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Many Roads to Love

Sexual Identity Formation in Slash Fiction

ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, scholars and researchers from various backgrounds have studied and argued about fan fiction. While many researchers now agree that fan fiction, and especially homoerotic slash fiction, can be seen as queer fiction aiming to deconstruct seemingly heteronormative popular media texts, a more nuanced reading of slash fiction has been lacking. Slash fiction has popularly been believed to “queer” heterosexual characters or place the characters in a sort of queer utopia where the line between homosocial and homoerotic is drawn in water and homophobia seldom gets in the way of the lovers. This article offers a more nuanced view of slash fiction and how slash fans write queer characters. Drawing from contemporary sexual identity formation studies, this article outlines three categories, or tropes, which fans often use in their texts. Closely reading three slash texts from three different fandoms, I highlight some of the various ways slash writers discuss sexual diversity, homophobia, historical and contemporary views of homosexuality and the many roads people take in forming their sexual identities.

Keywords: fan fiction, sexual identity formation, queer studies

SINCE THE EARLY 1990s, scholars from different backgrounds have argued and theorised about slash fan fiction, its themes, and its role in contemporary queer literature (see e.g. Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Pugh 2005; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Booth 2014). Fan fiction, or stories written by fans for fans based on their favourite TV-shows,

movies, etcetera, and its homoerotic subgenre slash, are massive fields with possibly millions of readers, writers, and artists working in countless fandoms. While much attention has been given to the seemingly revolutionary practise of women writing gay erotica about (allegedly) heterosexual male characters (and sometimes real people), what has been lacking is a nuanced investigation of the various ways that slash fiction deals with such issues as homophobia, the development of sexual identity at various points in history, and the challenges that people face when coming to terms with queer identities. Much has been written about the “queering” of straight characters for the purposes of writing more egalitarian and fulfilling romances (Jenkins 1992; Driscoll 2006; Woledge 2006; Booth 2014). The numerous and varied ways in which fans discuss queer themes and problematise the forming of sexual identities, even in the rather limited scope of monogamous and largely white, middle-class homosexual relationships, deserve attention. This article outlines a few ways in which fan writers write more robust and varied sexual identities for their protagonists than the “straight man having gay sex and loving it” trope would indicate. Drawing from contemporary identity studies (Dillon et al. 2011; Peña-Talamantes 2013; Gordon and Silva 2015) and theories about the formation of sexual identity, I discuss few of the various methods and themes that slash writers adopt in constructing their protagonists sexuality and the history behind their queer love stories. I start out by very briefly discussing previous research done on slash fiction as it relates to this study, then move on to outline the theoretical framework used here. From there I move on to a close reading of chosen fan texts.

The motivation behind using sexual identity formation theories as a lens to examine fictional characters is diverse. First, as several scholars from Henry Jenkins (1992) onwards have pointed out, writing and reading slash might serve a deeper, more political purpose for some fans; namely, the need to critically read and deconstruct the stories that mainstream media tells us, and in doing so, question the essentialist notions of gender, sex and sexuality prevalent in our culture (see e.g. Jenkins 1992; Jung 2002; Busse 2006; Driscoll 2006; Lackner et al. 2006; Woledge 2006; Booth 2014).

Second, we must bear in mind that behind these fictional characters are the real people writing them. As Daniel Marshall (2010, 75) points out in his study about the trope of portraying queer youth as victims, the occurrence of interpretive work and its public dissemination by queer young people themselves is an agentic practise, an example of queer youth taking a more active role in consuming media and contesting the stories they are told. Similarly, writing and reading slash may offer fans of all ages a possibility to discover themselves through the fictional characters they are rewriting. Sarah Gomillion and Traci Giuliano's study (2011) shows that LGBTQ teens wish media would tell more stories about same-sex families and happy queer relationships, because such stories could give young people more positive role models. Paulette Rothbauer (2004) shows that when it comes to reading practises, young queer women look for different narratives about gay and lesbian people and reject the typical modernist coming out narratives. She also shows that her interviewees use the Internet as an access to alternative digital texts.

Thirdly, this article is part of a larger ongoing study about slash fans and the role that slash may play in formation of fans' sexual identities and/or their understanding of sexual diversity. The main question in that study is, what kind of media spaces fan fiction communities create and how these spaces may affect the ways fans understand non-straight sexuality and possibly come to terms with their own non-straight identities. Situated in this larger picture, I use identity formation studies to point to other ways of understanding the representations of sexual identities and orientations. As Marshall (2010, 80) points out, conducting research at media level about queer youth and their responses to media portrayals is important because cultural contests over meaning usually have a media dimension, and it is through media that hegemonic notions like queer youth as victims are circulated.

Slash and After-Queer Reading Practises

Over the decades, much has been written and theorised about fan fiction, with slash having gotten perhaps a disproportionately large part of the academic interest maybe due to the perceived oddity and “perver-

sity” of women writing gay erotica/porn (Reid 2009, 464). Two of the early studies of fan fiction and slash writing, Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women: Television Fans and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1992), both aim to dissect and understand the motives some women fans have for “queering” seemingly straightforward popular texts and to theorise about the central themes in slash fiction. Bacon-Smith in chapter 9 of *Enterprising Women* argues that the primary theme of slash is the creation of egalitarian romance, which despite taking place between two men has many similarities with popular romance novels.

The story of women resisting patriarchy by writing egalitarian pornographic romances between two heterosexual men is a compelling one, and many other academics have since developed the idea. In the anthology *Fan Fiction at the Age of the Internet* (Hellekson and Busse 2006), Abigail Derecho, Catherine Driscoll, and Elizabeth Woledge all further develop the theory of slash writers deconstructing seemingly heteronormative texts and revealing queer subtexts in them. Woledge (2006), following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (1985) work on male homosexual desire, places slash in a utopian world she dubs *intimatopia*. There would-be lovers can transit seamlessly from deep, platonic friendship into homoerotic, sexual relationship without homophobia ever getting in the way of true love. Driscoll (2006) in her essay, places slash at the intersection of romance and pornography, highlighting the potential of slash to reveal and combine the pornography of romance and the romance of pornography. Derecho (2006) contemplates fan fiction writing as the offspring of earlier female writing practises where women react to earlier works of fiction by writing their own versions of them. Paul Booth (2014, 400) similarly sees fan fiction highlighting the re-reading of mainstream media. To him, slash represents empowerment and denotes the creation of a queer space where mainstream media texts can be re-read. In this, Booth chimes with Kristina Busse (2006) and Eden Lackner et al. (2006, 201) who see fan fiction as a queer female space where the binary notions of sex and gender are challenged and where

the conventions of slash writing are transferred to the way in which women writing and reading slash communicate.

What all of those previous studies have in common is that they all understand slash to use queer reading practises. Following Frederik Dhaenens et al. (2008, 337), I understand queer theory as a reaction against normalised sexual hierarchies, conducting research outside the boundaries of predefined gay or lesbian communities. If we place the concept of resistance at the heart of queer theory, we can understand why the idea of slash writers resisting hegemonic male-targeted texts is so compelling. As Marshall (2010, 76) points out, queer audiences resist heteronormative media texts by reading themselves into those texts that do not offer many or any non-heterosexual representations. This “reading in” practise changes, however, when media texts are no longer purely populated with heterosexual characters. What Marshall (2010, 77) calls a “Queer moment” in the post-1990s era marks a change in queer reception practises from reading *into* to reading *out of* the text (Marshall 2010, 77). Marshall calls these critical readings of explicit gay and lesbian characters “after-queer” reading practises. Contemporary reading of slash reveals the same kind of change from fans reading themselves into texts to more complex and (one might argue) more realistic portrayals of sexual diversity and sexual identities. From the resisting of labels and the seamless transition from homosocial to homoerotic that many of these earlier scholars hailed as revolutionary, we now see fans more readily labelling some characters as gay or bisexual and critically analysing such concepts as homophobia.² This does not mean that all slash is, or should be, understood as queer nor that what is queer is always progressive. Indeed, sometimes fan fiction with queer themes can end up supporting the very structures they seem to be resisting, such as heteronormativity or strict gender roles.

As Marshall points out, after-queer reading practises do not completely supplant queer techniques of reading-against-the-grain, as indeed not all media texts have embraced portraying sexualities outside heterosexuality. As can be seen from Internet movements like #GiveCaptainAmericaABoyfriend³ sexual diversity in big superhero

blockbusters is still something that is only being discussed. Indeed, contemporary slash might in many ways be situated at the intersection of reading into and reading out of, as I will demonstrate later in this article.

A Brief Outline of Fandoms and Texts

The texts discussed here belong to three different fandoms: *Captain America*, *The X-Men*, and *Starsky & Hutch*. Stories from different fandoms were intentionally selected in order to offer a more extensive view of slash fiction. Specifically, the reason stories from these fandoms were selected for analysis is that they have interesting similarities that makes it sensible to discuss them together. Firstly, all of them are older and have enjoyed a considerable revival in recent years. Secondly, they are all situated at different points in history, which makes it possible to discuss sexual identity as a historical construct. The selected stories also represent broader themes and tropes in contemporary slash fiction. These tropes can be briefly summarised as I. “I’m not gay, it’s just you that I love,” (including a common variant of “Having to pretend to be a couple made them understand their feelings”) arguably still one of the most common tropes in slash fiction; II. “In denial,” a trope where one or both protagonists are written as queer and for one reason or another have a hard time coming to terms with their sexuality; and III. “Success stories” where the protagonists either successfully overcome some difficulties and are able to embrace their sexuality, or stories that aim to portray gay people in more varied ways than contemporary media usually does. This list of tropes is based on my extensive reading of slash in various fandoms but should by no means be understood as comprehensive or complete.

Captain America is an American superhero that first saw the light of day in 1941 in the comic *Captain America #1*. Captain America can be seen as the ideal American patriot, a supersoldier created to help the Allied powers to defeat Hitler and win the war. In a film based on Captain America comics, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), Captain America’s alter ego is Steve Rogers, a frail and sickly young art student from Brooklyn, New York, who was denied access to the army because

of his health. However, a German-born scientist, Dr. Erskin, sees Mr. Rogers' potential and offers him a chance to serve his country by giving him a serum that enhances his good qualities and gives him a nearly indestructible body. After seeing his best friend Bucky presumably fall to his death from a moving train in the Alps, Steve is devastated and soon after dies himself crashing a plane to stop the movies villain, Red Skull, from blowing up major cities with weapons of mass destruction. Steve's body is finally discovered in 2011 and he is revived, having been in the ice for nearly seventy years. Captain America fandom, old as it is, really became popular with fan fiction writers after the 2011 film. Especially the relationship between Steve and Bucky continues to be the source of great interest and speculation for slash writers. The text I have chosen to represent this fandom is called "All The Angels and The Saints" (2014) by Speranza. It is a Steve/Bucky short story about the difficulties of combining competing parts of one's identity and about the battles one must face in trying to remain true to one self in a world where everybody you used to know is gone.

X-men is a group of mutants, or people that have through, what is called the X-gene, received a plethora of superhuman powers and abilities, such as the ability to manipulate metal with their mind or the power to read minds and hear people's thoughts. The leader of X-men, a benevolent group of mutants aiming to keep peace between humans and mutants, is Professor Charles Xavier, alias Professor X. His best friend/enemy is Erik Lensherr, alias Magneto, who leads a group of radical-minded mutants called The Brotherhood. The discrimination and hostility the mutant population faces is often read as a metaphor for the struggles of the civil rights movement or of the LGBTQ population, which has made the *X-men* a popular fandom among LGBTQ teens who struggle to come to terms with their sexuality (Gomillion and Giuliano 2011, 345).⁴ The slash story representing this fandom is "Good Boys" (2011) by zamwessel, a Charles/Erik slash story. In it, Charles, a privileged and repressed young man, is forced to give in to his feelings towards men, and through Erik's help, learns to embrace the whole of his identity, as queer as well as a mutant.

Starsky & Hutch is a television cop show that ran from 1975 to 1979. It features two young detectives, David Starsky and Kenneth Hutchinson, partners and best friends. The relationship between the two men soon became central to the whole show and was often depicted in ways that made countless people take notice and wonder just how close the two men actually were. Together with Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock of *Star Trek*, Starsky and Hutch soon became a very popular slash pairing of the 1970s and 1980s. With the help of the Internet, Starsky and Hutch has remained a popular pairing with many active web pages and fan fiction writers. “The Outcome” (2010) by lamardeuse is a Starsky/Hutch slash story about how the two men after many years of deep friendship learn, with a little help from their friends, to look at their relationship through different eyes.

Sexual Identity, Sexual Orientation, or Both?

Identity is a large and multidimensional area of study. Even the term identity is multifaceted. Vivian Vignoles et al. (2011, 3–5) separate identity into three aspects, personal, relational, and collective, that are distinct but undeniably linked, which means that identities are inescapably both personal and social. All of the above mentioned three aspects of identity are also present in the understanding of sexual identity. One might have romantic and/or erotic feelings mainly towards the same sex but the surrounding culture will determine whether those feelings will be understood as an indicator of homosexuality, which makes homosexuality a culturally specific construct.⁵ This cultural constructionist view of sexuality differs from the essentialist view in that constructionalism better takes into account the social norms and cultural practises that regulate the form that same-sex practises and acts take.

Liahna Gordon and Tony Silva (2015) and Frank Dillon et al. (2011) separate sexual orientation from sexual identity. They define sexual orientation as the combination of one’s sexual, romantic, and affectionate arousal and desire that are beyond conscious choice (Dillon et al. 2011, 650). Sexual identity, then, is the label that refers to our understanding of our sexuality as a whole, and as such it refers to more than just one’s

sexual orientation or the label one chooses to put on it (Gordon and Silva 2015, 500).

Slash fiction has many ways of dealing with the difficult relationship between sexual orientation and sexual identity. Most slash stories that fall into the “Not gay, just love” trope usually insist that the protagonist’s sexual orientation and sexual identity both are, and remain, heterosexual despite the same-sex relationship. The “In denial” trope usually posits one or both men struggling with their surrounding culture or upbringing, like in the story “Good Boys” (2011). In it, Charles is unable and unwilling to combine his sexual feelings towards men with his ingrained view of himself. Being a good boy, in Charles’ world, means that he does “not go rampaging through the minds of strangers. He did not lie. He did not cheat at chess. [---] He did not fall for strange men. He did not fancy men at all.” (“Good Boys” 2011) When Charles first meets Erik and saves him from drowning, Charles’ delight in finding a fellow mutant bears striking resemblance to Sedgwick’s (1985, 1–2) notion about the “potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual.” “What he liked about Erik Lehnsherr, he thought, was that they were equals. They could be men together. It was uncomplicated like that.” (“Good Boys” 2011) According to Sedgwick (1985, 89), to be a man’s man is separated only “by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being ‘interested in men.’” After meeting Erik, Charles has to revise his image of what “being men together” might mean for them. Erik aims to show Charles that he is hiding more behind his sophisticated image than just his mutation.

“You’re a good boy, Charles. I appreciate that. After all, it’s invisible, isn’t it? Your – mutation. Only sometimes your eye winks without meaning to. You don’t want to be rounded up and laughed at and so you scrupulously hunt down your fourteen human girls – ”

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen. Proper Charles. Perhaps you’re right. They’re Neanderthals.

Hard enough to be a mutant, let alone – ”

“I’m not,” Charles said.

“Aren’t you.” Erik’s voice was level.

“You’re not,” Charles said. He tried to make it not sound like a question.

“Aren’t I,” Erik said. “Might as well admit it, once society has its cap set against you.” (“Good Boys” 2011)

zamwessel’s story highlights some of difficulties people may have in integrating parts of their identity into the overall picture they have of themselves. In Charles’ case, his struggle against accepting and naming his sexual identity is crystallised in his refusal to give into his desire to have anal sex with Erik.⁶ The narrative revolves around Erik and Charles’ passion filled nights and Charles’ daytime insistences that he is not gay. This conflict is finally resolved and Charles admits to himself that with Erik he can no longer remember why being a good boy was so important. “Good Boys” is a good example of Marshall’s (2010) reading into and reading out of reading strategies. zamwessel reads into her story the queer implications of the source material and makes Charles struggle with his homosexuality. At the same time, she offers astute perceptions about homophobia and the multiple levels of discrimination queer people may face. Charles’ reluctance to “come out” is only partly influenced by the homophobia of his surrounding culture, however. He is more concerned about how he would see himself if he gave into his feelings. In that way, zamwessel *reads out* a different coming-out narrative.

Sexual Identity Formation Models

Since the 1970s, many different linear models for how sexual identity develops have been presented (see e.g. Cass 1979; Coleman 1982; for a more critical take on linear models, see Troiden 1988; Fassinger and Miller 1996). They all start with the assumption that sexual orientation, especially homosexuality, is an ingrained and unchanging part of a person’s sexuality, and in gradual step by step discovery of one’s true sexual orientation, one also develops one’s sexual identity (Gordon and Silva 2015, 500).

The linear development models are numerous and all differ slightly from one another but three stages or developmental steps remain the same in virtually every model: First is a stage of confusion about one’s

sexuality that often consists of personal experiences that seem to indicate that one might indeed be homosexual. This is followed by difficulties of combining one's feelings with one's internalised heteronormative ideology. These conflicts are finally solved, perhaps by befriending other homosexuals or by getting into a same-sex relationship, which allows a person to establish a well-adjusted gay identity and to "come out" to other people (Gordon and Silva 2015, 500). The linear models do not take into account the whole of human experience nor do they explain the many alternative pathways people take in forming their identity.

A Change of View on Sexual Landscape

"The Outcome" (2010) by lamardeuse follows the story of Starsky and Hutch as they slowly move from lifetime of being friends to a homosexual relationship. The story takes place seventeen months after the series ended with Starsky getting shot and ending up in a hospital. lamardeuse picks up the story from there, showing Starsky and Hutch retired from the police force and living together, renovating their house and landscaping the yard. They are visited by Kiko and Molly, teenaged stepsiblings to whom Starsky and Hutch are honorary uncles. Kiko is now an eighteen-year-old college student and has come to talk to Hutch about his new relationship – with a boy named Frank. Kiko assumes that Starsky and Hutch have been lovers for years and wants to know how they managed to combine their work as police officers with their personal relationship.

In her 1996 study, Paula Rust offers a new way of looking at the formation of sexual identity. She suggests that instead of seeing sexuality as a continuum, a better metaphor would be to view it as a landscape. After interviewing bisexual women, she developed the sexual landscape model to explain the changes and shifts in their identity. Rust theorised that changes in the physical, relational, and ideological environments that she calls sexual landscape, also caused the women to re-evaluate their sexual identities. Gordon and Silva (2015, 506) develop her model further, defining the sexual landscape as the context in which we operate, that includes the biographical, interpersonal, social, cultural, political, and historical contexts that people live in. People relate and engage with

the landscape in various ways, and changes in landscape may lead to changes in their understanding of their sexual identities.

For Starsky and Hutch, the visit from Kiko causes a shift in their sexual landscape. Kiko's coming out marks a shift in one landmark that causes Starsky and Hutch to re-evaluate their view of him as well as of each other.

"S'not important," Starsky murmured, waving a hand. "The thing is, it's not so crazy for them to have figured it that way. I mean, it's not like you and I ever talked to them about the stewardesses we bagged –"

Hutch made a face "– or the *relationships* we were in. And whenever we came over to visit 'em, it was always –"

"– just the two of us," Hutch finished for him.

"Right. And after I was shot, you were with me practically every damned minute. Then we moved into this house, started the business together, and – hell, if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck –" ("The Outcome" 2010)

lamardeuse uses the quite popular trope of "having to act as a couple causes the protagonists to fall in love" but she ties the trope to astute perceptions about homosexuality in early 1980s and the biases that many people held – and hold – about the "gay lifestyle": A life of never-ending partying, shallow relationships and older men looking to "corrupt" young innocent teens.

Kiko shrugged. "Sort of. He – we've gone out a few times, just for burgers and that. He wants to go dancing this weekend, but I– I've never been to a club, and I'm – a little nervous."

Of course he'd be nervous, Hutch thought, protective instincts slamming into gear. Besides being underage, Kiko was fairly innocent in the ways of the world. Chances were this Frank was a lot older than he was, and had picked him out of the crowd because of his perceived gullibility. What kind of sweet line had the poor kid been handed to make him think this Frank character cared about anything but getting his hands on – ("The Outcome" 2010)

Kiko is not the only landmark that changes in Hutch's sexual landscape. In a disco, where he and Starsky go to "chaperone" Kiko and Frank, Hutch begins to re-evaluate his own love life and the changes he is feeling in himself. The disco scene and the hunt for one-night stands feels boring and desperate to him and he begins to understand why women might not be interested in a man who spends all of his time with his best friend. This realisation marks a shift in Hutch's perspective of himself and his relationship with Starsky. He sees now that apart from sex, "Kiko hadn't been as far off the beam as he'd originally thought" ("The Outcome" 2010). Starsky and Hutch also begin to understand that as role models, it might be their job to offer Kiko and Frank a different view on gay relationships: that of monogamous relationship and a family life.

"Look, we don't hafta act any different than we usually do," Starsky argued. "I just wanted to show him two guys can have a good time without gettin' hammered and dancin' all night. That's what he really wants – to see he can have that life someday, too."

"The house, the yard and the white picket fence?" Hutch murmured.

"Well, we got it, ain't we?" ("The Outcome" 2010)

Gordon and Silva (2015) argue that not only changes in sexual landscape cause us to shift our perception of ourselves. The shift depends on how we interpret those changes. "Our interpretation of different landmarks will determine what kind of shift in sexual orientation or sexual identity, if any, we will experience, and to what degree." (Gordon and Silva 2015, 509) To Starsky and Hutch, the changes in their sexual landscapes cause them to re-interpret a lifetime of extremely close relationship, with lots of touching and being close to each other. Feeling guilty about deceiving Kiko and Frank, Hutch begins to draw away from Starsky but trying not to touch Starsky makes every touch electric, and causes Hutch to wonder whether the only change in touching Starsky is in his interpretation of it. "*Or does Starsky's touch feel strange because you're enjoying it?*" Hutch blinked. "Where the hell had that come from?" ("The Outcome"

2010) What follows then is a series of incidents that make both men realise something in them has changed and they must shift their perception of themselves.

Starsky watched as a beautiful dark-haired girl in thigh-hugging shorts grabbed at the dog and strapped on a leash. As his gaze catalogued her considerable assets, assets he normally found very, very attractive in a woman, he wasn't surprised to find that he felt – absolutely nothing. As in, nada. Zip. Bupkus. No action. (“The Outcome” 2010)

Mirrorless Existence: Steve Roger’s Figured Worlds

As explained above, the linear identity development models over-simplify the complexity of human sexuality and how it forms. Furthermore, the stage models only take into account one aspect of identity, sexuality, while ignoring the many ways that different identity dimensions form simultaneously and may come into conflict with one another. Different identity dimensions such as sexuality and ethnicity, or sexuality and religious identity, form in a complicated interplay and potential collision, as Dana Tagaki (1996) argued. This propelled other researches (Jones and McEwen 2000; Abes and Jones 2004; Abes et al. 2007) to propose models of multiple dimensions of identity that are believed to be fluid and in constant interaction with each other around a core sense of self (Peña-Talamantes 2013, 269). Abrahám Peña-Talamantes studies what happens when the different dimensions of identity come into conflict with one another. He uses the term Figured worlds, following Dorothy Holland et al. (1998), to explain the ways that latina/o college students negotiate and reconstruct their conflicting identities: their home-life and their college-life, their ethnic background and their sexual identities.

Holland et al. (1998) suggest three contexts of identity they dub figured worlds: positionality, space of authoring, and making worlds. A figured world is person’s own understanding of the world that surrounds them. One becomes positioned into these worlds through a myriad of social activities, such as thinking, speaking, gesturing, and cultural exchanges, and this positioning is dubbed positional identity (Peña-

Talamantes 2013, 270). For Steve Rogers in Speranza's short story "All The Angels and The Saints" (2014) (later "Angels and Saints") the first figured world is 1920s and 1930s Brooklyn and the Catholic church. Steve is positioned into this world of church and religion through his study of catechism and with the help of a priest, Father MacNamara. The first crack to disturb Steve's small figured world comes when he is standing with his mother at Brooklyn War Memorial, remembering his father who had died in World War I. The patriotic display is disturbed by a group of women shouting:

"They weren't *heroes!*" she was shouting, and her voice was powerful but rough, like the seams underneath were pulling apart at the effort to make herself heard. "They were *victims!*" and Steve was straining upward, now, scanning the crowd – lots of people were – to see where the voice was coming from. [...] [S]he was carrying a red-lettered placard that said WOMEN FOR PEACE. She was standing with a group of other women who were also holding signs [...] that said RADICAL WOMEN'S LEAGUE and WORKER'S PARTY and one, terrifyingly: OUR MEN WERE SACRIFICED IN VAIN. ("Angels and Saints" 2014)

For most people there, this is only a small inconvenient disturbance, but for Steve it shifts something in himself, he feels "twitchy as a cat, wanting to hear more, and he found himself angry at crowd's numb chanting." ("Angels and Saints" 2014) This marks for Steve his first glimpse of what Holland et al. (1998) call the space of authoring, the collision of person or collective and the normal world, when individuals must answer the world and write themselves into the world in a particular way (Peña-Talamantes 2013, 270). The conflict between what he had been taught and what the women were shouting forces Steve to look beyond the limits of his small world and realise that sometimes you have to break the norms to be heard. Bucky explains that "normal people" do not talk about what the women were shouting in public, because it is not polite conversation. Steve replies he does not want to be polite.

This interaction leads Steve to his first major conflict with his figured world of home and church and his inner desire to learn the truth. The “glorious certainties” of the church dim and he finds himself in conflict.

Steve had picked it [the catechism] up the other day, skimming the familiar questions and answers – How shall we know the things we are to believe? *We shall know the things we are to believe from the Catholic Church, through which God speaks to us.* – and all the magic had gone out of it. *I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting* – and now he didn’t believe any of it. (“Angels and Saints” 2014)

Feeling conflicted and confused, Steve goes to meet Father MacNamara, only to find out that he is no longer a priest and has been harbouring some doubts of his own. Stephen LeDrew (2013, 433) in his study about atheism among college students outlines three processes of becoming an atheist: discovery of ideas, self-discovery, and discovery of the collective. Steve’s trajectory away from religion combines all three of those. His discovery that what he had been taught about patriotism and the valour of war were not the whole truth, leads him realise he values truth. His doubts about God and the church are validated when he realises Father MacNamara had been having the same doubts, which causes Steve to lose faith in authorities. He stumbles on literature about disbelief that further cements his doubts and leads him to meetings of The Radical Women’s League where he finds a collective of people who think like him. There, he also first becomes aware of something else that has shifted in him.

“Hey, Bucky, look at this,” Steve said. “There’s pamphlets about atheism, vegetarianism, trade unionism, free love,” [...] and Steve was really scared for a moment, because Bucky’s expression, Bucky was – And then Bucky let go of him, and that was *fear* on his face. (“Angels and Saints” 2014)

After attending a lecture about religion and how it stands in the way of true human love, Steve comes to a startling realisation.

His mind was full of Bucky, image after image of him, like all the pages of his sketchbook at once. [---] He lay there, brain flooding with oxygen as his chest expanded and pulled in air: how could he not have known? [---] Images came to him – St. Michael’s muscular arms, upraised, carved in marble; Bucky, drenched, coming out of the ocean at Coney Island; the long curve of Bucky’s throat swallowing, his Adam’s Apple bobbing as he drank a beer. (“Angels and Saints” 2014)

Steve’s rejection of religion and his realisation of his feelings about Bucky are closely related. After kissing Bucky for the first time, Steve asks him if Bucky thinks it is a sin.

“I think you *want* it to be a sin,” Bucky said, mouth twisting unhappily, and Steve was jolted into seeing that Bucky was hurt, really hurt. “I think this is some page in the radical leftie playbook, [...] and you’re trying to prove something, to yourself, or to *God* –” (“Angels and Saints” 2014)

Bucky, too, faces the dilemma of trying to combine his family’s expectations and his own dreams. He and Steve face the difficulties of trying to fit their relationship in their everyday world with its expectations and rules of how men are supposed to be. Together they start to encounter a space of authoring, answering to the conflicts of the two environments and trying to create their own figured world governed by their own social rules and expectations (Peña-Talamantes 2013, 270). The death of Steve’s mother offers them a chance to move in together, to hide their relationship in plain sight, under the disguise of two young bachelors living together. This is interrupted, however, with the attack on Pearl Harbour and America joining the war.

Jesse Smith (2011) presents his four-stage model of atheist identity development where people travel from religious upbringing, through doubts and discovery of atheism and atheist communities, to “coming out” as a committed atheist. This model suffers from the same shortcomings that stage models for sexual identity do. It does not take into

account the various paths people may take towards atheist identity, nor does it address the shifting back and forth between atheism and religion that some people go through, especially in times of crisis. For Steve, Pearl Harbour and Bucky's enlisting is a huge crisis. In his desperation, he turns to prayer and tries to bargain with God.

"Please, God, please, I'm sorry, I take it back, I take everything back, I'll do anything – anything – just please don't let Bucky get killed, or let me go with him, let me get killed, too," and then he was empty of words, empty of everything, and for the first time he understood the importance of rote prayer. ("Angels and Saints" 2014)

Finally getting to enlist and being offered the serum that transforms him and being given the role of Captain America, seem to Steve as an answer to his prayers. After saving Bucky from Hydra prison, Steve is now absolutely sure of God's existence and his own role as God's tool.

He felt the hand of God in everything, now, moving him like a chess piece on a board – all across the United States, and then to Europe – so he was hardly even surprised when his U.S.O. show turned up at the 107th just after their defeat at Bolzano. He knew why he was there: what God had put him there to do. ("Angels and Saints" 2014)

But his newfound confidence also drives Steve to another conflict between his belief in God and Bucky.

Jessica Lapinski and David McKirnan (2013) explain the difficulties that strongly religious people may have with coming to terms with their homosexuality. They claim that in order to resolve the conflict between their religious and sexual identities, people must learn to accept their sexual orientation and move from merely tolerating gays and lesbians towards positive approval (Lapinski and McKirnan 2013, 855). Their model is too simplistic, however, and does not take into account cultural differences that may prohibit people from fully integrating their sexual identity into their everyday lives. Peña-Talamantes (2013) explains how

gay and lesbian latino/a students negotiate the conflicts between their ethnic background and their college life by sometimes compartmentalising different parts of their identities. Hiding their sexuality from their parents and in their home-life helped them to find empowerment in holding control over with whom to share different parts of themselves (Peña-Talamantes 2013, 276). He shows that sometimes it is not necessary, or even possible, to fully integrate conflicting aspects of identity. Between the conflicting figured worlds, in Steve's case that of religion and his role as Captain America and his love for Bucky, it is according to Peña-Talamantes (2013, 278) possible to create a third figured world or an identity buffer where the conflicting identity dimensions can coexist. For Steve, this identity buffer comes from a compromise. He promises Bucky never to "confess" their relationship to a priest. By segregating one part of himself to keep outside his world-view of being God's tool, Steve is able to maintain his view of himself whole, at least until Bucky presumably dies and Steve himself crashes the plane and is frozen for nearly seventy years.

Vignoles et al. (2011, 3) in their introduction to identity studies outline three "levels" of identity: individual, relational, and collective identities. They show that all of the different levels are nevertheless united in many ways, as individual identities cannot truly be established without being recognised by a social audience. For Steve, waking up seventy years into the future is like being thrown into a foreign country. Almost everybody he used to know is dead and he has to come to terms with losing Bucky all over again, as for him it was only a few weeks ago. He reads books people have written about him and does not find himself in them.

He was surprised to find that there were a couple of biographies of *him*, as well, often parables of persistence (*Sixth Time's The Charm*) or courage (*An American Soldier*). Mostly they were sort of thin histories of Captain America and the Howling Commandos, or Captain America and Bucky Barnes, and after reading through them Steve saw why; they knew almost nothing about him. ("Angels and Saints" 2014)

With everybody he used to know gone, Steve feels like he is living in a mirrorless world. Nobody is left who can recognise him or to whom he could relate, his sense of self is existing in a vacuum.

“I’m going to say this, and I’m never going to say it again. You have to let someone get to know you. Or nobody will know you. I know you like Chaplin movies. I know that you draw. What else? Who the hell are you, Cap?”

Steve didn’t answer; he didn’t know how to answer. He’d been living in a world without mirrors. Because Stark was right, of course: people [...] were mirrors, and the only face he’d had reflected back at him was Captain America’s. He didn’t know who he was now. He had to get someone to see him, to tell him. (“Angels and Saints” 2014)

With no-one left to check his identity against, Steve feels like his public persona is engulfing him whole. Only after Bucky’s miraculous return is Steve able to start to piece together who he is. With Bucky back, Steve feels like he is “regrowing his arms and legs.” But Steve is still stuck between his desire for honesty and his conviction that God is leading him through life. Bucky finds Steve’s conviction that God answered his every prayer insulting, as that would suggest that God did not care enough to stop millions of other people from dying. “I miss Steve! You took him from me!” Bucky accuses. It’s not certain whether Bucky means Captain America or Steve’s religious convictions, but than again, perhaps they are one and the same. Captain America is an ideal, a personification of what it means to be American, and with religion being a very big part of the American culture, it could be argued that, especially after waking up, a big part of Steve’s religiosity is due to his public persona as Captain America. With Bucky back, Steve can peel of his mask and find himself under the guise of an American hero.

“Fuck, I miss *Steve*. Goddammit! Goddamn you! – you took him from me and he was all I had!” Bucky’s face was twisted in pain. “I want *Steve* back. What would *Steve* tell me?” Steve heard himself answering. “He’d

tell you there's no meaning in this. No lesson. It's just what happened to us." He had Bucky's full attention now; Bucky was nodding at him. "And that life's hard enough –" "– without lies on top of it," Bucky said distantly. "Yeah. That's it. Hi, Steve." ("Angels and Saints" 2014)

Conclusion

Sexual identity and how it forms is a question that researchers have pondered for decades. Increasingly, the question of media representation and how it affects LGBTQ people and their perception of themselves is also much debated. I have offered one view on the representation of sexual minorities on homoerotic fan fiction. I have argued that slash fiction goes deeper in the portrayal of queer characters than the traditional view of "straight men having gay sex" would allow. Slash fiction writers seem to be increasingly aware of the identity struggles for LGBTQ people and the difficulties especially young people face when trying to find accurate and positive portrayals of sexual minorities in media. Slash fiction writers offer several views on the question of sexual identity politics by creating multidimensional and realistic identity formation stories that discuss both the difficulties queer people have historically faced and how far the Western world has come and how far it still has to go to ensure the same rights for everybody. That is not to say that slash fiction has solved the problems of equal representation, far from it. Most popular slash pairings are between white, able-bodied, middle-class young men, although some fandoms such as *The X-men* and *Star Trek* also discuss the questions of sexuality of disabled people or the sexual lives of older men. How slash writers write the aspects of sexuality that are seldom discussed in mainstream media, such as people with disabilities, would be an interesting follow-up to this article.

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NOTES

1. Note that I use queer here as an umbrella term for various non-heterosexual identities.
2. Please note that this claim is based on my own extensive reading of slash in various fandoms, both as a fan and as an academic. To my knowledge, a comprehensive history of slash has not been written and might indeed prove impossible to write due to the splintered and not easily defined nature of slash fiction.

3. A very popular Twitter hashtag #GiveCaptainAmericaABoyfriend is a passionate plea for Disney-owned Marvel to make its group of superheroes more diverse by including openly gay characters. This, together with #GiveElsaAGirlfriend is not only about slash fans and their desire to see their interpretation validated, they are part of a bigger campaign for more diverse characters in big blockbuster movies.
4. The similarities between LGBTQ-population and mutants were not lost to the filmmakers, either. In *First Class* (2011) a young scientist, Hank McCoy, is revealed to be a mutant. When his employers ask why he did not tell them sooner, Hank replies: "You didn't ask so I didn't tell," a clear nod towards the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy the U.S. military held until recently.
5. The term homosexual is relatively young, coined in 19th century, and the stark division between homosexuals and heterosexuals is even younger. For discussion about the historical connotations of same-sex feelings and behaviour and their construction as homosexuality, see George Chauncey (1994).
6. The first anal intercourse is often very important in slash fiction, symbolising the union of the two men and often marking the end of conflicts and the beginning of a lifelong love story (Jung 2002, 38; Kukka 2012, 57–58).

SAMMANFATTNING

Sedan 1990-talet har forskare med olika bakgrund studerat och argumenterat kring fanfiction. Även om många forskare numera är ense om att fanfiction, och i synnerhet homoerotisk slashfiction, kan betraktas som queer litteratur som syftar till att dekonstruera till synes heteronormativa texter i populärmedia, saknas en mer nyanserad läsning av slashfiction. Slashfiction har allmänt ansetts "queera" heterosexuella personer eller placera personerna i ett slags queer utopi, där gränsen mellan homosocialt och homoerotiskt är flytande och homofobi sällan utgör ett hinder för de älskande. Denna artikel ger en mer nyanserad bild av slashfiction och av hur slashfans skriver queera personer. Med hjälp av samtida forskning om formerandet av sexuella identiteter, beskriver artikeln tre kategorier, eller troper, som fans ofta använder i sina texter. Genom närläsning av tre slashförfattare diskuterar sexuell mångfald, homofobi, historiska och samtida uppfattningar om homosexualitet och de många vägar människor tar när de formar sin sexuella identitet.