

# “YEARNING VOID AND INFINITE POTENTIAL”: ONLINE SLASH FANDOM AS QUEER FEMALE SPACE

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To me, slash is about cracks and crevices in a text, a yearning void in both the text and the reader. So space is a vacuum—something that isn't there but could be. But in the larger terms of community, culture, politics, space is less about vacuum and more about potential. The slash space, to me, is remarkable in its fecundity. It is space that is never filled, potential that never runs out. No matter how many stories, how many writers, there's always more space. Slash as space, space as both yearning void and infinite potential. (Julad 2003)

**T**o date, work on women, queerness, and online communities has mainly focused on lesbian and queer-identified women's use of online space in the service of identity and sexuality narratives played out in the physical world.<sup>1</sup> In this project, we expand the scope of such inquiries to include ways in which particular online spaces, cultures, and practices can queer women (and other gendered subjects) in ways not accounted for by most identity narratives. We are interested in the interactions between women which structure online media fandom, specifically the exchange of sexually explicit slash stories which depict relationships between male characters and actors from films, books, and television shows. In the virtual spaces we invoke in this paper, such shared sexual fantasies bring people together from a wide array of identities and locations. Our experience in slash fan communities on LiveJournal.com (LJ) suggests that participation in electronic social networks can induct us into new and unusual narratives of identity and sexuality, calling into question familiar identifications and assumptions. Slash fandom's discursive sphere has been termed *queer female space* by some who inhabit and study it; we want to explore the function of this space in the lives of the people who occupy it, how it is structured, and what it can do.

We have chosen not to pursue our exploration by producing an academic research essay which draws evidence from experts external to the community it discusses in order to construct an argument that will build to a final conclusion. Rather, we want to demonstrate the open-ended theorizing in which fan fiction writers and readers participate, bringing into a different sphere some conversations that continue to take place in spaces other than—though not always dissimilar to—the conferences and seminar rooms of academia. To do this, we created an online discussion space, which we used to invite some fellow fans to

address issues around sexual and gender identity, queer practices, and their politics and limitations, all questions which circulate widely in slash fandom. The authors of this essay participated in these discussions under fannish pseudonyms, but we have chosen not to identify which comments are ours. We instigated, facilitated, and collected discussions, and we edited parts of these conversations to present them as a linear text, which we reproduce here. Some excerpts have been edited for length and clarity, but our collaborators were consulted at every stage, and the ideas expressed throughout the paper have taken shape from all our interactions. A longer edited version of the debate is available at <http://slashroundtable.livejournal.com>.

We hope that this piece will open up important and interesting questions for both fan studies and queer studies. For example, can we consider slash fandom to be an anti-heteronormative space? Does it problematize the distinction between the normative and the deviant, the heteronormative and the queer? If slash fandom's discourses of queerness circulate outside queer theory's commonest academic and (sub)cultural locations, what contributions can they make to queer theoretical and political practices?

### **Connectivity: Queerness in Fannish Space**

**Cat:** On LJ and in fandom, I've really found a home that integrates the variously queer or non-mainstream aspects of my personality in a way I never have in real life. For my friend J., fandom was the only way she could express her queerness and she had to keep that completely hidden from her family. But through fandom she met people who helped her become comfortable with that aspect of herself and then she met someone she was attracted to. It was during heady nights and days of complete immersion in cowriting a very, very smutty story that both our relationships really crossed over from the theoretical to the actual, the queerness of the writing and fannish interaction becoming manifest in our outside lives.

For us, slash fandom has become a place where a young urban dyke shares erotic space with a straight married mom in the American heartland, and where women whose identity markers suggest they would find few points of agreement have forged erotic, emotional, and political alliances. We do not wish to make excessive claims for the radical diversity of a space dominated by middle-class, educated, liberal, English-speaking, white North American women. Nevertheless, our own experiences in this virtual sphere suggest there is something interesting, and queer, going on here. We are variously lesbian and bisexual and straight, married and partnered and single, American and German and Scottish, generationally, economically, and geographically divided. Though we are all feminists, all engaged with academia in some form, and all white women currently located in the United States, we probably would never have engaged with one another if not for the virtual spaces of online fandom. Nor would we have encountered the other participants whose ideas shape this paper, and about whom we prefer not to divulge detailed personal information. In a pseudonymous online culture, participants are judged on textual contributions alone, although it is important to remember that—just as the apparently democratic nature

of the Internet is constrained by economic barriers to access—cultural capital evident in these texts unavoidably conditions our perceptions.

Necessary caveats in place, we posit that online slash fandom is a place in which the forms of radical intersubjective contact Samuel R. Delany has called for can take place.<sup>2</sup> Sexual fantasy rather than the erotic physicality he highlights provides the point of intersection, but the meetings are no less real. Showing how queer discourses can be useful in worlds which do not wholly coincide with queer-identified subcultures, we hope that our work will resonate with analyses that challenge what Judith Halberstam has named the “metronormativity” of much queer theory.<sup>3</sup> To Karen Tongson’s insistence that U.S.-based queer theory should not abandon “red America” but instead endeavor to “intellectually move beyond the geopolitical presumptions that concede vast territories of rural and suburban space” to a “homogenizing” heteronormativity,<sup>4</sup> we add our demonstration that queer things are going on in the relatively uncharted virtual territories which connect disparate physical zones.

**Galadriel:** The queer space exists between the writers, co-writers, readers, commenters, participants, etc., but it’s that *space*, not the points connecting it, that is where the queer reading lies.

**Robert:** The act of writing and sharing slash can be just as hot to me as actual sex. I have never been satisfied with pornography, but slash, well, yep. Perhaps it is because there are so many possibilities in slash and I am at heart only turned on by non-heteronormative, read very queer, sex.

We do not claim to represent all fans, or even all of any given subset of fandom; such a universalizing representation would not be possible or desirable. Some writers involved in this project live and work in geographical areas with access to a variety of queer spaces: intellectual, political, social, and sexual. Others’ only access to nonheteronormative space is through the Internet, by which they create and maintain friendships and communities based on shared fannish, professional, and personal interests. What we share is that we conduct our lives by means of both online and offline social networks, using LJ for assorted overlapping purposes.

**Savageseraph:** While the erotic may get expressed most fully in the gift exchanges of fics and feedback, it is shaped out of the exchanges and responses to the everyday troubles and traumas, joy and pains, that people share in their journals. It’s the intimacy of those exchanges that gets reflected and amplified in the intimacy of the erotic exchanges.

### **Context: The History of Slash Fandom as a Queer Female Space**

When we speak of online slash fandom, we refer to a particular demographic group: fans who tend to consciously identify with media fandom’s roots as developed in the 1970s and 1980s. An offshoot of organized science-fiction fandom, media fandom formed around (mostly female) creative engagements with *Star Trek* in the late 1960s. Through conventions and fanzines, a distinct community was built around the creation of stories, art, and later videos featuring favorite characters.<sup>5</sup> Within this community, slash fans focused primarily

on male-male relationships and their homoerotic subtext: the term *slash* derives from the separation of character names with a virgule to denote homosexual content (Kirk/Spock). Often ostracized and ridiculed for their seemingly aggressive interpretations, slash fans developed their own communities. The growth of the Internet made it easier for fans to connect, and in recent years publicly available social networking and blogging sites such as LiveJournal have replaced Usenet as the main hubs of online fan activity.<sup>6</sup> As fan fiction has become more widely known through academic and popular discussions, online fandom's popularity has exploded. As fannish engagement with media texts becomes more widespread (often encouraged by producers as viral marketing), people may often participate in fannish behavior without feeling that they belong to any particular community.<sup>7</sup> Still, many remain self-aware about the history and context of their practices, including the fans who took part in this project.

Slash fans have been the focus of several academic studies since the 1980s. Such analyses, as well as discussions within slash fan communities, usually seek to explain why women would write sexually explicit fiction about male homosexual relations. Answers vary both within and outside fan communities, but most can be placed into a few categories. Cultural approaches argue that few female role models are available in media texts, or that, if they are, their overdetermination for female viewers complicates or even prohibits identification;<sup>8</sup> textual approaches suggest that fans respond to shows' homosocial or homoerotic overtones;<sup>9</sup> feminist readings offer same-sex relationships as models for a more equal relationship;<sup>10</sup> psychoanalytic analyses address the fact that women can *be* and *desire* both subjects within a given pairing, thus offering a wider variety of identificatory options;<sup>11</sup> and sexual approaches (often the default response by fans themselves) foreground the object status of male stars who become sexual objects in the female fannish gaze where "one hot guy's good; two hot guys are better."

**T:** When I think of the exuberance I felt participating in fandom, I think it was at seeing women stepping forward to describe their own erotics, because our culture silences female desire as effectively as it silences queer desire.

**Cat:** For me what's interesting about the eroticism of fandom isn't the erotic content in general but its communal nature and the way sexual activities and proclivities on the fringes of ordinary acceptability are considered quite normal.

Most academic research on slash fan communities has located a disruption of heteronormativity in straight women's fannish engagement, sidestepping issues of queerness beyond the fact that stories' protagonists are presented in homosexual relations. Some exceptions address the existence of lesbian and bisexual fans, often drawing directly from the fannish community and debates within it. Written by fans, such works reflect concerns about queerness, feminism, identity, and political agency that pervade fans' self-reflexive discussions.<sup>12</sup>

As our discussions demonstrate, fans frequently address the relationship between slash and sexual identity. The often intense eroticism of slash writing and the intensely personal connections between sexual identity and fandom invite the use of a sexual identity category of “slasher.” When Anna S. suggests that “slash is for many people a form of sexual orientation” (LJ, August 30, 2003), she articulates a connection between fandom and identity that resonates with many. Again and again, slash fans invoke narratives of closetedness, of coming out. Merry describes the retroactive narrative of her slasher identity: “I can look back to when I was six years old, watching [*Star Trek*] reruns . . . I knew even then that it was what happened between those two men [Kirk and Spock] that mattered most to me in the narrative. So, you know, are slashers born? Or made? Or maybe both?” (LJ, August 30, 2003).

Since many more self-reflexive fans are well versed in critical, gender, and queer theory, it is no surprise that fan debates resonate with those in academia. One central inquiry addresses the distinction between minority sexual identity and particular nonheteronormative acts. Aerye, for example, emphasizes slash as “not queer identity, but queerness as . . . a blurring of sexual lines, something strange and unusual” (LJ, April 3, 2003). It is in this climate that the term *queer female space* was first used. For Jintian, it described not only the queerness of women’s sexual fantasies but also how these queer fantasy acts often lay the groundwork for nonvirtual queer acts and lives: “[I]t’s not just about physical sex (or rather, imagined physical sex). It’s also the relationship of creation and consumption, the bond that forms between the writer and the reader” (LJ, March 13, 2004). The discrepancy between performances of online queerness and lived queer experience is at the center of various debates. Busse describes how fans differentiate between women for whom fandom functions as a safe space in terms of sexual identity and those who play at a queerness that takes place online only; though both groups may construct “fannish fantasy space as a place where women can experiment and explore,” the latter group “uses the fantasy as a self-contained space where queerness is played out in lieu of any potential effects on real lives.”<sup>13</sup> This tension between various levels of real-life queerness is a highly contested aspect of the slash fan community’s self-perception of its queer female space.

**Jintian:** I would say that many of us who are using online media fandom to liberate ourselves sexually are still, in a way, in the closet. I’m only liberated in one direction—the fictional—and that reinforces how “normal” my offline sex life really is. When I attended conventions I was aware of fan hook-ups taking place, but it’s a very different thing when you’re confronted with an actual body, as opposed to the fic produced by a brain. In some ways it wasn’t until I got home and logged on, behind a monitor and keyboard, that I felt “free” again.

### Theorizing the Boundaries of Queerness in Fandom

In constructing a theoretical and contextual frame around our fannish conversation we have inserted quotes as illustration and counterpoint. The entire discussion can be found at

<http://slashroundtable.livejournal.com>, but we want to finish with a particular thread that illustrates and expands on the complex relationship of queerness and fandom.

**T:** People in fandom pretty frequently get into battles over issues of whether a kink/subgenre/pairing is subjectively squicky or objectively freakish, who's got the most cred—that kind of thing. To me, it looks exactly like the kind of border policing I've often seen in nonvirtual queer spaces—bisexuals without same-sex experience being allowed in queer groups only on the sufferance of those with more queer cred, mainstream gays and lesbians trying to distance themselves from the “queerer queers” (transpeople, folks in leather communities, etc.) in hopes of getting basic rights.

**Lila:** I've always thought about the two kinds of policing you talk about as coming at opposite ends of a spectrum. The inclusion of “queerer queers” is an emphasis on the importance of limit cases, of the margins of the margins. But then there always are exclusions—often lesbians and people of color are left out of “queerness.” In and out of fandom it's about how much or whether taboos are being/can be broken, how far people can go before policing begins.

The exclusion of “straighter queers” is more complicated in some ways, because one does have to recognize the privilege one might get from passing or from belonging to a majority and what it means for people who don't have it, but that shouldn't translate into exclusion (self- or otherwise) from queer spaces in the way that it usually does.

**Cat:** Maybe fandom as a continual negotiation of who we are and how we constrict ourselves is how we are both inclusive and exclusive, gradually expanding and shifting our borders, but still keeping them up. Over time fandom has become more inclusive, and on some level more queer. When you think of the aspect of queerness that is all about challenging borders and heteronormativity in real life then the constant renegotiation of fandom whereby ideas, expressions and groups move from taboo to commonplace is really a queer act.

**T:** I see queer as a highly political rejection of the notions that you need to rigidly or explicitly define your own sexuality, that others can legitimately require you to make your sexuality public and intelligible. I think queer often is used to mean “not straight,” with the problematic effect of reducing straightness to an ever-shrinking space of possibilities.

**Cathy:** These days, my self-definition of straight is informed by an attempt to maybe re-expand the notion as well as to not colonize an identity that I don't feel I've “earned.”

**Galadriel:** It seems to me, however, that there is an inherent danger in widening the definition too far, because a great deal of queerness rests on being part of the minority or a marginalised group. The further out “queerness” extends, the less it becomes about working against the grain, and the more it becomes fully normative.

**Lila:** Queer applies to a specific, bounded group in terms of gendered and sex-

ual identity, and that's fine, being part of that group is highly central to who I am, and I wouldn't ever, ever want to lose that community. But that normativity of queer identity (and it's too often an urbanized, whitewashed normativity) may hide queer acts that are taking place in spaces and among people who don't identify that way, and recognition of these practices might show how unstable the "mainstream" can be and how normative the margins are on occasion.

I don't think queer identity is a necessity for participation in queer practices or for being in queer space. For me, one definition of queer space would be the space (a physical place like a bar or a cruising area or the world of a fictional text or a virtual online space, or whatever) in which things happen that challenge the way gendered and sexual identities and practices are defined and policed into rigid categories. People might engage in practices that problematize the identities they claim—and this shouldn't be seen as them acting in bad faith or in contradiction to the way they identify.

**Cat:** Oh, that's a really good way to look at how even more "straight" forms of fanfic are often very queer in practice. People can be involved in a queer community/queer writing and object strenuously to being described by that term.

**T:** I've suddenly realized that trying to deem a space "queer" or "not queer" feels too reductive to me, and, to some extent, kind of absurd. It feels like we're treating queerness as a switch that is either on or off, but never in between. When, of course, the power of queerness to me is that it can seep through the vast no-man's-land that binaries prohibit. To me, a space could only be definitively queer if queerness were a prerequisite for entering that space, just as a space can only be definitively not queer when queer identities and acts are strictly prohibited. I think that slash fandom is a space that invites queer potential. Not all acts within its diffuse borders are queer, but many of them are. Not all slash products are queer in their content, but they can be—and many of them in ways more profoundly transgressive than simply containing m/m or f/f relationships. Not all slash fans identify as queer, but this space provides room for people to queer their identities. Queerness isn't a mandate here—it's an open possibility.

## Conclusion

We hope this project has succeeded in bringing a small range of the vernacular theory fans produce daily into the academic sphere. Even the multiple perspectives we have tried to offer are, however, limited: much work remains to be done around questions of queer identities, politics, engagements, and practices in online cultures. The limitations of print make the discussions we have presented seem isolated, and it is important to remember that they took place within a vast, highly interconnected online discursive space. It was neither possible for us to reproduce the variety of conversations which occurred simultaneously nor to include the subject headers or personal icons (100 by 100-pixel images), which many use to supplement their arguments. Even the content of our debate is by necessity limited: were we to instigate a similar discussion today, changing fannish networks might cause us to

invite different people, and participants' concerns might have moved on from the matters of greatest relevance in early 2007. Fandom contains many sub-communities, fan creations are infinitely diverse in style and scope, and the increasing number of queer participants in fan communities and changing fannish relationships to gender and sexuality within fan production must be acknowledged in future queer scholarship on online fan culture. We can only conclude this piece with an acknowledgment that future queer scholarship on fan fiction and the gendering of online culture contains its own yearning voids of possibility, its own infinite potentials.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Recent examples include Sally Munt, Elizabeth H. Bassett, and Kate O'Riordan, "Virtually Belonging: Risk, Connectivity, and Coming Out On-Line," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 7.2-3 (July 2002): 125-37; and Mary Bryson, "When Jill Jacks in: Queer Women and the Net," *Feminist Media Studies* 4.3 (2004): 239-54.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York UP, 1999).

<sup>3</sup>Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: New York UP, 2005) 36.

<sup>4</sup>Karen Tongson, "JJ Chinois's Oriental Express, Or, How a Suburban Heartthrob Seduced Red America," *Social Text* 84-85 (Fall-Winter 2005): 195.

<sup>5</sup>See Francesca Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, ed. Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006) 33-58.

<sup>6</sup>See Kristina Hellekson and Karen Busse, "Introduction: Work in Progress," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006) 5-40.

<sup>7</sup>This is the approach taken by Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup>See Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1992) 231-38.

<sup>9</sup>See Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 202-25.

<sup>10</sup>See Joanna Russ, "Pornography by Women, for Women, with Love," *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans and Perverts: Feminist Essays* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1985) 79-99; and Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diane Veith, "Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and *Star Trek* Zines," *Erotic Universe: Sexuality and Fantastic Literature*, ed. Donald Palumbo (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986) 236-55.

<sup>11</sup>See Constance Penley, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture," *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992) 479-500.



<sup>12</sup>Lesbian and bisexual fans' presence is addressed in Shoshanna Green, Cynthia Jenkins, and Henry Jenkins, "'Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking': Selections from the *Terra Nostra Underground* and *Strange Bedfellows*," *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity*, ed. Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1998) 9–38. Eden Lackner, Barbara Lucas, and Robin Reid, "Cunning Linguists: The Bisexual Erotics of *Words/Silence/Flesh*," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, ed. Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006) 189–206, offers a case study on the erotics of cowriting and reader responses.

<sup>13</sup>Busse, "'My Life Is a WIP on My LJ': Slashing the Slasher and the Reality of Celebrity and Internet Performances," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, ed. Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006) 207–24.