

BENDING GENDER:  
FEMINIST AND (TRANS)GENDER DISCOURSES  
IN THE CHANGING BODIES OF SLASH FAN FICTION

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John lay shivering, luxuriating in the heat of both of them, and abruptly reached down between – between her own legs: fingers tangling with Rodney’s, exploring all the complicated folds and hollows where her cock should have been, her clit still pulsing gently against the heel of her palm, so wet and slick and hot it made her shudder all over again, thrilled and terrified all at once.

– Astolat, *But Some Things Never Stop Being Funny*

Meet John Sheppard and Rodney McKay, two typical guys. On the Sci-Fi Channel TV show *Stargate: Atlantis* (2004-), they spend their days exploring strange new worlds and glorifying the American military. In online fiction by fans of the show, however, they do a great deal more. Online amateur fictions by media fans expand, analyze, and transform the fictive universes of popular media texts. Slash is a fan fiction genre that engages in a particular kind of transformative and interpretive practice: it depicts homoerotic dynamics between characters from TV, film, and other media forms, often in a sexually explicit manner. The subgenre on which we focus in this essay is “genderfuck” fiction, which uses science fiction and fantasy tropes to alter and reimagine characters’ sexed and gendered bodies. The passage quoted above shows a John whose body has turned temporarily female, engaged in exploring the orgasmic potential of his new genitals. Such sudden re-embodiments are common in the genre, and not only for the sake of their erotics. Connected to feminist concerns with the cultural meanings and effects of gendered bodies and to the tensions around gendered embodiment explored by queer and trans theorists, these fictional tropes manipulate the bodies of their protagonists for a variety of purposes, ranging from the spurious and voyeuristic to the political and subversive. Through explorations of cross-dressing, disjunctures between identity and embodiment, and allusions to realities of queer and transgendered lives, fan genderfuck stories highlight multidimensional intersections of sex, gender, desire, and embodiment.

### Media Fandom and *Stargate: Atlantis*

Scholars have been researching slash fan fiction for almost two decades and fans have engaged in the practice – often with a high degree of self-consciousness – for almost twice as long.<sup>1</sup> Still, the complex interrelationships between slash readers, writers, and source texts have not yet been understood comprehensively. Fan stories negotiate among multiple interpretations of characters, dynamics, and events, often filling in scenes or thoughts that are absent in the source text. Stories often provide insights and critiques which rival any academic analysis. Fan fiction also creates a canvas where writers, unrestricted by commercial impetus, can explore characters and worlds already familiar to and beloved by their readers. Although some fan fiction is easily accessible to outsiders, in most cases its audience is clearly defined: fans write for other fans who are intimately familiar with the source text and, quite often, the surrounding fandom and the discussions and stories it produces. This communal context is central to the understanding of any fanfiction genre: tropes often function as community-wide conceits and must be read with an awareness and within the context of the culture that produced the stories and constitutes their primary audience. Gender and sexuality are central to many discussions of slash, but the tendency to seek explanation for slash fans' psychological motivation often obscures the multiple, complicated functioning of stories and interactions within slash-based fan networks. In order to take this into account, we have chosen to analyze stories and tropes within one particular fannish network: the slash fan community around the characters of John Sheppard and Rodney McKay from *Stargate: Atlantis*.

*Stargate: Atlantis* (SGA) is a science fiction spinoff of the decade-running *Stargate: SG-1*, in which planets are connected to one another via wormholes that can be traversed through so-called stargates. The spinoff follows a one-way expedition to the lost city of Atlantis in another galaxy, which is inhabited by humans on various planets and an overwhelming enemy of life-sucking aliens. The show's ensemble character is built around a team of four explorers and a command structure within the city; slash fans, however, have overwhelmingly focused on the relationship between acerbic genius scientist Rodney McKay and unflappable military commander John Sheppard. Like many favorite slash pairings, the two contrast visually and emotionally. As the de facto leads of the show, they work together closely in every episode, often saving one another's lives. The McKay/Sheppard pairing has drawn many slash fans from other fandoms, aided by the

<sup>1</sup> Most of the early discussions of slash (Russ 1985; Lamb and Veith 1986; as well as Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992; and Penley 1992) address tensions between the romance tropes that pervade most slash narratives and the explicitly pornographic scenes many contain. For an overview of older and more recent conversations on slash, see Hellekson and Busse 2006.

spinoff's ready-made fannish infrastructure of *Stargate*-oriented mailing lists, blog communities, and archives. Impressive fan artifacts and popular fan writers also drew fans to the show from other fan communities. Due to all these factors, SGA fandom contains large numbers of fans who engage theoretically and critically with the source text, the fandom, and its creative productions. Readers and writers tend to be familiar with various slash tropes and, as a result, fiction in this fandom draws heavily and often playfully on traditional themes and tropes. Halfway through the show's fourth season, thousands of stories focus on the McKay/Sheppard pairing alone; several dozen of these are genderfuck stories, which – in all modes from the comic to the deeply serious – present sex changes, gender-switches, crossdressing, impregnation, transgender life narratives, and radical genderqueer politicizations of the two characters. We draw from these to explore the ways feminist and transgender theory and politics play out in fannish interpretive communities.

### Female Men in *A Female Thing*: Genderswap and Feminism

T'Mar's story *A Female Thing* exemplifies many of the tropes found in classic iterations of gender-bending fan fiction, while also highlighting tensions between romantic narratives and feminist politics which are frequently present in slash.<sup>2</sup> In the story, John Sheppard turns into a woman after having been exposed to alien technology. He remains military commander of Atlantis and, in the several years the story covers, grows closer to his colleague Rodney McKay, eventually becoming pregnant when another alien influence counteracts his birth control. The two get married and, after the birth of their daughter, learn that scientists have reconfigured the machine to return John to a male body. They defy US military regulations and demand to stay together, overcoming Rodney's straight identity as he continues to physically love John in his male body. In feminist mode, the story explores John's disconnect and discomfort over physical changes and his confrontations with an outside world that regards him differently depending on his sexed body. As a romance, *A Female Thing* provides a heterosexual validation for the central same-sex pairing, who are able to consummate their partnership with marriage and childbirth before continuing their relationship as men. The sex-change trope has two central functions in this story as in the others that share its concerns: one narrative and romantic (to get apparently-straight characters into a same-sex relation and/or give them children) and one thematic and obliquely political (to explore women's situation by transferring it onto a male character).

<sup>2</sup> For a number of reasons including potential negative legal and/or social repercussions, many fan authors publish and interact online under pseudonyms.

Fan fiction-writing communities have historically been made up overwhelmingly of women (who tend to be mainly white, middle-class and straight or bisexual, though significant and vocal minorities of otherwise identified fans exist); it is scarcely surprising, then, that questions of gender presentation, representation, and equality are central to fan fiction and discussions. Fan writers use the characters, plots, and bodies from their chosen texts as raw material which can be manipulated to explore questions of most interest to them as well as issues and plot points raised by the source: manipulations of gendered embodiment frequently lead to the exploration of feminist concerns. The John of *A Female Thing* takes on a significance which is quite common in genderfuck fiction: he becomes a female man whose physical alteration brings him to consciousness of the experiences of women in a sexist society. T'Mar addresses gendered difference on the most concrete, physical level at which a man might be surprised at the everyday mechanics of a female body – “having to get half undressed and sit down just to pee was a right pain” for her John. She also shows the effects of gender on engagement with others, and the significance of sexism to such relations, as here when a soldier newly under John’s command attempts to pick up a woman he does not recognize as his military superior:

John was startled when a marine sat down [...]. “Can I help you?” he asked. “Just thought you’d like some company,” the marine said, smiling at him in a way John instantly recognized. It was the ‘I’m so charming you’ll want to sleep with me’ smile. The marine thought he was a woman! It was so odd and disconcerting and downright *scary* that for a moment John was completely nonplussed. Finally he just said, in his strictest military voice, “What?” “Come on,” said the marine, “it must be slim pickings out here in the middle of nowhere.”

This passage demonstrates the extent to which behavior, self-image, and outward appearance do not coincide with gendered stereotypes: the John whose narrative perspective is given in male pronouns is not the attractive woman the marine hopes to seduce with his suggestive comments, and the juxtaposition of opposing perspectives is sufficiently unsettling to provoke fear in John. The experience of having femininity misread is something that may not require recent bodily transformation to experience. John’s confusion as his physical female attributes cause someone to think he is a woman raises the question, as feminist theorists from Simone de Beauvoir to Judith Butler have done, of what it means to “be” a “woman.” Reading genderfuck and fucking with gender, writers and readers may come to wonder, like Butler, how and whether biology results in a subject “becoming its gender” (2000, 182) and how familiar characters in unlikely situations construct their identities and negotiate sexed bodies in gendered environments.

Forcing male characters to experience the social and cultural, physical and emotional realities of life in a female body, genderfuck stories ask whether and how much these socio-biological facts – objectification, sexual vulnerability, the possibility of becoming pregnant – constitute womanhood. They also ask to what degree originally-male characters remain themselves through such changes: when the cultural predicates by which one gains one’s sense of identity change, is one still the same person? In many cases, these questions are answered with surprisingly stereotyped understandings of the intersections of biology and gender. Frequent discoveries for the newly female-bodied include exaggerated invocations which would horrify many feminists: intense menstrual cramps, chocolate cravings, frustration at the restrictive expectations around women’s clothing and grooming behavior. This preoccupation with negative aspects of female-bodiedness often goes along with similarly stereotyped positive descriptions: characters, who are often highly invested in their physicality, may trade strength for agility and endurance, learn to read their emotional environment better, and experience a different and multi-orgasmic sexuality.<sup>3</sup> Given the community which contextualizes these stories, we suggest a few rationales for the stereotyping that can so often accompany play with fictional characters’ genders. In communities where fan fiction tends to be written within a primarily female group of friends and acquaintances, the stereotypical presentation of womanly complaints may be less an attempt to accurately portray women’s realities than a means of fictionally venting frustrations among likeminded friends. Furthermore, the exaggerated lens is often a tool through which to explore gender relations rather than a failure of verisimilitude. It is a reflection of cultural stereotypes of femininity, reflecting both the fears and envies of men, rather than an accurate depiction of readers’ and writers’ own embodiments. The stories become an ironic playground to explore exaggerated stereotypes and feminine roles, projecting onto these fictional men the fictional constructs of what womanhood should look like.

The following scene, for example, looks on the surface like a near-offensive stereotype wherein normally feminine women are restrained during sex but John’s manly womanhood is a positive exception:

Rodney managed to lift his head and kiss John, who just about devoured him, even as he drove into John with a rhythm that was becoming unsteady and erratic. “Oh, uh,” were about the only sounds that Rodney could make. Most women felt debased at male sex sounds, but of course John would be different. He let out a series of groans under Rodney, matching Rodney’s own noises.

<sup>3</sup> In these generalized descriptions, we draw from our extensive reading of genderswap not only in SGA but in other fandoms as well, since this trope and its associated characteristics can easily be found in many stories and fandoms. See, for example Busse’s discussion of genderswap in boy band fan fiction (2006).

If we understand the genderswap trope as an exploration of gender roles, however, this scene reads quite differently: it's not an issue of readers or writers believing that women don't or shouldn't make noises as much as it is an acknowledgment that women do make sounds even as imaginary "woman" does not. So, if "woman" can't make noises during sex, then real women would have to identify with not-woman – or, in this case, with John-as-woman, who both is and is not female, both is and is not the story's reader. Slash in general offers this distanced embodied identification insofar as many women will more readily identify with the unmarked bodies of male TV heroes than the overdetermined bodies of female TV stars who often present bodies that are oppressively unlike their own (Penley 1992; Lamb and Veith 1986). Genderswap then further complicates crossgendered identification by turning the identificatory (male) object into a (false) female, thus forcing characters and readers to address the constructed gender not just of the protagonist but of all of us.

Theoretically, these crossgendered writings connect to an understanding of gender as performance: the woman writing can show the disjuncture between womanliness and actual women by writing femininity and its discontents onto the bodies of favored male characters. If women write men, because to write women would mean to feel that they have to abide the narrow roles permitted to them, then it would make sense that these men (as they become identificatory objects for the women reading and writing them) would be defined against the narrow roles women are supposed to follow. Genderswap, then, offers women a reconnection to the female body via a doubled gender masquerade, reminding us clearly that all women perform femininity just like John quite consciously has to acquire these skills. Thus, genderswaps enjoy afflicting male characters with supposed female behavior at the same time as they complicate such female stereotypes by using characters that have been explored in hundreds and thousands of other stories. Rather than using female media figures with whom no one can compete, the cross-gender identification allows a distancing, whereas the genderswitch then returns these characters into familiar (yet defamiliarized) territory. Merging the gender identity of the writer with the body of the desired male subject produces a paradigm in which the twice-removed body offers an identification that actual female media representations cannot.

The centrality of romantic recognition to genderfuck slash stories frames their questions of identity and gender, asking how much of desire is generated by a person and how much by their physical attributes and cultural attributions. Male/male slash explores sexual dynamics via crossgender identification, placing two often highly masculine men in romantic relations to portray love that eludes the hierarchies often inscribed in heterosexual relationships. Lamb and Veith (1986), in fact, suggest that slash's love between male protagonists explores relationships with a gender equality impossible in heterosexual pairings. Classic slash narratives

are closely aligned with the feminine genre of romance, and frequently present sexual relationships as idealized emotional and spiritual partnerships. Drawing from characters' seemingly explicit onscreen heterosexuality, many stories use these narratives of inner compatibility and true love to suggest that partners' love for one another is strong enough to overturn their clearly defined heterosexual identity. When one of the slashed characters' gender is changed, the idealized and romanticized egalitarianism of male coupledness shifts, and the romantic questions change even as their underlying impetus remains the same: do the two love one another regardless of external cultural and social expectations? Where traditional slash often requires the pair to overcome both their supposed straightness and external or social prohibitions, the genderswapped pair faces different problems, often situated in the way women are treated in society and how that may affect their relationship.

The romance plot has often been criticized as a patriarchal structure (Modleski 1980); when slash fans take it up, it can be difficult to see where texts criticize patriarchal structures and where they reinscribe them. In *A Female Thing*, romance structures of male superiority can be seen in various scenes. John's pregnancy especially becomes indicative of the heteronormative desires informing much slash fan fiction, which retains romance tropes' underlying sentiment of true love and devotion transcending all external rules. John declares his desire for an abortion which his doctor refuses; when he tries to leave the base, Rodney physically keeps John from leaving. While John recognizes in the final scene that his love for Rodney and the child somehow valorize the unethical actions, it nevertheless suggests that John at this point remains as helpless as many women are when their bodies become conduits for the reproduction of patriarchal structures. This representation may function as a critique of patriarchy, but the approving way in which Rodney's disempowerment of John is handled suggests that it may also be a reinscription of women's normative vocation to motherhood. The impossibly overdetermined topic of pregnancy and the power dynamics associated with it brings slash fiction's inherent tensions between romance and feminism into sharp focus.

In *A Female Thing* and many other genderswap stories, the final plot twist involves a return to the old, male body, yielding new complications. For slash romance plots made heterosexual, this raises questions of sexual orientation which gender change may have evaded: Rodney must decide whether he remains attracted to a John who is once again male. In some stories of this type, love fails to easily transcend physicality and the (heretofore) heterosexual partners cannot deal with the changed bodies. Far more often, however, the slashed couple immediately continues their sexual relationship or return to it, effectively becoming gay for one another, thus invoking the powerful slash trope wherein romantic love trumps identity politics. The singularity and exceptional status of the relationship is confirmed, ultimately evoking values of true love, monogamy, and heteronormati-

vity. *A Female Thing* (like most genderswap and, in fact, most slash stories) ends with the happily same-sex-loving central slash pairing – here, married with child. Fucking with gender has thus accomplished what otherwise would not have been possible: biological children, legal marriage, and defiance of the US military prohibition on open same-sex relations. The story detours through changed gender embodiment and the questions of identity, sexuality and patriarchy associated with it, but it finds its closure in a romanticized, homosexual, familial relationship which connects the story to the community and its general reader expectations.

### ***You're Pretty Good Looking: Gender Identities and Sexual Desires***

*A Female Thing* activates the best-known tropes of fan genderfuck fiction when it takes a trip through heterosexuality to arrive at a gay love story. Even when they do not present this precise narrative, many if not most genderfuck stories are written in conversation with it: they use iterations and variations of the common community narratives to make intertextual and political points about sexual identity and object choice, desire and embodiment. Trinityofone's *You're Pretty Good Looking for a Girl* uses genderfuck to explore questions of body, identity and orientation by looking at two different characters who change gender and their respective partners. In a scenario very close to an episode from the original program, Rodney McKay and female marine Laura Cadman get stuck in one another's bodies. The story explores their various responses, dwelling on the difference between Rodney's and Laura's reactions to changing bodies. Rodney's investment in and mourning of his embodied masculinity is a genderfuck commonplace, but when Laura changes from female to male she is surprisingly unfazed by the experience. From the beginning she seems to adjust to the change with a certain ease: Rodney, the point of view character, marvels that while he is awkward, "her movements were easy – had been, from almost the beginning". Laura, an explosions expert in the Marines and thus accustomed to life in a male-dominated world, adjusts easily to her male body; the story suggests that she may have had gender-queer tendencies even before the switch, that her gender presentation may not have been as simply connected to her physical embodiment as Rodney's was.

Laura's comfort also raises wider questions about the social significance of gendered embodiment. While a man suddenly inhabiting a female body effectively loses social status, a fact that many fan genderfuck stories address in detail, she does not – her new body is socially unmarked in ways her female body was emphatically not, especially given her area of expertise. More difficult for Laura is the negotiation of sexual orientation and object choice in her new body. She wonders at one point whether the prohibition against homosexuality in the US military actually means that as a woman in a man's body all sex she could have would be gay and therefore she is "not allowed to have sex with *anybody*" (original

emphasis); this alludes to the difficulty of fitting transsexual and transgendered subjects into the normative regulation of sexuality along a binary homo/hetero division (Halberstam 1994). Her heterosexual love interest refuses to continue the relationship because he cannot desire a male body. As the story progresses, Laura finds a male lover, accepting her continued attraction to men regardless of the apparent identity it ascribes to her; this opens questions about orientation and embodied identity that mirror issues raised not only by conservative organizations like the US military but also within lesbian communities, whose members have frequently been confronted by the instability of politicized identifications based on gendered object choice when gender presentation and identification is itself unstable and politicized.<sup>4</sup>

Rodney's change of sex and his relationship with John explore these questions in more detail. Like his ability to navigate the world in his new body, Rodney's relationship to sexual desire is presented as opposite to Cadman's. At first, he is too uncomfortable in his female body to think about sex; when he does, identity politics are a relatively minor concern, but he finds that the change in embodiment has altered his desires. As a male-bodied, heterosexual man he paid little attention to the charms of his team leader, John Sheppard, but after the change an apparently biological desire comes over him: "He was aware of Sheppard – or rather, he told himself frantically, this body was aware of him." Orientation, for Rodney, is apparently not only located in his reaction to an object but in the imagined relationship between the object and his body, and heterosexual interrelation is the most attractive prospect. Armed with this normative interpretation of desire, Rodney propositions John with the exhortation that "any man" would find Laura's body attractive; John's violently negative reaction comes as a great surprise. John, it turns out, is gay, closeted, and in love with a male-bodied Rodney.

In an inversion of the traditional slash narratives where seemingly straight characters choose to overcome their sexual orientation – bodily restrictions and social conventions – for the one person they love above all else, this story presents a gay John confronted with a female Rodney who asks him to overcome his same-sex desires for the love of his best friend, now female-bodied. John is offered the fulfillment of his desire, but he must change the way he understands the relationship between object choice and gendered identity in order to attain it. His hard-won identity and any affiliation he has with gay communities will be stripped from him, something Rodney's encouragements recognize even as they deny:

<sup>4</sup> For example, in Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, the protagonist's lesbian-feminist-identified partner leaves her because she finds living with a "he-she" is incompatible with her identity and politics; Califia discusses the particular issues partners of transgendered people face in chapter 6 of *Sex Changes*.

[Rodney] closed his eyes. “It wouldn’t mean...” He opened them again; he had to look, had to see Sheppard’s face. “Wanting me, like this – it wouldn’t mean giving into your father, or society, or...or The Man. It would just mean...” He shrugged, helplessly, giving up. “It would mean whatever you want it to mean.”

Both John’s gayness and his ultimate willingness to have what he perceives to be straight sex can never “mean whatever [he] want[s] it to mean” since it is already complicated not only by biological desires but also by social regulations and community allegiances. Heteronormative societal strictures, as represented by John’s father, may not control sexual expressions but they inevitably contour them even in situations, both real and fictional, where the complexity of gender and sexuality renders categorization constantly insufficient. Rodney may disavow the seeming heterosexuality of their relationship and insist that John maintain his queerness, but for the military and the world at large, the appearance of a normal relationship will be no different from its reality. However, given that John has evidently been passing for his entire military career, Rodney may indeed be his ideal mate if John can recognize the male he desires in Rodney’s female body.

As in the traditional trope, Trinityofone’s characters love one another so deeply that genders and physical embodiments become secondary to physical expressions of this deep love. The slash reader knows that John will make the choice to be with Rodney, even a female Rodney, and that knowledge encourages us to separate desired individuals from the bodies that house them even as the plot of the story reminds us that embodiment does matter:

Sheppard stared at him, into him, like he was searching for the last remaining spark of light at the center of a black hole; Rodney didn’t break the gaze as with a sigh he stepped forward into the palm Sheppard instinctively uncurled, cupping it gently around Rodney’s breast. “This is me.”

Here the emphasis is on what or who is *really* inside a body: Rodney’s male eyes beam out from Laura’s female figure and John recognizes the one he loves. The slash love narrative wins out over Rodney’s relational heterosexuality and John’s determined gayness by enabling and deconstructing both: male and female bodies are together but the true relationship is a love between two men, one female-bodied. Rodney takes on the appearance of heterosexuality while leaving narrow interpretations of it behind in his queer relationship with John, while John continues to live a queer identity under the appearance of heterosexuality.

*You’re Pretty* thus plays with slash’s true-gay-love-despite-heterosexuality trope by embracing it (in Rodney), inverting it (in John), and rejecting it (in the way John is troubled by betraying his hard-won queer identity rather than the actual sex with Rodney). Bodies and their relationships to identity are thus configured in the story in interesting ways, at times being mostly incidental (as in Laura’s case) at others mostly determining love interest (as in Rodney’s case) and

often becoming a burden to be overcome (as in John’s case). Whereas earlier slash frequently required its heroes to declare their heterosexuality even as they were clearly in love with (and loving) another man, more recent slash stories often maintain much of the appeal of the underlying trope while eschewing its homophobia. Thus, the earlier version of straight men loving and having sex with men has since mostly given way to men who are less definable in terms of sexual orientation yet often still “become gay” for their partner. As in romance literature, where true virginity has often given way to a symbolic virginity of never truly having loved before, the slash pairing’s first time often matters in particular ways as sex tends to symbolize emotional intimacy and long-term commitment.

### **Genderqueer Terrorism and the Romance Narrative: *always should be someone you really love***

If traditional slash (and traditional genderswap) foregrounds the love that transcends physical boundaries and, by extension, sexual orientation, the narratives we look at in the remainder of this essay foreground a very different ideology. Rather than bodies ultimately not mattering in the face of loving the person underneath, *Thingswithwings’ always should be someone you really love* presents these ideas only to subvert them entirely even as it seems to announce its true-love thematic in its title and deceptively simple plot: the narrative presents a straight John and Rodney who get genderswitched, start having sex as women with one another, get switched back and, after a time, realize that they want to continue a romantic relationship. On the surface, this evokes the standard slash trope where two seemingly straight guys realize for one reason or other their deep and abiding love for one another and decide to express that love physically even though they were not/are not/still do not consider themselves to be gay; it also plays with the virginity subtrope, and does so twice over as both John and Rodney are literally virgins in their female bodies and (to gay sex) in their male bodies. And yet the story ultimately and queerly rejects the romance and heteronormativity so often associated with slash narratives.

*Always should be* gives romance closure a very different significance by producing a conscious intersection of slash fans’ interpretive tropes with concerns about gender and identity drawn from queer politics and fiction. *You’re Pretty* touches upon some of these, but works mainly in the slash vernacular; *always should be* draws equally from both. The source of John and Rodney’s sex change, though not revealed until quite late in the story, is crucial to the story’s intervention. The two SGA characters are caught in the crossfire of an alien civilization’s armed conflict over the acceptability of same-sex desire: as one reader remarks in the comments to the story, they are turned into women by “alien queer radical gender terrorists.” John and Rodney’s change here is not a mere accident of

science but inescapably linked to the political; in fact, in a public discussion the author connects the political act within the story of forcefully imposing gender on the characters to her own act of writing. This story, in other words, performs what happens when radical queer gender terrorism hits the SGA genderfuck tropes: the characters described by its author as “fairly uncritical middle-aged heterosexual men” become queer, both in the sense in which “queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (Edelman 2004, 17) and in the ways that shared nonnormative relationships to sex and gender define queer communities.

The queering of John and Rodney is an involved and complex process. At the beginning of the story, when John and Rodney unexpectedly become female, they retain their male identity and female object choice. They relate to each other’s female bodies via their accustomed male heterosexual perspectives even as they worry that they may be “lesbians now.” During their first sexual encounter, John says “you are really gorgeous as a woman” and Rodney responds “you’re completely my type.” Each man understands himself as fundamentally male, having sex *with* (not *as*) a woman. As they move towards fucking, though, this begins to change: their pleasures come from their experience of female embodiment not only as sexual object but also as sexual subject, their male heterosexual identities disrupted by their bodies when they start to have sex *as* (and *with*) a woman. So when John fantasizes about having a cock to fuck Rodney, Rodney agrees with him: “this body seems to like having, uh. God. Having things inside it.” Rodney accepts their mutual cognitive dissonance between physical and mental identities and desires: the story mixes, merges, and twists the binary notions of sexual identity and sexual object choice through which John and Rodney understood sexuality prior to their transformation.

As female-bodied heterosexual-identified men fucking one another, John and Rodney lose all sense of the stability required to identify as straight or gay – their sense of identity as sexual beings is in constant flux. From noticing one another as attractive females and retaining their initial straight object choice, to acknowledging that their own bodies clearly make their sexual encounters gay, John and Rodney come to an awareness of their bodies as multi-erogenous zones that can give and receive various forms of pleasure in ways that complicate any clear position for identity or desire. Their discovery of their own polymorphously perverse sexuality functions as a mirror, disrupting the genital obsession binary as their changed genders disrupt traditional gender binaries: the acceptance of the spectrum of gender identity is doubled in the spectrum of the bodies as sexual zones in toto, fucking one another and fucking with gender simultaneously. And this is true even when John and Rodney masturbate their female bodies, as they then also slip into this perverse zone, both subject and object. John thinks at first that he “can’t tell anyone, not even McKay, how much he loves this, this body all new for him, beautiful and unworn. But he’d been almost glad of that; it stays his

secret, delicious and perverse.” The secret is shared, though: Rodney also has that delicious and perverse experience, and shared secret becomes shared pleasure as they embrace their identities as queer male lesbians.

Having thus queered the characters entirely, the story gives them back their old bodies. Yet instead of restoring normality, this second shift moves both of them even further into a queer territory where all identities are disrupted. No one else can appreciate how they now experience body and desire, and they only have one another to relate to. John and Rodney have been male and female, have learned to relate sexually in ways that confuse and complicate the way they experienced their bodies before, and they cannot return to their prior simple understanding of sex and gender. The change of sex has changed them, and it has done so in ways far more profound than the sudden recognition of true love that provides closure for classic genderswap slash plots. For both to enjoy sex in the returned bodies, they must accept that gender and sexuality have been altered by both transformations. That acceptance is found when John and Rodney come together as men, again. Their doubled identities and desires are represented in an overlaid image: “John is overwhelmed by double-vision: Rodney’s strong masculine jaw shadowed by the gentler curve it’d held two weeks ago, his broad, furry chest reminding John of his beautiful soft breasts.” The sex scenes and the conversations between the two suggest their multitudes of desire, their coming to terms with multiplicities of sexual bodies and polymorphously perverse desires where all parts of the body become erogenous zones. The story, with its emphasis on breasts and other non-genital parts of the bodies they touch and inhabit, suggests that this is what they learned as women. Having realized the entire body as a canvas of potential desire, their male bodies, suddenly rediscovered and suddenly as alien as their recent female bodies have been, can become a more plural playing ground.

*Always should be* presents a plot that looks almost exactly like the route through gender crossing to find homonormative love that *A Female Thing* instantiates and *You’re Pretty* modulates. John and Rodney are not gay, they just love one another; their experiences of sexual transformation lead them to recognize that they should be together. But in this story, that love is not born from a recognition of the other’s individual perfection that transcends gender – it emerges from a community of unique shared experience. And that difference is crucial. This is not a story about individual love overriding false barriers of gender and sexual identity, but of the development of queer community-in-adversity: we are shown how and why a queered identity politics is preferable to a naively imagined genderfree utopia of individualistic desire. It is the significance of bodies to the characters and the romance plot which demonstrates this best. John and Rodney may think that they’re not gay but just love each other, but we see a different story. The vertiginous doubling of their sexual identities in both themselves and their lovers is what creates the commonality that allows them to be together; rather than the attainment

of a predestined love *despite* bodies, this relationship happens *because* of the ways that bodies trouble identities and desires. In fact, the final scene portrays a non-erect penis, which works nicely as a deemphasis of the phallus as the center stage of their identities and desires, as the primary means of pleasure. If their female desires are multiple and not as genitally focused, then their doublegendered/multigendered new identities and desires should exceed the phallus as well.

The political subtext of the story becomes particularly clear when we look at the figure of the alien gender terrorist Tarin. He has become a social outcast after a failed revolution which tried to use sex-changing technology in the service of homosexual acceptance, the only one who chose not to return to the sex he was assigned at birth; he is also, according to the author a “nod to all the lonely passing FTM/butches of lesbian literature” – and, of course, a stand-in for the author herself, who also aggressively alters gender to increase awareness. Nevertheless, the overall force in *always should be* is toward a queer rereading of genderfuck romance tropes rather than a figuration of gender through transdiscourses.

### Transgender Slash Narratives

Transsexuality, transgender, and transsexualism have been used by many feminist and queer theorists to explore the fluidities and complexities of gender and desire, from Butler’s accounts of drag as representative of the way all gender is iteratively performed to Marjorie Garber’s exploration of cross-dressing and the production of cultural gendered meanings. In recent years, however, trans-identified scholars have begun to take issue with the use of transgendered and transsexual bodies as tropes in the exploration of cisgendered identities when the quotidian realities of translives are given little consideration.<sup>5</sup> Just as transgender historians have sought to (re)claim transpeople’s histories or to write them in to contemporary realities (Cromwell 1999; Feinberg 1996), so have some slash fans looked to draw transgender realisms from the metaphoric uses of gender changes which appear in genderfuck fiction.

Genderfuck fiction is common in many fannish contexts, but *Stargate: Atlantis* offers more support for transgendered interpretations than most. The science fiction show performs any number of transfigurations, swaps, and impossible body/mind feats, some of which play with gender in interesting ways: in the episode “Duet,” two consciousnesses get stuck in Rodney’s body, one of them female. As a result, viewers see Rodney as female on screen (or rather, they see the female

<sup>5</sup> Halberstam discusses this movement in relation to her 1994 essay “F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity” and the critiques it received from transactivists in *Female Masculinity* (1998, 145-149). Her later work (2005) analyzes the specificities of transgendered embodiments as she defines the “transgender look” and trans temporalities.

marine stuck in Rodney’s head as male). Moreover, Rodney McKay’s first name is revealed to be the often-feminine Meredith in the episode “McKay and Mrs Miller,” inspiring fan fiction writers to invest his name change with deeper gender-affiliated meaning. Rather than exploring what would happen if John and/or Rodney were suddenly given a female body, these stories ask what the *Stargate* world would look like if Meredith Rodney had always been female-bodied, if his change of gender had taken place before we, or John, had ever met him. Rageprufrock’s untitled story imagines a scenario in which Rodney indeed used to be a female-bodied Meredith. He reminisces about his transition:

The ensuing freakout, subsequent recriminations, tedious psychological profiling, and degrading consults, the moment of transcendental horror when the testosterone pills had kicked in and Meredith’s voice dropped an octave seemingly overnight – they were nothing compared to the day Meredith passed for Rodney without so much as a second glance.

This rather romanticized narrative of FTM transsexuality assumes that passing is a once-for-all, “overnight” experience productive of “transcendental horror” and that Meredith becomes Rodney only when others easily accept him as male. Most of the story revolves around Rodney and John’s relationship and the repercussions of John finding out about Rodney having been born in a female body. The story thus clearly functions in a phantasmatic space that is less concerned with accurately representing transgendered or transsexual identities and politics than it is with exploring the show’s characters and their dynamics. For many fan stories, the trans narrative thus is a trope to comment on the show: with this emphasis, the multiple realities of transpeople’s lives, from potential psychological turmoils to the mechanics of sex reassignment surgery, can be relegated or dismissed in favor of character explorations or romantic plots.

Grace’s *Life (Sometimes It Washes Over Me)* is a direct response to the failures of FTM fan fiction and more general genderfuck conventions to do justice to trans materialities. If traditional genderswap is driven by female desires and fantasies at the expense of trans realism, *Life* is its exact opposite, forcing its readers to recognize the everyday normality of “a gender at odds with sex, a sense of self not derived from the body” (Halberstam 2006, 76). It pushes fan fiction to its limits as it uses John and Rodney as characters but places them in situations where they are far removed from the ones fans know and love on screen. Alternative universe (AU) stories, which place characters in contexts outside of the original TV show, are popular in SGA fandom: usually, the heroes are turned into nobles, pirates, CEOs, physicians, gourmet chefs, and so forth, with John and Rodney conventionally successful and often fulfilling traditional romance plot tropes. In contrast to such elevated fantasies, *Life* casts a gay John and FTM Rodney as runaway kids in 1980s Los Angeles, hustling to stay alive. The differences between



this John and Rodney and the more common interpretations of the characters in fandom are central to the intervention this story makes in genderfuck fiction: trans, poor, teenage sex worker Rodney is not the same person as male, privileged, scientific genius Rodney. *Life* addresses the economic realities that face many transgendered people in transphobic US society, where the majority live in poverty and are denied access to medical care and welfare services.<sup>6</sup> With no resources, having run away from a homophobic town and their foster parents, this John and Rodney are not likely to be recruited by the US military and sent on a mission to another world. If one of the central questions driving such stories is how much a character is defined by his external circumstances and how much of identity is internal, then *Life* pushes this question to its breaking point, forcing fans to confront the political realities of their favored fantasies.

*Life* does, despite its grit and grime, participate in slash romance tropes as it explores the intersections of embodiment and sexual identity. When the two are children, John, who understands himself as gay, is attracted to Rodney because of Rodney's masculinity, not despite it:

He thought about kissing her, about touching her. He knew she didn't have a dick for real, but thought of what it would be like to give her a blowjob. It wasn't like thinking about girls at all. He'd tried thinking about boobs and pretty girls when he jerked off, but he might as well have been thinking about what was for dinner.

And like the John and Rodney of *always should be*, the two band together as a queer community of two – the only ones who can understand each other – before they take off for the city where they hope to find “lots of gays.” Even their life of LA hustling and struggling to survive is ameliorated by their love, which is framed as mutual care as well as romance. The story closes on a sex scene which has Rodney “hard and slick” and masculine as John kisses him to say that “it's okay.” Slash romance, here, becomes a hope for sexual community in a hostile, homophobic, transphobic world.

As is not unusual in fan communities where collaboration is widespread and ideas disseminate freely, *Life* gets a followup in Busaikko's *Ring of Fire*. In that envisioned future (the very basis of fan fiction is the celebration of multiple, often contradictory fictional interpretations and extrapolations), *Life*'s John and Rodney lose touch when Rodney gets pregnant and calls his sister for help. Having been helped to transition officially by his middle-class sister, Rodney has begun a successful computer career; left alone in LA, John is HIV positive, has spent some time in jail, and is working as a mechanic when he re-encounters Rodney at the beginning of the story. *Ring* reinforces the messages that *Life* raised: thanks to

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<sup>6</sup> For the high proportion of US transpeople who live in poverty and the difficulties gender variant people face in accessing public services, see Spade (2006).

class and gender difference, John, the consummate pilot who can fly just about anything in SGA, in this story has never set foot in a plane, while Rodney, the genius with several Ph.D.s, has escaped John's run-ins with sickness and the hostile State but remains a college dropout, a person for whom his SGA persona would have little respect. Sex is still redemptive, still the source of a queer commonality for them both. In this case, the changes hormones and surgery have wrought in Rodney's body allow the experience to become a mutual homecoming:

“My stubble's turning you on. That's beyond kinky and into weird.”

“You're turning me on,” John says, and kisses Rodney again. “It turns me on to see you in a body that we both think is sexy.”...

“I don't –” Rodney blurts out, and John shuts him up with his mouth and his fingers.

“You've always been kind of genitally challenged,” he says, while Rodney is gasping with that wonderful rare pleasure of letting himself be touched.

In this final iteration of trans/genderfuck fan fiction, a change in embodiment provides the opposite of alienation, and gives both characters and readers a sense of hopeful bodies and possibilities which are not contradicted by reality. The investments in these stories, even as they offer a romantic sexual payoff, are intimately connected to queer and trans subcultural and activist discourses: they are perhaps more salient examples of the permeation of these tropes and knowledges into cultures not explicitly based upon them than they are of the genderfuck fan fiction genre. Or, rather, they are an indication of the ways different discourse communities intersect, constructively and creatively contaminating one another. They provide a testimony to the variation within the group that ultimately constitutes what we'd call media fans.

### Conclusion: Writing Politics and Pleasure

Fan fiction is a literary genre based primarily in affect: love for the source, desire to continue it into different contexts, annoyance with the things it does badly, and pleasure in the friendships and shared desires that circulate in fan communities. Within these affective frameworks, political critiques are often articulated: the readings we have offered here developed from conversations we had with one another and with others as part of our fannish participation. In the stories we analyze here as in our own reading practices, feminist, queer and trans\* politics are as much part of the fannish interpretive framework as love for and knowledge of the fans' source text. As such, these stories and debates provide an excellent location from which to begin exploring the political potential of communal affective expressions within this particular community of amateur online writing.

The interpretive community within which given fan stories arise is extremely important here: every story is the result of intricate negotiations between fannish

textual and activist cultural demands. These two imperatives – the desire to revel in comforting tropes and the demands of real world concerns – drive all fan fiction to varying degrees; fans vocally express their displeasure if a story has failed to fulfill both. While an outsider’s look at certain stories might criticize them on political grounds, the contexts in which the stories are produced, circulated, and received may provide a common interpretive framework in which the stories are read and received differently – though politicized critiques are, as we have shown, also articulated within this frame. Many fans prefer not to see political concerns foregrounded in fanwork: “issue fic” can be a derogatory description. But issues are ever-present even when they remain subtextual, as in many of the stories and tropes we have discussed.

In the frameworks of changing embodiments which set genderswap conventions, we have found more and less ambiguous moments of feminism in undecidable recapitulation of and resistance to heteropatriarchal relationship models, suggesting the complexities inherent in the most traditional female desires. In more elaborately fucked-with gender fiction we have found complex iterations of queerness which challenge the assumptions of mainstream TV, mainstream culture, and the main streams of fandom. And in the stories where transgender embodiment is the major issue at hand, we have found tight canon ties and romantic community conventions hand in hand with the political and activist agency that might make these last stories more appealing for academics, queers and transfolk not affiliated with fandom’s many gender conventions. Micropolitical interventions take place in even the most hedonistic sex scenes, as we hope that we have shown. And what puts them there in fan fiction is their communal context: the fact that the writing is never spoken to a vacuum but engages in a constant process of revising and transforming the fictional and nonfictional world.

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