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A HISTORY OF SLASH SEXUALITIES

Debating queer sex, gay politics and media fan cultures

Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian

Introduction

The popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey*'s reconfigured *Twilight* fan fiction has made heterosexual fan fiction a widely recognised cultural phenomenon. In contrast, slash stories about sexual and romantic relationships between same-sex fictional characters (or, frequently, real-world celebrities) have yet to achieve such commercial success. Both within academic fan studies and in popular culture, male/male slash's existence – from the Marvel Cinematic Universe to One Direction to the success of self-published erotic fiction ebooks – is widely acknowledged and discussed. One point that stands out in many discussions is that male/male fan fiction communities tend to be largely female, and thus distinct in history and membership from writers and readers of original gay male erotic fiction. (Slash about women characters, often called femslash, receives less attention, for reasons Julie Levin Russo (2010) examines in her work on femslash-specific communities and histories.) Though the majority of male/male slash writers have tended to be women who identify themselves as heterosexual, intra-community discussions suggest that there always have been many queer-identified writers, and that this number is increasing. In the absence of quantitative research, the gender and sexuality of slashers remain uncertain and open to debate. Is slash gay? Is it straight? Is it feminist? Is it political? Is it offensive? Is it romance? Is it porn? This chapter explores how male/male slash fan writers have transformed commercial characters and narratives into stories of gay romance, queer desire and even sexual activism.

While not all slash fan fiction is erotically explicit, news articles often focus on graphic homoerotic fan writings, and many academic essays follow suit. Thus fan fiction often gets reduced to its erotic aspects, whether for celebration or critique. Yet in 1985, in the first essay discussing slash, Joanna Russ argued that sexual fantasy is never just about the content of a fantasy, but is also about the structural position and social context of its writers and consumers. The erotics of slash have, over the past 30 years, served communities of readers and writers more diverse in their interests, concerns and identities than existing scholarship might lead us to believe.

Building on previous work on queer fan cultures, fans' community-building and transformative critique by the authors, this chapter historicises and explores the changing significance of sex and sexuality within slash communities in terms of politicised identities, self-presentation and the relationships between pleasure, subcultural community and media. With both fan culture and gay representations entering the mainstream in the past decade, the politics of sexual identity has become a central thematic concern within fan communities. The subcultural world of slash fan fiction writers can often seem highly removed from queer communities and practices, yet the shared romantic and erotic narrative pleasures of slash fan fiction are not necessarily distinct from issues of rights and representation. For some fan writers, political and social issues become as important to the production of erotic and romantic fan fiction as the engagement with source texts themselves. Accordingly, a range of critical analyses of the relationships among sex, capital, pleasure, gender, race and other axes of difference can be found in fan fiction as well as in queer scholarship and political movements. We work with slash stories to trace their engagement with multiple connected discourses: the content of the fan texts themselves; the context surrounding these texts in fan meta conversations; academic discussions; and the relationship between the texts and the readers and writers' own sexualities.

Beginning with a general overview of the historical roots of slash fan fiction and its theoretical interest to feminist and gender studies scholars, we posit three *waves* in the relationship between slash and queer culture:

- 1 Initial woman-centric slash that consciously used male protagonists and male bodies to envision ideal relationships and fantasise about sexual experimentation, often within deeply committed romantic relationships.
- 2 A politically self-aware movement towards realism that confronted these fantasy men not only with the realities of male bodies and sexualities but also with the cultural realities of gay lives.
- 3 Slash fiction that is deeply embedded within a self-defined queer space, neither fantastically creating nor idealising yet othering gay men, but rather writing multiple genders and sexualities as both reflections and fantasies of the complexly diverse community of readers and writers.

These stages are broadly chronological, yet it is important to note that they are also synchronic: as Elizabeth Freeman (2010)'s writing on temporal drag has shown, cultural formations that seem to have become old-fashioned and outmoded do not disappear as soon as academics have declared them to be so.

The first wave: like men, only better?

The term *fan fiction* describes works that employ settings and characters from established texts. While the term could be applied to all writing that takes on a transformative relationship to existing texts – from collective ancient storytelling to postmodern literature – fan fiction as a response to contemporary popular media became popular in the 1970s with *Star Trek* (CBS, 1966–9). Fans of television shows and other media created their own versions of the source texts, sharing them privately or via fanzines and APAs (Amateur Press Associations). Some stories retell the originating texts, while others comment critically on the sources; some stories focus on a particular moment that may not have been shown or shown sufficiently in the source text, while others create wide and sprawling new

plots and universes for their protagonists. While there are many reasons for writing fan fiction, two primary motivations are clear: either to have more of the same story or to fulfil a desire for a different story, a different narrative or plot twist. From the outset, romantic relationships have been created alongside action and adventure stories, and most fan writers have been women (Verba, 1996). In the early 1970s, a subsection of women fan writers moved away from established canon pairings and imagined heteronormative romances and instead began to imagine romantic relationships between two male protagonists.

The term *slash* derives from the fanzine convention of declaring a story's central romantic pairing through initials, separated by a virgule. In 1974, the first homoerotic slash story was published by a *Star Trek* fan writer: Diana Marchant's 'A Fragment Out of Time'. The story doesn't contain any identifying names, yet clearly suggests that the Starship Enterprise's Captain James T. Kirk and its First Officer Commander Spock are in a sexual relationship.

For both fans and academics writing about slash in the 1980s and early 1990s, the central question was *why*: why would women, who seemed mostly to be straight and often married (though Russ identified as a lesbian and a slash fan and was certainly not the only writer to do so), choose to read and write homoerotic romances with often explicit sex scenes? Explanations mostly focus on the following points:

- 1 Many women enjoy the description and image of attractive men together in ways similar to heterosexual men enjoying images of women having sex.
- 2 Imagined homosexual relationships allow for equality between partners, especially when these partners are men and thus not subject to gender oppression as women are.
- 3 Gay erotica allows the woman reader to both have and be the male character, allowing for various fantasised subject positionings.

Theorists also acknowledge the value of an inclusive, primarily female community in which women whose lives were often very distant from queer cultural life could share erotic desires and fantasies with less fear of sexist repercussions.

This initial fannish and theoretical engagement with male same-sex eroticism was characterised by a seeming disengagement from gay politics and publics. Neither the slow legalisation of homosexual acts nor the increase in gay and lesbian visibility nor the outbreak of AIDS and its devastating effects are regularly reflected in slash fiction of the 1970s–90s. Instead, the emphasis in many slash stories remains on the individual or personal: on the sexual identity crises of the characters and the emotional turmoil the pairing may cause for the couple and their friends. For the world of *Star Trek*, set hundreds of years in the future, such a non-political take may make sense, but in slash written for non-science-fiction TV series set in the contemporary world, such as the US cop show *Starsky & Hutch* (ABC, 1975–9) or the British spy show *The Professionals* (ITV, 1978–83), gay identities and politics continue to be conspicuous by their absence.

Rather than reproaching these early slash stories for their lack of political awareness and LGBT consciousness, let's consider the meanings they held for the communities who wrote and read them. The purpose of these stories seems to have been not verisimilitude but rather an emotional self-engagement for readers and writers. In other words, a married, middle-aged, straight woman writing the *Professionals* pairing Bodie/Doyle was often writing more about her own desires and anxieties than about the realities of gay or bisexual men in the British military and secret service in the 1970s. In 2004, prolific and popular fan writer Speranza wrote about her longtime participation

in the slash fan community that ‘we’re NOT writing about ‘gay men’ in any realistic/ mimetic way, just as I don’t believe we’re writing about real cops and sex in a realistic or mimetic way’ (2004a). Invoking gay identity as a historical and politically contingent term, she emphasises the primarily female readership of slash and their particular needs and desires: ‘the “best” stories are not the ones which gay men would find most recognizable, but the ones that give the female slash audience the most recognition and pleasure’ (Speranza, 2004a). This emphasis on female spaces and desires is indicative of the first wave of slash fiction, reflecting a feminism relatively unconcerned with gay experiences. In what some might identify as an essentialist feminist erotics, the stories of this wave consciously take over – one might even say colonise – male bodies for the sake of female pleasures.

Not every story from the 1970s–90s period avoids gay culture or queer community themes. In general, though, stories focus more often on the interpersonal, romance and identity questions, and, in police, spy or military settings, on chain-of-command and fraternisation rules. The relationship that these slash sexualities hold to gay male cultures – one of avoidance if not outright rejection – is well exemplified by the ‘undercover in a gay bar’ trope, which is pervasive enough to have its own entry in the fan wiki, Fanlore.org. Fairly self-explanatory, this genre of story posits that circumstances require two supposedly straight protagonists to go undercover as a gay couple and pass in a gay environment, most often a club or bar. Within this unfamiliar context, play-acted physical affection and couplehood makes them realise their ability to be physically intimate with their partner, and/or the fact that they already share a most intimate bond, and/or the fact that at least one, if not both, of them already has had sex with men. We might expect that this scenario would be one of celebration of gay community. But in practice what appears is a clear juxtaposition, where the slash couple is defined against rather than with their environment, often returning to an explicitly internal focus and to emotional turmoils regarding the way feelings and physical relations could affect the all-important work environment around which the show’s story lines revolve. The undercover trope allows the author to confront the characters with post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS gay club culture – yet the protagonists are marked out clearly as not part of the subculture that they infiltrate.

Alexandra’s 1996 *Professionals* story ‘Dance While You Can’ showcases the awkward relationship between slash and gay culture when agents Bodie and Doyle are sent to a gay club to trap a blackmailer. During their encounters there, they admit to their mutual desire but also love. In a moment that reproduces stereotyping responses to the sexual freedom of 1970s gay male culture, they place their relationship in direct contradiction to the men around them:

Doyle waved idly at the crowd. ‘Look at these blokes. All they’re here for is to get off. Don’t they ever think about love?’

Bodie smiled. ‘No. I meant what I said. This isn’t everything. I want you in my bed, Ray. But mostly I want you close, always, no matter what we’re doing. Okay?’

In Flamingo’s 2007 *Starsky & Hutch* story ‘Cheap Sunglasses’, both are called gay by a suspect they arrest in Venice Beach. This raises questions in Hutch’s mind about the depth of their partnership. Later, the two main characters discuss their partnership and the world around them, leading to their first kiss and declarations of love.

[Hutch] shook his head wearily. 'What kind of a fucked up world is this, Starsk? Where people have to hide love? Where people kill love?'

...

Starsky gave him a sudden shake. 'Not ours, Hutch. 'Cause we're our world. No one else. Just you and me. All we've ever needed.'

Interestingly, in both cases, the couples define themselves against predominant gay culture, both good and bad. They feel as little a part of the gay dance club scene as they do of the homophobia so clearly expressed in the second story. As Starsky describes, they are their own world, a trope common in traditional buddy slash pairings. A closeted, closed relationship – where only the two protagonists know of their love and are happy to not interact with any outsiders – is the explicit romantic ideal of these stories.

The idea of a slashed couple existing in a world of their own is epitomised in the 2001 fan fiction challenge '101 Ways to End Up in a Canadian Shack', in which 30 writers wrote short pieces in 62 fandoms. The title references the B-52's 'Love Shack' and the hunting cabin owned by a character in *Due South*, which featured in many slash stories. The challenge's only requirement was that 'all fandoms ought to end up in a Canadian shack', implicitly celebrating absolute seclusion from any professional, familial or communal environment. The shack/closet image is a particularly resonant metaphor in *Due South* fandom because Fraser lives in his office at the Canadian embassy, yet his closet opens to fantastic Canadian landscapes that his dead father and other friends often inhabit. Canada, here, is not just an idealised fantastic space (Bury, 2004) – it literally exists in Fraser's closet, just as the actual Canadian cabin becomes their virtual closet.

One major pitfall of the decontextualised slash relation favoured by first-wave slash authors is its tendency to promote a return to traditional gender roles. The small quantity of fan fiction written for serial drama suggests that the initial appeal is clearly the action, excitement and professional situation that tends to be central in procedurals, for example. In addition, the appeal of slash for heterosexual women is often explained through its portrayal of equal relationships, an equality often seen as impossible for opposite-sex couples (Lamb and Veith, 1986). Ironically, fan fiction often domesticates these professional protagonists, be they cops, secret agents, military officers or starship fighters. In the shows, popular characters are often family-less and, as a result, their team, their partnership, becomes their family. Fan writers fill in the gaps left by the frequent absence of personal lives in television procedurals. Challenging the existing paradigm of slash's subversive resistance of the source text, Sara Gwenllian Jones (2002) critiques this domesticating aspect of slash, suggesting that the homosocial, nondomestic setting of many shows invited the very slash pairings that fan writers would then domesticate into traditional gender roles. Especially in first-wave slash, all too often, once the relationship gets established, the stories replicate heteronormative scenarios. Often indistinguishable from the binary gender norms that characterise both the culture that the author inhabits and the one the characters do, these stories thus reestablish the very norms slash fiction tried to complicate.

The second wave: slash fandom meets gay politics

Cultural change in the 1990s not only created explicitly gay, lesbian and (more rarely) bisexual characters within the TV shows around which fan communities clustered, but also fostered an environment within slash fandoms that valorised direct engagement with gay

topics and an approach driven more by realism and less by fantasy. Nowhere might this be more obvious than in the introduction of sexually transmitted infections, including AIDS, as a threat and reality in protagonists' lives. The scenes of disavowal played out in the 'undercover in a gay bar' stories are replaced by a sense that the characters' choice of love object must by necessity bring them into contact with a community organised around gay men's specific experiences and needs. Concurrently, slash fan fiction began to circulate primarily through online communities (first mailing lists and then web-based journal sites like LiveJournal), separating it from the publishing networks of science fiction fandom and making it more possible that potential readers might find stories because of their interest in same-sex representation rather than their fascination with a particular show as such.

The confrontation between first and second waves of slash sexuality is played out interestingly in the fandom of *The Sentinel* (UPN, 1996–9), which pairs a hypermasculine Special Forces agent-turned-cop with a long-haired, Jewish graduate student in anthropology. In canon, both men are shown as only interested in women. While slash fans tend to retain a more traditionally masculine representation for police officer Jim Ellison, they assign a variety of queer identity markers to grad student Blair: he frequents gay clubs, is a member of gay–straight student alliances and is comfortable with his sexuality. Many stories play off this opposition:

Patience running low, Blair put down the paper he was reading, 'I *actually* remarked that; "exploring the *whole* gay lifestyle might be beneficial to you" when we first got together, because you were a little upset that what we had was, in fact, a homosexual relationship. . . . I still recall you saying; "But goddamn it Chief, I am *not* a homosexual, I do *not* get off on guys . . . just you."

(K9, 1999)

Here, Jim plays the role of the earlier slash protagonist, with Blair a relaxed representative of a younger generation comfortable with a nonheterosexual identity – although Blair goes on to reassure Jim that 'We are just Jim and Blair and we love each other, end of story'.

With AIDS looming large, condom use is a frequent point of discussion in late 1990s/early 2000s slash fiction, signalling both the characters' and the authors' sense of commitment to gay men's health. In Basingstoke's 2000 *Sentinel* story 'Strawberry Pop Tarts', Blair refuses unprotected sex with Jim because 'I've never had sex without a condom. Ever. I don't think I can . . . The thought of a naked dick is utterly not appealing, okay?' Such scenes emphasise the role of fiction in a potentially pedagogic relation to reality: if unsafe sex is wrong, then fiction should not portray it. One of the more popular sites of the 1990s – 'Sex Tips for Slash Writers', by gay male slash fan Minotaur – offered information from research and personal experience so slashers could write anatomically and culturally realistic gay sex.

Beyond sex descriptions sometimes verging on public service announcements, second-wave stories also often contain more general awareness of social and political issues, such as Gay Pride marches, AIDS and homophobia. Yet individual romantic relationships continued to be foregrounded even if the external world had entered the protected space. In Speranza's *Due South* story 'Hanged Man' (2004b), police partners Ray Kowalski and Benton Fraser's relationship is threatened when they have to choose between their professional and sexual partnerships:

'I want you to answer the phone, Fraser', and fuck, he really, really does. 'I want either of us to be able to pick up the phone at any time and for that to be okay.

Most of all', Ray says, putting his hands on Fraser's shoulders, his voice shaking a little, 'I don't want us ever, ever to have to talk about who's going to answer the phone again'.

Ray never considers himself straight in this story, yet he is deeply closeted and justifies this as both a desire for privacy and a response to external homophobia. This small conversation about who gets to answer the phone, then, indicates a fundamental shift where Ray is willing to stand by his relationship and have it be seen by the world. Moreover, the story ends with the couple's move to Canada, an interesting double move that resonates with the escapist fantastical space of Canada and its self-contained shack, while referencing the very realistic option of Canadian domestic partnership.

The move from first- to second-wave slash narratives was accompanied by extensive discussions within fandom about the nature and purpose of slash, its function as feminist fantasy space, its homophobic colonisation of gay men, the necessity of realism and its relationship to the historical changes of queer rights and representations. So even as first-wave slashers continued to write, more and newer fans increasingly saw slash fiction as part of a critique of heterosexuality in media and as a form of queer representation created by a subversive subcultural community rather than a romantic and erotic hobby of heterosexual women.

Political and social changes fundamentally altered slash fiction's relationship to narratives of sexual identity. With every new country or US state that gained marriage equality, stories appeared that responded to the new laws: Sherlock Holmes and John Watson responding to UK legislation in 2013; Charles Xavier whisking away Erik Lehnsherr to a private ceremony in New York in 2011; Starsky and Hutch finally legalising their commitment to one another in 2015. Likewise, the removal of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell', the military imperative to keep one's queer sexuality hidden, spawned numerous writing fests, as did the US Supreme Court's overturning of the Defense of Marriage Act. Marriage fits seamlessly into the romance tropes so well loved by slash fans, yet the social and cultural recognition of same-sex marriage also means that romance is no longer set in opposition to participation in gay identity and culture. This does not necessarily mean, however, that slash fans' representations, desires and debates have begun to align smoothly with those of queer communities or movements.

The show that most forcefully required a rethinking of slash fans' terminology – and that highlighted the fault lines between queer and slash fan cultures, despite many fans' understanding of slash as a subversion of heterosexuality – was Showtime's *Queer as Folk* (2000–5). The show unapologetically celebrated queer lives and communities, depicting explicit onscreen gay and lesbian sex. With a wider array of queer characters, the show could present different points of view and directly address its cultural context. Debates over marriage in queer communities, for example, are reflected in the contrast between the two main characters. While Michael Novotny gets married, adopts a teenager and moves to the suburbs, his best friend Brian Kinney rejects heteronormative values of monogamy and domesticity:

Look, I don't believe in love. I believe in fucking. It's honest, it's efficient. You get in and out with a maximum of pleasure, and a minimum of bullshit. Love is something that straight people tell themselves they're in, so they can get laid.

(1.2)

Like Michael Warner's 1999 popularisation of radical queer values, *The Trouble with Normal*, Brian passionately opposes same-sex marriage and advocates for an ethics modelled on queer life and sexuality – one that resists shame, values diversity and is based on pleasure, respect and honesty.

With an entire cast of gay men and women, one would expect a wide range of queer fan fiction, yet the traditional romance plot dominates much of *Queer as Folk* slash. Kyra Hunting (2012) describes how 'the dominant trend in fan fiction has been to favor the "happily ever after" over the messy, sometimes unsatisfying queer politics of the *Queer as Folk* canon'. The fandom all but fetishises the very values that Brian so adamantly repudiates, celebrating true love via if not marriage then at least monogamy and its assumed capacity for barrier-free sex. While it is certainly problematic to envision same-sex narratives with primarily heteronormative values, it is even more so when fans aggressively reinscribe such conservative values onto a text whose characters are 'already queer – and potentially queerer than many of their rearticulations in fans' creative products' (Hunting 2012).

The third wave: queerer, kinkier worlds exploring desire, identity and power

However strong the pull of heteronormative romance may remain, slash fan fiction offers a variety of queer pleasures to its readers and writers. There exist no hard numbers about the amount of fan fiction devotees that self-identify across the queer spectrum, but fannish surveys repeatedly suggest that slash fandom veers much queerer than any representative cross-section of internet users. Many younger fans describe writing and reading slash fan fiction as enabling them to explore and come to terms with their own queer identifications. Slash fandom has been experienced as an empowering space of 'women stepping forward to describe their own erotics, because our culture silences female desire as effectively as it silences queer desire' (T., quoted in Lothian *et al.*, 2007: 106), where 'sexual activities and proclivities on the fringes of ordinary acceptability are considered quite normal' (Cat, quoted in Lothian *et al.*: *ibid.*). The erotic imaginaries that fans create are not always politically radical or diverse, yet the desires that women (and, increasingly, nonbinary-identified individuals and both transgender and cisgender men) speak through slash fiction also incorporate a spectrum of gender identities, sexual desires and other interests beyond romantic love and gay sex – and these have slowly begun to be recognised within academic work on fandom too.

The designation of 'third-wave slash' signals not only an organic shift in the relationship between fandom and queer culture but also an active engagement with concerns that, while present throughout feminist history, are often associated with third-wave feminisms, including growing commitment to intersectionality and racial justice alongside matters of gender and sexuality (TWC Editor, 2009; Wanzo, 2015). In terms of sexual desires, identities and politics, our third wave is defined by writers' willingness to reimagine sexual and social structures as they explore boundaries in fiction and reality. The elaborate fannish framework surrounding the term 'kink' is one framework within which fans have engaged sexual experiences, fantasies and even politics. The Fanlore entry for 'kink' notes that the term 'usually refers to various non-normative sexual practices or desires, such as voyeurism, fetishism, and the many activities included under the BDSM umbrella' ('Kink', n.d.). Fans may also 'refer to other, non-sexual preferences as 'kinks', meaning particular imagery, story-tropes, or elements that they enjoy so much they are worth considerable effort to find and

collect' ('Kink', n.d.). Within this frame, mpreg and domestic romance become 'kinks' whose preference ranks on the same order as a love for fiction featuring rope bondage, sexual slavery or watersports. Desires often deemed illegitimate, for whatever reason, can feel normal and accepted, even celebrated, within the fan community. At the same time, the focus on erotics of power exchange within the BDSM definition of kink opens up spaces in which stories can engage in complex negotiations regarding the politics of gender and desire.

The organisers of one fannish project – the long-running challenge of Kink Bingo, which encourages fans to write stories featuring uncommon sexual practices – explicitly describe their embrace of kink as a 'political project': 'Kink bingo attempts to redefine kink, to question the naturalness of our responses to certain kinks, to reclaim desires and pleasures that are marginalized, ignored, and maligned in the popular press' (eruthros, 2009). For the Kink Bingo creators, fannish kink is a worldmaking project: welcoming and celebrating fannish fantasy, desire and pleasure, refusing the norms that structure sex and gender representation and thus becoming an explicitly, politically queer project (Berlant and Warner, 1998).

Some of the most intense explorations of non-normative sexual practices in fan fiction take place within stories that construct alternate universes where traditional sexual binaries are replaced with or supplemented by power dynamics that are or appear to be biologically determined. As with the *Queer as Folk* slash, there is no shortage of problematic stories repeating gender stereotypes without any critique or even awareness of their own reductive tendencies. And yet, we conclude our overview of queer ideas within slash fandom with the way in which this trope is often used not to celebrate biological essentialism, but as a conceit through which to interrogate current norms and assumptions of sex and gender.

Helenish's 2006 *Stargate: Atlantis* (SciFi, 2004–9) story 'Take Clothes off as Directed' takes place in a world where BDSM roles of 'top' and 'sub' are understood to be hardwired into characters' biology. Other fans had used this premise previously, but Helenish's story questions the social components of such a clearly bifurcated universe and riffs off racist and sexist discrimination:

Until 1941, subs hadn't been allowed in the military at all; temperamentally unsuited, everyone said, for fighting. Much better to keep them safe at home. Subs were excellent aides and secretaries, junior engineers, kindergarten teachers, nurses, assembly-line workers, mechanics, accountants – careful, rule-following, meticulous, obedient.

The story uses the idea of sub identity to create an analogical narrative that describes the role of women in patriarchal society. Helenish's story takes first-wave slash's mapping of gender inequality onto male/male relationships and imagines the ways in which it would operate on a societal level through the same mechanisms as real-world sexism. Characters may chafe against societal prejudices and may even challenge their expected roles in the bedroom, but ultimately the story perpetuates the fantasy of a sexual relationship that can somehow create equality in an unequal world.

The difficulties such a universe creates are further explored in Sassbandit's 2011 My Chemical Romance story 'Forget About the Dirty Looks' and Montrose's 2013 Blackhawk story 'Switch'. The stories star celebrities, shaping their public personas into fictional narratives (Busse, 2006a, 2006b; Hagen, 2015): My Chemical Romance were

an all-male group with a sizeable slash community; the Chicago Blackhawks are a National Hockey League team (hockey is one of the bigger sports slash fandoms). In different ways, both stories explore questions of power, desire, gender and inequality in both sexual and social situations – drawing from real-world experiences of bisexual marginalisation, transphobia and the social dimensions of Dom/sub identification within BDSM communities.

Montrose's story 'Switch' (2013) announces its central theme in the summary: 'You're supposed to know if you're a top or a sub by the time you're twelve. Fourteen at the outside. It's biological, the researchers say. It's not a choice. But sometimes Jon thinks that for him, it really was.' Montrose creates a binary world in which top/sub clearly aligns with male/female – in the way that subs are excluded from public life, sexualised and seen as lesser all round – though the experiences of openly gay sports players are clearly also part of the analogy. Using hockey players Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane of the Chicago Blackhawks, she shows the difficulties experienced by a sub player on a professional sports team. Point-of-view character Jon is a top, but when he becomes attracted to his team-mate Patrick, his desires run outside of what he is supposed to want:

He's not thinking about Patrick cuffed demurely to his headboard, eager to do whatever he's told. Oh, no. He's thinking about Patrick talking back. Refusing to go down on his knees. Grabbing the cuffs from Jon and joking about which one of them is going to wear them. Making Jon work for it. Making Jon beg.

The romance plot triumphs, but the story takes its time in examining the negotiations and personal challenges both characters experience in getting there. Both characters must – like so many protagonists of slash fiction – come to see themselves differently from that which their society considers normal. Jon's narration follows the format of a coming-out story, as he slowly recognises his experiences do not align with expectations. His feelings for Patrick make him recognise his desire to be dominated, and he recoils from that as we might imagine (and might have read in many slash fictions) a man thinking himself straight might respond to overwhelming sexual desire for a colleague and team-mate. Patrick's love for Jon is known to everyone on the team but Jon himself, yet the story does not simply bring the lovers together or enable Jon to gratify his desires in secret. Instead, Jon must learn that he is not the only one to experience social expectations as restrictive.

Jon must develop a collective understanding of who he is as a 'switch' – he must also educate Patrick, whose initial response is one of fear and misunderstanding. In a depiction of a common experience described by bisexuals, Patrick assumes that Jon's switch identity means that he cannot be happy with a sub but will require multiple partners. By the end of the story, though, Jon and Patrick have discovered that they can effectively be both top and sub within their partnership. The story climaxes when Jon gives Patrick a collar, symbolic of permanent submission to one's top and analogous with marriage in the logic of the alternate universe, but immediately proclaims that he wants to wear it too – celebrating a reciprocal and fluid exchange of power that offers a queer version of romantic utopia.

If 'Switch' offers an individual romance of choice within a queer version of a BDSM universe, Sassbandit's 2011 'Forget About the Dirty Looks' focuses on power dynamics and decisions at a social and cultural level. Depicting the queer-positive band My Chemical Romance, the story challenges conventions of the story's D/s society by portraying the band

as advocating for greater respect for sub fans and by depicting band members' top/sub provocations. A fictional newspaper article, for example, reads:

Daily Mail: Emo danger: Kids at risk as bands blur line between tops and subs.

Parents are frightened for their kids' safety, and they're blaming the dangerous messages sent by 'emo' bands such as My Chemical Romance, who are currently touring the UK.

The band's lead singer Gerard Way, 29/top, regularly appears on stage with long hair, heavy makeup, and torn clothing. He tells fans, who cross-dress in outfits that mix top and sub, to defy their roles and 'be whoever they want'.

On tour, we see various acts of oppression towards the subs, as tops in other bands throw their socially supported power around. These function as analogies, since we can imagine women in rock bands having similar experiences with objectification and delegitimation from a music press that treats them as 'eye candy', or queer figures being perceived as a 'danger' to the gender norms of teenage fans. The story also explores the power dynamics of BDSM itself, with the band's sub characters engaging in a variety of consensual relationships that demonstrate how tops can use their power responsibly as well as abusing it.

The romance plot explores non-normative identity when frontman Gerard Way, who publicly challenges top/sub identity expectations, falls for band manager Brian Schechter, who was wrongly identified in childhood as a sub and is now passing as a top. In a story analogous to the outing of a transgender celebrity, the media get hold of the story. Brian's explanation identifies top/sub identity as operating through the same mode as gender production in childhood, though 'tests' rather than simple visual presumptions separate people into the two categories:

Look, they did all the tests, they said I was sub, and I was four fucking years old. What was I going to say to them? So I went to school and I did all that shit, you know, but I hated it. So I told them I'm not a sub, I'm a top, and they put me in remedial classes.

(Sassbandit, 2011)

Gerard must now see if he can live up to the playful challenging of roles he offers onstage. He also learns that his performative declarations to fans that they can 'be whoever they want' will require some complex negotiations when confronted with the lived complexities of non-normative identity. When he finally has sex with Brian, he knows Brian won't sub and so he instead switches, letting go of the expectations associated with his official identity for the sake both of romantic love and of practising what he preaches. Afterwards, he says: 'I want – I want to try everything. Can you fucking believe it? I've been saying for so long that roles don't matter, and now I get to really, you know. Do it. For real.' Public politics and private sexual desires come together at the climax of this critical, intertextual story.

Conclusion

We have sketched three broad waves: from women-oriented romance fantasies written onto male bodies, to self-conscious engagement with gay representation in mainstream television, to multilayered and complex metaphorical discourses engaging queer formations of

sex, gender and power. Yet even in our discussion, it is clear that these distinctions are only the beginning point for more elaborate discussions. The question remains as to whether politically and socially problematic issues can or should ever be used as sexual fantasies, and how to acknowledge their inherent problems. Simplistically, one view reads the tropes (whether of ideal male love, of the transcendence of gay identity or of elaborate alternate universes) as fantastical and defends, if not celebrates, the explicit articulation of (female) desires, while another reads them as mimetic and criticises the potential for reductiveness and essentialism.

We have traced a progression from the more conservative to the more radical, but stories whose narratives fit into all three waves are being written every day; the complex narratives we discuss in the last section are more exception than rule, and much of fan fiction reinforces rather than challenges stereotypes. Nevertheless, the culture surrounding fan fiction does not expect and accept gender or sexual stereotypes; depictions of biologically determinist fantasies are popular, yet also constantly questioned and debated; and even the cathexis of gay male bodies to fulfil women's wish fantasies and desires is frequently debated within the community. While slash fandom may not provide an idealisable queer space, it certainly continues to queer media worlds and everyday experiences.

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