2017

**Negotiating Desire: Resisting, Reimagining and Reinscribing Normalized Sexuality and Gender in Fan Fiction**

Charity A. Fowler  
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Negotiating Desire: Resisting, Reimagining and Reinscribing Normalized Sexuality and Gender in Fan Fiction

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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April 2017
Acknowledgement

I would like to thank, first and foremost, my advisor, Dr. David Golumbia: Thank you for your unceasing support while this project went through multiple stages as my thinking shifted during the course of my research. Your assistance in pointing me toward resources down avenues I might never have gone, your insightful questions on drafts, and your unflagging willingness to just listen as I bounced ideas off of you and clarified my own thinking was invaluable. Your encouragement kept me going when I felt like I’d hit a wall, and your guidance kept me on track when I got overwhelmed. Thank you, too, just for letting me ramble and engaging with me in discussions of frustration over the Revolution finale—it was a needed break in otherwise scholarly discussions, and our TV meta-discussions kept my enthusiasm for the project alive, by reminding me how much I really did love what I was doing and the material I was working with. This project would have never been possible without your steadfast support.

To Dr. Eric Garberson: Thank you for pushing me to find clarity and seeing issues in the draft that I had missed. Your questions and willingness to give in-depth feedback made me recognize where I’d skipped steps from brain to page and your perspective made me look at things in new lights. Thank you for your support throughout my time in the program, for being willing to ask questions about the fannish things and share your own experiences, from the first class I had with you, through independent studies and this project. Thank you, too for your institutional support and my overall experience in this program.

To Dr. Elizabeth Hodges: You have been my constant mentoring support since I was a new graduate student in the Master’s program. I am the writer, scholar and teacher I am today in large part because of you. This project may never even have occurred to me if not for my work in your autobiography class all those years ago. Before I even knew “fan studies” could be a thing, your encouragement of my exploration of it in my personal life, and its impact on my view of the world, and the connections that could be made, made me realize that this could be an exciting area of intellectual inquiry. Thank you for your unwavering support all these years, for always being in my corner, for guiding my writing and helping it mature, and me along with it. I am where I am today because of you, and I will always be grateful for it.

To Dr. Archana Pathak: Thank you for being my guide through feminist theory, queer theory, and the joys of autoethnography. Thank you for giving me the language to navigate the social sciences after a lifetime in humanities and law. Your classes expanded my academic world in new and exciting directions and inspired me to question the positions from which I view and analyze the world. My ability to be critical of more than the text and to question how that text functions in the world has developed largely because of you, and your guidance has helped me hone my ability to convey my insights to people in different fields. This project is as
interdisciplinary as it is and the areas of research I see in my future are far wider in scope of inquiry because of you. Thank you.

To my family: I could not have done any of this without you. Your support in my decision to pursue this degree has been more than anyone could ask. I know you sometimes wondered if we would ever get here, but we did. Thank you for loving me, for listening when I needed to vent, for pushing me when I needed pushing, for believing in me when my belief faltered, for reminding me to take care of myself, for helping me have fun in the midst of everything, and for always encouraging me to follow my dreams. I love you.
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NEGOTIATING DESIRE: RESISTING, REIMAGINING AND REINSCRIBING NORMALIZED SEXUALITY AND GENDER IN FAN FICTION

By Charity Ayn Fowler, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017.

Director: David Golumbia, Associate Professor, Department of English

Among participatory audiences engaged in interpretive strategies with popular narratives, media fans stand out in the ways they challenge media texts through discourse, appropriation and the creation of their own texts. Fan studies has examined how fan fiction resists heteronormativity by challenging depictions of gender and sexuality, but to date, this inquiry has focused disproportionately on slash, to the exclusion of other genres of fan fiction. Additionally, scholars disagree about slash’s subversive effects by setting up a seemingly stable dichotomy—subversive vs. misogynistic—where one does not necessarily exist.

In this project, I examine multiple genres of fan fiction—namely, slash arising from bromances; femslash from female friendships; incestuous fan fiction from dysfunctional and enmeshed familial relationships; and polyamorous fics, which resist mononormativity in the source texts and fandoms’ shipping practices. I chose fics from four televisions shows—NBC’s
Revolution, MTV’s Teen Wolf, the CW’s The Vampire Diaries, and its spin-off, The Originals—and closely read them to explicate patterns in their narrative construction, representations of gender and sexuality, and elements which connect them to the source texts. Part of my inquiry involved testing the claim that fan fiction is a subversive, resistant practice against claims that it reinscribes heteronormativity instead.

Taking a dialogic “both/and” approach, I argue that critics claiming that slash is often not subversive are right to a point, but miss a key potential of fan fiction: its ability to evoke possibility—for new endings, relationships, and sexualities. Heteronormativity often asserts itself in endings; queerness plays in the middles and margins. So, too, does fan fiction. While some individual fics may reinforce elements of heteronormativity, many also have moments of subversion and resistance, which actively question and transgress norms of gender, sexuality and love. Further, they embrace fluidity and possibility that refuses to resolve itself in closure, and, in doing so, engage with the source texts and larger culture around them in a way that provides a subversive interpretation of both and offers insight into the function of the constructed, non-natural nature of institutionalized heterosexuality.
Introduction

Who, what and how people love constitute important parts of their identity, and international debate and discussion swirls around the issues. This centrality is reflected in the media and narratives which shape people’s lives and validate or obviate their existence. Because people are not automatons merely soaking up the messages thrown at them, examining how these messages are received, negotiated, interpreted and used allows for insight into how the constructions function. Among active audiences engaged in reception and production practices, media fans stand out for the ways in which they speak back to the media texts through engaging in discourse, appropriating the source texts, and creating their own texts in response.

In this project, I analyze the representation of gender and sexuality within the texts of four television shows and the secondary fan-authored narratives (primarily fan fiction) created around them, within their cultural context. A great deal of research within fan studies has focused on understanding or pathologizing fan activity and culture as separate from the mainstream, focusing on either valorizing the creative products of fans as subversive or refuting that valorization and explicating the ways in which fans perpetuate an oppressive hegemony, acting as “agents of maintaining social and cultural systems of classification and thus existing hierarchies” (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington).

Neither of these paradigms proves satisfactory, as they constitute a false dichotomy. Instead of this either/or approach, which has dominated approaches in fan studies, I adopt
Bahktin’s dialogic “both/and” (Elbow 23). Yes, fans are a part of the culture in which they exist, and interpret and create texts within those enculturated, normalized constructs. However, many fan narratives also question and press back against those norms, demonstrating the fissures within their façade of innateness. Further, these fan narratives are not individual entities, but texts circulating within an interpretive community, with their own intertextual and paratextual connections. Thus, I position fans and their texts in conversation with each other, as well as with their source texts and the norms of the sex/gender system of Western culture and examine the ways in which these fan texts both subvert and reinforce the social construction of sex and gender.

Rather than focusing on just the messages in media texts or only the way fans interpret and use these texts, this project, then, examines the interplay between the producers, the primary texts, the fan community, and the secondary and tertiary texts the fans produce. Specifically, I ask how the romantic and sexual scripts, gender norms and relational tropes:

a. Reflect on or react to current cultural discourse around heteronormativity, gender and sexuality; and

b. Constitute patterns and sites of audience engagement across narratives, reinscribing heteronormativity or creating counter-hegemonic resistance in both source and fan-authored texts.

**Rationale: Source and Fan Texts**

In his introduction to the twentieth anniversary edition of *Textual Poachers*, one of the foundational texts of fan studies, Henry Jenkins argues that popular culture and fandom are not things we can fruitfully study from the outside: “[t]here are questions we can only answer by
examining our own emotional experiences.” He links fan studies to the tradition of feminist and queer studies and the autobiographical turn in cultural studies in the 1990s, tied under the “aca-fan” concept: the academic who studies fandom from the inside, acknowledging his or her membership in the community he or she studies (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*). This makes a great deal of fan scholarship autoethnographic, as scholars draw on their own experience within the community to illuminate parts of their work.

My involvement in Internet fandom goes back to 1998, and I have seen it develop from centralized message boards and newsgroups to the sprawling megalithic entity it is today. As such, while I have tried to independently document as much as possible, some elements of fandom have not yet been covered in scholarship or explicitly stated by an authoritative source, but are those norms and pieces of knowledge shared and passed through the community from multiple sources. Throughout the project, I have tried to be clear when I’m drawing on this shared, communal knowledge.

While I do not directly refer to my own experiences in this particular project, they do underlie many of the choices I made, from the texts to study to the types of relationships to explore. My experiences also undoubtedly influence my interpretations, though I have made sure that such interpretations can be supported both by the texts and theory. I wanted the depth of analysis that immersion and self-reflexivity allow for, where I was able to look at texts from multiple angles without needing to try and remember which character was which. Ergo, I picked source texts with which I was familiar and of which I was fond, thus implicating my own emotional investment in both the televisual form and the texts themselves (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* Introduction). Likewise, I chose to study pairings with which I was familiar. Not all of them are necessarily my preferred pairings or even pairings I personally enjoy; however, some
are, and I have written and published fic to Archive of Our Own for four of them. I am also an active participant in the *Revolution* and *The Originals* fandoms generally, though far more peripherally in *The Vampire Diaries* and *Teen Wolf*.

The four shows I examine as my source texts are NBC’s *Revolution*, MTV’s *Teen Wolf*, and The CW’s *The Vampire Diaries* and its spin-off *The Originals*. Beyond familiarity, I chose the shows based on varying production factors which could affect how gender or sexuality were represented, to see if there were patterns and similarities in representation in both the source text and fan fiction even with different values and focuses in the source text. While still not quantitatively representative by any means, this allowed me to examine how different factors in the source text might impact the way in which fans interpreted and recreated the narrative through their own work. These production factors included the shows’ channels, time slots, target demographic, and cast characteristics (see table 1).

Table 1: Characteristics of subject television shows

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Production Factors</th>
<th><em>Revolution</em></th>
<th><em>The Vampire Diaries</em></th>
<th><em>The Originals</em></th>
<th><em>Teen Wolf</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Channel Type</td>
<td>Major Network</td>
<td>Niche Network</td>
<td>Niche Network</td>
<td>Cable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target audience</td>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>Teenage girls</td>
<td>Women, 18-34</td>
<td>Teens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cast type &amp; gender</td>
<td>Ensemble, more males in key roles</td>
<td>Female protagonist, balanced supporting cast</td>
<td>Ensemble, more males in key roles</td>
<td>Male protagonist, male-dominated supporting cast</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Revolution*

*Revolution* aired on NBC from 2012-2014; in 2015 the series finale was released in graphic novel from DC Comics, distributed via NBC.com and ComicBooks.com. The show begins fifteen years after a blackout that left the world permanently without electricity. Through
Season 1, we learn that the Blackout was caused by the failed containment of electricity suppressing nanotech, created by Ben and Rachel Matheson and deployed in Afghanistan by the US Department of Defense. Major governments have crumbled and been replaced by militias who carved the United States up into six areas—four of them formal countries, the other two either uninhabited or ruled by war lords. The northeast of the former United States is the Monroe Republic, founded by lifelong friends Sebastian Monroe (“Bass”) and Miles Matheson. Although they had the best of intentions to protect people, they turned it into a military state in a dictatorial effort to enforce law and order. When things got too bloody and Bass too unstable, Miles tried to assassinate him, but was unable to do so and fled.

Season 1 opens with Bass’s army killing Miles’ brother and kidnapping his nephew, Danny. His niece, Charlie, comes to find him to ask for his help in getting her brother back, and so Miles has to go back and face Bass. Ultimately, Danny is killed by Bass’s militia and Rachel and Charlie go on a quest for vengeance, while Miles takes control of the Georgia Federation’s army to wage war on his former best friend. Season 1 explores how the blackout occurred as characters work to get the power back on in order to win the war. Doing so, however, allows the faction in the now-defunct US government who caused the Blackout to try and regain control by nuking Philadelphia (capital of the Monroe Republic) and Atlanta (capital of the Georgia Federation). The power is turned back off after the bombings, and Season 2 deals with the invasion of the “Patriots”—remnants of the US government who retreated to Guantanamo Bay after the Blackout—and the rising threat of the nanotech, which have become sentient. The main relationships on the show center around Bass and Miles, who restore their alliance in Season 2 and their friendship by the finale, and the other Mathesons—Charlie and her mother Rachel, as
they all try to work through years of love, abandonment, trauma and guilt for the fact that, between them, they basically destroyed the world, twice.

*The Vampire Diaries and The Originals*

*The Vampire Diaries* and *The Originals* are supernatural dramas on the CW. *The Vampire Diaries* first aired in 2009, and *The Originals* was created as a spin-off from it in 2013. *The Vampire Diaries* tells the story of Elena Gilbert, recently orphaned, who meets and falls in love with Stefan Salvatore, a vampire, and, eventually, his older brother Damon. It’s based on a series of Young Adult novels published in 1991 and 1992, though beyond character names and occasional storylines, the two stories quickly diverged. Stefan and Damon are both drawn to Elena because she looks exactly like their lost love—the vampire who turned them both back during the Civil War, Katherine. This is no coincidence, as Elena is descended from Katherine and they are mystical doppelgangers, a fact that plays out repeatedly over the arc of the series, as their blood and that of the doppelgangers before them have been used in spells by witches which shaped the supernatural world thousands of years.

This means that a lot of people in search of power come after Elena, wanting to use her for their own ends, and much of the plot of the first three seasons revolves around keeping her safe from each new villain. Elena’s friends are dragged into the fights, as well: Jeremy, her younger brother, who’s lost in the beginning, tends to get involved with dangerous women and winds up becoming a vampire hunter; Jenna, her mother’s younger sister who becomes her and Jeremy’s guardian and doesn’t know anything about the supernatural world; Caroline, control-freak beauty queen who is turned into a vampire by Katherine; Bonnie, who discovers she is a witch, and slowly watches almost all of her family be killed because of the vampires Elena’s presence seems to draw to town; Matt, the lone human by the end, who also loses everything to
vampires and wavers between ally and enemy; Tyler, captain of the football team and initially an arrogant jock who turns out to be a werewolf and a member of the team; and Alaric, their history teacher, a vampire hunter, and, eventually, Damon’s best friend.

Klaus Mikaelson is one of the vampires who comes to town for Elena. He was born a werewolf, but after turning all of her children into vampires to protect them, his mother used Elena’s ancestor’s blood to place a curse on him which bound his werewolf side. This prevented him from becoming a hybrid, and he has spent a thousand years trying to figure out how to break the curse and regain that dual power. He eventually does so, killing Jenna in the process. His older brother Elijah comes after Elena, as well, first allying with her friends to destroy his brother, but then reconciling with him when he learns the rest of their family is still alive, not killed by Klaus, as he thought. The Mikaelsons are the Original vampires, created by the same doppelganger blood that their mother used to curse Klaus, and virtually invincible. The other three siblings—Rebekah, Kol and Finn—also wind up in town, and the family members are by turns friends and enemies of the main protagonists. Ultimately, they settle into being uneasy allies, before the Mikaelsons leave for New Orleans in the spin-off, *The Originals*.

Having lived in New Orleans and helped build it for two centuries, the Mikaelsons return because Klaus wants to retake control of the city from his former protégée, Marcel. That need remains at the core of the show, as the power relations in the city are in constant flux. Werewolf Hayley, once a friend of Tyler’s, joins the family when she gets pregnant with Klaus’s child, and the need to protect their daughter, Hope, from foes who fear how powerful the child could be underlies most of the conflicts of Seasons 1 and 2. Where *The Vampire Diaries* is heavily geared toward teens, with the main human characters moving through high school for the first four seasons and then on to college, *The Originals* is far more adult—most of the main characters are
vampires, most of the humans are adults. Hayley and Davina, one of the witches, are the youngest of the main characters. While Davina’s youth often shows, Hayley has been on her own since she was thirteen and even at nineteen is far more adult than most of the characters on *The Vampire Diaries*. It’s also a far darker show, in a lot of ways, as the protagonists are hardly heroes and who is good and who is bad isn’t so much the question, but who will win the power games.

*Teen Wolf*

Also a supernatural teen drama, *Teen Wolf* first aired on MTV in 2011. Like *The Vampire Diaries*, it is geared more toward teens. As the name indicates, the shows main supernatural creatures are werewolves, though other supernatural creatures, like banshees and druids, populate the world. The overarching number, however, are still shapeshifters: kitsune and chimeras, for instance. Where *The Vampire Diaries* largely creates its own myths and supernatural origins, *Teen Wolf* loosely bases its supernatural creatures on identifiable world myths, though often heavily modified. The main characters are all in high school, and the story starts with Scott McCall, the protagonist, being bitten by a mysterious Alpha werewolf. The first season deals with Scott learning how to handle being a werewolf and still manage his friendships and schoolwork, while also trying to figure out who the Alpha is, as the other wolf starts killing people. The defeat of one villain tends to draw another to town, and the seasons are loosely organized around the new Big Bad.

Scott’s friends fight alongside of him—some of the supernatural, some not: his Season 1 girlfriend Allison is from a family of werewolf hunters, and that legacy provides a great deal of secondary plot through the first three seasons; Lydia, queen bee of the high school who turns out to be a banshee and the team’s resident genius; Stiles, Scott’s best friend, Lydia’s co-genius and
one of the lone humans; Isaac, another new werewolf with a tragic past; Derek Hale, a twenty-something who was born a werewolf, unlike Scott, and serves first as sometime antagonist, but also mentor, then an ally, then a friend. *Teen Wolf* also has more adult involvement than *The Vampire Diaries* where almost all of the parents are killed off by Season 5. Scott’s mother is a nurse and a major character; his boss, Deaton, is the local vet, but also a druid; Stiles’ father is the sheriff; and Allison’s father is a hunter who slowly learns that not all werewolves are bad and serves as a protector to the kids a lot of the time. Derek’s uncle Peter is one of the main antagonists, turned ally, turned antagonist, and his daughter, Malia, joins the team later, after they rescue her from where she has been stuck in the form of a coyote for eight years.

*Fan Fiction*

Where once fans distributed fan fiction via paper fanzines, today they distribute it through email or archive it on journaling sites like LiveJournal and in fan fiction archives (Thrupkaew). *Archive of Our Own (AO3)* and *FanFiction.Net (FFN)* are the two largest and most well-known multi-fandom archives. Launched in 1998, FFN is the larger of the two and has been around longer (Pellegrini). However, due to pressure from advertisers, in 2002, FFN prohibited fics with NC-17 material in them, and, in 2012, purged over 60,000 stories from the archive, without notice (Ellison). AO3 was launched in 2007 and grew slowly at first, but experienced a surge as many users left FFN. Unlike FFN, AO3 does not censor content. Given my focus is on fan fiction which explores differing sexualities and sexual taboos, access to fics which might include NC-17 material was critical. Additionally, the general consensus within fandom is that AO3 has better quality fic (Pellegrini). My experience as a long-time member of the community supports this and also influenced my choice of archive.
In choosing sub-genres of fan fiction to examine, I chose to go with those involving consensual romantic or sexual activity between adults which were non-normative in some way, including slash and femslash between close friends, consensual adult incest and polyamory. For *Revolution*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *The Originals*, I read the majority of fics that met my requirements in each category, then chose ones which represented the patterns I saw to analyze more in-depth. For *Teen Wolf*, because of the sheer number of fics (upwards of 70,000 at the time of writing), I chose to read a comparable number of fics as in the other fandoms, chosen from those which were the most highly rated, to analyze whether the very popular fics contained any of the same patterns and how they related to the fic in other fandoms.

While similar patterns ran through the fan fiction across fandoms, not every relationship category was as well represented in every fandom. For example, *The Originals* had no popular bromance-to-slash pairing save for actual brothers, who I cover in the incest chapter, and so do not duplicate in discussing male friends-to-lovers patterns, despite there being a lot of similarities. Similarly, while *Teen Wolf* has a plethora of incest stories dealing with dubious consent, also often cross-generational and with underage characters, it has only a few drabbles (extremely short fic) for the twins who literally combine into one person in the source text. Given the two are supporting characters whose background is barely explored, I chose to leave them out of the incest chapter. Additionally, some characters and pairings who fit one of the first three categories (slash, femslash, incest), also make up two of the characters involved in the most popular polyamorous fics in their fandom, and so they make an encore appearance in Chapter 5.
**Fan Terminology**

Like many subcultures, fandom has its own language which can be confusing for the uninitiated.¹ The following are the fandom terms I use most frequently in this project and their definitions, as I use them. A “fandom” is the community created by fans. The term refers both to fandom at large—fans of all source texts who exhibit similar behaviors, engage in similar activities and operate through similar norms—and to the community of fans around a specific source text (e.g. Star Wars fandom). A “ship” or a “pairing” is a romantic relationship between characters, and is usually indicated by a “/” between their names in a fan work’s description (e.g. Han/Leia). “Ship” can also be a verb, with all the conjugations of any other verb (e.g. “I ship Han and Leia;” “I shipped Han and Leia for a while, but I’m currently shipping Leia and Rey.”).

Varying levels of ships also have their own names. For example, an “OTP” is a fan’s One True Pairing (for a particular fandom or across all fandoms); a variant is OT3 (or any other higher number) for non-monogamous relationships.

“Fan fiction” (also spelled “fanfiction,” though I have tried to be consistent in my spelling) is a literary genre written by fans which expands upon or offers alternative readings of the source text it is drawn from. Many people use the term interchangeably with “fan fic” (“fanfic”) and “fic,” but for clarity’s sake, I have chosen to separate them. Thus, I use “fan fiction” or “fan fic” to refer to the genre itself or to refer collective body of fics within a fandom (e.g. “Revolution fan fic,” or “fan fiction authors”—a stylistic, rather than substantive, distinction based mainly on scansion of the sentence), and “fic” to refer to an individual narrative (e.g. “Corycides’ fic ‘There Will be Blood’…”). Relatedly, when I use the term “fan narratives,” I am

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¹ Adding to the confusion is media misuse of terms and that even within fandom, terms are not always used uniformly and various groups may develop their own terms. Given there is no truly authoritative source and that usage is based upon community consensus for clear communication, unless otherwise noted, I am drawing on my own knowledge as an active member of that community to formulate my definitions here.
including fan videos and fan art within the definition. As I focus mainly on textual narratives in this project, this occurs rarely, but, on occasion, it is the more appropriate term.

I read fan fiction as a literary genre, as it consists of similarities in form, style and subject matter across fandoms and languages (Pugh 11). Within it, however, are multiple sub-genres, which are usually defined by the central relationship, emotional tone, or events of the fic. One fic may fall within multiple sub-genres. The primary distinction is usually made by whether the fic centers on a relationship or not. Fic with no romance or intense relationship aspect is called “gen” (i.e. “general”). The primary divisions for romantic fan fics are “het,” “slash” and “femslash.” “Het” is short for “heterosexual,” and the central pairing of such fic is male/female. “Slash” is fic which takes two characters who are presumptively straight in the source text and queers them, putting them in a same-sex relationship. Technically, slash initially referred to either gender, but because of the prevalence of male/male slash, the term “femslash” developed to differentiate stories with female/female relationships at their center. Other non-romantic subgenres include alternate universe, crossovers, hurt/comfort, missing scenes and fluff, among others.

“Canon,” “fanon” and “headcanon” are all interrelated terms which refer to the authority given to a certain event or interpretation of an event or character. Things which are canon are those events and facts explicitly drawn from the original source text and its authorized derivative works. Fans may choose to ignore or alter canon for a certain work, but such works are understood as alternative narratives. Fanon is made up of those events or characterization

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2 The term “slash” comes from the “/” between two characters’ names. It was first used with “Kirk/Spock” to designate a romantic or sexual relationship between the characters, as distinguished from “Kirk + Spock” (Jenkins, Textual Poachers 185). The “/” itself has come to signal a romantic or sexual relationship between any characters, same sex or not, but the term “slash” retains its name.

3 How to categorize fan fiction centering on same-sex canonical pairings, like Kurt/Blaine from Glee, has yet to reach a consensus in either the fan or academic community (Hunting 1.3).
elements which are widely accepted within a source text’s fandom. It usually has a basis in
canon or can be easily extrapolated from it; it may even be implicit in the source text. Fanon
often appears as tropes in fan works by different authors working independently within a
fandom. Finally, things considered headcanon are those events, pieces of background
information and characterization elements which are never addressed at all in the source text and
which individual authors or collaborators create as they flesh out a character; for instance, what,
if any, instruments they play or languages they speak which are never shown or mentioned in the
source text. Headcanon usually rises above the level of individual events in a story and is
something an author carries across most of her work in that fandom.

**Broad Theoretical Foundations and Terminology**

**Gender, Sex and Normative Sexuality**

In her seminal essay, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,”
Gayle Rubin attempts to determine the origin of women’s oppression, a question which she
insists is not trivial since the answer “forms the basis for any assessment of just what would have
to be changed in order to achieve” a society free of sexual oppression (“The Traffic in Women”
157). Rubin locates the source of sexual oppression within what she calls the “sex/gender
system,” using the conceptual tools provided by structuralism and alliance theory (both via
Claude Lévi-Strauss), psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud), and Marxist theory (most notably,
Friedrich Engels) (“The Traffic in Women” 158–159). The “sex/gender system is the set of
arrangements” used by a society to turn biological sex into “products of human activity” and
meet the needs of such (Rubin, “The Traffic in Women” 159). The term “sex/gender system” is
deliberately neutral to allow for the possibility of an egalitarian system, but every society needs
*some* system to “deal with sex, gender and babies” (Rubin, “The Traffic in Women” 168).
Rubin’s work combines with that of others examining the constructed nature of sex, gender, sexuality, family and society to form the basis of the theory from which I operate in this project. Some of the scholars and theories draw directly upon the others, while some offer connected arguments drawn from separate foundational sources. The theoretical underpinnings of this project are interdisciplinary in nature, and, by necessity, streamlined so as to reconcile them into a cohesive, coherent whole from which to conduct my analyses: an in-depth analysis of their connections and contradictions with each other could inform multiple projects in and of themselves.

Despite the neutrality of “sex/gender system” as a term, the majority of such systems have been constructed with hierarchies of gender; patriarchy is one such system and a specific form of male oppression (Rubin, “The Traffic in Women” 168). However, while patriarchal privilege still exists in Western society, I have chosen to use “institutionalized heterosexuality” as the term for the Anglo-American sex/gender system since that is the culture that generated the texts I analyze in this project. My rationale for doing so encompasses multiple reasons, all of which relate to the focus of the work on ways of challenging, subverting, transgressing and reinscribing normative sexuality and gender roles. My inquiry here is more interested in the transitivity of gender, sex and sexuality as social constructs, and the fluidity of their possible expressions, than examining the ways in which they constitute hierarchies of oppression.

That is not to say that issues of hierarchy, oppression and axes of power do not arise in my analysis, are absent from the texts I study, or do not need addressing. They do, and they are. But the activity engaged in by fans seems more one that explores possibilities and attempts to imagine something other than the heteronormative—maybe better, maybe not. As such, “patriarchy” felt too laden with hierarchical and oppressive connotations that pit gender against
gender. “Institutionalized heterosexuality,” on the other hand, speaks directly to the normative functions of the social construction of sexuality and gender and their taken-for-granted nature. By focusing on the constructed nature of not just gender, but sex itself, the term more easily allows me to examine how these norms systemically structure power relations between society and individuals, as well as how they work to form and inform people’s sense of themselves as gendered and sexual beings. Ultimately, in organizing my framework, patriarchy serves as the particular regime of power, but institutionalized heterosexuality is one of the tools that maintains that power.

“Institutionalized heterosexuality,” as I use it, then, is a structural concept which “shapes the social order at a macro level” that uses gender as a hierarchical division and not only normalizes, but literally institutionalizes heterosexuality through the powers of the state, such as laws and benefits (Jackson 108). Notably, it does not just regulate those outside of its boundaries, but those within (Jackson 105). Its etymology lies, at least in part, in Adrienne Rich’s “compulsory heterosexuality” and the work of feminists who argue that heterosexuality perpetuates a gendered division of labor and male oppression of women and appropriation of their labor (Jackson 105; Rich; Wittig). In Chapter 3, which deals with fan fiction that queers canonical female friendships, I draw heavily on Rich’s theory of compulsory heterosexuality and the lesbian continuum, and use Rich’s terminology more in that chapter. However, because Rich’s legacy so closely links compulsory heterosexuality and the lesbian continuum to each other and to the particulars of women’s experiences and historical erasure within patriarchy, I chose to use “institutionalized heterosexuality” more generally and specifically when talking about relationships involving male characters, as they are constrained by the system as much as women, even if from a more privileged position.
Within the structure of institutionalized heterosexuality lie sex, gender and heteronormativity. The institution of heterosexuality depends upon gender and sex division: without them, it cannot exist. Heteronormativity and institutionalized heterosexuality are often used synonymously, with “heteronormativity” used as a shorthand term for how heterosexual privilege weaves through everyday life (Jackson 108) However, Stevi Jackson argues that they vary in subtle ways, mostly in the sense of their function and level of ordering, based on the concept of social norms—“the assumptions that sustain particular institutions” (108). Thus, as institutionalized heterosexuality upholds patriarchy, so heteronormativity upholds institutionalized heterosexuality. Heteronormativity, as I use it, references not the structure, but the norms and taken-for-granted assumptions—especially about sex, gender and nature—that allow institutionalized heterosexuality to function without scrutiny. Where institutionalized heterosexuality operates at a macro level, then, heteronormativity concerns itself with meaning, values and beliefs and the practices people engage in based upon them (Jackson 108). Heteronormativity, argue Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner “is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and effects of narrativity, romance and other protected spaces of culture”(Berlant and Warner 554–555). It is what makes people operate from the assumption that heterosexuality is natural, that it is the sex that does not need definition, because it just “is” (Beasley 142). As such, heteronormativity operates in multiple social dimensions, privileging heterosexuality by naturalizing it and helping to produce gendered subjects; it “extends far beyond the terrain of sexuality in a narrowly defined sense to the regulation of subjectivity, identity, biographical narrative, relationship expectation” and more (Klesse, Spectre of Promiscuity 136).
The norms of heteronormativity function not only to normalize heterosexuality in general, but the “right” kind of heterosexuality in particular, and to allow it to apply even to non-heterosexual behavior: for example, heteronormativity allows for the existence of the “good homosexual” who conforms to its ideals in every way but sexual object choice (Klesse, *Spectre of Promiscuity* 12). In this way, heteronormativity and institutionalized heterosexuality remain flexible, able to shift across cultures and time to still retain their hegemonic power. Even after the legalization of same-sex marriage, the underlying structures of power have changed very little: the state still privileges the monogamous couple as its foundation, and thus legitimates only certain forms of relationships (Jackson 110; Klesse, *Spectre of Promiscuity* 12).

Heteronormativity is so fully woven into the sex/gender system of Anglo-American culture that it defies constraint to social institutions and embeds itself in narrative and modes of storytelling themselves, something I explore in greater detail in this project, particularly in chapters 4 and 5 (Roof xv; Hunting 3.3).

As mentioned above, both institutionalized heterosexuality and heteronormativity require a division of gender, and both also rely upon other binary constructions. The concept of heterosexuality requires sex division by its definition: the attraction of opposite sexes. Likewise, “heterosexuality” only has meaning if there is “homosexuality,” and vice versa; binaries are not just opposites, but necessary antitheses (Dollimore 15). Binary thinking oversimplifies complex concepts, leaving no room for anything in between, but, at the same time, serves a useful, possibly even essential, purpose in human efforts to make sense of the world (Barber 497; Ivakhiv 259). The human brain makes meaning by differentiating things and evaluating them in relation to others, which leads to categorizing them based on observed patterns. These categories are often binary ones. Judith Butler terms this effort to make sense of the world through
categorization “intelligibility,” and, in relation to sex and gender, argues that people only become recognizable as a “person” via the gender norms that define them (Butler 23). All of these binary distinctions work together as people read and interpret others: for there to be heterosexuals and homosexuals, for instance, there must by definition be opposite and same sexes, and we recognize sex, at least socially, by someone’s gender assignment and performance. Ergo, we cannot make assumptions⁴ about whether someone is gay or straight until we can recognize whether they are male or female and then evaluate how they perform “man” or “woman” and whether they appear to be sexually attracted to other “men” or “women” (Jackson 113).

Although awareness is growing regarding the oversimplification of binary thinking, at least in regard to gender and sex, the normalization impulse remains strong, especially outside the halls of the academy, in the social world where mass media is produced and consumed. Because binary gender and sexualities still connect so closely to many people’s understanding of the world, investigating how narratives uphold or push against them mattered in this project. But to examine them means defining them.

*How* gender is performed varies between nations, regions, cultures, races, socio-economic classes, generations, religions and even social situations: how the same person performs “masculinity” at church may be different than how he does so at the bar with his work buddies on Friday night (Connell and Messerschmidt 831). However, if gender is socially constructed, and intent on rendering people intelligible, then part of that construction requires some referent to be cognizable outside the realm of theory. Often, that referent is seemingly outdated gender stereotypes which are, despite cognitive recognition of their outdatedness, still active in producing intelligible gender. Even in recognizing that people present gender in

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⁴ Whether people *should* make such assumptions or not is another matter and, while an important topic, irrelevant to my current point. Simple observation of social interactions shows that such assumptions occur.
different ways, linguistically and semantically, the referent in popular discourse always seems to return to these essentialist definitions of gender: men who stray too far from traditional, hegemonic conceptions of masculinity are “effeminate”; girls who play sports and like to get dirty are “tomboys”; a man closer to hegemonic masculinity is a “manly man” or a “man’s man,” while a girl who stays close to hegemonic femininity is a “girly girl.” Thus, in analyzing characters and patterns of relationships in this project, I use as my referent those stereotypes about gender and sexuality often considered to be innate qualities of the sexes, that have shaped gender roles and performance in the post-industrial, Anglo-American world.

I also define binary gender performance via gender stereotypes because my analysis is not of “real” mean and women in “real” situations. Instead, I am analyzing the creation, performance, interpretation and redefinition of fictional characters: men and women constructed solely from the imagination and shared via mass media. Even the most well-rounded character is by necessity limited and confined to the text from which they arise. Whole swathes of their backgrounds, emotions and psyches are left un-enunciated. In audio-visual texts, especially, much of the interpretation and understanding of characters relies solely on visual cues, the words they speak, and those they do not. Without the introspective text sometimes allowed in a print medium, the audience must extrapolate, or, more often, guess, what characters are thinking, or feeling, underneath. This arises from reception and interpretation practices, and can be a highly individualized undertaking. John Fiske argues that viewers use fictional characters “as a cultural resource to think through their social experience,” and that social difference requires popular texts to be polysemic in order to “maintain, question and think through those differences” (Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* 24–25). Popular culture only becomes popular if it can appeal to
a variety of audiences—thus, its meanings must always be relative (Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* 111).

**The Heterosexual Script**

Mass media serves as one of the four main forces for gender socialization—the process of learning the social controls and expectations that sustain the traditional differentiation between male and female (Emolu 22; Mullins 21). Much of this socialization occurs through repeated exposure to gender stereotypes and reward for behaving in accordance with them. A great deal of research shows that mass media still disseminates gender stereotypes people might claim to think are outdated when broken down piece by piece (for instance, the idea that women are passive), but these stereotypes nonetheless still shape our view of normative gender performance. For instance, a 2015 study examined the gender socialization practices in place relating to physical fitness, finding that, despite female Olympians and professional female sports teams, stereotypes of women as less athletic and physically competent still persist and negatively affect girls’ physical and mental health and well-being (Mullins).

Similarly, a study published in 2016 examined the results of 82 studies spanning 29 countries, mostly in North America and Western Europe, and found that teenagers across cultures still commonly express inequitable, stereotypical attitudes toward gender and concluded that “there is still a long way to go in addressing norms that perpetuate unequal gender and power relations” (Kågesten et al. 27). The results further showed that these attitudes saw masculinity as being comprised of “toughness, competitiveness, and heterosexual prowess,” and femininity as encompassing “weakness, physical appearance and the control and shaming of female sexuality” (Kågesten et al. 25). Other studies demonstrate that exposure to sexual and gender stereotypes on television correlates to a greater acceptance of rape myths and
stereotypical and dysfunctional attitudes about sex and relationships (MacKay and Covell; Haferkamp). It also affects the ways in which viewers may interpret ambiguous real-world interactions between men and women (Ward, Hansbrough, and Walker).

One of the common ways of framing how these sexual and gendered stereotypes are deployed and absorbed to contribute to these attitudes and interpretations is through what is often referred to as the “heterosexual script,” another term I use in the project, especially in Chapter 1. The concept of the heterosexual script arises from social learning theory and scripting theory, broadly, and more specifically from the metaphor of sexual scripts, introduced in 1973 by John Gagnon and William Simon. Gagnon and Simon posit that people learn sexuality from these cultural scripts, which “define what counts as sex, how to recognize sexual situations, and what to do in relational and sexual encounters” (Kim et al. 146; Gagnon and Simon). The heterosexual script plays an important role in normalizing institutionalized heterosexuality and reinforcing gendered behavior especially relating to sex and relationships. The heterosexual script consists of two parts—one for girls/women and one for boys/men—which work together to “produce ‘culturally intelligible’ heterosexual interactions and relationships” (Kim et al. 146). In the dominant heterosexual script, women long for love, while men seek sex; women should be sexually passive, while men act as the aggressors; women should be the gatekeepers, providing a check on male sexuality, but still be available sexually and put men’s sexual needs above their own; meanwhile, men focus on the performance side of sex and are responsible for their partners’ pleasure (Kim et al. 146; Sakaluk et al. 517; French and Neville 371; Dana Ménard and Cabrera 242).

Simon and Gagnon argue that real people enact sexual scripts in many different ways, but Janna Kim and her colleagues, in a 2007 study examining the prevalence of the heterosexual
script on primetime television, claim that the heterosexual script plays out in its “most reified and least variable” form in televisual enactments, which are literal “scripts of male and female characters coupling and uncoupling in relational and sexual contexts” (Simon and Gagnon; Kim et al. 146). The heterosexual script, then, becomes a powerful cultural and narrative construct through which to examine how heteronormativity plays out in popular culture texts. As such, I expand the discussion of the heterosexual script in Chapter 1 and use the concept both to analyze the media’s construction of gender and sexuality in its created characters’ gender performance and their relationships in relation to heteronormativity. Additionally, in Chapter 1, I draw on the large body of research connecting these fictional enactments of the heterosexual script to the ways in which adolescents learn to navigate their sexual and romantic relationships based upon what the media portrays. The heterosexual script has also greatly informed much of the scholarship examining slash and other fan fiction: even though the term is rarer in fan scholarship than critical media studies, in arguing that fans are, or are not, subverting, resisting or transgressing heteronormativity and institutionalized heterosexuality, many of the arguments rely on the concept of the heterosexual script as their basis for the norms potentially subverted. Thus, I use the term in my analysis there, as well.

Queerness and Fandom

While my analysis is interdisciplinary, I do draw heavily on queer theory and sex-positive feminism. Like Alexander Doty, I use “queer” not as any particular identity label, but as an umbrella term for non-straight identities and practices, interpretations and frameworks that offer resistance to institutionalized heterosexuality (2). Queer theory centers on the concept of resistance; so, too, does much of the theory of fandom, making the two complementary partners, especially for my purposes (Dhaenens, Van Bauwel, and Biltereyst 337). Alexander Doty argues
that queerness goes beyond gender to a “way of responding” to texts, to readings which are “not concerned with…or limited by” binaries of gender or sexuality (xv). According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “queer” involves “the openness of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excess of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick, *Tendencies* 8). A number of queer-theory informed media scholars argue that television can both reinforce dominant norms and disrupt and undermine heteronormativity: unable to engage in radical gestures aimed to overthrow the hegemonic order, television instead can use the discursive practices of the hegemonic order to “erode the order from within” (Dhaenens 521; Arthurs; Creekmur and Doty; Becker; Chambers, *The Queer Politics of Television*; Davis and Needham; Leibetseder; O’Riordan and Phillips).

This “erosion from within” is how I define and refer to “subversion,” throughout this project—a concept fan scholars have embraced since Jenkins. The verb “subvert” carries a connotation of overthrowing and destroying order, often from the outside, but this more subtle form of subversion can be one which is more effective (Chambers, “An Incalculable Effect” 660). Dollimore argues that knowledge gleaned from subversive practices is “produced in and by its containment in the cultural sphere” (88). However, the risk remains that, being produced within the culture, attempts at subversion can also be reintegrated into it (Dollimore 88–89; Butler 119). “Resistance” is also a popular term in cultural studies, queer theory and fan studies, one closely linked to both subversion and transgression. It may be defined as strategies and practices aimed at resisting the imposition of a dominant ideology (Fiske, *Television Culture* 40–41). The critical concept of resistance, as used here, is a tool, often made up of practices and acts that may be personal instances of refusing to conform to normative structures or more concerted
efforts to effect subversion. A refusal to accept a label or placement within a binary paradigm, for instance, could be a strategy of resistance. Foucault argues that resistance comes from “engag[ing] in a cultural politics of inventive, progressive and counter-normative practices” (“History and Homosexuality” 370). Transgression involves actions which deliberately violate cultural norms and could destroy the “ideological nucleus of the text,” indicating more than a resistance to the ideology, and leaning toward the more destructive definition of subversion (Fiske, *Television Culture* 183). However, where subversion and resistance are almost always seen as somehow political acts, transgression can often be done merely for the pleasure of transgressing, to shock or for fun, rather than with any intent to function as a tool for social change (Klesse, *Spectre of Promiscuity* 150; Leonard and Lugo-Lugo 96–97). On the other hand, subversion and resistance are often linked together as a “politics of transgression,” demonstrating how interwoven the three are in critical theory, especially (Dhaenens, Van Bauwel, and Biltereyst 334). For my purposes, I use “resistance,” for those actions which attempt to refuse to conform to stereotypes or conventional expectations, and “transgression” for those which more explicitly break still-widely held cultural norms.

When it comes to the study of fan fiction in particular, much of both the academic and mainstream journalistic focus has centered on slash, often because of its potential to be subversive, resistant or transgressive (Busse and Hellekson, “Introduction: Work in Progress”). Divining why isn’t difficult, once you consider the ways in which people engage with their favorite texts outside of fandom. Almost everyone has had the experience of imagining other adventures from their favorite texts, whether they write them down or not. Children pretend to be their favorite characters, or to be living in their favorite stories, acting out alternate scenarios. Every Halloween sees an explosion of people dressing up as fictional characters, and couples
often choose to dress as couples from popular culture. Seeing two people at a costume party dressed up as Han and Leia from *Star Wars*, and acting like lovers, would raise no eyebrows. However, while seeing two people dressed up as Han and Luke, in and of itself would come as little surprise, seeing those two people portraying Han and Luke as lovers probably would.

People writing fan fiction, then, was interesting from an appropriation standpoint: Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* explores the phenomenon as a whole in depth. However, minus copyright laws, the activity draws on a long tradition of storytelling. Before the law fenced off intellectual property and claimed ownership over stories, both oral storytellers and writers drew liberally on “others’” stories to create their own. For example, in the 60 years after Lewis Carroll published *Alice in Wonderland*, at least 200 other writers imitated, revised or parodied it and published their efforts (Jenkins, “Digital Land Grab”). Disney has retold multiple stories written by the Brothers’ Grimm, who wrote down many of those based on oral stories they heard. Shakespeare reworked Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* into *Troilus and Cressida* and used a poem by Arthur Brook (*The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*) and its prose retelling by William Painter as his main source for *Romeo and Juliet*, less than 40 years after the first two versions were published (Mabillard). Therefore, the fact of fan fiction was less fascinating than that these fans were defying corporate ownership of stories to retell them in their own way.

*Slash*, however, presented as something new, and something potentially far more transgressive: (mostly) female writers appropriating (mostly) white, straight male heroes and writing them as queer. In 1992 and 1993, Jenkins devoted an entire chapter to it in *Textual Poachers* as did Constance Penley in *Enterprising Women*. In 1998, Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander published an edited collection of essays looking to establish a broad theory of fan studies: *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity*. The stated intent of the collection
was to “develop distinct theoretical perspectives on the phenomenon of fandom…toward an understanding of why fandom is a fundamental and widespread social role in contemporary western society” (5). One-fourth of the chapters deal with slash alone.

This fascination with slash remains, even as fandom diversifies and queerness proliferates in online spaces and elsewhere. Sheenagh Pugh’s *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context*, published in 2005, not only gives slash its own chapter, but also discusses it in seven of the other nine. Published in 2006, the edited collection *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* devotes a third of its chapters to slash and slashers (Busse and Hellekson, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*). Additionally, a search through library databases reveals that more than 100 articles on slash have been published in academic journals in 2016 alone.

Much of this investigation has revolved around the “why” of slash in one way or another, though little agreement as to an answer exists. Through this scholarship, several competing theories emerge about both why women write it and whether or not it serves any kind of liberatory purpose; most of these revolve around its treatment of sexuality and gender. Christine Scodari approaches slash from a feminist perspective and argues that, at least in some cases, slash can be an exercise of misogyny—even in source texts with strong female characters, slash writers still prefer male/male stories (128). However, the majority of scholars approach it from the perspective of queer theory instead, focusing not on what slash writers are not doing (writing heterosexual romances) but what they are doing with gender and sexuality. Henry Jenkins, for example, proposes that slash is a form of art that pushes back against the normative construction of male sexuality and predominant gender stereotypes to instead explore “a fluidity of erotic identification,” engaging in “an explicit critique of masculinity” (*Textual Poachers* 189, 219).
Echoing Doty’s argument about queer readings being erroneously dismissed as “subtextual,” Sara Gwenllian Jones, however, claims that slash does not resist a dominant reading of characters’ heterosexuality, but is “an actualization of latent textual elements” in the text itself (82). Meanwhile, Noy Thrupkaew claims that slash is a refreshing approach to sexuality and gender that does away with the tired heterosexual tropes of typical television romances.

This integration of queer theory and fan studies informs a great deal of my analysis in this project. Much of the existing scholarship either narrows in on one genre of fan fiction from one or two shows, broadens to look at a genre such as slash and its wider conventions, or examines fan fiction and many subgenres from a distance that allows for little close textual analysis. All of these approaches have yielded important insights, but none of them examined the intertextuality between subgenres and fandoms to see not just how slash, for instance, operates, but how it operates in conjunction with femslash and how both operate alongside het. As I pointed out above, scholars have sought to locate queerness in the fans or in the text, but little research has examined the ways in which the two intersect. Few, if any, have examined femslash or the ways in which fans interpret and reconstruct female characters (Russo 6). Even fewer have examined other non-normative relationships to question the ways in which they challenge heteronormative scripts. Those that have tend to focus on how one particular pairing or relationship functions, without examining it in a larger context (Tosenberger; Geraghty).

With this in mind, I do not engage solely with slash, but examine multiple forms of relationships involving male and female characters in both same-sex and opposite-sex configurations. Chapter 1 lays the foundation with a more thorough articulation of queer and media theory, which I then use to analyze the source texts of the four television shows. In Chapter 2, I focus on specifically on slash arising out of the source texts’ bromances, working
with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s homosocial/homosexual continuum. I both extend this analysis and address the dearth of femslash scholarship in Chapter 3, which uses Adrianne Rich’s lesbian continuum to explore fics with female/female romances written for characters who are best friends in the source text. In both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, I focus primarily on queer theory’s resistance to binary categorization and the bisexual erasure that has girded up much analysis of fics queering characters.

For Chapters 4 and 5, I dive into fan fic genres that have even less attention given to them than femslash, even though both explicitly challenge the ideology of institutionalized heterosexuality and heteronormativity. I tackle consensual, adult incest fics in Chapter 4, drawing heavily on Foucault and Rubin, and the premise that the incest taboo is a social construction created to ensure heterosexual exogamy. In analyzing these fics, this chapter closely examines the deployment of patriarchal power, the nature/culture binary, questions of female sexual agency, and issues of consent. Finally, in Chapter 5, I take Rubin and the body of theory critiquing the ideology of monogamy with me to venture into the world of polyamorous fan fiction, putting it into discourse with the other three chapters as it illuminates the heteronormative ideology that lies at the heart of almost all fan fiction, supporting both cultural definitions of romance and the normative structure of narrative itself.

While I have divided the chapters by types of relationships, the same characters show up in multiple relationships in fic through the project, often written by the same authors. As such, I examine the characters, fic and relationships not just from one position, but several, and consider how their construction in different relationships and sexualities intersects with the notion of fluidity and latent textual elements, both. This fluid examination also allows me to directly consider claims such as Scodari’s that argue that fan fiction is less resistant and subversive to
dominant cultural representations than most scholars seem to believe. Examining only four shows does not provide enough data to make generalizable statements about all fan fiction, but does offer enough to determine the existence of a pattern of engagement with source texts in a certain manner. Thus, in this project, I seek to bridge the gaps that keep inquiries segregated and offer a multi-level analysis of the complicated ways in which fans engage with, resist and reinscribe hegemonic norms, intersecting with a wider struggle of identity construction and the tensions between it and fluidity in a binary-driven culture.
Chapter 1: The Textual Source

“Did you just try to prove your straightness by quoting a Lady Gaga song?”

Introduction

Any creative endeavor by fans begins with a source text. Thus, while the focus of this project is on the potential for subverting institutionalized heterosexuality in specific sub-genres of fan fiction, this initial chapter lays the foundation with the television shows that inspired those fics. I expand on the function and prevalence of the heterosexual script in particular, and its use as an analytical tool in critical media studies, and its ongoing deployment in popular texts. Neither the source texts nor the fan fiction I examine in this project exist in a vacuum: the fan fiction draws most directly on the source texts, creating dialogue with them and with each other and responding to their polysemic possibilities; the source texts arise from a cultural industry that seeks to capitalize on the broad appeal of its narratives and characters for popular and commercial success. Mass audiences are made up of multiple subcultures and subjective spaces, so television shows must try to find the elements these various audiences have in common (Fiske, *Television Culture* 37). Oftentimes, these common elements arise from a shared dominant ideology produced by a medium that relies on shared textual conventions (Fiske, *Television Culture* 37). Thus, the depictions of characters and their relationships are more likely to fit into a conventional, heteronormative frame than not. For example, the 2016-2017 broadcast television

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5 (Texts From Last Night, “#63538”)
season had 895 regular characters on scripted shows; only 71 of them were LBGTQ characters (GLAAD).

Similarly, despite vocal calls for changing the expectations surrounding gender roles and performance, the heterosexual script is still prevalent on television shows, and still has a strong influence on viewers, especially teenagers who are developing their personal sexual scripts. While sexual scripts change over an individual’s lifetime, adolescence is a critical developmental time for building the foundation for choices regarding sex, love and relationships, and the sexual scripts adopted during the teenage years will likely at least “influence the lives, values and choices of individuals throughout later life stages” (Sakaluk et al. 518). Thus, mass media’s influence over these personal sexual scripts creates a cyclical pattern that can perpetuate the dominant heterosexual script supporting institutionalized heterosexuality. Evidence suggests that more egalitarian scripts are beginning to emerge among some adolescents, but the traditional heterosexual script is still strongly present, and, further, seems to be more prevalently accepted by young women than men, though young men also internalize many of the underlying premises of the script (Sakaluk et al. 518). Therefore, given the heavy marketing of these shows to teenagers, and their activity in fandom, I begin this chapter with a brief review of literature exploring how the heterosexual script in general positions men and women in relation to sex and relationships and the effects this has on young adults’ psychosexual development. From there, I examine the particular enactment of sexual scripts in the canon romantic relationships in Revolution, The Vampire Diaries, The Originals and Teen Wolf and fandoms’ seeming distaste for many of them.

The second half of the chapter looks more broadly at gender performance and presentation of the characters on the shows, in relation to both appearance and behavior—it is
here that the shows seem to subvert gendered expectations the most, allowing characters of both genders (none of the source texts include transgendered characters) far more latitude in deviating from traditional norms of masculinity and femininity. Finally, I turn to queerness in the source texts. Three of the four texts are supernatural texts, and the fourth, Revolution, is post-apocalyptic science fiction. Thus, all the texts are situated within the broad genre of speculative fiction and outside of life as we experience it. Theoretically, speculative fiction allows for greater exploration and potential subversion of the normative values of a culture (Russ 90–92). Vampire and supernatural narratives, especially, provide “an almost automatic” narrative through which to explore alternate, and potentially subversive, visions of sexuality and desire (Leavenworth and Isaacson 119). Therefore, I also discuss the potential inherent queerness in some of these texts, as created, especially given how much fan fiction involves queering characters.

**Living within the Heterosexual Script**

The concept of the heterosexual script arises from scripting theory, specifically from sociologists Simon and Gagnon’s sexual script theory (Gagnon and Simon; Kim et al.; Sakaluk et al.; Masters et al.; French and Neville; Cabrera and Ménard). Sexual scripts are “scripts” learned from cultural observation and education “that define what counts as sex, how to recognize sexual situations, and what to do in relational and sexual encounters” (Kim et al.; Simon and Gagnon). The heterosexual script in particular is highly gendered, largely conforming to essentialist gender norms, which it then perpetuates. Mass media serves as one of the four main forces for gender socialization—the process of learning the social controls and expectations that sustain the traditional differentiation between male and female (Emolu 22; Mullins 21). Much of this socialization occurs through repeated exposure to gender stereotypes and reward for behaving in accordance with them.
Popular culture, especially that aimed at teenagers, is saturated by the heterosexual script, and multiple studies have supported social learning’s theory that “television is a source of observational learning [where] viewers model the behaviors they see being rewarded [and] avoid the behaviors that are punished” (Kim et al. 146). In the dominant heterosexual script, women long for love, while men seek sex; women should be sexually passive, while men act as the aggressors; women should be the gatekeepers, providing a check on male sexuality, but still be available sexually and put men’s sexual needs above their own; meanwhile, men focus on the performance side of sex and are responsible for their partners’ pleasure (Kim et al. 146; Sakaluk et al. 517; French and Neville 371; Dana Ménard and Cabrera 242). Despite the many feminists and others who argue against the salience of these roles, studies show that many of the sexual scripts are still robust and accepted among young adults. For instance, one study examining the sexual scripts still accepted and enacted by emerging adults found that the traditional scripts they support include the distinctions between men’s seeking sex while women seek love, and that men are always ready for sex, while women set the limits (Sakaluk et al. 528). The heterosexual script expands outward from sexual encounters, as well, to teenagers commonly defining masculinity as “toughness, competitiveness, and heterosexual prowess,” and femininity as encompassing “weakness, physical appearance and the control and shaming of female sexuality” (Kågesten et al. 25).

One study focused specifically on the deployment of the heterosexual script in television shows that teenagers regularly watch, grounding it in both scripting theory and previous research into the silencing of female desire and slut-shaming and the balancing act women do to be sexually alluring and available to men, but not too much so (Kim et al. 154). The authors conclude that, indeed, the heterosexual script still playing out in most television shows is “the
story that ‘real men pursue sex’ and that ‘good girls set sexual limits’” (Kim et al. 146). Of the different elements of the script the authors coded for, the three top ones encompassed these elements: that men are defined by sex, that women should objectify themselves as part of attracting men, and that, while men are judged by their sexual prowess, women are judged by their sexual conduct (Kim et al. 150–152). Thus, one of the most common elements still easily identifiable in popular television, and one which showed up repeatedly in *The Vampire Diaries* is what Jana Kim and her colleagues call the “Good Girl Code” that comes largely from the part of the heterosexual script that denies women’s sexual desire and positions them as the checks on male sexual aggression, which I discuss in the next section (Kim et al. 148).

*Good Girls vs. Bad Girls*

Despite seeming advances in sexual freedom for women, heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality and hegemonic gender roles still inform, and to some extent control, how sex and gender operate in our culture. Through these concepts, Deborah Tolman argues that female sexuality, and the battle over it, has been at the heart of women’s oppression and suppression, and forms the foundation which replicates patriarchal power. The femininity which comes out of heteronormativity constrains the ways in which women are supposed to think, feel and behave. A large part of this reveals itself in the double standards which pervade our understanding, still, of sexual politics and “proper” sexual behavior.

The history of the representation of sexual activity in America is rooted in the discourse of romantic love—sex merges two souls and marriage binds them legally before they come together and prove their love by merging physically as deeply as one can by forming a child that is made up of each of them (Canaan 187). This discourse began changing with the sexual revolution of the 1960s, forming a new sexual domain which openly confronts the lines of power
and divorces sex from marriage and procreation (Canaan 189). However, fifty years later, a backlash against this new sexual domain persists and young women (a target demographic for at least three of these shows) are most vulnerable to it.

In the 1980s, Joyce Canaan conducted an ethnographic study of a group of high school girls, including in-depth interviews and group discussions to examine how they were navigating issues of desire post-sexual revolution. Much of her work involves analyzing the narratives the girls told her and each other about sexual regulation. In looking at these narratives the girls tell and those told about them, Canaan illustrates the lines we attempt to draw to divide “good” sex and “bad” sex. At first, and on paper, they seem simple in a world and time where the dominant script was (is?) romantic love: “good” sex happens when you are in love and the sexual act is a culmination of your expressed love—a physical act cementing the emotional connection; “bad” sex is everything else, especially anything deemed “kinky” or not normal (202–203). Good girls only have sex when they’re in love and they only have the “right” kind of sex. Bad girls have sex for fun, they want it. It is every piece of rhetoric out there that lends itself to victim blaming, which, indeed, is what happens when a “bad” girl in a narrative is gang-raped (197).

Thirty years after Canaan conducted her study, more current research indicates that not much has changed. In Dilemmas of Desire, Deborah Tolman reveals that society still considers female desire—especially that of teenage girls—to be unspeakable and dangerous: “Even as we enter the twenty-first century, the possibility that girls might be interested in sexuality in their own right rather than as objects of boys’ desire is met with resistance and discomfort” (D. L. Tolman 1, sec. 1, para. 6). She goes on to report that, “Teenage girls continue to be denied entitlement to their own sexuality, and girls who do defy the irrepressible double standard continue to do so at their own risk” (D. L. Tolman 1, sec. 1, para. 6). We are not so bothered by
the fact that girls are having sex—because we expect boys to, and girls, well, they do just give in, don’t they?—but when confronted with evidence of girls’ sexual desire, society often reacts with “shock, a diagnosis of pathology, and impassioned calls for the imposition of social controls” (D. L. Tolman 1, sec. 1, para. 9).  

Jessica Valenti aims much of her work at fighting these narratives, which she calls “the purity myth.” Regarding the backlash against perceived hook-up culture, she declares, “Girls ‘going wild’ aren’t damaging a generation of women, the myth of sexual purity is” (Valenti, The Purity Myth 9). Valenti asks how the act of having sex can make a woman dirty, but leave a man clean. She exposes the levels of control and derides any system which says that a good, moral girl is one who hasn’t had sex and a bad girl is one who has—never mind things like compassion, kindness, generosity, courage or integrity (The Purity Myth 12). Pursuant to the tenets of the purity myth, all that matters is if you haven’t had a penis inside of you. Once that happens outside the sanctity of marriage, you’re “damaged goods.”

“I don’t want a boyfriend; I want a distraction”

This sense of being “damaged goods,” is one that is mostly lacking from the four shows. As we’ll see below, Rebekah and Hayley’s sexuality is presented as problematic on The Vampire Diaries, as a major conflicting message to the one which is otherwise pro-female desire. However, as protagonists on The Originals, their desire and sexuality is normalized, like Elena and Caroline’s. While Klaus repeatedly tries to curb Rebekah’s sexual expression, the narrative and other characters recognize his attempts for what they are: assertions of patriarchal control which Rebekah repeatedly rebels against in her search to find her own life and path. The larger narrative celebrates this for her, and though she has probably had more lovers than any other

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6 Lydia Martin in Teen Wolf (“Tattoo”).
female character on either show, *The Originals* depicts her as a confident, 1,000-year-old vampire who enjoys sex—even as she does long for the heteronormative ideal life of a husband and children that being turned into a vampire denied her. Meanwhile, Hayley’s sexual and romantic desire forms one half of the core-romantic relationship on the show. Klaus may attempt to belittle her as his “drunken one night stand” when he’s angry, but that has more to do with attempting to deny her an equal voice in family discussions (since she’s usually siding against him) than judging her for the sexual act. Even so, the other characters counter his comments by asserting that Hayley’s proper identity is the mother of his child and part of their family, end of story. No one else cares how it came about, so, like with his attempt at controlling Rebekah, Klaus is clearly shown to be in the wrong.

Through both *The Vampire Diaries* and *The Originals*, Hayley is presented as sexually free and sure of herself. In an argument with Elijah, who refuses to act on or even declare his feelings for her, Hayley tells him, “I live in the now. If I feel something, I act; if I want something, I take it” (“Apres Moi, Le Deluge”). She never apologizes for who she is, and, ultimately, she becomes the catalyst for change in his life, after 1000 years. When they finally consummate their relationship, they do so after she has agreed to an arranged marriage in order to save her pack and her daughter. She tells Elijah about her choice and adds that it wouldn’t be fair to her new husband for her to still be involved with Elijah after she’s married. Elijah tells her to marry Jackson, for her people and her daughter, but pulls her in for a passionate kiss which she meets with equal passion before hopping into his arms and ripping his clothes off (fully demonstrating her earlier “If I want something, I take it.”) (“The Map of Moments”). The night is clearly framed as a one-time thing, a saying goodbye to something they can’t have, at least right now, and she confesses spending the night with Elijah to her fiancée. Although she clearly
expects him to condemn her, she doesn’t apologize. He accepts the information, and her, without any recrimination. Thus, rather than condemning what could be seen as infidelity, both the show and the characters frame her night with Elijah as a moment out of time, a bittersweet expression of a love put on hold.

The girls on *Teen Wolf*, too, enjoy sex for its own sake, even outside of relationships. Lydia, especially, is shown to have a voracious, unashamed sexual appetite and to be quite comfortable with her own sexual prowess. When Allison calls her on the way she keeps acting like she’s not smart or capable in front of her boyfriend, suggesting Lydia “stop pretending to suck just for his benefit,” Lydia responds, “Trust me, I do plenty of sucking *just* for his benefit” (“Pack Mentality”). Notably, this is the only direct reference to oral sex on any of the four shows. Although this seems to put Lydia in the category of the girls who just have sex for their boyfriends’ pleasure, not their own, future incidents show this isn’t the case. Similarly, her growth into someone that does not “pretend to suck” for anyone is a major part of her character arc, and the narrative clearly marks this as the better choice.

After breaking up with Jackson, Lydia goes through a series of one-night stands. Season 3 opens with her getting ready for school: the camera pans to her bed, where an older, naked guy is looking a little bemused that she’s just leaving him there. When he asks if they can go on a real date, she shoots him down with a look; when he asks if they can have sex again, she flashes him a bright smile before heading off, leaving him in her bed (“Tattoo”). While Allison tries to get her to admit she’s acting on a broken heart, Lydia refuses to be drawn into an analysis of her sexual behavior as anything but her own desire. “I don’t want a boyfriend,” she tells Allison. “I want a distraction.” At that moment, Aiden and Ethan—twin brothers who are werewolves—
walk by the girls, and Lydia’s reaction echoes stereotypically male fantasies as she tells Allison, “Mmmmmm…twins,” before heading off after them (“Tattoo”).

As one of the twins is gay, she doesn’t get to live out that fantasy, but she does start a mostly-purely sexual relationship with the straight twin, Aiden. Aiden turns out to be one of the main antagonists, trying to kill her friends, but this doesn’t stop Lydia from sleeping with him. Even though he is an Alpha werewolf and antagonist, she is still the one who is more sexually aggressive. After sneaking into an office at school, the two are making out heavily when Lydia demands, “What are you doing?”

Confused, Aiden asks, “What do you mean?” Lydia’s attempt to clarify—“I mean your hands”—just leaves him more confused. Clearly assuming that she must be setting a sexual boundary, like girls are “supposed” to do, he protests, “They’re on your waist!”

Instead of pushing his hands away or ending the make-out session, Lydia responds, “I know.” Aiden looks more confused, and she huffs, “What am I, a nun? Put them somewhere useful” (“Motel California”).

The other girls on the show aren’t quite so sexually aggressive, but none of them are apologetic about their own desire. Allison attempts, once, to set a sort of standard for when sex is okay in a relationship, but Lydia shoots that down. In its place, she asserts her own take on sexual expression, including that girls can and should seek it as much as boys do. Thus, when Allison tells Lydia that she and Scott are going to study that night, Lydia tells her, “Studying never ends with just studying. It’s like getting into a hot tub. Somebody eventually cops a feel.” Allison asks her what she’s saying, and Lydia shrugs and responds, “I’m just saying…you know…make sure that he covers up.” Allison looks bemused, and Lydia laughs, punching her

To Allison’s attempt to assert there is a “proper” timeline for sex in a relationship (“Are you kidding? After one date?”), Lydia responds, “Don’t be a total prude. Get a little taste” (“Magic Bullet”)

Malia, too, has a very direct view of sex being something pleasurable that there should be no shame in. Granted, she spent eight of her sixteen years as a coyote, so her grasp on human social rules is nearly nil, but this only highlights that the limits placed on girls’ sexual desire are social and cultural, rather than something innate about female sexuality. Malia’s position is that sex is natural and feels good and, ergo, they should do it. She becomes the voice questioning a lot of social rules, a voice that calls the status quo into question in many ways, not just with sex. Her direct attitude and disregard for social constructs mirrors Hayley’s: notably, Hayley, too, spent a lot of time on her own, traveling from werewolf pack to werewolf pack, and not spending too much time with humans. Their sexual “morality” is that of the wolf and coyote they are: the narratives neither glorify nor fetishize this, nor do they attempt to change the girls. Instead, they use the girls’ confusion and refusal to conform to illustrate the lack of coherent logic in a standard that says women should not be the sexual aggressors or feel desire on their own.

Similarly, Revolution portrays feminine desire as the same as male desire, in most instances of its expression. Of the four shows, Revolution includes the fewest sexual or romantic subplots overall, though the world is still highly sexualized. A clear patriarchal culture has taken hold in the post-apocalyptic world, which is common in post-apocalyptic fiction, and masculine desire is visually prioritized: all the prostitutes shown in the show are young, nubile, scantily clad women, for instance, usually with a male pimp (Lavigne). Many minor male characters act

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7 Though less so by the narrative itself, as I discuss below
as if women only exist to fulfill their desires. However, the female characters we come to know best over the course of the series express their sexuality openly and are not shamed for it by the other characters, who usually do not even comment on it.

Even those women who violate the heterosexual script by not just desiring sex, but by actively seeking sexual relationships outside of their established partnerships, are not overtly shamed by other characters for desiring more than one partner. Instead, any shame leveled at them (which is fairly minimal) is for betraying the promises and bonds of marriage or friendship they made, and the men they cheated with are equally shamed for their part in the betrayal, if not more so. This is even more evident as none of the cheating occurs with unconnected partners: Rachel is married to Ben but has an affair with his brother, Miles; Emma is engaged to Miles, but sleeps with his best friend, Bass. If anything, the shame evidenced in the text is on the parts of Miles and Bass for betraying their brotherly bonds, for coveting their brother’s girl, as it were. In Emma’s case, the only sign of anything being wrong in her sleeping with Bass comes when Bass tells Miles about it nearly thirty years later and apologizes. It turns out that Miles was aware of the affair, and the child that resulted from it, and held no lingering anger at either of them. When he and Emma interact, it is as good friends, and when Emma and Bass speak of their night together with each other, it is coded as an instance of young love, with Emma confessing that she loved him, as well as Miles, which shocks Bass as she never admitted that back then (“Home”).

Rachel and Miles’ affair, while she was supposedly committed to his brother, is portrayed as something to regret, something broken and also betrayed, through most of Season 1. They attempt to be together in Season 2, but continue to encounter obstacles that go back to an inherent wrongness in what they had done. The nanotech that caused the Blackout become sentient at the end of Season 1 and seek to understand human experience. One method they use
to do this is by infiltrating characters’ thoughts and causing them to hallucinate interactions, often based on their regrets. Under this influence, Miles hallucinates a conversation with his brother, who accuses him of stealing his family—Rachel and Charlie. Not fully realizing it’s a hallucination, Miles “kills” his brother rather than apologize, a fact he keeps to himself, until the nanotech reveal it, telling the other characters that Miles isn’t really the hero he claims to be (“$#!& Happens”). The entirety of Miles and Rachel’s relationship seems to be summed up in Miles’ comment in the Season 2 premiere that bad things happen when they’re together (“Born in the U.S.A.”). Even when he’s telling her that thinking of her got him out of a deadly situation, he adds that she killed the world, and he put the nail in its coffin, and calls them quite a pair, highlighting their destructiveness again (“Tomorrowland”). Still, the shame is not in Rachel’s wanting, and her desire is even blessed by her daughter, who encourages the two to give a relationship a try, seeming a stand-in for Ben as she gives this permission (“Declaration of Independence”).

Conversely, sex outside of marriage which offers no betrayal to anyone is hardly remarked upon by men or women. Charlie sleeps with Jason, and while people do not approve because they keep ending up on opposite sides in the wars, Charlie’s budding sexuality isn’t chastised (“The Longest Day”). In the Season 2 premiere, while searching for Bass so she can kill him for causing her father and brother’s deaths, she hooks up with a bartender, something portrayed as nothing but a pleasurable sexual experience for both her and him, despite them being strangers (“Born in the U.S.A.”). The following morning, she finds out that the bartender was part of Bass’s army and has seen him recently. Charlie, who has been searching aimlessly for the man, learns where he is and continues her quest—information she would not have had if she’d followed the heterosexual script. Additionally, her finding him—and not killing him—sets
up the rest of the season, and much of its conflict. While less of a plot catalyst, her attitude when she hooks up with Connor, Bass’s son, later in the season, is very similar. She tells him explicitly that the only reason she slept with him is that she was bored and he was cute, and she’s not looking for anything more than that (“Happy Endings”). Despite this being as casual as her earlier one-night stand with the bartender, rather than the start of a relationship, Charlie looks highly satisfied at the end of it.

In both instances, she also appears, like Lydia, Malia and Hayley, to be the sexual aggressor—pushing the bartender against the wall as they kiss and positioning herself atop Connor. She is strong, independent, and seeking her own pleasure. While Bass is furious at discovering Charlie and Connor together, the reasons for his outrage are unclear and varied and arguably come more from jealousy than any disapproval of her having sex (“Happy Endings”). There is a hint of patriarchal outrage when he tells Connor to stay away from her because Miles won’t like it and they need Miles. Presumably Miles wouldn’t like it because of protecting Charlie, but his reasoning could easily be because Connor is a Monroe and have nothing to do with the sex itself. Either way, the assumed outrage from Miles never comes—he doesn’t even comment on it, and when Rachel finds out about the two young people hooking up, she basically shrugs it off, though her father calls Charlie’s behavior “wild” (“Exposition Boulevard”).

Likewise, bounty-hunter-turned-rebel Nora’s sexual behavior is never remarked upon. She and Miles engaged in a relationship for some time in the years before the show begins, with no form of commitment, perhaps even seeing other partners, though that is never quite clear. The one time they have sex in the show, it is Nora who comes to Miles, offering them both comfort in the midst of war, and though they are both a little awkward afterward, no one comments or cares, and Nora clearly doesn’t think she has done anything wrong (“The Love Boat”). Neither
does she offer any excuse or evidence shame when she speaks of the child she miscarried, one that she conceived in a relationship with a man she had no serious interest in. The focus of the story she tells Charlie about it revolves around her grief over the loss of her child and her lack of grief over losing the man, too, who had been unable to accept her independence (“No Quarter”). There is no indication in her telling or Charlie’s reaction that she should not have been seeking sexual pleasure, or that the pregnancy was a negative consequence of doing so. Indeed, her sense of loss is for the child she wanted very much, showing the pregnancy as a positive consequence of an otherwise unremarkable sexual encounter.

Sex, then, is presented as something which provides pleasure for women as much as for men—sometimes in the context of a loving relationship, but just as much so when engaged in for nothing but physical pleasure. While the world in which they live is a hypermasculine one and seems to privilege male sexuality and carry troubling levels of male entitlement, the central characters themselves do not show evidence of this entitlement or need to confine female sexuality, and female desire is accepted and portrayed as normative without any discussion or requirement for emotional connection. The women on the show may fall in love and may want relationships, but this is not tied to their sexuality, which they can take care of devoid of emotional attachment.

While The Vampire Diaries does maintain a large portion of the heterosexual script, especially with its focus on women longing for love and the idealization of the monogamous couple, it, too, tosses out the part of the script which denies female desire. The girls and women on the show want. They like sex. They pursue it, even. While Jenna may tell Stefan that he’s not staying the night with her teenage niece, she doesn’t shame Elena for not being a virgin (“Children of the Damned”). It never even comes up. Kelly Donovan is not pleased when she
finds Caroline and Matt half naked on the sofa, but it’s because she doesn’t like Caroline for other reasons, not because she’s half-naked (“A Few Good Men”). Caroline and Tyler have a discussion in which Caroline admits that, like him, she’s horny all the time (“The Birthday”). Elena admits to sexual, physical desire for Damon long before she’ll admit that she’s having emotional feelings, as well, and when she starts to reconnect with Stefan while with Damon, it’s the physical flutter, the pulse of her desire that pushes them toward a physical act (“Miss Mystic Falls”).

Sexuality as Male

Where the shows push back some of the heterosexual script as it relates to women’s supposed role as gatekeepers who act as checks on male sexuality and do not embrace their own, the male characters’ relation to sex as part of their masculinity is not challenged. Other characters may disapprove of their choice of partners—on The Vampire Diaries, Elena is upset when Damon sleeps with Rebekah and on The Originals Elijah does not approve when he finds a witch who has tried to harm their family in Klaus’s bed—but not their seeking out sex (“All My Children”; “The Big Uneasy”). Similarly, on Revolution, Bass is extremely upset at finding Connor and Charlie together, but that upset is based purely on the fact that Connor chose Charlie, as he tells him: “We’re in New Vegas, literally surrounded by whores. You choose her?” (“Happy Endings”). Rather, that men will seek out sex, even with inappropriate people, seems taken as a given and to validate the piece of the heterosexual script that says, “real men pursue sex.”

On the other hand, the shows do not generally depict the male protagonists as sexually aggressive, or even initiating sexual encounters, let alone as being defined by their pursuit of sex. Much of this is likely due to the balance struck with the female characters actively pursuing their
own desires. However, unlike many other shows, the male characters rarely, if ever, sit around and talk about a need to have sex, or being horny or discuss their sexual prowess and conquests or, even, talk about how attractive certain women are. Of the four shows, Revolution engages in this the most, but even those are small moments in the overall show, unlike those found in the studies above, and often come as memories or very rare off-hand comments. In the pilot episode, Bass is in the middle of texting a 22-year-old, who is about to send him nude pictures that he never receives as the Blackout occurs and his phone dies (“Pilot”). In another flashback, he and Miles laugh about the memory of a one-legged stripper Bass hired for Miles’ 21st birthday (“The Dark Tower”). These snippets support comments other characters later make: Rachel describes Bass as having been a womanizer, and, later, Miles tells the rebels that he can get to Bass because he knows everything about him, including “the women he bangs” (“Chained Heat”; “Kashmir”). However, despite a brief glimpse of him sleeping with a naked, nameless woman in one scene and another of him flirting in the background with a girl in a casino, Bass is the only protagonist who never has sex on screen, and those glimpses combined with the flashbacks above and Rachel and Miles’ comments make up less than two minutes of the entire series. The male characters who do have sex in an episode do not pursue the encounter, however, but respond to their female partners’ initiative (“The Longest Day”; “Happy Endings”; “Austin City Limits”).

Comments or scenes of male pursuit, conquest, or even physical need for sex are just as rare in the other shows, even though more characters engage in on-screen sexual activity. On The Vampire Diaries, Tyler makes a comment to Caroline about a sexual dry spell, but it comes in context of them discussing their new supernatural senses and how it leaves both of them always horny—thus linking that need for sexual release to something beyond gender that they both share.
(“The Birthday”). Male characters on *The Originals* and *Teen Wolf* definitely express attraction and sexual desire, but generally for female characters they have an emotional attachment to, not the pure physical desire or objectification commonly associated with male sexuality via the heterosexual script. Female characters do sometimes function as gatekeepers, but it is just as rare.

When moments of men activity pursuing sex and objectifying women do occur, they are generally portrayed negatively, not as a “natural” or innate male behavior. Instead, they often are enacted through some form of sexual violence by villainous (at the time) characters, and, more often than not, are about control, not sexual desire. For example, in Season 1, while still the antagonist, Bass’s threats to both Rachel and Nora come with sexual overtones. With Rachel, these overtones are mostly physical—crowding in her space, pushing her down on a desk and looming over her, gentle touches while threatening her (“The Plague Dogs”; “Ties That Bind”). When he captures Nora, he makes comments about how he’s always wanted what Miles has while touching her, and, when she attacks him, he bends her over the table, pressing into her from behind as he threatens her (“Clue”). He kisses Rachel, too, in a moment that seems driven as much by frustration as any actual desire, and throws it back out there that, at least once, they did have sex in the years after Miles left (“$#!& Happens”). She reminds him that she was his prisoner, but whether she means that she didn’t consent, or that she was trying to get closer to him to get him to set her free is not clear. That Bass thought it was consensual, however, is, and the matter is never settled because they never refer to it again.

Similarly, on *The Vampire Diaries*, Tyler and Damon both have instances of predatory, sexual aggression. Early in Season 1, a drunk Tyler almost rapes a girl in the woods, only stopping when he’s physically pulled away from her by another male character (“Pilot”).
Damon’s active pursuit of physical pleasure also comes laced with power. Often, his random seductions are as much about blood as they are sex. He seduces and compels both Caroline and Andie into being his girlfriend, using them for blood and, in Caroline’s case, information (“The Night of the Comet”; “Crying Wolf”). Andie he does seem to develop some feelings for, and, eventually, sends her away so that he will stop hurting her, but the majority of their relationship occurs while she’s under his mind control (“Klaus”). None of the other characters approve, with Stefan telling him that she’s not a wind-up doll, but none of them intervene, either (“Crying Wolf”). On Teen Wolf, Peter’s use of Lydia to resurrect him, similarly comes from mind control and carries a lot of sexual overtones: he causes her to hallucinate him frequently, sometimes as himself as a teenager (“Abomination”; “Venomous”; “Frenemy”). In that guise, he flirts and semi-seduces her into a passionate kiss, until she realizes who and what he is (“Restraint”). Afterward, he behaves a lot like Bass does with Rachel with lots of intimate touches and moments of making himself comfortable on her bed (“Party Guessed”).

Despite the fact that these moments are negatively portrayed, they carry with them little to no consequences for the men involved who are the protagonists. Tyler’s attack on Vicki in the woods is never mentioned again, and Damon’s crimes and violence are regularly forgiven. Matt is the only character to continue to hold Damon’s past actions against him, and to rebuke the others for how they always forgive the vampire, but he focuses mostly on the deaths at Damon’s hands, particularly his sister’s. Bass, too, seems to never have his moments of sexual violence held against him, but the fact that he caused the death of Rachel’s son—and everyone but Rachel seems to forgive him for even that, with Charlie going so far as to indicate she considers him family in the series’ finale (Parrott and Reed, Revolution: Endgame - Part 2 9). Peter, too, is generally villainized because of the blood on his hands rather than his sexualized violence. The
show only makes one gesture to his use of Lydia when they first see each other a few months later. Notably, that one moment is one of the only times Peter actually looks ashamed of himself, while he refuses to admit his non-sexual violence was wrong (“The Girl Who Knew Too Much”). Bass, Tyler and Damon generally also have these moments of looking ashamed of themselves, or even apologizing, and that seems to suffice, which seems to indicate a trivializing of at least their sexual violence compared to murder. That trivialization stands in contrast to the moments of female desire and sexual agency and that the female characters generally drive the romantic and sexual encounters among the main characters, complicating the resistance to the heterosexual script.

A double standard emerges for the men, as well, as divided into main characters and minor ones. While the main male characters are forgiven for their sexual violence, the other villains who do so are not, especially on Revolution. For instance, Rachel kills Sargent Strausser, who threatens to rape her and Charlie; a drug-dealing pimp in Season 1 and a pimp who chains Charlie to a bed to let his clients rape her in Season 2 both die very shortly thereafter, and it is Bass’s saving Charlie from five men who drugged her and intended to gang rape her that begins their tenuous alliance and ultimate shift from enemy to family (“Sex and Drugs”; “The Patriot Act”; “Nobody’s Fault But Mine”; “Fear and Loathing”). Perhaps the fact that the main characters go on to do positive things and are, at least somewhat redeemed that differentiates them, but the contrast is nevertheless notable. Thus, the romantic and sexual encounters may play out often in resistance to the script, but these other moments reinforce the gender hierarchy and power relations established by institutionalized heterosexuality, which lead to both characters and audiences either forgiving male characters for violence against women, or indicating that sexual violence is less of an offense than other kinds of violence.
Identifying the “Bad” Girls: Slut-Shaming

Another complication of the shows’ potential resistance arises from the fact that only some women can deviate from the Good Girl Code without being judged, and that when that judgment comes it still regularly goes to judging a woman’s worth as a person based on her sexual conduct. In the study mentioned above examining television shows for their deployment of the heterosexual script, one of the interactions which would warrant the Good Girl Code was “the use of words that link a woman’s sexual history to her value as a person (i.e. slut, tramp, skanky, loose, jezebel, bimbo)” (Kim et al. 148). In fact, within the incidences of the Good Girl Code, the one with the highest prevalence was women being judged for their sexual conduct. This included direct comments on a specific woman by someone close to her (Spike telling Buffy not to be a prude, for instance, because he knows what kind of girl she really is) to passing comments labeling other women as whores, sluts, tarts and tramps (152). Unlike the shows in that study, however, most of the shows I examined resisted this tendency toward judgment entirely, with their only discussions of female desire the ones I explored above. However, The Vampire Diaries complicates its this resistance by identifying the “bad” girls/antagonists via derogatory terms tying their worth as people to their sexuality—i.e., slut-shaming. While the male characters on the show all seem to exist in a moral shadow zone, drifting from hero to villain in ways that complicate their labeling as protagonists or antagonists, most of the girls are firmly categorized as “good” girls or “bad” girls and stay that way. Much of this is reflected in the way the female characters speak about their own and other girls’ desire, as the message begins to turn from those where the “good” girls enjoy sex to one where the “bad” girls’ sex lives demonstrate their larger moral failing.
Originally used as a synonym for a female servant, “slut” has become a powerful word in regulating female sexual behavior. This began in the seventeenth century, as the word began to be associated with the inability of servants to stay as clean as their employers. Lapses in cleanliness, of course, meant someone’s morals had lapsed, as well, and slut joined drab, slag, trollop and slattern as a word that indicated pollution. Women in the households took the word from the men and used it to attack other women and demonstrate their own virtue in a “performative speech act” that “turned a sexually exploited woman into a source of filth” (Attwood 234). And somehow it stuck. “Often a thinly veiled attack on the attractive ‘assets’ of the girl or woman in question, slut shaming is, of course, a deeply classed discourse, whereby associating ‘sluts’ with ‘prostitutes’ and ‘whores’ her sexual value is to be diminished and kept in check” (Ringrose and Renold 335). Being sexual, for a woman, may be hot, but it still isn’t seen as “classy” (Attwood 239). Thus, in general, to be called a “slut” today infers a sexual promiscuity or embrace of sex for pleasure or outside of the confines of a relationship.

Although some have tried to reclaim the word “slut,” and get rid of its negative connotations, Elizabethe Payne argues that “slut” and its synonyms are still “among the most common and the worst possible pejoratives hurled in the high school social arena, equivalent in regulatory power to fag and dyke” (317). The reason for the power of naming someone a slut lies in the fact that it is not just an insult aimed at sexual behavior. Instead, a woman’s entire worth as a human being is aligned with her perceived sexual practices. “Breaking the rules of gender and sexuality,” Payne argues, “Makes a girl a bad person” (318). Thus being a slut becomes a judgment on a woman’s total morality, her worth and even her humanness. Jessica Ringrose and Emma Renold describe slut-shaming as “that familiar form of sexual regulation that circulates between girls and women when they attack other women for dressing like ‘sluts’ and ‘whores’ to
‘get male attention’” (335). Valenti, too, calls slut-shaming something women do to other women, and her first piece of advice for fighting the double standard of sexual freedom is, “[f]irst and foremost, stop calling other women sluts!” (He’s a Stud 3). However, the term does not always correlate to actual sexual conduct, but to perceived conduct. Similarly, it can be deployed as a word that devalues a woman by reducing her to a negative sexual stereotype by its mere expression, regardless of her sexual conduct. In any of these situations, the word ties a woman’s value to her perceived “purity” or lack thereof, reinforcing the “damaged goods” rhetoric of the Purity Myth, even in places that seem to support the expression of female desire in multiple forms.

*The Vampire Diaries* is rife with these moments, and, generally, they fall on the good/bad girl division, reinforcing the message of tying a woman’s sexuality to her worth as a person even farther. On the good girl side, we have Elena, Caroline and Bonnie as our main characters, and, more tangentially, Jenna, Rose and Andie. On the bad girl side: Katherine, Rebekah, and Hayley, and, tangentially, Sage, Vicky and Nadia. These classifications in and of themselves, given the shifting morality among the male characters, are highly problematic. Arguably, all of these characters (except Jenna and Andie), have lied, manipulated, and killed people. If we shift our gaze, any of them can be seen as sympathetic and could be protagonists or antagonists (as Rebekah and Hayley’s change to the protagonists of *The Originals* demonstrates). So, unable to distinguish the heroes and villains by their behavior, *The Vampire Diaries* resorts to the age-old way of letting us know who the bad girls are—by calling them sluts.

“Slut” is a far worse insult, it seems, than “liar,” “manipulator” or “murderess.” Indeed, when these other words are used to describe one of the girls, they are inevitably used as adjectives for the appositive noun “slut.” Those crimes are what the girls do; sluts is what they
The "bad" girls are lumped in, then, by nomenclature, with the throw-away bit-character girls. Many of these girls are also deemed sluts or who must argue they are not sluts; they serve no purpose to the plot, and sometimes do not even appear in the narrative except by reference to their sluttiness. Thus, they could never even be mentioned or seen, and the plot would be exactly the same. Their only purpose, then, seems to be to allow one of the "good" girls to assert her own moral superiority. By lumping the more fleshed out "bad" girls together with these nameless or even faceless girls through the appositive use of "slut," the narrative implies that the are equally worthless, good for nothing but being used and tossed aside.

Caroline seems to use the word the most virulently and the most traditionally, with both moral and classist tones. When Tyler mentions that he has to pick up Sophie (a character we never actually see) to bring her to Elena’s birthday party, Caroline laughs in disbelief and asks, “You’re bringing Slutty Sophie as your date?” Tyler answers that things have been slow in that department for a while, indicating that he’s bringing Sophie because of her reputation and his belief she will have sex with him (“The Birthday”). Similarly, when Caroline finds out that Matt is bringing Rebekah as his date to the Homecoming dance, she goes off on a rant to Tyler about how Matt is a good person and should not be hanging around with “evil blood sluts” (“Homecoming”). Unlike Sophie, there is no evidence of promiscuous sexual activity on Rebekah’s part (in fact, her deepest desire is to find true love and have a family and someone to share her life with—the ultimate heteronormative dream), but in indicating her evilness, “slut” is what Caroline resorts to. She does the same thing to Hayley, calling her “that little werewolf slut” when Hayley interferes in Caroline and Stefan’s plans to get rid of Klaus (“O Come, All Ye Faithful”). At this point, Hayley has not even slept with anyone on the show, so Caroline’s
comment is not about her sexual activity, but attributing evilness to her via naming her promiscuous.

The insult takes on clear classist tones, as well, defining sluts as women who are unclean in ways that “pure” people should avoid. In “We’ll Always Have Bourbon Street,” Caroline, Elena and Bonnie are hanging out in Damon’s bathroom, drunk, and Elena comments on how great the tub is, and asks why they don’t hang out in it more often. Caroline quickly asserts, “I’ll tell you why. Cooties. Think of all the germ-ridden skanks that Damon has lured into his den of iniquity” (“We’ll Always Have Bourbon Street”). Note that the girls Damon brings home for one night stands are not just sluts, they are “germ-ridden skanks,” indicating not only moral but physical filth. Rebekah and Sage’s interactions are also distinctly classist. At different points, Rebekah calls Sage “trampy” and “trashy.” Sage asserts that Rebekah and Klaus didn’t just treat her as a whore, but a “peasant whore,” and in an earlier scene refers to Rebekah as “that elitist, Original bitch” (“1912”; “Break on Through”; “The Murder of One”).

Other instances of slut shaming occur in the text without direct use of the word. For example, Caroline and Bonnie slut shame Elena for sleeping with Damon, who then defends herself by turning the slut shaming back on Caroline. Yes, *Elena* slept with Damon, but only after two years of him being there for her. Caroline slept with him the day she met him, which by implication in Elena bringing it up, makes her sluttier than Elena (“We’ll Always Have Bourbon Street”). Notably, this is the first time anyone even tries to defend themselves after being slut-shamed, and even then, Elena points out the hypocrisy of being shamed for behavior Caroline exhibited, but fails to acknowledge the gendered double standard inherent in slut-shaming.

In Season 5, Caroline gives in to Klaus, and hooks up with him in the woods in an instance of “just this once” (“500 Years of Solitude”). When her friends find out, she finds
herself on the other side of the slut-shaming (“The Devil Inside”). Out of this comes the only other two times anyone has spoken up about slut shaming and tried to defend against it. The first still comes, like Elena’s defense of herself by slut shaming Caroline, in an instance of slut-shaming for slut-shaming. When Caroline attempts to shame Matt for hooking up with Nadia, Nadia calls her out on it, saying, “You've done nothing but judge Matt since he walked through that door, when everyone here knows that you're not exactly winning friends with your romantic choices” (“No Exit”). This is the first, and so far only, time in which someone speaks up against someone slut-shaming someone else (as opposed to in their own defense). Notably, it is an attempt to shame a man that provokes the rebuke, though nothing is said of this gendered distinction.

The show almost addresses the gendered double standard a few episodes later when Caroline confronts Tyler on the unfairness in shaming her for sleeping with Klaus. Nadia and Katherine have just died, Nadia because of being poisoned by the venom in Tyler’s fangs when he bit her. While they are talking, Caroline sleeping with Klaus comes up, with Tyler once again acting as if she’s done something shameful. Caroline finally snaps, defending herself with reference to Tyler’s killing of Nadia:

Caroline: Your hybrid bite just killed someone and no one even batted an eye. I sleep with the wrong guy weeks ago and I don’t hear the end of it. How is that fair?

Tyler: I don’t know, Care. Maybe people just expect more from you.

Caroline: Why? Because being good comes so easy to me? Well, guess what, Tyler? It doesn't. I am a vampire. I have the same impulses as you. So, I'm allowed to make some mistakes along the way. Yes, I slept with Klaus. But only after you walked away from
me. That was my choice and I am living with it and I don't need to be hearing about it every 5 seconds. So, just get over it or get out of my life, but... I'm done feeling guilty.

(“Gone Girl”)

Caroline pointing out that her sexual behavior is viewed as somehow worse than murder is a pretty powerful moment, but there is no follow through. No one recognizes the gendered double standard explicitly (Damon sleeps with Rebekah and Stefan with Katherine, even after both girls either tried to kill or did kill the protagonists’ loved ones), and this precludes an assessment of the situation by the characters from that standpoint. Beyond this, the show’s creators seem to use this scene more as the defense of a beloved character rather than showing reflection on the way shaming has been used against other characters. Beyond the overt shaming, then, The Vampire Diaries also engages in more subtle forms of slut-shaming, not by what it does say, but by what it doesn’t.

Gender Performativity

Visual Performance of Gender

Judith Butler argues that the performance of gender is what renders individuals culturally intelligible (23). Part of this intelligibility includes visual performance, though what appears “masculine” or “feminine” is culturally and historically determined through arbitrary conceits of fashion and personal grooming. However arbitrary, though, culturally we give these visual cues significant weight in assigning them to the performance of gender: even though they are being challenged more openly, today, they still have broad regulatory power. Take, for instance, sexual discrimination based on appearance in the workplace. In Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins (1989), the Supreme Court ruled that Title VII prohibits employers from requiring employees to conform
to their gender’s stereotypes (Brennan). This would seem to have settled the matter, but the ruling has been applied inconsistently. On one hand, the Ninth Circuit has held that harassment of a victim for failing to live up to the standards of gendered behavior is illegal sex-stereotyping (Nichols v. Azteca Restaurant Enterprises, Inc.). Similarly, the Seventh Circuit held that a man cannot be harassed at work because “his voice is soft, his physique is slight, his hair long, or because in some other respect he exhibits masculinity in a way that does not meet his coworkers’ idea of how men are to appear and behave” (Doe v. City of Belleville).

However, despite the clear application of Title VII to gender stereotyping, courts have consistently upheld sex-specific dress codes in workplaces. These dress codes, for instance, prohibit male employees from wearing skirts or make-up while requiring female employees to do so. Women can have piercings and long hair; men may not (Grossman). To get around Title VII, courts often uphold these codes by granting an employer the right to run his business the way he sees fit, at least in regard to the presentation of his employees to the public. In 2006, the Ninth Circuit upheld Harrah’s policy requiring female employees to curl and tease their hair and wear colored nail polish and a certain kind of make-up, while men had to keep their hair short and not wear make-up or nail polish (Jespersen v. Harrah’s Operating Co., Inc.). The court ruled that sex-differentiated dress codes are legal under Title VII, so long as they do not “impose unequal burdens on men and women” (Grossman). However, Harrah’s code put substantially more of a burden on women: all men had to do was keep their hair and nails trimmed and not put on polish or make-up. Women were required to “tease, curl or style” their hair, wear a specific style of make-up and have a perfect manicure, all of which takes both time and money to maintain (Grossman).
Like these cultural norms and, sometimes, requirements, about visual performance and indicators of gender, the characters on Revolution, Teen Wolf, The Vampire Diaries and The Originals all visually present as their identified gender in an intelligible performance. For example, even though the female characters may often wear pants and get dirty, they are still all also presented as traditionally sexy or beautiful (i.e. they all have long hair and wear make-up and figure flattering clothes, even in battle). Male characters, likewise, visually present as “masculine” (they all have short hair, most of them with well-defined physiques; none of them wear skirts as anything more than a joke, and the only make-up might be eyeliner for more “Goth” characters).

More so than the women of Revolution, the girls on The Vampire Diaries, The Originals and Teen Wolf all present as very feminine, if within a varied range from “tomboy” to “pageant queen.” Caroline, Rebekah and Lydia are always perfectly dressed, with their hair done and make-up flawless, and are more likely to be seen in skirts than pants. When they do wear jeans, their tops are still very feminine, with ruffles and lace—no t-shirts or flannel for them. While Caroline and Rebekah, particularly, are physically strong as vampires, they often present visually as physically delicate. Given both are pale, blonde and blue-eyed, as well, they visually echo the Victorian ideal of femininity, the “angel in the household.” By contrast, Lydia may be fierce mentally and physically, but she’s also tiny at 5’2” and physically weaker than the other characters on Teen Wolf. Her supernatural power is mental and emotional, and she often becomes the victim of physically stronger foes. Her appearance reinforces this physical fragility as well as her sexual desirability: beyond the perfect hair and make-up, she is also almost always in a short skirt and heels (despite knowing how often she’s likely going to have to run away from monsters).
By contrast, Hayley and Malia are more masculine in their physical presentation. Hayley is a self-confessed tomboy, almost always wearing jeans or shorts and combat boots. If she does pull on a dress, it’s usually more comfortable than elegant—and she’s still in boots. Before taking her to a party, Tyler feels the need to tell her to wear a dress (“My Brother’s Keeper”). Rebekah brings her a wedding dress before she marries Jackson, telling her she “can’t get married in skinny jeans and combat boots” (“I Love You, Goodbye”). When she and Elijah are going to go scope out the enemy at a party, he has to pick out a dress for her, because all she can do is stare blankly at Rebekah’s assortment of dresses (“A Walk on the Wild Side”). However, despite this down-to-earth, tomboy persona, she, too, almost always has perfect hair and make-up. By contrast, Malia’s hair and make-up are a little less perfect. After spending eight years in the woods as a coyote, she has little sense of fashion or appropriate behavior or dress. She’s far more likely to be found in jeans and a t-shirt, hair generally a bit mussed, and minimal, if any, make-up. The two girls’ very down-to-earth, tomboy-ish appearances do correlate with their being a werewolf and were-coyote. Thus, their ineptitude at traditional feminine conceits like curls and heels, are also tied to their dual natures: their wolf-sides are too impatient and focused on immediate needs and impulses to have the patience required by beauty routines.

Elena and Allison fall somewhere between the two other groups of girls. Both can be found somewhat equally in jeans versus dresses. They tend to have simpler hair and make-up than their friends or rivals—very natural, girl-next door. Indeed, one of the ways to distinguish Elena from Katherine, her doppelganger, is that Katherine will have her hair curled and styled and be wearing make-up, where Elena only does so for parties. As Allison trains more as a hunter, her attire becomes more masculine, and she, too, seems to reserve the more feminine look for special occasions.
The appearances of the girls on *The Vampire Diaries, The Originals* and *Teen Wolf*, especially the more feminine ones, do not necessarily signify anything about their behavior, attitudes or capabilities. Rebekah may look sweet, but she’s one of the deadliest characters on either show. Elena may look like a tomboy much of the time, but she’s far more likely to end up being the damsel in distress than Caroline. And although she doesn’t do well at picking them out, once in a dress, Hayley moves as confidently as she does in her jeans. Their clothes, then, reflect some of their personalities, but cannot be indicators of much else. Despite their generally feminine presentation, the fact that appearance and behavior or capability are divorced shows a point of resistance to gender norms linking feminine appearance to weakness and passivity and more masculine appearance to competence and strength.

On *Revolution*, this is not always the case. As on the other shows, the women in *Revolution* tend toward clothing that reflects who they are, but also what they can do. The only women regularly in dresses are those living in the cities, behind walls, or with the protection of their armies. Julia Neville, an officer’s wife who rarely leaves the city, for instance, is almost never without a male protector—her hair is long and well done, her nails manicured, her make-up impeccable, and she’s almost always in a dress. She uses her femininity and sexuality as her power, but that is her power—she can’t hunt or survive in a post-apocalyptic world without a protector. Likewise, minor characters Cynthia and Emma may not wear dresses as much as Julia does, but they are presented as more delicate and feminine and both fill the damsel role, though they die before they are rescued. The women in the background who are dressed in a highly sexual way or scantily clad are prostitutes, and none serve any purpose in the text but to hang on men’s arms, look pretty and be available for sex.
The women who are independent and capable of surviving on their own are far more masculinized in dress, to the point that Charlie and Nora, like Hayley and Malia, are a little unsure about what to do in highly feminine dresses. They are both always in pants, combat boots and jackets, unless forced into something else. Of course, they’re also generally wearing tank-tops or midriff shirts under said jackets, to remind viewers they are women. Duncan, as well, a war lord who leads her own war tribe, dresses the same as they do, and the attire seems to signal capability and competence, which all three exhibit. Of course, all three still have impractically long hair, but it’s rarely perfect and they almost never have on visible make-up. However, a dangerous connotation begins to emerge in this clear segregation of women by dress code.

For instance, Rachel is the one female character who seems to flow easily between femininity and masculinity in both apparel and attitude. However, her clothing seems to delineate her capability in that moment. When she is unstable, weak and in need of being rescued or taken care of, her attire becomes more feminine. When she is in charge and determined, she appears in more utilitarian clothes. Likewise, when Bass captures Nora, the first thing he changes is her attire: he sends her a delicate white dress to wear to dinner with him (“Clue”). Although she tries one moment of defiance, strong, capable Nora disappears into a Nora who is held prisoner and tortured (“Clue”). Although she holds out against the torture for three weeks, something that demonstrates her capability and toughness, her trauma renders her fragile and she is dead within two episodes (“Children of Men”; “The Dark Tower”). The attire-attitude shift does not work as clearly with Charlie, but, as one of the protagonists, her character arc seems to be implicated in her different reactions. Early in Season 1, a still innocent Charlie is put in the position to play assassin. To carry out the mission, she puts on a dress to play on her femininity and vulnerability, but she also ends up demonstrating that femininity, unable to follow through
on the assassination and needing to be rescued by Miles (“Sex and Drugs”). However, in Season 2, after she’s been through a war and has blood on her hands, things go differently—though not easily. When Gould, a pimp and thug in New Vegas, captures her and tries to put her to work as a whore, he changes Charlie’s clothes, like Bass does to Nora, and leaves her chained to the bed in the scanty attire that accentuates her sexuality. In this case, however, she is able to rescue herself by killing the client who attempts to rape her, and goes on to rescue Bass and his son Connor, as well. However, her escape is a close call, with her overpowered more than once (“Fear and Loathing”).

What potentially emerges from these patterns is a message that while women may be capable of fighting like men and protecting themselves, to do so, they must put away even the guise of femininity and be more masculine: to be feminine is to be vulnerable. Therefore, while Revolution gives us these strong, capable female characters, their more traditionally masculine attire doesn’t just signify practicality: it signifies capability, thus privileging masculinity by maintaining the binary of masculine/feminine with all the “weaker” attributes being ascribed to femininity. Similarly, Lydia is arguably the most feminine of the other female characters; she is also the one most often in danger and who has been victimized more than once.

While variation exists in the way the male characters present as visually male, like the female characters, none of them defy or even challenge gender stereotypes in physical characteristics. In an essay examining masculinity and “non-obvious” gay characters in 1970s television, Joe Wlodarz argues that the masculine gay “not only tests the presumed security of the homo/hetero binary, he also incites a complex interrogation of masculinity and male sociality,” which was profoundly destabilizing and disturbing to normative masculinity (89). Similarly, in these source texts, even the gay male characters all present as traditionally
masculine. Wlodeaz argues that in the 1970s, especially, these “non-obvious” gay characters evidenced an anxiety at the blurring of the line where “masculine” equaled “heterosexual”: straight characters had to negotiate that anxiety, and the implications for the erotic identity of straight masculinity (96). However, in these newer texts, that anxiety is notably missing. Where shows like *Glee* still exploit that tension, the shows in this project do not.\(^8\) That said, however, it is still worth noting that the way the shows break gay stereotypes is by ensuring gay characters “act like men,” not women, which still posits the feminine side of the binary as the weaker side, the one male characters should not seem like, which ultimately reinforces heteronormative gender expectations.

*Gendered Behavior: Being a Man and Acting Like a Lady*

Institutionalized heterosexuality defines gender—specifically what is “masculine” and “feminine”—not just by visual recognition, but also by attributes, which are often opposites. The heterosexual script lays these out in relation to sexual or romantic scripts, and many of the parts of the heterosexual script coincide with attributes displayed outside of sexual situations—for example, that men are more aggressive and women are more passive. These gender attributes are at the heart of gender essentialism, which claims that they are innate, or natural, attributes. This binary division persists, even within the language used to challenge the innateness of these traits: for instance, arguing that many women can have “masculine” traits and men possess a “feminine” side still code the attributes signified by those words as gendered. The use of these essentialist attributes in media perpetuate their normalization, and while society may be having the discussion about how innate these attributes are, the studies I discussed above in relation to the heterosexual script demonstrate how entrenched that acceptance still is.

\(^8\) At least for the openly gay characters. The ambiguity in *Revolution* causes reactions from one character that seem to evidence that anxiety, which I will examine more in the next chapter.
While the characters on the shows all visually present within the expected norms of their gender, all four shows do resist offering characters that conform to these essentialist gender attributes, at least to some extent. Interestingly, this coincides with the court’s decisions in sex-discrimination cases: sex-specific appearance codes that reinforce traditional gender stereotypes have been upheld, but harassment based upon stereotypes of gender attributes has been declared unlawful. However, while the shows push boundaries here and there in some interesting ways, for the most part, they end up reinforcing the gender binary as far as attributes, as well.

Of the four shows, *Teen Wolf* offers the greatest variation of expressions of masculinity and the strongest condemnation of traits generally seen as masculine, like competitiveness, aggressiveness and dominance. While all of the shows allow their women to be strong, at least to a point, *Teen Wolf* is the only one that allows its men to be “weak,” without shame or censure within or by the narrative. In fact, *Teen Wolf* often transposes the binary, and what was once considered “weak” in a man—like gentleness and compassion—is now shown to be a strength, while traits traditionally considered “masculine” are often portrayed as weakness. *Teen Wolf* does this through the character of Scott McCall more than any other.

Scott is the central character, the show’s lead. When the show opens, he’s asthmatic, failing most of his classes, warming the bench in lacrosse and at the bottom of the social ladder (“Wolf Moon”). His one friend is Stiles, geeky and brilliant, but just as socially and physically inept. The show traces Scott’s rise to hero and leader—in many ways a traditional hero’s arc—but does so in a less archetypal way. After becoming a werewolf, Scott does get stronger and more traditionally masculine in appearance: he cuts his floppy, always in his eyes hair; he starts to work out to build up on his werewolf strength leading to a more well developed musculature and inclusion among the list of often-suddenly-and-gratuitously shirtless male characters on the
show. However, his mental and emotional journey lacks the aggressiveness, competitiveness, hard, emotionally shut-down traits that accompany, for instance, Miles and Bass’s attempts to save the world.

Scott feels – he refuses to shut it off. He struggles to master the aggressiveness of his wolf side, but in a world where werewolves routinely chain themselves up for years not to kill just for fun on the full moon, Scott only has to use the chains once (“Lunatic”). He is still affected by the full moon, and he gets more irritable and more prone to aggression, just like the other werewolves do, but he masters himself, not out of a need for mastery, but because the thought of hurting someone sickens him. As the series progresses, he does use violence, but only ever as a last resort and only in defense of himself or someone else—and he never kills. After defeating an enemy who threatened everyone Scott loves, who had killed dozens of people, Scott offers him mercy (“Lunar Ellipse”). After winning a fight against Peter, who meant to kill him and take his power, Scott spares Peter and turns him over to the authorities rather than kill him and eliminate the threat (“Smoke and Mirrors”). He prefers to talk to his enemies and try and reason with them rather than fight them. Rather than fake confidence, he admits when he has doubts in himself and his abilities; he asks for help when he needs it and relies on his friends; he sees the best in people.

He wants to protect even those who have stood against him, those he doesn’t trust: for example, after establishing an uneasy truce with Derek’s pack in Season 2, he and Isaac embark on a dangerous mission. Even though they have both recently said how little they trust each other, and even though Isaac’s violent ways of getting things done upsets Scott, before they separate, Scott tells Isaac to be careful. Isaac, thinking Scott is worried about the character they are there to sedate before he can cause more harm, says he doesn’t think the drugs will hurt him.
Scott looks confused and then corrects Isaac: “I meant you. I don’t want you to get hurt” (“Raving”). Within the world of Teen Wolf, to become an Alpha, normally a werewolf must kill another Alpha. However, Scott’s journey to being a hero culminates in Season 3 when he becomes a True Alpha—one who ascends to Alpha status by virtue of will and character alone (“Lunar Ellipse”).

Where the hero’s journey often ends on an achievement like this, Scott’s continues, as life does. More enemies come and Scott has to find a way to deal with the responsibility of being an Alpha, including protecting his pack, while still clinging to who he is. Ultimately, the show continues to remind us that while he is a True Alpha and a werewolf and facing increasingly dangerous foes, he is also a teenage boy, and that sometimes involves breaking down and crying in his mother’s arms, because he’s lost and doesn’t know what to do or how to be who people need him to be (“Status Asthmaticus”). While many heroes have crises of faith, the archetype of the lone, male hero generally means they brood and work through things somewhere on their own. They may rant or get drunk and let it out at a loved one, but they don’t cry. They certainly don’t go cry to their mothers—in fact, that’s a taunt thrown at little boys who cry if they’re bullied or hurt: “go home and cry to your mother like a baby.” But that reading is absent from Teen Wolf’s narrative. Being willing to be vulnerable, to have doubt rather than arrogance, to be scared and overwhelmed, to have a close, trusting relationship with his mother without anyone deriding him for it: these are the things that Teen Wolf offers not just as part of who Scott is but as proof that Scott is the hero. He messes up, sometimes big time, but he apologizes and attempts to make it right. He’s imperfect, but trying, and that struggle is as much emotional as it is physical, and Teen Wolf lets him be all of that and shows it as a strength, not a weakness.

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Scott’s refusal to kill is even more pronounced when you consider that this genre of show is almost always about killing the bad guys: Buffy had a sacred calling to kill monsters, *Supernatural’s* Sam and Dean are always hunting monsters and while they have been convinced to spare some who really aren’t hurting anyone, that’s rare; Oliver Queen on *The Arrow* came to the realization that killing people the way he was made him no better than the bad guys, but only after he got a lot of blood on his hands. On most shows based around any sort of action or battle, faceless bodies drop without comment, so long as they are the bad guys (or simply not friends of the protagonists). A common trope runs through multiple forms of media, where the hero is motivated by vengeance for losing his family. Some characters might question if that is a healthy path, but usually it is portrayed as natural. This is true on the other three shows in this project.

Season 2 of *Revolution* launches with Charlie hunting for Bass, planning to kill him in vengeance for her father and brother’s deaths, and everyone else kills their enemies without a second thought; even when telling Bass they are the good guys now, and need to act like it, Miles still only refrains from killing the bad guys when it’s strategically favorable to let them live. Likewise, the characters, including the protagonists, on *The Originals* regularly kill anyone who crosses them, and often just those that annoy them, though they do not quite qualify as “heroes.” But on *The Vampire Diaries*, to get vengeance on Klaus, the characters portrayed as the “good” guys plan to kill all of his siblings, as well, considering them collateral damage. Elena, the moral center of the story, is the only one who tries to protest, and eventually even she goes along with the plan (“The Murder of One”). The shows may have a different morality about innocent bystanders who die, but they all see little problem in eliminating the bad guys, or those who have caused them significant grief. *Teen Wolf* refuses to do that – it kills people off, yes, and sometimes problematically, but even the monsters’ deaths matter. Scott is the one at the core of
this, demanding it of his friends. Scott’s moral refusal to kill is so strong that when his best friend kills someone, even though it is justified, it drives a wedge between them for a while (“Status Asthmaticus”).

In contrast to Scott, consistent antagonist Peter Hale is arrogant, closed off emotionally, aggressive, competitive, domineering, and disturbingly entitled in the way he physically interacts with other people. He seeks vengeance and power, and it proves to be his downfall more than once. He is not the only “villain” on the show whose motive arise from vengeance--for the first four seasons, each antagonist’s motive is seeking vengeance, some justified, some that start out that way, but which become monstrous. Very few people, however, would question Peter’s need for vengeance—in fact, it’s the type of vengeance that generally motivates anti-heroes if not heroes, the same type that motivates Revolution’s Charlie in going after Bass.

Ten years before the start of Teen Wolf, ten members of the Hale family burned alive in a house fire; Peter was the only one to survive (“Co-Captain”). While the fire was officially deemed an accident, in truth it was an orchestrated attack by a hunter who gained the information she needed to carry it out by sexually abusing Peter’s fifteen-year-old nephew (“Formality”). Then she locked Peter and nine other members of the family—many of them children—in the basement of their house and burned it down around them. It takes Peter ten years to recover, even with a werewolf’s healing powers, but when he does, he hunts down the hunter and all of those who helped her by covering it up, and kills them.

Most narratives would consider what Peter did justified and, more than that, a natural, sane reaction. In fact, as far as numbers killed go, the protagonists on The Vampire Diaries and The Originals regularly kill more people for less reason in an episode than Peter kills in five seasons. Yet, rather than being seen as a hero, or even sympathized with, he is referred to,
several times, as a psychopath (“Battlefield”). Thus, the seeking of vengeance, of avenging horrific wrongs done to you and yours which is so often the hallmark of strength—even sometimes to the point of positioning it as a man’s duty to avenge his family—is instead positioned as weak in Teen Wolf. More than weak: it is villainous. This hero who seeks forgiveness and mercy instead of vengeance is not unheard of, obviously: the Christ-like figure willing to lay down his life and refusing to do evil is an archetype in and of itself. Luke Skywalker’s victory over the Dark Side of the Force was refusing to kill the Emperor or Darth Vader, after all. However, for a show in this genre, where violence and death are par for the course, to have a hero who refuses that path, consistently, is rare: even more so when that hero is male.

Teen Wolf’s other male characters run the gamut from Scott to Peter. Derek is a traditional masculine anti-hero: dark and brooding, with a tragic past that keeps him cut off until he is lured back out of his shell, at least somewhat, by finding people to connect with. Isaac is a survivor of paternal abuse, shy and sensitive, who turns violent and brash when he has power given to him finally, but who connects to Scott with almost puppy-like devotion after being shown kindness. Stiles is the geeky sidekick who doesn’t fight very well, but is always ready to try with a bat in hand and who has amazing emotional insight and an ability to really see people for who they are. Each of them represents a different kind of masculinity, but the one constant is that when they act in accordance with a masculinity that values aggression and dominance and being disconnected from others, they suffer; only when they reject that road do they ever find peace and happiness.

Teen Wolf’s female characters equally push back against their stereotypes. Lydia appears at first to be that ditzy popular girl who cares for nothing but her image and dating the right boy,
but it turns out she has the highest grades in school, has finished most of her coursework a year in advance, is aiming to go to Stanford, and planning on winning a Fields Medal. As I mentioned above, she hides that intelligence and fire for much of the first two seasons, worried about alienating her boyfriend, because she loves him and now is trapped in the persona she crafted for him and worried if she breaks it, she’ll lose him. The other characters explicitly challenge her on this, as well as stereotypes about girls who are good at math and science, and encourage her to show her brilliance and step more into her own potential, which she eventually does.

Allison is a warrior, who slides down a dark path for a little while, very much parallel to Charlie’s in Revolution. Both girls suffer the loss of a loved one at the villain’s hands—Peter kills Allison’s aunt, Derek bites her mother, leading to her mother’s suicide (“Code Breaker”; “Raving”; “Party Guessed”); Bass’s soldiers shoot Charlie’s father, and he sends an army after them at one point that guns down her brother (“Pilot”; “The Stand”). Both girls are set on vengeance for a while, and train harder, becoming more proficient in combat and battle (both, also, interestingly with bows of some kind). Both eventually realize they have to let their quest go, for themselves, to be the person they want to be. Allison’s slide is more damaging than Charlie’s, as she takes her rage out not just on Peter, but all werewolves, including those who fought for her and with her. Charlie, too, is more able to forgive and let her hatred go in the face of pragmatic realities; she’s more able, too, to go farther, to embracing Bass as part of her reconstituted family, where Allison refrains from killing Peter, yes, but only because he’s useful.

The men on The Vampire Diaries, The Originals, and Revolution tend toward the more traditionally masculine. Most of them have a bad habit of trying to do things on their own rather than confiding in their loved ones, trusting and working cooperatively. This never works out well for them, but they keep doing it. They tend far more toward emotional stoicism than the teens on
Teen Wolf, but, then, arguably that could be because of their ages (though, given that several of the vampires—centuries old—act like teenagers, that argument loses strength). Of these three, The Originals has the greatest variation in representations of masculinity.

Combined, Elijah and Klaus Mikaelson provide an image of elements of traditional and resistant masculinity always in contrast and flux between the two of them. Elijah is generally stoic and reserved—always in a suit, always with a handkerchief on hand. For a thousand years he has sacrificed his own happiness, his own emotional fulfillment in order to take care of his siblings and see to their needs. Like Teen Wolf’s Scott, Elijah’s selflessness sets him apart. Although hurt when it seems his ex-girlfriend is moving on with one of Scott’s friends, Scott, nevertheless, eventually just wants them to be happy. Elijah, too, loves and loves deeply, but, until Hayley, he always chooses his family over love. Then, with Hayley, he repeatedly puts her needs above his own, demonstrated most poignantly when he tells her to marry someone else in order to save her people and her daughter, and orders Klaus to let them be, because he wants nothing more than Hayley’s happiness (“The Map of Moments”; “I Love You, Goodbye”).

Without a doubt, Elijah steps in as the family patriarch in place of an abusive father and a disapproving eldest brother. He wields his words with authority, even mercurial, selfish, mayhem-prone Klaus listens to when he lays down an ultimatum. Elijah values civility, negotiation and clearly enjoys the finer things in life. People see him as Klaus’s foil, see his restraint and think him the tamer of the two. However, Elijah is just as—perhaps even more—violent than Klaus. His violence, however, always comes with a protective edge. He does not kill for pleasure, like his brother, but he very much finds pleasure in killing those who have threatened his family or others he has sworn to protect. Where Scott refuses to kill on Teen Wolf, even to protect his loved ones, Elijah—arguably the most “heroic” of the men on The
Originals—will kill not only those threatening his loved ones, but often those connected to them, in order to send a message about what happens to anyone who tries to harm them in the future. As discussed above, Teen Wolf’s Peter takes this approach, and is the villain, highlighting the break in this accepted tradition of violence as the purview of the masculine protector/avenger. Revolution’s Sebastian Monroe also shares this Machiavellian take on deterrence, killing not just the rebel who bombs a restaurant and almost kill him and Miles, but also the rebel’s wife and children.

In many ways, Klaus is his older brother’s opposite. If Elijah is selfless, Klaus is selfishness personified. He wants what he wants, when he wants it and how he wants it, and anyone who gets in his way usually ends up dead. While on The Vampire Diaries, Klaus served first as the primary villain, then later, an antagonist who occasionally turned ally when their goals were aligned, on The Originals, he is a protagonist. Of all of the characters who crossed over to the spin-off, he was the one who had the farthest to go to make that switch. That The Originals is a far darker show allows for this, but given that Klaus has been willing to go as far as ritual human sacrifice to get what he wanted, even shifting to view him as an anti-hero is challenging. Much of how the show accomplishes this is through his emotional vulnerability and a tragic backstory (an admittedly common television trope). He and Bass have much in common in this way. In fact, in many ways, the relationships and personalities of the main protagonists on The Originals and Revolution mirror one another.

Much like Elijah, Revolution’s Miles Matheson on Revolution is, in many ways, a perfect example of the lone, male hero. His violence, though just as brutal as Elijah’s, always aims at protecting someone, somehow, not just violence for violence’s sake. More than Elijah, Miles wants to do the right thing for everyone rather than just for family, but his last attempt to do so
resulted in founding a dictatorship with Bass that became more oppressive than the bandits and other militias they were initially trying to protect people from. He tells Bass that he left because it just became “too much blood,” but he attempts to remedy the situation by going to war and spilling more blood, the blood of boys he trained to be soldiers, the blood of civilians caught in the cross-fire (“Nobody’s Fault But Mine”). He created the mess, but he tries to clean it up the same way—he eventually realizes that won’t work, that “it’s time to start acting like the good guys,” but he does that by tricking Bass and using his loyalty against him rather than sitting down and talking to him (“Tomorrowland”). In fact, he attempts to deal with all his problems with Bass with anger, sarcasm and violence. Not once does he sit down and have a talk with the other man; not once does he think to say, “Hey, I think we’re going too far—maybe we need to rethink this.” Instead, he attempts to assassinate him and runs away when he can’t go through with it. When Bass is literally begging him for a kind word, he can’t give it, and his inability to discuss his own emotions sets off a chain reaction that gets yet more innocent people killed (“Nobody’s Fault But Mine”).

Like Klaus, Bass is violent and unstable, aggressive and hard and sharp, but not shut down. If anything, Bass and Klaus both feel too much, and the only thing either wants in the world is to be loved and not alone, to have someone there to share their lives with—preferably Elijah and Miles. Bass’s backstory has him losing his parents and two little sisters all at once in a drunk driving accident, then losing his wife and their unborn child because of a lack of medical care available after the Blackout (“Nobody’s Fault But Mine”; “Dead Man Walking”). And then Miles, the only person he had left in the world, betrayed and abandoned him. Meanwhile, Klaus was abused by his father, turned unwillingly into a vampire and then further cursed by his mother, driven insane by ghosts for over fifty years, abandoned by the woman he loved, and
betrayed by all of his siblings, at one point or another (“Ordinary People”; “Farewell to Storyville”; “Every Mother’s Son”; “The Axeman’s Letter”). When both men fear imminent abandonment, they react with violence—in the midst of which, both often find themselves in tears. They both try to shut down and be as stoic and cut off as Elijah and Miles are, but fail at it, repeatedly. However, where Scott’s emotional nature and clear desire for connection is lauded in Teen Wolf, Bass is drawn as unstable and obsessed by Revolution and Klaus as unreasonable and psychotic by The Originals. They aren’t just emotional, they are too emotional, and that leads to them being disastrous leaders.

Given how both of them contrast with such sharpness to Elijah’s control of his vampiric nature and Miles’ ability to put what has to be done above how he feels, it is hard to not compare the two positions against the traits of traditional masculinity. Miles and Elijah are the strategists. They think rationally; they see long-term; they understand consequences. They do not allow sentimentality to stop them from doing what is necessary. Bass and Klaus are emotional and often portrayed as irrational; they think with their hearts, not their heads; they never think about the consequences of their actions; logic fails to persuade them. Notably, the two “heroes” are those who fall within the bounds of traditional masculinity, especially glorifying rationality, while the two “villains” are prone to an excess of emotion and irrationality which traditional gender norms generally attribute to femininity. Bass and Klaus do things on impulse that never work out well; Miles and Elijah’s rational plans generally are required to set things right.

Similarly, on The Vampire Diaries, Damon Salvatore moves from antagonist to anti-hero, and is also prone to impulsive, emotional decision-making that almost always works out poorly for him. His brother, Stefan, usually presents as the calmer one, far more in control, selfless and giving. When he shifts toward engaging in “bad” behavior, however, he, too, becomes prone to
excess, unable to control himself. Stefan’s villainy comes from shutting off his emotions even farther, which seems to indicate that lack of emotion, completely, is just as bad as too much: one must still be able to feel to be “human,” even men, but they must be able to control it. When over-emotional, the male characters must repeatedly be stopped. When the female characters become irrational or over-emotional, however, they must be humored and comforted until the storms pass.

In contrast to the vampires, the human male characters are studies in traditional masculinity. History teacher Alaric Saltzman enters their world in search of vengeance for his wife, who he thinks was murdered by a vampire (“A Few Good Men”). After learning that isn’t true, he continues in the role of hunter, but as a protective measure—once again, an illustration of where violence for both vengeance and protections is coded as appropriate behavior for a hero. Although Alaric goes through massive trauma, he generally handles it stoically and exactly as Miles does: by making friends with a whiskey bottle. He rarely discusses his feelings, refuses to talk his way through them. The one time he allows emotion to rule after the murder of his wife, he convinces someone to use dark magic to attempt to bring his wife back to life and releases the souls of imprisoned, crazy vampires instead (“Age of Innocence”; “Live Through This”).

Like the girls of Teen Wolf, the female characters on Revolution, The Originals and The Vampire Diaries are all tough and competent. They challenge the coding of several gendered attributes, but usually only those which have been disavowed by all but the most regressive portions of Western culture today. As well as tough, most of the women are also intelligent and shown to be good in subjects like math and science, despite the low rate of women, still, who choose to go into those fields. As mentioned above, Teen Wolf’s Lydia wants to win a Fields
Medal. On *The Vampire Diaries*, Elena wants to be a doctor, and, in fact, two of the three doctors we’ve gotten to know well on the show are women, as well. On *Revolution*, Rachel Matheson is a brilliant scientist.

However, women are only allowed to push back so much against traditional femininity before they are pulled back into it by the plot. Rachel’s husband is also a brilliant scientist. When the two realize the nanotech they created to generate clean energy inhibits it instead, they are faced with a dilemma. Ben wants to sell it to the Department of Defense for money to keep their research afloat. Rachel resists, not wanting to see it weaponized because of the danger it could pose to the world, but she agrees when offered a chance to save her son’s life in return (“The Children’s Crusade”). That Ben wanted to potentially sell the world out for money is never actually addressed, but that Rachel allowed the world to burn for one child is, and she is positioned as irrational for doing so, but… she is a mother. What mother wouldn’t do that for their child? What mother wouldn’t decide to risk burning the world again, just to get vengeance for the death of her child? Miles attempts to talk Rachel out of turning the power back on, pointing out that “there are no good guys” left to stand up to Bass—all of them are just as bad, but Rachel won’t listen (“The Song Remains the Same”). And so, two cities wind up decimated by nuclear bombs. For all Rachel’s brilliance, her “downfall” is her traditional, feminine, maternal emotions.

All of the female doctors on *The Vampire Diaries* are presented as nurturing caretakers, rather than scientists. The male doctors or scientists, by contrast, focus on medical experiments on supernatural creatures, caring more for scientific progress and their own reputations when they’re able to develop cures than they do for the sentient beings they torture and imprison to do so. The one female doctor who tries to use the supernatural in medicine does so with a
recklessness that comes from a need to save people, not a rational one—instead of just saving some people, she inadvertently turns two into vampires who never wanted to be (“Bringing Out the Dead”). The men’s experimenting, then, is portrayed as rational, but cruel—however, their downfalls come from their cruelty, not an irrational mistake. Meredith’s experimenting, however, comes from emotion and backfires on her—she didn’t think through the consequences of her actions.

Other female characters who are presented as smart, tough and competent on all four shows still fall into traditionally feminine roles. Melissa McCall, Scott’s mother is just as capable of using violence, but, like Rachel, her violence is in protecting the teens. She works as a nurse and, despite often knowing more about what’s going on, has to defer to male doctors at work—the only female doctor mentioned is no more than that—a mention, when they report she died off screen. On The Originals and The Vampire Diaries, the two non-doctor female characters with advanced degrees are both psychologists—who focus on getting other characters to talk about their feelings—and are both presented as still students, not licensed practitioners. Hayley has no education, though she’s bright and curious, and lives in a world surrounded by vampires centuries older than her, so while she is physically tough and street-smart, the male characters around her often operate in teacher roles. Rebekah, though as old as her brothers and clearly intelligent, rarely, if ever, shows off her knowledge of the world, focusing more on romance and family.

Revolution’s Nora Clayton is a tough warrior archetype, well-versed in weapons and explosives. She’s a leader among the rebels and, it seems, committed to freeing people from Bass’s tyranny, even though the idea of bringing back the United States at this point is irrational and unlikely. When her motives are revealed, however, it has nothing to do with the greater
good, as it were. She supported Bass and Miles’ regime, worked as their bounty hunter, until Miles left, and, even then, she clearly was not fighting against Bass. Only when she lost her child because of some militia soldiers does she become a rebel—like Rachel, driven to irrational vengeance by the loss of a child (“No Quarter”).

Of the three primary female characters, Charlie is the one who most pushes at stereotypical boundaries by the end of the series. While she starts off a wide-eyed ingénue who “saved” Maggie and will “save” Miles if he lets her (“The Plague Dogs”), she becomes hardened by grief and loss, ruthlessly pragmatic, emotionally shut down and withdrawn. She becomes aggressive, turning to violence first, cold and mocking to people she should care about. And the show positions this as her becoming masculinized, as becoming like Miles. Rachel sees it, sees her similarity to both Miles and Bass, and tries to pull her back (“Why We Fight”). Bass even calls her “mini-Miles,” indicating he sees it, too (“Fear and Loathing”). But she ultimately pulls herself back, finds hope again, after a tragic loss (“Tomorrowland”). That doesn’t change the rest of her behavior, though. She’s still a warrior, she just finds that center, that reason for fighting that isn’t vengeance but protecting others. In the end, she does save Miles, arguably, and she saves Bass, too, or at least pulls him farther along the way toward redemption than Miles is able to do. While she does need to be rescued a time or two, she also turns around and rescues the men, as well. At first, Bass and Miles keep her on the periphery of the singular fighting organism they seem to become when in sync; they give her support roles, try to keep her out of the most dangerous spots, but by the end of the series, she has been fully integrated into their unit, as much a part of them, even militarily, as they are of each other (Parrott and Reed, *Revolution: Endgame - Part 1*).
In general, then, these shows resist defining their characters by gendered attributes, at least to some degree. Few of the women are submissive, the men who attempt to be overly dominant often find themselves losing; at least some men are allowed to be emotional, women can learn to be stoic; most of the women are intelligent and ambitious; everyone, not just the men, tends to be violent and most shows eventually seem to position a healthy balance of these traits as something to strive for—the integration of yin and yang into oneself, as it were.

However, traditional traits and binaries, especially those positioning women as emotional and men being rational, while sometimes subverted in a character are still upheld in the larger narrative. No one may call the men who cry “sissies” (and would likely die horribly if they did) and no one may attribute the women’s irrational decisions to being women, but decisions made from the heart almost always go badly, and the men who are the most rational and logical generally find themselves as the leaders and heroes.

**Queerness in the Text**

Of the four shows, *Teen Wolf* is the most queer friendly, though many critics argue that said friendliness is not nearly as revolutionary as the producers and cast like to make it out to be (Farid-ul-Haq). *The Vampire Diaries* and *The Originals* both have openly queer characters, as well, but despite promising moments, have either failed to follow through on the potential to explore healthy, queer relationships or have fallen into tired tropes (such as routinely killing off their queer characters). *Revolution* has no openly queer characters, and at least one character is openly homophobic, but its text is, instead, latent with ambiguity and possibility, which is both interesting and problematic. Since *Revolution’s* ambiguity makes up a central part of Chapter 2, for now I want to focus on the other three shows.
Of the three shows, *The Vampire Diaries*’ treatment—or lack thereof—of queer characters is the most lacking and problematic. The first gay character mentioned is Bill Forbes, Caroline Forbes’ father. This truly is just a mention, though: the audience learns Bill lives with his boyfriend in a brief comment, when Caroline’s mother tells her that if she’s having trouble with guys, she should call her father instead, because Bill is “successfully dating one” (“You’re Undead to Me”). Later in the season, he gets another mention, as Caroline plans to attend her father’s boyfriend’s daughter’s birthday party (“Let the Right One In”). Bill isn’t mentioned again until Season 3 when he comes back to town to deal with Caroline’s being turned into a vampire, a creature his family has hunted for centuries: “They’re not human. They’re monsters,” he tells another concerned parent (“The Hybrid”).

Many critics argue that the vampire is intrinsically a queer disruption of heteronormativity itself (Leavenworth and Isaksson 120). Dracula, argues Christopher Craft, represents the threat of the homosexual to the boundaries and norms of heterosexuality which Van Helsing must reinscribe by destroying the vampire and “correcting” his monstrosity (Craft 116–117). *The Vampire Diaries* makes this analogy explicit in Bill Forbes’ reaction to his daughter’s transition. His “dealing” with the issue consists of torturing her to get her to deny her now-natural, and necessary for survival, instincts to drink blood. In pain and tears, starving because he has refused to feed her, Caroline asks him “Why are you trying to fix me?” Bill replies, “So I don’t have to kill you!” (“The End of the Affair”). The storyline serves as a heavy-handed condemnation of attempts to “fix” homosexuals through conversion therapy, and the explicit parallel of parents rejecting their children for being queer because they believe it’s a sin, continues to the end. Even though Bill tells Caroline on his deathbed that he loves her and is proud of her, he also chooses death over becoming a vampire, telling her his “strength is all in
my beliefs. Becoming a vampire is wrong, people aren’t supposed to cheat death.” When she attempts to argue, he cuts her off with, “It’s just what I believe. Please respect that” (“Bringing Out the Dead”).

The storyline gains layers, then, as the once-rejecting parent tells his child he loves her, no matter what, which is a message thousands of children no doubt wish they’d been given. However, he still rejects what she is, intrinsically, as wrong. Caroline doesn’t choose to become a vampire. She is turned against her will, cementing her transition instinctually, with no understanding of what she is. After that, she chooses to live, to not kill herself because of what she now is. In effect, then, her father dies still telling her that he loves her, but that she should have died rather than become what she is now. The show gives us the sense that Bill is wrong, but he requests tolerance he has not given. Faith and acceptance, respecting people’s freedom of belief and validating others’ existence are central, contentious issues facing society today. Tackling them has pitfalls for everyone, and they shouldn’t be avoided just because they’re thorny. The conversation needs to be had.

Having Bill be the voice of this conversation highlights the hypocrisy of his actions even farther and makes the point that hating based on differences can infect anyone, even those who “should know better.” However, when the mouthpiece of the conversation is the only queer character on the show, already sidelined, and then villainized, the lesson becomes diluted and can potentially be used as a weapon. Of course, queer characters should not all be the same: true representation would show queer characters with the same diversity as straight characters. But when a show has only a token queer character, who isn’t even a regular supporting character, but one who appears only in five episodes, it potentially does more harm than good to represent him
as a hypocritical bigot who would torture his own child rather than accept her for being different. Pointing out others’ bigotry is a common way to then dismiss bigotry against them, after all.

The Vampire Diaries’ next queer character, Luke Parker, is equally tokenized, though less villainized, in general. His actions often cause more harm than good, but they come from a place of wanting to help, not hate. When the magic his sister is using to keep open a portal to the Other Side starts killing her, for instance, he uses his own magic to break the spell, consequently trapping a dead Damon and Bonnie on the Other Side (“Home”). Feeling bad for that, he tries to help Elena cope with Damon’s loss, but does so by becoming her drug dealer for hallucinogens that let her see Damon (“I’ll Remember”). Eventually, he dies trying to save both his sisters, and in doing so does temporarily humanize his sociopathic brother, though not for long enough, as his sisters end up dead within a few episodes, rendering his own death meaningless in a lot of ways (“The Downward Spiral”; “I’ll Wed You in the Golden Summertime”; “I’m Thinking of You All the While”). On top of being a completely marginalized recurring character, the only reason the audience knows Luke is gay is from his mention in passing of just breaking up with his boyfriend and from Elena telling a friend that Luke isn’t interested in her romantically because “Damon is more his type” (“While You Were Sleeping”; “Rescue Me”). While this does normalize queerness in some ways, it also does nothing for actual representation.

In Season 7, the show introduces Mary-Louise and Nora, who are both vampires and witches, and have been lovers for over a century. They spent most of that century locked away from the world in a hell dimension, so a great deal of their storyline involves them adjusting to the fact that they are able to have an open relationship. The changing ability of women to embrace their own desire also weaves into the storyline, as Nora embraces this greater freedom in both dress and behavior, while Mary-Louise wants to cling to more conservative values and
winds up slut-shaming Nora (“I Carry Your Heart with Me”). Unlike Bill and Luke, Nora and Mary-Louise get a well-developed storyline. While they start out as the villains, like so many other characters on The Vampire Diaries and The Originals, they turn out to be far more complex than that and sympathetic. Just as they find their way back to each other and have joined the protagonists’ side, however, they die—albeit trying to save the others and in a moment very reminiscent of Thelma and Louise—holding hands and racing away in a car that ultimately explodes (“Days of Future Past”). The show received a lot of backlash from fans and critics for their deaths, notably because it happened in the spring of 2016, amidst the ongoing #BuryYourGays backlash (Blackwelder). They were the fifth and sixth lesbian or bisexual female television characters killed off in a month, a trend which continued through the year. According to the 2016 GLAAD Annual Report on LGBTQ Inclusion, 12 of the 28 lesbian and bisexual female characters on broadcast television were killed off by the end of the year; between broadcast, cable and streaming shows, over 25 lesbian or bisexual female characters died in 2016 (GLAAD).

The Originals gives us a gay vampire in the character of Josh from very early on in the first season. While still a secondary character, unlike Bill and Luke whose purpose is to serve the protagonists’ story, Josh has his own storyline, and is far more developed as a character. He does tend to slip a bit into the “gay best friend” category during Season 1, but he isn’t just a sounding board or a sympathetic ear. His own struggles to adjusting to life as a vampire and his search for where and how he fits into the warring factions in New Orleans run in a consistent flow throughout the first season. A new vampire and an outsider to all of the power struggles, Josh joins with lone human character, Camille, to serve in many ways as an audience identification point. The other characters have been entrenched in this world either since birth, or for so many
centuries that they no longer remember what it is to be human and young. Josh, on the other hand, is pulled into the world as a cruel test, a pawn between vampires, and has to struggle to assert and find himself and learn to navigate the world, much as the audience has to.

Season 2 of *The Originals* introduces Aiden, a gay werewolf. Queer critic and blogger polyglotpices argues that, pursuant to the theory of “Magical Obligatory Queer Dating,” when any show has two queer characters with actual storylines, inevitably, they become a couple (polyglotpices). While this theory needs more research to quantify, just as Ethan becomes Danny’s love interest in *Teen Wolf*, discussed below, Aiden becomes Josh’s on *The Originals*. While Ethan and Danny’s storyline gets minimal screen time, however, Aiden and Josh are far more developed as a couple. In fact, they are arguably the most functional couple on the show, in that they actually communicate openly and honestly, rather than scheming and keeping secrets, and actively work to support each other and prioritize their relationship.

In the beginning, they’re on two sides of a warzone, something they realize only after having been messaging each other on an online dating app for a while. Despite that, they still meet for their first date, agreeing that for one night, at least, they’ll forget that they’re at war and just be themselves (“Live and Let Die”). They still struggle with questions of what to do, stuck in what Josh calls a “Romeo and Romeo” situation, but eventually do get together as a couple—and the struggle is one the audience gets as a storyline, rather than having to assume. The two even have a temporary break-up before solidifying themselves as a couple (a common trope of all romances). *The Originals* continues to tell their story, with plenty of on-screen kisses and time in bed and plans for the future. Aiden finally proposes, and the two plan to leave the drama of New Orleans behind and start a life where they can be together. They agree to get their stuff together and meet back in two hours, at which point they are, pursuant to the grand tradition of serial
television, inevitably doomed. Before the end of the episode, Aiden is dead and Josh is destroyed by grief (“When the Levee Breaks”).

Airing in 2015, and not in the middle of a rash of other deaths of LGBTQ characters, the episode did not receive the same backlash as Mary-Louise and Nora’s deaths on The Vampire Diaries. While still playing into the troubling “Bury Your Gays” trope—especially as it was a needless death that served only to further one of Klaus’s schemes—Aiden’s death was par for the course for most romantic relationships on The Originals. After building the relationship since the pilot episode, in the mid-season finale for Season 3, The Originals has Klaus’s love interest die and become a vampire just moments after they have fallen asleep together for the first time (“Savior”). Her becoming a vampire seems to avert the tragic ending, but only for a few episodes; she dies before the end of the season (“No More Heartbreaks”). Similarly, Klaus’s brother Kol and his girlfriend, Davina, are separated first by his death, then, after he comes back from the dead, hers (“I Love You, Goodbye”; “No More Heartbreaks”). Hayley, too, loses her husband Jackson, just as their marriage finally begins to solidify, and then loses Elijah for over five years, just after they have finally gotten together (“A Ghost Along the Mississippi”; “The Bloody Crown”).

Teen Wolf holds the record for the highest number of gay characters of the four shows. Danny Māhealani is a supporting character for the first three seasons of the show. Teen Wolf strives to create an inclusive show, where homosexuality and bisexuality are both normalized, and Danny represents this with both his completely non-stereotypical characterization and the other characters’ acceptance of him. Danny is a player on the lacrosse team, popular in school, and the best friend of Jackson Whitmore, the stereotypical star athlete of the school. Unlike the
frequent portrayal of gay teens in as marginalized socially, Danny is popular and well-liked, both smart and good at sports, and completely comfortable with who he is.

On the other hand, he also exists, like Bill and Luke on *The Vampire Diaries*, almost exclusively to serve the interests of the main cast. While involved in most things that happen at school, Danny is otherwise sidelined and doesn’t help out with the supernatural events like all the other characters do. It turns out he’s aware of them, after all, when he turns down the chance to get back together with his ex-boyfriend by telling him he doesn’t think he can date a werewolf, and in response to a surprised, “You knew?” replies, “Dude. It’s Beacon Hills” (“The Divine Move”). However, this is, to date, his last line on the show, so what seemed like a possible tease of a more involved Danny became his parting line and does little more than point out how marginalized he was for three seasons. While Danny does get a romantic storyline in Season 3 with said werewolf, unlike Aiden and Josh’s, it develops off-screen and we learn no more about him or his life outside of school.

Danny’s love interest, werewolf Ethan, gets more screen time as one of the antagonists of the season and, where his brother never seems to fully repent from his antagonistic ways, Ethan is drawn a little more sympathetically and as struggling to be one of the good guys. He’s the one who explains their past to Scott and the one who breaks even with his brother to help the protagonists more than once. But with Danny’s rejection and his brother’s death, Ethan leaves the show, as well.

*Teen Wolf* promptly brings in Mason at the start of Season 4, to keep a queer character, but Mason is almost more sidelined than Danny was, serving mostly as a side-kick for new wolf Liam and occasionally helping the gang out, but always on the periphery. Like Danny, we know little to nothing about him outside of school. The show has also had a bisexual girl, Caitlyn,
whose girlfriend dies the first time they try to make love, and who serves as little more than a plot device to questions Stiles’ possible bisexuality (“Fireflies”; “Illuminated”). Despite hints of this possibility with Stiles, a main character, the show has, in five seasons, kept it only hints and even those have been nearly absent since he was given a female love interest in Season 4. Thus, while Teen Wolf strives to be more inclusive and representative of queerness in their stories, this inclusiveness remains largely marginalized and the only show of all four to have a fully fleshed-out-given-their-own-story-arc queer couple is The Originals.

**Canon Relationships vs. Fandom Pairings**

Beyond Aiden and Josh, the major couples on all four shows are heterosexual. Many of them also seem doomed. On The Vampire Diaries, Alaric loses the two women he loves to death and every guy Bonnie falls for dies at least once. Similarly, on Teen Wolf, Scott and Isaac’s first love, Allison, dies trying to save them, and Lydia’s boyfriends all seem to leave or die, as well (“Insatiable”). Both shows focus on romance significantly, but both also keep that romance always delayed.

Unlike the mostly teen protagonists of The Vampire Diaries and Teen Wolf, the protagonists of both The Originals and Revolution are mainly adults, and romantic plots are secondary to the main narratives and often sidelined Where the relationships on Teen Wolf and The Vampire Diaries, are routinely thwarted by fate or tragedy, on Revolution and The Originals, romance is consistently sacrificed to and for family. Bass and Emma never get together because he leaves for boot camp with Miles. The potential relationship between Miles and Rachel never comes to fruition, because he leaves with Bass and Charlie. On The Originals, Elijah and Hayley are first thwarted by his desire to respect Klaus’s objection to their relationship, then by her need to protect her pack, and later by his being poisoned and locked into a mystical sleep for five
years. Marcel and Rebekah’s relationship, too, never truly develops because of Klaus’s disapproval. However, Klaus sacrifices his own feelings for his first love when she threatens his family, showing that he, too, values family over romance.

All of these thwarted romances would seem to be prime spots for fan fiction to intercede and provide a different ending, but, as is often the case in fan fiction, fans have rejected many of the canon romances in favor of creating their own. While the disruption of romantic relationships is something which keeps serial television moving forward and audiences engaged, the constant refusal to establish any heteronormative stability leaves open space for queerness and for fandom to play. While some canon couples are immensely popular, often the primary couples about whom fans write their own stories are ones which are never, or barely, seen in the source text. How those non-canonical relationships are created and construed is one of the questions I consider through the rest of this project.

The table below contains the top five popular pairings on Archive of Our Own in each of the four fandoms, along with the percentage of total fics in which the pairing is included. Those which are bolded are ones which have a basis in canon—meaning at least one of the characters has expressed romantic or sexual feelings for the other:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Revolution</strong></th>
<th><strong>The Originals</strong></th>
<th><strong>The Vampire Diaries</strong></th>
<th><strong>Teen Wolf</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charlie/Bass (31%)</td>
<td>Caroline/Klaus (14%)</td>
<td>Caroline/Klaus (17%)</td>
<td>Stiles/Derek (57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bass/Miles (18%)</td>
<td>Hayley/Elijah (10%)</td>
<td>Damon/Elena (15%)</td>
<td>Allison/Scott (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rachel/Miles (7%)</strong></td>
<td>Davina/Camille (10%)</td>
<td><strong>Stefan/Elena (8%)</strong></td>
<td>Lydia/Jackson (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie/Miles (7%)</td>
<td>Hayley/Rebekah (6%)</td>
<td>Damon/Alaric (6%)</td>
<td>Boyd/Erica (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Charlie/Connor (3%)</strong></td>
<td>Elijah/Klaus (5%)</td>
<td><strong>Caroline/Stefan (5%)</strong></td>
<td>Stiles/Peter (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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9 As of December 1, 2015. Numbers do not add up to 100%, because not all fic contains a romantic pairing.
By and large, fans of *The Vampire Diaries* and *The Originals* (many of whom overlap, given the shows are related), seem to respond better to canon interest rather than creating their own pairings, although the non-canon pairings are still well represented. *Teen Wolf* and *Revolution* fans, on the other hand, seem to look toward subtext and other factors in forming the pairings they create alternative narratives for. Of the ten non-canonical pairings (or eleven, counting Caroline and Klaus), eight (or nine) are transgressive in some way: characters are queered, the relationships are incestuous, the characters have a large age gap between them, or one of the characters is a villain, paired with a hero/heroine (and has often caused said hero or heroine a great deal of pain or been openly abusive in canon). Many of them fall into more than one of these categories. As such, while I only explicitly examine the queered relationships and incestuous ones, many of those, or of the polyamorous relationships fans write, also include age gaps and protagonist/antagonist pairings.

**Conclusion**

All four of the shows contain elements of resistance to institutionalized heterosexuality through their handling of the heterosexual script and the heteronormative gendered attributes that uphold it. All four also resist the parts of the heterosexual script which privilege male sexuality and position men as the ones pursuing sex and their own pleasure, and instead depict female characters who aggressively and unashamedly sought their own sexual pleasure. Similarly, the coding of sex as masculinity seems less prevalent than previous studies indicate—male characters rarely talk about sexual pursuit or conquests or their own prowess, nor do they engage in significant objectifying of women, but instead treat women as equals. When male sexual aggression is portrayed, it is generally done by villains and portrayed negatively.
On the other hand, all four shows also uphold parts of the heterosexual script. *The Vampire Diaries* tends to still enact the Good Girl Code in using sexual conduct, or words aimed at it, to judge its “bad” girls and bolster the good girl’s moral superiority, but the other three shows do not. Similarly, while male sexual aggression was portrayed negatively and by villains, the main characters face little condemnation for their sexual violence, especially when compared to the sustained enmity their acts of non-sexual violence incur. The message seems to be that sexual aggression is wrong, but somehow still natural and something easily overlooked in rehabilitating a character. The minor characters who were defined by their violence, sexual and otherwise, all wind up dead; the major ones often became allies of the protagonists, or even protagonists, themselves later in the series.

When it comes to gender performance on a visual level, the main characters are all gender conforming, though the use of clothing to signal more feminine or masculine attributes—and how that could shift with clothing—on *Revolution* indicates a perception that femininity is weaker than masculinity, even if those traits are not tied to biological sex. Conversely, gendered attributes beyond appearance, are more fluid, especially for the female characters. This is very similar to the resistance in the performance of the heterosexual script, which is not surprising seeing that traditionally gendered attributes like masculine aggression and feminine passivity underlie the heterosexual script. Male characters are more gender conforming here than the females, or penalized for it in some way if they are not. For example, male characters like Klaus and Bass who exhibit attributes often coded as feminine—such as excessive emotion leading to a lack of rationality—are also coded as unstable and weaker, while the leaders and the ones exerting the most power are those who can emotionally detach and make rational, strategic decisions. The exception to this seems to be *Teen Wolf* which flips the values laid on binary
traits—masculinity as defined by aggression and violence is portrayed as weak, where
compassion, forgiveness and vulnerability are marks of strength in all characters, but most
consistently in the male lead.

Like their source texts, their fandoms are not monolithic and therefore cannot be said to
be, as a whole, transgressive or conforming, either. In both, pieces of the whole move toward a
more flexible presentation of gender and sexuality, while others reinforce some heteronormative
elements or fetishize others. However, even the most open and progressive of narrative is still
bound within its cultural context, and the best of intentions to subvert or resist normative
ideology can fall prey to old patterns. Fan fiction authors work from the source texts, and often
dramatically alter their representations, but in doing so, it’s possible they replicate patterns which
reinforce other elements of institutionalized heterosexuality. Examining the ways in which fan
fiction operates in relation to heteronormativity at large and the norms of the source texts in
particular makes up the rest of this project.
Chapter 2: Slashing the Bromance

“I’ve noticed we have slowly begun to phase the ‘B’ out of our Bromance.”

Introduction

Few, if any, fan practices generate the level of critical commentary and controversy that has surrounded slash since its outing by academia, if not since its inception. Academics cannot agree on its *raison d’être*, its importance, its effects or its implications. For some, it is a form of cultural resistance, a textual interpretation of homoerotic subtext or a feminist modeling of more egalitarian relationships than can be found in heterosexual fiction (Lothian, Busse, and Reid 106). Others dismiss it as blatant misogyny, narcissistic fantasy or the objectification and fetishization of male or gay bodies (Bacon-Smith 249; Scodari 116; Lothian, Busse, and Reid 106; Panigrahi 7). Some scholars laud slash as a mechanism for subverting traditional gender norms and “counter-hegemonic resistance”; others condemn it for prioritizing male relationships over female and reinforcing the marginalization and lack of representation of other genders and minority races (Scodari 114–115). Within fandom, slash is no less controversial. Fans who dislike slash generally dismiss any pro-slash argument out of hand and claim slashers are only interested in imagining pretty men together rather than “real” writing.

One weakness at the foundation of the controversy is that both critics and proponents try to explain all slash, and all slash writers, through one theory. These theories, defenses and

10 (Texts From Last Night, “#48993”)
dismissals often fail to differentiate slash across fandoms, genres and decades and present slash as a monolithic practice. Henry Jenkins noted this failure and attempted to remedy it as early as 1993. Through online discussion groups and listservs, he collected a diverse array of views on many salient questions about writing and reading slash and demonstrated that slash cannot be understood through one theory (Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins 10–11). However, despite this, the scholarship which tries to explain the phenomenon of slash still attempts to explain all slash as much the same, and many who do reference the multiple discussions from the listserv do so with cherry-picked responses often used to validate one unilateral theory or another for the one question researchers seem fixated on: why on Earth would women\(^{11}\) want to write and read this stuff?

Instead of traveling this well-worn path, this chapter approaches slash as a multi-vocal discourse in dialogue with its source text, the genre conventions of film and television, its own history as a fan practice, and the cultural moment of its conception. Rather than addressing all slash, I frame this inquiry through the lens of masculine friendship and “bromance,” and explore how opening the space for a potential shift from homosocial to homosexual relationships liberates, confines and complicates late 20\(^{th}\) and early 21\(^{st}\) century gender norms for masculinity and intimacy between men. By viewing slash as a form of cultural discourse, I argue that slash is inherently neither subversive and resistive nor puerile and misogynistic but, instead, a dynamic, ongoing conversation encompassing gender roles and their subversion, institutionalized heterosexuality and alternative sexualities, and the lines between friendship and romance.

\(^{11}\) The only attempt at capturing the demographics of readers and writers on AO3 found that fans identifying as men make up 3\% of both slash readers and writers, respectively, and those who identify as non-binary make up about 10\% of readers and 13\% of writers (centrumlumina, “M/M Fans”). However, nearly all the scholarship on slash investigates it as something women do, and so very little exists that asks why men or non-binary people would want to.
The value of that line between friendship and romance is another weakness in the scholarship about slash. With so much of the focus on what slash does for the women writing it, what it says about male friendship often gets neglected. Henry Jenkins describes slash in a way that focuses on the relational aspect and restrictions placed upon masculine intimacy in modern society. He references the scene in *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan* when Spock is dying as Kirk watches helplessly from the other side of the glass. The two men try to express what the other has meant to them, but there are few words, and they each reach for the other, pressing their hands against the glass that separates them. Slash, Jenkins explains:

Is what happens when you take away the glass. The glass, for me, is often more social than physical; the glass represents those aspects of traditional masculinity which prevent emotional expressiveness or physical intimacy between men, which block the possibility of true male friendship. Slash is what happens when you take away those barriers and imagine what a new kind of male friendship might look like. (Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins 20)

But slash is not just friendship, as we usually define it. Friendship is generally seen as platonic—if a sexual element enters it, then we call it “friends with benefits.” Slash explicitly makes the platonic relationship in the source text into a sexual one. This distinction, in many ways, could potentially undercut what Jenkins thinks the work is that slash does is. The idea that two people could mean so much to one another and yet not be each other’s everything clashes with the primacy of the narrative of romantic love in our culture and the devaluation of friendship (Jackson and Scott 155). While understandable, perhaps, given our inculcation into societally expected gender norms, this concept is hardly the progressive one. If anything, it underscores and reinforces traditional gender norms.
Research on male friendships suggests that most men feel their friendships are lacking and are disappointed by this fact. They would like to have the option for something deeper, better, more nourishing, but fear an admission of that fact to their friends would make them seem weak and open them to ridicule (Seidler 15–16). In a study of two hundred men in America, researchers found that two-thirds of them could not even name a close friend, and for those that could, the friend was usually a woman (Giddens 126). This leads to “a potentially crippling emotional handicap” (Giddens 116). But what does it say about men, or friendship, if such friendships cannot exist without sex, or if we automatically assume that such friendships are sexual?

In some ways, this conundrum is what the modern bromance wrestles with explicitly, and it is always present underlying my analysis in this chapter, because the bromances that I examine, particularly, do offer, or at least seem to offer, the men involved in them a deeper level of friendship. However, for some, the source texts erect their own barriers to intimacy that are less based on gendered expectations, but, nevertheless, still stand as impediments. And, yet, these bromances are also some of the more popular slash ships in their respective fandoms. What changing the relationship to a sexual one does for the relationship, and what it does for the discussion about the work of slash itself is another question I explore throughout.

To try and answer these questions, I examine three distinct televisual bromances, all of which have a significant number of fans who ship them as a couple and a wide selection of slash fan fiction written about them: Miles Matheson and Sebastian “Bass” Monroe from NBC’s Revolution (2012–2014), Scott McCall and Stiles Stillinski from MTV’s Teen Wolf (2011– ), and Damon Salvatore and Alaric Saltzman from the CW’s The Vampire Diaries (2009–2017). The six men involved come from three different generations: one was born in the mid-19th century,
three are members of Generation X, and two are Millennials. Both characters in the source texts and the creators of these characters recognize the importance of these relationships to the men, in varying degrees, and the creators of the characters are aware of the sexualization of the pairs by fans.

**Binaries, Bromances and Continuums**

In *Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick dissolves the opposition between “homosexual” and “homosocial” and restores desire to the discussion of homosociality (*Between Men* 1). Doing so, she argues, structures male relationships along a “continuum of male ‘homosocial desire’” that parallels the continuum of women’s relationships, which encompasses the erotic as well as the social (*Between Men* 3). Like most binary categories, the heterosexual/homosexual, or homosocial/homosexual, dichotomy oversimplifies something which is far more complex by leaving no room for anything in between. Like most binaries, these are generally unrealistic: very little in the world operates so cleanly (Barber 497). Beyond that, knowledge-making is never innocent but active and political, which leads to the use of binaries in problematic ways like the marginalizing or even demonizing non-dominant categories (Ivakhiv 267).

If we can identify and examine binaries, then deconstruct them, we are left in a situation where we do not necessarily have to discard the seemingly antithetical concepts, because using one or both of them does not preclude also using a wide range of other concepts across a spectrum that stretches between them (Russell 49). Sedgwick’s homosocial/homosexual continuum, then, does not pigeonhole the nature of a relationship, but allows it to contain varying degrees of both platonic and erotic attachment. Lisa Diamond argues that our current binary categorization removes the consideration of sexual nuance; bromances and slash, both, have been
considered as places where that nuance can exist, at least via gendered behavior and potentially regarding sexuality, as well (Diamond).

Thus, I use the construct of a continuum to examine multiple elements of the three bromances. The base continuum stretches between conceptions of masculine friendship from, at one end, the conception of masculine friendship that arose through the 20th century, defined by rigid gender norms to, at the other, a more intimate form of masculine friendship, which I term “millennial masculinity” and which sociologist Victor Seidler hopes will arise through “a new generation [of men] under the impact of feminism [who have] learned to communicate more openly with each other” (23). These relationships formed by “millennial masculinity,” broken free from the rigid nature of hegemonic masculinity, could possibly be those where binaries are deconstructed and open a wider range of relational possibilities for men.

The other continuums I use in looking at the bromances and the slash relationships drawn from them parallel the first and stretch between: traditional examples and tropes of slash and a new form arising; the queerness in the both source text itself and the fictional world represented within it; the discussion of the intimacy and significance of the bromance by actors or producers; the aggressiveness and progression of the bromance in the source text; and the level at which heteronormativity is reinforced in the source text.

Damon/Alaric anchors one end of the continuums, representing hegemonic masculine friendship and the most traditional slash tropes, drawn from a source text which generally ignores its own queerness and reinforces heteronormativity. Notably, their story begins quite differently from the other two, which are single generational and begin in childhood. Instead, the two begin as enemies, and vampire Damon is born 1834, while human Alaric is born in the late-
1970s. They become reluctant allies against a common enemy and often find themselves working together. Through their alliance, they start to respect one another and transition into drinking buddies. Not until near the end of Season 2 do either of them use the word “friend” to define their relationship, but the bond is clear and steadily deepens, overcoming obstacles to become the most stable thing in either of their lives.

Miles/Bass straddles the middle of the continuums, ambiguous in source text and extra-textual discussion, set in a post-apocalyptic world which questions the value of heteronormativity and heterosexual scripts and is abundantly aware of its own queer moments. Both men are members of Generation X, and, as mentioned above, have been friends since childhood. They joined the Marines together, fought in Iraq together, survived an apocalypse together and rebuilt a country together. Although separated and operating as protagonist/antagonist instead of allies when Revolution begins, their relationship is the central one of the show: their feud drives the plot of the first season and their inability to “quit” each other, the second. Until their split, everyone in their world thought of them as a unit, not individuals: Monroe and Matheson. Where you found one, you would find the other. The childhood symbol they created as “theirs”—an “M” inside of an open circle—became the symbol of their Republic, burned into everything and everyone they claimed as theirs.

Scott/Stiles anchors the other end, representing millennial masculine friendships and a form of slash which fits very little of the traditional descriptions of the genre, drawn from a source text which revels in its queerness and disrupts heteronormative scripts regularly, if not entirely. Both young men are millennials, born in the late 1990s, and have been friends since childhood. Like Miles and Bass, as well, the two are generally seen as a unit. Where you find
one, you are likely to find the other. If one of them is caught getting into trouble, both of their
single parents ask where the other is (and he is generally hiding close by) (“Wolf Moon”). When
Scott’s mother grounds him, the worst punishment she can come up with is “no Stiles”
(“Restraint”). Although the teenagers argue now and then, their relationship lacks the serious
conflict that marks the other two, and you can easily imagine that they provide an image of how
Miles and Bass were at their age, before things went wrong.

Despite the clarity of the placement on the continuum, even Damon/Alaric plays more
consciously with gender norms and relationships than both slash and source texts have in the
past, marking a progression in cultural discourse. This interplay begins with male friendship and
the cultural norms surrounding masculine intimacy.

**Male Friendships**

Historically, philosophers believed that “true” friendship, such as what Jenkins posits
slash can demonstrate, was only possible for men because women did not have the capacity for
the inner life and depth of thought and feeling friendship required. Men’s friendships were often
described in erotic language, and physical intimacy was acceptable because there was no
presumption of sexuality in the intimacy. Indeed, Michel de Montaigne argues that friendship
consists of “souls that mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam
that joined them” (Nardi 1). This echoes Aristotle’s definition of a “true friend” as “one soul
dwelling in two bodies,” a concept we have translated into the idea of “soulmates,” which now
generally carries a romantic connotation (Ophir 593). Similarly, early Christian writers extolled
the virtues of friendship, seeing friends as gifts from God that He had directed the men to
through their lives (Dykstra 585; Culbertson 155). These conceptions applied to platonic
friendships, which were far more valued than sexual relationships. In fact, many philosophers of friendship insisted that homosocial love had to happen before heterosexual love was possible, and it had to be maintained if heterosexual love was going to survive—men could not truly love a woman (erotically) if they had not first, and consistently, loved a man (platonically) (Culbertson 170).

Within these relationships, there was no social stigma attached to physical affection, so men were not only more intimately expressive verbally with one another but also allowed to be far more physically intimate: sharing beds, engaging in behavior that we would call snuggling today. For example, in an entry from the 18th century, a male diarist, reflecting upon an imminent and protracted separation from a friend, writes about the two of them staying up all night, holding each other and crying. The only part he is embarrassed about is the crying (Hansen 44). This physical intimacy carried homoerotic overtones but was not sexual or sexualized as we would see it today (Hansen 43). Romantic friendships, especially among young men, seem to have been quite common, based on primary sources such as diaries (Rotundo; Brickell). Part of this can be explained by an absence of the concept of homosexuality as an identity rather than as a discrete sexual act. Thus, friends could embrace, even kiss, without worrying about any sexual connotation, because they assumed that homosexual impulses, as we think of them today, did not exist (Rotundo 10).

Only in the late 19th century did a conception of homosexuality develop as an identity rooted in biology and psychology. As people became aware of this potential identity (as opposed to an understanding of homosexual acts as linked only to behavior not a person’s self), stigma and suspicion rose, and homophobia emerged. Before this, any misguided or sinful person might engage in homosexual acts, but they were not differentiated from the rest of society any more
than any other criminal. They were not Other. After this Othering, and as homophobia became prevalent, people began to interpret what had been ordinary touches as something suspicious and deviant, instead (Nardi 3). The growing understanding of the homosexual as a subset of society also made “heterosexual” an identity, as well—and one which had to be clearly defined and aggressively policed (Balcerzak 100).

What has arisen since, then, is a culture where many men actively fear male friendship (Dykstra 583). Philip Culbertson, a pastoral theologian who has written extensively on male-male friendships, observes that this fear is “one of the most critical forms of oppression under which [men] live” (174). He argues that this anxiety arises from three possible areas: a fear of becoming unexpectedly aroused; a fear of being emotionally vulnerable with other men; and men’s perception of intimacy as claustrophobic—they spend so much time suppressing their own emotions, to have to take care of someone else’s is overwhelming (Dykstra 583).

Today, this same homophobia creates tension in male friendships and hinders men from experiencing full expression and intimacy in their relationships. Instead of intimate friendship, men often have comrades—others with whom they engage in “parallel play”—doing things alongside one another without really interacting with each other (Strikwerda and May 112). Gender stereotypes about the expression of emotion often actively limit men’s willingness to be intimate with one another, especially because it could be coded as gay. Results of a study as recent as 2013 demonstrate that many men fear social rejection should they express or report their intimate feelings, especially to other men, where such behavior is more often seen as socially unacceptable (Gaia 599). Beyond expression of emotion, gender stereotypes and social acceptability also limit the type of touches men can give or receive: a touch on the shoulder, for instance, is viewed as more masculine than a touch on the hand (Gaia 599). This has negative
consequences for both men’s mental health and their emotional fulfillment. Studies of American men, especially, have shown that they do not find their same-sex friendships as fulfilling as women do theirs (Strikwerda and May 110). Interpersonal relationships and intimacy within them are important for both physical and psychological health; coupled with the fact that this reluctance to admit vulnerability also leads to men not reporting emotions such as loneliness and depression demonstrates that these limits on male friendship cause harm beyond the stigmatization of non-normative sexualities.

Popular culture has wrestled with these issues in multiple ways, especially in the film genre. Within it seems to lie an understanding of the importance of male-male intimacy, but institutionalized heterosexuality and heteronormativity generally intervene in the narratives to cut short the potential disruption of the restrictions placed on men. However, some elements of the modern bromance genre seem to be more receptive to potentially finding a way to bridge the gap these anxieties place between men, and these have their roots in earlier film forms, most notably the buddy films of the 1970s.

*From Buddy Films to Bromance*

The history of film has within it an audiovisual history of 20th century male friendship and intimacy that has interacted with institutionalized heterosexuality in ways that often created a tension which highlighted the queer potential of intimacy between men. Post-World War II, in a complex world where heterosexual romance and heteronormativity were as compulsory for men as they were for women, these celebrations of male friendship in film often were tinged with nostalgia for the ease of this less-complicated homosocial past (Mizejewski 23). The 1950s and 60s provided audiences with a sex-comedy cycle that introduced a narrative fixture that would be named “bromance” four decades later: “the comedic treatment of queer antics between
purportedly straight men,” which ultimately reinscribed heterosexuality by ending in a heterosexual pairing, but for the first time did so uneasily instead of either enthusiastically or as an afterthought (Weinman 30, 41, emphasis mine).

In the 1970s, as homoerotic tension surrounding male friendships and compulsory heterosexuality mixed with the rise of the feminism and gay liberation movements, a new movie genre arose that focused on these male friendships and the self-consciousness of the era around male intimacy: the buddy film (Balcerzak 102). These films, such as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and Midnight Cowboy are replete with homoerotic tension, subtext and possibility, “a genre based on the sublimation of homosexual desire” that must remain unfulfilled (Lang 7). Scott Balcerzak argues that these buddy films arose at a time when homophobia about the homosocial had caused a severe lack of male friendships, and, thus, the male-male relationships in these films were a fantasy, which used male companionship to reinforce heterosexuality, much like the sex comedies of the 1950s and 60s (103). These films, he argues, “sublimated essentially homoerotic pairings of appealing male bodies to confirm a supposed hegemonic normalcy” and “the patriarchal order within sexually unstable times” (102).

Robin Wood agrees that the films were made in a patriarchal industry and the homoerotic had to be sublimated to find commercial success (205). However, he argues that the buddy films of the ‘70s did not so much “confirm a supposed hegemonic normalcy,” as they did subvert the core values of it: “heterosexual romance, monogamy, the family” and the idea of a home where a father maintains the status quo (205). The sex comedies of the 1950s and 60s that Balcerzak claims the buddy films are akin to ultimately separated the male characters after their “queer antics,” by sending them home with the girl at the end. The buddy films, on the other hand, separate the men not by a return to heterosexual normalcy, but by death, which is the “most
effective impediment” to keep the male relationships from being consummated—more effective than the heterosexual love interest who restored heteronormativity in the earlier sex comedies (204). Wood argues that the insistent disclaimers in some of the movies actually make it clearer that they can be regarded as “surreptitious gay texts,” because the fact that it was so important to deny that the central relationship was homosexual meant that, really, they just drew attention to it (Wood 204). Thus, Wood disagrees with Balcerzak that the films operate to reaffirm patriarchy, but instead claims they function to subvert it in many ways, to the point that patriarchy had to reassert itself to quell the queerness of the texts. Among the source texts, this seems most similar to the nature of Miles and Bass’s relationship on Revolution, which has many elements of these buddy films in it—but the fact that the nature of their relationship is also consistently questioned, even if in a derisive manner, just draws attention to its queer potential.

Even if the buddy films of the 1970s are not “surreptitious gay texts,” much about them is most certainly queered. Their subversion of the core values of heteronormativity—home, family, heterosexual union and reproduction—connect the films to Judith Halberstam’s construct of queer time and queer space (1). These elements, which allow us to “detach queerness from sexual identity” are precisely what Halberstam and Foucault both argue mark the actual danger queerness poses to institutionalized heterosexuality (Halberstam 1; Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” 310). The threat of homosexuality, Foucault claims, is not “as a way of having sex” but “as a way of life,” and this can arise from these queered friendships that subvert the imperative of institutionalized heterosexuality toward home and family (Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” 310; Halberstam 161).

The buddy film declined in popularity in the 80s and 90s, but after the turn of the century, a new genre of buddy comedies emerged: the bromantic comedy (DeAngelis 1). While having
much in common with the buddy films of the 1970s, bromantic comedies are distinctly different in the level of discourse they contain about the central relationship between the male protagonists. These contemporary bromantic comedies evolved in a cultural discourse that is much more explicit in its discussion of homosexuality and homoeroticism, and, thus, the protagonists of the bromance quite often find themselves engaged in equally explicit deliberation about the meaning of their relationship and its reflection of meaning on themselves (DeAngelis 10). In fact, the bromance depends on this tension and discussion and draws its comedic power by its play on tropes traditionally reserved for heterosexual romance.

In his introduction to *Reading the Bromance*, Michael DeAngelis connects the bromance to the pattern and consistent play in popular media that marks sexual union as the “anticipated and desired outcome of intensifying interpersonal intimacy in heterosexual relationships” (2). When a couple’s intimacy deepens, the audience expects a romantic or sexual resolution. In a bromance, many of the courtship movements and narrative arc mimic the traditional romance, but always stop short of sexual consummation. Bromance, then, plays with the friends-into-lovers expectation, which is so intimately familiar to audiences, and “sustains its identity from the anticipation of a sexual ‘something’ that will never happen” (DeAngelis 3). However, where the buddy film often ends with death or disavowal, inevitably, the bromance ends with the men decisively declaring their heterosexuality, tying them back to the sex comedies of the 1950s and 60s. Often one of them ends up assisting the other in “getting the girl,” thus reassuring everyone of their straightness and ultimately reinscribing heteronormativity. Bromance, then, often gives those in its narrative world, and its audience, a discourse that “navigates the possibilities of male-male intimacy” while not alienating heterosexual viewers and, ultimately, reasserts a heteronormative worldview (DeAngelis 15).
Most critical attention to the phenomenon of the bromance has been dedicated to the genre of bromantic comedies. The narrative arcs of film, especially in the genre of romantic (or bromantic) comedy, require an ending, a closing of narrative possibilities, like queerness in the midst of the text or possibilities of non-monogamy, which I discuss in depth in Chapter 5. While a fan may posit a world that comes after the end of the film—much as works like *Into the Woods* and *Once Upon a Time* posit a world post the “happily ever after” of fairy tales—the explicit narrative story is over. The serial nature of television dramas, on the other hand, makes the world of the television bromance even more fraught with tension between homosociality, homosexuality and heterosexuality.

Romantic arcs on television shows are notoriously unstable. The couple together at the end of Season 1 is not guaranteed to still be together at the beginning of the second season, let alone by series’ end. Abrupt cancellation is always a possibility, and often a reality, leaving untold narrative threads dangling in ambiguity. Even when showrunners are allowed to carry their stories to the conclusion they envision, rarely are all plots neatly tied up. Often the closing of the story leaves open the sense of more stories to come which, in this day and age, often do come via other narrative media, such as graphic novels or webisodes or tie-ins with other television shows in the future. Thus, even if a show closes on what seems to be an unambiguously heterosexual note, television carries with it the sense that a story never really ends, which, if there has been substantial homoerotic tension, and particularly if it remains unresolved, means the seemingly unambiguous heterosexual note is not so unambiguous after all.

Each of these bromances follows codes for heterosexual romance in some way and is recognizably central to either the show or character, often even more so than their explicit heterosexual relationships. *Revolution*, for instance, can easily be read as the story of Miles and
Bass’s relationship—the things going on around them are merely the stage on which it plays out. Similarly, when *Teen Wolf* creator Jeff Davis was asked what his favorite relationship was on the show, he replied: “It's hard for me to pick one, especially if we're talking romantic relationships. So, I'm just gonna go with Scott and Stiles, because I've always said that the true romance on the story is a bromance” (“Weaponized”).

Davis’s comment signals another tension at play: where Aristotle’s notion of the soulmate was a platonic ideal, modern culture has transformed it into an erotic one. For many televusual bromances, the soulmates are the two men. In comedic bromance films, the female love interests are on the periphery in some ways, but always present—the ultimate goal of the film is generally the realization that friendship has its place, but erotic love is superior, the love you shape your life around, and a good friend helps you find that love, even as you mourn the loss of that seemingly elusive but perfect male-male connection (Radner 61). The tension between the two is not new or original to the sex comedies of the 50s or the bromances of the new millennium. In his enshrinement of male-male friendship in *The Faerie Queen*, Edmund Spenser offers a choice “between the marital bond that leads to the biblical ‘one flesh’ and the classical bond of amicitia that produces ‘one soul in two bodies’ [that] is emblematic of the tension between these two relationships in Early modern English culture” (Chaplin 268). Indeed, the ideals of humanism resembled the buddy film more than the comedic bromance, as they privileged male-male friendships in a way that threatened the kinship and economic bonds of marriage, and the two types of relationships were seen as competing for the same place in the heart of a man (Chaplin 268).

The buddy film resolves this tension, then, by accepting this privileging of male-male friendships, eradicating love from sex and sex from love, and often ends in death when the
separation cannot be sustained. The comedic bromance, on the other hand, resolves the tension by reinscribing heteronormative norms and privileging the heterosexual romance—friendship is necessary, but subservient to the heterosexual unions, thus not a threat to the established order of society. The televisual bromance has the potential to offer other possibilities which slash then expands upon.

**The Liberation of the Sublimated**

As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, one of the continuums upon which these bromances fall stretches from the point I call “traditional slash” to a point where it is almost too easy to bother slashing. Remembering Jenkins’ description of slash as a tool that removes the “glass wall” between men and expressiveness and emotional intimacy, this continuum is one along which the wall separating men thins. At one end rests “traditional slash,” which queers men and relationships who are still separated by the glass wall in their source text; in the middle, the glass has been replaced by a chain link fence; at the other end, nothing separates the partners but a beaded curtain left hanging, either from nostalgia or because no one has bothered to take it to Goodwill, yet.

Since these barriers, whether seemingly impermeable or effervescent, arise out of the source text, how subversive an act slash may be is partly delineated by the source text it arises from—if the barrier it needs to remove is paper-thin, then creating the shift to slash is less of an expansion of male-male intimacy, but possibly more of an allowance for breaking the binaries. Conversely, if the barrier between the men is Jenkins’ glass wall, the slash potentially operates subversively against both normative gender and a binary construction of sexuality. The two main elements of the source text which influence slash’s subversive potential are the queerness of the text itself, or the treatment of queerness within it, and the nature and depth of the bond of the
men in the bromance in relation to traditional gender norms surrounding male-male friendship and intimacy.

As I will reiterate throughout this project, the connection to the source text is an element of fan fiction that remains constant. Fan fiction operates to allow fans to explore the “unrealized possibilities” in the source text (Jenkins, Textual Poachers 23). But, in order to have their texts read by the larger fan community as successful fan fiction, fan authors must still ground them in the source text and remain true to the characters. This means that when their interpretations of what this means differ, the reader must still be able to recognize the characters as the characters they love, even when they act in ways they do not in the source text (Stein and Busse 195–196; Gathman 9). This becomes easier with those texts which appear to support Sara Gwenllian Jones’ argument that slash is “an actualization of latent textual elements” in the text itself (Jones 82).

Queerness within the Source Text

“[T]he true romance on the story is a bromance.”

Of the three source texts, Teen Wolf normalizes alternative sexualities to the point where they are a non-issue for the characters. While some critics complain about aspects of the representation, mostly that it does not go far enough in its inclusiveness, as many of the queer characters are secondary ones, the show has gay males, lesbians, bisexuals and gives frequent hints of bi-curiosity from some ostensibly heterosexual characters. This normalization of queerness encompasses Scott and Stiles’ friendship, allowing for them to be comfortable in having their sexuality questioned and in not fearing reprisals for “too much” intimacy. The

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12 Teen Wolf creator Jeff Davis when asked about his favorite relationship on the show (“Wolf Watch”).
source text plays with this freedom and comfort, allowing queer moments to surface and pass between the boys easily. This comfort is established in an early episode where Stiles asks Scott if he thinks he’s attractive to gay guys (“Pack Mentality”). In another, he tells Scott, “I gotta say that this new-found heroism is making me very attracted to you.” Scott grins and pushes him a little, very affectionately, and tells him to shut up, heading to class. Undaunted, Stiles calls after him, down the crowded, high school hallway, “No, seriously. Do you wanna just try making out for a sec? Just to see how it feels?” (“Ice Pick”).

The most sustained play of queerness between them in the first four seasons, however, comes in Season 2 in the episode “Abomination.” The scene opens with Stiles and Scott in the hallway at school, with Stiles seeming to pour out his heart to Scott who is listening with rapt attention: “I’m so sorry about the other day. I’m trying. We’ll get through this. Uh, I know, because I love you. I love you more than…” He breaks off and we learn that he is actually relaying a message from Scott’s girlfriend, Allison, after her parents forbid her to see Scott (“Abomination”). While the scene functions more as a tease for the audience (Scott knew the message was from Allison, not Stiles confessing his undying love, after all), that Stiles could stand in the middle of a hallway at school and give that speech indicates the normalization of queerness in the source text and the boys’ comfort with it.

“I'm sure they occasionally made out.”

At the other end of the continuum, *The Vampire Diaries* constrains its male characters far more within the confines of institutionalized heterosexuality—the possibility of operating outside of it seems far more limited when compared to *Teen Wolf*, especially in the early seasons when

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13 Ian Somerhalder regarding Damon and Alaric (Ross).
most of Damon and Alaric’s relationship develops. Queerness exists in their world, but only on
the far margins of the narrative. While within the text, the characters do not act as if queerness
violates their normative sense of the world, its very rarity and marginalization makes it a non-
normal element in the text. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the only two queer characters
until Season 7 are minor: one is portrayed as a bigot unable to accept his daughter and the other
is fairly two-dimensional and dies before being truly fleshed out. As far as Damon and Alaric’s
relationship goes, the characters and world of the text never question its nature as being anything
more than friendship. In fact, more often than not, the other characters do not even recognize the
relationship’s emotional importance to the men, instead devaluing it to “drinking buddies,”
leaving both men alone in their grief when death separates them.

“He’s fallen in love with all these people, in many ways, as much as he hates them.” 14

Where Teen Wolf normalizes queerness and The Vampire Diaries marginalizes it,
Revolution seems to relish playing with its ambiguity. Bass and Miles’ friendship operates at the
same level of intimacy as Scott and Stiles, an intimacy normalized by earlier views of male
friendship, but ambiguous when viewed through the lens of 20th and 21st century norms. Since
Bass and Miles are members of Generation X who grew up with the same cultural codes and
proscriptions against too much male intimacy as much of their audience did, their level of
entanglement raises questions about those masculine norms, friendships, love and sex. Many
critics and fans alike read Miles and Bass’s friendship as transgressing platonic norms, but the
speculation appears not only in extra-textual interpretations, but within the text, as well. Where
the buddy film and comedic bromance play with this in-text uncertainty, ultimately, their
conceits rely on disavowals of the homoerotic nature of the relationship and “no homo” jokes to

14 Billy Burke (who plays Miles) about Miles’ feelings about Bass and Rachel (KSiteTV).
reestablish heteronormativity. *Revolution* refuses to go this route. When other characters speculate about the nature of their relationship, whether just questioning or being insulting, both Miles and Bass remain quiet and refuse to confirm or deny any reading of their relationship. Their silence could be read as not choosing to dignify it with a response, but then, that, too, defies what we usually see, both in media and life, from two men raised in a small Indiana town, who joined the Marines at 18, at the height of “Don’t ask; don’t tell,” and so keeps the silence an ambiguous one.

When Major Tom Neville leads a mutiny against Bass, he taunts his former commander: “Sir, I could never say this while in your employ, but you have become foolish and deranged and you have a borderline erotic fixation on Miles Matheson” (“The Dark Tower”). Bass says nothing. When Miles later refuses to let Tom kill Bass because Bass is on Miles’ side now, Tom snaps: “You’re not serious. After all Monroe has done? Are you that blinded by your man-love for that son of a bitch?” (“Happy Endings”) When Miles is missing, and Bass and his son Connor could easily make a move to regain the power Bass lost (a goal they have both confirmed with each other repeatedly), Bass, instead, goes to search for Miles. Bitter, Connor snaps, “I got it. Go find your boyfriend.” Bass says nothing (“$#!& Happens”).

When Rachel and Miles stage a break-up to trick Bass into helping with a mission he is opposed to, Rachel uses the ambiguity of their relationship as her excuse, telling Miles, where Bass can hear: “This is about you and Bass and whatever the hell that is. I have never been able to compete, and I’m done trying. You and me? We’re done. Bass wins.” Both Miles and Bass remain quiet (“Tomorrowland”). When Bass, who teams up briefly with Tom after learning the break-up was a trick, turns on him the moment the man threatens Miles’ life, Tom evidences no
surprise: “I should have known. Anything for your precious Miles” (“Memorial Day”). Miles and Bass say nothing. Frustrated and baffled by Bass’s inability to stand against Miles, even when it’s in his best interests, Connor asks Tom to explain what it is with the two of them. “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” Tom replies. When Connor doesn’t believe him, and says he’s serious, Tom just sighs: “Kid, seriously. I’ve been asking myself that question for years” (“Memorial Day”).

While Tom’s questioning of the relationship is clearly derisive, and his “don’t ask, don’t tell” meant to belittle the men’s relationship—much like his earlier comments to them—his inability to understand the nature of their relationship seems genuine and is consistent through the series, though whether this is due to the loyalty or intimacy of the relationship is unclear. In the Season 2 finale, when Bass tells him that he can’t betray Miles, Connor snaps, “Miles isn’t your family, your blood. I am” (“Declaration of Independence”). Later, in the graphic novel that serves as the series finale, his more direct, rather than sarcastic, comments to his father reinforce the sense he and Tom seem to exhibit that Miles and Bass’s relationship is somehow too close to be only friendship. Although he is possessed by the nanotech at the time, so whether the comments are truly his or the nanotech’s interpretation, his final words to his father echo his earlier ones as he tells Bass that he forgives him for everything “even loving Miles more than your own son” (Parrott and Reed, Revolution: Endgame - Part 3). Even Charlie’s final summation of Bass leaving them at the series’ end has shades of ambiguity in it: “Even Miles wasn’t enough to keep him around” (Parrott and Reed, Revolution Endgame - Part 4).

The way in which these three relationships are treated in the text affects the level of connection between the source texts and slash which queers them, and the amount of work the
slash fics must do to queer them and keep them tied to the source text. If Scott and Stiles became sexually involved in the source text, most people would likely pause, consider and move on with little-to-no shock or commentary, especially given Stiles’ seeming bi-curiosity. The audience, too, might have a moment’s pause, but, given the high number of slash fans within *Teen Wolf*, the relationship would likely be met with cheers. On the other hand, should Damon and Alaric come out as a couple within the source text, everyone in the text and most of the audience would be stunned and bemused. It could be done, but it would be a huge step for the show and the network. If Bass and Miles were discovered to be in a sexual relationship, it would be stunning because NBC went there, but most of the audience and characters around them, including their lovers and children, would likely say, “I knew it!” Of course, these reactions are not only shaped by the queerness of the text; the bond between the men plays a far more important role.

**The Bromantic Bond**

The bonds between Damon/Alaric, Miles/Bass and Scott/Stiles have significant similarities, though, it should come as no surprise, given their placement on the continuum, that Damon/Alaric and Scott/Stiles each have more in common with Miles/Bass than they do with each other. Each one transgresses some norms and upholds others; occasionally, that changes from moment to moment. As in any relationship, each also has key moments of tension or release, joy or despair (but mostly despair—there is not a lot of joy on any of these shows) which shape them in the source text and capture fans’ imaginations. An episode containing one of these moments will air and instead of one or two new fics a week appearing in the archive, there will be ten or twenty. These episodes are those that keep on giving, as well, ones to which fans return again and again, still using them as frames or referencing them in fic written years later. Quite often, these are transgressive moments; more often they are moments wherein transgression
would be so simple—a slip, a shift, and the characters would cross that invisible line
demarcating a boundary, demolishing it and one more dichotomy, if only for a moment.

While the masculine gender role is made up of multiple elements, and heteronormativity
consists of a set of beliefs and behaviors, the two most implicated in examining the subversive
potential of both the bromance and slash are emotional expression and intimacy and sexual
rigidness or fluidity. Of course, the two are intrinsically linked: men are supposed to refrain from
too much emotional display or intimacy with other men, because that is how straight men should
act. Since all the relationships are nominally\textsuperscript{15} platonic in the source text, sexual fluidity can only
be examined in the slash written around the bromances. Emotion and intimacy, however, are the
bridge that links the source text to the fan fiction, and the place where the bromances in the
source text themselves subvert our expectations of modern male friendships.

\textbf{Expressing Emotion}

The moments and characteristics that fan fic grows out of encompass a wide range of
human expression. These three bromances all contain a depth of intimacy and dependence that
transgress normative masculinity and make them stand out from contemporary depictions of
male friendships. However, Damon/Alaric and Miles/Bass’s bromances also contain a great deal
of violence: a far more commonly depicted way for males to bond.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{15} I say “nominally” because of the significant in-text material that supports a canonically queer reading of
\textit{Revolution}, though that is another project.}
In his critical account of the historical epics of the 1950s and 1960s, William Fitzgerald notes, “the physicality through which enmity is expressed comes to express also the love that revolts against that enmity” (40). Expanding on this, Konstantinos Nikoloutsos argues that scenes which include the juxtaposition of stabbing with a phallic object with a tender embrace, especially in the absence of women, require some form of a “homophobic disclaimer…to prevent potential gay appropriations of the intimacy between the film’s male characters” (228). In both the source text and fan fiction, Miles/Bass and Damon/Alaric engage in a lot of this flirtation, though without any such disclaimers.

Damon and Alaric begin as enemies, with Alaric arriving on the show for the express purpose of killing Damon. When he tries, Damon tries to ward him off first with words, telling him they are “kindred spirits, abandoned by the women we love” (“A Few Good Men”). That does not dissuade Alaric, who attacks anyway. Damon easily disarms him, then cradles Alaric against himself gently as he stabs a stake into his lungs, killing him, though Alaric later revives, due to a magic ring his ex-wife gave him. After this first fight, Damon and Alaric expend most of their violence on others, fighting together instead of each other, but their activities together are still often based in violence, two soldiers allied in a war. While they settle most of their disagreements with each other with words, however, violence erupts again one crucial time for each: when Damon ends a disagreement by snapping Alaric’s neck, killing him temporarily and breaking their friendship for half of Season 3 and after Alaric is turned into a vampire intent on killing every other vampire and beats Damon to a bloody pulp, before then dying in his arms.

While Bass and Miles’s relationship began in childhood and they spent the next three decades as best friends, Revolution begins with them as enemies. Every time they meet in Season
In Season 1, they are either trying to kill one another (often with swords) or engaging in a combination of a fist fight and wrestling match. In Season 2, they are nominally allies again, but, like Damon and Alaric, engaged in battle against a common enemy with much of their activity together being fighting and killing others. Beyond that, when frustrated with Bass for some reason or another, Miles, the far more traditionally masculine of the two, has a tendency to use punches and shoves to let Bass know of his displeasure rather than his words. In contrast, where Bass engaged in the fight, giving as good as he got through Season 1, in Season 2, he attacks with words and refuses to fight back with his fists. However, in the one fight in which Miles attempts to use words, Bass responds with violence (“Tomorrowland”). Perhaps the two must always be juxtaposed in the source text or risk pushing the tension between homosocial and homosexual in the source text over the line.

This aggression and violence translates into eroticized moments in slash fic. While later fic for Damon and Alaric usually depicts a loving and supportive relationship, early fic thrives off their antagonism. With both men abandoned and hurt by their loves, these fics often have the two men develop a no-strings sexual relationship with each other as an outlet for their emotional turmoil, though not always in a healthy way. “Venn Diagrams,” written shortly after the close of Season 1, explores this not-healthy, but becoming necessary dynamic:

Alaric disapproves of the word 'relationship' to describe what they're doing. It's not a relationship. It's nothing close to that kind. Whatever they have, it's something dark and vicious that probably hurts more often than it feels good. Sometimes it hurts and feels good at the same time. Sometimes, or all the time. But he wants this, wants the reckless, destructive mess he's made of his own life. (entanglednow)
This violent beginning shows up in later fics, as well, even when the relationship has settled into something healthier. For instance, in “Learn to Live,” Damon and Alaric begin a sexual relationship at the height of their grief, and while Alaric thinks to himself that “this isn’t love,” it is obvious that it is far more than friendship, as well (blackforests). Similarly, in “In the Interests of Full Disclosure,” the two are in an established relationship, but looking back at the beginning, Alaric describes it as, “back when things were still messy and explosive and they were just as likely to end up beating each other up as falling into bed” (pleasebekidding, “In the Interests of Full Disclosure”).

A lot of Miles/Bass slash has violent content ranging from fist fighting that turns into sex to stories that take a much darker turn, with torture, dubious consent and sometimes even death. Few go that far, however, but given the amount of fighting the two men do in the source text, violence is more common than not in any fic set after the start of the series (pre-canon stories tend to be far lighter, given the lack of an apocalypse and attempted assassination). “Under a Bloody Texas Sky” is set in Season 2 and told from Charlie’s point of view, when she happens to stumble on Miles and Bass and stays to watch what unfolds:

There, not a hundred yards from the safe house and with only some sparse brush for cover, are Miles and Monroe with their hands fisted in each other’s hair and shirts, tongues shoved into their mouths. I clap a hand over my mouth in surprise, eyes going wide. I mean, I guess I’m not as shocked as I could be but it’s a different thing to see than it is to imagine.

Miles jerks away all of a sudden, glowering at Monroe, and I think they’re going to descend into brawling like they usually do. Just about the time I’m ready to make
my presence known and break them up, Miles yanks his weapons belt off and drops it to the ground with a clatter. Monroe matches the metaphorical gauntlet, shrugging out of his jacket and leaving it to crumple in the dirt. Almost before I can blink, he’s stepping into Miles’ arms again, sucking the taller man’s bottom lip between his teeth. (lovesrogue36, “Under a Bloody Texas Sky”)

“Somewhere Different” by buttercups3 starts a little softer, with the two of them actually talking about where they are going, what they want. Then Miles sees the scars on Bass’s wrist from another failed suicide attempt. He doesn’t use his words:

“You promised…” Miles’ mouth moves, but the words don’t even sound.

“We promised each other a lot of things, Miles,” Bass murmurs, a ribbon of energy still binding Miles’ fingers to Bass’ flesh.

Miles swallows his shock at how emotional he still gets over this man. His brain is telling him to fix Bass. But there’s only one way he knows how.

Explosively Miles shifts both hands to Bass’ chest and shoves. For a split second Bass thinks it’s to push him down, abandon him, maybe even spit on him. But Miles has backed him against a pine tree, is sliding huge fingers into Bass’ grimy beard and immobilizing his chin. Then hot, whiskey breath smothers him, chapped lips smash into his teeth, and the wet tongue makes itself entirely at home. (buttercups3, “Somewhere Different”)
The linking of violence and sex is not something confined to men or to slash, of course. But when intimate expression is constrained by gender norms, and the price for violating those norms has lessened, but not enough, violence often becomes short-hand for the expression of deep emotion. When a man shoves a woman into a wall and presses in close on a television show or in a movie, the audience knows that a kiss, at least, and probably more, has become inevitable, so it is little wonder when its appearance in the source text translates to a more erotic moment in slash.

Unlike the other two pairings, Scott and Stiles do not have as much conflict between them. While they argue on occasion, as teenagers will, theirs is not an adversarial or competitive friendship, and their fights never become physically violent. Likewise, few of the fics written for them have violent elements between the two boys (hurt/comfort fics where one comforts the other after someone else has hurt them, though, are rampant). However, when an evil spirit possessed Stiles in Season 3 and derived clearly erotic pleasure from feeding on Scott’s pain, authors wrote and posted a slew of slash fic playing off this rare show of pleasure-in-pain for the pairing.

*Devotion and Dependency; Emotion and Intimacy*

The primary emotional force binding these pairs in both source text and fan fic is love and the dependency that arises out of that. Where Damon/Alaric and Miles/Bass were most similar in their aggressiveness, here Miles/Bass and Scott/Stiles parallel each other. Whether using the Aristotelean and Platonic or modern and erotic construct, “soulmates” defines their relationships more simply than anything. They are two halves of a whole, and their lack of being able to survive losing the other is clear both in the source text and fan fiction. The pairs not only
feel this connection, they are able to express it to one another, though sometimes better than others. Stiles and Bass tend toward a greater emotional expressiveness; Scott isn’t as eloquent as the two of them, but sincerely shares his feelings; Miles embodies the traditional, stoic loner who drinks away his suppressed emotions, but his actions speak for him.

Flashbacks throughout the series reveal how close Bass and Miles once were, in contrast to the often-antagonistic relationship they have in their present. In one flashback, Miles stops Bass from killing himself after his family has all been killed, by reminding him that he is not alone: “Well, you got me. I mean, what the hell would I be without you? We been brothers our whole lives, since we were kids.” He reaches out his hand, and adds, “Bass, give me the gun, before you do something stupid.” Seven years later, Bass and Miles are at war, leading their men against another militia. Miles is injured, badly, and he tells Bass he must leave him, because someone has to lead the men. Bass responds, “I don’t care about the men. All the years, all the times I was in trouble, you never left my side. You never ran. If you’re dying, I’m dying with you” (“Nobody’s Fault But Mine”).

Scott faces a similarly dark moment in Season 3, when everything is going wrong. People are dying, Scott can’t protect them, and he just wants to give up. When Stiles finally finds him, he stands in a puddle of gasoline with a lit flare in his hands and tells Stiles, “Every time I try to fight back, it just gets worse. People keep getting hurt; people keep getting killed.” He wishes he could go back to when he and Stiles were still no one. In a move that combines Miles at the graveyard and Bass on the battlefield, Stiles steps into the gasoline and moves to Scott’s side, reaching out and putting his hand on the flare as well: “Scott, just listen to me, ok? You’re not no one. You’re someone. Scott, you’re my best friend. Okay? I need you. Scott, you’re my brother.”
All right, so…so, if you’re gonna do this, I think you’re just gonna have to take me with you, then…” (“Motel California”).

For Miles and Bass, this depth of emotion is sorely tested through the first season. When Bass begs Miles to come home, Miles resists and tells him, “I’m sorry I didn’t kill you the first time…You? Are nothing to me” (“Nobody’s Fault But Mine”). Audience members suspected this was a lie, as in the previous episode, Miles hallucinates his reunion with Bass. In Miles’ hallucination, Bass confronts Miles with a truth he has been denying: that he regrets leaving and wishes he could take it all back. Ignoring Miles’ denials, Bass delivers his accusation with a soft, knowing smile and eroticized language: “I know your dirty little secret, the one you don’t want to tell Charlie or Nora…that if I take you back, you just might do it, you just might sell out your friends, fall straight back into line, right beside me” (“Kashmir”). Fic written after the episode aired took this hallucination in “Kashmir” and deduced that Miles’ disavowal was him still lying to himself and Bass to escape temptation, a fact proven true in the season finale, when Miles rescues a captive Bass, telling him: “We’re still brothers. And as much as I hate that—and let me tell you, I do—that’s never gonna change” (“The Dark Tower”). Likewise, when he believes Bass has been executed in Season 2, Miles is wrecked, shell-shocked, and when he learns that Rachel saved him, he smiles one of his only real smiles of the whole series (“Dead Man Walking”; “The Patriot Act”).

The initial disavowal, however, in mid-Season 1, causes Bass to snap: he spends the rest of the season becoming more and more unstable. Earlier in the season, a soldier suggests to Miles that Bass has been deteriorating ever since Miles left, but Miles refuses to see it. In talking about his choices in playing Bass, actor David Lyons shares that he took the idea of Bass’s utter
devotion to Miles and ran with it: “I thought it would be interesting if…what if that relationship was so deep that that’s what drove him to insanity?” Carrying that onward, Lyons explains that Bass’s motive is “much more about Miles than it is about power…The way that he holds himself, the ways that he carries himself, the decisions that he makes – those aren’t the ones of a man who wants power for power’s sake. It’s a lot more…darker and…emotional” (BuddyTV).

That concept played out all season until the finale, when Miles tells Bass the reason he left was an action Bass took in vengeance after Miles was nearly killed. Dumbstruck, Bass gives the speech that made even non-slash fans wonder at the relationship between the men: “Everything I have ever done was for you. You care so much about the Republic, I don't care. The only thing I ever cared about was watching your back. That's the only reason I followed you into any of this” (“The Dark Tower”). As one critic observes, summing up the first season and the speech: “This is a man who took control of an army to start his conquest of America, but now claims that he doesn’t care about world domination, he only cares about Miles Matheson. That seems like an awful lot of effort to make an impression” (Surette). Fans of the pairing agreed, and Bass’s ultimate devotion to Miles above everything else became a central tenet of the slash fan fiction around them: one that many of Bass’s actions in Season 2 would seem to reinforce.

In contrast to the other two bromances, while fan fiction may position Damon and Alaric as soulmates, their bond reads as less intense in the source text, though not shallow, by any means. Their friendship changes them both, and provides a comfort and touchstone for them both. But they both go on when they lose the other; they grieve, they hurt, the loss of the other leaves a clear hole in their lives, but they go on. The loss, though, provides the few times when the two of them are able to express what the other means in the source text.
When asked which death affected Damon the most, Ian Somerhalder who plays him answered without hesitation: “Alaric. Alaric damn near killed him, and losing him was awful. He was his wingman, drinking buddy… I’m sure they occasionally made out” (Ross). And indeed, after Alaric dies, Damon is distraught, but refuses to share it with the others. He refuses to let anyone sit in Alaric’s seat at the bar and storms off alone when Stefan tries to have a memorial service, ending up in the cemetery, talking to Alaric’s grave instead:

Do you know what they are? Children. Like lighting a candle is going to make everything okay or even saying a prayer… Stupid, delusional, exasperating, little children. I know what you’re going to say; "It makes them feel better, Damon." So, what? For how long? A minute? A day? What differences does it make? Because in the end, when you lose somebody; every candle, every prayer is not going to make up for the fact that the only thing that you have left is a hole in your life where that somebody that you cared about used to be. (“Memorial”)

What he doesn’t know is that Alaric’s ghost is sitting right next to him, looking wrecked, before murmuring softly, “I miss you, too, buddy.” We learn later that Alaric could have moved on, found peace, but chose to hang around on the Other Side—a supernatural purgatory—so that he could keep watch over Damon.

After Alaric is resurrected at the same moment that Damon disappears into a hell dimension at the end of Season 5, Alaric must pick up the pieces of his life, try to come to terms with his vampirism, and take care of all the “children.” He has no grand speeches when dealing with Damon’s death, but while other people attempt to move on, he spends all his free time trying to find a way to get Damon back from the dead, like he is. He seems calm about it, the
grown-up, but that he is not doing so well slips out now and then. When confronting Jeremy, for instance, about backsliding to drugs and skipping school, Alaric snaps:

You wanna talk about resentment, huh? Is that it? My wife ran away because she would rather be a vampire than be married to me. Come to find out it was Damon who turned her. And then she died. And then Jenna, she died. And then I died. And then the guy who killed my wife died. And I actually kinda miss him… I have resentment for years. Years!... But I find a way to keep going, because that's what we do: we find a way to keep going. (“Black Hole Sun”)

Similarly, when he discovers that Stefan has been lying to him about following up on leads to find Damon and has, instead, attempted to move on and to forget Damon, Alaric is furious. Stefan comes to him to ask him for a favor, to help himself move on. Alaric is having none of it, accusing Stefan of forgetting all about Damon. Stefan tries to defend himself by reminding Alaric that Damon was his brother, but Alaric snaps back, with the clear message that “best friend” here trumps “brother,” at least in their refusal to give up on Damon: “Yeah, and he was my best friend. Why don’t you get out of my face? Before I compel you to be the guy I used to know instead” (“The World Has Turned”).

These moments are significant to the slash writers of these pairings and provide jumping off points for fics. Bass and Miles’ mid-Season 1 confrontation, where Miles lied and told Bass he was nothing to him is a focal point in fics set both in Season 1 and Season 2, tormenting one or both men in different ways. “One Fine Day in the Middle of the Night” by Davechicken is written from Miles’ point of view. After he thinks Bass has been executed, he reflects on
everything he’s ever done to Bass and his motivation for that moment of disavowal and contrasts it with Bass’s devotion:

I tried to get him to lash out at me. I tried so fucking hard. I tried to make him see. I pointed weapons at him. I hurled abuse at him. I threw everything I could at him, but it never made him love me less. I threatened to kill him. I called him a monster. I told him we were not family.

And he never. Once. Stopped. Loving. Me.

Didn't he get it? Didn't he understand when you were supposed to break up? Didn't he know that when someone disowned you and told you that you were a deranged maniac that you were supposed to say it back? (Davechicken)

Set following the next episode, “No One Sings Like You Anymore,” written by GoddessofBirth, gives Bass’s point of view as he hovers on the verge of giving up and leaving, letting Miles’ presumed hatred drive him away. Miles changes his mind by changing the context and story for that pivotal moment in “Kashmir”:

“Bass, I'm sorry.”

“I know. I know.” Bass shakes his head. “You're sorry you didn't kill me when you had the chance. You already told me. I got it.” Shutupshutupshutupshutup.

“I'm sorry I let you down. I'm sorry I left you.”

Shutupshutupshu- “What?”
Miles' hold eases up slightly and the blinding pain in Bass' shoulder disappears. “I look at you, Bass, and I see everything I've ever broken. Every one of my failures. And it was easier to run away than to face that. Easier to blame you.” (GoddessofBirth, “No One Sings Like You Anymore”)

Despite all the atrocities he has committed, for fans, the most important element of the relationship seems to be Bass’s steadfast, unswerving loyalty to, unconditional love for and forgiveness of Miles, which is supported in Season 2 of the source text. In the source text, no matter how many times Miles pushes him away, Bass returns, even when his own goals should dictate he do otherwise. The source text and fan fiction seem to agree on this point, that Bass’s love for and loyalty to Miles finally gets through to the other man and he allows himself to trust Bass again. Fan fiction, however, shifts the focus of the need for change, stressing Bass’s constant devotion, but making the catalyst for change, for fixing and shifting the relationship, Miles’ guilt and self-loathing over his own mistakes and his treatment of Bass, a guilt that remains subtextual in the source text, if it is there at all. This emotional shift seems to arise, at least in part, from the difference in the other man’s emotional expression: Bass’s constant show of loyalty and devotion is often portrayed as him having done his part of the emotional work; now it is Miles’ turn, and if the source text keeps him isolated in stoic silence and will not force him to have, and somehow express, his own emotional journey, then fan fiction will do so.

For example, after Miles tries to fix things with kisses instead of words in “Somewhere Different,” Bass’s reaction highlights the dynamic in Season 2:

It dawns on Bass that he’s moaning *yeahyeahyeah* into Miles’ mouth. Humiliating.

How can he still have it this bad after all the torment Miles has put him through? Nothing
has ever succeeded in dampening his devotion. And nothing ever will. But can’t Miles give him just a little? Say something, even something small?

With incredible force of will Bass shoves off Miles, panting, and they both look surprised that it was Bass who managed it. (buttercups3, “Somewhere Different”)

Here, Bass recognizes that Miles has not yet met his side of the emotional exchange required for an equal relationship. In some ways Bass’s “can’t Miles give him just a little,” is a feeling many heterosexual women can relate to, and reflects the desire for an emotionally, as well as physically, intimate relationship. This emotional shift within fan fiction, then, seems to recognize a limitation of the bromance within the source text, at least as a resistance to heteronormative masculinity’s repression of emotion: self-disclosure is necessary to truly have an intimate bond, and the lack of that is a common occurrence in men bound by hegemonic gender norms (Strikwerda and May 110). When the characters remain silent as to what they are feeling or thinking in the source text, then the apparent intimacy, and potential subversiveness, at least relating to gender norms, of the relationship is lessened.

These limitations and lessening of intimacy may arise, in large part from the fact that the characters are male and, despite some resistance to the dictates of heteronormative gender roles, they still do govern a lot of these characters—Miles and Alaric, especially, but Bass and Damon to a degree, as well. These heteronormative male gender roles inhibit friendship, as I have discussed above, but not only due to homophobia or anxiety about intimacy and appearing effeminate. Intimate friendship requires the disclosure of self, but disclosing oneself requires being able to access the feelings to disclose, and American men have been socialized to not show their feelings, and, more than that, to not allow their feelings to “interfere at all with the conduct
of their lives” (Strikwerda and May 117). This socialization, then, can make it very difficult for them to even access the emotions internally and conceptualize and process them for themselves, let alone share them with someone else. This ability to access their own emotions, even if they don’t wind up talking about them in depth, out loud, is something that slash gives the characters.

“In the Air Tonight” provides an example of this dynamic:

“They’re not my family, Bass. They’re my blood. You – you’re my family. I’ve known that the whole time. I can’t keep running.”

“So don’t. Come home, Miles.”

Miles blinked at Bass. He was always caught off guard by how simple everything was for Bass. How even after everything Bass still just wanted to forgive and forget. He was always the one to make concessions for them, to be understanding, to make the sacrifices… “I don’t deserve it.”

“I know.”

Miles rubbed his brow, a slight smile on his face. Just like he’d suspected, Bass was just going to forgive and forget again.

“How many times are you going to be the better man? Aren’t you ever just going to kick me to the curb?”

“As many times as it takes,” Bass ducked his head a bit, a slightly embarrassed smile on his face. “And never, Miles. Never.” (3988Akasha, “In the Air Tonight”)
This issue of self-disclosure and the processing of emotion affects Miles and Alaric most: they are the two more stoic characters in the source text, meeting more traditional norms, the ones caught more in not knowing what words to use to break down the glass separating them from Bass and Damon. However, pushing them toward uncharacteristic expressiveness could cross the line most fan fiction writers try to maintain: keeping the characters recognizable as those within the source text. Thus, most fic writers open them up in their heads, leaving their words as brief as they are in the source text, like Davechicken does in “One Fine Day in the Middle of the Night” above. Similarly, “Your Heart is a Bad, Bad Thing,” a fic of over 8000 words, is almost entirely Miles’ inner monologue, which serves the purpose of allowing for emotional realization and development—granting him access to those feelings—without breaking Miles’ canonical stoicism (skyline).

Alaric gets similar treatment. In pleasebekidding’s “Lapis and bourbon, amen,” Alaric spends the whole fic mostly in his head and thoughts, trying to decide if he will allow Damon to turn him into a vampire or not while Damon works himself into a frenzy of worry at his silence. When Alaric tells him his decision, he makes no speech, just says, “I want this.” Damon asks him why, and he says a lot about history (he is a history teacher, after all) and getting to watch it be made, but as to his primary reason, the emotional one, he keeps it simple, as well: “This. Us” (pleasebekidding, “Lapis and Bourbon, Amen”).

Fan fic writers strive to make these few words meaningful in their directness, then back them up with action, as in the source text. However, sometimes Bass and Damon need more reassurance that Miles and Alaric are on the same page, emotionally, as they are, and Miles and Alaric must go beyond just action to find the words to express their feelings. In “It Only Takes
“Is this…” A spark of anger lights at the base of his spine. “Is this some kind of pity fuck? Just one more thing you think you should give me to keep me stable?” He spits the word out like the dirty thing it is. There's a lot of things he'll gladly take from Miles, happily hoard up and lock away, but this...this isn't one of them. “Poor little Bass, with a hard on for his brother. I don't fucking need that from you. Not from you.”

Miles strikes fast, lunging at Bass and rolling him underneath him. “You're not actually my brother, Bass, you do realize that, right? And I don't do pity fucks.” He strokes a thumb down the curve of Bass' neck, and Bass can't help it, can't keep from arching into it. “I'm just catching up, Bass. Don't be angry at me for being slow.”

(GoddessofBirth, “It Only Takes Dying”)

In Ark’s “The Way It Goes,” Damon needs similar reassurance from Alaric. The two fight about whether they are even together, officially, and Damon storms off because Alaric won’t commit to more than a casual arrangement. When they make up, Damon’s declaration is fraught with emotion, trying to explain both why Alaric’s uncertainty hurt and why it is that he needs Alaric so much:

Ric, you have to understand. Vampires don't bond easily. Our instinct pushes for the opposite. We're solitary predators on a never-ending hunt…Most people are temporary playthings, pawns, or food. When we really take a lover, we're consumed by it until we're not. Everything is always amplified. We find it...difficult...to process rejection in that
quarter…Our see-saw takes two. It's you who have kept me balanced. Taught me to be a model citizen. Been the better influence. Shown me there are people not worth killing. Worth keeping alive at all costs. Given me…better things to live for than death or eternity…And I won't claim I'm not consumed. (Ark)

A simple, “I want this; I love you,” cannot answer that fairly, and Ric makes a speech of his own, less angry, but otherwise reminiscent of his outburst to Jeremy in Season 6:

I'm slow to catch on. But not that slow. These days without you -- I'd forgotten what it was to be that alone. You showed me how to not be that…I'm -- I'm not good at it. Being alone. When I'm not with someone I obsess over what's lost. I'm unbalanced that way. Need balancing. And you did that. I didn't get how much you did. I used to tell myself you were my secret. Another indulgence. Part of my recklessness…But you weren't that. You were the cure. You went there with me, but you showed me other things. How to come back from it. How to blend in. How to fight really bad guys. How to make a new life again. And we've been doing that together, haven't we? Nothing's been lost or lacking for a long time. (Ark)

In both “The Way It Goes” and “It Only Takes Dying,” Miles and Alaric’s declarations contain not just their feelings, but an apology for not being on board with what Damon and Bass need, along with an explanation that frames itself within the stereotype of men being out of touch with their emotions; where Bass and Damon have been aware and expressive of their feelings for a while, both Miles and Alaric are “slow to catch on.”
One emotion that all four men share, in spades, is regret: for being “slow to catch on” like those above, for things done, like Bass in multiple fics set in Season 1, when he must accept that he drove Miles away; regret for things said, like Miles telling Bass he means nothing to him; and regret for things unsaid and undone. The inability to accept the death of one or the other could form a subgenre of Damon/Alaric fan fic on its own. Most of them deal with Damon’s regrets (for not telling Alaric he wanted him or not telling him he loved him, beyond just wanting him) and inability to let go, but dametokillfor’s “Like a Sunburn” gives us a look into Alaric’s head, as he deals with Damon’s loss and trying to cope on his own, after Elena asks him to compel away her memories of Damon in the Season 6 premiere. Paralleling Damon at his grave in “Memorial,” Ric is not constrained to quiet stoicism, and speaks to Damon like Damon spoke to him, though he knows that, unlike him, Damon is not there, listening. Even so, most his emotion comes out in the words he cannot say aloud, even to empty air, but keeps locked in his head:

He doesn't know where to go. He doesn't want to go back to the house. He's not ready to apologise to Elena yet, not ready to pretend he's not still pissed off that she's even suggested erasing Damon. He's not got any other options, not really. “You know, if you were still here, this would be so much easier. I go back to the boarding house, we drink until we can pretend we're both drunk enough and...”

He can't even finish his sentence, he finds himself laughing at the hopelessness of it all…He and Damon would have drunk until such a time that both of them grew tired of pretending Ric wasn't there for more than the bourbon. Damon would have instigated the first kiss, pushing Ric back against the chair he favoured, kissing him furiously. Ric would have pushed him away, just enough to remind him that they had all the time in the
world now, would have slowed things down. It would have been perfect and romantic and love making and they'd have mocked themselves for it in the morning, fucked furiously to reassert their totally casual arrangement, each wishing they could just stop pretending they weren't ass over face in love with each other. "But you're not here. You're not even floating around, I can't even pretend you can hear any of this, because you're really gone, you asshole. (dametokillfor, “Like A Sunburn”)

This inner monologue is laced with Ric’s regret for how he and Damon never allowed themselves to express their emotions, never allowed themselves to be vulnerable with one another, even when they broke the line between homosocial and homosexual. Instead, they mocked themselves for anything that might be considered emotional intimacy, more afraid of that than they were the possibility of seeming queer. These sorts of blurring of the lines turns back around to Jenkins’ description of slash: that it breaks down the barriers to male intimacy as much as it does binary sexuality. Of course, it does the latter, as well, but the main revising of the narrative that these fics do relates specifically to breaking the emotional restrictions heteronormativity places on men.

A slew of fics came out after Alaric’s death and continued to be posted throughout the next year, dealing with Damon’s handing (or non-handling) of his loss of Alaric in ways as emotionally excessive as Bass’s, in keeping with both characters’ emotional volatility. Most of them focus on Damon’s inability to move on, with some giving him a way to do so; others bridge the gap to fit in with the source text by having Damon grieving alone rather than with the others because no one knew they were a couple. Pleasebekidding’s “Circles Around Me,” for instance, starts with Damon’s rage and grief, unfettered and choked back because no one knows what he is going through. This ties in to the source text with how the other characters devalue his and
Alaric’s relationship and echoes his level of grief, and how he grieves alone, through the first half of Season 4. Rather than regret for an inability to express emotions, the fic focuses on Damon’s unwillingness to allow the relationship to go public, to admit to the others his feelings for Ric. Throughout, he expresses these moments, thinking that he should have done things differently, because no one knew. Elena asks him if he’s mad at her, and all he can say is “no,” though he thinks to himself, “I’m mad because I never kissed Alaric at the Grill in front of the whole of Mystic Falls” (pleasebekidding, “Circles Around Me”). When Jeremy finally realizes how upset Damon is, and asks why, Damon still can’t quite tell the truth aloud, but he at least admits it to himself:

Jeremy nods. “You were…”

“Don’t, Jeremy. I can’t.”

Jeremy pushes. “Why didn’t anyone know?”

*Because I was a coward, because I wasn’t sure what I wanted. Because maybe a small part of me was hedging my bets with Elena. Because Alaric was cool with it and I was a fucking idiot. Because just when things were getting serious I broke his neck and we had barely found our way back to each other when he was torn from the world.*

These are some of the things Damon doesn’t say. “No one’s business but ours,” is what he says. (pleasebekidding, “Circles Around Me”)

While Damon does not explicitly say what he was being a coward about, his earlier thought when talking to Elena indicates that it was fear about what people might think or say—though whether about the non-normative sexuality or about them loving each other is unclear.
That he was “hedging his bets” with Elena—the heteronormative and canon choice—indicates both the former and ties the fic to the source text, taking into account Damon’s canonical pursuit of Elena.

Like Bass and Damon, Scott and Stiles have little trouble expressing their emotions or being vulnerable with each other. When they do, masculinity has nothing to do with it; nor does a troubled, angst-ridden past. Instead, their friendship more closely parallels the main female friendship on the show—Allison and Lydia—and, in fact, achieves an even greater emotional intimacy than the girls do in the source text. This new form of friendship echoes Seidler’s hopes and predictions for the route masculine friendships could take in men raised by feminists and with loosened gender restrictions. While messages of heteronormativity still abound in the show, in some ways, and Scott’s movement toward becoming an alpha involves embracing more masculine norms in aggression and strength (tied to his being a werewolf), the emotional honesty between the two boys and complete lack of concern over interpretations of their sexuality mark a measure of difference from representations we have seen heretofore.

Fan fiction keeps this openness and honesty between them. If they struggle to express their feelings, it reads as normal teenage fear of rejection that holds their tongues, rather than anything gendered. What Scott/Stiles stories do, though, that the others sometimes fail to do, is a more thorough exploration of how fine the line is between friendship and romantic love, and the easy slide from emotional to physical intimacy. While some fics do pre-position the boys as gay, and aware of it, or assuredly bisexual, more of them seem to be as much about sexual awakening and realization as they are about the relationship itself. Therefore, slash, for them, serves a different purpose: to illustrate the slide along the continuum from friends to lovers and how simple it can be.
**Sexual Fluidity**

Recent research on sexuality supports queer theory’s impulse to call the binary categorization of sexuality too simple. However, much of this research divides on the question of whether this fluidity is biological or sociocultural, and whether it is equally true for men and women. For example, after a 10-year longitudinal study of changes in women’s sexuality, Lisa Diamond argues that fluidity is an “additional component” to women’s sexuality as compared to men’s, because for women, sexual orientation is only part of what determines attraction (Ch. 1). Conversely, Sabra Katz-Wise, whose study on sexual fluidity in young adults is the first part in an attempt to replicate Diamond’s study, argues that the assumption that women are more fluid than men does not take several factors into account (191). Compared with Diamond, Katz-Wise gives more weight to sociocultural factors than biological, arguing that individual development cannot be removed from context, and the restrictions on displays of affection between men could contribute to the appearance of more rigidity of sexual orientation in men (191). Katz-Wise’s initial study found, instead, that if women’s sexuality is more fluid than men’s, it is only by a very small percentage (201).

Ultimately, then, no inherent, biological or innate reason has been found to privilege female fluidity, and the difference seems to be as social a construction as gender itself. This is supported by research demonstrating that sexuality falls on a continuum or spectrum with several “degrees of nonexclusivity in between heterosexuality and homosexuality” (Savin-Williams 446). In general, however, most people add a third category to encompass all the in-betweens: bisexuality. In some ways, turning fluidity into bisexuality just creates another way to place people in a fixed position, but bisexuality is still a potentially destabilizing force in regard to sexual binaries, because “it upsets the stability of hetero/homosexuality as mutually exclusive
opposites” (Sin 415). Within scholarship, especially queer theory focused on destabilizing binary categories, bisexuality has become a more visible object of study, but outside the academy bisexuals struggle to be recognized (Steinman 402). Bisexual erasure—rendering bisexuals invisible—happens in multiple ways which delegitimize it, usually by claiming it’s just a transition point or accusing bisexuals of adopting the identity as a cop-out to avoid coming out or to retain heterosexual privilege (Flanders and Hatfield 234). This disavowal of bisexuality as a real identity offers a glimpse of how the binary “serves to discipline other sexual variants into normative sexual classifications” (Sin 415).

This bisexual erasure also has a history within fan scholarship, specifically that surrounding slash. A lot of older slash has been criticized for the lack of any discussion within fanfic of the issues that individuals with non-heteronormative sexualities must wrestle with. Critics argue that the lack of such discussion negates the argument that slash truly explores sexuality and is not just based in adulation for the male character or actor and, thus, just porn for female enjoyment (Scodari 125). Many of the issues these critics address relate to the erasure of these issues and any discussion of male sexuality by getting the men into bed together through various plot contrivances while maintaining their heterosexual identity. Often, the characters just leap over any doubts about a first same-sex encounter that one might expect a strictly heterosexual person to have, merely because of the strength of their bond with the other person. Other times, fics do not even do this, but rather have some other force compel the men into bed: for example, Pon Farr was common in Kirk/Spock stories, sex pollen occurred a lot in Stargate, and magic serves in many supernatural fandoms. Still, other fics handle the emotional and mental wrangling one could expect to go through in such a situation by having the character wave them away—he isn’t gay; it’s just with this person. In others, the subject of the characters’ established
heterosexuality and any questioning of a shift in orientation just never comes up at all (Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins 22). This erasure of homosexuality from slash was often seen as homophobic and closed-minded, possibly even an appropriation and fetishizing of gay male bodies (Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins 24).

The fans who deliberately wrote their fics with these tropes pushed back against the accusations of homophobia and calls for more engagement with issues of queer sexuality. They were not writing for gay men or appropriating gay male bodies, because they were not writing about gay men. Instead, they wrote to engage with their own sexuality and explore it in a society which constrains female desire, and to share that exploration with others who were seeking an outlet to do the same (Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins 25). Since they were attracted to straight men, their characters were still straight, because that was what turned them on—the kink of straight men engaging in same-sex relationships. In a rebuttal of the accusations leveled at them, they accused the others of kink-shaming (Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins 26). While not a clear-cut line, where a fan fell in the debate was often based on their own sexual identity: queer fans were far more likely to want to engage with issues of sexuality and society.

Within this debate the binary, exclusive nature of heterosexuality and homosexuality, is consistently reinforced: the characters are gay, or the characters are straight. The potential for bisexuality rarely, if ever, arose in the earlier days of fandom. That is one thing that has changed a great deal. Even fics that do not deliberately talk about sexuality, still often demonstrate an innate fluidity as if it were a matter of course and the natural way of things. One reason for this could be that, while conventional analysis has held that most slash writers are heterosexual women, a survey of AO3 writers showed otherwise. While limited by the fact that there was self-selection bias, and the survey was heavily promoted on Tumblr rather than more widely
circulated, its sample size was over 10,000, which makes its findings still valuable (centrumlumina, “AO3 Census”). What it found in relation to slash writers and readership, was that a clear majority of slash writers and readers identify as bi- or pan-sexual (centrumlumina, “M/M Fans”). Per the survey, heterosexuals only make up 35% of slash readers and 32% of slash writers (centrumlumina, “M/M Fans”). While not dispositive, this growing number of fans who identify as something other than straight—a much larger proportion than the general public—could be what is bringing more awareness of issues surrounding sexuality to the slash genre.

Thus, the fics I examine in this section are not those that rely on a plot contrivance to get the men into bed, predominantly because those types of fics very rarely occurred within these fandoms. Instead, the first group of fics I examine in this section are “first time” fics that deal with questions of shifting character sexuality and the risks involved in changing the nature of the characters’ bond from friendship to sexual, and a second group that consists of fics which explicitly engage with the nature of sexual fluidity in the social and political context surrounding non-normative sexualities. These categories obviously can overlap, but I tried to distinguish between the character’s relation to himself in one and his relation to society in the other. As opposed to those fics which ignore the matter of sexuality or social context, fics in which the characters acknowledge the cultural norms within which they live and actively choose to subvert them can serve as an explicit criticism of the boundaries limiting the potentiality of masculine friendships, whether those friendships are ultimately sexualized or not.

*Friends to Lovers*

One popular subgenre of slash is “first time” stories which involve negotiating the beginning of desire and acting on it. What I found most, in relation to shifting sexuality were fics in which the characters often face questions from themselves, and their prospective partner,
about their sexuality and what a shift in it might mean and how changing their relationship to one involving sex might affect their bond. These fics, then, explicitly have the characters wrestle with questions about the nature of sexual identity in ways the source text does not permit. The first time is not inevitable or natural, in these fics, but rather “an alternative path down which the story might go, if he were adventurous enough to recognize other possibilities in himself and open up to them” (Pugh 96).

In these “first time” fics for Scott and Stiles, the normal teenage emotions arise, reading like any other teen romance: realizing you have a crush, trying to get closer to the person, nerves about admitting your feelings, fear of rejection, giddiness and delight in having your first love. “Be My Valentine? We Can Eat Pizza and Stuff” presents the relationship as an inevitability, something everyone else can see, but the boys can’t, quite, yet, but the cues are those of any other high school crush:

Stiles Stillinski was hopelessly in love with his best friend. Everyone in Beacon Hills knew, except Stiles Stillinski and said best friend, Scott McCall. Now, how they did not, nobody knew. To them, it was glaringly loud. It was loud in the way that Stiles purposely took the same classes with Scott, although he could go to much more advance (sic) classes. It was loud in the way Stiles cheered for Scott at lacrosse. It was loud in the way Stiles’ face melted every time he talked about Scott. Plain and simple: it was loud. (the_witch_in_a_crowd_of_muggles)

For most Stiles/Scott fic, the slide from friends to lovers, the slipping along the continuum is simple, easy. Natural. As Stiles points out in “You Belong with Me (I Belong with You)”: “When he started looking into being not-entirely-straight-maybe, he soon found that crushing on your best friend was an almost universal constant. He considered his crush on Scott
something like the anti-virus program on his brain: always running in the background, pops up regularly for an update and keeps him safe” (Hedwig_Dordt). Similarly, “Trying to Keep the Warmth In,” starts very simply from a naturalized premise: “The thing about them being best friends is that they’re always touching” (Loz). QuickLikeLight expands on it in her fic “Endgame,” which evolved from a post on Tumblr she’d made where she “talked about what the end of Teen Wolf might look like if Scott/Stiles was ‘endgame’ canonically.” The discussion of the evolution of the boys’ relationship sums up a lot about the nature of the bromance-to-romance phenomenon in all its different layers, from exploration of sexuality to the early buddy movies that were never allowed to go there:

Scott twines his fingers in with Stiles’, resting their palms on the stick shift between them. It is a quiet thing, falling in love with your best friend. It is a thing that happens when you aren’t looking for it, but when you discover it, it is more precious than anything else you might have sought. He didn't expect it, but he wants it, knows Stiles wants it. They fit together like puzzle pieces, filling in each other’s gaps, making themselves whole. (QuickLikeLight)

In 3988Akasha’s series of fics, “Friendship Chronicles,” which details Miles and Bass’s childhood and life pre-canon, Miles and Bass go through much the same emotions and path, including a spate of teenage jealousy. In “Green,” Miles has become aware of his crush, and, like Stiles and Scott, it starts as a quiet thing that creeps up on him:

Recently he’d caught himself looking at Bass more than he normally did, seeing if he was okay, seeing if he was smiling, noticing what he was doing. Most of the time he thought Bass could feel him watching, and thought he’d get an earful from him, but instead Bass would turn and look at him, a soft smile on his face. Sometimes he’d even get a wave.
When that happened, he would wink because it made Bass’ face change even more, almost like he was embarrassed, and Miles enjoyed the look. (3988Akasha, “Green”)

He hasn’t put a name on it, yet, but when he sees Bass give “his smile” to another boy, he reacts by dragging Bass into the locker room and shoving him into the wall (even as a teenager, Miles has issues with words) and demanding a confused Bass explain himself, then making his own feelings clear, pretty much as he does as an adult: “Miles finally felt like he could breathe, the world was still around him. His thumb moved restlessly against Bass’ throat as he leaned in to touch his lips to Bass’. He meant to be gentle, to give Bass a chance to back off if he wanted. The road to hell was paved with good intentions and his were the most recent coat of paint” (3988Akasha, “Green”). In the Miles/Bass fics as adults, as well, this slide is naturalized. Miles sometimes has to “catch up,” but once he does, the end seems as inevitable as Scott/Stiles.

As mentioned above, Damon and Alaric often begin their relationship as a casual, friends-with-benefits one, or an antagonistic one, with feelings developing along the way, rather than a sudden realization the other pairs have. When they do follow this pattern, they tend to be more humorous, lighter, like VampirePam’s “World’s Worst Wingman,” which has Damon purportedly serving as Alaric’s wingman at a bar, with no success (VampirePam, “World’s Worst Wingman”). Alaric overhears Damon with one of the women, finally, and realizes Damon is, in fact, driving them all away. When he confronts Damon, the vampire tells him he needs someone who can put up with all his brokenness, and informs him that said person is him, before sudden-kissing him, Miles-style. Alaric’s sexuality is mentioned, briefly, and then discarded just as easily:
To his utter embarrassment, Alaric heard himself let out a little moan, and before he
took it, his arms were around Damon's neck, his hands tangled in Damon's dark hair to
pull him closer.

When Damon finally allowed him a few seconds to breathe, he had every intention of
saying, "What the hell?" or even "I'm very flattered and everything, but I'm straight," but
somehow all he actually got out was, "Wow," before pouncing on Damon once again.
(VampirePam, “World’s Worst Wingman”)

If Damon and Alaric do not have everyone questioning their relationship and interest in
the source text, like Miles and Bass, fan fic makes up for that, though usually in a far more
supportive way. “Conversations about Dead People” involves Alaric complaining about Damon
to multiple characters who all assume the two are together. Though Alaric protests this, at first,
because he’s still clinging to the idea of hating Damon, he eventually takes a chance when
Damon adds his voice to the mix, indicating his interest in Alaric (VampirePam,
“Conversations”). Similarly, “A Fine Romance with No Biting,” Damon and Alaric fall asleep,
drunk, in Alaric’s bed one night, and everyone becomes convinced the two are together
(nomelon, “A Fine Romance”). Stefan even gives Alaric a warning about dating Damon. Alaric
keeps complaining about what people think, exasperating Damon who points out that since
nothing happened, Alaric is “freaking out about nothing” (nomelon, “A Fine Romance”)
Pointing out that if Alaric is going to freak out anyway, he might as well freak out about
something, Damon moves into his personal space and kisses him (more gently than Miles-style),
and they both are surprised by the result:

Damon didn't kiss like Alaric had thought, if Alaric had spent any time at all
imagining how Damon may or may not have kissed. It started out soft, barely a brush of
lips, just hovering, breathing Alaric in and waiting for him to break first. Alaric stood firm, resolutely not giving in and closing the distance between them. For about six seconds. They were a steadfast and unbending six seconds and Alaric was proud of each and every one of them.

Damon’s hair was soft against his palm as Alaric groaned and pulled him in. Damon kissed like he meant it, deep and open and so good that Alaric was dizzy with it.

When Damon finally broke their kiss and drew back to look at him, naturally he looked like the cat that had got the canary, but there was a hint of surprise mixed in there somewhere, too, just enough to make Alaric feel less like an out of depth teenager and more like he was really being \textit{seen}. (nomelon, “A Fine Romance”)

That idea of being \textit{seen}, being \textit{known}, echoes through all the bromances, in the source text and fan fiction, and circles back to an idea of intimacy that is out of step with our modern version of it and the question of where the lines lie between platonic and erotic love.

\textit{Realism vs. Fantasy in Queering Characters}

This second group of fics involves the partners engaging with the more social questions of sexual fluidity and the political climate surrounding non-normative sexualities, at least in passing. This engagement connects them to the current political climate more surely than fics of the past that received criticism for their erasure of the non-normative sexuality aspects of slash. While Miles occasionally falls into the trope of “only Bass,” this is rarer than in the past, and the other five characters usually identify explicitly as bisexual or gay. Much of the fan fiction around all three of these bromances remarks on the society in which the characters live, heeding the social norms and issues of the day, even in established relationships.
As with emotional expressiveness, Scott and Stiles have an easier time facing the outside world. However, “Five Times Scott Knew He Loved Stiles (And One Time Stiles Knew He Loved Him Back),” the two, as children stuck at some relative’s wedding, decide to have a wedding of their own:

That day, Scott's mom didn't make a big deal of him marrying his best friend, but after Mom left the table and he mentioned it to Grandma, she was mad. She told him to stop saying things like that when he didn't know what they meant, and then went on a long rant about God and family and right and wrong, and Scott just stood there and listened with wide eyes, not understanding most of what she said but knowing he did something wrong. She said she wouldn't watch her grandson become a "fag", and the small word felt heavy and bitter on his tongue as he repeated it, not knowing its meaning. Stiles stood dutifully by his side and listened attentively, not daring to hold his hand when he started sniffling even though it felt almost unnatural - when Scott was crying, Stiles held his hand; that was just the way things worked. (larryberry2)

Scott later asks his mom why his grandmother was mad, and the authorial voice inserts, making a statement that fits with Jeff Davis’ attempt to create a world where queerness is normal:

“Because some people hate the things they don’t understand, and I love my mother, but God help her, she’s one of those people” (larryberry2).

Now and then, the teens experience a fear of a homophobic reaction from the other. For instance, “Into Me (See?),” written from Scott’s point of view, has Scott freaking out when he comes to the realization that he’s in love with Stiles:
The worst part is that these are all the extra things that may or may not happen. Scott's really only worried about one thing – what if Stiles hates him? What if Stiles never speaks to him again? What if he says "dude, what the fuck?" and looks at him with disgust in his eyes? Scott can't handle that. He would rather face down the entire Argent clan that have that happen - and he's basically done that, just for Stiles. When did his awkward best friend become the most important person in the whole world to him?

(deathgetsusall and mrvsc)

In Miles/Bass and Damon/Alaric slash, however, these issues seem to arise more frequently. In some, like 3988Akasha’s series tracing the two through high school into the Marines has them having to keep their relationship secret in both small-town Indiana and under Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (3988Akasha, “Party”; 3988Akasha, “Cars”; 3988Akasha, “Baseball”; 3988Akasha, “Rendezvous”). Similarly, in “Firsts,” they make a point of having to slip off base to be together (buttercups3, “Firsts”). And in “Boredom (and the other thing),” the two men are deployed in Iraq and Bass is chafing at the rules that keep them apart (JaqofSpades, “Boredom”). Fics set post-Blackout are sometimes more open, but if set while they are leading the militia, often keep to the same military rules, even with DADT long gone, occasionally due to their internalized homophobia. “In the Beginning” presents their trek across America, searching for Rachel and Ben as their, somewhat grim, honeymoon, but Miles still keeps any displays of affection to the tent at night, and Bass worries if Miles is really okay with this more certain relationship, especially relating to things like Miles’ occasional issues with being the bottom:

“You want me in you?” I whisper to him privately, as if the dog could understand on the other side of the nylon tent.
He nuzzles against my neck and nods. Inexplicably, he has a hard time admitting he wants this. It always makes me a little sad that he thinks there’s wrong in it, that there’s even a possibility our sex together shames him. (buttercups3, “In the Beginning”)

Like pre-Blackout Bass and Miles, Damon and Alaric live in a small-town, surrounded by people whose experiences with queer people seem limited. While the risk to Damon is negligible (he is an independently wealthy vampire, after all—no one is going to care what gender he sleeps with), Alaric’s position as a public high school teacher in such a town could arguably be in jeopardy in the “real” world. Stares and comments might be common, at the least. Alaric has family, as well, and familial reactions to alternate sexualities can be polarizing. Instead of ignoring these things, many Damon/Alaric fics weave this awareness into the fabric of the story in a way which acknowledges and makes a statement about the cultural moment without making the narrative “about” those issues.

In “Caught between Two Worlds,” Alaric struggles to choose between Damon and his girlfriend in Season 2, Jenna. Much of his debate over which of them to choose circles around the “normal girl-next-door American dream” life versus the one spent always moving around with the dangerous, unpredictable vampire. However, when his brother comes to town, the issue of Damon’s gender arises briefly, touching on Alaric’s not being out to his parents:

"I’m guessing your second option is a guy?" he said then and Ric was surprised, although he shouldn’t be. Nate was one of the few people who knew that he was bisexual. He hadn’t told his parents so far. Hadn’t really felt the need to, since he hadn’t been in a serious relationship with a guy anyway. So why provoke another fight with his dad? (Dahlia_Rose_83)
Conversely, in “Lapis and Bourbon, Amen,” when Alaric goes to say goodbye to his parents because he has decided to allow Damon to turn him into a vampire, his father is aware of his bisexuality and gives his blessing for him to be happy:

Alaric’s father’s mind tends to wander at times, but he’s relatively focused today.

“Your Damon. You love him?”


“Do that,” his father muses. “He can't be stranger than your Isobel.”

(pleasebekidding, “Lapis and Bourbon, Amen”)

While Damon’s fear is less to do with others’ reactions to the homosexual relationship so much as his own trying to not admit to needing someone, the political climate and risk still underlies pleasebekidding’s “Home,” as well: “If Alaric was here Damon wouldn’t be a coward again ever about any part of it. He’d take Alaric to Vermont and marry him. He’d kiss Alaric at the Grill in front of god and everyone” (pleasebekidding, “Home”). Later, when the two are reunited and searching for the eponymous home, Alaric asks Damon where he thinks he would want to live, Damon responds: “I don’t care…Somewhere with no vampire population. Somewhere we can lie low…Somewhere I can hold your hand when we’re walking down the street” (pleasebekidding, “Home”).

While none of these stories become “about” LGBTQ issues, nor do they make wide-sweeping social justice statements, they do make the attempt to tie into, address and, sometimes, correct the Othering of queerness still present today.
Conclusion

Some queer theorists reject automatic sexual classifications because they cannot possibly capture the “complexity of sexual subjectivities” (Sin 414). Rather than being innate, these categories of sexuality, like gender, are also socially constructed and limited by institutionalized heterosexuality and its discourses. To them, a better construct would be one of sexual fluidity, not necessarily from one category to another but without the concept of a fixed identity category at all (Sin 414; Seidman 134; Butler 188; Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* 24–27). Another argument focuses instead on subverting institutionalized heterosexuality with “non-heteronormative and sexually ambiguous performances, representations, identities and practices” (Sin 414; Halberstam 20–21; Sullivan 140–141).

These two are not mutually incompatible—one focuses on a conception of sexuality that has the possibility of transcending culture, while the other involves confronting the ways institutionalized heterosexuality organizes itself and the real-world implications of that system. As mentioned in the Introduction, my theoretical position draws heavily on the deconstruction of the binaries and the possibilities inherent in recognizing fluidity as opposed to rigidity; however, writing fic that subverts heteronormativity is a performative act, which grounds this project back within the social and cultural. One question research in sexual fluidity has yet to focus fully on is how institutions have the power to resist, co-opt or reject fluidity’s potential to disrupt them (Sin 416). What arises repeatedly in this project is how our own socialization is often the force that provides that power—that even texts and narratives with the power to subvert and disrupt the normative power of institutionalized heterosexuality still end up upholding some parts of it—much like the source texts in the previous chapter which tended to balance resistant practices
with the acceptance of normative ones, like male sexual aggression. Some of the same forces can be at work here, but potential for subversion still exists.

Despite criticism saying otherwise, the idea persists that slash writers are doing something radical, something subversive, something new, which resists the dominant discourse about gender and sexuality and posits a world where men are allowed to be emotional and intimate without being “unmanly.” Beyond gender norms, though, our culture places a premium upon romance, especially the myth of the one true love, or soulmate, coming from a romantic, sexual, rather than platonic, relationship. For some, the idea that Bass and Miles, in particular, due to the ambiguity of their source text, are not sexually involved, or at least repressing those feelings, seems impossible. The problem this can create within the construct of monogamy is something I address in chapter five, but it has negative implications for our concept of what friendship even means, as well.

When asked at San Diego Comic-Con in 2013 about Tom’s interpretation of the relationship between Bass and Miles as sexual and if it was reasonable, or understandable, that viewers were now wondering if there was something more going on between the men, David Lyons, who plays Bass, answered: “Absolutely. How could you not?” (BuddyTV). However, he went on to explain that he’s never consciously played Bass’s feelings for Miles as sexual and argued that to insist on a sexual reading because we believe that two men cannot love each other so deeply without it being sexual, reinforces stereotypes of what a certain sexuality must look like and thus belittles both men’s ability to love so deeply without sex and the lives and loves of those with alternate sexualities.
What neither Lyons nor the interviewer touch upon is the continuum of sexuality and sociality which could free men of any sexuality not only from the limitations of traditional gender norms but rigid sexuality categorization, as well. Like the arguing critics and fans, they both fall into the common practice of representing the question as a binary one, an either/or, rather than as a space of possibility and potentiality. Where Jenkins offered slash as a mechanism by which to open men up emotionally, if men are allowed in the source text to be more open emotionally, slash, instead, can function as a mechanism to shatter binaries and open men (and women) up to less rigid notions of sexuality. Rather than maintaining the heterosexual-homosexual binary, by recognizing the complexity of human sexual and emotional experience this freedom of even the potential for fluidity\(^1\) offers the greater challenge to institutionalized heterosexuality, which Robin Wood argues “depends on the separation of the sexes, hence upon the continued repression of bisexuality in order that masculinity and femininity may continue to be constructed” (199). If the primary reason for sexuality lies in pleasure, communication and expression, Wood argues as he examines “traces of repressed bisexuality” in buddy films, “no logical reason remains why sexuality should be restricted to heterosexuality” (198). In other words, slash can potentially offer a way to push back against the rigid binary of gender and sexuality in a far more radical way than traditional analysis of slash and gender representations in popular culture consider.

On one hand, if viewed as a reassertion of the Platonic and Aristotelean ideals of friendship, these bromances offer a space in which greater, more expressive male-male intimacy can be allowed, celebrated and explored, and a counterpoint to this modern myth of masculinity. Tension between erotic and platonic love might not be eradicated, but if men were offered a

\(^1\) Not everyone may feel drawn to this fluidity, or that it represents them. But institutionalized heterosexuality and fixed binaries deny the possibility of such fluidity, which arguably limits everyone.
wider array of relational choices, and acceptable ways to express intimacy, that tension could transform into something healthier for everyone: women have intimate, supportive friendships without threatening their erotic bonds; perhaps men could, as well. If so, then we could apply Jenkins definition of slash to these non-comedic bromances:

[Bromance] is what happens when you take away the glass. The glass, for me, is often more social than physical; the glass represents those aspects of traditional masculinity which prevent emotional expressiveness or physical intimacy between men, which block the possibility of true male friendship. [Bromance] is what happens when you take away those barriers and imagine what a new kind of male friendship might look like. (Green, Jenkins & Jenkins 20)

On the other hand, if we accept this premise, it forces us to ask the question: what, then, does slash do?

If our erotic ideal rests upon being in love with one’s soulmate, a perfect union that all other relationships are subservient to and which serves as a panacea to all ills, then the narrative that reinforces the bromance as a love between soulmates should, at least sometimes, culminate in the characters reassessing their sexuality and exploring the options that being together erotically might offer. Rather than death or denial, televisual bromances such as these and others like them could signal, instead, the reintegration of self and resurrection of possibility. With the acceptance and representation of more queer characters on screen, these bromances offer the perfect opportunity, too, to reform the legacy of heteronormative rejection offered by the buddy film from one ending in death to one ending in expansion and to challenge the binary constraints that insist on a paradigm of “either/or.”
Possibility, then, seems to be the key to the bromance and to slash. The homoerotic tension, the *possibility* of something more, something different, is at the heart of it (DeAngelis 3). Exploring it platonically offers a possibility to reassess our cultural narrative about male intimacy. Exploring it erotically offers the possibility to reassess our cultural narratives about sexuality. The source text, at least for these bromances, seems to do the first. Slash, then, goes farther than Jenkins’ assessment of it, and not only explores the possibilities for male intimacy but for those of human sexuality, as well.
Chapter 3: Female Friendships and Femslash

“I like to imagine that in some alternate universe, we’re living this wonderful lesbian life together.”

Introduction

The counterpart to slash, femslash takes female characters who are presumptively heterosexual in their source text and places them in a same-sex romantic or sexual relationship or encounter in fan fiction. Although most research discussing male/male slash mentions that femslash exists, most spend no time examining the genre. While the reasons for this are rarely explicated, two reasons seem most likely and logical: scholars and fans alike view femslash as merely the female corollary of male/male slash, much as lesbianism is often included in discussions of gay men, almost as an afterthought, or femslash is somehow considered less subversive than male/male slash. Either way, the lack of critical analysis of the sub-genre seems to highlight how scholars, like fans and like media producers, are products of our culture and its norms—those essentialist, gendered norms that say female friendships are more fluid and devalue female sexuality that is not aimed at men or created for the male gaze (Diamond; Fahs). Thus, given the push to demonstrate the subversive potential of slash, a cultural acceptance of female sexual fluidity may minimize that potential when queering female characters, leading scholars to neglect it as an object of study.

17 (Texts From Last Night, “#50497”)
Another reason there may be a dearth of scholarship on femslash could be because there is a dearth of femslash. Where slash makes up nearly 50% of all fan fiction posted on Archive of Our Own, only 7% of fics are categorized as femslash.\textsuperscript{18} These disparities, if not the exact numbers, hold true in \textit{Revolution}, \textit{Teen Wolf}, \textit{The Vampire Diaries} and \textit{The Originals}, as well: 21% of \textit{Revolution} fan fiction is slash, while 2% is femslash; \textit{Teen Wolf}'s fan fiction is 71% slash and only 6% femslash; and slash makes up 17% of fan fiction for \textit{The Vampire Diaries} and \textit{The Originals}, combined, compared to femslash's 9%. When investigating phenomena within fandom, the initial scholarly impulse has been to examine those elements of the subculture which can arguably offer more insight to fandom as a community, and, in that sense, stashing femslash into the same category as slash merely mirrors the inclusion of lesbians, bisexuals, transgender individuals, pansexuals, asexuals, queer, questioning, intersex and other non-heteronormative identities and sexualities in the “LGBTQIA” acronym, while privileging the experience of gay, white, cis-gendered men as the face of the community (Gillespie). But this subsumption of both femslash and identity fails to acknowledge important differences (Rich 136). It also fails to interrogate the lack of femslash as an issue in and of itself.

As with the question about why women read and write slash, multiple theories exist to answer the question about the dearth of femslash. Like the question regarding slash, too, the likely answer to the femslash question comes from a convergence of reasons. The following theories all seem plausible, though none are comprehensive: the lack of complex female characters in source texts; the lack of female relationships for those complex female characters who do exist (either they never interact with one another or only interact in regard to the male characters); the characters lack the dynamics that get characters shipped most often (rivalry or

\textsuperscript{18} I arrived at these numbers and the others in this section by using Archive of Our Own’s category search feature and dividing the number of fics in a category by the number of fics in the fandom as a whole.
close friendship); compulsory heterosexuality and a difficulty in imagining women’s pleasure for pleasure’s sake; internalized misogyny of fans (the female characters who do exist are often judged and disliked by fans far more than male characters); and the idea that femslash hits too close to home for female writers—writing about male characters provides a buffer, allowing enjoyment in the narrative without over-identification and thus without potential triggers around thoughts and emotions that arise in exploring sexual narratives (centrumlumina, “Chart”).

The lack of media objects which have multiple, well-developed female characters who interact with each other in ways which allow for the development of intimacy undoubtedly creates a portion of the issue. Fandoms which have more female characters in either close friendships or intimate rivalries, who are well-developed, well-rounded characters, have a much higher incidence of femslash. For instance, 81% of fan fiction written for Rizzoli and Isles, a crime procedural whose cast is led by two women who are close friends, is femslash. Similarly, the fan fiction written for Once Upon a Time, where the women of the cast tend to be more active in moving the plot arcs forward and all have strong bonds with one another for better or worse, consists of 32% femslash and only 7% slash.

However, the very lack of femslash in the products of an activity heavily dominated by women, should be a reason to look at it more closely. “Why not femslash?” provides a counterweight to the common “Why slash?” inquiry. Unlike “traditional” eroticization of feminine relationships, femslash is not written or created for the male gaze. Instead, women (generally) write it for their own pleasure and that of other women. If we can argue that slash is a feminist endeavor, at least sometimes, because it privileges the female gaze and offers a means through which women can write and explore their own pleasure, how much more so should that argument apply to femslash? But if, like Adrienne Rich argues of lesbians’ “‘inclusion’ as
female versions of male homosexuality,” we merely conflate femslash and slash, do we equally deprive femslash of its own voice and its own power (136)? By focusing on similarity instead of difference and choosing slash fics to analyze instead of femslash, do we erase more feminine existences and experiences?

This chapter considers those questions, investigating femslash pairings, and, as with the bromances in the previous chapter, exploring their connection to same-sex friendships and potential subversion of sexual and gendered norms. Additionally, while the question of why women read and write slash has been the focus of so much previous research, questions regarding the corresponding lack of femslash have garnered little attention outside of fandom. Ultimately, I argue that femslash, too, is a dynamic cultural discourse which, in its creation and consumption, in its similarities to and differences from slash, offers a compelling cultural critique of gender norms, intimate relationships and sexuality, and our conceptions and value of female experience.

The Lesbian Continuum

Unlike the bromantic pairings, the femslash pairings have no clear demarcation along multiple continuums within the text. In theorizing a continuum from the homosocial to the homoerotic in male relationships, Sedgwick argued that this paralleled the continuum of women’s relationships which encompasses the erotic and the social, a theoretical construct posed by Adrienne Rich (Between Men 3). Detailed in her essay on compulsory heterosexuality, Rich’s “lesbian continuum” focuses on identity and “a range of...women-identified experiences” which may or may not include actual or desired sexual activity with women (135). Rich argues that the clinical definition of “lesbianism,” which focuses on sexual behavior not identity, has separated women from each other and kept “breadths of female history and psychology” out of reach.
To recuperate this lost history, we must “expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (135). Rich argues, then, that instead of lesbians being an afterthought in the discussion of male homosexuality, heterosexual women and lesbians should not be separated by the genders of their sexual partners, but read as part of a whole, because they are co-substantial with similar women-identified experiences (Rockler 91). Then, and only then, Rich argues can we:

Begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself; as an energy not only diffuse but, as Audre Lorde has described it, omnipresent in “the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, or psychic,” and in the sharing of work; as the empowering joy which “makes us less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.” (136)

Naomi Rockler concludes that the definition of “lesbian” as confined to a genital, sexual experience, builds a wall between women and the experiences of lesbian and straight women, much like the “way homophobia radically disrupts the continuum between the homosocial and homosexual” on Sedgwick’s continuum between men (Rockler 94; Woledge, “Intimatopia”). Disrupting this definition, Rockler argues, provides the key to freeing women from the prison of compulsory heterosexuality; women could well choose to stay in their heterosexual unions after obtaining this freedom, but it would be an informed choice, made with agency, knowing that they need not be dependent on men for their emotional and physical needs (Rockler 94). For a broader, oppositional definition of lesbian, Rockler offers: “an identity that involves the many ways in which women receive support and pleasure from each other” and which makes “some of
the distinctions between lesbians and heterosexual women become ambiguous” (94). When read this way, female friendships are reconstituted on the lesbian continuum, which provides the emotional intimacy most human beings crave and offers a way of creating more consistent intimacy than women find within the paradigm of compulsory heterosexuality, even in their female friendships.

Notably, this notion of a continuum for women’s relationships, without the barrier that dichotomizes those of men, exists outside of feminist and scholarly discourse. However, more often even though social norms allow women more freedom of physical expression in their friendships, many people still see the behavioral divide functioning in the same way homophobia does on the male continuum: blocking the fluid movement of identification and refusing to blur the lines between friendship and romance. In researching the representation and interpretation of lesbianism versus “just” friendship in Fried Green Tomatoes’ adaptation to the screen, Rockler conducted interviews probing into subjects’ perceptions of both lesbianism and friendship. One respondent claimed that there was “a lot of leeway for women being together” without being “looked down on as lesbians” (103). Another argued that people might “mistake” women who are close as lesbians because “people don’t understand relationships between women, because women are so much more open” (103). However, a third had this to offer: “I don’t think it makes sense to really draw a boundary between, okay, this is a friendship and this is a romantic relationship. A lot of people fall in between those and will move back and forth. Maybe they’ll try a little romance and then will move back into the friendship category. And I think this is indicative of a real blurring of relationship” (102).
Friendships vs. Frenemies

Compulsory heterosexuality, then, complicates female friendships. On one hand, female friendships are represented as nurturing, supportive and intimate, allowed far more “freedom” than that allowed for men in expressing emotion both verbally and physically (Rockler 103). This lack of clear demarcation and definition hampers research into friendship: however, most social scientists agree that friendships are voluntary relationships which include “support, trust, intimacy, loyalty and affection” (Glover, Galliher, and Crowell 71). One feminist theory of friendship, the Self-in-Relation model, holds that mutuality is critical for friendship: the sharing of self, of emotional connections and responsibility which help each woman to grow (Glover, Galliher, and Crowell 71). Research also supports the common idea that female friendships are more supportive and physically demonstrative than male friendships (Diamond and Dubé). Since so much is taken for granted about female friendships, however, Rich argues that a history of female relationships has been erased which demonstrates consistent feminine rebellion against oppression, a history of women “resist[ing] male tyranny” by banding together for support and validation (137).

On the other hand, compulsory heterosexuality also requires women’s dependence on men to meet their relational needs, both sexual and emotional, and as cultural patterns shift, female friendships shift, as well. Cultural patterns like same-sex education tend to enhance the intimacy and support of female friendship, while patterns which subordinate women into the role of only wife and mother, and which demonize lesbianism, devalue these friendships and discourage intimacy (Glover, Galliher, and Crowell 72). The requirement to attain a heterosexual union can also put women at odds, setting up friends as romantic rivals for male attention and putting women in general into constant competition (Bleske-Rechek and Lighthall 83). Judith
Taylor’s examination of feminist memoirs in relation to Rich’s call for an acknowledgement of a lesbian continuum reveals a bleaker image of women’s intimacy with one another (94). Instead of support, Taylor found that these feminist archives documented “meditations on the cruelty with which women engage one another” (94). Taylor argues that, despite this, the image of female friendships as sites for nurturing and support persists because feminist scholars largely refuse to “be critical of the gendered assessment that girls and women are…good at friendship” (96). Women often devalue their own friendships, making them subordinate to their heterosexual relationships; patterns of closeness and betrayal reverberate through our friendships, and most women have multiple stories of the petty cruelties of their perceived friends (Taylor 99).

Female solidarity, when it exists, is not something usually defined by femaleness, but a certain type of femaleness—like to like, and within it are multiple strands of “us” vs. “them.” Women are most powerful in this solidarity “when there is an identified form of oppression” to oppose (Winch 79). However, these fractures of sisterhood revealed themselves in “second wave feminism’s superficial understanding of female solidarity,” which attempted to ignore the multiplicity and intersectionality of women’s lives and experiences and the significance of colonialism in the lives of minority women (Winch 71). These differing visions of female friendship conflict with each other and our conception of friendship, but they exist within both the lived experiences of women and our cultural texts.

From Female Friendship Films to the Girlfriend Flick

In addition to their own continuum, like male friendships, female friendships also have their own film genres. The late 1970s saw the start of “female friendship films” as counterparts to the male “buddy film,” and bromantic comedy has found its balance in the girlfriend flick. Female friendship films in the early part of the cycle consisted mainly of dyadic sentimental
films, which, like the buddy films, concentrated heavily on the intimacy between two female friends. The late 1980s took this sentimentality to new heights with *Beaches* and *Steel Magnolias* (Hollinger 43). While some of these films do attempt to be progressive and make political statements, the sentimentality and intense intimacy of the friendships are often lifted to an idealized level which does not exist in real life, like the buddy films created a fantasy of male relationships no longer enacted off the screen. In addition, just as idealized romantic scripts can lead to dissatisfaction or unrealistic expectations for sexual relationships, so too can these performances of friendship lead to unrealistic expectations of real friendships (Hollinger 49). Additionally, the majority of these films ultimately deliver a conservative message: all relationships are judged by the heteronormative ideal; careers end in motherhood; and women “naturally” wish to be separated from men in their own sphere, rather than the reality that they are often excluded from male spaces (Hollinger 74–77).

The 1980s also saw comedic political female friendship films, which challenged social norms, but then these films took a turn to far more “deadly and deadly serious” political friendship films, like *Thelma and Louise*, which threaten the patriarchal status quo by depicting women who react violently to their victimization (Hollinger 106). However, this turn was brief because, Hollinger argues, the threat to the status quo in them was so overt that producers backed off from making them almost immediately (Hollinger 107). In their place, a backlash against female friendship films emerged, as well, which positioned female friendship as dangerous and destructive not just to patriarchy and male violence, like *Thelma and Louise*, but to women, as well. Films like *Single White Female*, *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* and *Poison Ivy*, all represent “manipulative female friendships” which “offers the typical anti-female friendship
message to women,” that they must beware of other women who will only betray and destroy them (Hollinger 234).

The turn of the millennium, however, saw a return to comedy, and films which combined these messages in multiple ways, sometimes progressive, sometimes not. The girlfriend flick genre includes such films as *Sex in the City, Baby Mama, Bride Wars,* and *13 going on 30.* In their article “I Love You, Man: Gendered narratives of friendship in contemporary Hollywood comedies,” Karen Boyle and Susan Berridge compare the girlfriend flick and bromance, drawing heavily on Hollinger’s work with female friendship films. One of the biggest distinctions they note is the de-eroticization of female friendship in girlfriend flicks, in direct contrast to the dangerous play with homoeroticism in the bromance. This eroticization or lack thereof is rigidly gendered and at odds with the typical narratives of the continuum, which generally see an inherent eroticism of female friendships where the line between friend and lover blurs, and the function of homophobia to fracture the male homosocial-homosexual continuum (Boyle and Berridge 357). Where the bromance plays with the possibility of non-heteronormativity, then, only to disavow it at the last moment, the girlfriend flick usually disavows it immediately.

Filmmakers, then, appear to realize the disruptive nature of female homoeroticism, recognize that allowing its exploration, even briefly, may validate Rich’s argument that women can find fulfillment in their female friendships, and believe that, if women should recognize that they do not need men, then their obvious choice would be to abandon them all together. Male power recognizes its own oppressiveness in this way, sees the threat of female solidarity against that power, and cannot conceive of an egalitarian world where women might choose to stay with men without compulsion. The homoeroticism of the bromance offers no such threat; homophobia still rules the reactions of too many heterosexual men, and patriarchal power already positions
women as there to be picked up or cast aside as needed for sexual relations, so the patriarchy does not fear men’s own recognition that they could choose to be without women. They have done so for centuries.

The girlfriend flick, then, like the bromance, operates to reaffirm heteronormativity and works in the service of institutionalized heterosexuality. However, as the bromance opens up possibility for exploring and recognizing emotional expressiveness in men, the girlfriend flick envisions ways of navigating the seemingly dichotomous experiences of female friendships and, at the same time as it reifies heteronormativity, reaffirms the potentiality for feminine solidarity. Maybe. While the girlfriend flick privileges friendship over heterosexual romance and evinces a wry cynicism about men, it also privileges traditional femininity and promotes the policing of each other’s bodies and the notion that women can have it all (Winch 71–72). “All,” of course, includes the husband, house and 2.5 kids—the heteronormative American dream. The girlfriend flick, then, seems to offer empowerment—women working in their careers, having each other for emotional support, seemingly free of the need for men, the image of the modern, independent, unoppressed woman—then, somewhat insidiously, reinserts heteronormativity as the ideal (Boyle and Berridge 354). Women may ultimately espouse the intimate value of female friendships, but women in these films also police one another’s bodies, tear other women down, and make sexual objects of themselves and other women (Winch 74, 77).

This dual messaging and way of interacting is present in the source texts for the femslash pairings in this chapter. All of the women involved are well-rounded, independent women, strong in their own right and supportive of their friends. All of their texts pass the Bechdel test, which has become “the standard by which feminist critics judge television, movies, books and other media” (Steiger 104). The Bechdel test (which came to popular attention via Allison 

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Bechdel’s comic *Dykes to Watch Out For* asks a seemingly simple question: does a work of fiction have at least two female characters who talk to each other about something other than a man? (Ulaby) The question isn’t meant to be a list to check off, but can start an important discussion about the representation of women in the media. But it also hits the necessary elements for femslash and, consequently, fandoms attached to source texts which fail to pass the test have less femslash.

Of course, the women in these friendships do all spend time talking about men, either as romantic interests or simply because the men are the protagonists and the women talk about the events that are going on—usually put into motion by the male characters: for instance, in *Revolution*, because Miles is so stoic, Charlie must go to Nora for information on his past with Bass in order to better understand her uncle and the situation they are walking in to. Because they are fighting a war, the fight against Monroe—a man—also becomes a frequent conversation piece. But they also talk about other things, including a lot of self-disclosure leading to mutual support and deeper intimacy.

**Female Sexuality**

Those reasons offered for the dearth of femslash which do not focus on the lack of female characters who are well-depicted and interact with one another all tie into perceptions of, experiences around, and silence about female sexuality. Feminist-geek blogger Porluciernagas argues that the quantity of slash far outweighs that of femslash because female fan fiction authors have been socially conditioned to believe that female sexuality, desire and pleasure are unimportant. Mass media reinforces this repeatedly. For instance, mainstream television shows consider both depictions of consensual sexual encounters and rape and as acceptable, but not of female masturbation. The CW’s *Reign* features fairly explicit sexual scenes and discussions,
including those of a middle-aged king having sex with a teenager and murdering another in a BDSM game gone wrong, as well as the rape of the female protagonist. However, a scene in the pilot where one of the girls, aroused from watching a public bedding of a newlywed couple (which was shown in as much detail as prime-time network television can show), runs off to masturbate in private was cut as being too risqué (Clark-Flory).

On the other side of this, research into sexuality in relation to sexual identity continues to indicate that these identities are not stagnant categories, but fluid. And, as I discussed in the previous chapter, Lisa Diamond’s conception of female sexuality as fluid and male sexuality as far less so seems to be one which has taken hold in the cultural consciousness for the moment (Diamond). The idea of girls who experiment or have a same-sex relationship in college is a standard trope in popular culture texts and wider society, to the point of having its own popular acronym—LUG (lesbian until graduation)—while male characters are rarely given that license, at least on mainstream television, without potentially serious social consequences and identity crises. In addition, intimate emotional relationships are often presented as a catalyst for a change in women’s sexuality. With this in mind, for fan authors who wish to challenge the heteronormative script perpetuated by cultural texts, reading and writing femslash would seem to be both a radical and realistic practice through which to do so. While television shows more often tease the possibility of bisexuality in women than men, often to draw in viewers, rarely do those explorations go on to become fully realized relationships.19 Femslash creates a space for this exploration of a more fluid world, but also implicates female writers’ own desires.

The “straight girls want hot guys” argument for why more slash exists than femslash holds little merit anymore, since the survey I discussed in the previous chapter debunked the

19 The CW’s The 100 is an exception to this, and its creation of a bisexual protagonist has been celebrated by fans.
myth of fandom being made up of mostly white, middle-class, heterosexual women. Instead, the survey reveals that while the fandom as operating most on AO3 and Tumblr is, yes, largely female (80%) and white (78%), it is less so than the monolithic image of fandom previous researchers have presumed. Only 29% identified themselves as solely heterosexual (there were respondents who chose “heterosexual” as one of multiple sexual identities they do now, or have, embraced, indicating far greater fluidity). Bisexuals and pansexuals, combined, made up 35% of the respondents (centrumlumina, “AO3 Census”). This many fandom participants identifying as some other sexuality than “straight” puts much of the traditional reasoning for both slash and the dearth of femslash into doubt.

**Reclaiming Erotic Fascination**

Girlfriend flicks often short-circuit possible eroticism between female friends by writing characters who have been friends since childhood, rather than focusing on new female friendships, which could impede heterosexual desire. Friendship often develops from a “visual and narrative fascination, curiosity, desire and identification,” and without the mediated gaze of a man, the subject/object gaze between women carries an inherent erotic charge (Boyle and Berridge 355). Friends from childhood are considered to have gotten over this charge. However, unlike the friends in a girlfriend flick, most the pairings in this chapter are friendships between women who meet and develop their relationship during the source text’s narrative. Only Caroline and Elena have a pre-existing friendship and history to draw from. Allison and Lydia meet in the pilot episode of *Teen Wolf,* and the narrative fascination on Lydia’s part is immediately apparent, as she immediately pulls Allison into her circle on the first day of school (“Wolf Moon”). Rebekah and Hayley meet in the second episode of *The Originals,* never having met while they were both on *The Vampire Diaries* (“House of the Rising Son”). Similarly, Charlie and Nora
meet in the second episode of *Revolution* (“Chained Heat”). Both Rebekah and Hayley and Charlie and Nora are quickly thrust into situations of male violence which involve life-changing moments for at least Charlie and Hayley: Charlie kills someone for the first time and Hayley realizes that she wants the baby she was about to abort before being attacked (“Chained Heat”; “House of the Rising Son”). In Hayley’s case, both in this first act of violence and a subsequent one a few episodes later, Rebekah, rather than either of the male protagonists, either saves Hayley or provides back-up as Hayley saves herself.

*Fics which happen in queer, liminal temporality*

Maria Lindgren Leavenworth and Malin Isaksson provide one of the few scholarly examinations of femslash in their book *Fanged Fan Fiction*. While they do not separate femslash from slash with respect to gender difference, they do examine femslash as a transgression of heteronormativity with a connection to the tradition of lesbian vampires, and so provide more insight into the functions of femslash in fan fiction than anyone else to date. More to the point, while they explore the maker/child bond of Eric/Godric in *True Blood*, the majority of the slash fics they examine are those involving male characters in an antagonistic relationship in the source text. They reserve their examination of the eroticization of intimate, homosocial relationships for femslash.

Leavenworth and Isaksson note a pattern of crafting liminal homoerotic spaces in the pairings and fic they examine: spaces where the female characters come together for a moment before returning to the heteronormativity of the source text (128). These spaces, they argue, are confined by genre limitations and the expectation of heterosexual union in the texts (128). Within the fics examined in the previous chapter, this temporary carving out of a space for queer desire before returning to heteronormativity was not in evidence. Once the partners chose to
begin a sexual relationship, it was just that—a relationship, a commitment to their intimacy. Conversely, these temporary spaces seem to be a recognizable trend within femslash.

Charlie/Nora femslash fics seem particularly prone to operating in liminal space. Nora’s romantic relationship with Miles in the source texts presents a dynamic which complicates any erotic or romantic pairing for her and Charlie. In the source text, Miles and Nora never define their ongoing relationship, but were clearly in a relationship in the past, and Nora’s feelings for him have not changed. Whether the sexual relationship between Charlie and Nora occurs in a liminal, separated space and time or as an established couple, the tension in both women’s fraught relationships with Miles remain in play in most fic.

Temporality in “Nora Clayton, Loyal Dog” is reinforced by the reader’s knowledge of the source text and the Season 1 finale but settles first in the transient nature of Nora’s relationships with the Mathesons. The fic opens with Nora disillusioned with Miles and captivated by Charlie. This captivation, however, remains in relation to Miles, the constant patriarchal presence.

“As Nora stood up, she pressed her small frame into Charlie's long, thin one. The physicality reminded her vaguely of Miles, but once their mouths parted and tongues

“Charlie was everything Nora wanted Miles to be. Believed he could be. At some times, thought she could see him trying to be” (faetlrae, “Nora Clayton, Loyal Dog”). Ostensibly in a relationship with Miles, Nora finds herself occasionally making out with Charlie—a softer, kinder version of Miles; the lover she would fashion Miles into, but as the fic wends its way through Season 1 and Charlie darkens through repeated losses, Nora watches as the slip goes the other way: Miles is not becoming more like Charlie; Charlie is becoming more like Miles. The shift starts slowly:

As Nora stood up, she pressed her small frame into Charlie's long, thin one. The physicality reminded her vaguely of Miles, but once their mouths parted and tongues
began tasting, Nora found Charlie's tongue neither fought Nora's nor slid lazily along her teeth like Charlie's uncle's did. Charlie's tongue lacked such a contrast in behaviors. Rather than being either tactical or half-assed, her tongue expressed her feelings just as well as her shirt sleeves wore them, gliding across Nora's, making a wet noise, before drawing some picture on the roof of her mouth. It was curious, gentle, and full of intent. It was only when Nora started to pull back and Charlie stubbornly refused to let her that the kiss echoed Miles at all...The thought made Nora laugh. (faetlrae, “Nora Clayton, Loyal Dog”)

Her realization that Miles is suffering from the loss of his brother and nephew, just as Charlie is, pulls Nora back to his side, though when he looks at her, lost, Nora almost calls him “Charlie.” She distracts them both by kissing him instead:

If she gave herself time to really sit back and think about it, Nora might be really wigged out at making out with Miles and Charlie, uncle and niece, something on the deplorable side of most people’s moral radars that perhaps only Monroe might be caught doing.20 But not her, right?

Wrong.

It was like some bizarre alternate reality in which Nora couldn’t figure out why she was making out with whom. (faetlrae, “Nora Clayton, Loyal Dog”)

Charlie and Miles have become conflated in her head, meeting somewhere in the middle of who they were before each other, then morphing further into the same person, which is a

20 In fact, Miles/Bass/Charlie is the most popular threesome in Revolution fan fiction, as I discuss in depth in Chapter 5.
pattern in fics for Bass/Charlie, too. This confluence connects to the source text, as well: Miles becomes more determined to be a “good guy” while Charlie loses her idealism and begins to resort to violence as a first, rather than last, resort; Rachel, Charlie’s mother, tells her she’s worried about her, because she is becoming more like Miles and Bass; Bass’s nickname for Charlie is even “Mini-Miles” (“Why We Fight”; “Fear and Loathing”). While Rachel does not directly connect this to Charlie’s gender, but to a slipping of Charlie’s empathy and humanity, those still are more traditionally traits identified as feminine. In the fic, Nora notes the change through the progress of their kiss, which starts out curious and gentle and all the things Miles’ kisses are not, but turns more demanding when Charlie refuses to let Nora pull back—a trait Nora connects more to Miles’ masculinity. Similarly, when Miles acts more lost, emotionally and Nora remembers his vulnerability, she almost calls him “Charlie.” Her distinction between them relies mostly on behaviors assigned to genders, while their confluence into one person seems to simultaneously point out the constructed and arbitrary nature of those assignments.

In the fic, Nora’s realization of this, and her categorizing them as “Mathesons,” rather than male and female—with similar, expected behaviors constituted on blood ties rather than the gender binary—so early on turns out to be prophetic, then, both for the fic and its source. The fic ends as they reach the Tower, where she will die, and readers familiar with the source text recognize the poignancy of that prophetic thought:

Nora wondered if the Mathesons could see how destructive they were. How everywhere they went, people seemed to die and cities seemed to burn. How every decision they made led to the demise of their latest ally. She wondered how much time she had left
before she met the same fate of all the other things they touched. Before she turned to ash. (faetlrae, “Nora Clayton, Loyal Dog”)

Both the transgressive nature of Nora’s relationships with the Mathesons—repudiating monogamy, engaging in same-sex sexual activity, dating family members of different generations—and the liminal space within which the fic is set operate to defy heteronormativity. Judith Halberstam defines “queer time” as time which challenges normative time—it takes place outside of it, or in non-linear fashion (2). While the narrative itself follows a linear structure (the constant progress toward the Tower), the overlap of identification between Charlie and Miles that slips through and between gender without comment, makes the flow of the fic feel like moments pulled out of time. Nora does not completely eschew heterosexuality, but her refusal to deny Charlie for Miles breaks her out of heteronormativity and puts her sexual identity more into the fluid space created by bisexuality’s refusal to conform. On the other hand, as Charlie becomes more like Miles and his hyper-masculinity, Nora slides more toward the feminine values of nurturance and loyalty, suggesting that heteronormativity is still at play, and the queer moments merely a temporary subversion.

“Forbidden Fruit,” by 4Kennedy, the most temporary of the Charlie/Nora fics, has Miles present during the women’s sexual encounter, though asleep and unaware of it. As the leader of an army, Nora’s lover, Charlie’s uncle and the protagonist of the series, Miles’ presence, even sleeping, inserts patriarchal, heteronormative expectations into the textual fabric of the fic. From title to Miles to content, “Forbidden Fruit” carves out a transgressive space for homoeroticism which is acutely aware of both its transgressiveness and that such transgression is temporary.
Interestingly, the fic is also the most explicit of the rest, both sexually and in its linguistic engagement with heteronormativity.

The plot is little more than pretense for smut: Nora is taking her turn keeping watch while Charlie and Miles sleep, but Charlie is cold so Nora snuggles up behind her and proceeds to slide a hand down her pants and warm her up. When Charlie asks about Miles, sleeping on the other side of the fire, Nora tells her it’s “just fucking” between them, “no strings,” but she’s obviously bitter at his lack of feeling for her. Charlie initially gives the moment more weight than Nora and worries that because of Miles, she’ll hate herself for doing this in the morning. Nora, however, absolves her of responsibility by denying her agency and participation: “I'm the one doing this. You're letting it happen, there's a difference” (4Kennedy, “Forbidden Fruit”). When Charlie offers to return the favor after her own climax, Nora denies her participation again by refusing. Before she leaves, Nora tells Charlie this “didn’t happen” and has to be a secret, and to not fall in love with her. Echoing what she said about her relationship with Miles, she cautions Charlie, “It’s just sex” (4Kennedy, “Forbidden Fruit”).

The denial of both the experience and Charlie’s ability to participate, creates a question about Nora’s intentions and just what to make of the fic—was it merely a casual, helping hand? A rebellion against Miles’ authority and control? Something Nora wanted for herself? Although we are privy to some of Nora’s thoughts, the answer is never apparent. In some ways, her bitterness when Charlie asks about Miles gives the ensuing sex an edge approaching vengeful, where Charlie serves merely as an object on which Nora plays. However, the last line gives us Charlie’s point of view, and she seems completely unbothered by the secrecy, her lack of agency, and the lack of relational intimacy afterward:
"No big deal." It had only been fucking. Just like it was only fucking between Nora and her uncle. It had been quick and dirty. But strangely Charlie wasn't disappointed, the way she fucked suited Nora and she wouldn't have expected more of her if she had foreseen that something like this would happen between them. They hadn't even kissed and it didn't even trouble Charlie the slightest. (4Kennedy, “Forbidden Fruit”)

The fic is set at a time when Charlie is still a virgin, with a crush on Jason who’s on the wrong side of the fight, but neither of these gets a mention. Charlie’s satisfaction with the “quick and dirty” sex stands in contrast to her otherwise troubling lack of agency and allows for a reading that rebels against both patriarchal gender norms in general and specifically Miles’ representation of such. Women are not expected to have casual, quick and dirty sex. They should kiss. They shouldn’t do it in a sleeping bag with lover and uncle just a few feet away. But they do and “it didn’t even trouble Charlie in the slightest.” The space carved may only be temporary, but it carries with it a sense of freedom and perhaps greater knowledge of self.

Corycides’ “Value of Exchange” occurs in an alternate universe in which Charlie and Nora’s relationship exists only in temporary spaces. The narrative stands in sharp contrast to “Forbidden Fruit,” even if it plays with the same themes of freedom, knowledge of self and other, and of choice, consent and agency. Where “Forbidden Fruit” positioned Miles as the present-but-absent other, asleep away from them, “Value of Exchange” puts Bass in that place, and increases the patriarchal power surrounding them by naming him “Monroe” throughout—the President and General—rather than the more familiar and familial “Bass.” The narrative flips, as well, told mostly from Nora’s point of view, rather than Charlie’s, and the questions it raises remain unanswered, posed as they are in a stolen moment. The questions are further muddled by Nora’s position as an unreliable narrator. The fic makes use of not only the temporary for the
space of the narrative, but also positions the possibility for a sustained non-heteronormative potential in the past, which Leavenworth and Isaksson argue can be a space of freedom for fan fiction to explore (130).

In the alternate universe of “Value of Exchange,” instead of battling Monroe, Miles and Charlie have chosen to make an alliance with him. Their reasoning is not given within the fic itself, though Corycides explains in response to a reader comment that the rebels had split when they realized Georgia was not really any better than the Monroe Republic—half went back to working for Monroe, half to Georgia. Without this paratextual information, however, the fic doles out information in bits and pieces that come as surprises and shocks and demonstrate the power of patriarchal control.

In the fic, Nora and Charlie were lovers in the past, and Nora has come to Philadelphia with a Georgia delegation to negotiate a treaty with the Monroe Republic. The opening is dissonant and ambiguous, and only the fact that the fic is categorized as Nora/Charlie marks the dissonance. Thinking about all the things that went wrong, and how quickly things changed, Charlie thinks of Nora: “One day Nora was her friend/pseudo-sister/one stupid uncle admitting how he felt away from an aunt, and the next she was an enemy on the other side of the chessboard” (Corycides, “Value of Exchange”). No mention is made of Nora being her lover, but the reference to her relationship with Miles stays, as in the other fics. It lingers, still, as Charlie shows Nora to her room and asks if she’d like to see Miles. Nora tells her that she doesn’t want to see Miles “caged here, not after everything he did to escape,” and Charlie laughs at her and says they made a choice and an alliance and anyway, Miles loves Monroe.

When Nora makes a move that’s soft and warm and reminiscent of the peace that was apparently once between them, Charlie kisses her, and we learn simultaneously that they were
lovers in the past and that Charlie is Monroe’s lover now. Gendered difference and patriarchal control echo through the passage. When she kisses Nora, Charlie mentally compares Nora and Monroe in a gendered way that casts quick light into their characters, as well: “It was the warmth that drew Charlie's mouth down. Monroe ran cold or napalm hot, never a gentle heat” (Corycides, “Value of Exchange”). Tough and prickly, Nora does not usually give off the feel of “warmth,” but she is steady and sure, especially compared to Monroe’s volatility. Power, too, is rarely gentle, and power and Monroe are synonymous here.

The dichotomy of the language and emotional reality that contrasts sharply with the past continues as Nora references how she’s heard Charlie has changed, but with the kiss says she knows her Charlie was still here, “no matter what they said.” Charlie’s touch is gentle, and she is pulling Nora’s hair down, looking at how her “dark curls framed her face” – another feminine image. What she says though, is, “They say I’m Monroe’s…It’s not a lie” (Corycides, “Value of Exchange”). Placing herself as a possession serves as a warning to Nora and a counter to her earlier statement—she and Miles “allied” with Monroe, not “bent the knee.” Miles may not be “caged,” but she belongs to Monroe. However, with the warning given, Charlie makes a choice to step out of that place of possession and into a fraught encounter with Nora.

The two make love and the contrast continues, as well as Charlie’s subsumption within it—Nora’s hands are gentle and “gentling, like she thought Charlie was breakable” and linger on a bite mark “sympathetically.” Charlie cannot understand the soft touch until she realizes what’s upset Nora, and then:

She laughed and tumbled Nora onto the bed, exploring the hard planes and soft curves of the other woman. 'I make my own choices, Nora.'
Nora twisted her hand in Charlie's braid and pulled her down. 'I know,' she said, the 'you think so' mute on her tongue. (Corycides, “Value of Exchange”)

Adrienne Rich argues that the assumption of innate heterosexuality most people make is a “theoretical and political stumbling block for feminism,” because acknowledging that “for women heterosexuality may not be a ‘preference’ at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and ‘innately’ heterosexual” (135). This is the trap Nora believes Charlie has fallen into; Charlie may believe that she is choosing to share Monroe’s bed of her own free will, but Nora does not.

Which one of them is correct is not a question the fic answers, as it ends with the end of their stolen moment—a moment which defies heteronormativity and Charlie’s belonging to Monroe. She chooses Nora, for a few moments, warmth and gentle passion, but she pulls away even as Nora is coming down from her climax. Nora, caught in the softness, the warmth of the space of intimate, female sharing support, offers Charlie a chance to continue, to extend this moment indefinitely, to recapture who and what they were, or could have been, but the completeness with which Charlie has been pulled back under patriarchal power alters the softer moment:

“I’d kill him for you,” [Nora] said.

Charlie stood up and leant over the bed, propping her hands on either side of Nora's finely-carved shoulders. Her braid, frayed but still knotted, fell over her shoulder to tickle Nora's freckled clevage [sic]. Nora laughed and reached up, brushing wet, sex-smelling fingers over Charlie's lips.
“I'd kill you for him,” [Charlie] said. “Leave the explosives in your room. I can smell the cordite.” She licked her lips again, catching the bitterness under her own juice. “I can taste it.” (Corycides, “Value of Exchange”)

When Nora protests that Charlie can’t stop her from assassinating Monroe, Charlie tells her that they know where her sister is, but that she’ll be fine, so long as Nora remembers she’s a “diplomat, not an assassin.” For the first time, Nora is afraid of Charlie, but she still attributes the threat to Monroe and believes in the other woman, insisting she wouldn’t let Monroe do that. Charlie shatters the space out of time and the potential for different futures as the fic ends: “‘It was my idea,’” Charlie said…They were on opposite sides of the chessboard now, no matter what they used to be – or could have been” (Corycides, “Value of Exchange”).

The image of the chessboard is particularly telling, given its position as a strategic, logical game, tied to masculine traits of rationality, deception and ruthlessness. Charlie’s emotions rule her in the source text, but this Charlie has lost her soft edges, promoting violence and scheming against someone she once loved and wanted. Their readings from the source text are reversed: Charlie is the masculine one; Nora the feminine. The intimacy that it can be assumed their original sexual relationship grew from seems to have disappeared for Charlie. Part of her misses it, but not enough to bridge the gap, or return to that space outside of the heteronormative, militaristic world she has chosen (or had chosen for her).

The majority of Caroline/Elena fic fits into the next section and fits a pattern unto itself, one that is, in many ways, similar to Scott/Stiles. However, the fics that vary from the pattern do so by operating within this liminal space. Santanico’s “take me home,” for instance, is reminiscent of both “Forbidden Fruit” and “Value of Exchange.” The fic takes place within Season 4 of The Vampire Diaries, during a time in which Elena has turned off her ability to feel
human emotion, empathy or regret. This colder, cruel persona is not the Elena her friends and the audience know, and the structure and tropes of the narrative in the source text reassure us that the situation is not permanent (she is the heroine, after all). Therefore, “take me home” operates within the enforced confines of audience expectations and genre conventions which necessitate its temporality. However, Elena’s new persona is able to step outside of the normal constraints binding Elena’s behavior, which I discuss in the next section, and, in doing so, able to fulfill Caroline’s secret desire.

As the narrative begins, Caroline is finishing her bath when Elena comes in, joining her in the shower to “save water” and brushing aside any of Caroline’s protestations of modesty. Caroline’s point of view guides the story, and from her thoughts, we learn that she has always wanted her best friend, sexually (reminiscent of Bass and Stiles). Whether or not Elena has ever realized this before is unclear, but humanity- and inhibition-free Elena turns out to be well aware of it, and sets out to seduce Caroline, who offers little more than a token protest:

“What are you gonna do?” Caroline says, swallowing. She doesn’t know what to hold onto, and grips the side of the tub as a substitute. She can barely hold on.

“I’m gonna make this worth the wait,” Elena says, tilting her head back. Water runs down her breasts and stomach, down to her thighs, and drips off in streams.

Caroline stares.

“Come on, you’ve always thought about it.” Elena reaches forward, brushing Caroline’s chin with long fingers. “I can tell. The way you look at me. The way you’re looking at me right now. Care.”

“You’re being unfair.” (santanico)
Elena shrugs and dips her head down, kissing Caroline’s knee. Her mouth feels distinctly different from the hot water still streaming down on them both. Elena’s hands tuck between Caroline’s legs, and she tugs them apart. Caroline’s thighs “quiver,” but she lets Elena open her up.

Caroline is uncertain how to react to this new version of her friend. Elena is dominating and demanding. Whether she is playing a game or genuinely wants this as much as Caroline does remains unknown, though the former seems likely. Caroline’s confusion echoes throughout, rendering her passive, much in the same way Charlie was in “Forbidden Fruit,” pleased, but refused the opportunity for pleasuring:

Caroline feels this more than she ever has, and can only think about what’s going to happen next with a burning pulse, her blood thrumming through her body like electricity. Caroline wants to grab Elena’s hair and get this over with, to never have to think about it again.

But Elena doesn’t want that at all. (santanico)

The confusion and uncertainty continues throughout, temporarily delayed by physical pleasure, but then returning:

When she comes, it still feels sudden and without warning, and she manages “Elena,” in a tense gasp, her body shaking as she collapses against the wet tile. Elena gives two last licks to Caroline’s clit, and Caroline lets out a near sob at the over-stimulation, her muscles still twitching around Elena’s fingers. Elena sits up then, slides her fingers out of Caroline’s cunt, and smiles. Her mouth is wet, and Caroline wants to kiss it.

“Get washed up, I need to shower before the water runs out.”
Elena stands, pushes the shower door open, and leaves Caroline to scramble to her feet, blushing and shaking, grabbing for the body wash. (santanico)

Elena’s departure is as abrupt as Nora’s in “Forbidden Fruit” and as cold as Charlie’s in “Value of Exchange.” Like Nora in the latter fic, Caroline is clearly not okay with it. “Blushing and shaking” indicates at least embarrassment, if not shame. The source of Caroline’s embarrassment is unclear. Earlier in the fic, when Elena first kisses her, she thinks: “I shouldn’t be doing this I shouldn’t be doing this I shouldn’t be doing this…The thought races through her head but she doesn’t stop or even want to” (santanico). The why, however, remains undisclosed. Two possibilities exist, intertwined, but distinct.

The first arises from Caroline’s own moral center. At the point in canon where the fic is set, she has refused to give Klaus a chance for over a year, because he is the villain. She’s a good girl and shouldn’t want the bad boy, and she has held firm to that. Elena now stands in a liminal place in regard to morality. On one hand, she is Caroline’s best friend, who has been there all her life. On the other, with her humanity off, she is capable of anything Klaus is, and has already shown a disregard for human life. Does Caroline want her more, now that she’s the “bad” girl? Related to that is her embarrassment when Elena calls her out on her secret desire. Just for mentioning it, she tells Elena she’s being cruel—which implies that what Caroline wanted before when Elena was herself is somehow wrong, though whether this is because Elena was uninterested or because Caroline finds same-sex attraction immoral is uncertain. Given Caroline’s father is gay and she seems very supportive of his life with his partner, though, the former seems more likely.

The second reason for Caroline’s shame goes toward Elena’s agency and desires. While Elena has her humanity off in the source text, Stefan and Damon both refuse to sleep with her,
believing that she is not herself and not making decisions in concert with who she really is. Therefore, to sleep with her as she is, they suggest, would be to take advantage of her (“Bring It On”). On one hand, this seems paternalistic, as if shutting off her empathy makes Elena unable to judge for herself what she would and would not like to do with her own body. On the other, given Elena’s position as a character who believes in monogamy and spends half a season berating herself for a single kiss, their refusal seems honorable. In “take me home,” however, Caroline doesn’t refuse. She doesn’t push Elena away. She doesn’t even consciously dwell on Elena’s agency and ability to make decisions or not. If Elena would not engage in sexual activity with Caroline with her emotions turned on, did Caroline take advantage of her to get what she would otherwise never have? Since santanico never clarifies in Caroline’s thoughts, nor gives any indication that the concept of “taking advantage” might be in Caroline’s mind, it’s impossible to know for certain, but the issues of sexual morality and ethics lace through the fic, no matter which is Caroline’s sense of shame.

Like Caroline and Elena, the fic for Lydia and Allison from Teen Wolf fits mainly in the next category. Of the four pairings, Lydia/Allison stretches the furthest, exploring the girls as partners and the shift from friends-to-lovers more than the rest. In contrast, most Hayley/Rebekah fics on AO3 are all drabbles, a fan fic form that requires a fic to be exactly 100 (or in some cases 200) words. The necessity of this constraint makes the fics liminal in their own right, even if the time and space carved out for the women is within a more permanent relationship. Those not written in this form still fall far shorter than fic from other pairings: the longest is just a little over 1000 words. I suspect part of this is due to the fic writing in general among the fans: fics written in The Vampire Diaries and The Originals for some reason fall shorter than those in Revolution and Teen Wolf. While drabbles can be quite complex, forced to
pack something meaningful into 100 words, most of the Hayley/Rebekah ones are not, nor do they present much of a challenge to gender norms or compulsory heterosexuality.

However, also like with Caroline/Elena, Hayley/Rebekah have some notable exceptions. Many of the drabbles take place within an established relationship, so while the fic may be just a snippet of time, it does not necessarily qualify as “queer time.” It’s a photograph of a moment within an eternity. However, these liminal moments exist on occasion, and, like the others in this section, they hold a depth of grief and darkness within them. 4Kennedy’s “Bittersweet,” for example, is set after Rebekah has been forced to leave New Orleans by Klaus. That fact is not apparent immediately, however. The fic begins with Hayley crying by the fire and Jackson, the werewolf her parents planned for her to marry, comments that she’s a popular girl:

“What do you mean?” Hayley snapped without looking up.

Despite her rudeness, Jackson sat down beside her. “You’re pregnant with Klaus’ hybrid child. Elijah would do everything for you. And Rebekah…”

Hayley cut him off. “That’s enough.” Biting down on her bottom lip, she tried to stop the tears from falling.

“Three original vampires all lined up for you,” Jackson teased. (4Kennedy, “Bittersweet”)

Hayley doesn’t appreciate his teasing, and he leaves. Only then do we learn what her tears are for: “Hayley didn’t care how popular she seemed to be these days. The only one she truly wanted was Rebekah. But Rebekah had left town. Right after Hayley had caught up with her at the car,
where they’d shared their first and last kiss. A bittersweet goodbye” (4Kennedy, “Bittersweet”).
The fic ends there, on a moment and an image. We do not even get to see the kiss, to experience it, only the regret and the loss, something come too late, that could have changed things, broken the pattern of Hayley’s life, where she seems sometimes to be the prize three men are fighting over, but did not.

Terapsina’s “Love Hurts,” does not even give us the queer longing that shows up in a lot of Miles/Bass and Scott/Stiles fic, though it is usually fulfilled there. Here it is not. Elena has come to visit, and she and Rebekah are out with Elijah and Hayley. The story is told from Elena’s point of view, and we see her hurting as she realizes that Elijah has fallen in love with Hayley, and she missed her chance. A glance at Rebekah reveals she is not alone in her pain:

Blinking away the sudden wetness her eyes land on a slumped form, cradling a glass of scotch, with eyes on the same couple hers were a moment ago, is Rebekah. There's heaviness in her friend's shoulders, like they're carrying a weight too great for even her millennium of experience, her hand is protectively in front of her, covering her heart, as if she's protecting it. Like it's bleeding and she wants to hide it from the sight in front of her.

Elena's eyes land on the blood still marring Rebekah's clenched knuckles, the drying blood belonging to the unfortunate soul who thought it smart to fondle the ass of the dark werewolf girl in the presence of a protective Original. It's as she thinks back to that second when Rebekah's face transformed into raw, possessive fury that the truth slides into place.
Rebekah is in love too. (Terapsina)

“Love Hurts,” is short, like many of the others, but it contains more than most of the others. Rebekah’s longing for Hayley is made equal with Elena’s for Elijah, a clear parallel, highlighting the sameness of homosexual and heterosexual love.

In some sense, the longing renders both girls passive, however. Hayley and Elijah are objects of love, clearly in love with each other; whether they know of Elena and Rebekah’s feelings is not revealed. However, a sense that if Elena can see it in Rebekah, then perhaps Hayley should lingers. Rebekah’s actions—punching someone for fondling Hayley—“should” have been Elijah’s, in a heteronormative story: the white knight protecting his lady. Instead, even though Rebekah was the one to protect her, Hayley still dances with Elijah rather than his sister, and the text gives the impression that this is somehow unfair to Rebekah. On the other hand, “possessiveness” implies that Hayley can be possessed, that, perhaps, Rebekah possesses her, or wants to, rather than Elijah. However, a reader would know, as does Elijah, that Hayley can take care of herself and tends to get angry and push back when coddled or unnecessarily protected.

The idea of love as possession and defending your love’s honor, as it were, especially with violence, brings us back into the sphere of heteronormativity quite squarely. In the end, the fic seems to offer us a glimpse into a non-normative moment, but ends up curling back on itself and back into the boxes drawn by expected norms, at least on the part of Rebekah. Arguably, Elijah’s inaction may well indicate that he is the one resisting traditional gender roles and respecting Hayley’s autonomy and ability more than his sister, which is why Hayley is with him.

These moments out of time provide some insight into how fans negotiate non-normative behavior for female characters. While some prove to not offer much of a challenge to
heteronormative gender norms, others push at them, show them for what they are—though the queerness of the moments is temporary, and a return to “straight” time seems inevitable. But what about fics which position the women at the start of or in the midst of a committed relationship as lovers?

_Femslash and the Lesbian Continuum_

Leavenworth and Isaksson examined fleeting moments of non-heteronormative relationships in femslash, much like those above. However, a substantial amount of femslash does not adhere to this pattern and, instead, works to challenge institutionalized heterosexuality. While a few of the fics for Caroline/Elena, Hayley/Rebekah and Allison/Lydia play with the pattern of temporary queer spaces, the majority of them position the women in these more permanent same-sex relationships, echoing those formed from the bromantic pairings. Conversely, where Nora and Charlie are almost always positioned in liminal space, a few fics offer them the same hope for a sustained relationship like those given to Miles/Bass. In contrast to most of the fics in liminal space, however, the majority of these fics do not challenge gender norms. However, in allowing the women to find their fulfillment in one another, to realize they do not “need” men, they still challenge and subvert institutionalized heterosexuality.

BeaRyan’s fic, “You and Me of the 10,000 Wars,” opens on Charlie finding Nora reading a book of poetry given to her by her ex-girlfriend while also brooding over Miles. Surprised about the existence of a girlfriend, Charlie nonetheless asks her more about it, probing gently to find the source of her upset. In this, she demonstrates the emotionally supportive side of female friendships, listening with empathy. Nora admits that Miles is great as a lover, but sucks as a boyfriend, but she keeps setting herself up to fall right back into it again. Charlie tries to get her
to explain the connection between the girlfriend, poetry and Miles, and Nora speaks in the voice of every woman who has ever wanted her boyfriend to be a little more emotional, a little more romantic:

“They're the opposite of it. This reminds me of what I had, of what I want. Mission first, right? But sometimes I miss being loved and the choices I'm making now aren't going to get me what I want.” She quickly flipped to the inside cover of the book and read what was written on the end paper.

"Kiss me again and again, for your love is sweeter than wine. How fragrant your cologne, and how pleasing your name. No wonder all the young women love you. How beautiful you are, my beloved, how beautiful. - Love, Sarah (by way of the Song of Solomon)

“That,” Nora said. “That is what I want. And since it's not available, I'm settling for hard fucking on dirty floors. I can't see Miles even reading that aloud, much less writing it in the front of a gift. Can you?” (BeaRyan, “You and Me”)

Rather than addressing Miles’s failings as a boyfriend explicitly, Charlie offers a simple solution: “I see your problem…Wrong Matheson.” The fic ends on their first kiss and the implication that they are settling in for a relationship, loving and supportive with mutuality in emotional expression instead of the dissatisfaction Nora has experienced with Miles and his emotional distance.

The move is made possible by Nora’s admission to a non-heterosexual past, even though she is struggling with dissatisfaction in her current heterosexual relationship—a temporal shift
that marks the fluidity of her sexuality and the fleeting nature of love. Charlie gives no indication throughout the fic of having feelings for Nora or thoughts about a same-sex relationship except for a side thought about how she usually complains about Jason (her love interest in the source text) “stalking her.” Instead, the kiss with Nora is depicted as an awakening for her, and she explicitly compares kissing Nora to kissing a boy, like she compares Nora and Monroe in the previous fic: “but Charlie couldn't hold back her delighted giggles as her hand came up to caress Nora's cheek. It was softer and smoother than a boy’s, and as their first kiss became their second she noted it was more like a delicate exchange than a wrestle for dominance or logs roughly thrown on a fire” (BeaRyan, “You and Me”). The kiss contains delicacy contrasted with the roughness of kissing a man, even though neither woman is particular delicate in the source text. Compared to the grim, gritty world of the source text and the previous fics, this one feels removed from the narrative world, as the fic not only softens the world and the women but introduces the notion of perfect, romantic love, poetry and all, which is absent from the source text.

This sense of perfect, romantic love, with the ability to find fulfillment in one another rather than men runs through even the shallowest of these fics. While the bromances that transition to lovers often dwell on issues of coming out and recognizing sexuality, this questioning is less prevalent in femslash with friends-to-lovers. Instead, like Charlie, above, comparing kissing a woman to a man, if any thought at all is given to questions of sexuality, it often presents itself as this curiosity. A substantial majority of the fics end on a kiss with a promise of more—like BeaRyan’s above—as an expression of this curiosity. Other times, the kiss comes as a surprise on the heels of a deeper, emotional conversation or sharing, a deepening
of the friendship or offer of support that leads to a tense moment broken by a kiss, followed by surprise, and, then, ultimately to a decision that they would like to do more of it.

Bridgesto’s “Drown the Noise,” takes place after Lydia has had a tense conversation with Peter Hale about her power as a Banshee. She’s upset—Peter used her for his own ends in previous seasons—and Allison’s response is fierce. Never mind that Lydia has just said that they need Peter, Allison is upset and, like Rebekah’s instincts to protect Hayley in “Love Hurts” and Nora’s toward Monroe in “Value of Exchange,” Allison’s first impulse is violent:

“No,” Allison says. “That’s not how this works. You don’t have to take one for the team. He’s a wild card and a loose cannon and a murderer. If you think he can still be useful, help us in some way, then he can stay, but if you want him gone he’s gone. No questions asked. He’s a threat, Lyds. And he hurt you.”

“And you’d kill him for that?”

“In a heartbeat,” Allison says, and realizes as she does that it’s the unvarnished truth. (Bridgesto)

Lydia is grateful for the support, especially since her friends had not really been there when Peter was first using her, and some of that vulnerability leaks through. Trying to reassure her, and apologize, Allison takes her hand, scoots close, like female friends have done a million times before, but then it becomes charged:

Allison realizes abruptly that she’s still holding Lydia’s hand, and still has one hand framing the side of Lydia’s face. Allison could back away, probably should back away,
but she doesn’t. Instead, she leans in and presses her lips to Lydia’s. Lydia’s lips part; she grips Allison’s hand harder and Allison slides her hand over Lydia’s smooth hair to cradle the back of her head and kisses Lydia. She tries to put everything into it that words are failing to convey. *I’m sorry and I’m here and you’re amazing, I believe in you.*

Lydia is confused when Allison pulls back, not sure what to do or where Allison is going with that, but when she asks, Allison clears it up:

“And what was that for?”

Allison knows that tone. It’s the one Lydia uses when she’s not entirely sure about something and is trying hard to hide it. Allison feels her lips quirk into a smile.

“For you. And because I wanted to. And because you’re brilliant and beautiful and the best friend I’ve ever had, and I’m not leaving you.”

“Oh,” Lydia says. “Well in that case you should come back here and do that again. I think I might have missed something the first time around.”

Allison grins. “With pleasure.” (Bridgesto)

The fic ends there. Beyond Lydia’s momentary surprise, there is nothing else to suggest Allison has done anything particularly out of the ordinary. Neither girl spends any time wondering about the boys they’ve been with or what this means about them or their sexuality. The kissing becomes just a natural next step in their friendship, barely questioned and easily accepted.
Ankaret’s “On Three,” has Caroline and Elena having a very similar conversation with a similar outcome – also in a car. Caroline is trying to adjust to being a vampire, and struggling, which she finally opens up and tells Elena about. Like Allison, Elena slips closer and takes her hand. Like Allison kisses Lydia, Elena’s kisses Caroline after a fraught moment. This time, however, the story is told from Caroline’s point of view and her moment of surprise is more obvious, though it is as easily dismissed:

Elena was looking straight into her eyes. And then Elena was looking at her lips, and up at her eyes again with her own eyes dark under those long, long lashes, like a guy did when he wanted to kiss her.

Oh. Oh. Okay. Maybe that wasn't something just guys did. Caroline closed her eyes and leaned closer. Elena's lips caught the corner of her mouth at first, and then between them they righted themselves and Caroline's lips were opening to the warmth and the blood-sweetness of Elena's tongue, and her hand was in Elena's hair. (Ankaret)

Unlike with Lydia and Allison, we continue to get a lot more of Caroline’s inner monologue, which sounds like that of Scott and Stiles on their first kiss, or Bass and Miles on theirs, laced with a sense of inevitability:

She felt like something had finally fitted into place inside her. Eight-year-old Caroline and eight-year-old Elena teaming up to show eight-year-old Matt that it wasn't true that only boys could play sports and girls had to cheer, thirteen-year-old Caroline and thirteen-year-old Elena discovering that cheering was actually damn awesome in its own right, fifteen-year-old Caroline and fifteen-year-old Elena getting
drunk, properly drunk, for the first time and staggering home with their arms round each other because they couldn't walk straight, all of that was just as true as the other stuff.

All of that had been leading up to this. (Ankaret)

Unlike Lydia and Allison, above (and unlike most of the slash fiction), the boys in Caroline and Elena’s lives do assert themselves in Caroline’s consciousness. When that happens, she assesses their positions as presumptively straight, and worries about what the boys will think:

Caroline had meant *what do we do now* on a longer time scale than that. But now that she thought about it, she didn't want to get into that, not right this minute. Because whatever happened, *someone* was going to get hurt.

How would Stefan take it, when he found out his fledgling was making time with his girl? And then there were all the stupid frat-boy jokes that people like Tyler would make about girls who kissed girls, as if he didn't have a *suspicious* possessiveness about Matt.

Maybe Tyler wouldn't say anything, not these days. But if there was one thing Caroline knew, it was that there were an endless supply of Tylers out there, all of them as confused as each other. (Ankaret)

Pointing out the bromance-to-slash potential of her boyfriend and his best friend, Caroline is able to justify the shift in her relationship with Elena, though she still worries about the jokes. Her concern for Stefan is more altruistic, given that he is in love with Elena. However, even that she quickly dismisses: “But she didn't have to think about that now. She made the smile come back to her face” (Ankaret). While this is typical Caroline, who often channels
Scarlet O’Hara, it also takes the relieves the text from having to try and answer the question, letting it end in ambiguity rather than certainty of direction. The concern, either way, is a marked difference from that of the men in the bromance. Their thoughts about supposed significant others are few and far between, and the difference highlights a gender divide: when they worry about the future, the girls worry about who they will hurt, while the men worry about how they will be seen.

However, even for the girls, these concerns or moments to dwell on their own sexuality are rare in most of the pairings. The moments of comparison in “You and Me of the 10,000 Wars,” are the only thought Charlie gives to it. Caroline and Elena never really question themselves over it, or struggle to accept it. The only fic that has Hayley struggling with anything related to the relationship with Rebekah is ajarofgoodthings’ “Your throat in one hand, your heart in another.” I examine the fic overall in Chapter 5, as it is a polyamorous fic, but as to Rebekah, Hayley’s dilemma is an emotional one where she is torn between the Mikaelson siblings, comparing each of them and the way she feels trapped between them, but loving all three of them. About each individually, including Rebekah, Hayley has no confusion:

Rebekah is the sort of puppy love crush she remembers from highschool; only tenfold. Rebekah is bright laughter and bad decisions, sitting on the roof in the middle of the night and walking hand in hand through the quarter in the middle of the morning. Hayley's never had many women in her life; certainly not many who were her friends - but, when she thinks about it, she has to admit to herself that they were never really friends. They went from zero to ten to a hundred; hatred, to truce, to naked, Rebekah kissing her like she meant it and taunting; you can be louder than that. The sex is the other part that
reminds her of highschool [sic]; Rebekah's worse than she remembers any fifteen year old boys ever being, and every time Hayley's trying to catch her breath with the blonde already running lips Hayley's seen covered in blood along the inside of her thigh, she laughs and then sighs, thankful for supernatural abilities and the fact that the other can't actually kill her. It's instantaneous, the way the sexual tension snaps - the immediate shift from innocent to dark. It's Rebekah, essentially; the way she shifts between easy smiles and laughter and something broken, residual traumas that wake her up in the middle of the night, have her hyperventilating and her voice cracking with pain Hayley's not sure she'll ever be able to understand. (ajarofgoodthings)

That Hayley denies that they were ever friends leaves open the question of how long the sexual relationship has been going on, but it also places it on par with her relationships with Klaus and Elijah—the Mikaelsons are different, but still a unit, and Rebekah’s gender makes little to no difference, nor does it have any greater sense of emotional intimacy than her descriptions of her relationships with Rebekah’s brothers.

By contrast, Allison and Lydia find themselves struggling to clarify feelings and understand themselves and each other more often. In upagainstthewall’s “Eyes on Fire,” Allison struggles with what she thinks is an unrequited crush on Lydia, as well as her own sexuality, in great detail which is left unresolved at the end of the fic:

Allison likes boys, see. She doesn’t like strawberry blonde ice queens with fire in their eyes and lips that bring to mind flower petals and her 4th grade Barbie dolls. She doesn’t want to kiss lips that leave a sticky mark on her own, that smell like vanilla and caramel. She doesn’t want to bury her face in a creamy smooth neck that reeks of the
latest Prada perfume. She definitely doesn’t want to slide her hand up a thigh only slightly fuller than her own, curvy and soft, white and smooth. No. She doesn’t. Or at least that’s what she tells herself.

Day in, day out. She can’t let it get weird.

Lydia is beautiful, and strong, and smart, and irrevocably heterosexual. Allison might be bisexual, whatever. She hasn’t let herself think about it, it’s not like she’s gay or anything. She’s only ever liked one girl, and it’s never gonna happen. Ever.

(againstthewall)

However, while helping Lydia pick out clothes for one of her many dates when she is searching for her “distraction” at the start of Season 3, Allison’s interest almost slips out:

“Are you sure you want to do this Lydia?” She asked quietly, “Brent seems sweet, but I don’t know about Michael.”

“It’ll be fine, Allison, it’s exactly what we need. I need a distraction, and so do you.”

“Does your distraction have to be another boy though?” Allison let slip, mentally backpedalling [sic] at her slip up. “I mean - I meant that you could try being single for a while! I didn’t mean…”

Lydia paused, eyeing her speculatively, and Allison realizes she had just drawn attention to her own slip that Lydia had clearly missed.
Lydia stared for a moment, before spinning on her heel, back to the closet. “Look, I know what you meant, but I just, I need someone to distract me. I’m bored.”

(upagainstthewall)

Allison’s comment is one she considers a “slip,” something she must guard against, and she’s relieved when Lydia allows for that retreat. When Lydia decides to eschew the date to have a sleepover with Allison, Allison fights her attraction throughout, as the sleepover otherwise goes on in stereotypical teenage girl sleepover fashion. A drunk Lydia gets sentimental, however, and another moment of tension, like the ones that have led to other kisses above occurs, which also leads to a kiss:

Lydia closed her eyes; sighing slightly, face coming closer just so. Every inch of Allison’s body was frozen in tension, eyes wide despite Lydia’s relaxed expression. The gap closed between them, Lydia’s lips brushing almost unintentionally against hers. Allison kept her eyes wide open in shock. Lydia pressed forward softly, moving her lips gently against her own. Allison responded, eyes slipping shut. The kiss ended, Lydia pulling away slowly with her eyes still closed. (upagainstthewall)

Unlike the others, however, this kiss doesn’t end with the girls in a relationship. Instead, Lydia either falls asleep or pretends to be asleep to avoid talking about it, and Allison lays awake wondering how she is supposed to act around Lydia in the morning.

Cerberusia’s “and good-morrow to our waking souls” begins with far less emotional intensity than the others. If anything, it seems to start off following the trope of teenage girls
experimenting. In fact, Lydia describes it as such at one point, categorizing it as one of those “friendly just-to-try-it make-outs”:

The sound of Allison's pen grows louder momentarily, then ceases. Lydia looks up from her own paper to see her consider her last answer for a long moment, then shut her book with a satisfied air.

"Lydia," she says, "have you ever made out with a girl?"

There are several places this conversation could go, answers definite or ambiguous. Lydia can see the web of possibilities laid out before her like a net. So many - but Allison is sweet and her long legs are enticingly smooth, and Lydia knows where she wants to go. She says, "Not yet." (Cerberusia)

Allison’s invitation is to open her arms, and Lydia tosses their studying aside to join her with no hesitation. The rest of the fic involves their make-out session, generously laced with Lydia’s comparisons between Allison and the boys she’s been with, and her growing curiosity about taking this farther than kissing, though she doesn’t press for more, only imagines it. Her imagination leads her to a realization that calls to mind Charlie and Nora’s discussion about Miles’ failings as a boyfriend and choosing each other and directly reflects the potentiality that Rich suggests is possible if women broke free of compulsory heterosexuality—a possibility Lydia considers for the first time:

The boys Lydia goes for are either healthy, fit and not too bright, in which case she likes being the the [sic] sun to their worshipful moons; or healthy, fit and decently intelligent, in which case she enjoys matching wits - understanding that of course she will
come out on top, because they're never *that* clever. (Jackson was an outlier because he was simultaneously trophy boyfriend and friend, something Lydia would usually consider bad form). She has spent several years enjoying their attentions: smiles in the corridor, a tongue in her mouth, a hand on her ass. None of them were experienced enough to be that good at sex, but it fulfilled an animal hunger in her and as aesthetically displeasing as penises are, watching boys' faces when she squeezes them gives her a thrill.

Strange, that she should have spent so long only valuing partners for how powerful they made her feel. Strange, that she should only now be considering the value of tenderness. She wants to have sex and have a conversation afterwards about things they're both interested in. She wants to paint Allison's nails and kiss her nipples. She wants it to be easy, for once. (Cerberusia)

Beyond Lydia’s desire for something beyond what she’s had in the past, the fic paints Lydia true to her presentation in the source-text as a girl with a healthy sexual appetite and no fear of slut-shaming. It isn’t the things one normally associates with heterosexuality making Lydia dissatisfied: she is properly worshipped, courted, adored, given all the attention she wants and much she doesn’t. The boys she has been with haven’t withheld what she needs—she just didn’t know she needed it. As discussed in Chapter 1, Lydia’s sexual behavior is one usually seen in males or “bad” girls, and in this fic, she is the one opening up to the feminine norms she has so far subverted. This continues when Allison asks her if she can take her on a date, her final response much like Caroline’s in “On Three” though for a different reason:

Lydia regains her breath, tamps down a hysterical giggle, and says:
"If I can take you on one [a date] at the same time."

And then she kisses Allison again before she can work out what that means, smile pressing against smile. (Cerberusia)

Lydia’s uncertainty about emotional intimacy, about having something mean something, but allowing herself to feel the craving for it, in her friend, reads more like the bromance fics than the rest of those in this chapter, but is consistent with the comparatively non-normative world in *Teen Wolf* which its fans seem to usually incorporate into their fics.

Femslash that places women into relationships seems to follow patterns far more like the bromance slash: moments of emotional intensity, leading to confession and romance. Given it is a pattern which flows through nearly every mainstream romance in our culture, that’s not surprising. Where these relationship fics seem to differ the most, though, from both the bromances and the liminal fics, is in their conspicuous lack of sex. That isn’t to say that none of these types of fics have sexual content; many do. However, those which end on a kiss are far more prevalent. Even fics which have the girls in already established relationships seem to fade to black, or end with them just snuggling more often than not. In BeaRyan’s “Tangled Honey,” Nora confronts Charlie about her tendency to wear her hair down, where an opponent could catch it in a fight. In the ensuing discussion, Charlie tells her about a traumatic event from her childhood. Nora comforts her, and they talk some more, before it begins to turn physical:

"I love it when you play with my hair," Charlie said.

Nora twisted the gathered strands into a high bun and kissed Charlie's now exposed neck. "So we can try putting it up?" she asked.
"If you keep doing that, you can do anything you like." (BeaRyan, “Tangled Honey”)

And the fic ends.

“Someone New,” by agirlnamedtruth, takes place during a time in canon when Rebekah’s soul has been transported into a witch’s body—still female, but human rather than vampire, African-American rather than Caucasian, and with the capability of doing magic that Rebekah lost when she turned into a vampire 1000 years before. As the fic opens, Rebekah is trying to adjust to the differences, but her primary concern becomes whether Hayley will still desire her when she doesn’t look like herself:

“What do you think?” Rebekah asked, certain that her lips weren’t what actually attracted Hayley to her in the first place. Or if they were, not these lips.

“I'm not going to lie, it's very... new,” Hayley ventured diplomatically.

Rebekah sighed, turning back to the mirror. “That's the problem. New face, new body, new voice...”

“New smell...” Hayley continued distractedly.

“Excuse you?” Rebekah asked, whirling around, eyes going wide as she tried to cover her mortification behind hands on hips and raised eyebrows.

“God, no, I just meant... You're human now and I can smell you. Your blood. You smell delicious, I'm sorry. I really don't have control of this whole hybrid thing yet.”
“Now that I could live with. Fancy a taste?” Rebekah smiled, the way Hayley was looking at her making her heart race. In the blink of an eye, Hayley was on her, kissing hard, teeth nipping at her bottom lip, drawing blood. “Oh yeah, I could definitely get used to this.”

And the fic ends.

Conversely, the fics with the most smut tend to be those lacking in much emotional content. For example, “(as long as you got me) you don’t need nobody” by orphan_account has Lydia using Allison as her distraction rather than going through boys—something that puts the fic, possibly, more in the liminal space than a relationship. No one is longing for anything: the fic opens with the girls making out, trying not to let Lydia’s mother hear them, moves through a very explicit sex scene, and ends with them starting round two. When taken as a whole, and connected to the other types of fic I examine, this lack of smut in friends-to-lovers femslash specifically may give credence to the theory discussed at the beginning of the chapter that the dearth of femslash might come at least partially from a discomfort with female desire and sexuality, especially if it happens to conflict with the writer’s own identification (centrumlumina, “Chart”). Given that femslash between rivals tends to be far more explicit, this may be even more true for these categories where the relationships arise from close friendships and which highlight the possible fluidity of that identification.

**Conclusion**

The most explicit femslash between friends seems to come from fics taking place in liminal spaces or sexual encounters otherwise divorced from emotion—in other words, those
which deviate most from the heterosexual script. Conversely, bromance slash often uses the explicit sex scenes either as a way to convey emotion without having to talk about it, a way to get past culturally enforced barriers, or as the natural outcome of emotional outpouring. The lack of sex within the relationship-based femslash is not evidence of reinforcing institutionalized heterosexuality and its norms, in and of itself. Sex is by no means a requirement for a fic to do so, or to explore female intimacy; desire and sexuality or lack thereof are not determined by sex acts. However, the pattern at play in fics that have sex within them and those that do not requires more examination.

The placement of carnal female sexuality in angst and antagonism, rather than cooperative, nurturing environments like Rich imagines, supports Gathman’s argument that “femslash tends to appropriate female characters who are engaged in performing what Judith Halberstam terms ‘female masculinities’” (18). While Gathman’s main argument centers on slash between masculine rivals, she uses femslash between female rivals and antagonists to support her claim that slash’s creation of non-hierarchical relationships is most fully realized in antagonistic relationships. As related to femslash between female friends, not antagonists, it points toward the claim that one reason there is less femslash than male slash is discomfort with female sexuality and intimate pleasure. If the argument that female fan fic writers are socialized to focus on masculine pleasure in sex rather than their own is valid, then the element of aggression or other traits seen as masculine in the binary model of gender potentially becomes necessary. To imagine non-hierarchical sex without masculinizing the female participants or adding some element of aggression in its execution seems antithetical in its challenge to culturally ingrained perceptions of satisfying sexual encounters.
The lesser incidence of adult fics for these pairings does not arise solely out of the way fan fic authors write the particular characters: all eight women have a great deal of fan fiction written with them engaging in explicit heterosexual encounters that weave together emotion and sex the way male slash tends to do. Therefore, these friends-to-lover fics, while seeming to explore a rejection of institutionalized heterosexuality in favor of a world where women rely on each other to meet both physical and sexual needs, often fail to explore the sexual side of that equation. This leaves the impression that these female characters can have hot, passionate, even “dirty” sex under certain conditions: (1) in liminal spaces; (2) with antagonistic female partners; or (3) with men. Further, this raises questions about the influence of cultural norms about female sexuality at play even when texts try to resist them. Do our cultural products condition us to think that exciting sex must contain an element of risk or aggression? Does a non-aggressive form of sex not factor into wider cultural fantasies? If so, is it because we find it hard to imagine two women who love one another being passionate? Are we buying into gender stereotypes that position men as more sexual than women, and, thus, require women to have either a male partner or an antagonist to be that passionate? The numbers and patterns in this sort of femslash suggest such an explanation. This would challenge the norm in fan studies to see slash and femslash as subversive readings of the source text simply by virtue of queering the characters, as it seems to still divorce passion from nurturance in women while depicting male characters embracing both.

On the other hand, the relative plethora of fics in which female characters find and take pleasure on their own terms outside of the necessity of a monogamous relationship may be the truer counterpart to male slash in subversive effort and effect. Taken together, bromance slash and femslash in liminal spaces flip the binary gender norms, allowing the men greater emotional expressiveness than the norms generally upheld by popular culture and the women the freedom
to seek pleasure for pleasure’s sake, without slut-shaming, as I discussed in Chapter 1. Beyond challenging the positioning of women as less sexual and aggressive, these liminal fics also push back against the norm of the compulsory monogamy that accompanies institutionalized heterosexuality. Thus, the liminal fics may be ultimately the more subversive, a question which I explore in depth in Chapter 5.
Chapter 4: Family above All

“You don’t know weird until you’ve had a musical wet dream about your older brother.”

Introduction

The previous two chapters, broadly, dealt with negotiating desire and intimacy between friends and lovers, examined the continuums that exist between those friends and lovers and argued that those continuums strain against a binary notion of sexuality. This chapter and the next engage with negotiating desire and intimacy between family and lovers and the norms of forming families within institutionalized heterosexuality. Institutionalized heterosexuality and the norms it encompasses grew out of a culture originally organized in kinship systems, which prescribed members’ duties, responsibilities, and privileges, in relation to others based upon their kinship or lack thereof (Rubin, “The Traffic in Women” 170). In order to function, the patriarchal society which arose from these kinship systems needs the incest taboo.

In an article examining Wincest—fan works which construct an incestuous relationship between brothers Sam and Dean Winchester on Supernatural—Catherine Tosenberger argues that “[i]n the West, cultural discourses of incest run headlong into discourses of romantic love, and the resulting tangle is endlessly fascinating to writers, artists, scientists, and thinkers” (2.1). The way Anglo-American culture constructs romance centers on the union of two into one, the merging of soulmates, both body and soul: perfect sex in both romance and fan fiction also

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21 (Texts From Last Night, “#58060”)
requires that perfect, spiritual connection. Incestuous romances take this a step further: one in blood, as well as, body and soul (Tosenberger 2.1). Ellen Pollak, in her study of incest in 17th and 18th century British novels, examines the connections made between desire and incest by theorists like Freud, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari, among others, and finds that a consistent theme is that “normative sexuality is always inherently incestuous because all legitimate love objects are always already substitutes for the objects of incestuous longing” (Pollak 15; Tosenberger 2.1). However, this configuration of incest remains a symbolic referent for fantasy to be “endlessly deferred…an ungraspable limit” (Pollak 16). In this chapter, I analyze fan fiction which refuses to defer the fantasy by constructing incestuous relationships between consenting, adult characters and explore how these fics function as alternative readings of the source text which both reenact and resist normative sexuality.

With few exceptions, the depictions of both sibling and cross-generational incest in *Revolution*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *The Originals* fandoms are all consensual and between adults. Most of the incest fan fiction arising from *The Vampire Diaries* and *The Originals* is between siblings: of the 5,666 fan fics posted on AO3 for *The Vampire Diaries*, only five are tagged parent/child incest, and three of those include only the implication of it or a passing reference to past abuse. Compared to wider literary trends, this distribution makes sense. Sibling incest is an overwhelmingly more popular trope within both fandom and the larger literary sphere, where narratives often portray it as a tragic, but sympathetic, and sometimes even romantic (Tosenberger 2.1; Patterson 96; Ford 3). Given the presumptive abuse of power implicated by cross-generational incest, however, Western literary works generally treat it with more horror than romance (Ford 3). Incest fic in the *Teen Wolf* fandom tends to follow this trend. In general, then, while *Teen Wolf* fan fiction contains a wider gamut of incestuous relationships
than the other fandoms, many are explicitly abusive\textsuperscript{22} or break with characterization in a way that renders the fan text almost unintelligible if read in concert with the source text, which puts these texts outside the scope of this project.

*Revolution* breaks this tradition by having a cross-generational pairing—Miles/Charlie—which is, with a few darkfic exceptions, portrayed as non-abusive and consensual, if not always healthy. Fic featuring Miles and Charlie as a romantic pairing also has to take into account something none of the other pairings in any of these four fandoms have to: a shift in the nature of the relationship in canon. Through both televised seasons, *Revolution* depicts Miles and Charlie as uncle and niece, but in the series finale published in graphic novel form, Charlie’s mother reveals that Miles is actually Charlie’s father. This caused a dilemma for fans of the pairing, though most fics written after the reveal handle the shift by ignoring it, and still portraying them as uncle and niece. In one of the few exceptions, Steph_Schell wrote “The Needs of the Father” for a fic challenge offered by The Orgy Armada\textsuperscript{23} from the prompt “being Charlie’s father changes exactly nothing” and directly addressed the new relationship. The comments afterward reveal fans struggling with what to do with the change and how to respond to the new dynamic in the pairing (Steph_Schell, “The Needs Of The Father” Notes).

JaqofSpades, who writes a lot of Miles/Charlie and Miles/Charlie/Bass fics, comments, “I love this fic in that context, even though my headcanon likes to ignore Rachel's little bombshell

\textsuperscript{22} In general, *Teen Wolf* fandom produces a far larger amount of darkfic (fan fiction which focuses on darker themes and acts: dubious-and-nonconsensual sex, pedophilia, snuff fic, etc.) than the other three fandoms. Given the extreme lack of scholarship on this type of fan fiction and the ways in which it plays directly against feminist theory, it is something I want to revisit in a future project. However, confining it to one chapter would be nearly impossible, and my focus in this project are on forms of fan fiction involving consensual sexual relationships which use narratives of romance and intimacy as their patterns (I will briefly touch on one or two where consent may be dubious for contrast, but not an in-depth examination).

\textsuperscript{23} A collection of *Revolution* fans who offer prompts for fic writers along various themes throughout the year.
and sing ‘Miles is Charlie's uncle who she barely knows la la la’ as loudly as I can to avert the squick” (JaqofSpades, “Comment to Steph_Schell”).

“Everyone does. No one wanted the obvious cop out/cliché. But we have to work with what we have,” Steph_Schell responds (Steph_Schell, “Comment to JaqofSpades”).

Fellow Miles/Charlie writer, hithelleth compliments Steph_Schell for “mak[ing] even that awful option seem good,” and agrees with JaqofSpades: “I do generally like to pretend that part of canon doesn't exist” (hithelleth, “Comment on ‘The Needs of the Father’”).

Steph_Schell is again pragmatic in her response: “Yeah, most of us just through [sic] that part out but the prompt is the prompt. And I figure if Miles is willing to bang his niece, he's probably not going to stop because the labels changed” (Steph_Schell, “Comment to hithelleth”).

I found this conundrum particularly interesting, as well, given the father/daughter romance lies at the very heart of institutional heterosexuality and many of our romance narratives: in Patriarchy and Incest, Jane Ford convincingly argues that the threat/promise of it underlies at least 21 of Shakespeare’s plays (4). I explore this shift and fan resistance to it or lack thereof later in the chapter.

Since the 1970s, “incest” has become nearly synonymous with child abuse and rape, but that discourse has obscured the ways in which the taboo itself is rooted not in the protection of women and children but in their domination and exploitation (Pollak 49). Instead, my inquiry examines incest as it has functioned to reinforce institutionalized heterosexuality, monogamy, and patriarchal systems of power, and the ways in which the representation of incestuous relationships in fiction can serve as moments of resistance and transgression to explore different questions of desire. Considering that authors who tackle the issue of incest and desire in their
work are situated within a particular cultural moment, examining the discourse around incest, desire and gender in law, life and literature is appropriate.

Like gender roles and sexuality itself, the incest taboo is a social construction, not a “natural” one. Its construction, however, lies at the heart of the others, and the ways in which it has become embedded in our psyches run even deeper. Incest serves as the horror we as a society, no matter our politics, generally agree represents both the ultimate moral degeneracy into sexual perversion and the clearest example of female victimization by patriarchal culture (Cahill 1574). And yet, according to nearly every school of psychoanalysis, incestuous desire, not repulsion, and its sublimation or conversion forms the basis of human psycho-sexual development (Vaz da Silva 6).

As homosexuality has become more accepted, so too has slash fan fiction, which was once forbidden from being circulated at fan conventions, publicly decried as “character rape,” and accused of dismantling of the characters’ status as heroes (Jenkins, Textual Poachers 187). The degenerates of fandom are now those who write incest fic. Rather than taking the common “don’t like/don’t read” stance to fics which contain elements a reader does not like (which, by standard practice, are put into warnings and tags), many critics deem the ties between writer and subject absolute when it comes to incest. These critics then often harass, cyberbully and even suicide bait fans who write incest fics, while accusing them of being child abusers and rape apologists on Tumblr (“By the Antis’ Logic…”). When mainstream media stumbles on slash fan fiction, it tends to either get huffy about “Tumbrinas” making everything gay or pathologizes the sexuality of teenage girls (Minkel, “Star Wars”; Minkel, “Why It Doesn’t Matter”). When the
media discovered Wincest and Weasleycest, however, journalists speculated about what kind of deviants would write such things (Romano).

While critics claim that writers of incestuous fan fiction are romanticizing and normalizing incest in order to get off on the taboo/kink of it, my analysis shows that the vast majority of these narratives focus at least as much on character motivations and relationships as they do smut. It seems as if the writers, aware of the way critics deride their work as specious or harmful and fic which makes the characters horrifically out-of-character, seek to prove the critics wrong. Maybe even more than most genres of fan fiction, a large portion of these fics deeply probe characters’ psyches and explicitly extrapolate how the relationship, as portrayed in the source text, could plausibly be read as, or lead to, incest. Of course, some fics exist that validate critics’ complaints, but they are the minority. By and large, the treatment is generally far more nuanced and rendered at least plausible based on the situations and relationship dynamics within the source text which mimic those in which incestuous desire is more likely to arise.

**The Incest Taboo**

The need to develop a society beyond the family through exogamous marriage forms at least part of the historical foundation of the incest taboo, which also connects it to institutionalized heterosexuality. In *The Elementary Structure of Kinship*, Claude Levi Strauss argues that the incest taboo is the “supreme rule of the gift” that expresses the “fact…that the biological family is no longer alone, and that it must ally itself with other families in order to endure” (482, 485). Notably, the law of exogamy requires that the “gift” given is a daughter or a sister—“valuables -- viz., women -- valuables par excellence from both the biological and the social points of view, without which life is impossible” (Lévi-Strauss 481). These gifts, Gayle

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24 Fan works which construct the relationship between *Harry Potter* twins Fred and George Weasley as incestuous.
Rubin argues are an exchange of “sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors, rights and people,” which solidifies power structures and undergirds patriarchal systems (“The Traffic in Women” 173, 177). Foucault, too, points out that incest would close a family in on itself and keep it from looking outward, expanding society via connections among families (History of Sexuality 109). At the same time, he argues that “sexuality has its privileged point of development in the family” and “for this reason, sexuality is incestuous from the start” (History of Sexuality 108). These two tensions inform many of the fics I analyze in this chapter, perhaps arising from the question, “If heterosexual exogamy is made possible by blocking incest, what happens when heterosexual exogamy is itself blocked?” (Tosenberger 2.2)

While most of the characters in this chapter live in worlds where they are unconstrained by the law—either because it no longer exists or because they are supernatural creatures—they do still operate within worlds with social norms similar to ours and with the same internalized taboos. Incest may be a cultural taboo, not a natural one, but “that does not make it less deeply encoded” (Haggerty 388). In order for their texts to still be read as fan fiction by the larger fan community, fan authors must make them seem plausible interpretations, with characters that readers can still identify as those within the source text, even as they act in ways that they do not in the source text (Stein and Busse 195–196). This remains true even when pushing the limits or writing something that might seem, at first glance, to be implausible, like incest (Stein and Busse 197). In examining Wincest, Catherine Tosenberger argues their relationship “is best understood not as a perverse ‘resistance’ to the show’s presumed non-incestuous heteronormativity, but as ‘an actualization of latent textual elements,’” which leads her to examine the ways in which the source text offers these queer, incestuous readings within itself (1.1). Of Revolution, The Vampire Diaries and The Originals, only The Originals offers the almost-explicitly incestuous
reading in the source text that Tosenberger finds in *Supernatural*. However, all of the source texts contain elements that make the characters engaging in incest not as out-of-character as it might first seem.

**Sibling Incest**

*Dysfunctional Dynamics*

Foucault may argue that incest occupies a central place in our lives and families, always solicited and refused, an object of both attraction and obsession, but modern psychology says that the solicitation is accepted, even by consenting adult siblings, most frequently in dysfunctional families where there is domestic violence, lack of parental emotional connection, and problems across generational boundaries (Mc Veigh 119; Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 109; Hardy 258; Cahill 1606; Vontress and Epp 378). In his study of sibling incest in literature, myth and life, *The Children of Oedipus*, Luciano Santiago connects the lack of parental love to consensual sibling incest, as well:

> When either or both parents are not available physically or emotionally, the siblings, lacking an object for rivalry and love may turn to each other instead to meet their dependency and erotic demands. What initially seems to be the ‘second best’ love object may turn out to be ‘even better’ than the original (7).

The Mikaelson and Salvatore siblings from *The Vampire Diaries* and *The Originals* often serve as mirrors and parallels for each other, especially the two primary brother-pairs: Klaus and Elijah Mikaelson and Damon and Stefan Salvatore. The Mikaelsons also have two other brothers, and two sisters: Kol and Finn, Rebekah and Freya. Finn has been a very marginal character for much of the Mikaelsons’ tenure on television, and Freya did not become a major
character until the end of Season 2, so neither features much in fan fiction, yet. However, Kol and Rebekah are both frequently shipped with each other and with Klaus and Elijah in multiple configurations, including incestuous threesomes and foursomes.

Both the Mikaelsons and the Salvatores grow up in violent homes, with abusive fathers: Mikael nearly beats Klaus to death multiple times, then spends the next 1000 years hunting all of the siblings; Guiseppe Salvatore beats his wife and both his sons, puts cigars out on Damon’s arm and is the one who shoots and kills his sons, ultimately turning them into vampires (“Farewell to Storyville”; “A Closer Walk with Thee”; “Blood Brothers”; “Mommie Dearest”). Their mothers are either little better than their fathers or absent: Esther Mikaelson turns her children into vampires against their wills, weakens Klaus while he is a child, curses him to subvert his werewolf nature, and, finally, comes back from the grave not just once, but twice to try and kill all five of her children; Lily Salvatore supposedly dies of consumption, but actually turns into a vampire and runs away, leaving her sons alone with their abusive father, even though, as a vampire, she is now strong enough to defy him and save them (“Always and Forever”; “Every Mother’s Son”; “Mommie Dearest”).

To survive their childhoods, the siblings form intense bonds with one another that even violent family feuds and betrayals cannot break. While they are still human, Rebekah almost kills Mikael in his sleep for his abuse of Klaus (“Farewell to Storyville”). Later, Elijah, Rebekah and Klaus make a vow to one another over their mother’s (first) grave of “always and forever,” and, no matter what happens between them, they always return to it (“Ordinary People”). Throughout their 1000 years, even when they are most at odds with each other, if a threat arises against any of them, they stand together against anyone, including their parents. For instance, when Klaus
and Elijah realize both Esther and Mikael have returned from the grave at the start of the second season of *The Originals*, they decide there is only one question that needs to be answered: “which of our parents do we kill first?” (“Alive and Kicking”) Similarly, when their mother returns, Damon lashes out at her the most, both for leaving them and for making him take on the role of protecting Stefan from their father (“Mommie Dearest”). That protector role is the one that pulls Damon back to his brother, even after a fight makes Damon swear to make Stefan’s eternity miserable: he may say this, but when Stefan is in true danger, Damon goes to any lengths to save his brother.

The Mikaelson siblings, meanwhile, are thoroughly enmeshed, bound by love and hate and an inability to walk away, even for the sake of non-familial, romantic love. Although Klaus takes actions that attempt to prevent his siblings from leaving him, even when given freedom to do so they still repeatedly choose him and each other over their lovers of their own free will. For instance, Elijah abandons his first love because Klaus loves her, too, and they don’t want to fight; he abandons the next woman he cares for when Mikael forces them to flee, even though he could have taken her with him; he blames himself when Klaus murders one of his lovers, telling Hayley even 200 years later, “She died because of me. Because I cared too deeply for her. I had allowed my brother to slip through my grasp…I had abandoned him in the name of my own happiness. Celeste paid the price” (“Bringing Out the Dead”; “A Streetcar Named Desire”; “The River in Reverse”). Similarly, even Rebekah who constantly claims to only want to have her own life, free of Klaus, makes no move to find love when he releases her, but focuses all her energy on finding a way to bring Kol back from the dead and to them, so they can both return home to Klaus and Elijah in New Orleans (“I Love You, Goodbye”). Likewise, Kol returns to

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25 Though this was retconned—changed by the writers, who contradicted themselves in their previous version of the story—later to say Elijah accidentally killed her when turned into a vampire, instead (“Red Door”).
stand beside his family when their enemies start a war, even though, just hours before, his siblings let the love of his life die (“Give ’Em Hell, Kid”).

The Mikaelson siblings’ over-attachment does not go unnoticed: their lovers frequently confront them with it, like other characters in Revolution do Bass and Miles, and though they rarely accuse the Mikaelsons of anything explicitly incestuous, the implication hovers. After Klaus and Elijah separate her from her brother—with whom she has a relationship which is also almost explicitly incestuous—by burying him at sea, Klaus’s first love, Aurora mocks them and their inevitably endogamous and loveless lives:

Look at you two. How could a woman really love either of you? Even if she can stomach all your treachery, she’s left to face your brother…Did you not rip Aya from Elijah when you forced him to abandon his loyal Strix, just as he tore you from me? All in the name of “always and forever”: a ridiculous concept that ensures both of you spend your immortality alone. (“A Streetcar Named Desire”)

A reincarnated Celeste, seeking vengeance for Klaus having her killed, berates Elijah: “I died because of Klaus and…you stood by him. All because of your vow—’always and forever’…I’m here to teach you the error of your ways. ‘Always and forever’ was the greatest mistake of your life” (“Crescent City”). When Mikael offers to stop hunting Elijah if he will turn against Klaus—“Stand with me, or fall with him. Choose son,”—Elijah’s response is immediate: “I will always choose him” (“Le Grand Guignol”).

26 According to showrunner Julie Plec, the actors playing Aurora and her brother Tristan improvised “a sweet brother-sister kiss that was decidedly Flowers in the Attic-inspired.” The kiss had to be cut because they had already shot non-incestuous scripts for the next 4 episodes, but Plec shared that she’s “not…against a little incest amongst villains.” While the Mikaelsons, who were the villains and antagonists on The Vampire Diaries and have hardly become heroes despite their change to protagonist status on The Originals, may never engage in canonical, incestuous relationships, it does offer some paratextual support for an incestuous interpretation of the text.
For fans of both *The Originals* and *The Vampire Diaries*, this exchange directly echoes Damon’s vow to Elena in Season 2 of the latter: “Let me be clear about something. If it comes down to you and the witch again, I will gladly let Bonnie die. I will *always* choose you” (“The Last Dance”). That Damon and Elena are the endgame romantic pairing in the source text and that the two shows share a writer shade the emotion in Elijah’s response, three years later, with incestuous ambiguity. He is, after all, not even being asked to choose between family and not-family, but his father and the brother who has betrayed him repeatedly, including killing people he loved. But he still chooses Klaus. Add in jokes from Elijah—while in an erotically charged situation with a lover—about needing to give Klaus a spanking, and how some could interpret their relationship as at least covertly incestuous becomes clearer (“The River in Reverse”).

Unlike the Mikaelsons, who spend their 1000 years living together, with only brief respites from one another, Damon and Stefan actually spend decades apart, angry at one another for various betrayals and the burden placed on them by their parents and their roles as sons. Despite this, their bond to each other is arguably as strong, or stronger, than their one to Elena, who they both love. When they are first turned, Damon wants to die rather than transition fully into a vampire, but Stefan manipulates him into it. A century and a half later, he finally apologizes, telling Damon, “what I did was selfish…I guess I just needed my brother” (“Rose”). Stefan sacrifices his chance with Elena, promising Klaus a decade of time together, in order to get the cure Damon needs after a fatal werewolf bite (“As I Lay Dying”). Later, when they finally rescue Stefan from Klaus, Elena tells Damon, “I think that you’re going to be the one to save him from himself. It won’t be because he loves me; it’ll be because he loves you” (“Ordinary People”). Explaining to Stefan how he survived five years being experimented on and
tortured by scientists, Damon shares that a fellow captive had a girl he loved who was the “hope [he] held on to,” then tells his brother, “You were mine” (“Man on Fire”).

Likewise, when Elena asks Alaric to take away her memories of Damon in Season 6, Alaric accepts that decision, but Stefan is angry. He equates his relationship with his brother to hers with him as lover, telling her, “You loved Damon for the same reasons I love Damon. Because in spite of every single thing that he did, we couldn’t live without him. Now you don’t have to. But I do” (“Black Hole Sun”). Later, in the crypt where Damon died, Stefan has a moment of talking to the air reminiscent Damon at Alaric’s grave: “I gotta say, I’m not doing so great without you. I keep trying to start over but I can’t get anywhere because I’m lost, brother. I’m lost” (“The World Has Turned”).

Sibling Incest: The Literary Tradition and Source Texts

This idea of there being no other bond higher than that of siblings—above and beyond other family relationships, even—runs rampant through The Vampire Diaries and The Originals, as seen above. The dysfunctional, enmeshed family dynamics coupled with a literary tradition of sibling incest as high drama, romance and tragedy play an integral role in establishing a context for reading incestuous relationships into the source texts. Incest fic about the Mikaelson and Salvatore sibling relationships echo the manner in which Romantic poetry portrayed sibling incest, “not as a perversion or accidental inversion of the normal sibling relation, but as an extension and intensification of it” (A. Richardson 554). For the Mikaelsons, especially, the whole historical and social basis for the incest taboo falters, rendering their relationships even more susceptible to incestuous interpretation. Referring to Supernatural’s Winchester brothers, Tosenberger asks the question I quoted earlier, which applies just as much to the Mikaelsons: “If
heterosexual exogamy is made possible by blocking incest, what happens when heterosexual 
exogamy is itself blocked?” (2.2) In answer, Tosenberger argues that the source text of 
*Supernatural* positions Sam and Dean Winchester as being forced to live a life on the road, cut 
off from the possibility of settling down to a normal life. In fact, their female love interests die 
with shocking regularity. Without any option for love and lasting intimacy, Tosenberger asks, 
where else can the brothers turn for a relationship deeper than one night stands but to one 
another? (2.2) Likewise, the Mikaelsons are consistently denied the chance to marry or even find 
lives outside of one another, trapped by both their parents’ legacy and their own vows and 
obsessiveness.

Some of their failure in exogamous relationships has been due to Mikael’s chasing them: 
Elijah compels Klaus’s first love to end their relationship so that she won’t try to come with 
them when they run from Mikael; Klaus compels Stefan to forget about Rebekah when Mikael 
finds them in Chicago; when Mikael finds them in New Orleans and they have to flee, Rebekah 
leaves behind her lover, Marcel (a quasi-incestuous relationship in its own right, as Klaus 
adopted him and raised him as a son, making Rebekah his adopted aunt) (“Beautiful Mistake”; 
“The End of the Affair”; “Farewell to Storyville”). Others come from Klaus’s possessiveness, 
demonstrated tellingly in his comments about his siblings, and to others about their attempts to 
find love are telling. When Marcel tries to get Klaus to allow him to court Rebekah, Klaus 
refuses, telling him, “I love my sister, but she lacks fortune when it comes to men. They come 
and go for her, but *I* am the constant” (“House of the Rising Son”). Klaus’s continual 
interference in Rebekah’s love life is pure patriarchal privilege in many ways. “I’m not your 
girlfriend,” she snaps at him at one point when he’s trying to pull her away from Stefan, only for 
him to respond, “No. You’re my sister, which means you have to do what I say” (“The End of
the Affair”). He refuses to give her away, refuses to allow an exogamous union, choosing instead to keep her for himself (“I am her constant”).

Klaus both punishes and keeps his family near him through the use of magical daggers, forged by Rebekah’s first love, a vampire hunter who uses one on her during sex, while his comrades use the others on her brothers. When thrust through the Mikaelsons’ hearts, these daggers keep them in a death-like state until removed. Unaffected because of his werewolf side, Klaus resuscitates his siblings, but blames Rebekah, kills her lover and keeps the daggers for himself, using them on his sibling as it pleases him (“The Five”). When he finds out Rebekah has fallen in love with Marcel, for instance, he daggers her for over 50 years, and when she tries to leave him for Stefan, he daggers her for another 90 (“The River in Reverse”; “House of the Rising Son”; “The End of the Affair”). The act of daggering of his siblings itself can carry erotic potential beyond a signifier of jealousy: the first instance of its use was Rebekah’s lover sliding it into her during sex—a second penetration of her body by a phallic object. Daggering requires holding someone close, even cradling them, and Klaus’s other actions in doing so can often be tender and combined with sentiments of love. When he daggers Elijah at the end of the pilot episode, for instance, Klaus tells him it is because Elijah is his one weakness, and he cannot be distracted (“Always and Forever”).

The erotic potential of the daggering, barely implicit in the source text, becomes explicit in fan fiction. “If she was never supposed to choose so wrong, he was never supposed to do this. She’s ruined them both. Rebekah was never supposed to want anything more,” thinks Klaus in forcynics “not with a bang, but with a whisper,” as he daggers her instead of allowing her to leave with Stefan. In this, the transgressive nature of the acts—both daggering and incest, echo one another: “This isn’t—the dagger slides into her chest easily, like she is anyone else, like this
isn’t so utterly wrong – *this isn’t how it was supposed to happen. This was never supposed to happen*” (forcynics).

Klaus also refuses Elijah the same chance to make any alliance outside of the family—an odd form of power, given Elijah is Klaus’s older brother, which prevents the same patriarchal reading that can be applied to Klaus and Rebekah’s relationship. At one point, Elijah asks Klaus not to continue his vendetta against Katherine, who Elijah has loved for 500 years, but allow Elijah to have a chance of a life with her. The conversation goes about as well as Rebekah’s attempts to leave:

“*I am asking you to spare her. As your family, as your only living brother,*” I would ask that you provide me with this opportunity to feel, to care. To love,” Elijah tells Klaus.

Klaus comes in close and raises the (very phallic) stake he is holding upright between them, to tap on Elijah’s chest, responding, “*I gave you that opportunity. And you sided against me.*” (“Pictures of You”).

Given that Elijah is explicitly asking Klaus to allow him a romantic and sexual relationship, only for Klaus to respond, “I gave you that opportunity,” a *non*-incestuous reading of the scene seems less plausible than an incestuous one. He likewise refuses to allow Elijah and Hayley to form a relationship for the first two seasons of *The Originals*. That he begins to allow, even encourage it, by Season 3 comes only after significant character growth. His change of attitude also could come from the fact that Hayley leaves her people and comes to them and is bound to Klaus through their daughter, which means she may take Elijah’s attention, but will also ensure he does not leave Klaus.

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27 Kol and Finn are dead at the time of this conversation, though they are resurrected a year later. Twice.
As I alluded to above in the description of the scene between Elijah and Klaus, where Klaus steps into Elijah with a stake raised between them, the translations of the relationships from platonically familial to sexual rest not only on words and plot arcs, but also on the visual codes of the medium itself. Elizabeth Woledge examines these codes in analyzing the source of fans shipping Kirk and Spock (Woledge, “Decoding Desire” 237). Most of these visual codes come from looks and gestures between characters that highlight the ambiguous dialogue, like in the Elijah and Klaus exchange above. These codes may include things as blatant as a phallic stake—or dagger—held at its base, pointing upward between two closely positioned characters, or may be more ambiguous: a clasp of a hand that holds a bit too long; a glance from one brother to another while the other looks down or shoots a coy glance, before looking away again; a gaze held, intent and fraught with emotion (Woledge, “Decoding Desire” 244). When these same looks and gestures are observed between a non-related heterosexual pair, viewers recognize them as codes for flirtation, emotional attachment and desire, or, in the case of the stake example, at least sexually charged exchanges (Woledge, “Decoding Desire” 245). Indeed, like Woledge argues about masculine behavior, there is a taken-for-granted knowledge that says proper familial behavior decrees that glances between family should not be coy and gazes and hands should not linger any longer than necessary (245). When they do, questions about the nature of the relationship may arise—questions some fans are more than willing to explore and answer in their own narratives.
The fan fiction surrounding these sibling relationships uses all of these elements—the intense attachment after difficult childhoods, the enmeshment, the idealized bonds, the obsession—as the foundation from which they construct incestuous relationships. That the Mikaelsons and Salvatores are all vampires further allows fans who ship them an additional way to address readers’ possible internal recoil from the incest. Indeed, that they are vampires makes reading them as incestuous almost too easy, given that “[t]he vampire is a most complete condensation of the problems and resolutions of family romance” (Twitchell 76). Many fics reiterate this, reminding the reader that these characters are all vampires who have lived in multiple cultures across multiple centuries. Hayley’s point of view in ajarofgoodthings’ polyamorous “Your throat in one hand, your heart in another,” offers one such perspective:

The only person she's sure she loves more than any of them is Hope, and…she knows they all feel the same. It's wrong; on a human level, when she sees Elijah kiss Rebekah quiet, when she passes Klaus' room and hears the break of a vase, furniture slamming into a wall and telling her Klaus and Elijah are settling another argument in the best way they know - but they're not human, and she can't fault them for loving each other as much as she loves them. (ajarofgoodthings)

Similarly, the third person narrator of orphan_account’s “Maybe It’s Love” muses about the morality of Klaus and Elijah’s incestuous relationship in comparison to the circumstances of their lives:

Maybe their touches are full of untold secrets…Both of their eyes, maybe they’re filled with regret…Maybe this is wrong. But after a thousand years of love it is bound to twist
into something different, and who is to tell them that it’s wrong? (orphan_account, “Maybe It’s Love”)

The meaninglessness of the taboo wars with its internalization when, after a fight with Klaus escalates into kissing, Rebekah wonders how long it’s been since they’ve been together and decides the reason for the length of time is the taboo: “Centuries, they were siblings, after all, and although they were no longer bound to mortal rules, they never wanted to risk Elijah’s disappointment” (mysweet_time).

The same pattern emerges in incest fic involving the Salvatore brothers. In Redcognito’s “On Our Way to Hell,” for instance, Stefan tries to resist Damon’s seduction by reminding him that it is wrong. Damon, however, merely laughs, and responds, “We're vampires, Stefan. Centuries old, blood sucking vampires. I don't think a little thing like sharing some genetic code counts as anything much in the face of that…We're already damned, little brother. We might as well enjoy ourselves on our way to hell” (Redcognito).

Admittedly, justification does not equal emotional health, and fluffy, happy fics might validate the criticism that says incest fics romanticize and normalize something harmful. However, the negative side of the siblings’ level of enmeshment often weaves its way through fic, as well:

It was always a given that they love each other. What's more worrying is what happens after that, when centuries spent together have worn down the fondness and left only the rock-hard foundation of love, what love becomes when it has rotten and died a hundred times. Rebekah is the romantic of the family, but sometimes even she wonders if love is really made to withstand such a long period of use. (theviolonist)
A majority of the fics that focus on the Salvatore brothers center on their unhealthy enmeshment, as well. After years of anger and separation, Damon and Stefan finally try to come to terms with that enmeshment in Ellen Smithee’s “Blood of My Blood”:

"You know what I really want?" he [Damon] hissed. "I want you to stop pretending that this [being with Elena] is fucking normal." Damon was glaring, his body taut with anger and pressed hard against Stefan. "What are you going to do with her? Have babies? Raise a family? Bury them? You didn't want me for eternity, Stefan. You just didn't want to be alone in your misery when you had to give up the things you really wanted."

"You think you know everything, don't you?" Stefan braced his hands on Damon's upper arms, digging his fingers into his brother's hard muscles. "I wanted to spend it with you, Damon, not Katherine, not anyone else, just you. You're the one who didn't want me." His voice broke and he closed his eyes. "I get it, Damon. I got it years ago. I just don't know why you won't let me move on." (Smithee)

After their fight turns to sex, the brothers seem to come to an accord:

He [Damon] licked Stefan's blood--mixed with his own blood--from his lips, and Stefan wondered if he would ever not taste Damon on his tongue again.

"Mine," he whispered against Damon's lips. He pressed himself as close to his brother as he could get without crawling into his skin and closed his eyes, content. (Smithee)
Stefan may be content, but Damon’s earlier statement doesn’t evidence a healthy, functional relationship so much as a sense of entrapment, even if the trap is one they both finally admit to wanting.

Indeed, in several of the fics, the Salvatore brothers’ need for one another seems pathological. In “How Many Times Can I Break Till I Shatter,” Stefan describes it thusly:

Damon was life. And Stefan wanted him, needed him, craved him... Stefan was truly nothing without him. But with him, oh... with him he could be anything; anything Damon wanted him to be, because Damon was the light, so glorious that he could not stay away even if it ended up being the end of him…Damon was a lifeline chaining him to this world and everything that was worth in it. Stefan could not, would not lose him.

(OnyxHime)

Elsewhere, in another fic, he reminds himself that “[i]t doesn't matter how long you spend apart, how dysfunctional and destructive your relationship has become -- he's always been the sun you orbit around” (nomelon, “Weak”).

Psychiatrists Clemmont Vontress and Lawrence Epp wrote a case study about two brothers involved in an incestuous relationship who recognized enough of a potential problem to seek therapy, and, like those brothers, more often than not, the siblings in these fics also recognize the problems that come from their enmeshment (376). The two brothers, however, quit therapy after four sessions. Vontress and Epp “suspect this happened because the brothers interpreted our hesitant neutrality as tacit approval of their lifestyle, which was possibly all they desired from therapy” (377). Later coming to doubt this neutrality, the two psychiatrists reflect
on ways they would have handled the relationship if the men had continued in therapy: “we would not label it dysfunctional as a matter of sensitivity, although we would question whether it was the most growth promoting and courageous” (380). In the end, though, their conclusion is ambiguous: “[w]ith therapeutic insight and perseverance, we suspect the brothers would have eventually entered acceptable and fulfilling relationships; and yet we fear love is so serendipitous that what the brothers have now may be better than the search for a healthier love they may never find” (381). Damon certainly echoes this sentiment, telling Stefan, "This is all we've got…This is it. Everything else is gonna die” (Smithee).

Of course, this level of dependence is not unique to incest ships. This desperate need to lose oneself in one’s partner, the obsessive dependence on a lover is a foundational convention of a romance narrative. The pairs in the bromances I examined in Chapter 2 certainly exhibit the same level of dependency as the siblings and these classic lovers do, in their fan fiction, at least; Bass and Miles and Scott and Stiles exhibit it in their source texts, as well. Like the bromance turns to romance from source text to fan fiction, the siblings’ complete interdependence in their source texts also translates to something sexual in fan fiction. Given the primacy of the sense of unity that lies at the heart of romance narratives, this translation of the source text seems less implausible and out-of-character than some insist.

Power Plays, Love and Hate

Many of the narratives exploring the incestuous vibes between the Mikaelson siblings fully acknowledge the shifting power dynamics between and among them set forth in the source text: the ways in which their love is also pain and their dependence a darkness, and the thin lines between love and hate. For example, in the second episode of The Originals, Hayley tries to
understand these dynamics, noting that Rebekah says she hates him, but that she still loves him is equally obvious. Rebekah tells her: “I guess when you spend a thousand years with someone, deciding to quit them is like losing a part of yourself. But sometimes the hate is just... so powerful” (“House of the Rising Son”).

This dynamic of love and hate is one that many fan fiction authors bring in to play in their Klaus/Rebekah fics. After *Brokeback Mountain*, the idea of “quitting” each other, which Rebekah invokes in “House of the Rising Son,” further eroticizes the tension between the two emotions, as well. Author nereid’s summary of “fuck me into open caskets (I wanna die with this)” reads simply: “This is their tragedy, a thousand years in the making.” In it, as Klaus pins Rebekah to the ground, she thinks: “He's looking at her, a million universes in his eyes and her breathing's hitched now and she hates how he can still do this to her” (nereid). The last two paragraphs of the fic also echo Rebekah’s explanation to Hayley in “House of the Rising Sun”:

*I hate you* she says then. (For good measure; because it's fitting; because she does and because she never really will. Because this is the only sort of answer she'll give to him like this; pinned on the floor beneath him, their blood on her lips and the smile of a wolf on his. But maybe he'll believe her for a second, and maybe then it'll hurt him as much as it sometimes hurts her. Maybe.)

Before his tongue finally meets her clit, he whispers into her skin, a secret that never really was. *No you don't. But you should.* (nereid)

In much the same way, Elijah and Klaus’s interaction in hithelleth’s “Each of Us is Broken, Always and Forever,” while not as despairing and ending on a more hopeful note, still
plays with the dynamic, circling back around to Klaus’s desperate need for his siblings touched on in forcynics “not with a bang, but with a whisper,” above:

“Niklaus.” He [Elijah] pauses, his eyes boring into yours. “This is it. You and I.” He motions between the two of you to emphasise his words. “No betrayals this time, no backstabbing. We’ll take this city back. For us. For our sister. For our family.”

Nothing either of you haven’t said before. Always meant it. So many times dishonoured it like a bunch of lies.

And yet you don’t break the gaze.

“For our family,” you echo. “Brother.” Elijah opens his arms, so you can step closer, so he can crush you in them – though he just holds you tight; so you can crumple against him – mentally, because physically you manage to simply hug him back. (hithelleth, “Each of Us Is Broken”)

The fic also echoes that knowledge of the taboo, and shame within breaking it:

Your cock, which grew hard during the earlier scene, strains against the fabric of your jeans, pressing into Elijah and you stiffen for a moment, expecting being inevitably shoved away, seeing disgust on Elijah’s face, although you know better than that from centuries of experience; but that deep engraved fear of wrongness, of rejection never fails to surface, let alone after everything that has happened in the last few days. After all you are… *a monster, an abomination, embarrassment... pathetic, burden...* (hithelleth, “Each of Us Is Broken”)

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After acknowledging the taboo, however, both fics above focus on the mutual consent in breaching it, making it clear that the siblings are choosing this and being offered that choice.

He makes a step back, keeping his hands on your shoulders, studying your face. It’s a courtesy he gives you, a choice, as if you need one, as if you ever needed one. You appreciate it, still, having control handed over. And you take it, slamming Elijah into the opposite wall, crushing his mouth with yours, because it’s been too long. (hithelleth "Each of Us is Broken")

(She could get away if she wanted to, she knows this. She wouldn't even have to break a sweat. But this is her choice as much as it's his and it's almost kind of him to hold her down at least for a part of it, pretend he's the one making her stay. He pretends to take away her options and that should serve to take away the blame she feels as well. She guesses she'd be more grateful if it actually worked.) (nereid)

The Question of Resistance

Plausible or not, faithfully rendered to characters’ psyches or not, the question of whether these fics are resistant to heteronormativity remains. Undoubtedly, they transgress those norms, which some argue makes them resistant. However, transgression, subversion and resistance may intertwine, but are not always synonymous (though they are sometimes used that way). Foucault defines resistance as “engag[ing] in a cultural politics of inventive, progressive and counter-normative practices” (Foucault, “History and Homosexuality” 370). Transgressive acts are those which violate cultural norms and could work to alter the social order, but the political link inherent in resistance is less inherent in transgression: people may transgress social norms solely for the thrill and pleasure of such transgression in and of itself (Leonard and Lugo-Lugo 96–97).
In *Incest and the English Novel*, Ellen Pollak disagrees with the common reading of incestuous texts that automatically equate incest and resistance or liberation (64). The hero in Aphra Behn’s *Love Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister* tries to convince his sister to sleep with him by arguing that engaging in incest rises from a “liberatory ethos” that allows the lovers to throw off social constraints for original, natural pleasures (Pollak 63). Many scholars have read the novel as innately subversive, but Pollak argues that this concept needs to be carefully examined, because how one reads the text is integral for “a feminist analysis of narrative representations of incestuous desire, especially for efforts to theorize the role of incest in modern discursive inscriptions of female desire” (64). Instead of reading incest as being universally liberatory, Pollak insists that its subversive nature depends on gender and differs for male and female characters (64). Ultimately, the sister’s agency does not come from her incestuous desire; instead, her desire has been coopted by the intersection of patriarchy and individualism, and she functions as the site where paternal and fraternal desires collide (Pollak 65). Her brother seeks to use her to thwart the father, and she becomes just a representation in the “male homosocial matrix of desire,” not a person but “a sign within a drama of masculine rivalry” (Pollak 65). Only when she recognizes this and walks away from both men does she take control of her own desire and agency (Pollak 66). In this sense, then, incest can challenge the prerogative of patriarchy, but not masculine privilege itself.

That the concerns about the liberatory potential of fictional incest seem to rest on gender makes sense given the taboo arises out of necessity in establishing institutionalized heterosexuality. Tosenberger argues that the subversive potential in Wincest (Sam/Dean Winchester) fics lies not in the fact that they depict homoerotic incest, but that they offer Sam and Dean a joy *Supernatural* denies them, one which “defies all codes of normative sexuality,
but has a profound depth and intimacy that epitomizes the ideals of romantic love” (5.12). Thus, the taboo itself is not broken for titillation, but seen as an obstacle to overcome for fulfillment, similar to the “obstacle” of same-sex desire between presumptively heterosexual characters in previous chapters. “Fans take the discourse of sibling incest in capital-R Romanticism and combine it with the discourse of love of the lowercase-r romance novel” (Tosenberger 5.9).

While the characters on The Vampire Diaries and The Originals have more constant love interests than Sam and Dean, they are nonetheless insecure by the nature of serial television: no one gets to live happily ever after until the series ends. Their canonical love stories are usually fraught with loss and angst; their shelter from the storm remains their families. However, fewer fics with the Mikaelsons and Salvatores have the happy endings Tosenberger argues are the true subversiveness of Wincest fics (5.12).

Further, a haunting element emerges, in the fics surrounding both the Mikaelson and Salvatore brothers, especially, of lack, emptiness. Where the Winchesters and the members of the bromances in chapter 2 find their sense of completion in one another, the Mikaelsons and Salvatores are more often presented as broken—clinging to one another, surviving with one another, but not necessarily healed by the love between them. Given that most pairing-centered fan fiction does draw from the romance genre, and the heteronormative expectation is fulfillment, these fics defy that, arguably indicating that love outside of that ideal is lacking. On the other hand, rejecting the happily-ever-narrative could function as a pushback against the unrealistic expectations set up for those indoctrinated into institutionalized heteronormativity by pervasive fairytales, something I address in further detail in the next chapter (Kies 312).
For male characters, then, incest may be resistant and can potentially subvert heteronormativity. However, the same cannot automatically be said for female characters, at least in heterosexual sibling relationships. Like Aphra Behn’s Silvia, Rebekah remains a signifier for masculine rivalry, both in canon and in fan fiction. Given that her relationship with Klaus is more than a little covertly incestuous within the source text, that the dynamics change little through adding sex is no surprise. While Rebekah’s consent is clear through “fuck me into open caskets,” the incest is also presented as a game, one in which Klaus is dominant: “He has to step up his game, and then eventually she loses. She knows this by now. It always plays out the same, she knows every note of this melody by now, the G major of his grins and the C minor of her defiant smiles. She still plays along.” Likewise, in “not with a bang, but a whisper,” where Klaus daggers Rebekah, his possessiveness shows as he thinks:

[She] who was never supposed to end up like this, who was never supposed to damn herself and both of them, who was never, never, never supposed to fall in love with Stefan Salvatore – never supposed to fall in love with anyone. She’s fading in his arms – the staggered half-embrace by which he caught her – but he can still hear her in his head, telling him she chose Stefan, chose wrong. (forcynics)

Even in fic where Rebekah has a happier encounter, tries to take something for herself, her position as caught up in the fraternal, masculine rivalry infects the fic. For example, agirlnamedtruth’s “An Eternity (Hoping to Learn)” features Rebekah and Elijah finally admitting they want one another and having sex. But Klaus hangs over it like a shadow from beginning to the end:
"Elijah, had I known..." she started wistfully before shaking her head. “No, I will not start this with regrets. What I should have said is - Elijah, I want you too."

"I do hope you'll forgive me if I'm being presumptuous but I had rather hoped that was the case. What with..." He flicked his eyes upwards, unable to stop himself grinning a touch smugly. He'd got everything he'd ever wanted, after all, and made Rebekah happy at the same time. He was allowed to be happy himself. For a moment, at least. Until Niklaus returned home and daggered them both for finding a moment of peace without him. (agirlnamedtruth)

Rather than subverting or even resisting patriarchal norms, fic which places Rebekah in an incestuous relationship with any of her brothers often not only reinforces them, but rises up from the necessity of the taboo itself. Rebekah does not just fail to find an exogamous relationship (though canonically, that is all she has ever wanted), her brother(s) deliberately refuse to exchange her, keeping her for himself (themselves). Since Rebekah in the fics eagerly consents to the incest, and is a 1000-year-old vampire with all the strength that comes with that, authors can lessen the specter of abuse, somewhat, but the situational factors tend to keep the fics from being a subversive or resistant celebration of love, as well. If anything, they tend to reinforce institutionalized heterosexuality and heteronormativity.

**Fathers and Daughters**

Twitchell argues that while Romantics were eager to “play out the fictional possibilities of once repressed brother-sister fantasies, when the subject of parent-child incest arises, even in literature, a greater sense of hesitation emerges, sometimes even sliding into horror, as in the Gothic” (102). The 18th century Gothic genre repeatedly shows that father-daughter incest
damages the family and can even destroy it if the father’s actions are not curbed in time; indeed, even in the 18th century Gothic novel, the father-daughter incest was sometimes “so upsetting to contemplate” that authors displaced the father’s role onto the uncle instead (Twitchell 152).28

Jane Ford agrees, arguing that brother-sister incest is “traditionally regarded as the least reprehensible,” which is why it is more overtly represented in literature, while overt father-daughter incest “more frequently than not constitutes an abuse of power” (3).

However, the horror at father-daughter incest attaches mostly to overt incest, the actual acknowledgement of sexual desire, or the acting upon it. Covert incest, otherwise known as emotional incest, on the other hand, serves as the foundation for heterosexual desire: a girl’s relationship with her father constructs female heterosexuality and desire (Gonda xv; Zwinger 9). More specifically, the father-daughter relationship, or, more aptly, the father-daughter romance, lies at the heart of institutional heterosexuality, heteronormativity and patriarchal power (Zwinger 118). Marriage rites themselves demonstrate this:

“The very fact that culture has needed to impose a taboo to ensure an exogamous exchange of its daughters and the fact that it has evolved a ritual of husband-wife marriage that is primarily a father-daughter separation rite both suggest that the father-daughter relationship has no effective internal mechanisms for negotiating its dissolution.” (Delaney 35)

As such, while depictions of overt incest might be rare, the covert father-daughter romance structures a great deal of Western literature, and underlies almost all traditional romance narratives.

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28 This displacement, along with the fact that the source text first positions Miles and Charlie as uncle and niece, then only at the end reveals they are father and daughter is why I evaluate them under that rubric.
Even when a girl has only one suitor, a love triangle between father, daughter and suitor often structures these narratives. In *Patriarchy and Incest*, Jane Ford claims: “all literature treating conflict within the father/daughter/suitor triad can be considered to have the incest theme as its subtext. The relationships and attitudes of both father and daughter prior to resolution are related to the threat of incest or its avoidance” (33). Examining the 21 Shakespearean plays with a father/daughter/suitor triangle at their core, Ford argues that they usually resolve themselves in one of three ways: (1) the father lets his daughter go reluctantly, usually due to some outside authority; (2) the father keeps his daughter for himself; or (3) in order to avoid incest, the father goes out and finds her a suitor (33). The avoidance of incest, refusing to indulge in the desire that the narrative necessitates, allows the father to appear innocent, but, in fact, constitutes the “most powerful paternal act of all” (Zwinger 9).

*Transgressing the Taboo*

As discussed above, the large majority of incestuous fan fiction takes some pains to address the question of the taboo, however briefly, before justifying breaking it. Often, characters wrestle with the moral dilemmas involved, as well, including acknowledging the potential for abuse. This arises far more often in these cross-generational relationships than those of siblings. Indeed, while many fics in both types of relationships go on to have them break the taboo, others stop with the attraction and one or both of the characters’ angst around it, and this, too, is seen more often in cross-generational relationships than those between the siblings. This is particularly prevalent in Miles/Charlie fics, many of which explore the psychodynamics that can lead to sexual attraction, even obsession, while not physically violating the taboo.
Not “Really” Family

Revolution fans who write Miles and Charlie as sexually attracted to one another (whether or not they act on it) tend to use the fact that they do not have a familial relationship for nearly two decades to explain the incestuous interpretation of their relationship. Canonically, when they meet in the pilot episode, Miles has not seen Charlie since she was four or five years old. He has no idea who she is when she walks into his bar in Chicago; she’s just a pretty, young blonde in tight pants and a low-cut, midriff top. She does not recognize him either: in fact, Miles pretends to be someone else for the first part of the conversation, denying he even knows “Miles Matheson.” For fans who ship Miles/Charlie, the possible frisson of that moment of not-knowing sparks the characters’ incestuous desire.

“Wild Wanting” offers that moment from Charlie’s perspective, demonstrating how attraction can flare before realization sets in:

Before she even knew who he was she recognized his strength. The way he hid behind quips, but his stance was guarded and aware. For a moment she imagined possibilities with this man that she had never given into before, Nate being the half hearted [sic] exception, this man knew what it was like to lose someone. This man she wouldn’t need to protect. And for that moment she asked the world for a selfish wish. The world answered in a cruel joke. (blueberryocean)

In “Rules Made to Order,” Miles has much the same thought: “It’s bitter here in the Black – inside and out – the frigidity of January punching through and joining hands with the acrimony welling up from his soul. He’s angry at the world, goddammit, childish as it sounds, because why bring him this perfect creature and then make her his fucking niece?” (buttercups3, “Rules”)
Similarly, Miles resists his attraction to Charlie in hihelleth’s “Second Worst,” berating himself for it: “It started with a spark of lust when she walked into your joint in Chicago with that sweet innocent face, before she said who she was. Your niece. Your daughter, maybe. Yeah, you are not that bad at Math” (hihelleth, “Second Worst”).

After the initial attraction, the fics continue to use this lack of an established pattern of familial feeling and behavior as a reason that Miles and Charlie are drawn together, even after knowing of their blood relationship. For example, after beginning an affair with both Charlie and Bass in Corycides’ “In These Times of Tyranny,” Miles tries to explain his attraction to Charlie to himself:

He'd never really thought of her as his niece, he admitted to himself. Family, yes. Blood though? In his mind his niece was forever that skinny little four year old that chewed the collars of tops slobbery and hadn't picked up yet that girls weren't meant to find farts funny. She was dead and memorialised. (Corycides, “In These Times of Tyranny”)

Another time, he uses their lack of a familial past, of a shared history, to defend their relationship when Rachel finds out about it:

“She's your niece Miles.” Rachel's arms fell to her to her sides her hands curling into fists.

Miles shrugged. “Not really. I mean yes DNA wise yes, we are uncle and niece but relationship wise not really, I didn't even know who she was until two years ago. The last time I saw her before that she was what, four, hardly makes me family.” (ShyRomantic, “Whoops”)
As I explored at the beginning of this chapter, the revelation that Miles is Charlie’s father shifts the discourse of guilt some, for the few authors who choose to go there, as it were. Corycides’ “A Good Lie is Better Than The Truth,” has Miles offering up a token protest due to the revelation of their actual relationship, which Charlie dismisses. While the fic reveals they had a previous sexual relationship, this is the first time since Rachel told them they were father and daughter. The first time they have sex in the fic, Miles has amnesia, and the fic does not address Miles’ thoughts and feelings about their previous incest, but when his memory returns, he feels guilty. She tries to relieve him of the guilt by once again distancing their relationship, claiming that their lack of a father-daughter relationship negates the biological facts. In the absence of feeling like family, then, it seems easier to dismiss the taboo as almost inapplicable:

‘You’re not dirty, Miles.’

‘This is,’ he said. ‘You...you’re my kid....’

‘I’m my Dad’s kid,’ Charlie said. ‘He raised me. I don’t care what Mom pulled out of her ass at the last minute.’ (Corycides, “A Good Lie”)

Steph_Schell’s “The Needs of the Father,” previously mentioned, has Miles still acknowledging the wrongness of the relationship, but with far less guilt and more acceptance of himself:

Being Charlie's father changed exactly nothing. He wished it did. He wished that piece of information put him firmly back on the straight and narrow. But Miles had never been very good at walk a straight path...The only thing being her father changed was the magnitude of his sin. He was now a father fucking his daughter instead of an uncle
fucking his niece. But incest was incest either way so it's not as though the labels really matter when it came down to it. (Steph_Schell, “The Needs Of The Father”)

While Miles does try to end it (“He told Charlie they couldn't keep going like this. It was wrong. Even more than before. They had to stop before it got out of control”), he ultimately gives in when she turns reckless and self-destructive in frustration at his denial, and the fic ends with him shrugging off any lingering issues: “Oh yeah, he was going to hell. But he was going to enjoy every second of the ride” (Steph_Schell, “The Needs Of The Father”). Charlie’s love, desire and consent allow Miles, and the reader, to enjoy the relationship and the fic. However, the very ability to consent is the issue at the heart of the criticisms that incestuous fan fiction romanticizes abuse.

**Issues of Consent**

If the emotional ramifications of consent, of choosing something that they know could be, or is, wrong, arises in the fics between siblings, fan narratives exploring cross-generational incestuous relationships explore it more consistently. Miles and Charlie’s attraction may be explicable, psychologically, but acting on it still not only violates the taboo as a taboo, but has the potential to be damaging, especially for Charlie. Thus, more than fics involving incest between centuries-old vampires, a Miles/Charlie romance raises the specter of abuse and questions about the nature of consent and the ability, especially of young women with powerful men, to do so. Whether “consensual incest” even exists between siblings may be a matter of some debate, but that debate is especially contentious in regard to in cross-generational relationships. Some scholars and critics argue that young women in Charlie’s position explicitly cannot consent: if they say they have, it is meaningless due to the internalized coercion that
arises from the way Western culture shapes sex and violence (MacKinnon 484–485; Real; Hakvåg 121–122). The problem with this argument, especially as applied to fiction, is that for many, this internalized coercion affects almost all relationships, especially heterosexual ones. One of the most long-lasting explanations for why fans write slash is that it arises from a difficulty imagining a heterosexual relationship between equals, due to the power imbalances between genders in our culture (Scodari 113–114). At the same time, a great deal of fan fiction explicitly chooses to explore those power imbalances and, more and more, involves explicit discussions about and negotiations of consent.

These passages in fan fiction explicating the level of consent from all characters, point toward a community aware of the ongoing cultural discussions surrounding consent. Especially in cases where the larger society might question the authenticity of consent, the fics strive all the harder to show that the consent is real. Much of Charlie/Miles fic reflects an awareness of, and an impatience with, what Gayle Rubin termed “the brainwash theory”—the belief that “some sexual acts are so disgusting that no one would willingly perform them…therefore…anyone who does so must have been fooled or forced” (“Thinking Sex” 168–169). Instead, the fics seem to insist that denigrating a woman’s ability to freely consent is an “implicit system of ideological condescension” (Rubin, “Thinking Sex” 167). Both in the source text and fan fics, Charlie Matheson is a young woman with a mind of her own, determined to succeed against often overwhelming odds. When dealing with whether or not she genuinely desires Miles in fan fics, this independence comes through.

When Miles asks Charlie for seemingly the millionth time if she’s sure in “In These Times of Tyranny,” Charlie rolls her eyes and orders him to “[s]top asking” because she has “a
militia outside if I yell” (Corycides, “In These Times of Tyranny”). Similarly, in “What the Water Gave Me,” when Miles implies that Charlie is too young to really know what she wants, she snaps:

“And you think I don’t know what I want? Since when have you ever been able to make me do something I didn’t want to do?” She glares up at him, and try as he might, Miles can’t think of a response. (orphan_account, “What the Water Gave Me”)

To mollify concerns about Charlie’s potential victimization, and actively try to negate readings of Miles as a sexual predator, this focus on Charlie’s consent and genuine desire makes sense. Thus, more often than not, Charlie initiates the relationship and, when Miles inevitably has moral qualms, actively reassures him, and, by extension, the reader, that she wants, or even needs, this. In fact, many Miles/Charlie fics go beyond her consent and initiating contact to show it is her fantasy, as much as his. In faetlrae’s “Si vis pacem, para bellem,” for instance, Charlie thinks about her wanting Miles downright defiantly:

She does not know exactly what got her gut, and quite frankly her groin, going for him—maybe it is the way he asserts himself as a leader and fighter, or her own fetish of the exotic—but damn it she aches for him. And she is sick of all the biological conjecture in this yet unredeemed society in which he has only truly existed for a few months to her, and, equally, she is tired of the awkwardly spaced distance he has been placing between the two of them.

Because, truthfully, Miles Matheson turns her the-fuck on.

She will not apologize for it. (faetlrae, “Si Vis Pacem, Para Bellum”)

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Even when Charlie is less certain of how to deal with her attraction to her uncle and more constrained by taboo, the fan fics still work to demonstrate that said confused attraction is nonetheless real. “Scattered Pieces of Who I Am” by angelette, which develops into a threesome fic with Bass,\textsuperscript{29} begins with Charlie’s attraction to Miles:

\begin{quote}
Miles does something that surprises her, he leans forward, touches his forehead to hers, and only just the sheer closeness of him thrills her. She would, of course, deny if anyone asks her, but her body doesn’t react to Miles as it should. It’s all catching breath, galloping heartbeat and butterflies in the stomach. None of this should feel so good, when it’s so wrong, and Charlie has to push away the thoughts about her parents, because they sure would be ashamed. (angelette, italics in original)
\end{quote}

Conversely, orphan\_account’s “What the Water Gave Me” is told mostly from Miles’ point of view, exploring his doubt and self-castigation and his attempts to evade crossing the line with Charlie despite his growing attraction. The fic begins with his denial, while showing it for the lie it is:

He cares about Charlie, sure, but only in the way that any uncle would care about his niece. It’s perfectly natural to feel protective of her, to want to keep her safe, to feel the urge to beat every man who touches her into a bloody pulp. And if his eyes linger too long on her body every now and then, if her smiles occasionally take his breath away, if their touches sometimes last longer than is strictly necessary – well. It’s nobody’s business but his. (orphan\_account, “What the Water Gave Me”)

When he gives in to acknowledging his attraction is sexual, he also acknowledges the taboo:

\footnotesize
\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{29} A triad I explore further in the next chapter
\end{flushright}
That night, long after Charlie’s breaths have become slow and even, Miles gives in and reaches into his pants. He tries to think of Nora, Maggie, anyone else, but all he can see is Charlie, her slim but powerful body moving through the air, her muscles working under her clothes as she fights, kills, spills blood, all for him. When he comes, biting down on his fist to stop himself from saying Charlie’s name, all he can think is, *This is the most messed up thing I’ve ever done.* (orphan_account, “What the Water Gave Me”)

Only then does the fic move on to Charlie’s vehement declaration of desire and consent. The relationship does not take the step across the line from fantasy to reality until Charlie makes a move and convinces him she wants him, too, and justifies their breaking the taboo:

“Look,” she continues, “maybe it’s wrong, maybe it’s messed up, but in case you haven’t noticed, this entire world is pretty messed up to begin with. We could have died back there. We could die tomorrow, for all I know. So if we both want this…” Her hand trails down Miles’s stomach and brushes against his dick, which has been half-hard since the first kiss. He hisses out a breath, and she grins smugly. “Then why can’t we just take it?” (orphan_account, “What the Water Gave Me”)

She could be asking the question as much to readers and critics as to Miles.

The first chapter of Corycides’ “All Our Woe” similarly seems like a pre-emptive response to critics and reassurance to readers that they can set aside any doubts or worries for Charlie and enjoy where the fic is going. Charlie takes the initiative here, again, surprising Miles with a kiss, which proves to be the start of a planned seduction:

'Charlie,' he said. 'What are you doing.' [sic]
'Kissing you,' she said, mock-patiently. 'If you can't tell, it must have been a long time.'

The key, she decided, was just to go for it. Be upfront. She pulled her t-shirt over her head, her thick hair tumbling around her face, and dropped it to the floor. (Corycides, “All Our Woes”)

However, Miles continues to resist, offering up the protests and arguments required by what Rubin terms the “ideological condescension” that questions a woman’s ability to consent. He first reminds her of their blood relation. She doesn’t care. Then he attempts to tell her “this isn’t you.” “Like you know me so well,” is her somewhat scathing response. When he tells her it isn’t a good idea, she tells him she doesn’t care, again. He tells her she’s a kid; she reminds him she’s an adult and that he’s taught her to think things through, which she has done in regard to this. When he attempts to pull other people’s opinions into it, asking what her mom would think, Charlie responds:

“I don’t know…Maybe, ‘Wow, I guess being abandoned as a ten year old to take care of your little brother, has consequences? Who’d have thought it.’”? Or maybe, “Well, I guess breaking the world changes the social norms?” [sic] Something like that. Thing is, I don’t care. I can keep saying that all night.” (Corycides, “All Our Woes”)

When Charlie insists that she wants this, Miles’ response echoes the brainwash theory: “No, you don’t. You just think you do.” Charlie shoots that one down, too. Miles’ last ditch effort—and by this time Charlie’s lost all her clothes and got his half undone, as well—is, “But
I—WE—shouldn’t. Ben trusted me to keep you safe.” And Charlie brings it right back around to love:

“And you have,” Charlie said, stroking his cheek. “You saved Danny. You saved me - a 100 times over. Why do you think I love you?” (Corycides, “All Our Woes”).

Miles finally gives in and the fic settles into unapologetic smut, issues of Charlie’s ability to consent seemingly settled.

Discourse of Forbidden Love

Beyond establishing Charlie’s consent and Miles’ struggles with his conscience, writers strive to normalize the ship the same way they do those of the siblings: by drawing heavily upon the discourse of forbidden love, of mutual need that neither party can resist. Like both sets of those siblings, Miles and Charlie may try to resist, but doing so leaves them miserable. Like the narratives surrounding the siblings, as well, Miles and Charlie’s incest often is held up in contrast to the bleak, deadly world they inhabit: next to the horrors the characters go through in the source text, consensual incest just does not seem so bad (Tosenberger 5.1). Finding love in such a world seems more a thing to be cherished rather than condemned.

For example, “The Space Between Us” by buttercups3 offers Charlie’s perspective on the issue of right and wrong, and her need for Miles, especially in dire circumstances:

But right now, after Miles came so close to dying and is sitting there - eyes crinkling at her, irises mud through a sunlight window, body deflated - he looks so sexy and weary, and she just wants him again. How wrong it is really bothers him – her less so. The
conventions of society mean so very little to her. Her world is winding down. Soon she’ll be dust under the heels of the Patriots. And if this is the last opportunity to touch the man she loves and admires most on this earth, then she’ll claim that final scrap of joy for herself. (buttercups3, “The Space Between Us”)

ShyRomantic’s “Three Times” echoes the tone of “The Space Between Us,” as Miles and Charlie’s relationship shifts after she is almost killed and Miles realizes he cannot bear to lose her:

> It seemed to take tragedies and fear to make him realize how much he needed her, but this was the last time he was going to let her just slip away to arms length again. He pulled her to her feet and held her for a moment longer before he let her go and urged her to run.

> It was in those moments when he realized he loved her, he loved her more then she should but he was already going to hell so why bother stopping now. It was in those moments that she realized that she loved him, she knew it was wrong, but she was alright with it if he was damn anyone else. (ShyRomantic, “Three Times”)

In hithelleth’s “Second Worst,” Miles struggles with his desire for Charlie, but hithelleth frames it as love. Because of that love, rather than lust, after Miles acknowledges that Charlie could be his daughter (excerpt earlier in chapter), he contemplates his perceived wrongness of his love, and refuses to act on it. He concludes, “It would be easier if it was just lust. (Easier to be a monster, to succumb to it.)” (hithelleth, “Second Worst”). The distinction hithelleth draws is clear—men who would act on lust for their nieces or daughters do not do so out of love. At the
same time, though, her text offers an ambiguous reading, as both Miles and Charlie are left miserable by Miles’ refusal to act, both of them settling for “second worst”—him for Rachel, her for Connor (or Bass). The conclusion the fic seems to offer is that, for each other, because of the taboo, their relationship would be the worst possible thing, but the word “settling,” as applied to their “appropriate” relationships, implies that their inappropriate relationship would also be the best.

Other fics where the characters successfully resist temptation seem to send this message, as well. There is no reward in refusing temptation in Miles/Charlie fics, no happily ever after with someone else. Like hithelleth’s “Second Worst,” JaqofSpades’ “Blood to blood,” walks through the internal angst of denied desire, this time Charlie’s:

Matheson blood, she thinks, and reaches up to stroke the red swell of his busted lip.

Were her cells singing out to his? Did they recognise each other? Was it written in their DNA, that hateful reminder of how fucked up fate can be?

He jerks his chin away and she’s reminded once more. Uncle and niece. Mentor and protégé. Badass and … badass in training.

Not this. (JaqofSpades, “Blood to Blood”)

Moving back and forth between the events in the fic—Charlie is wounded, Miles takes care of her—to Charlie’s thoughts on Miles and their shared blood and a very explicit sex dream about him, the fic shows the toll that hiding how she feels is taking on Charlie. The fic concludes with her assessment of the tension between them and inability to act: “Matheson blood. Their mutual curse” (JaqofSpades, “Blood to Blood”). By denying the pull of forbidden love, then, both
characters are denying finding completion with their soulmates, the fics suggest. This turns the father/daughter romance on its head: to find true love, the daughter is supposed to leave the father, but when Charlie leaves Miles, she usually only finds loneliness.

Transgressive, Resistant or Subversive?

Charlie and Miles in a consensual sexual relationship is clearly transgressive of the socio-sexual norms of those who read and write the fics. However, as with Rebekah, the question remains of whether Charlie’s desire and participation is subversive or merely reinscribing masculine privilege. In most literature with the specter of father-daughter incest within it, the incestuous desire generally comes from the father, not the daughter. The father-daughter romance, after all, forms the core of much that upholds institutional heterosexuality, from purity balls and being Daddy’s girl to the “final” father-daughter dance after he “gives her away” to another man. The fantasy of the young girl (a daughter figure) who desires an older man, and seduces him, taking away his responsibility for the action—the Lolita fantasy—is one mostly associated with older, heterosexual males (Plummer 39). Deborah Tolman argues that sexual agency itself has been objectified with “representations of desiring women” produced to induce male desire (751). Even in rare literature, when a girl reciprocates her fathers’ desire, more often it seems like a justification for the father’s desire and an attempt to victim blame the daughter or the daughters’ internalized need for masculine approval (Ford 14).

To suggest otherwise—that such desire could be genuine and found within the daughter—can radically disrupt expectations, then, and this radical subversion of expectation shows up rarely in even Romantic literature, which shies away from overt father-daughter incest which is not thwarted. Many incest narratives rely on a narrator, as well, rather than giving the
female character a voice. However, in *Mathilda*, Mary Shelley breaks both of these conventions in a radical move within the genre of father-daughter incest fiction: the daughter both tells the story in first-person and returns her father’s desire (Delaney 31). Shelley’s father, William Godwin, refused to publish the novel or to even return it to her after he read it. Instead, he told a mutual acquaintance that it was “disgusting and detestable,” and if it were ever to be published should have a preface beforehand to reassure the reader that the heroine does not give in to such lust, so the reader would not be worried about it through the whole novel (Delaney 32). The idea of this preface seems quite similar to the lengths fan fic writers go to assure the reader of the parties’—but especially the female characters’—consent and genuine desire. The two differ mainly in their position regarding proper female sexuality and what readers need reassurance on: that a woman resists temptation (that she ought not even feel) and remains pure or that a woman knows her own mind and can freely consent to actions others might find deplorable.

All of this seemingly supports the assertion that Charlie’s desire merely serves to fulfill this heteronormative fantasy rather than subvert it, except for one thing. This is not commercially produced fiction; this is not written by or for men, but by and for women. Beyond being an example of porn by women, fan fiction also illustrates the ways in which romance and pornography inform and shape one another (Driscoll). Of course, these fan fiction writers may arguably have internalized masculine fantasies and are shaping their desires to meet those of men. Breaking sexual taboos is definitely a transgression, then, but can just as easily be one that is reactive rather than resistant, and one that can become a “force *against* social transformation” (Dymock 880). This form of transgression is an “inert form of sexual license” which offers readers the chance to engage in a thrilling liberatory experience which is nonetheless illusion and which ultimate reinscribes that liberty within heteronormativity (Dymock 881, 890). *50 Shades*
of Gray may function this way, for instance, especially when the series ends in marriage and babies and “curing” Christian of his need for sexual deviance (Dymock 887).

In the spaces between creation, reception and response, however, even a transgression meant for titillation can potentially serve a subversive purpose if it provokes intellectual speculation in the reader or functions to “confront, challenge and undermine notions of order and propriety by calling in an experience which rises beyond that of the limits imposed by convention and morality” (Messier 132). For writers like Georges Bataille, breaking sexual taboos necessarily blurs and challenges norms and conventions and upsets “arbitrary systems of meaning,” like social constructions (Messier 131). In this way, transgression is less a tool for cultural subversion or resistance of hegemony at large, but more personal; the erotics of transgression come not from pressing external boundaries, but internal ones (Dean 69). True, real world transgression is rare, but literature offers a vehicle to explore transgressive acts and experience, the chance to press against one’s own limits, at least in fantasy (Dean 73). The self becomes more implicated in transgressive literature, especially that of a sexual nature, such as pornography: what is a reader’s reaction to fics that break taboos? “Literary representation also has the capacity to bring us into contact with matters that otherwise would remain untouched, indeed, untouchable… Literature, like sex, is not always ‘safe.’ The risk of transgressive literature—that it may expose the self to extreme boundary violation—is the source of its erotic power” (Dean 77–78, emphasis mine). A reader comment on the Miles/Charlie fic that acknowledged Miles as her father demonstrates this well: “Soooooo wrong. But hot. I'll give you credit for hot. But, Miles, dude, no” (BeaRyan, “Comment on ‘The Needs of the Father’”). Transgressing the incest taboo, willingly, with a sexually empowered female who is not a victim may be an example of this inner subversion and confrontation.
In his book, *Lot’s Daughters: Sex, Redemption and Women’s Quest for Authority*, Robert Polhemus examines the Biblical story of Lot and his daughters in Genesis and demonstrates how it plays out in everyday social interactions between younger women and older men, even when not explicitly incestuous. The fantasy in *Lolita*, of the precocious daughter who seduces her father has its roots in the story of Lot, where, thinking they are the only people left in the world, Lot’s daughters get him drunk and have sex with him in order to preserve the human race (Polhemus 41). But for Polhemus, the “Lot complex,” is not just about the father’s power or the need to preserve patriarchal culture. Instead, he argues that because the force of the Lot myth arises from the daughters who take their father’s power, it has the power to transform patriarchal culture (5). Polhemus’ argument is not one of victim blaming, and he fully acknowledges the harm caused by that attitude. His aim is also not to justify father-daughter incest, by any means. Rather, he seeks to explicate how shifts in the gendered power dynamics shape history and ways in which “daughters” have struggled not to take their “father’s” power but rather assume his authority in shaping their own lives (Polhemus 389).

Reading and writing a sexual Miles/Charlie relationship through these lenses opens its subversive potential up. The focus on Charlie’s consent, written by women, for women, seems less like retelling the same-old patriarchal narrative. Miles doesn’t refuse to give Charlie up, as Klaus does Rebekah—Charlie refuses to leave, eschews her position as potential wife and mother for that of warrior and lover. Miles’ resistance to her overtures, in many ways, is institutionalized heterosexuality’s resistance to women embracing their own sexual power. Embracing the non-safe potential of literature to transgress, the fics and their detailed dismissal of the strictures of normative reasoning could function not just to reassure readers that Charlie is not a victim, but to challenge the construction of victimization that claims women are not able to
meaningfully consent to certain kinds of sex. The fics with Rebekah in them can be read in a more resistant way, as well. Yes, in many ways they replicate patriarchal power hierarchies and Klaus’s possessiveness is an extension of his masculine, fraternal privilege. However, the fics do not portray this as a good thing; rather, they clearly depict Rebekah as trapped by both societal structure and her own codependency. The fics brim with struggle, resistance and, yes, often the failure of that resistance, but in doing so they point out the inequity of the situation and shine a light on the flaws of both characters in a way that demonstrates the difficulty of breaking free of the power structures that constrain them. Thus, all the relationships in this chapter can conceivably be read within:

[T]he pornographic tradition embraced by the likes of the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille…deeply rooted in a philosophy which regards sexually graphic material as a means to confront, challenge and undermine notions of order and propriety by calling in an experience which rises beyond that of the limits imposed by convention and morality. (Messier 131–132)

Conclusion

Despite what critics claim, the fics in this chapter do not treat incest as a taboo to transgress for shock or fun: they are detailed and deep investigations into and reflections of characters’ motivations, needs, and searches for connection. As such, the fics challenge the reader’s comfort with internal boundaries; those who enjoy them and who are involved in fandom via social media face criticism and demonization and so must weigh that against their own enjoyment; writers publishing such fics openly, rather than sharing them privately, invite that criticism to fall on them specifically in the form of flames and other forms of cyberbullying (“By the Antis’ Logic...”). In doing so, fans of incest fic, some of them perhaps consciously,
align themselves not with heteronormativity but with a strain of feminism more congruent with queer theory in resisting not just normative boundaries but the “pressure toward homogenization within movements for social change” (“Notes and Letters”).
Chapter 5: Loving Them Both

“How many times a week can a couple have a threesome with the same guy before it becomes some sort of 3-way relationship?” (Texts From Last Night)

Introduction

The fan narratives in previous chapters have all engaged with the constructions of gender and sexuality within the source texts in ways that resisted or transgressed the norms of institutionalized heterosexuality to some extent. However, heteronormativity regulates more than one’s choice of partner, sexual acts and identity and does more than privilege heterosexuality. It does not operate “as a discrete and easily identifiable body of thought, of rules and regulations,” but, instead, informs myriad “practices, institutions, conceptual systems and social structures” (Sullivan 132). While these practices, systems and structures may seem contradictory at times, they uphold institutionalized heterosexuality as the “elemental form of human association…as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn’t exist” (Warner xxi). Aristotle declares the union between men and women necessary in The Politics, and Monique Wittig claims that “to live in society is to live in heterosexuality” (Wittig 40).

Heteronormativity operates as the “hegemony of normalization”; however, hegemony is always in flux, able to expand to allow for some change, usually by enfolding practices that were once outside the norm, so long as they conform to the values of the norm and privilege at least

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30 (Texts From Last Night, “#18184”)
some of what the hegemony privileges (Klesse, *Spectre of Promiscuity* 12, 139). While queering relationships may challenge the privileging of heterosexuality and challenging the incest taboo in certain ways may likewise challenge the power of the father, what many of the previous fan fics fail to challenge, and, in fact, reify, is the underlying relationship which heteronormativity privileges, no matter the gender, sex or relationship of the parties: the monogamous couple. This chapter analyzes those fics that instead embrace plurality and possibility and fluidity not just in gender and sex, but also in relationship configuration.

Many of the polyamorous relationships in this chapter combine dyads from the previous three, preserving those individual-level relationship dynamics, as well as the moments of resistance, subversion and transgression within them. Therefore, my analysis here begins to turn on how these relationships change when one or more partners join the dyad, especially given how authors construct many of those dyads as soulmates and two parts of a whole. The addition of a third (or fourth) partner allows flexibility not only for the characters, but also for the writers who resist the constraints of the OTP placed on them by expectations of monogamy. Thus, many of the popular triads in fan fiction coalesce from a combination of three different popular pairings: for instance, Miles/Bass/Charlie, the most popular triadic relationship in *Revolution* fan fiction, combines the three popular pairings of Miles/Bass, Miles/Charlie and Charlie/Bass.

Polyamorous relationships are not always triadic in the fan fiction; instead, they encompass many possibilities from multiple dyadic relationships conducted with openness and honesty between all partners to “polyamorous pack” fics that are highly popular in *Teen Wolf*, in which all the main characters are sexually intimate with all the others in various, shifting configurations. For the sake of keeping the project size manageable, I focus primarily on triads for the majority of the chapter, but incorporate some fics that include dual dyads without triadic
sexual relations, and some fics of the more consistently fluid configurations of characters. Some writers are not comfortable with incest, but still do not want to enforce a monogamous coupledom, and, ergo, allow the non-incestuous member the luxury of not having to choose. A fic in which the Miles/Bass and Bass/Charlie pairings coexist without Miles and Charlie engaging in sexual activity with each other is still polyamorous, after all, so long as Miles and Charlie know about and support Bass’s relationship with the other. Ultimately, I argue that the combination of moments of resistance from previous chapters with the rejection of monogamy create a space for polyamorous fan fiction to engage in subversive discourse that allows fan fiction as a genre to reignite its flagging reputation as a literature of subcultural resistance.

**Polyamorous Fan Fiction**

Fics where characters have multiple sexual partners are popular within some fandoms, though less so than more traditional pairing-centric fics. Some of these texts position the individuals as “truly” polyamorous (within the meaning of multiple romantic relationships, not just sex for sex’s sake); others coalesce around casual sexual encounters. Triads, however, more popularly known in fandom as “OT3” (“One True Threesome” as opposed to “OTP” – “One True Pairing”), seem to be the most prevalent form of polyamorous fan fiction. In one of the few academic inquiries into OT3s, Bridget Kies examines and explicates those arising from love triangles within the source text, reinforcing Sedgwick and Girard’s claims that bonds between rivals are as strong as those between beloveds. By combining elements of the heterosexual romance plot and the homoeroticism of the source text, fan fiction around triads has “the potential to queer characters and relationships in a way that calls into question dominant cultural values” (Kies 1.5).
Compulsory Monogamy

In the previous chapter, I connected the incest taboo to the exogamous exchange of women, “sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors,” and rights between men in order to form the “concrete systems of social relationships” which constitute the base of culture and social hierarchies (Rubin, “The Traffic in Women” 177). The fact that a man gives away his female kin implies a right to them which they do not have in themselves, creating an asymmetrical balance of power between the sexes and resulting in the constraint of female sexuality: what you give must still have value (Rubin, “The Traffic in Women” 183). Patriarchal societies generally operate under a system of patrilineal descent, and children are only “legitimate” if acknowledged by their father as such. Therefore, in order for a father to be sure that a child is his and so will carry on his lineage, that constraint on female sexuality requires women to be virgins upon marriage and monogamous thereafter (Stelboum 43). Thus, historically, the incest taboo and monogamy originated to serve the same purpose: the protection and expansion of male property and homosocial bonds.

Whatever societal advances have challenged power bases and disrupted the heterosexual imaginary, however, many ultimately reinforce and reproduce the ideology they are working to disrupt. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott remind us that feminism in the 1970s was not just critical of heterosexuality or marriage, but of monogamy itself as an institution (151). Yet, the concept of monogamy is still central to our general conception of marriage, even if historically, it has bound women more than men (Jackson and Scott 152). Some scholars have termed this normative process “mononormativity.”

“Mononormativity” encompasses the “relations of power that stem from the belief that the monogamous dyad is a natural, morally correct and essential aspect of relating and being
human” (Finn 124). It indelibly links to heteronormativity and often functions adversely to
women’s interests by privileging men and capitalism through “exclusivity, possessiveness and jealousy, all filtered through the rose-tinted lens of romance” (Robinson 144). Mononormativity allows the hegemonic force of institutionalized heterosexuality to continue to function with minor adjustments: society acknowledges same-sex relationships as legitimate, but the privileging of monogamy continues to structure our vision of the family in the vision of the “traditional” heterosexual ideal (Jackson and Scott 155). Ergo, the vision of the nuclear family and the laws that encode that vision may have expanded to let Jack and Jill have two mommies or two daddies, but the key word there is “two.” Christian Klesse contends that “[n]o cultural terrain, no identity category and no political project is located entirely beyond the terrain of (hetero)normative hegemony” (Klesse, Spectre of Promiscuity 13). Diane Richardson further argues that political “‘citizenship’ is itself a hegemonic form of sexual citizenship,” that requires assimilation in order to be granted the rights of a “legitimate” citizen (D. Richardson 65, 74). Instead of resisting the power structures which enforce institutional heterosexuality, then, those who were outside of it assimilate into it to access the power and privilege previously denied them, like the 1138 federal provisions through which the United States confers legal rights, privileges and benefits on married couples (“Defense of Marriage Act: Update to Prior Report”).

The privileging of monogamy does not just force the assimilation of queer relationships, but is also one of the norms that maintains institutionalized heterosexuality and “patriarchal power relations” within heterosexual relationships, as well (Farvid and Braun 362; Jackson and Scott). Beyond the fact that women are still often expected to do more of the emotional and sexual work of the relationship, monogamy also restricts the partners’ access to friends and other social networks and cuts off exploration of other types of sexualities and intimacies (Finn 133;
Farvid and Braun 362). I touched on the tension between friends and lovers in chapters 2 and 3, and how one reason that close friendships may be read as sexualized is because of the ways society privileges romantic and sexual relationships over platonic ones. The bromance and buddy movie ends in a heterosexual partnering; pop culture assumes female friends drift apart once they are in a romantic relationship. Coupledom itself is often positioned as necessary for happiness, as anyone who has ever been single at the holidays can tell you. People in monogamous relationships are often presumed to be more stable, more mature—one of the signs of “growing up” is being ready to “settle down,” and the expectation tied to that is that one settles down with someone else (Jackson and Scott 155; Farvid and Braun 361).

In “Thinking Sex,” Gayle Rubin argues that religious, psychiatric, popular and political discourses map out what counts as good sex/normal sexuality (sex which is “sanctifiable, safe, healthy, mature, legal and politically correct”) versus bad sex/damned or deviant sexuality (sex which is “the work of the devil, dangerous, psychopathological, infantile, or politically reprehensible”) (Ho 548; Rubin 152). Although several critics have pointed out that Rubin’s analysis fails to take into account intersectionality, her “charmed circle” hierarchy nevertheless captures a salient point in our analysis of Western, hegemonic sexuality and its representations (Ho 549).

At the top of the sexual hierarchy, which Rubin calls the “sexual value system,” the ideal form of sex is that which occurs at home between two married, monogamous opposite-sex partners of the same generation for the purpose of reproduction (Rubin, “Thinking Sex” 152). “Bad” sex can be any of the following: between people of the same-sex, between more than two people, between unmarried couples, casual, promiscuous, for fun not reproduction, prostitution, public sex, fetishistic, involving pornography, using sex toys or sex games, masturbatory, or
across generational lines (Rubin, “Thinking Sex” 152). These categories of “bad” sex are not completely stark, nor static. They fall along a continuum from “best” to “worst,” with the “good” sex as the best. In the 1980s, Rubin saw some forms of “bad” sex edging across the line into “good” sex (though not ideal), and I contend those forms have become mostly respectable in the intervening decades: masturbation, sex between cohabiting couples, and homosexual sex within a committed partnership (Rubin, “Thinking Sex” 152). The forms of sex at the bottom of Rubin’s hierarchy (sadomasochism, promiscuity—especially homosexual promiscuity, fetishism, transsexualism and “cross-generational encounters”) may not evoke the “unmodulated horror” they once did (at least in the wider cultural conversation), but they still carry more of a negative moral charge than the others (Rubin 153).

Recent research on hook-up culture confirms this impression. Panteá Farvid and Virginia Braun analyzed online texts about casual sex to see how people construct and position it. They discovered a set of rules and etiquette that were consistent across forums that insisted casual sex is not for everyone, can be risky and must not involve emotions (364). These articles are “pro-casual sex,” claiming any sex is better than celibacy, but uniformly positioned the practice as less fulfilling than the emotion and intimacy found in a committed relationship. Casual sex is not an acceptable lifestyle choice, except for the young; it only fills the gaps between relationships or keeps you satisfied when you don’t have time for a relationship (367–369). Most notably, the discussion of casual sex is highly gendered: women are most at risk, because they are prone to getting attached to their casual sex partners and romance is the biggest risk in casual sex; men in a “friends-with-benefits” situation are “lucky” to be getting long-term casual sex that women are “giving away” (367). The structure of the rules, the fact that so many have to be in place to continually warn people to not get emotionally attached, and the constant comparison with
monogamous, committed sex all demonstrate that, while casual sex might be permissible now, most still view it as unnatural, and monogamous, committed sex remains the ideal (369).

*The Potential for Polyamory*

Polyamory allows fans to explore what Henry Jenkins calls “unrealized possibilities” in the source material, much in the same way it offers another way for people to explore the possibilities for intimacy outside of marriage and monogamy (*Textual Poachers* 23). In the second-wave feminist endeavor to critique marriage and monogamy together, non-monogamy was both a personal and political challenge to the oppression of institutional heterosexuality (Jackson and Scott 151). For many, it was not just theory: “it also shaped the way we tried to live our lives” (Jackson and Scott 152). From the 1980s on, though, both people and politics seemed to retreat from non-monogamy in the backlash from the sexual revolution and the start of the AIDS epidemic to what one scholar called a “somewhat ‘inevitable’ slide away from casual sex to sex within relationships” (Robinson 154). At least one school of proponents of non-monogamy, however, then and now, argue that, despite dominant discourses surrounding it, non-monogamy is not automatically synonymous with promiscuity and casual sex (Robinson 154; Jackson and Scott 154; Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” 310; Sheff 253; Klesse, *Spectre of Promiscuity* 103; Klesse, “Polyamory and Its ‘Others’” 571; Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse 524). Instead, the focus rests on polyamory, situated as “responsible non-monogamy” and distinct from swinging and casual sex (Klesse, “Polyamory and Its ‘Others’” 571).

In theory, polyamory can cover a wide range of sexual and relational practices, because the word has no set definition. It’s a “manufactured” word, made up of the Greek “poly” (meaning “many”) and Latin “amor” (meaning love), and thus translates to “many loves,” but what, practically, having “many loves” means is contested both within and without the
polyamorous community (Klesse, “Polyamory and Its ‘Others’” 567). However, most dictionaries—which are those in a “position to have a greater impact on lay understanding”—define “polyamory” as a philosophy or state of being in more than one close, emotional, romantic or sexual relationship at a time, “with the knowledge and consent of all partners concerned” (OED; Merriam Webster; “Polyamory | Define Polyamory at Dictionary.com”; Burris 258). This focus on love is critical to many polyamorists who stress it and the possibility of multiple, intensely intimate relationships, sexual or otherwise (Klesse, “Polyamory and Its ‘Others’” 568–569). While some critics argue against this focus on love, claiming that the idea of “true love” itself serves little purpose other than to constrain women’s sexuality, many proponents of polyamory see far more transgressive and resistant potential in breaking the prescribed dyadic form of love and expanding the romantic narrative without demonizing love and intimacy:

If the primacy of the couple ceased to be recognized, it would be difficult to maintain the forms of privilege that accrue to heterosexuality. If sexual relationships were de-prioritized as the basis for our most meaningful social ties and if they were not exclusive, then one’s sexual choices might come to be of less pervasive social significance. Heterosexuality would then lose its privileged, institutionalized status and non-sexual friendships would no longer be regarded as intrinsically less significant than sexual ones. (Jackson and Scott 155)

While mainstream culture does give a nod to this privilege, especially in the bromance, by referring to close friends (especially those deemed maybe “too” close) as “heterosexual life partners,” the semantic nod still rarely acknowledges the true depth or equality of those relationships as compared to sexual ones in a mononormative society. Polyamory does; in fact, it
relishes these ambiguities in definition between “friend,” “partner” and “lover” (Klesse, “Polyamory and Its ‘Others’” 570). A large part of this comes from recognizing that different people meet different needs, so where monogamy primes people to depend solely on one person to meet all of their needs, polyamory allows them to find multiple partners capable of meeting different needs, or offering a different kind of relationship.

Given the focus on romance, most polyamorous fan fiction does not question the value of intimacy, or seek to challenge the importance of romance, but rather embraces this ideal of “many loves” and how it can take many forms. For instance, in missfeministfangirl’s “The Love of an Orchestra,” a polyamorous pack fic from Teen Wolf, Isaac finds himself in intimate relationships with each member of the pack. Many of these are sexual, but the non-sexual ones are still clearly love relationships. Most the fic involves detailing Isaac’s relationship with the others, and what need they meet for him. He and Stiles “fuck casually” and snark at one another; he submits to Derek as his alpha and Lydia because she lets him worship her (missfeministfangirl, “The Love of an Orchestra”). With Scott and Allison, he feels cared for and allowed to care in return and “[w]ith them it’s tender and slow, it’s lovemaking, full of sweet whispers, blushes and soft sighs.” He and Danny mostly just cuddle; he and Boyd are like brothers; Cora is his mirror and his comfort—“[t]hey take long walks in the woods, holding hands and not saying anything, being alone without being lonely” (missfeministfangirl, “The Love of an Orchestra”). Notably, missfeministfangirl tagged the fic by making the relationships equal, as well: Isaac does not have sex with either Boyd or Cora, but the tags are still “Boyd/Isaac” and “Cora/Isaac” indicating a romantic rather than platonic intent.
By contrast, Hayley’s multiple relationships in “Your Throat in One Hand, Your Heart in the Other” are all sexual. However, her ruminations on her different attachments come from emotion and each sibling speaking to a different part of her:

She feels differently about all of them, of course. They’re different people; trying to love them in the same way would be as outrageous as trying to make them behave in the same way…Her affection for Klaus is dark, buried in the bottom of her heart, pounding loudly through her system with each beat…Elijah is a noble sort of love; it's the one she read about in fairytales when she was young and wanted nothing more than to be saved - from the world, from herself - but refused to admit it…Rebekah is the sort of puppy love crush she remembers from highschool; only tenfold. (ajarofgoodthings)

Likewise, Elena’s realization that a triadic relationship could be possible in “The Analogy of the Three-Legged Stool” also comes out of this sense that having more than one person there makes everyone more stable. Trying to work out how to deal with Damon loving both her and Alaric, she muses: “There’s something about three,’ she said at last. ‘It makes sense, you know?…I mean, it’s stable…A three legged-stool works a lot better than a two-legged one’” (pleasebekidding, “The Analogy”). This sense of being stronger, more stable together runs through the majority of polyamorous fan fiction and flips the general framing of non-monogamy as immature and both physically and emotionally unsafe (Hutzler et al. 9). However, it also ties polyamorous fics back to the ideology that sweetens and sells heteronormativity: romance.
Romance

Louis Althusser defines ideology as “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,” and the “heterosexual imaginary” masks this nature of heterosexuality as a social construction and organizing institution, and instead naturalizes, and thus normalizes, it (Ingraham, “The Heterosexual Imaginary” 203–204). One of the primary methods for deploying the heterosexual imaginary and, through it, compulsory monogamy, is through the continually reinforced idea of romance.

The women’s movement and sexual revolution began with the dissolution of the economic necessity for marriage: as women entered the workforce and gained at least some economic independence, they no longer needed a husband to survive. Many of those who rejected monogamy on these grounds did so less because they wanted multiple partners, per se, and more because they rejected the idea that finding your “one true love” was the road to happily ever after. The critique of marriage and heterosexuality in second-wave feminism was also a critique of the “institutionalization of coupledom,” but in the past couple of decades the “critique of monogamy has become so muted as to be almost inaudible” (Jackson and Scott 151–152). Instead, that discourse of romance and monogamous fulfillment still shapes the majority of our narratives and social expectations today, for people of any sexual orientation (Farvid and Braun 361).

As women gained more economic freedom, rates of divorce and cohabitation both rose, more women chose to be single parents, and the institution of marriage began to survive based on romance and the marketing of the wedding industry (Ingraham, Thinking Straight 5). But it survived. More than that, it expanded: the wedding industry made approximately $55 billion in 2014, up from $35 billion in 2004 (Glum; Ingraham, Thinking Straight 6). While some in the
industry express concern about Millennials waiting longer to get married and the effect that could have on their business, most are celebrating the expansion promised by the legalization of same-sex marriage (Glum). Evidencing the fact that the heterosexual imaginary—the power of marriage and coupledom and legitimacy—still has power, one wedding planner remarked about Millennials: “They’re still going to get married…At some point their parents are going to go, ‘What are you doing?’” (Glum). Images of couples suffuse advertising and other narratives: even in action movies, audiences expect the hero will get the girl. The idea of finding “the one,” runs through sitcoms and medical dramas, commercials and Groupons for romantic getaways—reinforcing, once again, the power of the heterosexual script. “Singles” activities become mating dances. The running joke might be that country music centers on broken hearts, but narratives of love found, love lost, love longed for and love betrayed support and echo through rock, pop, R&B, punk, hip-hop and heavy metal just as much.

Whatever resistance, transgression or subversion to heteronormativity the fan texts offered in previous chapters, all of them still reinscribed this normative ideal of romance and monogamy, queer or straight. This norm defines the function of a love triangle, especially in a romance story: a character is caught between two different potential lovers and must choose; the narrative itself demands it (Miller 96). The central narratives of romance privilege the committed couple above all others. In fact, narrative itself is an expression of ideology, and the structures of romance plots “express attitudes at least toward family, sexuality and gender” (DuPlessis x). Rachel DuPlessis calls these plots the “scripts of heterosexual romance, romantic thralldom and telos in marriage” (2). A love story that does not end in marriage (or monogamous commitment) indicates a failure (Russ 85).
The analysis of the romance plot by feminist scholars notes the ways in which it closes off options for female characters, limiting their agency and trapping them in gender binaries where a woman’s success is gauged by whether she has achieves marriage by the end of the narrative (DuPlessis 1; Russ 85). Joanna Russ argues that only a shift in genre will lift these restrictions on what a heroine can do or be, but Esther Saxey offers the additional possibility of redeeming the romance narrative by tossing out this compulsorily monogamous ending (Russ 91; Saxey 31). After analyzing the few samples of the fiction of non-monogamy, Saxey concludes that it opens up “enormous possibilities…for new sexual and emotional interactions between characters, fresh plots which move towards innovative conclusions, and the imaginative reconfiguration of both monogamy and non-monogamy” (31).

Monogamy not only closes off options for characters—in doing so, it also ends narratives: it is, practically by definition, “nonnarratable” (Miller 9). The formation or collapse of monogamy contains the elements of drama needed for narrative, but a stable state has no quest, no story in and of itself: it is achievement, not goal (Saxey 24). Non-monogamy, then, often drives plots forward: the temptation of taboos, the lack of something desired, the threat to something one cherishes (Saxey 25). In this way, the middle parts of narratives play with non-monogamy, acknowledging the strength of the desire that drives it: in order for there to be any element of suspense or tension in a love triangle, for instance, the second possibility must be plausible; there must be a genuine connection with both possibilities. Opening up that possibility, Saxey argues, calls the inevitability of the final pairing (and of monogamy itself) into question, though dominant narratives then make the possibility of choosing both options seem inconceivable (26). However, for there to be true closure, the narrative cannot just settle on the idea of a choice made; it must suppress the possibility of the other choice itself and deny that it
was ever really a choice at all (Miller 97–98). The ending of a narrative colors the whole thing, revealing how readers “should’ read it; the ending is what makes the meaning. And those endings, more often than not, reinforce culturally dominant narratives, particularly monogamy and heterosexuality (Saxey; Miller; Roof).

“Narrative ends are heterosexual closure,” Judith Roof argues, even those which may be stories of coming out, or homosexual romance (xxxiv–xxxv). Comparing theories of narrative with Freud’s narrative of sexuality, Roof claims that the idea of struggle and persevering, being true to yourself and finding your identity until finally emerging somehow victorious is the story of the dominant, heteronormative narrative—the heteronarrative, as she calls it (xix, xxxv). The existence of this heteronarrative allows homosexual characters to be drawn back into the cultural fold, leaving the dominant discourse only slightly modified, if at all. In the middle of narratives, though, rests the doubt and risk, the potentiality for queerness, the place where alternatives are made possible, even if they are ultimately closed off and denied by the ending (Roof xxxiv; Miller 98).

Based on calculations derived from fics tagged “Gen” on AO3, nearly 80% of fan fiction involves romance in some way. That percentage is comparable to those specifically in *Revolution, The Vampire Diaries, The Originals* and *Teen Wolf*. The connection of fan fiction to romance, and to the romantic fantasies of its writers, is one present from the earliest studies of the genre. Anne Kustritz argues that slash, for instance, “is not about being gay (or being straight). It is about being in love” (379). Constance Penley contends that romance creates the field in which fan fiction writers write, but their narratives are moving “imaginatively toward what they wanted: a better romance formula” (489). Sex, in fan fiction, Catherine Driscoll argues, “marks out story development, usually in a sequence of escalating intimacy that maps
onto the standard shape of the romance narrative. In romantic fiction, the drama is usually how a given couple will come together, not about whether they will” (86). All of these, like the narratives of previous chapters point toward fan fiction operating within the traditional romance terrain and its structural support of heteronormativity.

This connection to the romantic narrative remains even when fan authors expand the focus of that romance and turn love triangles, which mononormativity insists must be resolved, from a dyad into polyamorous triads instead. The same principle of not being complete within oneself, but needing someone else to fill in the missing pieces figures as heavily in polyamorous fan fiction as the dyadic pairings examined earlier. The stories still operate within the expected rules of plot formation and need a sense of closure; the narrative structure still follows Roof’s heteronarrative; the characters still end the story in some form of cohesive unit.

“The Analogy of the Three-Legged Stool” by pleasebekidding is a Vampire Diaries fic that ends with a triadic relationship forming between Damon, Alaric and Elena that offers a good example of this need for closure that follows the heteronarrative of struggle and completion of self. Throughout the fic, Damon pushes for the threesome relationship, working to overcome Elena and Alaric’s resistance. All three characters struggle with loss and have to deal with their resistance to the various non-normative pieces of their relationship. But once they reach an accord, the three of them have sex for the first time. The fic follows the romance narrative pattern and ends after their actual climaxes on a note of satiation and completion, emotionally as much as physically: “They slept there in front of the fire, that night, and Elena wasn’t sure how they knew to, but they settled Damon between them. Alaric curved over his back, and Elena settled into his arms. He’d fought for this, after all” (pleasebekidding, “The Analogy”).
LeTempest’s “Give Me Shelter,” a Teen Wolf fic with Scott, Allison and Isaac in a relationship, ends very similarly:

They fell asleep, not long after, three warm bodies twined together, the nightmares chased away, at least for now, in their wake…They find a rhythm, the three of them. Not just in bed, but in life. The first early, uneasy days fade into weeks and they start to treat what they have less as something fragile and more like something that gives them all strength. (LeTempest)

“Bad Blood,” by hayj, takes this a step farther in the Revolution fandom. The Miles/Bass/Charlie fic ends with Charlie declaring she doesn’t want to hide their relationship, but take the name “Monroe-Matheson.” She cements it by offering each of them a ring. After they exchange them, the fic closes on a similar note to the others, with the three of them falling asleep together, with a clear statement of the rightness of this completion and closure: “Slipping down into the bed, Miles and Charlie waited on Bass to blow out the lamp on his bed side table. Turning on her side, Miles spooned up behind her and as Bass curled up against her front, Charlie fell asleep between the two of them, just as it always would be” (hayj, “Bad Blood”).

These traditional romance endings also provide closure in fics dealing with polyamory between more than three partners, where everyone is involved with everyone else. Examined in the previous chapter for its incestuous elements, ajarofgoodthings’ “Your Throat in One Hand, Your Heart in the Other” in The Originals fandom, ends with Hayley’s happy acceptance of her polyamorous relationship with all of the Mikaelson siblings. The final passage of the fic reads: “Hayley's never believed in God; she's never really believed in anything, but the way they look at her as Marcel turns her out in a spin- a dance far too elegant for the environment - predatory,
protective and powerful; it feels a little like faith” (ajarofgoodthings). The endings of Teen Wolf’s polyamorous pack fics are similar. For example, natcat5’s “These Fine Threads will Find Us and Bind Us,” ends with Lydia, Allison, Scott, Isaac and Stiles in a five-some that provides them all with a sense of forever even in the deadly world they live in:

It comes together, and they have one day where they go on a ‘date’, all of them, brave and shameless and in love and lust and passion. Scott in the center, with Allison on his right, holding his hand, Isaac on her other side, and Stiles with his arm slung across Scott’s left shoulder, Lydia on his arm as if he’s escorting her. They walk.

And they’re young, living wild, dangerous lives. And everything is fleeting, everything is ephemeral. But they have this now. They have this, the warmth of skin, the lacing of fingers, searing hot touches of tongues, lips, and the safety of each other’s hands. They have this, and it feels like it’s eternal. (natcat5)

However, despite these endings which largely fit within Rush’s heteronarrative, even if they buck monogamy, the genre of fan fiction itself offers a counter to the expectation of the narrative closure of possibility. Instead of being bound by endings, fans “play with the limitations and possibilities offered by their source text of choice” (Stein sec. 2). The limitations may keep writers to recognizable elements, but their imaginations allow them to take a work in infinite directions. Fan writing serves to “rework and rewrite” the source text, “repairing or dismissing unsatisfying aspects, developing interests not sufficiently explored” (Jenkins, Textual Poachers 162). This continual narrative reinvention allows the doubts and risks of a narrative middle to expand and explores it in order to supplant an unsatisfying ending.
As previous chapters have demonstrated, by the use of many of the same writers in different chapters, writers within a fandom often write multiple, competing narratives drawn from it, rather than reworking the source text into one, new, coherent text. An author who writes Miles/Bass slash, for example, may have twenty different stories posted for them, all of which start at different moments, follow different arcs, conclude in different ways that contradict both the source text and the fan author’s previous works. Fans struggle to articulate multiple “unrealized possibilities within the original works” (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 23). While some authors are one-pairing shippers, most write not just different stories for one pairing, but different pairings for a character; for instance, Miles/Bass for one story, then Charlie/Bass for another. Each of these possibilities has a narrative closure of its own, an ending that makes sense of the story in the same way that the source text does. Perhaps the insistence on narrative closure does follow Roof’s “heteronarrative” structure, but that does not render meaningless the resistance against normative social and narrative ideology within the works themselves (Dollimore 88).

**Wish Fulfillment vs. Resistance to Normativity**

Christine Scodari’s argument that slash is not a form of counter-hegemonic resistance, explored in previous chapters, potentially applies to polyamorous relationships, as well. In disputing the claim that women write slash in order to “reconstruct male sexuality in terms of feminine sensibility,” Scodari points out that this objective could be obtained in heterosexual fan fiction (115). Instead, Scodari links the motivations for slash writing to those of writing “Mary Sue” fan fiction (113). “Mary Sue” fan fiction is a subgenre in which the author includes an original character who becomes the object of desire for one of the canon characters. The subgenre is generally derided within mature fandom and seen as self-insertion better left to
private writing—other readers do not want to read about the author’s fantasies of being with the characters, but rather a story with the characters they know and love (Somogyi 400–401). Scodari links this desire of the author for the male characters to slash, comparing it to lesbian sex in mainstream porn and arguing that women may well write slash fan fiction because it removes any female characters from the scene who the fan could see as competition (Scodari 114). As part of her evidence, Scodari cites the disdain many female fans have for female characters and the fact that fans continue to write slash even when strong female characters are present in the source text, disputing the claim that slash arises because the only characters of interest in the source texts are male (125).

Minus the misogyny, perhaps, the part of this argument dealing with fan fiction as personal fantasy could apply to threesome fics, especially of the M/F/M variety. In these, rather than inserting a Mary Sue-like character, the author can arguably identify with the female character enough to not need to create a Mary Sue. The threesome structure allows for an explicit fantasy of having both male characters’ attention, rather than the implied one present in Scodari’s interpretations of fan motivations for writing slash. It also allows for authorial insertion through identification with the female characters’ thoughts about watching the two men together, taking on the position of voyeur: this flips the script, but echoes the stereotypical male fantasy of watching or being with two women at once.

Many threesome fics do make blatant this voyeuristic, erotic enjoyment. And, often, this enjoyment does come from the girls, as in “All We Want Baby is Everything,” when Scott kisses Isaac: “Allison squeezed her thighs together and had to fight the urge to use some four letter words in reaction” (missfeministfangirl, “All We Want”). Similarly, in “Tomorrow and Tomorrow” Elena, too, becomes aroused in watching Ric and Damon kiss:
Damon finally pulls Ric off her and kisses him fiercely, his hand on the back of Ric's head. Watching them makes her stomach to do a strange little flip. They're rougher with each other than they are with her, like each is trying to get the other to submit. When they pull apart, they both look at her warily, like they are expecting her to shriek in disgust and run away, but she can only small [sic] lazily at them, feeling herself soaking through her panties again. (someryn)

Likewise, in “The Analogy of the Three Legged Stool,” watching Alaric and Damon kiss leads to Elena fantasizing about what else they might do:

Her heart thumped…She found herself anticipating what would happen next. Wanted it to happen now, wanted to cement the thing, make it solid. Give it a name. She wanted, urgently, to see Damon unravel Alaric with his mouth the way he had Elena. She wanted to see Damon plastered over Alaric’s back, Alaric over Damon’s…She wanted to see Damon’s fangs in Alaric’s flesh. (pleasebekidding, “The Analogy”)

Even Rachel, as much as she hates Bass, finds the sight of him kissing Miles more erotic than she expects or wants to:

Miles makes some kind of weak protest but then he’s driving a hand into Bass’ curls and there’s this strangled little noise that escapes him, that nearly rips me open. And yet…It does something to me too. Bass was right. Of course I’ve imagined them, fantasized about them. The reality, of Bass’ tongue peeking out as he swipes it over Miles’, of the way Miles sucks Bass’ bottom lip in between his teeth, just like he does with me…It hits me harder than I could have calculated. (lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”)
While these moments and those like them do support Scodari’s argument that some of the appeal of slash might be that women take pleasure in the thought of two men, they do not support her conclusion that the fics are mostly a product of authorial self-insertion or even “just” normal sexual fantasy. Something can be more than one thing, and, as I discussed in the previous chapter, fantasy itself can be transgressive and subversive (Dean 77–78). Like with the incestuous fics, polyamorous fics offer a lot of introspection from the characters, about their arousal, about norms, about the ethical and social implications of engaging in this kind of relationship. These moments of introspection could offer a meta-analysis of the fan’s position in relation to their own enjoyment of non-normative sexuality in fan fiction or they could be a way to bridge what seems to be out-of-character behavior compared to how the character behaves in the source material. Either way, they still reflect an awareness of socio-sexual norms and their constructed nature.

Sex with multiple partners may be a common pornographic trope and sexual fantasy, but mainstream pornography rarely offers introspective struggles as characters try to come to terms with acting on their non-heteronormative desires. Further, this tension between expected norms and engaging in non-heteronormative sex extends beyond the erotic enjoyment of watching two men. A common theme in polyamorous fan fiction centers on the characters’ coming to terms with their desire for more than one partner and, beyond that, to negotiating the form and expression of that desire. As in the other sub-genres of fan fiction explored in this project, Porn-Without-Plot (PWP) fics exist in polyamorous fics, separated from any potential awkwardness or difficulty in bucking societal norms of heterosexual monogamy and constrained desire. While these fics may well count as inner transgressions that push at readers’ own comfort levels, PWP fics likely do not function to question those norms, but transgress them for the fun or shock of it.
As in previous chapters, to both work as fan fiction and offer a challenge to heteronormative, mainstream media messages, polyamorous fics need to be grounded in a defensible reading of the text and an understanding of the norms they subvert.

A significant number of polyamorous fics do just this. As with other fan fiction in previous chapters, the fic I examine in this one stays rooted in the core of who characters are and the situations they face in the source text. In addition, in many fics, characters realistically struggle to establish working polyamorous relationships. These struggles include finding a way to overcome their perceptions and those of friends and family about what a relationship “should” look like. Characters also wrestle with feelings of jealousy and insecurity, engage in negotiations of how their polyamorous relationship will function, question whether and when to share their relationship with friends and family, and figure out how to navigate the emotional and physical awkwardness of multiple partners when they have been raised in a dyadic relationship frame.

*Teen Wolf* fics offer the most pragmatic, realistic look at how someone might go about establishing a polyamorous relationship. In “All Good Things Take Time,” Stiles puts the idea in Allison’s head of forming a relationship between her, Scott and Isaac, and serves as a facilitator in helping her figure out just how to do so, as well, which both amuses and unsettles Allison:

> She finds a compendium of posts and articles regarding triad relationships in her locker, and doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry at it and the footnotes littering it. There’s a green post-it on it, as well, with *hurry* written across it in a squiggly scrawl. How her life went from normal to werewolves and death and atypical relationships, she doesn’t know, but it has and that’s that. (CloudedCreation)
Stiles also comes to the rescue in providing information again in “It’s Okay,” though this time of a more physical nature:

"How would it even work though?" Scott asked, rolling onto his back and lifting his hands to try and work through the configurations while Stiles fell off the chair with a moaned "Oh my God," and muttered about how he had failed Scott as a friend.

Three hours of Google searching later and a few very interesting animated gifs, Scott had blinked open mouthed at Stiles who just looked inordinately proud of his appropriately titled folder "Fuckit List". (Shenanigans)

In “Tomorrow and Tomorrow,” Damon and Alaric propose a triadic relationship to Elena, after it becomes clear all three of them are interested in the other two. While Elena does not engage in practical research, she does a lot of thinking about who she is and whether this is something she wants:

She lets her mind wander to the crazy, ridiculous proposition waiting downstairs. Two of the world's most emotionally damaged men (two of the people she trusts most in the universe), and they're proposing her and... them? Could they be better together than they are separately? She thinks it's possible. Will people talk? Hell yes. But they talk about her already, her living with an older man, her immoral liaisons with the unnatural and mysterious Salvatore brothers, how she always seems to be nearby every time something bad happens in this town. The old Elena would have cared very much about what the sheriff or Mrs. Lockwood thought about her, but the new Elena really has a hard time sparing them a second thought. Whatever she decides to do about RicandDamon (they are
already linked inextricably in her head), it will be because she wants it or doesn't want it. She refuses to live her life by anyone else's rules. Especially since she's already broken so many of them. What's one more? (someryn)

Some of Elena’s debate is justificatory in ways similar to the incestuous fics, but it also underscores that she realizes that the taboo is just a social one: someone’s rules, not a natural law.

Another area where fics engage with the non-normative nature of polyamory is in the reactions of friends and family to the characters’ relationships, or the decisions about whether to tell them or not. In missfeministfangirl’s “The Love of an Orchestra,” a polyamorous pack fic from Teen Wolf, discussed above, Isaac worries about how to tell the pack that he needs all of them, only to have them reassure him that they know, and they all love him. Elena’s friends are not always so supportive. In “The Analogy of the Three-Legged Stool,” without knowing that Elena is seriously considering a relationship with both Alaric and Damon, Caroline still tries to warn Elena away from both men, telling Elena, “The whole thing is just weird” (pleasebekidding, “The Analogy”). Similarly, in another of pleasebekidding’s fics, “Auld Lang Syne My Ass,” Caroline tells Elena that her relationship with both Damon and Stefan is “deeply fucked up” (pleasebekidding, “Auld Lang Syne My Ass”). While it is unclear whether Caroline’s objection to the triad is that it’s polyamorous or that it’s incestuous, Bonnie takes it with a shrug, and offers up the same “they’re vampires” justification that many of the fics in the previous chapter do:

Bonnie, in the end, shrugged and said “well, whatever.” And Jeremy shot her an appalled look and Bonnie shook her head and said “What? It’s not like they’re going to give birth
to little mutant baby vampires, you know. I just don’t even think this is the weirdest thing I’ve heard today, let alone all year.” (pleasebekidding, “Auld Lang Syne My Ass”)

The Miles/Charlie/Bass triad in Revolution gets similarly mixed responses in hayj’s “Bad Blood.” When the three of them join Texas’ army, Miles and Bass ask that its general, Blanchard, keep Charlie assigned with them. Blanchard just does it, without comment:

Blanchard, having been around the block a time or two, (but not that block, thank you very much), knew when to keep his thoughts and opinions to himself and granted the request, if only to keep them out of his hair. The Matheson-Monroe family dynamics were NONE of his business. (hayj, “Bad Blood”)

However, Bass interprets it differently, sensitive, at least, to his own desire for both Mathesons, even if the relationship has not yet turned sexual, and later thinks, in regard to Charlie:

He wanted to explain to her that there was a price to pay for living. More importantly, that there was a price to pay for living with them. People liked to misinterpret things they didn't understand. He could see it clearly in Blanchard's eyes when they had insisted that Charlie be commissioned along with them. He knew Miles had seen it as well, standing there beside him with that closed off expression on his face, all the way down to that stick he had suddenly impaled his spine upon. But it didn't really matter what anyone else thought. (hayj, “Bad Blood”)

Some soldiers harass Charlie with a lot of innuendo about just what happens when she goes back to the Generals’ tent at night, and in another of hayj’s fics, “The Boys are Back in Town,” more than a few people make the mistake of calling her “The Generals’ Whore.” In both, Charlie
handles the situation herself, her anger more about the disrespect to Miles and Bass than any concern about what the soldiers think about her. In both fics, the trio meet the taunts with violence, rather than apologies, which is in keeping with their personalities in the source text (hayj, “Bad Blood”; hayj, “The Boys Are Back in Town”).

Like most of the other fics, all of these also involve areas of negotiation and discussion between the parties, as well, a working out of what everyone wants out of the relationship in some form. However, because many of these issues relate to the connection to the source text as much as they do to social norms themselves, I examine and analyze them further in conjunction with the relationships themselves below.

The Erotic Triangle

Fans can connect polyamorous fan fiction to the source text in many ways, but one of the most popular is via the love triangle, or triangular desire. The image of the triangle shapes a large portion of Western narratives and understandings of love and desire. Indeed, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes it as the “graphic schema…of our intellectual tradition” for erotic relations (Sedgwick, Between Men 21). The love triangle may now be rapidly becoming a tired cliché in modern media, but it has its roots in our earliest myths. The Bible abounds with love triangles: King David, for example, serves as one side with Bathsheba and Uriah and, earlier in his life, arguably centers in another with Michal and Jonathan. The Greeks give us Aphrodite, Hephaistos, and Ares; Paris, Helen and Menelaus; and Hera, Zeus and whomever Zeus is pursuing that week. Ireland offers Midir, Etain and Eochaid, as well as Conchobar, Deirdre and Naoise. The British Isles also birthed Tristan, Isolde and Mark, and Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot.
Freud uses the Oedipal triangle as his schema for the development of human sexuality: “the young child that is attempting to situate itself with respect to a powerful father and a beloved mother” (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 22). He theorized that homo- and heterosexual outcomes in adult desire are “the result of a complicated play of desire for and identification with the parent of each gender: the child routes its desire/identification through the mother to arrive at a role like the father’s, or vice versa” (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 22–23). Heterosexuality, by this theory, requires a strong identification with the same sex parent; homosexuality results from over-identification with the opposite-sex parent (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 23). While many of Freud’s theories have been challenged through the years, they nevertheless still ground much of Western culture’s collective understanding, further cementing the triangle’s figuration in our concepts of desire.

In *Desire, Deceit and the Novel*, Rene Girard conducts an in-depth analysis of the structure of the triangle as a locus for not just the expression, but for the creation of desire. For Girard, the triangle performs as a structural model that changes in size and shape—now equilateral, now isosceles—in order to accommodate a great diversity of works, desires and human relationships (2). The three points on the triangle represent the subject, the object of his or her desire, and a third, whom Girard names a “mediator.” A triangle forms when the object of desire arises not spontaneously (which Girard argues is a rare occurrence) within the subject, but is somehow chosen for the subject by the mediator (3). A mediator may be external or internal, and the closeness of the subject and mediator determines that categorization. When subject and mediator operate within “spheres of possibility” which do not overlap, the mediation is external; when their spheres draw nearer to one another and comingle, the mediation is internal (Girard 9).
For example, for a Christian who tries to live their life as Christ commanded, Christ serves as the external mediator. More relevant to this project in an overarching sense: the idea that fairytales and romances make young women crave a life and a story that does not exist in real life positions the fairytale or romance as an external mediator. The young woman does not, *sua sponte*, desire to have a horse and carriage take her to her wedding at Cinderella’s castle in Disney World; she wishes it because something outside of herself has painted the picture for her that she should want it (Girard 5). The spheres of possibility of Christ or the fairytale do not intersect with the subject’s sphere. Internal mediation, on the other hand, operates far closer to the subject. We see someone else who has something, and we want it. This could be as simple as wanting an iPad because we have seen a friend using his or as intimate as falling in love with our best friends’ partner. Girard organizes all of these desires, internal and external, material and spiritual, by the triangle.

With that established, Girard proceeds to use the triangle to analyze novels across time, nation and genre, showing how it serves as a tool the “great” novelists all employ. His primary argument in doing so pertains to the power exerted by the mediator on the subject. The bond of the subject and mediator, both Girard and Sedgwick argue, matches or surpasses that of the subject and object of desire (Girard; Sedgwick, *Between Men* 21). The subject only wants the object because the mediator has deemed it worthy of wanting, and the subject, ultimately, wants to be the like the mediator. When this happens via internal mediation, when the mediator is within the subject’s life, a rivalry forms, because the mediator actually wants the object, too, and so becomes both author of desire and obstacle to its attainment (Girard 7). As Sedgwick argues, “the choice of the beloved is determined in the first place, not by the qualities of the beloved, but
by the beloved’s already being the choice of the person who has been chosen as a rival” (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 21).

Sedgwick, then, uses Girard’s triangle to reinforce the argument that patriarchal heterosexuality is the trade and traffic of women to cement the bonds between men, whether homosocial or homosexual, a distinction defined by culture and historical point in time more than any physical act (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 26). Her analysis through the rest of *Between Men* examines literary love triangles to demonstrate the strength of the bond, and the desire, between the men involved and the lesser importance of the female they are supposedly rivals for. Girard does not provide an extended analysis of the triangle’s structuration of homosexual desire, as Sedgwick does, given that the focus of his study is “the male-centered novelistic tradition of European high culture,” but he mentions its applicability there in passing (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 21–22).

Using “latent homosexuality” on the part of the subject does not explain the structure of desire, Girard argues. Indeed, because this homosexuality is “opaque to the heterosexual,” it reduces the triangle to something inexplicable and bypasses the opportunity to explore the very structure that underlies the narrative (47). Instead, he contends that we should attempt to “understand…homosexuality from the standpoint of triangular desire” and defines homosexuality within the triangle (at least in Proust, the object of his study) “as a gradual transferring to the mediator of an erotic value which in ‘normal’ Don Juanism remains attached to the object itself” (47). This transfer, he argues, “is not, a priori, impossible,” but in particularly acute forms of internal mediation, “is even likely” (47). As discussed in Chapter 2, most slash scholars cite Sedgwick’s extrapolation of the male homosocial bond as the operation by which fans form slash pairings. However, the likelihood of this rarely mentioned “gradual transfer” of
“erotic value” to the rival seems even more apropos.\textsuperscript{31} Equally apropos for this chapter, the fact that Girard’s triangle applies to any form of desire highlights some of the shifting desires which form and underlie the same-sex triads created by fans.

**Triangular Desire and the Fan Fiction OT3**

*From Source Text to OT3*

With such an ingrained schema underlying so many of our foundational narratives, the presence of love triangles in the shows under consideration and fan interpretations of them is hardly surprising. All four shows have iterations of triangular desire in some form, and fan fiction resolving them somehow makes up a large part of polyamorous fan fiction. This OT3 fan fiction arises from three main iterations of triangular desire canon and fanon: (1) explicit love triangles in the source text, like Damon/Elena/Stefan from *The Vampire Diaries* or Scott/Isaac/Allison from *Teen Wolf*; (2) explicitly rivalrous triangular desire in the source text whether platonic, erotic or a complicated combination of both, like Rachel/Miles/Bass in *Revolution* or Klaus/Elijah/Hayley from *The Originals*; and (3) implicit triangular desire arising from fan readings of a text, often reconciling two or three popular pairings, like Miles/Charlie/Bass from *Revolution* or Derek/Stiles/Scott from *Teen Wolf*.

Many of the shows have explicit love triangles that nevertheless do not have a great deal of fan fiction written about them. Often in these triangles, fans have a clear preference for which character the beloved should choose, which seems to obviate any need for an OT3. For instance, *The Vampire Diaries* sets up a triangle between Caroline, Tyler and Klaus, but Caroline/Klaus

\textsuperscript{31} While not applicable to the Scott/Stiles bromantic pairing, Girard’s theory of triangular desire offers a second way of reading both Damon/Alaric and Miles/Bass given their canon rivalries; at one point, Girard refers to the subject and mediator as “brother-enemies” (100). However, given that they both turn away from the object of their rivalry and to each other, both in source and fan texts, that exploration is better addressed in a future project.
rapidly became the most popular pairing in the fandom. Out of the 2000+ fan fics with Caroline posted on Archive of Our Own, over half of them pair her with Klaus, while less than 200 pair her with Tyler. Similarly, *The Originals* has a canon triangle with Hayley loving both Elijah and Jackson, but Hayley/Elijah has been the fan favorite pairing for the show since Season 1, and it shows in the fan fiction numbers: Hayley/Elijah have around 150 fics on Archive of Our Own, compared to 13 for Hayley/Jackson. It is tempting to say that the relationships are also more difficult to map onto Girard and Sedgwick’s concept of how triangular desire functions, but this is only true for Elijah/Hayley/Jackson. In that triangle, both Jackson and Elijah love Hayley before ever meeting one another, so while they may envy a piece of the relationship the other has with her that they do not, one does not mediate the other’s desire. This is not the case with Klaus, Tyler and Caroline, where Klaus’s desire for Caroline comes only after he has Tyler under his control and makes Caroline a pawn in their game. However, the applicability of Girard’s triangle to an analysis of their relationship does not automatically lead to fans taking the triangle and making it something more.

Instead, the relationships that fans turn into triadic ones arise from many of the same things that lead to popular pairings: complicated emotional depth. The most popular threesome fics in all four fandoms that come from canonical love triangles seem to arise from those where more complicated, intense relationships exist between each pairing of characters. For some, each member of the triangle cares deeply for the other two, like Elena/Damon/Stefan and Scott/Allison/Isaac—both the most popular OT3s in their respective fandoms. Given each member cares deeply for the other two, and there is no dyadic solution where someone does not get hurt, resolving them into triadic relationships allows everyone to get a happy ending. As Elena tells her friends in “Auld Lang Syne My Ass” about her decision to be with bot of the
Salvatore brothers: “I’ve chosen, and in the end, I chose… not to choose. And you can hate me, and you can judge me, but this is what I want” (pleasebekidding, “Auld Lang Syne My Ass”). Emotional complication between all three parties is also a hallmark of Revolution’s main canonical triangle—Rachel/Miles/Bass. Rachel and Bass may not care much about the other anymore, but they did, once, and have a previous sexual relationship, as well, and history that makes their rivalry over Miles about far more than just Miles.

The emotional complication and layered relationships also define the popular OT3s which arise from relationships which are not explicitly erotic in the source text. The Originals most popular threesome, for example, is the incestuous Klaus/Rebekah/Elijah, with their enmeshment and Klaus’s jealousy I discussed in the previous chapter. Revolution’s two most popular OT3s are Miles/Bass/Charlie and Miles/Bass/Jeremy, where all three people in the triangle can be paired with the other two to form popular pairings, and all of whom have complicated entanglements with the others. Miles/Bass and Miles/Charlie I’ve discussed in previous chapters, but Bass/Charlie is the most popular pairing in the fandom and arises from a relationship in the source text that went from her trying to kill him for causing the death of her father and brother to the two of them as close allies with clear, if unresolved, sexual tension. Meanwhile, Miles saved Jeremy’s life, which puts Jeremy in his debt, but also betrayed Bass, which has Jeremy offering to kill him for Bass at one point, because somehow Bass is the one who has earned his unswerving loyalty (“Nobody’s Fault But Mine”).

Triadic Fan Fiction

Most of the polyamorous fan fics resolve the love triangles by turning them into triads, or OT3s. How much negotiation and justification it takes to get them there varies, however, as do the ways in which characters do so. Triads like Scott, Allison and Isaac, three twenty-first
century teenage characters caught in a canonical love triangle where both male characters have shown an openness and ease about the possibility of being queer in the source text, form easily. Others that involve mostly fan pairings, queering characters and breaking multiple taboos take more work to demonstrate their plausibility. Just as many dyadic fics work more on forming the relationship than sex, and most incestuous fics work to justify why and how these characters would break that taboo, so too do most polyamorous fics work more on the formation of the polyamorous relationship than sexual threesomes. The sex scenes are there, some explicit, some vague, but the pattern I have observed throughout this project, of the time and care taken to make the characters act as in-character as possible, to support the reading of the fic as plausible, continue in this sub-genre. Whether canonical or fan-formed, then, much of OT3 fics consist of resolving the rivalries or torn emotions imposed on love triangles by monogamy. Like with the other chapters, the ways of doing this often involve similar patterns across fandoms. I analyze the fics below in light of the elements of romance and triangular desire, the ways in which they connect to the source texts, and how the characters navigate and the fics challenge (or not) heteronormative sexuality. I roughly arrange them via relationship model and the ways the characters form and negotiate their polyamorous relationships, followed by elements that set particular relationships apart from the others, such as breaking multiple taboos or further challenging expectations of heteronormative sexuality.

**Polyamorous Relationship Models**

In her article in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, “Models of Open Relationships,” Kathy Labriola offers a practical breakdown of different forms of polyamorous relationships in response to the question of “how does it even work” many people ask when first hearing about polyamory. Polyamorous relationships can form in very many configurations, but Labriola
arranges them into three main models that can encompass most variations: the primary/secondary model, the multiple primary partners model and the multiple non-primary relationships model (Labriola 217). The primary/secondary model is the most common, as it retains the socially familiar couple relationship, which is the primary, but allows each partner to have secondary relationships in certain situations decided by the couple, so long as they do not challenge the primary one (Labriola 218). On the other end of the spectrum, the multiple non-primary relationships model focuses mostly on the individual and is more akin to having multiple casual sexual partners than committed relationships (Labriola 224).

By contrast, under the multiple primary partners model, three or more people are in an equal relationship, which can be open or closed (Labriola 221). In a closed model, or polyfidelity, each partner commits to only the other partners; in an open model, the partners all develop their relationships as they see fit, each able to negotiate equally with all their partners to create the relationship they want (Labriola 221–223). Fan fiction exists for each of these models, but the polyfidelity model, with multiple mutually committed partners, is the most common. Triadic relationships, or OT3s, (as opposed to polyfidelity among more than three people) are the most common iteration of a this model, both in fan fiction and real life (Labriola 221).

*Open Multiple Primary Partners, aka “Sharing”*

When it comes to resolving love triangles, while most fics do so with a triadic relationship, others opt for the open multiple primary partners model, which, in the fics, amounts to the two rival points of the triangle sharing the mutual beloved. This is the form the relationship in dametokillfor’s “My Boyfriend’s Boyfriend” takes as it resolves Alaric’s canonical romance with Jo with the fan favorite bromance of Damon/Alaric. This is a common underlying element in polyamorous fan fiction, as it serves to “merge established canonical
elements like the heterosexual romance plot with the interpretation of latent homoeroticism” (Kies 1.5). It emblemizes what I call the “it’s okay” trope in polyamorous fan fiction which appears when one partner recognizes that their partner loves someone else, too, and, rather than exhibiting the expected jealousy, tells them “it’s okay.” From that “it’s okay” the relationship can go in various directions, but inevitably ends in some form of polyamory in the fics. While it seems like it would be more common in fics like this, which form two dyads instead of a triad, it more often seems to serve to launch a triad by inviting a third person into the couple.

In “My Boyfriend’s Boyfriend,” Jo recognizes the fact that Alaric has feelings for Damon and encourages him to pursue them, much to Alaric’s consternation, but she cuts off his protests.

“Shut up.” She tells him, “I've already told you that I'm not giving this up, I know that you like me, I like you and I want this to work…[W]hen I let you leave, you're going to go to Damon and you're going to tell him that you're still crazy about him. You're going to have amazing make up sex, and you're going to tell me every sordid detail…You're going to tell Damon that I am willing to share you”

Ric's mouth opens to speak, no, I don't want that, but Jo quickly jumps in.

“You're going to shut up, because I will gag you if you start to protest this.” She tells him, “I would rather share you with him, than have you only half in this because of some unresolved feelings you two have…You're going to invite him to dinner after you two have got all the make up sex out of your system, and we're going to discuss this properly. If that discussion results in you and I being together, and you and him being together separately, that's how it will work. If that discussion ends up with the three of us in this
obnoxiously large bed of mine,” She sighs theatrically, “then I suppose that's something I'll just have to deal with.” (dametokillfor, “My Boyfriend’s Boyfriend”)

Jo exhibiting her willingness to either share Ric or invite Damon to their bed serves as an opening negotiation point. Most fics that start in this place generally move toward a triad. As it turns out, however, this is the one fic in which Damon is not looking for a threesome, but is willing to share, or at least try to:

“I don't want her…You just said it, she's your girl, and I want her to be your girl. I want you to have something that isn't touched by my special brand of screw up. Someone who's going to be there when I inevitably get myself killed or eaten or piss you off so much that you finally see sense…I do want you though…I want whatever this is too, because I'm selfish as hell and I can't give you up completely. I can't guarantee I'm going to make it easy, that I won't ever be jealous, or drink too much, or won't get kidnapped on date night, because I'm pretty good at screwing relationships up, but I want to at least try.” (dametokillfor, “My Boyfriend’s Boyfriend”)

The fic ends shortly after that, with some light banter to break from the seriousness. Damon raises some issues that can be common with the multiple primary partners relationship model when practiced in real life, as well. The model is not as predictable as the others and its fluidity and possible conflicts in loyalty can be stressful for many people (Labriola 223). Damon’s character traits in the source text would make this model less likely to be successful with him, but the fic owns this through Damon, who acknowledges how hard it might be for him. At the same time, it is also his choice—Jo offers something more secure, and he turns it down, because he thinks that is best for Alaric. While Damon is often selfish and seems to fail at self-
reflexiveness in the source text, he does exhibit it in bursts, generally with the people he cares for most. These smaller moments in the source text, combined with Damon’s acknowledgement that he might not always be so gracious connect the fic back to the source well enough to make it at least plausible that this would be his first reaction. Ending the fic here avoids having to deal with the potential issues in the future, following the familiar pattern of ending the fic on the formation of the relationship.

Closed Multiple Partner Relationships: The OT3

Fics that end up in triadic relationships may start from being dyads before moving to forming a triad. In some of these, two characters start the fic already in an established relationship and invite a third to join them. In others, the characters either form or start as two dyads, like Jo, Alaric and Damon, above, before developing into a triad. Some start with a consideration of the idea of sharing first, but either they dismiss it or, if they suggest it, another character vetoes it. For example, while Allison is trying to decide what to do with Stiles’ suggestion of a relationship between her, Scott and Isaac, in “All Good Things Take Time,” she considers sharing Scott with Isaac, but then quickly rejects the idea because of what it might do to Scott:

She doesn’t want it to be the two of them simply sharing Scott – pulling him in two different directions and expecting him to be enough for the both of them – but rather they all be in it together. The three of them as a whole. A triangle instead of a v.

(ClousedCreation)
After Allison rejects the idea of sharing, “All Good Things Take Time” becomes one of the fics with the “it’s okay” trope. This trope is particularly common in Scott/Allison/Isaac fics, to the point that Shenanigans has a fic titled “It’s Okay.”

Shenanigan’s fic, like most Scott/Allison/Isaac ones, also has Allison being the one to suggest the threesome, though the fic is told from Scott’s point of view. She introduces it for the first time during sex, and, for a while, it remains that—something to think about to make sex hotter, but inside of that is also her acceptance of Scott’s attraction to and affection for Isaac, made explicit one time when they’re caught in a sexual afterglow:

Later, with her hair sprawled over the pillow and his face tucked into the curve of her neck as he reminded his lungs that he no longer had asthma, she carded her nails into his hair and smiled an, "I don't mind, you know," into his temple. She'd spasmed around him, still half hard, wet and slippery inside the condom as he shivered, tensing around the flash of something too sweet and too perfect to make his brain form words beyond: guh.

(Shenanigans)

Once Scott accepts that this could be real, the two have to convince Isaac, which they do less by conversation and negotiation and more by just inviting him into their room. Understandably uncertain, Isaac joins them, and the main conversation about him being there boils down to just those two words, from both Scott and Allison:

Isaac had been wide eyed- tentative at first. Just light fingers at the high arch of Scott's foot as his knee pushed a divot into the edge of the bed. Scott had been sitting up, Allison tucked between his thighs as he mouthed at the curve of her shoulder and stroked
lightly over her stomach and then lower. He'd closed his eyes at the noise she made when he touched her, the tight crackling silk of her hair against his palm as he'd spread and touched, finding the way she lolled back and spread her thighs for him the deepest sort of heady.

"It's okay," she breathed, soft and comforting around the teeth that bit at her lip when Scott flicked a finger curiously over her clit.

He'd opened his eyes at the dip in the bed, finding Isaac staring at him. "It's okay," he'd repeated, soft and hopeful. (Shenanigans)

As the fic ends on a sexual encounter and does not involve further discussion, the text is ambiguous about whether the three of them are forming a relationship or if the couple is adding some spice to the relationship. It focuses more on the sexual aspects even in the build-up, but the long build-up, along with the fact that Isaac and Scott live together and some of that build-up is just between them as they start getting more physically open, also gives it a sense that this is more than a one-off encounter.

Part of grounding a fic in the source text requires remaining true to the characters, no matter if interpretations of what that means differ (Gathman 9). This can involve many things, but one element is not forcing romance on “perfectly good Enemies pairing[s],” something many fans actively dislike (Gathman 14). Love triangles often have an inherent level of antagonism in them, but most of those resolved via turning them into OT3s also involve genuine love and feeling for all participants toward all participants. For the mostly canonical and third most popular triad in Revolution—Rachel/Bass/Miles—that simply is not possible while staying in
character without making it an alternate universe. However, resolving this triangle into an actual triad (as opposed to a one-off, antagonistic threesome), is popular within the fandom, and those fics that do so challenge not only monogamy or the taboo of polyamory, but the heteronormative understanding of love and romance, as well.

One of the longest and most detailed of these fics, “Murders of a Quiet, Domestic Interest,” by lovesrogue36 seeks to resolve the Bass/Miles/Rachel triangle, where the possibility of sharing Miles is the language used, but turns out to be just a starting point for negotiations. Told from Rachel’s point of view, and set post the series’ broadcast finale, the fic deals with her reactions to Bass and Miles and Bass/Miles and how she negotiates what she wants by deciding what she can live with in a way that is real and honest and raw in how it strips bare all three characters, as they are, without any romantic haze. After Rachel finds Bass’s dog tags in Miles’ drawer and realizes that for all he claims to not still care about Bass, he still does, she confronts Bass:

“When did he get them? Why does Miles have your dog tags?” I wonder if I sound as panicky as I feel. My chest is tight and each breath feels shallow, raw. I’m not sure why. (That’s a lie.)

“Because I have his.” Bass squints up at me with that wide-eyed look that means he’s being as honest as he currently believes himself capable. “Had ‘em since Parris Island.”

“What is that, some kind of macho Marine marriage contract?” I snap, gnawing on my bottom lip. Miles and Bass exchanged their dog tags. It’s almost adorable. Or, at least, it would be if it didn’t explain so goddamn much…
When I found dog tags in Miles’ drawer this evening…I thought they were his. I’ve always been a little wary about his time in the service, not the least of which because of how much more exponentially damaged he was every time he came home from a tour. But I felt a twinge of pride when I found the tags, at least in the fact that he could hang onto something that long, that he could care about something. And then I realized my mistake.

SEBASTIAN MONROE, stamped out in glaring capitals.

Yeah, Miles can hang onto something for this long, just one thing: Bass.

(lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”)

Rachel’s realization about how much Bass still means to Miles forces her to confront that they are, in fact, still tied up in a love triangle that she’s tried to deny for twenty years, which leads to the question of what to do about it. Their consideration of the possibility of sharing, and reluctance to do so, forms the basis of most of the negotiations and attempts to resolve the triangle for a large portion of the fic, and is one of the most grounding elements, connecting it squarely to their inability to share Miles’ attention in the source text. In doing so, the fic also positions Rachel and Bass as mirrors to one another:

“Now I’m apparently worried about whether or not the man I love is actually in love with the man who held me prisoner for eight years.” I’ve never said it out loud, but I catch his eye as the words leave my mouth and I know it’s true. We’re both terrified of having to share him. We’re pathetic. And all over a man who’s good at nothing but drinking and
killing and fucking and who can’t tell either of us he loves us, even if we were to beg for a straight answer.

The two start a game of chicken at one point, trying to discomfit the other by descriptions of their sexual encounters with Miles or possible threesomes with all of them, though Bass shuts that down fast, or tries to:

“You think I’d share him with you?”

“Probably not. You’re a jackass like that. But we both know you would if he told you to. You’ve played your hand, Bass; I know full well you’ll bend over for him any day.”

(lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”)

All the games aside, though, the thought of actually sharing Miles gets rejected in favor of making him choose, or, as Rachel declares: “He may not have exactly chosen me outright…but that seems to be what he wants us to think. Maybe you and I have to make the real choice for him” (lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”). Despite her defiance, and seeming determination to make Miles choose her, when Rachel actually confronts Miles with the dog tags, she tries to make the choice for him by planning to leave because she’s done competing with Bass—making real the threat she made once in the fake break-up in the source text (“Tomorrowland”). Within that, she inserts the “it’s okay” trope, as well, though less reassuring than in other fics, where the trope generally precedes offering a polyamorous option. Here, Rachel acknowledges that the good man she fell in love with was never actually hers and uses the “it’s okay” as reassurance that she understands how much Miles needs Bass and does not want to stand in the way of that any longer:
"But I’m ashamed to admit that’s not the man I fell in love with. Unfortunately for me, Bass already had the part of you I did fall for.” Miles tries to protest, but I slide my hand onto his stubbled cheek, trace his bottom lip with my thumb, and make him look me in the eye. “It’s okay. I love you, but you are never going to be mine. And I get that now.”

“Rachel, come on, please.” He grabs my hand, rattling the dog tags to make a point, but his eyes still shoot over to Bass, like he’s not sure what he can even say about them. “These, they’re…”

“It’s okay.” My eyes are watery, his face swimming in front of me even as I draw a finger over the familiar lines around his mouth and eyes. “I think… I’m gonna leave for Willoughby in the morning. Go see my dad, and Charlie.” (lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”)

Where Bass was near-giddy about the fake break up in the source text, here, he seems to have realized, as she has about him, that part of Miles really loves her, and he offers his own version of “it’s okay,” by stopping her from leaving, making her keep talking out other possibilities for them to work this out. As the possibility of sharing arises more seriously, she’s the one to protest first:

“I’m not saying you don’t love me.” *I don’t believe we’re only capable of loving one person at a time.* “But you can’t love the both of us, specifically. There’s too much venom here. We’d tear each other apart” (lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”).
When Miles still protests her going, and Bass clearly isn’t walking away now that he knows Miles still cares, though, she reassesses: “A shaky breath escapes me and I flinch at his dark brown gaze on me. I only have so many seconds, so many heartbeats, to make this final move. To decide where we go from here and how much trauma I can live with” (lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”). She decides to stay, but, staying true to the source text, this decision hardly leads to the happy contentment of the fics above. Rather, she’s “resigned” to not bolting as they “spiral into whatever twisted trois we’re on the doorstep of” (lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”).

That the story is not about Bass and Rachel falling in love continues to be obvious. When Miles asks how either of them are okay with it, even though the whole thing is at their instigation they make it clear they aren’t, really, but are doing it for him. Bass still thinks Rachel is “a hypocritical bitch” he’s never going to trust, and Rachel still thinks Bass is “insecure and a sociopath” who “destroyed my family” but is also part of Miles (lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”). Bass clarifies that he “doesn’t actually want to share” Miles, but adds, “I also don’t want to lose you. Certainly not to her. And here I thought I already had” (lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”). More moments like these continue as the three of them cement the new understanding through sex, where Bass and Rachel touch, as well, but keep Miles very much in between them. Miles protests this, though, and the idea of them sharing him disintegrates, as he tells them, “Wait. You want this to work? It can’t just be me in the middle… You two… you can’t fuck me and play Lava with each other at the same time” (lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”). Neither Bass or Rachel is terribly enthusiastic at the idea, but once they start, the reluctant attraction they’ve both been fighting surges and they forget for a while that they hate each other. However, the fic ends still on an
decidedly not romantic note as Rachel and Bass wake up the next morning, while Miles still blissfully sleeps:

We regard each other in shouting silence for long moments before he inches closer, muttering, “This is never gonna work.”

I lay a hand on his bare chest, white sheets stark against his tan, and argue, “It has to. It’s this or we kill each other.” (lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”)

While very true to the uneasy truce the characters share at the end of the series, it is also a very non-standard ending to a story in a genre generally classified as romance. The fic strips away the illusions of romance and delivers a story about two people, as Rachel says, “learning to breathe the same air” while struggling to be honest about who they are, what they want, and what they can live with. It breaks sex from love in some ways—for Bass and Rachel—while still allowing it to be a vehicle of expression for Miles: when he’s uncertain of what to do, Rachel tells him, “‘Just make love to me, Miles. Make love to us. You’re good at that.’ He’s not good at very many things but Miles is wonderfully physical. It’s how he makes up for all the words he withholds, without even realizing” (lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”). The layers of complexity in characterization and emotional punch make an otherwise simple plot a far deeper study both of character and of how relationships often work. It’s messy, but in stripping away the romance, it also strips away the normative expectations or the idea that “normal” even exists, and just allows the characters to find their way to what works for them, or, at least “how much trauma [they] can live with” (lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”).

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Alternately, rather than integrating a third person into an existing couple, other fics start with three single people at the beginning of the fic, all of whom are interested in one another. However, for various reasons, one character may resist the triad so that forming the characters into either one or two dyads becomes the first hurdle and convincing the third to make it a cohesive triad becomes the second. The reason for the resistance to a triad often comes from a secondary taboo that inhibits a relationship between two of the characters. In the fan fiction of *The Vampire Diaries* and *Revolution*, in particular, this taboo is either incest, like between Miles and Charlie or Damon and Stefan or pseudo-incest, as between Alaric and Elena. Both pleasebekidding’s Damon/Alaric/Elena fic “The Analogy of a Three Legged Stool” and JaqofSpade’s Miles/Bass/Charlie fic “The Path Where No One Goes” have Alaric and Miles resisting the relationship, respectively.

I discussed Miles/Charlie in depth in the previous chapter, and the dynamic between Alaric and Elena is very similar. While a relationship between the two is not technically incestuous, it has shades of that: Alaric was married to Elena’s birth mother at one point, though long after Isobel had given up her parental rights, so he was never her step-father. He also dated her aunt and, after her aunt and birth father both died, moved in with Elena and her brother Jeremy as a guardian-figure. The complicated familial entanglements, however, are not what give Alaric pause: his main concern is that he is also Elena’s history teacher. The two are a popular pairing, still, mostly because Alaric functions more as a peer in the source text rather than an authority figure, and this is “The Analogy of the Three Legged Stool’s” take on it, as well. In the fic, given Elena is in a relationship with Alaric’s best friend, who is a 175-year-old vampire, and she regularly handles life-and-death negotiations and situations with 1000-year-old vampires, Damon and Elena both feel that Alaric’s concern over the relationship’s
appropriateness is unnecessary. However, it still takes them a very long time to get him to agree. Like Miles, Alaric wrestles long and hard with his guilt over his attraction to Elena in any fic that pairs them. His and Miles’ manner of doing so, and self-castigation throughout, are also similar. The similarities in how they handle matters ground these triadic fics, as well.

Both men react to the other two being together with both jealousy and fascination. The first time Alaric finds himself thinking about them together, he calls the image both “intoxicating and repellant,” and has a realization that: “He wasn’t sure what inspired more jealousy, the thought of Elena’s hands on Damon, or the thought of Damon’s hands on Elena; he only knew he hated himself for thinking about it” (pleasebekidding, “The Analogy”). Miles’ initial reaction is pure jealousy, as he is focused on Charlie and denying he still has feelings for Bass:

He rounds a corner one day, and the fucker is kissing her belly, one hand peeling away her jeans while the other works her nipple. Her head is thrashing back against the wood, hips already bucking into him, little moans floating to him on the breeze. No, something inside of him screams. How long, and she hates him, and, wearily, desperately, this is not the first time.

His hand is shaking on his sword by the time he manages to turn his back. Can't kill Bass and we need him. And besides. These days? He's only half the monster you are. (JaqofSpades, “The Path”)

Later, however, when he has let Bass back in some emotionally, he reveals that the allure of the two of them together has grown. Stuck in a basement, trying to figure out how to get out, Miles’ focus keeps going to Bass and Charlie:
Miles thinks, and tries to focus on how the fuck he's going to get out of here. But she needs him – they need him – and fuck. Just this once, please? He'd been good, kept his distance from Bass, stayed away from Charlie. (When he saw them together, his imagination started filling in the fucking gaps, and yeah, those thoughts sure as hell were not getting him out of here.) (JaqofSpades, “The Path”)

Later, he starts to pray:

But you obviously don't give a damn about me any more, or I'd have been dead years ago. Probably damned twice over, by now. A little bit more every time I look at them.

Because I'm not imagining it. The way they're looking back.

His mouth goes dry, and all the blood left in his body heads straight for his cock.

Fuck. I'm praying to the wrong dude, Miles despairs. We're all going straight to hell. So fucking be it. (JaqofSpades, “The Path”)

Alaric’s inner turmoil is quite similar. In the shower, he allows himself to give in to his attraction, still evoking the notion of temptation as devilish and resistance as a force of good:

It was ridiculous, to jerk off in the shower with Damon and Elena in the next room; but whatever, he had to do something. On one shoulder, a tiny devil yelled over and over ‘she’s eighteen! It’s legal!’ and on the other, another devil yelled ‘he wants you! Just take him!’

In every cartoon Alaric had ever seen on this theme, one shoulder had an angel.
Just his luck. (pleasebekidding, “The Analogy”)

The path the other characters take to getting Alaric and Miles over the taboo and forming a triad are very different, however.

In “The Analogy of the Three Legged Stool,” Damon actively works to first get Elena on board, then the two of them work, slowly but surely, to convince Alaric. Alaric’s first reaction, comes after the two of them have had sex for the first time in a while, and he asks Damon what he wants from Elena: “Damon paused. Debated lying. Told the truth, capturing Alaric’s eyes again. ‘Same thing I want from you’” (pleasebekidding, “The Analogy”). Alaric does not approve, because of Damon’s age, but doesn’t grasp what Damon really wants. After Damon and Elena start a sexual relationship, as well, she gives him an “it’s okay,” moment, worried that because she and Damon have slept together, Alaric will be hurt. Damon’s trying to work out how she feels about it leads to them discussing the possibility for the first time of a triad:

“You’re not going to… leave him, are you?”

Damon froze. “We’re not together.”

“Well, something happened,” Elena said.

“Does it bother you?”

Elena was quiet a long time. “No,” she said at last. “There’s something…”
Damon waited patiently. Well, no, not patiently. What he wanted was to jump up and shout. Yes, he’d say. There is something. It’s called, the three of us get our happy ever after.

“There’s something about three,” she said at last. “It makes sense, you know?”

Elena Gilbert, genius. Damon waited, and bit his tongue.

“I mean, it’s stable, you know. A three legged-stool works a lot better than a two-legged one.” (pleasebekidding, “The Analogy”)

With Elena on board, Damon drops the pretense of him needing to choose, which jumps immediately to Alaric finally understanding that Damon isn’t talking about two dyadic relationships:

“I’ve been pretty fucking specific. With both of you. I want you both…I’m not giving you up. Elena doesn’t want me to, I don’t want to, and when you’re used to the idea, you won’t want me to either.”…

“I don’t think it’s my style, Damon.” He shook his head.

“Which part? The whole… three thing? Or sleeping with a student?” Damon frowned. “She won’t be, for much longer. You’re being ridiculous. I know how you feel about each…”

“Keep your fucking voice down, Salvatore,” Alaric growled. “I’d really like to not lose my job. She’s… I’m supposed to be taking care of her.”
“She would love you to take care of her, if you know what I mean.” Damon leaned, a little, in that way he did. Just to lean. Bumped against Alaric’s shoulder, touched his leg.

Alaric rubbed his eyes. “Drop it. I’m not talking about this right now. And definitely not in public. Just give me a break, Damon. I’ve had two days with my sick, elderly parents. I’m tired, I have to work tomorrow, and my life just gotten ten times more awkward than it was, which I gotta say was pretty fuckin’ awkward. So I don’t want to talk about it. Please don’t make me.” He finished his glass.

“Polyamory is the new black,” Damon said, absurdly.

“Oh, fuck off,” Alaric said, dropping a couple of notes on the bar and walking away. (pleasebekidding, “The Analogy”)

The rest of the fic then becomes an exercise in convincing Alaric that it’s okay, with Elena joining Damon in that effort. In the end, it is Elena who manages to convince him, rather than Damon, which, as with the focus of Charlie’s consent in the Miles/Charlie’s cases, was needed to make the fact that this is her decision to break the taboo explicit. When she finally broaches the subject with Alaric, he starts off denying her, giving the same reasons Miles often gives Charlie. Elena isn’t as forceful in her rebuttal as Charlie, but she is just as clear, and ultimately takes the initiative to make the first move:

Elena felt like her heart would break. “I don’t understand,” she said. “It’s what I want. It’s what Damon wants and… you might not really feel like admitting it to yourself but I think it’s what you want, too, Alaric. The three of us… we fit, we make sense together, in the strangest way.” She pleaded with her eyes, and hoped she didn’t sound
like a little girl. She turned beneath Alaric’s arm, resting her legs against his thigh.

“Don’t pretend this isn’t real. We all know it is.”

Alaric bit his lip, made sad eyes. “Elena…”

“Don’t tell me I’m eighteen. Age has no relevance here. Damon loves us. Both of us. And I love both of you…” she blushed, and shook her head slightly, letting her hair fall over her shoulder. “I guess it’s just a question of whether you love us, too.”

“It’s not that simple.” As he said it, though, Alaric’s hand sifted through Elena’s hair. “I’m supposed to be looking after you.”

Elena smiled. “That won’t change. Just, everything else will.”

Bold, suddenly, she leaned, and captured Alaric’s lips in a kiss, swallowed the murmur he let out. “It’s not so crazy,” she said.

“It’s crazy,” Alaric answered. “It’s pretty goddamn crazy.” But he pulled her closer, and kissed her deeper, his body relaxing as she eased into his lap.

“It’s what I want,” she said. “It’s what we all want. Does that count for anything?”

“I don’t have it in me to argue about this any more,” he said, and kissed her again. (pleasebekidding, “The Analogy”)

The two of them tell Damon, and the three come together, falling asleep idyllically by the fire, as described above.
Conversely, none of the characters in “The Path Where No One Goes” actively pursues a threesome relationship. However, where Damon’s relationships with Elena and Alaric form and function separately from one another for the most part, Miles still serves as an emotionally intimate third in the formation of Bass and Charlie’s relationship, even when holding himself apart from them. Everything Charlie and Bass feel for each other, ends up connected to Miles as much as either of them. Bass even thinks his initial draw to Charlie is because of Miles:

It had boiled his brain, and suddenly he was stupid for her, downright surrendering his sword to another fucking Matheson. He told himself it was Miles, for a while. The way she lifted her chin and curled her lip, so glorious in her disdain. The flash of murder in her eyes, and the cool, cool head for combat. The way she watched him, one part curiosity to two parts resentment, furious about the fact that they worked so well together. Killed so well. And if she only let herself … (JaqofSpades, “The Path”)

Charlie, too, links their developing relationship to Miles, claiming “he seduces her with stories of Miles” before she justifies her feelings for him, even after all the bad things he’s done, because Miles loves him, too:

This is not the same man, her stubborn heart insists. She's not sure who he is becoming, or whether it was mad General Monroe who was the aberration, but this is her uncle's oldest friend. The only person left alive who loves Miles as much she does – and the only other man she's willing to rely on. And with Connor and her men sent off to scout the nearby towns, it's just the two of them, filling the air with stories in a bid to avoid all the things left unsaid. (JaqofSpades, “The Path”)

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And Miles remains between them, when they have their “it’s okay” moment, after Rachel and Miles break up:

“They talked about you a lot,” she says quietly. “Yelled, actually. Mom said he never stopped loving you.” Her eyes, full of understanding…she props her forehead against his.

“It's okay, you know. I don't mind.” (JaqofSpades, “The Path”)

The fic handles the incest in much the same manner as the Miles/Charlie fics in the previous chapter: from Miles feeling a lot of guilt and angst, even after the triad has fully formed (“Yep. Fucking his niece is certainly a new low”) to Charlie’s refusal to feel guilty about it while being very straightforward about what she wants (“What am I supposed to say, Miles? 'Oh God, you're my uncle, don't touch me?' You know I can't lie for shit,” she says defensively. “Yes, I want this.”) (JaqofSpades, “The Path”). The relationship reconciliation between Bass and Miles is likewise akin to those I analyzed in Chapter 2, with Miles attempting to tell Bass he still loves him and Bass afraid to trust that, throwing the things Miles did to him back in his face defensively instead. The main difference in the way these moments unfold in “The Path Where No One Goes” is that the text filters both moments of acceptance through the third person’s view. Like Miles being there in spirit as Bass and Charlie fall in love, processing both breaking the taboo and the reconciliation through the third partner solidifies their presence and the interconnectedness of the three of them as a triad.

Bass is the one who supports Charlie’s confession, refusing to let her feel bad about it. He goes farther, bringing it into their relationship as an added element of sexual fantasy, much as Allison and Scott did in “It’s Okay”: “[H]e's not noble about this. Can't be. She's riding him the first time he does it, already slippery from one orgasm when he tells her what it's like, having
that big body wrapped around you, that curving blade of a cock inside. She immediately shatters for the second time, and he wants to tell her, right then, but he has to be sure” (JaqofSpades, “The Path”). When he is sure Miles wants her, too, he tells her so, letting that sit with her for a while. When the moment comes that they are on the brink of a threesome, and Miles looks like he could retreat, Bass’s inability to be noble reasserts itself. He thinks to himself that he should “say something” to “let Miles escape with his dignity intact,” but, instead, he puts the question clearly out there, ostensibly to Charlie, but clearly for Miles, since he knows the answer: “Is this what you want, Charlotte?” he asks. “Both of us?” (JaqofSpades, “The Path”). Miles’ capitulation continues from Bass’s point of view, with his emotional and physical reaction the focus: “Miles growls then, and it's blessedly familiar, that declaration of carnal intent. Bass lets himself breathe again, trying not to hyperventilate. He hadn't let himself think about this possibility, not really, because Miles and Charlie, Miles and Charlie …” (JaqofSpades, “The Path”).

Charlie likewise serves as the lens through which the reader experiences Miles and Bass’ reconciliation. When Charlie tells them that she “wants to see,” meaning them, together, Bass tries to backpedal, because he thinks Miles does not actually want that, telling Miles that it’s okay, that what the three of them have shared, focused on Charlie is enough. But then Miles confesses he still wants Bass and they fight, their pain and devastation clear for Charlie who wants to fix it, for Bass, mostly, but doesn’t know how:

The note of resignation grates over her already raw nerves, and Charlie's fists itch with the need to teach her asshole uncle a lesson. Drink like a Matheson, fight like a Matheson, fuck 'em up like a Matheson, she fumes. Some legacy. She's about to kiss
Bass, to pull him into her and make it clear she chose him first, when Miles finally lurches into coherence…

Miles looks away, seemingly chewing on the words, then spitting them out. “Every day of the last five years, Bass. No matter who I was with.”

Charlie watches Bass as the confession lands. The flare of hope in his eyes sends a glad little shiver down her spine, but then she has to watch it die, snuffed out by a blazing, boiling resentment. He pushes himself back into Miles’ face, but this time, it's pure threat.

“I thought I was a black hole, Miles. The worst decision you ever made,” Bass taunts, nose to nose with his former lover. “Not. Family,” he grinds through gritted teeth.

Miles looks stricken at first, but they’re still them. Warlords at heart, happier to swing a sword than have an honest conversation. One giant hand lands on Bass’ shoulder to push him away, but the other makes a grab for his fist. And misses, only to catch it on his chin. He rears back, outraged, then throws his entire body over Bass, the two of them pummelling [sic] each other as they roll around on the bedroll.

Sex with their clothes on, Charlie concludes seconds later. She wonders if it was ever any different between them, or whether this was the latest in a long series of pretexts.

(JaqofSpades, “The Path”)

By handling each individual pair through the same patterns that other fics do, “The Path Where No One Goes” connects to the source text and the separate ships. It may take the trio in a
new direction, but for fans of each of the pairings individually, these connections lend credibility to the formation of the triad, making the norms challenged and broken feel less jarring, both emotionally and cognitively. The characters’ main drives from the source text remain, as well: Miles’ self-loathing and trying to be a good man; Bass’s desperate need to be loved and underlying insecurity and vulnerability; Charlie’s desire to prove herself and have them see her as strong and their equal. While the fic does not make the same arguments about the rules not applying, notably the three of them form their relationship while out on a mission alone, away from everyone else. In the sequel, “To Build a Dream,” they find themselves in California, looking for a place to call home, where they can be someone other than who they were before:

“Why go back?” she asks the restless ceiling over the bed, Bass and Miles lying as stiff as boards either side of her. “Why don't we just pick a town out here, and stay?”

“Your mother? Blanchard? The glory of great state of Texas?” Miles offers, but he's far from persuasive, hangover notwithstanding. Bass says nothing, but she glances sideways to catch the bitter twist to his mouth. In Texas, Monroe will stalk him till the day he dies. Here, he's just another scary guy drifted in from the carnage in the East.

They've been tiptoeing around the future for months now, but it's time to grab it by the scruff of the neck.

“Let's find a place we like, and then stay. Somewhere with a beach,” she tells the room, and they don't say yes, not straight away, but things are different, after that. They move more slowly, and ask different questions. (JaqofSpades, “To Build a Dream”)
Miles is over the guilt by the start of the sequel, but, at the same time, by finding a place where they can be not Generals Monroe and Matheson but just “scary guy[s] who drifted in,” they also divest themselves of the possibility of social repercussions for the incest, leaving just the polyamory in play. The sequel is one of the few fics that carries on after the formation of the relationship, letting it develop as the characters become more comfortable as a triad and move toward their next goal of establishing a permanent home and life for themselves.

**Conclusion**

In the characters’ struggles to figure out how to function outside of monogamy, many of the fics demonstrate an awareness of the cultural conversation around polyamory and challenge the natural construction of monogamy. In “Murders of a Quiet, Domestic Interest,” above, Rachel makes the clear declaration: “I don’t believe we’re only capable of loving one person at a time” (lovesrogue36, “Murders of Quiet, Domestic Interest”). General Blanchard, reflecting on Miles/Bass/Charlie in “The Boys are Back in Town,” thinks, “Knowing them the way he did, he totally got their unconventional lifestyle and good for them. You had to grab the devil by his tail and rip his fucking horns off just to get a glimmer of happiness these days” (hayj, “The Boys Are Back in Town”). That these characters do all exist in worlds where social norms could have far less sway should allow the fics to ignore the dictates of institutionalized sexuality and refuse to bother trying to justify that choice. Certainly, the choice to do just that, is one that many writers have made—the discussion of whether this was appropriate in slash, or evidence of homophobia on the part of the fans has been ongoing for nearly thirty years (Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins 22–23).
But most of the fics I examined for and in this chapter refuse to take the easy route. Instead, the characters struggle not just with society’s expectations and the possible condemnation of friends and families, but their own conceptualizations of what romance should be—namely, monogamous. Elena’s hands tremble in “Auld Lang Syne My Ass” as she announces to her friends, “I’ve chosen, and, in the end, I chose…not to choose” (pleasebekidding, “Auld Lang Syne My Ass”). Notably, this wrestling occurs more for certain characters than others, and more in certain fandoms than others, but most of these are tied to the source text: it would be out of character for Damon to fret about breaking social conventions of any kind, but in character to recognize his tendency toward jealousy would make navigating polyamory a challenge for him. Similarly, that Teen Wolf fics are those most focused on the pragmatic side of polyamory, including Googling articles on how to make it work well, makes sense, given that Teen Wolf is also the source text in which friends frankly discussing sex and sexual identities, as well as the only one to even mention practicalities like condom use, and making sure to be prepared with one because a date might get more physical than you anticipate.

These polyamorous fics do tend to end in characters in some form of a committed relationship, often on a note of hope now that the difficulties have been navigated, which ties them back to those narrative conventions of romance which support institutionalized heterosexuality. However, more than any other of the categories of fic I have examined, polyamory also makes explicit what the others only imply when contrasted with the source text: the presence and existence of bisexuality. In these fics, the question of “is he or she gay?” and subsequent debates that can arise about the “canon” sexuality of the character, slips away. Most of the OT3 fics are made up of both male and female characters, although those of three men or three women do exist. These, however, are largely less popular. This could, perhaps, point back
to Scodari’s theory of wish fulfillment and self-insertion which allows the writer to figuratively be with both male characters. On the other hand, the depth of introspection and nuance in the characters’ negotiating their feelings and desires still points to a more complex explanation than she offers.

In most, the characters’ bisexuality is an already established fact—some Scott/Isaac/Allison fics and others in Teen Wolf also include the boys discovering their attraction, as in the Scott/Stiles fics in chapter two, but just as often, that hurdle has already been crossed. This, then, simultaneously challenges the “one true love” romantic convention and the heterosexual/homosexual binary by embracing the notion of fluidity in both affection and attraction, refusing to force either to conform to the strictures of the source text. When coupled with the refusal of fan fiction texts to truly close because their authors constantly work and rework them, these types of fics challenge multiple narrative and social norms, and, perhaps more than any of the other sub-genres, offer a subversive interpretation of their source texts that offer insight into the function of the constructed, non-natural nature of institutionalized heterosexuality.
Conclusion

In his introduction to the 20th Anniversary edition of *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins argues that fan communities have always had a tension between wanting to create something for themselves and wanting to engage in a larger cultural conversation (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*). While this could be dismissed as “play vs politics,” Jenkins points out that:

The forms of play which drive fan culture are often deeply political at the most personal level (for example, teens asserting their own sexual identities, wives claiming some control over their social and cultural lives), and even when fan’s play is “innocent” of politics, it is often forced to defend itself because it operates…outside heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions. (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*)

In this project, I have examined distinct forms of “play” that cross this play/politics line to engage specifically with the normative constraints of institutionalized heterosexuality. Western culture has progressed in the near thirty years since Henry Jenkins wrote his first article on the controversy stirred up by the existence of slash as a genre. Rather than the underground practice it was decades ago, producers and actors, as well as mainstream media, are aware of fandom and fan fiction, and many have encountered and responded to slash. Academic interest has never waned in it: in the last year alone, over 100 research articles have delved into some facet of slash.

From this multitude of works, an equally multitudinous number of theories have arisen, positioning slash as everything from misogynistic to embodying the transgressive potential to actively subvert patriarchal norms to find a way to “write outside the hierarchical restrictions of
These multitudinous theories, however, tend to organize along their own binary of normative/transgressive, and little scholarly work exists that investigates the subversive potential of fan fiction beyond male/male slash, often re-creating the same potential issue slash itself has been accused of perpetuating: an overwhelming focus on male characters being queered without a similar investigation into femslash or potentially non-normative heterosexual relationships.

In this project, I sought to expand the analysis, using many of the theories that have been applied to slash, as well as other elements of queer theory and critical media studies, to examine not only slash, but other relationships with the potential to resist or subvert institutionalized heterosexuality. What I found was a complex engagement with the norms and assumptions of institutionalized heterosexuality, some of which were resisted, others of which were reinforced, but all of which were explored through a lens that demonstrates a community actively deconstructing meaning and negotiating the conceptions of desire it finds in the source texts it takes as its own.

A large part of my inquiry found itself in the liminal spaces between constructs: homosexual/heterosexual, transgressive/normative, assimilative/deconstructive, friend/family/lover. What developed was an underlying sense that rose to an argument that denied an either/or construct and demanded more of an examination of fluidity in all forms, and to the sense of possibility as a theoretical underpinning in and of itself. Institutionalized heterosexuality depends on separation and categorization: of sexes, of genders, of sexual identities, of attributes. This categorization cannot hope to capture the complexity of human subjectivities, sexual and otherwise (Sin 414). This is what makes bisexuality such a threatening, destabilizing construct—to the point that even in discussing slash and its potential
subversiveness, the discourse often returns to “making straight characters gay,” focusing on their same-sex encounters rather than their fluidity, despite Henry Jenkins’ chapter on slash being titled, “Welcome to Bisexuality, Captain Kirk” (Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins 22–28; Jenkins, Textual Poachers 185).

But fluidity, possibility, inform both the basis of much of queer theory and much of the nature of fan studies: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines queer as including “the openness of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excess of meaning” when gender and sexuality “aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick, Tendencies 8). In writing fan fiction, fans struggle with unsatisfying narratives “to try to articulate to themselves and others the unrealized possibilities within the texts,” and refuse to be bound by narrative endings, but instead “play with the limitations and possibilities offered by their source text of choice” (Jenkins, Textual Poachers 23). Esther Saxey claims fiction exploring non-monogamy opens up “enormous possibilities…for new sexual and emotional interactions between characters, fresh plots which move towards innovative conclusions, and the imaginative reconfiguration of both monogamy and non-monogamy” (31). Queerness exists in the middle of texts, in the possibilities that alternative options leave open for characters before the narrative ends and closes them off (Roof xxxiv; Miller 98). The tension in the erotic triangle, too, is all about the possibility of transgression and the slipping focus of desire. Buddy films and bromances both are replete with homoerotic tension, subtext and possibility, and though neither genre generally crystallizes that non-heteronormative possibility into fact, if we never reach the ending, the closing off of possibility, then the ambiguity remains (Lang 7).

This is what fan texts do best, especially in regard to television narratives, which have their own inherent instability, especially in romantic arcs. Because of the serial nature of
television, full closure of storylines is rare, which leaves latent ambiguity in the texts in the realm of the possible. As fans struggle to realize those latent possibilities through their work, they continue to do so in polysemic ways that defy their own sense of narrative closure. The nature of fan fiction itself counters the expectation of narrative closure: fans continually rework the texts, reinventing the story and composing multiple alternate endings that allow the doubts and ambiguities in the middle to expand continuously—even if one fan moves away from writing in the fandom, another will come along and begin.

This possibility and refusal to be confined by norms, even when they do not completely subvert them is what connects all the fics in this project. The bromances and slash together offer multiple possibilities for ways of understanding male-male intimacy. Combined, they open up possibilities that exist between hegemonic masculinity and homoerotic expression, much as the idea of the lesbian continuum opens up possibilities for the expression of female friendship and intimacy, with or without an erotic charge. This breakdown and blurring of the lines is something much about polyamory supports, as well, and lies at the heart of much of the feminist and queer challenges to monogamy—to stop privileging sexual over non-sexual relationships and insisting on categorizing the uncategorizable (Jackson and Scott 155). Possibility, too, lies in the more liminal femslash, which counters institutionalized heterosexuality’s proscriptions on female sexuality and desire and opens up space for women to fulfill physical desire without the need for a romantic union that has for so long been argued to be at the heart of women’s desire, ultimately yoking them to a need for a partner, which then curtails their other relationships, which takes us back to the divisions and categorizations that box people in.

The incestuous fics stand apart from the others, mostly because they do not relate as clearly to subversive actions and desires to be acted on outside of the space of fiction. But their
writing and circulation presents as subversive acts, especially given the backlash authors can receive. While published under anonymous pseudonyms, these fics are out there for anyone to find, and the authors may not link them to their real world lives, but they still interact through the paratextual communities surrounding the fan fiction archives and other social media sites, like Tumblr. Although there are male/male incestuous fics, these fics, like the femslash and polyamorous fics, in many ways directly impact female desire, and engage in other discussions surrounding that desire, like power, consent and agency. Through the fics we see the contested nature of these sites, and the myriad influences and implications within them. Many of the fics offer a critique of patriarchal power which turns feminine desire to its own pleasure, while others emphatically push back against it in crafting their discourses on consent. These engage with cultural conversations and norms, among mainstream culture, feminist and queer theory of the last thirty years, possibly more explicitly than the other fics, as they tackle the issues the source texts only hint at regarding the nature and autonomy of female desire constructed within a still robust system of institutionalized heterosexuality. Most of the fics reach no conclusions, and the paratextual commentary surrounding them shows a community equally uncertain about the answers to the questions it struggles with, but in openly writing the fic, discussing it and sharing their own reactions to it from a largely female point of view, the writers and readers perform their own act of resistance to the constraints and limits put on their own sexuality regarding appropriate directions for desire. The ability to engage in this discourse circles back around to the other categories of fic, and the acts of transgression that may only be in the imagination, but nevertheless open the cultural discourse to possibilities in ways of living and loving that challenge institutionalized heterosexuality, including mononormativity.
Future research along these lines should further interrogate the potential for slash to reinforce gendered norms regarding masculinity, rather than subvert them, by tying intimacy to sexuality. Likewise, femslash deserves more attention, both to the discourses within it, as well as the possible implications in its less robust representation compared to other types of relationships. Beyond incest, other fics exploring taboo categories or power dynamics warrant investigation—much of fan scholarship has focused on the positives, but a large portion of fan fiction also delves into darker themes. What purpose this can serve, especially within the discourses of transgressive literature, could prove a fruitful avenue for exploration. More focus on fluidity—of fans, of narratives, of sexualities and relationships—can only enrich fan studies, and, when considering it within the larger scope of media or literary studies, can add divergent voices to the discourse surrounding multiple cultural constructs and institutions. Above all, this project has confirmed for me the need to resist a universalizing theory, or debate about genres as if they are monolithic structures. Patterns and possibilities proved to be a far more fruitful inquiry, and within them offered a read on fan fiction, like sexuality and gender, that avoids the binary construction of “either/or” and embraces, instead, the complexity of “both/and,” both in fiction and life.
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Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of English Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
Instructor of record for 4 sections of upper-level Advanced Composition course
Designed course to focus on narrative, research and multimedia composition, requiring students to create and interact on blogs and social media as part of the course

Adjunct Instructor, Department of English Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA 2000-2001
Developed and taught 4 sections of first-year English composition course using media and popular culture criticism to encourage engagement with the material and as the basis for class writing assignments.
Adjunct Instructor, Department of English  
*University of California, Irvine*  
Fall 2000  
Developed and taught 2 sections of Academic Writing and Research

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of English  
*Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA*  
1998-2000  
Adapted department syllabus and independently taught 6 sections of freshman Narrative and Researched Writing courses.  
Tutored students one-on-one in the Writing Lab

Teaching Assistant, Tort Law  
*University of San Diego School of Law, San Diego, CA*  
2003-2004  
Tutored at-risk students in the course in small group setting  
Prepared weekly study guides and worksheets to reinforce course material  
Assisted with classroom management and administrative tasks

Other Teaching Experience

Instructor, Communication and Media,  
*Blueprint Summer Programs, Washington, D.C.*  
*Blueprint Summer Programs, Lehigh, PA*  
Summer 2016  
Developed and taught a communications course for college-bound high school students who want to major in communication or media studies  
Created and assigned projects in multiple media, including visual criticism of photographs at the Newseum, photography composition, multimedia criticism of music videos and final projects of either digital film or image production they presented to the whole program,

Instructor, Careers in Law  
*Blueprint Summer Programs, Charlottesville, VA*  
Summer 2015  
Developed and taught a course for college-bound high school students who are interested in being attorneys.  
Employed television shows and movies to demonstrate lecture points and keep students engaged, such as analyzing powerful closing arguments from movies and playing a game using *Law & Order* to practice evidentiary objections

LSAT Prep Instructor  
*Kaplan Test Prep, Reno, NV*  
2010-2011  
Presented and taught LSAT prep from a structured system and lesson plan  
Adapted problems and process as demanded by the classroom environment  
Worked closely with students to prepare writing portion of the exam

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Research Assistant, Professor Roy L. Brooks  
*University of San Diego School of Law, San Diego, CA*  
2003  
Performed close reading and analysis of affirmative action case law for potential journal articles

360
Conducted and compiled extensive legal and social research for a monograph on racial reparations
Assisted in the preparation and editing of a scholarly monograph.

PUBLICATIONS


**Fowler, Charity.** A Bad Bromance: Betrayal, Violence and Dark Delight in Subverting the Romance Narrative.” *Sex, Subversion and Bodily Boundaries: The Darker Side of Slash Fan Fiction*, edited by Ashton Spacey, McFarland & Company, Inc. (accepted, pending final review)

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS


“I’d like to believe that in some alternate universe we are living this wonderful lesbian life together’: Female Friendships and Femslash.” *Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association National Conference*, Seattle, WA, March 2016.


“Seasonal Villainy: Relativity and Redemption in the World of the Big Bad.” *Evil Incarnate: Manifestations of Villains and Villainy*. Interdisciplinary Conference at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH, July 2014.


“Mixed Signals: Slut-shaming and Consent on *The Vampire Diaries*.” *Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association National Conference*. Chicago, IL, April 2014


UNIVERSITY & DEPARTMENTAL SERVICE

University Assessment Advisory Committee, University of Virginia, 2016-2017
University Writing Competency Assessment Committee, University of Virginia, 2014-2015
Search Committee, Virginia Commonwealth University, Department of English 2012-2013.
Editorial Board, San Diego Law Review, University of San Diego School of Law, 2004-2005
President, International Law Society, University of San Diego School of Law, 2003-2005

FELLOWSHIPS, HONORS & AWARDS

Humanities Center Fellowship, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013
Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011-2013
Academic Achievement Award, USD School of Law, 2003-2005
USD School of Law Grant, 2002
Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1998-2000
Golden Key National Honor Society, 1996
Phi Beta Kappa, 1996
National Merit Scholar, 1993

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Board of Directors, Reno Little Theater, Reno, NV, 2008-2001
Big Brother, Big Sisters, Reno, NV, 2006-2007

MEMBERSHIPS

State Bar of California
State Bar of Nevada
Popular Culture Association