Identity, Community, and Sexuality in Slash Fan Fiction

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Introduction

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Introduction

On Saturday, September 15, 2007 a crowd of over 200 women (and a handful of men) wearing ball gowns and costumes gathered in a hotel reception hall in Chicago and sang Bette Midler's "The Rose" together for the last time. It was the 18th and final meeting of the semi-annual convention Zebracon, which began in 1979, originally only for discussion of 1970s television drama *Starsky and Hutch* but eventually for all media, with a particular focus on slash fan art, video, and fiction. Emerging from *Star Trek* and literary science fiction fan activities, the term fan fiction describes stories written by amateur authors that borrow characters, situations, and/or settings from a pre-existing source, most characteristically from the mass media but also from literature, history, amateur or independent media, and contemporary public figures and events. Although many written, visual, and oral storytelling traditions incorporate forms of adaptation and reinterpretation, the term fan fiction identifies the particular cultures, stories, and histories that circulate under that name. The term slash frames a contested artistic and social space, but most often designates a subgenre of fan fiction containing same-sex romance, relationships, and erotica, written primarily by women, primarily about male characters. A slippery signifier alternately used as a verb, noun, or adjective, "slash" communicates a bundle of interconnected meanings, simultaneously describing communities, personal identities, clusters of texts, and active reception practices. 2007 marked my third consecutive Zebracon, but many of the participants had met there for decades for the unique experience of sharing their passion with a collection of friends and (former) strangers, gathered together by a shared investment in something they each thought of as slash.

I recall that as I added my near whisper to the swell of voices around me, some boisterous, some laced with melancholy, some choked by embarrassment, I couldn't meet anyone's eyes. The embarrassment, my own and others', resulted not only from the usual inhibitions toward singing in public, especially a song requiring as much conviction as "The Rose," but also as a response to the overflowing emotional weight tied by invisible but palatable threads of history to that song and that moment. What portion of their collective joy and grief did I share? At that point, I was a relatively new fan with

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only just over one decade of experience, perfectly at home in online fan spaces, but still tentative at in-person conventions, which I only began attending when the funding for my ethnographic research on slash communities allowed. Yet, years later, I'm still attending conventions, and whenever I hear the strains of "The Rose" on the radio, tears spring to my eyes and I know that what Raymond Williams called a deep "structure of feeling" connects me to that ballroom and the hundreds of other women who also feel their heart swell whenever a strident voice insists that a seed beneath the snow will endure. In her book *An Archive of Feeling*, Ann Cvetkovich argued that one must look in unlikely places to uncover archives of queer experience. She spoke primarily of discovering shared responses to the structural traumas of queer oppression and sexual violence. Yet, in unpacking the web of meanings attached to "The Rose," a different sort of hidden archive of feeling emerges, one wherein numerous participants in underground slash spaces planted dreams of new ways to imagine and author community, sexuality, gender, and identity.

Although convention culture did not disappear with Zebracon, and indeed many new conventions have since flourished, to some extent the waning of Zebracon marked generational shifts in slash culture and illuminates the layered technological transitions from the print, cassette, and VHS era to the computer era. This project analyzes and documents these years of transition from the late 1990s through the first decade of the 2000s as the cultures, practices, texts, and people that constituted pre-digital slash culture came into contact with a vast influx of new fans, new technologies, and new media strategies. Studying slash in these years thus reflects the larger cultural problematic of the relationship between media industries and audiences within convergence culture and technological change. "The Rose" is itself a palimpsest of this mixed moment, a term used by Mafalda Stasi to describe fan fiction because it specializes in constructing thick strata of meaning by layering a series of cultural reinterpretations upon each other. "The Rose" came to be sung at the Saturday evening party of every Zebracon because it was also the soundtrack of one of the first VHS fan-edited videos, or "vids," made in the *Starsky and Hutch* fandom. Created by Kendra Hunter and Diana Barbour in 1980, the vid laid the song to one continuous piece of footage, which nonetheless strikingly synchs the song's lyrics to the characters' expressions and actions from a scene many fans could immediately recognize as emotionally resonant, an impressive feat that makes the most of the inability to create multiple cuts on early VHS machines. Singing "The Rose" thereby originally encapsulated shared insider knowledge of the vid's very hidden and low-circulation existence, as well as the fannish knowledge of *Starsky and Hutch* and slash investment in the subtextual romantic and/or erotic interpretation of their relationship, which together made the original vid meaningful; the song thus served as a collective experience of pleasurable remembering of both the vid and the source text, as well as a moment for the construction of community through

the ritualized invocation of this shared knowledge, shared interpretative frame, and shared emotional investment.

Yet, over three decades, the repeated singing of "The Rose" took on other, new meanings. Over time, the song came to evoke fans' many experiences of the con itself, and the people, texts, and practices that flourished there. Particularly because the vid derived from very early VHS vidding aesthetics and technologies, it speaks to Zebracon's deep association with earlier stages of slash culture, those rooted in pre-digital technologies and the print cultures that surrounded them. Although in some fan cultures print 'zines are still produced, especially in commemorative editions, the last years of Zebracon also coincided with a slow reduction in the demand for hard-copy fan fiction, and the gradual elimination of a 'zine sales room from many conventions. Likewise, Zebracon's vidshow would also become one of the last to run primarily on VHS; other conventions gradually transitioned to DVD and computer projection, prompting a drive among some fans to preserve and digitize VHS vids and print 'zines, as well as the history of those artistic, literary, social, and analytic forms.[1] Further, Zebracon survived for so long by incorporating new fandoms as slash grew and changed over time, but at its core still retained a commitment to keeping some of the first slash fandoms alive, *Starsky and Hutch* most centrally, but also *The Professionals*, the original *Star Trek*, *Blake's 7*, *Simon & Simon*, *I Spy*, and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, as well as fading mid-'90s fandoms like *Due South, Stargate: SG1, Highlander: The Series*, and *The Sentinel*. As a result, Zebracon became an important locus where new fans might encounter still active older fandoms.

The nostalgic melancholia associated with the end of Zebracon encapsulated in "The Rose" thus connects to that con's role in maintaining pre-digital slash fandoms and practices. Especially for those fans who have never seen the vid or watched *Starsky and Hutch*, singing "The Rose" may become all the more tied directly to their personal experiences and memories of the convention itself, and the unique encounters made possible by its shared space. Importantly, this moment connotes not only loss, but also pride in the way in which slash has changed, grown, and survived over time. Within this reading, slash culture itself also becomes the stubborn rose that has endured the winter of the mimeograph's demise and *Star Trek*'s cancellation, and will successfully adapt again to whatever challenges the digital environment presents.

Furthermore, "The Rose" additionally carries the weight of other slash experiences, emotions, and spaces. As a place of contact in a transitional moment, many of the people circulating at Zebracon could be expected to carry memories of digitally-mediated slash, including new, online vids also appropriating "The Rose" to tell their own stories. A particularly resonant version, also titled "The Rose," made by Morgaine using clips from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* points toward some of the shifts in slash culture facilitated by the internet. Aesthetically, Morgaine's vid does not take advantage of the

millisecond cutting and special effects made possible by computer video editing; instead, it borrows from the visual standards of VHS vidding practice, which favored longer clips when later VHS technology made cutting feasible but cumbersome. Yet, its ensemble treatment of the many romantic relationships within *Buffy* points toward the increasing availability, visibility, and importance of female characters and female/female slash, known as femslash. The almost exclusive focus on male/male relationships in earlier slash resulted from a combination of mass-media restrictions and fan community norms. In the first case, the number of male characters on television vastly outnumbered female characters, especially in terms of the main characters who develop their own personality and storyline, a problem that persists to the present day, although the numbers have improved somewhat over time. Even as many ensemble television series began to add diversity to their cast, this usually resulted in tokenism, wherein one character of color and one woman joined a group of white male characters, meaning that such shows rarely offered the kind of interaction between more than one woman or person of color likely to inspire slash.

Series like *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy*, which offered viewers many richly developed female characters who interacted with each other, frequently encouraged the creation of large, enthusiastic femslash communities, mostly on the developing fan infrastructure within the early internet. As such, these fandoms organized themselves differently than those whose origins preceded listservs and webpages. Internet publishing contrasted strongly with nonprofit 'zines whose circulation was governed by the economics of risk aversion, which required that 'zine editors find a stable audience to foot the at-cost price of printing and binding. This need, combined with community taboos and beliefs about audience preferences, allowed 'zine editorial controls to restrict the variety of fan fiction produced in the print era (Bacon-Smith 7–43, 81–114; Coppa; Verba). Although femslash certainly existed during-that period, the ability to publish in advance of demand and without a clear preconception of the audience, with no editorial controls, and to an amorphous audience not determined by the in-person limitations of existing fan networks, helped femslash to expand greatly in the digital age. This holds true for fiction containing both elements that contradicted fan systems of categorization, like mixed gender polyamory, which cannot easily fit within either heterosexual ("het") fiction or slash, and fiction that directly contested fan taboos, such as against real-person fiction or real-person slash ("RPF" or "RPS"), which depicts actors rather than the characters they play, as well as musicians, politicians, and historical figures. All of these expanded greatly at various points when the internet supplanted the traditional editorial controls of the 'zine system.

However, this greater public visibility also entailed a loss of safety for many fans who felt that the internet would expose fandom to legal challenges, public scorn, and the constant attention of "outsiders" who might maliciously disrupt their spaces and practices, or who might try to join in

without understanding or accepting their cultural norms. Thus, the vast influx of new fans and the disruption of established cultural standards created intense anxiety among certain existing fans, while many others welcomed the new online opportunities. This situation parallels widespread crises in the social consensus about what it means to be "in public" when online, and how attitudes about and rights governing privacy in digital space continue to transform. The internet has allowed an unprecedented number of people to make their lives, opinions, and creative expressions public, while also constructing numerous flexibly public but anonymous spaces wherein previously silenced groups can find each other and gather. However, both phenomena also come with unintended consequences and dangers that can leave some people feeling painfully exposed and others the target of anonymous harassment.

Slash communities' migration from primarily print and in-person spaces to digital spaces reflects these cultural tensions over the meaning of publicness in the digital era. While the online environment drastically expanded the size and reach of the slash community, and some fans fully embrace fan spaces as public spaces where fan works and professional works circulate side-by-side and anyone can discover fandom, others remain strongly protective and reinvest in protocols for secrecy developed in the print- and early web 1.0 era, including pseudonyms, hidden forums, and deliberately secretive, low-circulation distribution networks. In this way, fans' evolving cultural norms about whether fan spaces should be considered public or private offer a window into larger cultural questions about the fate of privacy as modern life becomes increasingly saturated by digital surveillance, and the promise and potential of amateur producers' access to nearly unlimited audiences via web self-publication. As a result, this project examines the way that fans, corporations, academics, and lawyers negotiate the meaning and potential of digital public space.

Thereby, while viewing the *Starsky and Hutch* version of "The Rose" required investing over a long period of time in a network of fan contacts and cultural events in order to acquire one of the few physical copies or gain entrance to the small number of screenings, Morgaine's version circulated freely online, without even the password protection that many vidders once used to provide access only to those already accepted within the community. Since femslash was considered unusual rather than morally incorrect by dominant fan norms, Morgaine's vid did not contain anything that overtly contravened dominant fan taboos of that time, such as underage relationships. However, it did bring together both femslash and het relationships, modes of representation often kept deliberately separate, both spatially and artistically, since it contravened fan genre expectations, and because slash was distributed in a much more clandestine manner than het or "gen" (i.e. non-romantic/erotic) materials. The internet thus often facilitated a greater degree of hybridization and contact between fandoms, styles, and genres (Coppa). Although some online platforms reinforced and

constructed specialization and separation, such as the numerous listserv groups or web archives with tightly delineated rules of discourse dedicated to only one mode for representing a particular relationship, many other web technologies fostered unlikely contact between formerly discrete categories and created collages of mixed content, such as LiveJournal and large, centralized web archives, as well as the later development of platforms like Twitter and Tumblr. In some ways, these online technologies mimicked the free, carnivalesque space of pre-digital conventions where unforeseen encounters between people, media objects, and fan works might occur; yet, online this space of encounter extended and proliferated in time and geographical reach, vastly increasing the number of people who could access its expanding limits.

Therefore, a tangle of multiple meanings fill "The Rose" to overflowing, leaving some fans invigorated, others afraid, others in mourning, some ashamed, and some alienated, but all held together within this shifting web of meaning, made possible by repeated encounters in physical and digital slash spaces. "The Rose" represents merely one object among thousands that resonate within different subsections and generations of slash fandom, and indeed fandom at large. Its layered history and the multivalent emotions, memories, cultural resignifications, and investments it supports represent the way in which slash functions as a space where participants encounter and author numerous dreams, desires, and relationships, both in fictional stories and in practice as they interact with each other. Slash means something different to each of them and they each author new meanings under its aegis, while the term "slash" itself becomes not a determinate reality but the passcode that opens a shifting space of possibility.

In Chapter 7 I use the term "pocket public" to describe the tactics necessary to secure these spaces of possibility, and the practices enabled by designating a liminal zone of private public space where alternate social rules may thrive. I based my concept of a "pocket public" partly on the string theory term "pocket universe," defined by Alan Guth as pockets of ordinary space existing in parallel with our own reality, which nonetheless each contain their own internally consistent but completely unique natural laws. Yet, in many ways my usage of the term is more greatly indebted to the genre of urban fantasy, which frequently relies on the trope that mythical creatures live alongside our everyday reality in pockets of space invisible to ordinary sight. The *Harry Potter* series used this convention to explain how entire cities of wizards existed all over the world, without drawing the notice of non-magical people. Harry describes the way in which insiders notice the entrance to the wizarding world while outsiders' gazes seamlessly slide away:

> "This is it," said Hagrid, coming to a halt, "the Leaky Cauldron. It's a famous place."
>
> It was a tiny, grubby-looking pub. If Hagrid hadn't pointed it out, Harry wouldn't have noticed it was there. The people hurrying by

> didn't glance at it. Their eyes slid from the big book shop on one side to the record shop on the other as if they couldn't see the Leaky Cauldron at all. In fact, Harry had the most peculiar feeling that only he and Hagrid could see it.
>
> (Rowling 52–53)

Pockets of public space where slash texts and participants meet and circulate function similarly. Claimed and protected by passwords, codewords, and word-of-mouth, entrances into slash space often lie hidden in plain sight in hotel lobbies, in office cubicles, within mass-media narratives, and woven into the fabric of digital space. Yet, if these entrances are seen and recognized, they can transport passersby beyond expected perception into a network of often much more private spaces: personal hotel rooms, house parties, and private internet servers.

While some of the conclusions drawn in this project may apply to fans and fan spaces beyond slash and in eras outside the study period, the purpose of this project is to understand the social and artistic practices that unfolded around the turn of the millennium within that zone of possibility opened through the tactics of constructing and protecting pocket publics and social circulation of the term "slash." Because slash involves almost exclusively female amateur authors constructing same-sex relationships between usually male characters, and thus falls beyond normative notions of gender, sexuality, and audience identification, journalists, academics, and slashers themselves frequently want to know why women invest in male same-sex erotics. Similarly, for political purposes many attempt to situate slash as either romance or pornography, either progressive or misogynist, homophobic, racist, and exclusionary. All of these strategies come up short among the plethora of routes by which individuals find slash, their personal reasons for staying, and the unique moments, texts, and relationships that signify "slash" for that particular person in that particular time.

This principle first started to solidify for me when, wracked by melodramatic anxiety that my academic project would alienate me from the slash community, I asked a close friend who entered fandom with me whether writing an academic book about slash would "make everyone hate me." Sighing, she explained, "Anne, fandom has never agreed on anything. They're not going to start by all agreeing to hate you." Within these words of wisdom lie both a rebuke and a form of liberation. Her reproach isolated the common tendency to treat slash, fandom, or even all fans as a totality, as if its people and products have one homogenous, underlying cause, objective, and significance just waiting for a persistent academic or journalist to uncover. This approach pervades textual, anthropological, and psychological approaches to studying fans, and often to study of popular culture in general. As I have argued elsewhere, slash particularly pushes academic fictions to the breaking point because although many participants experience fandom as a coherent identity and community, it remains nearly impossible to truly generalize from

experiences and observations of one set of texts, people and practices onto the entire fragmented patchwork of digital, in-person, and pre-digital spaces and relationships organized within the term slash (Kustritz, "Homework"; Kustritz, "Transnationalism"). There are numerous contradictory arguments, lessons, studies, and stories to be told about slash, and the truth of one need not detract from the importance and truth of another.

The inability to meet institutional standards of knowledge by producing one definitive account of slash's political significance, slashers' particular psychology, or slash culture's key symbols or rituals may at first seem like a profound failure. Yet, this is just the sort of "failure" described by Jack Halberstam in his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, which exposes the flaws inherent to institutionally entrenched definitions of success and leads toward detours where productive paths to new methods, aesthetics, and ways of knowing might be discovered. This project therefore takes place in the gaps created by several disciplinary crises. In analysis of popular culture, a dizzying array of "turns" toward morality, affect, neurobiology, and set theory have each attempted to fill the void left by post-structuralist deconstruction of metanarratives, which made approaches that prescribe one meaning of popular culture impractical. Likewise, the anthropological project remains seriously destabilized in the wake of feminist, queer, and post-colonial critiques of ethnographic practice, while often still clinging to the tattered remains of its scientific credibility. In both cases, slash's stubborn refusal to submit to a single definition, value, ideology, location, or aesthetic becomes instructive rather than problematic. Thus, as a dialogue between many versions of the same characters, places, and/or events, fan fiction offers a unique glimpse of a space wherein multiple contradictory truths may all coexist.

Thereby my method for representing slash fan fiction spaces, people, and cultures borrows from the tradition of experimental ethnographic writing, but the particular complication of describing slash fans requires its own methodological innovations. Perhaps most famously in the anthologies *Writing Culture* and *Women Writing Culture*, experimental ethnographic writing takes many forms, each focused on displacing the colonial (and hetero-patriarchal) power structures inherent to the traditional stylistics of the discipline (Clifford and Marcus; Behar and Gordon). Many of these experiments seek to demonstrate that even after anthropology's fall from scientific grace, ethnographic work retains value as a record of the irreproducible intersection between human lives. As argued by Ruth Behar, anthropology's ability to tell multiple stories becomes a strength as each one differently reflects the complexity of producing knowledge from the meeting between individuals, each with their own very particular autobiography and place in history and culture (Behar, "Ethnography"; Behar, *Traveling*; Behar, *Vulnerable Observer*; Behar and Brink-Danan).

Common tactics to displace the anthropologist's univocal authority over the process of knowledge creation include the incorporation of long, uninterrupted sections of fieldnotes, overlapping between fiction and non-fiction,

clear incorporation of the author's story and point of view, and the intensive use of photographs. In response I have included several self-reflexive elements both in this introduction and in Chapter 1 to stylistically frame my ethnographic knowledge production as resulting from contingencies of my own history, as advocated by native anthropologists, post-colonial anthropologists, and auto-ethnographers (Kuntsman; Visweswaran). In dealing specifically with the increasingly mediated world of post-modern culture, Charles Soukup advocates writing ethnographies that mimic the experience of living within multiple, overlapping media. In Part II I have similarly attempted to allow my reader to simulate the experience of reading in a fan fiction community, where every story must be read within the context of multiple other, equally plausible and pleasurable alternate narratives. By juxtaposing several different close readings, I attempt to provide my reader experiential access to the multiple narrative space that slash readers and writers produce and live within.

Aside from formal changes in layout and genre, many tactics of experimental writing seek to disturb and displace the anthropologist's exclusive authority. Thus some, like Gelya Frank, advocate giving research participants veto power over the completed text. Others make their participants into writing collaborators, either by asking them to write whole chapters as in Mitchell Duneier's partnership with Hakim Hasan in *Sidewalk*, or by interspersing writing by the anthropologist and participant, for example in the collaboration between Paloma Gay y Blasco and Liria de la Cruz Hernández. Yet, many of these models rely on finding and elevating one "key informant" or "native intellectual," and assume that the anthropologist's text functions as the research participants' best or only access to publication and distribution of their reflections.

In contrast, somewhat uniquely but also more and more common given increasing access to self-publishing via the internet, fan communities have a long tradition of publishing their own analytic and creative work. While some of my work followed conventions where fans congregate together in person, the digitally-mediated field in which I performed most of my research has absolutely no natural end in either space or time, making it difficult to definitively separate free time and work time, academic research and personal pleasures, the field and "normal life." Experienced by many scholars of popular culture, some lament the loss of a taken-for-granted space of entertainment separate from the academic impulse of analysis, but others come to find pleasure in this hybrid position of constant cultural critique; when used to read "against the grain" of dominant cultural hierarchies of race and gender, this way of looking was described by bell hooks as the cultivation of an "oppositional gaze" (115–131). Yet, assigning this role only to academics who study popular culture, or even to academics who are themselves fans, known as an "aca-fan," undermines and underestimates the way in which many lay people and fans also engage in forms of cultural critique outside the academy. Henry Jenkins famously championed these fan-analytic activities,

and although Matt Hills argues that fans invest in affect over analysis, it is worth taking seriously all the genres and forms in which those excluded from the professional publishing apparatus find to analyze, critique, and make sense of their lives (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*). Like the aca-fan, the fabric of life for many fans consists of a hybrid field in which culture is constantly both loved and interrogated, simultaneously from the perspective of affect, aesthetics, and ideology.

Multiple methods and approaches are therefore layered throughout this text, moving between scenes from fieldnotes, to recollections, self-reflexivity, statistics, academic theory, fan theory, and close-readings of fan texts and events, partly to unseat the absolute authority granted to any of these sources of information, but also to treat fan essays and creative works just as seriously as academic theories and texts as sources of legitimate knowledge about fans' experiences. This means accepting that fan knowledge-creation and analysis comes in many forms, ranging from traditional essays, to group discussions, to art including fiction, video, and hand-crafts. These myriad forms produce a hybridized type of analytic-affective-erotic knowledge. Elsewhere I have called fan works a "genre commensurate form" of analysis because, through these multiple media, fan works match the strengths of the media that they critique and transform, often answering video with video, or offsetting the limitations of one medium with the strengths of another, as in compensating for film's limited access to characters' interiority with fiction's thick psychological descriptions (Kustritz, "Re: Public Sphere"; Levin Russo). It is one thing to find oneself convinced that a work of art contained problematic ideologies, and certainly fan essays make such arguments, but it is another thing entirely to interact with a transformative piece of art that works upon the very aesthetic and emotive dimensions as the original piece.

Thus, rather than use academic work to understand fan works, I have attempted to ask what fan texts can teach everyone about community, sexuality, popular culture, and imagination. Thereby, this text represents a dialogue between fan thinkers and academic thinkers, between my experiences, and those of my participants. Whenever possible, I have tried to honor the self-knowledge, language, and conceptual frameworks that derive from within slash fan fiction cultures, starting by organizing my inquiry, as fans organize their social and artistic infrastructures, around the term slash itself.

Points of Departure

This book is an ode to multiple arrivals and open endings. In the tradition of works like Bronisław Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, Clifford Geertz famously argued that ethnographies often establish their credibility by beginning with an "arrival scene" that richly describes the anthropologist's first contact with a foreign object of study (Geertz 1–24). Yet, the division and instability of fan cultures requires constant reflection on what it means to be an insider and an

outsider, and many lenses and directions of approach through which the fragmented field might be encountered anew. As I have argued here and elsewhere, there is no universally accepted moment when one becomes a fan, and even within slash vast differences exist between generations, languages, nationalities, technologies, genres, and spaces (Kustritz, "Homework"). Therefore, involvement in slash consists of constant, repeated arrivals to each of the community's diverse on- and off-line spaces, and across time as fashions, aesthetics, and platforms enable new formations. Dealing with each of these facets requires borrowing from the methods of many disciplines, and therefore this book consists of several different "arrivals" at slash culture, each approaching the topic from a different perspective. Yet, as a field of constantly proliferating discourses dedicated to opening closed narratives and continuous expansion, it is also fitting to always retain room in any account of slash activities for one more chapter, one more study, one more truth, and one more arrival at an unforeseen horizon of possibility. Therefore, these approaches seek not to close but to open a discussion of how slash communities navigated the digital transition, and what these years can still teach about current slash cultures and the future of digital expression.

Part I consists of two chapters that introduce readers to the people and texts that populated slash spaces during the digital transition. Chapter 1, "Mediated Travel and Digital Ethnography in Slash Spaces: Assembling Identity and Community," considers slash as a community and an identity from the perspective of critical ethnology and ethnographic research. Over the course of nearly a decade, I engaged in online as well as embodied ethnographic interviews and participant-observation. Key themes include the problematics of media(ted) anthropology, the role of class and cultivation in slash communities, and demographic data that unseats established conclusions about slashers' age and sexual orientation. While anthropological methods contribute a vibrantly embodied level of detail and multiple perspectives, I also attempt to situate my ethnographic data as suggestive, but necessarily limited. Importantly, because the individual is the instrument of measurement in ethnography, my own overlapping identities as white, female, and American (among many other categories) acted as central mediating variables that could facilitate some connections and exchanges while undermining others. In addition, the path of my own idiosyncratic travels through often hidden slash communities has affected which practices I've been privy to as well as which stories I read, and the nearly infinite subgroups within the community make truly representative sampling practically impossible. As a result, it would be methodologically inappropriate to directly generalize my findings outside of slash fandom, or indeed even to generalize them too broadly away from the specific spaces and times in which I participated directly.

However, this methodological problem also offers an insight into the way that average participants abstract their notion of group identity and textual meaning, i.e. their sense of what slash is, from limited, personal experiences

within only some slash spaces and some slash texts. These unpredictable experiences may facilitate some participants' construction of hybrid social and sexual identities, while living in a largely female community that normalizes a "benign" range of sexualities may enrich other participants' ability to think through the impact of heteronormativity and their own heterosexual identity. In the end, although "slash" does not describe a truly shared identity, it does become the organizing principle through which many participants create meaningful identities and lasting relationships.

Chapter 2 "Parallel Lives: Body Symbolism in a Multiple Narrative Space," introduces slash texts and develops a theory of the narrative space constructed by slash writers' and readers' ability to cycle through many versions of the same story. Chapter 2 thereby engages with literary criticism, particularly feminist literary theory and the works of Walter Benjamin, to argue that ideological analysis of slash texts must move between analysis of the many slash-specific genres and close-reading of individual texts. This technique seeks to balance between the shared social context of the stories' production, each story's particularities, and the lack of editorial control, which produces a staggering variety of narrative forms. Because slash includes numerous (sub)genres and narrative styles, as a textual practice the content of slash stories collectively advocates no single aesthetic or ideology, but instead produces a "multiple narrative space" that broadens the field of acceptable sexual and social possibility by upsetting systems of coercion, which police what can and cannot be said and known in public. I therefore advocate thinking about slash as a queer, intersectional feminist space, characterized as such because hybrid depictions of sexuality, including articulations of desire more complex than the biological sex of object choice, aim binary busting, inherently queer challenges to both patriarchy and heteronormativity. An intersectional focus redirects questions about the ethics of sexual and community life from the moral content of sexual acts themselves to consideration of systems of power and representation that constrain and shape people's ability to think about and evaluate their safe, intelligible, culturally approved choices for constructing a way of life.

As a form, slash fan fiction uniformly equalizes only one vector of power: social signifiers of biological sex and their attendant cultural meanings. Critically, this means that slash stories do not coherently or uniformly alter any other vectors of power and thus frequently leave in place other forms of hierarchy, including those associated with class, race, citizenship status, etc. Important work, perhaps most notably by Rukmini Pande in *Squee from the Margins*, has been done in recent years to track the function of systems of hierarchy within fan communities (Bay; Coker and Viars; Gatson and Reid; Jenkins, "Negotiating"; Johnson; Kang; Martin; Middlemost; Morimoto; Pande, "How (not) to Talk"; Stanfill, "Introduction"; Stanfill, "Unbearable Whiteness"; Young; Wanzo). Yet, by structurally manipulating the effects of biological equivalence alone, slash stages in public space a range of multifaceted sexual and relational questions and possibilities. Instead of an

ideologically pure reversal or "counter" to culture industry productions, fan fiction's multiplicity of stylistic and narrative modes encourage an approach to representational politics that shifts focus from identifying fixed types of storytelling that undermine hierarchy, to an analysis of systems that shape and constrain the kinds of speech and narrative available in public space. By making numerous accounts of sexual, social, and community life available to a theoretically infinite digital public, online slash spaces offer a unique case study in the internet's ability to sustain a vibrant, democratic forum for artistic, critical, and pleasurable discourses.

The second section consists of an experimental "Chapter 3" divided into several essays, each providing a close reading of particular slash texts, genres, and themes. Thus, "Five Ways Mary Sue Never Had Sex" sets a series of close-readings in dialogue to balance between the specificity of individual stories and genres, and the social context of slash production and circulation, which reads stories as part of an ongoing community conversation wherein participants routinely interact with many versions of the same characters and events. The chapter thereby attempts to simulate the experience of reading within the slash community's production of what I have called multiple narrative space. Juxtaposing five (or more) distinct sexual aesthetics suggests the constantly expanding proliferation of sexual fantasies and subject positions available under the umbrella term "slash," including many that incorporate types of violence, a mode often overlooked in academic analyses, while also gesturing toward the unique storytelling made possible by the use of two same-sexed bodies that carry equivalent biological sexual signifiers.

First, examining the symbolic significance of interpenetration suggests large-scale ramifications in the meanings assigned to sexual acts, while outlining the possibility of multiple, similarly moral and desirable egalitarianisms. Second, fans' investment in "flawed" characters and professional texts gestures toward the possibility of accepting numerous "good lives." Third, same-sexed characters' negotiation of consensual violence within the frame of chivalric "suffering for love" prompts a reconsideration of sexual submission. Fourth, a state-mandated form of consensual violence between same-sexed but opposite-gendered partners raises concerns about the co-construction of gender, biological sex, and sexual domination in historical and contemporary debates about marriage. Fifth, non-consensual violence between same-sexed partners offers a series of troubling but resonant questions regarding the kind of egalitarianism built through mutual aggression, and intimate partners' ability to cope with otherness, forgiveness, and recognition in the wake of violence. Sixth, a same-sex couple at opposite ends of colonial hierarchy illustrates the complexities that arise when analyzing romance as an intersectional political metaphor, within the context of colonial memory. Finally, reflecting on polyamorous writing challenges the boundaries of the category "slash" and suggests the flexibility of slash space as a forum wherein new possibilities may emerge. Together, these textual analyses build a holistic, but never completed picture that requires the (mostly) peaceful coexistence of multiple,

constantly proliferating modes of imagining pleasure, storytelling, and living to fully understand slash fan fiction at the level of content.

While Parts I and II chart spaces and introduce people and texts, Part III draws upon a combination of legal anthropology and cultural studies of law to consider the legal and social frameworks that limit and structure slash production, as well as the community's development of its own norms and discursive standards. Multinational conglomerates and international law have scrambled to redefine copyright and obscenity law in an era characterized by massive debates over the internet's facilitation of copying. These chapters highlight the everyday world of informal legal struggle that takes place outside of courtrooms as corporations and fans attempt to both win over hearts and minds while also marshaling their resources competitively. As a result, they examine the function of hybrid sociolegal concepts that combine ideology, economics, and law. Thus, Chapter 4 examines how stories told by rival fan groups about pirates reveal tensions between fans and corporations, highlight differences between fan communities' moral and economic norms, and offer narrative resources for imagining alternate forms of distribution. Chapter 5 looks at resonances between fan fiction and court cases involving the novel *The Wind Done Gone* and artist Richard Prince to consider the cultural stakes involved in pastiche, wherein new works threaten the authoritative social status of the "original." Chapter 6 unravels the unequal power dynamics that allow corporations to use sociolegal strategies to enforce a version of legal storytelling favorable to their own interests, and the tactics used by fans to push back and enforce their own internal communicative norms and ethics. Together, these three chapters map the informal legal landscape wherein fans and corporations negotiate the governance of digital space on an everyday basis.

Chapter 7, "Things I Never Imagined: Unpredictable Encounters in a Pocket Public," concludes the book by placing the social, textual, and legal analyses of the previous chapters within the context of public sphere theory, arguing for the power of slash's increasingly public visibility, and its continued liminal position as a protected "pocket public." Although many fans experience online slash spaces as private and intimate, the openness of online environments has vastly increased overall awareness of slash, and enhanced the ability of previously uninvited, uninitiated strangers to discover and join slash communities. The gap between some fans' feeling that online slash spaces remain private even when publicly available marks an important contradiction of modern digital life, and the slash community's struggle with tactics for balancing visibility and safety offers instructive insights into the power and danger of mediated publicness. Although internal hierarchies, exclusions, contestation, and divisions certainly exist, at its best, by creating a public forum that puts numerous textual, virtual, and embodied performances of sex, gender, and social life into dialogue, slash creates a location for unpredictable collisions between people, ideas, and pleasures, thereby establishing common space for the construction of new imaginaries. By

encountering slash some people form complex queer identities, some place primacy on textual sexuality, others invest in largely female communities and friendships, some invest in same-sex and/or same-gendered erotics, while others reexamine their political and personal beliefs after witnessing kinds of sexual and social life that dominant regimes of representation deem unimaginable. None of these experiences occur all of the time for everyone involved in slash, but the opportunity to encounter and author new ways of experiencing pleasure, relationships, and ways of living, whether through slash texts or community processes, remains a valuable potential in and of itself. Exploring slash as a scholar, reader, author, artist, or interested bystander affords unparalleled glimpses of a constantly expanding horizon for representation and practice whose limits remain always just beyond our current ability to fully imagine.

In sum, this book argues against understanding slash fan fiction as a coherent activity, and against categorizing slashers as a homogenous "kind of person." Thus, this project takes slash as its subject on ethnographic more than theoretical terms; this inquiry is interested in slash not as a fixed essence or a demographic boundary, but as a term used dynamically in practice by individuals and communities to construct and express experiences, texts, and spaces of social and artistic circulation. As a result, this book celebrates the variety of life experiences that bring participants to slash, the variety of identities and relationships they build within the community, the variety of narrative forms and genres within slash texts, and the many physical and online spaces that organize themselves around the label slash. This variety and multiplicity is what allows slash to become an impetus for creativity and discovery at the edges of imagination. Offering disciplinary lenses and methods, including anthropology, literary theory, close reading, legal criticism, and public sphere theory, each chapter explores a different aspect of slash and provides its own "arrival" into slash identities, communities, practices, and spaces; yet, each chapter also emphasizes the role that multiplicity plays in constructing slash as a laboratory for the playful production of new pleasures and possibilities.

Note

1 The University of Iowa library also has a special collection for fan materials, in cooperation with fan archivists and the non-profit Organization for Transformative Works, called "The Fan Culture Preservation Project."

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