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FILLING IN THE BLANKS: FANFICTION AND THE CULTURAL CANON

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1. Introduction: So long lives this, and this gives life to thee

Even though fanfiction has been around for more than four decades, it is still a phenomenon that is not widely known outside fan communities and criticism of fan culture. The definition of fanfiction that is widely accepted goes along the lines of ‘any piece of writing that uses characters or plot created and owned by someone else’ (Jenkins 1992, Busse & Hellekson 2006 etc). One of the most contested aspects of fanfiction¹ is its ambivalent legal status in the USA (which controls most means of production and dissemination of fanfiction) – it has been attacked as violating the copyright of the ‘rightful’ owners of the characters. However, its main characteristic, that of not being made for profit, but for free sharing between the fans, has put it in the legally protected, albeit problematic category of ‘fair use’, that is, of content that is “(1) noncommercial and not sold for a profit; (2) transformative, adding new meaning and messages to the original; (3) limited, not copying the entirety of the original; and (4)[which] do[es] not substitute for the original work.” (“What exactly is fair use?”) The ‘transformative’ aspect is the one that has been embraced by the fans and scholars alike, which is reflected in the name of the single most important organization of fans online, the nonprofit *Organization of Transformative Works* (OTR), which runs the largest depository of fanworks today, *An Archive of Our Own*, as well as various sites that observe and record fan activity, and provide legal protection for fans that engage in fan writing.

Several aspects of this definition have been under scrutiny since fanfiction appeared – firstly: is fanfiction any piece of writing that uses already established characters, such as *Wide Sargasso Sea* or *The Wind Done Gone*? Furthermore, has the practice of writing fanfiction changed with the modern notion of copyright and ownership? What can we consider the first fanfiction community, if fan communities existed and created already in the time when the Sherlock Holmes novels were popular? (Hellekson, Busse 2014, 33) Furthermore, can the already-narrow definition of fanfiction appearing with modern Star

¹ In this thesis, I use ‘fanfiction’, or ‘fanworks’ for these works, and the widely-accepted term ‘canon’ for the original media and its content: I use the term ‘fandom’ for the community of fans in which these works are created and disseminated, both in general and as a term for specific fandoms, e.g. Harry Potter fandom, Star Trek fandom etc.

Trek zines² in the 1960s and slash fanfiction be narrowed further with wider use of The Internet as a platform for socializing and distributing fan content and fan criticism? This certainly depends on what aspect of fanfiction we consider crucial - whether it is psychological, social, legal, or subcultural. Fanfiction practices belong to neither and all of these frameworks, especially if we observe the rising popularity and number of well- (and, of course, badly-) written fanfiction published online, which means that it escapes narrow and limiting definitions. Its creators and consumers are vastly heterogeneous, and their motivations cannot easily be reduced to a single aspect of their identity.

However, fanfiction and the community behind it have been subject to discussions by scholars and the general public alike. This has interestingly been highly gendered – fanfiction has often been denigrated as ‘pornography for women’, shallow, trivial, as bad writing etc. Even some authors themselves are explicitly against fanfiction, accusing fanfiction writers as unimaginative, derivative or outright stealing. One writer suggests fanfiction writers to “change the characters’ names before [they] post it” (Gabaldon) so as to ‘sell’ their fiction as original. I am sure there are more objections to this advice beyond the obvious one that the *point* of fanfiction is that the characters are common to people sharing it. However, I would like to return to the gendered aspect of most of criticism of fanfiction in the media, which goes along the lines of disparaging fanfiction as “scribbling women”, and horny scribbling women at that (since some parts of fanfiction can, albeit simplistically, be classified as ‘romance’.) These comments continue the tradition of criticism of the modern romance genre, and female fiction before that. However, fanfiction consumers and writers are aware that it is a narrative form (whether one would classify it as being most similar to textual, dramatic, or oral tradition) which has its faults (that it is at times repetitive, trope-ridden and often sexist and racist). On the other hand, most members of these communities are protective of the fact that fanfiction differs from dominant narrative practices and that its main feature is, essentially, writing what one wants to write and read, the freedom of narrative choice being the often quoted motivation. One (Harry Potter) erotica fan expresses this in her poem:

² Zines are self-published magazines of small circulation which usually have a topic or a theme and often include fanworks and fanart. Since internet became the main place for circulation of such content, zines largely disappeared or were turned into websites.

I am told that my porn is unrealistic/Not quite as erotic as flashing ass saying 'just turned 18' so you can fantasize about fucking the youngest girl you won't go to jail for I'm told that this is what is supposed to turn me on The first time a man that I loved held me by the wrists and called me a 'whore', I didn't think 'run', I thought 'this is just like in the movies'. ... My sex is not packaged, my sex is magic, I exist when you're not fucking me. (Twohy)

The point of this piece, even though focusing on adult fanfiction, is indicative of a wider attitude of communities of readers and writers who are at all times aware of the shortcomings of patriarchal and racist narratives, knowing that what they read in fanfiction, including stories told by and for 'minorities', is likely, at best, to be only glossed over in the canon. On the contrary, fanfiction and fan communities, as diverse and heterogeneous as they can be, can be a powerful outlet and a site for productive, albeit marginalized, discussion on, for example, insidious racism of the new *Thor* movie. Is it, then, so unrealistic to assume that each trope-ridden fanfiction and unbelievable or rehashed plot says something new not only about the underlying theme of the piece (whether it is depression, racism, homophobia, gender binary, sex or relationships), but also about the sentiment and practices of the community it has been inspired by? Even more so when every piece of fanfiction has the kudos and the comments of the readers as a prerequisite and an essential part of its existence. What is central to fan communities and in particular, to fanfiction, is its affective potential, where sharing (of characterizations, emotions, fanons³ etc.) is one of, if not their most important, aspect. The fanfiction community is not only characterized by its ability to produce criticism of the original work but also of its own practices, which best reflects the diverse educational backgrounds and age diversity, as well as the provisional nature of the fan in a subculture within the Internet culture – fans consume, create, parody themselves and criticize (often these pieces of criticism that circulate within fandoms function and look a lot like scholarship, but are, unlike scholarship, often assimilated into fanon, blurring the lines between genres as well as constructing a self-sufficient community that determines its own modes of reading). These communities are extremely open, not least due to the Internet being widely available to fans.

³ 'Fanon', as in 'fan canon', refers to "ideas and concepts that fan communities have collectively decided are part of an accepted storyline or character interpretation" (Chaney, Liebler, 1)

Nevertheless, in this thesis, I would like to look at the social and gender aspects of fanfiction, and examine how much practices that influence themes and the ways of disseminating fanfiction depend on gender (namely, female) – what is it that motivates a fan to explore the characters and the plots? More importantly, what is it that has made women the ‘default’ creators and consumers of fanfiction? Simply put – what do they find in this kind of expression and these kinds of communities? As already mentioned, the phenomenon of fanfiction as a whole (or any of its genres) can be seen as interplay of many different influences, from gender, sexuality, problems of authorship, copyright, economy etc. Indeed, fanfiction has been studied from all of these aspects, both from the outside (Camilla Bacon-Smith) and the inside (the self proclaimed ‘aca-fan’ – academic fan – Henry Jenkins) and is not defined completely by any one of them. I am taking an identity-based approach to fanfiction because I think that observing this aspect of fanfiction (not only as a literary, but also as a sociological phenomenon) can still tell us something new about how and why modern fandom functions and reacts to texts.

Those who study fanfiction generally place the beginnings of modern fanfiction somewhere in the 1960s, when women of Star Trek fandom first began writing their versions of the narrative, which spread to other TV shows and media. I would like to look into some interesting reasons that the fanfiction community consists, for the most part, of women. Certainly, this argument runs the risk of reducing the fans to a binary – the ones that write fanfiction (women) and the ones that engage with the canon non-transformative ways (men), as well as ignoring diverse identities that fall outside this binary, and that are increasingly present as creators and consumers in contemporary fan communities. It is true that many men are writers and consumers of fanfiction, but I would here like to focus on practices that have found fanfiction to be a safe space for expression of identities that seem to lack representation (in form of characters on the screen, in public discourse etc.) in the mainstream media, namely women (queer women and women of colour). Expressing those identities in a separate space has helped shape the practices in fanfiction communities, not just those that determine content of the filled-in blanks and the ever-expanding narratives of the fanon, but also the wider sentiment and practices of sharing and criticising fandoms and the canon. In other words, I would like to examine why it is that (statistically, even) fanfiction ‘belongs’ to women – and fanfiction not as stemming from (active) resistance at its basis

(because activism has never been its main cause and motivation), but as practice which has certain characteristics which provide women (and other minority identities) a place separate from the mainstream. I will thus compare and contrast mainstream and mass modes of storytelling and expression on the one hand, and fan practices on the other. My basic assumption, which I will base this thesis on, is that fanfiction (and some characteristics of fanfiction support this) has become a separate place from the mainstream because fans have found mainstream narratives to insufficiently and inadequately represent everyone but the white bourgeois, able-bodied, heterosexual male (Heyes), who⁴, perhaps most importantly, control the amount and the way women, racial and sexual minorities are written and represented. Fanfiction can provide, I would argue, an alternative to, e.g. interplay of male gaze, imperialism, racism and heterosexism in the mainstream - or “the ‘dominant gaze’: the tendency of mainstream culture to replicate, through narrative and imagery, racial inequalities and biases which exist throughout society” (Russel, 244). And whether it is the ‘womanhood’ of the fanfiction writer, their race, sexuality etc. what gives them a different perspective from which to read and change the canon, fanfiction still remains a domain separate from the domain of its canon.

This thesis takes its analytical framework from what is called ‘identity politics’ in that it assumes that experiences (or, more importantly, reception) of media is fundamentally different for certain oppressed groups. And even though there has been much criticism towards activism that focuses on one axis, such as sexuality, race, or gender, it cannot be denied that fanfiction is the domain of women (with all their differing attitudes towards what constitutes quality representation), and this is the fact that I wish to explore further. Fanfiction is plural in that its community is not led and controlled by any majority, except that most of it consists of people that identify as women. And, while I emphasize that any fanwork (as fanfiction in general) can point to different ‘faults’ in the canon⁵, this thesis will focus on how and why women in particular fill those lacunas. Of course, I presuppose some common experience that most women have and which makes fanfiction a separate domain that started and continues to be a point of interest for them, as well as the way this fiction is different from what they encounter every day. Criticism of identity politics has often assumed that saying that women have some common language, “reifies femininity”, that is,

⁴ For whatever reasons, be it racism, sexism or classism (or an interplay of these).

⁵ or society (directly or indirectly)

that by appropriating this language, the critic or the writer always reinforces the patriarchal discourse (Heyes 2014). What this ‘language’ assumes, is what has often been called ‘the voice of care’⁶, which comes into play when we talk about the focus of fanfiction not on plot, but on characters’ relationships and emotional states, as well as the hurt-comfort aspect of slash fanfiction in particular (as discussed in third chapter). This raises the question of what female writing is. I do not claim that any style of writing is inherently male or female (as Helene Cixous, for example), and that the female one is the one fanfiction employs and has to be automatically marginal. However, I would argue that there are some patriarchal and racist discourses that arise from and are influenced by who controls the output of narratives – whose stories are told and the way that they are told. This is not independent of how they function within the market logic – how much distribution and attention they get. In other words, “What matters is therefore not so much whether a particular theory was formulated by a man or a woman, but whether its effects can be characterized as sexist or feminist in a given situation . . . What is important is whether we can produce a recognizable feminist impact through . . . specific use (appropriation) of available material.” (Moi, 119) – what matters is not that there are not any instances in society that go against dominant ideology, but that fanfiction is an important space in which these interventions can happen independently (and often against) the logic of the market. These interventions are often not ‘écriture féminine’ in that they have markedly different language – the most important difference is not a linguistic one, but in themes and characters, which are often marginalized in mainstream discourse.

I also refer to the experience of most fanfiction writers as ‘female experience’ because the demographic of fanfiction cannot be ignored, even if all women have somewhat different experiences – it is not surprising that a subcultural community such as fanfiction found an alternative to the fact that much of today’s discourse is centered around the practices of male gaze, loss of bodily autonomy (primarily of female characters), women and minorities as token characters, and other practices. The criticism of a woman-centered perspective (and this ‘voice of care’) ignores, however, that this kind of discourse (both in style, content, and the people that write it) always assumes a subordinate position in canon (and, as I have mentioned above, in discourse surrounding fanfiction). Fanfiction is thus a

⁶ The ‘voice’, or ‘ethics’, of care, defined during second-wave feminism, is generally defined as an approach that focuses on interpersonal relationships and communication at the centre of ethical problems.

practice that at least provides a place (or a subculture) in which a multitude of voices can be heard, even if they have no social, economic or cultural capital.

2. It is a truth universally acknowledged that if you're a fan on *Archive of our Own*, you are a woman unless proven otherwise.⁷

Before I begin discussing gendered aspects of fanfiction, I would first like to emphasize the vast number of subjects, genres and modes of storytelling fanfiction deals with – out of currently more than 1 000,000 works on the most popular fanfiction platform, *An Archive of Our Own* (even more when one counts *fanfiction.net* and *Livejournal*, which was shut down in 2005) one can find thousands of fandoms, age groups and genres of fanfiction (action, romance, one-shots etc.). It is thus clear that fanfiction is not an isolated phenomenon within modern fandom. However, it has proliferated and been made popular through democratization of the Internet, as well as in spite of strict modern copyright laws. Fanfiction has from the moment it appeared faced serious legal charges from large companies that own their beloved characters and stories, as well as prejudices about its artistic and societal merit. Thus, even though late capitalism changes from the ground what a 'subculture' means, since most subcultures are not isolated in any aspect, all fandoms, even though sometimes vastly different, share some common behaviors and modes of sharing and establishing communality. These different practices are what has been called 'performative acts' and, while different fans perform their identity in different ways, fanfiction as a valid form of engaging with and performing this identity cannot be ignored. Rhiannon Burry talks about online subcultural communities as having no substance outside "the consistent engagement of *communal practices* by a majority of its members" (2013, 270, emphasis in original). I would argue that, along with the important aspect of gender in fanfiction, much of its practices have to be looked through the lens of communality and sharing. It is clear that fan practices would amount to nothing for those who participate in them without them being shared within a community, in which every act of creation and sharing is imbued with meanings (that have context within the fan culture). This is why

⁷ Since there are few surveys that deal with gender and sexuality of fans in contemporary fandom, no truth is universally acknowledged – however, a 2012 survey by OTR showed that *tumblr.com* (the main platform for, among many other things, sharing fanfiction today – before it was *livejournal.com*) consists of more than 62% women which is one of the highest percentages in any social media (Report: Social Network Demographics 2012)

fanfiction's communal aspect is closely tied to the aspect of gender. What this means more specifically, is that content is never disseminated between the source and target fan without them being almost explicitly aware that on the other side of the fan 'production chain', lies a person who not only shares their love for the story and characters, but similar views and experience of the canon which affects their view of the story. Thus some practices in fanfiction, whether they are subversive or not, and despite the fact that sometimes they can have vastly different motivations and styles, have some underlying characteristics that separate them from the dominant modes of storytelling in consumer capitalism.

In this chapter I would thus like to examine the unique characteristics of communality between women fans (and not only women, but gender and sexual minorities) that strongly influenced the form and content of fanfiction today. Why I put gender and sexual minorities under this designation, too, is that the performance of identity, as Helen Reddington states:

continues to signify gender intelligibility, albeit *linguistically*, when it goes online. Certainly, the discourses that regulate the gender performances of the body seated at the keyboard have not magically vanished. What we do lack is access to visual practices with which to map gender onto subjects more or less instantaneously. Thus, online gender does not disappear but becomes akin to RL identities like class or sexuality not so easily pinpointed by the power of vision. (271)

I would like to apply this statement to fanfiction, since it is essentially and in its conception, a reaction to and a change of not only the original story, but also the cultural practices and patriarchal and racist ideology that has underlined almost every aspect of dominant cultural production. What these aspects are, and the ways fanfiction, as a subcultural genre, reacts to them, I will explore in this chapter.

Henry Jenkins, the forefront scholar in this field, borrowed the term 'textual poachers' from de Certeau to designate fanfiction writers. Poachers are by de Certeau essentially defined as the 'multiple voices' of popular orality that work against institutional sanctioning of societal narratives (Jenkins 2014, 99). Textual poachers is thus an appropriate term, since it carries an inspired implied meaning that their practices are in some ways less-than-legal, something that has followed fanfiction production from its inception. Fanfiction

has always operated within this frame, not just in a legal sense (since they are rewriting characters that somebody else effectively owns), but also illegal in the sense that it has always resisted popular and institutionally sanctioned narratives. This kind of reading of a subculture may seem essentialist; and it is important to recognize that fandom is not uniquely cohesive culture or community, and neither is fanfiction. Many scholars of fanfiction (Jones, 2002; Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998; Jenkins, 1992) have recognized that fanculture in many ways tries to reconcile and work within the dual nature of late capitalist production, by rarely ever being (what S. Hall calls) either resistant or incorporative, but what Jenkins explains with Abercrombie and Longhurst's spectacle/performance paradigm, whereby "media invites complex and diverse audience responses that should not be simplified into a binary division" (Busse, Helleksson 2014, 45). The basic premise of a fan 'wanting more' from the story and the characters certainly does not imply something subversive or resistant in and of itself. On the other hand, I would argue that fans, female fans in particular, engage the media in a different way than other fans, albeit not always in a subversive way.

The Internet is today arguably one of the most democratic sites for fans in that provides a space for different 'minority' groups to express themselves, but more importantly, it provides a safe space for them to interpret the outside world and media (even if this engagement is confined to a subculture.) This 'diversity' that the Internet prides itself to having of course is not universal – even though much can be said for the diversity in terms of gender, sexuality, it leaves much to be desired when including all classes and educational backgrounds – fanfiction culture slightly less so, since from a superficial glance at who fanfiction writers are we can see that it provides a slightly different space than that of what has always been implied when the word 'fan' is mentioned – a white middle-class male. On the one hand, this designation has, when put into a fannish context, never been considered privileged – Mell Stanhill argues:

[t]hough whiteness is typically understood in contemporary American culture as a position of privilege, represented fans seem to contradict this conventional wisdom; they are conceptualized in television shows, fictional films, and documentaries as white people deviating from the constructed-as-white norm of heterosexuality and employment through a "childish" fixation on the object of their fandom. (1)

On the other hand, it has been shown that to designate the ‘fan’ only in terms of their (at a glance, invisible) status within the dominant society is insufficient – a noticeable trend in fanculture has not only been marked by fans, but also by some scholars, that those ‘underprivileged’ white men have constructed an alternative fannish identity by emulating modes of behavior that construct a patriarchal hyper-masculine and female-hostile community on the Internet. This kind of behavior is not unusual, considering the long history of exclusion of women and minorities by even the well-educated community of artists, showing that women and sexual and gender minorities have always constructed alternative spaces that were separate from the exclusively male space of mainstream cultural production⁸.

While it could be said that all literature is intertextual, or archontic, Abigail Derecho distinguishes fanfiction as literature that it in its essence explicitly intertextual, as well as intertextual in a much higher degree than other forms of intertextuality (877), when observing the degree in which fanfiction explicitly reuses and transforms common stories, not limited to original canon. I wouldn’t however state that fanfiction is a form of storytelling that entirely corresponds to both older and modern rewritings like the mentioned *Wide Sargasso Sea* – fanfiction is very much defined by the communal context within which it is created.

Some scholars (Jenkins, Stasi) call this phenomenon ‘collective authorship’. While I would not go so far as to say that everything in fanfiction is shared (since every writer is to a certain point protective of their work), this content is indebted to the practice of creating a communal ‘mythology’ (the ‘fanon’) within the fandoms, and filling in the blanks not just for the writer herself. The term ‘mythology’ is something that is often mentioned in the context of fandom:

Myth making [...] was taken for granted in premodern times, the deep changes in the way individual authorship and ‘originality’ are regarded in the modern age have by and large marginalized anonymous collective authorship, writing in a shared universe and using a common repository of legends and myths (Stasi, 1789.)

⁸ See, for example, scholarship based around consumption of soap operas

The fanon is, thus, a common mythology created within a culture that accommodates and encourages supplementing the canon. Thus fan communities and fanfiction perhaps owe more to the female practices of bonding such as gossip and storytelling than mimetic practices of textual production (and the classical concept of the author). That is, fan production which engages with the canon is not limited to narrativized texts, but expands to include one-shots, speedily written headcanons⁹ and suggestions that look more like gossip (fans often talk, imagine and think about the characters as if they were their friends, to their friends) that is shared with the specific purpose of telling something about the source text, or the fan herself. Ika Willis argues that “these gaps may only become visible – may only, indeed, be gaps – when the text is read from a position that refuses the illusion of continuity; and textual gaps are filled in according to an associative, not a deductive, logic”. (2274) The associative logic of changing and filing in the story of another author is perhaps why so much fanfiction finds its most fertile ground in fantasy genres, since the fantasy aspect of the story provides a buffer that makes it easier for the writer and the reader to identify with the characters more closely.

Fanfiction and headcanons are perhaps the most prolific way that fandom constructs that canon. I would argue that the practice of mythmaking within fandom is in many ways related to the female practice of storytelling as a communal gesture. One observant fan, in her meta-fandom comment (“Fandom thoughts”), noticed the difference between female and male-centered fandom, as being in its essence a difference between ‘exegesis’ and ‘literalism’, which is to say that the more established fandoms, the ones that the public and the showrunners think of when thinking about fans, are mostly made up of male audiences. It could be said that they perform their fan identity through practices that do not usually question the merit and the validity of the canon and the context in which it is created, such as canon trivia competitions, cosplay¹⁰, buying merchandise etc. Female fandom, on the other hand, seems to engage with the canon in a different way, which cannot only be accounted for by fandom ‘wanting more’ (characters, more story – which canon is unable to do often due to the format and the essence of a text that it is to the fans in many ways

⁹ Defined by Urban Dictionary as: “Used by followers of various media of entertainment to note a particular belief which has not been used in the universe of whatever program or story they follow, but seems to make sense to that particular individual, and as such is adopted as a sort of ‘personal canon’.”

¹⁰ ‘Cosplay’, short for ‘costumed play’ is a practice of re-creating a character for the canon through clothes and props.

incomplete), but also trying to make fanon a space that reflects their various and heterogeneous desires. This could be a consequence of the frustration with the lack of content that reflects female and minority experiences. Simply dividing fan practices into these two binary camps, however, means perhaps simplifying the heterogeneous ways of performing identities within the larger and diverse fan culture. On the other hand, it doesn't seem like male-centered communities of fans have quite yet jumped on the bandwagon of fanfiction (which doesn't mean that some male fans don't write popular and quality fanfiction¹¹), perhaps due to the fact that the dominant semiotic production of gender and sexual identities always still favors male (white, heterosexual) stories – which not only lack women's stories, but also lack the diverse ways in which stories can be told.

It certainly cannot be stated that today's cultural production is completely void of representing minority experiences; however, the mainstream production, such as Hollywood action and fantasy genre and popular literary and comic works still make their minority characters into tokens.

Here is precisely where fanfiction find its most fruitful ground – what fandom does is it takes the modern, default, and popular mythology that doesn't accommodate women or their diverse modes of storytelling, and changes its genre, content and production modes to something they want to see. It is interesting that these spaces and the newly-created mythology make the female experience the default, and thus the tenants of the female experience (use of tropes and focus on romance, for example) are the accepted and encouraged ways to engage with the canon.

2.1. Ernie Macmillan's¹² third cousin from his mother's side's love story and her fight with the demons of her past

In *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, Adriana Cavarero states that the essential part of one's selfhood involves its *narratability* – that the narration of one's story not only performs one's identity, but can also reveal it. She emphasizes the biographical aspect of one's story (that is, of narratability of one's story through another) as a way of transcending the *what* of the subject, and revealing the *who*.(17-29) This constant desire for

¹¹ Such as fanfiction writers *copperbadge* and *thanfiction*

¹² Ernie Macmillan is a minor character in the *Harry Potter* series

telling one's *who* through storytelling is essential to any narration. However, what distinguishes fanfiction from other forms of storytelling is the multiplicity of stories created with great care for an already created character – fanfiction's main feature is the continual retelling of a character's story, a character that was created by someone else, that is essentially *other* to the writer(s). Expecting and sustaining multiple readings of the *who* and the *what* of the character is what makes fanon a constantly fluctuating entity that changes with the writer, the community and the wider social and political circumstances. That is why we can compare fanfiction today and in the early 2000s and say, for example, that themes of PTSD, trauma and mental illness have gained attention as a consequence of a larger and more open fandom, as did gender- and race-bending tropes that reflect the social and political circumstances. Appropriating the already-established, 'lived-in' characters, in which the viewer and the fan already has some affect invested seems to be the most fertile ground for stories which have the crucial component of *circulation*. It is precisely here that I would apply Cavarero's theory, that originally centers on biographies, of storytelling as a crucial component of female community-building.

I would like to emphasize again that fanfiction has a range of different ways of engaging with the canon – there is a multiplicity of ways in which the canon could be 'changed'. While some fanfiction changes one or several components of the canon, some fanfiction narrates stories before/during/after canon narratives that are not included in the original. The latter are a particularly excellent starting point when it comes to still ignored field of studying fanfiction as a literary genre. However, I would here like to focus on how fanfiction writers appropriate the characters to project some issues of the canon, as well as themes they would like to write about and share, consciously or unconsciously. One example of this fandom's propensity to analyze characters to the extreme, with countless stories dedicated to the most minute aspects of their identity, as well as exploring important issues that they feel are lacking in canon. This could be, for example, countless works written about Captain America's PTSD, Draco Malfoy's depression, Winter Soldier's body dysmorphia and anxiety disorder, or fanworks written that center on racism and imperialism of Asgard (the copyright for these stories belongs to *Marvel* and J.K. Rowling), all of which are only touched upon or entirely ignored by the canon (whether due to format, genre, or other reasons). Ika Willis argues that "reading involves the negotiation of painful gaps between the desiring

subjectivity of the reader and the ability of the text to sustain that subjectivity and those desires.” (2229), which is precisely what fanfiction does – sustains the desires of the fan by telling her stories and sharing them with fans that have an interest in them. The affect that the fan invests in these characters means that she can in various ways identify with them through storytelling or consumption of stories by other fans.

The rejection of great narratives, of the authority of the canon and the original authors reflects what Cavarero calls the rejection of the “discourse of the universal” (53), which has for centuries been the exclusive domain of men. Thus the female in the fandom is characterized by refusal to conform to the universalizing nature of storytelling¹³ that often reduced the Other to a two-dimensional stereotype, the Other being women, people of color, sexual and gender minorities etc. While Cavarero observed Italian consciousness-raising groups, the community as a site for creating and disseminating stories could be applied to fan communities, since they are too dominated by women. And since “women are usually the ones who tell life-stories” (54) because they, as mentioned before, refuse (or at least always actively seek out something more - fanfiction, in this case) to engage in practices that take canon as their be-all-and-end-all, many fan stories include or concentrate on the domestic and romantic scenes. The reason for this lies is that women not only of twenty years ago when Cavarero write her book, but of today, too, lack the political space in which to express themselves. Even more so in mainstream cultural discourse and its world-building, which is still as space dominated by men and reserved for the stories that focus on their experiences, Women, thereby, “whether on the level of expression or representation ... find themselves trapped between a double powerlessness” (58), that is, they do not have political spaces in which to express their identity, but also are victim to the patriarchal order which reduces them to representing only their function in the society, which directly follows their gender (mothers, caregivers, wives etc.) (58) I would therefore argue that fanfiction is not inherently subversive in its content (since women are not exempt from emulating patriarchal and racist practices), but in the very conditions of its creation – the community of

¹³ Cavarero (here writing about the tragedy of Oedipus) writes: “ ... the tragedy of the originary scission between the universal Man and the uniqueness of the self ... is an entirely masculine tragedy. [...] The clear refusal by women – which has exploded in the contemporary era – to recognize themselves in the images of women thought for millennia by Man, has some significant precedents in a long history of mute feminine resistance. [...] The discourse of the universal, with its love of the abstract and its definitory logic, is always a matter for men only. (52-53)

women writing stories for each other in which they in various ways and to various extent project their identities on both female and male characters, while at the same time telling stories that center on particularities of female condition (by negotiating the particularities of canon, of course.) In this way, I would go so far as to argue, they move towards deconstructing the patriarchal tendency of giving “human beings of the male sex the ability to recognize themselves in this abstract universal”(58), as well as constructing in many ways, a subversive subcultural political space separate from the male gaze, as well as lacking in cultural and social capital that determines their source material.¹⁴ This ‘makeshift political space’ that the women construct is, on the contrary, completely catered to what one wants or doesn’t want to read or see – every piece of fanfiction is marked with tags that indicate its subject, as well as any trigger and content warnings. This kind of democratization of Internet space that has been happening elsewhere is most visible in the fanfiction and meta¹⁵ communities (the most popular fanfiction depository today, *An Archive of Our Own*, requires fanfiction writers to state these warnings, such as rape, PTSD, anxiety, emotional abuse etc. upon uploading.) Reasons for this may be diversity of online fandoms, as well as the fact that women try to make a safe space for themselves and others that are not available in wider fan community characterized by hostility of male fans toward anyone perceived as an outsider or an Other (for connection of privilege, social capital in gaming and female-hostile behaviours, see Nakamura). No one writing fanfiction hopes to achieve social or economic capital from it – stories that are shared in this community do not, as Cavarero puts it, “aspire to immortalize [themselves] in a literary empire . . . but [are] rather the type of [stories] whose tale finds itself in the kitchen, during the coffee break, or perhaps the train ...” (53). Fanfiction writers are characterized by their unwillingness or outright contempt for making money out of what they write. Some of them are professional or aspiring writers that wish to publish their original book. Nonetheless, very few of them reduce their fanfiction to a mere ‘practice’ of their writing. I would argue that it is precisely this filling-in of shared gaps in the text that gives the writing its substance within a wider context of fan community. One of the examples I have encountered is, for example, a shared construction of canon in multiple fandoms that occurs when a fan shares their headcanon (that most commonly has to do

¹⁴ For further explanation of complex processes of identification with male characters, see below.

¹⁵ “Meta” in fandom defines texts that most closely resemble criticism and scholarship about a topic regarding the canon.

with honing in on ignored aspects of a character or narrative) with other fans replying with their own, thus actively constructing a shared (but by no means final or true) mythology of the character. It is clear that “in their attempt to concretize textual gaps, readers are required to draw on their own knowledge and experience” (Sandvoss, 267) and, owing to the heterogeneous and diverse nature of fandom, these gaps could contain and be filled in with things that highlight, respond to, and subvert the problems of the original material¹⁶. For example, Harry Potter, as a fantasy world that invites fans to expand it, usually finds fans underwhelmed by the western tradition that the wizarding world in the J. K. Rowling’s books derive from; they – and I think this is influenced by diversity in the fandom as well as raised social awareness that occurs as a consequence – expand the world to include non-western (Indian, Native American, pagan etc.) traditions, as well as telling the stories of culturally marginalized – the disabled, mentally ill and non-binary students of Hogwarts¹⁷, thus expanding greatly the source text and creating what they want canon to depict. They are thereby “build[ing] their culture within the gaps and margins of commercially circulating texts” (Jenkins 2014, 118). This culture (or fanon) is not, however, characterized by expanding the canon in a neutral way – on the contrary – most of fanfiction is one way or the other a commentary on the canon and the “fault lines within the dominant ideology” (Jenkins 2014, 119). These ‘fault lines’ often highlight problems in representation in the canon that the fans want to ‘fix’. On the one hand it could be stated that in this way fanfiction is similar to adaptation or reworking. However, fanfiction separates itself from ‘classical’ forms of storytelling by its reluctance to enter the late capitalist economy and what is called Web 2.0. Jenkins states that, as corporate interests will never fully align with those of participatory autonomy, they seek more explicit acknowledgment from companies, but are “concerned with how the active participation of corporations might distort communities or that corporations will only embrace audience practices in the ways they can most easily profit from them” (Jenkins, Ford, Green, 36). We can see a kind of protective

¹⁶ I am not trying to say that canon has no literary/artistic value only because we can find textual gaps – no text is without them; however, the textual gaps that fans engage with usually highlight faults in the dominant ideology, mostly gaps having to do with representation of women and minorities. If we accept the position that subjectivities are constructed through narration, social capital of women and minorities doesn’t allow them to, as I previously mentioned, assert themselves beyond the already-offered representations by the dominant gaze.

¹⁷ Links to stories that engage with the canon in this way can be found under *Sources* “Thus the muses spake” and “Wizarding schools around the world”.

attitude towards fan culture from fans themselves, whereby they try to protect these practices, fearing that the participation in late capitalist economy destroy the affective aspect of fanfiction, thus limiting the freedom of the writers. As mentioned, many fanfiction writers are professional and aspiring writers themselves, but most of them are explicit about the separation of their fanfiction from their original fiction. From this we can see that fanculture has a deeply ambivalent attitude toward not only contents of the canon, but the system it is created in. One of the reasons for this is perhaps the fact that in the 'real world' that controls the output of narratives, an average fanfiction-consuming fan receives neither sufficient nor accurate representation in these popularly-circulated narratives, or a chance to participate in the conditions of their creation, thus searching for a way to represent themselves, or find themselves represented 'on their own terms'.

Another way fanfiction resists placement into rigid lines is the fact that no fanfiction or headcanon, is the 'right' one - the character is never final, they always expand and change. In this way, fanfiction is more similar to mythology and communal and oral forms of storytelling than the universalizing, ideological and accepted art forms. Busse and Hellekson cite that "fandom's constant awareness that every reading is provisional and that every characterization yields one variation among a nearly countless number of others" (Busse, Hellekson 2006, 106) is the main feature of its stories.

Furthermore, fans circulate stories with the same premise (called 'prompts' – plot ideas for a fanfic) but told differently every time. This is another mechanism of the storytelling within a community that Cavarero writes about – reciprocity. The implied closeness between participants in a subculture is important here – an important feature in fandom is that there is closeness that excludes a sense of shame that comes with interactions in the 'real world'. A direct consequence of this is the vast number of stories and interactions shared among fans¹⁸. This reciprocity, of 'tell me your story and I'll tell you mine', is one of the ways this closeness is expressed. The only thing constant in fandom is the existence of tropes and prompts, which enable a fan, if she so wishes, to read a story completely on her own terms. In this way, fanfiction provides a 'safe zone' from not only triggers, but also, I would say, from the 'universalizing' pressure of canonized and

¹⁸ If this were not true, fandom would not be so protective of its 'porn without plot' genre, or of the fact that they are often critical and cynical to practices that occur in fanfiction – that, even, bring the community closer: "In fandom, we've all got this agreement to just suspend shame" (Ellen Fremedon, qtd. in Busse & Farley)

'canonizable' stories. In other words, being the 'story-taker' of art that is part of the cultural canon is what fan writers resist, and find the fact that fanfiction can be anything at any time and to anyone, a liberating fact. On the one hand, fans are dissatisfied by the ideology that permeates the stories they change. On the other hand, it could be said that they are reluctant and careful of characterizing their 'headcanon' as the canon because they are often aware (which is commonly not the case with canonized story-takers, authors) that every story is in some way flawed. On the contrary, this flawed character is often taken to extremes when fans explicitly write, and readers explicitly seek out, overused tropes and idioms¹⁹. Instead, fans seek legitimation from other fans, and not the wider culture and economy. This is why I would argue that, even though much of fanfiction has artistic merit, its vital aspect is one of community, that characterizes it as a 'subculture', one that consists of predominantly women, and whose modes of storytelling are influenced by this.

Of course, this kind of argument risks essentializing the fandom and reducing fandom to a male-female binary. There *are* men writing fanfiction, and men reading fanfiction. However, I would argue that the demographics of today's fanfiction is a direct consequence of the conditions in which it appeared and the conditions in which it operates (as well as its content.) Firstly, fanfiction found itself on the margins of popular narratives for the reasons I stated before. In the beginning, the content was in many ways influenced by the romance genre or, more specifically, domains in which women traditionally found outlet for their desires²⁰. The "sexualization of the female condition" that will be touched upon later, is an appropriate term in some cases. Secondly, fanfiction provided a space in which women could transform what they thought was inadequate in the canon. They do not expect that writers of the shows they transform will read their stories – while they are aware of the faults of the canon, they do not expect that every piece of media will accommodate the wishes of all fans regarding representation, themes etc. Fandom is a unique and separate space from the mainstream in that it sets no limitations upon how many, and what kind, of stories, are made and read, nor upon which version of these is final.

¹⁹ These, for example include "coffeshop" and "highschool" Aus ('alternative universe' stories, that is, stories which re-imagine one or more characters in a different universe or situation, completely different from the canon story), as well as tropes such as 'genderflip' and 'hurt/comfort'.

²⁰ The subsuming of fanfiction under the 'romance' genre often means essentializing it, since fanfiction transforms the canon in many different ways, but it could be said that modern fanfiction started primarily as a slash rewritings (fanfiction that focuses on rewriting characters into a homosexual relationship) of Star Trek and other TV shows from 1980s.

3. You can't write 'fanfiction' without 'slash fiction'

Every critical and theoretical work on fanfiction has hitherto inevitably written, or at least mentioned, *slash*. It is arguably one of the most talked about topics in theoretical works on fan culture; however; it has also been the basic target in various censures of fan culture and fan writing.

Slash is most commonly described as fiction or other art depicting a same-sex romance between characters from a canonical work. The term *slash* marks the practice of marking same-sex relationships in fanfiction and other discourse; Kirk/Spock, for example. Slash fanfiction is arguably the 'primeval' fanfiction – ever since the first fanzines appeared in the 1960s, appeared slash fanfiction, first exclusively as Kirk/Spock fanfiction, and later spread to other fandoms and media works. The most common form of slash is male/male and just a minority of works deal with female/female relationships. Furthermore, a vast majority of slash writers are women, and slash has often been called 'porn for women, by women' (even though not all slash is rated as 'mature'²¹.)

Slash was first met with considerable dislike and resistance, some defensive fans claiming it is 'out of character' and just 'bad writing', but it has through decades gained attention. Henry Jenkins argues that slash "may be fandom's most original contribution to the field of popular literature" (193). However, not just the general public is divided about slash – critics argue about merit of slash with arguments from the one that it fetishizes homosexual relationships by not acknowledging the fact that characters are gay (Russ, Coppa, Stein), to the ones that claim that it is highly progressive in its depictions of homosexual relationships. However, it is important to emphasize that, as I already mentioned about fanfiction and fandom in general, slash cannot be described in an essentialist manner, as either progressive or not, since the corpus of slash works is vast and heterogeneous and, in many cases, reflects misogyny of the community. On the other hand,

²¹ According to *fanlore.org*, ratings are "the header element in fan works that indicate in a general way what audiences the fic, fanart or other work is appropriate for". On *Archive of our Own* they are divided into: G (General audiences), Teen And Up Audiences (inappropriate for audiences under 13), Mature – (adult themes - sex, violence, etc) Explicit (more graphic than 'mature')

it seems that slash, due to attention it has received, has been held to a much higher standard than other forms of fan engagement – the judgment of a certain art form based *solely* on whether it is resistant or not ignores a large aspect of any work.

Since it is as important to examine the social as well as psychological dimension of slash, in this chapter I will explore how the many forms of slash writing fit into the paradigm of the ‘gendered fandom’, that is, how its conventions operate within a heterogeneous community of women online – as their ‘imaginary domain’, as Drucilla Cornell calls it. Jenkins notes that “the meaning of slash resides as much in the social ties created by the exchange of narratives, the sharing of gossip, and the play with identity as it does with the words on the page” (227) which come into play through, among other things, the pervasive use of tropes in such fanfiction, and which I will touch upon.

3.1. And there was a wicked witch and she was also called goddess and her name was²²

There are several complaints directed at the practice of writing slash. One of them is expressed by Henry Jenkins who states that slash “runs the risk of celebrating gay male experience (and more traditional forms of male bonding) at the expense of developing alternative feminine identities (85). It is certainly true that any fiction easily falls into the trap of focusing solely on ‘attractive white men’ and their sexual and emotional experiences at the expense of the experiences of ‘minorities’ and this is also true of fanfiction. Out of the 400,000 fanfiction works last year alone, many are sure to emulate the modes of narration set by the canonical works they are based upon, as well as the overreaching trend in culture nowadays. For example, one study, which analyzed diversity of Hollywood movies (many of which are very popular as canon material in fanfiction) in 2013, shows that men take up 71% of lead roles (with white men over 95% of this number), and the number for women directors is even smaller – 4,1%²³. The numbers for television are better, but not by a large margin. If we look at fanfiction, this number seems to be much better, but it is still clear that the fanfiction community has a similar problem. The limited identificatory options might justify this disparity; given the already mentioned fact that much of fanfiction, which is for the most part written by women, focuses on the emotional and the affective, it could be said that the lack of well-developed women characters hardly offers inspiration and wish to

²² Dworkin 1974

²³ Lauzen 2014

explore them further²⁴. This is a simplified explanation of what Busse, Lothian and Reid call “overdetermination for women viewers” that prohibits identification (Lothian, Busse, Reid, 4). Furthermore, the serious issue of female representation inevitably leads to a distorted perception (even internalized misogyny) in many women fans, that makes them unable to write women characters in any context (and especially not a romantic or sexual one, in their works. One fan, in their meta text on *Orphan Black* makes an interesting observation:

audiences are disinclined to extend to female characters the same moral/emotional licenses they extend to men; it’s also a failure to create narratives where the women aren’t just flawed, but where the audience is still encouraged to like them when they are. We think of men as antiheroes, as capable of occupying an intense and fascinating moral grey area; of being able to fall, and rise, and fall again, but still be worthy of love on some fundamental level, because if it was the world and its failings that broke them, then we surely must owe them some sympathy. But women aren’t allowed to be broken by the world; or if we are, it’s the breaking that makes us villains. (“Women in Orphan Black: The Meta of Meta”)

We can find further explanation (or at least a part of it) for the overabundance of male slash characters in fanfiction in another scholar’s works: Theresa de Lauretis writes that in the “phallic order of patriarchal culture and in its theory, woman is unrepresentable except as representation” (20.) What this could mean for the complex dynamics of fan culture and fanfiction is that the women characters that are few-and-far-in-between in canon cannot function as anything other than representations of a certain types of women (mother, nurturer, or any other simplified stereotype).

That could be part of the reason why some women writing fanfiction take the path of least resistance and avoid tackling these complex issues of representation and prefer to identify with (and modify, rework, alter) the “unmarked bodies of male TV heroes”(Jenkins 2014.) This is most evident in the *mpreg* fanfiction trope²⁵, which shows just one way of marking those unmarked bodies through complex and covert means of projecting female identities onto male bodies. Constance Penley also mentions the numerous *Star Trek* fics

²⁴ This is supported by the fact that fanfiction based on works that have many and diverse women characters (such as *Harry Potter* or *Star Trek*) seems to have a much greater number of stories focussing on female characters

²⁵ ‘Mpreg’ is short for ‘male pregnancy’

which focus on Spock's (Vulcan) "PMS-like phase" *pon farr* and *plak tow* symptoms, which play with and seek to level "the biological playing field" and which "think through and debate the issues of women's relation to the technologies of science, the mind, and the body" (659).

This kind of 'embodied' female identity is supported by Francesca Coppa's insightful article about the performative aspect of fanfiction, in that fanfiction truly explodes when the written stories become embodied in the actors': "one could define fan fiction²⁶ as textual attempt to make certain characters 'perform' according to different behavioral strips" (810). This is not only true of slash, but of any kind of fanfiction: the fanfiction writers use embodied characters to mould them into something that fits their own experience or something they want to express, rather than to comply with the limiting form of a story which is linear – a 'theatrical' performance can take as many forms and reworkings as there are directors/fanfiction writers. Slash characters can thus behave in any way the writer wants them to – they can develop interest toward persons of the same sex and behave according to certain modes of behavior usually reserved for women – thereby providing an 'imaginary domain' for the (women) writers to not only relate to the wider fan community through a common 'body', but also to project their own sexual and emotional identities onto male characters. Mafalda Stasi notes, "'masculinity' may be claimed and constructed by both men and women."(2801) This kind of practice is particular to women, but also of people of various gender identities that don't find accurate representation in mainstream media and the canon, and which choose to project the issues on the numerous male leads. This has already been discussed in the previous chapter regarding women's particular tendency toward 'exegesis'. The transformative practice in the heart of fan writing always has some purpose. One of the common explanations for the already mentioned fanfiction's 'obsession' with male/male relationships is that it offers mostly women writers an easy alternative to the problem of depicting equal female/male relationships (Lothian, Busse, and Reid; Woledge; Stasi, and many others). Mafalda Stasi sums recent critical approaches:

Disagreement exists over whether or not the male characters in slash are women disguised as men, androgynous men, (straight) men the way (straight) women want

²⁶ The terms 'fanfiction' and 'fan fiction' are both used when discussing fan works; however, both fans and OTW prefer to refer to it as 'fanfiction', while in older scholarship the term 'fan fiction' remains.

them or want them to behave, or gay men. We identify the problem as trying to fit all slash characters into one theoretical box instead of acknowledging that a number of categories might be needed to analyze a range of diverse stories (2790).

It cannot be denied that any art and especially one so widespread and open as fanwriting is subject to wider processes in society – it is clear that slash, which comprises so much of fanwriting, is a constant negotiation between the womanhood of the writer, and everything it includes (including the difficulty to identify with the few characters of the same gender and imagine them as fully as the male ones), and the subversive potential, which is often realized, but also often shows both the limitations of the same source texts is based on, and the misogyny of the fanfiction writer. Slash can never be separated from other styles, genres or types of fanfiction (slash is so widespread and taken for granted in fanfiction that it is more often than not just a feature of a work that explores other issues or plays with other styles²⁷) Thus, we cannot say that it is either subversive or incorporative. Fanfiction cannot be designated as fully one or the other, subversive or misogynistic, but it constantly negotiates and balances the complicated societal and gender circumstances of its making²⁸. That is how, for example, many slash relationships (I will use this term to designate male/male relationships in fanfiction) are depicted as stereotypical female/male relationships in real life; that is, one male character (in a vast majority of the cases the one who is physically weaker or emotionally more vulnerable) is always in an inferior position, either sexually, emotionally (as constantly needing help from their partner) or in terms of authority, in that they make no decisions in the relationship²⁹. If we accept that male characters are identificatory positions for the woman writers, then this could be explained by the fact that women writers find it difficult to imagine an equal female/male relationship.

²⁷ *If and Only If*, for example, by FelicityGS, which plays with style as much as the content

²⁸Lothian, Busse and Reid add another, completely valid, explanation: „ .. sexual approaches (often the default response by fans themselves) foreground the object status of male stars who become sexual objects in the female fannish gaze where “one hot guy’s good; two hot guys are better.” (2007, 4), which shows that slash as a genre, or any one piece of slash writing, can be reduced to one subject position.

²⁹ For examples of ‘dramatized’ characters mentioned above, this is often the case in Erik/Charles and Sirius Black/Remus Lupin (X-men and Harry Potter fandoms, respectively)

I would like to further explain this position that slash relationships serve as a re-imaginings of the very concept of relationships, and that male characters can serve as avatars of their women writers as well as two parts of the same, equal relationship.

Firstly, it is important to note that slash can be both G(eneral) and Mature. It is wrong, however, to assume that 'mature'-rated stories are only focused on sex between characters – one of the main defining features of slash (and fanwriting in general) is that it offers what Elizabeth Woledge calls 'intimatopia' (1414), that is, a mode of writing that neither focuses on romance or porn (Woledge contrasts intimatopia with both these genres of writing). Many critics have compared slash to romance, since a majority of slash focuses on domestic and marital resolutions of relationships, while others have compared it to erotica, since much of its plot is interspersed with sex scenes. However, placing slash into genre distinctions has proven difficult, since the very essence of slash is that it blends these two genres³⁰ for the purpose of exploring relationship dynamics and emotional lives of characters. I have written about the explorative aspect of fanfiction in that it seeks to dissect the character, exploring their different aspects. In slash, what is dissected are both the characters and their dynamics, often in different ways and vastly different results. However, one of the most interesting aspects of this practice is how women writers try to explore relationships on safe and neutral grounds, through an equal relationship between two men. The main premise is that women writers find it difficult to imagine an equal heterosexual relationship in which the woman would not be reduced to her one defining characteristic, or in which she would not be in some way submissive, thus limiting the liberty of the writer to play with her character. This can certainly be traced to the processes in society, which women writers find difficult to shake off. Anna G. Jónasdóttir thus writes about the 'labour of love', that is, the heterosexual relationship as an 'embodied human practice' (Jónasdóttir, qtd. in Gunnarson, 11) in which the woman performs the need-tending labor that puts the man in a dominant position and which generates "oppressive, alienating and exploitative relations." (ibid. 12). Homosexual relationships thus become a space for the sexual and emotional expression of writers that don't have the opportunity to express, or even see, these kinds of equal relationships in canon and media, which they then project onto the male characters. These male characters thus do not fall into the traditional relationship

³⁰ And many others (fairytale, action, fantasy etc.)

patterns, which gives the writers more liberty to explore other facets of not only relationships, but also the wider circumstances and how characters react to them.

One strong argument for the case of 'equal treatment' is that many slash stories make no explicit mention of the character's homosexuality, that is, of their social identity as a homosexual. It is not unheard of, but it is uncommon to find a 'politically engaged' slash fiction piece. Woledge notes: "Intimatopia is a world separate from our current realities, a world defined and shaped by its own rules and codes- a world of male intimacy, yes, but not the world of the modern homosexual"(1479). Fanfiction writers therefore (will) have nothing to do with LGBT activism in their works, or feminist activism for that matter – fanfiction is one of the ways mimesis can respond to the state of womanhood in canon and society, in that women try to make the space not provided for them in the cultural production by telling stories for themselves, and other women. It is not so much that women set out to write a piece in which a homosexual relationship would be a stand-in for their own fantasies and desires about relationships, but the act of writing slash, being arguably less stigmatized because it is produced within a community, lend itself to these kinds of practices, even more so because the community expects and encourages these relationships.

The most indicative feature of slash fiction is the way it dissects, dismantles, and rebuilds the modern 'masculine' men. This feature has often been described as subversive and forward-thinking, since it is gay men whose relationship is depicted, which, some think, could be (often) interpreted as representation for all intents and purposes. Furthermore, even though recent television and film has improved in depicting male friendships and heterosexual relationships (less as suffering from consequences of toxic masculinity, that is), mainstream culture and art, which often prompts fan responses) still suffers from more insidious traditional beliefs. In slash fiction, depiction of relationships that are not heterosexual can avoid not being subject to traditional gender dynamics in canon-represented relationships, which could leave much more room for the characters to not suffer from traditional gender stereotypes and behavior, either. Characters in slash seem to act in a way that is in patriarchal society and canon deemed more 'feminine', which could not only be a consequence of this 'equality', but also in part of the projected female identities onto male characters. This is very visible in one particular genre of slash that has, (with varying frequencies and exposition) pervaded slash ever since the '70s – the

hurt/comfort genre. In this type of fanfiction, the basic premise of the story is that one character is hurt or is in pain, while the other takes care of him, and the two fall in love in the process. This kind of trope is not uncommon in traditional romance novels and films, with the female character playing the traditional role of the caretaker. And while in slash there are stories that in the end fall into this traditional gender dynamics, more often than not, these kinds of relationships operate under different conditions: “. . . the heroine may marry the hero still marveling at how little she knew him. This is in stark contrast to the images of emotional sharing, mind linking, and psychic oneness that pervade sexual relationships in *intimatopia*” (Woledge, 1518.) Therefore, in hurt/comfort, but in slash in general, too, the relationship can be freely explored without any party compromising themselves automatically because of their gender – the less ‘masculine’ character is never necessarily the caretaker, and vice versa – and more importantly, the caretaker is never necessarily in subordinate position. This proves the vast number of Kirk/Spock stories that started the genre in the ‘70s.

The characters can, in other words, act in any particular way (they don’t have to reenact patriarchal heterosexual modes of behavior in a relationship, that is), without compromising their position in the relationship. They, in other words, don’t have to accept and decide between being ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’, the latter usually meaning they accept the subordinate position in the relationship and in the narrative (as is so often the case in depictions of heterosexual relationships). Such behavior, which our grandparents would probably describe as ‘feminine’ (though not in these polite terms) is almost completely unmarked in slash, but accepted as a given. Unfortunately, these dynamics and behaviors I can here describe as ‘feminine’ only because these are more exceptions than rules in canon stories, but also in society – in slash, however, they are treated³¹ as natural reactions and behaviors to the relationship status and emotional state of the character. This includes, as Woledge mentions, emotional sharing, but also some things that can rarely be found in either canon, or romance genre, which slash is often compared with; such as (pointedly summarized by Janis Cortese in „Eew, He's All Girly: Issues Surrounding Feminized Male Characters“):

³¹ (if they are in character, of course – writing OOC – ‘out of character’ – is generally frowned upon in fanfiction community)

1. pay[ing] attention to body parts other than the mouth, cock, and ass
2. pay[ing] attention to facial expressions and correctly interpret[ing] them, or even try[ing]
3. recogniz[ing] and admit[ting] when another person was right
4. elaborately negotiat[ing] sexual consent.

(Cortese 2004)

This 'emotionally mature' and 'emotionally available' behavior of male characters in relationships is often characterized as 'feminine' and thus 'bad' when people outside fandom try to explain and talk about slash fiction – there have been more cases than I can count that scenes of physical or emotional bonding in slash have been read out loud³² as a joke. This shows how the taboo of male emotional connection is still pervasive. Emotional availability is exemplified here as a taboo, even though this taboo is more pervasive when it regards straight men than gay men who are more likely to behave in the way society would characterize as feminine. In fanfiction, works following straight male characters are much more likely to be written as in the canon, which means that they follow patterns of traditional masculinity (that is, where Cortese's four characteristics of feminized male characters are nowhere to be found). However, following the very nature of fanfiction, which is closely dissecting character's emotional states, this doesn't have to be. At the same time, it is true that slash stories are far more likely to feature a character that struggles with traditional roles. This could be a consequence of slash being a more convenient platform for the woman writer to, as was mentioned before, explore more equal relationships, or even to play and transform traditional gender roles. That is, slash could arguably be characterized as unmarked in terms of gender, following from the fact that it is easier for fandom writers to identify with male characters, as well as their sexuality, than it is for them to identify with a female character. This is, of course, lamentable, and it is precisely in this fact that, I would argue, slash at times fails its female writers and readers when it comes to representation. For, after we take into consideration all the subversive ways slash (as the most popular and

³² With increasing frequency, these stories have been read to the actors playing these characters – an 'invasion of privacy' that fandom generally considers rude an unnecessary, primarily because these stories are, in fans' minds, isolated from the wider context and the 'real world' that surrounds the canon works.

productive of fanfiction modes of storytelling) plays with the canon – depicting relationships that are more equal and liberating in terms of breaking from behavior resulting from the strict gender binary, it is mostly just that – dealing with handsome white males that canon works only ever deal with, when there is a greater issue of representation of credible, realistic, well-rounded, and well-written female characters (and other 'minorities'). This arises from, and subsequently creates, the problem of women projecting patriarchal modes of representing women, mainly what fans criticize as 'villainizing' women, but at the same time excusing male characters.

The argument still stands that slash fiction provides an outlet for the woman writer, and “making space for her own desires in a text which may not at first sight provide the resources to sustain them” (Willis 2006, 2235), especially regarding relationships and sex. It is important to note that slash (sex) can never be one thing at all times, and that is it always a renegotiation of canon as well as societal norms and modes of storytelling. Slash is only a genre and the purpose of slash sex and relationships can at any given point represent gratification, alternative forms of equal bonding, or as fantasies of what women want to see (read, imagine). Joanna Russ in her essay “Pornography for Women by Women” raises several interesting points that look at and connect the already mentioned identificatory potential of slash fiction for women writers and ‘feminine’ modes of emotional connection in slash fiction, calling it ‘the sexualisation of the feminine condition’ (320-340). What this means is that, like in the above mentioned hurt/comfort genre, slash seems to in great deal correspond and be a reaction to what women want to see from a relationship, that is, that these scenes and stories serve as ‘sexual’ (because these are often not about sex, as Ross explains) fantasies for women writers. This could also explain the massive female fan community that accepted male/male relationship as proxies for those shared fantasies. But how does masculinity play into this? Ross supports the fact that these characters do not play into the traditional gender binary of most heterosexual relationships depicted in mainstream media:

Although Spock encodes many female characteristics, what is striking in these stories [again I agree with Lamb and Veith] is the androgyny of characters, the way responsibility, initiative, activity, passivity, strength and weakness shift constantly from one to the other. (316)

Ross uses the example of the most famous of slash pairing, but this statement could be applied to most of slash fiction and relationships it depicts. An interesting fact is that sometimes fans find pairings with 'masculine' characters most interesting and productive, perhaps because of the challenge to explore their androgynous and more 'feminine' side. The mentioned 'sexualization of the feminine condition' is what this feminine side involves: "we have . . . sexualized our female situation and training, and made out of the restrictions of the patriarchy our own sexual cues" (324). These restrictions include the nurturing, but also the delay, the prevailing tropes of "endless analyses of motives and scruples for pages and pages", the monogamy etc. (325) Ross claims, and I would agree, that this is the way women have explicitly sexualized (and made interesting, more liberating, perhaps) what has been for centuries for women presented as 'conventions of love'. This is subversive insofar as androgyny, the "shifting" of gender roles, which can never be assigned to one or the other character, makes it possible for women to explore, and fantasize about, relationships that are not unbalanced in terms of power. Furthermore, this leaves more room for exploring the character (which many fanfiction writers in general cite as their main motivation), which present an even bigger challenge since the situation is so incredible (insofar as the canon goes) – the slash aspect of a story is in almost all cases completely 'fictional', that is, it completely deviates from the canon. Thus, this aspect of their personalities could be written any way the writer chooses. Why this in most cases involves a supportive, emotionally mature relationship could be explained with reasons mentioned above. I do not think that it can be explained with slash falling under the same societal stereotype that gay relationships are more 'feminized'³³, since most slash fiction, as mentioned, doesn't follow the traditional gender dichotomy implied by this stereotype.

In this way, slash in a way makes the taboo of male bonding, which is still (albeit, in a lesser degree) so pervasive in mainstream and the canon, less pronounced. On the other hand, the fact that fanfiction and fans are so 'obsessed' with slash pairings is exactly where this subversive potential fails in part, because in some part this practice settles with the lack of well-represented male friendships, by writing the images of bonding into an exclusively sexual and romantic context. It could, of course, be argued that this is a reaction to canon's what we could only call terror from having overt homosexuality displayed on screen. It could

³³ 'Feminized' here, and in other parts of the text, means of course merely any behaviour that is in wider media considered 'not manly'

also be connected with the aforementioned embodiment of the loved characters, which over-interprets any physical and emotional contact and writes it into the slash fantasy, which gets accepted and encouraged by the fans, which may not always be completely unaware of this fact – as mentioned before, fandom has shown a potential for self-awareness through satire of its own practices. Fandom is not homogenous, it consists of many sexual and gender identities, so slash is not exclusively a domain of (hetero)sexual women. There are still no comprehensive surveys that would examine sexual, gender, class and race identities in fandom (not to mention the parts of fandom that read fanfiction regularly); however, a survey by Tumblr user *centrumlumina* (AO3 Census: Masterpost) revealed some interesting patterns related to sexuality of slash readers – only 33% identified as heterosexual, while, which is more interesting, around 8% identified as asexual, roughly the same as the readers of general (meaning fanfiction not involving a romantic relationship) and female/male romantic fanfiction. All of this could mean that the popularity of slash pairings cannot be attributed only to the above reasons related to romantic and sexual motivations - slash readers and writers constantly negotiate between incorporation and resistance of the learned practices and what they see in society and canon. It could also be attributed to a wish to explore the character's motivations and personality, as well as to bonding within the fandom, since slash and romantic fanfiction consumers have an unusual tendency to encourage and even embrace the common tropes (as opposed to 'original' stories that would be classified as 'art' in society), such as many 'alternative universe' prompts (historical AU, highschool AU, coffeeshop AU etc.), for the already mentioned purpose of bonding through storytelling – through affect.

3.2. But what about the women?

On the one hand, slash stories include many well-written female characters from the canon, so it cannot be said that they are completely ignored in slash. However, the focus on M/M pairings and relationships, often at the expense of completely changing and ignoring canon F/M relationships of the characters in question (many of which bear little or no trace of the gender unbalance talked about previously) shows a more problematic aspect of slash in relation to the community around it, and one that some might characterize as a regressive way of dealing with the canon and settling for the weak points of much of today's cultural production, which is a lack of (well-written, non-white, queer etc.) female characters. In

recent years the fandom itself has noticed the tendency in fanfiction to focus on defending and apologizing male character's behaviors and motivations and excessively focusing on their stories and consequentially ignoring the few female characters the canon has. This argument stands, when one looks at the vast increase in the production of slash fanfiction. As a part of the same survey by *centrumlumina*, one user expressed this in relation to slash fanfiction:

I think why I only read m/m, even as a feminist, still comes down to misogyny. Certain characters, experiences, and pleasures are inaccessible to me because of how misogyny affects me in real life. Just thought that it was neat that misogyny not only over values men, but makes female spaces feel unsafe when it comes to my own pleasure. ("Why M/M?")

Therefore, while slash can in many ways be liberating and empowering for women in that it allows them to explore relationship (dynamics), desire and what they want, it can be argued that it still in many ways enables internalized misogyny in that it always marks the male bodies as sites of sexual pleasure and emotional support and safety – they are proxies for female bodies, but they are always explicitly male. A writer of slash herself said that “The problem is [women who] don't like their own bodies enough, they can't see themselves saving the universe once a week, they can't let their own sexuality out without becoming dependents or victims.” (qtd. in Ross, 321) The fact stands that popularity of M/M pairings might lie in the fact that male characters can serve as proxies for female writers and readers, without the added danger of overrepresentation by the characters female bodies; however, it has not been constructed as a neutral space for female desires insofar as those desires are always projected onto male bodies, ignoring the physicality of the female desire.

On the other hand, fans have been claiming that slash fandom has changed immensely since its online beginnings at the turn of the millennium – most explicitly in its treatment of female characters – Lackner, Lucas and Reid point out that the ‘absence’ of women in slash has never been a valid claim: “women have always been present in slash. The writers and readers are the women, and as our cultures and fandoms change, it becomes possible to write more women like us into slash.”(2812) This returns to my claim of communities of women being the essential aspect of fanfiction as a phenomenon, as well as

exposing the danger of reducing abilities of identification to 'one equals one', when it has, in fact, always carried multiple meanings when it comes to engagement of fans with the text and each other, even though the proliferation of slash fanfiction is a consequence of and reflects, rather than subverts, misogynistic practices of writing women and men.

4. Conclusion.

In conclusion, it can be said that themes and practices of fanfiction are in many ways influenced by its overwhelmingly female community. This community provides a free space for creating and disseminating content that is often (directly or indirectly) a commentary to canon, and which presupposes a number of smaller communities of (mostly) women. Even though online communities are heterogeneous and we cannot easily make generalized claims about any such community, fanfiction studies (Jenkins, Hellekson, Coppa, Busse etc.) have always tried to explain certain aspects of fanfiction through the aspect of gender. More specifically, the ways in which the female fans have, by writing in an alternative space, highlighted themes that are lacking in the canon as well as the conspicuous absence of women from that same canon. They have thus created a space separate from the market of popular culture (of TV-shows, blockbusters, comic books), the creation and output of which is still controlled by men. This kind of separate space both creates and sustains alternative readings and also depends on sharing those readings while creating a subcultural community.

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