

**Queering Hallmark: Reinventing heteronormative
romance tropes through slash fiction**

Riya Daniel

S3793678@student.rmit.edu.au

Master's Thesis
COMM 2669
RMIT University

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge that this research work was produced on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past, present and future. Sovereignty was never ceded, and I acknowledge that this land always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

I thank RMIT University for their excellent resources and support to enable me to complete this thesis, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic where access to learning became difficult. I thank my classmates in the Professional Research Project (Communication) course for their immensely helpful input and feedback as we bounced ideas off each other for a fruitful two semesters, and my dear friends aphaire and lightninghikari (pseudonyms) for their voluntary participation in this research that led to some highly useful insights.

I extend my biggest gratitude to my faculty and research supervisor, Dr. Zoe Dzunko, for her guidance throughout the conception and building of this thesis, and her invaluable assistance through its rough patches. It has been an immense pleasure to receive your tutelage for the duration of my degree.

Abstract

There is often a stunning lack of queer romance stories in mainstream family media, and queer-centric stories are instead focused on the labours of their existence. While these are issues that do deserve the spotlight, queer audiences also wish their lives would get the same storytelling treatment as heterosexual people; often queer characters are rarely the protagonists of romances, or if they are supporting cast, they are written by way of stale stereotypes. This results in a lack of options available to queer audiences that aren't the bare minimum.

One area where I have identified this to not quite be the case is the realm of fanfiction, where romance stories centred around queer pairings make up the majority of all literature produced, and feature campy plots that are highly beloved despite their trite or generic nature. The popularity of fanfiction owes itself to the dissatisfaction of fans—mostly queer fans—who look for representations of themselves on screen, and could thus prove a vital tool in advocating for more of it.

This creative research thesis thus aims to determine if the fanfiction model of taking a popular trope or storyline in heterosexual media and 'queering' it can translate to a viable queer romance on screen, by taking an existing campy storyline with a straight pairing and rewriting it as queer fanfiction—otherwise called 'crossover fanfiction'—using an autoethnobiographical exegesis to detail my writing practice, and the necessity behind any changes made to better suit a queer pairing and audience. To further inform these conclusions, I will examine my research through the lens of queer theorists such as Michael Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who have previously explored the concept of 'queering' mainstream literature.

My work aims to create a better understanding of how queer characters can be written for the mainstream, for both readers and writers aiming to be more inclusive—including identities not commonly explored (e.g. bisexual and non-binary characters), from the perspective of a queer writer, and the audience that consumes them.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	3
Introduction	5
1. Research Questions	8
2. Methodology	8
3. Methods	9
4. Literature Review	11
4.1 Slash Fiction as Course Correction.....	11
4.2 The Resistance Against Queerbaiting.....	13
4.3 Queer Theory, Contemporary Literature, and Slash Fiction.....	14
5. Autoethnography	19
5.1 Introduction: Film Summary and Replacement Leads	19
5.2 Plot Breakdown.....	19
5.3 Exegesis: Developing the Creative Artefact	21
6. Conclusion	30
References	32
Appendix A: Audience Responses to Researcher Questions	37
Appendix B: Excerpt from the Creative Artefact, ‘The Angel in the Elevator’	41

Queering Hallmark: Reinventing heteronormative romance tropes through slash fiction

Introduction

Firstly, a note on the usage of ‘queer’ throughout this text: The term has a contentious history, including in the early stages of the conception of what we now commonly refer to as queer theory; Annamarie Jagose argues the word queer has ‘radical potential’ but not any ‘fixed value’ and is not particularly progressive in its claims that it decreases homophobia via generalisation (1996, pp. 2–6). Other arguments were that the blanket term went against the politically charged nature of the gay rights movement by being devoid of any such acumen (de Lauretis, 1994). But it is important to note that these major queer theory scholars in the nineties still spoke of research in terms of the gay and lesbian sides of the community; bisexual and transgender identities were hardly or never spoken about (Callis 2009). I use the term ‘queer’ liberally thus as I, being bisexual myself, seek greater visibility in research including my own.

Queer representation in mainstream media, in both TV and film, still has a long way to go. GLAAD, the organisation that advocates for queer representation in media, conducts an annual survey detailing the number of openly queer characters in film and television called the Studio Responsibility Index, and noted that 2020 saw an increase in the number of LGBTQ+ identifying characters to 22 percent from 18.5 percent last year. While the slight increase is a positive factor, the numbers still remain overwhelmingly low, and these characters do not feature in films that made the biggest impact at the box office or the highest views on TV. Furthermore, the representation of demographics within the community is disproportionate; bisexual representation decreased to 14 percent, with a total of three films featuring bi characters (GLAAD 2020). It is no surprise, then, that audiences that identify by these distinct yet valid labels turn to more inclusive forms of alternative media such as fanfiction, where queer versions of existing characters are so mainstream, they’re almost the default.

The art of writing fanfiction is far from a recent phenomenon. The earliest known instance dates back to 1967 with the publication of a *Star Trek* fanzine called *Spockanalia*, which was so massively popular even creator Gene Roddenberry called it required reading by anyone in the fandom (Katyal 2006). It was with the rise of the Internet that fanfiction truly exploded onto the mainstream; while initially its circulation was restricted to chatlogs and closed forums, for fear of copyright strikes from original content creators: Anne Rice was notoriously anti-fanfiction, for instance (Romano 2013), public forums such as FanFiction.net allowed users to gain a wider reach for their fanworks beyond their closeted space. More recently, the fanfiction website Archive of Our Own (AO3), hosted by the non-profit Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), works tirelessly to ensure fans' creations remain protected in the intellectual sphere from legal challenge (Organization for Transformative Works 2007).

It cannot be understated, however, that one of the reasons fanfiction still gets questioned as 'serious' writing is because it is a practice commonly associated with young women. There is even a TV Tropes article titled 'Most Fanfic Writers Are Girls', despite the existence of male fanfiction writers in the sphere. This harkens back to the *Spockanalia* days—which was authored by two women—where female fans often saw a barrier between themselves and male fans who occupied discourse, and the emergence of alternative media was an effort to make fan culture more open and inclusive to women (Jenkins 2012). But it can also be argued that the lack of diversity within the traditional publishing landscape that makes it hard for writers belonging to minority groups to break in, sees them turn to alternative avenues where their writing can still get attention from a public that wishes to see more of that specific type of work. Fanfiction has made it to mainstream publishing and the big screen—the *50 Shades of Grey* franchise and the movie *After* being notable examples—but the women who wrote them had their start in these online communities granting them widespread popularity. Yet few writers will admit to having a start in fanfiction because of the stigma attached, owing to its derivative nature (Pugh 2005) or the harbour it provides for 'taboo' genres such as erotica and slash fiction.

Slash fiction is the subgenre this thesis takes a specific purview on—though it is commonly associated with erotic writing, the term refers to any work of fanfiction that involves a pairing between the same sex (Katyal 2006), such as the creative artefact that accompanies this

research. As with most subjects centred around the LGBT+ community, slash fiction has generated discourse and disdain in equal amounts. While some see it as a form of subversion, of writing in representation and diversity where there is otherwise none—putting forward the idea that people of a similar demographic to the writer are desirable and worthy of positive portrayals of romance (Chander & Sunder 2007), there are others who still criticise the practice as shameful and voyeuristic, especially when it comes to teenage girls writing about gay men as is the majority in slash fiction circles (Dommu 2018).

This thesis aims to draw upon the subversion aspect of slash fiction: whether its practice of rewriting romance stories that otherwise cater to a heterosexual demographic in a homosexual context can actually prove beneficial for queer writing as a whole, by exploring if the formula behind traditional Hollywood male/female romances can work just as well for a same-sex pairing at the centre. It also aims to highlight the genre's reliance on gendered tropes, and how a queer romance might actually help subvert these tropes by using them as character traits without relying on gender. This will be carried out in the form of an autoethnography, as I attempt to break down a traditional film romance through a queer lens to rewrite it as slash fiction. My decisions to reflect upon, add or omit certain tropes and creative decisions will form the exegetical component of this research, and inform my conclusions.

The title of this thesis, 'Queering Hallmark', is a reference to the Hallmark Channel, the American broadcasting network famous for its family-friendly romance classics particularly popular around Christmastime – but often overwhelmingly feature a heterosexual pairing at their centre, with standardised plots that rely on gendered tropes. As detailed in this thesis, the creative work will also follow a Christmas-themed plot.

1. Research Questions

The major questions raised by this research are thus:

1. Do these romance tropes, originally written for a heterosexual couple within heteronormative norms, now challenge existing discourse in writing and society by working just as well with a queer pairing?
2. Does fanfiction achieve this end as a means of course-correcting an otherwise forced romance between two characters of the opposite sex, or is its creation purely for the voyeuristic tendencies of the audience?

To answer these questions, as well as any others that may be raised as this investigation progresses, we turn to the autoethnography and exegetical component in an attempt to add to the conclusions of previous researchers in the practice of queering literature.

2. Methodology

Creative practice as research is often broadly classified into ‘practice-based’ and ‘practice-led’ research (Niedderer & Roworth-Stokes 2007) depending on the positioning of the creative artefact in the research process; practice-based research often derives from an existing creative artefact, whereas practice-led research focuses on the creative practice ahead of the artefact, often leading to the generation of an entirely new creative artefact based on the practices in question (Perry 2008). This generalisation alone makes it obvious why my thesis employs practice-led research, but the nature of its approach to creative practice provides further justification for this choice.

According to Skains (2018, p. 85), practice-led research ‘focuses on the nature of creative practice, leading to new knowledge of operational significance for that practice, in order to advance knowledge about or within practice’. In terms of my thesis, the objective is to attempt to create advances in queer storytelling by way of fanfiction’s employment of standardised heterosexual tropes, essentially creating new knowledge within this domain. The

process of writing the piece of fanfiction forms the nature of the creative practice; detailing my decisions in advancement of the plot, if certain tropes work as is or are too gendered to be applied directly, and the changes I made to them if necessary. These also play a role in generating the exegetical component that is commonly associated with both practice-based and practice-led research (Skains 2018).

While the model of an exegesis that is written as woven into the creative work is the most commonly employed and recommended form (Krauth 2011), it should be noted that this exegesis is a reflection of my own creative process and questions over the creative work. As such, the exegesis and the creative work are independent answers to the same research question (Milech & Schilo 2004), and each uses a different ‘language’ to address the same discourse. They are not a commentary upon the other.

I thus decided to approach my exegesis as an autoethnography. Broadly defined, an autoethnography is ‘an approach that seeks to describe and analyse personal experience in order to extrapolate understandings about wider cultural experience’ (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2007). This approach appealed to me for two reasons: first, that it places emphasis on my role as a queer writer generating a creative work centred around queer relationships and individuals. The second is a direct consequence of the first, in that writing about the process of writing is a form of reflection upon the writer’s choices and personal beliefs (Richardson 1994). While autoethnographers must take necessary caution against emotional writing and failing to connect personal experience with theory (Duncan 2004), the approach is still a useful tool in practice-led research wherein the artefact generated is of the researcher’s own making. The key word here is reflection; in this case, reflecting upon the choices of plot and situation to place these characters and relationships in, and the author’s reflection upon their own queerness influencing the direction the story takes.

3. Methods

The methods employed by this thesis are largely split into two divisions: the creative practice artefact, and the autoethnographical exegesis. As stated above, they are independent

components to the same research question: the exegesis aiming to identify significant questions raised by the creative artefact and generate discourse around them.

The creative artefact is hosted on the Archive of Our Own (AO3), spanning multiple chapters that were periodically updated to allow for reader feedback. Comments on chapters are allowed both for registered users on the site as well as guests, to allow for a wider range of feedback and opinions to draw analysis from.

Crossover media is a highly popular genre in fanfiction, with 77,438 fanworks using the search tag 'crossover' on AO3 alone. Often the most popular and easily conceptualised crossovers involve reimagining a popular Hollywood film's plot with the characters of a different, larger fandom. I employ this strategy here in the knowledge that there exists a plethora of films centred around heterosexual relationships rife with tropes and stereotypes, ideal for my investigation into a queer retelling. The film in question, *A Christmas Kiss* (2011) checks several of these boxes: spontaneous intimacy with attractive strangers, gendered stereotypes of characters, and uplifted notions of marriage among others. Christmas-themed films have long been a staple of the romance genre, but there are far fewer films that involve a same-sex relationship at its centre.

In choosing a fandom to crossover with, I needed to select one I was familiar with in terms of characters and dynamic, in order to create a more meaningful story, as well as community engagement and popularity. I decided to settle on the *Pokemon* video game franchise, owing to my familiarity with the universe of the games and my considerable engagement with its fanfiction-reading community; the pairing in question between the characters Steven Stone (Daigo Tsuwabuki) and Wallace (Mikuri) from the Ruby/Sapphire/Emerald and Omega Ruby/Alpha Sapphire iterations of the franchise. While the pairing itself is quite popular, with 296 works on AO3 as of 17 April 2021, their canonical occupations are also a close fit with the occupations of the film's leads.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Slash Fiction as Course Correction

As previously explained, slash fiction refers to any work of fanfiction centred around a same-sex pairing. Leavenworth (2015, p. 40) explains, ‘fanfic authors comment on and transform the canon through switched narrative perspectives, altered romantic combinations of characters, expansions of minor characters or scenes, or a play with the temporal boundaries in prequels and sequels.’ A majority of fanfiction is born out of a desire to rewrite elements of a story or media that would feel more satisfying to the author, either in terms of plot resolution, representation in characters, or both. In the case of slash fiction, it is overwhelmingly the latter, and there are various reasons why writing romance of a homosexual bent is so popular in a space dominated by women and queer writers (Lothian, Busse & Reid 2007).

There are many reasons women would turn to writing slash between two (often male) characters in a media over an established male/female romance within the same media: either because the romance is a foregone conclusion within the text by virtue of their genders (Jenkins 2012), or the reliance on heavily gendered tropes means there is an inequality introduced marking the man as dominant and the woman as submissive (Somogyi 2003). By effectively removing gender roles from the equation, the writer is allowed to develop a romance that feels more natural and defined by the established relationship between the two characters. This eventually becomes a key element of this particular investigation: whether the gendered tropes that persist in mainstream romances can still stand when rewritten as a queer romance, or if it negatively affects the protagonists and their relationship.

A common criticism of fanfiction—specifically fanfiction that includes original characters or those that are self-inserts or reader inserts—is the use of the term ‘Mary Sue’, which derives its name from an eponymous original character that was inserted into a piece of *Star Trek* fanfiction (Bacon-Smith 1991, p. 94), and according to Wikipedia is “a fictional character who is portrayed in an idealised way and lacks noteworthy flaws.” The Mary Sue term seeped its way into common fan discourse and soon became a justification for why fanfiction

is considered frivolous, even narcissistic literature in some circles (Chander & Sunder 2007). However, owing to its origins as a powerful but invented female character, the term became synonymous with any female character in fanfiction that was the centre of her story and was ‘idealised’ and ‘too perfect’—traits that male characters have been given more leeway to be; because they are so prominent this perfect protagonist mould is expected from them, and is hardly noteworthy or taken exception to (Pflieger 1999). It makes the case for why female fanfiction authors would want to create these characters as a form of course correction: to give themselves agency and see more characters like themselves front and centre (Chaney & Liebler 2006), when there are so few female protagonists in mainstream media in the first place.

Consequently, this extended to fanfiction writers who either insert original queer characters into a fictional universe or establish a canon character’s sexuality as queer. This correction of the absence of homosexuality in a piece of media can itself be defined as a form of Mary Sue writing (Chander & Sunder 2007). This extends to women that write slash fiction as well; to go against fixed notions of gender and affix a rare emotional element between two men, embracing the idea that sexuality is fluid once we move beyond these gendered boundaries (Jenkins 1992, p. 187–188). Kustritz (2003) explains that authors of slash fiction aim to ‘tear down the traditional formula of romance novels and films that negotiate the submission of a heroine to a hero by instead negotiating the complicated power balance between two equally dominant, independent, and masculine characters.’ Often this is a natural consequence of the formula several mainstream scripts follow: a male protagonist that is fully fleshed out with emphasis on his male ‘buddy’ character and the bond between them, whereas the female lead serves purely as a love interest with no real personality beyond admiring the male protagonist. It is no surprise then that slash fiction authors find little investment in the canonical ‘foregone conclusion’ male/female romance, and instead focus on developing an already existing wholesome bond between two men, by making romance a possibility. (Brandybuck 2004)

This breakdown of tropes employed by a film focused on a heterosexual pairing, and examining if they are too gendered to be sufficiently employed in a slash fiction or queer context, thus forms the backbone of the exegesis detailing the conception of the creative artefact.

4.2 The Resistance Against Queerbaiting

Wild (2020, p. 255) defines the practice of queerbaiting as ‘the trope of two male characters having a close friendship that can be read as romantic, but never crosses that line’. The BBC television series *Sherlock* has been most notoriously associated with this phenomenon, because the chemistry between its leads hasn’t gone unnoticed, with over 40,000 works on AO3 centred around the pairing of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. Given our previous examination of why slash fiction authors prefer to develop an existing bond between two men (in this case, as opposed to the flimsy romance between Sherlock Holmes and Irene Adler—who the BBC show introduced as being a lesbian, no less), a male bonding dynamic that has been in popular culture for over 250 years is fair game. However, the blatant hinting by the show’s script and writers that the two may exhibit some interest in the other, but never following up on it, caused the show to be openly accused of queerbaiting by both reviewers (Romano 2017) and fans (booksblanketsandtea 2017).

The showrunners and its cast have often dismissed the notion of the characters getting together as absurd, leading fans to accuse them of queerbaiting based on previous statements they made that suggested otherwise; in a 2010 interview, show writer Mark Gatiss calls the relationship between Holmes and Watson ‘desperately unspoken’, and showrunner Steven Moffat went a step further opining that fans’ readings of their canon might cause the show to derail (Click & Brock 2016). Though there is no confirmed fifth season for the show and its leads have engaged themselves with other major work, fans still hold out hope that the pair will get together in a romantic context owing to the ‘disappointing’ conclusion of the fourth season—which still posited them in their nebulous platonic intimacy.

Ng (2017) demonstrates the importance of paratext and context in establishing why these queerbaiting accusations are made: in the case of *Sherlock*, as we have seen, author intent over the relationship of the lead pair was consistently unclear. This was coupled with some misleading promotional material for the fourth season suggesting Holmes would reveal a dark secret to his best friend, Watson—and that he was also in love with someone. For queer individuals within the audience, especially, this kind of queerbaiting might be viewed as a

form of symbolic violence (Floegel & Costello 2019), denying them a chance to see a romance like theirs on screen; and writing fanfiction is a way to consume this largely heteronormative media in a more satisfying manner (Ng 2017). Thus, the push to write slash fiction centred around Holmes and Watson—or any other pairing in any other media of two same-sex individuals with a deeply close bond—can be viewed as another form of course correction, to counteract the suggestion that queer identities cannot be represented in the mainstream (Wild 2020). Roland Barthes (1967) in his famous manifesto repeatedly states that author intent becomes irrelevant once the reader begins to read and draw their own conclusions; the reader is the consumer, and fills in any gaps in storytelling with their own logical conclusions—and we can infer a minority reader would employ this same principle to fill in gaps in media left by not seeing characters that are the same as them. The art of writing slash fiction is thus a way to retaliate against queerbaiting, to grant power back to the reader over an author’s ambiguous intent and lack of representation—an author who is often straight, white or male, the opposite of the average fanfiction writer (Fiesler 2019).

There is plenty of existing research on slash fiction on its own, centred around the reasons for both its popularity and denigration. Not enough investigation has been conducted on its potential as a subversive writing device—mostly because the practice of writing slash fiction is still perceived as leisure done for cheap laughs (Wild 2020)—but there are reasons behind its popularity in female- and queer-dominated online spaces, owing to the dissatisfaction of these individuals over their representation in the mainstream. As a queer individual myself, it is thus clear that my contribution to this research would be to attempt this subversion based on these concerns other fanfiction writers have expressed; to justify readers who aim to highlight gaps in media by writing slash fiction. This also justified my methodology of choice being a practice-based autoethnography.

4.3 Queer Theory, Contemporary Literature, and Slash Fiction

The idea of ‘queering’ literature in order to form a more comprehensible or relatable version of author intent is not new, and has been explored previously by several independent queer theorists. According to Adair (2002), queer theory ‘developed as an aesthetico-ethical practice that made use of reading and writing’, and hence creative writing that is informed by

queer theory can be used to investigate ethics of the self in the Foucaultian manner. Baker (2015) further substantiates this argument by saying: ‘The writing of queer subjectivities into literature is not seen as a reflection of a writer’s identity... rather as a deliberate inscription and dissemination of non-normative discursive subjectivities’. Esteemed gender and queer theory scholar Judith Butler (2004) maintains that subjectivity and performative research—and thus creative writing—is dynamic and reflective, and via this reflection can undo a prior conception of who one is. In the context of queer theory, this process of undoing subjectivities via texts is an act of disrupting heteronormativity. In her 1993 essay *Queer and Now*, prominent queer theory scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says, ‘the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. ... The demands on both the text and the reader from so intent an attachment can be multiple, even paradoxical.’ The statement is reflected in modern-day fans who attach themselves to a bond between two same-sex characters in the hope it may lead to a romance, and as illustrated by the case of *Sherlock*, become disappointed when that hope remains unfulfilled—and thus, turn to writing slash fiction as an act against the foregone, heteronormative conclusion.

But what makes the heteronormative nature of male bonding a foregone conclusion? It could be because heterosexual tropes and systems, such as heterosexual marriage, are so steeped in society that this ‘obligatory heterosexuality’ is a by-product of systems largely built and dominated by male kinship, thus making the oppression of homosexuality a product of the same patriarchy that oppresses women (Rubin, 1975). With that in mind, the same language that subordinates women can be used to erase homosexual desire from literature, and misogynist writing is thus circulated by this institutionalised heterosexuality to deny queer identities the same visibility (Wittig, 1980). Rubin further argues that these arrangements of genders still hold true for writers depicting social relationships between two men.

In a particularly interesting case study in her landmark work *Between Men*, Sedgwick (1985, p. 29–47) uses Shakespeare’s Sonnets as a means to further explore this idea. Sonnets 1–126 are typically thought to be addressed to a man; one the poet describes as a ‘fair youth’, which he pits against a ‘dark lady’ who is seemingly the object of both their affections. In Sonnet

42, however, the poet laments that the fair youth loving the woman pains him far more than the woman loving another:

‘That thou hast her, it is not all my grief,
And yet it may be said I loved her dearly;
That she hath thee, is of my wailing chief,
A loss in love that touches me more nearly.
Loving offenders, thus I will excuse ye:
Thou dost love her, because thou know’st I love her;
And for my sake even so doth she abuse me,
Suffering my friend for my sake to approve her. ...’

Throughout these Sonnets, Sedgwick notes that the dark lady is not given as much consciousness more than that of being a divider between the poet and the fair youth: ‘... within the world sketched in these Sonnets, there is not an equal opposition or a choice posited between two such institutions as homosexuality and heterosexuality. The Sonnets present a male-male love that... is set firmly within a structure of institutionalised social relations that are carried out via women: marriage, name, family, loyalty to progenitors and to posterity, all depend on the youth’s making a particular use of women that is not, in the abstract, seen as opposing, denying, or detracting from his bond to the speaker.’ Even if the relationship between the poet and the fair youth were to be interpreted as homosexual, it would still have to function as a result of rules set by a male-dominated social structure.

One then returns to the parallel of modern-day slash fiction, where writers fixating on the bonds established between two male characters—often also written by men—is a result of the viable female lead either being non-existent or merely reduced to a ‘love interest’ rather like Shakespeare’s dark lady, without any agency to establish why her bond with the male lead is a good thing, as opposed to that of him and his male best friend, the fair youth. And given fanfiction’s use as a tool to subvert patriarchal gender norms, it thus becomes easier for writers to interpret these men’s homosocial relationship as a homosexual one.

Lothian, Busse, and Reid have surveyed that slash fiction writers and readers need not necessarily be queer to participate in writing and reading it; rather they need merely have an interest in exploring queer identity, in challenging societal discourse of gender and sexuality

that is often put into practice in mainstream writing. The first half of this literature review has examined this in detail; that with fanfiction being a space where individuals of all kinds can create media without profiting financially from it, they can then use it to challenge and resist against ideas in popular media and adapt it to their own (Penley 1992).

Queer theorists have debated these ideas since the 1970s, when homosexuality began to be viewed less as a form of extremism and more as a social and cultural ideology, put to the forefront by Michael Foucault's ground-breaking *History of Sexuality* (1978). Foucault speaks extensively on the 'queering of the self' to remake oneself towards an artistic ideal: 'who one is... emerges out of the problems with which one struggles.' He speaks about challenging the dichotomy of sex and power with subversive language: 'If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom.' This harkens back to Rubin and Wittig's earlier arguments about the oppression of homosexuality being a consequence of patriarchal laws; and by bending the language used to describe sexual identity, one is directly placing themselves outside of the realm of compulsory heterosexuality.

In the Foucaultian model of discourse, subjectivity is key, and insists that the ethics of the self are informed by the texts that one reads and writes; because the discourse on sex and sexuality, he argues, is not singular but a multiplicity of discourses produced by various institutions in world history operating on their own fixed ideas of sexual identity. Butler (1990, p. 17) challenges this by stating that because these subversive gender identities fail to conform to the intellectual domain, they are viewed as developmental failures within the heterosexual matrix—however, their very presence substantiates the need to re-examine this matrix and throw it into disorder. Could this argument be applied to the fanfiction writers we have discussed previously, who choose this outlet as a means to challenge common heteronormative and gendered discourse by queering the world around them? (Floegel 2020)

To conclude: by queering a text, as slash fiction and in turn this thesis aims to do, we establish that the heteronormative ideals that dictate the creation of mainstream literature are fictional and created purely out of societal discourse; and that texts are fluid and amorphous,

allowing for the accommodation of all identities and subjectivities (Baker 2011). Writers of slash fiction often rely on subtext between characters—when ‘the specific content of a particular text intersects with a certain queerness’ (Willis 2007), and that this queerness arises by not limiting storytelling or story tropes to societally generated gender discourse.

5. Autoethnography

5.1 Introduction: Film Summary and Replacement Leads

The film is *A Christmas Kiss* (2011). My approach was to go in completely blind, knowing nothing about the plot or its leads—simply on the recommendation of a friend who described the story as ‘ridiculously heterosexual’—and note down significant plot points as cliff note summaries that may or may not feature exactly as is in the fanfiction piece.

As previously mentioned, the fanfiction piece will replace the leads of this plot with two characters from the *Pokemon* video game franchise, Steven Stone and Wallace from the Ruby/Sapphire/Emerald and Omega Ruby/Alpha Sapphire iterations. Their popularity as a pairing is based on their closeness in canon; Steven is the Champion of his region in the games, while Wallace is his closest ally during the conflict that takes place—he trusts him enough to hand over his Champion title to Wallace in the Emerald version. Their chemistry and numerous interactions that are laden with equal amounts of playfulness and deep understanding as friends, have often led fans—myself included—to theorise there is something more between the two men.

5.2 Plot Breakdown

- Our female protagonist is Wendy, an interior designer in Boston who we learn had a previous job as a stage designer for theatre sets. According to her, her interior design career is thriving, but this doesn’t seem to please her friends, who claim it’s made her serious and dull.
- It should be noted we’ve already checked off two overused character tropes by now: Wendy as the protagonist is rather plain in her looks and dress sense, possibly to make her appear ‘relatable’ to the audience; her friend Tressa, who happens to be a Black woman, speaks in nothing but sassy one-liners and provides her white friend ‘advice’ on how to live life. The tired, tropey representation of POC in romance movies is outside the scope of this thesis, however.

- Her friends convince her to ‘glam up’ for a night on the town, but first she needs to head to her boss’s penthouse to fix the heating. Said boss, Miss Hall, is continually referred to as a ‘control freak’, despite being one of Boston’s premier interior designers.
- On her way back in the elevator, our male protagonist enters midway, whose name we don’t know yet. He’s mildly curious about her glamorous appearance, but suddenly the elevator begins malfunctioning—a bit too suspicious and convenient for a building with a swanky penthouse—and they conveniently grab onto each other for balance as it jerks this way and that.
- And the crux of this story, and the most bizarre element, happens here: after holding onto each other for far too long, and staring into each other’s eyes, they kiss. For *absolutely no reason whatsoever*. It should be reinstated that they have known each other for all of twenty seconds. And the film hasn’t even reached the six-minute mark.

Given the nature of my thesis and its aims, this is the point where I’m questioning: was this the kind of scene that’s written out purely because a (cisgender) man and a (cisgender) woman are involved despite them being total strangers? Will we ever get to a point where we can write two men or two women locking eyes and randomly kissing in an elevator and have it normalised on family broadcast?

- The elevator finally stops malfunctioning and opens to a group of carollers, at which point they finally break their (extremely long) kiss and Wendy flees in the confusion. Male protagonist tries looking for her in the lobby, but he’s lost her.
- A few scenes later we’re introduced to her boss Miss Hall, who is the well-dressed and domineering embodiment of the Bossy Career Woman trope. She orders Wendy to be her housemaid for the day because her ‘travelling boyfriend’ Adam is here for the holidays, and she aims to ‘seal the engagement deal’ with him over a lunch date.
- In an incredibly predictable plot twist, Adam the boyfriend is the same guy from the elevator kiss. And he does not at all recognise Wendy due to her lack of glam makeup.
- This is the setup established; the premise follows Adam requesting Hall to decorate his home for a Christmas party for his theatre donors, and Wendy is asked to assist—but after an accident leaves Hall out of commission, Wendy is left in charge and thus

gets closer to Adam in the process, and romance blooms; but pursuing it could put Wendy at risk of losing her job.

5.3 Exegesis: Developing the Creative Artefact

This plot setup is a pretty clear example of the ‘foregone conclusion’ romance device talked about in the literature review, except rather than it being the endgame as it is traditionally, it is established in the very beginning. So, by keeping the same setup intact and ‘queering’ it—replacing the spontaneous kiss as between two men—we are already challenging the rules of the heterosexual matrix, that dictate gender is a driving force in the establishment of a romance. (Katyal 2006, p. 486)

There were two important elements I wanted to establish at the very beginning. The first was that by replacing the male lead with Steven—and substituting Miss Hall with Courtney, a villainous female character from the games—I effectively write him as a bisexual man; a fact that is later explicitly confirmed in the text. This is done for several reasons; the most pressing being there are still very few openly bisexual characters in mainstream media (GLAAD 2020). Bisexuality as an identity itself suffers from invisibility and depiction in a stereotypical fashion; bisexuals are often accused of not ‘picking a side’ of homosexuality or heterosexuality, or accessing the ‘privileges’ both sides provide by passing for either one (Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell 2009, p. 300). Judith Butler, in her ground-breaking work *Gender Trouble* (p. 31–32) argues that these restricted definitions of homosexuality as well as bisexuality only arise due to the matrix of heterosexuality enforcing a gender identity to conform to; and so by arising above these predetermined notions of gender, we allow a place for bisexual identities in the norm. Steven’s internal conflict between the two objects of his affection thus does not arise from them merely being a woman and a man, gender identities that are culturally constructed as opposites (Rust 2000) but because of the characteristics that had drawn him to each of them that were independent of gender:

Because he knew her (Courtney) well, and he knew that she did everything for a reason. There was a time he could confidently say that was an attractive quality—but he was starting to have his doubts. But he couldn’t say that here. (Chapter 3)

But more importantly, he already knew Wallace had a knack for infusing a scene with life and detail—and it had touched him through his designs, and here it was again, letting him experience so many little things about the city he'd missed out on while constantly being on the move. (Chapter 4)

It is also for these reasons that Wallace's sexuality is left open to interpretation to the reader; he could be gay or bisexual, but his sexuality isn't as important as his purpose to fulfill the role of replacing the female lead—with an archetype that hinges less on the use of the female lead's gender to achieve a romantic endgame, but rather on his establishment of a fully-fledged bond of friendship with the other man, which puts them on equal footing and subsequently makes for a more balanced, believable romance (Kustritz 2003, p. 377) despite the setup of the impulse kiss in the elevator. The reason this is the primary aim of slash fiction and why it is so successful is because female characters are either conventionally written as supporters with little to no development, or if they are the lead, they are merely used as vehicles for romance, with no agency or personality beyond their attraction to the male lead (Green, Jenkins & Jenkins 1998). Often with romantic dramas whose sole story is about the romance and often marketed to a female audience, giving the female lead a blank slate can be seen as a way for said audience to insert themselves into their romantic fantasy with the male lead. But this leads us back to the issue of making the romance hinge solely on the genders of the two leads; that if she is a woman, her role is merely that of a conduit in establishing a relationship with a man, and only the man thus benefits from this heterosexual framework (Sedgwick 1985, p. 26). This was the second important element I needed to establish at the beginning; that Wallace as a lead had a discernible personality, one that proved vital in drawing Steven to him in the initial setup and not merely a compulsory 'femininity':

“Going for the uh, Christmas tree look?”

Wallace couldn't help snickering. “You can say I'm very tall, it's alright.”

“No, no, that's uh, not quite what I meant,” the other man laughed, the pink in his cheeks more prominent now. It was rather adorable. “If I had to guess you were inspired by either the fairy lights or the angel.”

“Well,” Wallace winked, tilting his head, “which one would you like it to be?”

...

He decided to test the waters and find out. “Well, I think we have our answer,” he grinned, keeping a gentle yet firm hold on the man—the elevator was still lurching slightly, but not as dangerously, and the lights were still flickering ominously. “If we survive this, just call me the angel.”

“Well—if we don’t, then you’d be the angel who takes me to heaven,” the man chuckled, before turning pink and biting his lip, as if wondering where he found the bravery for such a statement. But Wallace appreciated it; so much so that he’d unexpectedly felt his heart flutter, both from the returned flirtation and the unbroken gaze of those blue eyes on him. (Chapter 1)

These were the frameworks upon which the first chapter, covering the initial setup detailed in section 5.2, was formulated and published on the Archive of Our Own. Given the nature of the original premise’s reliance on compulsory heterosexuality to allow the rest of the story to progress, it was then essential to understand what an audience would make of the same premise being rewritten in a homosexual context, and whether they were invested in how the story would play out. Specifically, I required the opinions of an audience that was queer and/or female, as they comprise the vast majority of those creating and consuming slash fiction (Lothian, Busse & Reid 2007) for the reasons of dissatisfaction previously highlighted.

I facilitated the assistance of two respondents by sending them the first draft of Chapter 1 along with a few questions to answer after reading. Both identify as bisexual, female-presenting non-binary individuals; one hails from the United States (AO3 pseudonym: apharine), and the other from Mexico (AO3 pseudonym: lightninghikari). The questions posed to my respondents were as follows:

1. Have you watched any Hallmark Christmas movies before/any equivalent from your country with a typical Christmas romance with a hetero couple in the lead? If yes, do you mind them or would you prefer seeing more of something like this?
2. In the original film, Wallace’s place is taken up by the female lead—who does not have nearly as much confidence and poise as he does. Do you think the substitution worked better? Would you not mind if the film still had a hetero pairing, but the female lead had the characteristics Wallace shows here? Conversely, would you prefer if within the hetero pairing, the male lead does not have an overwhelmingly masculine presence but is instead shy and soft-spoken like Steven is?
3. To reflect on the previous question: do you think traditional romance movies are also limited by traditional gender roles, and having gay pairings erases that limitation? (yes/no, can detail if you want)
4. What did you think of the men’s introduction to each other? Did their shared moment feel organic? Do you think it would still translate well on screen?
5. Finally, these questions are only for the first chapter, but did it invest you enough to want to follow forthcoming chapters if/when they are uploaded? If yes, is it because of your investment in the pairing, the quality of the writing, or both?

The individual answers to the questions in full can be found in appendix A of this thesis; there were some insights that were common to both individuals, whereas some that were spotted by either one but marked itself as a key takeaway—all of which would eventually go on to influence the development of the rest of the creative artefact. Based off the final draft of the first chapter, the standout insights from the audience response were as follows:

- The inversion of the dominant/submissive dynamic that is typically assigned to male and female leads can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, giving the female lead—or Wallace, in this case—a more dominant personality and agency makes them a more active participant in the plot, and does not lead to blurry lines of consent such as the case of the elevator kiss (apharine). On the other hand, still retaining these archetypes could lead to the unfortunate coding of a homosexual relationship in which there is still a ‘man’ and ‘woman’ present dictated by gendered notions of personality (lightninghikari).
- It was evident to both respondents that the original plot served to pit two women against each other—the mild-mannered, more ‘desirable’ protagonist, versus the domineering, career-minded boss, and this is further reflected in the script’s choice of a few misogynistic lines (“*Plain girls like you always think like this!*”). The choice of replacing the female lead with a man, therefore, was a way to take traditional gender roles out of the equation (apharine) and allow the story to take a more creative direction without Courtney seeing Wallace as a threat (lightninghikari).
- Both respondents definitely felt the idea of the setup was simultaneously cheesy and jaded, but that its build-up was organic enough to warrant a follow-up storyline and romance (lightninghikari).
- Both respondents expressed investment in following the story’s subsequent updates, owing to both the quality of the writing as well as their existing interest in the canon characters of Steven and Wallace as a pairing. This was an outcome I anticipated, and the reason why I chose slash fiction as the vehicle for this investigation—it utilises existing interest in a well-established bond between these two men to subvert traditional storytelling norms for no additional financial gain.

The most surprising insight gleaned from these responses was the onus on Steven's role as replacing the male lead. The decision to invert the dominant/submissive dynamic was made keeping the characters' canon personalities in the games in mind: Wallace is shown to be flamboyant and witty, trademark of his artist persona, whereas Steven is depicted as more formal and mild-mannered, owing to his upper-class background. Diverting radically from characters' canon personalities—out of character or 'OOC' works—is often seen as taboo in fanfiction writer circles, and to some readers as well; both respondents' interest arose specifically from the dynamic the two provided from the interaction of their canon personalities. However, there was concern from both parties that allowing Steven to retain his shy and soft-spoken introduction might deprive him of agency as the story progresses, essentially making him suffer from the same problems the female lead normally does.

Further examination of the original plot revealed that the male lead actually has lesser agency than I originally assumed. There is a subplot where Wendy creates the interior designs for Adam's party based off his prized copy of *A Christmas Carol*, which has sentimental value to him; however, Hall claims the designs as hers and wins Adam's favour while blackmailing Wendy not to reveal the real creator of the designs. Adam does not realise the truth about the designs until the very end, by which time he's already trapped in a false engagement.

The male lead's role here is essentially to pick the more 'desirable' woman by letting their opposing notions of femininity influence him; he does not allow himself to work out the truth simply by looking at their differing creative output in the designs. This makes him a rather unremarkable character—but as observed in the Mary Sue analysis in section 4.1, there is no impetus on male characters to be remarkable; traced as far back to George Eliot (1856) who in her essay elaborates on how male characters simply exist to be dazzled by the starring heroine—the essence of the majority of modern-day campy romance movies. These romances, therefore, actually act on the reverse of Sedgwick and Rubin's discourse of women merely being a conduit in homosocial relationships between men, but the agency they give to the female lead(s) is not necessarily positive; this scenario, specifically, pits the two women against each other using ideals of femininity perpetrated by the same patriarchal heterosexual matrix that oppresses them, and subsequently oppresses homosexuality (see 4.3).

By giving Steven more agency as the plot develops, we not only make him a more interesting and likeable character, but achieve several radical departures from this framework of compulsory heterosexuality. We establish that a soft-spoken, shy manner is a trait not limited to women and outside of the patriarchal narrative of how a man should act (Katyal 2006, p. 483); and we put him on an equal footing with Wallace in his own investment in the romance, by making him realise the truth about the designs earlier, and thus letting it guide his romantic views of his fellow man:

Now, Steven wasn't stupid. He could see the difference between the carefully-crafted Photoshop concepts and the equally carefully-crafted crayon sketches as clear as day; and he knew the latter could not have possibly come from Courtney's hand—if he had to guess, they were from her assistant. But he'd have to find a way to thank Wallace on his own; there had to be some reason Courtney wasn't giving him the credit. (Chapter 3)

"I'm, uh—I'm glad you like it," he finally coughed out. "I really did put a lot of thought into it."

The words had slipped out completely by accident, and Wallace immediately considered taking them back—after all, he was sure the assumption was that these were still Courtney's designs. And if he let the cat out of the bag, he was sure to be in hot water with his boss.

But to his surprise, Steven turned towards him without a trace of wonder—in fact, he was smiling, almost bashfully.

"Yeah. I know you did." (Chapter 4)

"I know those weren't really your designs." At this, her jaw dropped open, and Steven grew bold enough to stand up. "I know you stole the credit, and I also know that you don't know as much about me as you claim to, and I can prove that right now. Tell me. Whose copy of *A Christmas Carol* was this whole design based on?"

"Oh, you know," she scoffed, shaking her head. "Your grandma's, or someone."

"It was my mother's." (Chapter 5)

Chapter 5 is significant as it marks where Steven finally resolves his internal conflict by admitting to Courtney his realisation that her wealth and social status were not what he truly wanted in life, despite it making them a 'perfect match' for each other. As Rubin (1975, p. 178–179) repeatedly states, sex and 'exchanging' power go hand in hand, and desirable feminine virtues are used as 'tradeable' values that justify a good marriage. Therefore, where the original film focused on the differences between the two women's femininity, I instead used Courtney's (and Hall's) justifications of marrying within your social class as a play on the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality that Steven is otherwise caught within:

“I don’t think you ever told me how you two met.”

This brought more of a smile to Courtney’s face, though it was tinged with smugness. “It was at a fundraiser party in Slateport. I was told by a mutual friend he’d be there, and so I went, hoping we’d get off on the right foot, and we did.”

“Interesting.” He (Wallace) tapped his chin thoughtfully. “So you knew of him, but you didn’t know him.”

“Alright, calm down, Shakespeare,” she deadpanned. “I knew enough to know that I had an interest in him; that he was single, well connected, his lifestyle complemented mine—and I was attracted to him, of course. That seems enough for a first impression, no?”

“Well, yes, but—do you love him?”

“Of course I love him!” She laughed dismissively, her eyes shining. “He’s handsome, intelligent, well-read, charming... comes from money, stands on the same footing with me as far as looks and ambitions are concerned... honestly, there’s nothing more one could ask for.” (Chapter 2)

“Yes, we do make the perfect couple, don’t we? That’s what it looks like from the outside to everyone in every single event we go to. Perfectly good-looking, perfectly titled, perfectly put together couple. What a perfect husband and wife they’d make. And I’m sure that’s what you’ve told everybody, too, and what you’ll tell everyone at the party. You probably got press on it too, now that I think about it. Because that’s how you’ve always done things, Courtney. You want them to be perfect—for you.”

“I don’t understand,” she stammered. “You’ve never had a problem until now. You were of the opinion that you loved me.”

“Was I? You know, maybe I was, a long time ago. I did like your style, I did like the way you did things. But maybe I liked them at the time because it was the only thing I knew.” He took a deep breath, balling his fists at his sides. “But I’m not doing that anymore. I’m done with hiding, and I’m done holding myself down because I need to look perfect. Fuck perfect.” He exhaled. “You know when I said I planned to return the ring? I realise now that I should’ve never bought it in the first place.” (Chapter 5)

The last excerpt is particularly pivotal—because it was always going to be tricky to tackle how an openly bisexual character would reject a love interest of one sex for one of the opposite sex, without making it look like they were being forced to ‘choose’ between sexes. By establishing the heterosexual matrix as one defined by societal power, rather than sexual power, we allow Steven to make a choice depending on his own personal agency and feelings; that his ‘coming out’ is not merely by virtue of his bisexuality being a phase (Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell 2009, p. 307).

Lastly, we look to the reason slash fiction provides an effective vehicle for exploring and developing these concepts—a phenomenon Floegel (2020) defines as ‘information world-queering’: that is, the act of slash fiction writers forming unique worlds based on queering

interpretations of media. This may include writing queer pairings without predatory stereotypes or tragic endings (Gomillion & Giuliano 2011, p. 340) or worlds in which everyone is queer and there is no backlash (Floegel 2020, p. 740). I make use of the latter, by introducing more explicitly queer pairings within the otherwise heterosexual or unspecified supporting cast: the two women who are the original female lead's roommates are now girlfriends, and the mentor character to the two leads (changed from a janitor to a director to remove another tired stereotype) is now a (significantly older) queer man. All of these characters significantly influence the lead pair's decisions in the original; and by queering their supporting narrative, they further establish an environment of safe queerness for Steven and Wallace to act on their desires, as a stark contrast to the confines of compulsory heterosexuality.

"Maybe that's a sign," Flannery piped up. "That there really was a spark in that mystery kiss. That the universe decided to let you have a moment for once!"

"Flanny, when you put it that way, you make it sound like the only time he'll have a moment is with a guy he's probably never gonna see again in his life," her girlfriend (Winona) snorted, patting Wallace on the back.

"Sorry, dude. You're gonna die alone."

"Hey, I could've died in that elevator. But I didn't, and I got an incredible kiss out of it, so maybe Flanny's right," Wallace shot back, sipping on his gin and tonic satisfied. "Sure, I'll probably never see the guy again. But if something's meant to happen, who knows? He'll find me." (Chapter 1)

Steven smiled warmly, the contemplation from earlier seeping into his expression. "Although I can't help wondering... and I feel like you're the best person to ask. With you and Kabu... how did you know he was the one?"

"Well, I think everyone here is aware of my sordid history with men and women at this point," Juan chuckled, tilting his head. "But I'd known Kabu for a long while, and through all of that, he was always there, and we got closer as friends do... and one day, we kissed, and it all came to a head. Maybe not quite fireworks, but it was certainly a spark." He smiled as he reminisced, absentmindedly twisting his wedding band. "You know, we've been together for so long now some of our memories have started to blend. But I'll never forget that kiss. That was what made those memories happen. And his kisses still have the same spark."

"That's beautiful," the younger man echoed, feeling a tear prick at his eye. "Hopefully I get to feeling something like that with someone." (Chapter 2)

The act of information world-queering is that of creating an idealised world; one which slash fiction writers may use as a means of escapism. But this could be applied to every single plot change detailed here: idealised notions of behaviour outside the gender binary that is dictated

by heterosexual and patriarchal regimes (Butler 1990, p. 31–32), removing the imbalance between gender dynamics, a reinforced and non-stereotypical perception of bisexuality, and a romance that is built on equality and friendship rather than societal notions of perfection and compulsory heterosexuality. In applying these guiding principles of slash fiction, however, it is not just the story that has benefitted but the characters—forming them into individuals with agency that choose who they love, rather than that choice being made by the plot, and whose dynamic gets the audience invested in seeing their progress.

A final, perhaps cheeky addendum: as a method of introducing queer subtext between the two men and a tribute to the queer theorists that shaped this work, I reference Sedgwick’s case study on Shakespeare’s allusions to homosexuality as explored in 4.3 in their first proper conversation:

He (Wallace) chuckled, changing his tone to a dramatic recital. *“Two loves I have of comfort and despair, which like two spirits do suggest me still...”*

To his surprise, Steven paused on the gravel as his eyebrows shot up in recognition, and he grinned as he continued the sonnet for him. *“The better angel is a man right fair, the worser spirit is a woman coloured ill.”* “Wow. You know your Shakespeare,” Wallace grinned back, impressed. “We had the Sonnets drilled into our heads every Autumn Showcase, but I had to admit I began to find them very fascinating.”

“They are, rather. It’s quite a thrill going through the layers and layers of subtext. On that note,” Steven shot him an inquisitive wink, “what do you think. Shakespeare, gay or bi icon?”

“Well, going by the subtext in that sonnet alone, he didn’t seem to have a very high opinion of women as a romanceable option, so, gay. Flamingly so.”

“You make a good point. I guess I know what I’ll be reading tonight.” (Chapter 2)

6. Conclusion

While this research does have its limitations, such as the small audience sample size and the limited scope to explore how multiple, varied LGBTQ+ identities would work in a traditional romance context, it does provide the possibility for future research in that field. More importantly, it highlights slash fiction as a legitimate, viable form of literature that allows writers—especially young, queer writers—who are dissatisfied with traditional, heterosexually-dictated romance narratives to rewrite them in a manner that is more relatable to them and reflects the real-life composition of the twenty-first century world we live in; where queer people do have thriving, wholesome love stories, but they are yet to translate on screen in a sufficient capacity. Slash fiction has long been derided as a form of frivolous writing only women partake in, or as merely being associated with smut; and while the time for gay sex to be regarded as taboo should long be past, so should the stigma against slash fiction, as it boasts a wealth of genuinely enjoyable family-friendly stories and characters.

The aim of this research, henceforth, was to use queer theory to unlock what the formula was behind slash fiction's radical success, and if those principles could be utilised to create a story that could work in the mainstream. The findings largely highlighted upon the problems with traditional romance narratives that make them so limiting to feature homosexual relationships; that the use of gender as a sanction, as Butler puts it, causes heterosexual relationships to be skewed along a singular, gendered axis—making a relationship between two characters of the opposite sex in media a foregone conclusion rather than a justified end—and causes homosexual relationships to not exist at all. Slash fiction effectively subverts this by taking a relationship between two characters of the same sex that the original creators have put far more investment into than the canonical romance, and explores if the mutual understanding and equal footing between them could effectively lead to something more.

While eminent queer theorists have already spoken in volumes about the effects of gendered structures on homosexual tendencies, a significant limitation I faced while analysing their texts for insights was a lack of approach or understanding of bisexuality; neither Butler nor Foucault mention it explicitly. However, their discourse on sexual identity politics (Callis, p. 221–222) and gender being performative (p. 226–227) respectively can easily be interpreted

as speaking to a bisexual identity that does not conform to gendered structures, and allows for a bisexual writer such as myself to introduce an openly bisexual character as a lead, and increase nuance in the romance. This could subsequently be extended to characters of varying identities—including transgender and asexual characters—to be active participants in what is considered a traditional ‘cheesy’ romance; by making the catalyst for the romance various external factors that are independent of gender, that allow for audience investment in the characters rather than viewing the romance as a foregone conclusion.

It is my hope, therefore, that writers looking to write queer characters and romances but aren’t necessarily queer themselves could draw upon these conclusions to forge a story that respects its queer characters and dynamics, without allowing themselves to fall into the easy trap of compulsory heterosexuality; and I point them towards the ideals behind slash fiction as a viable place to start.

References

Adair, D 2002, ‘‘Queer Theory’’: Intellectual and ethical milieux of 1990s sexual dissidence,’ PhD thesis, Griffith University.

Bacon-Smith, C 1991, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, University of Pennsylvania Press.

Baker, D J 2011, ‘Queering practice-led research: Subjectivity, creative practice and performative research’, *Creative Industries Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1.

Baker, D J 2015, ‘Writing and reading queerly: Foucault’s aesthetics of existence and queer selfmaking’, *TEXT Special Issue*, vol. 31.

Barthes, R 1967, *The Death of the Author*.

Booksblanketsandtea (2017), ‘Heteronormativity and Queerbaiting in BBC’s Sherlock’, *Archive of Our Own*, viewed 12 June 2021, <<https://archiveofourown.org/works/13001748>>.

Brandybuck, C 2004, *Slash Fanfiction: A Personal Essay*, *Fanfic Symposium*, viewed 7 June 2021, <<https://trickster.org/symposium/symp158.html>>.

Butler, J 1990, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, USA.

Butler, J 2004, *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, New York, USA.

Callis, A S 2009, ‘Playing with Butler and Foucault: Bisexuality and Queer Theory’, *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 213–233.

Chander, A & Sunder, M 2007, ‘Everyone's a Superhero: A Cultural Theory of “Mary Sue” Fan Fiction as Fair Use’, *California Law Review*, vol. 95, no. 2, pp. 597–626.

Chaney, K & Liebler, R 2006, 'Me, myself, and I: Fan fiction and the art of self-insertion', *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture*, vol. 31, pp. 52–57.

Click, M A & Brock, N 2016, 'Marking the Line Between Producers and Fans: Representations of Fannish-ness in Doctor Who and Sherlock', in *Seeing Fans: Representation of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York.

de Lauretis, T 1991, 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities, differences', *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. iii–xviii.

Dommu, R 2018, *How Teenage Girls Think Gay Men Have Sex, According to Fanfiction*, Out Magazine, viewed 17 April 2021, <<https://www.out.com/news-opinion/2018/2/10/how-teenage-girls-think-gay-men-have-sex-according-fan-fiction>>.

Duncan, M 2004, 'Autoethnography: Critical appreciation of an emerging art', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 3, no. 4.

Eliot, G 1856, *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*.

Ellis, C, Adams, T E, & Bochner, A P 2011, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 12, no. 1.

Erickson-Schroth, L & Mitchell, J 2009, 'Queering Queer Theory or Why Bisexuality Matters', *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 297–315.

Fiesler, C 2019, 'Why Archive of Our Own's Surprise Hugo Nomination Is Such a Big Deal', *Slate*, viewed 12 June 2021, <<https://slate.com/technology/2019/04/archive-of-our-own-fan-fiction-2019-hugo-nomination.html>>.

Floegel, D & Costello, K 2019, 'Entertainment media and the information practices of queer individuals', *Library and Information Science Research*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp 31–38.

Floegel, D 2020, “‘Write the story you want to read’”: world-queering through slash fanfiction creation’, *Journal of Documentation*, vol. 76, no. 4, pp. 785–805.

Foucault, M 1978, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1, Random House, New York, USA.

GLAAD 2020, *Studio Responsibility Index*, viewed 20 November 2020, <<https://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/GLAAD%202020%20Studio%20Responsibility%20Index.pdf>>

Gomillion, S C & Giuliano, T A 2011, ‘The Influence of Media Role Models on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity’, *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 58, no. 3, pp. 330–354.

Green, S, Jenkins, C, & Jenkins, H 1998, “‘Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking’”: Selections from The Terra Nostra Underground and Strange Bedfellows, *Theorizing Fandom*, vol. 9.

Jagose, A 1996, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, New York University Press, New York, USA.

Jenkins, H 2012, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa, United States.

Katyal, S K 2006, ‘Performance, Property, and the Slashing of Gender in Fan Fiction’, *Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law*, vol. 14, issue 3, pp. 461–518.

Krauth, N 2011, ‘Evolution of the exegesis: the radical trajectory of the creative writing doctorate in Australia’, *TEXT*, vol. 15, no. 1.

Kustritz, A 2003, *Slashing the Romance Narrative*, *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 26, pp. 371–372.

Leavenworth, M L 2015, ‘The Paratext of Fan Fiction’, *Narrative*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 40-60.

Lothian A, Busse K & Reid R A 2007, ‘‘Yearning void and infinite potential’’: Online slash fandom as queer female space’, *English Language Notes*, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 103–111.

Milech, B H & Schilo, A 2004, ‘‘Exit Jesus’’: Relating the Exegesis and Creative/Production Components of a Research Thesis’, *TEXT Special Issue*, no. 3.

Niedderer, K & Roworth-Stokes, S 2007, ‘The Role and Use of Creative Practice in Research and Its Contribution to Knowledge’, *International Association of Societies of Design Research*.

Ng, E 2017, ‘Between text, paratext, and context: Queerbaiting and the contemporary media landscape’, in *Queer Female Fandom, Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 24.

Organization for Transformative Works 2007, *About Archive of Our Own*, Organization for Transformative Works, viewed 15 March 2021, <<https://archiveofourown.org/about>>.

Penley C, 1992, ‘Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture’, *Cultural Studies*, pp. 479.

Perry, G 2008, ‘The Non-Verbal and the Verbal: Expanding Awareness of Practice-Led Research in Creative Writing’, *The Creativity and Uncertainty Papers: The Refereed Proceedings of the 13th Conference of the Australian Association of Writing Programs*.

Pflieger, P 1999, ‘Too Good To Be True: 150 Years of Mary Sue’, presented at the American Culture Association conference, March 31, 1999, San Diego, CA.

Pugh, S 2005, *The Democratic Genre: Fanfiction in a Literary Context*, Seren.

Richardson, L 1994, ‘Writing: A method of enquiry’, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, pp. 516-529.

Romano, A 2013, 'Author Responds After Blogger Rips Book To Shreds—Literally', *The Daily Dot*, viewed 12 June 2021, < <https://www.dailydot.com/culture/anne-rice-pandora-review-backlash/>>.

Romano, A 2017, 'Sherlock season 4, episode 3: "The Final Problem" might be the series finale. If it is, it's a huge disappointment', *Vox*, viewed 12 June 2021, < <https://www.vox.com/2017/1/16/14279588/sherlock-finale-final-problem-review>>.

Rubin, G 1975, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex', in *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, Monthly Review Press, London.

Rust, P C R 2000, 'Bisexuality: A contemporary paradox for women', *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 56, pp. 205–221.

Sedgwick, E K 1985, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Columbia University Press.

Sedgwick, E K 1993, 'Queer and Now', from *Tendencies*, Duke University Press.

Skains, R L 2018, 'Creative Practice as Research: Discourse on Methodology', *Media Practice and Education*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 82–97.

Somogyi, V 2003, 'Complexity of Desire: Janeway/Chakotay Fan Fiction', *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*, vol. 25, issue 3-4, pp. 399–404.

Wild, N M 2020, 'The active defense of fanfiction writing: Sherlock fans' metatextual response', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 244–260.

Willis, I 2007, 'Slash as queer utopia', in *Queer Space: Centres and Peripheries*, at University of Technology, Sydney, pp. 1–6, viewed 12 November 2020, <<https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/413/>>.

Wittig, M 1980, 'The Straight Mind', *Feminist Issues*, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 108.

Appendix A: Audience Responses to Researcher Questions

A.1 User pseudonym: apharine (United States)

1. Yes, I watch Hallmark Christmas movies almost every year. Sometimes it's just because they're what happens to be on TV and there's nothing else good to watch, and sometimes it's because I actually think the movie itself is cute. Either way, I don't usually mind them! I do typically get a little tired with Hallmark movies eventually though because it doesn't reflect my own lived experiences, nor does it reflect the lived experiences of my real-life friend groups. Most Hallmark movies (at least the ones I've seen) are a white, young adult, cis het pairing. I'm white but I'm queer and nonbinary, and a lot of my friends are people of colour, also queer, and sometimes also nonbinary or trans (and therefore not cis). As a result I often feel disconnected from Hallmark movies after a time, because it just doesn't reflect reality for me or the narratives I'm interested in seeing/hearing. Therefore, I would very much prefer for some queer narratives such as this fic to be turned into Hallmark movies!
2. In my opinion substituting Wallace in place of the original female lead does work better—again because it feels more relevant to my life and the stories I see around me, but also because Wallace's personality makes these situations *work*. I always find it odd when the female leads in Hallmark movies are essentially meant to be relatively mild-mannered women with no significant personality. I understand that they're probably meant to be that way on purpose to allow for a wide range of female members of an audience to project onto them, but it means that a lot of the story ends up feeling like it happens *to* them instead of them participating in the plot. It also makes some things feel preposterous in Hallmark movies—if a female lead is shown to be mild mannered, less poised, and overall with less agency, scenes like the elevator kiss lead to a loss of my suspension of my disbelief and/or can feel uncomfortable (where is the boundary of consent, for example, if a woman is being kissed by a stranger versus participating in the kissing?). I can continue to be immersed in the story and suspend my disbelief with a character like Wallace, however, because his personality is suited to the scene unfolding and the actions he's taking, and he's an active participant in his decisions.

I would not mind if the film had a hetero pairing but the female lead were imbued the personality traits shown by Wallace, because it would again feel more appropriate given the scenarios the female lead finds herself in and the actions she takes as a result. A female lead with this personality would be preferable to the original female lead as described. However, a queer story would still be my greatest preference, again for the sake of representation as mentioned above.

A male lead with a shy and soft-spoken presence similar to Steven can also be enjoyable! I think men who are quiet and less traditionally masculine are often under-represented in media, and very seldom is shyness or gentleness the defining traits of a male lead. Again, as long as he has agency in his decisions, I'd feel happy with seeing that. To me, the key difference between a shy, quiet male lead and a shy, quiet female lead is in how the female lead is handled—frequently the implication in Hallmark movies is that quietness, gentleness, and meekness are traits to be desired in women, which reinforces potentially harmful gender norms. The limited agency assigned to these leads also tends to feel extremely uncomfortable as a viewer in specific situations. Conversely, shy men are underrepresented and defy gender norms; as long as Steven were to be shy but still with agency, I would feel very happy with him as a male lead.

3. I think traditional romance are very limited by traditional gender roles. It's extremely hard for me to think of a single movie that does not involve some variation of "sweet, gentle woman meets strong, handsome guy", and ultimately, there's only so many ways that even the best scriptwriter can handle that situation. I can only think of a couple movies with a situation with the woman as what is traditionally ascribed as the "manic pixie dream girl"—a woman with strong agency, passion, high-energy, who knows what she wants and is often young and/or creative—and in both these movies, the main message was actually "don't love a person for what your idea of them, or what they can do for you, is—projecting onto someone instead of loving them for who they are leads to harm." Nevertheless, these messages are sometimes missed and they're sometimes ascribed as romance movies, so I'm mentioning them here. Either way, my point remains that we keep seeing the same thing over and over again, just

with whatever variations can be incorporated, and because of the limitations of traditional gender roles, both writers and audiences are essentially prevented from exploring the many other dynamics and situations that can arise from having characters with different personalities, sexualities, gender identities, etc.

4. I enjoyed the men's introduction to each other! I thought their spirited banter did a great job of setting up a fun dynamic, and perhaps because of this, I did feel like the scene was organic overall. There's a certain amount of cheesiness to having a first kiss moments after meeting, but it's exactly the vibe I would expect from a Hallmark movie, and I could absolutely see the entire scene translating well on screen.
5. Yes, I would absolutely want to follow forthcoming chapters as they are uploaded (and plan to do so, if possible). I am very interested in seeing how the unexpected conflict of Steven being Courtney's boyfriend, but Wallace being a little star struck with Steven, resolves. I'm already cheering for Wallace to get his 'moment' again and figure out a way to get Steven back in his arms! The quality of the writing and the dynamic of the pairing (as well as the dynamics of the characters surrounding the main pairing) are all what compels me to wish to read more. I believe to some extent both are inextricable from one another—a strong dynamic requires good quality writing, and quality writing tends to produce a good dynamic.

A.2 User pseudonym: lightninghikari (Mexico)

1. I'm from Mexico, so I didn't watch a lot of these films growing up other than Mickey Mouse movies which did feature romances with Minnie. Christmas here is more Catholic than secular so I didn't consume a lot of Christmas movies, but if I did I would've definitely liked to see more couples aside from the classical hetero one.
2. In my opinion, the substitution worked better because it made the plot twist more unpredictable to me. Had Wallace's character still remained a woman it would've played into the traditional media stereotype of pitting women against each other, and even though we don't know if Wallace is gay or bi it makes Courtney seem less of a threat to him overall until the plot twist.

Wallace himself embodies quite a few ‘feminine’ traits in canon so it’s not hard to extrapolate him onto the female lead, however if the female lead displayed more of his confidence and flamboyance rather than being a shy flat foil that is special only in the male lead’s eyes, I would definitely like her better.

As for the male lead, I do prefer when they’re not presented as overwhelmingly masculine, however in this case I feel Steven is trapped in another traditional cliché of a dominatrix-like female controlling him based on her moods, and the underdog ‘nice’ female lead slowly getting closer to him. So while it is nice to not have a ‘manly’ man in the lead, his gentle temper doesn’t save him from the classical hetero clichés of this particular plot, even when the other lead is a man.

3. I definitely feel romance movies are limited by gender roles—however the issue for me is that they portray only ONE type of heterosexuality. Which is why simply replacing the lead pair with a gay one does not always erase the issue—a common complaint with queer media (written by straight people) is that one member is always coded to be the ‘woman’ of the relationship so as long as those traditional frameworks are in place, it doesn’t solve the issue.
4. The moment doesn’t feel as organic because it lacks real life’s verisimilitude, but that doesn’t mean it wouldn’t work well on screen because film is a medium of escapism after all. But I should clarify, that opinion is purely personal to me because I’m quite jaded to the age we live in where random meetings in bars and one-night stands are all too common; so while the moment was still dreamy, I can see it happening as an everyday thing.
5. Like I stated earlier, I’m far more partial to my own Mexican Christmas traditions, but I would still keep reading this work since I’m a huge fan of the characters and pairing, and the writing was compelling. Yes, maybe the elevator moment was unrealistic, but the way in which it was depicted did convince me to abandon logic for a second and really believe that these two were fated for each other from the start. And that made the plot twist all the more impressive, so I would like to see where this goes!

Appendix B: Excerpt from the Creative Artefact, ‘The Angel in the Elevator’

This excerpt is lifted from the ending act of Chapter 3 of the fanfiction piece. Full text can be accessed at: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/31453718/chapters/77799008>

Steven wasn’t present to oversee decorations the next day—Courtney explained he was in another series of meetings and wouldn’t be present till the afternoon. But she’d still arrived prompt and early to make sure everything was in place as she wanted it—after all, this would be her house soon. Of that she was convinced, and let her little helpers know it.

“No, no, that won’t do. Put it in that corner over there,” she frowned, directing Flannery who was struggling to carry around a large decorative lamp post. Wallace had brought her along for an extra hand, but they hadn’t realised just how much intensive manual labour would be involved—so now Flannery’s feeble arms were stuck swivelling the lamp while Wallace’s arms were full with shopping bags containing every ornament one could think of. She’d decided to be nice and offer to come because Winona said a firm no—but now Courtney’s repetitive instructions were wearing even her endless patience thin.

“Hmmm, this still looks odd. You know what,” Courtney tutted, pointing back in the direction they’d come from, “let’s just put it by the door.”

“I swear to God, lady, make up your mind,” Flannery muttered under her breath, kneeling and gripping the bottom of the pole with as much strength as she could muster. “Because I know where I’m gonna put it...”

Unfortunately, hoisting the pole from the bottom up meant gravity carried the top of the pole and swung it in an arc—right towards where Courtney was standing behind Flannery, who dropped the pole abruptly back down when she heard a sickening crunch.

Wallace dashed back inside just as he saw his boss fall to the floor clutching her nose, turning white as a sheet. “Holy shit! Are you okay?!”

“What kind of a question is that? Do I *look* okay?!” Courtney screeched, still covering her face but carefully scrambling to her feet. “Get me some ice, you idiot!”

In his defence, he’d been too stunned to form a proper response, but now the initial shock was over he quickly darted to the kitchen to find some ice and rags. Flannery, meanwhile, was helping Courtney onto a chair, guiding her to breathe. The woman seemed to be panicking more than either of them.

“Here, here, I got it,” Wallace interrupted, running back in and handing over the rolled-up bag of ice. Courtney grabbed it instantly—but the moment she lowered her hands the other two got the full view of her bloodied, broken nose, and grimaced.

She caught the simultaneous reactions and paled even further. “Oh God. How bad is it?”

“It’s... pretty bad,” Wallace said slowly, reaching for a small mirror that sat on the mantelpiece above the fireplace. “You wanna take a look?”

“No! Absolutely not! I think I can figure out how bad it is, thank you,” she groaned, pressing the ice bag to her nose while frantically waving her other hand. “Oh God. Steven absolutely cannot see me like this.”

“Er... I’m sure if you tell him what happened, he’ll understand it was an accident, and it shouldn’t matter...?” he began uncertainly.

“You try doing that when you look like a bloody mess before your engagement!” she wailed, flinging the ice bag to the floor and rummaging in her purse, mostly muttering to herself while the other two looked on helplessly. “Nobody is allowed to see me like this... no no no, where is it... aha, gotcha, you pesky shit... need to do this before he gets here...”

“Um, I don’t get it,” Flannery whispered to her roommate, watching as Courtney punched something into her phone with urgency. “Why is she fussing so much? If we called Steven and explained things would go so much easier.”

“Look, I’m as confused as you are,” Wallace shrugged. “But then again, it’s Courtney. You know how she is about wanting everything to look perfect.”

“But—if she’s gonna be *marrying* the guy, then—”

“Good news, everyone!” Courtney shrieked, throwing them a rather morbid-looking grin. “My uncle Maxie knows an excellent plastic surgeon in Celadon City, as well as several spa treatment options. In just a couple days all of this will go away!” She finished with a clap of her hands, clearly in an attempt to soothe her own spirits, but it only served to unnerve everyone else.

“So... does this mean I’m in charge till whenever it is you get back?” Wallace pointed out. “Because we still have so much to do—”

“Obviously you’re in charge!”

“But then—what am I supposed to tell Steven?”

“Just tell him I got called out on unexpected business! It happens all the time!” she groaned, throwing her hands up and striding towards the door. “Now I’m gonna head off before I miss my flight. You two morons already ruined my day, you don’t need to do any more of it.”

And with a slam of the front door, she was gone, leaving the roommates to stare at each other in a mixture of stunned and bewildered silence.

“... Wow,” Flannery said finally, exhaling. “What a hurricane. Honestly, that smile of hers is scarier than her yelling at you.”

“Yeah, which is why it’s a good thing she doesn’t do it so often,” Wallace remarked dryly, picking up one of the bags stuffed with tinsel. “Well, we might as well get to work. Who knows, we might actually do a quicker job without her hovering around all the time.”

“You’re right. Ooh, but this is perfect! Let me call Winsy. She’ll be happy to lend a hand now.” Flannery fished her phone out of her pocket, throwing him a sly grin. “You do realise what this means, don’t you?”

Wallace blinked. “Uh... we can put the lamp post where it was *supposed* to go in my design rather than at the fucking door?”

“No, you dense dummy,” she rolled her eyes at him, now smirking. “It means you get to spend a couple days alone with Steven.”

“You’re right, that’s true,” he nodded, then stood back up straight when he realised what she’d said. “No! That’s terrible! The idea was to spend less time with him, not *more!*”

“Well, that can’t be helped now,” Flannery shrugged, still smirking as she sat down to sort out the boxes of baubles. “You’re in charge, which means you have no choice but to report all your progress to Steven yourself. Honestly, I don’t know what you’re so worried about. It’s not like Courtney suspects you or anything.”

“I kind of get the feeling she might not know he likes men,” Wallace muttered warily, going over the decoration checklist far too many times than necessary. “And he seems so affectionate towards her too, so...”

“So? He could be bisexual.”

“That is true. But that makes it his problem, not mine,” he declared, a sudden realisation slowly settling over him. He’d been so concerned over the elevator incident, he’d forgotten about all of yesterday, and the time they’d spent together already. With Courtney’s sudden departure, Steven would certainly want someone to turn to... and by all means, he did consider Wallace a friend.

And Wallace didn’t feel it in his heart to turn him down like that.

He finally put the checklist down, taking a breath and grinning a lot easier than before. “You know what? Maybe you’re right. Maybe having him around more often won’t be that much of a problem after all. I’ll manage. It’ll be fine.”

“You say ‘I’ll manage’ like you don’t enjoy his company,” Flannery chuckled, shaking her head. “But you don’t fool me. I see that extra smile in your voice whenever you talk about him.”

“You don’t see nothing,” Wallace shot back, but completely failed to hide the smile. And he knew it, and he cursed himself internally for it, but he couldn’t help it. “Now shut up and help me jazz up this fireplace.”