Queering Popular Culture: Female Spectators and the Appeal of Writing Slash Fan Fiction[1]

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Abstract:
The advent of the internet has provided a larger forum for and brought increased visibility to a number of alternative writing practices. One of the more curious ones is slash fan fiction, a particular type of queer fan fiction which is written almost exclusively by women of all sexual orientations for a predominantly female audience, featuring same-sex relationships between (mostly) male TV characters. In my essay I argue that this particular type of fan fiction is a communal and grass roots critique not only of popular culture but also of heterosexual hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality.

1 The advent of the internet has provided a larger forum for and brought increased visibility to a number of alternative writing practices. One of the more curious ones is slash fan fiction, a particular type of queer fan fiction which is written almost exclusively by women of all sexual orientations for a predominantly female audience, featuring same-sex relationships between (mostly) male TV characters. Often sexually explicit, it has been celebrated by science fiction novelist Joanna Russ as early as the 1980s as "pornography by women for women, with love."

2 Fan fiction itself is not an altogether recent phenomenon. A number of nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers wrote stories based on the characters of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, contributing to the popularity of Carroll's tales.Today's fan writers explore the adventures of characters from *Star Trek*, *The X-Files* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Writing about media characters can itself be seen as a subversive move, challenging the economy of consumer/producer capitalist entertainment. Fan fiction writers refuse to be mere consumers, producing their own "poached" versions of texts.

3 Slash fan fiction, which posits same-sex relationships between the (mostly) male series protagonists, originated with Kirk/Spock fan fiction in the 1970s; the term slash derives from the "/" employed to denote a specific romantic pairing (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 186-7). Slash fan fiction has been discussed by a number of academic writers (cf. the work of Henry Jenkins, Constance Penley, Camille Bacon-Smith, Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith). It has been described as "romantic pornography," as a critique of traditional

[1] I would like to thank Ingrid Hotz-Davies for providing me with the opportunity to write this essay and for constructive suggestions on several of its drafts. I would also like to thank the various people with whom I had the chance to discuss slash fan fiction over the last few years. The present essay would not have been possible without you.

masculinities, because quite often traditionally "feminine" traits such as nurturing and the open declaration of feelings are extended onto the male characters, or as a utopian vision of a continuum of male homosocial and homoerotic desires, because the most popular formula of slash writing sees two men who were formerly best friends suddenly discover their physical attraction to each other.

4 My essay combines a creative with a critical approach to slash fan fiction. It was inspired by a story I myself had written using the characters of another American science fiction series, *Stargate SG-1*. In this story, which was in turn inspired by queer theory and which is available online,[2] I sent a set of late twentieth-century characters to an alternate reality, confronting them with a utopian society which had overcome our current straight/gay divide, a society beyond heterosexual hegemony. In my discussion of slash fan fiction, I draw on my own story as an example of a popular slash narrative, the "first time" story. My story follows certain tropes established by the slash writing community, which allows me to analyse both the story and the genre of writing it represents at the same time.

5 I will then go on to discuss some of the less than favourable reactions to slash fan fiction by straight men, analysing why dominant culture should be so troubled by the concept of women writing about gay men and especially about gay male sexuality. Slash writers, I argue, tackle not only the primary binarism of homo/heterosexual definition, but also other binarisms influenced by that dichotomy such as knowledge/ignorance, masculine/feminine, high/low cultures of writing. Most revolutionary, perhaps, and most troubling for dominant culture is the pornographic aspect of slash writing. In reinscribing conventional tropes of pornography - pornography as gender inequality - onto two male bodies, slash writers can be shown to be playfully deconstructing the Lacanian concept of sexual difference as an exclusionary position of either "having" or "being" the phallus. Another popular mode of pornographic writing which focuses on the sensual exploration of bodies and an economy of equals can serve to illustrate Butlerian notions of the reappropriation of the phallus as the primary signifier in an erotic exchange. Slash fan fiction, I posit, is a communal and grass roots critique not only of popular culture but also of heterosexual hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality.

Living in Utopia

6 Analysing one's own story has its own set of advantages and disadvantages. As the author, I cannot be sure if what I have tried to convey in a scene will be recognized by the

[2] "The Spring Garden" at http://www.tenthplanet.org.

reader. At the same time I am not able to read the story from an assumed reader's point of view. I can, however, in analysing my own work analyse the process of writing itself. The first part of this essay will therefore not attempt to provide an outsider's reading of the text but will endeavour to combine a reading of the text with looking into the process of creation and my own relationship with the text and its intended readership.

7 When I set out to write "The Spring Garden," I knew one thing: I was going to depict a utopian society which had overcome our current straight/gay divide, a society beyond heterosexual hegemony. I chose to operate with the characters and settings of an American mainstream television series, in the mode of a genre of predominantly female underground fan writing that sets out to subvert mainstream culture by posing same-sex relationships between the main screen characters. My premise was to send a set of late twentieth-century characters into a parallel world beyond the "crisis of homo/heterosexual definition" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 1), portraying the same characters in different realities. I asked myself, what would a reality look like that did not have our notions of femininity and masculinity any more, a society in which accordingly the discourse of sexuality would not be entirely dominated by the gender of the sexual object?

8 My set-up of the different realities was a rather simple one. My story would focus on two male characters, the two male protagonists of the feature film *Stargate* which was subsequently turned into the television series *Stargate SG-1*:[3] Daniel Jackson, archaeologist, linguist, anthropologist, a character trained in inhabiting different cultures, aware of the workings of prevailing discourses; bisexual, I assumed, with an unrequited crush on his best friend. Someone who would not differ too much in the two realities, apart from being more self-assertive in a society that did not require closets and the connected experiences of internalized homophobia and shame. He would also be the main focalizer of the story, the traveller to whom readers might attach their sympathies and let themselves be guided through the clashing cultures.

9 My second main character and other half of the main romantic pairing was to be Jack O'Neill, colonel of the U.S. Air Force, a man's man, whom I took to be heterosexual in the sense that he had not seen it necessary to question his own sexual preferences since they appeared "natural" within the conditions of heterosexual hegemony. His character offered the

[3] According to the original MGM and Showtime press kit, "Stargate SG-1 follows a unique team of a Special Operations Colonel, an Archaeologist, an Astrophysicist and an Alien Warrior on their missions through an ancient 'gate' to new worlds where they encounter fascinating, but sometimes dangerous cultures. This team, known as SG-1, works under the auspices of a covert agency known as the SGC, a division of Air Force Intelligence that is highly classified; only the President and the Joint Chiefs know of its existence." Stargate SG-1 started airing in 1997 and currently comprises eight seasons. In the timeline of the series, "The Spring Garden" is set some time after the first episode of the fourth season, entitled "Small Victories."

opportunity to push twentieth-century masculinity beyond the straight/gay divide and explore what might happen if he suddenly found himself confronted with a reality that did have a male homosocial-homoerotic continuum, the living proof being he himself in that reality.

10 A secondary set of characters introduced in the alternate reality were to challenge a few preconceptions of the reader: Sergeant Jones, female officer, whom Jack O'Neill mistakes for a man in his first encounter. Sergeant Jones, whom I pictured as a baby butch, was supposed to date Nurse Barbara. The set of female SGC officers is completed by Colonel Carmen Alvarez, female butch version of Jack O'Neill. Introduced in an alpha-female, lesbian setting, I hoped the reader would assume her to be gay, which as it turns out is the case in our reality where, as Daniel learns, she has been discharged from the Air Force in the 1980s on the grounds of homosexual conduct. However, in the alternate reality I intended her to be in a relationship with a man, thus opening up the straight/gay divide from the other side.

11 My second main romantic pairing consisted of Major Samantha Carter and Janet Fraiser, MD, who together with adopted alien daughter Cassandra form an alternate version of family to the bourgeois male/female/biological child "ideal" perpetuated in our society since the seventeenth century. Sam Carter further offered the opportunity to deconstruct the TV show itself, in which she appears to be the obligatory love interest for a number of recurring male characters, most of whom are alien and thus regularly unavailable for the next few episodes until they eventually die. As it is, the alternative the writers of the show have to offer appears to be to portray Sam as pining away for her commanding officer. However, some parts of the female fan community feel that this scenario does not do justice to Sam as a strong and independent female character. What if, I suggested therefore, Sam Carter is not looking for a man at all?

12 With Jack's neighbour Ben and his parents, Eddie and male partner Nick in the alternate reality, Eddie and wife Darlene in our reality, I introduced a second family, directly contrasted as I set them up (somewhat melodramatically maybe) with completely different family dynamics. Ben in the alternate reality is a playful, happy, open ten-year-old, who - apart from being a plot device to get Jack and Daniel to share a bed for the night - serves the purpose of confronting Jack O'Neill with his other self and his other self's relationship with Daniel, whereas the Ben in our reality, despite being raised in the "ideal" nuclear family, is a shy, wary child, aware of the necessity of hiding from his homophobic father certain parts of his life, most notably his friendship with Jeff (whose mother is in a relationship with another woman). His father Eddie in our reality epitomizes homosexual panic, the necessity for the male heterosexual subject to abject his homosexual Other. With what the reader knows about

him from the alternate reality, Eddie himself may not be entirely straight, yet presumably refuses to accept his same-sex desires, becoming deeply distrustful towards everything that defies his norms and terrorizing his wife and son instead. By juxtaposing the two realities I tried to question both the supremacy of the heterosexual bond over other social bonds and the myth of the nuclear family as the fundament of the sanity and health of civilization.

13 But what exactly is different in my utopian society so that compulsory heterosexuality could cease to be normative? I decided - somewhat naively, maybe - that politically a more successful history of the 1960s liberation movements might have had the desired effect, involving a non-assassinated Martin Luther King, a number of more liberal U.S. Presidents and no homophobic backlash in the wake of AIDS. As for society as a whole, I gathered that a less rigid system of sexualities would be entrenched in a less rigid system of genders, a society with less rigid gender interpellation, which would not need to uphold current signifiers like dress and "masculine" and "feminine" behaviours in order to tell the sexes apart (and make sure the "right" sexes get paired off). Such a society, I felt, would also not feel the need to insist on the primacy of a Western phallogocentric discourse and would educate its children accordingly. This is why I had the alternate reality Ben relate to Jack and Daniel what he has learned in school about the system of genders and sexualities in non-Western cultures (thus rendering visible that our current sex/gender system is just another construct among many). As far as the art of storytelling is concerned, I realize now that this is probably a rather crude attempt at educating the reader by educating Jack. Yet I think educating the current and next generation about the existence of a multiplicity of discourses historically and culturally, and questioning the supremacy of one set of constructs over all others is the only way to actually overcome current binarisms.

14 A little anecdote: a strange thing happened to me while I was writing this story. It is the prerogative of the writer that during the process of writing you can "become" one or several of your characters and step into the world you created. For the two months of writing "The Spring Garden," I was able to live in a world where neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality as we know them existed. Towards the end of this time period I happened to be sitting at a bus stop, when I noticed a couple, a man and woman, kissing and holding hands in public, and I thought, "how strange they look! A man and a woman." To me, a couple consisting of two men or two women would at that moment have felt more "natural." I do not relate this incident in an effort to argue for the primacy of homosexuality over heterosexuality, but in an attempt to describe how up to that point, without even having been aware of it and in spite of being out as a queer woman in most parts of my life, compulsory

heterosexuality was apparently constantly at the back of my mind, that feeling of being "a copy, an imitation, a derivative example, a shadow of the real" (Butler, "Imitation" 20). Only by its sudden absence did I suddenly realize its otherwise constant presence. My hope is that some of that feeling of having truly been in a land "somewhere over the rainbow" for a while will also communicate itself to the reader, regardless of gender or sexuality.

Beyond Binarisms

15 In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that "many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured - indeed, fractured - by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century" and goes on to show how this crisis of definition has infused a whole set of binarisms underlying our modern thinking (1). Meanwhile, all over the world, since the 1970s, a culture of underground fanwriting has emerged, mostly by women, which offers a cultural critique of what is offered to current audiences as popular entertainment, trying to challenge some of these binarisms. "The Spring Garden" belongs to this genre and exhibits many of its typical features.

16 The prototypical plot for a slash story, as characterized by Henry Jenkins, involves "a series of movements from an initial partnership, through a crisis in communication that threatens to disrupt that union, toward its reconfirmation through sexual intimacy" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 206), with the "initial partnership" usually referring to an on-screen friendship between the (mostly male) protagonists, or, less often, an antagonism between the hero and his nemesis. Slash writers thus centre their stories around homosocial bonds which are already established in the primary text, the TV series itself. Underlying these bonds, they suggest, is a homoerotic subtext or, as Constance Penley puts it, one that is "easily *made* to be there" ("Brownian Motion" 137). In *Between Men*, Sedgwick introduces the notion of "male homosocial desire" to denote an entire spectrum of men's relations with other men, a spectrum which may at different points in history take different forms. Following Claude Lévi-Strauss' and Gayle Rubin's notion of patriarchy as a male "traffic in women," she proposes that "in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power," a relationship which may "for historical reasons [. . .] take the form of ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structured combination of the two" (25). She hypothesizes the "potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual - a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society is

radically disrupted" (1-2).

> To put it in twentieth-century American terms, the fact that what goes on at football games, in fraternities, at the Bohemian Grove, and at climactic moments in war novels can look, with only a slight shift of optic, quite startlingly "homosexual," is not most importantly an expression of the psychic origin of these institutions in a repressed or sublimated homosexual genitality. Instead, it is the coming to visibility of the normally implicit terms of a coercive double bind. [. . .] For a man to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being "interested in men." (89)

17 This subtext of male homosocial desire can of course also be found in the narratives of popular entertainment. Drawing on Sedgwick's theories, Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* argues that "slash turns that subtext into the dominant focus of new texts. Slash throws conventional notions of masculinity into crisis by removing the barriers blocking the realization of homosocial desire; slash unmasks the erotics of male friendship, confronting the fears keeping men from achieving intimacy" (205). He characterizes the genre as a whole as representing "the conscious construction of a male homosocial-homosexual continuum" (206).[4]

18 It is perhaps not surprising that this genre of writing seems to be produced almost exclusively by women, for whom the concept of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual bonds, between "women loving women" and "women promoting the interests of women," is still intelligible. As Sedgwick puts it, "the diacritical opposition between the 'homosocial' and the 'homosexual' seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society, than for men" (*Between Men* 2). While the majority of slash stories focus on same-sex relationships between men, this may be at least partly attributed to the fact that there still are not many television series which feature strong female pair bonds, while strong male pair bonds - and interesting, three-dimensional male characters - seem to abound.[5]

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[4] An earlier exploration of slash and homosocial/homoerotic desire is provided by Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L.Veith. In their discussion of K/S (the original *Star Trek* slash) stories, they characterize slash as the creation of "a universe that contains androgynous heroism and transcendent romantic love" (237). In these stories, Kirk's and Spock's relationship is portrayed as an almost fusional union of two strong equals who nevertheless both exhibit equally "masculine" and "feminine" traits. Lamb and Veith point to the similarity of the transcendent, mystical bond between these two characters (a human and a Vulcan) with Leslie Fiedler's description of the mythic quality inherent in the interethnic male bonding found in American literature, and with the female romantic friendships described by Lillian Faderman in *Surpassing the Love of Men*. "K/S stories," they argue, "remove gender as a governing and determining force in the love relationship." Disillusioned with the inequality inherent in their own contemporary gender relations, Lamb and Veith suggest, these stories provide for their authors "a vision of a new way of loving and especially a vision of new possibilities for women" (255). For an extended reading of K/S with regard to Fiedler and Sedgwick see also Penley, *NASA/TREK* (132-45).

[5] This has changed to a certain extent in recent years with the *Star Trek* spin-offs *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Voyager* and *Deep Space Nine*, and series such as *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In what follows, I will be focussing almost exclusively on m/m slash fiction, simply because this is the genre I am most familiar with. One of the main reasons why I personally prefer m/m slash to f/f slash is, I think,

19 "The Spring Garden" follows the narrative formula of slash in that it starts out with the solid if slightly strained friendship of the two series protagonists in the wake of a mission gone wrong, in which Daniel was forced to order a torpedo launch that would have killed O'Neill had it not been for the intervention of alien allies. The psychological fall out of this situation is complicated by Daniel's having fallen in love with Jack, a development Jack is up to that point blissfully unaware of. While I set up Daniel as a character who for himself has no problem travelling from one end of a proposed male homosocial-homoerotic continuum to the other, Jack O'Neill was to be the straight male character who in a series of moves was to be pushed across the gap of homosocial and homosexual desire. The on-screen version of the Jack and Daniel friendship already exhibits a number of characteristics which are perceived as "slashy" by fans, i.e. as having great potential for a slash pairing. Among them are comfortable banter, a tendency to finish off each other's sentences or talk simultaneously, an obviously comfortable occupying of each other's personal space (necessitated in part by the film medium itself), a number of hugs and an apparent lack of selfconsciousness about touching each other.

20 My first move then included a scenario referred to in fan writing as "smarm": our two heroes comforting each other in a situation where one or both are physically or psychologically harmed, usually involving lots of bodily contact and reassurances about how much their friendship means to them. Smarm does not necessarily have to have an element of sexual tension. Rather, it tries to imagine a different idea of masculinity, one in which traditionally feminine traits such as nurturing and the open declaration of feelings are extended onto male characters. It can, however, serve as a starting point for a sexual relationship in a slash story. Mirna Cicioni discusses similar instances of comforting in her analysis of the "hurt/comfort" genre which she characterizes as an "eroticization of nurturance." With one partner satisfying a basic need of the other - providing warmth, food or emotional reassurance - elements like warmth or food, "although not specifically sexual in themselves [. . .] are eroticised because they give a physical dimension to the closeness of the bond between the partners and lead to, or become a part of, an intimacy that also has a sexual component" (163). In "The Spring Garden," I had Daniel relive the traumatic experience of his having to issue the order that would ultimately kill Jack in a nightmare, resulting in Jack, who at this moment conveniently shares his bed, comforting him both by his physical

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because for me, the writing or reading of a slash story, especially a first time story, is an almost ritual enactment of making dominant culture admit to its disavowed homosexual Other and by extension acknowledge my existence as a queer woman. This is, of course, most successful in a story revolving around the representatives of dominant culture themselves, the male protagonists.

presence and by his reassurance that Daniel could not have acted any differently under the circumstances and that Jack was aware of how the incident had affected Daniel. Ultimately, Jack acknowledges the depth of Daniel's feelings for him (if more on the level of friendship than on the level of sexual attraction) and demonstrates that he cares for Daniel. The friendship has been restored; the traumatic experience has allowed Jack to openly demonstrate his affection. Fully informed about the true extent of Daniel's feelings, the reader understands the scene as part of the build-up towards a different sort of relationship, anticipating greater intimacies to come.

21 My story departs from the usual slash plot in that sexual intimacy between the characters does not mark the point at which all conflicts are resolved and friendship naturally segues into undying love. Instead, I appropriate a different male gender stereotype to bring about the ultimate conflict between the two characters: the notion that it is "natural" for men (but not for women) to separate sexual acts from love. His exposure in a parallel world to a society which promotes both men and women as potential sexual objects for men allows Jack to perceive his friend as a possible object choice, which combined with a protective, bordering on possessive streak towards Daniel brings about their first sexual encounter in Jack's shower. The ultimate conflict is reached when it becomes apparent that the same act has different meanings for both men (Jack's "we both needed to get laid" vs. Daniel's admission of his feelings, "those Friday nights, I never came for hockey, Jack"). Not until he sees another Daniel through the eyes of his differently socialized counterpart by means of the other Jack's holiday video tape can this Jack O'Neill make the leap from regarding Daniel as a friend to imagining him as a potential lover. The crisis is resolved with Jack admitting to his feelings after drunkenly pondering the nature of his relationship with Daniel, and receiving a blow to the head from a loose plank. As regards the ending, strictly speaking I did not adhere to the slash plot paradigm which demands the story end with a another sex scene. The occurrence of sex is merely hinted at in the epilogue. Instead, I opted for afterglow: the reader leaving Jack and Daniel lounging on Jack's deck in post-coital bliss; the (virtual) camera pans out to the sound of the pride anthem "Somewhere Over The Rainbow," another intertextual reference to the original product, the TV series itself, which alludes to the motion picture *The Wizard of Oz* in a number of episodes.[6] And thus, a previously straight Colonel Jack O'Neill

[6] Most often it is Jack O'Neill who delivers quotes from *The Wizard of Oz*, ranging from "Let's follow the yellow brick road," and "We're off to see the wizard," to Dorothy's "Auntie Em! Auntie Em!" which somehow out of Colonel O'Neill's mouth never sound camp. Both Judy Garland, who played Dorothy Gale in *The Wizard of Oz*, and the movie itself have acquired a cult status in the gay and lesbian community. The story of the small town girl who escapes into a wonderful Technicolor world mirrors queer people's own search for self-acceptance and a community where they can openly be themselves. "Come out, come out, wherever you are," has been adopted

has been incorporated into a proposed male homosocial-homoerotic continuum. While the prototypical first time story as outlined here is not the only plot explored in slash stories, first time stories of this sort form a dominant subgenre of slash fan fiction.[7]

22 How does dominant culture react to this transgressive form of rewriting original texts? Reactions range from puzzlement to amusement to painting slash writers as perverts who need to "get a life" (thus referring to William Shatner's original dismissal of "trekkies"). The fans are accused of being escapists, refusing to engage with society proper, and at the same time posing a threat to society (that is, the heterosexual order) with their depiction of homosexual love stories.[8] The argument most often evoked by critics is, of course, the possibly bad influence of pornographic (male) same-sex stories on the mental health of children who might happen upon certain websites on the internet. Slash is not uncontested even among fan fiction writers themselves. There are those who deem the portraying of a character as homosexual or bisexual as disrespectful to the (fictional) character and by extension to the actors who lend their bodies to these characters. More than anything else, these arguments reveal the deep-seated homosexual panic prevalent in our culture. If modern masculinist culture requires the scapegoating of male same-sex desire for its maintenance, as Sedgwick argues, then slash writers do indeed pose a threat to carefully constructed male heterosexual identities by envisioning a society in which the boundaries of homosocial and homosexual desires have become blurred. A whole system of thought becomes unhinged if "the homosexual" is incorporated into an economy of homosocial desire. The abjection of the slash genre and its writers becomes another instance of that "paranoid insistence with which the definitional barriers between 'the homosexual' (minority) and 'the heterosexual' (majority) are fortified, in this [the twentieth] century, by nonhomosexuals, and especially by men against men" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 83-4).

23 The explicit nature of most slash stories appears to be a particular source of unease for dominant culture. Again, male heterosexual identities, this time the heterosexual readers', are

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as a slogan by gay and queer activists, and the rainbow flag, a symbol for the gay community's diversity and multiculturalism, is also popularly associated with Judy Garland's rendition of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Judy Garland, who had several gay husbands and many gay friends, became an icon for oppressed, closeted gay men in the 1950s and 1960s. The term "friend of Dorothy" then served as a code for closeted gays to identify each other in mixed company.

[7] I did not feel the need to go to such great lengths plotwise with the Sam/Janet romance since, in line with Sedgwick's notion of a relatively smooth female homosocial continuum, I felt that mere curiosity on Sam's part would suffice as motivation for her to take up Janet's offer. For a discussion of other types of slash narratives see also Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (206-19). Mirna Cicioni provides an insightful analysis of "first-time" stories, the "hurt/comfort" genre, and what she terms "virtual marriage" stories, as well as a reading of slash narratives alongside conventional heterosexual romance fiction.

[8] Constance Penley draws parallels between contemporary society's dismissal of slash writers and the sentiments expressed towards the nineteenth-century community of American domestic novelists, in the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne, that "d---d mob of scribbling women" (*NASA/TREK* 132-5).

at stake. For straight male readers of a m/m slash story, the "homophobic terror over performing homosexual acts" becomes "a terror over losing proper gender."[9] Particularly distressing to such readers is, of course, the fact that the vast majority of these stories are written by women. An analogy put forth quite often by female slash writers to puzzled straight male friends - that maybe gay male sex is as intriguing to some women as lesbian sex is to straight men - apparently regularly fails to convince the friends in question. It seems that another central node of current thought is potentially being disrupted, a node which has the powerful binarism of knowledge/ignorance at its centre.

24 If knowledge, as Sedgwick drawing on Foucault argues, has since the late eighteenth century become conceptually inseparable from sexual knowledge, "so that knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance sexual ignorance" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 73); and if sexual knowledge has consequently, and especially with the growing split between "public" and "domestic" spheres and the subordination of women under the companionate marriage ideal, been the prerogative of men, then women writing about sex for a predominantly female audience is indeed a transgressive move, troubling for dominant culture. Women writing about men having sex is then doubly transgressive in that it not only violates the notion of female sexual ignorance but also has at its centre that sexuality which since the end of the nineteenth century has been "constituted *as* secrecy" (73), (male) homosexuality. For the politically motivated, slash writing can then be both, the insertion of queer content into popular culture, and a feminist act. Precisely the transgressive nature of slash writing can then become one of the thrills of writing the genre.

25 Not only our current understandings of sexual orientations or identities are overturned when women of all sexual orientations choose to write about (mostly male) same-sex desires. Notions of masculinity and femininity, of maleness and femaleness are being challenged as well. Much has been argued about whether the characters portrayed in m/m slash are still "men," are still meant to be male.[10] I, for one, while writing the scene where Jack comforts

[9] For this I am borrowing Judith Butler's words from *Bodies That Matter* (238).

[10] Lamb and Veith propose slash as an exploration of truly androgynous characters, while Jenkins stresses its potentiality for a critique of traditional masculinity. An avenue that, to my knowledge, has not been explored so far is the notion that slash may be offering the female writer/reader the opportunity to "put on male drag" for a limited amount of time and thus explore her own masculinity. Judith Halberstam offers a history of literary and cultural traditions of female masculinity in her book of the same title. She describes her project as "a seriously committed attempt to make masculinity safe for women and girls. Although it seems counterintuitive that such a project should be necessary in the 1990s, it has been my contention that despite at least two decades of sustained feminist and queer attacks on the notion of natural gender, we still believe that masculinity in girls and women is abhorrent and pathological" (268). She asks:"Why are we comfortable thinking about men as mothers, but we never consider women as fathers? Gender, it seems, is reversible only in one direction, and this must surely have to do with the immense social power that accumulates around masculinity. Masculinity, one must conclude, has been reserved for people with male bodies and has been actively denied to people with female bodies. And this is not to say that all things being equal, all female-bodied people would desire masculinity, only that the protection

Daniel after his nightmare, was constantly asking myself whether my characterization was not possibly slightly off. I still wanted the characters to be recognizably male, to operate with what is culturally propagated as "male" behaviour. I did not want the reader to point out to me that Daniel, as I had written him, was really a woman in disguise. Yet, if the reader came to that conclusion, would I not have achieved what I wanted, exposing the ultimately performative nature of gender?[11]

26 The topic is a highly debated one among slash writers. Like any other genre of writing, slash is in flux, is constantly being renegotiated. Slash writing is diverse, conventions change. It has been demanded - especially since the advent of the internet and its easy and anonymous access to information of all sorts - that there should be more of an effort to portray "real" men in slash, to include gay culture, write "realistic" gay relationships (*not* the romantic vision of one true love and the monogamous couple who live happily ever after), "realistic" gay sex. Yet the enthusiasm is not shared by all fan fiction writers. For some, this obligation detracts from their enjoyment of the genre. "Why is it our duty to accurately reflect the gay male experience? Is it the duty of gay male writers to accurately portray the lives of spinster librarians?" asks slash writer Lezlie Shell. And Barbara Tennison adds, "a story about men in a tight relationship, as a metaphor for how women see love, can illustrate that both sexes need affection and support, that the need is simply human" (qtd. in Green, Jenkins and Jenkins).

27 Along with prescribed models of masculine and feminine behaviour, slash writers break down binarisms regarding the genres of writing which the two genders are expected to prefer. If women supposedly get emotional satisfaction from romance novels and men supposedly get off on pornography, then slash writers offer a curious mixture of the two, a "romantic pornography," (in the case of SF slash) "radically shaped and reworked by the themes and tropes of science fiction" (Penley, *NASA/TREK* 102). It is a genre which includes sexually explicit scenes, but also one in which the sex scenes fulfil narrative functions; they

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of masculinity from women bears examination." (269-70) While her book analyzes masculinity mostly in lesbian contexts, she maintains that the general concept of female masculinity may prove useful for all women. She furthermore suggests that "when women lack powerful images of masculine women, they cross-identify. The results of such cross-identifications are fertile productions of lesbian James Deans, butch Marlon Brandos, and dyke renditions of male masculinity" (276). Halberstam concludes that, living in a society that stigmatizes gender deviance and "cut off from the most obvious rewards of masculinity - political power and representation - many masculine women have had to create elaborate rationales for [. . .] their decisions to live explicitly masculine lives. They have had to imaginatively recreate masculinity through writing and other forms of cultural production" (276). The same may hold true, I propose, for some female writers of slash fan fiction.

[11] In her essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Butler illustrates her notion of gender performativity using the spectacle of drag: "Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself." (21)

further the plot or are used as a tool for characterization. Furthermore, they are embedded in the characters' pasts, present and futures as provided by TV "canon," i.e. the character background provided by the actual television series. The contemporary gap in the male homosocial-homosexual continuum meanwhile provides an ideal backdrop to a male same-sex romance, a perfect obstacle to true love. The slash reader highly appreciates the amount of work a fellow writer is willing to put into conceiving a convincing way to get the characters together and ultimately into bed. Jenkins is reluctant to characterize slash as mere "erotica" or "pornography," since "sexually explicit sequences often constitute only a small section of lengthy and complex narratives." He argues that "slash is not so much a genre about sex as it is a genre about the limitations of traditional masculinity and about reconfiguring male identity." Yet at the same time he admits that "most slash fans concede that erotic pleasure is central to their interest in the genre" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 190-1). Jenkins, I think, fails to acknowledge the way the two elements, narrative and porn, are inextricably linked. For the average slash reader, the 15,000 word build-up to a sex scene is as much part of the erotic reading experience as the actual sex scene itself. In this sense, and bearing in mind that its writers and readers are for the most part women, slash may be truly a kind of revolutionary "female pornography."

28 Finally, there are a number of binarisms not only the slash writers but the fan fiction writing community as a whole sets out to undermine. Fan fiction writers refuse to be mere consumers of mass-produced goods, producing their own "poached" versions of texts. Jenkins draws on Michel de Certeau's analogy of active reading as "poaching," a raiding of primary texts, ultimately a "type of cultural bricolage through which readers fragment texts and reassemble the broken shards according to their own blueprints, salvaging bits and pieces of the found material in making sense of their own social experience" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 26). In fandom, this form of reading ceases to be a solitary activity but becomes a communal process, resulting in a "participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community" (46). Fan fiction writers also rally against a dichotomy of high vs. low cultures of writing, both in refusing to accept the inferiority of texts based on the narratives of popular culture, and by encouraging writers of all levels of technical skill to participate in their community. A community in which writers are readers and readers are writers, it is nonetheless visible in its current form only due to the possibilities of anonymous publishing on the world wide web. Many fans use pseudonyms, aware of the fact that their "hobby" may not stand well with friends, family or employers. Slash writers in particular are very reluctant

to disclose their activities to their real life environment. The term "to come out of the slash closet" has thus been coined to describe such an outing to family or friends, an activity fraught with danger and experienced by the slash writer with the anxiety and apprehension associated with any other form of coming out. Meanwhile, inside the closet, slash writers celebrate the safe environment they have created for "poaching" mass-produced culture and exploring the needs and desires of its participants.

Slash, the Lesbian Phallus and Phantasmatic Identification

29 "Pornography by women for women, with love." This is how Joanna Russ celebrated slash fan fiction in the mid-1980s (Penley, "Brownian Motion" 138). Needless to say, not every slash fan fiction writer felt herself included in Russ' terminology. It was, after all, the middle of the sex wars; "pornography" was not necessarily what every writer saw herself as producing, self-identified feminist or indeed not.[12] Attitudes have changed to some extent since then, as have tropes of writing sex scenes in slash (this especially in the wake of internet publishing, and the call for more "realistic" gay sex). Yet the majority of stories still conform to the model Jenkins describes: "While the stories may provide detailed descriptions of specific acts, the emphasis is much more on the emotional quality of the sex than on physical sensations." Sex is a "meaningful exchange between equals" rather than being depersonalised, and the "focus is often on sensuality [. . .] rather than on penetration and ejaculation" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 192). Together with a rewriting of female sexuality onto male bodies, this may indeed result in some slash writing in the depiction of seemingly unrealistic gay male sex. I would like to argue, however, that this portrayal constitutes rather a conscious reworking of technologies of the body on the part of the slash writer, performed by mostly female authors, aimed at a predominantly female audience and written mostly over male bodies - a reworking of the heterosexist scripts available in conventional pornography, of "a heterosexist version of sexual difference in which men are said to 'have' and women to 'be' the phallus" (Butler, Bodies 88), offering a resignification of the phallus and challenging the heterosexual matrix. It is in this sense - and not in the least by the very act, as a woman, of

[12] Camille Bacon-Smith discusses some of the reactions - not all favourable - to Russ' article in the slash writing community (242-4). Note that I am using *pornography* and *erotica* interchangeably for describing sexually explicit material; this usage is, however, not uncontested among slash writers. In this respect the female slash writing community mirrors conflicting contemporary - and not only exclusively feminist - contentions over what, exactly, constitutes pornography and whether or not, apart from being for the most part deeply misogynistic, it is harmful. For an extended discussion on the subject I refer to two essay collections which offer a variety of viewpoints, Drucilla Cornell's *Feminism and Pornography* and Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh's *Sex Exposed*. Among the academic writers who have discussed slash, Cicioni, for instance, is reluctant to describe slash as pornography. I should also mention at this point that there are many slash stories which do not contain explicit sex scenes.

writing sexually explicit stories itself - that slash writers regardless of sexual identity (or even gender) can be understood as wielding what Judith Butler has termed "the lesbian phallus."

30 In *Bodies That Matter* Butler draws on Lacan's discussion of ego formation through identification with an idealized specular image, the child perceiving its reflection in the mirror; the "mirror stage" coincides with its entry into language and the symbolic order. In the perceiving of the idealized body, some body parts "become the token for the centering and controlling function of the *bodily imago*" (77); the result is a signifying chain centred around a privileged signifier, according to Lacan, the phallus. Butler reveals Lacan's idealization of the phallus as masculine narcissism, a "wishful transfiguration" (79). The phallus is not the origin of signification but "the effect of a signifying chain summarily suppressed" (81). For Lacan, the phallus is a signifier, symbolizing the penis (or the clitoris). Yet Butler asks why the phallus has to require "that particular body part to symbolize" (84). For her, the phallus becomes a "transferable phantasm;" its "naturalized link to masculine morphology can be called into question through an aggressive reterritorialization" (86). If the phallus as an imaginary effect can be reterritorialized, can be employed by those who neither "have" nor "are" the phallus (this is where the lesbian phallus comes in); if it can symbolize other body parts - or even, as Butler suggests, alternative fetishes, discursive performatives - then anatomy and the dichotomy of sexual difference (dividing the sexes into those who "have" and those who "are" the phallus) becomes also open to resignification. Sexed bodies, the anatomical, is, Butler argues, "only 'given' through its signification" (90). The body in the mirror is only a "delirious effect" (91). Butler's notion of the lesbian phallus (a reterritorialized phallus that can be employed by anyone, not just lesbians) allows for "a displacement of the hegemonic symbolic of (heterosexist) sexual difference and the critical release of alternative imaginary schemas for constituting sites of erotogenic pleasure" (91).

31 This reterritorialization of the phallus is, I think, to some extent realized in the tropes of "romantic pornography" prevalent in m/m slash. This is also what I was aiming for in the depiction of a flashback scene in which the Jack O'Neill from the alternate reality remembers a trip to an uninhabited alien planet, involving swimming in a forest lake, the ingestion of psychotropic fruit, and sex with Daniel. I tried to write a sex scene involving both a sensual exploration of bodies and penetration, but a scene that does not revolve around the penis as a primary phallic referent. If I were to attribute "phallus" - as privileged signifier in this erotic exchange between men - to specific body parts, I would like the reader to have understood that this fluctuates throughout the scene - a case can be made for various body parts as referents of a phallic signifier. The penis as the only phallus imaginable is deprivileged, the

phallus resignified; there is no stable hierarchy of significant body parts any longer. It is thus that this Jack O'Neill does not experience the penetration of his own (male) body as a threat to his masculinity; his "bottoming" ceases to be a "bottoming," as "bottom" and "top" have lost their signifying power - in a displaced phallic economy, the signifiers could as well be employed reversed.

32 I apparently felt the need to place this scene in as remote an environment as I could. The scene takes place between two men raised in an alternate culture, inebriation is involved and the setting is an alien planet. I think I felt that in order to describe this alternative erotic exchange, I had to employ alternate reality "men." I certainly chose the alien location in an effort to step outside culture, outside heterosexual hegemony and the symbolic order - into a void where we (I/you/the characters) can create an "alternative imaginary schema of erotogenic pleasure." Within the story itself, a sentient alien creature is present to witness this novel exchange: an alien bird-like animal is hovering above Jack and Daniel, "poised motionless in mid-air, bright wings shimmering, illuminated by the light of an alien sun," possibly an alien discourse. "What are you doing?" the creature appears to be asking when looking down at the two men. "We call it love," explains Jack, thereby creating that which he names, a performative speech act which puts into effect a new symbolic order beyond heterosexual hegemony.

33 But what happens if one were to retain the penis as a primary phallic referent in the depiction of gay male sex; if one were to use the conventional scripts of erotogenic pleasure for male bodies, but if one were a woman writer writing for a female audience? What about those sex scenes in m/m slash fiction that try to depict not an alternative vision of masculinity and masculine pornographic discourse, but opt for "realism," a more accurate depiction of "men" having sex with "men"?

34 The second sex scene between Jack and Daniel falls, I think, into this category. Reading the sex scene in the shower a considerable time after I have written it, it strikes me how close this scene comes to typical porn cliché - the location (the shower), the voyeur (Jack, from whose point of view the scene is narrated, and by extension, if s/he is so inclined, the reader), the first unsuspecting then willing object of Jack's lust (Daniel). If it were not for Daniel being a man, this scene would follow rather closely the misogynistic scripts Catherine MacKinnon criticizes in conventional pornography; pornography as objectification, an institutionalisation of "the sexuality of male supremacy, which fuses the erotization of dominance and submission with the social construction of male and female" (148). One of the appeals of slash writing for women may be that this genre allows for exploring scenes of

dominance and submission in a safe environment - over equal, preferably male bodies, as these have never been constructed as sites of subordination the way female bodies have. Without invoking institutions of gender inequality, the (female) reader is free to choose to identify with either the dominant (Jack) or the submissive male (Daniel), switch identifications during the exchange, or simply remain voyeur to the scene. These multiple identificatory positions as well as the high popularity of switching points of view in the narration of slash stories - trying to get inside both character's heads almost at the same time - attests, I think, to a tendency among slash writers to question or even renounce the cultural construction of sexual difference as either "having" or "being" the phallus. Taking up the tropes of pornography as gender inequality but rewriting them over male bodies is more than just a female "traffic in men," although it may at times be a tongue-in-cheek revenge for centuries of male "traffic in women;" and this role reversal is, as we have seen, highly disconcerting for dominant masculine culture. It is written from the perspective of someone who knows. Of someone who is wielding a phallus she is not entitled to on a body not culturally "meant" for it. Of someone who is aware of the mechanisms of gender inequality in conventional pornography and also of someone who knows *why they have to be there*.

35 In psychoanalytic understanding, sexed positions are assumed by the masculine subject by imaginary identification with the father, motivated by a fear of castration embodied by the mother. Butler shows this assumption to be a heterosexual construct, based on the abjection of the homosexual Other. Lacan's law of the father, which is were the threat originates, is not on a prior authority but an effect of citational practices. The embodying of a sex is for her "a kind of 'citing' of the law." However, "neither sex nor the law can be said to preexist their various embodyings and citings" (Butler, *Bodies* 108). The gender dynamics portrayed in conventional pornography mirror the assumption of sexed positions as enforced by the Lacanian symbolic. Men have to occupy a dominant position, otherwise they would be in danger of being castrated; the male body is constantly in danger of being negated. Women are the embodiment of this threat of castration and "obversely, the guarantee that the threat will not be realized" (264). This is why they have to remain submissive, object not subject in this heterosexual exchange. But, says Butler, "castration could not be feared if the phallus were not already detachable, already elsewhere, already dispossessed" (101). This masculine fear of castration, which the female slash writer knows to be unwarranted, is what she plays with when applying tropes of conventional pornography to an m/m sex scene. To reinscribe "pornography as gender inequality" - ultimately nothing more than another instance of citing and thereby producing the symbolic law - onto two male bodies is then to mock male

castration anxiety, to question the validity of this phallogocentric, heterosexist reasoning of the assumption of sexed positions. Slash writers illustrate what Jacques Derrida posits when he writes:

> She who, unbelieving, still plays with castration, she is "woman." She takes aim and amuses herself (*en joue*) with it as she would with a new concept or structure of belief, but even as she plays she is gleefully anticipating her laughter, her mockery of man. With a knowledge that would outmeasure the most self-respecting dogmatic or credulous philosopher, woman knows that castration *does not take place*. (61)

Slash writers can thus be shown to be neither a bunch of "scribbling women" nor rabid TV fans who need to "get a life." They are instead critical consumers of modern entertainment who in their writing question essentialist notions of gender, sex and sexuality, playfully deconstructing the main paradigms of Western heterosexual hegemony.

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