is most common in f/f fics, but has been known to appear in some m/f fics. G!p fics continue to be criticized for the fetishization of (trans) women who happen to have penises, because it removes any genderqueer identifying factors from the g!p character. Unlike A/B/O fics, g!p fics are disrespectful and detrimental to the depiction of genderqueer characters, in that they do not provide any queer reasoning for the character with the g!p. Neither of the femslash fics mentioned contain the g!p trope; instead I will be focusing on the adapting sexual roles explored throughout RaeDMagdon's femslash fics.

RaeDMagdon has published three hundred and fifty-six fics on *Archive of Our Own*, most of which feature lesbian, bisexual, queer, and genderqueer women. In *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014) fandom alone, they have written A/B/O fics, as well as fics with at least one genderqueer character and lesbian relationships. This section will focus on two of her fics: the *Omega's Gambit* series (and A/B/O story) and *My Girl*, a oneshot about two lesbian women (both featuring the canonical relationship Korra x Asami¹⁶). Both works present one character (Korra) penetrating her partner (Asami), and neither time is presented as a struggle for dominance or the desire to “be the man” in the relationship—it is simply about Korra's desire to penetrate Asami, and Asami's desire to be penetrated by her woman lover.

In the first chapter of their series, *Omega's Gambit*, RaeDMagdon provides a brief explanation of the different bodily functions of the secondary genders present. They write:

Everyone can be classified in one of three groups: Alphas, Betas, and Omegas. Both male and female alphas have cocks (females get them when they're aroused, especially during an omega's heat), and possess the ability to ‘knot’ (tie themselves together) with their

¹⁶ Their relationship was made canonical in the series finale of *The Legend of Korra*, when the two women are shown holding hands as they enter the spirit world. Queer interpretations of this scene was further confirmed in the follow-up comic *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars Part 1*, when the characters shared their first kiss.

partner upon completion. Betas are the switches¹⁷ of this universe. They can mate with alphas and omegas, although they can't change their genitalia. Omegas are the bottoms. Both males and females have the ability to get pregnant, and they go through very intense heats, releasing pheromones that call all the alphas around them so they can find an appropriate mate. (RaeDMagdon)

In their fics, RaeDMagdon bypasses the limitations of binary sexes (male/female) by making Korra an alpha. Thus, Korra (a woman) has a penis and fertile sperm, making it possible for the two women to have a child together. This also gives them the ability to create a soul bond, which is thoroughly explored throughout the series. Although the dynamic of soul bonds is up to the author's interpretation, RaeDMagdon seems to demonstrate these relationships consistently throughout all of their works. Specifically, soul bonds can only be formed between an alpha and an omega, and these connections happen during a sexual encounter; however, this does not mean that the bond is dependent on a dominance/submission dynamic within the relationship.

Although some authors interpret soul bonds as a form of ownership (re: the alpha character “laying claim” to the omega, and marking them as their property), RaeDMagdon explicitly gives omega character (Asami) agency throughout her fics, thus emphasizing that “omega” is not synonymous with “passive.” Even though she and Korra have already formed a soul bond, Asami is still able to deny Korra's sexual advances¹⁸ until she is emotionally ready to resume their relationship.

Like most Omegaverse fics, RaeDMagdon does not spend a lot of time with beta characters. They are typically ignored in A/B/O dynamics, or—if beta characters appear—they

¹⁷ Switches being someone who is versatile when it comes to sexual roles; they are not strictly bottoms, nor are they strictly tops.

¹⁸ A common trope seen in A/B/O fics: when the omega character is unable to refuse their alpha's sexual advances because their bond is too great. This (unfortunately) bleeds into dub-con, since the omega is often too unstable and aroused to give proper consent, or they refuse the alpha verbally but their body still desires to mate.

are side characters and not part of the main pairing. Some of this is due to beta's inability to form soul bonds the same way alpha/omega pairings can. That being said, there are still plenty of fics that feature alpha/alpha pairings, where the characters can't form a soul bond, but still have a meaningful relationship. Beta characters usually don't deviate from their assigned gender, nor does their anatomy change. They are the cisgender characters of the Omegaverse.

There has been minimal exploration into f/f Omegaverse fics within fan studies. Part of this is due to the original scarcity of A/B/O stories that feature any women characters, combined with slash fanfiction studies' heavy focus on m/m romance. As of March 5, 2021, there are only 6824 f/f fics tagged with A/B/O dynamics on *Archive of Our Own*. For a site that hosts over seven million works, that number is miniscule. Like Mpreg fics, f/f Omegaverse fics validate genderqueer authors and readers, the lesbian desire for penetrative sex, and women who want to penetrate their partner outside of a dom/sub dynamic. They remove the cis het interpretation that the person doing the penetrating automatically wants to dominate their partner—fetishizing a woman's desire to be on the giving end. According to feminist theorist Luce Irigaray, women were not expected to feel a desire reminiscent of a man's (25), thus categorizing a woman's desire to penetrate her partner as deviant, breaking away from the implied dichotomy of intercourse—a man's penis inserted into a woman's vagina. Sexual interactions between two Omegaverse females (as seen in *Omega's Gambit*) are not about one woman dominating another—it's (typically) about lovemaking and bonding, like most other Omegaverse stories.

Associating the woman's "role" during intercourse with passivity has created a misunderstanding of f/f Omegaverse fics, particularly ones where an alpha female has a penis. If women are supposed to be passive during sex, that must mean their partner is aggressive. This is how the assumption that women who want to penetrate their partners are automatically craving

sexual superiority came to be. The woman's desire to penetrate is (more often than not) associated with BDSM¹⁹ culture and/or dominatrixes. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray writes how sexual dynamics have always been centered around the man's penis, leaving women out of the equation. She writes, "Her lot is that of 'lack,' 'atrophy' (of the sexual organ), and 'penis envy,' the penis being the only sexual organ of recognized value" (Irigaray 23). This phallic-centric analysis of sex led the assumption that the woman's desire to penetrate is not emotional, but instead a power dynamic—in which the partner with the phallus dominates the sexual encounter. The stereotypical "dominant phallus" (and therefore "submissive vagina") imply that all sexual encounters are meant to assert superiority, rather than the focus on pleasing one's partner.

Although *My Girl* is not an Omegaverse fic, RaeDMagdon thoroughly explores the intimacy that occurs when two women have penetrative sex. The story is told from Asami's perspective, detailing every part of their interactions; like in *Omega's Gambit*, Korra is still the one penetrating her partner albeit with an artificial instrument, instead of her own penis. Asami notes, "When Korra stood up and turned to face her, the tanned length jutted from between her thighs. It looked natural there, like a part of her" (RaeDMagdon, *My Girl*). The strap-on is not fetishized, but instead treated as an extension of Korra; she desires to fill her partner, and Asami wants to be filled by her. The scene continues:

"I want you to feel this," Korra mumbled, kissing fresh trails down her back and around her shoulder blades. "Want you to feel how much I need you." Asami bit her lip, stifling a whine. She already felt it, but she wanted to feel so much more—wanted to feel Korra fill her until she couldn't speak, couldn't think, couldn't even breathe. Until she couldn't

¹⁹ Bondage, dominance, sadism, and masochism as a form of sexual pleasure.

possibly be sad anymore. Until there wasn't room for anything but the utter relief of being fucked. (RaeDMagdon *My Girl*)

Again, there is no mention of kink, nor dominance, it is simply about the two characters feeling and needing one another. This contrasts with Irigaray's thought process, because neither Asami's nor Korra's pleasure comes from penis envy. There is no desire to become a man, nor to possess an actual penis; the act of penetrative sex can be done without stimulating a phallus. It is important to note that Korra does not feel the vaginal walls touching the strap-on—her eventual orgasm is caused by the emotional connection combined with the part of the strap-on inserted into her own vagina. RaeDMagdon continues:

When Korra came too, going stiff over her and grunting with each short, selfish jerk of her hips, Asami's release stretched out even longer. She couldn't tell if it was a new orgasm or an extension of the first, but it didn't matter. Korra was coming—coming for her, inside of her. Korra loved her. She was loved. Each rough stroke of Korra's cock, each gentle thrust of Korra's tongue into her mouth, was proof. (RaeDMagdon, *My Girl*)

Asami feels Korra's want through the strap-on—not just as sexual desire, but as their emotional bonds; it gave her something she would not have found with non-penetrative sex. Korra's desire to penetrate her partner is not rooted in dominance or penis envy, but instead found in the desire to give their partner the pleasure that comes with penetration, being inside of them, and becoming one. Korra, though still identified as a woman throughout this fic, is performing a role that is typically assigned to a masculine partner. By penetrating her partner, she is adopting an otherwise masculine role, yet it does not pull her away from femininity. Her performance of gender bounces between the assigned “man” and “woman” roles.

Irigaray argues, “Woman lives her own desire only as the expectation that she may at last come to possess an equivalent of the male organ” (24), however her interpretations rely heavily on that pre-imposed gender binary; the man’s penis is one, it is whole, therefore the women’s vagina must be considered the opposite—it is nothing, because the penis is “something.” Her writings do not recognize gender as a spectrum of infinite possibility and therefore disregards the genderqueer ideology found in such sexual interactions. Korra and Asami’s sexual connection is not derived from penis envy, rather from the fluidity of gender as a whole. The act of penetration is an adopted masculine trait—it does not negate Korra’s personal identification as a cisgender woman, but it is an action not typically associated with her assigned gender. The repetition of such an act²⁰ implies that Korra is comfortable adopting more masculine traits—that she identifies with certain facets of gendered masculinity—without conforming solely to either “man” or “woman.”

Conclusion

The Omegaverse has since spread into original stories hosted by Amazon Kindle, Barnes and Noble Nook, and Apple iBooks. However, these hosts proceeded to do the exact same thing book publishing houses did, and they severely limited the number of queer A/B/O stories they carried, compared to the heterosexual ones (specifically ones featuring a cishet, alpha man and a cishet, omega woman). The monetized publishing of said stories lead to one major problem: it took a free, queer dominated genre, forced it back into heterosexual norms, and sold it for profit. This space for queer slash fanfiction (that has finally broken away from most of the cisgender and heterosexual romance tropes) was suddenly regressing, because the more popular stories were featuring specific plot points that fanfic authors were constantly fighting against. Cishet

²⁰ The fic implies that this is not the first time the characters engaged in penetrative sex (RaeDMagdon, *My Girl*).

authors of these new Omegaverse stories (like Addison Cain or Zoey Ellis) were relying on old stereotypes of dominance vs. submission—the very thing authors like RaeDMagdon actively avoided. Cain’s Omegaverse novel *Born to be Bound* centers around a female omega who is captured by a male alpha (after she goes into heat in his general proximity) and he forces her into sexual submission. The story is heavily reliant on dub-con, where the female omega enjoys their sexual encounters, but the relationship was forced from the start (Alter). Zoey Ellis’ story *Crave to Conquer* also features an abundance of dub-con elements, where a male alpha kidnaps a female omega and forces her to become his mate. Both stories reverted back to using dub-con (or in some cases, flat out rape) as plot devices and a way for the alpha to show ownership over the omega, something the Omegaverse fanfiction has stepped away from. In her video “Into the Omegaverse: How a Fanfic Trope Landed in Federal Court,” Lindsay Ellis²¹ showed an anonymous Facebook²² post from an Omegaverse author/reader page. It read:

I’ve read almost all of the [m/f] Omegaverse on Amazon, and I read a lot of [m/m] Omegaverse. There are some differences that I noticed... but one of them is that [m/f] pairings tend to be rough and almost brutal sometimes, even when the alpha and omega are in a relationship or have feelings for each other. The [m/m] stories tend to be a lot sweeter and there isn’t the same kind of violence... in their matings. (Ellis “Into the Omegaverse...”)

These cishet stories have now become the face of the Omegaverse genre outside of fanfiction, and have made it seem like the primary focus is rough, animalistic sex and ownership.

Unfortunately, these are the stories that continue to be published and introduced to a wider audience, thus making the queer inclusiveness of the Omegaverse seem more and more

²¹ No relation to the previously mentioned m/f Omegaverse author.

²² The person did not post anonymously, but their name was blacked out for the video.

mythological to those outside of the fanfiction community. Despite the lack of queer representation in the mainstream, the number of Omegaverse fics published through internet platforms continues to grow as more queer and questioning authors utilize the format as a way to explore their own identities.

The Omegaverse in fanfiction continues to be a space to explore performative gender and gender identity. Butler states, “As a corporeal field of cultural play, gender is a basically innovative affair, although it is quite clear that there are strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisation” (531). In the Omegaverse fanfiction community, there are no constraints or punishments that the author must fear. They can be fully expressive, knowing that the only people who click on their fic are people who *want* to read about that world, and the non-binary gender dynamics it features. Seeing these stories exposes cishet fans to the trans and non-binary experience under the umbrella of fandom, encouraging them to engage with and relate to one another—after all, they already have at least one thing in common: their love of the fandom.

Conclusion

Fan authors continue to defy societal norms; by not adhering to strict guidelines, they are developing new ways to express queerness. The evolving the authority of the fan writer (along with the inclusion of youth authors) has led to an increase in trans and non-binary inclusivity in slash fanfiction, as explored in the first chapter. Fanfiction communities provide a space for queer teens—as well as adults—to resist heteronormative society, explore gender and sexuality, and openly embrace their queerness.

Fictitious settings like the Omegaverse, encourage trans and non-binary inclusivity by defying gender norms and experimenting with the physical bodies of sexual beings. Fics featuring women with penises or men who can get pregnant normalize trans relationships and family dynamics in non-heteronormative households. These familial relationships are key turning points in accepting and understanding queer romantic and sexual interests. Demystifying trans and non-binary relationships make them more approachable for cisgender readers—specifically those who may not understand *how* such relationships function without the forced heteronormative standard. Queer sex becomes destigmatized, and the fics encourage a healthy discourse about different forms of sexual intimacy.

Not only is slash creating a space for people of all ages to explore the limitations (or lack thereof) of gender and sexuality, it also encourages comfort in discussing sexuality. The Omegaverse presents a place where sex and sexuality are discussed at length—and those discussions are treated as normal rather than taboo. Sex isn't something that is hidden—in fact, many characters freely discuss their sex lives with friends, and sometimes even family. In jupiter_james' fic *No Righteous Path*, a *Supernatural* fanfic with A/B/O dynamics, featuring the pairing Dean Winchester x Castiel, they spend a full chapter discussing the aftermath of the main

character's blood bond²³ and how Castiel's family addresses it. In the fic, it is the morning after Dean and Castiel formed their blood bond, and Castiel's family stops by their house unexpectedly.

Dean's shocked silent. He honestly hadn't considered that part yet. It's barely an hour since they'd noticed the blood bond, so it's only been about them thus far. It's a little jarring to be shoved into the broader spectrum of familial consequences so abruptly. Not bad, of course. Aside from the delicious smells from [Castiel's mother]'s cooking, Dean detects nothing but pleasure and amusement from the Novak clan²⁴. (jupiter_james Chapter 18)

Castiel's family is warm and welcoming, treating Dean and Castiel's blood bond like it is something to be celebrated, rather than being disgusted or offended by knowing details of their sex life. In the scene, the only character who is embarrassed is Castiel, and he is more embarrassed because his family saw them naked in the kitchen than anything (Chapter 18). The most extreme response might be that of Castiel's sister, who simply rolled her eyes at the display. She then says, "Today's a day to celebrate, not to pretend like you got caught macking in the back of Dean's muscle car" (jupiter_james Chapter 18), emphasizing that their bonding is not something they should be ashamed of. Following this interaction, Dean and Castiel make arrangements to tell Dean's family about their bonding, knowing they will have a similarly positive reaction.

As jupiter_james has demonstrated, Omegaverse fanfiction does more than explore the spectrum of gender and sexuality; A/B/O dynamics encourage people who are not cishet to feel

²³ In jupiter_james' fic, a blood bond only occurs after the alpha (in this case, Dean) bites the omega (Castiel) during sex. This bond changes both party's scents, making it noticeable to the other people around them. The bite mark is also visible, since it is on the neck (*No Righteous Path* Chapter 22).

²⁴ In this fic, it is established earlier that characters can decipher general emotions based off of scent.

comfortable discussing their sexuality and preferences, much like the standard discussions of sex seen in heterosexual romance. Castiel's family is not focused on their son's sexuality or the mechanics of their lovemaking, but instead treats it like any other form of sexual intimacy. This interaction normalizes familial acceptance of trans and non-binary sexuality and validates sexual experiences that are not heteronormative. It is a similarly popular trend that is seen in literature, gradually encouraging the comfort and acceptance of a marginalized group of people through everyday interactions. An example of this is Candace Bushnell's novel *Sex and the City* (1996), which showed cishet women who were comfortable discussing their sex lives with other cishet women, and encouraged women readers to embrace their sexuality, rather than being ashamed of it. The Omegaverse does the same for trans and non-binary people. Portraying characters who are comfortable discussing their sexuality and gender identity will encourage the fanfiction reader to do the same; slash fanfiction is taking one large step towards trans and non-binary inclusivity by administering a newer, more accepting ideology.

The Future of Fic

Contemporary fanfiction has multiple goals. The first, and most critical, is the inclusion of queer representation in popular media and fandom. Slash authors have pushed back against media censorship and worked to diversify fandom for queer fans, creating an inclusive and informative space for trans and non-binary inclusion. The second, and less reliant on societal norms, is the fan author's desire to participate in fan communities and interact with their favorite texts. I draw attention to slash fanfiction written about Rainbow Rowell's novel *Carry On* (2015). The story already features a canonical queer couple (Simon Snow and Baz Pitch), who are both the protagonists of the story and, while their relationship is important to their character

development, it is not the central plot of the book. It seemingly checks most of the boxes mentioned in the earlier chapters: Simon and Baz get to function as queer men without their sexuality being their only personality trait. By the end of the book, the two of them are an official couple and find their own happy ending. Rowell released a sequel titled *Wayward Son* in 2019, delving a little deeper into the couple's relationship continuing their adventures now that they are romantically involved. These are all things slash fanfiction seeks to accomplish, yet there are *still* slash stories featuring these two characters. Why is that? To paraphrase Sheenagh Pugh, fan participation in the slash community is partially driven by the quest for inclusivity, but also from the fan's appreciation of the canonical text ("The Erotic Space"). Slash fans will still engage with the text and write fanfiction even if the canon meets the basic criteria for queer inclusivity because they are inspired and want to extend the story further. Even if popular media became more inclusive, fans would continue to create their own inspired narratives and extend the original text. There is the possibility that, in this future where media has queer representation, fanfiction will change and have a new goal that is relevant to the developing cultural shifts. There is still plenty of space to explore new burgeoning fields of study, such as eco-critical fanfiction emerging as the discussions of climate change grow more urgent. Fanfiction is a fruitful space who's anonymity allows authors to take creative liberty without fear of backlash or the biases of media publishing houses; the possibilities are endless. However, there is one thing that is certain: slash fanfiction is not going to disappear—it will evolve.

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