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‘The Tent’s Big Enough for Everyone’: Online slash fiction as a site for activism and change

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‘The Tent’s Big Enough for Everyone’: Online slash fiction as a site for activism and change

This paper draws on a piece of wide-scale mixed-methods research (n=429) that examines how women who write and read male/male erotica feel their involvement with the genre has affected their views on gender and sexuality and their political engagement with gay rights issues. Previous work has looked at how online slashfic communities might provide a safe space for exploring gender performance and sexuality, while other researchers have observed a tension between those who identify as queer themselves and those who only 'play at queerness' exclusively within the online environment. However, much of this work has examined the theoretical positioning of such forums as transgressive and/or political. Far fewer pieces have attempted to engage with the women who frequent such sites to ask them about whether their involvement in these online spaces has affected their attitudes and behaviours. This study looks not only at the ways in which online m/m fandoms can act as a safe space for women to explore their sexualities and gender identities, but whether and how these insights connect to women's real-world lives. Data presented here shows a strong consensus among participants that involvement with explicit slash communities has had a positive effect on their lives, as well as contributing to beneficial changes in their knowledge, attitudes, and practices with regards to LGBTQ+ issues. Overall, slash is seen as a medium which can create better allies, encourage cross-identification, and bring about positive personal changes. To this extent, I argue that explicit online slash sites can act as heterotopias.

Keywords: M/M, slash fiction, queer space, activism, heterotopias

The internet has provided important space for women to engage with concepts related to gender and sexuality in new and dynamic ways, as well as unprecedented opportunities for accessing sexually explicit media [SEM] (Attwood 2010). These two aspects are often linked, with SEM providing a catalyst for changes in how women view gender and sexuality, and the growing visibility of women's perspectives on sexually explicit representation changing general views on the articulation of female desire in cultural forms. Attwood (2010, 2) argues that the internet has 'domesticated porn', bringing it in to the home and allowing women to interact with it on their own terms, and Milne

(2005, xiii) notes how women's involvement in SEM is often seen as 'helping shape and change society's views on sexuality'. McNair (2002, 2013) builds on these ideas, maintaining that sexual liberation in general, and acceptance of feminism and gay rights in particular, have generated a societal demand for more modalities and expressions of sexual culture, including non-normative forms that challenge or disrupt traditional patriarchy. He believes that the expansion of what he refers to as 'the pornosphere' – 'the space in which explicit sexual discourse is circulated' (McNair 2013, 14-15) – has led to a greater democratisation of desire, and the entry of traditionally excluded or marginalised groups into sexual citizenship. 'Traditional' heterosexist male-orientated pornography has now been joined in an ever more segmented market by a diversity of pornographies, catering to all sorts of tastes and desires. As Jacobs (2011, 186) notes, 'digital media networks have allowed women and queer groups to develop and distribute their own types of sexually explicit media and to create niche industries', providing a medium for non-traditional SEM consumer groups to define their sexual selves. To this extent, the internet provides a place for marginalised and historically excluded identities to have their sexualities represented, leading Lackner, Lucas, and Reid (2006, 196) to characterise digital 'pornospheres' as spaces which constitute 'a postmodern geography, a queer time and space'.

Nowhere is this fusion of both female and queer desire more apparent in online spaces than in the area of slash fiction. Slash is a genre of fan fiction that focuses on interpersonal attraction and sexual relationships between fictional characters of the same sex, believed to have originated in the 1970s when female fans started to compose stories based around *Star Trek* where Kirk and Spock had a romantic - and often sexual - relationship. Much of the academic research on slash has come from the areas of media studies and cultural studies, with 'the former tending to emphasize the pornographic aspects of slash, the latter its romantic aspects' (Salmon and Symons 2001, 74). Hayes and Ball (2009, 222) observe that 'by far the most popular stories have sex scenes between the two main male characters, which are graphically depicted in detail with the explicit aim of titillating the reader'. The more sexually explicit genres within slash have (not without controversy) been characterised as 'porn' by some scholars (Russ 1985). Paasonen (2010, 139) agrees that these sorts of texts can certainly be classified as pornographic, describing the tendency to understand pornography purely in terms of the visual as problematic, particularly considering 'the

history of pornography has largely been one concerning the written word'. To this extent explicit online slash texts can be viewed as a form of pornography for women. While men are involved in both the production and consumption of slash, it has traditionally been viewed as a genre 'by women, for women', and survey data supports the existence of a majority female authorship and readership (e.g. Fielding 2013; Lulu 2013). However, the internet's 'cultural cachet', as well as its properties of wide circulation, have contributed to the expansion of slash fic participation 'beyond a show's die-hard fanatics' (Levin Russo 2002, 27), and it now attracts a broad and diverse readership on sites such as AO3, Livejournal, and Tumblr. While some commentators view this expansion as a positive thing, others are more wary. Bacon-Smith (1992, 44), for example, stresses that, in her experience, the slash community 'does not want to attract people who are drawn to it merely for the exotic sexual literature'.

Slash as queer female space?

Slash has previously been described as 'queer female space' (Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007, 103), and there is widespread agreement that slash can be categorised as 'queer', inasmuch as it is 'a practice that problematizes clear straight/gay dichotomies' (Busse 2005, 122). It has also been argued that slash is 'political' inasmuch as it is inherently transgressive (Thrupkaew 2003), and provides a space for going against current restrictive social norms. If women writing about sex is still seen as transgressive, then women writing about sex using the male body and inviting other women to enjoy these stories is doubly transgressive (Jung 2004; Neville 2016, 2018). As a practice, it challenges the heteronormative metanarrative that informs much social discourse about sexuality and gender, 'thumb[ing] its nose as the insidious heterosexism underpinning most forms of literary expression' and 'celebrating sexualities that fly in the face of traditional heterosexist discourses' (Hayes and Ball 2009, 223). Some academics have therefore viewed online slash communities as providing a space for exploring gender performance and sexuality in a way that constitutes Foucault's vision of 'creative practice' as a form of political dissent (Hayes and Ball 2009). Others have regarded slash communities as a type of heterotopia, which Foucault (1986, 24) describes as 'real places... which are something like counter-sites, a kind of collectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites which can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'. Rambukkana (2007, 73)

highlights the importance of heterotopias being *real* spaces (unlike utopias which are simply romantic ideals) – it is the *realness* of heterotopias that means ‘they have a substantive place in politics as spaces where actual things can happen’. Lackner, Lucas, and Reid (2006, 192) describe slash forums as ‘counterpublics... complex and multiple constructions of queer female spaces in an easily accessible public venue’: the internet. To this extent online slash communities can be viewed as a type of counterpublic – a space in the public sphere where alternative identities can be reflected and where subordinated social groups can find support and collective resistance (Fraser 1992; Warner 1999).

As Cockayne and Richardson (2017) have argued, if putting sexuality on the map represents space as a ‘realm of stasis’ (Massey 1992, 67), this kind of queer virtual space has the potential to generate ‘elements of dislocation/freedom/possibility’ that enables the politicisation of space-time (79). Cockayne and Richardson (2017) note that ‘such productive spaces are nascent in the post-structural politics’ called for by Oswin (2008, 90) that extend the utility of queer theory beyond the imaginaries of ‘concrete space that is carved out by sexual dissidents’. Martin (2012, 365) emphasises that such m/m SEM online spaces are not ‘feminist utopia[s]’ nor ‘zone[s] of unilateral sexual-political progressiveness’, but argues that it is nevertheless noteworthy that they *exist* – participatory spaces, that, in Mizoguchi’s (2011, 164) words, can act as ‘unprecedented, effective political arena[s] for women’ with the potential for feminist and/or queer activism.

‘The Queer Minstrel Show’ and Gayappropriation

However, many commentators have noted a tension between creators and consumers of m/m erotic content who see online communities as a safe queer space to explore their own lived queer identities, and those who only ‘play at queerness’ exclusively within the online environment (Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007, 107). While it is relatively straightforward to view online slash communities as tolerant spaces, it is perhaps less so to view them as undeniably queer – is there really any ‘queerness’ going on in m/m erotic forums beyond the fact that the stories’ protagonists are presented as having homosexual sex? The sexual orientation of slash writers and readers has been a source of debate in the literature, but, undoubtedly, slash communities contain a large number of women who identify as heterosexual. Can such a space therefore be termed as

queer? Busse (2006, 209) comments that while statements about sexual identity are hard to substantiate, ‘many women [in slash] acknowledge that their queerness is often restricted to the virtual realm as they live their “real” heteronormative lives’. She quotes a fan who describes slash fandom as ‘the queer minstrel show’ (Busse 2006, 209), and goes on to warn that online forums can ‘permit a masquerade of queer discourse and thereby trivialise queer identities and experiences’ (Busse 2006, 211).

Judith Butler (1993, 230) notes that while the term ‘queer’ has been politically productive as a ‘discursive rallying point’ for various sexual minorities, as well as for heterosexuals for whom the term expresses an affiliation with anti-homophobic, inclusive politics, too broad a use of the term can create a tension between the critical performance of sexual identities and the material realities of sexual minorities. There is a perception here that, for LGBTQ+ folk, a heterosexual person identifying as queer can feel like an attempt to appropriate the “good bits” of gay culture – namely the cultural and political cachet – without having to experience the discrimination and stigma that effect non-heteronormative people in their day to day lives. Indeed, Beasley, Holmes, and Brook (2015, 684) warn of attempts by heterosexuality to ‘invite itself along to the fashionably cool queer party without having had to pay the dues of marginalisation’.

Slash fiction has also been accused of what I have termed “gayappropriation” – exploiting m/m sexual culture in order for women to achieve sexual satisfaction. To this extent, many of the criticisms directed at “girl-on-girl” pornography created for the heterosexual male consumer can be directed at explicit slash – that it is produced for the voyeuristic “other” gaze to the detriment of real homosexuals (Rich 1980). Slash fiction has also faced criticism for presenting potentially queer narratives in a heteronormative fashion – relationships between male protagonists can be seen as typified by an emphasis on monogamy and marriage (as a happy, fairy tale ending), and the manner in which m/m sex acts are written and described often conforms to Gayle Rubin’s (1992) hierarchical valuation of sex acts, with (anal) penetration being portrayed as the ultimate, and ultimately most satisfying, type of sex (Hunting 2012). This has led some critics to express concern that homosexual men within slash fiction are simply being presented as an aesthetic to be consumed, and that the queer lives on show are entirely fictionalised accounts, with no reference to social reality. Akatsuka (2010, 172) stresses that while readers and writers of m/m fan fiction may well not

deny, or denigrate, the existence of queer individuals in real life, what ‘trouble[s]’ him is ‘not that writers or readers are homophobic, but that they could easily consume [slash’s] queerness without necessarily being anti-homophobic’.

There has been much valuable work carried out in this arena to date, but it has largely examined the *theoretical* positioning of online m/m slash forums as transgressive and/or political. Far fewer pieces have attempted to engage with the women who frequent such sites to ask them about whether their involvement in these online spaces has affected their views on gender and sexuality, or their behaviours and activities in the “real” world. Reinhard (2009) notes that insights into slash fandom have typically consisted of theorists discussing *their* ideas of why women slash and what it means, and there has been less work grounding these ideas in conversations with slashers, using their interpretative stance to inform better understanding or to develop theories. Given the ‘diminishing boundaries’ between online erotic content and real life sexuality (Arvidsson 2007, 74), and a growing awareness that the virtual plays a constitutive role in the materialization of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in both digital and physical spaces (van Doorn 2011) it is important that future work starts to take into account not just the ways in which online m/m fandoms can act as a safe space for women to explore their sexualities and gender identities, but whether and how these insights connect to women’s real world lives. Are m/m online fandoms ‘self-contained space[s] where queerness is played out in lieu of any potential effects in real lives?’ (Busse 2006, 210). Or do they have the ability to have real world political and social impact? By drawing on a piece of wide-scale mixed-methods research ($n=429$) conducted with women who read and write m/m erotic slash fiction, this paper aims to provide a response to these questions and address some of the existing gaps in the field.

Method

Participants and procedure

Data were collected via a series of semi-structured focus groups [FGs] and in-depth interviews [IDIs], and an online questionnaire. I am a writer of gay male erotica and m/m slash fiction, and was able to use my existing contacts to signal boost the call for participation, using a snowball sampling method – both online through various fora and in real life. In both FGs and IDIs participants frequently discussed the ways in which they felt their writing and reading preferences did (and did not) constitute a form of

queer politics, and this focus informed the development of the questionnaire. While participants were asked a range of questions about their engagement with m/m SEM, this paper specifically focuses on the answers provided to the questions ‘Do you think what you write/read has any sort of political angle?’ and ‘Has reading/writing m/m erotic content made you more aware of issues around gender and sexuality?’

This sampling strategy recruited a total of 508 women, 429 of whom were readers/writers of slash fiction and are therefore included in this analysis. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to over 65. Forty three percent (43%) of participants identified as heterosexual, with 31% identifying as bisexual, 6% as asexual, 5% as pansexual, 5% as lesbian, 3% were questioning their sexuality, 3% as queer, 2% as demisexual, and 2% did not state a sexual orientation.

Analysis

The analysis of the data took a contextual thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Although often (implicitly) framed as a realist/experimental method (Aronson 1994), Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is essentially independent of theory and epistemology, and is thus compatible with both essentialist and constructivist paradigms within the social sciences. Due to its theoretical freedom, Braun and Clarke (2006, 78) describe it as a ‘flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data’.

Responses were analysed following phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the data were read and an initial list of ideas was generated about what was in the data and what was interesting about them. This produced a long list of different codes. Second, codes were then sorted into potential themes, and relevant coded data extracts from within the identified themes were collected. Themes were then reviewed and refined and sub-themes were created. The thematic analysis resulted in 13 codes, which were grouped into 3 key themes (and one additional miscellaneous theme that contained the more negative responses). The analysis was exhaustive in that 96% of the data was allocated to at least one theme.

Results

Only 13% of the women who took part in this research felt that their involvement with m/m erotic writing had not impacted on their awareness of issues around gender and sexuality (13% weren't sure, and 74% felt it had an effect). Sixty-eight percent (68%) also felt that what they read and/or wrote had some sort of political angle (30% didn't think so, and 2% were undecided).

Thematic analysis of the reasons given for the above responses generated three key themes, which are explored below.

'Opening the window': Slash as a gateway to activism

Many participants spoke about how their involvement with slash impacted on their political and social beliefs and practices using the language of journeying – of moving from a position of ignorance or ambivalence to one of awareness and action. Slash was variously described as a window, a stepping stone, a doorway, a gate, a vehicle. There was often a clear recognition that simply reading m/m erotic content was not sufficient to claim any kind of allegiance with real life queer communities, but that it could often play an important role in not just raising awareness of gay rights issues, but of moving people towards playing a more active role in community activism. As one participant put it:

‘Writing and reading slash does not make you an ally, but it can expose you to people who are allies, and give you a window of opportunity to become one yourself. You have to do the work, though; simply enjoying m/m work isn't remotely enough. However, you may begin to pick up on some simple issues; how gender roles are culturally established and enforced, how much disparity there is for marginalized people, and how what you may have thought was ‘normal’ was anything but... Enjoying m/m can give you a window to see more of the issues at hand’ –
American, 25-34, bisexual

There was also a sense from many participants that this potentially transformative quality of slash fandom should not be dismissed, nor made light of, with one participant observing ‘it's easy to hate on tumblrinas who are supporting gay marriage just because of John and Sherlock, but at least they're doing something, right? I think it's a stepping

stone to thinking about the world and queerness in general' (American, 18-24, QUEER AS HELL).

When talking about how their involvement in slash fandom had changed their own behaviours, some spoke about small scale changes they had made, such as talking openly about non-normative sexuality to show that 'it's nothing to be ashamed of' (Czech, 18-24, heterosexual), calling people out on anti-LGBTQ+ "jokes", and entering into discussions with regards to gay marriage rights and gay adoption rights. Participants noted that often both the fiction they had read, and the associated discussions they had with other fans, meant they went into these discussions with 'far better informed arguments than before' (Belgian, 25-34, heterosexual). For others, slash had inspired them to take a much more concrete step into activism, such as attending marches and demonstrations, giving financial support to LGBTQ+ rights organisations, and canvassing for referendums on same sex marriages in the countries or states they lived in. One participant tells her story:

'Because of my involvement with [slash], I have volunteered at Boston Pride [and] donated to It Gets Better... I have worked tirelessly as a volunteer supporting the repeal of DADT [Don't Ask, Don't Tell] and the passage of same sex marriage in Maine and Washington State' –
American, 45-54, asexual

'I'm starting with the man in the mirror': Slash as a medium for knowledge building

For other participants the change they experienced was much more inwards focussed. Often these were the participants that felt that slash had affected their views on gender and sexuality, but did not necessarily feel that there was a political element to what they read or wrote, or 'only in the sense that the personal is political' (American, 35-44, demisexual lesbian). For these participants, slash had often served as a way of educating themselves about queer realities. As one participant noted, 'before, I was aware of the prejudice [LGB people face] but, for instance, I wasn't aware of the brutal danger transgendered people live with far too often' (American, 35-44, sexuality not disclosed). Other participants felt slash had removed some of their own misconceptions and prejudices about homosexuality. One respondent explained, 'I

started out with this thought that there were tops and bottoms and they were totally concrete, and [I] pretty much fetishized homosexuality. But as I learned more, and understood the reality of relationships, sexuality, and the issues of gender, that all changed. This community is very open in talking about current issues regarding sexuality and gender, as well as the potential pitfalls with misunderstandings' (American, 25-34, heterosexual). There was also a sense, that, even if all slash served to do was make heterosexual people more aware of homosexuality, this could be a positive thing, as it removes some of the 'mystery' surrounding gay sex, and 'you fear the unknown unconsciously' (French, 35-44, heterosexual). This improved knowledge and awareness was also reflected upon by participants who noted that slash fiction provided a space where readers could engage with gay characters who were fulfilled and happy. One participant observed, 'Have you ever noticed how gay guys are not allowed to live happily ever after in books or film? One or both always ends up dead' (American, 45-54, heterosexual) – slash was seen as providing a counter to this portrayal. In turn, this allowed some participants to better understand that gay people would not necessarily 'live miserable lives' (American, 18-24, pansexual), by offering up texts where non-heteronormativity was often celebrated and seen as a site of joy and play. Several commented on how increased personal knowledge around aspects of queer lifestyles were likely to have an impact on others through the nature of their work.

'I'm currently in medical school, and it's amazing to me how some of my classmates - and real doctors - approach sexuality... It makes me terrified to think how many people won't be able to talk to their doctor, get treated and educated properly, because they'll be too busy just trying not to get labelled as a freak - by a medical professional...! I think that slash fiction made me a more open, more respectful person. I can only hope that it'll make me a better doctor' – American, 25-34, bisexual

'Space to work out who I am': Slash as a place for personal discovery

A large number of participants who did not identify as heterosexual commented on how their involvement with slash had helped them to better understand their own gender identity and sexual orientation.

‘I’ve been awash of sexuality and gender confusion since forever, and through fandom I found people on the trans spectrum who helped me deal and feel less alone, and I learnt the term “pansexual”, which fits me as well as any word ever will and was a huge relief - because if there's a word for it, it's a thing, you know? I'm not the only person who feels this way. I didn't make up this way of thinking’ – British, 25-34, pansexual

Often this personal realisation went hand in hand with a realisation that, not only were there others ‘like them’ in the world, but there were also heterosexual allies, or, as one participant put it ‘there were people who [despite being heterosexual] didn’t want me dead. That’s definitely changed my life massively. I can’t underscore how important having access to these sort of fics has been to my life’ (British, 25-34, bisexual).

While not to dismiss Butler’s (1993) fears about the dangers of queer appropriation, it is important to note that respondents who specifically identified as queer did not express a problem, on the whole, with heterosexual cis-gendered women in this space – instead having a wide range of people within fandom spaces was seen as an opportunity to foster communication and understanding. Most respondents – including those who identified as lesbian, bisexual, demisexual, pansexual, and queer – were also strongly against the ‘shaming’ of sexual identities, and emphasised the fact that they were comfortable sharing sexualised space with heterosexual and/or cis-gendered women because they felt any expression of female sexuality had value and should be encouraged. As one participant noted, ‘If [a] woman [in slash fandom] also becomes more interested in the civil rights of homosexuals or something, great, but there is enough shaming of women's sexual fantasies and interests in the world and every little bit is awful’ (American, 25-34, lesbian).

There also tended to be a very open and fluid definition of what constituted queer. Only a tiny minority of respondents spoke directly about concerns as to queer appropriation, or the authenticity of online queer identities discussed by Busse (2005). One woman commented on how she saw slash as a way for people to ‘play’ with gender and sexuality, and open themselves up to experimentation, even if they presented as heterosexual in day to day life – to this extent she saw slash as having made her ‘more open about accepting and understanding people who are not sitting neatly in one

labelled box' (Australian, 35-44, queer/dyke). Another wrote about how the labels attached to sexuality were 'confining' and that she viewed the 'slash fiction world [as] "queer"' insomuch as she felt it created a world where 'all of these identities and categories are quite secondary to human-ness' (American, 25-34, heterosexual). There was a clear rejection of community "policing" in terms of creating rules about who was and wasn't allowed to engage in fandom, or write m/m sex, and an acknowledgement that yes, fandom provided a safe space for queer women, but that safe space should be extended to everyone – gay or straight, man or woman, cisgendered or trans.

Likewise, respondents as a whole were not concerned that people might engage with any type of m/m erotic content (including slash fic) purely for the purpose of "getting off". One respondent commented, 'If you have an emotional connection to the characters [in slash], that's great. If it's just porn for you, it's just porn' (American, 25-34, asexual). A number of women noted that fanfic is free and is often available on sites that are not picked up by internet pornography filters – thus making it more inclusive than other types of SEM which either might not be affordable to some women, or might be restricted in some countries. Thirty-nine percent (39%) of respondents from within slash fandom expressed concern about the involvement of people who were drawn to the community just for the erotic literature, as opposed to a pre-existing interest in the source material (TV show, film etc.). However, these concerns were almost entirely along the lines of accuracy (adherence to canon and/or fanon), and therefore the believability and characterisation of any fiction a non-fan produced, and were aimed at writers, not readers. The remaining 61% of respondents were not concerned, with one noting, 'Come on in, the tent's big enough for everyone' (American, 45-54, bisexual).

Discussion

The data presented here show a consensus among female participants that involvement with online m/m SEM and slash communities has had a positive effect on their lives, as well as contributing to beneficial changes in their knowledge, attitudes, and practices with regards to genders and sexualities. For women who identify as queer, online slash spaces contribute to the 'democratisation of desire' as laid out by McNair (2002, 2013); but these spaces can also provide a place of education and transformation for *all* sexual identities. The majority of participants see the material that they read and/or write as

having a political aspect, although there is a clear acknowledgement that simply reading or writing m/m SEM is not sufficient in terms of making a political impact. However, many view engagement with slash fiction as a gateway into activism – a creative practice that has the ability to influence political and social views, as well as a site for sharing and supporting – not judging nor shaming. There is a strong emphasis on the legitimacy of women's desire, and the need to encourage women to be open and frank about their needs and wants as sexual consumers, something which online slash forums are seen as facilitating. From a feminist perspective, we can trace this back to Woolf's (1929) *A Room of One's Own*, which sees space as an essential pre-requisite for certain types of autonomous action, especially for women in a patriarchally structured society. Online slash communities can provide a 'narrative safe haven' where women 'can experiment with identity, find affirmation, and develop the strength necessary to find others like themselves and a sense of belonging' (Welker 2006, 866). Slash community spaces are not just about sex, they are about women having a place free of heteronormative conditionings in which to chat and share meaning, and reflect on life, politics, the world (Bury 2005, 71). Because these spaces are queered, they are (for some) 'safer spaces of connection and reflection' (Rambukkana 2007, 77).

In terms of thinking of fandom communities as safe spaces for non-heteronormative communities, many participants offered up the idea of online slash communities as "queer" spaces that should be open to all who are prepared to positively contribute and listen. There is a rejection of overly-rigid policing of the boundaries of these spaces, and an enthusiasm for the idea of them as heterotopias, counterpublics, spaces that are radical and have the potential to be genuinely transformative. In his discussion of slash and heterotopias, Rambukkana (2007) draws on Warner's (1999) observation that restrictive zoning laws in real space which limit the number, size, and proximity of sex-related businesses in areas that also contain residences can threaten gay areas of a city. In this sense, non-conventional sexuality is constrained to the margins, to liminal spaces where no one lives, places which are 'out of site and out of mind' (Rambukkana 2007, 78). If explicit m/m sites served merely as idealised fantasy spaces for women interested in getting off on gay sex they would not have any impact on mainstream space, place, or culture. However, the change in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours expressed by the women surveyed shows how participation in such a counterpublic can interrogate and overturn hegemonic codes governing the public

expression of gender and sexuality, meaning that explicit m/m fandom ‘can work to elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations... including forms of intimate association, vocabularies of affect, styles of embodiment’ (Warner 2002, 57).

For many respondents, participation in online slash spaces encouraged them to talk more openly about queer sex – to demystify it, to challenge prejudiced “jokes”, to correct misinformation when they found it in the public sphere. In this sense, participants act to make queer sex more visible, and as Cefai (2014, 611) points out, notions of visibility are ‘central to the politicisation of space in geographies of sexuality’. Berlant and Warner (1998, 562) argue that the potential to change our social system lies in freeing sex and intimacy from their ‘obnoxiously cramped’ position within private space; by having ‘public sex’. By ‘public’ sex, Berlant and Warner do not mean sex that is happening “out there” in the open, but rather sexual relationships that do not pretend they have no connection to any social context, that can instead be a foundation for new communities that may then become dissenting political bodies – ‘public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity’ (Warner 2002, 203). Many of the women surveyed maintained that their involvement with m/m fan spaces was political, and we can read this through the lens of ‘public sex’ – m/m fandom can serve to decouple sexuality and intimacy from the private, and re-situate them in the public. Sexuality is thus rendered a more public activity, not just because of its setting, but also in its cultivation of important dimensions of performance and collective witnessing. As Abrams (2012, 32) describes, sexual cultures such as explicit m/m fandom can foster forms of intimacy and trust that create a context for stranger sociality – ‘for casual contact or intense, shared observation that forge new forms of collective bonds between people with no prior acquaintance’. Explicit slash sites can help freer circulation of sex-radical discourse and change the dynamic relation between sexual subcultures and the mainstream public sphere, as well as asking that queer sexuality and relationships be publicly celebrated.

Overall, slash is seen as a medium which can create better allies, encourage cross-identification, and bring about positive personal changes. In addition, many women speak about how these spaces are queer because the women in them are often “queer” in one way or another. Not only are heterosexual women in the minority in this sample, but a large proportion of women who identified as heterosexual in terms of their

relationship and sexual history discussed (in both focus groups and other sections of the survey) how their affinity with non-conventional (and often non-vanilla) SEM made them feel they weren't "straight" in the traditional sense. As one woman described it, 'I'm heterosexual, sure, but I'm certainly a little bent' (British, 45-54, mainly heterosexual). This can be seen as resonating with the idea of the 'queer heterosexual', which Powers (1993, 24) describes as the 'testy lovechild of identity politics and shifting sexual norms'. In contrast to some of the objections raised to the appropriation of queer identities by heterosexuals discussed in the introduction, Smith (1997) writes about how he claims the identity of queer heterosexual in order to 'further [his] own desires for a world of multiple possibilities rather than as a means of benefitting from queer chic'. Embracing this perspective, the queer activist and director Tristan Taormino (2003) 'welcomes queer heterosexuals into the fold', adding 'being queer to me has always been about my community, my culture, and my way of looking at the world, not just who I love and who I fuck'. While I would be hesitant to make a case either for or against the existence of the queer heterosexual, a determination to create a welcoming, open, and liberal environment within online spaces dedicated to slash fandom is overwhelmingly apparent in the data. Both Hubbard (2007) and Sanders-McDonagh and Peyrefitte (forthcoming) have argued that queer spaces – and, indeed, queer geography – are about 'the fluidity of sexuality, the diverse forms of desire that are aroused in different sites' (Hubbard 2007, 156) – and to this extent it can certainly be argued that online slash spaces are queer. Much of what participants say about their fandom space finds echoes in the works of writers such as Leo Bersani (1995, 9), who argues that we should be looking to create a kind of community 'that can never be settled, whose membership is always shifting... a community in which many straights should be able to find a place'. It would certainly seem, as Donna Haraway (1991) has previously suggested, that the politics of affinity have strong potentials to move us beyond some of the limitations of identity politics.

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