

Framing Celebrity

New directions in celebrity culture

Edited by Su Holmes and Sean Redmond

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2006
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Ave, New York NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Transferred to Digital Printing 2010

Editorial material and selection © 2006 Su Holmes & Sean Redmond
Individual essays © 2006 the contributors

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Framing celebrity : new directions in celebrity culture/edited by Su Holmes and Sean Redmond
p.cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-37709-9 (hardback : alk. paper) – ISBN 0-415-37710-2 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Popular culture—United States. 2. Celebrities in mass media. 3. Mass media—Social aspects—United States. I. Holmes, Su. II. Redmond, Sean, 1967– E169.Z83F68 2006

306'.0973090511—dc22

2005033385

ISBN10: 0-415-37709-9 (hbk)
ISBN10: 0-415-37710-2 (pbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-415-37709-6 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-415-37710-2 (pbk)

Chapter 15

'I'm Jealous of the Fake Me'

Postmodern Subjectivity and Identity Construction in Boy Band Fan Fiction

Kristina Busse

It's boyband slash. And man, have I got it bad. Four stories in a week, with more coming. What's more, I hate these bands. I don't go near them. I hadn't even *heard* of *nsync... I have feminist-type issues with boybands – they're a multi-media product designed and marketed to stimulate particular emotions in young women, but the mass culture which works tirelessly to generate those emotions also disrespects them, and the industry which profits from them must invalidate them when the band's sales-cycle winds down(Julad 2001).

Over the past few years, thousands of stories have appeared on the internet featuring the members of the male vocal group *NSYNC as their principal characters. *NSYNC, with its members Chris Kirkpatrick, JC Chasez, Joey Fatone, Lance Bass and Justin Timberlake, rose to fame in the late 1990s with chart-topping hits and record-breaking sales; they are a quintessential boy band, adored by pre-teenage girls and derided by almost everyone else. In fact, their star function is such that their public life has become a narrative often unrecognizable to the stars themselves: Justin Timberlake (2003), for example, points out that his life in the media is more interesting and appealing than his actual life, a sentiment exemplified by the quotation that constitutes the title of this essay. However, a large number of the stories circulating on the web differ from such official accounts. As Julad's account above indicates, she became a fan of the group only via the fan narratives. Her fannish obsession with *NSYNC developed out of her engagement with the stories and the fan writing community. Moreover, rather than being a passive consumer, she clearly analyses how she is implicated in the interaction between the commercial presentation of the pop stars and her own fantasies about them.

While popular conceptions of *NSYNC fans tap into historical perceptions of

adolescent girl fans from Beatlemania and beyond (Frith and McRobbie, 1990; Ehrenreich *et al.*, 1992; Driscoll, 2002), Julad belongs to a community with a decidedly different fannish lineage, shorthanded by its members as *popslash*. Slash is a term derived from media fan fiction and describes the narrative expansion of media texts and, more specifically, the depiction of relationships between same-sex characters in the fictional world (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1992). While this phenomenon can be traced back to the late 1960s and early *Star Trek*'zines featuring fan-authored stories, it has become more widespread with the rise of the internet and now includes almost every TV series, many movies and books, as well as any number of celebrities. Popslash writers use pop stars as their protagonists, constructing fictional narratives that supplement and enhance those disseminated by the media. They manipulate public information to question and undermine the very media images that form the source text for their stories. In so doing, popslashers address complicated notions of reality and performance as the fictional depictions question the truth of the public accounts of the stars and their worlds.

As the stories I have chosen to examine indicate, popslash boasts a sizeable number of self-reflexive and theoretically sophisticated texts, which is not surprising considering that many of its writers identify themselves as highly educated adult women. Some, like myself, are academics, and familiarity with recent theories on gender performance and star theory clearly informs the stories, as well as the discourses surrounding them. As recent discussions within fan studies suggest, studying any community of which one is a member is difficult (Doty, 2000; Green *et al.*, 1998; Hills, 2002), but I choose to do so nonetheless. While some would argue that one's position in a given community could lead to a lack of objectivity, I contend that my very subjectivity provides a comprehensive insight difficult to achieve otherwise.

It is of course impossible to clearly define different types of fans, not only because the internet is an anonymous space where everyone can perform any chosen identity, but because various fan positions can be occupied. While it may seem that popslash fans have little in common with boy band or pop fans in general, I would like to suggest that popslashers exemplify an aspect of fan engagement that may be less openly displayed in other fannish testimonies. In other words, insofar as the popslash community shares many qualities with fan behaviour as it is typically described (Jenkins, 1992; Jensen, 1992; Hills, 2002), popslash fans' engagement with the celebrity images suggests a clear – if not always overtly expressed – engagement with the ways stars function for all fans as nodes of signification, desire, and identification (Hansen, 1991; Stacey, 1991).

As popslash stories imagine the split between the 'real' and the public self,

they both address and thematize the difficulty of performing the postmodern self, a difficulty exemplified by, but not exclusive to, stars. These stories foreground the way subject positions not only are chosen but are consciously created and shaped by the audience at the same time as they address a desire for an imaginary core identity. The conflicting discourses of authenticity and performance to which they draw attention are concerns which popslashers face not only in the media texts they draw from but in public discourse in general. Popslash fans thus use stars to address issues of ‘authentic’ identity (Dyer, 1998), at the same time as they recognize the stars’ as well as their own postmodern performativity (Lovell, 2003).

In the popular imaginary, the fan is often conceived as an isolated individual who substitutes star or celebrity attachment for actual social interaction (Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2004). Both Turner and Rojek refuse to view this fan/celebrity para-social relation negatively, rejecting the contempt other critics have shown for such an ‘illusion of intimacy’ (Schickel, 1985). Yet they still ignore the real social relationships that grow up around the para-social ones. In the case of fan fiction, where fans literally write out and share their fantasies, they create a social space of communication and interaction that is about the celebrities, the stories, as well as the women writing them (Ehrenreich *et al.*, 1992; Wald, 2002).

Whether in private, with one’s best friend, in organized fan clubs, or at conventions, many fans share and gain ‘real’ social interaction via their fannishness (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Harris and Alexander, 1998; Hills, 2002). The social community surrounding this often becomes equally central – if not more so – to the fans than the stars themselves. In this way, the stars ultimately function as a conduit through which the fans creatively explore their own identities, desires and sexualities. They create social networks through engagement with each other, as well as with the shared star texts. Rather than replacing real social interaction with para-social ones, popslash exemplifies how the community creates new social networks from which ‘real’ relationships and friendships evolve.

Boy Bands and Reality

In their clearly constructed roles, boy bands epitomize issues surrounding identity construction and performativity which are central to all stars (Dyer, 1998; Giles, 2000) and, by extension, all postmodern subjects. In this way, boy bands are a perfect example of the simulacrum, the copy without an original (Baudrillard, 1988; Marshall, 1997: 165–84), and it is this very deliberate construction of the star’s persona that appeals to popslashers. Discourses

surrounding boy bands consistently criticize the members' supposed lack of talent and authenticity (Wald, 2002). Deliberately marketed as sexual objects toward a female pre-teen audience, the pop stars clearly must confront the issue of constructing one's public self and the effects of being a public figure. They become exemplary for the postmodern subject. As variously (and differently) defined by theorists like Foucault (1970), Derrida (1976), Lacan (1977) or Butler (1990), the postmodern self is built around a notion of performance: its identity shifts among multiple versions of the self, all of which are determined by context. The split between the public and private personae of any star simply exaggerates the performative aspect in which all of us engage on a more general level (Gamson, 1994; Rojek, 2001).

The questions of truth and reality are central in popslash writing, which consciously fictionalizes a reality that itself is already performed and choreographed. Unlike much of the tabloid press, which purports to tell the 'truth', popslashers consciously declare their writing to be fictional and clearly separate their stories from rumors. Of course, this creative process allows the popslasher to construct the star as she wishes: as an object of desire, as someone with whom to identify, or as a recreation of the star's supposedly 'real' self. Moreover, popslashers refuse to follow the cliché of declaring the public performances of pop stars a fiction and the band members fake and fabricated; instead, their stories often reveal deep empathy and sympathy for the stars they depict. Rather than reproducing the star stereotypes often perpetuated by the media, popslash rehumanizes the celebrities by inventing backstories and inner lives. Popslasher Jae W., for example, describes how her fannish engagement and research forced her to 'empathize much more with the people [she's] writing about, and see them as full people' (personal communication, 2003). Popslashers use the available material while inventing what is not and cannot be known, which forces them to simultaneously believe and disavow the 'reality' presented by the media.

Insertion Fantasy and Identification

This tension between the performed self and the imagined 'real' self drives a variety of fannish desires of intimacy that translate into different narrative fantasies. Following along the lines of identification and desire, I want to distinguish between *insertion* and *observer* fantasy as recurring modes of fannish narratives. In the former, writers may directly insert themselves into the narrative or mould one of the characters to become their representative, while in the latter they voyeuristically fantasize a reality in which the stars remain undisturbed by

outside observers. In the insertion fantasy, the text imagines the author entering the story, usually to meet the stars and often to become romantically involved with them; in the observer fantasy, the text envisions the characters in a private unobserved state, allowing deeper insight into the star and the 'real' persons behind the public screen. The observer fantasy thus seems to replace or supplement the desire to be or have the characters with a desire to see or know about them. In other words, the satisfaction in reading and writing these stories is derived from the pleasure of information and insight (Foucault, 1990). Interestingly, this division between having and knowing is mirrored in a similar split in the actual fan– star interaction. Some fans collect objects owned or worn by stars; others simply gather information. For example, one fan may pick up the water glass a star drank from to gain access to his physical embodiment, another will examine his cigarette butt to find out what brand he smokes.

In the most obvious insertion fantasies, the writer explicitly writes herself (or some idealized version or avatar thereof) into the story. The primary logic behind these pieces of fiction revolves around the desire to either become the star or someone close to him in order to be with him. Sarah's 'The Middle of Nowhere' (2000) is an excellent example of an insertion narrative that allows various forms of identification and desire to play out in relation to the principal characters. Justin Timberlake, who wants to temporarily escape the limelight, hides out as a high school student in rural Kansas, where he falls in love with a girl named Maggie. In Maggie, the author creates an identifiable female character, a 'regular' high school girl, thus allowing the reader to imagine an encounter with a nice, everyday guy while simultaneously (as readers of the story) knowing that he is indeed an international pop star. This story represents the ultimate insertion fantasy: Maggie gets to have the real guy, and Justin Timberlake too.

At the same time, the story includes elements of identification with Justin himself. Told from Justin's point of view, the story includes his diary entries, which allow readers to see not only Justin's thoughts but to identify with his feelings. As such, there is a second level of self-insertion: although there certainly may be international male teenage pop stars who write diaries, it seems more likely that this is authorial projection. One early entry clearly establishes the theme of the story: 'It's just like if I could have a break. Even for 24 hours. If I could just find someone with whom I could be Justin. I mean, my parents don't even know Justin anymore.' By removing Justin from the media context and placing him in a regular environment, 'The Middle of Nowhere' fulfils a dominant fan fantasy of meeting the celebrity and beginning a love affair. Considering Dyer's (1998: 49) suggestion of the ordinary/extraordinary paradox, 'The Middle of Nowhere' bridges the paradox of the star being ordinary-yet-

special by letting the star occupy both positions simultaneously. At the same time, the story also discusses the issue of public versus 'real' self. Fan logic, of course, demands that 'we' – channelled through Maggie – fall in love with the 'real' Timberlake, not the media construct. Such a distinction presupposes, however, that we can clearly recognize the real thing as distinct from and preferable to the performative. By juxtaposing Justin's celebrity life with his small-town middle America adventure, the story raises not only the question of various selves, but also which of these lives, which of these Justins, is more 'real.'

Fans Writing Fans

Unlike Sarah's insertion fic, most popslash focuses on and identifies with the celebrities rather than with the fans, often characterizing 'fangirls' stereotypically as obsessive, intrusive and even aggressively physical. When fans appear outside insertion fic fan encounters, their central role is usually to uphold the star's public self, to be the audience for which that self is created and sustained. In general, then, the community identifies with the stars against the fans that they themselves are, or at least against the kind of fans that they do not want to be. Stubbleglitter's 'Smile for the Fans' (2002) envisions the pressure for the star in constantly being chased and touched by fans, yet having to pretend to enjoy it. Her JC is haunted by the fans' overwhelming presence and physical proximity:

Their fingers are wet. They're always fucking wet, and JC has nightmares about the girls sticking their fingers in their mouths or between their legs before reaching out so he can touch them as he runs along the stage. He cringes every time their slick slimy fingertips slide against his hand, thick with saliva or cum or whatever the hell it is they secrete, smelling heavy and overly sweet like rotting peaches.

The story not only addresses the star's plight of having to pretend to enjoy something he loathes but also disparages the 'excessively' embodied fan who needs to literally touch the object of her affection.

Despite its rather striking tone, and even apparent invocation of a 'monstrous' conception of the female (feminizing) 'mass', the story should not necessarily be read as a form of self-hatred on the part of the fan, or even as pointing to a hatred of other fans. Rather, it can be interpreted as an exaggerated critique of certain (popular) conceptions of fan behaviour that the writer has internalized

but wishes to distance herself from. At the same time it is true that the story remains firmly articulated from JC's point of view, thus demanding identification with him rather than the faceless, nameless, objectifying 'mass'. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the anonymous crowd also implies that the threat comes less from individual women, than from the way the music industry presents the stars to them as a commodity.

Media footage and imagination are interestingly merged here as Stubbleglitter relies on JC's public character in her fictional creation of his private one: the disgust pervading the story is one possible extrapolation from the fact that JC usually avoids eye contact during shows, instead performing with his eyes closed. The story concludes in his public persona, the only one we have access to: "We love our fans," he smiled into the camera. "They're what keep us going." Stubbleglitter thus conjectures a 'real' self for JC that not only contradicts the one fans are presented with by the popular press but also seriously questions their roles as fans. Jawamoney and Chris J.'s 'Genuine #1' (2002) directly addresses the relationship between fan and star as well as their respective identity issues. Positing an alternate universe in which non-celebrity Justin encounters Backstreet Boy AJ McLean, the story functions as a self-insertion with a twist: Justin is both regular fan and star, in and outside the story respectively. Interestingly, it is Justin, rather than the story's actual star AJ, who is constantly described as performing a role; he consciously observes and controls his behaviour, going so far as to name and number his smiles according to their intended effects. Shifting the concern of multiple identities and role playing from the celebrity onto the fan (albeit one whom we know in reality to be a celebrity and thereby deserving of AJ) suggests that not only the star but also readers and writers are concerned with issues of how to perform one's identity.

Observer Fantasy and Identification

The observer fantasy imagines the stars' secret private selves so that its driving force is the emphasis on the gathered facts as a basis to imagine the potential 'truths' they hide. Recognizing 'the real thing' is central to the observer fantasy, because its writers must rely on media footage to create a blueprint of the 'real' star in order to create a fictional extrapolation. Direct self-insertion is impossible here, because the stories fetishize the pop stars' close ties with one another and the fact that any love interest beyond the group must remain an outsider. Slashers, trained in reading between the lines of many TV shows to ferret out homoerotic subtext, carefully trace moments of inconsistency, find cracks in the

‘façade’ of the official star text, and search for a more genuine ‘reality’ underneath. The discourse surrounding these stories is often less about a fannish desire for the star in a visceral sense (as in wanting to meet or see him), as it is a fascination with understanding him, stripping away the layers of performance, and catching glimpses of the ‘real’ self underneath – to know the star better than he knows himself. The attempt to imagine a ‘real’ self as realistically as possible thus requires extensive research, ranging from concert performances and interviews to articles and personal interaction.

The insertion fantasy faces an obvious paradox: it rests on the premises that only the ‘real’ self can truly love and be loved while, of course, the fan obviously fantasizes about the star *because* of his star status, not in spite of it. Similarly, the observer fantasy imagines the ‘true’ self underneath, creating a layered and intricate psychological subject, yet fans are initially interested in these stars *because* they are famous, so the initial attraction is not a complex subjectivity but a simplification of the ‘real’ person behind the star function. In other words, in both types of story, insertion and observer, fans construct the fantastic life of being a star, as opposed to a fantasy of the stars’ realistic life, which is obviously unknowable. The fictional text is built around the public media narrative with the remainder filled by interpolated and extrapolated additions as imagined by the author.

Most stories contain traces of the author’s desire and identifications, and popslash in particular offers such a complex source material that interpretive decisions about characterization and interpersonal dynamics are paramount to creating interesting characters. Even though popslashers remain consumers who interact with the imagined and imaginary media construct, they also shape and alter the star to their own specifications, making him more interesting, intelligent or vulnerable, and thus more desirable, identifiable and available. Betty P., for example, describes how she writes her characters ‘in a certain way, a little more thoughtful than they probably are, a little more genuine, a little more confused. I write them trying harder to get through life than I think they really are ... I write the way I write because it produces a story that I like and not because I think it mimics reality exactly’ (personal communication, 2004). Often the characters are more literate, more sensitive or simply more self-aware than we might extrapolate from the media portrayal, and the particular aspects the fan writer chooses to foreground are indicative of the personality she wants to create or explore. As Betty points out, the popslash readers and writers want to understand, care for and maybe even identify with the characters, and ultimately that desire shapes the fiction more than any particular star quote or media clip does.

Celebrity Performance and Identity Construction

One area in which the fans' desires become clearly visible is in issues of identity, in particular their identity as popslashers. The theme of hiding one's sexuality underlies any story in which the publicly heterosexual members of *NSYNC are having sexual relations with one another. More specifically, popslash requires the celebrities to perform not only their official and private roles but also their (public) straight and (real) queer identities. It may be no surprise that popslashers emotionally engage with stories that revolve around notions of identities and the protection of secret selves, a concern that gets played out most often through anxieties over gender and sexual identity. The number of queer women in online media fandom in general – and popslash in particular – is significant. While not my intention to offer an essentialist (or indeed homogeneous) reading of identity, this may in part explain the central theme of sexuality here. Moreover, popslashers in general confront questions of identity insofar as they are boy band fans who read and/or write homoerotic texts, usually a secret known to few, if any, of their real life friends and family.

It is with this connection between the popslashers' and the stars' identities in mind that I want to look at the way identity is constructed and performed in popslash stories. Often, the fiction tends to emphasize a separation between what fans see and the actual personal lives, since one of popslash's central goals is to imagine the characters behind the supposed façade. Jae W.'s 'Disarm' (2001), for example, thematizes the boundary between public and private as one of the group members suddenly alters his public persona. The narrator notes, 'Of course he wore armor. They all did; it was that or lose themselves to the millions of eyes and fingers and minds that grabbed at them every day ... he had welcomed the safety he felt behind the walls he'd built.' The story posits fans as aggressive antagonists to a star who must protect and safeguard his private self. 'Disarm' traces the difficulties of such a clear split: Justin, for example, is almost unable to access his 'real' self as he 'flash[es] different smiles into the smoky glass... looking for the smile that was real'; in contrast, JC attempts to present a seemingly vulnerable and weak front as a defence, which is described as 'a brilliant idea, to close yourself so thoroughly by appearing to be so open, to discourage others from hurting you just by seeming so capable of being hurt'. 'Disarm' suggests that the various ways that one constructs one's 'real' self may often endanger that very sense of reality. In fact, the story refuses to end with a romantic relation that would supposedly allow both protagonists to shed their different masks and layers. Instead, it describes how different levels of intimacy and revelation dominate even their personal relationship. In so doing, the story

suggests that within personal relations, layers of identity are also taken on and shed, with the implication that such identity transformations characterize the experience of selfhood outside of stardom.

Postmodern critical thought suggests that most subjects enact various, yet closely linked, performative roles depending on context and interlocutor. Stars, however, may be more prone to clearly separating such roles (Rojek, 2001: 11), and popslash often dramatizes this separation. Synecdochic's 'Borderlines' (2003) presents a Justin Timberlake who consciously disassociates personalities and creates a separate identity named Jay as a way to escape his public self: 'They'd built him together ... piece by piece and trait by trait.' The underlying notion here, of course, is that the public self has, on some level, affected or destroyed the 'real' self to a degree where an objective outsider perspective cannot declare him sane. A second personality of a normal boy has to be constructed to safeguard the public Justin; in fact, 'sometimes Justin thinks that Jay is the only thing that's keeping him out of the loony bin' (see also Stephen Harper's essay in this collection on the discursive relationship constructed between 'madness' and fame). This story presents but one interpretation of how much the required public persona and the unceasing spotlight may have affected the emotional development of the fourteen-year-old who joined *NSYNC. In fact, it is no coincidence that most of the stories that directly address the notion of a public persona focus on Timberlake. As the youngest of the group and the one most in the spotlight, popslashers often present him as the one most likely to have had his 'real' self influenced by the public self and by his media image.

Of course, we cannot and will never know any star's 'real' self, because any declaration, any revealing interview, any behind-the-scenes recording, is by default a public statement (Dyer, 1998: 2). Still, the desire to know just how much is real and how much constructed is a driving force in public star discourse and, not surprisingly, in popslash as well. Sandy Keene's 'Your Life Is Now' (2002), for example, addresses the way fans collect information yet always remain on the outside: in the story Justin loses his memory and must piece together his past. Justin has become an outsider to his own life and, mimicking the fans, watches media footage of himself to recapture his identity. Nevertheless, all he can access that way is his public self, which he realizes is not sufficient. In this story, Justin is utterly lost because he cannot distinguish between his private and public selves. He cannot remember one, and he realizes that the other may be purposefully false.

Keene's story describes how the media is evidently crucial to the fans' engagement with the star because it is the principal – if not only – point of access here. Kaneko's 'Becoming' (2003) deals with this interdependence of

media and celebrity in a story where JC and Chris are fantastically given the ability to make things come true simply by voicing them: whatever they say out loud to the media becomes reality. Chris jokes about Justin liking gummy bears and JC being afraid of birds, and within a few hours, these likes and dislikes come true. Although the characters initially come upon this ability/curse accidentally, they soon learn to appreciate and fear its effects and begin to manipulate their own behaviour and the real-life changes they effect. By showing how the star may be affected by how the media have constructed him, Kaneko comments on the relationship between public and 'real' selves and how they shape one another.

'Becoming' thematizes the relationship between media, fan and star. Whereas the media and the star are often seen to conspire in creating the star image, in the story under discussion here, the stars themselves become victims of fan and media discourses and only later succeed in taking back limited control of their own image construction. As a result, the story reveals an underlying discomfort that fans may have with their role in making impossible the very thing they want most – the star's 'real' self. 'Becoming' explores, both metaphorically and literally, whether and to what degree fans may be able to manipulate their images and thereby their realities. In so doing, Kaneko criticizes the role of fans, problematizes the relationship between media and celebrity, and addresses fans' desires to control and become who they want to be. In a way, then, 'Becoming' is ultimately about how much anyone can control their behaviour and how they appear to others. Although the relationship between media and star is obviously an extreme case, the issue is nevertheless relevant for fans as well insofar as fans try to separate truth from fabrication and are themselves part of the process that 'makes' the stars they admire. Moreover, fans also create and shape themselves in certain ways, especially on the internet, where individuals create personae that in turn become part of who they are. Thus, while issues of identity construction and performativity may be important to any postmodern subject, they are especially relevant to women who spend much time online with varying degrees of differing personae and who have created strong social ties around these different layers of identity (Turkle, 1997; Baym, 2000; Rheingold, 2000). Popslash allows its readers and writers to explore these issues by playing them out on exemplary star bodies.

Feminism and Gender Swap

Much of popslash clearly engages with the everyday issues of female fans and the various roles such fans perform. One popular and particularly interesting

subgenre of popslash is gender-switching stories, whose central generic trope allows them to address various concerns particular to women. These stories deal with issues of identity, sexual identity and sexual orientation by forcing the protagonist to experience the physical and emotional – and, by extension, the social and cultural – realities of possessing a body of the opposite sex. Many popslash gender-switching fics exhibit deeper concerns about how sexual desire is configured in our culture. They explore how a temporary external change may force the stories' protagonists to question how much of their feelings are generated by the person they love and how much is merely a reaction to their biological sex. It is important to realize that gender-switching stories function as a specific fan fiction trope and in no way realistically describe gender dysphoria. In fact, the stories transfer the emphasis from the actual experience of gender switching to its impact. They often focus more on the shifting dynamics within the group than the individual's utter confusion of waking up in the wrong body.

Gender-switching stories thematize a variety of negative experiences often particular to women. These include issues such as greater objectification, a concern with body image, sexual vulnerability (including the larger emphasis on virginity), the risk of pregnancy and the greater danger of sexual violence. The stories displace these issues onto a male character, albeit in a female body. Wald (2002), following Ehrenreich *et al.* (1992), argues that one of the central appeals of boy bands is their members' ambiguous sexuality with their desirable yet non-threatening bodies that often challenge heteronormative masculinity. The fascination with body imagery in a variety of popslash fics suggest that boy band celebrities, by default, already stand in for many of the bodily concerns of their fans. After all, one of the reasons female slashers may be attracted to boy band characters is the fact that few other males face this same level of scrutiny. Furthermore, considering the fact that women themselves have to perform their 'femaleness', such a displacement onto a male character plays with some of the central issues raised in gender theory (Butler, 1990). Finally, these stories mirror slashers' own identification process across gender. Slash author Cesperanza (personal communication, 2004) suggests that 'the genderswap story parallels two stories: the male celeb[rity]'s taking on of a female role gives him access to his desire for men in much the same way that the female fan's taking on the male role in writing gives her access to her desire for women'. Rather than trying (and failing) to identify with female characters who are found wanting (Doane, 1982), slashers use men as the objects of identification yet mould these men in such a way as to address their own issues.

Helen's 'The Same Inside' (2001), for example, describes how, after Chris changes into a woman, he and Joey fall in love. Once Chris changes back, Joey

cannot handle that his 'girlfriend has a fucking cock' and leaves Chris, only to realize that Chris's maleness is less important than the person he is inside, the person Joey fell in love with. This motif of remaining 'the same inside', regardless of apparent gender, permeates the story. Early on, Chris exclaims in frustration, 'I don't *feel* like a girl ... I feel the same inside', only to be rebuffed by Lance's comment, 'Well, girls probably feel the same inside too'. Chris's frustration is immediately turned into a statement on gender equality, thus marking the story as concerned with what it means to be female for women. This emphasis on a consistent core underneath one's gendered body short-circuits the traditional gender binaries and suggests that the person underneath may be more important than the body s/he inhabits, while at the same time addressing concerns of self specific to women. Placed beyond the realities of transgendered individuals to whom bodies indeed make a difference, the story constructs a fantasy of true love outside sex and gender norms. Joey's comment seems to suggest that gendered subject positions are multiple, are often not directly related to biological sex and, ultimately, are not the deciding factor as to whom one loves or desires. Although 'The Same Inside' does acknowledge how both characters change and grow, and how they are affected and influenced by gender stereotypes and social expectations, their ultimate romantic victory suggests that it may be possible to move beyond such notions and limitations. The story combines a constructivist approach to gender, where one's biological sex is ultimately secondary to sexual attraction, with an essentialist understanding of identity that posits a core self that is 'the same inside' regardless of context.

Such competing notions of constructivism and essentialism are not unusual in popslash stories about identity and performativity. A playful belief in postmodern constructedness often exists alongside a desire for authenticity, an authenticity that can be found both in the fan's understanding of the star's success and in her construction of his identity. Fans repeatedly emphasize the stars' innate talents as well as their extraordinary hard work to explain and justify their success. In fact, this narrative illustrates Dyer's adaptation of Max Weber's concept of *charisma* (1998: 30): popslash fans, although perfectly aware of how the system works and how stars are produced and marketed, nevertheless continue to emphasize the stars' abilities and an actual reason for their fame. Similarly, although many of the stories thematize the celebrities as fragmented selves without any core, often a sense remains that underneath, there really, truly may be something that can be recovered or unearthed, most often with the discovery of romantic feelings. Popslash's cynical acknowledgement of our postmodern, constructed selves thus often seems to hide an interest in – if not desire for – a reality beyond the performative, for some central core that

makes us special and defines who we are. There thus exists a discrepancy between fans' simple acknowledgement of the constructed nature of stars and the ways in which they actually depict identity and performance in their writing. This is a tension which reflects on the complicated relationship fans display, not only in terms of understanding the stars' identities but also their own.

Conclusion

Even while exploring some of the more unusual identificatory dynamics within popslash, I do not want to argue that popslashers are not 'real' fans; in fact, their written fantasies supplement rather than replace the more typical star-fan interactions. Although their fannish behavior may take on different shapes and outlets than those commonly anticipated by the commercial market surrounding celebrities, popslashers nevertheless are part of that commercial process. As consumers, they spend money on merchandise and concert appearances even as it becomes part of their research; they dismiss certain aspects of fan behaviour while sharing others through their fannish social ties. In other words, fans can engage in fandom while critically analysing it. The emotionally distanced neutrality of some of their stories must be read in relation to their other fannish behaviour and the attention that goes into the writing of these fics. Finally, their often voiced awareness that stars' public selves are constructed must be understood against stories that often foreground the celebrities' inner charisma and work ethic, thus juxtaposing realist and postmodern versions of supposed star-fan interaction.

The central focus in popslash stories on identity and performance, on trying to separate public and private selves, suggests that these are issues that draw the fans both to popslash and to boy bands. In a way, popslashers seem to be identifying with stars, focusing on their constructions of subjectivity, because, as fans, they are similarly constructed by their environment. Boy band members are constantly told who they are supposed to be by their handlers, the media and the fans. Likewise, the audience is told these very particulars about the stars whom they are supposed to desire. In turn, such guidelines on what and how to desire instruct fans on whom they themselves are supposed to be. As a result, the wilful creative (re)writings of media representations and these performative, localized acts of agency still remain dependent on (and thus perhaps contained by) an entertainment industry that generates initial interest in these stars and controls the information fans rely on.

As Julad's epigraph to this essay indicates, many popslashers are well aware of the problems surrounding boy bands' marketing strategies. In fact, the

cynicism that surrounds boy band members may indeed appeal particularly to a group of intelligent women who know they ultimately lack agency but attempt to gain it nevertheless, women who are fully aware of the constructedness of their idols, yet love them for that very irreality. Popslashers, well aware that they can never achieve real agency, instead strive for the best any postmodern subject can have: the simultaneous embracing and disavowing of the belief in Justin's realness as much as their own.

Bibliography

- Bacon-Smith, Camille (1992) *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1988) [1981] 'Simulacra and Simulations', in Mark Poster (ed.), *Selected Writings*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Baym, Nancy K. (2000) *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble*, New York: Routledge.
- Derrida, Jacques (1976) *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Doane, Mary Ann (1982) 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator', *Screen* 23/3-4: 74-87.
- Doty, Alexander (2000) *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*, London: Routledge.
- Driscoll, Catherine (2002) *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*, New York: Columbia.
- Dyer, Richard (1998) *Stars*, London: British Film Institute.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara, Hess, Elizabeth, and Jacobs, Gloria (1992) 'Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun', in Lisa A. Lewis (ed.), *The Adoring Audience*, London: Routledge, pp. 84-106.
- Foucault, Michel (1970) [1966] *The Order of Things*, New York: Random House.
- Foucault, Michel (1990) [1976] *History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, New York: Vintage.
- Frith, Simon and McRobbie, Angela (1990) [1978] 'Rock and Sexuality', in Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (ed.), *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, London: Routledge, pp. 371-89.
- Gamson, Joshua (1994) *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Giles, David (2000) *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity*, New York: St Martin's Press.
- Hansen, Miriam (1991) 'Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, London: Routledge, pp. 259-82.
- Harris, Cheryl, and Alexander, Alison (eds) (1998) *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity*, Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- Helen (2001) 'The Same Inside', available at www.helenish.net/samep.shtml, accessed 1 May 2005.
- Hills, Matthew (2002) *Fan Cultures*, London: Routledge.
- Jaе W. (2001) 'Disarm', available at www.waxjism.org/jaesepha/disarm.html, accessed 1 May 2005.
- Jawamoney and Chris J. (2002) 'Genuine #1', available at www.mediageek.ca/cj/genuine.html, accessed 1 May 2005.

- Jenkins, Henry (1992) *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, New York: Routledge.
- Jenkins, Henry, Jenkins, Cynthia, and Green, Shoshanna (1998) “‘The Normal Interest in Men Bonking’”: Selections from The Terra Nostra Underground and Strange Bedfellows’, in Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander (eds), *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity*, Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, pp. 9–38.
- Jensen, Joli (1992) ‘Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization’, in Lisa Lewis (ed.), *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, London: Routledge.
- Kaneko (2003) ‘Becoming’, available at anyroad.org/kaneko/becoming.html, accessed 1 May 2005.
- Keene, Sandy (2002) ‘Your Life Is Now’, available at suitableforframing.mediawood.net/yourlife.htm, accessed 1 May 2005.
- Lacan, Jacques (1977) [1966] *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Norton.
- Lovell, Alan (2003) ‘I Went in Search of Deborah Kerr, Jodie Foster, and Julianne Moore but got Waylaid ...’, in Thomas Austin and Martin Barker (eds), *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, London: Arnold, pp. 259–70.
- Marshall, P. David (1997) *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Penley, Constance (1992) ‘Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture’, in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies*, New York: Routledge, pp. 479–500.
- Rheingold, Howard (2000) [1993] *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Rojek, Chris (2001) *Celebrity*, London: Reaktion Books.
- Sarah (2000) ‘The Middle of Nowhere’, available at railwayshoes.net/sarah/middle/midmain.html, accessed 1 May 2005.
- Schickel, Richard (1985) *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Stacey, Jackie (1991) ‘Feminine Fascinations: Forms of Identification in Star–Audience Relations’, in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, London: Routledge, pp. 141–63.
- Stubbleglitter (2002) ‘Smile for the Fans’, available at boudicca.com/unaware/smile.html, accessed 1 May 2005.
- Synecdochic (2003) ‘Borderlines’, available at www.kekkai.org/synecdochic/borderlines.html, accessed 1 May 2005.
- Timberlake, Justin (2003) Interview, *Total Request Live*, 21 October.
- Turkle, Sherry (1997) *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Turner, Graeme (2004) *Understanding Celebrity*, London: Sage.
- Wald, Gayle (2002) “‘I Want It That Way’”: Teenybopper Music and the Girling of Boy Bands’, *Genders* 35, available at www.genders.org/g35/g35_wald.html, accessed 1 May 2005.