

Ripe for the Taking: Disrupting Narratives of a Queer Utopia in the
Alpha/Beta/Omega Fanfiction Gift Economy

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Author's Note:

Before engaging with the history, structures, and terms related to fanfiction, it is important to establish that “fanfiction is shaped to the literary conventions, expectations, and desires of (specific) communities, and is written in genres developed by (those communities)” (Coppa 8). For this reason, it is not possible to provide a universal discussion on or universally accepted definitions of the material included within this thesis. The highly networked nature of fandom internet culture on sites like *Tumblr* and *Archive of Our Own* is vastly different today from its mostly in-person and zine-based¹ origins in the 1970s and 1980s (Busse and Hellekson 1). It continues to be in an ever-evolving state of flux as participants’ interests in certain fandoms—and genres within those fandoms—increase or diminish over time. The definitions and contextualization provided within this paper are specifically chosen because they offer a suitable introduction to fan terminology, reflect those terms encountered in the research for this thesis, and those from personal experience. It should be further noted that while fandoms and fan cultures are global practices, this thesis and all pre-existing personal experiences are centred around Western and English-based examples. Consequently, they also cannot be considered as a universal standard. Moreover, because of the relative anonymity afforded by the internet, all references to fanfiction authors included within this paper represent chosen screen names, and any otherwise personal or identifying information has not been and will not be researched or included.

¹ A zine is a kind of self-published magazine similar in style and intent to a chapbook.

Abstract

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This thesis considers the fanfiction genres of slash-fiction, and Alpha/Beta/Omega fiction through an analysis of fandom's embedded gift economy structures. Previous research on fanfiction and fandom structures have often characterized the gift economy nature of these spaces as countercultural and as separate from the frequent exploitation inherent in economic-based systems. There has been less attention paid to considering the potential disruptions that can come with unregulated and large-scale sharing. This thesis undertakes a critical discourse analysis of Alpha/Beta/Omega slash-fiction with a focus on commodity fetishism to reveal how the subgenre's relationship with the fanfiction gift economy complicates and at times counters the conception of these spaces as a 'queer utopia.' The purpose of this research is to dismantle traditional archetypes within Alpha/Beta/Omega fanfiction by exploring how male Omegan characters become fetishized cultural commodity objects internally through interactions with Alpha characters and externally through the desires of fanfiction readers and writers.

Keywords: Fanfiction, Slash-fiction, Alpha/Beta/Omega, Commodity Fetishism, Gift Economy, Marx, Derrida, Bourdieu, Queer Theory, Star Wars, Marvel

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I dedicate this thesis to every fanfiction writer. Thank you for freely sharing your time, imagination, care, and for expecting very little—if anything—in return. It is because of you that the stories I enjoy continue to flourish. It is because of you that I understand and love myself more fully. If I could leave all the kudos, I would instantly.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Preface.....	vii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Background.....	3
Literature Review.....	13
The Theory of Fanfiction as Commodity Fetishism and the Problem of the “Queer Gift”.....	21
Methods and Methodology.....	29
Chapter Outlines.....	35
Chapter Two: Narratives of Commodity Fetishism in <i>Star Wars</i> A/B/O Slash fiction.....	38
<i>Star Wars</i> <i>Sequel Trilogy</i> and Fanfiction.....	40
Fanfiction Case Study: “fingerprints smudging the stars”.....	45
Omegan Identity as a Cycle of Value and Exchange.....	51
The Potential Symbolic Violence of “Mating Cycles/Heat Fic” and the Alpha Body.....	55
Public Response.....	60
Chapter Three: Narratives of Commodity Fetishism in <i>Marvel</i> A/B/O Slash Fiction.....	65
<i>Marvel Cinematic Universe</i> and Fanfiction.....	69
Fanfiction Case Study: “Part of a Pack”.....	75
The Omegan Body as Fetishized Surplus Value.....	80
The Potential Symbolic Violence of A/B/O Courting Rituals.....	85
Public Response.....	90
Chapter Four: Reimagining Production.....	96
Male Omegan’s Reproductive Potential as Queernormativity.....	99
Fanfiction Archive Spaces as Queernormative Spaces.....	104
A/B/O Slash-Fiction as Kink and Heterotopia.....	108
Chapter Five: Conclusion.....	118
Appendix A.....	122
Appendix B.....	123
Appendix C.....	124
Works Cited.....	125

Preface

I think fanfiction is really special because it's so multipurpose. You want an outlet to vent? Write it out! (You're trans and you want your faves to be, too? Do it! Having friendship troubles? Write it!) You want to explore something you normally can't? Do it! (Confused about your sexuality? Explore through fiction! Got a kink you're not sure about? Write about it!) You want to change something about canon because canon is dumb? Do it! (...) And there are a thousand other things you can do with fanfiction, and a thousand other reasons to write it (...) Like diversity? Hell yeah! (...) Not to mention, on a way less serious note, WAY better sex scenes. Actually, a lot of fanfiction I've read is just generally better than most published books. Fanfiction is just truly amazing.

- Ezra (thesorrowoflizards) (2018)

I read my first piece of fanfiction ten years ago. Like *Tumblr*² user, Ezra (thesorrowoflizards) quoted above, I was immediately enamoured with the seemingly endless possibilities and limitless potential for fanfiction as a storytelling medium. At an age when I was just beginning to understand the boundaries of my own queer identity, as well as the ramifications of others' experiences of much more serious social marginalization and disenfranchisement in contemporary Western society's enduring white, capitalist structures, fanfiction presented itself as a kind of obvious and temporary

² *Tumblr* is a personal blogging site that launched in February 2007. Like other social media sites such as *Twitter* or *Facebook*, *Tumblr* users can follow other users' blogs and see the content they post appear on a personalized homepage or "dashboard." *Tumblr* is frequently a site for 'fannish' activity in the form of discussions about popular media sources and fan created works like those of fan art and fanfiction.

escape. Specifically, for my teenaged-self, fanfiction seemed to be an obvious escape from the oftentimes constricting social definitions of gender, sex, sexuality, and race. Where the media that I was consuming at the time was overwhelmingly heterosexual, heteronormative, neurotypical, and white, for my teenaged-self, fanfiction offered an open access space to play with the margins, and more importantly, to see those at the margins brought into the centre spotlight. Unlike in canon,³ in fanfiction, Harry Potter could be of Indian descent on his father’s side and marry Draco Malfoy instead of Ginny Weasley. Unlike in canon, in fanfiction, *Supernatural*’s Dean Winchester could find his faith and purpose in the arms of the angel Castiel, and not his father’s neglect and abuse. Unlike in canon, where queer and BIPOC characters and actors could be routinely “buried”⁴ or cast aside in favour of white, cisgender, and male counterparts, for my teenaged-self, in fanfiction, all characters regardless of their race, gender, sex or sexuality could be allowed to find—in anywhere from one to a million ways—a “soft epilogue” (cardiamachina). As Francesca Coppa writes in *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age* (2017), at its most enduring and basic form, fanfiction is “work (that) has been done out of love” to propel characters, authors, and readers “into greatness” (3; 5).

It is similarly out of a love for fanfiction that I write this thesis. The purpose of my project is to explore the potential for the misappropriation of queerness—and specifically male queerness—as a kind of commodity for fan-based desires and fetishization from the perspective of both authors and readers in fanfiction. However,

³ Canon represents “the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, setting, and characters” (Busse and Hellekson, 2006, p.9)

⁴ This term is in reference to the literary trope in which LGBTQ+ characters are treated as being more expendable than their heterosexual counterparts. While in the late 19th-century, the trope initially existed as a kind of fail-safe to allow authors a space to explore LGBTQ+ characters without appearing to “promote” homosexuality, in its contemporary usage, it is “no longer the refuge it once was” (Hulan, 2017, p.17).

while my arguments serve as a critique of recurring cultural norms in various fan-centric spaces or “fandoms,”⁵ I do so from the perspective of a fan who maintains that fanfiction can still be ‘just truly amazing’ in all of its forms *and* imperfections. In the spirit of entering an ongoing dialogue with fanfiction, it is only appropriate to use its specific terms and language. Before beginning a piece, it is common for authors on personal blogging sites like *Tumblr* and popular fanfiction archiving sites like *Archive of Our Own*⁶ to provide a preface or “author’s note,” wherein they position their relationship to both the canon material that they are drawing from, as well as the quality and content of their own original ideas. With this in mind, I claim no ownership over any references to any copyrighted material discussed in this work.

Any mistakes are my own.

⁵ The term ‘fandom’ exists as a hybridization of terms ‘fan’ and ‘kingdom.’ As J.J. Albrecht describes, like a kingdom, a fandom is meant to indicate a specific “realm of fans” all organized under the governing principle of one specific common interest (Albrecht, 2014, p. 5).

⁶ Archive of Our Own represents one of the current largest online repositories of fanfiction and fan-related creative works. The site was created in 2008 by the Organization for Transformative Works as a non-profit and open-source venture. As of the time of writing this, the archive now hosts 7.9 million individual works in over 50,000 fandoms, as well as 3.9 million registered users.

Chapter One: Introduction

Fandom is a common feature of popular culture in industrial societies. It selects from the repertoire of mass-produced and mass-distributed entertainment, certain performers, narratives or genres and takes them into the culture of a self-selected fraction of the people. They are then reworked into an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture that is both similar to, yet significantly different from, the culture of more “normal” popular audiences.

- Fiske (1992)

As noted by John Fiske in “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” and as referenced in this thesis’s opening preface, what makes fanfiction special for many is its ability to transform popular media properties from mass-produced and mass-distributed, but ultimately static objects, to ones that are active, personal tools of imagination for the masses’ curated enjoyment. This sense of fanfiction and fandom as ‘intensely pleasurable,’ ‘intensely signifying,’ and as being separate from the burdensome constraints of “normal” culture, seemingly presents these spaces through an imagined utopic ideal. Namely, in highlighting fanfiction and fandom spaces as places built around feelings of pleasure and deeply meaningful connection, and as places where these experiences occur away from “normal” culture, Fiske’s description evokes a kind of Neverland-esque quality wherein the boundaries of industrial, capitalist culture can be easily escaped if one is “following the right star straight on ‘til morning,” or in this case, looking for the right counter-cultural narrative.

Just as J.M. Barrie's Neverland appears at first glance to be full of limitless possibilities—a place built on a seemingly endless supply of imaginative and fantastical potential—so too are fanfiction spaces seemingly limitless. Yet despite all this potential for an 'intensely pleasurable,' 'intensely signifying' experience that takes any character, plot, or setting and reshapes it into a newly desired product, fanfiction and fandom spaces are not without their struggles, just as Neverland has pirates and crocodiles lurking around every corner. In "Queer and Unusual Space: White Supremacy in Slash Fanfiction" (2014), Angela Fazekas notes that "in spite of all the potential inherent in fanfiction" as a kind of 'bespoke' writing form and a means of escapism, "it often leaves so many fans wanting *more*" (2). This desire for more is born out of the fact that while fanfiction often originates out of radical beginnings—or their potential—such as those related to shifts in the depiction of characters' sex, gender, and sexuality, the nature of fanfiction spaces as gift economy spaces means that these radical intentions are often diluted over time through the efforts of large-scale acts of sharing. Like a palimpsest, in which only the traces of core ideas remain, so too do the gift economy spaces of fanfiction often leave behind only radical traces as tropes and genres are reimagined over and over so as to lose their original intentions. Like Neverland, fanfiction's constant creation is often an act of forgetting just as much as it is one of empowerment.

This question of more provides the impetus for this thesis. While much of the potential for fanfiction and fandom spaces is rooted in the idea of free-exchange and a freedom towards identity formation that propels chosen subjects into positions of greatness, this potential is not always the case. Rather, instead of moving away from the oftentimes rigid structures of Western culture—especially those of gender, sex, and

sexuality—for many, these shifts in fanfiction simply create boundaries for other more concrete and hegemonic realities. With the beginnings of this conflict in mind, this thesis exposes how, while fanfiction spaces have a queer potential—as will be shown in later chapters of this thesis—fanfiction is not entirely a counter-cultural space—not uncomplicatedly a “queer” utopia, as popularly imagined—but rather, a space where mainstream ideals and heteronormativity can still have control or purpose. In order to support this argument, this thesis will rely on previous scholarship exploring the presentation of queerness in fanfiction. In particular, this thesis will use the ideas of James Coleman, Kristina Busse, and Tessa Barone which suggest that fanfiction, especially when related to queer male characters, can promote a flattening of identity.

John Fiske states that in removing cultural elements from the mainstream and presenting them in fandom or in fanfiction, they become part of the “culture of a self-selected fraction of the people” (30). While this return to individual control can be liberating, it is not automatically the case. To this end, my thesis analyzes how, instead of resisting mainstream production practices, fanfiction and fandom production can instead mirror mainstream practices and problems as a space where individual profit *can* still represent only a fraction of the people and not the whole.

Background

Fan-scholar Henry Jenkins writes that fanfiction is “a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk” (Jenkins qtd. in Coppa 6). With so much of popular culture in contemporary Western society increasingly existing under the legal and economic

denomination of conglomerate media corporations like *Disney*, fanfiction has been routinely celebrated by both scholars and fans alike as a collaborative counter-cultural effort that exists outside of the literary marketplace and so, serves as a “case study in community production and reception” (Coppa 8). Lev Grossman explains that the process of fanfiction is one in which individuals: “(...) take possession of characters and settings of other people’s narratives (to) tell their own tales about them—to expand and build upon the original, and when they deem it necessary, to tweak it and optimize it for their own purposes” (Grossman qtd. in Coppa 4).

Spanning from television shows and movies, to books, anime, music, and even to real people—both historical and contemporary—like the examples briefly highlighted in this paper’s preface—this sense of “optimization” or even “appropriation” within fanfiction can assume a highly diverse number of forms. For the “optimization” of canon characters especially, fans may choose to ask “what if” questions “of background, (and) psychology” (Coppa 13), and then change anything from a particular character’s eye colour to more largescale transformations of identity such as those of a character’s connections to race, class, sex, sexuality, and gender (Ibid).

When considering the idea of transformation as well as the central argument of this thesis, another important aspect to discuss when outlining the characteristics of fanfiction is its use of categories and genres. Fanfiction is typically organized into three main categories: *gen*, *het*, and *slash*. As Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson note in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the age of the Internet* (2006), *gen* (from general) denotes a story with no romantic ‘ship’ or relationships between the characters (9). By comparison, *het* (from heterosexual) are stories featuring a heterosexual ‘ship’ or

relationship, with slash stories instead featuring same-sex or queer ships (Ibid). While often used as a kind of catch-all term for a relationship involving homoerotic pairings, slash is also regularly used to refer to solely queer male relationships, with *femme-slash* used as a sub-category term for specifically queer female relationships ⁷ (Ibid). The term *slash* is named for the tagging system on fan sites wherein a backslash symbol is used in-between characters' names to symbolize their togetherness (i.e., Harry/Draco, Dean/Cas, etc.) (*Fanlore.org*). For het and slash categories specifically, featured relationships are either invented between the fan-author's chosen characters or adopted from the chosen primary text being "optimized." *Archive of Our Own* organizes its stories based on these three categories, allowing users to filter for which type of category they would most like to read. This "act of supporting or wishing for a particular intimate relationship between characters (whether het, slash or femme-slash) is known as *shipping*" (from relationship) (Fazekas 5).

In this way, because fanfiction allows users the space to play with character identity and background in a diverse number of ways both for individual authors' interests and the interests of broader community reciprocity, there is an equally wide variety of genres alongside the categories of *gen*, *het*, and *slash*. While these genres may be found across multiple fandoms, individual fandoms may have specific expectations for how particular genres should be depicted in a way that directly contradicts another fandom's understanding of those same genres. Because there are too many unique genres to describe overall, descriptions by Busse and Hellekson (2006) will serve as a sufficient general overview:

⁷ Going forward, this paper will only use the term slash as a reference to queer male relationships.

[H]urt/comfort, or *h/c*, stories, which, as the name implies, revolve around a character being injured and another character comforting (them); *Mpreg*, where a man gets pregnant [...] *curtain fic*, or fic so domestic that the main characters, often a male slash pairing, shop for curtains together [...] *AU*, or alternate universe, where familiar characters are dropped into a new setting [...] *fluff*, an often light story that usually seeks to make a tender emotional impact rather than put forward a plot; *PWP*, which gets spelled out either as “porn without plot” or “plot? what plot?”; and various forms of sexually explicit stories that revolve around *kink*, such as *BDSM* (bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism) (11).

Building on these examples, the specific fanfiction case studies that will serve as the main focus of, and the basis for the arguments of this thesis, thus fall under the category of slash, and the specific genre of “Alpha/Beta/Omega” (A/B/O) dynamics. To provide a brief, initial outline, in this popular genre,⁸ humans are reimagined as existing in a biological three-gendered system based loosely on imagined wolf pack hierarchies. In this setup, individuals “present” during puberty as one of the three potential secondary sex dynamics: Alpha, Beta, or Omega. While the characteristics of this presentation vary from author to author, individuals who present as Alphas are typically represented as both physically and psychologically dominant where, contrastingly, those who present as Omegas are depicted as submissive. Betas act as a kind of default gender for those who ‘fail’ to present. They usually lack the strong instinctual drives that the other two

⁸ As of the time of writing this, *Archive of Our Own* features over 105,000 individual stories in the genre of “Alpha/Beta/Omega” fiction. While many other slash genres—like *Mpreg*—frequently draw upon A/B/O imagery and plot structures, the above number represents only those stories listed as including A/B/O dynamics.

dynamics possess.⁹ Those who present as Omegas are also typically represented as extremely fertile,¹⁰ and while not always, male Omegas can usually reproduce with male Alphas or Betas,¹¹ and naturally give birth. This ability for male Omegas to successfully reproduce with other males means that female characters often do not feature in the worlds of A/B/O slash-fiction; their traditional role as potential mothers is co-opted by queer male characters who can biologically produce a family without female intervention. An ongoing discussion of the genre's specific history in terms of these narrative structures, character hierarchy, and the themes of male reproduction will continue in more depth in chapters two and three. Moreover, a reading of the themes of male reproduction through a lens of queer theory and queernormativity will occur in chapter four.

This choice to routinely engage in character-driven story models that are rooted in specific genres and tropes designed to aid in the transformation of characters' personalities and presentations rather than more traditionally plot-based or action-based forms helps contribute to fanfiction's popularized reputation as a form of social resistance. As Rebecca Black et al., write in "Representations of Autism in Online Harry Potter Fanfiction" (2019), while:

⁹ While again, there is a variety of descriptions across the entire genre, an example of a common and recurring instinctual drive includes Alphas and Omegas possessing heightened senses of smell (to help them find suitable mates).

¹⁰ Like the animalistic characteristics that it draws itself from, Omegas and Alphas can experience heat and rut cycles, respectively. Just as it is for animals, heats and ruts urge Omegas and Alphas to have sex and procreate. Like wolves and dogs specifically, male Alphas—and very occasionally male Betas—possess a knot at the base of their penises which they use to sexually 'tie' Omegas with during sex in order to increase their chances at procreation. In some stories, male Alphas can only achieve a knot during their rut cycles, while in other stories, it can occur outside of rut cycles as well. Betas usually do not experience any kind of mating cycle.

¹¹ In some stories, male Omegas can also be impregnated by Alpha females. However, the existence of Alpha females is rare both within the worlds being described as well as a fanfiction narrative trope.

(...) the artistic and popular cultural experience of marginalized or nonmainstream groups has been one of being represented by the other, fanfiction creates space for ‘refocalization’ to occur so that marginalized groups may ‘offer alternatives to (...) normative discourse’ (30).

As noted above, where traditional Western media has both historically treated and too often continues to treat non-heterosexual, non-heteronormative, non-white, and neurodivergent characters and actors as either non-entities or unnecessary props, fanfiction’s interest in personalized character experience creates a potential soundboard for a fan-author to give voice to, and to integrate their own bodily experiences into a chosen character’s narrative regardless of that character’s original background. One such example can be found in the author’s notes section of the story “Grounding” (2020) featured in the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy’s* (2015-2019) catalogue on *Archive of Our Own*. Here, author EmperorsVornskr, explains how their reworked depiction of the canon series’ primary antagonist, Kylo Ren, as having schizophrenia is based on their own experiences with autism, PTSD, anxiety, and borderline personality disorder (BPD). Specifically, they write:

There really needs to be more fic for characters on the schizophrenic spectrum being treated with more respect! I did my best writing this as someone who is autistic/has BPD/PTSD/anxiety, so I apologize if I mishandled anything!

In using descriptions of their own experiences with mental illness and neurodivergence, EmperorsVornskr’s work exemplifies the seemingly limitless play with character that is a part of fanfiction by allowing them to align aspects of their own identity within the fictional spaces of *Star Wars*. While this particular fanfiction example is not a part of the

Alpha/Beta/Omega genre, and instead, is a subset of the “hurt/comfort” genre in which one character is hurt and another character comforts them, the story is further made relevant to the arguments of this thesis through its strong audience response displayed in the comment section on *Archive of Our Own*. Writing through their own experiences, EmperorsVornskr attempts to connect with those on the schizophrenic spectrum while simultaneously resisting what they see as the recurring public stigmatization for the condition. Their concerns for the possibility of “mishandling anything,” as well as their desire to treat those with schizophrenia with respect reflect Francesca Coppa’s initial claims noted above that fanfiction can love its subject into a position of “greatness” by attempting to provide chosen subjects with access to social recognition perhaps not otherwise afforded through traditional Western media sources (3;5). While in the canon *Star Wars* material, Kylo Ren does not have schizophrenia, through their act of ‘refocalization,’ EmperorsVornskr’s work becomes a kind of affinity space; a place for readers to affiliate with each other and with EmperorsVornskr through a newfound understanding of Kylo Ren as a character. The success of this effort in facilitating community reception can be seen in the comments section for “Grounding” on *Archive of Our Own*, which includes six diverse assertions from other readers that they too see themselves in EmperorsVornskr’s specific depiction of Kylo Ren. In particular, archive user LFG writes:

My mom was schizophrenic and I’ve dealt with episodes for years. I like the care, understanding, respect, and patience in this. Schizophrenic people are despised and dehumanized all the time and reading this made me want to cry cause it’s just how society should see them (...) Thank you, really.

Comments such as these begin to display how fanfiction stories can resonate on an extremely individual basis even when displayed in a public arena such as *Archive of Our Own*. As will be explored in chapter four of this thesis, while the content of a fanfiction story may not always be handled with the same level of personal connection or sensitivity as *EmperorsVornskr* treats their version of Kylo Ren, and this often detracts from fanfiction's capacity to perform as a countercultural medium, it is individual connections that readers have with the text that makes many fanfiction stories valuable and viable. For example, as will be shown when discussing the chosen fanfiction case studies in chapters two and three, it is the characters' dynamic as an Alpha, Beta, or Omega that determines both how they will be treated by other characters within their fanfiction story universe as well as how they will be received, both positively and negatively, by readers and writers.

Alongside this potential for personalized character-driven story models, fanfiction's structure as a gift economy also contributes to its popularized image as a space of community reception and resistance. Using *Fanlore*'s definition: "In fannish terms, *gift economy* refers to the process of fans making fan works available openly and freely (as communal or individualized gifts) without any formalized requirements that anything be given in return."¹² Returning to the author's notes for the story "Grounding," *EmperorsVornskr* shows that the piece has been written as a gift for a mutual user on *Archive of Our Own*. At the bottom of their preface to the story, *EmperorsVornskr* includes fellow user *Hollandswife*'s messaged request for a "purely self-indulgent" story featuring Kylo Ren experiencing a schizophrenic episode. This type of request from a

¹² While most do not, some fan creators do make fan works based off of commissioned requests, and do make a small profit off of their work. However, because the majority of fan spaces are free, going forward, fan commissions will be recognized as an outlying trait within the world of fanfiction and will not contribute broadly to this discussion.

reader of a fanfiction author for a chosen scene or story featuring that reader's desired character(s) is extremely common. Fanfiction authors will often freely write specific pieces for other authors or readers that they have a close relationship with or respect for both online and offline. Users or fandom groups on sites like *Tumblr* and *Archive of Our Own* will also often host gift exchanges such as "Secret Santas" and "Big Bang Challenges" in which fanfiction is written and given away under the set guidelines of specific wordcounts, featured relationships, scenes, and genres, among a diverse selection of other pre-set determiners. Unlike other forms of traditional Western media, which are usually exchanged for an individualized or selective economic profit, as a gift economy, fanfiction spaces assume what Francesca Coppa references as fan-scholar Arduinna's metaphorical image of the potlatch or banquet (10).

Like a potlatch or banquet in which individual participants bring a variety of dishes to be shared and sampled by an entire group, individual fanfiction authors create stories for readers to similarly sample and "feast" upon at their leisure. Just as a potlatch often creates an informalized social obligation to share food in return for the food received, "fanfiction reading and writing tends to create social obligations" and the impetus for participants to "(give) back to the community that's fed them" content (Ibid). This social obligation to provide fanfiction to fan-authors and readers as a form of thanks for the stories received is so casually embedded into the background culture of fanfiction as a whole that it is in turn a function physically built into the online structuring of *Archive of Our Own*. For those with an archive account, the website includes a separate 'Gifts' tab on a user's profile page as filtered from their generalized account inbox where they can specifically receive and view the content made for them by other users. As

referenced in *Archive of Our Own's* mission statement, unlike traditional Western media sources that frequently create accessibility barriers through structures of ownership and financial profit, the archive's intent as a gift economy is to "protect and defend (...) from commercial exploitation and legal challenge (...) while providing the broadest possible access to fannish activity for all fans."¹³ In promoting a gift exchange model, fanfiction can thus be seen to encourage the sharing of creative interests and communal bonds, and, in the process, foster resistance to capitalist structures' tendency towards the promotion of individualized wealth and the hoarding of resources.

Another essential and final background feature to note is that, with this sense of categories and specific genres in mind, on popular fan sites, fanfiction works will usually be "tagged" by the author to indicate their category and genre. "Tags" are words or phrases that function as headings or footnotes to a fanfiction piece and allow readers to assess a story's contents quickly. Alongside indicating a fanfiction's category and genre(s), many fanfiction authors will use a "tagging" system to provide "trigger warnings" for any graphic content that may appear within their work or to help readers avoid spoilers if the work is drawing one-to-one from canon material. In relation to fanfiction's attempts at resisting capitalist modes and refocalizing stories for fandom communities, tagging systems also demonstrate a mechanism by which fan authors and fan readers can establish themselves as the experts of the products they produce, share, and consume via gifts. As Alexandra Herzog writes in "We, the Fans: Power in the Democratic Archive of Fanfiction" (2014):

¹³ It should be noted, however, that *Archive of Our Own's* existence as an internet platform does create a technological barrier for those without access to a stable internet connection.

fans' use of jargon (like tags) makes clear how fan authors displace the producers from their status as the only ones with the right to create texts and instead position themselves as the hegemony of the archive to ultimately reframe themselves as powerful producers and as legitimate participants in cultural production (186).

For example, returning once again to EmperorsVornskr's story, "Grounding" on *Archive of Our Own*, when looking at the featured tags, they specify that the story centres around "Soft Kylux." This tag, which includes the specific fandom chosen "ship" name for the characters of Kylo Ren and Armitage Hux to denote their romantic and/or sexual relationship, intentionally rejects the canon-produced depictions of these characters. Where Kylo Ren and Armitage Hux are presented in the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy* as having predominantly hostile interactions in which, as will be further elaborated on in chapter two, Kylo Ren uses his force abilities to routinely choke Hux, EmperorsVornskr's tagging system "is used to enhance the fans' power over, and participation in, the official, cultural text" by instead establishing "Kylux's" relationship as not violent, but soft and so, challenging the direction of the canon story (Herzog 202). As such, while tags act as a kind of metaphorical literary "nutritional guide" for a fanfiction reader to help them know what it is they are about to consume, their use can also be political, "(acquiring) the function of 'linguistic capital' that marks the value and power of speech" (Bourdieu qtd. in Herzog 203).

Literature Review

As a Western and English language category, most fan-scholars agree that the foundations of slash-fiction began in the early 1970s and centred around the popular

pairing of Kirk and Spock from the original *Star Trek* television series (1966-1969) (Coppa 1). Like other forms of pre-internet fandom, 1970s slash-fiction mainly occurred through various fan-made ‘zines’ inspired by works like that of “Do-It-Yourself Star Trek—the Fanfiction” (Ibid). These zines were circulated via mailing lists or handed out at fan-based get-togethers, and they encouraged and invited fans to both read and participate in fandom communities (Ibid). Data from early studies of these pre-internet fandoms indicates that “the population of slash fanfiction writers was primarily made up of heterosexual women” (Fazekas 9). More recent studies compiled on *Archive of Our Own*—such as those performed by archive user “centrofttheselights” in 2013¹⁴—supports and expands upon this initial view. In their poll of just over 10,000 fellow archive users, “centrofttheselights’s” research showed that 85% of slash readers (see fig. A1) and 82.2% of slash writers (see fig. A2) polled identified as female but within a ranging variety of sexualities other than simply heterosexual (see fig. B1 and fig. B2); the other 15% of users identified as either male, non-binary, or non-respondent.¹⁵

Regardless, as a result of slash-fictions’ early and continued characterization as being stories written predominantly “for women, by women” (Fang 4), much of the research on slash-fiction has focused on the potential of the category to exist as a gender-

¹⁴ “centrofttheselights’s” 2013 study consisted of a poll advertised via a *Tumblr* post that went viral. The poll asked participants to answer questions about their gender and sexual identity, fanfiction preferences in terms of category and genre, and the percentage of time spent reading or writing fanfiction (centrumlumina; 2021).

¹⁵ While 30.6% of the female slash readers polled in “centrofttheselights’s” study identified as heterosexual, 56.3% of the female slash readers polled identified as being within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Likewise, while 25.8% of the female slash writers polled identified as heterosexual women, 66.8% of the female slash writers polled identified as being within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. The remaining percentages in both categories were made up of male and nonbinary readers and writers within the sexuality spectrums of “heterosexual,” “homosexual,” and “asexual,” as well as those who chose not to disclose this information (“centrofttheselights” [2014] *AO3.org*).

defying space, and specifically, as a kind of “queer, intersectional, feminist space” (Coleman 85). Because slash-fiction centres around stories involving “man-on-man (m/m) sexual and/or romantic relationships” (Willis qtd. in Coleman 84), when it is written by women—or perceived as a category written by women—it is often celebrated as a subversive, queer, female act of “reading and writing into existence alternative ways of being that elude the confines of patriarchal heteronormativity” (Coleman 85). Where so much of both historical and contemporary Western media and culture places limitations on female presence and voice in creative works, for many, slash-fiction serves a mean by which women may mobilize aspects of masculinity in order to interrogate the trauma of misogyny without simply repeating familiar narratives that reduce women to passive objects of desire and/or sex for an authoritative male ego. As fan-scholar Tessa Barone writes, “in writing and reading slash, women locate themselves in the subjectivities of men, appropriating the gender of masculine characters in order to situate themselves more comfortably in the narrative” and so, attempt to fictively untether themselves from the grasp of misogynistic expectations and archetypes (29).

Described by Lucy Neville as a “digital room of their own” (Neville 394), a space “where women can be strange and unusual and/or do strange and unusual things” (Julad qtd. in Tosenberger 190) such as using a ‘male persona,’ slash-fiction can perhaps be seen to emulate Russian literary critic and scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin’s understanding of the “carnavalesque.” For Bakhtin, the Chronotope or “space-time” of the carnivalesque embodies “a time (of a) utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (9). Just as Bakhtin envisions the “carnival” as an environment of “play” and “change,” a space of “undefined” forms in which the structured ideals of law and public identity can

become malleable and exaggerated (Ibid., 11), so too is slash-fiction a forum where hybridity and generic play are expected.

Notably, when discussing slash-fiction, there is often a question of identity performance at work. While slash is regularly imagined as an inviting and open space of play, a space where predominantly female readers and writers can perhaps “(make) love over the naked bodies of attractive men” (Busse 3), for others, disagreement arises over the treatment of the male characters within the fanfictions themselves. Just as for Bakhtin, for whom the structured nature of the carnival as an “organized feast” can serve to reinforce the same hierarchal ideals that it appears to contest (9), for some, slash-fiction’s attempts at creating a liberatory “queer, intersectional, feminist space” instead ultimately uphold the same potentially heteronormative and misogynistic histories that the system tries to reject. This becomes obvious in the A/B/O case study in chapter two wherein Kylo Ren is defined as an Alpha and in an intimate relationship with an Omega Armitage Hux. As will be shown, while Kylo Ren is framed by the author as a progressive Alpha who defies heteronormative masculine behaviours, this narrative ultimately comes undone when his relationship with Hux is centred around issues of consent, and a view of masculinity that is threatening and tied to acts of violence; a narrative that is also historically a harmful stereotype against queer men.¹⁶ As Eden Lackner et al., write in “Cunning Linguistics: The Bisexual Erotics of

¹⁶ In “Perceptions of a sexual advance from gay men leads to negative affect and compensatory acts of masculinity” (2021), Nathaniel E.C. Schermerhorn notes, for example, how some straight men perceive the sexual advances of queer men as a threat and how, historically, this perceived threat has been systematically treated through “gay panic” as a legal defence that has led to the murder of queer men (261).

Words/Silence/Flesh” (2006), “disagreement exists over whether or not the male characters in slash are women disguised as men, androgynous men, (straight) men the way (straight) women want them or want them to behave, or gay men” (9). While the act of writing slash-fiction itself may automatically carry queer connotations as a perceived writing mode of women loving women through male personae, scholars such as James Coleman focus on the nature of slash-fiction as stories that are fundamentally written about queer male relationships, yet are not typically written by those identifying as queer men ¹⁷ (86). Fanfiction scholar, Kristina Busse, while quoting a fan, notably describes how slash fandoms can serve as a kind of a “queer minstrel show” (Busse qtd. in Coleman 86). What this quotation articulates is the concern for many that slash-fiction has the potential to flatten queer male identity in its efforts to promote a celebration of imagined genres of difference. Specifically, rather than displaying characters that are nuanced and stories that appear real to life in their treatment of queer male relationships, histories, and everyday lives, slash-fiction instead becomes a place where, like a minstrel show, harmful stereotypes can easily flourish.

Similar arguments extend to the genre of “Alpha/Beta/Omega” (A/B/O) slash, as well. While the genre is often celebrated as a correspondingly queer space in which the oftentimes rigid sex and gender binaries of Western colonial cultures are dismantled and broadened to include a third category, ¹⁸ with writers envisioning worlds and characters

¹⁷ “centrooftheselights’s” 2013 study shows that only 2.7% of the male slash readers polled identified as being within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, while only 3% of the male slash writers polled identified as being within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum.

¹⁸ In “Performance, Property, and the Slashing of Gender in Fanfiction” (2005), Sonia Katyal notes that “in stark opposition to the typical dominant male/passive female theme (...) slash (depicts) men as softer, more complicated and emotional human beings” which lends itself to creating queer overtones (Katyal, 2005, 486). In A/B/O slash, Alpha and Omegas’ desires to care for one another and perform instinctual physical rituals with one another, in part, contribute to this same trend of reimagined masculinity.

entirely removed from the stigma surrounding queer male relationships, the “profundity” of these relationships is also often considered to have been removed (Barone 10). Credited by fans and fan scholars as having originated in the fandom for the *CW*’s television series *Supernatural* (2005-2020) ¹⁹ (Ibid., 3), A/B/O slash’s frequent focus on the sexual cycles of Alpha and Omegas’ bodies for many works as a metaphor that “posits the idea that fertility cycles (...) can be eroticized” (Ibid., 32). With female bodies—and especially menstruation—historically treated as a taboo subject, it is argued by scholars like Laura Campillo Arnaiz that A/B/O slash-fiction’s exploration of male Omegas bodies’ experiences undergoing heat—a period in which they become extremely physically desirable to the nonbiologically related Alphas around them—creates a parallel for some female readers and writers wherein, their own marginalized bodies are desirable through a bloodless comparison (Ibid). Many A/B/O stories also depict male Omegas’ experiences of sexual discrimination in which they struggle to maintain power over their reproductive rights and authority in a system where Alphas are treated as being more physically and instinctually dominant. Tessa Barone references Guy Mark Foster in stating that because “women have long suffered (these same kinds of abuses), depicting these stories (in A/B/O slash) allows fans to perhaps feel in control of ‘helplessness (and) humiliation,’” (30). ²⁰

However, just as James Coleman discusses the potential of slash-fiction to reduce the complexities of queer male relationships and identity to erotic, fantastical stories

¹⁹ The trope is also credited as having developed from *Star Trek*, specifically the canon descriptions of Vulcan mating habits referred to as “ponfar” (Busse, 2013).

²⁰ This argument could extend to other marginalized bodies more generally. However, the focus of this thesis remains more primarily on the relationship between queer male bodies and female (or perceived as female) bodies.

devoid of the repeatedly “painful history of (the actually lived) queer male” experience (104), A/B/O fiction is likewise critiqued as simply reinserting outwardly presenting queer male characters into “a highly heteronormative relationship without women” (Barone 6). While the genre claims to be a biological three-gendered system, in actuality, most stories of the genre almost “invariably feature (only) a pairing of a male Alpha and male Omega” (Ibid), where Betas are given background importance for their lack of ‘interesting’ biological differences from contemporary humans. When isolating discussion to only the Alpha as physically and psychologically dominant and the Omega as submissive, what arises is often a mirroring of familiar two-gendered and hyper-heterosexual tendencies wherein Alphas appear to stand in for an imagined aggressive maleness and Omegas appear to stand in for an imagined passive femaleness as opposed to the desired equality between two male figures. This same mirroring becomes even more apparent when the story depicts reproduction in which—as will be seen in this paper’s specific fanfiction case studies—the potential for male Omegas to become pregnant means that they are often excessively feminized and subsequently infantilized.

As such, this thesis ultimately aligns with Coleman, Barone, and Busse’s views that while slash-fiction and the genre of Alpha/Beta/Omega (A/B/O) dynamics more specifically, have previously been celebrated as a liberatory queer space—and in many ways meet these descriptions—more attention should be spent on the areas in which these narrative styles do not “blur” the notions of gender and sexuality, but rather, intentionally or unintentionally position them as ordered and defined structures. Using the models of slash-fiction and A/B/O fiction discussed, this thesis hopes to show that while the intention of this category and genre may exist within the overarching boundaries of a gift

economy as described, in representing queer male identities within these spaces as material to be exchanged between writers and readers as a kind of raw resource of play, what arises is a form of fetish not wholly based in liberated desires, but rather, in unacknowledged consequences and complexities similar to those of non-gift based economic systems.

While fanfiction's relationship to ideas of cultural capital and the gift economy has been previously studied, the focus of this study has also largely celebrated fanfiction as a counter-cultural space that supports cultural capital and gift economy structures as more liberating than capitalist structures. Notably, in "Rewriting 'Xena: Warrior Princess': Resistance to representations of gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality in fanfiction" (2007), H.C.J.M. Spierings uses a discussion of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to describe fanfiction's relationship to both mainstream media production and to itself (22). Spierings also compares fanfiction creators to the Marxist philosophy of the proletariat to explore how fanfiction is routinely structured as marginalized and emotional spaces "strongly disapproved of by the cultural elite" (i.e., mainstream media producers) (Ibid., 23). Using the work of Karl Marx and Jacques Derrida, among others, my thesis hopes to bring attention and discussion to an ongoing question of what arises when queer male characters are valued as cultural commodities and contained within the structures of highly fantasized narratives, and so, regularly exchanged with impunity.

The Theory of Fanfiction as Commodity Fetishism and the Problem of the “Queer Gift”

In *Capital Volume One: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867), German philosopher and political theorist Karl Marx outlines that “a commodity is (...) an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (41). Specifically, for Marx, this idea of satisfaction is inherently connected to the idea that every commodity has both an embedded framework consisting of “use-value” and of “exchange value” (Ibid., 27). A commodity’s “use-value” “becomes a reality only by use or consumption,” such as when the product has been used or consumed in some way for an intended purpose ²¹ (Ibid.). “Use-value” is further related to ideas of human labour so that a commodity must be something in which labour has been used to produce, and more specifically, been used to produce for others outside of the individual or group that initially created the product (Ibid., 30). In comparison to this, the framework of a commodity’s “exchange-value” is more ephemeral than concrete. While a commodity may have multiple “use-values” and multiple “exchange-values,” its “use-values” are tied to the physical properties of the product. In contrast, its “exchange-values” are “only the mode of expression, the phenomenal form, of something contained in it, yet distinguishable from it” (Ibid., 27). For instance, Marx gives the example that while wheat can be exchanged for various monetary tokens like gold, silver, cowry shells, etc., the relationship between the wheat and these monetary tokens is not embedded in any physical property of the product, but instead, an invented connection by a society’s economic desires and expectations (Ibid., 28).

²¹ For example, a loaf of bread would have “use-value” when it is eaten, whereas a book would have “use-value” when it has been successfully read.

In this way, Marx continues with the idea that ultimately, the concept of value is a social relationship expressed between people and their products in forms of purchase and trade, and subsequently, between the products themselves (Ibid., 33). Notably, in using another of Marx's examples, it is only in looking at linen in direct relation to and equality with the coat that it can produce that the value of the linen becomes apparent at both a physical and social level ²² (Ibid., 35; 36). This comparison between commodities thereby perpetuates a larger metamorphic cycle in which commodities are continuously transformed into other commodities, exchanged through purchase or trade to generate some kind of economic value, and then retransformed from economic value and back into another commodity ²³ (Ibid., 75). It is this perceived value that continues the cycle of production and metamorphosis so that, as Marx describes: "it is not the exchange of commodities which regulates the magnitude of their value; but on the contrary, that it is the magnitude of their value which controls their exchange proportions" (Ibid., 42).

In regard to fanfiction, although positioned as part of a gift economy rather than a monetary-based economy, as stories that have been created for the specific consumption and satisfaction of fandom communities, fanfiction can be seen as a commodity with a similar relationship to Marx's ideas of value. Just as an economical product such as wheat or linen gains monetary value through its transformation into bread or clothing, a canon source text also gains cultural value through its transformation into fanfiction. For example, in returning to the piece "Grounding," it is by "consuming" Kylo Ren's source characteristics or "use-values" and optimizing them for their own purposes that

²² I.e., first as a raw resource, and then through transformation, as a product valued for warmth and/or fashion.

²³ I.e., a baker turns wheat into bread, which is then sold for some kind of coin, which is then used to acquire more wheat to continue the cycle of bread production.

EmperorsVornskr exchanges Kylo Ren’s source character into a fandom version that can then be shared with the community in the hopes of generating more fandom content through the form of comments, “kudos,”²⁴ and ideally, the eventual production of even more *Star Wars* fanfiction. Like Marx’s ideas about the social nature of value, the success of any single fanfiction’s popularity on *Archive of Our Own*—or circulation in other online or offline spaces—is related to the surrounding love—as Francesca Coppa writes—for the material. The perceived economic value of a commodity perpetuates its production and circulation. Likewise, the perceived cultural value, as love, surrounding fanfiction similarly encourages its production and circulation. This sense of value also works to create notions of “solidarity” (Siisiäinen 12) so that in an economic-based system, the possession of certain kinds of commodities (or lack thereof) forms ideas of class. In a cultural value system, the possession of fanfiction as a cultural commodity helps to structure fandom as a community bond against mainstream cultures and within individual fandoms.

Once again, despite this opening framework of a counter-cultural sense of solidarity against mainstream media production, when discussing the concept of cultural capital, Martii Siisiäinen further writes in “Two Concepts of Social Capital: Bourdieu vs. Putnam” (2000), that “it inevitably assumes an ideological function: it gives the legitimized forms of distinction and classification a taken-for-granted character, and thus conceals the arbitrary way in which the forms of capital are distributed among individuals in society” (13). Just as ideas of class hierarchy and disparities of wealth become

²⁴ On *Archive of Our Own*, “kudos” refers to a button attached to individual fan works that allows readers to quickly express their enjoyment without having to leave a comment. This function is similar to other sites algorithms such as *Youtube’s* like button or *Tumblr’s* heart button.

naturalized in an economic-based system, so too do cultural systems similarly “(promote) or (privilege) certain cultural tastes and competences” over others (Fiske 30). For fanfiction, this privileging is perhaps seen in a participant’s knowledge of the preferred treatment of genres within varying fandoms or an understanding of how certain characters are popularly portrayed.²⁵ For Marx, this same process of naturalization which objectifies a commodity’s value within a social space is what forms the basis for his theory of commodity fetishism. He writes:

a commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s [sic] labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour (47-48).

He outlines how, while it is entirely arbitrary that any one product should be exchanged for any one value or should be produced in such a way as to create class boundaries, these social systems and processes become so entrenched within the production, treatment, and imagination surrounding the commodity itself, that they appear to be natural and inseparable from said commodity. Similarly, in fanfiction, recurring patterns in the optimization of characters and the popularization of certain fanfiction genres and character treatments encourage readers and writers to see the creative choices made as natural to their fandom rather than as chosen motifs.²⁶

²⁵ A popular compliment from a fanfiction reader to writer is to congratulate them on their accurate portrayal of the characters’ personalities. Authors will sometimes tag their work with “OOC” or “out of character” to warn readers if they feel that they have not matched—whether intentionally or unintentionally—either the canon characterization or the fandom’s preestablished expectations of said characters.

²⁶ One example of this mistaken objectivity is when “shipping wars” occur in fandom. “Shipping wars” “result when tensions arise between fans or shippers of two (or more) different character

As discussed above—and as will be discussed in ensuing chapters—while this form of commodity fetishism is perhaps not harmful to inanimate products, questions of negative consequences do arise when it is human bodies—or imagined human bodies—being fetishized. In *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992), French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant theorize the potential for a system based on cultural value to produce what they term “symbolic violence” (167). They write that symbolic violence is “the fact of recognizing a violence which is wielded precisely inasmuch as one does not perceive it as such” (Ibid). More specifically, symbolic violence occurs when a dominant or selective group controls a monopoly of symbolic classification and categorization and perpetuates these symbols in a way that is not always immediately recognized as harmful ²⁷ (Ibid). If scholars like Coleman, Barone, and Busse are correct that slash-fanfiction is to some degree a writing form that adopts queer male stories but is not predominantly written for or by queer men, then this thesis further posits that it becomes a space with the potential for symbolic violence to occur.

When exploring the specifically selected cultural sites throughout this thesis, the boundaries of this potential for symbolic violence to occur culminates, in part, in Algerian-French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s idea of the impossibility of “the gift” and, in the scope of this thesis, the limitations of a “queer” gift exchange. In his work, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money* (1991) and in the chapter “Counterfeit Money II: Gift and Counterfeit, Excuse and Forgiveness,” Derrida writes that the idea of the gift is a near

relationships in either canon or fanfic” (“Shipping Wars” *Supernaturalwiki.com*). Fans believe so strongly that their ship is the correct pairing or OTP (“One True Pairing”), that it can lead to in-fighting between fans.

²⁷ An example of this would be the use of stereotype as the primary characterization for an individual or group.

semiotic impossibility because it would need to “presuppose the total absence of return (counter gift), (or) of trace and of custody (including custody as a memory of a given or received gift)” (Derrida qtd. in Champetier 15). In outlining this idea that a “gift should not create a debt or the obligation of a counter gift” (Champetier 17), Derrida plays with the linguistic nature of giving as an action and so postulates the potential power imbalance and loss of control inherent in every act of “generosity.” For example, he notes that while “we give a gift, (we can) also give a slap or an order, we render a visit, we render homage, we render service...” (Derrida qtd. in Champetier 17). Like Marx’s argument that a commodity exists as both a physical object and an object with an imagined sense of cultural and fetishized value, so too do Derrida’s descriptions of the act of giving create a spectrum for simultaneously oppositional modes of thinking and acting. For instance, while on the surface, the act of giving is perhaps generally founded in positive structures like generosity, for Derrida, it is comparable to the violence of a slap because the act of giving concretizes an unequal relationship between the gift giver and gift receiver. It is a relationship that confers upon the receiver an automatic obligation to the giver, in the process creating a relationship of symbolic ownership wherein the receiver is bound by the favour through their comparative act of taking and their newfound debt to the giver in the form of eventual repayment (Derrida 40).

When considering fanfiction as a relationship primarily between fanfiction authors and their readers, the earlier utopic view of the potlatch as a site of free exchange and love is perhaps reconfigured in this new view of giving and taking into something less balanced. For example, in “The Fannish Potlatch: Creation of Status Within the Fan Community” (1999), Rachel Sabatini describes how “high-status creators”—those

fanfiction authors who most benefit from the products of the fannish gift economy in the form of kudos, comments, and views—can drain their fandoms of emotional energy by continuously requesting feedback and support: “the individual high-status fans continue to write and post, and their status goes up (within their fandom(s)), while the fandom that supports them finds themselves emotionally drained because of its ongoing, continued emotional support” (Sabatini n.pag).²⁸ When thinking about this quotation in the context of A/B/O slash-fiction, supporting “high-status creators” often means encouraging the continued production of the familiar tropes of the Alpha/Beta/Omega genre, many of which, as will be shown in the ensuing chapters, can lead to the reproduction of heteronormative and heterosexual stereotypes. In this case, rather than the individual readers becoming drained from supporting the “high-status creator,” supporting the “high-status trope” in A/B/O slash-fiction can lead to the draining of queer potential.

Similarly, when considering these acts of giving and taking as a demonstration of unequal power relations, in “Counterfeit Money II: Gift and Counterfeit, Excuse and Forgiveness,” Derrida further poses the questions: “What would a gift be in which I gave without wanting to give and without knowing that I am giving, without the explicit intention of giving, or even in spite of myself?” (123). He answers with the stance that “there is no gift without the intention of giving. The gift can only have meaning that is

²⁸ One example of this is the frequent request for comments and feedback by fan authors to their readership. In a top *Reddit* post on the subreddit “r/FanFiction,” *Reddit* user “drcarpetcat” notes their concerns over fanfiction writers in their fandom asking for feedback in a way that they perceived as “threatening” and questioning the validity of this ([reddit.com/r/FanFiction](https://www.reddit.com/r/FanFiction/)):

The author notes were typically cheery - asking for feedback about whether or not readers were liking the story and so on. But about halfway through I started to notice the author notes became borderline... threatening? Complaints about traffic to the story outpacing reviews, saying they did not appreciate readers consuming the material without engaging and imploring the audience to comment, going so far as to say they simply would stop updating if the response rate didn't increase, especially from lurkers.

intentional” (Ibid) or else risk being “condemned to the limbo of abstract representations” (Ibid., 159). This condemnation can be a kind of violence because, in the context of queer representation, it can relate to the production of harmful stereotypes. Like an abstract representation, stereotypes are similarly based in broad ideological forms of thought. When considering queer identities, stereotypes can serve as a violence because they can present these identities through the static heteronormative and heterosexual imagination, which still frequently sees queer identities as a threat to contemporary Western society and culture, rather than as identities that are fully lived and realized. Once again, in pursuing this line of thinking alongside the topic of slash-fanfiction, Derrida opens up the discussion of symbolic violence. While slash-fiction authors may choose to share their work with a willing fandom readership, in choosing to knowingly or unknowingly fantasize demographics—like a queer male identity—that they are not necessarily a part of, they risk giving their readerships elements of categorized stereotype and so, as Derrida suggests, further risk condemning these demographics to a harmful realm of abstract representations far removed from their actual, lived experiences. While fanfiction predominantly draws on fictional characters who are, by their very nature of being fictional, a series of abstract representations, when these texts also attempt to draw upon the formation of real-world marginalized identities and their challenges and experiences, a question of consent arises. If the structures of fanfiction—and A/B/O slash-fiction more explicitly—exist as a gift economy but with a queer exchange rate, and if gift-giving, as Derrida suggests, is simultaneously the continuous threat of debt and of taking, then the question again arises of what, if anything, is being taken from queer male slash-fiction characters, what, if anything, is being given back, who is expected to do the giving, and

most importantly, who is expected to pay the debt? Likewise, when considering the relationship between fanfiction authors and their readers, what debt is created and shared in the production and consumption of a slash-fiction text? The interrogation of these questions will occur when exploring Omegan identity as a form of value and exchange, and as surplus, and when exploring the public responses to chosen fanfiction case studies.

Methods and Methodology

As such, in order to interrogate the position of queer male identities and their performances in A/B/O slash-fiction through a lens of commodity fetishism, this thesis undertakes a theoretical and critical discourse analysis of the economic and sociocultural arguments surrounding commodity fetishism as well as ensuing discussions in the fandoms of the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy* (2015-2019) and the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (2008-present). Both the genre of A/B/O slash-fiction and commodity fetishism can be seen as like discourses in that they both encourage participants to evaluate “certain perspectives and states of affairs (...) as ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ and others to seem or be taken as ‘deviant’ or ‘marginal’” (Gee 200). As will be discussed in the following chapter, Karl Marx describes in *Capital Volume One* (1887) how the process of capital “consumes its own component parts for the purpose of transforming them into a mass product of a higher value” (22) which then affirms and cements the expected social relations between producers and products (Ibid., 47). Similarly, in the various worlds of A/B/O slash-fiction, canon male characters are likewise consumed as cultural capital and transformed by readers and writers into a fandom chosen and expected representation of gender, sex, and sexuality—a mass product as mass genre—for that same fandom’s

perceived benefit and socio-psychological gain. Angela Fazekas, referencing Louise Phillips and Jorgensen in “Queer and Unusual Space: White Supremacy in Slash Fanfiction” (2014), writes that:

By looking not only at how a text is produced and consumed, but the wider social practices surrounding it, critical discourse analysis allows for consideration of the ideological effects of discourse and how it contributes to unequal power relations and social inequalities (15).

Within the context of this work, understanding how A/B/O slash-fiction and commodity fetishism connect first at the level of value and exchange (Marx), and then at the level of the transformation of the queer male body into a symbolic, possessed object (Derrida and Bourdieu), equally reflects the practices of this critical discourse analysis.

Furthermore, alongside a theoretical and critical discourse analysis, this thesis draws on the concept of intertextuality, “or the idea that each individual text draws on discourses and elements from previous ones” (Fairclough qtd. in Fazekas 15). As stated in the opening introduction of this chapter, because “fanfiction is shaped to the literary conventions, expectations, and desires of (specific) communities, and is written in genres developed by (those communities)” (Coppa 8), each work must be considered as a nexus of texts rather than individual pieces. Influenced by fandom interactions, reader comments, and both online and offline discussion of material, fanfiction displays intertextual qualities in that “the truth of (any one) text comes from a plurality of voices, which create a plurality of meaning” (Booth qtd. in Fazekas 16). This thesis thus uses methods of intertextuality to read the relationship between commodity fetishism and queer male identities and performances across sources—the canon texts, fanfiction, and

broader fandom discussions—to expose potential areas of misappropriation of these representations of queer male identities. While fanfiction and fandom are popularly imagined as sites of cultural giving back, this thesis instead considers how popular tropes given to A/B/O slash-fiction can also serve as a kind of theft to potential queer narratives.

This thesis also explores two cultural sites to accomplish this reading of male queerness in A/B/O slash-fiction as potentially misappropriated cultural capital. The first is a critical discourse analysis of a *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy* fanfiction on *Archive of Our Own*. A discourse analysis of plot, dialogue, and the characterization of both canon and fandom representations of characters will allow for a consideration of the story in its component pieces. My close reading will enable subsequent analysis of the text as one intimately tied to political and social relations. In focusing on the depiction of queer male fanfiction identities and relationships in relation to structures of commodity fetishism, this thesis will explore ideas of value and exchange. Specifically, my analysis of fanfiction and commodity fetishism exposes how the performance of queer male characters in this work are fantasized and transformed within a fictional primary source into a product that both challenges heteronormative scripts and embraces them. To do this, my analysis will engage with the ideas of the gift as both a product of giving and a product of symbolic violence.

The second cultural site of focus is a critical discourse analysis of a *Marvel Cinematic Universe* fanfiction on *Archive of Our Own*. Similar to the first site of focus, close reading strategies applied to the story's plot, dialogue, and the characterization of both canon and fandom representations of included characters will be used to interrogate the story's potential political and social effects and consequences through a similar

discussion of the ways in which the text engages with potential queer and heteronormative scripts through the idea of the gift as a potential form of symbolic violence. Examining two pieces of fanfiction from two different fandoms (the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy* and the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*)—but from within the same genre of A/B/O slash-fiction—also allows for a broader analysis of fandom practices wherein specific, and potentially problematic, depictions of queer male characters are concretized and naturalized within an expanse of cultural spaces rather than confined to a single area. Choosing to explore multiple fandoms also has the benefit of removing emphasis from any one fandom to show that the practices explored regarding A/B/O slash-fiction are not the result of or the responsibility of any one fandom, but a collective practice that fandoms as a whole must claim and recognize.

I have chosen the specific fandoms of the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy* and the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* as cultural sites because of my personal connection to and familiarity with these spaces as a fanfiction reader. These fandoms have also been chosen because of their large user base, continuing popularity on *Archive of Our Own* due to the continued production of canon content by *Disney*, and because both sources' prevalence of male characters—especially in the case of the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*²⁹—means that slash-fiction is frequently encouraged by the canon material through an originating lack of canon representation of demographics outside of a structured lens of Hollywood's understanding of maleness.

However, it should be further noted that while these chosen fandom spaces are suitable due to their popularity on *Archive of Our Own* and because of their prevalence in

²⁹ For instance, of the original six mainstream cinematic Marvel Avenger's characters, Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) is the only female representation.

slash-fiction, like much of popular culture, they do suffer from a lack of representation and this lack is integral to the discussion of these fandom spaces. In “Queer and Unusual Space: White Supremacy in Slash Fanfiction,” Angela Fazekas notes that whiteness “permeates slash fanfiction” (25). Referring on “Fanlore” to “The Two White Guys trope,” Fazekas writes how slash-fiction often “foregrounds the experiences of conventionally attractive white men, regardless of the diversity of characters and any subtext or evidence present in the canon material” (26). Centering this thesis’s arguments around the slash-fiction relationships of Kylo Ren and Armitage Hux from the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy*, and Steve Rogers, James “Bucky” Barnes,³⁰ and Tony Stark from the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* means engaging in and acknowledging a pervasive whiteness within slash-fiction as a by-product of canon materials and as a creative choice made by fanfiction authors and readers even when less frequently changed by fanfiction authors as a form of text optimization. While this thesis does not directly interrogate the conflicts of race and racial representation within fandom, it should be noted that these barriers exist and, in exploring the ideas of commodity fetishism, the question of why white male bodies are positioned as the most desirable within fandom content is worth interrogating.

Alongside the consideration of the value and transformation of objects into commodities, I also locate my chosen cultural sites within the theoretical foundations of Karl Marx and Jacques Derrida because both are central to the research and discussion of commodity fetishism. In the case of Derrida, his work in *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, semiotically builds on patterns of exchange and value as seen through the idea of the gift. Thus, his work allows for a more integrated discussion of the theoretical

³⁰ From this point forwards referred to by his common nickname Bucky, or Bucky Barnes.

materials. Using Derrida's work to compliment my own analysis provides the potential for added layers of intertextual reading between and across primary and secondary sources at a level that is both applied (Marx) and conceptual (Derrida).

Using these various methodologies, I also remain conscious of the efforts to work within and around a framework of queer methodology as a self-identified queer individual and as someone who does not identify as a queer man. Matt Brim and Amin Ghaziani write in the introduction of their collection, "Queer Methods" (2016), that:

Queer social research methods question the origins and effects of concepts and categories rather than reify them in allegedly generalizable variable-oriented paradigm, because these categories do not always align with lived experience. (...) Queer social research methods reject the fetishizing of the observable. If empiricism grants authority to categories that are operationalized into observable units, then to queer empiricism means to embrace multiplicity, misalignments, and silences (16-18).

Efforts to include the strategies described above appear within this thesis through the ongoing attempts to question the forms of A/B/O slash-fiction's representation of queer male characters and the potential—and simultaneous—fluidity *and* rigidity of Alpha and Omega secondary sex dynamics in chosen cultural sites. Resisting definite answers and instead integrating arguments within the wider discussion of fanfiction through the use of intertextuality allows for an analysis of processes surrounding fanfiction and so resists the attempt to erroneously categorize its structures and genres as a singular whole. Moreover, exploring multiple cultural sites and the potential absences present in their depiction of queer male characters across fandoms will hopefully allow for a broader connection to an

understanding of “multiplicity, misalignments, and silences,” and allow for a discussion that both takes an account of the chosen texts, while also forwarding areas for further investigation that celebrate fanfiction as complex storytelling.

Chapter Outlines

The chapter following this introduction, “Narratives of Commodity Fetishism in *Star Wars* A/B/O Slash-fiction,” reveals narratives of commodity fetishism in A/B/O slash-fiction fandom space via an analysis of male Omegan bodies’ loss of controlled individual agency. Specifically, this narrative is explored through the conditions of a heat cycle on male Omegan bodies and so, the ensuing effects of seemingly uncontrollable biological processes, and more importantly, the social construction of these processes on male Omegan bodies. By undertaking a critical discourse analysis of the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy* fanfiction story “fingerprints smudging the stars” (2019), I hope to establish how the popular descriptions of a heat cycle within A/B/O slash-fiction engage in Marx’s descriptions of the metamorphosis of commodity production and in doing so, further allow for a discussion of the symbolic violence that can occur when human bodies—or imagined human bodies—are positioned as products for public fan consumption. In looking at specific descriptions of Kylux as an Alpha/Omega pairing and the power relationships that this entails during Hux’s heat cycle, I attempt to reveal the homonormative overtones of the genre in its attempts to be a “queer, intersectional, feminist space.” In doing this, I argue that the treatment of Omegan bodies in heat has the potential to erase queer male identity by transforming it through a heterosexual gift-economy based lens, and as a fantastical social gift for a public fan space that exists

outside of objective queer historical understanding. Through this exploration—centred first within a close reading of the chosen text and then through a discussion of associated cultural markers such as comments—this analysis contradicts notions of fandom, and A/B/O slash-fiction in particular—as a countercultural space by revealing how the nature of treating Omegas as biological objects for Alpha and reader pleasure infuses fandom with the conflicts of stereotypical, familiar, and ongoing identity politics.

Following this, I turn my attention in the third chapter, “Narratives of Commodity Fetishism in *Marvel A/B/O Slash Fiction*.” In this chapter, I explore narratives of commodity fetishism in the A/B/O slash-fiction fandom space of the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*. Like chapter two, this analysis of commodity fetishism occurs through an exploration of how male Omegan bodies experience a loss of agency when imagined as products for Alpha control and desire. In particular, this analysis occurs by comparing how the A/B/O trope of pack dynamics and Alpha/Omega courting rituals transform Omegan bodies into a product of what Marx deems as surplus value. In looking at specific descriptions of “Stuckony” as an Alpha/Omega grouping between the Marvel characters, Steve Rogers, Bucky Barnes, and Tony Stark, along with the power relations that this relationship entails, I attempt to reveal how imagined queer male and Omegan bodies become potentially exploited through an increased understanding of value as placed on the social construction of ‘Omeganess’ rather than in the consequences of this Alpha-facilitated labour power. By undertaking a critical discourse analysis of the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* fanfiction story “Part of a Pack” (2021), I hope to establish how author Buckybeardreams’s decision to listen to public opinion and make use of popular A/B/O tropes in relation to mating/courting rituals as well as the depiction of Steve

Rogers as an Omega, again engages in Marx's descriptions of the metamorphosis of commodity production, and specifically, the symbolic violence related to Steve's transformation into a kind of fetishized "doll" that has been 'gifted' to Tony and Bucky as a result of his direct integration into their established pack dynamics. Through this exploration—as with chapter two—centred first within a close reading of the chosen text and then through a discussion of associated cultural markers such as comments and author's notes, this analysis further broadens the discussion of fandom, and A/B/O slash-fiction as a "queer, intersectional, feminist space" by showing where it impedes the production of meaningful closure. Moreover, in doing this, I further link Steve's treatment as a 'pack Omega' to Coleman's concerns over the treatment of queer male relationships as a kind of static parody.

In chapter Four, "Reimagining Production," I turn my attention away from the ways that male Omegas are confined through the structures of commodity fetishism to instead consider the ways in which the dynamic can be liberating. Following the tenets of queer theory which resists one-sided or definite answers, I expand my argument in this chapter to consider ideas of queer methodology, kink theory, and the characteristics of queer heterotopias as resistance spaces and spaces of potential empowerment to evaluate how slash-fiction and A/B/O fiction depict ideas of transformation and value as related to growth rather than as controlled change. In doing this, I attempt to offer the beginnings of a meaningful conclusion that builds on the notion of fanfiction as not being utopian, but rather a space that is complex, shifting, and worthy of further academic investigation.

Chapter Two: Narratives of Commodity Fetishism in *Star Wars* A/B/O

Slash-fiction

I've found Omega-verse stories in just about every fandom I've ever tried, and once I saw the variation, I felt I could take the bits and pieces of most interest to me, and use them how I wanted. So even if there was one initial story, a lot of people must have read it and then tried to write their own versions, and then other people read *those* and tried to write *their* own versions, and it just sort of spread...virally, with mutations, so to speak.

--Quick_Adeptness7894 (2020)

Taken from an A/B/O dynamics forum on *Reddit*, this comment from *Reddit* user, “Quick_Adeptness7894,” speaks to the ideas discussed that Omega-verse stories—that is, stories set in the Alpha/Beta/Omega genre universe—are spaces that can be explored at the manufacturing level of value and exchange. In establishing their love for Omega-verse’s potential as a medium that invites constant growth and change—as a kind of living narrative form that can spread and “mutate”—“Quick_Adeptness7894’s” comment highlights both aspects of the genre as existing within the conventions of the fanfiction gift economy as well as Marx’s conceptions of commodification. In stressing the possessive pronouns in their comment by using italics, “Quick_Adeptness7894” visually identifies the production of fanfiction as this personalized process of desire. Like the conventions of the fanfiction gift economy, for “Quick_Adeptness7894,” it is desire that fuels the world of A/B/O fanfiction and encourages people to read and produce content.

Their descriptions of the production line through which fanfiction is read, processed, internalized, and then externalized again through the production of new

fanfiction mirrors Marx's descriptions of the metamorphic cycle that commodities undergo in their journey from individual-to-individual use-value. In stressing that the value of fanfiction is the ability to "(...) take the bits and pieces of most interest" from across variations, "Quick_Adeptness7894" again stresses how value is a social relationship that is perhaps easily mobilized and developed by a product's consumer; it is something that can be picked apart and changed rather than accepted as a complete whole. It is this idea of value as something that is not embedded in the actual physical, surface quality of a product but rather in its imagined details that is especially pertinent to this chapter's contents.

Like Quick_Adeptness7894's ideas of A/B/O fanfiction, through close reading strategies, this chapter will show how *Archive of Our Own* user TheSpaceCoyote's slash-fiction piece, "fingerprints smudging the stars," similarly depicts how Omegan male bodies are transformed both through physical and social cycles into desirable objects for others' perceived gain rather than allowed to exist as a contained and individual whole. As will be shown throughout this chapter, when depicted as an Omega undergoing a heat cycle, Armitage Hux from the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy* transforms from private to public in ways that directly relate to both Marx's ideas of value and exchange and the ideas of symbolic violence as gift giving.

The purpose of this chapter is thus to explore how TheSpaceCoyote's depiction of Hux's heat cycle, using both personalized and stereotypical fanfiction tropes, transforms him into a fetishized object by normalizing the Omegan aspects of his body that he both does not want and cannot change. The aspects of this transformation will first be explored at a metaphorical level by engaging with the specific literary devices employed by

TheSpaceCoyote in their work. This analysis will then move from within the text being described to outside of it to look at how Hux's body becomes a public object not just from an in-universe perspective but also through the nature of the fanfiction gift economy. Finally, this transition will be connected to questions of queer male representation and how the concept of a heat cycle perhaps enables gaps regarding Coleman's concerns of "the painful history of queer male sex" (104).

Stars Wars Sequel Trilogy and Fanfiction:

Disney's the Star Wars Sequel Trilogy includes the titles: *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Abrams 2015), *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Johnson 2017), and *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (Abrams 2019). The films mark "episodes" seven, eight, and nine of the *Star Wars* cinematic universe originally created and developed by Mark Lucas in 1977. As a trilogy, the films centre around protagonist Rey (Daisy Ridley)—a nineteen-year-old orphaned girl initially living on the desert planet Jakku—and her efforts to aid the politically democratic, "light-sided" New Republic or "Resistance" in their fight against the contrastingly "dark-sided," fascist structure of the First Order. Throughout the films, Rey learns about the nature of her "force"³¹ abilities and what it means to be a "Jedi"—a mystical knight whose duty is to uphold ideas of Galactic order, peace, and honour. Rey's force abilities frequently bring her into contact with the trilogy's preliminary villain turned anti-hero, the equally force-sensitive Kylo Ren (a.k.a. Ben

³¹ The "force" is "what gives a Jedi (their) power. It's an energy field created by all living things," that a Jedi is able to sense and harness (*Starwars.fandom.com*). A Jedi's use of the force manifests in telekinetic abilities such as being able to move objects with one's mind, mental manipulation in others, increased reflexes, and precognition. While Jedi's use these abilities to help others, those on the "dark side of the force" use their abilities to hurt and suppress others (Ibid).

Solo, son of New Republic leaders Leia Organa and Han Solo). While Kylo Ren (Adam Driver) is initially framed as a genocidal, patricidal “Supreme leader” of the First Order, through interactions with Rey, he is seemingly redeemed over the course of the series, rejecting the dark side of the force by throwing away his red “Sith-coded”³² lightsabre, and sacrificing his soul at the end of the series in order to save Rey’s soul from being destroyed.

Other important characters within the series to note include Rey’s friends and fellow protagonists, Finn (John Boyega), an ex-stormtrooper for the First Order, Poe Dameron (Oscar Isaac), an x-wing pilot for the New Republic, and for the purposes of this chapter’s arguments specifically, antagonist Armitage Hux (Domhnall Gleeson), First Order General and one of Kylo Ren’s main cinematic rivals.

Like *Star Trek* fanfiction, Western documentation of *Star Wars* fanfiction formally begins in the 1970s in the form of zines and mailing lists (*Fanlore.org*). As of the time of writing this, *Archive of Our Own* currently hosts over 187,000 individual *Star Wars* ‘fics,’ with over 71,000 of these stories explicitly belonging to the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy* tag. According to a 2021 study performed by “centreftheselights” reviewing the most popular relationship tags on *Archive of Our Own* in the period between January and December of the same year (see fig. C1), the pairing between Kylo Ren and Rey ranked as number 56 of the top 100 other pairings (“centreftheselights” [2022] *AO3.org*). When investigating other popular pairings within the *Star Wars* fandom, the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy* tag on *Archive of Our Own* shows that following Kylo/Rey or Ben Solo | Kylo

³² A “Sith” is the term for a “force-user” who has rejected the Jedi order and committed themselves to the “dark side of the force” (*Starwars.fandom.com*). While a Jedi’s lightsabre is typically in shades of blue, green, or purple, a Sith’s lightsabre is typically red and so, denotes their investment in cultivating anger and hatred (Ibid).

Ren/Rey³³ as the most popular pairings, “Kylux” ranks second with over 19,000 individual works when including all Kylo Ren identity tags.

For many, the popularity of “Kylux” as a recurring pairing indicates conflicting patterns within the sphere of *Star Wars* fanfiction. In “Welcoming the Dark Side?: Exploring Whitelash and Actual Space Nazis in TFA Fanfiction” (2017), Cait Coker and Karen Viars write that in choosing to romanticize Kylo Ren and Armitage Hux’s relationship from the source text and transforming it from hostile to romantic by affectionately tagging them as “Literal Space Nazi Boyfriends,” “fans (are) knowingly writing romances about genocidal fascists” (Coker and Viars, n.pag). Despite the fact that the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy* features three minority leads—Rey, a woman, Finn, a black man, and Poe, a Hispanic man³⁴—for Coker and Viars, Kylux’s popularity “has pushed back against the progressivism of the text” (Ibid). Namely, Coker and Viars argue that the popularity of Kylux—especially when considered over other slash-pairings—reiterates the ‘traditional’ values of white male bodies for a (mainly) white female audience, creating a fannish corollary to the nationalist impulses of global politics in the real world” (Ibid). Like Marx’s notion that “it is not the exchange of commodities which regulates the magnitude of their value; but on the contrary, that it is the magnitude of their value which controls their exchange proportions” (42), the popularity of Kylux as a slash-pairing, for many, speaks to the concerning continued desirability and valuing of white

³³ The use of the vertical bar (|) in fanfiction tagging systems is used to denote a character’s alter egos. In writing Kylo Ren | Ben Solo, fanfiction authors simultaneously distinguish the character as distinctly both identities as well as the idea that both identities are distinctly separate from one another. This symbol usage stands in contrast to the use of the backslash which serves to pair two characters as a unit and is relatively uncommon when compared to the use of the backslash.

³⁴ As of the time of writing this, the relationship pairing between Finn and Poe (named “Stormpilot”) has just over 7,700 individual works—12,000 less than “Kylux”—despite Finn and Poe’s larger film presence as series protagonists (“Star Wars Sequel Trilogy” *AO3.org*).

male bodies in contemporary Western society over every other demographic and regardless of those bodies' political affiliations, character, or actions. Specifically, Marx's idea that it is the magnitude of a commodities social value that controls its exchange relates to Kylo Ren in this instance by demonstrating how it is Kylo Ren and Hux's social desirability as white men that makes them more likely to feature in fanfiction despite the fact that Rey, Poe, and Finn should have more storytelling value as the protagonists who have the most screen time.

The perceived value of Kylo Ren as a character is also displayed through the popular bifurcated tagging system on *Archive of Our Own*, which includes both facets of the character's personality as Kylo Ren, but also as Ben Solo. In choosing to tag Kylo Ren through the bifurcated moniker, "Kylo Ren | Ben Solo," Coker and Viars further note that "this tag manipulation within the system is well-known for corrupting searches for specific 'ships,'" so that even when readers wish to avoid Kylo Ren and focus on his more morally sympathetic alter ego as Ben Solo, all stories with Ben Solo will now have an influx of Kylo Ren embedded within them (Coker and Viars, 2017, n.pag). Likewise, where other characters from the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy* only have one tag to search for them, Kylo Ren, as both a singular and pluralized identity, has increased outlets to display and accumulate cultural value. In increasing the ease through which readers are exposed to stories featuring Kylo Ren, Coker and Viars outline how this works at "normalizing parts of fandom until they are functionally accepted and even become 'fanon'"³⁵ (Ibid). In normalizing Kylo Ren by consistently pairing him with the more

³⁵ "Fanon" is a term that refers to when pieces of information or characterization within fandom or fanfiction become the accepted standard by the fandom, even to the point of eclipsing the canon information as the 'truth.'

respectable Ben Solo, fanfiction authors—whether knowingly or unknowingly—work to make Kylo Ren more palatable and soften the reality of his extremist actions and politics as a leader within the fascist First Order. In this way, this sense of normalization begins to outline how characters like Kylo Ren are transformed into fetishized cultural products in a similar way to Marx’s definitions. Just as Marx describes how a commodity becomes fetishized through the naturalization of its qualities so that they appear to be inherent to the product rather than the design of human labour, in manipulating Kylo Ren’s tag on *Archive of Our Own*, fan authors similarly work to naturalize Kylo Ren’s worth as a redeemable character and so, fetishize his potential ‘goodness’ as Ben Solo, assuming that this is inherent to his character while simultaneously downplaying the source reality of Kylo Ren’s numerous canon offenses.³⁶

When looking at the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy* through the specific genre of Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics on *Archive of Our Own*, other recurring patterns emerge in the treatment of the characters’ secondary sexes. While variations exist, Kylo Ren is most consistently depicted as an Alpha, and Armitage Hux is most consistently depicted as an Omega. At the time of writing this thesis, the archive hosts approximately 900 individual works—when including all name variations—featuring an Alpha Kylo Ren versus approximately 200 individual works featuring an Omega Kylo Ren. Comparatively, approximately 200 works depict Armitage Hux as an Omega, versus the approximately 130 in which he is an Alpha (“Star Wars Sequel Trilogy” *AO3.org*). The reason for this demographic breakdown could be based on any number of factors chosen by individual

³⁶ The tag “Kylo Ren Needs a Hug” which includes over 1300 individual works on *Archive of Our Own* further indicates the normalized sympathy that fan authors often possess for the character (“Star Wars Sequel Trilogy” *AO3.org*).

authors. Because Alphas are frequently depicted as being physically and sexually dominant, Kylo Ren's popularity as an Alpha could be tied to the character's strong force abilities, which mark his physical talents as being above his peers. When pairing both Kylo Ren and Armitage Hux together, the division of secondary sex characteristics could also be based on the real-world fact that the actor who plays Kylo Ren, Adam Driver, is physically taller than Domhnall Gleeson.³⁷ Regardless, these patterns begin to reveal interesting disparities in the treatment of these characters when converted into cultural products for the use and enjoyment of fans. These disparities are worthy of even further consideration through an ensuing analysis of the fanfiction case study "fingerprints smudging the Stars" (2019) by AO3 user TheSpaceCoyote. Although TheSpaceCoyote's identity remains unknown for the sake of maintaining an academic distance, and they may or may not fit the preconceived demographic of slash-fiction authors as female-identifying, the features of their work—as will be shown—still contribute to the specific considerations of slash-fiction as a "queer, intersectional, feminist space." Moreover, their work helps identify how A/B/O fiction can be read as displaying gaps common to the commodification turned fictionalization of seemingly queer male bodies.

Fanfiction Case Study: "fingerprints smudging the stars"

TheSpaceCoyote's fanfiction piece, "fingerprints smudging the stars," makes use of many of the recurring patterns within the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy's* A/B/O fiction as

³⁷ The symbolic representation of this differentiation in height perhaps ties into the stereotypical Western ideal for masculinity in which those identifying with masculine features are expected to be tall and strong in comparison to their romantic and/or sexual counterparts. This theme is also popular in Japanese "Boys Love" stories in which the larger, more traditionally presenting male character sexually dominates over their smaller, more traditionally feminized male counterpart (Sihombing, 2011, 150-165).

well as the popular tropes of A/B/O fiction more generally. Like the majority of the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy's* A/B/O fiction, TheSpaceCoyote's work features a "Kylux" pairing with an Alpha Kylo Ren and an Omega Armitage Hux. The central plot of the piece follows many of the tropes of a "mating cycles/heat fic" story. The story revolves around an Omega Hux being forced to enter a heat cycle with an Alpha Kylo Ren after Hux's suppressants (an in-world form of birth control) have seemingly abruptly failed. At the story's outset, TheSpaceCoyote indicates that in order to perform his role as a general for the First Order aboard the ship, the Finalizer, Hux must hide his Omegan status through the use of birth control and by using artificial cologne-like scents to "pass" as an Alpha:

(...) The thin piece of plastic under his skin remains one of the few good decisions ever made in his youth. The suppression of those most loathsome traits had not only spared him unnecessary strife in his Academy days, it'd opened up the future for him, enabled him to obtain the rank he presently holds. An omega could have never become General ("TheSpaceCoyote" *AO3.org*).

With this quotation in mind, the sudden seeming failure of Hux's birth control in this way—which causes him to publicly "slick" ³⁸ while he is on shift at the command deck of the Finalizer—marks not only the risk of the bodily discomfort common to a real-world menstruation cycle, but also a real threat of social disenfranchisement through the sudden public loss of control of his body.

Hux's concerns over being exposed as an Omega to the officers he commands and his fears about being treated as lesser because of his reproductive cycle seemingly parallels the still often prevalent real-world experiences of contemporary Western

³⁸ In A/B/O terms, "slicking" occurs when an Omega's sexual organs begin to self-lubricate in preparation for their heat and sexual intercourse with an Alpha.

misogyny that many women face and fear in regard to their own professional lives. This fear is a very common pattern in A/B/O fiction. It reveals the ways that TheSpaceCoyote is perhaps attempting to integrate their work into the pre-existing nexus of a “queer, intersectional, feminist space” by—like previous A/B/O fiction—codifying Hux’s Omegan body through a lens of traditionally female imagery and conflicts.

The text demonstrates an in-world sense of internalized misogyny through Hux’s own dissatisfaction with his body and his attempts to reject its ‘natural’ functions as something lesser. Hux frequently regards his body as a kind of object that must be made over until it becomes an outward product of power that matches his internal perceptions of self and that he feels his outer physical body does not express (Ibid). The sense of this need to remake or refashion his physical body is most prominently seen through Hux’s literal use of clothing to hide and shape his outward appearance. For instance, Hux uses a greatcoat to help mask his Omegan scent, hide his smaller Omegan build, and the structural signs of his fertility like the “barest pinch of fat (that) clings to his hips” (Ibid). TheSpaceCoyote describes how when putting on his First Order uniform and greatcoat, “the final layers slide comfortably into place, and Hux smiles, satisfied at the pristine portrait of power he assumes as he strides out of his quarters and into the hallway” (Ibid). Hux’s desire to be viewed as “a general with an iron constitution” and respected for his intellectual character rather than as an Omegan body “valued only as a possession of others, used to parade status and claim” demonstrates an often distinctly feminine struggle to escape being seen as the possessed objects of an authoritative male Ego desired predominantly for their physical and reproductive qualities (Ibid).

In this way, if Hux is codified through the images of femininity as an Omega, then, by comparison, Kylo Ren seemingly stands in for the aggressive masculinity that Hux wishes to avoid. When regarding Kylo Ren as he moves through their shared workspace on the Finalizer, Hux notes that Kylo Ren is powerful in all the ways that an Alpha is traditionally expected to be; namely, he is physically large, strong, and imposing. Even with a poorer sense of smell,³⁹ Hux could “(pick) up on the swampy, oppressive nature of Ren’s scent the moment he’d first encountered the alpha” (Ibid). Just as A/B/O fiction commonly designates Alphas as extremely physically dominating, Hux notes the aggressiveness of Kylo Ren’s Alpha scent when he thinks about how “it reached out, like fingers of his own invisible powers, trying to curl into every nook, to pry apart the senses of every subordinate just as he did their minds” (using his force abilities) (Ibid). Where Hux’s Omegan nature is something that he feels he must hide and remodel into a more practical product, Kylo Ren’s Alphaness is contrastingly established as something that can “be used as a weapon, (just) like (...) all else within his grasp” (Ibid). It is something over which he is able to maintain a consistent and total agency over throughout the text.

However, the scope of Kylo Ren’s “Alphaness” as something inherently violent is partially reimagined when Hux falls fully into heat, and Kylo Ren attempts to assist him. In TheSpaceCoyote’s text, as in other A/B/O fanfiction, an Omega’s heat is a period of

³⁹ It is unclear whether this poor sense of smell is related to Hux’s Omega status or a personal physiological trait. In some A/B/O fiction, Omegas have a better sense of smell than the other designations in order to help them find a suitable mate through the detection of compatible pheromones. It is also possible that Hux’s weakened sense of smell is related to his use of birth control—effectively muting his ability to find a physiologically compatible mate and so take his place in a socially expected Alpha/Omega union. It is also possible that everyone but Kylo Ren is using some kind of scent blocker (something often expected of A/B/O characters in a professional environment), and this is another way that he dominates as an Alpha by refusing to comply with workplace rules.

physical and psychological inebriation in which they lose control over their higher faculties as a result of their body's demands for sex. Here, Hux experiences common symptoms of a heat, which include an intense fever, increased senses of smell and touch, and an extremely heightened libido, all of which can only be relieved through sexual intercourse with an Alpha. In the story's listing on *Archive of Our Own*, TheSpaceCoyote includes the tag "Fuck or Die" to show that not only are Hux's heat symptoms relieved through sexual intercourse with an Alpha, but sexual intercourse with an Alpha is also a biological imperative for Omegas in this imagined universe that, if ignored, will result in extreme bodily harm and the possibility of death. Kylo Ren reiterates this information after he breaks into Hux's room to find him trying to suffer through his heat symptoms alone: "'You need my help.' Ren says it so plainly, like it's some objective truth that only he's privy to, and that gets Hux's hackles rising" (Ibid). Where Hux views Kylo Ren's assurances that his aid is required as an attempt "to snatch the Finalizer and Hux's clout within the First Order, to shame him as an omega, as a weak-willed breeder and nothing more" (Ibid), TheSpaceCoyote also establishes that Kylo Ren does so out of a genuine concern for Hux's well-being and out of an implied sense of romantic attraction (Ibid).

Kylo Ren's insistence that his aid is not borne out of misogynistic intentions is reaffirmed at the end of the text when he helps Hux learn that the artificial Alpha scent he had put on before suddenly entering heat had actually been purposely tampered with by a rival political figure (Ibid). This tampering was done in the hopes of preventing Hux's military success and outing his Omegan status by chemically sabotaging him and forcing him to enter a heat cycle (Ibid). While Hux rejects all other Alphas as "brutish creatures," the text ends with the suggestion of a more formalized union between Hux and Kylo Ren

as they seek mutual revenge against Hux's adversaries (Ibid). In this way, Kylo Ren's intervention in Hux's bodily affairs is framed by the text's narrative as being largely beneficial and benign despite Hux's initial feelings. Despite Hux's initial assurances that Kylo Ren is "chomping at the bit" to destroy him, by the end of the text, his aid encourages Hux to form a tentative Alpha-Omega union and so assume an expected, and from an in-world perspective, heteronormative connection (Ibid).⁴⁰

That Kylo Ren respects Hux's intellect by leaving him the tampered vial of artificial Alpha scent to discover the nature of the revenge taken against him and so gain valuable political insight, perhaps further undermines the traditional misogynistic conventions that the text desires to communicate. In leading Hux to the vial, the text perhaps demonstrates that regardless of his experiences of a reproductive cycle, Hux can maintain and wield social power. Just as he describes the threat of Kylo Ren's scent at the beginning of the text, by the end of the text, so too can Hux—through Kylo Ren's aid—mobilize his vial of tampered Alpha scent as a political weapon against other Alphas by using it as the foundations through which to plan his revenge.

This being said, regardless of Kylo Ren's position as a "good" Alpha and the romantic overtones of TheSpaceCoyote's text as a more progressive union between an Alpha and an Omega in which Hux is in the end, respected as himself rather than solely through the products of his body, the descriptions of Hux's heat cycle still involve a

⁴⁰ While Kylo Ren and Armitage Hux both identify as male, and from an out of text perspective, this would classify them as being in a homosexual relationship, because TheSpaceCoyote acknowledges Omegas as "breeders" and investigates the capacity for an Alpha and an Omega to reproduce regardless of their primary biological sex, these details work to reframe the narrative and further explore how Hux seemingly adopts a more stereotypically female role while Kylo Ren adopts a more stereotypically male role ("TheSpaceCoyote *AO3.org*).

certain level of non-consent.⁴¹ While the text may end with Hux experiencing a newfound appreciation of Kylo Ren for his aid, during his heat cycle, his resistance to the idea of “mating” with Kylo Ren is positioned through similar descriptions to Marx’s conceptualization of a fetishized object and the symbolic violence that this ultimately entails. Likewise, while Kylo Ren is framed by the end of the text as a “good” Alpha and the ending seems to have largely positive connotations, what Kylo Ren gives out of a sense of care for Hux still implicates him in a position of debt. Hux is indebted to Kylo Ren first at the level of the physical through Kylo’s aid during his heat cycle, and then again at the level of the body politic for discovering the tampered vial of Alpha pheromones. Like Hux’s experiences as an Omega, this level of debt is also something that he has little control over and seems to be unavoidable. As such, as will be shown in the subsequent section, Hux’s heat cycle and the sexual intercourse he experiences with Kylo Ren as something that is “forcibly subsumed by biology” (Ibid), demonstrates how both the imagined Omega male subject and, by association, the imagined Alpha male subject can lose agency and control over their chosen sociopsychological structures and so, be reconceptualized as a new product that normalizes an existing society’s expectations of the body as a communal heterosexual object.

Omeagan Identity as a Cycle of Value and Exchange

Despite Hux’s efforts to restructure his physical form in a way that satisfies his own expectations for himself and to escape what he considers to be “the defects of his

⁴¹ The nature of this “non-consent” is also acknowledged by TheSpaceCoyote in their inclusion of the tag “dubious consent” to help make “visible the grey areas between rape and consent—for example, in situations where the distribution of power may limit an individual’s ability to give meaningful consent to sex,” such as a heat cycle (Popova, [2010] *mitpress.mit.edu/books*).

type” (“TheSpaceCoyote” *AO3.org*), the process of his heat cycle and Kylo Ren’s interventions within it effectively reaffirms Hux’s body as an object outside of his own control. Although Hux tries to establish his physical body as having use-value solely in relation to his sense of intellect and his capacity to maintain a “strict control over his body,” in heat, the value of Hux’s body as being distinctly tied to his autonomy is exchanged for a biological cost that Hux is unwilling to pay (Ibid). Previously, Hux’s crafted symbols of self-empowerment served to fill him with a “rejuvenated-like” confidence in himself” (Ibid). In heat, these symbols are also exchanged, changing from a help to a hindrance.

One such instance of this exchange is through the image of Hux’s greatcoat. Before his heat, Hux’s greatcoat existed as a symbol of his individualized self-control. When Hux realizes that he is entering heat and attempts to return to his room to privately see to his condition, his coat likewise moves from an image of security to harm. Notably, TheSpaceCoyote describes how “the greatcoat soon sheds from (Hux’s) shoulders, pulled down by its own weight, and he nearly trips over its folds as he finally stumbles through the bedroom doorway” (Ibid). Where before, the image of the greatcoat was something entirely in Hux’s possession—the primary tool in crafting the “pristine portrait” of his sense of self (Ibid)—in the language of this quotation, the coat becomes something that moves under its own power and not through Hux’s control. Rather than serving as a useful cover against the potential threat of social disenfranchisement and workplace discrimination, Hux metaphorically trips over his carefully crafted persona by literally tripping over his coat. In stumbling through his bedroom doorway, his emergence defines

his personal space through a kind of liminal quality that is equally shaped by the forced transition from an ‘artificially’ presenting Alpha to a biologically realized Omega.

In returning to Marx’s theory of commodities as examined in the “Methods and Methodology” section of this paper’s introduction, if the process of commodities—like Marx says—is one based in an ongoing and cyclical exchange wherein goods are continuously forced to shift and change to satisfy societal demands, then similarly, Hux’s heat cycle is one of metamorphosis that satisfies a demand for heteronormative relations. While at the beginning of the text, Hux imagines himself using very clinical and composed language—a kind of pseudo machine whose body can be ordered through medical intervention and strong willpower—the descriptions of his heat are comparatively organic and animalistic. Rather than commanding his troops with his previous “iron constitution,” the beginnings of Hux’s heat reduce him to “grunts of frustration” like that of an infant or an animal who has not yet achieved the capacity for speech (Ibid). In trying to inventory the symptoms of his heat, Hux experiences the sensations of his body as something distant, as a kind of organic process that is being done to him and against his will: “(...) It spreads like a living creature, like some awful planet-born parasite trying to eat him from the inside out” (Ibid). Just as Marx specifies that a commodity’s exchange-value is embedded into the framework of the product, in being reduced to an object of biological processes, Hux is equally forced to acknowledge the sexual exchanges of his Omegan body and the same reproductive value that he has tried so hard to repress.

Because TheSpaceCoyote signifies that in this particular A/B/O universe, Omegas require the assistance of an Alpha during heat, or else risk—as Kylo Ren explains it—

“fading away” (Ibid), Hux’s heat positions him as not only an object entrenched within biological processes but more importantly, as a product that must be shared and made available for other’s sexual gains and so, specifically, must rely on the gift of an Alpha to keep from disappearing and in turn, be made subject to the debt of this act of giving. Just as a commodity’s use-value is tied to its ability to perform some function for others outside of the labour used to produce the product (Marx 30), Hux’s heat performs the function of allowing Kylo Ren an opportunity to get close enough to take advantage of Hux’s vulnerability and make clear his romantic interests. Despite Kylo Ren’s assurances that he sees Hux as someone to care for and that his participation in Hux’s heat is a necessary and objective safety measure, his pleasure in the act—which makes him “mad with want” (“TheSpaceCoyote” *AO3.org*)—effectively eclipses Hux’s psychological insight into his own condition. For example, as Hux’s heat begins to die down after days of assisted intercourse with Kylo Ren, Hux notes that “the murmurs from the other body have grown stronger, louder, but what’s more they’ve buried deeper, wending with his own thoughts and feelings until Hux can hardly parse the difference” (Ibid). In the same way that the beginning of Hux’s heat reduces him from a practiced, authoritative speech and persona into a pattern of frustrated grunts, in the throes of his heat, Hux’s well-crafted interiority is once again silenced. However, this time his own biology does not solely silence it, but also the sounds of Kylo Ren’s affections and use of his body.

In once again returning to Marx’s theory of commodities as examined in the “Methods and Methodology” section of this paper’s introduction, Marx writes in *Capital Volume One*, how the process of capital “consumes its own component parts for the purpose of transforming them into a mass product of a higher value” (22). Through the

metamorphic nature of Hux's heat as a cycle that transitions him from a controlled autonomous individual to a shared subject embodied within Kylo Ren's desire, the rigid edges of Hux's self that he maintained in the confines of his greatcoat are consumed and remade into a mass product that better reflects the expected in-world union between an Alpha and an Omega. In a brief moment of lucidity amid his heat, Hux asks: "didn't something used to surround him—heavy and warm and *comforting*, draped around his shoulders and cinched about his waist?" ("TheSpaceCoyote" *AO3.org*). In the language of this narration, it is unclear whether the comforting weight that Hux refers to is the memory of his greatcoat and a desire to return to his former state or the biologically fueled desire to have Kylo Ren 'draped' over him. This call and return to prior 'clothing' imagery, now with an added layer of ambiguity in what exactly Hux wants to be clothed in, further shows how in heat, the boundaries of Hux's self are both literally and metaphorically 're clothed' and reshaped.

The Potential Symbolic Violence of "Mating Cycles/Heat Fic" and the Alpha Body

In the chapter "Foundations of Class Analysis in the work of Bourdieu" in *Alternative Foundations of Class Analysis* (2002), Elliot Weininger elaborates on Bourdieu's theory when he writes that "the misperception of social space—which characterizes both the dominant and the dominated, albeit to the advantage of the latter—is also symbolic violence" (142). As a body reshaped through the processes of heat, Hux's experiences can thus be seen to fit within the realm of Bourdieu and Wacquant's understanding of symbolic violence. Just as a dominant group performs symbolic violence without realization or an acknowledgement of the harm it causes, Kylo Ren—as

the ‘dominating’ Alpha—guides Hux through his heat cycle in such a way as to leave Hux’s experience of the events as largely internal and unexpressed. While Kylo Ren experiences Hux’s heat cycle as a narrative of care, pleasure, and an expected intimacy between an Alpha and an Omega, Hux is left to experience his body as “defiled and alien” (Ibid). In outlining how Kylo Ren’s participation in Hux’s heat is a benign act from his perspective, but for Hux, is a place of “dubiously” consented and disrupted change, TheSpaceCoyote delineates Hux’s body as a space that is equally misrepresented.

However—as explored above—the nature of this violence is continuously extended through the fact that, because of the in-world parameters set in which an Omega will die during heat if left unattended by an Alpha, Hux’s heat holds significance at both a physical and metaphysical level rather than just at the level of the symbolic. Weininger outlines how in Bourdieu’s later work on symbolic violence, he “takes gender domination to be the paradigmatic form of symbolic violence” because in the consistent cultural reaffirmations of biological markers, “gender amounts to a symbolic system that (...) is naturalized” (Ibid., 154). By identifying gender in this way, Bourdieu’s analysis illustrates how the symptoms of symbolic violence can thus manifest in a gendered body as the physical processes of various cultural expectations and pressures that have been ‘naturalized.’ Similarly, the physical inescapability of Hux’s heat reforms and naturalizes the perceptions of his gendered existence so that, although Kylo Ren may be positioned as a progressive Alpha—one who allows Hux to mark him as he has been marked ⁴²

⁴² Specifically, following Hux’s heat, Kylo Ren invites Hux to bite the side of his neck. In A/B/O fiction, the portion of the neck underneath the jaw holds special significance as the place where an Alpha typically bites when claiming an Omega as a mate. In allowing Hux to bite him here, Kylo Ren is seemingly allowing Hux to claim him a reversal of expected gendered norms. A fact that Hux does

(“TheSpaceCoyote. *AO3.org*)—he still glamorizes Hux’s body within the stereotypes of utopic Omegan physiology. For instance, following Hux’s heat, Kylo Ren tries to encourage Hux to see “how perfect, how *strong* this side of (him) can truly be” (Ibid). Kylo Ren describes “how beautiful the swell of (Hux’s) feelings in the Force (were) as (they) came together” (Ibid). In doing so, his unproblematized fantasy of the events—further fuelled by his quasi-magical experiences of the force—seems to echo Bourdieu’s assertions that gendered bodies—and female-codified bodies especially—are trapped within a layer of socially controlled “mystic boundaries” (Bourdieu qtd. in Weininger 153). Notably, while Hux is unable to articulate the experiences of his body during his heat, outside of his heat, Kylo Ren unintentionally continues to direct the narrative by encouraging him to see past his own internalized misogyny through a romanticized lens. Although this support is done with good intentions and is perhaps a healthier view than Hux’s ideas of his own self-worth, Kylo Ren’s attempts to continue to shape Hux’s experiences of his own body still expresses how symbolic violence allows for the dominant group to “retain the legitimate right to impose classificatory principles” (Ibid., 146). In hoping to convince Hux to see his heat cycle as something to be cherished rather than hated, Kylo Ren equally tries to get Hux to accept it as an integral part of his physical body. While an action with benign intentions, doing so encourages Hux to assume sole responsibility for a level of emotional labour that he does not want to take on and places Kylo Ren in another kind of saviour position that in turn places Hux in another position of indebtedness. In doing this, Kylo Ren naturalizes the experience of Hux’s trauma as acceptable because it is inevitable. So, like Marx’s definition of a fetishized

acknowledge as being “satisfying” despite the fact that the display of “carnality isn’t like him” (“TheSpaceCoyote” *AO3.org*).

object, Kylo Ren in part cements Hux's Omegan qualities as something that he truly cannot separate himself from or dictate without the added influence of societal expectations from others.

Although Kylo Ren does try, post-heat, to create an equal power relationship between himself and Hux by allowing Hux to bite his neck, and then later, by offering Hux the evidence of the attempted political betrayal against him, like Derrida suggests, his position as a gift-giver naturally makes the relationship between them unbalanced. In offering his body as a gift and cure against Hux's heat, Kylo Ren imbues Hux's inescapable need to take from him with a certain level of symbolic reverence that Hux, himself, does not return. In "Philosophy of the Gift: Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger" (2010), Charles Champetier writes that "independently of the possibility of restitution, (gift-giving) seeks to incite pleasure, admiration, sympathy, homage, knowledge or gratitude" from the gift receiver to the giver (17). In outlining his own pleasure in Hux's heat cycle and his attempts to convince Hux to feel the same, Kylo Ren similarly is seeking some kind of emotional return. Even Kylo Ren's gestures of equality—especially in allowing Hux to bite his neck—convey a certain level of symbolic weight by encouraging Hux to 'claim' him⁴³ and so physically and metaphorically link their otherwise spontaneous connection to more permanent ideas of custody—something that, for Derrida automatically negates the qualities of a gift altogether.

⁴³ In A/B/O terms, a bite given by an Alpha to an Omega or vice versa, typically indicates that the two are "mated." "Mating bites" are thus exchanged by Alphas and Omegas in committed relationships and are given with the same symbolic intentions as wearing wedding rings. In many fics, the act of sharing mating bites stands-in and replaces a traditional marriage ceremony. While bites can be given freely between both parties and are often shared symbols, in some stories, they are only given by Alphas to their Omegas and so, represent a kind of ownership.

As Champetier further notes, “the true gift, according to Derrida, is the unconditional gift, (...) The question of the gift should therefore seek its place before any relation to the subject, before any conscious or unconscious relation to self of the subject” (Ibid). However, in offering his body as a gift—and in return, viewing Hux’s body in heat as a kind of gift—Kylo Ren ends by binding Hux to the continual threat of subjectivity. Through his assistance, he gains intimate insight into Hux’s biological status. He holds the authority to, if desired, once again transfer Hux’s identity from a private to a public sphere. In binding Kylo Ren to him, Hux is also forced to be bound to a socially constructed version of himself. In Hux’s dislike in his status as an Omega—one that is feminized—and in his dislike in his need to have sex with Kylo Ren, the text can be read both as a critique of misogyny at a gendered level, but also as a story that presents homosexual relations as something that can be unwanted, unconsented to, and unavoidable. While queer identities and relationships are not automatically positive in comparison to heterosexual or heteronormative identities or relationships, there is something to be said for the way that the deterministic qualities of Hux’s gendered and sexual identity implicate him in a position of debt. While queer theory and queer narratives aim to resist definite answers, TheSpaceCoyote’s text ends with the static fixation of Hux’s identity and his relationships, and this fixedness is backdropped by extreme fascist military actions that will have permanent consequences for others in the future.

Public Response

As of the time of writing this, on *Archive of Our Own*, “fingerprints smudging the stars” has received close to 8300 individual views, forty-six unique comments, 717 kudos, and ninety-four bookmarks. When looking over the comments for “fingerprints smudging the stars,” the feedback provided to TheSpaceCoyote is overwhelmingly positive. Compliments range from viewing the text as romantic, “kinky,” hot or sexy, and overall, as a wonderful example of the characters and the genre (“TheSpaceCoyote” *AO3.org*). One such archive user, Kimiyu, writes that they “thought Hux (would) fall in Ren’s arms and be all smiles and blushes,” and when he fails to, that this change “surprised (them).” Their comment gives insight into the expected A/B/O tropes with which readers are entering the text wherein an Omega is traditionally submissive and adoring of an Alpha’s attention. Their surprise shows how TheSpaceCoyote’s work instead invites room for a broader discussion. Other comments, like those by archive user Pika_sami who mentions that they were “extremely uncomfortable (during the sex scenes) and wanted (them) to stop which is something (they) rarely read from an A/B/O AU,” gives awareness to how the bodies of Alphas and Omegas in works other than TheSpaceCoyote’s text perhaps exist more solely for reader pleasure rather than as a soundboard for any sort of deeper engagement in sexual or social politics. In TheSpaceCoyote’s text, Hux’s unwillingness to passively accept the expectations of his dynamic and Kylo Ren’s concerns over leveling the power imbalance between the two of them, however successful, perhaps demonstrates how a genre like A/B/O can begin to exist as a counter-cultural space against conventional Western societal identity forms like gender and sex dynamics. Contrastingly, the comments like those of archive user Senpai,

which read, “THIS WAS AMAZING AND SO HOT THE SEXUAL TENSION IS TOO MUCH THANK YOU FOR THIS DJDJRJKSKSKS (...),”⁴⁴ perhaps instead shows how regardless of TheSpaceCoyote’s efforts, their work still inspires a response that is similar to other stories in the genre. While TheSpaceCoyote has some level of authority over their work as a writer, unlike mainstream authors who are removed from their reading public, in fanfiction, the author and reader have a more equal relationship because both parties, as fans, are considered equally competent of the source material being optimized. As a result, if TheSpaceCoyote and their readers are supposed to be equal in terms of narrative consumption, then in the comments for “fingerprints smudging the stars,” a question of gift and debt again arises.

If “fingerprints smudging the stars” has been written as part of the gift economy structures of fanfiction and has been given as a public gift to those who discover and read it, then the nature of the cultural economy of fanfiction would suggest that the return for such a gift—the payment—would be in the form of comments as showing a love for the story. However, when readers potentially miss the desired intentions of a text by failing to separate it from the expectations and tropes of the rest of the genre, what occurs is perhaps an inability for readers to pay back their debt and an unequal relationship between author and reader. What occurs, is perhaps a cycle of gifting where the cycles of giving and taking lack clear focus. If the ‘dubious’ nature of Hux’s treatment as an Omega by Kylo Ren interrupts aspects of his character presentation, then perhaps the “dubious” nature through which TheSpaceCoyote’s text is able to be read and passed

⁴⁴ This capitalization and punctuation are unchanged from the original comment.

along as gift from reader-to-reader, also limits its capacity to fully play with and attempt to reimagine a genre like Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics.

These responses—especially those that speak to the story as “hot” or as only producing some kind of pleasure as the primary reader response—also recalls James Coleman’s discussion of how slash-fiction can reduce the complexities of queer male relationships and identity to erotic, fantastical stories devoid of the repeatedly “painful history of (the actually lived) queer male” experience (104). Although *TheSpaceCoyote* tries to speak to the complexity of Hux’s psychological interiority and the treatment of his body throughout his heat—and both the positive and negative consequences that this enables—in aligning Hux’s body with distinctly female imagery as an Omega, his position as a queer man experiencing a sexual encounter with another man is converted into a relationship that can be read through a more heterosexual lens. This reading is again furthered by the fact that *TheSpaceCoyote*’s text—as in other A/B/O narratives—establishes an Alpha/Omega pairing as the standard and so removes aspects of the queer potential of their “Kylux” pairing by integrating it into a comparatively hegemonic and heteronormative space.

When discussing the idea of “Queer Value” (2012) and commodities, Meg Wesling writes that: “the production of sexual identity, through which unpredictable constellations of desire, knowledge, and practice become concretized into limited models of sexual identity, is bound up in the way capital produces subjects accommodated to its own needs” (107). Similarly, in a gift economy space like fanfiction, the individualized desire to optimize characters like Hux and Kylo Ren by freely and publicly integrating them within the hyper fantastical physical and so “dubious” aspects of the A/B/O genre—

like a heat cycle—naturally limits the potential for their representation. James Coleman writes that when:

applied to queer male representation in slash, erasing the painful history of queer male sex creates interpretative space for fantastical understandings of queer young men, and these fantastical queers in turn reduce the potential for historical-based experiences to be written in fandom (104).⁴⁵

The concerns over slash-fiction’s capacity to depict sex in a fantastical rather than realistic nature is mirrored by many readers’ responses to the idea of heat cycles/mating cycles in A/B/O fiction. Notably, *Reddit* user *serralinda73*, writes that “(...) to me A/B/O skips over the falling in love part, changing it into a purely hormonal reaction.” As an Omega, Hux’s body is partially reduced to an object designed for sex in the same way that Coleman voices concerns about the nature of queer male relationships being similarly reduced purely to the realm of sex rather than as a nuanced connection. Like the opening of this chapter, for Coleman and *Reddit* users like *serralinda73*, concern arises over how characters like Hux become trapped within hyper-imagined details rather than realized realities.

In this way, while *TheSpaceCoyote* may strive to “to delve into Hux’s mindset and how he might have internalized some terrible things over the years (...)” (“*TheSpaceCoyote AO3.org*”), by virtue of producing their text as fanfic, they likewise call upon Derrida’s notion of the gift and perpetuate aspects of the same power

⁴⁵ For instance, in *TheSpaceCoyote*’s work, the nature of Hux’s heat cycle and Kylo Ren’s responses to it, perhaps flattens the reality or reader awareness of sexual violence by romanticizing the elements of non-consent between Kylo Ren and Hux as queer male presenting bodies experiencing a “mating” cycle. As Coleman writes, fanfiction’s display of a “singular encounter (too easily) becomes constitutive of gay identity as it conjures presumed sexual acts, cultural practices, and a particular community history” (Coleman, 2019, 103).

imbalance—the same symbolic violence—between the subjects of their text and their readers—the process that, by comparison, their version of Kylo Ren wishes to avoid. As receivers of TheSpaceCoyote’s writing as a gift in the open realm of fanfic, readers are encouraged to ‘take’ from Hux’s body in the same way that Kylo Ren must take, and so, add the intimate details of his interiority into the wider body of A/B/O fiction. In heat, Hux’s body is made public through his need to take from Kylo Ren. Similarly, as a product of fanfiction, his body is also made more broadly public by joining the intertextual boundaries that link and define all other Omegan bodies on *Archive of Our Own*. Although TheSpaceCoyote’s version of Alpha and Omega dynamics may strive to push these boundaries and succeed in noted ways, because readers are ultimately free to choose their own interpretations, to find their own value critically or uncritically, and then exchange this value through the production of even more fiction as incurred cultural value, the process of participating in the structures of the gift economy means that readers perform symbolic violence by being holders of symbolic classification.

Chapter Three: Narratives of Commodity Fetishism in *Marvel Slash*

Fiction

For religion, the ideal reference of the body is the animal; for the system of political economy, the ideal type of the body is the robot; for the system of the political economy of the sign, the reference model of the body is the mannequin.

-- Jean Baudrillard (1976)

This quotation, taken from “The Body, or the Mass Grave of Signs” in Baudrillard’s *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, speaks to the way that the body is ordered as a societal product. In outlining how different modes of society, from religion to the workplace, demand different presentations of the body from participants, Baudrillard speaks to the ways in which the body is inherently a part of what Marx alternatively terms “productive capital” (n.pag). Namely, in being made to shift structures to match the expectations of the different facets of a society, the body illustrates its relationship to productive capital through performing a specific role and so gaining value as an ‘ideal reference’ point perfectly optimized for said role. Of particular note for the purposes of this chapter is Baudrillard’s statement that the mannequin is the ideal reference model of the body for representing the political economy of the sign. When Baudrillard speaks about the political economy of the sign, he expresses the idea of cultural value as a pseudo “political economy of desire” ([1976] n.pag). Specifically, Baudrillard writes that “the homogenised body (is) the industrial production of signs and differences, mobilised under the sign of programmatic seduction” (Ibid). Like the way that cultural value through the structures of a cultural economy socially and institutionally legitimates

certain tastes and aesthetics, so too does Baudrillard's understanding of the body become regulated through the literal and metaphorical symbolic signs of "programmatic seduction" as organized desire. When Baudrillard speaks of "programmatic seduction," he specifically speaks to the notion that just as "programmatic" refers to the nature of a person or thing as according to an explicit program, schedule, or method, so too is a society's specific desires for a person's body programmed by their associated contact with institutional, cultural, and otherwise social methods and expectations. When speaking of the body as a mannequin, Baudrillard further writes that said body is "no longer labor-power, but models of signification that are produced" (Ibid). Put another way, in Baudrillard's description, as a function of cultural value and a cultural economy, the body as a mannequin is no longer credited for its physical capabilities but rather, the image of value that is placed on top of it. Like a literal mannequin whose position as an individual object is made invisible under the value of the clothes placed upon it, so too is the value of the body as a mannequin clothed and hidden through the value of a decided societal role and as a prop for other's perceptions.

In the previous chapter, Hux's transition in *TheSpaceCoyote*'s "fingerprints smudging the stars" from being clothed in a chosen uniform to being dubiously clothed by Kylo Ren's body—and so, with this, the societal expectations of an Alpha/Omega bond—displays this idea of the Omegan body as a mannequin. In his heat cycle, Hux's desires are made invisible under the social value of the expectations of his sexual dynamic. In this way, what emerges in seeing the Omegan body as a mannequin is an added layer of symbolic imagery that again illustrates how Omegan bodies are not only treated as products of a cycle of value and exchange, but also silenced in the transition

into passive objects societally constructed into being receptive to ‘wearing’ the expectations of Alpha desire.

With this connection in mind, the intentions of this chapter are to engage in a similar exploration of the Omegan body as mannequin by exploring a fanfiction case study from the superhero-centric *Marvel Cinematic Universe*. Just as “fingerprints smudging the stars” transformed canon elements of the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy* by reimagining traditionally masculine, heterosexual characters through a fantasized queer lens, so too are the *Marvel Cinematic Universe’s* characters reimagined. As will be discussed below, in placing the superhero characters of Steve Rogers (Captain America), Tony Stark (Iron Man), and “Bucky” (The Winter Soldier) together in an Alpha/Beta/Omega relationship, what emerges is a similar attempt to utilize these figures as desirable pieces for others’ perceived gain. In exploring Steve Rogers as an Omega, as with Hux, discussion will focus on how Steve’s body is entangled in cycles of value and exchange. Likewise, this chapter will discuss how this cycle leads to a transformation of Steve’s body into a fetishized commodity that is overdetermined by his Alpha partners. However, building on the previous chapter, this chapter will further explore how the Omegan body becomes a fetishized commodity not only through an uncontrollable process of exchange, but also through a controlled process that is intimately tied to Baudrillard’s ideas of labour power and the symbolic image of the mannequin as a prop meant to be clothed in other’s perceptions rather than by individual choice. To do this, this chapter will analyze Steve’s unique position in a polyamorous relationship and the A/B/O tropes associated with this such as patterns of infantilization.

As such, this chapter will show that *Archive of Our Own* user Buckybeardreams's slash-fiction piece, "Part of a Pack" (2021), depicts how Omegan male bodies are made valuable not through their own labour-power, but through the expressions of symbolic labour placed upon them by Alphas and Betas. As will be shown throughout this chapter, when depicted through both in-world societal expectations and a conscious in-text writing authorial trope, Steve Rogers's Omegan body is infantilized and made a willing product of other's labour-power. Clothed and positioned as both a literal and metaphorical "doll" for his pack, Steve's body similarly becomes a kind of mannequin that comes to experience the commodity fetishization and symbolic violence attached to ideas of surplus-value.

The purpose of this chapter is thus to explore—again through a lens of both personalized and stereotypical fanfiction tropes—how Buckybeardreams's depiction of Steve's body as a necessary part of a polyamorous pack relationship is not a solely harmonious position as Buckybeardreams claims, but rather, one possibly fraught with patriarchal power dynamics that affirm patriarchal authoritative control. The aspects of this unbalanced power dynamics will first be explored at an outside level by looking at how Buckybeardreams's text engages with counter-cultural intentions. This analysis will then investigate Buckybeardreams's text and its use of both genre-standard and genre-defying choices. Finally, this analysis will then move from within the text being described to outside of it to look at how perceiving Steve's body through reader response—through communal imagination—displays how A/B/O slash-fiction reproduces structures of heteronormativity.

Marvel Cinematic Universe and Fanfiction

The *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, or *MCU* for short, is an American media franchise produced by Marvel Studios (now a subset of *Disney*) (1993-present) that centres around the superhero characters and storylines originally published by Marvel Comics (1939-present). The franchise spans movies, television series, short films, digital series, and literature. As of writing this, the franchise consists of thirty-four films and twenty-five television series. The *MCU* film that first popularized the franchise is *Iron Man* (2008), directed by Jon Favreau. This trilogy, also consisting of the films *Iron Man 2* (2010), directed by Jon Favreau, and *Iron Man 3* (2013), directed by Shane Black, follows reformed billionaire playboy Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr) and his journey to become the hero Iron Man using a self-made suit of powered, full-body armour designed using advanced military technology. *Iron Man* grossed \$585.8 million in combined domestic and international box office sales following its release. The film's success allowed Marvel Studios to expand to more involved ventures such as *The Avengers* (2012), directed by Joss Whedon, which features the combined storylines of the Marvel superhero properties: *Iron Man*, *The Hulk*, *Captain America*, *Black Widow*, *Thor*, and *Hawkeye*. Following its release, *The Avengers* grossed over \$1.5 billion worldwide, setting numerous box office records, and becoming the then third-highest-grossing film of all time.

Because of its relevance to the ships featured in the chosen fanfiction case study for this chapter, alongside *The Avengers*, another Marvel property in consideration is the *Captain America: The First Avenger* saga. Also consisting of the films *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), both directed by

Anthony and Joe Russo, the trilogy follows Steve Rogers (Chris Evans), an American World War II soldier who, due to a “Strategic Scientific Reserve” experiment, is transformed into a genetically modified superhuman soldier. During a military procedure depicted in the first film of the series, Steve Rogers finds himself frozen in Arctic ice and resurrected into the present day. Here, he lives as a superhero using his superhuman abilities to aid the American paramilitary organization S.H.I.E.L.D (the “Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division”) in the 21st-century.

Another character of note within the series is Steve’s childhood friend and fellow World War II veteran, James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes Jr. (Sebastian Stan). In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Bucky’s regiment is shown as having been captured by the Nazi-coded military group Hydra, who use a variant of the super-soldier serum used on Steve to likewise transform Bucky into a superhuman soldier referred to as “The Winter Soldier.” As “The Winter Soldier,” Bucky is routinely brainwashed and tortured by Hydra to force him to perform as an unfeeling, inhuman military asset and weapon. As part of this torture, Bucky is also routinely cryogenically frozen, allowing him—through the miracles of pseudoscience—to drastically slow his aging, live into the 21st-century, and eventually reconnect with Steve Rogers, first as an enemy and then, once his memories return, as a reunited friend and superhero companion.

As of the time of writing this, *Archive of Our Own* currently hosts over 446,000 individual works listed under the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* tag. According to the 2021 study performed by “centreftheselights” reviewing the most popular relationship tags on *Archive of Our Own*, Marvel-centric ships comprise 9% of the total registered pairings. Of these occurrences, the ship between Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers, known as

“Stucky,” ranks the highest of the other Marvel pairings that make the top 100 list at rank number 15. Comparatively, the ship between Steve Rogers and Tony Stark, known as “Stony,” is 35 of 100. Of the nine ships represented in the “centrofftheselights’s” study, all but one represents a non-slash pairing or a pairing that is not male character-centric. This data is similarly reflected in the *Marvel Cinematic Universe’s* tag on *Archive of Our Own*, in which “Stucky” has over 54,000 individual fics, immediately followed by “Stony” with over 33,000 individual fics. When looking at the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* through the specific genre of Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics on *Archive of Our Own*, specific patterns once again emerge. When looking at the characters of Bucky Barnes, Steve Rogers, and Tony Stark individually, on “Archive of Own,” Bucky Barnes is most consistently an Alpha with approximately 1607 individual fics versus approximately 1017 individual fics in which he is an Omega. Comparatively, Steve Rogers is also most consistently an Alpha with approximately 1885 individual fics versus approximately 783 in which he is an Omega.

In contrast, Tony Stark is most often an Omega with approximately 1517 individuals fics versus only approximately 802 in which he is an Alpha (“Marvel Cinematic Universe” *AO3.org*). Much like the potential popular depiction of Kylo Ren as an Alpha due to his enhanced physical abilities in the force, Bucky and Steve Roger’s position as super-soldiers could also speak to their popularity as Alphas. Likewise, when pairing Bucky, Steve Rogers, and Tony Stark together, the division of secondary sex characteristics could again be based on the real-world fact that Chris Evans and Sebastian Stan are taller than Robert Downey Jr. and have a higher muscle tone. This division could also be based on the fact that Bucky and Steve make use of more traditionally masculine

qualities like active hand-to-hand combat and physical shows of violence as superheroes and soldiers. In contrast, Tony Stark relies on perhaps more traditionally feminine traits like his passion, self-reliance as an inventor, and sense of intuition to overcome hurdles.

When considering this depiction of gender dynamics occurring at both the level of the canon and fanon texts, Catherine Coker offers insight into the characters as existing both within and outside of a comic space. Due to the *Marvel Cinematic Universe's* overall lack of female representation, and the hypermasculine working environment that the male characters find themselves in as superheroes, the calm between bouts of extreme violence provides a space in which intimate man-to-man fandom imagined relationships might be explored. In “Earth 616, Earth 1610, Earth 3490—wait, what universe is this again? The creation and evolution of the Avengers and Captain America/Iron Man Fandom” (2013), Catherine Coker writes about the hypermasculine perception of the comic fandom from an outside media perspective. Coker writes:

Comics fandom is often viewed as consisting of heterosexual white men and comics are often explicitly marketed to them, excluding and othering the rest of the audience. Comics fandom online subverts this expectation of audience because the majority of fan authors and creators are women (sec. 1.1).

Like other accounts of fandom culture previously discussed, Coker again stresses in this quotation how the comics fandom seemingly exists within a “queer, intersectional, feminist space” by highlighting how it is an online space where marginalized identities frequent and flourish. However, despite mainstream Western media perceptions of the comic fan as white, straight, and male, Coker expands to discuss how these comic spaces instead exist as sites for other engagement and as an investment in non-hypermasculine,

non-hyperviolent male identity performances. To elaborate, Coker writes that because of its subversive and benign potential:

(Comic fandom) works thus become completely transformative because of the shift in both fan space and fan audience: texts that are homophobic become homophiliac, authors and readers who are male become female, and that which had previously been other becomes the new norm (Ibid., 1.2).

This being said, Coker also highlights that despite the overall subversive intentions of comic fandom space as a whole, in transitioning comic source material into fanfiction—and so, moving the narrative ideas from a predominantly visual to verbal medium—the ability for fans to be “hyperaware of their own identity as subaltern and subversive practitioners” is perhaps lessened (Ibid). Referencing comics theorist Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (1993), Coker outlines how while the visual nature of the comic format—and by extension, comics and comic movies—use “closure” in the form of the “gutters” of panels⁴⁶ or actual film cell frames to “(invite) the reader to acknowledge that comics (and thus, all texts) are artificial creations that our brains then rationalize to fill in the blanks,” the textual nature of fanfiction perhaps does not encourage this same level of awareness (Ibid).

For McCloud, this idea of “closure” has to do with the ability of the reader to interrupt the space between individual comic panels and then transform them into a

⁴⁶ The “gutter” in a comic refers to the solidly coloured space that separates individual panels. While many readers and comic theorists register the “gutter” as a point of empty space, Scott McCloud instead theorizes that:

The gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics. Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea. Nothing is seen between the two panels, but experience tells you that something must be there” (McCloud, 1993, 67).

cohesive idea despite the limitations of the visual or verbal input within the panels themselves⁴⁷ (67). Readers of comics or viewers of a comic film can see the transition between the images or frames and use these moments to build a unified visual reality. Coker stresses that while fanfiction also attempts to unify disconnected moments of canon, the opportunist nature of fanfiction as a gift-based space of constant revision also intercedes in these efforts. For the *Marvel Avenger's* multiverse especially, Coker writes that for many fans, the space serves as a kind of “tabula rasa (...) a blank slate on which they can write a new text” not based on any previous grounding in reality (sec. 1.7). While for Scott McCloud, comic-based closure may exist as a singular relationship between an author, reader, and the evidence of the page, because fanfiction exists as a nexus of value and exchange, the idea of closure transforms from a singular act to a constantly fluctuating conversation. As will be shown in the discussion of Buckybeardreams’s text “Part of a Pack,” their efforts to break Steve Rogers’s character down and then rebuild him into their interpretation of an Omegan body steeped in Omega-typical traditions and relationships presents a space wherein, once again, the imagined edges of the text, the space of queer potential, become a place of symbolic violence where meaning is read—much like the gutters of a comic—through silenced gaps. As with the discussion of TheSpaceCoyote’s “fingerprints smudging the stars,” when analyzing Buckybeardreams’s “Part of a Pack,” author identity remains unknown in order to maintain academic distance. Regardless of identity, like TheSpaceCoyote, their work adds to the discussion of A/B/O slash-fiction as a form of commodity fetishism by—like Hux in the previous example—aligning Steve Roger’s Omegan qualities with

⁴⁷ See figure one for an example of closure.

traditionally feminine concerns. Buckybeardreams's work also aligns with the notion that, like a fetishized object, Steve Roger's body is a site for—as Jean Baudrillard describes, and as will be explored moving forward—an understanding of the body itself as an object, as “annexed to a phallic order which, when expressed in political terms, condemns (it) to a non-existence” ([1976] n.pag).

Fanfiction Case Study: “Part of a Pack”

As established by the title and by the story's tags, Buckybeardreams's texts falls within a genre of A/B/O fiction that focuses on “pack dynamics” and the ideas of courting and “mating bonds.” The central plot of the text revolves around an Omega Steve's efforts to negotiate his newly developing relationship with both Bucky and Tony, having just moved into their apartment. These efforts include learning how to live with Bucky and Tony and insert himself into their previously formed mating bond to establish a three-way pack. The story also focuses on Steve's efforts to understand the public versus private perceptions of his own Omegan body as negotiated through a series of vignette-style interactions with his two boyfriends. In A/B/O terms, a pack dynamic can be either platonic or sexual and/or romantic. Packs can be made up of multiple characters of various dynamics who share familial, non-sexually intimate connections. More often, they represent a group of characters in a physically intimate, polyamorous, or polygamous relationship. In the case of this text, to court Steve and entice him to join in on their mating bond, Bucky and Tony perform acts of physical and domestic intimacy. These acts include preparing food for Steve, bathing/washing together, clothing Steve in

his own clothes and a shared wardrobe to share scents, cuddling, and offering emotional reassurance and support (“Buckybeardreams” *AO3.org*).

While previous statistical data shows that Steve Rogers and Bucky are usually imagined as Alphas while Tony Stark is an Omega, in “Part of a Pack,” while Bucky remains an Alpha, Steve’s role as an Omega, and Tony’s role as a Beta disrupts these expected norms.⁴⁸ Steve’s role reversal from the usual pattern of Alpha to Omega could be the result of the fact that Buckybeardreams specifies that this version of the character is “pre-serum,” and so, is both physically smaller and weaker than his counterparts; without his super-soldier persona, Steve is physically less powerful in the way that Omega characters are traditionally expected to be physically submissive.

As noted in the introductory chapter, fan scholars like Coleman reference how slash-fiction is popularly conceptualized as a space for “reading and writing into existence alternative ways of being that elude the confines of patriarchal heteronormativity” (85). Similarly, Buckybeardreams’s inclusion of Steve’s non-hypermasculine, non-super-soldier role reversal and Tony and Bucky’s domestic courting rituals appears to contest the conventions of patriarchal heteronormativity. Rather than interacting with one another through a physical connection built on acts of superhero-driven violence, Steve’s Omegan persona instead encourages Bucky and Tony to “spoil” him and “coax” him into a relationship with gentle affection (*Ibid*). This transformation from violence to gentleness thus recalls Sonia Katyal’s debate in “Performance, Property, and the Slashing of Gender in Fanfiction” (2005) that the success and appeal of slash-fiction is its ability to depict men as softer, more connected beings (486). Likewise, rather

⁴⁸ In the tags for their work, Buckybeardreams further specifies that their intention is to follow “Non-Traditional Alpha/Beta/Omega” dynamics (“Buckybeardreams” *AO3.org*).

than portraying a relationship in which Bucky is codified as having the most power within the relationship as the Alpha, and thus, the character most strongly aligned with hypermasculine traits, the inclusion of Tony's Beta status into an otherwise standard Alpha/Omega union, seemingly transforms their relationship into a constant conversation about the negotiation of power dynamics themselves. In "Slashing the Romance Narrative" (2003), Anne Kustritz considers how this discussion is a commonplace pattern within the genre of slash-fiction based on the fact that "slashers often exaggerate the extent to which slash characters seem drawn to talk about the power dynamics within their relationship" (377). So, while Bucky and Tony may be physically stronger than Steve as an Omega, and Tony may not be as instinctual as Bucky and Steve, Buckybeardreams establishes that they are a conventional pack who need one another in order to "coexist" and maintain not just their physical, but also emotional and psychological well-being ("Buckybeardreams" *AO3.org*).

Unlike in TheSpaceCoyote's text, wherein Hux sees the expected submissive nature of his Omegan status as a burden, Tony and Steve instead accept their lack of physical power as a boon that complements their relationship with Bucky by gentling his Alpha nature in order to create not a binary separation—as in the case of Hux and Kylo—but rather, a kind of harmonious cycle. Notably, during a pack get-together between Steve, Tony, Bucky, and the other members of their extended pack,⁴⁹ Steve comments that when together as a group with each dynamic present, "they seemed to work together cohesively" and that they—especially the Alphas within the group—can exist without

⁴⁹ This extended pack is made up of the characters made up of the Marvel characters Clint Barton (Hawkeye), Natasha Romanov (Black Widow), Bruce Banner (The Hulk), and Phil Coulson (former director of S.H.I.E.L.D.).

“any friction between them” (Ibid). Moreover, these efforts to display A/B/O dynamics as an integrated identity cycle rather than as a rigid gendered separation are also seemingly reiterated in the text through the fluidity of Tony’s identity as a Beta. This fluidity is primarily seen in the text through Buckybeardreams exploration of heat cycles/mating cycles. In Buckybeardreams’s text, as in other depictions, Tony does not undergo a heat or rut cycle as a Beta. Towards the end of the text, when Bucky and Steve are experiencing their own respective mating cycles, Tony contemplates how his role as a Beta is vital to help keep balance between his two boyfriends. While Bucky and Steve are lost to their instincts, Tony takes pride in the fact that “when they did lose control, Tony was the only one able to stay somewhat level-headed;” his neutral Beta biology giving him the ability to resist the “intoxicating pheromones” produced by his counterparts (“Buckybeardreams” *AO3.org*). Where Alphas and Omegas may be stuck in more rigid gender roles—as seen in TheSpaceCoyote’s text—as a Beta, Tony can more easily move in-between the spaces of Alpha and Omega identity so that while aiding Steve with his heat, and Bucky with his rut, he is described simultaneously through both Alpha and Omega characteristics. In particular, this transition between dynamics is most commonly seen throughout the text when Steve reflects on Tony’s scent when they are intimate:

Steve leaned over curiously to scent Tony, smelling the sweet Omega scent coming off of him. Steve practically purred at the scent. Omegas were known for their love of cuddling. Pack Omegas often found great comfort in snuggling up to and scenting their fellow Omegas. Steve was used to Tony smelling like an Alpha, as the Beta took on an Alpha's role when he was taking care of Steve. This was Steve's first time scenting Omega on him, since he had decided that Tony was

his. Tony had spent so much time with Steve, that he was more inclined to release Alpha pheromones these days, and Steve was surprised just how much he liked the scent of Omega coming from his Alpha (Ibid).

For Tony, as a Beta, this fluidity in scents as described above, in which his pheromones move between Alpha “musk” and Omega “sweetness” in order to better match his partner’s needs, speaks to a kind of genderfluidity that further contributes to the way in which Buckybeardreams’s text appears to defy traditional forms (Ibid). While Buckybeardreams may originally draw Steve, Tony, and Bucky from a hypermasculine canon source, in softening the characters’ identities and focusing on the ways that they find harmony through one another rather than through physical conflict, Buckybeardreams establishes the domestic sphere as one in which superheroes do belong and can coexist. In doing this, their text perhaps speaks to feminist and queer concerns by embracing characteristics of masculinity that resist hyper-heterosexual, normative presentations. Namely, in highlighting the potential of traditionally female-expected behaviours that are often otherwise dismissed in male-dominated Western society and popular culture, such as those focused on fostering nurturing behaviours of communication and relationship growth, Buckybeardreams effectively correlates the domestic sphere to a space that is worthy of the status of hero-dome by aligning it with familiar symbols of hyper-idolized masculinity.

This being said, in order to achieve this reimagined sense of hyper-idolized masculinity, Buckybeardreams, like TheSpaceCoyote with Hux, also integrates Steve as an Omega into a fetishized order of symbolization. While Tony may be free to move between the symbolization of Alpha and Omegan identity as a Beta, as an Omega, Steve

is confined to his biology. While he may revel in this, and so differ from Hux in this regard, like Hux, Steve's body exists as a product largely outside of his own control. As will be shown in the ensuing section, just as Hux is reduced during his heat cycle with Kylo Ren to a realm of pre-verbal silence, Steve is similarly physically and psychologically infantilized—his body rendered a kind of mannequin outfitted as a controlled product of “possession” and passion (Baudrillard [1976] n.pag).

The Omegan Body as Fetishized Surplus Value

While Tony's status as a Beta may serve to break down expected masculine gender norms as well as inject Buckybeardreams's work with elements of “Non-traditional Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics” (“Buckybeardreams” *AO3.org*), by comparison, Steve's role as an Omega is much more entrenched in a heteronormative sensibility. Where Tony can both consciously and unconsciously shape his position as a Beta in order to fulfill the role that he feels would best suit his packmates—whether this be making behavioural changes or changes to his physical pheromone output—Steve's role is shaped by external rather than individual and internal factors. Just as Kylo Ren perhaps unintentionally takes ownership of Hux's body as a fetishized object, and specifically, as a receptacle for his own pleasure during Hux's heat cycle, as a member of the Marvel pack, Steve's body is instead very intentionally manhandled by Tony and Bucky. In the fic's comments on Archive of Our Own, Buckybeardreams responds to a reader by saying that in their previous understanding of A/B/O dynamics, they felt “like Omegas are kinda babied in ways, and so it just kinda made sense to (them) for that to be a normal thing for an Alpha to do for their Omega” in the context of their own work (“Buckybeardreams” *AO3.org*). Throughout the text, there are thus numerous examples

of Steve being infantilized by Tony and Bucky because of his Omegan status. These examples often go hand-in-hand with the courting rituals described above. Like an infant, Steve is hand-fed, clothed, and carried by Tony and Bucky rather than acting under his own power. However, while an infant demands basic biological care out of the necessity of the care itself, Steve also craves attention, and often does so to the detriment of his biological needs. At the beginning of the text, while waiting for Bucky to get home from work and for Tony to get off of a conference call, Steve is described as struggling to eat food while left unsupervised: “Steve sighed, pushing his plate away. He’d barely touched his food, but he just wasn’t interested in it. He wasn’t exactly sure why, but unless one of his Alphas was coaxing him into eating, he really had no interest in it” (Ibid). Where Tony’s identity is more fluid, Steve appears to be so entrenched in the structures of the Alpha/Omega bond which dictate submissive versus dominant behaviours, that basic biological functions seem to lose all meaning unless one of his Alphas is there to facilitate the action. While Steve, as an adult, is capable of feeding himself, his desire for his Alphas appears to stunt his abilities, and like a child, makes him appear far less independent than he seemingly previously was before entering into the pack.⁵⁰

Moreover, like a fussy baby, when Steve does not get his way or faces any kind of complex physical or emotional strain, he must be coddled by Tony or Bucky, carried in their arms, hushed, and soothed:

As soon as Bucky got home, Steve was quick to latch onto him. He wasn’t all that thrilled when Bucky arrived home while Tony was lecturing him and the Alpha sent him a stern look as he kicked off his shoes. Steve’s lips quivered and he

⁵⁰ Buckybeardreams establishes that before the text begins, Steve was living independently in his own apartment and supporting himself through work as an artist (“Buckybeardreams” *AO3.org*).

couldn't help it when he broke down in tears. Immediately, both Alphas were fawning over him. Tony murmuring soft words, while Bucky lifted him into his arms and ran a hand through his hair (Ibid).

In hyperbolizing Steve's physical and psychological need for Tony and Bucky, Buckybeardreams thus also romanticizes his submissive nature to the extreme. Like Kyo Ren, Tony and Bucky's efforts to cater to Steve's Omegan nature and needs are—intentionally or unintentionally—imbued with a certain level of misogynistic overtones. Despite the potential progressivism of the characters' initial pack structure and Tony and Bucky's obvious love for Steve, in enforcing the idea that “just because an Omega's begging for something, doesn't mean you should always give it to them,” they, in turn, limit Steve's autonomy, directly influence how he sees his body, and communicate that Steve is not in control over his own personhood because he does not dictate his own actions (Ibid). This lack of control is also frequently reiterated throughout the text at the level of symbolic language by Bucky affectionately referring to Steve with the pet name, “doll” (Ibid). While Buckybeardreams's intentions for this pet name are most likely meant to parallel the canon source material by acknowledging that Bucky Barnes is originally from the 1940s and reflecting this in his use of slang, the word choice—when paralleled with Steve's treatment as an Omega—also evokes the literal image of a doll. Like a doll, Steve is positioned by Tony and Bucky, moved and modelled into a state of societally accepted and desired Omegan or feminized behaviour. Just as Hux's heat reduces his psychological interiority, as a kind of doll, Steve is similarly confined to the realm of the physical. This confinement becomes even more apparent in Buckybeardreams's frequent discussions of Steve's status within the text as a virgin. The

text outlines how Steve's sexual naivety means that "he (is) completely reliant on (Tony and Bucky) to teach him how to (physically) please them" (Ibid).

In this idea of needing to be taught how to perform his social role for his packmates, Steve's status as an Omega once again parallels Marx's ideas about commodity metamorphosis and commodity fetishism. As a doll-like product of Tony and Bucky's possession and passion, and their efforts to care for Steve and instruct him in the way that they see as being fit for an Omega, they transform his understanding of social relationships with the other A/B/O dynamics and also his position in relation to independence. Just as for Marx, a fetishized commodity is built upon "the mutual relations of the producers, within which the social character of their labour affirms itself," Tony and Bucky's treatment of Steve as the overseers of the production of his understanding of Omegan selfhood, sex, and romance as a virgin is similarly naturalized through their actions towards him (47). The success of this naturalization is cemented at the very end of the text when Steve agrees to share his next heat with his boyfriends in a year; a choice that, as Buckybeardreams elaborates on in their author's notes, demonstrates that he at least accepts this treatment as natural enough to stay for the long term rather than seeking out another relationship elsewhere ("Buckybeardreams" *AO3.org*).

As such, what emerges in both this literal and metaphorical treatment of Steve as a doll-like figure is a perspective of Steve's body as a kind of fetishized form of surplus-value. In *Capital Volume One*, Marx describes surplus-value as "the difference between the value of the product and the value of the elements consumed in the formation of that product, in other words, of the means of production and the labour-power" (147). Put

another way, in this definition, for Marx, surplus-value marks a kind of exploitation in which the ownership of a product and its potential for production eclipses the consequences or cost of the actual labour that goes into manufacturing said product. Instead, the focus is placed on the potential prospects of profit-making for the owner over the individual ideas of use-value in the product or the labourer's potential ("Surplus Value" *purdue.edu*). When framed in terms of Buckybeardreams's text, Tony and Bucky's efforts to provide Steve with what they feel he needs to fulfill his role as an Omega versus his wants or desires, as well as their control over his body as a 'doll,' positions them as the owners of his body as exploited capital. Their desire to direct Steve to 'correct' Omegan activities and behaviours—and so 'manufacture' him to perform his societally expected role—eclipses the consideration of how these acts—on both an intimate and more broadly social level—interfere with Steve's potential autonomy. Steve's satisfaction as an Omega comes to eclipse his potential satisfaction in other areas of his identity and his potential to perform other character traits as personal use-values.⁵¹ Just as Kylo Ren's consideration of pleasure and the possibility of generating even more pleasure in the future overshadows the cost that Hux must personally, physically, and psychologically pay to produce this pleasure, Tony and Bucky's efforts are filled with benign blind spots. Marx further notes that "this transfiguration (of surplus-value) takes place, as it were, behind the back of the labourer" (146). Thus, while Steve is a willing participant in his pack bond and "(feels) complete, safe, and sound, in the presence of his Alphas," his controlled naivety through his infantilized status as an Omega calls into

⁵¹ For instance, despite Buckybeardreams's claims that Steve was a professional artist before living with Tony and Bucky, at no point during the text does he make use of this skill set.

question the degree to which he is even aware of what he is exchanging in the first place (“Buckybeardreams” *AO3.org*).

The Potential Symbolic Violence of A/B/O Courting Rituals

As a body reshaped through controlled pack dynamics, Steve’s experiences can once again be seen to fit within the realm of Bourdieu and Wacquant’s understanding of symbolic violence. Once again, in shaping Steve’s actions, Bucky and Tony represent the dominant group who performs symbolic violence without realizing or acknowledging the harm it can cause. Where Kylo Ren transforms Hux’s body into something that he perceives as “defiled and alien,” in fashioning Steve’s body into a kind of manufactured Omegan doll, Tony and Bucky instead encourage Steve to fit a stereotypical standard by furthermore encouraging him to be totally reliant on them. This sense of reliance is reinforced by Steve’s transition from an independent adult living in his own apartment and supporting himself with his own income—as referenced at the beginning of the story—to being entirely dependent on Bucky and Tony’s care and resources (“Buckybeardreams” *AO3.org*). In the chapter “Foundations of Class Analysis in the work of Bourdieu” in *Alternative Foundations of Class Analysis*, Elliot Weininger outlines how “when differences of economic and cultural capital are misperceived as differences of honour,” this too functions as symbolic violence (142). Hence, while Tony and Bucky may see their actions as the duty of a good Alpha and Beta—much like Kylo Ren does for Hux—their honour in their own dynamic dispositions and the strength of the pack dynamics involved masks the exchange occurring so that Steve is ready to accept the potential imposition to his autonomy that his relationship—and broader society—

blindly expects. The extreme nature through which Steve is infantilized—to the point of drinking from bottles and being taken for playdates with other Omegas (“Buckybeardreams” *AO3.org*)—and the way that the text naturalizes these actions as necessary for an Omega’s well-being, reflects Bourdieu’s claims that symbolic violence is a “legitimizing theatricalization which always accompanies the exercise of power” (300).

Despite Buckybeardreams’s efforts to display “Non-Traditional Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics” and the characters’ pack dynamics as not a binary separation but a harmonious group, their treatment of Omegas still maintains strongly gendered distinctions. Just as Hux’s codification through traditionally feminine imagery compares to the “mystic boundaries” of gendered symbolic violence that Bourdieu speaks to, so too is Steve’s body made mystic. Where Hux’s heat marks his body as all too organic, in being feminized as a doll and revered for his virginal naivety to the extreme, Steve’s representation comparatively comes to feel artificial to the reader throughout Tony and Bucky’s courting rituals; he too is reduced to bodily processes, but they are processes that from an outside perspective, feel viewed through a foreign lens. Bourdieu continues by stating that “the very lifestyle of holders of power contributes to the power that makes (symbolic violence) possible, because its true conditions of possibility remain unrecognized” (*Ibid*). In Steve agreeing at the end of the text to continue his relationship with Tony and Bucky for the long term, he thus extends the power of the lifestyle that he is in and the possibility of the structure of the pack dynamics remaining. This is further extended by Steve’s desire at the end of the text to have babies or “pups” with Tony and Bucky, and so communicate that these lifestyle choices will be cemented in the next

generation (“Buckybeardreams” *AO3.org*). By ending the text in this way, the pack dynamics explored and Steve’s specific treatment as an Omega are seemingly celebrated because of the assurance of the gift of children in the future and Steve’s open willingness to offer the biological capabilities of his body to his boyfriends.

In the anthology, *The Body: A Reader* (2014), Jean Baudrillard writes in his essay, “The finest consumer object: the body” (2014) that the body is:

invested in order to produce a yield. The body is not reappropriated for the autonomous ends of the subject but in terms of a normative principle of enjoyment and hedonistic profitability, in terms of an enforced instrumentality that is indexed to the code and norms of a society of production and managed consumption (279).

Similarly, through Steve’s position as an Omegan doll, as explored, his existence likewise becomes one of managed consumption in which Tony and Bucky’s wants and desires for Steve’s body become difficult to separate from his own wants for himself.⁵² For instance, while the text ends with Steve’s request to have Tony and Bucky’s children in the future, Tony stresses that this decision will need to be run by Bucky who seemingly has the final say in the discussion. Thus, while Steve is not so entrenched in an Alpha/Omega bond as to be unable to express desires for himself, his position in his pack bond is such that he must also sacrifice total authority over these desires to his Alpha partners and this resists the initial claims that Steve makes at the beginning of the text about the pack bond being a democratic space. Similarly, while Steve does have social

⁵² Another example from the text of this inability for Steve to dictate his own actions is that even when he tries to initiate sexual interactions with his boyfriends, Bucky, as the Alpha, will intervene with the assertion that Steve is not ready to “play” like that (“Buckybeardreams” *AO3.org*).

power over his Alphas as the sole channel through which they can also achieve their societally expected roles as Alphas (i.e., the expectation of siring children and dominating over another), this does not eliminate the fact that this social power is a product of a heterosexual structure with strongly enforced boundaries, and especially for Steve who is expected to sacrifice his body as a vessel.

Moreover, while the three characters may initially diverge from an expected heteronormative relationship, in ending the text with the discussion of children, and specifically, Steve's expectations of his own body distilled down to his capacity to provide children for Tony and Bucky, the text once again adopts a heteronormative lens. Despite the initial mix of dynamics, Steve's relationship with Tony and Bucky is codified through a normative principle in which the expectations for the production of a relationship are based on the traditional Western values of marriage followed by children. While it is possible to read this text as a kind of feminist satire of the power structures that constrain many women to a position of dependence on male aid and to the sole status of motherhood, because the text also uses many common A/B/O tropes in a familiar rather than radical way, its full potential as a piece of satire is drawn into question. Likewise, Buckybeardreams's efforts to use common A/B/O tropes in a way that speaks to reader pleasure also calls into question the degree to which the production of this text is done out of a sense of earnestness and with the goal of generating surface-level enjoyment rather than deeper thought.

Furthermore, when considering ideas of production, because Steve's body is a controlled product, it also draws into question the nature of this gift of reproduction that he is offering at the end of the text and the capacity for Bucky and Tony to see his body

as a gift in general. As with the discussion of Kylo Ren and Hux's relationship, for Derrida, there is no gift without the explicit intention of giving (123). Because of Steve's infantilized position, Tony and Bucky frame his abilities in terms of a child and so create an unequal power dynamic between them. As a result, Steve's ability to be a gift-giver is called into question as, from an outside perspective, it appears to hold the same uncertainty as a child's ability to make informed decisions and understand the ramifications of these choices.

Like Kylo's efforts to secure a long-term relationship by encouraging Hux to bite his neck, Tony and Bucky's courting rituals—although viewed as a kind of “luxury” by Steve—further call into question the notion of the gift (“Buckybeardreams” *AO3.org*). While the question of the gift should seek its place before any relation to the subject (Champetier 17), in courting Steve, Tony and Bucky offer the gifts of food, shelter, and emotional and physical security out of love, but also with similar intentions of claiming and all of the ties to ownership that this evokes. In this way, the property of Steve's body as a gift, the uncertainty of his gift-giving abilities, and the duality of Tony and Bucky's courting rituals as both romantic gestures, but also ones of possible ownership, invites Baudrillard's description of the “functional body.” For Baudrillard, the “functional body”—made functional explicitly through its development as an “element of social rituals and tactics”—represents an awareness of the body as contrastingly “disembodied” ([2014] 279). In turn, this disembodiment is a product of what Baudrillard describes as being “ultimately encapsulated in the gaze” (*Ibid.*, 281). Comparatively, Steve's body is made publicly functional through his Omegan status, and through the social rituals of courting. Steve is disembodied, kept in Tony and Bucky's near-constant gaze as a by-

product of this courting. Like the impossible functions of a gift that Derrida stresses, Steve thus transforms into a “being altered,” one who is “veiled by (his very own) existence” (Champetier 18).

Public Response

As of the time of writing this, on *Archive of Our Own*, “Part of a Pack” has received close to 9700 individual views, thirty-two unique comments, 367 kudos, and twenty bookmarks. Much like TheSpaceCoyote’s text, when looking over the comments for “Part of a Pack,” the feedback provided to Buckybeardreams is overwhelmingly positive. Like TheSpaceCoyote’s text, compliments range from viewing Buckybeardreams’s work as deeply romantic to simply “sweet” or “cute” (“Buckybeardreams” *AO3.org*). Of the twenty comments provided, the majority of them include requests for a follow-up story featuring a pregnant Steve. The majority of comments also compliment Buckybeardreams’s infantilized depiction of Steve and broader suggestion of infantilized Omegas. One such comment from archive user hiker trash in regard to Tony and Bucky bottle-feeding Steve says:

“This was so sweet OMG! The bottle feeding is one of my favourite touches—I haven’t seen it before but holy shit I love it *so much*. No pressure, but if there were to be a third part with Steve being full of pups in his nest with his two Alphas taking care of him, I would probably lose my mind.”

This comment again gives insight into the way that Steve’s body is being read as an Omega. In particular, hiker trash’s use of the phrase “full of pups” rather than simply saying pregnant, demonstrates how, just as Tony and Bucky frame Steve as a kind of

doll, so too do readers frame him as a kind of vessel to be filled with public expectations and outside desires. The intense love that hiker trash seems to hold for the text's tropes, as well as the other majority comments that see the text as being romantic, sweet, or cute, proposes that like TheSpaceCoyote's text, Buckybeardreams's text once again perhaps exists more solely for reader pleasure rather than as a soundboard for any sort of deeper engagement in sexual or social politics as the tag "Non-traditional Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics" perhaps primarily suggests.

Returning to the concept of gift and debt existing between fanfiction author and reader as well as between fanfiction characters, Buckybeardreams' relationship with readers seems to once again suggest that despite offering the gift of a text, the author is in a position of debt when it comes to satisfying reader engagement. Despite Rachel Sabatini's claim that the high-status author emotionally drains their fandom by demanding support and feedback, Buckybeardreams's willingness to provide readers with expected tropes in the form of infantilizing Steve and promising a sequel in which Steve is pregnant based off of reader request, shows how the power of the high-status reader also directs the creative potential of a fanfiction author. It is in Buckybeardreams's desire to fulfill reader wishes alongside their own that in turn transforms "Part of a Pack" into a text that strongly aligns with the rigid tropes of Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics. In this way, if Rachel Sabatini is correct that the high-status fan author puts a drain on their readership, then it is the demands of the reader for specific generic choices that puts a strain on a fanfiction story's ability to be truly radical by escaping the limitations of these choices.

This being said, when looking at “Part of a Pack” specifically, one such comment by Sugaxhina perhaps does begin to reach a deeper level of engagement. Their comment⁵³ questions the relationship and courting dynamics throughout the text by discussing how Tony and Bucky’s specific treatment of Steve as an Omega appears to them as a kind of neglect:

Looks like they neglected Steve??? I don’t know, did they seem more focused on the two of them as a couple (rather) than making Steve feel comfortable participating? Even more so because they NEVER really take the time to get to know Steve (...) Both Tony and Bucky spend more time caring for each other as a couple than they do making Steve, a person they totally **CHOSE** to participate in their bonding, feel comfortable with his sexuality. It’s basically TonyBucky and Steve (“Sugaxhina” *AO3.org*).

In this questioning of the equality of the dynamics being presented throughout the text, Sugaxhina’s comment perhaps displays a similar concern over the imbalanced power dynamics of Tony and Bucky as gift-givers versus Steve’s ability to do the same. In questioning the degree to which Tony and Bucky’s interest in Steve’s well-being is simply a means of serving their own desires, Sugaxhina again highlights Derrida’s assertion that the idea of the gift—in this case, the idea of bonding—is not truly selfless or a perfect harmonious cycle. In writing Tony and Bucky as “TonyBucky,” Sugaxhina transforms them into a single identity with the power as equal symbol makers to control

⁵³ Sugaxhina’s comment was originally written in Portuguese and has been translated here via Google Translate. Because of this, potential barriers in the translation of certain words and phrasings are recognized as well as the way in which the full breadth of Sugaxhina’s thoughts may not be entirely captured in English.

Steve's position in the relationship despite the emphasis placed on his right to choose to participate as a like individual.

Buckybeardreams responds to Sugaxhina's comment by saying that, in particular, Bucky's hesitance to participate in sexual acts with Steve was something that they personally saw as a sign of respect because it meant that "there wasn't any pressure on Steve" to give into the stereotype of Omegas as sex objects ("Buckybeardreams" *AO3.org*). In response to this explanation, Sugaxhina replies that while they can recognize Buckybeardreams's intentions, their biggest issue still comes down to ones of biological-based ownership in which Tony and Bucky "just smelled Steve (and) found (him) tasty" ("Sugaxhina" *AO3.org*). Rather than having Tony and Bucky see Steve as a fully autonomous person, for Sugaxhina, issues still remain in how Tony and Bucky view Steve as an object of pleasure—one with a 'consumable' body—rather than as someone with expressible boundaries and who is valued for their character (*Ibid*).

While Buckybeardreams perhaps attempts to appeal to a more progressive reading of Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics, and in particular, the treatment of Omegan bodies as deserving respect, as comments like Sugaxhina's show, the quality of this subversion is to some degree undone by Buckybeardreams's equal efforts to still include what they describe as popularly requested and familiar A/B/O tropes such as the infantilization of Omegas ("Buckybeardreams" *AO3.org*). In distinguishing Steve's body as a kind of passive doll hyper-concerned with his Alphas' opinions and pleasure, Steve ultimately appears as a passive object of male desire rather than as a feminine-coded character who counters these standards. So, like Hux, Steve ultimately appears to be integrated into a hegemonic space.

Like Hux, Tony and Bucky's actions transform Steve into a kind of fantastical object, and so, once again, Buckybeardreams's text raises James Coleman's concerns that slash-fiction popularizes a parody of queer male relationships (Coleman, 2019, 101). Where so much of queer experience is dictated by others—or silenced entirely—Steve's position as a kind of doll for Tony and Bucky raises concerns about an equal level of silencing occurring within Buckybeardreams's work. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), gender theorist and American philosopher, Judith Butler, writes that when gender identity exists as “a style of the flesh, (...) it is taking part in the postmodern aestheticization of daily life” (139). As a kind of Omegan doll, Steve's life is similarly made into an aesthetic—the style of his flesh composed of a variety of author and reader input.

In this way, while Scott McCloud speaks to the nature of closure as an ability to form coherent meaning out of apparently disparate pieces, for Steve, reader input does not serve to build a unified written reality. Rather than filling in the blanks with meaningful character and connection, Steve's identity becomes a product of ever-shifting stereotypes. If Coker is correct in referencing *Understanding Comics* that the space between comic panels—the gutter—is a place that invites “the reader to acknowledge through comics (...) how our brains rationalize to fill in the blanks” (sec. 1.4), then in the space between the lines of Buckybeardreams's text, Steve is instead rationalized and naturalized in a way that perhaps does not acknowledge the fantasy within his reality, but rather, how his reality becomes entirely a thing of fantasy. If the gutters of a comic involve a reader exchange that leads to meaning and agency, then for Steve, Buckybeardreams's text instead leads to an exchange in character and value that

establishes a sociopolitical meaning that is symbolically dictated and silenced by a communal imagination.

Chapter Four: Reimagining Production

In the previous chapters, this thesis has explored how the specific fanfiction subgenre of A/B/O fiction within the larger genre of slash-fiction, positions Omegan male bodies as potentially fetishized cultural objects through a process of transformed value similar to commodified products in an economic system. When discussing the treatment of Hux and Steve Rogers as textual products in the fanfiction case studies “fingerprints smudging the stars” and “Part of a Pack,” this thesis has analyzed how the position of male Omegas in these texts—and within aspects of the A/B/O fan community more broadly—is one perhaps aligned with a certain level of silencing. Specifically, it is a silencing in which Alpha characters within texts, and authors and readers outside of texts, can collectively overdetermine Omegan identity through social hierarchy that represents patriarchal structures and that mirror how the consumption of commodified objects in an economic system occurs—whether intentionally or unintentionally—“as a mechanism of power” (Baudrillard [1976] n.pag).

From a textual perspective, this ability for Alphas to dictate Omegan bodies as a mechanism of power relates to broader ideas about identity formation both at an individual level and at an institutional level regarding ideas of gender, sex, and sexuality. Although the chosen fanfiction case studies show that Hux and Steve Rogers have differing private opinions about their status as Omegas, with Hux abhorring his status and Steve revelling in it, the texts make clear that regardless of private opinion, both characters are publicly fixed to their female gendered identity and this, as is the case in real contemporary Western societies, informs how their bodies are viewed as valuable.

Comparatively, when looking at the texts outside of literary close reading strategies and instead as public artifacts, the texts present questions about reader engagement, authorial intention, and the degree to which authors can successfully convey, or are compelled to convey, private counter-cultural ideas to a public fan-based audience. While both *TheSpaceCoyote* and *Buckybeardreams* express, whether through their author's notes or comments, a desire to play with the stereotypes of A/B/O fiction, because individual fan works exist within a nexus of all other fan works of a similar kind, the potential radicalization of these texts is perhaps diluted by public imagination. Just as their societies' public identity codes overshadow Hux and Steve's private opinions, so too are *TheSpaceCoyote* and *Buckybeardreams*'s fics continuously fixed within a realm of public opinion in which the social relationship between fanfiction authors and readers, and between readers themselves, serves to create definitions of value.

One area where this potential radicalization is called into question is the nature of A/B/O texts as illustrations of queerness. This thesis has shown both how fan authors approach their works as examples of "queer, intersectional, feminist spaces" through the adoption of narratives and motifs within the A/B/O subgenre that resist the behaviours and expectations of performances of contemporary Western masculinity, as well as how much of these narratives still appear to be linked to ideas of traditional heterosexuality and heteronormativity. A/B/O story universes allow for two male characters to be together "without any fuss" (Fielding 1149), as part of an unspoken majority in the story's depicted society.⁵⁴ However, the in-universe and textual expectation that this will be done through a "biologically natural" dependence on Alpha/Omega unions instead

⁵⁴ Versus queerness as a minority identity in real-world contemporary Western societies.

renegotiates symbolic ideas of maleness and femaleness as the unacknowledged and unmarked, default relationship. These renegotiations are, in turn, further extended through concerns raised by academics such as James Coleman and Kristina Busse that highlight how slash-fiction stories can flatten or appropriate the queer male experience by inviting or encouraging typically non-queer male authors and readers to play—and especially in the case of A/B/O fiction—in a hyper-fantasized environment easily removed from realistic or historical touchstones.

As such, while slash-fiction and A/B/O fiction stories are routinely presented by fans as gifts to be shared, this thesis has raised critiques intended to question the nature of the giving taking place. Notwithstanding these valid concerns, queer methodologies remind that communities are always multifaceted and that they must be understood in terms of their multiplicity alongside their misalignments and silences (Brimm and Ghaziani 16-18). While A/B/O fiction may not always appear to achieve what authors, readers, or outside observers intend as truly counter-cultural or utopic spaces, this does not mean that texts should be—to return to Francesca Coppa’s discussion of fanfiction as potlatch—removed from the metaphorical table.

With this understanding in mind, the purpose of this chapter is to explore the paradox whereby Omegan male bodies are simultaneously confined and full of liberatory potential. While for Marx, the transformation of commodities may, in part, reduce the qualities of an object to a narrowed understanding of its use, this does not eliminate the fact that transformation can also be a form of growth and is a powerful social process necessary in the fostering of beneficial individual and social relations. For instance, in returning to this thesis’s opening introductory example of the story “Grounding” by

EmperorsVornskr, transforming Kylo Ren into a character undergoing a schizophrenic episode was beneficial in connecting EmperorsVornskr to their readers, and in creating a positive space for readers to express their own feelings and experiences with mental illness, and to build relationships with one another.

In order to explore how the production of Omegan male bodies contributes to this expanded perspective, strategies of “Queernormativity” as “opportunities to rework the function of the normative itself” (Fielding 1135) will be applied to demonstrate how, while embedded images and tropes of heterosexuality and heteronormativity within the genre may appear to interrupt certain aspects of male A/B/O characters’ queer potential, pursuing only this line of thinking “surrenders a major site of potential resistance and risks defining queer only in terms of absence (...)” (Ibid., 1136). Thus, alongside strategies of “Queernormativity,” this chapter will also explore the nature of archives and fanfiction archives as potentially queernormative spaces. This chapter will also demonstrate how while fetishization is—as has been demonstrated from a commodity perspective—frequently reductive, A/B/O fiction as a kink subgenre of slash-fiction has the potential to reconceive fetish as not *just* a passive act of consumption as reappropriation, but also as active consumption as a means of taking more radical ideas of narrative and gender expression.

Male Omegan’s Reproductive Potential as Queernormativity

In “Queernormativity: Norms, values and practices in social justice fandom” (2020), Dan Michael Fielding writes that:

Heteronormative narratives reframe the work of gays, lesbians, and transgender people through gendered, racialized, and classed frames. This reaffirms the naturalness of the sex/gender binary, men's domination over women, racial hierarchies of oppression, and the state and other institutions' maintenance of sexuality (...) Heteronormativity (...) assumes that there are two and only two genders each following naturally from 'opposite' sexes. These genders are opposite and complementary; one cannot exist without the other demonstrating which qualities it does not have (1136; 1137).

By comparison, Fielding asserts that "queernormativity describes the production of queer norms and values which can be expressed even by cisgender and straight-identified people, and by those who do not desire sex, such as asexuals" (Ibid., 1139). Where heteronormative structures—through the restrictions of binary ideologies—isolate identities in terms of absence or, through barriers of what is seen as normal and abnormal to its practices, for Fielding, queernormativity instead opens these barriers through a process of "disidentification"⁵⁵ (as) a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (Ibid). In their capacity to foreground identities and experiences of difference within and around the established institutions of heteronormativity, queernormative practices and spaces have three main constitutive elements:

- 1.) They create a new language and other cultural objects depicting and describing queerness, rendering the queer knowable.

⁵⁵ This term, originally derived from José Esteban Muñoz's text *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), represents a theoretical and performative practice that "provides critical scholars with a framework for theorizing the relationships between subject formation, ideology, politics, and power" (Morrissey, *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*). The framework of disidentification is also meant to offer "people from marginalized communities a way to navigate intersecting forms of oppression and enact agency" by working to survive within inhospitable spaces while also subverting them (Ibid).

- 2.) They begin distinguishing queer norms and values designed to counteract heteronormative constructions of gender, sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation.
- 3.) They build a community which affirms queer identities and practices (Ibid., 1143).

Reading Fielding's definitions of queernormative practices in this way, while aspects of A/B/O slash-fiction may seemingly reproduce heteronormative narratives for the reasons outlined in previous chapters, the genre also displays queernormative potential. As a genre meant to resist and expand upon the canon material of chosen fanfiction sources, A/B/O slash-fiction has naturally developed its own tropes, terms, and trends. While some of these trends—such as the recurring infantilization of Omegas as a popular genre trope—perhaps present obstacles to the genre's full potential to act as a countercultural space, the ease through which male-on-male relationships are accepted within and outside the genre as common and desirable also serves to define an aspect of queerness as publicly knowable and acceptable. Moreover, as openly accessible sounding boards for a collective imagination, internet-based fanfiction communities further embrace the third tenet of queernormativity, which supports the expansion of attempted queer practices through community bonds.

However, the area where A/B/O slash-fiction perhaps best displays “values designed to counteract heteronormative constructions of gender, sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation” is through the depiction of male Omegas' capacity to become pregnant. In “Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are: Sexuality and Gender Exploration in Contemporary Slash Fanfiction” (2021), Rachael Joy Seifrit notes how A/B/O fics offer representation and “specifically provide a place for queer, genderqueer,

and non-binary people to explore possible sexual situations they could experience with a partner” (49). These opinions are additionally supported and expanded upon by J.T.

Weisser in “Transmasculinities and Pregnant Monstrosity: Hannibal Omegaverse Fan-fiction” (2019), who writes that Omeganess is not just a possible outlet for self-fulfilling queer fantasies but a reminder of real lived experiences and as a means to avoid erasure:

The omega male’s female-coded reproductive capabilities are intrinsic to his gender identity (and) misgendering him as female (...) consequently (makes) a pregnant man seem like an impossibility, a fantasy that cannot transcend normative discourses of sex and gender—at least, not without erasing the complexities of lived queer experience (Weisser n.pag).

As such, while this thesis has explored how male Omegan bodies are frequently constructed through a traditionally Western feminine lens in order to offset male Alphas’ contrasting construction through a masculine lens, this does not eliminate the fact that male Omegas’ ability to undergo pregnancy is a non-cisgender and nonheteronormative act.

Returning to Seifrit’s discussion, for many A/B/O authors and readers, it can be a liberatory experience to see bodies existing outside of a heteronormative, cisgender standard ⁵⁶ being treated as an unmarked norm, as being worthy of protagonist status, as well as mapped onto their favourite characters and settings. Notably, in the *Reddit* thread

⁵⁶ For instance, rather than the default biological constructions of “maleness” and “femaleness” in Western society being a man with a penis and testes, and a woman with a vagina and uterus, male Omegas and Alpha females typically have both stereotypically male and female genitalia. In this construction, male Omegan bodies and female Alpha bodies are in many ways similar to certain intersex and/or transgender bodily experiences.

“Is Omegaverse/abo Transphobic?” (2021) posted by user u/firecorn 22, fellow user Best-Isopod9939 answers the thread’s title question by stating that they are:

A nonbinary omega-verse fan. They (Omegaverse texts) make me feel less dysphoric. It can be written in a transphobic, fetishy manner though. I wouldn’t say it is inherently though. Omegaverse characters have bodies (I’d like to have or could have) and social positions similar to my own.

Within the same thread, LunarBlonde echoes Best-Isopod9939 opinions by sharing how “Omegaverse is what helped me realize I’m trans (and figuring) out the last confusing bits of my gender.”

In these comments, particularly Best-Isopod9939, users recognize both how A/B/O fiction, when written perhaps from a place of unacknowledged stereotypes rather than realized experience, can become—like any fantasy-based genre—a form of fetish. However, for these *Reddit* users, their reading of A/B/O fiction is ultimately grounded in the ability to see themselves represented in the characters’ experiences of their own bodies, and this takes precedence over the quality of the writing or its original intentions. While the fetishization of male Omegan characters may, in part, and as described in chapters two and three, occur through the texts’ existence within the problematic boundaries of a communal imagination, these *Reddit* users show how it is instead the efforts of private imagination and individual emotional labour, or individual consumption that also ultimately returns these texts to a place of empowered individual desire.

In “Cashing in On Queers: From Liberation to Commodification” (2006), Nadia Guidotto references American economist, Michael Pioré, to write that in a capitalist-based economic system, queer individuals “gain acceptance at the expense of chopping

off (their) own fringe elements” (4). Notably, what Guidotto suggests in this quotation is that in order to be accepted as a productive member within mainstream society, queer individuals must outwardly homogenise their appearance and behaviours in the same way that in an economic system, productivity is achieved through the creation of mass-produced and standardized products. Comparatively, the gift economy spaces of fanfiction, even when flawed, allow groups like the ones found in this specific *Reddit* thread to host and freely share discussions and explorations of things otherwise seen as “fringe” by mainstream Western society and so, alongside the genre itself, also find themselves seats at Coppa and Arduinna’s imagined potlatch table. Furthermore, this ‘joining the imagined table’ is especially important to consider because it occurs through a level of reappropriation or double appropriation. If it is largely ‘cisgendered women’—or an imagined surrounding fandom culture which retains the heteronormative female architecture of its inception—that appropriates queer male identities in the creation of slash-fiction and A/B/O slash-fiction, then it is readers like Best-Isopod9939 that then take these stories back. In reappropriating appropriated narratives, readers like Best-Isopod9939 once again demonstrate transformation as growth by reading these texts through a trans lens as queernormative rather than as systemically forced change.

Fanfiction Archive Spaces as Queernormative Spaces

This idea of reading material in new ways in order to support narratives of growth through queernormative spaces rather than as just static narratives of consumption is also seen in fanfiction and A/B/O slash-fictions’ existence on archive spaces like *Archive of Our Own*. Notably, just as individual fan works may help contribute to the development

of queernormative spaces and practices, so too does fanfiction’s habitual existence as an archive contribute to the development of these spaces and practices. In “Lost and Never Found: The Queer Archive of Feelings and Its Historical Propriety” (2013), Sarah Edenheim references literary scholar Ann Cvetkovich’s concept of the archive of feelings to write how “lesbian and gay history demands a radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism—all areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive” (38). Where a traditional archive frequently contains objects that are closed and limited because they are linearly structured and valued according to specific historical or research interests, queer archives are open and unlimited, consist of fragmentary objects that fulfill a psychic or emotional need, and that describe everyday events (Edenheim 40).

Like Best-Isopod9939’s comments allude to, in outlining A/B/O slash-fiction as a means of realizing lived bodily experiences, they demonstrate how these texts can relate to everyday events. This is reinforced by the plots of many slash-fiction stories centred on the domestic lives of characters such as TheSpaceCoyote’s focus on a moment of time in Hux’s lived reality as an Omega, and Buckybeardreams’s take on the domestic lives of superheroes.⁵⁷ Best-Isopod9939’s comments about Omegan male bodies helping to overcome personal feelings of body dysphoria also marks these texts as fulfilling a psychic or emotional need similar to the objects found within a queer archive.

⁵⁷ Visiting *Archive of Our Own* is also part of many users’ everyday routines. Users actively engage with the archive so frequently, that when the archive is down due to power outage or technical maintenance, its loss will trend on social media sites like *Tumblr*. As of the time of writing this, the archive was down June 13th, 2022 due to a technical malfunction and it trended on *Tumblr*’s top ten page with memes ranging from jokes about going insane without access to fanfiction, to users lamenting the loss of their bedtime stories.

Moreover, just as queer archives are open and unlimited, so too is *Archive of Our Own* an ever-expanding space,⁵⁸ that, because of the intangible nature of the internet, is able to more easily continue to grow without fear of physical borders.⁵⁹ Where traditional archives typically display only the life of an individual or a singular event, *Archive of Our Own* instead houses over 50,000 fandoms and so, just as a queer archive consists of many shared fragments, *Archive of Our Own* consists of the ephemera of many communities.

In “Rogue Archives—Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom” (2016), Abigail De Kosnik describes spaces like *Archive of Our Own* as “universal archives” because through their collections of cultural products, they perpetuate “a sense of belonging and (a) better understand(ing) (of) different aspects of (a) shared identity” despite their fragmentation (85). Like Fielding’s description of queernormativity as affirming queer practices and the foundations for a queer community, the fact that *Archive of Our Own* possesses the characteristics of a queer archive means that all works within it similarly become objects touched by this shared, universal identity. Just as characters like Hux, Steve, Bucky, or Tony, can be read through an intertextual lens as sharing characteristics with all of their other fanfiction counterparts, so too does the queer potential and queer audience of *Archive of Our Own* give all of its collected works a similar capacity to be read as potentially queer products. While this thesis has discussed how an assumed queerness within slash-fiction spaces can lead to problematic narratives,

⁵⁸ The nature of the internet means that users can continuously return to stories on the archive. So, while stories may be in some sense fixed once they have been written and posted, they continue to ‘grow’ through a potentially never-ending flux of comments, kudos, and bookmarks.

⁵⁹ Although this growth is conditional based on the ability for the archive to maintain the internet servers needed to support the data and memory necessary for largescale expansion.

I would, following Edenheim, still note how even within the archiving of moments of fantasy, there is still the potential for queerness to—like the tenet of queernormativity that demands queerness to be made knowable—be made in this case, “touchable, and, foremost teachable” (49).

However, despite this capacity for fanfiction pieces to serve as teachable cultural memory, this does not eliminate the fact that “digital cultural memory” is “unevenly realized through relations between people” (De Kosnik 130). So, while spaces like *Archive of Our Own* may automatically lend themselves to the creation of queernormative spaces, more work must be done to fully realize these spaces as such. De Kosnik elaborates that:

If users can perceive the human labor that undergoes digital cultural memory, then they can continue to question what that memory is and what it should be, what narratives it does or should support, and what power structures it endorses, questions, or facilitates (130).

In this statement, like the discussion of users like Best-Isopod9939’s act of double appropriation, what emerges again is a need for fanfiction to be read and then reflected on in order to achieve a level of metacognition that resists the creation of a closed space and so, a traditional archive’s hegemonic, or static structures. *Archive of Our Own* achieves what Edenheim—building on Cvetkovich’s theory of queer archives—describes as spaces that “document intimacy, sexuality, (and) love” (38)—by supporting works that depict chosen characters in a variety of intimate situations or, by allowing readers to achieve levels of self-love. However, despite these areas of possible resistance, more work must be done at the level of author and reader to allow the archive to achieve the

final characteristic of the queer archive as a space of true activism as so many already see it as and desire for it to be seen as.⁶⁰ This is because, while some fanfiction authors may explicitly strive for their work to be read as a narrative of resistance against hegemonic forms, this does not mean that all stories are intended for this purpose or interpreted as such when read through the intertextual nature that connects all fics.

A/B/O Slash-Fiction as Kink and Heterotopia

The subgenre's relationship to kink and position as a predominantly sexually explicit genre of fanfiction further facilitates A/B/O slash-fictions' potential to counteract heteronormative constructions of gender, sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation. On *Archive of Our Own*, approximately 48% of all individual works featuring the Alpha/Beta/Omega tag are rated explicit.⁶¹ This rating means that unlike a story described as "general," which features no references to sexual or otherwise graphic material, stories rated explicit can feature specific and pornographically described sex acts between characters.⁶² In "'Dogfuck rapeworld': Omegaverse fanfiction as a critical tool in analyzing the impact of social power structures on intimate relationships and sexual consent" (2018), Milena Popova notes that A/B/O fiction draws many of its roots

⁶⁰ This capacity for activism would also have to expand into issues of race within fandom alongside issues of gender, sex, and sexuality.

⁶¹ As of the time of writing this, the A/B/O tag on *Archive of Our Own* features approximately 60,000 individual works rated explicit versus an approximate 8300 rated general ("Alpha/Beta/Omega" *AO3.org*).

⁶² Just as stories on *Archive of Our Own* are organized into the categories of "het," "slash," and "gen," they can also be organized by rating. Ratings on the archive include added tags that get attached to a fic, such as: no rating, general, teen, mature, and explicit. The author determines these ratings based on how they view the content of their work. This means that while explicit fics always include graphic details, whether sexual or violent in nature, mature and teen fics may also display graphic elements if an author does not personally see the material as being overly sensitive or worth labelling with a trigger warning.

from BDSM practices⁶³ (181). As the title of their article suggests, Popova notes how impressions made by some fandom participants and fanfiction readers within the overall fanfiction community itself view the kink aspects of the A/B/O genre⁶⁴ as something that automatically denotes problematic pornographic subject material and references to sexual situations that are inherently violent and abnormal in nature⁶⁵ (Ibid). These opinions align with Seifrit's perspective that, from a traditionally Western mainstream cultural perspective, "the term "kink" is often used to negatively describe more "extreme" sexual fetishes (...) as well as sex that is not explicitly heteronormative" (50).

However, in "Textual Glory Holes": Genre and Community in Fan Kink Memes" (2010), Mary Amanda Wall notes that in fandom culture, often, "the definition (of kink) is (...) different from the dictionary definition of kink as a deviant desire or practice" (4). Wall's assertions that kink practices "encompass feeling alongside sensation" (Ibid., 12), resolves what American writer and feminist Audre Lorde frames as the "trap" of the traditional lens of Western pornography as "something that emphasizes sensation without feeling" (Lorde qtd. in Wall 12). For Wall, kink in fandom culture may constitute "a moment of heightened attention that makes patterns out of isolated moments," as "the eroticism of (this) fannish way of viewing (...) puts emphasis on body parts and particular character traits" rather than a pornographic way of viewing that is passive or predatory (12; 10). Specifically, in these descriptions of fannish kink versus pornography,

⁶³ For instance, Alpha/Omega relationships are often centred around ideas of dominance and submission since this reflects the biological and social instincts expected of Alpha and Omegan characters. Many of the more animalistic aspects of A/B/O dynamics are also drawn from ideas of 'bestial play' or 'pet play' (Popova [2018] 181).

⁶⁴ Most specifically, ideas of mating cycles, knotting, and the potential for imbalanced power dynamics (Popova [2018] 181).

⁶⁵ I.e., like the title of Popova's work suggests, that A/B/O stories are inherently tied to descriptions of sexual situations involving rape and bestiality.

what Wall draws attention to is how, while pornography often reduces its subjects to the presentation and products of their bodies, fannish kink instead connects bodily sensation *and* emotional response. So, for Wall, what is being eroticized through the practices of fannish kink is not solely the body, as in pornography, but also the emotional and psychological character of the identity within the body.⁶⁶

This understanding of fannish kink as emphasizing sensation arising not only from viewing the body erotically in a physical sense but also as “emotional, intellectual, and psychological” (Ibid., 12), is similarly discernable in TheSpaceCoyote and Buckybeardreams’s focus on Hux and Steve as Omegas as discussed in chapter two and chapter three. While both texts feature graphic sex scenes as one of their central focuses, Hux and Steve’s concerns over the properties of their own bodies show that these stories are not entirely products of “flattened affect” (Ibid., 13). In particular, Hux’s efforts to fashion his body in his greatcoat, along with the expressions of his discomfort over the treatment of his body both within and outside of the text’s sex scenes, in many ways, mirrors the above *Reddit* thread’s discussions of body dysmorphia. When referencing ideas of “flattened affect,” Wall discusses how traditional pornography can lead to a lack of emotional connection or expression because pornography’s depiction of bodies is often lacking in depth or made one note. However, in allowing Hux to express his discomfort and feelings of alienation in his body as a sexual object, TheSpaceCoyote invites a certain level of emotional depth, even if this depth is ultimately overshadowed by Kyo Ren. This initial insight demonstrates how the text, despite the potential fetishization of

⁶⁶ This sentiment is rearticulated by *Tumblr* user “funereal-disease” when they write that what is considered romantic in fanfiction “doesn’t mean this is ideal or healthy or even realistic. It means this is beautiful, this is tragic, this is grotesque, this *stirs emotion*.”

Omeganess, can function, at least at the level of fannish kink, as what fanfiction author Anna S. defines as the intentions of “the deepest kink,” that is, the exploration and deconstruction of a “profound sense of alienation and difference” (Anna S. qtd. in Wall 13).

Comparatively, Buckybeardreams’s text arguably offers less of a consideration of the tropes it endorses and enables. However, its intense focus on male relationships and how Steve, Tony, and Bucky can perform their lives collectively and in a domestic setting, and so, against the expectations of their superhero canon narratives, still presents their family as built on complexities rather than as something entirely one dimensional, even if the extent of this complexity is not always fully realized. So, this intense focus on Steve and Hux’s bodies and their experience of their own bodies as a result of fandom and fanfiction-based kink helps to bring further attention to Seifrit’s perspective that A/B/O texts can offer a specific insight into certain nonheteronormative bodies and certain potential experiences at an intimate, if often imagined, level.

Moreover, in “The Erotics of Fanfiction: Queering Fans, Works, and Communities in Modern Internet Fandom” (2016), Alexandra Garner further attaches this emphasis on body and character to cultural capital, and specifically what they outline as “erotic capital” (86). Garner echoes Wall’s descriptions of fanfiction’s capacity to express erotic sensation and feeling apart from traditional Western pornography, when writing that erotic capital in fan spaces is, for fanfiction authors, “the ability to (...) explicitly describe the anatomy and physiology of both male and female characters engaging in sex acts” without authors experiencing the fear of external social repercussions (Ibid). For instance, while mainstream media may be cancelled for

featuring a queer relationship or expressions of the body that defy heteronormative standards,⁶⁷ fandom spaces instead welcome these differences by attempting to create genres and tropes that in turn allow room within the larger narrative of fandom for the representation of these bodies to exist. The freedom in this ability to experiment and trade in erotic capital is similarly mirrored in the *Reddit* thread titled “What are your favourite kinks to read/write” (2021) posted by u/asldhhef. In this discussion thread, *Reddit* user Artic_Confusion writes about their love of explicit slash-fiction:

I actually think this is a huge reason why I’ve always been drawn to slash fiction (I’m assuming here that most characters in slash pairings aren’t queer in canon). There are these endless possibilities to imagine all kinds of situations where the characters discover something about themselves which is totally new to them or not new at all but they tried to suppress it in the past...and they share this with another character.

Where this thesis has previously outlined how slash-fiction can act as an appropriative genre that transforms characters into stereotypical or overly fantasized objects more solely based on reader pleasure, Artic_Confusion instead highlights the potential liberation in seeing characters be allowed to transform and grow through new romantic and/or sexual encounters. While the identity of Artic_Confusion is unknown, in describing the characters’ abilities to discover new things for themselves—rather than as having things simply done to them by an author or reader—Artic_Confusion perhaps

⁶⁷ For example, Alex Hirsch, the creator of the *Disney Family Channel* television series *Gravity Falls* (2012-2014), spoke openly on *Twitter* about how he was actively pressured by executive producers and the network to remove queer representation from the show or else risk being removed from air for “not being Disney appropriate” (Rude *Out.com*). In this instance, including queer characters came with the risk of social repercussions in the form of a loss of job opportunities.

foregrounds a view of slash-fiction that is less about fetishization and more like the affinity spaces of fanfiction spoken about in the introductory chapter of this thesis. Just as an affinity space is a place where one can find meaning through empathetic connections through a shared or common experience, so too is Artic_Confusion's love of slash-fiction based in the love of sharing in points of imagined discovery. So, their participation in slash-fiction—through its kink related aspects—marks an equal participation in erotic capital not as an economic system based in the sole consumption of products, but as a kind of communal market interested in the sharing of feeling and experience.

This perspective of fanfiction and A/B/O slash-fiction as spaces for simultaneously heteronormative practices based on ideas of commodity fetishism *and* queernormative practices based on theories of queernormativity and kink, gives rise to the possibility for a queer heterotopia. In “Queer Heterotopias: Homonormativity and the Future of Queerness” (2009), Angela Jones writes that:

Utopias are abstract portraits of ideal or perfect societies that do not exist.

Therefore, queer utopias are not possible. However, we are witnessing the birth of what I call queer heterotopias, which are spaces for the ‘other’ to be transgressive, and which are located in real spaces (1-2).

Internet fanfiction spaces are always partially ephemeral because the internet itself is an ever-shifting and digital, rather than a physical space. However, fanfiction's existence in long-lasting organized spaces like *Archive of Our Own* and *Tumblr*, where strong community and emotional bonds form and are preserved, mark it as a “real” space, and, one that can be considered under the definition of queer heterotopia. For Jones, queer heterotopic spaces are real because, unlike utopias, they can be based in lived realities

(2). Similarly, fanfiction spaces exist as real spaces because connections to fandom culture, in the form of community and emotional bonds, shape participants' lived realities by impacting the way they use and experience time, as well as how they relate to others in online and offline environments.

Like Fielding's definitions of queernormativity, which exists alongside and against normative structures and cultural practices, Jones similarly outlines how:

Queer heterotopias are sites of empowerment. They always exist in relation to heteronormative spaces and are shaped by them. Queer heterotopias exist in opposition to heteronormative spaces and are spaces where individuals seek to disrupt heterosexist discourse. (...) They are sites where (...) individuals attempt to dislocate normative configurations of sex, gender, and sexuality through daily exploration and experimentation with crafting a queer identity (Ibid., 2).

As explored above, the comments made by *Reddit* users and the author's comments made by TheSpaceCoyote and Buckybeardreams frame A/B/O slash-fiction, or slash-fiction more generally, as existing between the barriers of heteronormative, heterosexist discourse. Where heteronormative and heterosexist discourse considers definite answers, A/B/O slash-fiction presents room for disruption, even when still working within normative metaphors and structures. Situated at the varying crossroads of both male-oriented and female-oriented stereotypes, the male Omegan body marks a disruption of both and presents potentially liberating difference as well as an enduring sameness. Notably, while male Omegas present the opportunity to popularize bodies that differ from a heterosexist standard in the same way that cisgendered bodies are made default in contemporary Western societies, this celebration is still often encompassed within

heterosexist metaphors that, as Best-Isopod9939 suggests, can read as transphobic or as heteronormative.

Queer heterotopias are also based on an individual's ability "to explore and experiment with their desires" in order to "publicly present new subjectivities" (Jones 4), and this connects to the functions of fannish kink as an affinity space and the nature of the A/B/O genre itself as generating bodies that resonate with various gendered identities.

Contrastingly, Jones also notes how "Queer heterotopias are material spaces where radical practices go unregulated" (Ibid., 2), and this, in turn, relates to how A/B/O slash-fiction spaces are also often left open to reader and author interpretation without consideration of the ways that tropes can more negatively reflect the subjects being considered. Queer heterotopias are based on "the right to exist, to be seen, to be heard, to be accepted as a "viable body"" (Ibid., 6), and as seen in the *Reddit* comments explored, male Omegan bodies help some nonbinary and trans individuals to see their own bodies as viable.

However, "in order for queer heterotopias to flourish, there must be a move away from stable identities" (Ibid., 5), and the fixed nature of identity presentation in A/B/O fiction calls this notion of stable identities into question since, once characters in fics have presented as one of the three main dynamics, they are permanently locked into these roles. This fixedness is further cemented when considering the texts as public artifacts. The fanfiction gift economy ensures that tropes and character presentation ideas are shared broadly across fandoms until fanon versions of characters' A/B/O dynamics become regulated through the largely unintentional efforts of agreed-upon popular opinion. So, while differences from fanon versions do and can exist, they themselves do

not become accepted as fanon until they are reproduced through the fanfiction gift economy and made broadly popular within the community.⁶⁸

Thus, while fanfiction and A/B/O slash-fiction spaces more specifically are not ‘utopianly’ queer as often popularly imagined, they are also not spaces lacking in queer potential. While James Coleman is justified in his concerns that slash-fiction can repeat harmful narratives that implicate queer men but do not easily include them in the narrative, it is also true that these same stories offer queer individuals many hopeful narratives in other ways. Similarly, while A/B/O fics appear to replicate some heteronormative and heterosexual storylines through a dependence on Alpha/Omega bonds, which hampers their capacity to act as countercultural narratives, the genre does meet many of the characteristics of queernormative practice and the structures of a queer heterotopia. As such, to return to this thesis’s opening quotation by *Tumblr* user Ezra (thesorrowoflizards), what remains is a view of fanfiction and A/B/O slash-fiction that is “multipurpose” both to its success and to its detriment. This being said, it is important to note here that in discussing fanfiction as multipurpose, this does not mean that it is beyond discussion, or that all arguments are ultimately undone or equally lost within the vastness of fandom’s communal imagination. What remains is a view of fandom that is complex because it is a space that contradictorily recognizes a fanon subversion of mainstream heteronormative narratives to create its own ‘fixed’ accounts of entanglements that reproduce heteronormative structures, and also creates a cultural

⁶⁸ For instance, while A/B/O fanfiction for the television show *Supernatural* features stories in which the character Dean Winchester is an Alpha, because the fanon interpretation of Dean is as the “world’s first Omega” (*Fanlore.org*), Alpha Dean stories contribute to, but do not overwrite the popular narrative of Dean’s fanon dynamic as an Omega. If Alpha Dean stories were to become more popular than ones featuring Omega Dean, the fanon dynamics would perhaps shift to reflect this new desire, but this would simply result in the creation of a new dominant fan narrative.

impression of something that cannot be easily contained because of an underlying and inherent queerness.

In *The Forms of Capital* (1986), Pierre Bourdieu writes that “the economic, social, and symbolic ‘profit’ that follows from belonging to (an) association establishes a concrete base for the growth of solidarity” (251). For slash-fiction and A/B/O fiction to exist as a truly countercultural, queernormative, or “queer, intersectional, feminist space,” the nature of this sense of solidarity in writing and practice must be continually evaluated by those who profit from the structures of fandom to ensure that it exists as a space that is “just truly amazing” for all of those involved (“Ezra (thesorrowoflizards)” *Tumblr.com*).

Chapter Five: Conclusion

In “Fan(fiction) acting on media and the politics of appropriation” (2017), Moritz Stock et al., write that “the question is not if fan and commodity culture are two sides of the same coin. Rather, it is to ask, in which ways relations to commodity culture are part of the self understanding and justification patterns of fan cultures and how these narratives relate to actual practice” (22). This thesis has shown how slash-fiction as “man-on-man (m/m) sexual and/or romantic relationships,” and through a lens of the subgenre of Alpha/Beta/Omega fiction, can relate to ideas of commodity culture. Drawing upon theories and practices developed by Marx, Baudrillard, Derrida, and Bourdieu, among others, this thesis has shown how slash-fiction characters such as Hux and Steve Rogers, when written as Omegas, undergo cycles of uncontrolled transformation so as to leave them potentially vulnerable to Alpha, author, and reader opinion, in the process complicating the often-popular view of fanfiction practices as utopian “queer, intersectional, feminist spaces.” Through close reading and critical discourse analysis strategies, this thesis has shown how Hux and Steve come to experience key aspects of commodity fetishization at both a physical and symbolic level. Specifically, by accommodating common narrative features of A/B/O fiction such as mating/heat cycles and pack dynamics, Hux and Steve, like fetishized commodities, experience aspects of disenfranchisement such as instances of diminished autonomy and voice, a loss of individual labour-power, the characteristics of symbolic violence, and an aligning of self-worth with institutional and sociocultural ideologies.

However, as Stock et al., state, recognizing the commodity cultural aspects of fan cultures is not enough because thought must also be given to the intentions of the practices being employed. This thought is mirrored by Joshua Green and Henry Jenkins et al., in “Spreadable Media: How Audiences Create Values and Meaning in a Networked Economy” (2011) when they acknowledge that one can “see consumption as participation, with the understanding that participation carries multiple and perhaps even contradictory political valances” (125). As such, this thesis has tried to show both how the adherence to popular elements of A/B/O fanfiction perhaps unintentionally serves to justify a specific treatment of male Omegan bodies that aligns with heteronormative and heterosexual scripts, as well as how fan authors and readers read between these scripts to instead employ practices more aligned with the ideas of queernormativity and queer theory to create deeply meaningful connections with male Omegas and their treatment both within and outside of popular texts.

This being said, as Angela Fazkas further suggests, the potential for fan works to be truly radical “cannot stop at consideration” (123). Instead, fanfiction creation and consumption must also extend to an ability to critically read the ‘digital room of their own’ so that what is seen as liberating does not just continuously uphold “the symbolic potentialities of the old repressed body” (Baudrillard, [1976] n.pag). While the fan authors chosen as case studies for this thesis often try for this consideration, because fanfiction exists as a nexus of texts, and because “private decisions are taking place with social networks” (Green and Jenkins 120), their meaning is often lost to a communal imagination and a seemingly inescapable connection to all fannish practices across all other texts of a similar kind. As Ezra (thesorrowoflizards) alludes to in their *Tumblr* post,

when discussing the openness of fanfiction, there are no singular or easy answers. If fanfiction and slash-fiction are communal spaces, but ones, first and foremost, that are ultimately founded on individual enjoyment, then what is brought to the potlatch table will always be a process of self-edited consumption. With this in mind, the study of fanfiction must also always be one in which engagement, practice, and expectations are ingredients carefully measured out and continuously added to the conversation of this consumption so that passive consideration is not the only thing being brought to the collective table. After all, as Kristina Busse writes, it is the dialogue that exists within and outside of fanfiction texts—whether confrontational or comforting—that makes “fannish space not a utopian community, but a real one” (3).

Consequently, specific areas where the research and dialogue of fanfiction as related to ideas of commodity fetishism could be continued is through an exploration of other popular slash-fiction genres. In particular, the genre of “Real Person Fiction” or “RPF,” in which the characters featured in fan stories are real actors, musicians, athletes, etc., rather than a fictional counterpart, have been questioned as “an unethical denial of a celebrity’s personhood or simply a logical extension of the fannish tradition of textually poaching popular culture” (Piper sec. 1.1). This concern similarly aligns with the ongoing worry that slash-fiction and the genre of A/B/O fiction parodies and fantastically appropriates queer male identity as fans have primary status over what is “true.”

Another potential area of focus is “femme-slash,” which features “woman-on-woman” (F/F) fiction rather than “man-on-man” (M/M). Because of the lack of female representation in most popular mainstream contemporary Western media, as well as the enduring acceptance of certain kinds of maleness as the default cultural standard, femme-

slash is an underrepresented field of research in fanfiction studies. On “Archive of Our Own,” in both the *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy* and the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, the category of F/F has the least individual fan works, representing approximately 3% and 6% of the total collection of works. As a result, femme-slash could perhaps be an interesting area to compare and contrast to slash-fiction given its previous lack of consideration and differing status within many well-established fandom spaces like *Star Wars* and *Marvel*.

A third area of potential study is an exploration of the other dynamics in A/B/O fiction. While this thesis has largely focused on male Omegan bodies and, by proxy, their relationship to male Alpha bodies, like femme-slash, it could be valuable to look at female Omegan bodies and female Alpha bodies. Female Alpha bodies, in particular, would offer fruitful discussion since, like male Omegas, they often exist at a crossroads of gendered sociocultural expectations.⁶⁹ Future research could also more fully consider the position of Betas and question how their seeming lack of biological transformation or “lack of presentation” translates to ideas of commodity fetishization, if at all.

While this thesis did not have room to expand into these specific areas of questioning because of time and the scope of focus, fanfiction, as a continually emerging field of study alongside the study of transformative works more generally, offers a wide variety of potential for the future discussion of these topics. If Francesca Coppa is correct in the assessment that fanfiction is born out of an act of love that in turn loves its subjects into greatness, then similarly, it is a love of fanfiction that will continue to propel fanfiction studies into academic relevance and as a viable topic within literature studies.

⁶⁹ I.e., at a crossroads of both male (Alpha) and female (sex) expectations versus male Omega’s position at a crossroads of male (sex) and female (Omega) expectations.

Appendix A

Slash-Fiction Reader and Writer Gender Demographics

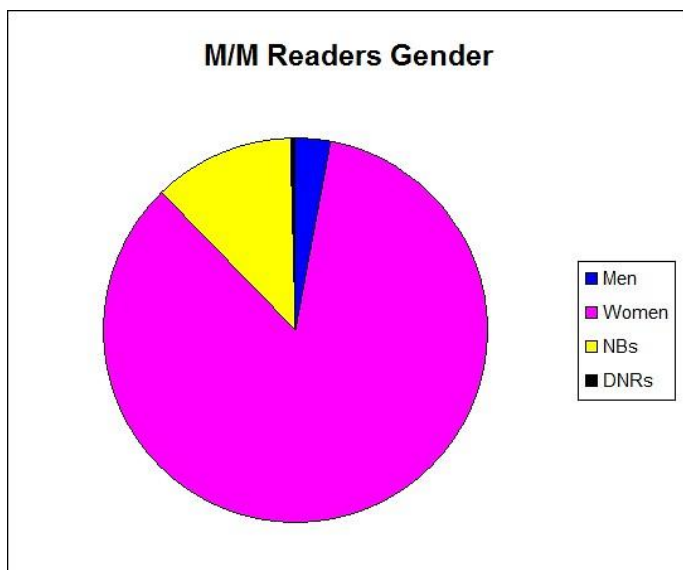


Fig. A1. A graph representing “Centreoftheselights’s” survey regarding the gender of slash-fiction readers on *Archive of Our Own*. Centreoftheselights. “Gender and Sexuality Demographics.” *Archive of Our Own*, August 12 2014, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/17018208/chapters/40008768>. Used with permission.

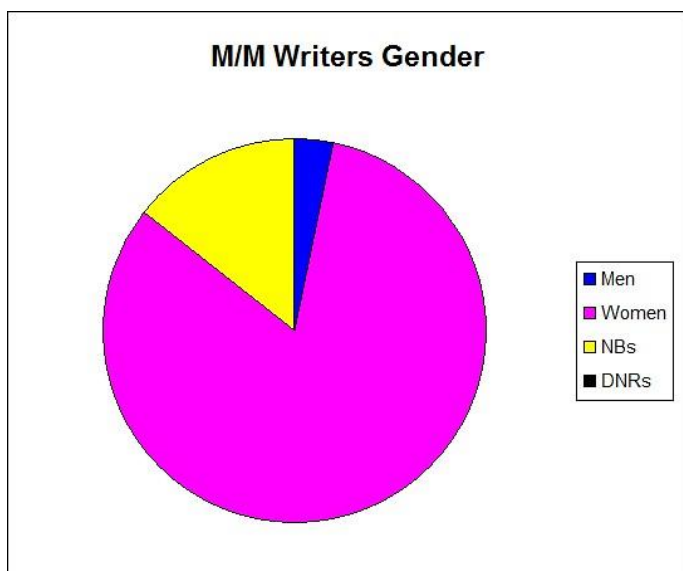


Fig. A2. A graph representing “Centreoftheselights’s” survey regarding the gender of slash-fiction writers on *Archive of Our Own*. Centreoftheselights. “Gender and Sexuality Demographics.” *Archive of Our Own*, August 12 2014, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/17018208/chapters/40008768>. Used with permission.

Appendix B

Slash-Fiction Reader and Writer Sexuality Demographics

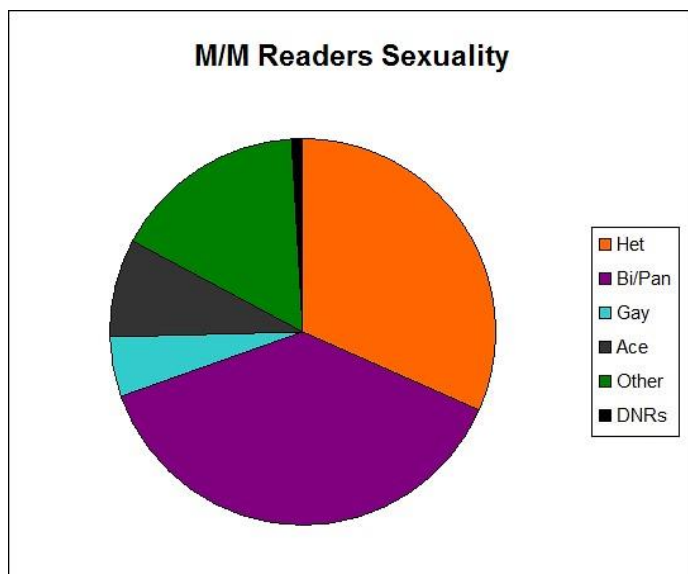


Fig. B1. A graph representing “Centreoftheselights’s” survey regarding the sexuality of slash-fiction readers on *Archive of Our Own*. Centreoftheselights. “Gender and Sexuality Demographics.” *Archive of Our Own*, August 12 2014, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/17018208/chapters/40008768>. Used with permission

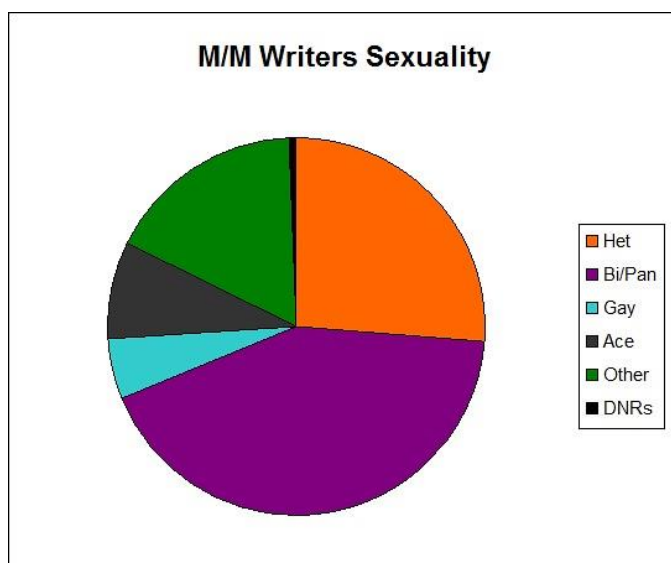


Fig. B2. A graph representing “Centreoftheselights’s” survey regarding the sexuality of slash-fiction writers on *Archive of Our Own*. Centreoftheselights. “Gender and Sexuality Demographics.” *Archive of Our Own*, August 12 2014, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/17018208/chapters/40008768>. Used with permission.

Appendix C

Top 100 Fanfiction “Ships” on *Archive of Our Own* January-December 2021

Rank	Change	Pairing	Fandom	New Works	Total	Type	Race
1		38 Clay Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)	Video Blogging RPF	15074	17945	MM	White White
2	N	Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)	Video Blogging RPF	10017	11103	Gen	White White
3		6 Castle/Dean Winchester	Supernatural	9412	100191	MM	White White
4	-3	Lín Zhàn Lín Wángqī/Wèi Yíng Wèi Wúxiàn	Módiào Zúshì - Mòxiàng Tóngxiù	9012	27313	MM	Asian Asian
5	N	Wilbur Soot & TommyInnit	Video Blogging RPF	8848	10108	Gen	White White
6	0	Bakugou Katsuki/Midoriya Izuku	Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia	8592	28854	MM	Asian Asian
7		Draco Malfoy/Harry Potter	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling	8510	52916	MM	White White
8		62 Toby Smith Tubbo & TommyInnit	Video Blogging RPF	7700	9623	Gen	White White
9	12	Sirius Black/Remus Lupin	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling	7640	27693	MM	White White
10	-8	Aziraphale/Crowley (Good Omens)	Good Omens (TV)	6939	39378	MM	White White
11	-4	Bakugou Katsuki/Kirishima Eijrou	Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia	6820	25094	MM	Asian Asian
12	16	Evan "Buck" Buckley/Eddie Diaz (9-1-1 TV)	9-1-1 (TV)	6722	11602	MM	White Latino
13	-2	Adrien Agreste Chat Noir/Marinette Dupain-Cheng Ladybug	Miraculous Ladybug	6715	28442	F/M	White Asian
14	N	Ranboo & Toby Smith Tubbo	Video Blogging RPF	6367	6367	Gen	White White
15	-2	James "Bucky" Barnes/Steve Rogers	Captain America (Movies)	5831	57582	MM	White White
16	N	Technoblade & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)	Video Blogging RPF	5743	6810	Gen	White White
17	25	James Potter/Lily Evans Potter	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling	5651	17201	F/M	White White
18	N	Tartaglia Childie/Zhongli (Genshin Impact)	原神 Genshin Impact (Video Game)	5601	6476	MM	White Asian
19	15	Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling	5521	17278	F/M	Ambig White
20	-1	Aizawa Shouta Eraserhead/Yamada Hizashi Present Mc	Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia	5345	14792	MM	Asian Asian
21	26	Mya Atsumu/Sakusa Kiyoomi	Haikyuu!!	5294	7847	MM	Asian Asian
22	N	James "Bucky" Barnes/Sam Wilson	Marvel Cinematic Universe	4874	8164	MM	White Black
23	-20	Gerrit z Rivli Gerrit of Rivla/Jaskier Dandelion	Wiedźmin The Witcher - All Media Types	4812	15841	MM	White White
24	-14	Jeon Jungkook/Kim Taehyung V	Bangtan Boys BTS	4807	30404	MM	Asian Asian
25	2	Bakugou Katsuki & Midoriya Izuku	Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia	4354	11069	Gen	Asian Asian
26	N	Ranboo & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)	Minecraft (Video Game)	4345	4345	Gen	White White
27	-15	Midoriya Izuku/Todoroki Shouto	Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia	4251	20253	MM	Asian Asian
28	N	Technoblade & Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF)	Minecraft (Video Game)	4249	4742	Gen	White White
29	-20	Peter Parker & Tony Stark	Marvel Cinematic Universe	4148	23844	Gen	White White
30	N	Hasegawa Langa/Kyan Reki	SK8 the Infinity (Anime)	4034	4034	MM	Asian Asian
31	-6	Dazai Osamu/Nakahara Chuuya (Bungou Stray Dogs)	文豪ストレイドッグス Bungou Stray Dogs	3985	14461	MM	Asian Asian
32	-10	Wazumi Hajime/Kisame Toon	Haikyuu!!	3890	17535	MM	Asian Asian
33	-17	Akaashi Keiji/Bokuto Koutarou	Haikyuu!!	3788	14052	MM	Asian Asian
34	-20	Jeon Jungkook/Park Jimin	Bangtan Boys BTS	3733	23836	MM	Asian Asian
35	-20	Steve Rogers/Tony Stark	The Avengers (Marvel Movies)	3730	41779	MM	White White
36	N	Clay Dream & GeorgeNotFound & Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF)	Video Blogging RPF	3663	4497	Gen	White White
37	N	Ranboo & Toby Smith Tubbo & TommyInnit	Video Blogging RPF	3632	3632	Gen	White White
37		62 James "Bucky" Barnes/Reader	Marvel Cinematic Universe	3632	12196	Other	White Ambig
39	N	Diluc/Kaeya (Genshin Impact)	原神 Genshin Impact (Video Game)	3613	3613	MM	White Ambig
39	-18	Merlin/Arthur Pendragon (Merlin)	Merlin (TV)	3613	24324	MM	White White
41	N	Karl Jacobs/Sapnap	Video Blogging RPF	3603	3873	MM	White White
42	14	Aizawa Shouta Eraserhead & Midoriya Izuku	Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia	3562	6928	Gen	Asian Asian
43	N	Wilbur Soot & Technoblade	Video Blogging RPF	3473	4072	Gen	White White
44	N	Nanjo Kojro Joe/Sakurayashiki Kaoru Cherry Blossom	SK8 the Infinity (Anime)	3466	3466	MM	Asian Asian
45	-14	Kara Danvers/Lena Luthor	Supergirl (TV 2015)	3420	17875	F/F	White White
46	-26	Hinata Shouyou/Kageyama Tobio	Haikyuu!!	3393	16169	MM	Asian Asian
47	-18	Derek Hale/Sales Sliniski	Teen Wolf (TV)	3326	6442	MM	White White
48	N	Geico Saiguma/Gojo Satoru	呪術廻戦 Jujutsu Kaisen (Manga)	3260	3627	MM	Asian Asian
49	N	Wen Kexing/Zhou Zishu	山河令 Word of Honor (TV 2021)	3187	3187	MM	Asian Asian
50	N	Clay Dream & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)	Video Blogging RPF	3186	3698	Gen	White White
51	-18	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter	Hannibal (TV)	3139	22510	MM	White White
52	N	TommyInnit & Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF)	Video Blogging RPF	3077	3671	Gen	White White
53	N	Alexis Quackity/Karl Jacobs/Sapnap	Minecraft (Video Game)	3073	3073	Poly	Latino White
54	3	Amity Blight/Luz Noceda	The Owl House (Cartoon)	3020	5251	F/F	White AI/Lat
55	-18	Dabi Todoroki Touya/Takami Keigo Hawks	Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia	3016	7266	MM	Asian Asian
56	-8	Remy/Ben Solo Kyo Ren	Star Wars Sequel Trilogy	2998	26956	F/M	White White
57	N	Lex Ackerman/Erwin Smith	Shingeki no Kyojin Attack on Titan	2945	9150	MM	White White
58	N	Tartaglia Childie/Traveler (Genshin Impact)	原神 Genshin Impact (Video Game)	2877	2877	Other	White White
59	-15	Hermione Granger/Ron Weasley	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling	2862	15977	F/M	Ambig White
60	-34	Marin Blackwood/Jonathan "Jon" Sims The Archivist	The Magnus Archives (Podcast)	2833	7649	MM	Ambig Ambig
61	N	Clay Dream & Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF)	Video Blogging RPF	2727	3423	Gen	White White
62	-38	Joe Yusuf Al-Kaysani/Nicky Nicolò di Genova	The Old Guard (Movie 2020)	2698	6453	MM	MENA White
63	-33	Magnus Bane/Alec Lightwood	Shadowhunters (TV)	2688	29251	MM	Asian White
64	N	Traveler/Xiao Alatus (Genshin Impact)	原神 Genshin Impact (Video Game)	2639	12959	F/M	White White
65	-12	Sherlock Holmes/John Watson	Sherlock (TV)	2617	65392	MM	White White
66	-17	Kaminari Denki/Shinsou Hitoshi	Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia	2610	6519	MM	Asian Asian
67	-50	Adora/Catra (She-Ra)	She-Ra and the Princesses of Power (2018)	2574	9251	F/F	White Ambig
68	N	Carlos Reyes/TK Strand	9-1-1: Lone Star (TV 2020)	2525	3869	MM	Latino White
68		27 Min Yoongi Suga/Park Jimin	Bangtan Boys BTS	2525	23438	MM	Asian Asian
70	28	Han Jisung Han/Lee Minho Lee Know	Stray Kids (Band)	2524	6360	MM	Asian Asian
71	N	The Darling Aleksander Morozova/Alina Starkov	Shadow and Bone (TV)	2500	2836	F/M	White Asian
72	N	Dabi Todoroki Touya/Reader	Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia	2498	2498	Other	Asian Ambig
72		Loki/Mobius M. Mobius	Loki (TV 2021)	2498	2498	MM	White White
74	N	Wilbur Soot & Phil Watson	Video Blogging RPF	2493	2913	Gen	White White
75	-37	Kozume Kenma/Kuroo Tetsuro	Haikyuu!!	2470	9174	MM	Asian Asian
76	N	Vent/ Xiao Alatus (Genshin Impact)	原神 Genshin Impact (Video Game)	2397	2397	MM	White Asian
77	N	Fushiguro Megumi/Itdori Yui	呪術廻戦 Jujutsu Kaisen (Manga)	2380	2788	MM	Asian Asian
78	N	Clay Dream & Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF)	Minecraft (Video Game)	2300	2756	Gen	White White
79	-31	Bakugou Katsuki/Todoroki Shouto	Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia	2294	8322	MM	Asian Asian
80	N	Traveler/Xiao Alatus (Genshin Impact)	原神 Genshin Impact (Video Game)	2287	2287	Other	White Asian
81	-10	Obi-Wan Kenobi & Anakin Skywalker Darth Vader	Star Wars - All Media Types	2249	5956	Gen	White White
82	N	Harry Styles/Louis Tomlinson	One Direction (Band)	2201	36269	MM	White White
83	-47	Kim Namjoon RM/Kim Seokjin Jin	Bangtan Boys BTS	2157	20063	MM	Asian Asian
84	N	Huà Chéng/Xiè Lián (Tián Guān Cǐ Fù)	Tián Guān Cǐ Fù - Mòxiàng Tóngxiù	2153	4271	MM	Asian Asian
85	N	Peter Parker/Reader	Marvel Cinematic Universe	2109	2109	Other	White Ambig
86	-43	Kim Taehyung V/Park Jimin	Bangtan Boys BTS	2091	13169	MM	Asian Asian
87	N	Hinata Hajime/KomaeDa Nagito	Super Dangan Ronpa 2	2075	5665	MM	Asian Asian
88	-42	Patrick Brewer/David Rose	Schitt's Creek	2059	8525	MM	White White
89	-44	Peggy Potts/Tony Stark	Marvel Cinematic Universe	2056	20412	F/M	White White
90	N	Clay Dream/Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF)	Video Blogging RPF	2046	2511	MM	White White
91	N	Diluc & Kaeya (Genshin Impact)	原神 Genshin Impact (Video Game)	2039	2039	Gen	White Ambig
92	-26	Dean Winchester & Sam Winchester	Supernatural	2035	12018	Gen	White White
93	-43	Tsukishima Kei/Yamaguchi Tadashi	Haikyuu!!	1983	8512	MM	Asian Asian
94	-33	Midoriya Izuku/Uraraka Ochako	Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia	1973	6774	F/M	Asian Asian
95	-16	Uchida Sasuke/Uzumaki Naruto	Naruto	1966	10471	MM	Asian Asian
96	-58	Wang Yi Bo/Xiao Zhan Sean	陈情令 The Untamed (TV) RPF	1965	8328	MM	Asian Asian
97	-35	Annabeth Chase/Percy Jackson	Percy Jackson and the Olympians - Rick Riordan	1964	8971	F/M	White White
98	-8	Bakugou Katsuki/Reader	Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia	1963	4957	Other	Asian Ambig
99	-67	Aziraphale & Crowley (Good Omens)	Good Omens (TV)	1958	11120	Gen	White White
100	N	Loki (Marvel)/Reader	Marvel Cinematic Universe	1950	6724	Other	White Ambig

Fig. C1. A chart representing the top 100 fanfiction relationship pairings on *Archive of Our Own* in 2021. Centreoftheselights. “What fanfic was the world writing in 2021? (AO3 Year In Review).” *Archive of Our Own*, January 1 2022, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/36126787>. Used with permission.

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