eros.usa:
Essays on the culture
and literature of desire

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"Harder," Justin whispered. He just couldn't help it, and then he said, "Fuck, no, don't — fuck," as Lance slid out and away, laughing, leaving Justin achingly empty" (No pSend Attached). This is the beginning of a short story a friend mailed me a few days ago, which served as her commentary on a theoretical discussion we were engaged in and as a gift to cheer me up and show me that she cared. At the same time, however, it was also the very explicit sexual encounter of two male celebrities. Moreover, when she posted the story, the responses consistently emphasized the readers’ visceral reactions, and instead of feedback proper, most readers resorted to emotionally descriptive code including several "whimpers", "pants", and "head explodes". This story is an example of slash fan fiction, the three-decade-old practice of women writing fictional stories about their favorite TV characters, often placing them together in romantic relationships, often detailing quite explicit sex. While this short story is not necessarily representative of the wide array of differing qualities, lengths, styles, and purposes collected under the term slash, it is indicative of a particular aspect of slash fiction in the way it functions on multiple levels: obviously meant to sexually arouse, the story simultaneously offered a witty intervention in our online debate as well as a confirmation of her friendship and

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1 "Digital Get Down" © 2000 by *NSYNC. I want to thank all my Live Journal friends without whom this article would not have been possible.
concern for me. In the following, I describe how the interaction between the women within the slash community is indeed one of the central aspects of this intriguing field of popular culture.2

Outsiders are fascinated with fan fiction and slash in particular; consequently, every article presents itself as a new revelation yet again asking the questions of who writes slash and why.4 The standard answers are endlessly repeated. They range from the cultural approach, in which slash picks up on the homoerotic subtext of many shows lacking female central characters (Bacon-Smith; Jenkins); to the feminist, in which slash can overcome the typical gender inequalities of the heterosexual relations it metaphorically depicts (Russ; Lamb and Veith; Symons and Salmon); to the psychoanalytic reading that emphasizes how slash allows identification with and desire for both male characters (Penley). The central underlying notion about slash that these academic studies share, however, is the belief that its practice and results are subversive, both by design and implementation.

Since the majority of writers are women, they are automatically othered and simply by writing considered to challenge patriarchal society. Not only does their enjoyment of pornography defy traditional morality and subvert standard views of women's sexuality (or lack thereof), but slashers also appropriate and thereby enforce their own agency onto the male bodies of the characters and defy homophobia by positing a gay subtext. Moreover, as media consumers, slashers subvert the capitalist system by creating an alternate system of exchange not based on money nor revolving around traditional marketing strategies. Such an uncontested stance is complicated by the fact that the relationship between the cultural text and its audience is complex: the fan cannot be completely dismissed as pure consumer, but neither can she be established as occupying a space of pure agency.

Whereas most studies of slash celebrate its rejection of passive consumerism, its appropriation of commercialized products, and its rejection of homophobia, this essay questions some of the more celebrated assumptions about what it means for women to read and write about romantic and sexual relationships between men. I am interested in the postmodern aspects of these texts and how they disrupt notions of authority and reality, identity and ownership, but I am ultimately concerned with the virtual space slashers have created for themselves. Thus, while I focus on more experimental stories in order to exemplify how slash embodies certain postmodern ethos, I return to more explicit slash stories – like the one that began this paper – to foreground the interactions within the community.

Previous work on female communities – focused around such interests as romance novels, soap operas, and even fan fiction – tends to foreground the communal aspect of joint readings and fan interaction and the comfort it brings many women (Radway, Baym, Bacon-Smith). I build on these studies to look at this homosocial environment that produces homosexually coded texts within homoerotically charged relations between readers and writers and argue that the slash community creates a queer female space that bridges while transcending the wide variety of the slashers' sexual identities, and that it is this aspect of slash that is ultimately its most resistant and most subversive moment.

In fact, I suggest that the most important and the most – if not the only – subversive effect of slash is the community of women who bond over highly erotic texts but whose connection and friendships easily transcend both the textual and virtual limitations. In other words, the ultimate promise of fan fiction lies in the particular community fan fiction creates and the specific desires explored within that group.

Fan fiction is a vast, diverse field, making it difficult to theorize. I have chosen a particular fandom as my focus because it concentrates certain issues while exemplifying the argument. Real
People Slash (RPS) is a subgenre of fan fiction whose protagonists are celebrities instead of TV, film, or literary characters (referred to as media fiction, Fictional People Slash or FPS). Not necessarily a new phenomenon, RPS has lived — until recently — a mostly closeted life, derided and avoided by most of the fandom community. For example, in her otherwise unbiased account of slash for *Bitch* magazine, Noy Thrupkaew calls FPS slash as “the latest offshoot” and immediately comforts her readers that “[m]any writers of fictional—people slash, however, frown on the morally dubious rps genre.” Yet rather than being fan fiction’s stepchild, RPS actually epitomizes many aspects of media fiction as it embodies a cultural shift in our understanding of the border between reality and fiction. In particular, I focus on pop-slash (fiction that slashes pop stars such as *NSYNC*), that mostly exists within and revolves around the Live Journal community, in order to interrogate the various ways slash can be considered subversive.

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5 Most mediaslash lists and archives place few limitations on violence and graphic sex, allowing torture, heavy BDSM, and often even underage and incest, yet they usually tend to forbid FPS. Looking over several central archives of bigger recent fandoms (*The X-Files, The Sentinel, Due South, The Phantom Menace, Smallville*), none of them archive actor slash and three of the five prohibit PM slash explicitly in their guidelines (*The Sentinel’s* “852 Prospect,” *The Phantom Menace’s* “Jedi Master and Apprentice,” and the “Smallville Slash Archive”). Moreover, the largest and most comprehensive fan fiction archive, www.fanfiction.net recently removed all Real People Fiction.

6 *NSYNC is a male vocal group, founded in 1996 by then-producer of the popular Backstreet Boys, Lou Pearlman. Its members are Chris Kirkpatrick, JC Chasez, Joey Fatone, Lance Bass, and Justin Timberlake. The group enjoyed immense success in the late 90s topping the chart repeatedly and breaking any number of sales records, including the most records sold in a first week (2.4 million) and first day (over 1 million) for *No Strings Attached*. They are equally loved by their female teenage audience as they are scorned by critics and the general press. Most famous member, Justin Timberlake, who dated equally well-known pop star Britney Spears for several years, released a solo album in 2002 which has been both a popular as well as critical success.

7 Live Journal (www.livejournal.com) is one of the larger blogging communities that in the past couple of years, for many fandoms, has all but replaced mailing lists as the primary mode of communication in online fandom.

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8 For discussions of fannish engagement with rock and pop musicians and its implicit gendering, see Lisa Lewis and Sheila Whiteley. For a differentiated view of women’s engagement with musicians, see Cheryl Cline; for a socio-sexual reading of fans’ excesses surrounding boy bands, see Barbara Ehrenreich et. al.’s essay on Beatlemania; for a specific reading of the sexual politics of boy bands and the stereotyping of their female fans, see Gayle Wald.
ethical objections as they accuse RPS of being: (1) open to libel in its disrespectful invasion of the celebrity's privacy; (2) disgusting in its sharing of one's (especially sexual) fantasies about real people; and (3) deeply immoral in its potential to hurt or disturb the celebrity or — even worse — their friends or families who may not have chosen the spotlight. While regularly debated, RPS's legality is still uncertain. Both RPS and FPS have a tenuous legal hold (for libel and copyright infringement respectively) and mostly seem to function in a grey zone. Without a legal precedent, however, and given the international character of the internet and the pronounced differences among the legal systems and procedures of different countries, predicting the outcome of a potential lawsuit is impossible.9

Defenders of RPS counter the privacy and morality claim by arguing that a celebrity not only gives up his or her right to privacy but, in fact, courts the intrusion of the public. Moreover, RPS questions the actual reality of celebrities, arguing that rather than fictionalizing a real person, RPS takes a prefabricated persona and creates depth and character in its fiction. The issue, then, is not actually whether pop stars or other celebrities are less "real" than normal people. Rather, RPS criticizes the way celebrities have become objects for a public that invades their privacy and expects them to act in particular ways. Rather than dehumanizing the real people by making them a character in their fiction, RPS writers re-humanize the persons artificially constructed for and by the media by giving them inner lives, often making them question their fame and struggle with their constant visibility.10 Rather than reducing celebrities to their favorite color and animal as many teen magazines do or completely dismissing them as artificial and unauthentic as most of pop's critics are wont to do, popslashers create fully formed, intricate and interesting characters with flaws and vices, doubts and insecurities.

Jae W.'s story, "Oddly Comforting," features a dialog between Chris and Justin in which the latter is hurt by the constant ridicule of boy bands and the often-voiced attack that *NSYNC does not create original or authentic music. While the dialogue is purely fictional, the reproach — and its implications for women who like to listen to such bands — is commonplace throughout the music world. Chris responds to these accusations as follows:

What do you want me to say? I've got all the old favorites — maybe the one about how our patriarchal society devalues what young girls like while respecting the taste of young boys, or the one about how fucked up it is that people think songs about rage and violence are real and valid, but not songs about love and happiness, or the one about how we're a society founded by Puritans who distrust pleasure. [...]

Oh, I've got something new about our attachment to the Romantic ideal of the artist and the conflation of passion and suffering. It's kind of long, but it's pretty good, if I do say so myself.

Jae W. thus offers an imaginative glimpse into the mind of this particular story's version of Chris. This Chris is intelligent enough to analyze the cultural dismissal of boy bands (in a theoretical move reminiscent of Gayle Wald) and cares greatly for Justin, using these theories to comfort his band mate. At the same time, however, the author also comments on pop culture and its public reception, thus placing both the boy band phenomenon as well as her stories in a larger cultural context.

Stories like "Oddly Comforting" suggest the strong postmodern undercurrent in RPS, a theoretical background that already exists in fan fiction. Since postmodernism offers an equalizing view of artistic products, an emphasis on the popular, and a rejection of high brow culture, fandom can easily be classified as a postmodern project. Not only do fans consciously celebrate pop culture and use sophisticated theoretical tools to study popular texts, the way in which fans appropriate and disseminate these cultural icons rejects traditional notions of cultural ownership and authorial intent. The fans' cooptation and reinterpretation of

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9 For the legal situation of FPS, see Rebecca Tushnet and Meredith McCardle. For the legal situation of RPS, see Rodney A. Smolla and "Symposium."

10 In fact, talking to most popslashers it becomes apparent that far from objectifying their slash objects, many show real empathy and defend the pop stars against accusations of fakeness or even lack of talent. Jae W. comments: "For me, and it seems for many of the people I interact with, RPS has actually made me empathize much more with the people that I'm writing about, and see them as full people, whereas before I might have been quite cutting and dismissive of boybands, and people like Britney Spears."
what is considered the most passive of entertainments subverts capitalist power structures by making personal property public. As a result, fandom's characteristic of sharing the source text (whether by taping it for friends, posting the shows online or sharing photos, interviews, and more) literally moves part of the ownership - if not legally at least factually - from the production companies to the fans.

Fan fiction, in particular, is postmodern in the way it pla(y)genizes texts, questions authorial rights, and teases out subtexts. It challenges more traditional roles of author and reader in the way the fanfic writers rely on yet alter the source material. Fan fiction questions and destabilizes the totalizing master narrative of the canon, often giving voice to minor, ignored, or maligned characters. Looking at multiple simultaneously coexisting stories, fanfic also foregrounds the postmodern truism that there is no objective position but only stories that complement and often contradict one another. Just as fanfic acknowledges the coexistence of different and competing stories, it also emphasizes the multiple ways in which identities are constructed, in which we perform our identity depending on our environment by creating hundreds and thousands of version that coexist and all trace themselves to the same source text. Slash, finally, gives voice to the other by teasing out a queer subtext usually not acknowledged in the source text.¹¹

On a structural level, fan fiction is highly postmodern due to its largely intertextual character: not only do the texts reference their source text, many also directly or indirectly rely and/or comment upon other previous texts within the fandom. Moreover, the production process breaks down boundaries that are traditionally maintained: readers and writers are in constant communication, often co-creating the stories. Beyond actual joint writing, these collaborations range from simple feedback to works-in-progress and stories written as specific responses to challenges and as gifts to the more formalized beta process.¹² Furthermore, activities such as constructing stories in real time during chats and Role Playing Games (RPG) also foreground fanfic's collaborative character. In a way, the writing process itself often takes precedence over the finished product, and the community of slashers becomes a central aspect of the writing.¹³ This aspect also constitutes one of the strongest differences between fan fiction writers and readers and the romance readers Radway describes. In fact, one of her (and her readers') strongest complaints is that "people who read romance novels are not attending to stories they themselves have created to interpret their own experiences" (49). Slash, on the other hand, constantly reverses the position of reader and writer since most readers also write and allows women to write the stories they - and other women - want to read.

If fan fiction is an empowering postmodern act that gives the fans agency over an industry seeking to pacify its consumers and maintain the status quo of power relations, RPS is its ultimate instantiation. RPS effectively moves the playing field from the manipulation of purely fictional characters into a real-life arena. As a result, it not only challenges the concept of authorial intent by appropriating and reinterpreting the characters, thereby subverting the fans' role as pure consumers, it also erodes the boundaries between reality and fiction, thereby raising questions about constructions of reality, creations of fantasy space, and formations of identity. This is, of course, one of the characteristic features of postmodernism as texts cross fictional lines, as writers and readers enter the text and, in turn, the characters escape their fictional prison. Yet while postmodern writers such as E.L. Doctorow and Robert Coover, Salman Rushdie and Nikos Kazantzakis may have explored these possibilities, mainstream culture has remained fairly protected from these theoretical investigations. The 1990s, however, saw an increase both in highly

¹¹ Of course, attitudes of source text producers vary greatly: while some (Gene Rodenberry or J.K. Rowling, for example) feel greatly offended and threatened by such aggressive (mis)readings, others (such as Smallville's executive producers or Buffy's Joss Whedon) freely admit that they bait the slash audience with especially provocative scenes.

¹² Fan fiction has a very refined editing process (called beta reading) in which most writers have one or several friends who will brainstorm with them, read various versions of the story, and often give very professional critiques.

¹³ See Lucy for this "participatory process" of story telling.
self-conscious television and film making (all the way down to Nickelodeon's Clarissa Explains It All or the teenie sitcom Saved by the Bell) as well as the rise of Reality TV which not only epitomizes the tenuous border between fiction and reality but also places new focus on the role of the media in the creation of celebrities. Finally, Real People Fiction has become completely legitimate with the awarding of an Oscar this year to Charlie Kaufman's Adaptation, and Shar Rednour's 2001 Starf*cker. Both are, in effect, published RPS.

Not only have the boundaries between reality and fiction become fluid, the concept of what must be considered real is questioned. Popslash is a case in point: one of the generally accepted truths about boy bands is the fact that they are prefabricated, put together artificially — and it may not be coincidental that the two biggest groups, Backstreet Boys and *NSYNC, come out of Orlando, home to Disneyland. In fact, on the Reality TV show Making the Band, TV viewers got to observe the construction of another Orlando boy band, O-Town, in what Joyce Millman has called "the Disneyification of pop."14 Throughout, RPS emphasizes the various constructions of reality as it disrupts the clear boundaries between fiction and reality. Whereas traditional fan fiction clearly maintains the separation between the levels of text and reader, popslash completely collapses these levels: the characters, the text, and the reader exist on the same level of reality — in fact, one of the characters could easily read stories about himself.15 Whether the repeatedly voiced reproach of boy bands' fakeness is true or relevant, the bands' successes in large parts rely on their ability to satisfy clearly defined — and manufactured — desires by enacting certain roles that may or may not be who they "really" are.16

14 For a more sympathetic review of Making the Band and the show's insight into the music business, see Fred Kovey.
15 A variety of celebrities admit to having heard of or seen fan fiction about themselves, and their reactions vary widely: while actors such as Chris Rankin (Percy Weasley in Harry Potter) and Elijah Wood (Frodo in Lord of the Rings) have both acknowledged actor slash without any serious concern, writer Neil Gaiman has commented on his disgust when encountering stories about himself.
16 Many popslashers vehemently reject the assumption that pop stars are not real and view it as a defense mechanism by which some readers and writers avoid the fact that they actually are fantasizing about actual people.

This collective imaginary is where RPS picks up. Acknowledging the artificiality of the stars' personas, the fanfic writers partially buy into this construction at the same time as they try to move beyond it. In other words, while a large number of *NSYNC slashers fervently believe that the guys are closer than brothers, very physical with one another, that Chris is crazy, Lance shy, Joey a flirt, they simultaneously want to extrapolate the given persona to create a sense of the complex and real human being beyond the media spectacle. This duality is what RPS thrives on: the writer and reader must simultaneously believe and disavow the "reality" presented by the media. In so doing, any interaction between two fans occurs, so to speak, under erasure, i.e., both interlocutors are well aware of the fact that their descriptions, by definition, are completely unstable and contextually dependent. However, rather than prefacing every statement with a disclaimer, fans constantly exist in a state of cognitive dissonance.

This double consciousness allows the fan to perceive the celebrities on two levels: on the one hand, she is simply interested in the guys themselves, follows their appearances, finds out whom they are supposed to date; at the same time, all this information is the basis that then creates the RPS canon.17 After all, what RPS foregrounds is the postmodern commonplace that there is no such thing as an actual core identity, that all of us are constructed in response to the discourses in which we find ourselves and perform certain roles according to our and our interlocutors' needs. RPS takes one such performance — namely the mostly public image of the celebrity — and uses it as the basis for its stories. As such, the gathered information creates, what Mary the Fan has called, a "collaborative fantasy space," from which the writers can draw freely to produce their fanfic characters. At the same time, fans know perfectly well that this canon is a joined creation — albeit based on certain facts and verifiable information — which carefully selects particular facts that seem to be "slushy" or present an opportunity.

17 I am choosing to ignore the extremely small subset of fans who fail to distinguish between reality and fiction, since the majority of slashers are well aware of the fact that their fantasies are exactly that.
around which to tell stories.\textsuperscript{10} On that level, the canonical reality as collaborative fantasy space becomes something in which the guys are gay and the fiction, in turn, becomes canonical to that particular version of reality.

RPS is constituted by a wealth of different sources; in that, it differs from TV shows with their clearly defined canon or even comic fandom with its varied and competing yet still authoritarian source texts. For popslash, for example, it not only includes the songs, concerts, public appearances, interviews, and print media, but also more personal experiences (such as sound check parties or personal photographs) that are shared within the community and thereby become public property. In so doing, the fans actually help create the source text, thereby exhibiting a postmodern contempt for such things as a classical and well-defined canon.\textsuperscript{19} It is important here to distinguish between RPS's source text and reality; the two need not coincide. Obviously, there are real events that are not part of the canon because fans are not privy to them; equally, rumors can easily create parts of the canon even though they are, in fact, untrue.\textsuperscript{20} Unlike mediafic where we can clearly distinguish between the producers' versus the fans' canon, RPS tends to confl ate the two.

\textsuperscript{18} It is actually more accurate to distinguish between canon proper, which contains the verifiable facts only and fandom, which is comprised of often cliché-ridden beliefs held by many of the fans. Since my emphasis is on the particular ways in which fans co-create their source material (whether by selecting aspects of the canon or by creating parts of the fandom) and the difficulties in separating the two in RPS, I have chosen to conflate them.

\textsuperscript{19} A recent example of such fan-created canon was the repeated descriptions of Trace Ayala (Timberlake's best friend who accompanied him on his summer concert tour) as careless in his appearance. This information was corroborated by various fans and soon became canon for at least a part of fandom.

\textsuperscript{20} A rumor that has been dismissed but continues to be used is Lance Bass's supposed coming out t-shirt at the 2003 Grammy Awards. He wore a shirt that read "Pop Rocks," and fans were excited that he would advertise one of New York's most famous gay clubs. Fans continue to refer to the shirt and its supposed implications even though the design apparently differed and nothing has collaborated this supposed coming out since. Yet it fits perfectly into a reading that regards Bass as the *NSYNC member most likely to be gay.

The boy band members' gayness – of course one of the crucial questions for slash – is a case in point: while the singers simultaneously flaunt and question their straightness, the slashers must use the media's version of reality to create their own "truths" behind and beyond the cameras.\textsuperscript{21} *NSYNC's front man Justin Timberlake, for example, taunts his audience over their constant interest in his sexuality: he offers his very public breakup with allegedly virginal Britney Spears; plays Elton John in the 2001 video for "This Train Don't Stop Here Anymore"; participates in British magazine Arena Homme's 2002 homoerotic photo shoot which he himself describes as "gay porn meets Fight Club" (qtd. in Flick); poses for the cover of The Advocate as coolest straight person of 2002; plays a gay cameo in his band mate's 2001 movie On The Line; and in early 2003 was rumored to appear in an episode of Will and Grace.\textsuperscript{22} Cynthia Fuchs thus argues that "Justin's gendered appeal is complicated, embodying as much as anyone what pop music scholar Gayle Wald terms the boy bands' "girlish masculinity," an unthreatening, compassionate, sensitive kind of sexuality, oozing and palpable but also delicate and unhurried" (par. 6). Accordingly, in the 2003 VH-1 documentary Totally Gay, that discusses the recent mainstreaming of gay culture, Village Voice's Michael Musto asserts how "Justin has made a lot of 'seemingly' gay career choices." While the overt homoeroticism which Timberlake sells may simply be a zeitgeist phenomenon, it obviously also provides ample material for the subtextual reading popslashers engage in.

Moreover, if the boundaries between truth and fiction are already fluid in the source text, if viewers already cannot distinguish what is truth, gossip, a certain façade for the media or the real thing, it is easy to see how RPS reflects this uncertainty. For popslash, much of this interaction between readers and writers takes place on Live Journal, whose very setup and experimental stance further enhances popslash's postmodern quality. The blogging

\textsuperscript{21} Of course, the band members' queerness could be explained with Marjorie Garber's insight that "[a]ll great stars are bisexual in performative role" as she describes "this heightened performative state, this state of simultaneously all-desiring and all-desired" (140).

\textsuperscript{22} For an earlier discussion of boy bands and gay culture, see Jeffrey Epstein.
community's nonlinearity with its interlinking pages, lacking an actual hierarchy, is not only a perfectly postmodern example of a rhizomatic structure but also most appropriate for a fandom whose source text is compiled of a nearly endless influx of various types of media, thus creating a virtually unlimited canon. RPS is not a medium tainting reality by fictionalizing it: it is an extrapolation and a reflection of the ambiguities already inherent in this media-created and dominated spectacle. Its extension of reality also carries into some of popslash's stylistic choices. Matching its more obvious postmodern philosophical background, RPS tends to be more experimental stylistically and invites interesting experiments that merge real with fictional worlds. 23

In Kel and Lise's 2002 story, "Flesh Mechanic" the writers supplement the written text with both real and made-up artifacts such as MTV announcements, EBay web pages, newspaper articles (actual and manipulated) and pictures. As a result, the reader is often left to wonder what is actual and what manipulated, thereby skirting dangerously close to the fiction/reality boundary that RPS carefully tries to maintain. This story is the exception rather than the norm; nevertheless, it demonstrates how RPS invites a more experimental manipulation of the source text since this text is already fragmented, multiple, and both true and imagined at the same time. The fact that the authors employ media that popslashers scavenge for information, facts and rumors as well as in its heavy reliance on the readers' knowledge and awareness of these things suggests that the text is a part of the cultural context it comments upon. The story actually describes how Lance, the protagonist, researches his band's history for a book on pop culture he is writing, all while finding clues about the mysterious disappearances of two of his band mates. Lance's collection of artifacts, his repeated watching of old footage, and his attempt to narrate a coherent story from the pieces of information he has gathered obviously mimics the way fans use various sources for information, facts and rumors as well as in its heavy reliance on the readers' knowledge and sources on which to base their own stories.

This pastiche-like element of fan activities, this piecing together of various information in order to reach a consistent story, is also employed in Imogen's "Paper Trails" where snippets of newspaper info and narrative intersperse. The author herself comments that the central conceit of the story evolved from the idea of scrapbooking ("Comments"), thus suggesting the collage-like aspect as well as the analogous actions of fans collecting information and telling "real" stories and the process of fan fiction writers telling their fictional ones. A slightly different postmodern approach is Sandy Keene's 2003 "As Lucid as Hell" which acknowledges its debt to Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author and shows the different fanfic versions of work-in-progress coexisting in some eternal virtual waiting room. Keene creates an entire world inhabited by characters waiting to be written. Those characters of unfinished stories or works-in-progress live together in a slashdorm (the story's unofficial title) and have their own encounters until a story is finished and that particular version disappears. The story is metanarrative of the highest order yet retains the character development and romantic plot desired by most slash readers. It is self-referential in its little inside jokes about fandom history; throughout, for example, the narrative acknowledges popular stereotypes or particularly prevalent clichés or plots:

"You have a crush on JC."
L'il Justin's eyes go wide. "Am I obvious?"
"No, kid, you're a trend."

More importantly, however, Keene's story comments on the relationship between author, reader, and characters when the romantic pairing (who are not from the same story and are, in fact, marginal characters in their own fics) try to remain together but fear their respective authors might conclude the story, thus breaking up their "real" romance. As minor characters, of course, they are allowed a higher level of freedom, because they are not as fully developed as the central characters and thus can create an identity of their own.

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23 In general, fan fiction is (surprisingly) traditional in style, mostly resorting to a realist or naturalist technique, usually linear with possible flashbacks. Rarely do we find even modernist techniques in this genre that is, on the whole, both character and plot driven (i.e., a large segment of fanfic can probably be classified as either romantic plot, character introspection, or a combination of the two).
All three stories share a relentless self-referentiality and awareness of both production and consumption of the source text as well as the fan text; moreover, they also exhibit an understanding of how the concept of reality is difficult to ascertain and how crucial the interaction between the actual participants is. While never actually writing themselves into the stories (even in Sandy Keene's story we never meet the authors), the authors remain aware that their stories are part of a larger genre, are contribution to a fandom of which the fics are but one, if the crucial part.

These various postmodern aspects indicate how RPS may empower its writers by subverting media culture; nevertheless, we need to remember that ultimately the fans remain consumers. To the celebrity, after all, it makes no difference whether the fan buying his products is a slasher subverting his media image or a more typical preteen fan. Looking at Timberlake's example, we might even wonder how much of his media image allows for or even anticipates such appropriation and subversion. Especially in popslash, many, if not most, describe how they have had little or no interest in the bands before reading the stories yet now consider themselves moderate to strong fans. Many women indeed describe how their fan engagement actually induces them to purchase products marketed specifically to fans.

While fanfic may be a more active engagement with the media and while fans constantly challenge the system by sharing their resources, ultimately they remain consumers. However, the one aspect that escapes such an economic model is the community and relationship between the fans, where the ultimate gain is emotional rather than financial. Most fans do not make money from their fan involvement and are willing to help one another without necessary reciprocation or compensation other than the friendships developing in a supportive and often loving community. Thus, if fan fiction produces a political and socially subversive element, it is not to be found in the relationship between the fan and the media product but instead between fans themselves. In fact, the real postmodern move is the creation of an erotic fantasy space by the mostly all-female community where the media objects are — to a certain extent — incidental. As such, slash ultimately produces a homosocial bond that is created over shared attraction to celebrities or media characters and manifested through shared erotic fantasy space.

While this argument holds true for mediafic, RPS really crystallizes the central role of this protected feminine space. For one, rather than having to rely on one hour a week of canon, RPSers can easily have a constant connection to their objects of attraction: whether turning on the radio, watching an awards show, or seeing a tabloid magazine in the checkout aisle, the celebrity remains ever present in the imaginary. This merging of real and fantasy life is further enhanced by the constant communication between fans online and in real life. RPS also illustrates the homosocial bond between fans more clearly by clarifying the role of fantasy construction within fan fiction. Many fans in media slash differentiate between the actors and the characters they play, preferring the fictional models the shows provide. This is, in fact, one of the central arguments against actor slash, because its critics argue that their interest and attraction lie with the media character rather than the actor who portrays him. While it seems that this argument speaks against RPS, the very same distinction is true for RPS as well. Slashers' true interest is not so much in the "real" object of their affection as it is in the written texts created about him, in the way other women present him in their shared fantasy space. Considering the highly educated background of a lot of slashers, these women often create fictional versions of the celebrities that are more educated and literate, possibly more intelligent than "the real thing." It is, in effect, the writers' cultural literacy, their sensibilities, their intelligence that is revealed in the stories.

In K's story, "The Creative Visualization Cookbook," the premise revolves around Justin's having read *Like Water For Chocolate* and teaching himself how to cook to seduce one of his band mates. While it is certainly possible that Timberlake reads and enjoys magical realism in his spare time, it is much more probable that this is the author projecting her own literary likes upon the character. It would be misguided, however, to fault this characterization as out-of-character; instead, I want to foreground how K. uses the canon to extrapolate and create a version of Justin that is

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24 In an informal Live Journal Poll, close to 90% of the respondents described themselves as only occasionally or not at all listening to *NSYNC before reading popslash and as moderate or serious fans after* (18/6661).
that involves the actual language used to describe these highly erotic scenes and the sharing of sexual fantasies among slash readers and writers—most of whom occupy both positions at various times. Reversing Eve Sedgwick’s argument, we can thus describe a homosocial—even homoerotic—bond “between women” where reader and author are making love over the naked bodies of attractive men insofar as the reader is enchanted with the other woman’s mind much more than with the actual person (or even character) the story depicts.

Returning to the story with which I began this essay, both the interaction that generated this particular fic and the reactions by other readers is indicative of this particular dynamic between slashers. While such gratuitous porn which uses the characters’ bodies for explicit sexual gratification is the most extreme form of such an erotic fantasy space, all slash, on some level, is as much about the female community creating these texts as it is about the readers’ and writers’ engagement with their erotic fantasy objects. Some of these fannish interactions include women co-writing sex scenes in chat rooms, the writing of stories tailored to specific requests by the reader, the writing of stories as a present, a thank you, or a bribe, as well as the detailed feedback describing the reader’s sexual and emotional responses. While many stories created like that may not fulfill canonical authenticity or even artistic merit, their function is a crucial part in an emotional bartering system that is more about the relationship among the women than it is about the characters, the canon, or the writing itself. Thus, terming this a fantasy space co-created by reader and writer a queer female space emphasizes both the underlying feminist potential as well as the inherently queer relations slash produces. The term queer is particularly useful, because it not only moves from sexual identity based on object choice to practices including fantasy, but also because it allows for the various ways subjects

28 I follow the definition of such queer theorists as David Halperin, who declares that “[q]ueer is whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence” (62), and Alexander Doty, who uses the term “to mark a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non-(anti,- contra-) straight cultural production and reception” (72).
identify within fantasy space. Moreover, while the term queer acknowledges the apparently high number of nonstraight women in slash today, it does not restrict the erotic interaction to lesbian, bi- or transsexual slashers; instead, it allows us to look at slash as — if not a sexual orientation — at least a practice that problematizes clear straight/gay dichotomies.

Whereas Penley cuts it down to “being” and “having” the guy, there are multiple ways to enjoy and/or enter a slash text: the pure voyeurism (possibly the most overused and maybe least applicable explanation of slash appeal), the exhibitionism of writing, the emotional and erotic exchange on the level of writer/reader, the various ways to identify and/or desire the characters but also the producers of the text. In other words, the female community is charged sexually not only in relation to our male fantasy and identificatory objects, but also in the imaginary relation between reader and writer and among the women within the eroticism of the given fan community. The concept of the queer female space incorporates the queerness of both the fic’s contents as well as the modes of its production, of the characters in the fics as well as its producers and audiences, i.e., the entire community of women. While there is obviously a queering of the canon within the text, fandom itself, the community of women creating and consuming erotic texts for and with one another, adds another level to this fantasy space that slash creates. This queer spectacle, utterly postmodern in its complete erosion of reality and its playful constructedness of identities, may be the most subversive element of fan fiction.

26 In an informal Live Journal poll earlier this year, out of 300 female popslashers, over 60% self-identified as queer (107/606).
27 What I am not addressing here is the potentially misogynist attitude that requires women to construct their erotic fantasies around male bodies only. At the same time, these bodies often function as little more than place holders to work through feminist issues within characters who — as men — can remain unmarked, a privilege not granted to women’s bodies.
28 In fact, one could probably make a quite similar argument for sexually explicitly heterosexual stories, since both readers and writers interact in ways mostly similar to female slashers.

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Totally Gay. VH-1. First Air Date: August 18, 2003.
