

“Slight dub-con but they both wanted it  
hardcore”: Erotic fanfiction as a form of cultural  
activism around sexual consent

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## **Abstract**

In this thesis I argue that the treatment of issues of sexual consent in erotic fanfiction can be viewed as a form of cultural activism.

Using a combination of traditional, digital and autoethnography, as well as discourse analysis, I trace engagements with sexual consent among readers and writers of erotic fanfiction both in their creative output published on sites such as the Archive of Our Own and in their conversations and day-to-day interactions with each other as well as beyond the fandom community.

The original contribution of this work is two-fold. Firstly, it maps in detail some of the ways in which sexual consent, particularly in the presence of power differentials, is treated in erotic fanfiction. I argue that through the use of techniques particular to fanfiction, readers and writers within this community are able to issue powerful challenges to dominant discourses about gender, romance, sexuality, and consent. Secondly, I argue that these engagements can be viewed as a distinct form of cultural activism. While cultural activism is traditionally seen as directed outwards to the general public, the production, circulation, and discussion of fanfiction allows the community to form powerful alternative imaginaries of sexuality and consent, make prefigurative gestures, and establish a praxis of consent within the community itself. The knowledges generated in these ways are then applied to community members' own day-to-day lives and engagements with sexuality, consent, and rape culture. This points to the fanfiction community as a source of a powerful discursive resistance on issues of rape and consent, and supports an expansion of the definition of cultural activism to cover activities directed at challenging internalised dominant discourses within the boundaries of a community.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

You know what the magic word— the only thing that matters in American sexual mores today is one thing. You can do anything. The left will promote, and understand, and tolerate anything as long as there is one element. Do you know what it is? Consent. If there is consent on both or all three or all four, however many are involved in the sex act, it's perfectly fine, whatever it is. But if the left ever senses and smells that there's no consent in part of the equation then here come the rape police. But consent is the magic key to the left.

---

Rush Limbaugh, October 2016 (Media Matters, 2016)

This is a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action out of his 20 plus years of life. The fact that he now has to register as a sexual offender for the rest of his life forever alters where he can live, visit, work, and how he will be able to interact with people and organizations.

---

Dan A. Turner, June 2016 (Cleary, 2016)

It is not clear how anyone is supposed to prove that consent was given. Is the CPS really suggesting that you have to get a signed statement off someone before they have sex?

---

Philip Davies MP, January 2015 (Drury, 2015)

## 1.1 The grey areas of rape culture

American talk radio host Rush Limbaugh defends then Presidential candidate Donald Trump for boasting about how he can “grab [women] by the pussy” (Jacobs, Siddiqui and Bixby, 2016) by casting the idea of sexual consent as a strange, outlandish, immoral invention of “the left”. The father of Brock Turner, a college student convicted of three counts of felony sexual assault of an unconscious woman after a campus party and sentenced to a mere six months in prison, bemoans the harsh sentence for what he calls “20 minutes of action”. A sitting UK MP argues that the only way for men to protect themselves from false rape allegations is to get a signed contract before sex. This is rape culture. Current and historical high-profile rape cases are covered in the media on a daily basis. In the UK alone, over 200 women are raped every single day (Ministry of Justice, Home Office and Office of National Statistics, 2013). At the same time those in power—from Members of Parliament, to judges, to talkshow hosts—routinely dismiss rape allegations. Even in the most egregious cases, like that of Brock Turner, they find ways of blaming the victims and protecting the accused and guilty. And while feminist campaigners have been pushing against rape culture and for better education about consent, it is clear that sexual consent is—at best—a contested topic in contemporary Western societies and cultures. Comments and cases such as these have gained prominence in the media and public attention partly because they are relatively clear-cut: two men witnessed and stopped Brock Turner’s actions, and their testimony was crucial in securing his conviction (Levin, 2016). Yet focusing solely on these cases risks obscuring experiences of sexual violence and consent violations that are less clear-cut and may fall in a problematic liminal space between “yes” and “no” for a variety of reasons.

2011:

I am at a young and trendy feminist activist conference. It is full of the rising stars of British media feminism, but there are also a handful of women who have been doing this for a while. It is one of those women who, sitting on the floor in a packed room, tells us how for years she genuinely believed that once a man had an erection it was her duty to make sure he had an orgasm, lest he die of “blue balls”.

\*\*\*

2017:

Then something happened that was not ok

Everything wobbled.

“That is unacceptable to me.”

How does she voice that and feel safe.

Not knowing the rules.

The one condom two women situation.

She was confronted by her inability to ask for what she needed, to know what it was she needed and then ask for it. She is shocked at not being able to say no in the moment—she didn’t trust her own sense of that’s not ok. Why was she so worried about how that would look in the peer group?

There was an incipient fear that she would be ostracized; become an even more peripheral participant than she was feeling. (Kirkpatrick and Mendus, 2017)

\*\*\*

2017:

In a Twitter thread, writer Alex Gabriel talks about how the erasure of asexuality from Sex and Relationships Education left him, as an asexual person, poorly equipped to meaningfully consent to sex for a significant part of his life. He talks about how being unable to distinguish between sexual and other types of attraction put him in a position where he consented to sex that he nonetheless experienced as a violation:

But rather: it’s clear in retrospect that between the ages of, like, 15 and 22, \*I Was Not In A Position To Assent To Sex\*. ... and that’s about culture & sex education & ace-invisibility & how we talk about desire. It happened bc I lacked the necessary awareness. When I think about my sexual history, such as it is, it feels like being raped by no one in particular. (Gabriel, 2017)

What these three accounts have in common is that the sexual experiences they relate would, by both law and “common sense”, be regarded as consensual. And yet, upon reflection, those who experienced them now characterise them as consent violations. If the utterances of Limbaugh, Turner, and Davies paint a picture of consent as contested, the latter three testimonies would suggest that it is more complex still than even those of us Rush Limbaugh calls “the left” would imagine. And while there is still plenty of work to be done in both research and activism on the arguably less complex cases, those perceived as consent violations at the time they occurred, my interest lies in the latter set: those cases where the operation of power, the discursive construction of what is and is not normal sex, the subject positions available to an individual, may impact their ability to give meaningful consent.

Feminist academic approaches to sexual violence and consent are diverse and multidisciplinary. Scholars from fields such as psychology, feminist legal theory, and cultural studies have made important contributions. Yet even within feminist academia, consent in its own right is significantly undertheorised (Beres, 2007), and scholars struggle to account for the vast grey areas the latter three examples reveal. Gavey (2005) calls the kind of dominant discursive construction of what “normal” (hetero)sex looks like that makes it difficult to name such experiences as violations the “cultural scaffolding of rape”. There is, however, another community—not academic, not overtly activist—that has developed a word for this. Readers and writers of erotic fanfiction would call the above three examples “dubcon”: dubious consent.

## 1.2 Erotic fanfiction and consent

Part of the title of this thesis is taken from a tag on the fanfiction website Archive of Our Own (AO3): “slight dub-con but they both wanted it hardcore”. Tags on the Archive of Our Own—a fan-owned, fan-run online archive hosting over three million fan works as of June 2017—are pieces of metadata, intended to facilitate the organisation and searchability of such fan works. Yet their usage in the fanfiction community makes them so much more than that. And those eight words, “slight dub-con but they both wanted it hardcore”, perfectly encapsulate one of the things that community does, not only with its tags, but with large sections of its creative output, its day-to-day interactions and practices: the nuanced engagement with issues of sexual consent that

I found in fanfiction circles long before I started researching it, that is at the same time delightfully playful and deadly serious.

Fanfiction is amateur-produced fiction based on existing, generally proprietary, media: TV shows, books, movies, video games. Fans—mostly women and non-binary people, mostly members of gender, sexual, or romantic minorities (centrumlumina, 2013a; centrumlumina, 2013b)—take the settings, plots, and characters from these “properties” and make them our own. We rewrite endings. We resurrect the dead. We give life to minor and marginalised characters. We imagine ourselves in the magical worlds we are passionate about. And in slash—the sub-genre of fanfiction that focuses on same-gender relationships—we put queerness and sex back into texts they have been meticulously scrubbed out of. Of course Mr. Spock has been banging Captain Kirk, Sherlock has been sucking Watson’s cock, Cho Chang and Pansy Parkinson have been researching innovative uses for wands at Hogwarts, and Link, the pointy-eared protagonist of the *Zelda* games franchise, is a transgender woman! Have you not been paying attention? And when nearly one million of your three million fan works are rated Mature or Explicit, when the fact that your community consists predominantly of women and non-binary people means that it is disproportionately affected by sexual violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012), it would be more shocking if this community *didn’t* think about issues of sexual consent.

Fandom—the community of readers and writers of fanfiction—is where I first encountered the concept of “dubcon”: the idea that sometimes, for whatever reasons, consent is not clear-cut, not a matter of “yes” or “no”. I have been a part of this community for so long that I have no conscious memory of when I first came across the word. Fanlore, the fandom wiki, traces early usages of it to some time in 2003 (*Dub-con* 2016), but fanfiction’s engagement with the grey areas of consent predates this usage by decades. Wedged awkwardly between the academic books on my bookcase, there is a collection of slim, US letter sized, perfect bound volumes older than me. Among them are Barbara Wenk’s *One Way Mirror* (1980) and Jean Lorrah’s *The Night of the Twin Moons* (1976). In one of the origin stories of fanfiction I tell my undergraduate students, Lorrah and Wenk would be considered some of the foremothers of today’s fanfiction community. Decades before fandom found its way onto the internet, they wrote stories about *Star Trek* (1966), typed them out, mimeographed them, had them bound into fanzines and sold them at conventions or through the post. Wenk’s novel-length story

explores, among other themes, material and social dependency within an intimate relationship. The first volume of Lorrach's series focuses on the relationship between Spock's parents, and particularly the emotional impact of *pon farr*, the Vulcan "fuck or die" mating drive. It is ultimately stories like these, where consent is a vast grey area between "yes" and "no", mired in power relations and inequalities, that I find offer the most nuanced and productive engagements with the issues, and that I focus on in my research. It is those stories that are epitomised by those eight words: *slight dub-con but they both wanted it hardcore*.

In eight words, the author of the story tagged this way draws a distinction between consent and the "wantedness" of sex that feminist researchers of consent from disciplines ranging from psychology to law have struggled with for decades. Sometimes, the desire for the other person and for the sex act may be there, but other factors, and particularly power relations, may impact whether you can genuinely and meaningfully give consent. Other times, there may be little or no desire, no wanting, and yet sex may be consented to for other reasons. Power still plays a role in those latter cases: sex consented to for relationship maintenance where that relationship also involves material, financial or social dependence of one party on the other may still fall in the grey area of "dubcon" for instance. These are things I should perhaps have been given the opportunity to learn at school in Sex and Relationships Education, or from my parents, or maybe even by osmosis from media representations of sex and relationships. But I wasn't, and ultimately I learned them from fanfiction, and from a handful of other feminist spaces I found myself in over the years. Was I alone in this? Did everyone else know these things already, and I had somehow missed them? Or were the discussions I was seeing in the fanfiction community around sexuality and consent part of a wider landscape of feminist activism, a space where women and non-binary people got together to work these things out because no-one had told us, maybe even because no-one else knew? These are some of the questions that drove me to embark on this research project.

### 1.3 Aims and objectives

I started this research project with the casual observations I outlined above, based on my own lived experience as a fanfiction reader and writer, as a feminist activist and blogger, and as a survivor of sexual violence. It was these observations that drove

the structure of this research and the research questions. I wanted to understand in detail how fanfiction communities engaged with issues of sexual consent in both their fanfiction and their discussions and practices. I also wanted to understand how these engagements related to other types of knowledges of consent: academic, legal, and activist. Would they map directly onto such existing knowledges, simply reproducing them and making them accessible to a different audience, or would they offer something genuinely new and unique? Finally, I wanted to understand to what extent fanfiction communities' engagements with consent issues could themselves be seen as a form of activism. With that in mind, I settled on two key research questions for this work:

- How do erotic fanfiction and the communities around it engage with issues of sexual consent?
- Can this engagement be meaningfully viewed as a form of cultural activism?

Investigating and mapping at least some of the ways in which consent is represented and treated in erotic fanfiction was a necessary first step. While fan studies research does engage with issues of gender and sexuality in fanfiction (e.g. Bacon-Smith, 1991; Jenkins, 1992; Lamb and Veith, 1986; Russ, 1985; Kustritz, 2003; Willis, 2007; Jung, 2004), this is the first in-depth investigation of *sexual consent* in fanfiction. Additionally, my interest here is not limited to representations of consent in the community's fictional output, but extends to community discussions, paratexts, and practices. Equally, while fan studies scholarship has also covered fandom's activist potentialities, the focus here has tended to be on people who are fans doing activities traditionally considered activism, such campaigns and charity fundraising (e.g. Hinck, 2012; Jones, 2012; Cochran, 2012), rather than on the activities that make fans *fans* as a form of activism in their own right. Yet if fanfiction communities genuinely were a space for discussing and understanding sexual consent, then it was important to examine whether and how these engagements translated beyond the world of fanfiction, and whether they could contribute to wider political change by mounting a robust challenge to rape culture.

## 1.4 Structure of the work

The remainder of this work is structured in seven chapters. In Chapter 2, I provide a critical overview of three key literatures: a broad introduction to cultural studies with an emphasis on issues of power, oppression, and resistance; a review of literatures on sexual consent from disciplines including cultural studies, psychology, and feminist legal thought; and a review of fan studies literature focusing on fanfiction, the genre of slash, and fans' *communal textuality*: meaning-making practices that rely on dense intertextuality and a community approach. I show how Foucauldian approaches to the operation of power through discourse both generally and on issues of sexual consent specifically can be stifling and fail to account for individual and collective agency, and propose approaches to resistance and cultural activism from the margins, focusing particularly on postcolonial and civil rights traditions and proposing a form of *discursive resistance*. It is at the intersection of these three literatures that the focus of my research lies, as I seek to understand how fanfiction as text and the communities around it engage with issues of sexual consent, and how this engagement relates to power and resistance.

In Chapter 3, I outline my methodological approach to this study. I present the rationale for the combined use of ethnographic data collection and discourse analysis. I address the challenges involved in studying a community that predominantly exists in a fast-paced, frequently ephemeral online environment, and a community I myself have been a member of for longer than I have been a researcher, and present the theoretical foundations for semi-autoethnographic approaches in online settings. I also discuss ethical choices around researcher role and visibility under these circumstances. I outline the resulting "follow the trope" approach I adopted to my data collection and analysis both online and offline and account for the choice of texts and case studies in this research.

Chapter 4 presents the first of three case studies in this research and consists of a close, discourse-analytical reading of three fanfiction stories from the Omegaverse or Alpha/Beta/Omega subgenre of fanfiction. The Omegaverse is a science-fictional setting created collectively by the fanfiction community. In it, human sexuality acquires elements of dog or wolf reproduction, including an estrus cycle as opposed to a menstrual one. Omegaverse fiction is controversial within fanfiction circles, partly due to its connotations of bestiality, and partly for its perceived treatment of consent issues.



In my analysis, I argue that Alpha/Beta/Omega stories are read by the community intertextually not just with the media works they are based on but also with each other, and with readers' and writers' own experiences of sexuality and its discursive construction in Western societies. I use sexual script theory (Gagnon and Simon, 1973) to show how Omegaverse stories use the science-fictional elements of the setting as a form of defamiliarisation, casting gender roles and sexual scripts as we know them into an unfamiliar light. This allows fanfiction readers and writers to examine dominant discourses of sexuality and highlight how they are socially constructed rather than natural. At the same time, the erotic nature of the stories provokes an affective response from the reader, prompting them to engage with the consent issues inherent in the setting on affective, emotional and intellectual levels.

A second case study is presented in Chapter 5, which examines power relations, consent, and emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) in "arranged marriage" fanfiction. Arranged marriage is a popular trope in fanfiction stories and borrows heavily from similar tropes in Regency-setting romance novels. Both romance novels and fanfiction stories using the arranged marriage trope depict relationships characterised by social and material inequality. In my analysis, I show that fanfiction readers and writers use some of the generic conventions of the romance novel while carefully rewriting others, thereby creating meaning through both similarities and differences to the romance novel genre. By using emotion work theory I show how small changes to familiar generic conventions can make a significant impact on the treatment of sexual consent in fanfiction stories. I examine the marriage consummation scene in arranged marriage fanfiction stories to show how by highlighting the power inequalities between the partners the practice and legal institution of consummation is recast from normal and always consensual to at least potentially coercive. I show how a change (compared to romance novels) to which partner performs the bulk of the emotion work needed to build the relationship enables fanfiction readers and writers to explore avenues for handling inequalities in intimate relationships and making sexual consent between unequal partners meaningful. The case studies in Chapters 4 and 5 show how fanfiction readers and writers engage with issues of consent, particularly in the presence of power differentials, in their creative output. I argue that these engagements amount to a demythologization and demystification (West, 1993) of dominant discursive constructions of gender, sexuality, and consent.

In Chapter 6, I extend my inquiry beyond the texts the fanfiction community produces and examine community discussion and practices in the wake of rape allegations against American ice hockey star Patrick Kane. I show how a desire to live by feminist values prompted a re-evaluation of community members' fannish engagement with Kane following the allegations. I also examine how knowledges about consent generated through the reading and writing of fanfiction were applied to community members' engagement with the criminal justice system and its treatment of sexual violence. I identify three resulting strategies of negotiating the discursive power of the law to impose its version of truth on other domains and discourses (Smart, 1989). While a minority of community members accepted the law's version of events, a majority of the group either found ways of bracketing the law by accepting some of its premises while acknowledging its failings in sexual assault cases, or outright challenged the law by constructing it as biased and reproducing rape culture. A combination of feminist values and knowledges of consent generated through engagement with fanfiction, rooted in a focus on the lived subjective experience of sexuality rather than in legal principle, therefore allows community members to construct complex arguments about the operation of sexual consent and the law in the real world and mount a discursive resistance to rape culture, the institutions supporting it, and dominant discursive constructions of "normal" sex.

In Chapter 7, I depart from the digital ethnography and case study approach and use interviews conducted with fanfiction readers and writers at a fan convention in London to discuss and illuminate the findings of previous chapters. I show how fanfiction community members not only use their creative output to explore issues of consent but also apply knowledges generated in this way to their real lives, both in private settings such as their intimate relationships, and in public settings such as activism and campaigning. I demonstrate that the knowledges of consent generated by the community are fundamentally epistemologically different to those generated in academia or by the law, as they focus on the affective and emotional aspects of human sexuality, on individuals' internal lives and lived experience. Finally, I show how the culture and practices of the fanfiction community themselves constitute a *praxis of consent*.

I conclude in Chapter 8 by summarising the findings of this research and showing avenues for future work, both in terms of exploring specific aspects of fanfiction and fan

communities further, and in terms of the wider questions this research raises for notions of activism and sexual consent. Here, I also discuss potential routes to generating impact with this research by disseminating the knowledges fan communities generate about consent to wider audiences in different institutional contexts.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that fanfiction is among the forms and spaces in popular culture that have the potential to make significant contributions to conversations around gender, sex, sexuality, and consent; and that the fanfiction community's engagements with issues of sexual consent can be viewed as distinct form of cultural activism (Buser and Arthurs, 2012). While cultural activism is traditionally seen as directed outwards to the general public (e.g. Dayan, 2005; Scholl, 2011; Buser *et al.*, 2013), I argue that the production, circulation, and discussion of fanfiction allows the community to form powerful alternative imaginaries of sexuality and consent, make prefigurative gestures, and establish a praxis of consent within the community itself through practices that encourage active engagement with consent issues and centre the wellbeing of survivors of sexual violence. The knowledges generated in these ways challenge, demystify and demythologize dominant discursive constructions of gender, power, sexuality, and consent, and the institutions that support these constructions. They are then applied to community members' own day-to-day lives and engagements with sexuality, consent, and rape culture. This points to the fanfiction community as a source of a powerful discursive resistance on issues of rape and consent, and supports an expansion of the definition of cultural activism to activities directed at challenging internalised dominant discourses within the boundaries of a community.

## Chapter 2

# Litrature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

My interest in the fanfiction community's engagement with issues of sexual consent as a possible form of cultural activism requires an engagement with literatures across several fields and disciplines. In this chapter, I provide a critical overview of three key areas in order to show how they can be brought to bear on my research questions and pinpoint the gap in existing work. In the first section, I review approaches to power, oppression, and resistance from a cultural studies perspective. I examine the move from studying the "messages" of media and culture to studying audiences and different approaches to the operation of power through culture, focusing in particular on Foucault's concept of discourse and the implications it has for the possibility of individual and collective agency and resistance. I then present approaches to the concepts of representation and resistance that originate in the work of marginalised groups, particularly feminist and postcolonial approaches. Finally, I introduce the concept of cultural activism and relate it to existing literature on fan activism. In the second section, I turn my attention to feminist approaches to sexual consent. I examine how different feminist traditions do or do not account for the effects of power on sexual consent before turning to discourse-analytical approaches to consent particularly across the fields of psychology and feminist legal theory. Finally, I bring together ideas about culture, power, and consent in examining how dominant discourses about sexuality may be reproduced in culture and internalised by individuals in their day-to-day interactions. In the final section, I provide a more in-depth overview of fan

studies literature, examining the textual and communal meaning-making practices of fanfiction readers and writers; approaches to slash fanfiction, gender, and sexuality; and approaches to fanfiction communities as communities of practice, knowledge creation, and knowledge preservation. I conclude the chapter by bringing these three literatures together to home in on my research questions.

## **2.2 Power, oppression, and resistance in culture**

### **2.2.1 The audience and the message**

The role of culture and the media in issues of power and resistance is central to cultural studies as a discipline, and to a number of other traditions within the humanities and social sciences prior to that. Early, Marxist-inflected, approaches to the influence of media and mass or popular culture in society view them as tools for the reproduction of the ideology and hegemony of the ruling classes. Adorno and Horkheimer (1993), for instance, view culture as a mass product that “impresses the same stamp on everything” (p. 406). Audiences in their essay are depicted as “victims” (p. 409) unable to distinguish between reality and fiction, passively absorbing the messages of the culture industry. One important but partial critique of this view from within the Frankfurt School itself comes from Benjamin (1993), who examines different modes of engagement with different types of works of art. Benjamin argues that mass-produced culture such as film is consumed differently to works of art. The reception of the latter is characterised by intense concentration, while the former facilitate a kind of distraction and only a shallow engagement. Nonetheless, he argues, “reception in distraction” (p. 73) can be used to engage with difficult and important issues in emancipatory ways. Because, however, the audience’s engagement remains shallow, Benjamin’s emphasis remains on producers and how they use culture to influence audiences. This focus on the producer is also evident elsewhere in Benjamin’s work (2002) where he argues that a work of art cannot be radical unless the conditions of its production radically challenge and transform existing structures and instruments of production. Broadly then, culture for the Frankfurt School is largely homogenous, dominated by the ruling classes, and used as a tool of oppression, and while some cultural producers may challenge such hegemony in their practices, the role of audiences is limited and passive. Hall (1980) seeks to complicate this view of media and communication by

splitting the communication “circuit” into the moments of production, distribution, and consumption. He sees each of these moments as “relatively autonomous” and shaped by different factors, but articulated together in such a way that they still shape each other. While he still views a message as “imprinted” at the production stage, Hall’s model allows for a limited polysemy at the consumption stage. He posits three hypothetical positions of consumption: the hegemonic code, where a message is decoded in line with the dominant meanings and codes in society; the negotiated code where some dominant meanings are adopted at a high level but may also be resisted in specific and local contexts; and the oppositional code, where the dominant meanings are rejected entirely. While there is still a level of “determinedness” about the message and its meaning in this model, it also opens up a space for a more nuanced engagement with audiences’ meaning-making processes and practices and allows for a move beyond the Frankfurt School’s monolithic and imposed view of culture.

What was later argued to be missing from this work is a focus on the pleasures audiences gain from their engagement with cultural products, and how such pleasures may challenge or reproduce hegemonic messages and ideas. Radway (1984) examines the popular romance novel and its reproduction of patriarchal power structures through the emphasis on heterosexual love and marriage, but at the same time investigates what pleasures and meanings the *readers* of romance novels gain from them. She argues that readers are highly selective in their choices of novels, and use their reading to carve out time for themselves, away from the pressures and demands of family life. Ultimately, however, Radway finds that the patriarchal messages of romance novels are reproduced as readers find comfort in them and as a result passively accept their place in the patriarchal order. Ang (1985) offers another early perspective on audience activity in relation to popular culture in her examination of Dutch viewers of the US soap opera *Dallas*. Ang, too, focuses on the pleasures viewers gain from popular culture, and more so than Radway foregrounds these over the messages of the text. This newly-found focus on audiences—and especially active, pleasure-seeking audiences—finds its ultimate expression in the field of fan studies, which seeks to understand how fans actively engage with, manipulate, and transform the meanings and messages of popular culture. Pioneers of fan studies view fan culture as subversive and transformative. Building on De Certeau’s (1984) metaphor of the poacher, Jenkins (1992) argues that fans who use the raw materials of popular culture to create works of their own (stories, songs, music

videos) are engaged in an active resistance against dominant cultural meanings. Though she denies that fandom is overtly political, Bacon-Smith (1991) speaks of the production of fanfiction as “civil disobedience” and “terrorism”. Yet the exact mechanisms of such resistance are never quite fully theorised, beyond references to the murky intellectual property status of fanfiction, which I will discuss later on in this chapter.

### 2.2.2 From hegemony to discourse

As already reflected in the gradual replacement of the Frankfurt School with more audience-centred approaches, the concept of cultural hegemony—the reproduction in culture of the ideals and values of the dominant class—struggles to account for cultural heterogeneity. While the idea of hegemony does allow for some contestation and change over time, it also presents a rather monolithic, constraining, and unidirectional view of power: it may be an unstable equilibrium (Gramsci, 1971), but it is nonetheless one that is manufactured by powerful social institutions. This reproduction of hegemonic ideas engineers the consent of the masses. This approach to power has been challenged, most notably in the works of Michel Foucault. Power, for Foucault, operates through discourse: a collection of ways of speaking as well as practices that determine what can be said on a topic in a specific social and historical context. Discourse, and by extension power, in this sense is productive. Rather than operating top-down through prohibition and repression, power as it operates through discourse is dispersed and multi-directional. Most importantly, rather than describing an objective reality, discourse produces the phenomena it describes. For Foucault, the concepts of power and knowledge are intimately intertwined, to the point of becoming “power/knowledge” (1980). Rather than the representation of an objective and absolute truth, knowledge is the effect of specific, socially and historically contingent operations of power. At the same time, however, knowledge enables the operation of power. By regulating what can and cannot be said on a topic, making certain statements seem natural and others unintelligible, power/knowledge creates a “regime of truth” (1984): regulated ways of speaking which “count” as truth under specific social and historical conditions. The operation of power through discourse in this way constructs what can and cannot be true, to the extent that such constructions appear normal and natural.

This view of power has significant consequences for conceptions of subjectivity and individual and collective resistance. Foucault struggles with ideas of selfhood and

subjectivity and is highly skeptical of the Enlightenment idea of the unified rational subject. While he never offers a comprehensive alternative to this view, he does regard subjects—like other phenomena—as produced by the operation of power through discourse. Because power is multi-directional and dispersed, this opens up a space for subjectivity to be contradictory and fragmented. Rather than being consistent and unified, an individual “may occupy in turn, in the same series of statements, different positions, and assume the role of different subjects” (1972). Such subject positions are constructed and made available through discourse, and in this way they produce, constrain, as well as fragment what an individual may do and how they may position themselves.

From Foucault’s formulation of power/knowledge, however, emerges another useful concept which may point the way towards possibilities of resistance: that of subjugated knowledges (1980). Foucault groups two separate types of knowledge under this term. On the one hand, subjugated knowledges refer to historical events and disjunctures masked by current dominant discourses and totalising systems of knowledge, to the effect that the current discursive construction of a particular phenomenon comes to appear natural. On the other hand, subjugated knowledges are also those knowledges challenging the current dominant discourse which are also constructed by it as somehow inadequate or illegitimate. It is this idea of subjugated knowledges that, as I discuss below, Collins (1990) reworks productively to construct a possible way of resisting oppression and the operation of power through discourse.

Foucault’s work has found purchase in both cultural studies and feminist work, but at the same time been extensively critiqued in both these fields. McNay (1992) highlights three key issues with Foucault’s conception of power from a feminist point of view: firstly, while Foucault’s conception of the body as discursively constructed allows us to move beyond essentialism and thereby offers productive new avenues for feminist conceptions of gender, it does not in itself account for issues of gender and the differential impacts of power on gendered bodies. Feminist theory and research has significantly extended Foucault’s work here (e.g. Bordo, 1993). The second issue McNay identifies is one of agency: if subjects are discursively constructed by the productive operation of power, occupying subject positions made available by discourse, how can they meaningfully act in the world? If one adopts a Foucauldian concept of power as all-encompassing and multi-directional, without a margin or outside, then the question



becomes to what extent and how is resistance possible from the inside. Finally, McNay argues, Foucault's refusal to define a normative basis for his ethics also leads to an unworkable relativism, posing further difficulties for action and agency. Rather than returning to the totalising grand narratives of the enlightenment, McNay suggest that a third way, allowing for action grounded in normative judgements, may be articulated by marginalised groups.

### **2.2.3 Representation and resistance: approaches from the margins**

It is ideas of resistance articulated by marginalised groups that I find most productive in my own research, particularly from feminist and African American traditions and their interactions with postmodern thought. The importance of representation for making avenues of resistance available is a key common thread across approaches to resistance from the margins. Key concepts here are the ideas of internalised oppression and representations of the self and one's reality, as well as finding a critical voice.

While Russ (1983) only speculates about the mechanisms of oppression, rather than resistance itself, she catalogues a variety of ways in which women's and other marginalised groups' writing is effectively suppressed through its discursive construction as lesser, invalid, and valueless, de-emphasising women's agency in their own writing, or setting boundaries that exclude it from the dominant definitions of art and aesthetic value. Russ, however, also identifies possible responses to this kind of suppression, from the redefinition of individual components of statements like "Women can't write" to the more radical fracturing and redefinition of aesthetics in a way that can value such writing. While not a theoretical framework, this account does offer some practical insight into possible avenues of resistance, particularly highlighting the importance of self-representation and of challenging dominant discourses.

This focus on images, representations and stereotypes is also prevalent in African American thought on oppression and resistance. Collins (1990), for instance, examines issues of oppression and resistance for Black women in the United States. She identifies a series of oppressive discursive constructions, or "controlling images", of Black womanhood in US culture. These images are transmitted and reproduced through a variety of institutions from media and popular culture to government agencies and the education system. Collins argues that "[p]ortraying African-American women

as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women's oppression" (p. 69). Here she draws a clear link between discourse and the discursive construction of subjects on the one hand and the material oppression and control of marginalised individuals and groups on the other: controlling images have negative associations which are in turn used to justify the oppression of Black women. She then proceeds to explore how Black women in the United States react to such oppression and how and where they are able to resist it. Reactions to controlling images, Collins finds, are not uniform but complex and frequently contradictory. They include internalising oppression and coming to identify with the controlling images; attempting to escape through drugs or alcohol; denial and discursively setting oneself apart while accepting that controlling images may apply to other Black women; and finally active resistance through finding a voice and self-definition. The concept of internalised oppression here is key. In Foucauldian terms, internalised oppression can be regarded as being so fully immersed in the dominant discourse and regime of truth that oppressive discursive constructions become normalised and naturalised, and the operation of power becomes invisible. This allows us to move, in feminist philosopher Susan Bordo's (1993) words "beyond the oppressor/oppressed model" (p. 23) and begin to account for the complex ways in which subordinated groups in society may collude in their own oppression. This view also problematises those cultural studies approaches focusing entirely on the active audience, and particularly valorising audience activity as a form of resistance in its own right. As Bordo argues, "power and pleasure do not cancel each other. Thus the heady experience of feeling powerful or 'in control' ... is always suspect as itself the product of power relations" (p. 27). It is this state of internalised oppression, this absence of a clear articulation of an alternative or even a problem, which becomes the greatest initial obstacle to meaningful resistance.

Here, however, writers from marginalised backgrounds truly come into their own. hooks (1989), for instance, examines institutional ways of silencing, including in seemingly private institutions such as the family, and argues for the value of "talking back" and certain types of speech as acts of resistance. hooks argues for the importance of finding a "critical voice", the true aim of which is liberation and which does not "suppress, trap, or confine" (p. 16). She gives the example of rap music as an area of culture which "has enabled underclass black youth to develop a critical voice" (hooks, 1990, p. 27),

thereby acknowledging the importance of culture in acts of resistance. According to her, “[o]ppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story” (hooks, 1989, p. 43). Building on work by other Black women intellectuals, including hooks, Collins (1990) in turn argues that there are key spaces which enable Black women to find such a critical voice: their supportive relationships with each other as well as cultural spaces and traditions such as Black women’s blues and Black women’s writing. These are spaces in which Black women are able to collectively articulate their experiences and come to terms with the contradictions between oppressive discursive constructions and controlling images on the one hand and their own everyday experiences and subjectivities on the other. In this way, they are able to reject controlling images, find a voice, and come to a positive self-definition. Black women’s very survival and ability to reject and resist oppression in these ways, Collins argues, forces a rethinking of the concept of hegemony. In order to open up this space for resistance, she makes use of and expands Foucault’s concept of subjugated knowledges. Where Foucault (1980) sees subjugated knowledges as naïve and insufficiently elaborated, Collins argues that Black feminist thought (and therefore potentially other such knowledges) are not naïve but have been “made to appear so by those controlling knowledge validation procedures” (p. 18). As an example of this dynamic, Collins re-interprets Sojourner Truth’s famous “Ain’t I a woman” speech (Truth, 2017), in which Truth juxtaposes the dominant construction of (white) womanhood as fragile and deserving of protection with her own experiences as a Black woman and former slave, as an act of demystification and deconstruction. Building on Foucault’s power/knowledge paradigm, this suggests the creation, articulation and reproduction of subjugated knowledges—and potentially working towards the validation of those knowledges—as a powerful act of resistance.

In a further elaboration on themes of self-representation and resistance, West (1993) argues that “[t]he modern black diasporan problematic of invisibility and namelessness can be understood as the condition of *relative lack of black power to represent themselves to themselves and others as complex human beings, and thereby to contest the bombardment of negative, degrading stereotypes put forward by white-supremacist ideologies*” (p. 15, emphasis in original). He advocates for a new “cultural politics of difference”, characterised among other factors by a rejection of “the abstract, general and universal in light of the concrete, specific and particular” (p. 3). Speaking

particularly of the representational practices of the African diaspora, West calls for the use of destruction, deconstruction, demythologization and demystification as key theoretical pillars in conceptualising and enacting cultural forms of resistance. *Destruction* here refers to challenging the grand theories of Western philosophical thought and particularly to foregrounding their temporality and historical contingency over their naturalised timelessness. *Deconstruction*, following Derrida, is challenging oppositional binaries such as black/white, good/bad, or man/woman, and the implied hierarchical relationships between the terms in those binaries. *Demythologization* refers to foregrounding the socially constructed (as opposed to natural) character of metaphors and stereotypes, and foregrounding their link to politics and the operation of power. Finally, *demystification* “tries to keep track of the complex dynamics of institutional and other related power structures in order to disclose options and alternatives for transformative praxis” (p. 21): it highlights the constraints within which individuals and groups operate while also emphasising the importance of human agency in transforming those constraints and operations of power. These pillars of cultural resistance foreground the importance of discourse both in the operation of power and, crucially, in formulating alternatives to a seemingly-natural order.

From these authors, therefore, a picture emerges of forms of *discursive resistance*: the ability to counter dominant discourses, controlling images and stereotypes through self-definition, self-representation, the overcoming of internalised oppression, development of a critical voice and the telling of one’s own story and history. Such discursive resistance is, however, not a solitary activity. As hooks (1984) argues, “the ability to see and describe one’s own reality is a significant step in the long process of self-recovery; but it is only a beginning. ... we must now encourage women to develop a keen, comprehensive understanding of women’s political reality. Broader perspectives can only emerge as we examine both the personal that is political, the politics of society as a whole, and global revolutionary politics” (pp. 24–25). Discursive resistance is not enacted simply through finding the *possibility* of oppositional readings in texts, but communally and systematically through collective analysis, conversation, and active creation, dissemination, and celebration of alternatives.

### 2.2.4 Cultural activism

Critical reconstruction and discursive resistance, however, have been understood as distinct from cultural activism. Buser and Arthurs (2012) define cultural activism as “a set of activities which: a) challenge the dominant interpretations and constructions of the world while b) presenting alternative socio-political and spacial imaginaries c) in ways which challenge relationships between art, politics, participation and spectatorship”. In his examination of the disruptive and confrontational potentials of cultural activism, Scholl (2011) identifies four key features of what he terms disruptive art interventions. Following Bey (1991), disruptions are “temporary autonomous zones”: a time and space situated within the everyday but away from it. Building on Benjamin (2002), they are characterised by participatory do-it-yourself practices, away from capitalist modes of production. Disruptions serve to “confuse and subvert dominant cultural codes” (Scholl, 2011, p. 163) by appropriating elements of dominant discourses and taking them out of context or juxtaposing them in thought-provoking ways. Finally, disruptive art interventions can be seen as exemplary gestures and lived practice of how an alternative vision would work. Research on such cultural activism focuses predominantly on highly visible public stunts targeted as specific political events. Routledge (2012) examines the activities of the *Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army* during the 2005 G8 meeting in Scotland. Lähdesmäki (2013) focuses her research on the *Turku—European Capital of Subculture 2011* citizen project which challenged the European Capital of Culture initiative and its impact on local communities in Turku, Finland. Withers and Chidgey (2010) explore the Bristol-based queer feminist theatre group *Sistershow*. Scholl (2011) himself uses the example of the *Reclaim the Streets* network in London which dug up roads to plant flowers. Buser *et al.* (2013) investigate activist groups based in Bristol’s Stokes Croft area. In all of these cases, the activities termed cultural activism are performed by a relatively small existing activist group and directed outwards at the general public. Indeed, examining the relationship between audiences and publics, Dayan (2005) argues that in order to become publics, audiences need to engage the wider public on a particular issue. He argues that to move beyond being merely a community, “[t]hey must offer a discourse directed towards the common good” (p. 52).

At a first glance, fans producing and sharing erotic fanfiction for pleasure do not meet these standards. Fanfiction communities are protective of their privacy and wary of

the recent mainstream media attention generated, for instance, by the commercial publication of works like *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James, 2011) which started out as works of fanfiction. Reading, writing, and sharing fanfiction are activities kept as much as possible *within* the community, not directed outwards, and certainly not consciously formulated as aimed at anyone but fans themselves. Where fans view their own activities as activism, and where scholars recognise them as such, they tend to be focused not on their fanfiction output but on activities such as charity fundraising and online campaigns (e.g. Hinck, 2012; Jones, 2012; Cochran, 2012). Additionally, where the transformative aspect of fan works themselves is the focus of fan activism research (Leavitt and Horbinski, 2012), this is seen as activism on issues of intellectual property and copyright, not issues such as sexuality.

Returning to the broader theme of discursive and cultural resistance within a context of multidirectional, productive power operating through discourse, a reframing of what activism actually is may be necessary to account for the impact of that power on individuals. Where certain discourses are so dominant, so totalising, that they are perceived as natural—such as the controlling images identified by Collins (1990) or, as I shall discuss below, the construction of many coercive sexual practices as “just sex” (Gavey, 2005)—activism directed outwards is impossible without first naming the problem within a community. Examples of such initially internally-focused activism range from the civil rights movement, to the origins of the movement for LGBTQIA+ rights and equality, to feminist consciousness raising and engagement with issues of domestic violence. These movements also have a long history of generating theory and knowledge which is not recognised as such by the academy—subjugated knowledges in Collins’ (1990) sense of the word. Bordo (1993), too, remarks on how feminist knowledges generated through consciousness raising in the 1960s and 1970s were not recognised for their enormous theoretical contribution and potential. Within Foucault’s power/knowledge paradigm, then, the creation of resistant discourses, the demystification of those discursive constructions that have been made to appear natural, the articulation and reproduction of subjugated knowledges—even *within a single community*—can, I would argue, become a powerful form of activism. Where oppressive discursive constructions have been internalised by individuals, such activities are a necessary prerequisite without which outwardly directed activism is impossible.

## 2.3 Sexual consent

The focus of my research is the operation of power through discourse in the area of sexuality and sexual consent. Discourse-analytical approaches to consent have only emerged relatively recently, and continue to compete with a range of other approaches across multiple disciplines, particularly law and psychology. While sexual consent as a concept has seen a revival within “fourth-wave” feminist activism, it still remains relatively undertheorised in academia, especially compared to issues like rape and sexual assault. Many researchers in this area use the term “spontaneously” (Beres, 2007), without clearly defining what they mean. This is evident, for instance, in literature on “unwanted sex” (Impett and Peplau, 2003; Muehlenhard and Peterson, 2005; Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Weiss, 2016). Definitions of consent in rape law also vary widely by jurisdiction (Jamieson, 1996). This leads to an academic and public conversation where one author’s “consent” is another’s “rape”, reflecting the contested nature of consent in our culture. In this section, I provide an outline of the two main approaches to consent in feminist theory and research—one looking at how power structures limit individuals’ ability to meaningfully consent to sex, and the second focusing on individual agency and the practicalities of consent negotiation—as well as attempts to bridge the gap between these approaches. Additionally, I review key feminist legal theory around rape and consent, as well as work on the cultural construction and mediation of consent, particularly in the genres of romance and pornography. I show the value of the discourse-analytical approach to sexual consent, and argue that what is missing from literature in this field so far is an articulation of possible and meaningful strategies for resistance against the discursive normalisation of sexual coercion and violence.

### 2.3.1 Power/agency: two approaches to consent

Two broad schools of thought have emerged in feminist academic and activist discussions of consent, though in both cases the starting point of analysis is often rape or sexual assault rather than consent itself. Radical second-wave feminism asks key questions about structures of power and oppression which limit particularly women’s ability to meaningfully consent to sexual activity with men. Dworkin (1983) identifies for instance the exemptions in rape law for marriage (which still existed in most

Western countries at the time and still do in some parts of the world today) as a type of oppressive structure which invalidates women's agency and ability to meaningfully consent. MacKinnon (1991) argues that the dominant discourses around gender and sexuality form another such oppressive structure by socialising women to view their own bodies as "for sexual use by men" (p. 1212). Under conditions of patriarchy, she argues, it becomes difficult for women to distinguish between intercourse and rape (MacKinnon, 1989). A key issue with this school of thought is its foundation in essentialist notions of gender which limit its analytical use for more complex and intersecting modes of oppression. Another is its totalising approach to power structures, which leaves little room for individual agency and the complexity of interpersonal relationships and consent negotiations.

The second strand of work on consent focuses on agency, and particularly the practicalities of consent communication from both a legal and a psychological perspective. Pineau (1989) identifies a dominant "contractual" model of consent, where unrelated actions such as accepting a drink or wearing a short skirt are read as consent for penile-vaginal intercourse. She goes on to propose an alternative model of "communicative sexuality" where both partners engage in verbal and nonverbal communication throughout the sexual encounter, driven by the desire and moral obligation to "promote the sexual ends of one's partner" as well as one's own (p. 235). Anderson (2005) analyses what she terms the "no" and "yes" models of consent. The former is the idea that for a sexual act to be counted as rape the victim has to clearly say no and demonstrate resistance; the latter suggests that consent should be actively expressed, either verbally or non-verbally. She finds both models wanting, arguing that "[a]t its core, the Yes Model relies on a man's ability to infer actual willingness from a woman's body language" (p. 1406). Effectively, the Yes Model opens the door to the miscommunication or "mistaken belief in consent" defence (Jamieson, 1996). Anderson proposes instead a model of negotiating sex where both partners have an exchange of views and reach a mutual, generally verbal, agreement to penetrative sex. Moving beyond theoretical models, Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) investigate gender differences in how undergraduate students communicate consent and how they interpret a hypothetical partner's consent signals. They find some gender differences in the extent to which men and women interpret their own behaviours as indicative of consent, but ultimately conclude that such differences are not sufficiently significant to



lend credibility to miscommunication as an explanation for rape. Notably, they also find that the most-frequently used sign of consent was a lack of response. Jozkowski and collaborators have produced extensive work on the types of behaviours college students use to communicate consent (e.g. Jozkowski and Peterson, 2013a; Jozkowski *et al.*, 2014; Jozkowski and Wiersma, 2015; Jozkowski and Peterson, 2013b). Their findings include gender differences in both how consent is communicated and how consent communication is interpreted. Specifically, they find that such communication is shaped by traditional conceptions of gender roles, where men are seen as the initiators of sex and women as gatekeepers. Thus, men tend to score higher on “initiating behaviours” while women tend to express consent through passive acceptance and nonverbal signals of interest. A key limitation of this work is its conception of penile-vaginal intercourse as the only act specifically requiring consent. As a result, other sexual behaviours such as kissing and intimate touching are constructed as “consent behaviours”—i.e. actions used to express consent to penile-vaginal intercourse—rather than as sexual acts requiring consent in their own right.

Both work proposing new models of consent negotiation (Pineau, 1989; Anderson, 2005), and work investigating how consent negotiation actually happens (Hickman and Muehlenhard, 1999; Jozkowski and Peterson, 2013a; Jozkowski and Peterson, 2013b; Jozkowski and Wiersma, 2015; Jozkowski *et al.*, 2014) has a strong focus on interaction between individuals. Thus it often fails to account for wider social inequalities and power imbalances and the way they map onto intimate relationships, potentially limiting individuals’ ability to meaningfully give consent to sexual activities. For instance, from a discourse-analytical point of view the very construction of penile-vaginal intercourse as the only act which requires consent, and of other sexual activities as “consent behaviours” is an exercise of power which potentially limits individuals’ ability to negotiate consent. Pineau’s (1989) communicative model and Anderson’s (2005) negotiation model both assume that communication and negotiation happen on equal terms, that all partners are free to know and express their own desires and limits without any external pressures or power structures. Work focusing on power structures, on the other hand, often results in a rather bleak outlook for positive change in sexual violence prevention, and particularly struggles to account for individual agency.

What the interpersonal negotiation and power structures approaches to consent have

in common is that the models of consent they propose tend to be highly gendered and heteronormative, and the focus of research remains heterosexual sex and particularly penile-vaginal intercourse. Attempts to move beyond this heteronormativity are limited and often give the impression of being an afterthought, such as Anderson's assertion that "[t]he Negotiation Model is gender-neutral and does not assume heterosexuality" (2005). Beres, Herold and Maitland (2004) specifically examine consent behaviours in same-sex relationships through the lens of sexual scripts theory, but do not go as far as using their findings to challenge the wider heteronormativity of consent research. Penile-vaginal intercourse continues to be privileged in consent research of both strands of thought as the main or most important act which requires consent, though not always as explicitly as in the research of Jozkowski and colleagues (e.g. Jozkowski and Peterson, 2013a). While there is some justification for an approach which focuses on heterosexual sex and relationships provided by the high incidence of sexual assault, rape, and sexual violence in heterosexual relationships, this work fails to address the complexities of gender and sexuality beyond the cisgender, heterosexual norm. In this way it further marginalises LGBTQIA+ people and communities whose experiences of sexual violence are thus erased. It also fails to adequately challenge dominant discourses of gender and sexuality. As with other work addressing different kinds of oppression, a challenge to the way gender and sexuality are discursively constructed could provide a potentially powerful tool in any attempt to end sexual violence.

### **2.3.2 Attempts to reconcile power and negotiation: unwanted sex**

In its erasure of issues of power, the negotiation paradigm also elides consent with the "wantedness" of sex: there is an implication in negotiation models and research that sex is either wanted and therefore consented to, or not wanted and therefore not consented to. Yet, there is a substantial body of research in psychology and sociology which indicates that frequently sex may be unwanted, and yet—within the strict legal definition of consent—consented to. This raises further questions about the complex relationship between power and negotiation, and literature on "unwanted sex" spans both broad approaches to consent—that of power structures and that of interpersonal negotiation and at least some research in this area makes an attempt to reconcile the two paradigms. Impett and Peplau (2003) provide a comprehensive overview of literature on unwanted sex, much of which indicates that women experience such

unwanted sex significantly more frequently than men. They categorise the available literature according to three different perspectives. The gender perspective looks at gender differences in sexual desire, initiating sexual activity, and willingness to comply with a partner's request. The latter includes factors such as traditional gender roles, beliefs about male sexuality, and differentials in power and dependence. The motivational perspective attempts to understand compliance as a factor in approach (seeking out a positive experience or consequence) and avoidance (seeking to avoid a negative outcome) motives. Finally, the relationship maintenance perspective positions compliant sex as one of a wider range of sacrifices in committed relationships.

Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005) seek to complicate the wanted/unwanted dichotomy in sex research. Drawing on their own empirical work, they propose a model which makes room for a discourse of ambivalence in research on unwanted sex. They identify several dimensions of such ambivalence, including the difference between wanting sex itself and wanting its outcomes, and differences between wanting sex and consenting to sex—thus coining the category of “unwanted consensual sex” (p. 18). Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) investigate undergraduate women's descriptions of sex which the researchers, following Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005), term consensual but unwanted. They find that gender norms and neoliberal discursive constructions such as independence and self-reliance exert powerful pressures on young women to engage in sexual acts they do not actively want. The subject position of a “good girlfriend” for instance includes sexually pleasing a male partner, and particularly if an act has been consented to once, future consent is assumed. This severely limits young women's agency when it comes to the interpersonal negotiation of sex and consent with a partner. At the same time the neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility and self-reliance ensured that participants either blamed themselves or did not blame anyone for their experience of unwanted sex. Burkett and Hamilton (2012) forego the unwanted sex paradigm entirely but find, similarly to Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, that postfeminist and neoliberal discourses exert strong pressures on young women and negatively impact their ability to meaningfully negotiate consent.

The “unwanted sex as relationship maintenance” perspective echoes theorisations of marital sex as work (e.g. Pateman, 1988; Delphy and Leonhard, 1992). It is worth here briefly turning to the theory of emotion work in order to shed some light on the kind of work unwanted sex within a long-term relationship might be. Emotion work was

first proposed by Hochschild (1979) as the work involved in managing feelings to bring them in line with societal norms and expectations. In the original definition, emotion work is performed on the self, and is the (not necessarily successful) attempt to induce or inhibit one's feelings to make them appropriate to a particular situation. Erickson (1993) extends the concept to such activities performed specifically to enhance the emotional well-being of others and provide emotional support, especially in a private, family or domestic context. Umberson, Thomeer and Lodge (2015) identify activities involved in reading others' emotions as well as managing one's own as part of emotion work. Erickson (2005) and Umberson, Thomeer and Lodge (2015) both argue that emotion work is key to perceptions of marital quality. With regards to emotion work and sexuality, Umberson, Thomeer and Lodge (2015) find that where a disparity in desire for sex is present in the relationship, women who desire less sex than their partners often perform emotion work to increase their own desire, and women in relationships with men often experience this as a one-sided effort to please their partner.

Unwanted sex therefore is a feature of both many long-term relationships (Umberson, Thomeer and Lodge, 2015) where it may be characterised at least partly as emotion work, and of young people's experiences of casual sex (e.g. Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008), where a theorisation of it as work is less appropriate. While some strands of work within the unwanted sex paradigm recognise the role of power structures in leading (predominantly) women to submit to unwanted sex (e.g. Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras' identification of neo-liberal discourses and subject positions as a driving force in this area), others, approaching the subject from a positivist stance, risk minimising and normalising the phenomenon (e.g. Umberson and colleagues' uncritical reporting of unwanted sex as relationship maintenance and emotion work). The unwanted sex approach is therefore limited in its usefulness in reconciling the power and negotiation paradigms of consent, or in its ability to effect meaningful change when it comes to sexual violence.

### **2.3.3 The different discourses of sex: the law**

A more fruitful approach to reconciling the power and negotiation paradigms in work on sexual consent can be found in feminist discourse analysis across a range of disciplines including feminist legal theory and discursive psychology. Interpreting gender, sexuality, and issues of sexual consent through the lens of discursive construction opens

a wide range of possibilities to examine how consent (and rape) is constructed in a range of social contexts and institutions. One particularly powerful strand of such work is a discourse-analytical engagement with rape and consent within the context of the legal and criminal justice system. This work shows how social institutions and powerful discourses construct human sexuality, influence sexual practices, and limit the possibilities for meaningful consent negotiation, providing a useful mapping of some of the discursive operations of power that need to be negotiated if addressing issues of sexual violence is to have a lasting and positive impact. It is therefore worth examining here in some detail.

Smart (1989) investigates the power of the law over women through a discourse-analytical lens. She argues that while the law is not a single, unified body of knowledge, it projects an image as such, which in turn gives it power. As a discourse, law has the singular ability to impose its own definition of truth on everyday life in a way which disqualifies other forms of knowledge and other discourses: a “not guilty” verdict from a jury constructs a defendant as not having committed a crime, where in reality it simply means that the defendant’s guilt could not be proved to the appropriate standard of proof (“beyond reasonable doubt”). In her critique of rape law in particular, Smart argues that the law “reflects cultural values about women’s sexuality” (p. 26) while disqualifying women’s own accounts and experiences of their sexuality. By working in binary opposites such as truth/untruth, guilt/innocence or consent/rape, the law erases ambiguities and can only validate one party’s experience or account of events. Legal structures such as the standard of proof then structurally privilege the accused’s version of events over that of the accuser. Smart argues that feminist legal reform campaigns generally only serve to strengthen the law’s position as a discourse of power able to disqualify other knowledges and discourses. She advocates a tactic of challenging the law by de-centring it, for instance by asserting alternative definitions to those the law legitimises, as well as continued use of non-legal strategies and engagement in local struggles.

Building on Smart (1989), Jamieson (1996) investigates the unreasonable mistaken belief in consent defence, only abolished in England and Wales by the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Crown Prosecution Service, n.d.). She argues that the power of the law as a discourse is such that it may be partially constitutive of “how men and women ‘do sex’ in our society” (Jamieson, 1996, p. 57). As a result, having recourse to a

defence of mistaken belief in consent, particularly one which does not require such a belief to be reasonable, further exacerbates power differentials between complainant and accused—generally women and men, respectively—in rape trials. In Jamieson’s words, it means that “if a woman believes what is occurring is rape and the man does not, then in the law it is, indeed, not rape.” Furthermore, “the law does not have to answer the question ‘what is it then, if not rape?’” (p. 62).

The theme of how the law as a discourse actively constructs human sexuality is picked up by Lacey (1998) who uses discourse analysis of the legal system to ask what the law *values* about sexuality. She finds that the implicit and explicit norm of sexuality in the law is “adult heterosexual sexuality, and ... penetrative heterosexual intercourse” (pp. 102–3). The law approaches the question of harm caused by sexual violence through the perspective of property: the disembodied legal subject grants or refuses access to one’s property, i.e. one’s body. There is little space in this construction for ideas of self-expression, mutuality, relationships, or intimacy, which at least partly shape our current understanding of sexuality. There is also little space for articulating in legal terms the true harm of sexual violence: “violation of trust, infliction of shame and humiliation, objectification and exploitation” (p. 106). As a result, the legal framework silences victims of sexual violence and privileges the account of the accused. Lacey also highlights the importance of power relationships and material conditions which may limit the meaningfulness of individual choice, and shows how these factors are also erased in the legal system. She envisions a reconceptualisation of sexual violence in both culture and the law based on notions of integrity and embodied, relational autonomy which would allow for a more complex and nuanced understanding and reflection of human sexuality in the legal sphere.

While this work may appear highly theoretical, Ehrlich (2001) uses critical discourse analysis to examine the language and discourses around rape within the legal and courtroom context by using transcripts of actual rape trials as her case study. She uses data from a university disciplinary hearing of two “sexual harassment” (in the terms of the university’s own disciplinary code) cases as well as the criminal trial for the same two cases, where the defendant was charged with sexual assault. The close analysis of this material enables her to pinpoint particular discursive strategies used in legal and courtroom settings to shift responsibility away from the defendant and to the complainant, constructing the complainant as consenting when she claims otherwise.

Ehrlich finds that, while he did not deny that sex had occurred, the accused in the case adopted a “grammar of non-agency” (p. 36) which had the effect of mitigating, diffusing, obscuring and eliminating his responsibility. More importantly, this representation of the accused was given credence at least to some extent by adjudicators in both trials, as reflected in the judge’s and tribunal members’ comments even where the accused was found guilty. In addition to constructing the accused as non-agentic, the discourse of both trials constructed the complainants as “ineffectual agents” (p. 95) by representing them as “unconstrained by socially-structured inequalities” (p. 78) and therefore having access to limitless options for resisting the accused’s advances, which they seemingly did not take up. Ehrlich argues that through this construction, legal discourses implicitly employ an “utmost resistance standard” (Estrich, 1986) when adjudicating sexual violence cases, thus casting anything but the “utmost” resistance as consent. Yet rather than ineffectual agents not making use of unlimited options, Ehrlich casts the complainants as strategic actors constrained by social power structures and their own fear of the accused’s actions and escalating aggression. She argues that “power relations help *constitute* the communicative behaviour of women and men in situations of sexual violence” and therefore “an adequate account of acquaintance rape must begin with the presupposition that women’s and men’s differential expression and interpretations, to the extent that they exist, are shaped by social inequities” (p. 135, emphasis in original). Ehrlich’s (2001) study stands in stark contrast to work in sex research and psychology on how consent is communicated. Where Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999), for instance, find that a lack of response is frequently used as an indication of consent, Ehrlich shows that in many cases it is more likely than not an indication of non-consent. Moreover such a lack of response is often construed as a sign of consent in rape trials, where the victim is cast as having limitless options for expressing consent or otherwise, thereby holding the victim to the standard of “utmost resistance” (Estrich, 1986): the idea that unless a rape complainant actively and vigorously resisted, they must have consented.

What discourse-analytical approaches to sex, rape, consent, and the law have in common is their emphasis on the importance of the cultural context within which the law operates. Even while advocating for the necessity of legal reform to better reflect what is valuable about human sexuality, Lacey (1998) says, “the most important conditions for sexual equality and integrity lie in cultural attitudes rather than coercive

legal threats” (p. 122). Smart’s (1989) call to decentre the law and reassert alternative knowledges and discourses also points to the potential of culture (both as a collection of social practices and customs, but also as representation), to reshape our understanding and dominant discourses of sexuality and consent in ways that neutralise existing power structures to empower individual agency. This emphasis on culture is also reflected in work on sexuality and consent in the field of discursive psychology, which is helpful in bridging the gap between the operation of power through discourse and the individual, fragmented, contradictory subject.

### 2.3.4 The different discourses of sex: psychology

The second strand of discourse-analytical engagement with issues of rape and consent comes from discursive psychology. Hollway (1989), building on Foucauldian ideas of discourse and Lacanian psychoanalysis, provides an early discourse-analytical approach to sexuality within this field. She identifies three key dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality in Western culture. The *male sexual drive* discourse sees men as “driven by the biological necessity to seek out (heterosexual) sex” (p. 54). This discourse casts men’s sexuality as natural and is reflected in a range of social institutions and practices including the criminal justice system’s lenient treatment of even convicted rapists. The *have/hold* discourse, on the other hand, positions sex as something which should take place within committed, long-term relationships. Finally, the *permissive* discourse originated in the 1960s and cast sexual expression as a right regardless of gender. Like the male sexual drive discourse, the permissive discourse too sees sexuality as natural, biological and asocial, but the permissive discourse applies this assumption to women’s sexuality as well as men’s. The three discourses identified by Hollway are contradictory, and each is dominant in a different way, in different parts of society. At their intersection, however, they put particular and contradictory pressures on women: to satisfy men’s sexual needs, to be chaste or seek life-long monogamous commitment, to express their own sexuality. Hollway’s work has been influential in a number of areas, including the feminist approaches to the law discussed above: Ehrlich’s (2001) work, for instance, makes use of these ideas, and particularly the male sexual drive discourse, to show how that discourse is taken up by the law and the legal system.

Gavey (2005) makes particularly effective use of Hollway’s ideas in an attempt to partially redeem second-wave feminist approaches to power, rape and consent. Using



Foucauldian discourse analysis, she interrogates the cultural constructions and social power imbalances which make sexual violence possible. Building on questions raised by second-wave feminism, she positions rape on a continuum of sexual violence and argues that many forms of sexual assault and even rape are often subsumed in the discourse of “just sex”. Following Hollway (1989), she argues that the male sexual drive discourse, the have/hold discourse, and the permissive sex discourse, as well as the absence of a discourse on active female desire, combine to produce a normative version of heterosexual broad enough to encompass a range of instances of forced or unwanted sex.

Gavey gives a range of examples of the kinds of sex that may fall in this space which are worth outlining in some detail as they are reflected, explored and expanded in the fanfiction works I analyse in Chapters 4 and 5. The most insidious of these is sex which is culturally constructed as normal or expected, such as sex within a long-term relationship where the male sexual drive discourse and have/hold discourse combine to create the expectation that sex is being exchanged for the continuation of the relationship. Some of Gavey’s interview participants reported consciously monitoring the frequency of sex in their relationships and experiencing guilt or even submitting to unwanted sex if they felt they were not satisfying their male partner’s sexual needs. Similarly, the male sexual drive and permissive sex discourses combined to create expectations of women to submit to casual unwanted sex. This parallels Pineau’s (1989) “contractual model” of sex where unrelated actions such as going on a date with someone generate an implicit contract and can be read as consent to penile-vaginal intercourse. Gavey’s discourse-analytic lens, however, can be particularly productively applied to the unwanted sex literature, yielding a picture of powerful dominant discourses which limit the subject positions available to (predominantly) women, leading them to submit to unwanted sex in both casual situations and long-term relationships. Crucially, such a framing allows for a problematisation of unwanted sex where, as previously discussed, many treatments of the subject risk to normalise it instead.

Gavey also builds on the work of Kitzinger and Frith (1999), to argue that in many cases women’s culturally accepted forms of refusal are not being accepted as such by men or are seen to contravene the norms of femininity. This invokes parallels with the utmost resistance standard, effectively giving women the choice between acting unfeminine—for which there are social sanctions—or risking being seen as consenting.

Gavey also demonstrates the power of identity and access to particular positively viewed subject positions—such as the “good lover”, the “sexually experienced/confident woman”, the always sexually available mistress (as opposed to the frigid wife)—in incentivising women to monitor their own sexual behaviour and submit to some forms of coerced or unwanted sex. The male sexual drive discourse, Gavey argues, can also construct men as needy, appealing to feminine nurturance and requiring “care” in the form of sex. Finally, she outlines several escalating strategies of coercion, from nagging and pleading, to interpersonal coercion such as name-calling and causing arguments, to the implication of ever-escalating violence and rape if women did not agree to men’s unwanted advances. Discourse-analytical approaches to the psychology of consent such as Gavey’s challenge key assumptions of the literature focusing on interpersonal negotiation of sexual consent, and highlight the need to consider social and cultural forces in the construction of “normal” sexuality. Gavey and McPhillips (1999), for instance, show how powerful discourses of romance and sexuality can work to limit individuals’ agency in consent negotiation. They demonstrate how women’s positioning as passive within the dominant discourse of feminine heterosexuality acts as a significant barrier to the negotiation of condom use. This raises serious questions about the extent to which, for instance, Anderson’s (2005) communicative model of consent is realistic and practical.

Gavey’s work shows some productive parallels with the framework of internalised oppression. As she convincingly demonstrates, the “just sex” construction of potentially coercive sexual practices as normal (hetero)sex is a powerful dominant discourse which permeates Western culture and society. The relative absence of alternative models makes it possible for this construction to be internalised by people of all genders. Coercive practices are normalised to the point of appearing natural, obscuring the operations of power through the various discourses which construct sexuality in this way. Gavey’s example of interview participants who voluntarily and habitually monitored the frequency of sex in their own relationships and submitted to unwanted sex for the sake of their partner is a case in point. Yet even adopting positively viewed subject positions such as the “good lover” or the “sexually confident woman”, or even the strong, self-reliant neoliberal woman (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008) is not a guarantee of an actual exercise of agency in the face of this operation of power, even though it may give, in Bordo’s (1993) words “the heady experience of

feeling powerful or ‘in control’” (p. 23). Through this lens, negotiation-orientated approaches to consent (Pineau, 1989; Anderson, 2005), by their neglect of issues of power in negotiation, become just another discourse through which the construction of potentially coercive practices as “just sex” operates. Like both Foucault’s conception of power as multi-directional and all-encompassing and second-wave feminism’s bleak verdict on the possibility of meaningful sexual consent under patriarchy, this view may seem to offer little space for agency and resistance. Yet this is where ideas of discursive and cultural resistance from marginalised groups may come into their own. In order to examine this, however, it is first necessary to understand approaches to the role of popular culture in issues of sexuality and consent.

### **2.3.5 Culture’s dual role in constructing sex: porn, romance, consent**

The two popular genres most frequently implicated in discussions of the impact of media and popular culture on sexual violence and consent are pornography and romance fiction. As erotic fanfiction has repeatedly been theorised as either pornography, or romance, or both, it is worth briefly exploring literature on both of these, and particularly their relationship with issues of sexual violence and consent. Pornography is often blamed particularly by radical feminist scholars and activists for the prevalence of violence against women (e.g. Dworkin, 1981; Itzin, 1992). MacKinnon (1987) goes as far as defining pornography as “the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or words” (p. 176). This argument is closely tied to second wave radical feminists’ views on rape and the impossibility of meaningful consent under conditions of patriarchy, as pornography is viewed as central to women’s systematic subordination. Other feminist scholars, however, have rejected this approach to pornography as having no basis in evidence of harm and being overly simplistic in placing the blame on a single factor (Segal, 1993). Psychoanalytic approaches to pornography also emphasise the possibilities the genre opens up for destabilising notions of gender and the associated power relations (e.g. Segal, 1994), although as Smith (2007) argues, much of the psychoanalytic literature on pornography evades a direct engagement with the material, its modes of production or its actual audiences.

There is an increasing drive towards more nuanced analysis of pornography and erotic material, examining both its production and how exactly audiences engage with it and the meanings they make from it. One key feature of such literature is

the recognition of the diversity of material frequently conflated together under the heading “pornography” as well as the diversity of audiences who engage with it, as reflected in Attwood’s (2002) argument that research in the field is moving “[f]rom pornography to pornographies” (p. 101). Materials as varied as women’s magazines, lingerie catalogues, and hardcore videos may be used as pornography by different audiences. They may share some representational conventions while being distinct in other ways. Attwood calls for more ethnographic approaches to porn audiences, examining for instance “how [pornography] is linked to the production of knowledge about sex and sexuality” (p. 103), and this call has been answered in more recent research. In her book-length study of British women’s use of a pornography magazine targeted at women, Smith (2007) engages in depth with women’s specific contexts, pleasures, and reading practices, showing the multiple meanings women make from this material. Smith (2009) also examines written BDSM pornography and argues that, far from eroticising the subordination of women, “descriptions of bodily discomfort, pain or shame are used in the stories to produce an emotional experience of sexual pleasure centred on bodily sensation” (p. 22). Some academics and activists have come to distinguish between “pornography” as exploitative sexual representation and “erotica” as empowering material (e.g. Wilson-Kovacs, 2009), although this distinction risks obscuring complexities of both modes of production and audiences’ meaning-making practices across the range of content thus labelled. One example of such complexity is identified by Schorn (2012) in the recent rise of commercial feminist and queer pornography on the internet. This is explicitly framed by its creators as an act of resistance against mainstream pornography, which in turn they position as exploitative. In her ethnographic study of women consumers of queer and feminist porn in several European contexts, Ryberg (2015) argues that porn spectatorship is complex, dynamic, and embodied, shaped by both internal subjectivity and social factors. It may not always be coherent or internally consistent, and may generate contradictory emotions ranging from arousal to disgust. Liberman (2015) casts feminist pornography as a site of exploration and development of sexual subjectivity for its women viewers. Further complicating ideas of ethical and feminist pornography, however, Scott (2016) highlights how the representational conventions employed in this subgenre and designed to showcase the ethical conditions of production can themselves be viewed as part of the pornographic performance. Barker (2013) explores audience reactions and BDSM activists’ responses to the *Fifty Shades* trilogy (James, 2011), highlighting how

even the problematic depictions of consent in the novels can spark conversation and activism on the subject. This research highlights the increasing complexity of both pornographies themselves and scholarly engagements with them, but also the potential of pornographies and erotic material to spark and shape conversations about sexuality. Yet the question of connections between pornography and issues of sexual violence and consent seems currently to be of greater concern to feminist activists following in the footsteps of second-wave radical feminism than to researchers, leaving a gap with regards to examinations of porn audiences' meaning-making and knowledge production practices when it comes to consent. My research therefore seeks to fill this gap by examining fanfiction as a particular kind of pornography, and tracing in detail fanfiction readers and writers' engagements with issues of sexual consent.

Romance novels, as a popular genre predominantly written and read by women, are a contested space in feminist scholarship and cultural studies, and frequently compared and contrasted with pornography particularly for their treatment of gendered power relations, sexual violence and consent. Historically they have focused on heterosexual relationships culminating in monogamous marriage, although more recently we have seen the emergence of the LGBTQ romance sub-genre and more open, "happy for now" endings (Roach, 2016). Early research on the romance genre, responding in part to a trend of "bodice-rippers" in the 1970s and 80s, focused on how the genre relates to—and enables its readers to relate to—patriarchy and gendered power structures in society. Radway (1984), a pioneer of romance research, sub-titles her chapter on the "ideal" romance novel "The Promise of Patriarchy" (p. 119). She demonstrates how in the conventional romance novel narrative the hero's behaviour towards the heroine is often abusive and yet over the course of the novel it is re-interpreted by the heroine as a sign of affection. Modleski (2008) sees a similar role for romance novels in enabling women to accommodate patriarchy and argues that romance fiction helps readers actively adapt to the harms of patriarchal society by enabling them to recode men's violent and aggressive behaviours as expressions of love.

Even more recently, a common criticism levelled against romance novels, frequently from outside the specialist field of popular romance studies, is that they recast violence, including sexual violence, as normal and romantic. Psychologists Ménard and Cabrera (2011), reviewing a longitudinal sample of *Romance Writers of America* award-winning novels, argue that despite some changes the genre continues to reflect and reproduce

dominant sexual scripts such as the focus on penile-vaginal intercourse, and depicting men as the initiators of sex and women as passively accepting or refusing advances. Philadelphoff-Puren (2005) examines depictions of the “token resistance to sex” myth in popular romance fiction and argues that such discourses are mapped from romance fiction straight onto legal discourses about rape. She argues that this narrative is so dominant that it has significant influence in courtrooms, accounting in part for the successful use of mistaken belief in consent defences (Jamieson, 1996) in rape trials.

Yet within the field of popular romance studies, such accounts have increasingly been questioned and complicated through engagements with both romance novels themselves and their audiences. In her groundbreaking work *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Regis (2003) challenges pathologising approaches to romance reading, highlighting instead the complexity and variety of works that fall within the romance genre and establishing clear generic links between works commonly considered part of the literary canon and more contemporary mass-market romance novels. Crucially, she argues that the romance narrative, through love, delivers joy and freedom to both hero and heroine. Regis’s work is firmly situated in a literary theory tradition with little examination of audiences’ engagements with the romance genre. Roach (2016), on the other hand, examines both the genre and its readers in an (auto)ethnographic study and returns to the question of the relationship between romance and patriarchy. She argues that romance novels and the reader and writer communities around them provide—within the limits of the tropes and conventions of the genre—a safe space for imaginative play where (predominantly) women can think through the challenges posed by patriarchy. Despite their decidedly more positive verdict on the romance novel genre, both Regis and Roach admit that the relationship between the genre and the reality of patriarchy remains problematic. Regis concedes that the freedom the heroine finds is nonetheless limited, whereas that of the hero remains unconditional. Roach, too, sees gendered differences in how the Happily Ever After ending affects the hero and heroine, with the hero being tamed within the context of the relationship but remaining embedded in patriarchy outside it.

In Chapter 5, I examine in more detail the intertextual relationships between fanfiction and popular romance novel tropes. As my primary focus is on fanfiction, my work in that chapter is based on much of the secondary literature outlined above when it comes to characterising engagements with issues of sexual consent in romance novels.

Yet, as Regis (2011) points out, there is a significant methodological problem with text selection in popular romance studies, resulting in generalisations being made about the genre that are not always supported by the evidence. A direct examination of the representation of sexual consent in romance novels is beyond the scope of my work but would be a fruitful avenue for future research. I do, however, argue that even where key popular romance scholars significantly diverge in their interpretations of the genre and its audiences, there is a common theme across the works of Radway, Modleski, Regis, and Roach, in that each of them addresses the relationship between romance novels and patriarchy, whether in the text itself or in its interaction with audiences. Furthermore, even Regis (2003), who casts romance in the most positive light, acknowledges its limitations in liberating the heroine. This common thread is what I pick up on in Chapter 5 to show how fanfiction readers and writers, themselves frequently romance fans, engage with the genre, play with its tropes, and thereby explore issues of sexual consent.

Discourse-analytical approaches to sexual consent enable us to examine the operations of power and the limitations these may place on individuals' ability to meaningfully give, withhold, or withdraw consent to sex. Further, popular culture has been implicated in the reproduction of such operations of power in a number of ways, though this implication is not uncontested. What is frequently missing from discourse-analytical accounts of sexual violence are avenues towards meaningful resistance. The study of fans has long claimed that this specific segment of active audiences is truly subversive and finds ways of resisting dominant meanings in culture (e.g. Jenkins, 1992; Bacon-Smith, 1991; Kustritz, 2003), although these claims are not undisputed. Fan studies has also paid considerable attention to issues of gender and sexuality in the works of fans, but it has not specifically engaged with issues of sexual consent. If, as Bordo (1993) argues, the mere pleasure-seeking of active audiences is not a sufficient condition for challenging dominant discourses, then are there audience engagements with culture that we can definitely point to and identify as extending beyond such mere pleasure-seeking and into overt resistance; and what would make those engagements different from the polysemy and pleasure-seeking of "ordinary" active audiences?

## 2.4 Fan studies

### 2.4.1 Studying texts/studying fans

The field of fan studies emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s from the turn towards the active audience in cultural studies. Following the examples of Ang (1985) and Radway (1984), who engaged directly with readers and viewers, early fan scholars took an ethnographic approach to studying fans, their communities, and their cultural practices. Two book-length ethnographies in particular set the tone for the study of those fan communities who use mainstream media properties to create their own cultural products: Jenkins' (1992) *Textual Poachers*, and Bacon-Smith's (1991) *Enterprising Women*. These works emphasise the marginalisation of fans both through structures of intellectual property and by demographics. In terms of intellectual property, fanfiction and other fan works have historically occupied an illicit space, as the prevailing view both within fannish communities and among the rightsholders of the mainstream media products fan works are based on was that fanfiction infringes upon copyright. Thus fanfiction stories for many decades were accompanied by disclaimers by authors, explaining they did not own the rights to the work they were based on and imploring rightsholders not to sue. Equally, while some commercial creators and rightsholders quietly tolerated fan works, others have a history of threatening to sue fans and issuing cease and desist notices, driving fannish activity further underground and fostering a defensive attitude among fans (Tushnet, 2007). Additionally, the fact that the fanfiction community is dominated by women and non-binary people, a majority of whom identify as members of gender, sexual, or romantic minorities (centrumlumina, 2013a; centrumlumina, 2013b), and that a significant proportion of fanfiction is erotic (destinationtoast, 2013b) further contributed to the marginalisation of fanfiction, fan works, and fannish communities<sup>1</sup>. Fans' "poaching" from mainstream media—borrowing, reusing and

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<sup>1</sup>Both the intellectual property status of fanfiction and the demographic marginalisation have changed over recent years. Tushnet (2007) provided the first in a series of legal and activist arguments for the status of fanfiction as transformative work, protected at least under US law. The establishment of the Organisation for Transformative Works in 2007, which clearly states in its founding principles a belief in the transformative status of fan works and has a legal team working on issues of fan works and copyright (Organisation for Transformative Works, n.d.), has further helped cement this view and discourage rightsholders from bringing legal proceedings against fans. Further, many rightsholders



rearranging elements without permission or dispensation—forms the central part of Jenkins’ argument, foregrounding this illicit aspect of fannish creativity. This in turn opens up a political dimension to fans’ activities: though she denies that fandom is overtly political, Bacon-Smith speaks of the production of fanfiction as “civil disobedience” and “terrorism”, both with regards to the reuse of commercial material in clandestine and resistant ways, and with regards to gendered writing. She explores popular sub-genres within fanfiction such as the Mary Sue (a character commonly seen as a too-perfect self-insert of the author), slash (stories about sexual and romantic relationships between men), and hurt/comfort (stories where usually stoic and unemotional male characters are shown as either deeply hurt or providing emotional and physical comfort to each other). In all of these, Bacon-Smith finds elements that give voice to women’s hidden experiences or subvert dominant conceptions of gender. Mary Sue stories, for instance present fanfiction readers and writers with a conflict: on the one hand many writers write them (though fewer actually publish them), and on the other, they are derided within the community. Bacon-Smith sees this conflict as an engagement with the contradictory demands women and girls experience from patriarchy. Conversely hurt/comfort stories, which Bacon-Smith sees as the “heart” of the fanfiction community, are an engagement with and challenge to the demands and constraints of masculinity. They are a space in which male characters can express vulnerability and emotion. Jenkins casts fans as “active producers and manipulators of meaning ... articulating concerns which often go unnoticed within the dominant media” (p. 23). He highlights fans’ lack of access to resources for commercial production and sees in that a way for fandom to express a kind of political resistance in positive terms. These early studies are, however, not limited to an ethnographic exploration of fan practices and modes of production. They also engage with the output of that production: fanfiction as text. It is in those texts that further evidence of resistance through culture is found: both Jenkins and Bacon-Smith see a subversive quality in the expression of women’s and queer sexualities mapped predominantly onto men’s bodies in erotic and explicit slash fanfiction.

In order to understand to what extent such subversiveness may apply to fanfiction’s 

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have realised the commercial potential of fan engagement, resulting in a partial commercialisation and mainstreaming of fanfiction and other fan activities, for instance through official fanfiction competitions or the publication of edited works which started out life as fanfiction, such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James, 2011)—a practice known within fannish circles as “filing off the serial numbers”.

engagement with issues of sexual consent, it is important to examine existing literature on the particular meaning-making processes of fanfiction, how fanfiction engages with sexuality, as well as key community practices.

#### **2.4.2 Meaning-making in fanfiction: dense intertextuality/communal practices**

In more recent studies of fanfiction and the communities around it, there has been a focus on how precisely meaning is made in fanfiction. Both approaches focusing on readers, writers, and their practices, and those foregrounding fanfiction texts themselves emphasise the important role of intertextuality in fanfiction meaning-making processes. Investigating slash fiction, Kustritz (2003) explores the fan practice of fanfiction challenges—writing prompts issued by one member of a community and fulfilled by others, so that thirty, forty or even a hundred relatively short pieces may be produced on a theme such as “sharing body heat” or “pirate stories” (p. 381). Kustritz examines the textual outcomes of this fan practice and makes a compelling claim about how fanfiction creates meaning, as well as the kind of work it performs for its reader and writer communities. She argues that for fanfiction readers and writers, much of the meaning of such challenges lies in the differences and similarities between the texts they produce in response to the prompt. This multiplicity of stories and interpretations, the similarities and differences between them, along with the community’s reading and writing practices, when read together produce a “metatext”. The way sexual and romantic relationships are depicted in this metatext is in turn significantly different to relationships portrayed in mainstream media, adding another layer of meaning construction. Kustritz argues that this metatext can be read as providing alternative ways of understanding the world, of being, and of doing relationships than those prevalent in the source works fanfiction is based on.

Approaching fanfiction purely as an art form and focusing exclusively on text rather than fan practice or the conditions of production of fanfiction texts, Derecho (2006) coins the term “archontic literature”. This is partly an attempt to move away from intellectual property issues and value-laden descriptors such as “derivative” or “appropriative” and builds on Derrida’s concept of the archive as ever-expanding. Derecho also uses “originary” (rather than the more commonly used “original”, “source”, or in fannish circles “canon”) for a work which may serve as inspiration

for fanfiction. She then goes on to argue that fanfiction is part of a wider genre of archontic literature—works based and building on other existing works. Viewing works of fanfiction and their originary works as part of the same archive enables a challenge to the traditional hierarchical relationship between “original” and “derivative”, as Derecho argues that each new work added to the archive alters the entire archive, including the originary work. Derecho traces a history of archontic writing, showing how it has frequently been used as a tool of social and cultural critique by minority and marginalised groups. Building on Deleuze, and in some ways similarly to Kustritz (2003), Derecho proposes “repetition with a difference” as a key concept in how exactly meaning is created in fanfiction. By repeating parts of the originary work—characters, setting, plot, dialogue, specific scenes—yet making changes to them, fanfiction creates a space where the originary work and the fanfiction work are read “side by side” at the same time. This emphasis on similarities and differences echoes genre theory, which examines how production concerns shape culture. Examining genre in TV and film, Feuer (1992) argues that it offers these industries a way “to control the tension between similarity and difference inherent in the production of any cultural product” (p. 142). Johnson *et al.* (2004) also highlight how genre analysis is by necessity intertextual, as it looks at the relationships—similarities and differences—between different texts grouped within the same genre. The approaches of both Derecho (2006) and Kustritz (2003) to similarities and differences in fanfiction, however, differ significantly from genre theory: repetition with a difference and side-by-side reading are the *primary* means of meaning-making for fanfiction readers and writers. Importantly, because the relationship between works in the archive is non-hierarchical, repetition with a difference and side-by-side reading are not restricted to the originary work and a particular work of fanfiction. Rather, any and all works within an archive can potentially be read side by side with each other, and fanfiction works may cause a reader to see an originary work in a new light.

Similarly to Derecho (2006), Stasi (2006) is interested in the relationships between different fanfiction works, as well as the relationship of those works to (in Derecho’s terms) the originary work. She uses the metaphor of a palimpsest to describe slash works, and her argument can extend to fanfiction works more generally. The palimpsest for Stasi is “a nonhierarchical, rich layering of genres, more or less partially erased and resurfacing, and a rich and complex continuum of themes, techniques, voices,

moods, and registers” (p. 119). Being able to rely on the reader’s knowledge of at least the originary work enables fanfiction authors to compress meaning through dense intertextual references. Stasi argues that such extreme compression of meaning is highly unusual in modern prose: “it points back to techniques more commonly used in poetry, or in genres such as folktales or mythological cycles” (p. 122). Having a shared canon—or originary work—and a common set of references fundamentally alters the textual creation process. Conversely, a reader without access to the shared canon risks being unable to access at least some of the meanings that other readers would find in the fanfiction text. Stasi also explores the relationship between different works of fanfiction, and the relationship between fanfiction and texts other than the originary work. She coins the phrases “intertextuality in the first degree” for fanfiction works referring to the originary work, and “intertextuality in the second degree” (p. 126) or “squared intertextuality” (p. 127) for the parts of fanfiction texts which refer to other, not obviously related texts. She gives a range of examples of intertextuality in the second degree: fanfiction works referring to each other, to a second originary work such as in crossover or alternate universe fanfiction, or to other shared cultural references such as classical works of literature or fairy-tale themes. Even the tropes and generic conventions of an entire genre such as romance novels may be implicated in such second-degree intertextuality.

Willis (2006) offers a dramatically different perspective on the role of intertextuality in fanfiction to those put forward by both Derecho (2006) and Stasi (2006). Seeking to challenge the incorporation/resistance paradigm through which fanfiction is frequently investigated, she builds on Barthes’ concept of *doxa*: the cultural code, the repetitions of motifs in language and culture which become overcoded readings and limit the possible meanings readers can construct from texts. For Willis then, the question of reading becomes “the question of the ‘docility’ of the intertext, the question of which extratextual/intertextual knowledges and codes a reader uses to orient a text” (p. 157). In this way, Willis argues, fanfiction can “open up” a canon text to possibilities not necessarily contained within it but which are contained in the reader’s knowledge of the world, for instance the possibility of homosexuality in works of fiction such as the *Harry Potter* books (Rowling, 1997). Crucially, this view creates a space for intertextuality in fanfiction beyond, in Derecho’s (2006) terms, the immediate “archive” of an originary work. Readings of all kinds of texts happen within wider linguistic and

cultural contexts, and depend for their meaning on readers' knowledge of these but also on their knowledge of the world and of their own lived experiences where these may contradict the doxa. To put this, again, in Derecho's terms, the doxa as well as any other intertextual and extratextual resources a reader brings to a text become part of the archive. A second important aspect of Willis' argument is that all intertextuality is not equal. A text can be read using the most "docile" set of intertextual and extratextual resources, or alternatively the reader may bring other knowledges and resources to the reading which contradict the docile reading and thereby open up or re-orient the text. What fanfiction does, Willis argues, is create a space where such non-docile readings can be created and circulated within a community.

Some of these different approaches to meaning-making in fanfiction emphasise the active role of readers and writers (Jenkins, 1992; Kustritz, 2003; Bury, 2005; Willis, 2006), while others are more concerned with the texts themselves (Derecho, 2006; Stasi, 2006). This is also reflected in more recent work seeking to understand both fans and fanfiction. Parrish (2013), for instance, argues that we need new metaphors for fandom, beyond Jenkins' textual poacher, and particularly ones centering not fans as agents but the creative processes of fanfiction. She returns to work by Penley (1991), and the metaphor of Brownian motion, arguing that the process of reading and writing fanfiction is a valuable object of study in its own right. She also finds Derecho's (2006) concept of "archontic literature" valuable in foregrounding the textual processes and properties of fanfiction. Tosenberger (2014), on the other hand, returning to a focus on fan practices and communities, suggests using "recursive" rather than "archontic" to describe fanfiction, for two reasons. Firstly, she argues, it indicates more agency on the part of the fanfiction community, rather than simply a space or archive which automatically accumulates new material. Secondly, she feels "recursive" is a more accessible word than "archontic". Additionally, building on fan writer Seperis' work, Tosenberger argues that its dense intertextuality makes fanfiction commercially unpublishable, and that that unpublishability is a key strength, allowing fanfiction to circulate non-commercially within its reading and writing communities. Willis (2013) makes a compelling case for the necessity of considering both fan texts and fan communities if we are to understand the "political work" done by fanfiction and other forms of fannish expression. She conceptualises fandom as a discourse community, showing in a case study of *X-Files* fandom how both fan texts and fan discussions can

serve to challenge and re-signify dominant meanings about gender and power from the originary work.

The continual shift in focus from fan agency to the textual properties of fanfiction and back is telling, especially given the similarities between some of the findings regardless of approach. Intertextuality is clearly key to how meaning is created in fanfiction, but so is how this intertextuality comes about and what fan readers and writers *do* with it. Several of these writers (Penley, 1991; Jenkins, 1992; Kustritz, 2003; Derecho, 2006; Willis, 2006) argue that for the reader and writer communities around it, fanfiction is a way of interacting with and making sense of their day-to-day lived experiences, especially with regards to gender and sexuality. Yet frequently these arguments are only made in broad brush strokes, the exact mechanisms of this sense-making only hinted at. There are key concepts across these authors' works which resemble each other: Kustritz's (2003) "metatext" and Derecho's (2006) "archive", both enabled by reading multiple texts side by side, by acts of repetition, by similarities and differences between different texts; similarly, Stasi's (2006) intertextuality of the second degree is perhaps a less deliberate, less targeted version of Willis' (2006) choices of extratextual and intertextual resources to bring to a non-docile reading of a text. Tosenberger's (2014) criticism of the word "archontic" notwithstanding, I find the concept of an archive in Derecho's (2006) sense useful in denoting the shared resources the fanfiction community makes use of in creating, reading and interpreting fanfiction works, as well as in explicating the relationships between the works and other elements within the archive. The archive on its own, however, does not account for how fanfiction (or other archontic literature) may interact with material that is not text, and—despite the ever-expanding nature of the archive—quite a limited set of texts at that. Here, I find Willis' (2006) idea that readers and writers' own knowledge of the world may be just as valid an extratextual resource for reading as their knowledge of the originary work helpful. In this way, it is not only "originary" and "archontic texts" that may become part of the archive, or of the shared set of interpretive resources available to the community, but all kinds of other material in an extended form of second-order intertextuality; and as any addition to the archive shapes the entire archive, a work of fanfiction may provide a lens through which readers and writers' own lived experience may be re-evaluated, just like said lived experience may be the jumping-off point for a piece of fanfiction. The collective character of meaning-making in fanfiction, I would

argue, makes the form a kind of *communal textuality*: meanings are always created, circulated, questioned, and recreated within a community which has a more or less shared set of textual, intertextual, and extratextual resources for making sense of the texts they produce.

There is some more recent work which seeks to elaborate the political and psychological work fanfiction and fannish involvement does for those involved in these activities. Naylor (2016) examines fan defenses of the character of Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner) from the TV series *Game of Thrones* on Tumblr, and sees in fans' day-to-day practices and discussions a kind of feminist "[c]onsciousness-raising for the twenty-first century" (p. 56). She shows how Sansa Stark fans weave their own experiences of living in the world as teenage girls or young women into their interpretation of the originary text, and how their discussions of the text inform their understanding of themselves. Zubernis and Larsen (2012) examine fanfiction in relation to the policing of women's sexualities and position the former as a space enabling women's self-discovery and the affirmation of the self in a communal environment. This emphasis on the communal aspect of fanfiction is implicit, for instance, in Stasi's (2006) work but is made explicit by authors such as Naylor (2016) and Zubernis and Larsen (2012). Fanfiction meaning-making is by definition a communal activity and fanfiction is a form of *communal textuality*: texts are created, interpreted, challenged, questioned, and recreated together. In this process, different levels of intertextuality come to bear not only on the community's texts but on community members' experiences and views. In this thesis, I explore these communal textual processes to show how textual explorations of sexual consent may have an impact on fanfiction reader and writers' day-to-day lives and their actions beyond the fanfiction community. As I will show in Chapter 5, for instance, a story based on the Marvel Cinematic Universe may have a first-order intertextual relationship with that originary work, but may also derive meaning from a side-by-side reading with concepts such a traditional gender roles, marriage law, the common tropes of the romance novel genre, or dominant and resistant discourses on sexuality and consent. Viewed in this way, a work of fanfiction may be part of multiple different archives, altering each and every one of them and bringing them into a relationship with each other. These archives are created, interpreted and added to by communities, which bring their own extratextual resources to them, but also take textual resources from them to apply to their own day-to-day lives. With that in mind, how do communal textuality and

different kinds of intertextuality come into play in fanfiction's engagement with issues of gender and sexuality?

### 2.4.3 Slash: sexualising equality/romancing porn?

Given the dispersed nature of fandom, gathering large-scale demographic data on online fanfiction communities has proved challenging, and to date no truly representative data set exists. Surveys conducted by fans themselves suggest that fanfiction is produced predominantly by women and non-binary people (centrumlumina, 2013a): in the *AO3 Census* conducted in 2013, only 4.2% of respondents identified as "male", 80% identified as "female", with the remaining 15.8% selecting other gender options such as "genderqueer" (6%), "agender", or "androgynous" (2% each). In terms of sexuality, approximately two thirds of respondents selected at least one option other than "heterosexual" (centrumlumina, 2014), and 53.7% of respondents identified as members of a "gender, sexual, or romantic minority" (centrumlumina, 2013b). This data is not without limitations, as centrumlumina (2013c) herself acknowledges. The sample is self-selecting, and potentially over-reliant on AO3 users who also use Tumblr, as that was the primary mode of advertising the survey. Nonetheless, the data is based on a sample of over 10 000 users of the Archive of Our Own, and is a significant improvement on previous anecdotal evidence of fandom demographics. A more recent project focusing on fans' views and experiences of sex and sexuality (finnagain, 2017) surveyed 2 200 fans aged 18 and above. Similarly to the *AO3 Census*, it found that 85.9% of respondents identified as "female" and 3.6% identified as male. 7.7% of participants selected "non-binary", 5.6% "genderfluid", and 4.3% "agender"<sup>2</sup>. With regards to sexual orientation, only 24% of respondents identified as "heterosexual". Thus while data on fandom demographics remains limited, available evidence broadly agrees that this is a group predominantly consisting of women and non-binary people, a majority of whom are not heterosexual.

One constant throughout the history of fanfiction has been the focus on issues of gender, sex, sexuality, and sexual and romantic relationships. As of August 2017, the Archive of Our Own contains over 3 million works. 2.5 million of them use a tag indicating that they feature a sexual or romantic relationship (F/M for heterosexual relationships, F/F

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<sup>2</sup>In this survey, participants were allowed to select multiple gender options, accounting for a total greater than 100%.



and M/M for relationships between two women and two men respectively, and Multi for works featuring more than one kind of relationship). M/M works, or slash, account for just over half of the works on the Archive. Given that fanfiction is predominantly written and read by women and non-binary people, this focus on relationships between men has intrigued fandom scholars since the very beginning of fan studies. The intertextual links between slash, pornography and romance, and the gender of readers, writers and characters occupy a significant proportion of fan studies research.

Some of the earliest writers on the subject, Lamb and Veith (1986) view slash as a variant of romance fiction. They argue that in an inherently sexist cultural context women find it difficult to write heterosexual romantic relationships as equal and unencumbered by dominant cultural discourses and power differentials. Similarly, they say, it is difficult to overcome our cultural expectations of women's sexual passivity. In order, therefore, to portray a relationship which is equal, fan writers resort to using male characters in relationships with each other. They also note that in slash fanfiction, characters who are men—and often extremely masculine men—in the originary work acquire androgynous characteristics. So in *Star Trek* (1966) fanfiction, Kirk is frequently presented as a leader and sexually promiscuous (associated with masculinity) and at the same time emotional, intuitive and beautiful (associated with femininity). Similarly Spock is logical and rational (masculine) and virginal (feminine) (p. 243). Writing at the same time as Lamb and Veith (1986) and in part reacting to their theory, Russ (1985) emphasises the sexual over the romantic content of slash fiction and views slash as “pornography by women for women, with love” (p. 79). She broadly agrees with Lamb and Veith on the effect of slash as an equalising factor, though she disagrees on how this is achieved. She argues that the male characters in slash are effectively coded feminine, and that certain tropes in slash effectively eroticise the restrictions put on women's sexuality by patriarchal society.

Like Russ (1985) and Lamb and Veith (1986), Kustritz (2003) is also interested in the relationship between slash and the genres of romance and pornography, and in the role gender plays in slash. She argues that slash fanfiction drastically reworks the romance narrative while also challenging the conventions of pornography. Unlike pornography, even sexually explicit slash texts focus on the emotional context and consequences of sex. Unlike romance narratives based on courtship, where the heroine is only deserving of love if she is perfect, slash texts depict romantic relationships as firmly rooted in a

friendship of equals where flawed characters are portrayed as deserving of and receiving love. Kustritz goes as far as arguing that slash authors “meticulously create an equality relationship dynamic in which characters are completely equal in everything from decision making to love making, and from patterns of dress to household chores to levels of attractiveness and financial security” (p. 377). She views slash as gender-neutral: the gender of the characters is not important to their relationship. Yet in many ways the equality dynamic that Russ, Lamb and Veith, and Kustritz all find in slash fiction is entirely predicated on the relationships depicted being between characters of the same gender. The kind of openness about one’s flaws, as opposed to a “careful presentation of one’s self in order to show a desired partner an ideal image” (p. 379), that Kustritz describes is made significantly more difficult in relationships characterised by social structural inequalities such as gender.

Seeking to reconcile the pornography/romance dichotomy, Driscoll (2006) shows how fanfiction enables a re-examination of common assumptions about both romance and pornography. Whereas they are commonly cast as mutually exclusive opposites, Driscoll argues that in relation to fanfiction, pornography and romance are “axes between which every story can be plotted as more or less romance and more or less porn” (p. 91). Fanfiction is at least implicitly both porn and romance. Driscoll characterises sex in fanfiction as either “plot sex”—used to develop characters, further the plot and provide closure to a romance narrative—or “porn sex” (p. 86), where it is written for its own sake and shares representational conventions with pornography. Importantly, however, porn sex in fanfiction and even so-called PWP (“Plot? What Plot?” or “Porn without Plot”) stories must retain an element of plot or characterisation in order to remain fanfiction. Even if such characterisation is only available through intertextual readings with the originary work, it cannot be dispensed with entirely. Here, Driscoll emphasises the communal nature of fanfiction and shows how both porn and romance in fanfiction are communally negotiated through such intertextual readings and references to originary works. The genre classification of fanfiction is secondary to the community’s negotiated meaning-making practices.

While many slash texts, particularly in the early days of fanfiction but also today, do indeed exhibit the equality dynamic described by these authors, it is notable that a large and growing body of slash work exists where authors insert forms of inequality other than gender for their characters to negotiate. Noting such unequal dynamics in

some slash works, Woledge (2006) defines a new literary subgenre of *intimatopia* which she argues is present not only in slash fanfiction but also in professionally produced fiction. *Intimatopia* is characterised by a focus on connecting sex and intimacy between the male protagonists, rather than separating them as romance and pornography do. Unlike earlier writers on slash (Russ, 1985; Lamb and Veith, 1986), Woledge argues that social hierarchies, rather than equality, play a key role in *intimatopic* fiction, as they enhance the sense of intimacy between the characters. “The greater the divide,” she writes, “the more intense the intimacy that must transcend it” (p. 109). More recently, Busse and Lothian (2018) have taken a historical approach to slash and its relationship with queer sexualities, suggesting three waves of this relationship:

1. Initial woman-centric slash that consciously used male protagonists and male bodies to envision ideal relationships and fantasise about sexual experimentation, often within deeply committed romantic relationships.
2. A politically self-aware movement towards realism that confronted these fantasy men not only with the realities of male bodies and sexualities, but also with the cultural realities of gay lives.
3. Slash fiction that is deeply embedded within a self-defined queer space, neither fantastically creating nor idealising yet othering gay men, but rather writing multiple genders and sexualities as both reflections and fantasies of the complexly diverse community of readers and writers.  
(p. 118)

This approach is a useful overview of the developments in slash fiction over several decades, but also necessarily limited in its granularity. Busse and Lothian do touch on more recent slash tropes featuring power imbalances in intimate relationships, for instance in their examination of several stories set in an “alternate universe” where societal gender roles are organised along lines of sexual dominance or submissiveness. They argue that such stories nonetheless perpetuate “the fantasy of a sexual relationship that can somehow create equality in an unequal world” (p. 125). While they explore some of the personal development characters undergo to achieve such equality, there is room here for relating such personal growth to the operation of power through wider societal expectations, and to the impact these have on individuals’ ability

to meaningfully consent to sex.

It is this *inequality dynamic* present in many subgenres of slash (intimatopic and otherwise) that I am particularly interested in. It is striking how a genre that started by levelling the gendered playing field has developed such a variety of ways of re-introducing different kinds of social inequality into the relationships it focuses on. Combined with the focus on sex and romance in those relationships, this raises interesting questions about how fanfiction readers and writers—and their characters—negotiate issues of power, inequality and sexual consent, and about what this material can tell us about the kind of cultural and political work slash fanfiction may help the communities centred around it perform.

## 2.5 Research questions

Discourse-analytical approaches to sexual violence and consent have emerged across a range of disciplines, including psychology and feminist legal studies. These approaches acknowledge the operation of power through discourse, highlighting the discursive construction of coercive and otherwise less-than-consensual sexual situations and acts as “just sex” (Gavey, 2005). What emerges from much of this literature is the operation of a regime of truth where the impact of power structures on individuals’ ability to meaningfully negotiate consent is obscured. When a party submits to or even initiates unwanted sex as a result of gendered dominant discourses of sexuality (Hollway, 1989; Gavey, 2005), neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility, or postfeminist discourses of women’s sexual liberation and independence (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Burkett and Hamilton, 2012), this regime of truth makes the labelling of that sex as anything other than fully consensual barely intelligible at best. This regime of truth is so dominant that it is even reflected in ostensibly feminist research on consent negotiation (Anderson, 2005; Jozkowski and Peterson, 2013a) and “unwanted sex” (Impett and Peplau, 2003; Umberson, Thomeer and Lodge, 2015), where the effects of power on interpersonal consent negotiation are effaced in favour of a focus on interpersonal interaction and individual agency.

Scholars also emphasise the role of popular culture in reproducing the discursive construction of potentially coercive sexual practices as “just sex”, and a number of legal as well as cultural studies scholars point to the importance of culture in

changing the law's attitude to rape (e.g. Lacey, 1998; Philadelphoff-Puren, 2005). Yet this view of culture is not undisputed within cultural studies, where one key focus has traditionally been on audiences' active meaning-making practices and resistant readings of "messages" in media and culture. Specifically on the issue of sexual consent and the normalisation of sexual violence, however, evidence of such resistant readings is lacking, while much attention has been paid to the supposedly harmful effects of particular kinds of media such as pornography and romance (Dworkin, 1981; Itzin, 1992; MacKinnon, 1987; Radway, 1984; Modleski, 2008). So what do audiences *do* with media representations of potentially coercive sexual situations as "just sex"? Can active audiences mount a meaningful resistance to this regime of truth? Fans are one particular type of active audience that has attracted attention for its resistant and subversive meaning-making using raw materials "poached" from popular culture, although the exact mechanisms of such subversion are rarely examined in detail. The fanfiction community consists predominantly of women and non-binary people, a majority of whom identify as members of gender, sexual, or romantic minorities (centrumlumina, 2013a; centrumlumina, 2013b). This community produces a significant amount of work focused on sexual and romantic relationships, much of which is sexually explicit in nature (destinationtoast, 2013b). For these reasons, the fanfiction community would be a likely suspect for the kind of active audience that critically engages with dominant discourses of sexuality and consent, that challenges those dominant discourses and creates alternatives, and that is able to resist the "just sex" regime of truth. It is the possibility of such critical engagement on the part of fanfiction readers and writers that interests me, as well as its potential as a form of discursive resistance and cultural activism. With that in mind, the key questions I aim to address in this research are:

- How do erotic fanfiction and the communities around it engage with issues of sexual consent?
- Can this engagement be meaningfully viewed as a form of cultural activism?

## Chapter 3

# Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

As I discussed in Chapter 2, dominant discourses around sex and sexuality construct a range of acts which fall along a continuum of sexual violence as “just sex” (Gavey, 2005). These constructions are internalised by individuals and shape their own attitudes and sexual behaviours. There is a substantial body of research that shows that individuals (predominantly women) submit to—or even initiate—“unwanted sex” both casually and in long-term relationships in complex ways and for complex reasons. Discursive constructions of sex and consent and the associated (un)availability of positively-viewed subject positions is key here, frequently translating into an environment where pressures to engage in sex are normalised and made invisible, rendering individual agency ineffectual. My interest is in the possible forms of engagement with and resistance to such discursive constructions, and in how online communities such as the fanfiction community can facilitate such resistance. My approach to this investigation is two-pronged, and driven by both theoretical considerations and the specific practicalities of studying the online fanfiction community. On the one hand, and in line with Gavey (2005), I maintain the Foucauldian emphasis on discourse and discourse analysis to understand both the dominant mainstream discourses around sexuality which circulate within the online fanfiction community and any alternative discourses the community may generate. On the other hand, I use ethnographic data collection and analysis both online and offline, and including autoethnography, to understand the context in which these discourses circulate and the ways in which

they are made meaningful within the fanfiction community. In this chapter, I outline the rationale for this dual approach, the key considerations in digital ethnography, as well as the specific practical challenges I faced and choices I made in the course of my research. I begin by reviewing the case for using a combination of ethnography and discourse analysis. I follow this with a more in-depth engagement with the particular challenges I faced in my ethnographic engagement with an online community, focusing on the role of the ethnographer online, the specifics of ethnography on and of the internet, and issues of temporality. Finally, I provide an account of the methods used for data collection through face-to-face interviews in the later stages of my research.

### **3.2 Ethnography and discourse analysis: an unlikely partnership?**

From an audience-centric perspective, Barker (2008) critiques the prevalence of discourse analysis in Cultural Studies, arguing that “[d]iscourse analysis naturally generates ‘images of the audience’ which require no testing” (p. 156) and “builds in a presumption of the effectivity of the patterns it ‘discloses’” (p. 158). As an audience researcher, Barker effectively asks what audiences *do* with discourses they encounter, which is also the question driving my research into the online fanfiction community’s engagement with discourses of sexual consent. My use of an ethnographic approach in conjunction with discourse analysis is designed to address this question.

There is some precedent for the combination of ethnography and discourse analysis across a range of fields. Spencer (1994) makes the case for the mutual relevance of the two methods and argues that ethnographic work may provide an entry point into a community which then enables discourse data to be collected and analysed. It also provides the necessary in-depth background knowledge and cultural competence (Hine, 2015) within the community of interest to add context and depth to any discourse analysis. Conversely, using discourse analysis in conjunction with ethnographic work may also enable the researcher to ask and answer questions about the operation of power through discourse within the specific local setting under consideration. Miller (1994) explores the overlapping and complementary aspects of ethnographic work, conversation analysis, and Foucauldian discourse analysis, while acknowledging the differences between these approaches. His focus is on ethnographies of institutional

discourse and the investigation of how social realities in specific and situated settings are discursively produced. Macgilchrist and Van Hout (2011) classify work which combines both ethnography and discourse analysis based on the epistemological underpinnings and specific type of discourse analysis employed. Unlike Miller (1994), who advocates a combination of conversation and Foucauldian discourse analysis, they propose that each of these two variants of discourse analysis affects ethnographic work in different ways: whereas Foucauldian-inflected studies treat discourse analysis predominantly as an epistemological position, conversation analytical work takes discourse as the object of its analysis. Hine (2015) also advocates the use of discourse analysis in conjunction with ethnography to “develop a systematic exploration of the emergent hunches and cultural competences an ethnographer has acquired through participant observation” (p. 105) as well as to increase the ethnographer’s sensitivity to practices which they may have started taking for granted.

An ethnographic approach has been fundamental to my research, precisely for the reasons Hine (2015) gives. As I discuss in detail below, data collection, selection, and analysis would have been impossible without the cultural competence developed through long-standing membership and participation in the fanfiction community. To understand how fans deploy and challenge discourses about sexuality and consent in their texts, conversations, and practices, it is necessary to understand the particular social structures those discourses operate within, and the meaning-making processes the fanfiction community employs. To that end, I have conducted ethnographic research both in the digital spaces fans inhabit, such as social media platforms and online fanfiction archives, and through attending offline fan events and conducting face-to-face interviews. The understanding gained in these ways has enabled me to apply discourse analytical methods to fans’ texts, practices and interactions, and to investigate how they engage with issues of power and sexual consent. My application of discourse analysis to the material emerging from this process is Foucauldian not only as an epistemological position but also in terms of the theoretical framework which underlies my analysis, as outlined in Chapter 2.



### 3.3 The role of the ethnographer in online settings

My long-standing involvement in fanfiction communities as well as the specificity of the online setting presented me with a number of methodological challenges for this project, both in terms of how I could relate to the community I was now studying, and in accounting for my own positionality in this research. Here, I have found literature on the role of the ethnographer, and particularly on autoethnography, helpful.

There are several models of the role the ethnographer plays in the community they are studying. These models are, however, complicated by the mediated nature of the online setting. Gold (1958) identifies four roles available to the ethnographer, along a continuum from complete participant to complete observer. The complete participant is a covert researcher, fully immersed and taking part in the core activities of the group; the participant-as-observer is known to the group as a researcher but is also immersed in community activity; the observer-as-participant, too, is open about their researcher identity, though their interaction with community is much less immersive in nature; finally the complete observer does not interact with the community or make their role as researcher known to them. There is a certain level of conflation involved in this model between level of participation and level of openness about the ethnographer's identity and objectives. Adler and Adler (1994) propose a different model based predominantly on levels of membership of the group: the peripheral member will "interact closely enough with members to establish an insider's identity without participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership" (p. 380); the active member may participate in the group's central activities and even take on responsibilities within the group but may not be fully committed to the values and goals of the group; and the complete member may be a researcher studying a community they were already a member of, or may be converted to membership. Covert and overt stances are open to researchers adopting all three of these roles. Bryman (2012) builds on Bell (1969) to identify four forms of ethnography along two axes: level of openness of the researcher about their identity and level of openness of the setting. Closed settings are often formalised organisations and tend to be characterised by formal barriers to access; open settings may be easier to access, though Bryman does caution that neither the distinction between open and closed settings nor the one between overt and covert research are necessarily clear-cut. From these three different models therefore, there

emerge three key factors which affect how the ethnographer conceptualises their role and their interaction with the setting: level of openness of the setting, level of openness of the researcher, and level of participation. Mediated settings such as online communities pose a number of challenges to these ways of conceptualising researcher roles, as all three key factors acquire new characteristics.

The level of openness of online settings is partially determined by features of the particular platform in question. Some social networking sites offer privacy settings which require the ethnographer to make themselves visible to the community they are studying and be actively accepted, for instance through a Facebook friend request. On other platforms, content is generally public and “lurking” (Baym, 1993, p. 151) or passive reading is the norm for a significant proportion of community participants and therefore to an extent for the researcher (Hine, 2015). Yet the fact that content on social media and other internet sites is publicly accessible in theory does not mean that those posting the content—whether it is fanfiction stories on the Archive or Our Own or discussion threads on Reddit—necessarily view it as such. An online setting may also be “closed” in less formal ways than the barriers to entry one may find in formal organisations: content created by many online communities may well be public and freely accessible, but only to those who know where and how to find it.

The question of levels of participation in group activities (Adler and Adler, 1994) is also complicated by the nature of the online setting and the specific platforms the community uses for interaction and conducting their day-to-activities. While some group members may generate large amounts of varied content—fanfiction stories, pictures, commentary or “meta”—many restrict themselves to only reading content and leaving the occasional “kudos” (a single-click indication that a user enjoyed a story) on the Archive of Our Own. Intermediate levels of participation are also possible, such as reblogging other users’ content on Tumblr, commenting on stories on AO3, or being a very active contributor within a small and fairly isolated friendship group while passively reading content elsewhere. While lurkers may not actively contribute to the group, they are familiar with community values, norms, types and genres of content, acceptable and unacceptable behaviours and types of interaction (Schneider, von Krogh and Jäger, 2013). In multi-sited online communities such as fanfiction fandom, individuals may participate in very specific and limited ways in only one of the many sites which form the community and still self-identify—and be identified

by others—as full, participating members. These different modes of engagement or participation are therefore also available to the ethnographer, though arguably each of them can be characterised as “complete membership” in Adler and Adler’s (1994) model, as each of them mirrors the experiences of at least some community members. As I discuss below, in an online landscape characterised by “networked individualism” (Wellman, 2001), the ethnographer’s construction of a field site from multiple fragments is an experience not dissimilar to that of community members constructing and curating their own online spaces.

While “lurking” therefore may still constitute full or close to full membership of the community, the ethnographer’s visibility *as a researcher* remains a question to be addressed separately from the level of participation. Rutter and Smith (2005) reflect on the “presence and absence” (p. 85) of the ethnographer in online communities. Unlike a conventional field site, community members are not constantly reminded of the ethnographer through their physical presence. In communities where passive presence is an accepted form of membership, covert research is easy (though not always ethical) to conduct, while establishing an overt and visible presence may pose a practical challenge. The exact forms of interaction with community participants, and hence the ethnographer’s visibility to participants, also varies with the technical features and social uses of the platform(s) where the ethnography is being conducted. Hine (2015) also comments on the many choices an ethnographer is faced with when establishing their presence in one or more online field sites: what and how much information to share in a profile, how to tap into the communities and networks of interest, whether and how to participate in community activities.

Online ethnography thus complicates the three key factors commonly identified as shaping the role of the ethnographer within the research setting in a number of ways. My approach to studying online fanfiction fandom was partly shaped by the fact that I was already a member of the community before I began my research, giving me “home field advantage” (Dyck, 2000, p. 32) and access to what is only a semi-open research setting. My level of participation (Gold, 1958) or membership (Adler and Adler, 1994) in online fanfiction fandom did not change as I became a researcher, though the modes of engagement did. Importantly, I had to make decisions about using the various fandom materials I had access to by virtue of my long-standing membership of the community while also protecting the privacy and confidentiality of other community members. This

resulted in two key strategic choices, driven in part by the level of control community members had over the privacy of the content they posted online. Firstly, any material which was in some way marked as private and which I only had access to by virtue of being a fan was out of bounds for my research. This included fanfiction stories only visible to AO3 account holders as well as material from invitation-only message boards and similar spaces. Secondly, I chose to treat material from sites with little or no privacy control as more sensitive than that from sites which offered users a number of options for protecting their privacy. This particularly shaped my approach to data from Tumblr, which only allows public posting. In order to minimise the likelihood of individual posts and contributors being traced back through internet searches, I have pseudonymised<sup>1</sup> usernames for contributors on sites which only allow public posts, as well as being extremely selective in my usage of quotes. My choices about the level of openness about my research were also driven by the nature of my participation in the community. My main forms of engagement were through posting content on AO3 and interacting with other members through a Tumblr blog, neither of which offer a stable presence from the point of view of individuals seeing my occasional posts on their Tumblr dashboard or browsing AO3 for stories about a particular pairing or character. I opted to post occasional reminders of my role as a researcher, generally in contexts where they were appropriate by community standards, for instance in response to memes asking about work and personal information.

As my involvement with online fanfiction fandom significantly predates my academic interest in the subject, this also posed questions and challenges about my own positionality within this research. Dyck (2000) discusses the anxieties and uncertainties which accompany the transition from being a social participant in a setting to “becoming anthropologically attentive to becoming an ‘out’ researcher” (p. 43). Relationships and activities which have been purely personal acquire a scholarly and professional dimension, and decisions need to be made about how to treat information one may only be privy to because of personal involvement in the field rather than as a researcher. A further issue is that of perspective: having an analytical interest as well as a personal engagement with a particular subject will shape and complicate

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<sup>1</sup>All pseudonyms used in this thesis are derived from character names from the *Pokémon* games. Pseudonyms of participants in online discussions are not capitalised, reflecting the convention of not capitalising usernames on social networking sites. Pseudonyms of face-to-face interview participants are capitalised.

the ethnographer's reactions to situations in the field. There is a range of approaches to the ethnographic study of communities one is part of, used in fan studies, online ethnography, and more traditional ethnography, which can be loosely summarised under the heading of autoethnography. Reed-Danahay (1997) gives an outline of the history of autoethnography, highlighting the multiple meanings the term has across different disciplinary communities. Authors such as Van Maanen (1995), Strathern (1987), and Pratt (1994) focus predominantly on the ethnographic components of autoethnography, broadly defining it as the practice of studying one's own culture. The second major tradition of autoethnography is that focused on life writing (e.g. Deck, 1990; Denzin, 1997) and the self and life story of the individual as an object of ethnographic interest.

This life writing or "evocative" turn in autoethnography has been challenged, and attempts have been made to reconcile the two traditions of autoethnography. Anderson (2006), for instance, proposes an analytic approach with five key features: analytic autoethnography is conducted by a complete member researcher but in dialogue with other community participants; it is characterised by analytic reflexivity and a commitment to theoretical analysis; and the researcher's self is visible in the narrative. Voloder (2008) builds on Anderson in her attempt to reconcile the ethnographic and autobiographical traditions in autoethnography by examining the concept of analytical distance between researcher and participant in her study of the Bosnian community in Melbourne. She argues for a separation of the insider/outsider dichotomy on the one hand and the concept of distance on the other, using distance instead as an analytical tool to compare her own and her participants' experiences and therefore the wider social and cultural factors shaping them. Voloder casts herself in the roles of both ethnographer and informant without making her own experiences the sole focus of her research.

The field of fan studies itself has a long tradition of fans researching other fans. Hills (2002) popularised the word "acafan" for this phenomenon, though both the practice and the term have a longer history than that. Jenkins (1992) talks of writing both as "an academic (who has access to certain theories of popular culture, certain bodies of critical and ethnographic literature) and as a fan (who has access to the particular knowledge and traditions of that community)" (p. 5). This approach broadly fits within the "insider ethnography" branch of autoethnography, though it is rarely explicitly labelled as such. Hills (2002) also calls for a more explicit use of the life history approach

to autoethnography within fan studies as a tool for unsettling the insider/outsider dichotomy and the privileging of either the fan or scholar position within fandom ethnography. The main focus of the kind of autoethnography proposed by Hills is the question of why fans are fans, but his call for autoethnography to “treat self and other identically, using the same theoretical terms and attributions of agency to describe both” (p. 81) is certainly applicable to other research questions.

Autoethnography is also valuable from a digital or online ethnography point of view. Hine (2015) highlights the increasingly individualised experience of the internet, as social media offers tailored content and users curate their own experiences by choosing who to connect with and which links to follow. This makes it impossible for the ethnographer to reconstruct a holistic picture of life online (see also Cook, Laidlaw and Mair, 2009), but at the same time this uncertainty and ambiguity mirrors participants’ own experience of the environment. This mirroring makes a partially autoethnographic approach to online interaction valuable, and Hine argues for “considering how connections present themselves and what choices are available for building meaning out of these diverse influences” (Hine, 2015, p. 83).

My own approach to autoethnography then is shaped by all three of these traditions: the insider ethnography of fan studies (Jenkins, 1992; Hills, 2002), the reflexive autoethnography mirroring participants’ experiences of the internet environment (Hine, 2015), and the uncomfortable but productive tension between my roles as researcher, fan, informant and analyst (Voloder, 2008; Anderson, 2006). My work is autoethnographic in the sense that my “field” is also my “home” and I am studying a community I am also a member of. It is also partially autoethnographic in the sense that I am adopting the role of informant and using my own experiences of online fanfiction fandom to inform my data selection, collection, and analysis while situating these experiences firmly “within a story of the social context in which [they occur]” (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

### **3.4 From site to journey: ethnography for the internet**

Readers and writers of fanfiction do not form a single community so much as a collection of different, loosely connected (and sometimes entirely disconnected) communities, with permeable boundaries. They produce not only fanfiction works but also an

extraordinary amount of discussion, commentary, personal updates, fannish squee<sup>2</sup>, wank<sup>3</sup>, and other material. It is impossible—and arguably undesirable—for a single ethnography to capture the range and volume of this material, and even a thematic focus such as “sexual consent” leaves a potentially unmanageable task. The mediated, digital nature of these communities, dispersed across multiple interconnected platforms raises further questions about how and where best to collect and select data. Discussions of boundary issues and the conception of the field site within both traditional and digital ethnography have been helpful in addressing the practical challenges this has presented for my research.

The concept of the “field site” has been problematised by ethnographers from a range of disciplines even before the emergence of ethnography online. The specific approach to finding—or, more recently and accurately, constructing—a field site reflects a number of ontological and epistemological assumptions as well as practical methodological considerations. In his classic challenge to “traditional”, geographically bounded ethnography, Marcus (1995) calls for a multi-sited approach, which would enable anthropologists to study and compare how phenomena of the “World System” manifest and are negotiated within a variety of specific, localised settings. He proposes a range of strategies for constructing such a multi-sited project, including following the movements of people or objects, and centring a study on a more abstract concept, such as a metaphor, a story, or a conflict. While this approach has been lauded as allowing ethnographers to break boundaries and ask questions about wider issues traditional approaches were unable to address, it has also been critiqued, both on epistemological and practical grounds. Candea (2007) identifies seamlessness—the idea that the global and the local are inextricably intertwined—as a key assumption of multi-sited ethnography and a contributor to the idea of holism within the discipline: the assumption that by studying multiple sites we can reconstruct the whole of the world system seen to exist at a level above them, “a strange hope that once we have burst out of our field-sites, we can conquer the seamless world” (p. 174). On a practical level, Candea argues, multi-sited ethnography pays little attention to the process of constructing the field site, thereby obscuring key methodological choices through the

<sup>2</sup>The fandom wiki *Fanlore* defines squee as “an onomatopoetic expression of enthusiasm and joy”. (*Squee* 2016)

<sup>3</sup>*Fanlore* gives several definitions of fannish usages of wank, including “[a] loud and public online argument”, and “[a] catchall term for objectionable or contemptible fannish behaviour”. (*Wank* 2016)

over-reliance on the theoretical whole. Building on this and his challenge to multi-sited ethnography's particular conception of holism, he suggests that the arbitrarily bounded field site, consciously and reflexively constructed by the ethnographer taking into account the ethical and political implications, is a methodological choice that allows for continued productive engagement with ideas of seamlessness and complexity.

Theoretical considerations and the specificity of research questions also play a role in how the ethnographer's field is conceptualised. Cook, Laidlaw and Mair (2009) build on both Candea's critique of multi-sited ethnography and on their own insights from the ethnographic study of religion to advocate for a conception of the field as "un-sited" (p. 47). Taking a broadly social constructionist approach, they reject the idea of the "whole" outright, arguing instead that it is "possible that no such single system exists" (p. 53) and phenomena are "intrinsically interactive, ... result from processes of assemblage or arrangement of entities" (p. 55). Instead of the multi-sited ethnography then, they propose that field sites are constructed based on the theoretical underpinnings of research questions: arbitrary in their multi-vocality and following of networks of people and other phenomena and yet on solid theoretical ground. To achieve this, the authors make a distinction between the concepts of space (abstract, impersonal), place (space imbued with meaning), and field (the object of ethnographic study). The field is decoupled from space and place, constructed across geopolitical and cultural boundaries, enabling the study and comparison of phenomena of theoretical interest. The authors point out that this approach is as applicable to places that occupy physical space as it is to non-geographic imagined communities.

The online environment further complicates ethnographic field site construction through a number of practical challenges. Hine (2015) posits an internet that is embedded, embodied and everyday, particularly in the Western world. A plethora of apps on mobile devices, a range of social media platforms, and highly individualised engagement patterns give rise to uncertainty, complexity, and the feeling that something is always being missed. Hine argues, however, that this uncertainty is not only a challenge for the ethnographer but an intrinsic part of the experience of internet users themselves, and so

"experiencing and embracing that uncertainty becomes an ethnographer's job, and pursuing some form of absolute robust certainty about a singular



research object becomes a distraction, even a threat, to the more significant goal of working out just how life is lived under these conditions” (p. 5).

Building on Wellman’s (2001) concept of networked individualism—the idea that our experiences are increasingly tailored and individual to us and that the focus of networks has shifted from connecting places to connecting people—Hine argues that ethnography’s key strength is its adaptability to new environments and advocates for a certain methodological eclecticism. She also makes a case for utilising the tools of everyday internet use in the construction of the field: search engines, social media platforms’ tagging and filtering systems, trending topics and other similar features shape users’ everyday experiences of the internet, and can therefore be productively used by the ethnographer as tools for field site construction. Marres and Weltevrede (2013) go as far as suggesting these features may not simply be part of our research methodology but form part of the object of study. Beaulieu and Simakova (2006) use this approach in their study of the temporal dimensions of hyperlinks. Building on multi-sited approaches to ethnography and previous ethnographic studies of online phenomena, boyd (2008) also foregrounds the network aspect of online environments and proposes a “networked” ethnography which “involves finding different entry points into a phenomenon, following different relationships between people and practices, and making sense of different types of networks and their relation to one another” (p. 54). Similarly to the un-sited field Cook, Laidlaw and Mair (2009) propose, here the components of the field site are constructed in relation to each other and the research question. Using the everyday tools of internet navigation to construct a networked field site, however, does ultimately reach a limit or boundary, even if only in the practical sense. Hills (2002) notes in his discussion on using “cyberspace ethnography” in fan studies that the mass of data available online makes it clear that selection and the construction of a boundary is required as “no *a priori* meaningful or internally coherent corpus can be identified” (p. 174). It is therefore also important to pay close attention to how that boundary is constructed in ways that may be both deliberate and arbitrary at the same time (Candea, 2007). Rather than a field site, the object of the ethnographer’s study becomes a mindful journey.

Following boyd’s (2008) networked ethnography approach of multiple entry points and tracing connections is an experience not dissimilar to that of discovering an online fandom community for the first time, highlighting Hine’s (2015) argument that the

experiences of the ethnographer mirror those of participants in online spaces. An internet search may lead to a fanfiction archive; users of the archive may include hyperlinks in their stories, pointing to their presence on more interactive social networking sites; social networking sites in turn may be structured in a way that aids discovery of other users with similar interests; finally, as those other users' interests are unlikely to be limited to the one fandom or piece of content originally used to find them, they may lead to other fandoms, groups or discussions. Any node in this network may be an entry point in its own right, as participation on social networking sites may lead to the discovery of fanfiction, or a trusted online or offline friend may bring someone into the community by sharing fannish content with them.

While I have been a reader and writer of fanfiction since my early teens, my engagement with fandom has also been punctuated by long breaks. My most recent foray into online fanfiction fandom was prompted by my discovery of the *Dragon Age* video game series (BioWare Inc., 2009) in 2010, which in turn led to my discovery of the Archive of Our Own, and about a year later to more active participation on the microblogging platform Tumblr. These two platforms are often used by members of some fanfiction communities in conjunction, to enable the searchable and long-term stable hosting of fan works (AO3) alongside interactivity of a more personal and ephemeral nature (Tumblr). Therefore, sub-communities crossing these two sites formed the core of my data gathering as I followed links and connections, or found new entry points entirely, to move fluidly between fandoms of a range of originary works and fan objects, between different tropes and sub-genres of fanfiction, and between loosely connected online fan communities, driven always by my theoretical interest in issues of discourse, power, and sexual consent. There are, of course, links I did not follow: fanfiction communities exist beyond those two sites. Most notably there is a large community on the social writing platform Wattpad, but anecdotally the overlap between it and the communities on Tumblr and AO3 is limited. Additionally, the communities which predominantly thrive on AO3 and Tumblr have presences elsewhere, notably on Twitter. While I maintained a casual presence on Twitter, ultimately the nature of interactions and conversations there showed only limited relevance to my research questions (Cook, Laidlaw and Mair, 2009), and therefore it did not form a major part of my field site.

### 3.5 Follow the trope

The methodological choices I made during data collection and analysis for this project were strongly driven by the above considerations, by my long-standing involvement in the fanfiction community, and by the theoretical considerations of my research questions. Ultimately, to construct my “field site”, collect and select material for analysis, I supplemented boyd’s (2008) networked ethnography approach with my own experience, in-depth community knowledge, and cultural competence (Hine, 2000) as a fan and the theoretical underpinnings of my research questions (Cook, Laidlaw and Mair, 2009). This led to what I call a “follow the trope” approach to my data collection. To understand this approach, it is first necessary to understand some of the tools and practices available to fanfiction community members in their day-to-day interaction with and navigation of the vast amounts of fanfiction and other community output available in online spaces. This will shed light on “how connections present themselves and what choices are available for building meaning” (Hine, 2015, p. 83) within this particular community context.

The preservation of fannish history and output is a central concern to many fanfiction communities (Versaphile, 2011). Archiving fan works and making them easily accessible and searchable plays a key role in such preservation efforts, and was a central motivation in the creation of the Archive of Our Own, the multi-fandom fanfiction archive that serves as a hub for many fannish communities today and that has been one of the central sites for my research (astolat, 2007). AO3 has a range of features intended to make fan works easily discoverable and filterable on a range of criteria. Community members make use of these features on a day-to-day basis to navigate the Archive and choose works to read. The creation, management, and use of metadata is particularly important for this purpose. Figure 3.1 shows how a fanfiction story is presented on the Archive of Our Own. The story is preceded by a block of metadata, progressing from the generic to the specific. The rating reflects the story’s suitability for different age groups, ranging from General Audiences to Explicit. “Archive warnings” are intended to prepare the reader for particularly upsetting content they may encounter. They fall into four categories: “graphic depictions of violence”, “major character death”, “rape/non-con”, and “underage”; additionally, an author may indicate that no archive warnings apply to the story, or that they chose not to use archive warnings, the latter of

Archive of Our Own *beta* Hi, elmyra! Post Log Out

Fandoms Browse Search About Search

Reindex Work Add Chapter Edit Edit Tags Bookmark Comments Share Subscribe

Download ↓

Rating:	General Audiences
<b>Archive Warning:</b>	<b>Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</b>
Categories:	F/F, Gen
Fandom:	Mass Effect
Relationships:	Female Shepard/Liara T'Soni, Female Shepard & her fish
Characters:	Female Shepard (Mass Effect), Liara T'Soni, Shepard's Fish - Character
Additional Tags:	Character death: Shepard's fish, Banging Yeoman Chambers just to get her to look after the fish would be wrong, Drabble, Shepard's fish, Paragon Commander Shepard
Language:	English
Series:	← Previous Work ● Part 2 of the Mass Effect Drabbles series ● Next Work →
Stats:	Published: 2017-04-10 Words: 100 Chapters: 1/1 Comments: 2 Kudos: 22 Hits: 407

## Fish

elmyra

### Summary:

Shepard is not allowed fish.

Shepard looks wistfully at the fish in her "favourite store on the Citadel". She likes them, finds them soothing to watch in the large tank in her quarters. But she hardly ever goes back to her quarters and, unfed, the last batch died. The fish don't deserve that. Maybe if Liara was here with her, Shepard would have a *reason* to spend time in her quarters. But Liara is fuck knows where chasing the Shadow Broker. Probably still thinks that Shepard is dead. Liara, too, does not deserve that.

Shepard sighs and turns away. No, she is not allowed fish.

Figure 3.1: A work of fanfiction as presented on the Archive of Our Own.

which functions as a signal to the reader to proceed at their own risk. The “Categories” field refers to the type of sexual or romantic relationships depicted in the story, e.g. between two men (M/M), two women (F/F), a man and a woman (F/M); multiple relationships (Multi) or no focus on sexual or romantic relationships (known as “Gen”) are also available options. Moving beyond these generic categories, the next four sets of metadata are called tags, and they help situate the work within the fannish context and establish its relationship to the originary work(s) it is based on. The Fandom tag specifies those originary works; Characters tags indicate which characters from the originary work the fan work focuses on; Relationships tags show which characters are in relationships with each other and what those relationships are, where characters

separated by a slash are in a sexual or romantic relationship, while those separated by an ampersand are considered friends. The “Additional Tags” category, also known as “Freeforms”, is intended to give authors a space to include any other information they feel necessary. This may include warnings and content notes not covered by the four “Archive warnings”, intended to let readers know that they can expect potentially upsetting content such as drug use or suicide. Freeforms can also be used to provide a sometimes flippant author’s commentary on the originary work, the fanfiction story itself, or the writing process. In addition to the two Archive Warnings dealing with consent issues (“Rape/Non-con” and “Underage”), Freeforms is another field where information about and discussion of any consent issues the story may deal with are frequently found in the form of tags such as “dubcon”, “consent issues”, or “fuck or die”. Finally, the Freeforms field is frequently used to indicate common tropes used in a fan work, such as “Alternate Universe—Coffee Shop” (a popular trope in which characters from originary works are taken out of their setting and reimagined as staff and customers of a coffee shop), “Fix-it” (a story that ignores or rewrites elements of the originary work perceived as wrong such as the death of a character or the end of a relationship), or “Slow Build” (a fan work which establishes and builds the central romantic relationship over time).

The Archive of Our Own also provides two ways for readers to interact with writers. A reader may choose to leave a comment on a fan work, explaining what they liked (or, less frequently, what they did not like) about it. Comments are published at the end of the fan work and viewable by other users (although the author of the fan work has some discretion over which comments to publish), and an aggregate count of comments is displayed along with the metadata for the fan work, as can be seen in Figure 3.1. Alternatively, readers can express appreciation for a fan work simply by clicking the *Kudos* button—akin to the heart button on Twitter or the reaction options on Facebook. An aggregate count of such kudos is displayed with the metadata, as is an aggregate count of “hits”—the number of times users have clicked on the fan work. The comments, kudos, and hits counts also have a secondary functionality, in that readers are able to sort a list of works by these metrics, which allows them to view the most popular works in that list first. Stories with a lot of hits, comments, or kudos, and particularly stories with a high kudos to hits ratio, are stories that are liked by a substantial number of people within the community, that are considered among the

best within that community, and that have a significant impact on their readership.

All of these Archive features are used by readers and writers of fanfiction to navigate the Archive, find material to engage with, and curate and personalise their own experience of the Archive and the wider fandom community (Wellman, 2001; Hine, 2015). A reader new to a particular fandom, for instance, may search for all works tagged with the fandom and then sort them by kudos or comments in order to read the most popular ones first, giving them a quick impression of what that particular community considers as the best of its output. Another reader may only be interested in a particular relationship (also known as “pairing”), and they would use the Archive’s search functionality to view a list of fan works featuring that pairing, sort them by the date they were last updated, and make their way through the list starting with the most recent first. A third reader may be interested in stories featuring their favourite pairing and a particular trope such as “Fix-it”, so they would use both the relationship and the freeform filters to find fan works to read. A fourth reader may only be interested in sexually explicit stories, while a fifth reader may wish to avoid sexual content entirely, and they both would use the work rating to find the right content for them. Of course, these search criteria can also be combined, for instance in a search for explicit stories about the pairing “Female Shepard/Liara T’Soni” that do contain an arranged marriage but do not contain BDSM elements. In addition to searching the Archive of Our Own, another key way in which fanfiction readers find stories is through following links and connections (boyd, 2008). These may be links from the Archive of Our Own to authors’ spaces on other social media platforms such as Tumblr, links to a particular author’s other works, or bookmarks and recommendations curated by other readers and writers. These search and sort functionalities, the following of links and connections between stories and authors in different spaces, combined with my cultural competence within the fanfiction community, and the theoretical guidance offered by my research questions enabled me to find and select the stories that serve as the basis of Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis.

I was particularly struck by the discrepancy between fan studies approaches to slash as a genre of gender equality (Lamb and Veith, 1986; Russ, 1985) and my own observations of the emergence of tropes and sub-genres within slash that seemed to deliberately explore unequal relationships. This also chimed with my increasing theoretical focus on the operations of power in sexual relations and the impact of power on individuals’

ability to meaningfully negotiate consent. Immersion in several fandoms, awareness of trends and popular tropes, and cultural competence within the community allowed me to choose two popular and sometimes controversial tropes or subgenres within slash fanfiction—the Omegaverse and the arranged marriage trope, both characterised by significant power disparities between the characters—to explore further. I was particularly interested in contemporary fanfiction engagements with issues of sexual consent, and therefore limited my research to stories published on the Archive of Our Own, which was founded in 2009. In fact, all of the stories selected for analysis were published after 2010. To find specific fanfiction stories for my analysis, I retraced the steps a fan would use to find and select works featuring specific types of content. I used the Archive of Our Own’s tagging functionality to search for works containing the relevant tags. I narrowed this search by focusing on a single, well-represented fandom and pairing within each trope. I then proceeded to read a wide selection of popular and impactful—as indicated by the AO3 “kudos” functionality—stories featuring the pairing and trope in question to understand common features and approaches. Acknowledging the networked nature of the community I was studying (boyd, 2008), I also followed links and connections to and from additional material, such as fannish commentaries (“meta”), introductions to popular tropes or pairings (“primers”), fan-curated recommendation lists (“recs”), and histories to help me situate the material within a wider cultural context.

My encounter with the Omegaverse subgenre of fanfiction is one of the key factors that sparked this research in the first place, so I had developed significant cultural competence in this specific area before beginning the project. The Omegaverse is a collectively created, cross-fandom, science-fictional setting where as well as being male or female, characters in the Omegaverse have a “secondary gender” which may be Alpha, Beta or Omega. Alphas are socially, and in some interpretations biologically, dominant, while Omegas are submissive. The resulting power dynamics offer interesting possibilities for exploring issues of power and consent. In selecting the stories for the in-depth analysis presented in Chapter 4, two factors were crucial. Firstly, I wanted stories that represented three different trends I had observed in my wider reading of Omegaverse fanfiction: the “straight-up” take on the collection of tropes that make up the Omegaverse setting; the trend seen in a substantial proportion of stories to subvert or invert some of these tropes, particularly as they relate to gender norms and

sexuality; and a trend to take the science-fictional premise of the setting and especially its biological essentialism to extremes. Secondly, and given the controversial nature of the Omegaverse within the fandom community, I was interested in some of the earlier stories in this subgenre. I wanted to understand whether what I perceived as a deep, complex, and productive engagement with issues of sexual consent had evolved over time or whether it had been present in the early development of the setting. As the Omegaverse originated within the Jensen Ackles/Jared Padalecki pairing in the fandom centred around the actors of the TV show *Supernatural* (2005), also known as Supernatural Real Person(a) Fiction or RPF, I also narrowed my selection criteria down to only stories featuring that pairing in order to facilitate comparisons between the different stories. Fans' own efforts to document and preserve fannish history proved helpful here, and netweight's (2013) account of the origins of the Omegaverse was invaluable. Through it, I found *Heat: Between You And Me* (Miss\_Lv, 2011), which is widely acknowledged as one of the earliest stories to feature most of the tropes commonly recognised as constituting the Omegaverse (netweight, 2013). *Slick* (tryfanstone, 2012) is the companion piece to another early Omegaverse story by the same author cited by netweight. Finally, following links from netweight's work led me to recommendation lists of early Omegaverse fanfiction for the Jensen/Jared pairing, which in turn led me to *Sure To Lure Someone Bad* (mistyzeo and obstinatrix, 2011). The selection of these stories, therefore, fits the kind of (auto)ethnographic approaches to internet ethnography described by Hine (2015) and boyd (2008). By building up cultural competence and using the same day-to-day tools and practices as the community I was studying (and that I was myself a member of), I was able to narrow down my selection of material. While this does not provide a comprehensive analysis of *all* Omegaverse stories, it is important to note that the stories I selected are representative of the genre in a number of ways. Firstly, they are stories that are recognised as impactful by members of the community: they are featured in histories of the genre and in recommendation lists. They are also popular, as reflected by the hits and kudos metrics on the Archive of Our Own: with over 1 300 kudos, *Slick* is the third-most popular Omegaverse story for the pairing on the Archive, and *Heat: Between You And Me* is within the top 30. As netweight (2013) points out, the language for the Omegaverse evolved over time, and as a very early representative of the genre, *Sure to Lure Someone Bad* is not actually tagged with any of the Omegaverse-associated tags on the Archive of Our Own. However, it is easily discoverable through recommendation



lists and has a comparable number of kudos to *Heat: Between You And Me*. All three stories can therefore be considered as impactful within the communities where Omegaverse fanfiction circulates. Finally and as previously discussed, the three stories are also representative of specific trends within the Omegaverse genre, showing three different but common interpretations of the collection of tropes that make up the setting.

To select the stories at the core of my analysis in Chapter 5, I also used the “follow the trope” approach. As themes of gender, power, and the impact of power differentials on individuals’ ability to meaningfully negotiate consent seemed at the forefront of Omegaverse fanfiction, it was important to explore other tropes and genres within fanfiction to understand whether these were qualities unique to the Omegaverse or not. Through my immersion in fanfiction fandom, I was aware of other tropes and trends that contradicted early fan studies scholars’ view of slash as a literature of equality (e.g. Lamb and Veith, 1986; Russ, 1985; Kustritz, 2003), and the arranged marriage trope was one of them. This trope borrows heavily from the Regency and marriage of convenience subgenres of romance fiction, and gender, social status and financial means of the characters play a prominent role in the development of the romantic and sexual relationship. The trope is popular with fanfiction writers: as of August 2017, there were 5 340 works tagged with “Arranged Marriage” on the Archive of Our Own. Other archives and fannish spaces also host a substantial number of arranged marriage stories. Arranged marriage fanfiction therefore seemed like the perfect case study to complement my investigation of the Omegaverse. As with the Omegaverse, I was familiar with the broad features and trends within arranged marriage fanfiction from extensive immersive reading. In order to narrow down the scope of my analysis, I again chose to focus on a single fandom and a single pairing. Using the Archive of Our Own’s tagging, search, and filtering functionality, I determined that the most popular pairing for arranged marriage fanfiction stories was Thor/Loki from the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) franchise. To gain more general context, I immersed myself in stories featuring the Thor/Loki pairing on AO3, then followed this by narrowing my reading down to only stories featuring arranged marriage. I read a wide range of Thor/Loki arranged marriage works, as well as other readers’ comments and discussions around the pairing, and this process of immersion gave me a “feel” for how writers of this particular pairing interpreted and adapted the arranged marriage trope, as well as how

they worked with the characters from the ordinary work. I narrowed my selection further to five of the most popular ones (measured by kudos) and identified common themes. To make an in-depth close reading possible, I finally focused in on two stories which were both representative of the themes I identified in my wider reading and complementary to each other in their treatment of the trope and characters: *Bride* (themantlingdark, 2013) and *XVII* (stereobone, 2013). Similarly to the Omegaverse stories I chose for analysis, these two stories are representative both in terms of their popularity and impact within fanfiction communities, and in representing trends and themes within fanfiction for this trope and pairing. The ethnographic “follow the trope” approach cannot, by definition, present a holistic or universal picture of the fandom community: different community members have different entry points, different interests, different networks and experiences (boyd, 2008; Hine, 2015). While the stories chosen for analysis are popular and impactful within the communities in which they circulate, there are hundreds of other stories—some similar to these, some different—I could have chosen, and my analysis of them would potentially have yielded results that were similar in some ways and different in others. Like Candea’s (2007) both deliberately and arbitrarily bounded field site, the follow the trope approach does, however, present one possible, specific and situated view of how substantial parts of the fanfiction community engage with issues of sexual consent. These parts of the community, and these engagements, may and do coexist with others, as well as with an absence of engagement in many cases—the community is far from homogenous. Importantly, however, the engagements I demonstrate in Chapters 4 and 5 are found in some of the community’s most popular and celebrated contemporary output and can therefore be said to have an impact on the wider fanfiction community.

### 3.6 Temporality

In an online field site spanning multiple platforms, mismatches in temporality present a key challenge for the ethnographer. It became clear to me early on in my research that the temporal aspects of the communities and platforms I was studying needed not only careful theoretical consideration but also practical adjustments to my methods, at times requiring me to make crucial decisions at short notice. In this section, I review key literature on issues of temporality in online research and reflect on how temporality

affected the choices I made in my work.

In her study of online engagement with a high-profile court case, Hine (2000) explores the different temporal features of different modes of online participation: website development and newsgroup membership. She finds that while individual website owners are highly driven by real-time offline events (both developments in the court case at the core of the online engagements in Hine's study and in participants' own lives) to provide fresh and up-to-date content, newsgroup participants engage in a much more fluid manner while still responding to offline developments. Hine builds on and challenges Castells' (1996) concept of the temporal collage, arguing that each mode of engagement has distinct temporal features which require significant cultural competence to navigate. Her study was conducted before the advent of Web 2.0 and the emergence of modes of engagement such as social media and microblogging, but the core of her analysis also applies to these new platforms which offer different experiences of time ranging from the immediacy and real-time focus of Twitter (Marres and Weltevrede, 2013) to the much more long-term, archival view offered by the Archive Of Our Own (Versaphile, 2011). The online fanfiction community uses these different temporal features of the platforms they inhabit to different ends: Where the AO3 is used for publishing, searching, reading and the long-term storage of fanfiction stories, Tumblr and Twitter are used for short-term, ephemeral interaction: conversations as well as posting and reblogging short pieces of content, either created by the individual community member or recirculated from someone else (Cho, 2015).

Different platforms and their technical features therefore create different temporal effects. Beaulieu and Simakova (2006) investigate the "timescape" of hyperlinks—the "variation in hyperlinking practices in relation to time". Similarly to Hine (2000), they find a considerable difference in the timescapes afforded by different platforms such as search engines and websites. They raise the question of the "recoverability of the past" through a range of practices such as personal archiving and infrastructural routines. Beaulieu and Simakova also find a relationship between offline events and the hyperlink timescape, where for instance newsworthy events may generate "link storms" to a particular site. Hyperlinks are only one feature of online spaces which shape the timescape. Tumblr's reblog functionality and its interaction with other site features can be seen as playing a similar role (Cho, 2015). Pink *et al.* (2015) propose the event as a key unit of analysis in digital ethnography. They focus on

public and media events, providing an offline anchor which can be used to structure online interaction and participation. They conceptualise the event as both “special” and “part of the continuity of communication and everyday life” (p. 151). They also emphasise that while some events have a clear centre, other digital media events are best conceptualised as de-centred. This framework is not applicable to all forms of online interaction, but does provide a useful bridge for those cases where online discussion and participation is generated by offline events, especially when such discussion is both intense and time-bounded, similarly to “link storms”.

Understanding the temporal features of the specific platform(s) where an ethnography takes place and how they may relate to an event as an analytical unit is key for the online ethnographer. Fink and Miller (2014) argue that Tumblr in particular “can be more erratic than other sites in that certain subcultural practices foster unfamiliar modes of temporal engagement”. Timestamps, for instance, are not a prominent feature of Tumblr posts, giving the platform both an ephemeral and a timeless feel. Some popular posts circulate and recirculate around the site, being reblogged by users, for months or even years with little indication outside of users’ own cultural competence (Hine, 2000) as to how old they are and whether they refer to current or historic events (Cho, 2015). Other posts, particularly “live” discussions around public, media, or intra-community events, only circulate briefly within a small community, generating a phenomenon similar to a “link storm” before they are forgotten (Popova, forthcoming). The site’s notoriously poor searchability and handling of tags consigns the majority of content to oblivion within a matter of days.

Temporal considerations became acute in my research when a fandom community I was socially part of but had not intended to study—the Hockey RPF or Real Person(a) Fiction fandom—became embroiled in a controversy over rape allegations against a high-profile athlete who was a key fan object in this community. As the discussions of the incident and its implication for the fandom were taking place predominantly on Tumblr, the platform’s temporal features became a crucial factor in whether and how to collect data. The ephemeral nature of the vast majority of Tumblr posts, combined with the high volume of posts relating to the discussion, meant that a decision had to be taken quickly as to whether to include what appeared to be a highly relevant but unexpected incident in my research, or else data would be irretrievably lost. Using Beaulieu and Simakova’s (2006) conception of a “link storm” and the “event” framing

Pink *et al.* (2015) suggest helped both theorise the challenge I was faced with and shape the data collection process. The data used in Chapter 6 was collected in waves, with an initial wave sparked by the rape allegations against Patrick Kane and lasting approximately two weeks until the rate of relevant posts had significantly declined, and further waves prompted by developments in the police investigation of the allegations and therefore further flare-ups of the fandom conversation around it, supported by my insider knowledge and cultural competence of the community and its practices. Additionally, the temporal features of the Archive of Our Own differ significantly to those of Tumblr (Popova, forthcoming), as the site is much more focused on long-term preservation and archiving. Nonetheless, the AO3's emphasis on author agency also allows for the seamless removal of fan works by authors. On the one hand, therefore, AO3 enabled me to take a much more long-term view of Hockey RPF fandom by returning to fanfiction stories produced at other key moments of Patrick Kane's career, as well as by allowing me to trace fan writers' active involvement with the fandom over time. On the other hand, as I discuss elsewhere (Popova, forthcoming), the removal of stories from the Archive has had an impact both on researchers' ability to access parts of this data, and on the fan community's own longer-term institutional knowledge and memory.

### 3.7 afk

As a final component in my data collection, I stepped away from the screen and into the world afk—away from the keyboard. While the fanfiction community is most obviously active online, there are gatherings—from small friendship circles to large conventions—where readers and writers of fanfiction congregate in person. The digital ethnographic components of my research had yielded rich and valuable data, particularly on how fanfiction and the communities around it engaged with issues of sexual consent. In order to understand whether fans took the knowledges of consent they created in their fanfiction outside of fannish spaces, what they *did* with them, and therefore the activist potential of these engagements, however, it became apparent that venturing into those spaces where a more targeted and genuine two-way interaction was possible would be invaluable. I was particularly interested in whether and how the knowledges and discourses around consent that the community so clearly generated in

both their fiction and their discussions were propagated beyond the realm of the fictional and the boundaries of fandom. Did fanfiction readers and writers think about consent in their own lives? What had they learned about it from fanfiction, and how did they apply that knowledge elsewhere? Equally, where else did they learn about consent, and did that translate into their fiction? In order to understand the true activist potential of fanfiction's engagement with issues of sexual consent, these questions were vital.

*Nine Worlds* is a fan convention which takes place annually in London. Since its inception in 2013, *Nine Worlds* has billed itself as "an unconventional convention" (Nine Worlds, 2013) and has emphasised values such as diversity, inclusion, intersectionality, and accessibility, as becomes clear from the event's original funding bid on crowdfunding website Kickstarter:

*So is this just for middle-aged straight white men who work in IT?*

Nope. It's for everyone. We're putting lots of tracks in there, and we've chosen the mix to make sure there are plenty of options whoever you are and whatever your interests. We're founded on the radical belief that geekdom should not be restricted by class, age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, or the ability to cite Wookieepedia in arguments.

To counter the barriers that can arise in tech, gaming or other types of cons, we're operating a strong anti-harassment policy. We're actively reaching out to diverse communities. And we're making sure our guests and volunteers represent the diversity we'd like to see in our attendees.

*So is this just for middle-aged straight white women who work in IT?*

Nope. See above.

The convention features a range of diverse programme tracks on the intersections of culture and race, gender, sexuality, and disability. It also features a dedicated track on fanfiction. *Nine Worlds*, therefore, seemed like the perfect place to meet readers and writers of fanfiction face to face and conduct semi-structured interviews to understand whether and how the fanfiction community's engagement with issues of sexual consent might translate into forms of activism.

I attended *Nine Worlds* in August 2016. I had previously made a brief appearance at *Nine Worlds 2015*, giving a short talk about my research and its progress. My aim

for the 2016 convention was to collect further research data in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews with fanfiction readers and writers. In order to recruit interview participants, I volunteered to run a workshop on consent in fanfiction at the convention, making it clear to organisers that I would be using it as a recruitment tool for my research. This approach had been approved by UWE's Research Ethics Committee. As the content of the workshop was directly related to the interview topics and several interviewees referred back to it, it is worth briefly outlining it here. The workshop was initially designed for a relatively small group of participants (10–15). However, attendance was significantly greater than expected, attracting between 40 and 50 participants in total, so some changes to the structure of the event had to be made to respond to the change in circumstances. While convention organisers were unable to strictly enforce an age rating for the event by requiring proof of age, the workshop was specifically marked in the programme as “Adult Content” and advertised as follows:

*Consent in Fanworks—Adult Content*

With all the shippy, explicit content we produce, fandom can be a great space to explore issues of sexual consent for both readers and writers. Are archive warnings your catnip? Do you like writing consent negotiation? Do you play with power imbalances and dubcon? Do you nope out of anything but the consentiest fluff? Come and share your thoughts on how and why we do all these things!

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, a content warning was provided at the start of the session indicating that discussions of sexual consent frequently also touch upon issues of sexual violence, and that participants were free to leave the session at any time if they felt the content was inappropriate for them for any reason. I then provided a brief overview of my research. Moving into the group discussion stage, participants were given handouts with quotes and other materials from fanfiction to generate discussion around three key themes: consent negotiation, power and consent, and “dubcon/non-con”<sup>4</sup>. Due to the size of the group the discussion was both lively and fast-paced, with participants responding to both the discussion prompts and each-other's points.

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<sup>4</sup>Fannish terms for “dubious consent” and “non-consensual”, respectively.

The workshop generated nine participants, one of whom withdrew before the interview began, so a total of eight participants were interviewed for this research. Six of the participants were interviewed individually, and two chose to be interviewed together. The interviews took place in semi-public convention spaces. Participants' privacy was ensured by being away from high-traffic convention areas where they could be overheard, while the semi-public nature of the setting served to ensure they could withdraw from participating at any time during the interview. Audio recordings of the interviews were made and subsequently transcribed by me. Recordings were pseudonymised at the transcription stage using pseudonyms derived from the *Pokémon* games. Where quotes from the interviews are used in this thesis, they have been edited to omit repetitions and hesitations which do not influence the meaning of the quotation. In a small number of cases, brief parts of the recording were insufficiently clear or inaudible to the point of introducing ambiguity, and these sections have been omitted from the analysis. The data from these interviews is covered predominantly in Chapter 7 and has ultimately allowed me to draw the links between the purely fictional and the material, between discourse and praxis, so vital to my research questions.

### 3.8 Conclusion

My research into the fanfiction community's engagement with issues of sexual consent is underpinned by a theoretical focus on the operation of power through discourse. Understanding what fanfiction readers and writers *do* with dominant or resistant discourses on sexuality and consent therefore is vital. To that end, I employ a combination of Foucauldian discourse analysis and ethnographic approaches. The ethnographic element of my research has been further informed by my long-standing involvement with the fanfiction community, which predates my research, as well as the fact that the fanfiction community exists and interacts predominantly in mediated online settings. As a result, I have had to engage with issues of the role and visible presence of the ethnographer; accounting for my own positionality in the research through autoethnographic approaches; constructing a field site in a networked, highly individualised environment; and the temporality of different online platforms. I have also stepped away from the keyboard and the purely online ethnography to interact directly and face to face with fanfiction readers and writers, allowing me to investigate



the links between the fanfiction community's textual output and their lives and engagements with issues of consent outside of fandom. This combination of methods and the practical choices I have had to make underpin the analysis that follows in the next four chapters, and allow for a robust investigation of the ways in which the fanfiction community engages with issues of sexual consent as well as the activist potential of those engagements.

## Chapter 4

# “Dogfuck Rapeworld”: Sexual Scripts and Consent in the Omegaverse

### 4.1 Introduction

My interest in sexual consent is focused specifically on those grey areas identified by Gavey (2005) where potentially coercive sexual acts are commonly discursively constructed as “just sex”—perfectly normal and consensual sexual relations. Like the second-wave feminists I discussed in Chapter 2 (e.g. Dworkin, 1983; MacKinnon, 1989), I am interested in how power imbalances impact intimate relationships and consent, but my interest extends further, to how individual agency can counteract such power imbalances. This is where I find Gavey’s discourse-analytical approach useful. My focus is on how power operates through the kinds of discursive constructions Gavey identifies to limit individuals’ ability to meaningfully give or withhold consent, and how those operations of power can in turn be made visible and resisted through culture. Fanfiction, and slash fiction in particular, has frequently been cast as erotic and romantic literature of equality. Early theorists of slash argued that it eliminates gender inequality and power imbalances from intimate relationships, putting partners on a level playing field (e.g. Lamb and Veith, 1986; Russ, 1985; Kustritz, 2003). More recently, Busse and Lothian (2018) have suggested that even when slash stories overtly deal with social inequalities they reproduce the fantasy of sexual equality. If we adopt this view of slash,

then the genre has little light to shed on issues of power and consent. Yet, almost as soon as slash emerged as a genre, it began to be populated by tropes and subgenres that were distinctly not about equality. For every story with a “meticulously create[d] equality relationship dynamic” (Kustritz, 2003, p. 377), there is a story featuring deeply unequal power dynamics such as workplace relationships between superiors and subordinates, or arranged marriages where one character is financially and socially dependent on the other. Rather than rejoicing in having removed inequality from the sexual and romantic relationships they write about, many fans appear determined to relish inventing new forms and sources of power imbalances for their characters to negotiate. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Woledge (2006) partially addresses this trend in her identification of the intimatopic genre, and she links the inequalities shown in such stories to a heightened sense of intimacy. I argue, however, that it is stories focusing on unequal relationships, intimatopic or not, that have the most to say about issues of sexual consent, particularly when power imbalances are involved in a relationship. These stories provide the focus of a significant proportion of my research. Why is inequality such a prominent feature of so many tropes within slash, and how do fanfiction readers and writers use those tropes to engage with and explore issues of sexual consent? In this chapter, I turn to the Omegaverse—a relatively recently emerged subgenre of slash also known as A/B/O—to begin to address some of these questions.

## 4.2 The Omegaverse

As I discussed in Chapter 2, the densely intertextual nature of fanfiction requires an analysis not as individual texts but as an archive (Derecho, 2006) or palimpsest (Stasi, 2006) of texts that are constantly in dialogue, not only with originary works but also with each other. Tosenberger (2014) argues that this reliance on intertextual knowledge makes fanfiction unpublishable and is one of the key literary strengths of the medium. Writers build on each other’s understanding of the originary material, or challenge it by creating “alternate universes”—slight or significant variations and deviations from the originary work. The use of tropes is both frequent and conscious. Favourites range from coffee shop settings to arranged marriages, and fan writers are highly skilled at using the features of a trope to the greatest effect, but also inverting, subverting and deconstructing them in a variety of ways.

The Omegaverse, also known as Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics or A/B/O, is a genre of fanfiction characterised by the re-use and repeated combination of several common tropes. Little academic work is available about A/B/O (Busse, 2013), but fans themselves have produced a large amount of so-called meta: histories of the genre’s emergence (e.g. netweight, 2013), guides to its common features (e.g. norabombay, 2015), and other commentary. netweight (2013) traces the origins of the A/B/O genre to the fandom of horror-fantasy TV series *Supernatural* (2005), and particularly Real Person(a) Fiction (RPF)—the part of the fandom that focuses on the actors in the series rather than the characters they play. The first stories recognised as A/B/O emerged in mid-2010 and what began as another trope has evolved into a fanfiction genre in its own right and gained popularity across a number of large fandoms, including *Supernatural*, *Teen Wolf* (2011), and *Sherlock* (2010), since. As of August 2017, there are nearly 26 000 works labelled as “Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics” on the Archive of Our Own, which accounts for around 0.8% of works on the Archive and is comparable to popular tropes such as the coffee shop setting.

A/B/O is an amalgamation of several common tropes, and the exact interpretation and configuration varies by author and story. Generally, as well as being male or female, characters in the Omegaverse have a “secondary gender” which may be Alpha, Beta, or Omega. Betas are effectively “normal everyday humans as you know them” (norabombay, 2015). Alphas are socially, and in some interpretations biologically, dominant, while Omegas are submissive. Through combinations and permutations of male/female and Alpha/Beta/Omega, the A/B/O premise effectively yields six possible genders. This has drawn criticism that the Omegaverse has an essentialist approach to gender (Stasi, 2013), yet as I explore below, writers and readers’ interpretations of the extent to which the six genders are anchored in biology as opposed to socially constructed vary significantly. The vast majority of stories in the setting focus on male/male relationships (destinationtoast, 2013a), and particularly on the Alpha male/Omega male configuration. Other common elements in Omegaverse stories include human anatomy, sexuality and social behaviour altered to resemble that of dogs or wolves (including a heightened sense of smell, mating cycles or heat, and Alpha male characters possessing a penis similar to a dog’s); male pregnancy; and a potentially life-long psychic bond with a partner (norabombay, 2015; Busse, 2013).

The fact that Omegaverse stories can be found across a number of different fandoms

indicates that the genre has an appeal of its own, beyond the particular fandom and originary work where it began. Particular variations of the Omegaverse are especially popular in some fandoms, such as more pronounced dog or wolf characteristics in stories set in the *Teen Wolf* fandom, or social structures which emphasise sexual dominance and submissiveness in Hockey Real Person(a) Fiction. Yet readers and writers also follow Omegaverse stories across fandoms and tend to be familiar with the generic conventions. The variations on the particular elements adopted or foregrounded in any given story, therefore, are read against this background knowledge of the Omegaverse as a whole, and both differences and similarities are used in storytelling and interpretation. Reader comments on stories will often highlight especially innovative elements or compare how the author has handled an aspect of the setting to its treatment by other authors. The Omegaverse as a whole can then be read as an archive (Derecho, 2006) or palimpsest (Stasi, 2006)—a densely intertextual *body of work* rather than a collection of individual works, where stories build on each other as much as on the source material.

There is little published academic work on the Omegaverse, although in a conference paper Stasi (2013) argues that the genre displays a new kind of gender essentialism, along with homophobic and heteronormative elements. Rose (2016), on the other hand, sees the potential for transgender readings in A/B/O. Even within the fanfiction community, the A/B/O genre is highly controversial. Many readers and writers object to its roots in bestiality fiction or to the highly gendered power imbalances inherent in the setting. Some fan communities have dismissively dubbed the Omegaverse “dogfuck rapeworld” (norabombay, 2015), an indication that consent issues are of concern to the community. The vast majority of Omegaverse stories are highly pornographic in the sense that they are both produced and consumed with the intention to arouse, as reflected in exchanges between readers and writers in the comments section of stories. As of August 2017 over two thirds of stories tagged as A/B/O on the Archive of Our Own are rated “mature” or “explicit”. Yet many of these stories also follow the recognisable patterns of romance novels and the resolution to the plot is often the beginning of a long-term, monogamous romantic relationship between the characters, or a Happily Ever After (Roach, 2016). This blending of elements of pornography and romance is characteristic of some fanfiction (Driscoll, 2006), and would potentially point to a classification of Omegaverse stories as empowering “erotica” rather than

exploitative “pornography” (Wilson-Kovacs, 2009). The A/B/O setting, however, is explicitly built around the social inequality of the romantic leads, which is at the heart of the concerns expressed by those fanfiction community members who refer to it as “dogfuck rapeworld”. Over the course of this chapter, I argue that examining A/B/O stories in detail reveals that readers and writers who enjoy and embrace the genre are highly conscious of the consent issues involved, and actively use the features of the Omegaverse setting—including its purported gender essentialism—to explore them.

### 4.3 Sexual scripts

The fantastical world presented in Omegaverse stories is drastically different from ours, with differences spanning both biology and social structures. To conceptualise these differences, I make use of sexual script theory (Gagnon and Simon, 1973), as it provides a useful lens for specifying the exact mechanisms which make Omegaverse sexuality so distinct. It also serves as a framework for examining possible side-by-side readings between the fictional A/B/O setting and sexuality as readers and writers of fanfiction might know and experience in their day-to-day lives.

Sexual scripts are the unspoken social rules of how a sexual interaction *should* unfold: what behaviours are acceptable, who may perform them, in what order. Questioning both biological approaches and the idea of “drives” originating in psychoanalysis, sociologists Gagnon and Simon (1973) argue that without such “scripts”, even situations that contain all the elements we commonly see as sexual (such as privacy, the presence of an attractive person of the appropriate gender, and even nudity) would not be interpreted as such and would not lead to sexual acts or even arousal. Sexuality, they argue, is produced socially and culturally and it is these processes and these scripts that give some body parts, situations and actions a sexual meaning within certain contexts. One important aspect of Simon and Gagnon’s (1986) work is their attempt to account for both stability and change in sexual scripts. They argue that scripting occurs at three different levels: the cultural, the interpersonal, and the intrapsychic. Cultural-level scripts tend to be abstract, providing the most generic guidance for collective life; interpersonal scripts are based on the cultural-level ones but also modified and rewritten by individuals to fill gaps and account for the next level of granularity; finally, intrapsychic scripts function as a kind of internal rehearsal and reconciliation

of complexities and ambiguities in the cultural level script. Western sexual scripts are highly gendered and heteronormative, with men seen as initiators of sexual interactions while women are passive gatekeepers (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Ménard and Cabrera, 2011). This observation also provides a useful link to discourse-analytical approaches to sexuality: in many ways sexual scripts as described by Gagnon and Simon reflect the three discourses described by Hollway (1989)—the male sexual drive discourse, the have/hold discourse, and to a lesser extent the permissive discourse. Gavey (2005) also uses the word “script” to refer to common and dominant conceptions of what “normal” (hetero)sex looks like, though she does not formally adopt sexual script theory. Like discourse analysis and discursive psychology, sexual script theory foregrounds the socially constructed character of human sexuality. Sexual scripts themselves are discursively constructed, and therefore may be contested. Simon and Gagnon’s (1986) account of permanence and change can be seen as an account of conflicts between different discursive constructions of sexuality and individuals’ own lived experiences.

A number of studies have been conducted into how popular culture relates to dominant sexual scripts. Ménard and Cabrera (2011) examine how such scripts are reflected in the sexual behaviours depicted in popular romance novels. Hust *et al.* (2014) identify a link between reading men’s and women’s magazines and individual consent behaviours. Power, McNair and Carr (2009) show that lesbian and bisexual women feel excluded from dominant sexual scripts, leading to significantly lower engagement with safer sex practices. Philadelphoff-Puren (2005), while not referencing sexual script theory directly, examines depictions of the “token resistance to sex” myth in popular romance fiction and argues that such discourses are mapped from romance fiction straight onto legal discourses about rape. Building on Simon and Gagnon’s (1986) ideas about permanence and change in sexual scripts, Masters *et al.* (2013) identify disjunctures between scripts at the cultural, interpersonal and individual levels. They find three different strategies for individual and interpersonal engagement with dominant cultural sexual scripts: conforming, where individuals fully accept and internalise the dominant cultural scripts and implement them in their own sexual and romantic relationships; exception-finding, where individuals or couples construct their specific situation or relationship as different from the dominant cultural script, for instance by describing their own performance of gender roles as atypical; and seeking to

transform cultural scripts, where individuals challenge dominant scripts and associated gender roles outright and seek communities that support them in this. It is this model of interaction of sexual scripts at different levels I find particularly useful. It provides a way to analyse how consent negotiation at the interpersonal level may be shaped by, but may also challenge, social and culturally mediated power structures. In this way, it provides a bridge between an approach to consent based purely on the way power operates through dominant discourses and which predominantly accounts for constraints and restrictions on the individual (e.g. Hollway, 1989; Gavey, 2005) on the one hand, and approaches which emphasise interpersonal negotiation while neglecting the social and discursive power dimension (e.g. Jozkowski and Peterson, 2013a).

The features of the A/B/O genre allow for the exploration of themes of power, desire, pleasure, intimacy, romance, control, and consent in a variety of ways. By positing a world with a radically different configuration of genders and sexualities to ours, readers and writers playing in this shared universe can examine gender roles as either driven by the strange biology of the Omegaverse, or socially constructed, or a mixture of both. The distance created by the unfamiliar setting enables questions to be asked about the power structures and inequalities around gender, and how they map onto intimate relationships. Sexual script theory (Gagnon and Simon, 1973) is a useful lens through which A/B/O stories can be read and compared to Western sexual scripts in order to examine how issues of consent are handled in these stories. The Omegaverse’s supposed biological or social construction of different genders and sexualities can be seen as leading to sometimes radically different, and sometimes strikingly similar, dominant sexual scripts in the societies depicted in A/B/O fanfiction. What is interesting is how such stories explore these sexual scripts, and how the characters in them negotiate the disjunctures between the dominant scripts and their desires in their own lives and interpersonal relationships, similarly to the kinds of negotiation Masters *et al.* (2013) found their study participants performing. This in turn allows for insights into how different discursive constructions of gender, sex and sexuality shape the subject positions available to individuals in relation to these discourses (Hollway, 1989; Gavey, 2005), and their ability to meaningfully consent to sex. In the remainder of this chapter, I examine three stories from the Omegaverse through the lens of sexual scripts and discourse analytical approaches to sexuality and consent and show how fanfiction readers and writers use the A/B/O subgenre to actively manipulate the



sexual scripts they are familiar with and thereby make visible the operation of power through discourse and its impact on individuals’ ability to meaningfully negotiate sexual consent.

#### 4.4 Three stories representing the Omegaverse

Because so many A/B/O stories are in dialogue with each other as well as the particular originary work they are based on, the Omegaverse can be treated as a single body of work collectively created by the fandom community, rather than individual, unconnected stories. Analysing any single A/B/O story needs to happen within the context of the wider genre. To that end, I have selected three stories which are representative of different aspects of the Omegaverse: a standard interpretation of the generic conventions and tropes involved in the Omegaverse; a more complex interpretation with elements that can be seen as exploring and challenging the limits of the setting; and a story that takes the features and tropes of A/B/O fiction to their extreme.

As discussed in Chapter 3, my ethnographic exploration of the Omegaverse sparked an interest in its origins and particularly in whether its distinctive approach to issues of sexual consent had evolved over time or was already present in the very early stories in the setting. For this reason and in order to facilitate comparisons across the stories, all three pieces selected are from the *Supernatural* Real Person(a) Fiction (RPF) fandom, where the Omegaverse originated, and centre around the two lead actors of the show, Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles. The three stories I have selected for analysis not only represent key trends in A/B/O fanfiction, they are also popular and impactful within the communities where they circulate, and are acknowledged by fanfiction readers and writers as such through comments, kudos, and being featured on recommendation lists. In all three stories, Jared is presented as the Alpha and Jensen as the Omega, reflecting perhaps the two actors’ physical size difference. Additionally, an important part of the premise of each story is that Jensen has either never had sex or a relationship with an Alpha male, or has stopped doing so some time ago. Finally, all three stories are written in very close third person from Jensen’s point of view, and two are written in the present tense. This is a common style in fanfiction works, allowing the reader an insight into a character’s thoughts and feelings and a sense of immediacy

while still leaving some distance between writer, reader and character.

*Heat: Between You And Me* (MissLv, 2011) is widely acknowledged by the fandom community as one of the early stories that established the A/B/O genre (netweight, 2013). It was originally published in late 2010 in response to a request on the *Supernatural* “kinkmeme”—an online forum facilitating anonymous requests for particular types of stories. In this story, Jared (Alpha) and Jensen (Omega) have been sharing a house and secretly harbouring romantic feelings for each other. When Jared announces his engagement to Genevieve Cortese, Jensen—who up to this point has never engaged in sex or a relationship with an Alpha male—decides to get over his feelings for his colleague by having a one-night stand with another Alpha. This plan is thwarted when Jared returns early from a trip away. Jared and Jensen have heat-fueled sex followed by a serious discussion about their mutual feelings, and agree to begin a romantic relationship. What is striking about this story is that even in this early version of A/B/O there are clear attempts at exploring and challenging the power structures inherent in the setting. The story contains several elements that subvert the common configuration of tropes that make up the Omegaverse, most notably the fact that Jared and Jensen are open about their gender and share a house together as friends. This may be partly due to the fact that *Heat: Between You And Me* is a very early A/B/O story, from a time before the setting had truly taken shape and solidified, yet such subversions of the core Omegaverse tropes remains a staple of the genre today.

*Sure To Lure Someone Bad* (mistyzeo and obstinatrix, 2011) is a relatively straightforward example of the A/B/O genre. In this story, Jared and Jensen are not colleagues and actors. Rather, they meet on the subway as Omega Jensen is making his way home in the early stages of his heat, and Alpha Jared makes a move. Again, the two characters have sex, initially positioned as a one-night stand, but by the end of the story they agree to see each other again.

*Slick* (tryfanstone, 2012) takes the biological imperative ideas behind parts of the Omegaverse to their extreme. In this story, a manipulative Alpha Jared tricks Omega Jensen into heat, and proceeds to repeatedly rape him, probably impregnate him and trap him in an abusive long-term relationship. The story is sexually explicit and, as I discuss below, deliberately positioned by both its author and its readership as a blend of horror and pornography.

## 4.5 Sexual scripts in the Omegaverse: the question of gender

It is common for Omegaverse stories to feature significant elements of world building near the beginning, and this is the case for the stories discussed in this paper. This is the author’s way of providing information on how their particular interpretation of the A/B/O genre works: which of the standard elements have they adopted and what are their precise effects on the society depicted. This has the effect of anchoring the story within the wider Omegaverse body of work, and gives the reader an indication of what the similarities and differences to that standard template may be (Kustritz, 2003). Even so-called Porn Without Plot stories (Driscoll, 2006) set in the Omegaverse—like *Slick* (tryfanstone, 2012)—often have some elements of this kind of world building, though they may be more subtle. It is therefore worth examining what information can be gleaned from the three stories about the social power structures and resulting sexual scripts that operate in the three versions of the Omegaverse they construct.

In two of the stories (Miss\_Lv, 2011; tryfanstone, 2012), Alphas are clearly established as the dominant and privileged social group, and all three stories at least hint at Omegas being oppressed or disadvantaged in some way. *Sure to Lure Someone Bad* (mistyzeo and obstinatrix, 2011), on the other hand, establishes a society dominated by Betas, in which both Alphas and Omegas are relatively rare. It becomes clear early on, however, that even in this society, Alphas are seen as domineering and Omegas as submissive, and that submissiveness is viewed negatively:

Some people got domineering, type-A personalities to go with their thick cocks, and some people got an urge to submit and the ability to self-lubricate. Jensen’s done a solid job busting the stereotypes about Omegas ... (mistyzeo and obstinatrix, 2011)

This set-up is interesting in its linking of biology and the social construction of gender: Jensen explicitly makes connections between sexual characteristics and personality traits, yet in the very next sentence those connections are disavowed and Jensen is cast as not fitting within and deliberately going against this framework. This parallels the way Western discourses about sexuality are frequently anchored in a discourse

of biology and “naturalness”: both the male sexual drive and permissive discourses (Hollway, 1989) build on ideas of certain expressions of sexuality being natural. These discourses are presented as pervasive and all-encompassing in *Sure to Lure Someone Bad* to the point where Jensen has clearly internalised them and challenging them is a struggle for him both personally and socially.

The opening paragraphs of *Heat: Between You and Me* (MissLv, 2011) reveal another society with significant power imbalances between Alphas, Betas and Omegas, but also introduce more complexity. In this world there have been “equality movements” leading to changes in legislation and an improvement in the situation of Omegas. At the same time negative stereotypes about Omegas still persist, and there are significant geographical and cultural differences in how strictly gender roles are enforced, as the following extract shows: “Going from Texas where the stereotypes were encouraged, expected even, to the free-minded LA had been liberating for [Jensen]”. In this way, the setting of *Heat: Between You and Me* parallels the successes and failures of feminist movements in Western countries: some gendered restrictions on Omegas have been changed or lifted, in some locations, some of the time, much as some of the oppression women experience in Western societies has changed, evolved and to some extent been redressed.

*Slick* (tryfanstone, 2012) presents the most overt and significant power imbalance between Alphas and Omegas. So strictly are Omegas controlled that Jensen has had to hide his true status as one in order to be able to work as an actor and live independently. There are indications that Omegas in this setting do not have the legal status of independent persons, and are instead owned by Alphas. The revelation of Jensen’s gender has dire consequences: “His career’s shafted, contracts void, fuck, he’s gonna lose the house without an Alpha co-sign—”. This indicates that as an Omega Jensen in this setting does not have the legal ability to sign employment contracts, rent a home, or own property. Were he not hiding his true gender, he would be completely socially, legally, and financially dependent on an Alpha partner.

While the extent of the social inequality between Alphas and Omegas varies significantly between the three stories, it is present in all three. Indeed, the variations between different authors’ interpretations of the setting are key for fanfiction meaning-making processes, and readers familiar with the Omegaverse are conscious of them and making use of them in their engagement with the stories. The structure of the social inequalities

between Alphas and Omegas in the stories is also related to dominant discourses of sexuality and gender, as well as sexual scripts, in Western cultures. We can see the operation particularly of the male sexual drive discourse (Hollway, 1989) at work to varying degrees in the world building of all three stories. The construction of the Alpha as unable to resist Omegas in heat clearly parallels the male sexual drive discourse. The subject position of the Alpha in the Omegaverse is characterised by power and dominance, but also by loss of control and avoidance of responsibility for one’s actions when it comes to sex with Omegas. At the same time, the reference to equality movements in *Heat: Between You and Me* and the Beta-dominated society of *Sure to Lure Someone Bad* indicate that the dominance of this discourse has been challenged to different extents in these two versions of the Omegaverse. *Slick*, on the other hand, presents a view of the Omegaverse where Alpha power and the Alpha sexual drive is not only unchallenged but actively enshrined in the formal legal structures of the society. It is a side-by-side reading (Derecho, 2006) of these three stories with each other, other stories of the Omegaverse, as well as the reader’s own awareness of the male sexual drive discourse that enables readers and writers to create these meanings.

Having established these power structures and imbalances and anchored them discursively in the Omegaverse world building, all three stories examine their effects on dominant sexual scripts. While the Omegaverse has six genders and therefore one may expect sexual scripts to be considerably more complex and varied, the focus on the male Alpha/male Omega pairing that is predominant in most A/B/O fiction effectively reduces the complexity back to two genders. The resulting dominant sexual scripts feel remarkably familiar to Western audiences, with a few key differences. The sexual script for the male Alpha maps onto the Western male script, whereas the male Omega script exhibits significant similarities to the Western female sexual script. The differences, however, are also important. Instead of penile-vaginal intercourse which is seen as the default sex act in the Western heterosexual script (Anderson, 2005), in the Omegaverse the default is anal penetration with the Omega as the receptive partner. “Knotting”—the swelling of the Alpha’s dog-like penis to keep it anchored in the Omega’s anus for up to an hour—is also of key importance, and in many interpretations of the Omegaverse has connotations of bonding or ownership. While in the Western heterosexual script men are seen as the active initiators of sex and women as passive gatekeepers (Ménard and Cabrera, 2011), the Omega’s mating cycle

or “heat” in A/B/O fiction complicates these roles. Omegas in heat are often seen as the initiators of sex, though in a parallel with the Western male sexual script, Alpha males are frequently represented as unable to control themselves around Omegas in heat. This is variously presented as a biological inevitability or a social construct, but in both cases serves to further underscore the power imbalance between Alphas and Omegas.

There is a kind of second-order intertextuality (Stasi, 2006) here not just between different Omegaverse stories, but also between these works of fanfiction and the dominant Western sexual scripts and discourses on gender and sexuality. Readers and writers in the fanfiction community are able to interpret the small differences between variations on the Omegaverse, or between fanfiction stories and the originary texts. It can be argued that they are also able to interpret and construct meaning from similarities and differences between the sexual scripts shown in the stories and those they are familiar with from their everyday lives in much the same way. This suggests that at least in some Omegaverse stories the parallels to and deviations from the Western sexual script and dominant discourses such as the male sexual drive discourse, and depictions of how characters negotiate their sexual scripts are deliberate and used as a tool to examine issues of social power inequalities, sexual scripts, and consent.

## 4.6 Negotiating disjunctures in sexual scripts

The Omegaverse construction of gender and gendered power dynamics has a significant impact on sexual scripts in the setting. Yet how individual characters relate to the dominant sexual scripts of their society varies between stories and is a central theme of the A/B/O genre. Masters *et al.* (2013) find that disjunctures exist between sexual scripts at the social, interpersonal and personal levels, and that individuals adopt three key strategies for managing these disjunctures: conformity, exception-finding, and transformation. Such disjunctures serve as a useful model for how individuals may challenge dominant discourses around gender and sexuality, and dominant discursive constructions of “just sex” (Gavey, 2005). In Omegaverse fanfiction, narrative suspension is frequently provided by how individual Alphas and Omegas negotiate their positions and their interpersonal relationships within the restrictions of their societies and dominant sexual scripts.

In all three stories the primary way of negotiating sexual scripts available to the Omega characters is through their choices of partners. In all three cases Jensen has either never had or has stopped having sex or relationships with Alpha males. The motivations for this are fairly similar across the three stories: to avoid discrimination and conformity with negative stereotypes of Omegas.

What was really annoying was that Jensen had lived his life vehemently opposed to being under anyone, much less an alpha. Being an omega was no cakewalk, while equality movements had changed the laws in the last century, discrimination was still present. Old way thinking and stereotypes still surfaced from time to time and it was hard when someone would off handedly suggest Jensen belonged under someone, under an alpha, even a beta, just under. (Miss\_Lv, 2011)

This passage serves several functions. It establishes the dominant constructions of gender and sexuality in Miss\_Lv’s interpretation of the Omegaverse, but it also suggests that the dominance of those constructions is unstable, that there has been resistance and attempts at reform. Most importantly, as the story is told from Jensen’s point of view, this is his reflection on the history and status quo of the society he lives in, and Jensen’s own resistance to the dominant construction of his own gender and sexuality is evident. His refusal to engage in sex or relationships with male Alphas further underscores this and can be seen as a form of exception-finding from cultural sexual scripts.

The abstinent Omega or Omega who does not have sex with Alphas could be seen to reflect second wave radical feminist concerns about the dominance of male sexuality and the impossibility of women meaningfully consenting to sex with men under conditions male dominance and gender inequality (MacKinnon, 1989). The trope echoes the political lesbianism of some feminist movements in the 1970s (Segal, 1994). The three stories present both similarities and differences to this position. In all three cases, Jensen’s choice of sexual partners (or abstinence) is presented as an individualised form of resistance to the oppression of Omegas. However, in none of the stories is Jensen formally part of a political movement or even support network of like-minded Omegas, though the existence of “equality movements” is sketched out in *Heat: Between You and Me* (Miss\_Lv, 2011). A sexual script approach to the abstinent Omega trope in

A/B/O fiction, however, allows for a more nuanced approach to the negotiation of social power imbalances in intimate relationships. Through this lens, Jensen’s celibacy or choice of non-Alpha partners can be seen as seeking to transform dominant sexual scripts through complete refusal to engage with them. Rather than being excluded from dominant sexual scripts as many non-heterosexual people find themselves (Power, McNair and Carr, 2009), Jensen removes *himself* from them.

An additional reason for Jensen’s abstinence is given in *Sure to Lure Someone Bad*:

Something about Jared makes him yearn to be that idiot again. God, it’s not like he doesn’t remember all the reasons he decided it was a bad idea, the dangers that accompany surrendering himself like that. Alphas fuck hard, relentless, and Jensen in heat is too pumped up on pheromones and need to recognise when things are getting out of hand. (mistyzeo and obstinatrix, 2011)

The contrast between Jensen’s past experience of sex with Alphas, his abstinence, and his yearning “to be that idiot again” highlights the conflicting discourses operating here and the different subject positions they make available or unavailable. One possible reading is that Jensen may have reframed some of his past sexual experiences, originally constructed as “just sex”, and may have come to the realisation that they were ultimately coercive. At the same time, he is finding the subject positions of sexually active Omega or abstinent Omega that seem to available to him as a result of this realisation restrictive, leaving him unable to enjoy sex on his own terms, without societal or interpersonal coercion. This is where sexual scripts and the negotiation of disjunctures between them may provide a route to understanding and negotiating such conflicting discourses and restrictive subject positions. As the story progresses, Jared is presented as an atypical Alpha, giving Jensen a sense of safety. This can be read as a strategy of exception-finding (Masters *et al.*, 2013), where individuals do not seek to change social sexual scripts but do work to establish exceptions to them in their own relationships or find partners whom they view as exceptional and non-conforming to the gendered script. Even in *Sure to Lure Someone Bad*, the story most typical of the A/B/O genre, such negotiation of sexual scripts is given prominence.

The exact tactics of negotiating power imbalances and sexual scripts available to characters are clearly determined by the nature of the power structures of the



setting, making visible the inextricable connection between the operation of power and individuals' ability to exercise agency in negotiating consent. *Slick* (tryfanstone, 2012) is the story with the most extreme social power differentials between Alphas and Omegas and features an in-depth exploration of sexual scripts around initiating sex and being able to control sexual urges, taking the premise of the Omegaverse setting and the biological essentialist elements of it to their extreme. When Jensen agrees to have sex with Jared during his heat in this story, he is under the impression that Jared is a Beta. Jensen himself has been hiding his own Omega status, and this is strongly implied to be the only way in which he can remain independent and retain bodily autonomy within their society. However, it soon becomes clear that Jared, too, has been hiding his status, and he is an Alpha. Jensen makes an immediate attempt to withdraw consent, but Jared is able to both physically overpower him and use Jensen's heat against him in order to get what he wants.

Throughout the rest of the story, Jensen's heat is used as leverage against him. What is interesting here is that on a superficial level, there is a verbal consent negotiation conducted (Anderson, 2005), as Jared repeatedly asks Jensen what he wants and reduces Jensen to begging to be fucked. However, this verbal consent is made meaningless by the effects of Jensen's heat on his decision-making: there are repeated references to “his head [being] a mess”, “his mind running in circles”. Additionally, even when Jensen is able to clearly verbally deny or withdraw consent, this is ignored, and his physical arousal taken as evidence to the contrary, playing into the male sexual drive and permissive discourses which link sexuality to nature and physicality, thereby dismissing other factors that may influence consent. Finally, while Jensen is portrayed as completely vulnerable and out of control due to his heat, Jared, in opposition to the dominant sexual script for Alphas and the male sexual drive discourse, seems to be in complete control of both himself and the situation throughout. By the end of the story, Jensen has no choice but to reluctantly conform to dominant sexual scripts. He is legally owned by Jared and probably pregnant, leaving him trapped in an abusive relationship, again highlighting the operation of power through discourses and institutions, and its effect on Jensen's ability to meaningfully negotiate consent.

By taking the Omegaverse premise to the extreme in these ways, *Slick* clearly illustrates the power of societal sexual scripts or dominant discursive constructions of “just sex” (Gavey, 2005) over individuals' ability to negotiate sexual consent. Jared's

dialogue throughout the story repeatedly draws both on the male sexual drive and the permissive discourse. Jensen’s own thoughts also reflect these and the Omegaverse dominant constructions of the Omega as sexually available, as over the course of the story he comes to believe that his attempts at exception-finding through celibacy are futile, further entrenching his own internalised oppression through these discourses. As indicated by Jared’s effective ownership of Jensen after the rape, even the legal structures of this version of the Omegaverse are designed to fully support the dominant sexual script of what happens between the two characters in the story as “just sex”. Conforming then becomes the only possible option for Jensen.

The negotiation between social and interpersonal sexual scripts is most complex in *Heat: Between You and Me* (Miss\_Lv, 2011). The story subverts both the social power structures and the sexual scripts of the Omegaverse in several sophisticated ways. Unlike the other stories, Jared here is shown to have been respectful of Jensen’s choice to not have sex with Alpha males throughout their friendship, despite harbouring a romantic and sexual attraction towards Jensen. Even when Jensen goes into heat for the first time while sharing space with Jared, Jared chooses to remove himself from the situation rather than force himself on Jensen, contrary to the male sexual drive discourse and dominant script of the out-of-control Alpha. It is made explicit that Jared’s behaviour and respect of Jensen’s boundaries are unusual within the setting, indicating a mix of exception-finding and transforming strategies employed by both characters.

‘No offence man, but up until last night,’ Jensen refused to fucking blush.  
‘I would have sworn you were a omega.’ He expected Jared to grin, flush sheepish or roll his eyes like he always did when Jensen teased his lack of alpha drive. (Miss\_Lv, 2011)

In this scene, set the morning after Jared and Jensen have sex for the first time, Jensen explicitly calls out Jared’s deviation from dominant constructions of Alpha masculinity and the Alpha male sexual script. He constructs Jared’s friendship with him, which up to that point has been completely platonic, as an anomaly in Alpha-Omega relations in their society. Jared and Jensen’s close friendship and sharing of living space in this story can therefore be read as a challenge to dominant sexual scripts. Segregation of unbonded Alphas and Omegas is typical of the sexual scripts in many A/B/O stories.

*Heat: Between You and Me* is one of the very early Omegaverse stories, so it is possible that this simply wasn't an established feature of the shared setting at the time it was written. However, reading this story within the wider context of the Omegaverse that followed it increases the significance of this feature. Jared and Jensen's cohabitation as friends and colleagues serves to set up and underline their later sexual and romantic connection. It is, however, also possible to read their deep friendship as defying social norms, or as an implicitly queerplatonic life partnership which flouts social expectations and transforms dominant sexual scripts in what, for two popular actors, would be quite a public way.

Finally, once Jensen realises how fulfilling he finds sex with Jared, he re-examines his own attitudes to his social position as an Omega and his sexual activities. Similarly to the Jensen of *Sure to Lure Someone Bad*, in this story too this re-examination is based on re-evaluating conflicting discourses and subject positions. Rather than endorsing the dominant discourse of his society—that of Omegas' biologically determined submissiveness—Jensen chooses to reframe his experience as a “newly discovered kink”:

Not that he would ever admit that out loud just yet but Jensen was man enough to realize in the safety of his own mind that he had gotten off hard while being dominated, it wasn't just his heat alone. It was something to think about later, and suddenly he felt like an ass for every time he belittled an omega happy under an alpha. (Miss\_Lv, 2011)

Here, Jensen links this insight to his own masculinity, thereby reclaiming some status within the gender hierarchy of his society, which potentially indicates his partial reproduction of dominant constructions of gender and particularly masculinity. He is also, however, willing to admit that a similar framing may apply to other Omegas in happy relationships with Alphas, extending his own transformation of the sexual script beyond the sphere of his relationship with Jared. Through this negotiation of disjunctures and transformation of sexual scripts, Jensen constructs a new subject position of the sexually active Omega who enjoys sex on their own terms while being aware of wider social issues and potentially coercive discursive constructions of what “normal” sex looks like. This gives him—and potentially the reader—the tools to navigate and challenge coercive dominant discourses in his own relationships.

The fact that such nuanced and complex negotiation of sexual scripts and power structures features so prominently in one of the earliest Omegaverse stories indicates that issues of inequality and consent have been at the core of the genre right from the beginning. A/B/O fanfiction is often dismissed by parts of the community as pornography that romanticises and glorifies rape, and there are certainly stories that do that. Yet the careful consideration of consent and social inequality that features in a lot of A/B/O stories right from the inception of the genre indicates that some readers and writers of Omegaverse fiction are using it as a tool to articulate and think through consent issues in unequal relationships. Far from “meticulously creat[ing] an equality relationship dynamic” (Kustritz, 2003, p. 377), stories from the Omegaverse often work to highlight issues of socially constructed inequality and its relationship to pleasure, and explore in detail strategies for managing it in interpersonal and intimate relationships. While stories often at least partially follow a romance formula, such in-depth exploration of issues of inequality and consent is not a feature usually found in either pornography or romance. Woledge’s (2006) *intimatopia*, with its emphasis on the connection between sex and intimacy, and the use of inequality to heighten intimacy, is perhaps the closest characterisation of at least some A/B/O stories. On the other hand, *Slick* shows that some readers and writers in the Omegaverse use the social inequalities inherent in the setting for more than enhancing intimacy. They consciously play with different power configurations, including taking them to the extreme, as a result exploring their effect on intimacy and sexual consent.

The way the characters evolve both within and beyond the social power structures of their settings, particularly in *Heat: Between You and Me* and *Sure to Lure Someone Bad*, allows them to negotiate disjunctures between sexual scripts at the social, interpersonal and individual levels in their intimate relationships. These stories provide detailed explorations of the relationship between dominant discourses and individual agency and between sexual scripts at the societal and interpersonal level in ways accessible to the fanfiction community.

#### 4.7 Porn, affect, and the Omegaverse as an analytical tool

Fanfiction stories set in the Omegaverse are clearly read side by side with Western sexual scripts or dominant discourses around gender and sexuality, and this is a key

factor in how readers and writers create meaning within them. It is, however, also worth briefly turning to another way meaning is generated within Omegaverse stories, which is intimately tied to their nature as pornography. Williams (1991) identifies pornography (on film) as one of three “body genres” (p. 3)—the others being horror and melodrama. She argues that these film genres provoke strong physical, affective reactions in our bodies—arousal in the case of pornography, the sweat of fear and tears for horror and melodrama respectively. As Omegaverse stories are disproportionately sexually explicit compared to fanfiction or even slash fiction in general and as they are written and read with the explicit intention to arouse, I want to examine their dual role as pornography and analytical tool. I am particularly interested in this in the case of *Slick*, which clearly eroticises a rape. I therefore turn at this point to the comment exchanges between readers and the author of *Slick*, as they give an insight into both reader reception and authorial intent and thus the way the fanfiction community makes meanings from this kind of material in ways profoundly shaped by affect and bodily experience.

One of the most striking features of these exchanges is how many readers describe the story as both “hot” and “disturbing”. *dunsparce* expresses this conflict as follows:

I am so happy that I am not the only one who is disturbed by the dynamics of this story and you yourself make such a point of how incredibly fucked up this beginning to a ‘relationship’ is. I nevertheless have to compliment you on your porn. It is exquisite and had me squirming because \*how\* can this fucked-up dynamic turn me on so much?

This comment alludes to the very visceral, affective, and yet conflicted reactions readers have to *Slick*: “sexual pleasure centred on bodily sensation” (Smith, 2009) is experienced at the same time and often with the same intensity as a very physical discomfort, expressed here as squirming. Paasonen (2010) says about the affective, embodied experience of (visual) pornography:

The embodied cannot be reduced to the semiotic, but neither can questions concerning meaning be merely effaced when working with cultural artefacts such as images. In pornography, bodies move and move the bodies of the people watching. This motion involves a complex nexus of flesh, generic

conventions, technologies and values—actors that are both material and immaterial, human and nonhuman—in and through which particular images and texts become experienced as pornographic. (p. 66)

While *Slick* is written, rather than visual, pornography, readers’ embodied reaction to it is evident from their comments. Yet it is also inseparable from a semiotic dimension where the multiple meanings of the story collide. Many readers clearly recognise the situation depicted in the story as a rape and a powerful violation of the Omega character, which is what gives rise to the discomfort, sometimes even horror, they describe in the comments. These conflicting affective reactions give readers a deeper access to the story and different ways of making meanings from the text. One of these meanings is a powerful empathy with the character of Jensen and a deep understanding of what effect the events in the story have on him, described by ursaring as “the destruction of his person”:

This was wonderful in so many ways. It was wrong and I just wanted to rescue Jensen from the destruction of his person but then he presented his ass so pretty and I wanted it to keep happening.

I love stories that dig deeper into ideas and present the not so pretty injustices.

ursaring’s reference to “dig[ging] deeper into ideas and present[ing] the not so pretty injustices” here makes a clear link between the affective reactions *Slick* produces in its readers and a much more intellectual level of analysis of the story that readers engage in simultaneously. The strong affective reaction blends into other forms of reading shaped by expectations generated by Western sexual scripts. Several comments, for instance, referred specifically to how the premise and tropes of the A/B/O subgenre provide constraints to characters’ agency and ability to seek, give or withhold consent. Viewed through the lens of sexual scripts, these comments clearly show how expectations generated by familiarity with Western sexual scripts, including what a loving romantic relationship between equals looks like, are read side by side with the Omegaverse sexual scripts presented in the story. There is a clear sense of what is happening to Jensen being wrong, and both the author and readers repeatedly refer to the events of the story as being no basis for a healthy romantic relationship. This sense is generated

through a side-by-side reading with a range of discourses on sexuality which include ideas of what a healthy romantic relationship should look like. Such ideas may build on the permissive discourse (Hollway, 1989) or even some of the exception-finding or transformational approaches identified by Masters *et al.* (2013), demonstrating how these are brought to bear on readers’ affective, emotional and intellectual engagement with the Omegaverse.

At the same time, the sexual scripts of the Omegaverse as presented in *Slick* are acknowledged by both the author and readers. The author repeatedly notes that it was her intention to explore the extremes of the A/B/O subgenre and what she calls the “absolute biological determinism” of it. Both she and several readers note how, in the context of the society depicted in the story, what Jared does in *Slick* would not be considered rape. Taking this to its logical conclusion, rape in this version the Omegaverse is impossible, as an Omega in heat—possibly in fact any Omega—is always assumed to be consenting. In Gavey’s (2005) terms, the discursive construction of Alpha/Omega sex in this society completely precludes the possibility of rape, and any sexual contact between Alphas and Omegas is “just sex”, regardless of consent. It is this complete destruction of Jensen’s, or any Omega’s, agency which gives rise to another strong affective reaction in readers: horror and disturbance. As the story is written from Jensen’s point of view, the contrast between the social sexual scripts according to which he has no meaningful way of giving, withholding or withdrawing consent, and his clearly painful and damaging experience of the events depicted is highlighted. Read side by side with Western sexual scripts and dominant discourses such as the male sexual drive, have/hold and permissive discourses identified by Hollway (1989), *Slick* raises questions in readers’ minds about the relationship between dominant discursive constructions of sex and consent and the internal, embodied, lived experience of sexuality—both that of the character in the story and their own. Readers’ responses to *Slick* call into question Wilson-Kovacs’ (2009) distinction between exploitative pornography and empowering “erotica”: the story does not sit comfortably in either category, highlighting instead the complexity and ambiguity of readers’ engagements with the material. Despite this, readers were clearly able to simultaneously derive pleasure from it and critically analyse it. The sexually explicit nature of the story allows for engagement with issues of power, consent, and rape on multiple levels, including the affective, emotional and intellectual.

## 4.8 Conclusion

A/B/O stories establish settings where gender inequality is not only present but taken to extremes. This clearly contradicts the theories of slash fiction (Lamb and Veith, 1986; Russ, 1985; Kustritz, 2003) that see in it a way of removing gender as a site of power in intimate relationships. Instead, these features of the Omegaverse, combined with the sexually explicit nature of many stories, allow fanfiction readers and writers to explore the impact such power structures may have on pleasure and consent in intimate relationships. The A/B/O stories I examined in this chapter set up clearly unequal, gendered relationships while at the same time removing them from our everyday understanding of gender. These stories are densely intertextual, in dialogue with originary works, each other, and dominant Western sexual scripts and discursive constructions of gender and sexuality. Fandom practices around intertextuality result in a reading that emphasises similarities as well as subtle differences between these different intertextual elements, which in turn functions to foreground nuanced explorations of issues of inequality, power, and consent. Viewed through the lens of sexual scripts, the stories also outline possible strategies for subverting power structures and managing disjunctures between sexual scripts at the social, interpersonal and individual levels, thereby challenging the operation of power through dominant discursive constructions of gender and sexuality. The impact of power structures on intimate relationships is thus made visible, and dominant discourses that have come to appear natural are demythologized and demystified (West, 1993). All three stories analysed in this chapter explore the female-coded character’s internal feelings and external communication of consent or non-consent. They show three very different scenarios of individuals meaningfully negotiating power differentials and sexual scripts in intimate relationships—or in the case of *Slick* failing to do so. The results of such exploration acknowledge the operation of power and its impact on individuals’ ability to meaningfully consent to sex, but they also outline possible ways of resisting such operation of power in interpersonal and intimate relationships. As evidenced by reader comments, readers engage with the stories at an affective, emotional, and intellectual level, examining the implications of the social power structures of the setting for individuals’ ability to meaningfully negotiate sexual scripts and consent to sex. Moreover, these stories are representative of wider trends in the A/B/O subgenre, as reflected in their popularity among fanfiction readers and in their intertextual



relationships with other Omegaverse stories. Rather than uncritically accepting gendered sexual scripts and socially constructed power differentials, Omegaverse stories popular within the fanfiction community clearly problematise issues of power and consent and offer ways of negotiating meaningful, consensual intimate relationships within wider abusive social structures, providing a *discursive resistance* to dominant sexual scripts and discursive constructions that invisibilise the operation of power in consent negotiation.

The Omegaverse is only one example of how erotic fanfiction, and slash in particular, engages with issues of power and sexual consent. In the next chapter I turn to another popular trope—arranged marriage fanfiction—to examine how such stories engage not only with dominant discourses of gender and sexuality and their impact on consent, but also problematise fundamental institutions of Western society such as marriage and the law.

## Chapter 5

# Rewriting the Romance: Emotion Work and Consent in Arranged Marriage Fanfiction

### 5.1 Introduction

I really love how you describe the tension that builds up in the same time than their relationship gets closer and they start having all these feelings for each others, feelings that are maybe unexpected and also unwanted. Because it's always easier to hate someone than get the risk of being hurt, especially considering how much influence Thor has over Loki's life in this situation. I think you have captured that very well.

---

poliwrath, AO3 comment on *XVII*

a: Hmm Thor as Loki's queen... yes, I think I can work with this (not the anon but yes)

u: what? really??! another fic omg! but yes I'd like to see Thor as the "queen" for once. Loki's always forced to leave his family and kingdom to be Thor's wife and even tho I like this kind of fic I want to see Thor, still young and naive ruling Jötunheim with Loki.

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ampharos and umbreon on Tumblr

Marriage has been a focus of feminist theory and activism since the very origins of the first wave of the feminist movement. Donovan (2012) documents a number of

historical and legal developments which cemented the stark inequality between men and women within marriage during the European enlightenment: women's isolation and relegation to home and the private sphere, away from public life; the doctrine of coverture which denied married women legal personhood and subsumed them into that of their husbands; and central tenets within liberal theory such as private property and inheritance which "necessitate[d] conjugal subordination of women" (p. 4) in order to ensure property remained within the family. As the feminist movement made progress in securing legal rights for women—importantly ownership of property, liberalisation of divorce laws, and the vote—other issues and inequalities within marriage moved into focus. Second wave feminists, for instance focused on abolishing legal exemptions for marital rape (e.g. Dworkin, 1983; Smart, 1989)—a campaign that only succeeded in England and Wales as recently as 1991. Yet despite such legal progress, gender inequality both within and outside marriage persists in matters of sexuality and in other areas of life (Smart, 1989; Donovan, 2012). Building on a discourse analytical approach, Smart (1989) goes as far as questioning the effectiveness of the legal reform strategy pursued by successive waves of the feminist movement and urges feminist academics and activists to find ways to de-centre and sideline the law in both theory and campaigning. As previously discussed, Gavey (2005) takes a similarly cultural and social constructionist view and outlines the construction of a range of coercive practices within heterosex as "just sex". She calls this process the "cultural scaffolding of rape". She pays particular attention to sex within marriage and notes that the dominant construction of it is as a wife's duty. She finds this construction influential in her interview participants' attitudes even well after the abolition of marital rape exemptions in most Western jurisdictions.

Issues of inequality and sexuality within romantic relationships, including marriage, are a popular theme in fanfiction stories and community conversations around them. The two quotes at the beginning of this chapter illustrate this. In her comment on a fanfiction story, poliwrath discusses both the pleasure she got from seeing the relationship between the main characters develop and some of the factors which raised the emotional stakes for the reader and the characters. The inequality between the partners, expressed as the "influence Thor has over Loki's life" is highlighted as a key cause of emotional involvement and risk-taking on the part of the characters here. In the Tumblr conversation between ampharos and umbreon, also quoted above, inequality

in marriage is also expressed in several ways. Despite both characters referred to being men in the originary work, feminine-coded language—“queen”, “wife”—is used here to establish a hierarchical relationship. References to one character being forced to leave their family and thereby any sources of support further highlight this inequality, as do the words “still young and naive”. This conversation, in fact, hints at a story about a relationship of convenience or an arranged marriage, and that is precisely the kind of story it inspired.

The arranged marriage trope is popular in slash fiction across different fandoms. It is closely related to the extremely popular marriage of convenience subgenre in romance novels. The social networking platform for readers goodreads.com has multiple user-created recommendation lists of romance novels featuring this trope, split into contemporary and more traditional Regency or other Western historical settings<sup>1</sup>. On the fanfiction side, as of August 2017, there are around 5 400<sup>2</sup> works on the Archive of Our Own tagged as “Arranged Marriage”. As can be seen from the quotes above, issues of inequality, lack of options and the resulting personal and emotional risks are part of the appeal of this trope for fanfiction readers and writers. Characters are forced together by circumstances and have to learn not only to live with each other but, as these stories are ultimately romance stories, to love and trust each other despite all that divides them. Arranged marriage is often (though not exclusively) used as a way of bringing together two characters who may be enemies, rivals, or otherwise an unlikely pairing—a “crack ship” in fandom parlance. The fanfiction stories mirror the plot and structure of the marriage of convenience romance novels, as the protagonists start out as reluctant strangers or even enemies but find increased intimacy and ultimately love with each other. Using Derecho’s (2006) concept of archontic literature, such stories can be seen as not only part of the archive around the originary work but also as part of the wider archive that is the romance novel genre. They are read and written side by side with romance novels, and similarities and differences between individual works but also between broader sets of works and tropes

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<sup>1</sup>There are non-Western genres, such as Bollywood films, which make extensive use of the arranged marriage trope. However, arranged marriage fanfiction is rooted predominantly in Western romance novels, which is why my intertextual analysis focuses on these.

<sup>2</sup>While this number may seem low, particularly in comparison to the Omegaverse, the arranged marriage trope is considerably older than the Archive of Our Own, and many works using it may be hosted on other archives or writers’ own pages.

are used to construct meaning. Given the contested nature of commercial romance novels within feminist academia and activism, how similar or different are fanfiction stories using the same trope? And how do they handle issues of sexual consent in unequal, arranged relationships? In this chapter I explore these questions by reviewing the literature around romance novels, and proposing the theoretical framework of emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) to understand the development of the relationship between the main characters in marriage of convenience romance novels and arranged marriage fanfiction stories. I argue that by focusing on relationships that involve disparities of social standing and often financial dependence of one partner on the other, arranged marriage fanfiction stories explore marriage as an institution that reproduces and amplifies inequalities. This exploration includes the legal and formal aspects of marriage, as well as the social and emotional ones. As a result, they cast the practice of marriage consummation—and sex within marriage more generally—as an at least potentially coercive practice. Furthermore, while arranged marriage fanfiction stories retain some key elements of the romance genre, notably the Happily Ever After (HEA) ending and the sex scene (often the marriage consummation scene) that doubles as the emotional climax (Roach, 2016), they may also make key changes to how the relationship between the main characters develops and particularly how the emotion work necessary to make the relationship work is divided between the partners. It is these changes that allow arranged marriage fanfiction stories to challenge dominant discourses of sexual consent within marriage and propose an alternative view of how consent within unequal relationships can be made meaningful.

## 5.2 Romance, work, emotion

As a popular genre predominantly written and read by women, romance novels are a contested space in feminist scholarship and cultural studies. Historically they have focused on heterosexual relationships culminating in monogamous marriage, although more recently we have seen the emergence of the LGBTQ romance sub-genre and more open, “happy for now” endings (Roach, 2010; Roach, 2016). Research of the romance genre often focuses on how it relates to—and enables its readers to relate to—patriarchy and gendered power structures in society. Radway (1984), a pioneer of romance research, sub-titles her chapter on the “ideal” romance novel “The

Promise of Patriarchy”. In it, she breaks down the narrative structure of the typical romance novel into 13 “functions”, each based on a stage in the hero and heroine’s relationship, progressing from antagonism through the hero punishing the heroine and a rapprochement, to a final sexual and emotional union. Radway repeatedly refers to the initially cold or ambiguous hero being “tamed” by the heroine. Yet she argues that rather than through a radical change in the hero, this taming is achieved largely through a reinterpretation of his behaviour on the heroine’s part. This argument is worth quoting at length:

The romance thematizes the activity of interpretation and reinterpretation for a very good reason, then. In suggesting that the cruelty and indifference that the hero exhibits towards the heroine in the early part of the novel are really of no consequence because they *actually* originated in love and affection, the romance effectively asserts that there are other signs for these two emotions than the traditional ones of physical caresses, oral professions of commitment, and thoughtful care. When the heroine retrospectively reinterprets the hero’s offensive behavior as equivalent to expressions of his basic feeling for her, the reader is encouraged to engage in the same rereading process in order to understand properly what she is offered daily in her own relationship. (Radway, 1984, p. 151, emphasis in original)

This concern for the work romance novels do and the impact they have on their readers is both common in popular romance studies, and controversial. Similarly to Radway, Modleski (2008) also sees a role for romance novels in enabling women to accommodate patriarchy, but crucially argues that romance fiction helps readers actively adapt to (rather than passively accept) the harms of patriarchal society by enabling them to recode men’s violent and aggressive behaviours as expressions of love. In her study of Harlequin romances, she focuses on the transformation of the heroine (and analogously, the reader), arguing that she can only achieve happiness “by undergoing a complex process of self-subversion, during which she sacrifices her aggressive instincts, her ‘pride,’ and—nearly—her life” (p. 29). Regis (2003), on the other hand, counters the argument that romance novels, through their pre-ordained “Happily Ever After” ending in monogamous heterosexual marriage, “extinguish” the spirited heroine and “bind” the reader in the structures of patriarchy. She questions the assumptions that

books have the power to do this, arguing that “[r]eaders are free to ignore, skip, stop, disbelieve, dislike, reject, and otherwise read quite independently of the form” (p. 13). Secondly, Regis says, it is not the ending in marriage that is important to romance readers and writers, but the process of overcoming the barriers and obstacles in the heroine’s path to happiness with the hero. This process takes a heroine who is already bound and frees her. Regis does concede that freedom for the heroine is provisional and constrained, unlike freedom for the hero, which is total and absolute. Ultimately, the heroine’s provisional, constrained freedom is achieved through the heroine’s own hard work in taming and healing the hero.

Returning to the question of the impact of romance novels on their readers and the wider culture, Roach (2016) examines the role of the romance narrative (not limited to the romance novel genre) in Western culture. Like other writers on the subject before her, she also picks up on the Beauty and the Beast themes of taming and healing present in many romance novels. Similarly to Regis (2003), Roach sees a more active role for the readers of romance novels. She argues that romance novels and the reader and writer communities around them provide—within the limits of the tropes and conventions of the genre—a safe space for imaginative play where (predominantly) women can think through the challenges posed by patriarchy. In this, Roach follows Sedgwick’s “reparative reading” (1997) model. Sedgwick critiques what she calls “paranoid reading” approaches to texts. Paranoid readings emphasise and expect negative affect, and seek to expose the underlying negative assumptions and effects of texts. By contrast, she proposes a reparative reading mode, where rather than expecting and seeking to expose negativity, a reader approaches a text with hope, open to surprise, regardless of whether that surprise may be positive or negative. Building on this, Roach argues that romance fiction performs “deep work” for women readers struggling with patriarchy. Through their guaranteed Happily Ever After ending, they provide pleasure, an escape from reality, a reparation fantasy and imagined healing. The takeaway message of contemporary romance novels, says Roach, is a simultaneous and contradictory “You can’t fight the patriarchy/You must fight the patriarchy”. She identifies risk and hard work on the part of the characters as some of the essential elements of romance, noting that “giving up individuality to coupledness requires a willingness to make changes in one’s life for the sake of another” (p. 23). Yet Roach’s analysis often glosses over how exactly this hard work is performed and how risk is

taken by characters in romance novels. Here, Modleski (2008) and Radway (1984) offer a more in-depth and persuasive account of the heroine's hard work to predominantly transform herself rather than the hero—and by extension the absence of any such work on the hero's part. Roach herself admits that even at the end of the romance novel the “alpha hero” remains deeply embedded in patriarchy, made only safe for the heroine by his love for her: the changes to his life are limited and private whereas the changes to hers are fundamental and public.

It is this hard work that Roach (2016) identifies as such a central element to the romance narrative that I want to investigate further in examining how fanfiction readers and writers approach the romance trope of arranged marriage or marriage of convenience. Hard work on the part of the heroine in the name of building and maintaining a romantic relationship with the hero is at the core not only of Roach's analysis but also Radway's (1984) and Modleski's (2008). It is the heroine who gets to know the hero, who learns to read his behaviours, moods, and feelings, and who adapts to them. Regis (2003), too, focuses on the overcoming of obstacles to the relationship, which ultimately involves work performed by the heroine. This emphasis on work chimes with feminist concerns about “invisible work”: forms of work either not recognised as such or not valued in the same ways as other types of work. Daniels (1987), for instance, argues that such forms of work raise questions about the differences between activities performed in the public sphere and those performed in private settings such as relationships and the family, the importance of payment in ideas and constructions of what work is, and the gendered differences in what “counts” as work. I propose that to examine in detail the romance novel heroine's work towards building and sustaining and romantic relationship with the hero, the lens of invisible work, and specifically emotion work, is a useful tool.

Emotion work was first proposed by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (1979) as the work involved in managing feelings to bring them in line with societal norms and expectations. Emotion work is performed predominantly in private contexts such as the family, unlike emotional labour, which is performed in public settings and particularly the workplace. In the original definition, emotion work is performed on the self, and is the (not necessarily successful) attempt to induce or inhibit one's feelings to make them appropriate to a particular situation. Hochschild identifies three techniques of emotion work: cognitive (attempting to change ideas or images in order to change the feelings associated with them); bodily (attempting to change physical



signs of emotion); and expressive (attempting to change expressive gestures, such as smiling or frowning, to change how one feels). Erickson (1993) extends the concept to such activities performed specifically to enhance the emotional well-being of others and provide emotional support, especially in a private, family, or domestic context. Umberson, Thomeer and Lodge (2015) identify activities involved in reading others' emotions as well as managing one's own as part of emotion work. All of these activities are remarkably similar to those shown by a range of romance novel scholars as being performed by romance novel heroines in the name of building and maintaining their romantic relationship with the hero. Viewing these activities as emotion work enables us to ask questions about how such work is distributed among the partners in romantic relationships, and what that may mean for power imbalances between partners.

Both Radway's reinterpretation of the hero's actions as motivated by love and Modleski's recoding of violent or aggressive behaviours and self-subversion of the heroine can be conceptualised as emotion work. It is the heroine's emotion work that causes the change in the typically gruff, cold, indifferent hero, and it is the reader's emotion work that enables them to read the hero's motivation for his gruffness, coldness, or indifference as ultimately moved by love. Radway writes of one romance novel heroine:

It is in fact a combination of her womanly sensuality and mothering capacities that will magically remake a man incapable of expressing emotions or admitting dependence. As a result of her effort, he will be transformed into an ideal figure possessing both masculine power and prestige and the more 'effeminate' ability to discern her needs and to attend to their fulfillment in a tender, solicitous way. (pp. 127–128)

Regis (2003) also acknowledges the taming or healing dynamic, through not only emotion work but also domestic work, especially in romance novels featuring the marriage of convenience trope:

Jenny heals [Adam] through her careful attention to his needs and wants: she manages his households with determined efficiency, she learns the duties of being the lord's wife. Her motive is love: she has loved him since she met him at Julia's house as a schoolmate guest. (p. 135)

On the romance novel character's part, these are examples of work performed in a private or domestic context to enhance another's emotional wellbeing and provide emotional support (Erickson, 1993). Additionally, if we accept Radway and Modleski's arguments, for the reader they become an exercise in cognitive emotion work—actively changing ideas and images in order to change the feelings associated with them (Hochschild, 1979). Even using Roach's (2016) reparative reading approach and her twin messages of “You can't fight the patriarchy/You must fight the patriarchy”, emotion work on the part of both the heroine and the reader is key. Even the tamed romance hero remains a profoundly patriarchal figure, and it is only in his relationship with the heroine that he is softened. The reader, then, must imagine the possibility of taming the alpha man, and must emotionally and cognitively separate the tamed romance hero devoted to the heroine from the man still inextricably enmeshed in patriarchal structures outside of the domestic context. This is as true in the marriage of convenience romance novel trope that serves as the basis for arranged marriage fanfiction as it is in other subgenres of romance novels. The courtship in this variation of the romance novel genre occurs after the marriage and culminates in a declaration of love (Regis, 2003). Similarly to other romance novel plots, however, the heroine still needs to tame the hero, using her beauty, charm and grace—that is her emotion work—to soften a man known for gruffness or even cruelty.

There is a second aspect to emotion work research that is relevant to my investigation of sexual consent in the context of romance novel tropes and related fanfiction: the relationship between emotion work and sex. Erickson (2005) and Umberson, Thomeer and Lodge (2015) both argue that emotion work is key to perceptions of marital quality, and that there is a sexual aspect to emotion work: sex is seen as a key activity within a romantic relationship and a differentiator between relationships that are romantic and ones that are not. Umberson, Thomeer and Lodge (2015) find that where a disparity in desire for sex is present in the relationship, women who desire less sex than their partners often perform emotion work to increase their own desire. Women in relationships with women are particularly keen to maintain an active sex life to mark their relationship as different from a friendship. Women in relationships with men often experience emotion work performed to increase their own desire to match their partner's as a one-sided, unreciprocated effort to please their partner. Yet while this sociological approach allows for the classification of some relationship activities

as (unwelcome) emotion work, it obscures the ways in which dominant discursive constructions of relationships and romance shape the courses of action available to individuals in negotiating their own intimate relationships. Viewing the experiences of emotion work described by both Erickson (2005) and Umberson, Thomeer and Lodge (2015) through Gavey's (2005) lens of discursively constructed expectations of women's sexuality and sexual behaviour, especially in relationships with men, raises questions about the boundaries between work willingly performed and reciprocated in the name of relationship maintenance on the one hand, and societal coercion on the other. It raises the possibility that at least for some women expectations of performing emotion work for the purposes of relationship maintenance negatively impact their ability to meaningfully consent—or more importantly withhold consent—to sex with their partners. Such expectations, often framed in the language of romance, facilitate certain courses of action and subject positions while making others unavailable. One example of the operation of power through the discourse of romance is given by Gavey and McPhillips (1999), who find that the wider discursive construction of what is and is not “romantic” acts as a significant barrier to women's ability to negotiate consent and sexual activity such as the use of condoms. Emotion work approaches, therefore, are limited if they do not recognise the wider cultural and discursive context individuals are embedded in. What I propose instead is using emotion work as a discursive lens through which I examine how power and inequality are negotiated in the relationships depicted in arranged marriage fanfiction.

Returning to the question of romance novels and the related arranged marriage fanfiction trope, viewing the development of the protagonists' relationship through the lens of emotion work raises some interesting questions about sexual consent. As popular romance scholars from Radway (1984) to Roach (2016) have argued, the romance novel heroine undergoes a profound transformation in order to find love and happiness with the hero, and as I have shown, that transformation can be conceptualised as emotion work. The generic conventions of both romance novels and the related arranged marriage fanfiction trope frequently feature sexual elements, often used to denote key milestones in the couple's relationship. As is evident from work like that of Erickson (2005) and Umberson, Thomeer and Lodge (2015), there are sexual aspects to emotion work, particularly with regards to relationship maintenance. Combining these insights with a discourse analytical perspective suggests there are mechanisms such as discourses

of what is and is not romantic, or the discursive construction of the subject position of a “wife”, that construct sex performed as emotion work and for relationship maintenance as perfectly consensual “just sex”, where at least in some circumstances that sex may actually be at least potentially coercive. If, for instance, a wife is financially and socially dependent on her husband (as is the case in many marriage of convenience romance novels), there are not only discursive but also material pressures on her to build and maintain a relationship with him. These pressures are frequently unacknowledged in romance novels, as are the resulting implications for sexual consent within the relationship. So when fanfiction readers and writers reuse the tropes and trappings of the marriage of convenience genre in their own arranged marriage fanfiction, to what extent do they reproduce such potentially problematic elements, and to what extent do they find ways of challenging them within the constraints of both the generic conventions of the romance, and of social and institutional discourses of marriage?

Recasting as emotion work the heroine’s taming of the hero and (in Radway’s terms) the reader’s reinterpretation of the hero’s callous initial behaviour as love provides a framework through which the interactions between the protagonists in both romance fiction and fanfiction based on romance tropes can be explored. However, the romance novels studied by Radway, Modleski, Regis and, to a lesser extent, Roach are highly heteronormative. Investigating the arranged marriage trope in slash fanfiction is further complicated by the fact that the characters are of the same gender. As previously discussed, there is a strong tradition in fan studies that argues that slash erases inequalities between the partners (e.g. Lamb and Veith, 1986; Russ, 1985; Busse and Lothian, 2018). Yet as already seen in the example of Omegaverse fanfiction, that is not necessarily the case, and fanfiction writers frequently incorporate and explore inequality in the relationships they write about. In the Omegaverse, such inequality is clearly gendered, even if the genders involved are not necessarily those we would recognise from Western culture and society. The arranged marriage trope—even when it focuses on same-gender relationships—is similarly shaped by inequalities. In this case, however, they arise from factors other than gender, while some may nonetheless have gendered connotations. I will therefore briefly introduce the arranged marriage trope in the context of the Thor/Loki pairing based on the characters from the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and the specific stories I am basing my analysis on, before moving on to an exploration of how such stories investigate marriage as an institution

that reproduces and amplifies inequalities in a number of ways.

### 5.3 Thor/Loki Arranged Marriage

To investigate the arranged marriage trope and how readers and writers of fanfiction use it to explore issues of consent, I have chosen a small selection of stories from the Marvel Cinematic Universe fandom, centred on the relationship between Loki and Thor. The Thor/Loki pairing is the largest pairing under the “Arranged Marriage” tag on the Archive of Our Own, with around 200 stories as of August 2017. The trope is popular for Thor and Loki, as in the originary works the two characters, although not related by blood, are raised as brothers. This acts as a barrier to recasting them as a romantic pairing without other changes to the setting. They are also antagonists, with Loki being the villain in both of Marvel’s Thor movies—*Thor* (2011) and *Thor: The Dark World* (2013)—and in *The Avengers* (2012). The arranged marriage trope, frequently combined with changes to the originary material to do away with the sibling relationship then allows fanfiction writers and readers to explore Thor and Loki as a romantic couple.

As discussed in Chapter 3, my story selection for this analysis was based on ethnographic knowledge of the Marvel Cinematic Universe fandom in general, and a more in-depth ethnographic exercise within the Thor/Loki pairing in particular. I immersed myself in the Thor/Loki pairing and particularly the “Arranged Marriage” tag on the Archive of Our Own. I read a wide range of Thor/Loki arranged marriage works, as well as other readers’ comments and discussions around the pairing. These gave me a base understanding of how writers of this particular pairing interpreted and adapted the arranged marriage trope, as well as how they worked with the characters from the originary work. I focused on five of the stories with the highest kudos count, and identified common themes. I then narrowed my selection down to two complementary stories for in-depth analysis: *Bride* (themantlingdark, 2013) and *XVII* (stereobone, 2013). Like the Omegaverse stories I selected for analysis in Chapter 4, these two stories are representative of some of the key thematic trends that emerged from my wider reading. Their popularity on the Archive of Our Own also reflects the fact that they are influential within the fanfiction community. My ethnographic exploration of the Thor/Loki fandom and the arranged marriage trope enabled me

to identify key ways in which the two stories were similar to and different from the ordinary material but also other fanfiction works for that pairing and within the arranged marriage trope. These similarities and differences are worth summarising here, as key elements of my readings of the stories arise from them.

Both *Bride* and *XVII* depart from the MCU canon<sup>3</sup> by having Thor and Loki grow up separately rather than be raised as brothers. This is relatively common in Thor/Loki stories as it allows writers to avoid depicting a sexual and romantic relationship between stepsiblings, although a minority of stories do retain the characters' canon relationship as brothers and explore its impact on their romantic relationship. In both stories, Loki is depicted as intersex, as are all Jötunar, and his gender presentation tends towards the masculine but is sometimes ambiguous. This is a common depiction of Loki in fanfiction, incorporating elements of Norse mythology not present in the MCU version, though they are to an extent present in some of the Marvel comics. It often serves to highlight Loki's otherness and associations with magic and the feminine (Drzewiecka, 2015), which complicates the power relationship between him and Thor. Both stories are told predominantly from Thor's point of view, though in *Bride*, the point of view shifts to Loki on a few occasions. It is the structure of the marriage arrangements that makes these two stories a complementary pair for analysis. In *XVII*, Loki leaves his home to marry Thor and secure a lasting peace between Jötunheim and Asgard. This is by far the more common premise of Thor/Loki arranged marriage fanfiction. Conversely, and unusually for this pairing, in *Bride*—the story inspired by the conversation between ampharos and umbreon quoted at the beginning of this chapter—it is Thor who must leave his home to marry Loki. Like in many other arranged marriage fanfiction stories, these marriage arrangements, alongside other factors, give rise to significant inequality between the partners at the start of each story.

In the next section, I explore how the institution of marriage in its legal, social and emotional aspects is constructed in these stories. I focus in particular on how the marriage arrangements relate to the inequalities between the partners in a range of gendered and non-gendered ways, and what these inequalities mean for sexual consent.

<sup>3</sup>The Marvel character Thor is loosely based on Norse mythology. He is a member of the Aesir, an extremely long-lived and god-like (albeit human in appearance) race who inhabit a world called Asgard. Asgard's historical enemies in the MCU canon are the Frost Giants or Jötunar (singular: Jötun), a race of large, humanoid, blue-skinned creatures who inhabit the ice world Jötunheim.

I then explore how the power imbalances are addressed through emotion work, and finally analyse in detail the consummation of each of the marriages and how sexual consent in the presence of power imbalances is handled in these stories.

## 5.4 Thor/Loki and the inequalities of marriage

Marriage as a social and legal institution has a history of constructing and legitimising gendered social inequalities. One mechanism for this is through the legal structures that codify marriage, for instance the historical doctrine of coverture (Donovan, 2012) or exemptions for marriage in rape law (e.g. Smart, 1989; Donovan, 2012)<sup>4</sup>. Yet despite extensive reforms of the legal institution of marriage, changes in the material circumstances of women have been slower and more difficult to achieve (Smart, 1989). Discourse, and the subject positions it makes available or inaccessible, may account for some of this discrepancy, as Gavey (2005) argues:

Those discourses which are commensurate with widely shared commonsense understanding of the world are perhaps most powerful in constituting subjectivity, yet their influence can most easily remain hidden and difficult to identify and, therefore, resist. (p. 92)

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<sup>4</sup>It is worth noting that these are only partial and non-intersectional critiques of the institutions of marriage and, more broadly, family. As Collins (1990) argues, these institutions also reproduce and legitimise racial and other inequalities, for instance through the construction of the “ideal” marriage and family as heterosexual, non-interracial, and restricting wives to the private sphere. Collins points out that this constructed separation between the public world of work that men take part in and the private family world that is seen as the domain of women does not describe the reality of black families and particularly black women in the US, who have historically participated in the public world of work while their private family world has been invaded by state institutions. This in turn is used to further justify racial oppression by constructing both black women as unfeminine and black men as inappropriately masculine. The view of marriage and family presented in arranged marriage fanfiction stories does not account for this. Instead, the marriages depicted here are a combination of two Eurocentric constructions of the institution of marriage. On the one hand, there is the ideal, private marriage and family described by Collins. On the other, as the arranged marriage fanfiction trope has its roots primarily in historical, Regency-setting marriage of convenience romance novels, these are also dynastic marriages, joining two powerful families for political and economic reasons. Both of these, however, exhibit a significant, *gendered* power imbalance between the partners. It is the impact of this power imbalance on the protagonists’ ability to meaningfully consent (or otherwise) to sex that is at the core of my interest in the trope.

The subject position of “wife” as constructed in discourses of marriage is particularly relevant here with regards to inequality and sexual consent. Gavey (2005) for instance shows how sex is still constructed as the “duty” of a wife, and how this discourse influences her interview participants’ perceptions of themselves, constructions of their own identity, and their material experience of sex within marriage. This is also reflected in studies like that of Umberson, Thomeer and Lodge (2015), which highlight emotion work performed in relation to sex and desire. With this in mind, it is worth examining how arranged marriage fanfiction stories depict marriage as an institution, including the possible inequalities it produces, reproduces and amplifies.

While gender has historically been a key structuring element of marriage, it is not the primary source of power differentials in arranged marriage slash fanfiction relationships. There are, however, gendered elements to how both Thor and Loki are presented and it is worth exploring those briefly, particularly as they do relate to other inequalities and are reproduced and amplified by the marriage arrangements. Lamb and Veith (1986) argue that the primary effect of slash is to remove power imbalances from sexual and romantic relationships by focusing on same-gender relationships. They also note that in slash fanfiction, the male characters from the originary work acquire androgynous characteristics. As discussed in Chapter 2, for instance, in *Star Trek* (1966) fanfiction, Kirk is presented as both a leader (masculine) and emotional (feminine), while Spock is logical (masculine) and virginal (feminine). This kind of androgynous characterisation is present for both Thor and Loki in all five of the stories reviewed, and particularly in the two chosen for in-depth analysis. Thor is most obviously feminised in *Bride* (themantlingdark, 2013), where even the title associates him with the feminine role in a heterosexual marriage and the subject position of wife. In this story, Thor is both younger and—unusually for fanfiction about this pairing—physically smaller than Loki. While Loki is heir to the throne of Jötunheim, Thor’s arranged marriage with Loki precludes him from inheriting the throne of Asgard which will pass to his younger brother: an arrangement which evokes the practice of male-preference primogeniture, serving to further feminise Thor. He is also forced to leave his home and join the family and household of his husband. While getting dressed for the wedding—in a white gown—Thor is explicitly described as feeling “feminine” and “delicate”, particularly compared to the frost giants surrounding him. Conversely, Loki in this story has a reputation for coldness and cruelty, adding to Thor’s apprehension about the marriage.



These elements evoke the first of Radway's (1984) narrative functions: "the heroine's social identity is destroyed" (p. 134). Through his removal from his home and family, therefore, Thor here is cast in the heroine role, while Loki's coldness and cruelty mark him out as a romance hero. Thor's isolation also echoes the first two of Roach's (2016) key elements of the romance message: "IT'S HARD TO BE ALONE ... as a WOMAN IN A MAN'S WORLD" (p. 21). Through the mechanism of side-by-side reading (Derecho, 2006), this gendering of the characters therefore clearly evokes popular romance novel tropes and sets expectations for the reader based on the generic conventions of romance novels many fanfiction readers are familiar with: by the end of the story Thor will have taken risks and done hard (emotion) work to tame Loki and transform him into a loving and caring husband. Additionally, these gendered inequalities within the context of the arranged marriage also highlight the structural inequalities of the marriage itself, as Thor leaves behind his own family to formally become part of Loki's, and as the settlement of property and titles is a key aspect of the marriage arrangement. Thor becomes dependent on Loki, both materially and socially.

Yet the characterisation of Thor as feminine heroine and Loki as masculine hero is complicated in *Bride* in two key ways. Firstly, Loki himself is shown to have feminine characteristics as well as masculine ones. On a bodily level, Loki, like all Jötnar, is intersex. He is also physically smaller than other Jötnar, and is known for his intelligence, gift for magic, and manipulateness: characteristics frequently associated with femininity. He is described as both beautiful and handsome. Secondly, on several occasions factors that make Thor feel feminine and vulnerable in the context of his wedding are shown to have gender-neutral or masculine associations in other contexts. When Thor objects to wearing the white wedding "dress", his mother, Frigga, explains that Loki will also be wearing a white gown. When Thor balks at the expectation to be nude for part of the wedding ceremony, Frigga again re-contextualises this for him by pointing out that in Asgard Thor is frequently nude, for instance in public baths. Returning briefly to the sexual scripts framework (Gagnon and Simon, 1973), these exchanges can be seen as a way of engaging with differing cultural sexual scripts. Thor interprets his wedding through the lens of Asgardian culture which appears to have sexual scripts similar to Western ones. Frigga, on the other hand, shows him that Jötunheim sexual scripts are different and helps Thor negotiate these differences on

the level of his own individual scripts. This complication of the the characters' gender coding and the social structures around them already signals a departure from the generic conventions and power imbalances of the romance novel. This "repetition with a difference" (Derecho, 2006) encourages a side-by-side reading where the differences between the fanfiction story and the romance novel trope are highlighted. Such departures in turn are a key tool for fanfiction writers and readers to explore, negotiate, and challenge dominant discourses about power, gender and sexuality in romance novels.

*Bride* has intertextual relationships with and therefore can be seen as part of three different archives: that of marriage of convenience romance novels, that of arranged marriage fanfiction stories, and that of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. By bringing together all of these intertextual and extratextual resources, additional layers of meanings become available to a reader versed in fanfiction community practices, who has access to these resources. *Bride* is fairly unusual within Thor/Loki arranged marriage fanfiction in that it casts Thor in the less powerful position within the relationship. As can be seen from the conversation that prompted the story, which is quoted at the beginning of this chapter, this is a deliberate choice to explore the change in the power dynamics between the characters. In this way, the story stands in contrast to the majority of Thor/Loki arranged marriage fanfiction, and both the similarities and differences between it and other stories are used in meaning-making.

*XVII* (stereobone, 2013) in contrast is representative of the more usual approach to Thor/Loki arranged marriage stories, where Thor is in the more powerful position in the relationship: he is the heir of Asgard, with Loki having to leave his family and make a life for himself in a realm strange to him. Yet, like in *Bride* and many other Thor/Loki arranged marriage stories, ambiguous or androgynous gendering of both Thor and Loki is also present in *XVII*. Loki's physical beauty is emphasised, as are his magic use, intelligence, and reputation for being manipulative. On the other hand, it is Thor who is too nervous to eat at their wedding feast, while Loki is also described as muscled and a competent fighter. Both *Bride* and *XVII* therefore rework their central characters—men in the originary work—into more androgynous versions of themselves, incorporating characteristics associated with both femininity and masculinity, while using the arranged marriage trope and related romance novel conventions to introduce other power imbalances between the protagonists.

There are several other factors, both internal and external to the relationship, through which power differentials are established between Thor and Loki in the two stories. Differences in physical size and strength, for instance, are used to establish—and sometimes negate—power differentials between the characters. In both *Bride* and *XVII*, Thor does not meet Loki before the wedding and expects him to be a giant like other Jötunar, which causes him significant anxiety:

The Frost Giants that Thor sees on his way through the palace leave him shaken.

I'm going to be torn apart, he thinks. (themantlingdark, 2013)

Even in *XVII*, where Thor in many ways has the upper hand in the marriage arrangement, he is concerned about Loki being a frost giant:

'This is your duty,' [Frigga] says. 'I know it is hard, my darling, but it is for the good of our realm.'

Thor knows that, he does, but it doesn't stop it from being hard. Jötun are not an ugly people by any means, but they are giants. And they are cold. Thor doesn't see how anyone can expect him to marry one. He doesn't say this, but his mother seems to sense it anyway. (stereobone, 2013)

It is only once he meets Loki that Thor's perception of the power imbalances between them begins to change, and he is palpably relieved in both stories. While Thor is generally depicted as physically stronger than Loki in MCU fanfiction, in both *Bride* and *XVII* Loki is presented as a competent fighter. In addition to that, Loki is a powerful magic user, and often uses his magic and intelligence to manipulate those physically stronger than him and get his way. Finally, differences in age and experience play a significant role in *Bride*. The author's notes accompanying the story specify that Thor is 18 and Loki is 27 in this setting, and this age difference is reflected in the characters' behaviours, attitudes and even physicality throughout the story. Even after he finds out that Loki is not a giant, Thor continues to be intimidated by his physical size, repeatedly reflecting that he himself is not "fully grown" or as muscular as Loki. Loki is also more sexually experienced than Thor: although neither character has had any sexual experience with a partner, Loki's magic allows him to create doubles

of himself which he indicates he has done for sexual reasons in the past. Physicality, age, and sexual experience are used in *Bride* to establish Thor as the partner with less power in the relationship. This is only partly the case for Loki in *XVII*, where only physical size is a significant factor, and even that is compensated by Loki's competence as a fighter. This underscores the intertextual character of the stories: as *Bride* shows a more unusual premise for a Thor/Loki arranged marriage story, it uses these additional factors to highlight the differences between the characters and the shifted power balance.

The arranged marriage trope also allows factors external to the relationship, such as political considerations, marriage laws and customs, and the characters' relationships with their families, to play a significant role in the power relations between the protagonists. In *XVII*, Loki's marriage to Thor means that he is no longer considered a Jötun: he will not be able to return to Jötunheim or see his family ever again, and he is completely dependent on Thor for everything from basics like food and shelter to emotional support. Conversely in *Bride*, while Thor has to leave Asgard and is somewhat dependent on Loki, his parents repeatedly reassure him that they will continue to visit and support him. Therefore the consequences of a failed marriage for Loki in *XVII* are much greater than those for Thor in *Bride*, which in turn exacerbates the power differential. When read side by side with both romance novels and an understanding of the history of marriage laws and customs in Western cultures, these stories then clearly cast marriage as an institution characterised by and potentially reproducing and exacerbating inequalities. Marriage here is not the "Happily Ever After", but rather the beginning of a process of negotiation, with significant personal and social risks attached to failure of such negotiation. While Roach (2016) sees risk-taking in the name of love as a key element of the romance novel, the risks in arranged marriage fanfiction stories are often taken out of a lack of options instead, as the personal, social and legal repercussions of failure—a life spent in an unhappy and unloving marriage, social isolation, or loss of legal status and the financial means for survival—are simply too great. In the face of these risks and power differentials within the relationship, the characters' options are limited.

There are clear power imbalances in Thor and Loki's marriage in both *Bride* and *XVII*. They are caused by factors internal to the characters—physical size and strength, age, experience—as well as exacerbated by ones external to them—marriage customs and access to material and emotional support outside the relationship. While both

characters are given androgynous characteristics, the overall picture of their relationship is still one of inequality, and more specifically inequality similar to that in marriage of convenience romance novels (Regis, 2003). At the outset of the relationship, Thor has considerably more power than Loki in *XVII*, and Loki has more power in *Bride*. The construction of marriage as a sexual relationship—as evidenced by the emphasis on marriage consummation I shall explore further below—puts additional pressures, particularly on the partner with less power. Even though these inequalities are only partially structural within the setting, they cast doubt on the ability of the less powerful character to give consent to sexual relations in a meaningful way. In the next section, I turn to the emotion work framework to examine how such power imbalances are negotiated within the relationships in the two stories, how the Happily Ever After ending is achieved, and what this means for sexual consent.

## 5.5 Emotion Work and the Happily Ever After

The Happily Ever After ending is an essential feature of the romance novel genre (Roach, 2016). The hero and the heroine have taken risks, worked hard, the heroine has tamed the hero, and they finally come together in a mutually loving relationship, often a marriage. In marriage of convenience stories, of course, the marriage itself has already happened, but it is transformed from a purely transactional arrangement into one of love (Regis, 2003). As previously discussed, it is useful to view the way this transformation is achieved in romance novels as a result of the heroine's emotion work (Hochschild, 1979). Emotion work is often gendered and the burden of it falls disproportionately on women, particularly in heterosexual relationships (Erickson, 2005; Umberson, Thomeer and Lodge, 2015). This is reflected in marriage of convenience romance novels, where the young bride—who has relatively little power in her marriage and is often financially and otherwise dependent on her husband—has to become skilled at reading the male hero's moods, negotiating them and transforming his gruff personality in order to achieve happiness and fulfilment in marriage (Regis, 2003). Radway (1984) and Modleski (2008) both make convincing arguments for why, rather than a transformation of the hero or the relationship, this development is actually a transformation of the heroine. Even Roach (2016) admits that the hero's position within the patriarchy remains unchanged as a result of the relationship—any changes for him are limited and private. Regis

(2003) argues that the more important element in the romance novel is not the Happily Ever After ending itself but the process of getting there. That process, nonetheless, involves emotion work predominantly on the part of the heroine or character with less power in the marriage. Given the intertextual relationship between marriage of convenience romance novels and arranged marriage fanfiction, how does the latter treat the development of the relationship between hero and heroine, the risks that must be taken and the emotion work that must be done if the Happily Ever After ending, which is retained as an essential element and generic convention, is to be achieved? Emotion work continues to play a vital role in negotiating the multiple and layered power differentials between Thor and Loki in both *Bride* and *XVII*, allowing them over the course of the story to create a more equal dynamic. What distinguishes these two stories, and many others featuring the arranged marriage trope, from more traditional marriage of convenience romance novels is who within the relationship performs this kind of work. In both *Bride* and *XVII*, the bulk of the emotion work depicted falls on the partner portrayed as more powerful in the relationship: Thor in the case of *XVII* and Loki in *Bride*.

The first time Loki performs emotion work in *Bride* is shortly after the wedding ceremony at which he and Thor meet. At the wedding feast, Loki seeks to put Thor—still too nervous to eat or engage in much conversation—at ease:

Loki has kept his hands largely to himself. He has leaned over a few times and set his hand at the small of Thor's back, pointing out the members of court with a nod of his head and breathing the best gossip about them into Thor's ear. He brushed his fingers over Thor's when he took his goblet from him to refill it with wine, but Thor wasn't certain if it was meant to be friendly or if it was incidental. They danced, but Frigga had held Thor closer when she was teaching him the steps than Loki held him as they spun through the hall. (themantlingdark, 2013)

Thor's surprise at Loki's behaviour can again be viewed through the lens of sexual scripts as Thor's expectations of his husband are shaped by Western scripts. It is not clear whether Loki's behaviour is in line with Jötun sexual scripts as most of the story is told from Thor's point of view. It is, however, clear that Loki is making an effort to set at ease the younger Thor who is also at that point experiencing culture shock.

When the two newlyweds are finally alone on their wedding night, Loki uses his magic to shapeshift into Aesir (or more human-like) form instead of the frosty blue skin of the Jötnar. This can be read as an effort on his part to empathise with Thor's position as insecure outsider and provide some reassurance and familiarity for him. This is also the first occasion where Thor acknowledges and reciprocates Loki's emotion work:

Loki shifts his skin to match his spouse's and Thor pauses in his pacing to stare.

'Which do you prefer?' Loki asks.

'The night does not compete with the day. As a Jötun you are fairest among your own folk, and as an Aesir you are lovelier than mine.'

'They are all our people now,' Loki reminds him, and Thor nods and smiles.

Loki shifts back into his blue skin, pleased with the lad's pretty speech, and pulls out a seat for Thor. (themantlingdark, 2013)

It is significant that Loki is proactive about making Thor feel more comfortable, as it shows that he clearly understands that Thor is feeling vulnerable and isolated. The gesture of shape-shifting is intended to reduce that feeling of isolation. It is also important that Loki asks for Thor's opinion and gives him a choice, thereby empowering him to make decisions within the relationship very early on. At the same time, this choice clearly makes Thor uncomfortable as he does not want to cause offence to his husband. He therefore retreats into language which can be seen as rather diplomatic and deliberately flattering, effectively passing the decision back to Loki. So while Loki's emotion work goes some way towards making Thor feel more at ease, the power imbalances between them are still clearly reflected in this exchange. The fact that Thor declines to make a choice indicates that he may not be feeling safe yet to do so, and by extension to meaningfully give or deny consent to any sexual relations between the couple.

Conversely in *XVII* it is Thor who performs the majority of emotion work both in trying to read Loki and understand how he feels and trying to make Loki feel at home in Asgard, particularly early on in the story. At the same time, Loki is studying Thor and trying to understand him, but he makes no move to initiate conversation or work on their relationship. As Loki expresses a desire for safety and privacy, Thor gives him

space by leaving their quarters during the daytime and bringing him food rather than making Loki join the family at mealtimes. This is in stark contrast to Radway's (1984) romance heroine:

Because she cannot seem to avoid contact with him despite her dislike, the heroine's principle activity throughout the rest of the story consists of the mental process of trying to assign particular significeds to his overt acts. In effect, what she is trying to do in discovering the significance of his behavior by uncovering his motives is to understand what the fact of male presence and attention means for her, a woman. (p. 139)

A side-by-side reading of *XVII* with this understanding of the heroine's behaviour in romance novels indicates that this is precisely what Loki is expecting to have to do in this story. He is watching Thor carefully and testing out the limits of any freedom he may have in this new situation. However where the heroine in a romance novel would then use any knowledge gained this way to provide emotional comfort and support for the hero, in *XVII*, Loki finds every wish he expresses respected, and as much space is given to him as the social and legal restrictions on both partners allow. Thus Loki does not need to account for and come to terms with Thor's presence in his life in the same way as a romance novel heroine would.

Thor also seeks to engage Loki in conversation and takes cues from his behaviour to find activities Loki might enjoy. The first breakthrough in their relationship comes when Thor, having seen Loki read the single book he has brought with him from Jötunheim, takes him to Asgard's library. As the relationship develops, the emotion work involved in deepening and sustaining it evolves to being shared equally between Thor and Loki, indicating that they have reached a level of mutual trust. While the inequality of the marriage arrangement is never erased and formally Loki remains dependent on Thor, Thor repeatedly demonstrates that he views his husband as an equal. When Loki is given the choice to dissolve the marriage and return to Jötunheim or stay in Asgard with Thor, he freely chooses to stay and negotiates a reopening of the border between the two realms, indicating that he feels confident in his own status and power as Thor's husband. Both partners here have taken risks and both partners have changed to build the relationship, but the changes Thor experiences are just as great and as public as those for Loki, as indicated by this new public role for Loki in the formal relationship



between Asgard and Jötunheim. Thor's emotion work has transformed the relationship to one where Loki is a loved and respected equal and feels able to make choices freely and without constraint. Thus, while the Happily Ever After ending is achieved, the process by which it is achieved, and how the obstacles are overcome differs considerably between these arranged marriage fanfiction stories and romance novels.

For readers versed in romance novels as well as fanfiction, the arranged marriage fanfiction story becomes a part of both archives, and the differences in how emotion work is approached in each body of work become a key site of meaning creation. While fanfiction stories retain the romance novel's Happily Ever After ending, they make key changes to how this ending is achieved. The contrast between the romance novel heroine's efforts to understand and accommodate the hero on the one hand, and the partner with less power in the fanfiction arranged marriage on the other, who ultimately has emotion work performed for them, becomes a challenge to the power imbalances in the romance novel trope. It is important that the "equality-centered relationship dynamic" (Kustritz, 2003, p. 377) is not present in these fanfiction stories from the start. Neither is the "hero" tamed by the "heroine" (Radway, 1984) or only changed in a private context while still remaining embedded in patriarchy (Roach, 2016). Rather, through persistent performance of emotion work, the partner with more power in the relationship levels the playing field to build trust and minimise inequality in the partners' day-to-day interactions. In the next section I explore what these changes to the romance novel generic conventions mean for sexual consent within the relationship.

## 5.6 Marriage consummation

Marriage consummation is a recurring feature of arranged marriage fanfiction stories. Part of the reason for this lies in the generic conventions of both slash fiction and romance novels, both of which often feature sex scenes. In the romance novel a sex scene is frequently used to mark the Happily Ever After ending, with the couple consummating their relationship in a mutually loving and respectful way. Roach (2016) argues that part of the message here for the (mostly) women who read romance novels is that they are entitled to love and great sex in their relationships, and that their partner should be devoted to their sexual pleasure. Yet arguably in a marriage of convenience

romance novel where the relationship between the hero and heroine is predicated on inequality, a question arises over the meaningfulness of any sexual consent in that relationship. Both as a result of her subject position as wife and of her material dependence on the hero, the heroine is under pressure to make the relationship “work” for her by any means necessary. This question is often not satisfactorily addressed in the marriage of convenience romance novel, particularly if the transformation of the hero and the relationship has happened largely through the emotion work performed by the heroine, with the hero remaining largely unchanged outside the relationship. Thus any re-negotiation of the power imbalance between them is limited and contingent at best.

In arranged marriage fanfiction the consummation scene too is a key generic convention, and while sometimes it is used in the same way as the climactic sex scene in romance novels to indicate the Happily Ever After ending, in many fanfiction stories it has a different function. A closer look at the metadata around the stories and the construction of these scenes in arranged marriage fiction shows how they are used to examine complex issues around sexual consent, power and inequality in intimate relationships. Of the 5400 works tagged “Arranged Marriage” on AO3 in August 2017, 884 also use a tag related to at least one of the following “Consent Issues”, “Non-Consensual”, “Rape/Non-Con”<sup>5</sup>. Of the five Thor/Loki stories I selected for this analysis, all of which were highly ranked by fanfiction readers in terms of kudos and can therefore be regarded as influential and exemplary within the community, consummation was a central feature in four, with pre-marital sex performing a similar function in the final one. One story presented consummation as an outright rape,

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<sup>5</sup>The Archive Of Our Own uses a “curated folksonomy” tagging system (Tag Wrangling Committee, 2012) in order to classify works on the Archive and make them searchable and accessible. The system seeks to combine the flexibility of a folksonomy where users can simply add any tag to a work (allowing for user creativity and evolution in community language and practice) with the robust searchability of a regulated taxonomy where users may only choose from preset tags (minimising issues such as spelling mistakes and the use of multiple terms for the same concept). So while AO3 users may use any tag of their own choosing on a work, a team of “tag wrangling” volunteers performs work in the background to create relationships between tags, such as ensuring that all variants on a tag can be found through a single “canonical” tag, and grouping similar concepts in “tag trees”. However, for Archive load reasons some related concepts with large numbers of works attached to them are not grouped together, which is why I selected these three umbrella concepts for my search. Taken together, these three umbrella tags also contain works with tags such as “Rape/Non-Con Elements” and “Dubious Consent”, covering a range of fandom community understandings and expressions of consent issues.

and the other three, including the two selected for in-depth analysis, contained discussion of consent issues in light of the arranged marriage and inequality of the partners. Consummation is presented as expected in these relationships, both through the legal structures surrounding the marriage arrangements and through the cultural expectations that construct marriage as a sexual relationship, reflected in the subject positions of “husband” and “wife”. Through both the metadata around the stories and key features of the stories themselves then, arranged marriage fanfiction casts marriage consummation as an at least potentially coercive practice. References to the range of different sources of power imbalances and inequalities in the relationship discussed previously are present throughout the stories and support this, keeping the issue of meaningful consent as a focal point of the works. This focus evokes both issues around the legal construction of marriage (Smart, 1989) and the social and cultural constructions of potentially coercive heterosex practices as “just sex” (Gavey, 2005). Where arranged marriage fanfiction departs from the generic conventions of romance novels is again in the distribution of emotion work between the partners, and in stories where consummation is explicitly addressed as coercive or potentially coercive, another sex scene later in the relationship may take its place in establishing the Happily Ever After ending.

*XVII* illustrates well the problematic nature of marriage consummation within arranged marriage fanfiction. In this story, when Thor meets Loki and finds he is not a giant, he is immediately sexually attracted to him. Once the wedding feast is over and the couple are alone in their room, Loki makes it clear that he expects the marriage to be consummated even though he is not feeling enthusiastic about the prospect. When Thor refuses on the basis that Loki would clearly not be a willing participant, Loki is both confused and angry. He accuses Thor of making a fool of him, reflecting his awareness of the precarity of his position as Thor’s husband and his subject position as the effective equivalent of a wife: having left his family and home, he is materially and socially dependent on Thor. Being married to Thor is his only source of status in his new life, but that marriage is precarious at best if it remains unconsummated. Loki continues to be cold and hostile as a result, not trusting Thor’s intentions in refusing to consummate the marriage, but eventually accepts that he has some agency within their relationship. This exchange between the protagonists makes visible the at least potentially problematic character of the practice of consummation, which is otherwise

taken for granted in both dominant discourses and the legal construction of marriage. Rather than “just sex”, consummation is acknowledged by both characters in this story as “potentially rape”.

There is a similar, though far less confrontational, conversation in *Bride*. This time it is Loki who makes it clear that Thor’s consent matters and that he will not insist on consummating the marriage unless Thor is willing. Thor, while nervous, does prove willing, though the language used in reaching their mutual agreement to have sex is rather formal and carries connotations of meeting expectations, both social and each other’s (Gavey, 2005):

‘I would not have you unwilling,’ Loki says, turning toward Thor. ‘I’m not a monster. This marriage was no more of my making than of yours. We needn’t punish each other for it.’

‘It is no punishment,’ Thor answers. ‘It is a gift, is it not? I mean to keep my promises. I would not rob my husband of the pleasures of his wedding night.’

‘Nor I mine,’ Loki agrees, smiling. (themantlingdark, 2013)

Thor’s phrasing of his consent reflects the discursive construction of the institution of marriage and the wedding ceremony, as it clearly references—and legitimises—the expectations of sexual intercourse generated by their wedding and his subject position as husband. The word “rob” in particular implies a sense of obligation on Thor’s part and an entitlement for Loki. In light of sexual script theory, these scenes can be seen to reflect a negotiation of sexual scripts at the cultural and interpersonal levels. There is a strong implication in both stories that the sexual scripts of both Asgard and Jötunheim include marriage consummation, possibly regardless of either party’s consent. Thor and Loki’s negotiation of these cultural level scripts would indicate a level of exception-finding (Masters *et al.*, 2013). In *XVII*, Thor thinks that wedding night rape is “not an uncommon practice, but certainly no practice Thor would ever take part in”, while Loki concedes that he “did not expect [Thor] to be so honorable” (stereobone, 2013). In *Bride*, while ultimately the cultural script is followed, this only happens with mutual agreement. It is Loki’s final response in this exchange, picking up on the implications of Thor’s phrasing and the word “rob”, that performs the work

of putting them on equal footing, as it acknowledges that the entitlement, obligation and subject position of being a new husband applies in reverse too.

In addition to sexual scripts, however, there are other factors that influence the practice of marriage consummation. In the Western legal context, there are consequences for non-consummation which may put one or both parties at risk. As Smart (1989) argues, “[t]he civil law on marriage is still interested in whether marital intercourse takes place, and whether the child of a woman is also the child of her husband” (p. 92). In the UK, for instance, non-consummation is grounds for annulment (except for same-gender couples) (GOV.UK, 2016), which in turn has different legal implications to divorce. In the US, annulment may have a significant negative impact on an immigrant spouse’s application for permanent residence. The exact legal context for Thor and Loki’s marriage is not specified in either *Bride* or *XVII*. However, similarly to reading these stories side by side with Western sexual scripts, it is possible to read them side by side with the complexities of marriage law. Moreover, the legal situation does play a central role in many other arranged marriage stories, including the other three included in my detailed reading sample for this research, where the consequences for non-consummation range from immediate magical death at sunrise (thorduna, 2013) to being disinherited (Thor) or flogged to death (Loki) for treason and filial disobedience (astolat, 2013). Loki’s anger at “being made a fool of” in *XVII* can be read as reflecting a similar concern with his legal situation as Thor’s husband. This again highlights the risks of a failed marriage, particularly for the partner with less power in the relationship and therefore the stakes for the characters in making the relationship work. Far from being a risk taken willingly and in the name of love (Roach, 2016), however, the risks here are clearly ones the characters are forced to take for lack of other options and potentially at peril of death.

When it comes to the actual consummation of Loki and Thor’s marriage in both *Bride* and *XVII*, emotion work plays a key role in facilitating meaningful consent between unequal partners. As previously discussed, unlike in romance novels where emotion work is predominantly performed by the heroine who is also the partner with less leverage in the relationship (Radway, 1984; Regis, 2003; Roach, 2010), emotion work in both these stories is performed by the partner who is more powerful: Thor in *XVII*, and Loki in *Bride*. This applies not only to the emotion work needed to build trust within the relationship but also to that needed to ensure any consent given is and

continues to be meaningful.

In *Bride*, the conversation between Loki and Thor once they are alone in their room quickly becomes an equal exchange, both of them working towards building trust and rapport. However, once they agree to consummate the marriage, it is Loki who works to read Thor's feelings, calm his nerves, and provide reassurance. In *XVII*, after Thor's initial refusal to consummate his marriage with an unwilling Loki, the couple grow closer over the course of weeks, largely due to Thor's efforts to make Loki feel more comfortable and at ease with him. Their first kiss is triggered by a scuffle following a trip away from Asgard during which Loki is verbally assaulted by another character. The kiss leads on to the consummation of their marriage, but throughout this scene Thor continues to consciously read Loki's reactions and feelings, and verbally or through gestures asks for consent on several occasions:

It gets Thor hot all over, and suddenly he has too many clothes on, and this isn't going fast enough.

Thor leans back and Loki looks angry, not because Thor is kissing him but because he's stopped. The look disappears once Thor pulls him upright and leads him to the bed. Loki understands then what's happening. He keeps himself pressed very close to Thor, like he can't stand to be pulled away from him right now. Thor doesn't move them onto the bed though, not yet. He searches Loki's eyes, tries to figure out what he's thinking, what he's feeling. He made a promise before, and he means to keep it, despite the lust that grips him tight all over and threatens to drive him crazy. (stereobone, 2013)

Here, Thor repeatedly performs the bodily emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) of controlling his own desire. As he is both the more powerful partner in the relationship and the one who so far has shown a greater desire for sex, this is a key indicator that he is actively thinking about issues of consent and looking to ensure that Loki has the space to deny or withdraw consent if needed. To that end, Thor is also carefully reading Loki's emotional expressions in order to be able to react and adapt to them. This stands in stark contrast to the findings by Umberson, Thomeer and Lodge (2015) where emotion work around sexuality and desire was performed predominantly by women

who desired *less* sex than their partner, with the aim of increasing their own desire. Read side by side with women's own experiences of such emotion work therefore, this story reveals some key differences. It and other arranged marriage fanfiction stories construct the partner who is more powerful in the relationship and desires more sex as the one responsible for the emotion work of managing their desire and of ensuring that any sexual consent is meaningful. Where potentially coercive heterosex is frequently constructed as "just sex" in Western culture (Gavey, 2005), in these stories this is challenged and problematised as "potentially rape". Consent can only be made truly meaningful through emotion work and a conscious effort to negotiate and manage power inequalities, and the responsibility for this work is placed squarely on the shoulder of the partner with more power in the relationship.

## 5.7 Conclusion

Arranged marriage fanfiction is part of several different archives: the marriage of convenience romance novel subgenre, fanfiction, the archive surrounding the originary work the fanfiction is based on, as well as that of readers' and writers' own life experiences and relationships with dominant cultural discourses of sexuality and consent. Reading arranged marriage fanfiction in this way—side by side with romance novels, originary works, other fanfiction, as well as dominant discourses on consent—gives access to a range of meanings created through similarities and differences with aspects of these different archives.

The arranged marriage fanfiction stories examined in this chapter retain certain key generic conventions of the romance novel: the Happily Ever After ending and the climactic sex scene. However they also directly address issues of power imbalances and inequalities in relationships, casting marriage as an institution that reproduces and potentially exacerbates them. This construction of marriage is built on both its legal and formal aspects, as well as the social and emotional ones. As a result, these stories reframe the practice of consummation—a feature of marriage frequently taken for granted, commonly constructed as "just sex"—as at least potentially coercive. To resolve this conflict *and* retain the Happily Ever After ending, the stories analysed here make key changes to the generic conventions of romance novels, particularly in the way the HEA ending is achieved. Where in romance novels the transformation of the

relationship is effected predominantly through the heroine's emotion work—her effort to understand and support the hero—in these fanfiction stories it is the partner with more power in the relationship, the equivalent of the romance novel hero, whose responsibility it is to perform this emotion work. Through it, inequalities in the relationship are negotiated, the playing field is levelled, and space for meaningful consent—or the denial or withdrawal thereof—is created. It is these changes that allow arranged marriage fanfiction stories to challenge dominant discourses of “just sex” and cast them as “potentially rape”. An alternative discourse then emerges where consent can only be made truly meaningful through emotion work and a conscious effort to negotiate and manage power inequalities, and this effort must be made by the partner with more power in the relationship.

From Chapters 4 and 5, then, emerges a picture of slash not as a literature of equality but as a literature of *negotiated inequality*. In both the Omegaverse and the arranged marriage stories analysed in this chapter, the intimate relationships depicted are predicated on power differentials. These must be resolved before consent can be truly meaningful and the couple can find happiness together. In this way, interpersonal negotiation and issues of power are very clearly shown to be inseparable, as characters' negotiating position is shaped by the power structures they are embedded in. By making this link visible, the stories examined here demythologize it (West, 1993), thereby engaging in discursive resistance to its normalisation and invisibilisation in dominant discourses of sex and consent. In the next chapter, I examine how insights about consent like the ones I have traced in Chapters 4 and 5 generated by the fanfiction community in their creative output are applied to real-world issues of rape and rape culture.



## Chapter 6

# Blurred Lines: From Fiction to Real Life<sup>1</sup>

### 6.1 Introduction

As I have shown in Chapters 4 and 5, readers and writers of fanfiction examine issues of sexual consent in a variety of complex and nuanced ways in their creative output. The active manipulation of sexual scripts in Omegaverse fanfiction allows for intellectual, emotional and affective engagement with the way coercive practices and gendered operations of power are discursively constructed as “just sex”. Changes to the generic conventions of the romance novel in arranged marriage fanfiction allow for an exploration of marriage as a legal and social institution, and marriage consummation and marital sex where inequalities exist in a relationship. In these ways, fanfiction stories challenge both cultural and legal constructions of sex and consent. Having mapped some of fanfiction’s engagements with issues of sexual consent, it is necessary for my argument that this is a site of activism to investigate the relationship between these fictional explorations and fanfiction readers and writers’ engagement with rape culture and consent in the real world. In this chapter, I shift focus in two ways. Firstly, I examine how fanfiction readers and writers talk about consent and sexual violence in their conversations outside of their ficitional output. Secondly, I am interested in whether and how the insights and knowledges about consent that fanfiction gives rise

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<sup>1</sup>This chapter is partially based on material also included in my paper “*When the RP gets in the way of the F*”: *Star image and intertextuality in Real Person(a) Fiction* (Popova, 2017).

to are applied to real world situations.

In August 2015 news broke that Patrick Kane, the star forward of National Hockey League team the Chicago Blackhawks, was under investigation for rape (Michel and McCarthy, 2015). Kane is what is known as a “franchise player”: highly skilled, and promoted by the Chicago Blackhawks as one of the faces of the team for marketing purposes. As a result he is popular with fans within the fanfiction community, who write and share Real Person(a) Fiction or RPF about him. When the allegations against Kane became public, he was one half of the Hockey RPF community’s most popular slash pairing, with over 1 500 stories published on the Archive of Our Own under the Patrick Kane/Jonathan Toews tag. In this chapter, I use the case study of the Hockey RPF community’s reactions to the rape allegations to explore how fanfiction engagements with issues of consent are translated by fanfiction readers and writers to real life situations. I argue that a substantial proportion of Hockey RPF community members used RPF-like techniques to give voice to and examine the motivations not only of Patrick Kane but also of other participants in the rape investigation, particularly the alleged victim and the District Attorney on the case. This in turn enabled them to present alternative views on the role of the criminal justice system in cases of sexual violence and challenge the operation of rape culture in the law. I also argue that the rape allegations against Kane and the community’s nuanced engagement with issues of consent and the law presented them with a conflict with regards to their continued fannish involvement with Patrick Kane and Hockey RPF. Discussions about resolving that conflict hinged on a desire to challenge rather than reproduce rape culture in the community’s fannish activities, which led to significant disengagement with the fandom. I use the lens of exemplary gestures (Scholl, 2011) to argue that these community reactions constitute a form of cultural activism.

## **6.2 Real Person(a) Fiction in the wider fanfiction context**

Existing academic work on Real Person(a) Fiction focuses and builds on issues of celebrity and the tensions between a celebrity’s public persona as a textual construct (Dyer, 2006) and private self. Busse (2006a) argues that the distinction between canon (the official version of events and characters) and fanon (a fictionalised version of events and characters that is broadly agreed upon by the fan community) in RPF fandoms

is often blurred. She dispenses with this distinction in favour of arguing that, unlike in fanfiction based on TV shows, books or movies, RPF does not have a single unified canon. Instead, a canon is constructed out of publicly available information about the celebrity: their official media appearances, reports and gossip available about them in mainstream media, as well as rumours and accounts of encounters with the celebrity circulating in the fan community. The canon is constructed through choices around which of these pieces of information to accept and incorporate and which to discard. Not everyone within a community will necessarily agree on the precise combination of such pieces that makes up canon, but a core set of events is still formed. She argues that authenticity is not necessarily an important factor in whether a given piece of information is incorporated into canon. Drawing parallels between RPF and fans' online interactions and constructions of personas, she ultimately argues that "any belief in clear separation of the real and fictional are [sic] illusory" (p. 223). Busse also examines RPF as a tool for identity construction—both that of the fan and the star they are writing about. She argues that fan writers "shape and alter the star to their own specification, making him more interesting, intelligent, or vulnerable, and thus more desirable, identifiable, and available" (Busse, 2006b, p. 260).

Tracing the textual processes involved in turning a real person into a fictional character, Piper (2015) examines the parallels between RPF and biopic films such as *The Social Network* (2010). She argues that "both [RPF and biopics] appropriate elements of celebrity bodies to recontextualize the existing public self through the representation of a fictionalized private self." Commenting on audience receptions of RPF and biopics, however, she notes that there is a major difference between the two forms in their level of intertextuality and in how audiences interact with them. A biopic, being often the only one of its kind and the first and only time the majority of its audience will engage with the subject, makes a much stronger implicit truth claim than a piece of RPF, which is one of often hundreds or thousands about that particular celebrity. The circulation of many different, clearly fictional, accounts of the same "canon" events in RPF communities therefore results in a stronger awareness that the limited information available can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and thereby encourages a certain level compartmentalisation between the celebrity persona, private person, and fictionalised character.

Combined with the densely intertextual nature of fanfiction (Derecho, 2006; Stasi,

2006), these theorisations of the relationship between “canon” and “fanon” and the associated textual processes of RPF make it an interesting case study for the exploration of links between text and real world, which are of interest to my investigation of how fanfiction readers and writers translate their textual engagements with sexual consent to engagement with real-world issues of consent, rape, and sexual violence.

### **6.3 Rape: culture, perception, the law**

There is a range of contexts in which issues of rape, and by extension consent, are discursively constructed. Media reporting and fictional representations play a role, as do legal and criminal justice discourses. In order to understand the Hockey RPF community’s reactions to the Patrick Kane rape allegations, it is helpful to review the literature on both the legal discourses and public perception of rape.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Smart (1989) takes a discourse analytical approach to the power of law in women’s lives. She argues that law functions as a discourse “which is able to refute and disregard alternative discourses and to claim a special place in the definition of events” (p. 162). Because of law’s special status as a discourse, she argues that in many areas relevant to feminist politics engaging with the legal system or campaigning for legal form only serves to further legitimise the “androcentric” outlook of the law and its power to define truth in particular contexts. She therefore questions the effectiveness of such campaigns and engagements and calls for law to be de-centred in feminist political action. Smart (1986) also distinguishes between “law as legislation” and “law as practice” and argues that law put into practice—even law campaigned for by feminist activists—often does not have the intended effect. This can be seen in how the criminal justice system operates around issues of rape and sexual assault. Mulla (2014), for instance, examines the processes and status of DNA evidence collection in the experiences of rape victims and medical and law enforcement professionals. She argues that there is a perception among all these groups that DNA evidence is vital to the disposition of rape cases, leading to elaborate and invasive processes of forensic examination. Yet she also cites several studies which demonstrate that DNA evidence plays a minimal role in the disposition of the vast majority of sexual assault cases in the US. This is only one example of the disconnect between rape law and the perception of rape not only by the general public but also by practitioners within the criminal justice

system.

Another example is presented by Anderson and Doherty (2007) in their review of rape perception studies from the field of social psychology. They cite findings which indicate that victim blaming and other rape myths are widespread and study participants' judgement of a rape victim is likely to be influenced by factors such as how much they resisted, their "respectability", prior sexual experience, whether they were intoxicated, and how they were dressed. Anderson and Doherty also challenge some of this literature by suggesting that the methodology it is based on may not be sensitive enough to capture the true level and subtlety of victim blaming and other rape myths still prevalent in discourse. Such discrepancies between rape law as legislation, rape law as practice, and rape law as perceived by the public are also evident in the courtroom, despite a range of ostensibly successful feminist reforms in how rape is prosecuted. Feminist scholars argue that often courtroom practices such as cross-examination of rape victims amount to secondary victimisation or "judicial rape" and can be as damaging to rape victims as the original assault (e.g. Smart, 1989; Lees, 1993; Lees, 1996).

Against this backdrop of legal and cultural constructions of rape and consent, therefore, I investigate how the Hockey RPF community's involvement with fanfiction allowed them construct alternative discourses, but also how they may have reproduced some of the dominant discourses of rape, rape victims, and issues of consent. Of particular interest is how the community used the techniques of Real Person(a) Fiction to engage with and challenge dominant discourses of the law and the criminal justice system, creating a space where the special status of the law as being able to define truth was often bracketed or rejected outright.

## **6.4 Home ice: studying my fandom**

Hockey RPF is fanfiction centred predominantly on the National Hockey League (NHL), which is commonly regarded as the highest professional level in men's ice hockey. Investigating fanfiction based on high-level European football, Waysdorf (2015) identifies key features of football—and more generally of high-level team sports—which make them an attractive site for RPF. The media narrative surrounding the sport—a combination of official promotional material and outsider perspectives such

as journalistic reporting—creates a set of paratexts around the sport itself. A focus on promoting individual players even in team sports like ice hockey and football as a way of fostering fans' personal investment in the sport has the effect of turning star players into celebrities highly attractive to RPF communities. Additionally, an overarching narrative is created over the course of a season or tournament, so that individual games acquire meaning beyond the ninety (or in the case of hockey sixty) minutes of play time. It is these individual and team narratives and the interplays between them, as players emerge as stars, are traded, or retire, that provide the starting point for sports-based fanfiction. Readers and writers in the Hockey RPF fandom may be hockey fans first, or may, like me, stumble across the fanfiction and develop an interest in the sport as a result.

Patrick Kane, one half of the popular Patrick Kane/Jonathan Toews slash pairing within Hockey RPF, is known among sports fans and within the Hockey RPF community for “off-ice issues”—public behaviour that does not fit with the role the Chicago Blackhawks organisation presents him in as a “franchise player”<sup>2</sup> and role model. While there are several incidents regularly discussed in the Hockey RPF community, the one that received the most attention prior to 2015 was Kane's drunken weekend in Madison, WI, which included allegations of him attempting to choke a woman at a party (Dickey, 2012), though no police report was made and no charges were filed in relation to that incident. After the Madison incident, the media controversy around Patrick Kane faded, and, aided by his and the team's sporting success, he was portrayed by the Blackhawks as having matured and re-focused on hockey. Yet on August 6th 2015, a local newspaper in Kane's hometown of Buffalo, NY, broke the story that Kane was subject of a rape investigation (Michel and McCarthy, 2015). Over the following three months Kane kept public appearances to a minimum. With media attention on the ongoing rape investigation, the Chicago Blackhawks nonetheless

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<sup>2</sup>The structure of the NHL is designed to stop one team from dominating the league by placing a cap on how much teams can spend on players and ensuring the best young players go to struggling teams. This structure is also reflected in Hockey RPF stories, and accounts to some extent for the popularity of the Crosby/Malkin and Kane/Toews pairings. All four of these players were highly talented individuals drafted by struggling teams who went on to lead their teams to success. The Pittsburgh Penguins won the Stanley Cup three years after Crosby was drafted, and the Blackhawks won their first Cup in 46 years three years after drafting Patrick Kane. These are players commonly referred to as the faces of their respective franchises, and whose high media exposure contributes as much as their skill as athletes to their popularity with RPF fans.

made the decision to let Kane participate in training and games in the early 2015/16 season (Elgas, 2015). On November 4th 2015, it was announced that Kane's accuser had stopped cooperating with the investigation, and two days later the investigation was formally closed without charges being filed (e.g. Gretz, 2015). Almost immediately after this, the NHL and Chicago Blackhawks resumed their use of Kane in promotional material and events, for instance through prominent coverage of his points streak (NHL.com, 2015).

My personal and emotional involvement with Hockey RPF fandom, the Chicago Blackhawks, and Patrick Kane as an athlete and slash object gives me a unique and often conflicted perspective from which to explore how the fandom community reacted to the rape allegations against Kane, and as discussed in Chapter 3, this part of my research is strongly auto-ethnographic. It is therefore both necessary and worthwhile to account for my own positionality in both the Hockey RPF community and my research. I was involved in the community in several ways: I interacted with other Hockey RPF fans through my Tumblr blog; I recorded podfic (audio performances of fanfiction stories written by other fans); I had written a few stories, including for community challenges; and there were people within the Hockey RPF community I had collaborated with and considered friends. When the rape allegations were made public, I was at a point in my research where this crisis in the community appeared highly relevant to my work on fanfiction as tool for critical engagement with issues of sexual consent and rape. The data I collected, therefore, is in most cases directly drawn from the networks I was already part of. I made the decision to start collecting the data two days after news of the rape allegations broke on August 6th 2015. I made an effort at this point to collect all Tumblr posts relevant to the Kane allegations from my personal Hockey RPF network<sup>3</sup>. I continued collecting data in this way for two weeks, which generated over 350 separate posts. After that, data collection became more sporadic. I did return to Tumblr and capture as many posts as I could from my network every time there were media reports on the case. This included milestones such as trade rumours, allegations of evidence tampering, and the media coverage of Patrick Kane's participation in the

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<sup>3</sup>As part of this collection, I had to make certain judgement calls as to relevance of particular posts. I chose to include a small number of posts which did not reference Kane directly but I knew from experience in the fandom were nonetheless relevant. Where the same post had been reblogged multiple times within my network without any additional content, I only captured it once; and where discussions through reblogs moved away from the topic, I only captured the most relevant posts.

Blackhawks' training camp. The final group of posts was collected shortly after the announcements that the complainant had stopped cooperating with the investigation and that Patrick Kane would not be charged<sup>4</sup>.

A second data set resulted from tracking and analysing Kane-centric fanworks on AO3 between August 2015 and January 2016, taking into account the same major media reporting milestones as for the social media data, and comparing Kane's treatment in fanfiction post-rape allegations to that in post-Madison stories. Additionally, I listened to a number of fandom and professional podcasts which covered the story and formed part of the conversation in the Hockey RPF community. Finally, I have attempted to both incorporate and account for my personal and emotional involvement with the Hockey RPF fandom. My analysis of the data is inevitably influenced by my three-year participation in the fandom. Once I started collecting the data I made the decision to minimise my own posting on Tumblr related to the case, and I started an autoethnographic diary, recording my thoughts and feelings as the case progressed.

## 6.5 Humanising the law

Patrick Kane's career does not appear to have suffered as a result of the rape allegations or the previous off-ice incidents, but his behaviour has been the source of significant challenges for the collective canon formation in Hockey RPF (Busse, 2006a). I have argued elsewhere (Popova, 2017) that for many community members, the rape allegations and the summer of 2015 created an "unfillable gap" in the Patrick Kane canon, while also drawing a range of extratextual reading resources into the Kane archive that, for those with access to them, tie Kane inextricably into issues of rape culture. Patrick Kane, however, was not the only object of interest within the Hockey RPF community following the rape allegations against him. In order to make sense of the allegations, the investigation and its outcome, and what all this meant for fannish involvement with Kane, community members took into account a range of other information and the experiences of a number of people close to the case, most notably the complainant and the District Attorney. Unlike Kane, who is a celebrity

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<sup>4</sup>The use of verbatim quotes in this chapter is limited in order to minimise the risk of individual discussion contributors being traced through the use of search engines. Where quotes have been used, they have been pseudonymised.



with a well-established public persona, little was known about either the complainant or the DA. In the following I examine how techniques and textual processes similar to RPF canon creation were used to seek to understand Kane's accuser and the District Attorney in the course of fanish discussions of the rape allegations. I argue that these in turn were used to create complex new engagements with and knowledges of the law and the criminal justice system and their operation in sexual violence cases, allowing Hockey RPF community members to challenge the special status of the law when it comes to determining truth. These challenges are acts of demythologization and demystification (West, 1993), opening up a space for alternative discourses to exist and exposing the law's discursive and institutional power.

One key figure the Hockey RPF community engaged with in their discussion of the Patrick Kane rape allegations was the complainant. There is of course a key difference between the accused and the accuser in a rape case, particularly a high-profile one, in that while the accused is named and in the public eye, the complainant is anonymous, and this affects the public's perception of them. Additionally, legal practice has a significant impact on both the accuser's experience of the criminal justice system and public perception of it. With reference to the British criminal justice system, Lees (1993) finds that "the victim is put on trial, her reputation is attacked, her credibility doubted" (p. 11). She dubs this experience "judicial rape", arguing that it reproduces and amplifies the original violation, leads to low conviction rates for rape and ultimately serves to protect rapists. While there have been some attempts at mitigating the most egregious of these problems since Lees wrote in the 1990s, more recent evidence suggest that many issues still persist. In both the British and Canadian criminal justice systems, for instance, the prosecution represents the state, not the victim (Ehrlich, 2001). Instead, the complainant is relegated to the role of witness for the prosecution, for which they get little to no preparation. Mulla (2014) documents rape victims' experiences within the US legal system and highlights prosecutors' continued practice of probing of the complainant's character, including criminal record, during the investigation and in the lead-up to the decision on whether to prosecute the case. This asymmetric treatment of accuser and accused within the criminal justice system is exacerbated when the accused is a public figure, including by measures designed to protect the complainant, such as their right to anonymity. This institutional set-up creates a rape complainant who is anonymous, faceless and voiceless. Where Piper

(2015) argues that “the appropriation of the celebrity’s physical likeness” is a key feature of RPF, such a physical likeness is not available here for the alleged victim. In the absence of any details about Kane’s accuser, however, the Hockey RPF community brought other sources of information to bear on their evaluation of the case, notably accounts and experiences of rape survivors within the community as well as discourses about rape culture and the inadequacy of the criminal justice system.

There were several prominent survivor voices within the community. These individuals shared their own experiences of sexual violence and encounters with rape culture and, where applicable, the criminal justice system. A key focus of these discussions was the rape kit process, which Mulla (2014) documents extensively in her ethnography of forensic nurses. Mulla highlights the discrepancy between the public and forensic practitioner perception of rape kits, where they are viewed as a vital part of evidence corroborating the victim’s account and potentially able to identify an unknown attacker, and their actual role in case dispositions, where they make very little impact as the vast majority of rapes are committed by an attacker already known to the victim. She argues this discrepancy between the perception of the importance of rape kits and the reality of their limited usefulness is at the heart of the often traumatic process of forensic evidence collection from a rape complainant. Once it emerged that a rape kit examination had been performed on Kane’s accuser, community members repeatedly highlighted the physical and mental invasiveness of forensic evidence collection in sexual assault cases, for instance in this anonymous comment:

One thing I think tumblr and a lot of people need to learn about is rape kits. The false information being spread of them is painful. But the biggest thing, is if you haven’t been through one or know someone who has (and they have told you about them), they are one of the most demeaning, invasive, embarrassing, and cold things to go through. I speak from personal experience. Anyone who goes through one of those who wasn’t raped... yeesh. (anonymous comment submitted to pidgey’s Tumblr)

Here the commenter brings their own personal experience of forensic evidence collection after sexual assault to bear on the information that Kane’s accuser also underwent a rape kit examination. The “demeaning, invasive, embarrassing, and cold” nature of the experience is juxtaposed with the experience of rape itself. This opens up a space

for considering the complainant's lived experiences and emotions: what is it like to be raped and then to have to face the cold invasiveness of the criminal justice system? Is it likely that someone would volunteer to undergo this unnecessarily? When it comes to Patrick Kane, community members construct elaborate stories from snippets of his public persona, making him, as Busse (2006b) argues, more vulnerable and relatable—more human—by providing an insight into the possible thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the person behind that persona. In the case of the complainant, who has no public persona, it is pieces of external information such as what a rape kit examination actually feels like that are used to fill the gaps and humanise her. The implication here is that no-one would voluntarily submit to a rape kit examination if they had not already undergone the more traumatic experience of being raped, and this serves to emphasise the credibility of the complainant's claims. By weaving in a small piece of publicly available information about Kane's accuser—that a rape kit examination had been performed on her—with the considerably more detailed account of the emotional impact of that process provided by the anonymous commenter, an inner life is created for the nameless, faceless, voiceless complainant, making her more human and relatable. The alleged victim's physical likeness (Piper, 2015) is not necessary in this process—the reader of this comment and others similar to it is still invited and able to empathise with her. This empathy is produced not through an emotional attachment to the victim herself (as is the case for the emotional attachment to Kane's celebrity persona) but through the intertextual meanings brought into the discussion. The commenter's account of her rape kit experience is read side by side with developments in the investigation. One effect of this reading is that, like a more conventional RPF character, the complainant here is humanised despite the relative lack of publicly available information about her. Commenters' own experiences and knowledges of the criminal justice system are mapped onto her, giving her a face and a voice composed of those elements.

Another external piece often brought into the discussions of the rape allegations, and that had a bearing on how Kane's accuser was perceived, was community members' understanding of rape culture, and particularly its prevalence within the criminal justice system.

Tags: BASICALLY reblogging because 'neutrality' isn't really neutral in rape culture and I've picked my side I'm done with Patrick Kane now (tags

on a Tumblr reblog by *snorlax*)

In these tags, added by *snorlax* to a Tumblr post she reblogged, rape culture is used to construct a dichotomy in cases of sexual assault, where one is either on the side of the accused or of the accuser. In this construction, neutrality is impossible and tantamount to siding with the (potential) rapist. While this particular quote appears quite abstract, many community members expressed similar sentiments with particular reference to the complainant and how she was likely to be treated by the press, the criminal justice system, Blackhawks fans, and the general public. Like the account of the rape kit experience, these comments also generate a relatable inner life for Kane's accuser. The reader is invited to consider the emotional and material impact the rape and resulting experiences are likely to have on the complainant. Here, the highly emotionally charged discussion of the Kane allegations, and particularly the practice of generating empathy with the alleged victim, reflect back on rape culture and the criminal justice system. The personal stake in fannish involvement with Patrick Kane enables a highly affective and emotional engagement with questions about how the law and the culture surrounding it operate and how they frequently let survivors of sexual assault down. Fannish and social engagement, the personal and political, are inextricably intertwined in these discussions.

Both the accounts of sexual assault survivors and the discussion of rape culture within the Hockey RPF community therefore function in ways similar to RPF canon construction to humanise and give an internal life to Kane's accuser, who is otherwise left faceless, nameless, and voiceless even by measures intended to protect her. Using survivor experiences and discussions of rape culture to give Kane's accuser an inner life, however, also has a secondary effect in the community, in that it exposes those members who may not have direct experience of these issues to new ways of thinking about the law and its operation in cases of sexual assault. In this way, the community collectively generates and elaborates new knowledges about rape, consent, and their treatment by the legal system. These knowledges are based not on legal definitions and principles but on internal realities and subjective experiences of sexuality and sexual violence. They are fundamentally epistemologically different to legal understandings of rape and consent. This becomes even clearer when examining how the Hockey RPF community discussed another prominent figure in the Kane rape investigation: Erie County District Attorney Frank Sedita whose department was in charge of the investigation.

Unlike both Kane and the complainant, Erie County District Attorney Frank Sedita made a number of public statements throughout the case. These included his first public statement after news of the investigation broke, in which he expressed concern for Kane's reputation (Rogers, 2015), and an in-depth interview after announcing the closure of the investigation, in which he cast doubt on the complainant's credibility (Sports Mockery, 2015). In processes similar to RPF canon construction, members of the Hockey RPF community researched Sedita's background and record as a prosecutor and interwove this information with their understanding of rape culture and the criminal justice system in an attempt to make sense of the outcome of the investigation and Sedita's statements. Three different versions of Sedita emerged from this process. Some members of the community were satisfied with the thoroughness and integrity of the DA's investigation and this served to convince them of Kane's innocence. Another set did not question the thoroughness of the investigation or the impartiality of Sedita and the police, but raised issues of rape culture and the inadequacies of the criminal justice system to justify their continued belief in Kane's guilt. Finally, a significant part of the community questioned Sedita's integrity and motivation as part of a wider discussion of the failings of the criminal justice system in sexual violence cases. I argue that these three different constructions of the District Attorney—thorough, impartial and competent; impartial but steeped in a wider rape culture; and openly biased—facilitated the Hockey RPF community's engagement with the criminal justice system and its effectiveness in sexual assault cases. Using RPF techniques to give Sedita an inner life and flesh him out as a character allowed community members to put a human face on the law and its operation: each characterisation of Sedita corresponds to a broader view of the legal system in sexual assault cases.

The first two characterisations of the DA can be seen in this exchange between an anonymous commenter and oddish, posted shortly after the closure of the investigation:

1) The DA is known for being tough on rape suspects. 2) It's not about different accounts from two people in the room. They are not arguing about whether the sex was consensual or not. There was no sex. The evidence doesn't support the woman's story. So, you are twisting the facts to support your point of view. ... (anonymous)

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The evidence doesn't disprove her story, nor does it definitively confirm it. If evidence comes to light that she made a false charge, fine. But the current evidence does not establish such a claim as fact, and it does not disprove her claim of being sexually assaulted.

But let's be honest—the problem is less about knowing the full facts of the case (which will never even have a chance to happen) than it is about how society reacts on the basis of the limited facts known. That so many people incorrectly identify “not being charged” as “being innocent” and are willing to attack a woman who claims to have been assaulted is a problem on a disgustingly grandiose scale. ... (oddish)

The anonymous commenter uses the DA's reputation as “tough on rape suspects” to bolster the case for Kane's innocence. The implication here is that if Sedita is indeed “tough” in sexual assault and rape cases, then the investigation conducted by his department and the police must have been thorough and the resulting lack of evidence for Kane's guilt must mean that Kane is in fact innocent. This is further borne out in the second part of the comment, which takes the DA's statement to mean that no sexual contact at all took place between Kane and the complainant, thus completely ruling out the possibility of rape. RPF canon construction is at work here in how information about Sedita's background and track record as a prosecutor is selected and used to create a characterisation of him in a way that is relevant to the “story”—in this case the Patrick Kane rape allegations. What is effectively a small piece of information—Sedita's reputation as a prosecutor—with very little factual underpinning is then given meaning in the specific context of the investigation. Other potentially relevant pieces, such as Sedita's political ambitions (Hopkins and St. Clair, 2015), are discarded. In this way, the DA is constructed as beyond reproach, and this characterisation is transferred to the operation of the law in the case: if Sedita is tough on sexual assault and a good prosecutor, and no charges were filed, then Kane must be innocent. These arguments ultimately hinge on an acceptance of the law's special status as a discourse which has the power of defining truth (Smart, 1989), and particularly on the presumption of innocence. In this line of reasoning, a lack of evidence of guilt, or the existence of “reasonable doubt”, is taken as evidence of innocence. The construction of the District Attorney as tough on sexual violence and beyond reproach serves to bolster this argument, giving the legal system a human face.

oddish's response to the anonymous comment, on the other hand, foregrounds the experience and expertise of RPF writers and readers in constructing multiple versions of events from the same information, and practically applies this to the outcome of the Patrick Kane rape investigation. Without questioning the District Attorney's credibility and integrity or the outcome of the investigation, oddish highlights that multiple valid interpretations of the available information are possible, and that there is no certainty about Patrick Kane's innocence or guilt. She also goes a step further in pointing out the dominant social attitudes to the uncertainty common in rape cases, where a lack of evidence or "reasonable doubt" is generally articulated with the accused's innocence, and their experience and point of view is thereby privileged over that of the complainant. oddish's criticism of the anonymous commenter's views thus becomes a critique of rape culture. Here, the issue of Sedita's character is cast aside in favour of focusing on systemic issues of rape culture and the law. Other commenters with a similar approach argued that within the narrow framework of the criminal justice system, it may be appropriate to prioritise the accused's potential innocence over other considerations. They also argued, however, that in other contexts, it was reasonable and appropriate to make judgements on the preponderance of evidence, the balance of probability, or even based on wider considerations such as the statistical improbability of a false rape allegation. This argument hinges particularly on making nuanced distinctions about when the presumption of innocence and the "beyond reasonable doubt" standard of proof are and are not appropriate. A key factor often cited in deciding whether particular standards of proof were appropriate in a given context was the power to enact consequences for the accused: where a judge and jury could potentially imprison the accused, a higher standard of proof was deemed necessary; where individuals' private opinion was concerned, which had little to no consequences for the accused, making judgements on the balance of probability was seen as appropriate. Just as oddish brackets the question of the DA's integrity, she and other proponents of this view bracket the special status of the law as a discourse able to determine truth. There is an acknowledgement that in certain contexts the law does—and perhaps even should—have that power. At the same time, Hockey RPF community members here are challenging the universal applicability of this special status of the law and making nuanced distinctions based on the relative power of those making judgements about guilt or innocence. While these arguments to an extent maintain the special status of legal discourse, they go a long way towards denying its

power to determine an official version of events beyond the very narrow context of the courtroom and the criminal justice system. They bracket the legal version of events while arguing for a wider understanding of reality more sympathetic to victims of sexual assault. These arguments build on the experiences of sexual assault survivors within the group, as well as the work done collectively by the community to give the voiceless, faceless complainant in the Kane case a more relatable inner life by weaving in other sources of information in an RPF-like canon. In this way, the RPF canon construction processes become useful analytical tools for the community's engagement with issues of rape and the law, allowing community members to develop new knowledges of rape, consent, and the law in ways that are focused on lived experience and internal subjectivities rather than legal interpretations of events. Developing ways of bracketing the law is an important step in overcoming the totalising, special power of the law to dictate its own version of truth (Smart, 1989). Bracketing creates a space where alternative truths and knowledges not legitimised by the law can exist alongside the official legal version. It is an act of demythologization, of showing that the legal version of events is in fact a construct rather than the absolute truth. In this way, the bracketing approaches to the law the community developed work to demystify the institutional and discursive power of the law.

The final approach to the District Attorney within the Hockey RPF community's discussions of the Patrick Kane rape investigation is illustrated by this comment on Sedita's end-of-investigation statement from vulpix:

The DA's statement was full of incredibly loaded language. It was uncomfortable to read. It literally used scare quotes (this so-called "case"); it used "well he didn't act guilty" as an apparently legitimate reason to disbelieve the alleged victim. And this is what he thought was appropriate to put out to the public in an official statement, so no, I'm not inclined to think anyone in this case went into it with no bias, even before you consider the hometown hockey hero who has made mistakes but is a reformed character who is friendly with the police narrative. (vulpix)

vulpix takes issue with the language of the DA's statement as well as the evidence he cited for closing the investigation. The implication here is that Sedita's words are chosen to deliberately discredit the complainant: rather than simply stating that there was



“reasonable doubt” or “insufficient evidence to prosecute”, which would be common wordings for statements in these circumstances, the DA used language dismissive of Kane’s accuser and unnecessarily—and perhaps selectively—outlined details of the investigation. Other community members offered similar analyses and brought other pieces of information about Sedita into the discussion, including the fact that in his first public statement about the case he had expressed concern for Kane’s reputation (Rogers, 2015), and the fact that he was running for election to a judgeship throughout nearly the entire period of the Kane investigation (ballotpedia.org, 2015; Hopkins and St. Clair, 2015). Using this information, the DA is given an inner life, highlighting his humanity rather than his function as part of the criminal justice system. Unlike typical RPF character construction, which tends to build on celebrities’ public personas to make the fictionalised private person seem more sympathetic (Busse, 2006b), Sedita here is constructed as biased, more interested in upholding the reputation of a hometown sports hero than ensuring justice for the complainant, and unlikely to have presided over a thorough and impartial investigation. In this way, a characterisation of the DA is again used to make broader points about the law and the criminal justice system: if individuals within the legal system are steeped in rape culture and personally biased in sexual assault cases, then the system itself cannot be seen as just and impartial. Other proponents of these arguments included sexual assault survivors and others who had themselves had direct experiences with the criminal justice system, in either reporting or making the choice not to report sexual assault they had experienced, or supporting friends and family members through similar decisions and processes. Community members also raised issues of rape culture, victim blaming and rape myths. They afforded high importance to Kane’s status as rich, white and privileged, and highlighted his connections with police in his home town where the alleged assault took place. Additionally, common rape myths and rape perception (Anderson and Doherty, 2007) were deliberately counteracted. A diametric opposition was constructed between the presumption of innocence on the one hand and believing the victim on the other. Statistics on low rates of both rape convictions and false allegations, as well as other feminist activist discourses were used to underscore the need to believe and support victims in the face of a system that was portrayed as actively hostile to them. The RPF canon construction work done by the community for both the complainant and the District Attorney is crucial in these debates. Sedita is cast as actively complicit in an unjust and ineffective system, while at the same time

identification with the complainant's experience of both sexual assault and the criminal justice system's response to it is invited. Standards of proof and the presumption of innocence are challenged outright, which in turn brings into question the very legitimacy of the law in cases of rape and sexual assault. Such outright challenges to the law then are an act of demystification that extends beyond what can be achieved with bracketing the law. They expose the articulation of legal structures such as the standard and burden of proof and the operation of rape culture. They show how the law, both as legislation and as practice, excludes and invalidates the experiences of sexual assault survivors while privileging those of alleged perpetrators. Feminist legal scholars have, of course, long argued this (e.g. Smart, 1989; Lacey, 1998; Jamieson, 1996). Yet in the Hockey RPF community we see an example of this knowledge being circulated, elaborated, and developed further informally and using tools not necessarily available to legal scholars, such as the textual processes of RPF canon construction.

The Hockey RPF community used a range of RPF canon construction techniques in their evaluation of the rape allegations against Patrick Kane. By bringing in community members' own experiences of sexual assault and the criminal justice system, they constructed a version of the complainant—left nameless, faceless and voiceless by measures intended to protect her—that they could empathise with and whose credibility was bolstered. The District Attorney's professional reputation, use of language, and possible motivations were used to construct three different versions of him. All of these constructions were used to humanise and give a face to the law, allowing Hockey RPF community members to engage with and challenge the criminal justice system in complex and nuanced ways. Ultimately, the community's RPF canon construction processes were used to create new knowledges about rape, consent, and the law, based not on legal principle and precedent but on affective and emotional engagement with issues of sexuality, agency, bodily autonomy, and the legal system's interaction with these. While a minority of community members placed a high degree of trust in the criminal justice system and interpreted the lack of criminal charges as evidence of Kane's innocence, the majority used RPF canon construction processes to challenge the law. They either bracketed it, acknowledging its power in a very particular context but questioning it outside of that context, or rejected it outright. Both bracketing and outright challenging the law are powerful acts of demythologization and demystification, opening up spaces for alternative truths and discourses to exist either alongside or in

place of the law.

## 6.6 Living our values

The Hockey RPF community used their discussions around the Patrick Kane rape allegations to generate new knowledges about rape, consent, rape culture, and the law. In the course of elaborating these knowledges and as the Kane investigation developed, another question arose: in light of this understanding of rape culture, in light of what many community members saw as the impossibility of determining Kane's guilt or innocence with any certainty regardless of the legal version of truth, could further fan involvement with Patrick Kane be justified? Three approaches to this question stood out in particular: ending involvement with the fandom, or at least with Patrick Kane and the Kane/Toews pairing; deleting existing work from the Archive of Our Own; and finding ways to justify continued involvement. In the remainder of this chapter I examine these discussions and the resulting actions community members took, and argue that many Hockey RPF readers and writers were driven in these by their desire to put into practice feminist values and the knowledges of rape culture they had articulated.

Questioning, suspending or outright ending involvement and activity in the the Hockey RPF or Patrick Kane fandoms was a common reaction from many community members very early on. Even before any details were known beyond the fact that a rape investigation was being conducted, many readers and writers declared their intent to withdraw from the community.

It almost doesn't matter whether he did this thing or not— I believe he could have, and that realization makes me sick to my stomach. It might not be enough to convict him in any court, but it's enough to make me put down my pen where he's concerned. (oddish)

oddish's comment clearly acknowledges the uncertainty around the case, and in fact her full post deals extensively with the problem of uncertainty in rape allegations in general and the Kane case in particular. As discussed in the previous section, she also makes a clear distinction between any judgement she as an individual makes based

on information she has, and what may or may not be enough to convict a person of rape in a court of law. Most importantly, it is the realisation that—from what she knows—she believes that Patrick Kane (the celebrity athlete) is *capable* of rape that ultimately drives oddish's decision to no longer write about Patrick Kane (the Hockey RPF character). oddish elaborates further in another post:

I need to own that as an RPF writer, I have two very different Patrick Kanes in my mind—one, the character that I see when I read or write who is a flawed but loveable idea that we have cooperatively created. The other is a real human being who for all the media attention he receives is unknowable—and deeply problematic. In fiction, we can create scenarios that suggest favorable interpretations and allow for character development... but those scenarios are clearly fiction.

Where life seemed to be imitating art, and Patrick Kane seemed to be improving himself as a human being, I was selfishly pleased, because it allowed me to enjoy my fiction all the more. But the recent accusation of sexual assault changes things. (oddish)

This comment echoes the analysis by Busse (2006b) of how RPF writers shape and mold the celebrity persona in their stories. It also clearly references the way RPF constructs canon from selecting, arranging and interpreting publicly available pieces of information about the celebrity (Busse, 2006a). It is the way RPF uses the celebrity's public self to create versions of a private self (Piper, 2015) that poses a particular problem for oddish and other Hockey RPF writers, as that fictional private self is often presented in the most favourable light and depicted as capable of learning, development and overcoming the celebrity's publicly known character flaws. As the fan work becomes part of the wider Patrick Kane archive for Hockey RPF community members, the fictional and real Patrick Kane are read side by side (Derecho, 2006). This in turn leads to a changed perception of the celebrity within the fandom community—a perception now at odds with the new information emerging about the celebrity. Rather than reading the fictional character and the celebrity persona side by side, and constructing meaning from the similarities and differences, the knowledge of what the real Patrick Kane is alleged to have done overwhelms any possible fan interpretation and imposes meanings that many Hockey RPF fans find distressing. This is supported by a number

of community members' accounts of the highly personal stories they had told through the character of Patrick Kane—including stories about sexual assault survival—and the feeling that in light of the rape allegations against the real-life Kane, the fictional character was now in some ways tainted for them.

The conflict generated by side-by-side readings of Patrick Kane—the celebrity athlete accused of rape—and Patrick Kane—the RPF character—is so deep and significant for individuals and the Hockey RPF community as a whole that oddish characterised it as a struggle to “live our values” in light of past involvement with the Patrick Kane fandom and the allegations against him. In mapping the key epistemological moments of cultural activism, Scholl (2011) emphasises the role of discursive and semiotic disruption and subversion. He goes on to suggest that one of the functions of such disruption is as “an act in itself [that] can embody a gesture that points to the future by giving hints about how a better world would look in practice”, or what he terms an “exemplary gesture” (p. 165). oddish and other Hockey RPF community members' desire and struggle to “live [their] values” can be interpreted as a desire to make precisely such an exemplary gesture. Having exposed the operation of rape culture in institutions such as the criminal justice system and celebrity culture, community members who argued for discarding Patrick Kane as a fan object were clear in their intention to no longer reproduce rape culture themselves, in their own fannish engagements and creative output.

The rape allegations against Kane not only changed the meaning of any possible future fanfiction about him, but also the meanings of existing works for both readers and writers, leading to discussions of whether such fanfiction stories should be deleted from the Archive of Our Own:

I have been thinking hard about pulling the only fic I wrote with him. Or changing it to a different pairing. I just—the things people have said about this fic, how it helped them process stuff in real life, I don't want to delete it. But I don't think I can present him as a sympathetic character anymore.  
(scyther)

From scyther's comment we can see that her Kane-centric fanfiction has acquired meaning for her (and her readers) beyond the immediate connection with Kane. In this

case, her readers found the story helpful in addressing issues in their own lives, which in turn made it more meaningful and valuable for scyther. This is only one example of how fanfiction stories acquired additional meanings for their readers and writers. Community members also discussed the emotional investment and labour involved in writing stories and engaging with the community, as well as the pleasure and joy they derived from reading and writing stories and discussing them in comments. All of these meanings for them became part of their involvement in Hockey RPF fandom, and therefore to an extent became a part of their own personal Hockey RPF or Patrick Kane archive. Yet scyther's comment indicates that these meanings needed to be re-evaluated against the meanings now imposed by the rape allegations. Here, the desire to make an exemplary gesture is taken beyond ceasing involvement with the fandom to actively removing existing fan works about Patrick Kane from the Archive of Our Own. For many commenters this approach was driven by a kind of "scorched earth" policy—the intention to not only remove themselves from the fandom but also prevent potential new fans from joining. As I argue elsewhere (Popova, forthcoming), this policy was ultimately unsuccessful, partly due to the temporal features of the technical platforms the community uses which made the long-term preservation of community-generated knowledge impossible. Nonetheless, the attempt itself speaks of a conscious desire to stop the reproduction of rape culture within the Hockey RPF community.

While the process of re-evaluating the meanings of Hockey RPF and Patrick Kane stories was common to many community members, not all reached the same conclusions. An alternative view was given voice in a long post by voltorb:

A huge part (the overwhelming portion, really) of my delight with hockey is rooted in the fantastic irony of a bunch of intelligent, sassy, powerful women taking a hegemonic male structure and turning it on its head: refashioning this world and these people to our purposes. It's a subversive act. (voltorb)

Here, voltorb is weighing the meanings Hockey RPF has accrued for her over time against those imposed by the rape allegations against Patrick Kane, but the outcome of this process is exactly the opposite of scyther and oddish's re-evaluations. Rather than finding other meanings overwhelmed by the rape allegations, she constructs a different hierarchy where the subversive meanings she finds in Hockey RPF directly challenge rape culture and hegemonic masculinity. A cornerstone of this argument is

the observation that Hockey RPF characters are better, more compassionate human beings than the celebrity personas they are based on, echoing the observation by Busse (2006b) that RPF writers humanise the celebrity persona by giving them an inner life, and shaping them to be “more interesting, intelligent, or vulnerable, and thus more desirable, identifiable, and available” (p. 260). For voltorb, it is this contrast between hockey culture as perceived by the fandom community and as depicted by them that attracts her to Hockey RPF. Effectively, for her Hockey RPF only acquires meaning through a side-by-side reading, and crucially through repetitions with a difference (Derecho, 2006), of the sport and media spectacle it is based on. Elsewhere in the post, voltorb also acknowledges—in language very similar to oddish’s “live our values” comment—the conflict she experiences in deriving enjoyment from a sport so deeply mired in rape culture. voltorb, however, argues that it is Hockey RPF, through what she perceives as its subversiveness, that helps her reconcile some of these tensions. In this case, she is reading hockey as a sport side by side with the meanings she has derived from her engagement in Hockey RPF, which in turn alters how she views the sport. What is important here, however, is that while voltorb is arguing for precisely the opposite action to oddish and scyther, she too is basing that argument on a desire to challenge rape culture. The disagreement here is not over the end but the means. At the heart of both sides of this argument is the desire to make an exemplary gesture, to find ways of challenging rather than reproducing rape culture, and in Scholl’s (2011) words to “*prefigure* the better world to come” (p. 165, emphasis in original). The actions different members of the community proposed in response to the Patrick Kane rape allegations are all intended to enact the community’s knowledges and beliefs about rape culture in ways that point to a world where rape culture no longer exists.

As evident from these discussions, many Hockey RPF readers and writers experienced a deep conflict between their creative and emotional engagement with the fandom and their desire to not support and even to challenge rape culture as it manifested within the sport of ice hockey. voltorb’s argument in favour of continued engagement with the fandom as a way of subverting rape culture was ultimately rejected by the majority of the community, and the conflict translated to significant levels of disengagement with the fandom which are worth presenting here in some detail. To understand the exact levels of turnover and disengagement in the fandom I investigated both the number of works posted to the Archive of Our Own featuring “Patrick Kane” as a character tag

Table 6.1: Authors active and works posted in Patrick Kane related tags on the Archive of Our Own in the months leading up to, during, and following the rape investigation.

	<b>Jun–Jul</b>	<b>Aug–Oct</b>	<b>Nov–Jan</b>	<b>Aug–Jan Total</b>
<b>Total works</b>	134	40	94	134
<b>Works per month</b>	67	13	31	22
<b>Total active authors</b>	84	28	51	66
<b>Authors active both in this period and before allegations</b>	n/a	12+4	14	19+4
<b>New authors in this period</b>	n/a	12	31	43

or “Patrick Kane/Jonathan Toews” as a relationship tag, and the number of active authors producing stories with these tags before and after the rape allegations became public. I completed this data collection between early August 2015 and the end of January 2016, during which period a total of 134 works featuring one or both of these tags had been posted on AO3. In order to obtain a comparable sample for the period before the rape allegations, I also took into account the 134 works posted to the Archive prior to August 6th, 2015 (the day news of the allegations broke)<sup>5</sup>. Two key metrics in this data are the rate of posting of new works, and the number of authors active in the fandom during the relevant time periods. I also took into account key milestones of the rape investigation, splitting the period after the allegations became public into two around the official closure of the investigation. Finally, I sought to understand how individual authors’ activity patterns had changed over the course of the investigation.

Immediately after the rape allegations the Hockey RPF community’s output of fanfiction about Patrick Kane stopped almost completely. In the three months between August 6th and November 5th (the date the investigation was formally closed), only 40 works were posted in the Patrick Kane or Patrick Kane/Jonathan Toews tags on AO3. In contrast, the 134 works I took into account for the pre-allegations sample were produced within a two-month period (June and July 2015). In the three months

<sup>5</sup>One source of inaccuracy in this data is the fact that a number of works were removed from the archive following the rape allegations. As there is no way to see what was removed or when these works were originally posted, it is impossible to correct for this. Therefore the posting rate and number of active authors in the pre-allegations period is likely to be underestimated in this data set.



after the investigation was concluded the rate of new works doubled compared to the August–November period, with 94 works posted to the archive, yet this is still only half the monthly rate of new works produced before the allegations. The overall number of authors active in the fandom decreased from 84 in the two months before the allegations to 67 in the August–January period. Of the 84 authors active in June and July, only 19 (less than a quarter) remained involved after the rape allegations became public, with the remaining active authors being new to the fandom. Another four authors were active before June and then again after August, though two of them posted works which had largely been completed before the allegations and then withdrew from the fandom entirely. Of the 67 authors active between August and January, 43 (nearly two thirds) joined the fandom after the rape allegations. These numbers demonstrate three key developments: a mass exodus of long-term fans from the fandom; a significant slowdown in the creation of new fanworks; and ultimately an overall smaller community made up largely of individuals who joined after the rape allegations became public and more specifically after the police investigation was concluded.

Community discussions about future involvement with the fandom and this level of disengagement can be viewed as prefigurative gestures challenging rape culture. This in turn points to how the kinds of engagements with sexual consent that I have traced within the fanfiction community so far can be viewed as a form of cultural activism, despite not necessarily being directed at a wider public. While discussions of the Kane rape allegations and their implication for fannish involvement were directed internally towards the community, members of the Hockey RPF community clearly expressed desires to challenge, rather than reproduce, rape culture in their creative and fannish practice, and collectively determined the best ways of doing so. These challenges may be on a small scale, limited to this community, but they are nonetheless a powerful form of *discursive resistance* within the context of the community. Fanfiction readers and writers collectively create new knowledges about rape culture and consent, together finding a critical voice (hooks, 1989) through their engagement with culture and representation.

## 6.7 Conclusion

The case study of the Hockey RPF fandom's reaction to the Patrick Kane rape allegations shows clear interconnections between insights about rape and consent generated through fanfiction and fanfiction-like practices on the one hand, and community members' evaluation of the real-world allegations and the criminal justice system on the other. RPF canon construction practices were applied not just to Kane himself but also to semi-public figures involved in the case, notably the complainant and the District Attorney. Through these processes, community members' own experiences with rape culture, sexual assault, and the criminal justice system were interwoven with the limited public information available about the case, enabling them to talk about the operation of rape culture in the criminal justice system, and the resulting impact on sexual assault survivors, thereby giving a human face to the law. These insights were applied to broader arguments about the effectiveness and even legitimacy of the law and the criminal justice system in cases of sexual assault, enabling a nuanced range of responses, including bracketing and outright rejection of the law's "special status" as a discourse able to determine and define truth. Community members' knowledges of consent and rape culture were rooted in highly subjective internal experiences of sexuality, enabling them to challenge legal principles as inadequate to the task of delivering justice to sexual assault survivors. Additionally, community members' concern with the legitimacy of any future involvement with Kane fandom in light of the rape allegations demonstrates a desire to implement these insights in their daily practice and to make an exemplary, prefigurative gesture towards a better world through a refusal to reproduce rape culture in their own fannish and creative engagements. While this gesture was directed primarily at other community members rather than externally, it nonetheless constitutes an act of cultural activism, seeking to challenge the operation of rape culture within community members' own day-to-day lives and sphere of influence. In the next chapter, I continue to trace fanfiction community members' efforts to apply their insights about and creative engagements with issues of sexual consent to the real world, in their own day-to-day lives and relationships, in their fannish output and interactions, and in wider and more public contexts.

## Chapter 7

# The Praxis of Consent

### 7.1 Introduction

The fanfiction works I investigated in Chapters 4 and 5 pose sophisticated challenges to dominant sexual scripts and discursive constructions of what normal (hetero)sex looks like and to the generic tropes of romance novels. In these ways, they make visible the connections between consent negotiation and power relations, painting a picture of *negotiated inequality* in the the sexual and romantic relationships they explore. They engage in sophisticated demystification and demythologization (West, 1993) of the ways in which potentially coercive sexual practices are constructed as “just sex” in culture. In my investigation of fan responses to the Patrick Kane rape allegations in Chapter 6 I also showed that some of these new knowledges about consent generated by fans are also applied by the community at least to their understanding of high-profile rape allegations. Fans’ discussions around the case served to challenge the law and criminal justice system on issues of sexual assault and consent. Together, these challenges and knowledges make up a kind of *discursive resistance* within some parts of the fanfiction community to dominant constructions of sex and consent. But does fans’ use of these knowledges go further? Even though fans’ activities are broadly directed inwards towards the community itself rather than outwards towards a wider public, could we conceptualise what they do around sexual consent as a form of cultural activism? Do fans, in Bordo’s (1993) words “come together and explore what the culture continually presents to them as their individual choices ... as instead culturally situated and culturally shared” (p. 300)? Do they, in Buser and Arthurs’ (2012)

words, “challenge the dominant interpretations and constructions of the world while ... presenting alternative socio-political and spacial imaginaries ... in ways which challenge relationships between art, politics, participation and spectatorship”? And if they do, then who is activated by this, and what does this very specific kind of cultural activism achieve?

While analysis of fanfiction texts and fan conversations online yielded some insight on this, there were also limits to the depth to which I could pursue the question of activism using only digital methods. Fanfiction community members tend to keep their fannish online identities strictly separate from their real-world activities, and so there are linkages between the fannish and the activist that may not be visible to a purely digital ethnographer. To really trace the activist potentialities of fannish engagements with issues of sexual consent, I needed to speak to fanfiction readers and writers directly. In August 2016, therefore, I attended *Nine Worlds*, a fan convention with a very strong feminist ethos and an entire programme track on fan works in London. At *Nine Worlds*, I was able to interview eight readers and writers of fanfiction about how issues of consent manifested in both their fanfiction and their day-to-day lives.

In this chapter, I use data from these interviews as well as the findings from previous chapters to address the question of cultural activism by focusing on the emphasis fanfiction readers and writers put on authorial intent. I argue that this emphasis originates partly in fanfiction’s relationship with mainstream media and the originary works it is based on, which are seen to reproduce dominant, oppressive discourses of sexuality and consent. I show that many fans see fanfiction as an overt challenge and reaction to this perceived poorly thought-through representation of sexuality and consent in mainstream media and originary works. My readings of fanfiction as a space to explore issues of sexuality, challenge dominant discourses about consent, and even challenge the law are confirmed and further elaborated by my interview participants. By investigating key fannish practices around the circulation of fan works, I show how fans move effortlessly between a textual consideration of issues of consent in their fanfiction and an activist *praxis of consent* that extends into their day-to-day lives.

## 7.2 Schrödinger's author: dead and alive

From the birth of fan studies, fans have been celebrated as the ultimate active audience. Jenkins (1992) casts them as “active producers and manipulators of meaning ... articulating concerns which often go unnoticed within the dominant media” (p. 23). Unlike the Frankfurt School's passive, distracted consumers, fans—particularly those actively engaged in the production and circulation of fanfiction—are seen to epitomise Barthes's (1977) “Death of the Author”. In his influential essay on literary criticism, Barthes argues that the meaning of texts is not determined by the author, their biography or their intent; there is no message from the “Author-God” (p. 146) to be deciphered by critics. Rather, “[t]he reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (p. 148). One would therefore expect that fanfiction readers and writers, who constantly poach and repurpose texts for their own ends, would themselves fervently declare the death of the author. To an extent, this is true, particularly with regards to any claims of authorship and ownership of meaning in the originary work. Yet the fanfiction community also has a deeply ambiguous relationship with ideas of authorship. A certain respect, for instance, is consistently demanded for *fannish* authorship. Many fanfiction writers insist on their right to control transformative works of their own work, such as fan art or audio recordings known as podfic. Herzog (2012) investigates author's notes, a common fandom practice where fanfiction writers include personal notes either at the beginning or at the end of fanfiction works, in the context of ideas of authorship. She argues that author's notes serve as a “claim to power” through which fanfiction writers negotiate their relationship with and establish a partial ownership of the originary works that fanfiction is based on and interpretations thereof. With regards to text and meaning, several scholars have noted that fan communities have multiple and varied modes of reading, interpretation, and engagement with texts. Jenkins (1992) suggests that modes of fannish engagement are gendered. Fannish communities consisting predominantly of men, he argues, seek to ground their readings of popular texts in knowledge of their authors and the circumstances of their production. Communities consisting predominantly of women, on the other hand, seek explanations and readings that are grounded within the more or less consistent internal world of the fictional text. Naylor (2016) shows how these two modes of interpretation are not necessarily gendered, and

may both be employed by fan communities to examine texts from different angles. Ideas of authorship, meaning-making, and authorial intent, therefore, are negotiated in complex ways in fan communities. This is also true when it comes to fanfiction readers and writers' engagement with sexual consent, as became evident from my interviews. Discussing her enjoyment of fanfiction featuring unequal power dynamics, Bulbasaur remarked:

I find this really really interesting. Though I'm sometimes a little wary of what the author is thinking? (Bulbasaur)

Similar concerns for "authorial intent" were also expressed by other interviewees, including Dratini:

Realising authorial intent after the fact sometimes can be something that really does change how you—so you can read especially if it's you know a one-shot, or you don't actually know anything about the author until everything is said and done—you'll go through the whole thing really really enjoying it, thinking it's great, and then you get to the end, read the author's note, and you go 'I genuinely feel unclean at having read this' despite having, all the way through, without any of that you know—that's something that 'oh my god I've contributed to this'. (Dratini)

The implication here is that while stories exploring unequal power dynamics in intimate relationships, or stories featuring "dubcon" or even outright rape may be enjoyed for a variety of reasons—including both for their pornographic qualities and their engagement with issues of consent—these readers found it important to have confidence in the author's awareness of the consent issues involved. Any consent issues in fanfiction stories, these fans feel, should be there consciously and deliberately. Conversely, where there is the suspicion that the author may not be aware that what they are writing is dubcon or rape, or that authorial intent around this does not align with readers' interpretation of it as dubious consent, that negatively impacts readers' enjoyment of the story as it acquires very different meanings. Why, then, is authorial intent on consent issues so important in a community that more often than not is prepared to declare the author—particularly of the originary work—dead and buried? By exploring

fanfiction readers and writers' attitudes to the representation of sexual consent in both mainstream media and fanfiction, I argue that the idea of authorial intent in this context is not used as an arbiter of meaning. Rather, it is used to express, reflect, and act on a belief that texts—both fannish and mainstream—do real work in the real world. It is this belief that forms the basis for what I call a *praxis of consent*.

### 7.3 Mainstream media, fanfiction, consent

One key theme from my interviews with fan readers and writers was fanfiction's relationship with the originary works it is based on, often described by fans as mainstream media. As I showed in Chapter 5, fanfiction readers and writers are frequently aware of the problems with, for instance, the depiction of power relations in intimate relationships and the resulting implications for sexual consent in those situations in romance novels (Modleski, 2008; Radway, 1984; Roach, 2016). In fact, while they frequently reuse the plots, settings, and tropes of romance novels, they consciously and actively rewrite them in order to better address the issues inequality raises for consent. This was further elaborated on by several interview participants, who felt that portrayals of sex, relationships, and consent in mainstream media were frequently problematic:

I don't like watching, I don't like the dynamics that we see in media between men and women often, because often it is sort of almost implied that it's ok for the woman to sort of take some abuse from the man without it ever being raised as an issue. (Blissey)

Blissey feels that abusive and coercive (heterosexual) relationships are normalised and often even romanticised in mainstream media, rather than challenged. This view echoes, for instance, Philadelphoff-Puren's (2005) account of how sexual violence is treated in mainstream media. It also parallels Gavey's (2005) argument that potentially coercive relationships and sexual acts are being discursively constructed as "just sex" in much of Western media and society. Importantly, it is this construction of such relationships as normal that is the issue here, rather than the mere portrayal of them in media. The implication is that if they were specifically being addressed as abusive in originary works, Blissey and other interviewees would find them less problematic: it is not the

depiction of sexual violence and coercion that is the problem, but the author's presumed lack of awareness that what is depicted is violent and coercive. Here, too, we see an emphasis on authorial intent both in mainstream media and fanfiction, and a desire to hold mainstream media creators accountable for problematic portrayals of consent issues. Importantly, however, authorial intent is not treated as an arbiter of meaning and media depictions of potentially coercive relationships as normal are challenged, not taken at face value.

Several participants also highlighted occasions where consent was handled well in mainstream media as particularly memorable exceptions. Referring to a scene in *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole* (Townsend, 2002), Nidorina says:

There's a moment when he asks his girlfriend whether he can touch her over her sweater. And I remember, I'm sure, I was about 12 maybe when I read that, and I'd seen so much stuff where stuff just—happened on TV. And I was like, why would you stop and ask? And that stuck in my head, for a long time because I was just like, on the one hand, yeah, he should ask. On the other hand it literally struck me as so weird compared to everything else I'd seen. (Nidorina)

Here, a scene in a book where consent is discussed openly and explicitly stands in stark contrast to Nidorina's experience of the way sexual consent is usually handled in mainstream media. The scene in question is presented in the text as intensely awkward, in line with the main character's signature trait. Yet Nidorina's interpretation is different: it is not that awkwardness that attracts her attention, but rather the fact that a consent discussion is shown at all. For her, that serves to challenge what is commonly perceived as the default or normal way for a sexual relationship between two people to progress: the "contractual" progression (Pineau, 1989) is disrupted, as is the privileged status of penile-vaginal intercourse as the one sexual act requiring specific consent that is so often evident in consent research (e.g. Jozkowski and Peterson, 2013a; Jozkowski and Peterson, 2013b). In this process, those default and normal "just sex" constructions are made visible and problematised. That this instance has remained in Nidorina's mind for decades is an indicator of quite how unusual such representation of consent negotiation is in mainstream media, and how dominant the "just sex" and



“contractual” constructions of relationships automatically progressing through stages of physical contact to penile-vaginal intercourse are.

Nidorina also remarked on how she felt mainstream media portrayals of sex and relationships had changed:

I remember growing up there was a lot of like—it seemed to be on the cusp really of in a mainstream way, changing from, you know take things slowly and build up to sex, to sex is just a thing that’s gonna happen. That’s what it felt like to me when I was growing up, like a lot of the, everything from magazines to TV shows to everything seemed to be dah-dah-dah-dah teenagers have sex dah-dah-dah-dah-dah, you know whatever, and it just, it was such—it became such a common thing that having, you know, a couple actually talk about not having sex yet, not doing it—it’s interesting to me cos it—almost without explicitly doing it, it kind of tackles that assumption that they’re just gonna fall into bed as soon as they decide they like each other. (Nidorina)

Nidorina feels that the “default” progression of a romantic relationship to penile-vaginal intercourse and the privileging of penile-vaginal intercourse as the only valid form of sex has become more entrenched in mainstream media. This, too, echoes both Pineau’s (1989) contractual model of consent, and more broadly, Gavey’s “just sex” construction: the default progression of romantic relationships in media is seen as providing an uncontested template for intimate relationships. As it is uncontested, this template comes to seem natural and becomes normalised, thereby negatively impacting individuals’ ability to meaningfully negotiate consent in ways that deviate from it. At the same time, in talking about how she is interested in, for instance, couples explicitly discussing delaying sex in their relationship, Nidorina highlights the importance of challenging that default and hints at the possibility of doing so in fanfiction.

Interview participants constructed a dichotomy between their experiences of representation of sexuality and consent in mainstream media and the way they found fanfiction handled similar issues and situations. They speculated about the tools and resources available to fanfiction readers and writers that enabled them to deviate from norms and dominant discourses. Several interviewees elaborated on this by highlighting

the ways in which fanfiction provides more scope to explore certain aspects of an originary work, from individual characters, to aspects of the world building, and even specific scenes and situations. This is illustrated in the following extract from Bulbasaur:

I think what fanfic does is it gives you an opportunity to delve into these moments that in the original source material are probably gonna be passed over in a couple of—max a few paragraphs, or a couple of lines of dialogue. Whereas fanfic gives you this opportunity to genuinely delve into what is happening in the minds of these characters. If you're reading a novel, you sort of go ok this is really dragging it down, you're turning this into a doorstopper, for no reason. Whereas in fanfic you've got that opportunity because that's what the reader is there for. They don't want the plot, cos you already know what the plot is, or it's been laid out—this is pure character. Which I think can be really interesting when you're talking about issues of consent. And you already know the characters, the characters are already fleshed out, they already have backstories, they already have personalities. So you're not, you know, you feel familiar with them anyway, so you're exploring them—deeper. It's just such a great opportunity to do that. Again, in a normal novel there isn't, there isn't the opportunity for that as thoroughly. (Bulbasaur)

Here, Bulbasaur highlights two of three key elements of the intertextual relationship between fanfiction and originary work that allow fanfiction works to focus on different aspects to mainstream media: plot and character. Because the originary work already provides these, fanfiction works can spend less time on them and can instead focus on exploring in more depth issues of interest to the author and readers, such as how characters may react to a certain situation. As I discussed in Chapter 5, tropes and even entire plots are frequently re-used from story to story with only minor changes. When these plots are familiar from the popular romance genre, the similarities and differences become a crucial part of the meaning-making process of fanfiction readers and writers. In this way, elements of mainstream media such as the plot and structure of romance novels are drawn into the fanfiction archive. They become part of the community's set of second-order intertextual meaning-making resources (Stasi, 2006),

with similarities and differences serving to explore and comment on the originary work. Conversely, originary works are limited in their scope and ability to explore issues such as consent in depth, precisely because they strive for originality and as a result limit the amount of intertextuality they can rely on. While other forms of popular culture may explore sexuality and consent, the particular approach of densely layering meanings through repetition with a difference (Derecho, 2006) and leveraging these to examine both characters' internal lives and social power structures in a dialogic and iterative way is unavailable elsewhere. Dratini elaborates this further in the context of fanfiction for the *Dragon Age* (BioWare Inc., 2009) video game series, with specific reference to issues of sexual consent, and highlights a third key element of intertextuality fanfiction relies on—that of setting:

I quite like reading things that explore what slavery is like inside of that empire, which very often involves dubious consent—and I actually enjoy that—not—I enjoy it cos it's interesting to explore that kind of culture, cos it can go into quite a lot of detail. And that's something that you can't get in non-fanfic, often, because if it's an original story, they're having to build their own world from scratch. So anything, particularly in erotica or something, they can't—you're not likely to get an erotica novel that has a really complicated empire which you can then delve into. Whereas in fanfic you have that unique opportunity to explore, you know dubcon within, or dubcon or noncon within elaborate existing contexts. (Dratini)

Here, Dratini shows how being able to reuse a particular setting from an originary work may enable an in-depth exploration of issues of sexual consent. She uses the example of the practice of slavery in the Tevinter Imperium in the *Dragon Age* games (BioWare Inc., 2009) to showcase how the power dynamics inherent in that setting can shape the characters' relationships and their ability to give meaningful sexual consent, much in the same way that the fandom construction of the Omegaverse discussed in Chapter 4 enables similar explorations. In both cases, the setting itself provides social structures featuring significant power imbalances, that at the same time are sufficiently different from readers and writers' everyday experiences of power structures to make their impact on interpersonal relationships visible. This demythologizes the idea of consent negotiation taking place on equal, power-neutral terms and demystifies the

effect of power on individuals' ability to meaningfully negotiate consent.

Fanfiction's meaning-making practices are a key factor in how it engages with consent issues in ways that are different to mainstream media or genres such as romance and pornography. These genres, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, do raise questions and shape conversations about sexuality and consent for their audiences. The ability to use existing characters, plots, and settings, and rewrite scenarios over and over and in dialogue with others, however, allows fanfiction readers and writers to build on these conversations and respond to the questions raised in them in nuanced ways, as Victreebel argues here:

I think there's a lot more grey areas in the sense that I think authors are given—because you can play the same scenario so many times with the same characters, many authors will not just like write one fic about a particular pairing, they'll write like twelve. And try to get the dynamic the way they want it. Which means that—in a way they get to replay that scenario, and make a different decision each time. And I think that sort of multiplicity I think assists in the dialogue, as well as understanding of the issues surrounding it. Whereas with canon you have the one way it's done and that's done. (Victreebel)

Victreebel makes a key connection between the “repetition with a difference” technique and fanfiction's ability to explore consent issues in a deeply nuanced way that takes into account characters' emotions and inner states, explores ways of resolving conflict, accounts for power differentials in relationships and challenges clear-cut binary paradigms of rape/consent. This echoes Kustritz's (2003) account of how fanfiction “challenges”, which result in multiple stories around the same prompt or theme, when read together, create a metatext that can provide extensive and nuanced commentary on issues of gender and sexuality. The Omegaverse discussed in Chapter 4, as well as fanfiction writers' reworkings of romance novel tropes discussed in Chapter 5 both clearly demonstrate this process. Elements of the originary work, other fanfiction stories, common mainstream media tropes, and readers and writers' own experiences of social power structures and intimate relationships are all used in such stories and the meaning-making processes around them. The changes made to these intertextual and extratextual meaning-making resources are sometimes relatively small and subtle such

as the exact process by which the Happily Ever After ending of the romance novel is arrived at. At other times, they are so significant as to make everything seem alien and strange, such as with the Omegaverse. It is the similarities and differences between the different intertextual elements that fanfiction readers and writers bring into play that ultimately allow for the subtle and nuanced exploration of consent issues we have seen.

Interview participants pointed clearly to the shortcomings of mainstream media when it comes to issues of sexual consent. The key issue they raised was not that mainstream media depicts potentially problematic situations, but that it normalises and frequently even romanticises unequal relationships and other potentially coercive sexual situations and in this way reproduces the dominant construction of such situations as “just sex”, the “contractual” progression of relationships to penile-vaginal intercourse, and the privileging of penile-vaginal intercourse as the only sexual act requiring consent. They pinpointed instances where such defaults were challenged in mainstream media as exceptionally rare and highlighted their potential for challenging and dismantling dominant discursive constructions of sex and consent. They also foregrounded the set of tools fanfiction has at its disposal to do just that: its dense intertextuality, its relative lack of concern with originality, its reuse of plots, characters, and settings, and its ability to explore a situation from multiple different angles and perspectives through side-by-side reading and repetition with a difference. Throughout these conversations, the importance of the author’s awareness of consent issues was repeatedly emphasised, and mainstream media was criticised for its perceived lack of such awareness. In the following section I examine more closely three key ways in which fanfiction tools for the exploration of consent are used intentionally by readers and writers, both within fanfiction itself and in community members’ own day-to-day lives: exploring sexuality, overtly challenging norms and defaults, and questioning the power and appropriateness of the law on issues of sexual violence and consent. I argue that the concept of authorial intent is a key enabler for doing this work through fanfiction, as it highlights the work that texts do in the real world and allows fanfiction readers and writers to make clear calls to action to challenge based on this.

## 7.4 Exploring sexuality—breaking defaults—challenging the law

In line with a significant body of feminist media and cultural studies (e.g. Radway, 1984; Modleski, 2008; Philadelphoff-Puren, 2005), many fanfiction community members perceive mainstream media and the originary works they base their fanfiction on as normalising sexual violence by reproducing “just sex” constructions of coercive sexual acts. In fanfiction, they find the space to challenge such constructions by taking key elements of originary works such as characters, plot, and setting, and exploring them in depth using methods such as side-by-side reading and repetition with a difference to create a multitude of alternative scenarios. More importantly, perhaps, interview participants also indicated that they make use of these materials beyond the realm of fanfiction itself. This link between the knowledges about consent generated through fanfiction and interviewees’ own lives was highlighted by a number of participants, and points towards ways in which the fanfiction community can be seen as an activist community dedicated to challenging regimes of truth, norms and dominant discourses around sex and consent. One important way in which this is done is through using fanfiction as a tool for exploring one’s own sexuality and relationships through the fictional characters.

In her interview, Magmar emphasised the emotional aspects of sex and sexuality, and the sometimes contradictory feelings they can generate. She described how reading and writing fanfiction allowed her to process those feelings both before and after new sexual experiences. She also talked about how fiction and fantasy could itself be used as a tool for consent negotiation:

What I really enjoy is, like two characters for example sitting down and talking about fantasies. Like ‘there is this woman, she is doing this and that, what will she do next, how will she react if I would do something or’—like in the third person and you can think about it and it feels like a safe way to explore because the character—who’s telling the dominant one for example what he or she wants and doesn’t want—doesn’t have to say ‘I don’t like that’, it’s just ‘hmm, I don’t think the character would react positively to being bound or something’. You don’t have to say ‘I can’t

cope with that' but more like 'They wouldn't like that.' So that feels—and you can, at the same time you can have a really sexy fantasy—so, it's fun. I really like that. (Magmar)

For Magmar, the exploration of sexual fantasy and ultimately one's own sexuality through fictional characters talked or written about in the third person is safe: there is less exposure and less vulnerability involved than in talking about one's own desires in the first person. Importantly, for her, it makes refusing or withdrawing consent easier as it is less of a direct refusal. Kitinger and Frith (1999) show that direct refusals, i.e. simply saying "no" to something, are socially stigmatised actions that are therefore conversationally "dispreferred": they tend to be qualified, justified, or delayed rather than performed immediately like acceptances. In everyday conversation, refusals are performed through a range of other conversational actions, including silences and hesitations, hedges, or palliatives such as compliments or even "token agreements" (p. 301). Kitinger and Frith argue that there is no reason for refusals in sexual situations to be performed or interpreted in any different way, contrary to the "just say no" paradigm prevalent in rape prevention work in the 1990s. Magmar's description of performing refusals through a character talked about in the third person fits this conception of refusals as dispreferred and indirect and allows both parties in a conversation to minimise the additional vulnerability and exposure associated with sexual situations.

A second important element of Magmar's description is pleasure: this way of negotiating consent is not only safe, but also fun. A number of other interview participants also talked about the importance of portraying consent negotiation as fun or sexy in fanfiction. They contrasted this to a dominant discourse in mainstream media of consent negotiation as mechanistic and legalistic: the view presented, predominantly by men, that the renewed feminist emphasis on consent would require the signing of a legal contract before intercourse can occur (e.g. Drury, 2015). For them, fanfiction offered alternative templates to follow in their own consent negotiation to those presented by mainstream media: templates that allowed them to find socially acceptable ways of refusing or withdrawing consent, but also to make negotiation a pleasurable activity in its own right. Ekans spoke about applying these templates directly to their own relationship:

In my own marriage it's sort of been very much like—constant

communication, constant negotiation and understanding each other's boundaries, and I think that's very much something I picked up from from fanfic. ... It's sort of an ongoing cycle because I take the stuff that I've learned in my own relationship that I've learned from fanfic in the first place, and then put it back in my own fanfic, so it's a sort of ongoing cycle of learning about negotiation and learning about consent (Ekans)

Here, Ekans describes the cycle of learning about consent from fanfiction, putting this knowledge to use in their own relationships, and putting knowledge gained from their relationships back into their fanfiction. This cycle shows the different functions fanfiction and the community around it have for Ekans. Fanfiction acts as a source of communally-generated knowledge about consent. It is also a space where they can creatively explore issues they come across in their own life, thereby making their own contribution to that communally-generated knowledge.

This communally-generated knowledge does not just focus on the mechanics of consent negotiation. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, issues of power and how it is inextricably intertwined with individuals' ability to exercise agency and meaningfully negotiate consent underlie a significant proportion of fanfiction's engagement with issues of sexual consent. Several interview participants highlighted the ability of fanfiction to challenge defaults and norms of what not just consent negotiation but sex more broadly "should" look like, i.e. the operation of power through discursive constructions of "normal" sex and sexuality. Challenging defaults in this way and providing alternative templates is a key focus of the community's knowledge-creation around sexual consent.

I think actually fanfic has taught me a lot about consent—in and of itself. Like first of all that it's a thing that that can like that negotiations are a thing that can and should happen. That negotiation can be sexy. That—I'm just trying to think how to word it, that—that sex isn't a sort of linear path that goes from kiss to touch to another kind of touch to another kind of touch to you know Tab A Slot B—that it can take sort of all different kinds of directions. (Ekans)

Here, Ekans uses knowledge gained from fanfiction to challenge a series of dominant discourses about sex and consent. Their description of the "linear path that goes from



kiss to ... Tab A Slot B” is a rearticulation of Pineau’s (1989) contractual model of consent: the idea that the dominant model of sexual consent in Western society involves certain actions (accepting a drink, wearing a short dress, or kissing) generating a contract or obligation to perform other actions, notably penile-vaginal intercourse. For Ekans, then, fanfiction has helped make this model of consent visible in both culture and their own day-to-day interactions, and exposed their own internalisation of it. This model is then disrupted by the realisation—through fanfiction—“that negotiations are a thing that can and should happen”. This echoes, and stands in stark contrast to, Jamieson’s (1996) analysis of the construction of consent and “normal sex” in criminal trials: “The shadow of ‘normal sex’ cast by these [courtroom] contests, when the defense and prosecution portray events and their aftermath as ‘not rape’ and ‘rape’, is typically far removed from mutually negotiated, mutually satisfactory sex between equals. Rather, ‘normal sex’ [in rape trials is constructed as] encompass[ing] women acquiescing to sexual use by men. *Mutual negotiation is not a test of normality*” (p. 58, emphasis mine). It is this definition of normality that is brought into question by the realisation—through reading and writing fanfiction—“that negotiations are a thing that can and should happen”.

The knowledge Ekans has acquired from fanfiction does not stop there, and they allude to two other key elements of knowledge about consent they have gained from fanfiction. Firstly, in addition to making visible the dominant “contractual” construction of sexual interactions, fanfiction has given Ekans, like Magmar and other interviewees, alternative templates—not only *that* “negotiations are a thing that can and should happen”, but also *how* such consent negotiation can happen. An alternative model is provided in which consent negotiation is not only normalised but is shown to be sexy (or, as other participants discussed, funny, caring, or affectionate). Secondly, once aware that consent can and should be explicitly negotiated, Ekans is in a position to start challenging the dominant definition of “sex” as penile-vaginal intercourse: rather than “Tab A Slot B”, sex can now take “all different kinds of directions”. In discussing what they have learned about sexual consent from fanfiction, Ekans describes a kind of layering of rendering visible dominant discursive constructions of sex and offering alternatives: first you realise the dominance of the contractual model and the extent to which it has been internalised, then you realise that negotiation “can and should happen” and learn how to make it happen, and then you come to the understanding

that what you have been taught to think of as sex is actually only a limited selection of available options. This layering then in itself functions to render visible the coercive elements of the dominant constructions of sex and consent in Western cultures: the regime of truth that renders statements such as “kissing requires consent in its own right” or “there are other ways to have sex than penile-vaginal intercourse” near unintelligible. The combination of defining sex only or predominantly as penile-vaginal intercourse, and mapping out a clear path to be followed from acts such as kissing to “sex” without opportunities for variation, negotiation, or even stopping is precisely what Gavey (2005) describes as the “cultural scaffolding of rape”. Negotiation is inextricably linked to such discursive operations of power, something a significant proportion of academic literature on consent negotiation obscures (e.g. Pineau, 1989; Anderson, 2005; Jozkowski and Peterson, 2013a; Jozkowski and Peterson, 2013b). For Ekans, this connection has been made visible, and crucially alternative approaches have been offered by their involvement in the fanfiction community.

The range of different dominant discourses about sex and consent, the operation of power through them, and the impact of this on consent negotiation was highlighted by the examples interview participants discussed.

Having you know a couple actually talk about not having sex yet, not doing it, it's interesting to me cos it—almost without explicitly doing it, it kind of tackles that assumption that they're just gonna fall into bed as soon as they decide they like each other. And that kind of brings us back to consent in a in a way that is a little bit different to the sort of standard talking about, asking about it, because it's agreeing, it's not just sort of saying do you consent yes let's go for it, it's actually agreeing to stop at a certain point.  
(Nidorina)

Here, Nidorina refers to depictions of couples and relationships in mainstream media, where the default assumption is that intercourse will occur, and that that is a defining feature and key milestone of sexual and romantic relationships. In this way, penile-vaginal intercourse is constructed as the ultimate endpoint of a progression of intimacy in relationships. This echoes Gavey's (2005) findings that having sex was tied in with particular subject positions for some of her interview participants. Here, it is the subject position of “part of a couple” that drives the assumption

that intercourse must take place. As discussed in Chapter 5, this is also reflected in arranged marriage fanfiction where the subject position of “husband” or “wife” and the legal structures around marriage require that a marriage is consummated, which imposes limitations on individuals’ ability to refuse or withdraw consent. Nidorina then highlights the importance of fanfiction showing consent negotiations that do not result in consent being given, or result in consent being withdrawn before the assumed endpoint of penile-vaginal intercourse. For her, fanfiction has been a key contributor to the realisation that it is possible to be in a sexual or romantic relationship without necessarily having intercourse. Again, through fanfiction, the regime of truth which makes a range of sexual situations unintelligible as coercive has become visible, and alternatives are offered.

It has made me more aware of the fact that some things, like kissing for example, that are generally portrayed as completely ok for everyone doesn’t necessarily have to be. So for me it’s more like I’m not assuming just someone is ok with something because it seems like the normal stuff to do. So yeah, I’m more aware of little details, little like breaking the whole act down into little steps. And just because you’re perfectly alright with having sex doesn’t mean you’re perfectly alright with holding hands afterwards or something. (Magmar)

Magmar goes a step further in her account of what she has learned about consent from fanfiction than Nidorina. She questions not just the privileged and default position of penile-vaginal intercourse but also the construction of acts like kissing or holding hands as not requiring consent in their own right. Where often even feminist academics researching sexual consent will construct these as “consent behaviours” (e.g. Jozkowski and Peterson, 2013a), Magmar highlights them as acts for which consent should not be assumed. This formulation centres active communication between partners and echoes Pineau’s (1989) communicative model of consent, while clearly linking individuals’ ability to communicate and negotiate to their position within the discursive operation of power. Magmar has become aware of the construction of acts like kissing as “completely ok for everyone”, and the impact that has on consent negotiation around these acts. This awareness in turn has enabled her to challenge these otherwise normalised and naturalised discursive constructions in her own life and practice.

By highlighting and de-naturalising the dominant discursive constructions of what sex is and how it should proceed, fanfiction exposes the operation of power through discourse, including where these discourses have been normalised and internalised, and allows community members to formulate alternative constructions. Such cultural and discursive change in attitudes to consent has been proposed by a number of feminist legal scholars (e.g. Lacey, 1998; Smart, 1989) as necessary before any meaningful legal reform on issues of sexual violence and rape can be achieved. As discussed in Chapter 6, fanfiction readers and writers, too, use the knowledges and insights they generate about consent in their fiction to evaluate rape allegations and the law's role in sexual violence. Interview participants confirmed this in their discussion of how their engagement with issues of consent in fanfiction had shaped their views on consent in other aspects of their lives. These conversations begin to paint a picture of a cultural activism that operates on two levels. Within the community, it is directed at dismantling community members' internalised oppression by demystifying and demythologizing dominant discursive constructions of consent and providing alternative imaginaries. Naturalised ideas of sex and consent are challenged and revealed as socially constructed and the role of institutions such as marriage or the law in maintaining these dominant constructions is highlighted. This process gives community members the ability to envision alternative possibilities. On a second level, the knowledges generated in this way are then used beyond the boundaries of fanfiction, in community members' own day-to-day lives and relationships and in their engagement with institutions such as the law. What emerges here is a fundamental epistemological conflict between two different orders of knowledge about consent: that of the law, and the one fanfiction readers and writers create by questioning dominant discourses, focusing on the physicality and affect of sexual experiences, and providing alternative templates for sexuality to follow.

The law's treatment of issues of sexual violence and rape was brought up repeatedly by interview participants and juxtaposed with their own understanding of consent, gained from fanfiction and other sources. Magmar spoke to me about a story she was writing in which the main character had consented to sex with her partner but found she had mixed feelings about the experience afterwards. Writing the story had allowed her to explore the emotional impact of the situation and reflect on the implications of such a scenario in the context of the law and the criminal justice system:

I think that some things that you have to be aware for yourself as well, and

you don't always know them beforehand. So even consenting to something can result in having problems afterwards. And I think that's one of the problems we have with this whole discussion of consent and that people are 'do I have to get a written permission to do this to you'. Because uh—if you think you're fine beforehand and afterward you realise you *aren't*. That is where the legal stuff I think gets in. Because then people can say 'I didn't want this and I don't want to talk or think about the fact that I did want it before'. And suddenly then this legal position where you apparently did something without the consent even though you had it at that moment. And I think we can't really solve that by just putting our names on papers because it's about emotions. And I've no idea how to sort that out legally but at least I can discuss it with my characters. (Magmar)

This situation also echoes some of the elements of *Sure to Lure Someone Bad* (mistyzeo and obstinatrix, 2011) I discussed in Chapter 4, where the Omega character reframes some of his past sexual experiences as coercive. Such reframing is common for survivors of sexual violence but stigmatised and dismissed in rape culture. Magmar's comments are a powerful response to the rape culture myth of "the woman who changed her mind afterwards". Lees (1996) discusses at length the issues around determining consent or the absence thereof in rape trials, and the role these play in the low conviction rates for rape. Defence lawyers consistently use criteria ranging from a lack of sufficient resistance to the presence of vaginal lubrication to paint a picture of rape complainants who make false allegations after actually consenting to sex and subsequently changing their mind. On the other hand, as Lees points out, the vast majority of rapes are never reported to police as "forced sex is far more common than imagined and ... women who are forced into sex often do not name this as rape" (p. 125). In this way the myth of women who make false allegations after consenting to sex serves not only to make conviction more difficult but also to discourage those who only later come to define their experience as rape from ever reporting it. Additionally, feminist scholarship and campaigns for legal reform have a strong incentive to erase and minimise such cases as a pre-emptive defence against the myths of rape culture. Magmar's comments, prompted by her exploration of these issues in fanfiction, acknowledge the emotional issues around reframing one's experiences after the fact and also pose a powerful challenge to the law's inability to accommodate such emotional complexity. While Magmar is unable to offer

a legal solution, she is able to use her writing to understand in a nuanced way situations that are frequently otherwise erased by both rape culture and feminist campaigners for law reform. In this way, she decentres the law, and exposes an epistemological conflict between legal knowledges of rape and those based on lived experience and emotion, which she has developed through her involvement in the fanfiction community.

This epistemological conflict is particularly visible when we consider the relationship between the law as a discourse that has the power to determine truth and invalidate other discourses (Smart, 1989) and the dominant discursive construction of potentially coercive sexual practices as “just sex” (Gavey, 2005). These two discourses work together and reinforce each other within rape culture. Low conviction rates for rape and routine courtroom practices casting even the most egregious violations as “consensual” reinforce rape myths such as the ones discussed by Lees (1996), Ehrlich (2001), or Jamieson (1996) as cultural norms. On the other hand, the cultural construction of “normal” sexuality is one factor that renders the law unable to recognise more subtle violations of consent or power relations that render consent dubious at best. Subjects seeking to position their experiences of consent violations within these discourses are left with little choice but to continue to construct them as “just sex” or alternatively to go up against the regime of truth created by the combined force of the legal and cultural constructions of “normal” sex: statements constructing their experience as anything other than “just sex” may not even be intelligible to themselves. Here, fanfiction, through its focus on characters’ emotions and experiences, allows for a much more nuanced engagement with discursive constructions of sex and consent, making those naturalised and internalised operations of power visible and exposing them as constructed. This in turn makes it possible for readers and writers of fanfiction to expose the inadequacies of the law as Magmar does above.

Another such challenge to the law came from Lapras when discussing the case of Welsh footballer Ched Evans who was initially convicted and later acquitted of rape on retrial (Burke, 2015).

But the fact is, she is telling you, she did not consent to have sex with you. So even if you at that point in time did not believe you were raping her, the correct and moral thing to do is to be like, ‘oh my god, I am sorry, I did not mean to have sex with you against your consent, this has happened, how

do I pay for your counselling and support and help you' instead of being like, 'no it was consensual'. And it's like, well she's telling you it isn't. The correct response, if you genuinely did not intend to rape somebody but you did—and I do think that happens, I think some people are drunk, they don't go back to a hotel or something intending to rape somebody but actually maybe they just, they're themselves drunk, and they're not aware of how out the person is. But the correct response to that is actually, check yourself and maybe change the way they're living their life that this is happening. (Lapras)

Lapras's comments touch on several aspects of rape culture. Once a rape allegation is made, the criminal justice system structures all further interactions between accused and complainant in an adversarial manner (Ehrlich, 2001). However, Lapras challenges this adversarial structure. Instead she appeals to morality and compassion and proposes an alternative approach rooted in ideas of restorative justice. This alternative is enabled by Lapras's engagement with consent issues in fanfiction, as becomes evident from her account of how fanfiction has shaped her views on consent in real life:

I think it is interesting, it gives an interesting safe space to actually explore consent violation and actually write it when consent goes wrong or kink negotiation goes wrong. (Lapras)

Similarly to Magmar, fanfiction enables Lapras to explore the emotional aspects of consent issues, creating what she describes as a safe space. The safety here is created by the emotional distancing from possible real-life experiences of sexual violence, but also by the ability to explore scenarios that cannot unfold in the context of the criminal justice system as it currently exists. This is a key factor that enables Lapras to challenge the adequacy of the law and offer possible alternatives. It also enables her to envision fundamental social change and the dismantling of rape culture:

You should be able to walk down the road naked and people should think 'why is that person naked, let's maybe consider that maybe they need help'. We shouldn't look at a naked person and be like 'oh that's permission to rape'. (Lapras)

Both Lapras and Magmar here provide powerful “alternative socio-political ... imaginaries” (Buser and Arthurs, 2012) not only of how sexuality and consent *should* operate, but how institutions such as the law should handle them differently. Magmar demands a space in law for the complexity of human emotion and sexuality. Lapras seeks to open up spaces within the law that centre survivors of rape and sexual violence over the adversarial mechanics of the legal system, and spaces within wider society that privilege compassion for human vulnerability over the immediate sexualisation of bodies. Fannish spaces, fannish engagement with sexuality and consent make it possible to create these different kinds of knowledges. Jamieson (1996) argues for continued feminist efforts at legal reform: “I do not accept that to make such arguments within the legal discourse merely serve [sic] to strengthen the law. Let those who speak within legal discourse make these arguments while those of us who are outsiders resist phallogocentrism by whatever other means are available” (p. 70). What we see the fanfiction community provide here are those “other means”: ways of understanding issues of consent that centre and value human subjectivity, emotions and sexuality in ways that the law is, at least at present, unable to do.

Fanfiction readers and writers’ exploration of sexuality, challenging of dominant discursive constructions of sex, and challenges to the law are performed largely through their creative output. As shown in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, in order to explore issues of consent, fanfiction has to depict potentially problematic sexual situations ranging from, as a tag on the Archive of Our Own calls it, “mild dubcon” to outright rape. As several of my interviewees indicated, such depictions are not always different to those seen in mainstream media as romanticising and normalising sexual violence. As I discussed in Chapter 2, however, fanfiction is a form of *communal textuality*. Texts—both mainstream and fanfiction—are created, interpreted, challenged, questioned, and recreated together, all the while recognising their potential to do work in the real world. In the next section, I explore how the concept of authorial intent facilitates this communal textuality and provides a bridge from fictional text to a praxis of consent in community members’ interactions with each other and their day-to-day lives outside fannish spaces.



## 7.5 From practice to text/from text to praxis

I have argued in this thesis, and particularly in this chapter, that for readers and writers of fanfiction, the community they are part of provides a space where issues of consent and its representation in mainstream media can be made visible; the problem of the normalisation of sexual violence and coercive sexual practices as “just sex” can be named; and alternative discourses, knowledges and imaginaries can be constructed, that allow fans to challenge not just power as it operates through dominant discursive constructions of sex, sexuality and consent, but also how the law and the criminal justice system relate to those issues. In this final section, I want to return to the issue of Schrödinger’s author: the importance that fanfiction readers and writers attach to an author’s clear and demonstrated awareness of their handling of consent issues in their work, and that several of my interview participants raised as a key factor in their enjoyment of fanfiction. How is such authorial intent expressed by writers and interpreted by readers, why is it important to the community, and what does this importance say about the activist potential of the fanfiction community on issues of consent?

In the introduction to his eponymous study of paratexts, Genette (1997) asks, “limited to the text alone and without a guiding set of directions, how would we read Joyce’s *Ulysses* if it were not entitled *Ulysses*?” (p. 2). The implication here is that the title of the text, a paratext that, as Genette argues, is neither wholly part of the text nor wholly external to it, influences and directs our reading of the text in ways congruent with the author’s intentions and ends. Genette examines a wide range of such paratexts: practices and writings that accompany a text and help shape its meaning, including titles, covers, the name of the author, dedications and epigraphs. Given the dense intertextuality fanfiction relies on for its meaning-making, it is worth extending Genette’s question here: how would we read any fanfiction text without knowing what it was fanfiction of, or the characters it focuses on? While Genette’s focus is on novels and other printed works, it should be no surprise therefore that fanfiction comes with its own sets of paratexts and practices of textual presentation, some similar to those we are familiar with from printed works, and others less so. Herzog (2012) uses Genette’s framework of the paratext to examine some of these practices (specifically, author’s notes) and their relation to fans’ notions of authorship. The paratexts surrounding

fanfiction vary with both specific fandom community and publication platform. Some paratexts originate as archive metadata, intended to aid the organisation, filtering, searchability and discoverability of fanfiction stories. Others, such as disclaimers and the author's notes Herzog (2012) focuses on, originate in fannish authorship practices and (imagined) relations between fanfiction and the rightsholders of the originary work. In Chapter 3, I provided a brief introduction to fans' archival practices and the concept of "tagging" on the Archive of Our Own. In Chapter 5, I used tagging data to show that fanfiction authors marked a significant proportion of arranged marriage stories as containing elements of dubious consent or outright rape, thereby problematising the practice of marriage consummation. I want to extend this examination of the rich set of fannish paratexts to understand the work they perform in the context of fans' cultural activism on issues of consent.

Six of my eight interviewees brought up tags and other paratexts as a key community practice related to consent. Their comments reveal the different functions tags acquire within the community, and how they facilitate the community's collective discussions and the creation of meanings and knowledges about sexual consent. One key function of tags that emerges from interviewees' comments is as a paratextual tool of communication between writer and reader, as multiple participants highlighted. Blissey summarised the importance of this communication channel outside the text as follows:

The tagging, I find that really important because that tells you that the person has thought through what they're writing. (Blissey)

This comment shows that where issues of sexual consent feature in a work of fanfiction, readers find it important to know—and writers seek to show—that these have been consciously thought through by the author. Particularly where the sexual situation depicted in the story includes elements of ambiguous or dubious consent, or is a depiction of rape, the metadata around the story, such as tags, warnings, and author's notes is used by both readers and writers as an indication that these elements are deliberate on the author's part, rather than the kind of unsuccessful attempt to depict consensual sex fanfiction readers and writers criticise in mainstream media. The concern community members express about the normalisation of sexual and relationship violence in mainstream media echoes Gavey's (2005) argument about the discursive

construction of potentially coercive sexual behaviours as “just sex”. Situations that fanfiction community members can identify as problematic due to power differentials, involving dubious consent for other reasons, or being outright non-consensual are depicted as perfectly unproblematic, normal, consensual sex. In the face of this normalisation of sexual violence and coercive behaviours in mainstream media, Blissey and other fanfiction readers and writers I spoke to were keen to ensure that this pattern is not reproduced in fanfiction, even when fanfiction deliberately explores these themes. Frequently the mere textual representation is not enough to achieve this: without some indication of authorial awareness, a dubcon scene in fanfiction may look exactly like a dubcon-portrayed-as-unproblematic scene in mainstream media. Blissey described this as follows:

And what I have much more issue with [in fanfiction] is anything that accidentally writes dubcon, that doesn't even—that's something that I will, as soon as that happens I'm out. (Blissey)

In his analysis of a book's preface, Genette (1997) argues that “its chief function is *to ensure that the text is read properly*” (p. 197, emphasis in original). A statement of authorial intent, according to Genette, is a key component of a book's preface, frequently regardless of the author's own stance on the “death of the author” issue. Once authorial intent has been declared in this way, it is impossible “to read the story without having the authorial interpretation hang over your reading, compelling you to take a position, positive or negative, in relation to it” (p. 224). Fanfiction paratexts—both author's notes and tags—can be seen as performing similar functions in ensuring the “proper” reception of the text. Yet Blissey's comment suggests that what fans actually mean when they refer to authorial intent in relation to sexual consent is something else. In her discussion of someone who “accidentally writes dubcon”, Blissey is referring to stories where the paratexts that signal a deliberate engagement with issues of consent are *absent*. Moreover, Blissey clearly distinguishes between the author's intent—signalled in her view by the absent paratext—to write a romantic and consensual scene and her own reading of it as “dubcon”. Here, authorial intent is not taken as determining the meaning of the text. The presence or absence of paratexts indicating authorial awareness of consent issues does not necessarily change a reader's interpretation of a story or scene. Rather than the author's declaration of

intent compelling the reader to take a position, it is Blissey's *expectation* of a careful consideration of consent issues that functions to compel the author to declare a stance, and takes the absence of such a declaration as meaningful in its own right. It is not so much authorial intent itself as the *idea* of it in fanfiction communities that functions as a way of talking about the real-world implications of culture and fiction.

Conversely, being confident that an author has thought through the consent implications of a scenario and is deliberately exploring them can be a source of enjoyment of a piece of fanfiction:

I take very explicit enjoyment in seeing consent depicted, as in the awareness of the writer when they're making it—however the consent is indicated, I take a lot of pleasure in seeing that. It tends to make me go back and read more of that writer's work. (Nidorina)

The emphasis on authorial awareness, on knowing that a coercive sexual act was written by the author deliberately as coercive is a key tool for avoiding the reproduction of the "just sex" normalisation pattern. Tags and other paratextual information such as warnings and author's notes then act as a means of communication between author and reader to signal such authorial awareness. Here, the community is moving beyond demystification and demythologization of the "just sex" construction: these are conscious and deliberate efforts to dismantle that construction and offer alternative imaginaries in ways mainstream media is perceived as failing to do. The paratextual interaction between writer and reader in the margins of the text is itself a form of cultural activism. The reader's expectation to see information on consent issues in the tags is a prompt for the writer to consider them. Within the communal textuality of fanfiction, the presence of the tags is a declaration by the writer to the reader: "I have thought about this, you should too." In this way the community reinforces and normalises the expectation to think carefully about any issues of power and consent in fanfiction stories, further marginalising the normalisation of sexual violence through the "just sex" discourse.

Another key reason for the widespread use of paratextual tools such as tags and author's notes within the fanfiction community is highlighted by Lapras in her discussion of the use of trigger warnings. Trigger warnings refer to warnings about potentially upsetting

content a reader may encounter. The phrase itself is borrowed from clinical psychiatry, referring to triggers of posttraumatic stress disorder, and has been in use in fannish and adjacent communities since at least the early 2000s, when LiveJournal was the dominant platform for fannish interaction (Vingiano, 2014). The use of such warnings is not uncontroversial in fanfiction circles for a number of reasons, and discussions on whether warnings in particular should be an expected community standard surface with some regularity. The Archive of Our Own considers only four specific items as worthy of the “warning” label (“major character death”, “graphic depictions of violence”, “rape/non-con”, and “underage”), but other types of content can be and are warned for in the freeform tags. Below, Lapras discusses the controversy around using trigger warnings:

And the last thing you wanna do is trigger somebody, like that’s harsh. I think there’s a lot of people who are really negative about trigger warnings—it’s annoying. Because they’re a thing some people see as ‘oh it’s to stop people from being offended’—and like you don’t understand about trigger warnings, if you think that it’s about people being offended. You know we’re not saying ‘hey this contains talk of rape’ because we’re like ‘oh no the feminists might get angry’. We’re saying that because if somebody had recently been through something that’s been really sexually violent, then actually them reading that can be really emotionally damaging for them. (Lapras)

Lapras’ comment highlights the core intention behind the use of warnings around issues of consent in particular: to enable members of the community who may be traumatised by depictions of rape and sexual assault because of their own past experiences to make informed choices about the fanfiction works they engage with. This stance implicitly acknowledges that, given the fanfiction community consists predominantly of women and non-binary people who statistically experience sexual violence at high rates<sup>1</sup>, a significant proportion of community members are or may be survivors of sexual violence. This acknowledgement is critical to understanding the importance the

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<sup>1</sup>Sexual and intimate partner violence statistics vary significantly by jurisdiction and reporting methodology. In the UK, the Office of National Statistics (2017) estimates that 26% of women have experienced domestic abuse, a category which includes sexual violence by an intimate partner. The Ministry of Justice, Home Office, and Office of National Statistics (2013) estimate that 5% of women

fanfiction community places on issues of sexual consent in both its creative output and its day-to-day practices. The choice to centre survivor safety and ability to give informed consent to the kind of content they are exposed to is also a form of cultural activism: it is a prefigurative act (Scholl, 2011), a lived practice of how a world where sexual violence was not normalised would work.

The practices of tagging, warnings and author's notes, and the importance the community places on authorial intent also interact with issues of consent in other ways. Bulbasaur remarked that "the tagging system does make you actually think about what you're reading a little". Several other participants also brought up the issue of differences in the reader's and writer's interpretation of the level of consent depicted in a scene, even in stories which may be tagged as "dubcon" or "noncon":

I actually get kind of upset when it's labelled dubcon and it's noncon. Even when I will read noncon if it's labelled noncon, I get really kind of pissed off [laughs] when it's noncon. (Nidorina)

This comment indicates further ways in which paratexts contribute to the wider understanding and exploration of issues of sexual consent within the fanfiction community, and sheds light on how the community conceptualises authorial intent. While fanfiction readers find it helpful and important to know that an author has deliberately grappled with issues of sexual consent in their work, authorial intent here is not an arbiter of meaning, and disagreements between the author's intended interpretation and a reader's perception of the treatment of consent issues in fanfiction stories are common. Similarly to Blissey's comment above, this indicates that providing or receiving paratextual information around sexual consent in fanfiction stories is normalised within the community, and this acts as a prompt to both readers and writers to think through the consent implications of fanfiction stories. The archived version of *Slick* (tryfanstone, 2012)—the Omegaverse rape story discussed in Chapter 4—for instance, comes with warnings for "Rape/Non-con", tags for "Dubious Consent" and "Non Consensual", and the additional warning in the author's notes, "Omegaverse, 

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 have experienced rape, and 20% of women have experienced some form of sexual violence. In the US, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012) report that 18.3% of women have experienced rape. All of these reports agree that women experience sexual violence at significantly higher rates than men.

and every single layer of dubcon that implies”: clear indications to the reader that the author wrote a graphic depiction of a rape consciously and deliberately. In the fanfiction community’s conception of authorial intent, the author is very much both dead and alive. Their intent does not determine the meaning of the text. Rather, the idea of authorial intent around consent within the fanfiction community functions to set and reinforce community norms. It encourages readers and writers to reproduce particular practices, such as deliberate consideration and discussion of consent issues through both text and paratext, in their creative output and day-to-day interactions within the community.

Nidorina’s comment also suggests that the community’s paratextual practices work to render visible the grey areas of consent: those stories where authors’ and readers’ interpretations of what counts as consensual versus what may be considered “dubcon” or outright rape diverge, where there is room for discussion and exploration. What this shows is a collective understanding within the community that consent is rarely clear-cut, for a range of reasons. As Magmar (quoted in the previous section) highlights, human sexuality and emotions are more fragmented, complex and contradictory than the binary opposition of consent/rape the law suggests. Particularly when it comes to relationships where power differentials are involved, so frequently the focus of fanfiction stories, accounting for those in a way that makes consent truly meaningful is a difficult balancing act, and readers’ and writers’ interpretations of its success may diverge. In an arranged marriage story such as those discussed in Chapter 5, where one character is completely dependent on another for shelter, livelihood, social status and more, is the more powerful character in the relationship taking on the bulk of the emotion work enough to make consent truly meaningful? There may not be a single, clear answer to this that the entire fanfiction community will agree on. What fanfiction and its surrounding paratexts do, however, is enable the question to be asked in the first place. They expose the vast grey areas obscured by the legalistic binary opposition of consent/rape and by the resulting normalisation of sexual coercion as falling on the “consent” side of that binary opposition. They provide different tools for thinking through those grey areas, tools that the law, for instance, does not have at its disposal. As another interviewee put it,

That’s part of actually why I prefer AO3 cos you can have really extended discussions with the author and several people in one comment thread.

Which is great if you're a little worried about something like that? Cos some person will say 'well where do you think this falls in terms of consent' and then you will have four million comments, if it's a popular fic, really clearing it out. (Bulbasaur)

As discussed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, fanfiction readers and writers use their creative output to explore issues of sexual consent, to challenge dominant discursive constructions of sex and consent, and even to challenge the law and criminal justice system in their handling of issues of sexual violence. They create new knowledges of consent, arguably subjugated not in the Foucauldian sense but in the ways suggested by Collins (1990): alternative discourses that demystify and demythologise the naturalisation and normalisation of sexual violence and coercion, but that are also constructed as inferior and naïve by more dominant discourses. In this context, the community's paratexts and practices then perform several functions further facilitating and building on this work: they prompt and even normalise reflection on issues of consent on the part of both readers and writers; they render visible the grey areas of sexual consent in the community's creative output and open them up for discussion and exploration; they enable community members to make informed choices about the fanfiction works they engage with; finally, through the emphasis on authorial intent as a reflection of the work texts do in the real world, they show a conscious effort on the part of the community to challenge rather than reproduce mainstream media's construction of potential coercive sexual acts as "just sex". These paratexts and practices are firmly rooted in the shared acknowledgement that this is a community whose membership includes many survivors of sexual violence and the desire to create a space which centres the wellbeing of its members. While this acknowledgement and desire are not universal within the community, they are nonetheless sufficiently dominant forces to make the use of consent-specific tags, warnings and author's notes a widespread, if occasionally challenged, community norm.

## 7.6 Conclusion

As bell hooks argues, "the ability to see and describe one's own reality is a significant step in the long process of self-recovery; but it is only a beginning" (hooks, 1984, pp. 24–25). The ability to see oppressive discursive constructions of "just sex" for



what they are and imagine alternatives is absolutely necessary in a struggle against sexual violence, but on its own it is not enough. Theory and research on cultural activism focuses predominantly on activities performed by relatively small existing activist groups and directed at the general public. Fanfiction rarely if ever fits that description, and yet considering the role it plays in the lives of those who read and write it, it makes a compelling case for expanding our definition of cultural activism to that which helps us, in private or in small, hidden groups, take that vital first step of seeing and naming our reality, and of imagining it different. The sum of the fanfiction community's creative output, paratexts and practices becomes what I call a *praxis of consent*: the community's enactment of their collectively created knowledges about consent. The knowledges and theories developed through fanfiction of the oppressive discursive constructions of sex and sexuality are enacted in the community's day-to-day practices and interactions with each other: do not reproduce those constructions; think about the consent implications of what you are writing; consider issues of power; give those around you the opportunity to make an informed choice about the kinds of content they engage with—because they may be vulnerable, because it is the right thing to do. Through this praxis, fanfiction readers and writers' creative explorations of issues of consent and power in their fiction takes on a material dimension within their day-to-day lives. They realise that consent negotiation is “a thing that can and should happen” (Ekans), and are able to account for the effects of power imbalances in their own relationships and lives. They discover that consent/rape is not a legalistic binary opposition, that “we can't really solve that by just putting our names on papers because it's about emotions” (Magmar). They develop powerful challenges to rape myths and rape culture and are able to argue that “[y]ou should be able to walk down the road naked and people should think why is that person naked, let's maybe consider that maybe they need help'. We shouldn't look at a naked person and be like 'oh that's permission to rape'” (Lapras). Finally, they are able to create a space that centres the experiences and safety of survivors of sexual violence: a powerful act of prefiguration, an exemplary gesture of how a world where sexual violence is not normalised and naturalised would work. It may, as hooks argues, be only the beginning, but it is a *necessary* beginning without which further steps would be impossible.

## Chapter 8

# Epilogue

### 8.1 Summary of findings

In light of the dominant discursive construction of potentially coercive sexual practices as “just sex” (Gavey, 2005) and a prevailing regime of truth where many such practices cannot intelligibly be said to be anything other than fully consensual, I began this research with two key questions:

- How do erotic fanfiction and the communities around it engage with issues of sexual consent?
- Can this engagement be meaningfully viewed as a form of cultural activism?

Over the course of this thesis, I examined a range of ways in which some fanfiction readers and writers engage particularly with issues of power and sexual consent, both in their fiction and in their community interactions and discussions.

In chapter 4 I showed that the A/B/O slash stories I examined—despite ostensibly portraying same-gender intimate relationships—establish settings where gender inequality is not only present but taken to extremes. Rather than removing gender as a site of power in intimate relationships, this kind of slash fiction is a literature of *negotiated inequality*. Stories in the A/B/O subgenre explore the impact of social power relations on intimate relationships, pleasure, and sexual consent. This is enabled through the sexually explicit nature of the stories, which facilitates different modes and levels of engagement with issues of consent, as becomes evident through the

reader comments and discussions surrounding the stories. The contradictory affective experiences of arousal and revulsion many readers of *Slick* in particular reported highlights this: there is a need to reconcile these contradictions which in turn opens up a space for emotional and intellectual engagement with the issues the story raises.

Gendered power differentials are a central theme of the A/B/O subgenre, and particularly of the three stories I analysed in Chapter 4. By exploring how individual characters relate to such power differentials, these stories make visible the impact of power on interpersonal negotiations of consent. Much of feminist theory and research focusing on consent negotiation actively obscures issues of power. Pineau's (1989) model of communicative sexuality, for instance, assumes that a desire and moral obligation to "promote the sexual ends of one's partner" (p. 235) as well as one's own would not affect individuals differently in ways that are specifically gendered or shaped by other power imbalances. Similarly, Anderson's (2005) negotiation model appears to assume—and indeed would need to assume—that negotiation is conducted on equal terms in order for that negotiation to be meaningful. Yet, as Gavey (2005) shows, dominant discursive constructions of "normal" (hetero)sex make the terms of any such negotiation anything but equal. When for women the dominant discursive construction of sex already encompasses promoting the sexual ends of one's partner, frequently *at the expense of one's own*, individuals' ability to meaningfully negotiate sexual consent is severely restricted. Stories within subgenres of slash like A/B/O, which make power differentials a core concern, make the relationship between power and negotiation visible. They engage in an act of demythologization (West, 1993) of the dominant social constructions of gender, sexuality, and consent, highlighting them as social constructs where otherwise they are taken as natural. Above and beyond that, however, they also outline possible strategies to manage and negotiate such power differentials in intimate relationships. By making a space for individual agency within constraining power structures, they clearly contradict second wave feminist theories of power and consent (e.g. MacKinnon, 1989). Intertextual readings with dominant discursive constructions of (hetero)sex, which readers and writers of slash fanfiction experience in their day-to-day lives, allow some stories set within the Omegaverse to present a much more nuanced view of issues of power, inequality and consent. Here, meaningful negotiation may happen despite power differentials, or alternatively readers and writers can explore the effects of power taken to the extreme, where negotiation

becomes truly impossible. This becomes an act of demystification, as it not only reveals the operations of power through discourse but outlines possible alternatives and avenues of resistance. The different kinds and levels of engagement with the fictional material allow community members to create new—subjugated (Collins, 1990)—knowledges of sexuality and consent. These knowledges privilege inner emotional lives and lived experience over wider, dominant discursive constructions of how sex should or does work.

The focus in fanfiction on power relationships when it comes to sexual consent is not unique to stories within the A/B/O subgenre, and in Chapter 5 I explored how several stories using the arranged marriage trope engage with this theme in the context of the law as a powerful discourse in society. Like other fanfiction, arranged marriage stories are densely intertextual. They sit at the intersection of several archives: the romance novel genre as a whole, fanfiction, archives around the originary works they are based on and, like A/B/O stories, dominant discourses of sexuality and consent. It is the relationship of arranged marriage fanfiction to romance novels that is of particular importance here: where the generic conventions of romance novels, and especially the required Happily Ever After ending, frequently result in romanticising unequal and gendered power relations or abusive relationships, the fanfiction stories I examined use those same conventions but actively *rewrite* the romance template to account for and engage with issues of power and consent. Where romance novel research argues that the genre helps women accept or adapt to the demands of patriarchy (Radway, 1984; Modleski, 2008), or at best provides a playful space to engage with those demands (Roach, 2016), the arranged marriage fanfiction stories I analysed in Chapter 5 issue an open challenge through the changes they make to the romance novel script. Like A/B/O stories, arranged marriage stories provide specific ways of addressing power differentials in intimate relationships in order to make the negotiation of sexual consent truly meaningful.

A second important aspect of arranged marriage fanfiction is the particular type of power differential it engages with. Whereas A/B/O stories primarily focus on inequalities constructed through dominant discourses of gender and sexuality, arranged marriage stories explore and challenge the power of social institutions such as marriage and the law. The reconstruction of legally-supported practices such as marriage consummation from “just sex” into “potentially rape” is especially powerful here, as it

allows readers and writers to see a practice that is commonly taken for granted in a new light, thereby again demythologizing it. Where under the existing, legally-supported (despite the existence of marital rape law) regime of truth a marriage consummation cannot intelligibly be said to be non-consensual, the arranged marriage stories I examined expose the operation of power through this regime of truth by casting consummation as at least potentially non-consensual. Equally, the ways in which power differentials are negotiated in arranged marriage stories in themselves pose a challenge to the discursive power of the law. Emotion work performed by the partner in the relationship with more power to level differences and empower the other partner forms the basis of this negotiation. This work happens within the existing constraints of marriage as an institution and the law as a discourse, showing that an exercise of agency is possible within those constraints. The legal framework of marriage is taken as a given but also exposed as at least potentially coercive; ways are found to work around and, as Smart (1989) suggests, to *decentre* the law and its discursive power. An alternative discourse then emerges where, through emotion work and a conscious effort to negotiate and manage power inequalities, consent is made truly meaningful. Here, too, we see demystification at work. The decentring of the law and centring of human lived experience, emotions and emotion work further work to undermine dominant discursive constructions, and expose the fundamental epistemological conflict between these two different orders of knowledge. This in turn allows for a challenge to the law's special status as a discourse able to impose its version of truth on other domains.

From these case studies, we can see that some fanfiction readers and writers actively generate new knowledges about sexual consent by demystifying and demythologizing the dominant discourses surrounding it. They highlight the socially constructed character of sexual scripts, institutions such as marriage, and practices such as marriage consummation. They expose the operation of power through discourse in these constructions by problematising them where normally they are naturalised and taken for granted. Importantly, the ways in which these new knowledges are generated are rooted in the politics of representation and the particular practices of the fanfiction community. The densely intertextual nature of fanfiction allows for a wide variety of meaning-making resources to be used within the community, and for popular culture to be examined critically and with nuance. These knowledges are rooted not in the law's understanding of sex, rape, and consent, but in the emotional internal realities

of fictional characters, revealing fundamentally different epistemological approaches to sexual consent. Furthermore, while fanfiction does not operate entirely without institutional constraints, the constraints it faces are different to those of the law and academia. The very marginalisation and stigmatisation of fanfiction and the communities around it as a derivative, femini[ne/sed], queer cultural phenomenon allow for a certain latitude in approach that is unavailable to feminist academia, activists, or legal scholars striving for respectability within the discourse of the law.

My examination in Chapter 6 of a fanfiction community's engagement with real life rape allegations further underscores the epistemological conflict between legal and cultural—and particularly fanfiction—approaches to consent. Hockey RPF community members themselves displayed an understanding of this epistemological conflict and the necessity to account for and negotiate the discursive power of the law. By using insights generated through fanfiction and fanfiction-like processes, they were able to develop alternative discourses that challenged the law's power to define the truth in the Kane case in particular, and on issues of sexual violence more generally. They found three key strategies for doing this. A relatively small minority within the community reacting to the rape allegations against Patrick Kane accepted the law's discursive power to impose its version of the truth on other domains of knowledge. The majority of the community, however, either found ways to bracket the law or reject it entirely, based on their own lived experiences and knowledges of consent generated through fanfiction. Bracketing the law involved partially accepting key legal structures such as the standard and burden of proof as necessary evils on a societal level while also acknowledging the realities of rape culture on a personal level. Those who rejected the law presented the law as itself steeped in rape culture and inherently biased. These latter strategies both work to destabilise the discursive power of the law. Bracketing creates a space where alternative truths and knowledges not legitimised by the law can exist alongside the official legal version, and thereby works to demystify the institutional and discursive power of the law. Outright challenges to the law then are an act of demythologisation. They expose the links between legal structures such as the standard and burden of proof and the operation of rape culture. This, again, echoes Smart's (1989) call for a decentring of the law and its power in feminist thought and campaigning. Where in arranged marriage fanfiction the engagement with marriage as an institution and legal framework could be seen as applying purely within the fictional setting of the

story, the Kane case allows us to trace clear lines between the kinds of knowledges about sexual consent that community members generate in their fiction and their engagement with issues of rape, consent and the law in their own lives. Furthermore, the flow of knowledge in this case operated in both directions: community members' own experiences of sexual violence and the criminal justice system informed not only their interpretation of the rape allegations against Kane but also their readings of fanfiction; conversely, their fanfiction and the knowledges generated through it informed their views on the case. Fans' reactions and conflicts around the Kane allegations also revealed a desire within the community to live up to feminist values and counteract rape culture, in both their fannish engagements and their day-to-day lives, providing a first indication of the presence within the fanfiction community of a wider *praxis of consent*.

This praxis of consent is further evidenced by wider community discourses and practices, as shown through the interviews I conducted with fanfiction readers and writers at the *Nine Worlds* convention in London in 2016. The importance fanfiction readers and writers attach to authorial intent when it comes to consent issues reveals a productive tension between fanfiction as (erotic) text and fanfiction as an act in the world. Community members are conscious of the range of discourses around consent prevalent in media and culture, and express a desire not to reproduce constructions of potentially coercive sexual behaviours and situations as "just sex". As a result, fanfiction communities have developed practices that allow them to explore potentially problematic sexual situations in their stories—and enjoy them as erotic material—while also making visible the complex interactions of power and consent through paratexts surrounding the works. The sum of the community's output, paratexts and practices amounts to a praxis of consent, an enactment of the knowledges fanfiction readers and writers generate about consent in the real world. The fanfiction community's engagement with issues of consent is a form of cultural activism directed mainly inwards towards community members themselves. It offers discursive resistance to dominant discourses of sexuality and consent, including those reinforced by the law, but also has tangible impacts on the day-to-day lives of community members.

## 8.2 Limitations and future directions

Arguably, fanfiction fandom has been interested in consent for much longer than the limited period covered by this research. As discussed in Chapter 1, I have early *Star Trek* (1966) fanzines (fan-produced paper publications of fanfiction stories) on my bookshelves dealing with the consent issues in the Vulcan mating ritual *pon farr*, and exploring the possibility or otherwise of meaningful consent in societies with extreme power inequalities. Both of these stories have issues of power and consent at their core, and were I to analyse them I am certain both the similarities and differences between them and the contemporary material my thesis is based on would be striking. In their way, fanzines like *One Way Mirror* (Wenk, 1980) and *The Night of the Twin Moons* (Lorrah, 1976) highlight some of the limitations of my research to date. Both are “het” stories: they focus on sexual and romantic relationships between men and women, highlighting another limitation of my work and potential avenue for future research. My focus on slash has been deliberate, as slash has long been argued to be an erotic and romantic literature of gender equality. Yet understanding how het or femslash (slash stories focusing on relationships between women) engage with issues of power and consent would provide valuable additional insights, particularly around issues of gender and gendered power differentials.

Additionally, the focus of my work has been strictly contemporary. All of my case studies are particular to a time and a place, and a specific subsection of the fanfiction community. While some of the stories I have examined here were originally published on LiveJournal, the oldest among them still only dates back to 2010 and therefore falls firmly within the Archive of Our Own era of fanfiction fandom. In fact, regardless of where they were originally published, all stories I have used in this research were *discovered* through the AO3. Alongside the Archive, Tumblr has been the other community platform central to this research. Both these platforms are barely ten years old, and this raises a number of interesting questions which have been beyond the scope of this thesis. How has fanfiction communities’ engagement with issues of sexual consent changed over time, and why? How are Lorrah and Wenk’s stories, and those of their contemporaries, different in their treatment of power imbalances in intimate relationships to those today’s fanfiction communities produce? How have the successive migrations of fanfiction communities from one platform to another shaped



their discourses, practices and engagements with consent? In Chapter 6 I touched briefly on the different effects AO3 as an archive and Tumblr as an interaction platform have on the kinds of conversations that can be had on each. Are there things that could be said in zines that we cannot say on Tumblr? What were (or are) the affordances of bulletin boards, mailing lists, and Usenet newsgroups, of LiveJournal, of small independent fanfiction archives or privately owned sites such as fanfiction.net, and how do they shape the conversations that communities using them can have? What about the reportedly younger communities on commercial sites such as Wattpad, which have very little overlap with or knowledge of the practices and traditions of the communities currently residing on Tumblr and AO3? Investigating these questions would allow us to gain insight into three key areas: the historical development of the fanfiction community, including the lives, circumstances, and approaches to sexuality and consent of its members; the impact of the community's infrastructures on its ability to generate knowledges and resistant discourses; and the impact of different economic models (commercial and noncommercial) on communities' activist potentialities.

My research also raises bigger questions for future investigations. If some contemporary erotic fanfiction is a form of cultural activism on sexual consent, where is this activism going? Duncombe (2002) remarks rather cynically that revolutions have a tendency "to end at the guillotine or in a shopping mall" (p. 113), so can we see signs of this kind of activism heading in either of those directions? There are several trends that would indicate a certain level of cooptation and commercialisation, or at the very least mainstreaming, of both fanfiction and discussions of sexual consent. Fanfiction has for decades been an underground, clandestine activity, due to both its murky copyright status and the stigmatisation of expressions of women's and queer sexualities. Tushnet (2007) documents fans' use of copyright disclaimers accompanying fan works and imploring the rightsholders to the originary works not to sue as no profit was being made from fan works. Yet in recent years we have seen this trend disappear to the point that younger community members encountering older fan works are puzzled by such disclaimers. The founding of the Organisation for Transformative Works in 2007 has played a significant role in these developments. Prompted in part by repeated attempts on the part of rightsholders and other commercial entities to capitalise on fan works, and in part by social media platforms such as LiveJournal banning some fanfiction content, the OTW was founded to both provide "An Archive of One's Own", "run BY

fanfic readers FOR fanfic readers” (astolat, 2007) and to make a strong legal case for fan works as legal, not infringing of copyright, and themselves protected under US law as transformative works. This removed the perceived legal pressures on fanfiction and other fan works to remain clandestine activities. At the same time, a mainstreaming of discussions and representations of women’s and queer sexualities, and a tendency on the part of Fan Studies scholars to celebrate erotic fanfiction as subversive and transformative have at least in part mitigated the social stigma associated with reading and writing fanfiction. A third strand here is the realisation by rightsholders of originary works that fan engagement can be capitalised on and commercialised. As Jenkins (2006) argues, “the media industry is increasingly dependent on active and committed consumers to spread the word about valued properties in an overcrowded media marketplace, and in some cases they are seeking ways to channel the creative output of media fans to lower their production costs” (p. 138). Studios encourage cosplay (elaborate, highly skilled costume-making and dressing up as favourite characters), games developers run fanfiction competitions, and CBS and Paramount are trying to both accommodate and control the production of *Star Trek* fan films through a set of official guidelines. The publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James, 2011), which in its original form was a piece of fanfiction for the book and movie series *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005), is perhaps the most notorious incident of commercialising fanfiction, but other examples abound. These factors combine to create a much greater awareness of fanfiction and other fannish activities in the public eye, to the delight of some fanfiction community members and the chagrin of others. Another important development in the environment in which fanfiction communities operate is the mainstreaming of issues of sexual consent in a range of spheres of life, including popular culture, with fourth-wave feminism. Discussions like the one of the Patrick Kane rape allegations I investigated in Chapter 6 are not restricted to fan communities. A series of high-profile rape allegations and cases have been the subject of vigorous public debate in recent years: the allegations against Wikileaks founder Julian Assange in 2010; Welsh football player Ched Evans, who was initially convicted of rape in 2012 and subsequently acquitted on retrial in 2016; the case of US college student Brock Turner, convicted in 2016 of sexually assaulting an unconscious woman but ultimately only serving three months of an already extremely lenient six-month prison sentence. Exposing rape myths and the role of the law in rape culture has been a key focus in feminist public debates of these cases. So with both fanfiction and issues of consent becoming much more prominent in the public eye, what

can we say about the future activist potentialities of the kinds of cultural activism I have traced in this research? Has the mainstreaming of fanfiction eliminated the pressures that previously allowed it to be a clandestine, transgressive and subversive space? Has the mainstreaming of consent issues made the kind of activism fanfiction does obsolete? In this thesis I argue for an expansion of the definition of cultural activism to include discursive resistance that is not necessarily directed at the general public. Such an expansion opens up interesting new research avenues in this space. Firstly, there is a possibility of exploring other spaces of discursive resistance, both historical and contemporary, and investigating the work they do and their importance in enabling public-facing activism. This could include the specific work audiences of genres such as romance and pornography do and the conversations about sexuality that these genres contribute to and shape. Secondly, tracing future developments of the fanfiction community's engagement with issues of sexual consent would allow for a mapping of how such activism develops and moves from being internally focused to being externally directed. This in turn would enable us to examine how dominant discourses are challenged, contested, and possibly even changed through such activism.

The importance fanfiction readers and writers place on authorial intent when it comes to issues of sexual consent that I identified in Chapter 7 also raises an interesting set of questions. Fan studies has a history of approaching fanfiction either as texts (e.g. Driscoll, 2006; Derecho, 2006; Stasi, 2006) or as a social phenomenon (e.g. Jenkins, 1992). However, the structures, practices, and paratexts the community has developed around its texts indicate that there is not a clear distinction between the two. Fanfiction texts do real work in the real world through the discourses they challenge, employ and develop. With that in mind, authorial intent—largely discounted in recent cultural and literary studies—becomes an important factor in the reception of the text, not as an arbiter of meaning but as a reflection of the connection between text and real world. This desire to hold authors to account is no longer limited to fanfiction authors or to fannish circles, and there are several recent examples of fans and the wider public critiquing political dimensions of popular culture works. Ng (2017) examines discussions of “queerbaiting”—the idea that TV shows create an expectation of queer content to attract queer viewers but do not deliver on it—that has emerged among queer fannish communities in recent years. She argues that this idea originates in the interaction of three key factors: the actual queer content of the show, which she maps

on a spectrum from subtextual to overtly textual; official paratexts around the show, such as trailers, producers' comments, or cast interviews; and what Ng calls "queer contextuality": viewers' wider experiences of queer representation in media. Current queer contextuality, Ng argues, is shaped by several competing trends. On the one hand, there is more queer representation in mainstream media than ever before, countering a historical representational vacuum that is also taken into account in viewers' wider experiences. On the other hand, this representation continues to be mired in problems and stereotypes. Increased representation and producer comments aimed at attracting queer audiences then generate much higher expectations of overtly textual, good-quality queer representation than has historically been the case. Yet producers frequently fail to deliver on those high expectations, which in turn drives the accusations of queerbaiting. What is important about both queerbaiting discussions and Ng's analysis of them is that, like fanfiction readers and writers' emphasis on authorial intent, they show that audiences perceive a clear link between media texts and real world concerns. Naylor (2016) examines the tension between fascination and frustration in audience engagements with the TV series *Game of Thrones*. She argues that "[f]eminist discussion of [the series] in nonfan media and the progressive blogosphere has tended to apply close textual analysis of style and representation to unpack issues of gender and power" (pp. 46–47). This kind of close textual analysis, which has historically been reserved for academic and fannish circles, is being increasingly leveraged by more casual audiences as well as more traditional activists in community settings. Here, too, the interplay between text and real world is a central issue, with discussion moving seamlessly from a close reading of the text to explorations of political issues and back. My research therefore adds to an emerging body of evidence around the use of engagement with popular culture for activist and political purposes and the interactions between text and real world, the role and responsibility of authors and producers, and audiences' desire to hold them to account. The resurrection of the author in this context presents an interesting avenue for future research, particularly when viewed as symbol for the work media texts do in the real world.

### 8.3 Impact/activism

Recognising fanfiction as a form of cultural activism and knowledge production around issues of sexual consent raises another important question. As I showed in Chapter 7, fanfiction readers and writers are already taking the knowledges they generate through fanfiction into other areas of their lives, applying them to their own relationships, and taking them into other communities they are part of. Are there, however, other routes for disseminating these knowledges, particularly into spaces such as academia, the law, and mainstream media? These spaces have different tools and structures for knowledge creation to the fanfiction community, and as a result different ways of thinking. The way fanfiction readers and writers approach consent is fundamentally epistemologically different, with its focus on affect, emotion, individuals' internal lives and lived experience. Where the law actively works towards constructing a binary opposition of rape/consent with a clear line between them, fanfiction makes visible the grey areas between them, the messiness of human emotions and experiences. Mainstream media and fiction does have some of the tools available to fanfiction readers and writers to explore characters' emotions and inner lives, as heard for instance in the rape and domestic abuse storyline on British radio drama *The Archers* (1950). Yet even here, there is a marked lack of exploration of the effects of power differentials on intimate relationships and consent. Generating impact with my research is one opportunity to extend the reach of fanfiction knowledge of power and sexual consent into some of these domains.

One route to impact I am actively pursuing is through influencing and changing the way consent is represented in mainstream media and fiction. To that end, I have developed and piloted workshops for writers and other creative practitioners on writing consent. These workshops use examples from a range of media, from both commercial fiction and fanfiction, to highlight good and bad practice in the representation of sexual and romantic relationships and sexual consent. One key theme of the workshops is the mechanics of consent negotiation and how these are influenced by styles and techniques of writing as well as generic conventions. I prompt participants to discuss, for instance, how changing the point of view character, the affordances of a particular medium such as the immersiveness of video games, or the expectations in certain genres such as romance or erotica that sex should happen can have implications for whether a sexual

situation depicted appears consensual or not. I challenge participants to work against generic conventions, for instance in depicting the successful refusal or withdrawal of consent. Another key strand of the workshops is the issue of power imbalances in intimate relationships. By changing the genders of characters in a scene, I prompt discussion of elements of consent negotiation that may be specifically gendered. I also show workshop participants a range of different kinds of power imbalances beyond gender, such as material and social dependence, and discuss the wider implications of power for consent. A third key theme is the distinction between the “wantedness” of sex and the consensual or otherwise character of that sex so neatly encapsulated in the title of this thesis: “slight dub-con but they both wanted it hardcore”. Using these distinctions, participants are able to move beyond the rape/consent binary and discuss the grey areas of consent, as well as devise strategies for handling these in their own work. A future build on the existing materials will involve setting participants specific writing exercises, such as rewriting an existing scene from their own work taking into account what they have learned during the workshop, or writing to a brief such as “write a scene showing consent negotiation between a couple having sex for the first time, and then a similar scene for the same couple ten years into their relationship”.

My study of fanfiction readers and writers’ engagements with issues of sexual consent has demonstrated the importance of discursive resistance: challenging dominant, naturalised discourses of sexuality and consent through creative practice, communal discussion, and a lived praxis of consent. In these ways the fanfiction community generates new knowledges of consent, rooted in feminist values and focused on subjective lived experiences of sexuality. Community members themselves apply these knowledges in their own day-to-day lives and intimate relationships, and circulate them beyond fanfiction circles in their own feminist activist involvements. While conversations about consent have gained more mainstream attention in recent years, the level of nuance of fanfiction and its ability to engage with issues of power and consent in ways that other kinds of knowledge creation struggle with is a unique asset of the community. Drawing on these knowledges, expanding them and circulating them to wider audiences has the potential of mounting a robust resistance to rape culture and actively contributing to the creation of a culture of consent.

## Appendix A

### *Nine Worlds* 2016 Interview

## Questionnaire: Consent in Fanfic, August 2016

- How much do you think about issues of consent when you read/write fanfic?
- How do you relate to consent issues in fic?
  - Do you seek out stories which portray rape or dubious consent situations (non-con/dubcon)?
  - Are there ways in which consent is (not) portrayed that make you stop reading a story?
- Are there ways of handling consent issues you particularly like?
- In what other contexts outside fanfic do you think about consent?
- To what extent/how have your experiences outside of fanfic shaped how you view consent issues in fic?
- To what extent/how has your exposure to consent issues in fanfic shaped your thinking outside of fanfic?

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