

Silja Kukka

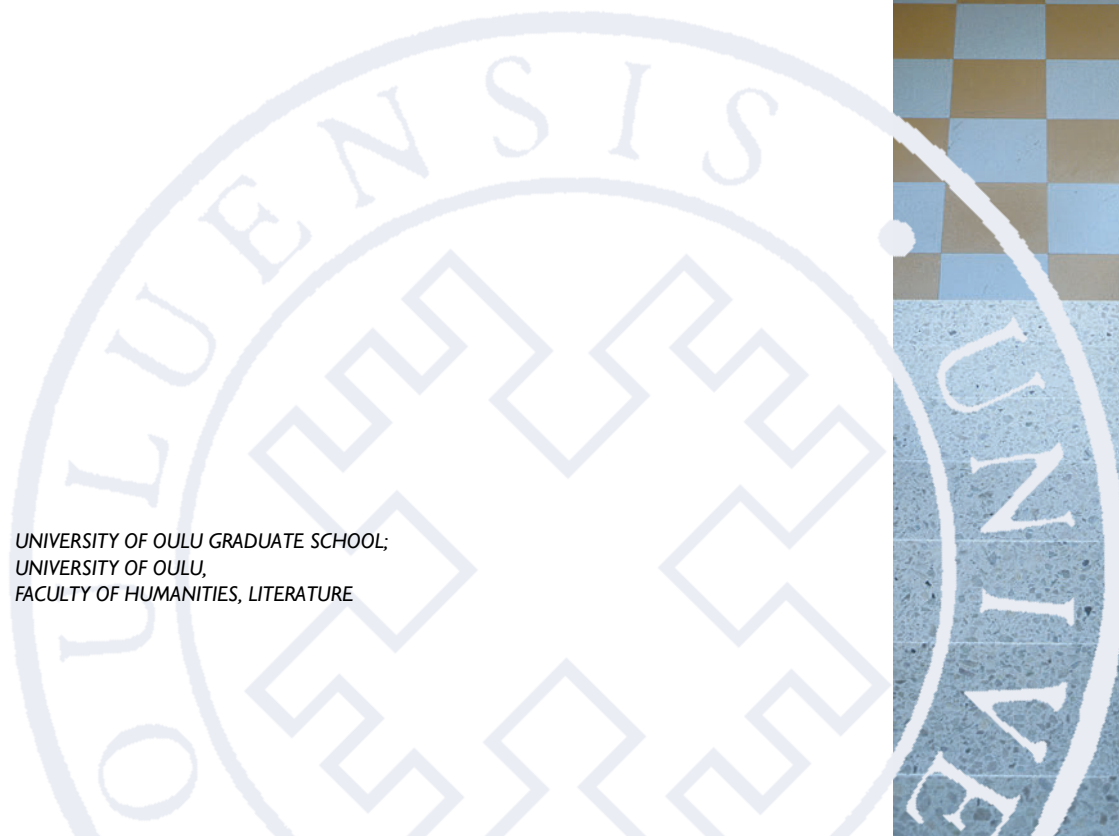
EXPLORING DESIRE

SEXUAL AND GENDER IDENTITIES
IN FAN FICTION COMMUNITIES

UNIVERSITY OF OULU GRADUATE SCHOOL;
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FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, LITERATURE

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SILJA KUKKA

EXPLORING DESIRE

Sexual and gender identities in fan fiction communities

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Abstract

The object of this doctoral thesis is to examine online fan fiction communities and how the themes of sexuality, sexual identity, and gender are discussed and developed both in the texts fans write, and in the conversations in online kink meme communities. Kink meme communities are fan spaces dedicated to sexually explicit fan fiction. They provide a platform for erotica or pornography that better resonate with the predominantly female membership than other, more mainstream porn or erotica.

The articles in this dissertation aim at understanding and highlighting the rich and nuanced view contemporary fan fiction writers and readers have on sexual identity, female and non-hetero desire, and gender. The articles highlight different parts of fan fiction, from the more mainstream slash fiction – or fiction dedicated to “shipping” of same gender characters from various tv-shows, movies, etc. – to less familiar kink meme communities and the practices and fan fiction written therein. The articles examine how sexual identity formation is discussed in contemporary slash fiction, how gender is discussed through fan texts about men who get pregnant, and how the kink meme communities have become places where a predominantly female population can discuss sexuality, desire, pornography, sexual fantasies, identities, and sexual traumas. The third aspect is examined through online survey circulated among kink meme community members. The survey and its findings form the third and largest part of this dissertation.

Fan fiction communities, whose history can be traced back to the 1960’s, are in this dissertation seen as places where female and queer desire mix, the binary notions of sex and gender can be re-examined, and where predominantly women can find a safe space to express their erotic likes and dislikes. Safe online spaces are important for women, trans-people, non-binary people etc. whose sexual and bodily self-determination and self-expression are not always guaranteed or respected in the real world, nor in mixed-gender online spaces.

Keywords: erotica, fan fiction, gender, kink meme communities, pornography, queer studies, slash fiction

Kukka, Silja, Halua tutkimassa. Seksuaali- ja sukupuoli-identiteetin käsittely fanifiktioyhteisöissä

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Tiivistelmä

Tämä väitöskirja tarkastelee Internetin fanifiktioyhteisöjä ja sitä, miten seksuaalisuutta, seksuaali-identiteettejä ja sukupuolta käsitellään sekä fanien omista teksteistä että kink meme -yhteisöissä käytävissä keskusteluissa. Kink meme -yhteisöt ovat Internet-yhteisöjä, jotka ovat keskittyneet vahvasti seksuaalisen fanifiktio luomiseen. Ne tarjoavat alustan, jossa pääasiassa naiset voivat luoda ja kuluttaa erotiikkaa tai pornoa, joka vastaa paremmin heidän makuaan kuin valtavirtaporno yleisesti.

Väitöskirjan osajulkaisut pyrkivät ymmärtämään ja tuomaan esiin fanifiktioharrastajien rikasta ja monipuolista käsitystä seksuaalisuudesta, naisten ja ei-heterojen halusta ja sukupuolesta. Artikkeleissa käsitellään sekä slash fiktiota – eli tekstejä, jotka ”parittavat” tv-sarjojen tai elokuvien samaa sukupuolta olevia henkilöitä – että vähemmän tunnettuja kink meme -yhteisöjä, niiden käytäntöjä ja fanifiktiota. Artikkeleissa tutkitaan seksuaali-identiteettien kehittymistä moderneissa slash-ficeissa, sukupuolta kink meme -tarinoissa raskaaksi tulevista miehistä ja kink meme -yhteisöjä naisten tiloissa, joissa seksuaalisuudesta, halusta, pornosta, fantasiaista ja erilaisista traumoista voidaan keskustella vapaasti fiktion keinoin. Viimeksi mainittu muodostaa väitöskirjan kolmannen ja merkittävimmän osion, jota käsitellään kink meme -harrastajien kanssa tehdyn kyselytutkimuksen avulla.

Fanifiktioyhteisöjen historia ulottuu 1960-luvulle asti, ja tässä tutkimuksessa ne nähdään queereina naistiloissa, joissa leikitellään sukupuolella ja seksuaalisuudella. Näissä yhteisöissä erityisesti naiset voivat vapaammin ilmaista seksuaalisia mieltymyksiään. Vapaat ja turvalliset Internet-tilat ovat tärkeitä naisille ja trans- tai ei-binäärisille ihmisille, joiden seksuaalista ja kehollista itsemääräämisoikeutta ei aina kunnioiteta sen enempää todellisessa elämässä kuin kaikille avoimissa nettiyhteisöissäkään.

Asiasanat: erotiikka, fanifiktio, kink meme -yhteisöt, pornografia, queer-tutkimus, sukupuoli

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Oulu, March 2022

Silja Kukka

List of original articles

This thesis is based on the following publications, which are referred throughout the text by their Roman numerals. Each article was published in a peer-reviewed journal and all are printed in this dissertation in their entirety.

- I Kukka, S. (2018). Many roads to love: Sexual identity formation in slash fiction. *Lambda Nordica*, 1-2(23), 85–110.
- II Kukka, S. (2020). Kink meme -yhteisöjen raskaaksi tulevat miehet sukupuoliä ylittämässä, *Sukupuolentutkimus*, 1, 35–48.
- III Kukka, S. (2021). "Fandom's pornographic subset": Kink meme communities as queer female practices, *Lambda Nordica*, 1(26), 53–79.

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1 Introduction

Since the early 1990's, there has been a growing interest among media studies and literary studies scholars to understand and categorize fan fiction, or original stories written by fans using a tv-show, a movie, or a book as a basis and rewriting or reimagining the story in some way. Many attempts have been made to try and categorize fan fiction and place it in the continuum of literary fiction. Especially slash fiction, or fan fiction stories that reimagine as homosexual or erotic the close homosocial relationships between men (although slash pairing together female characters does exist) so prevalent in many genres has been of great interest to many scholars, and many attempts have been made to place slash in existing literary or media genres. These genres include, but are not limited to, romance and pornography, (Booth, 2014; Driscoll, 2006) derivative literature, (Derecho, 2006; Jenkins, 1992) and queer female fiction deconstructing the patriarchal and heteronormative culture of our Western media (Busse, 2006; Busse & Lothian, 2009; Lackner, Lucas, & Reid, 2006; Lothian, Busse, & Reid, 2007; Neville, 2018; Rose, 2020). The early attempts at trying to analyze and understand slash fiction and the (mostly) women writing it looked at the phenomena from a sociological or anthropological point of view, focusing on the ways fan communities function (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992), or reading slash in search of psychological meanings, such as clues to women's mating psychology (Salmon & Symons, 2003).

Since the early 2000's, much has been written about the seemingly revolutionary practice of women writing gay erotica in search of more equalitarian and fulfilling romances by "queering" allegedly heterosexual male characters and placing them in romantic or erotic relationship (Booth, 2014; Driscoll, 2006; Woledge, 2006). What is missing is a detailed, nuanced investigation and analysis of the various ways slash stories develop the sexual identities of the allegedly straight male characters, and how slash can negotiate the complicated relationships between male-centric cultures and homophobia, the development of sexual identities in various points of history, or the complications in trying to balance two or more simultaneous identity aspects that does not always align easily, such as one's identity as a religious queer person.

While fan fiction has been studied a lot over the years, some important and interesting subsections of fan fiction writing have been overlooked. With this, I refer to the very little researched phenomena of kink meme fan fiction communities. Kink meme communities could be described, as one of my informants for this study did, as "the pornographic subset of fan fiction". They are online fan fiction

communities that work somewhat differently than other online sites where fan fiction is written and published. Firstly, kink meme communities mostly still use the somewhat outdated LiveJournal¹, perhaps because it offers a possibility to comment and post anonymously, without a username. Anonymity is important because in most kink meme communities a large part of the texts written and published are explicitly sexual in nature. LiveJournal was an important platform for fandoms and fan fiction writing in the early 2000's, and continued to be a major hub of fannish activity, such as fan fiction writing and discussions about the fandom, until supplanted by Tumblr around 2012. However, the most prevalent platform for housing and publishing fan fiction has for many years been the fan-created, fan-owned, non-profit site of archiveofourown.org, which is where all of the fics² studied in this dissertation were published. The exception here are the fics analyzed in article II, which were first published on *Supernatural* kink meme community on LiveJournal.

Secondly, unlike most other fan fiction sites, kink memes are built on reciprocity and emphasize readers and writers acting together. Most, if not all, fan fiction communities are based on non-capitalist, reciprocal gift-giving economy, as Karen Hellekson (2009) points out, where the fans can 'pay' each other for a story with a comment, a piece of art, by recommending the story for others, etc. In kink meme communities, I argue, this is even more pronounced, which brings me to my third point of how kink meme communities differ from other fan fiction writing. In kink memes, the 'gifts' are at the same time personalized and communal property. The stories (or 'fills') are written with a specific individual in mind, but they are published in the community for all to read and enjoy. Other people may even continue the story or write another fill for the same request, making both the stories and the enjoyment fans get from reading them shared and communal.

Kink meme communities work by forming discussion threads where people leave comments describing a story they would like to read. Most descriptions, or 'prompts', as they are called in these communities, are explicitly sexual in nature,

¹ At the time of writing this on Summer 2022 the *Supernatural* kink meme community, which was the main platform I utilized in discovering study material for the second article of my dissertation, announced it would be leaving behind LiveJournal and continuing on on a different platform, dreamwidth.org. LiveJournal was bought by Russian media company SUP media in 2007 and its servers were moved to Russia in 2016, which caused many users to migrate elsewhere. While most fan fiction writing had moved earlier to other sites, especially Archiveofourown.org, many kink meme communities continued to operate on LiveJournal. Whether the current migration away from LiveJournal is because of the war in Ukraine, I have no knowledge of.

² Fic is an individual piece of fan fiction writing, or one fan fiction story.

detailing a sexual situation, object, or theme (fannishly called a Kink) that the reader would like to see in a story. Another community member might then answer to the prompt by writing and publishing a story that matches the description.

As stated above, kink meme communities have not received much attention from fan fiction scholars. They are, however, an interesting and, I would argue, an essential part of the erotic and pornographic³ aspect of fan fiction. It was in kink meme communities that a now very prevalent Alpha/Omega genre first originated, and kink meme communities are places where the idea of queer female spaces, as theorized by Lackner, Lucas, and Reid (2006) and Kristina Busse (2006) is actualized by a mostly female community sharing and enjoying sexually charged fan fiction together. That is not to say that other fan fiction communities could not be described as queer female communities, but unlike most ‘mainstream’ fan fiction writing, erotica, kinks, and sexual arousal are the main part of kink meme communities. Kink meme communities are also places where interesting negotiations on what is an acceptable sexual fantasy can be had, and where fans are free to negotiate and try out different versions of themselves by discussing and learning about various sexual fantasies and kinks. In addition, many interesting fan fiction tropes negotiating non-binary gender identities or deconstructing our normative understandings of gender have either originated at or are very prevalent in kink meme writing. These include genderswap (where a character’s gender is swapped, either from birth or by magical or scientific means), mpreg (where a male character becomes pregnant, either by scientific or magical ways, or because male pregnancy is the norm in the story universe), and omega-verse (a subset of male pregnancy stories where the characters are divided into usually three hierarchical groups, alphas, betas, and omegas, who all have different gender and reproductive characteristics).

In the following sub-chapter, I go through the research questions which guided my research, briefly discuss the ethical questions in studying material published on the Internet, and analyze my own position as a researcher. I then introduce the original articles this dissertation consists of, before moving on to the theoretical framework.

³ Erotica and pornography are both loaded terms with lots of ideological and judgmental baggage. To simplify the matter, I opt to use the term sexually explicit material when discussing the fiction published in kink meme communities. A more detailed discussion on pornography, erotica, and the difference between them can be found in a subsequent section.

1.1 Research Questions

These negotiations of different sexual and gender identities and deviations from the normative binary understandings of gender and sexuality are at the heart of this dissertation. The main research question this dissertation aims to answer is:

How do modern fan fiction communities and fan writers discuss sexuality and gender, both in fan texts and in kink meme communities.

This main question has three sub questions, which are discussed in-depth in the three attached peer-reviewed articles. When starting this investigation, I first wanted to better understand how slash fiction writers discuss the formation of sexual identities for their canonically cis-heterosexual male characters, and how the writers deal with difficult things such as homophobia or interlocking identities, such as religious and queer identities. What became very clear right from the start was that the old stereotype of slash placing the characters in an alternative universe completely outside of labels like homosexuality or bisexuality, like Woledge (2006) theorized, does not hold true for most modern slash writers. On the contrary, slash writers seem to have a sophisticated and multidimensional understanding of the many ways one's sexual identity forms and changes during one's lifetime. For the first part of this theses, an investigation was carried out by doing a queer sensitive close-reading of three slash fics and analyzing them in the light of contemporary models of sexual identity formation. For the purposes of this study, queer sensitive close-reading meant diving deep into the texts, paying close attention to the ways they discuss non-heterosexual sexuality, and identifying three different sexual identity formation storylines, which were then analyzed in the light of contemporary identity studies.

All the fics studied were published in the early 2010's and continue to be housed on archiveofourown.org. Some ethical questions may be raised on using non-commercially published texts written a decade ago as study material. Should the writers be included in the study or asked for comment of permission? While the writers of course own all the rights to their texts and could have their fics pulled from the publishing platform, the communal nature of fan fiction writing and the realities of the Internet might make it difficult to completely erase material from the Internet. A fic may be published on various platforms, someone may have made a podfic, (a recording of the fic), which continues on even if the original story has been removed, etc. The ethical questions should be discussed if one wished to study a fic whose author has clearly expressed their wish to have it removed from the

Internet. As this was not the case in my study, I approached the fics as any other pieces of literature, whether published commercially or not. That is to say, once the text has been published, the author relinquishes their right to have the final say in how the text could be interpreted or analyzed. In literary studies this has been referred to as the death of the author, as discussed in the essay “La mort de l’auteur”, or the Death of the author, by Roland Barthes in 1968 (1993).

For the second part, I turned my attention to the kink meme communities, or more specifically to the *Supernatural* kink meme, and the many mpreg fics published there. I wanted to analyze how male pregnancies in these fics can deconstruct our cultural understandings of gender. For the third part of my thesis, I wanted to look closer at kink meme communities and learn what kind of role do these communities play in the lives of the fans who frequent them and how do the fans discuss their erotic fantasies and themselves as sexual beings. I took as a basis the idea that to get a better understanding of how these communities operate and what kinds of meanings they hold for their members, I had to ask the fans themselves. I conducted an online questionnaire and gathered a dataset consisting of seventy-eight respondents. My content analysis of the data forms the third part of my dissertation. A detailed explanation of how I utilized the content analysis method is offered in a subsequent section.

As the focus of this dissertation is the analysis and discussion of the many ways slash and kink meme writing and communities discuss and negotiate different ideas of sexuality, sexual identities, gender, and sexually explicit kinks, I utilized and built a large theoretical framework consisting of theories on slash as queer literature, the formation of sexual identities, and sexually explicit material made by and aimed at women. All of these theories are discussed in-depth in subsequent sections, and they form a good understanding of the rich and sophisticated ways fans discuss gender, sexualities, sexually explicit material, and the importance of nurturing, queer-positive communities.

As is almost inevitably the case when studying a subject that has a history spanning many different research fields, this dissertation became by necessity multidisciplinary. While my main field is literature and the study of fiction, fan fiction as a phenomenon already crosses multiple areas of research. As literature, it can be placed among other derivative, intertextual writings. As non-commercially published fiction utilizing someone else’s characters, fan fiction situates in gray areas of copyright laws. As mostly Internet-based phenomenon spanning multiple platforms and many different art forms all working together and forming an ever-changing web of ideas, fan fiction and fan communities cannot be summarized

using narrow, carefully defined terms. Therefore, studying it using only one lens would be in risk of narrowing down the subject too much. A multidisciplinary approach allows the researcher to study the subject from multiple angles, which, I argue, is almost necessary when the research subject is as large and multifaceted as fan fiction and fan communities are. This approach, while very advantageous, does make it more difficult to situate oneself as a researcher to any one field. Multidisciplinary study also means learning and taking into consideration the practices and history of many research areas.

The main research question and the sub questions that guided my research process were formed by extensive reading of both theoretical literature and selected fan fiction. They were initially born from my personal enjoyment and extensive reading of fan fiction in many different fandoms, and from the need to understand and vocalize in research terms the over-arching themes and questions of queer sexuality, gender, and feminism I gleaned from many years of reading and thinking about fan fiction. The following research questions acted as a guideline when conducting my PhD research:

Q1: How do slash writers construct and rewrite the sexual identities of their canonical male characters and what kind of identity formation models can be found in different slash fics?

Q2: How do male pregnancy fics deconstruct or maintain our cultural understanding of gender and what kind of different representations of gender can be found in various mpreg fics?

Q3: What kind of importance and meanings do kink meme communities hold for their members and how do the members utilize these communities in terms of writing and reading sexually explicit material?

With these questions working as a guide, I did my best to build a good solid understanding on how slash fiction and kink meme communities discuss and negotiate different meanings of queer sexuality, gender, and women's (and other non-cis men's) involvement in creating sexually explicit material. However, as fandoms and fan fiction are very large, continually growing and changing, the readings my study makes of six fics and the insights I got from the 78 respondents, should and cannot be seen as presenting the ultimate truth on slash fiction and the issues concerning sexuality. Rather, this research project offers a view on how the issues of gender, sex, and sexuality can be discussed in fandom and slash fiction, not how they are always and in all cases discussed.

Even this admittedly limited view can be helpful, however, in highlighting the broader field of women's and queer people's role in the making of sexually explicit material. As many studies show, the involvement of women and queer⁴ people in the production of feminist or queer sexual material can be a political and progressive act that may help to contest and complicate dominant representations of gender, sex, and sexuality (Attwood, 2009; Harris, 2001; Neville, 2018; Roach, 2018; Taormino, Parreñas Shimizu, Penley, & Miller-Young, 2013). Therefore, I deem it important to add to the knowledge and understanding of how different fan fics and fan communities discuss the questions of gender, sex, and sexuality. This can help us better understand how women and queer people can be actively changing how porn and erotica in general view and discuss gender and sexuality.

While fan fiction and fan communities have been studied a lot over the last 30 years, the point of view has all too often been one of outsider looking in. Often, this can end up reinforcing the negative view of fans as weird people detached from reality. A good example of this – perhaps unwittingly – was the case in Bacon-Smith's work (1992), that reduced all fan fiction to its erotic aspects as Busse and Lothian (2018) point out, or giving patronizing and universalizing value judgements about the merits and quality of all fan fiction based on reading a handful of fics, as many fans have pointed out was done in Salmon and Symons' work (2003).

Like always when studying minority groups or subcultures, especially when the study participants are socially positioned in a way that they lack the privileges of class, gender, or heterosexuality, one should be extra careful the study doesn't end up disenfranchising the people being researched even more. While many of the people who frequent fandom spaces and fan fiction communities can be seen as somewhat disenfranchised due to their gender or sexuality, an assumption one can make based on previous studies (Lothian et al., 2007; Neville, 2018; Reinhard, 2009), in many other ways they can be seen as quite privileged. Firstly, taking part in many fandom communities requires that one has access to Internet and a computer or a smartphone, and secondly, that one is competent enough in English to be able to operate in the largely English-speaking communities.⁵ Indeed, from

⁴ I use queer as an umbrella term when referring to various non-heterosexual or non-cis gender sexual or gender identities when either speaking of the aforementioned identities as a whole or when a person's sexual or gender identity is not known to me. When referring to specific people, as in discussing the respondents' responses to the kink meme survey (discussed in detail in article III) I use the pronouns and terms the person prefers.

⁵ Although most of texts published in Archive of our own are in English, stories in many other languages are increasingly written and published. Not all fan communities operate in English, either.

the early days of fan fiction, before Internet and personal computers, getting access to fan fiction published in fanzines required that one had enough free time, monetary resources, and competence in English language (Fielding, 2013, 5).

To not speak over the people who participate in the study, the researcher must acknowledge their own position. As Neville (2018) notes, most of the time the studies consist of the theorists discussing their ideas on fan fiction writer's motives and not actually interacting with the fans themselves. A stance favored in contemporary fan studies is that of an Acafan, an academic with a firm background in fandom and as a fan (Hills, 2002). This is my position as well, as I openly identify as a) an avid fan and reader of slash fiction, and b) as a queer woman. The Acafan approach has many advantages. It helps to destabilize the traditional relationship of researcher and subject. This in turn helps to de-pathologize fans and fandoms by showing them not as fascinating Others, but as members of a community, as represented by a researcher who is also a member of that community. (Waysdorf, 2020, para. 2.3.)

The Acafan approach, while very useful in building better relationships between the researcher and the fans being studied, may have a tendency to limit or reduce the aspects of fandom being studied to those most familiar to or beloved by the researcher (Waysdorf, 2020). I ran into the same problem when conducting the second and third parts of my research. While I am familiar with a handful of kink meme communities, I am not active in any, nor would I describe myself as a member in any of these communities. Similarly, while aware of mpreg fics, I never search them out or read them for pleasure. This posed a small dilemma: How to explain and analyze accurately and respectfully the practice I never participate in as a fan? For the analysis of the mpreg fics, (as presented in detail in article II) I looked at the fics themselves as literature and applied a gender sensitive close-reading method, paying close attention to how these fics discuss gender. I tried to hold an objective gaze while analyzing them, not as fascinating-but-odd examples of fannish imagination, but as illuminating pieces of literature which showcase some of the various ways fan fiction can discuss gender.

For the third part of my research, (represented in article III) I conducted the questionnaire with great care and keeping in mind all the time the importance of letting the respondents talk about their experiences in their own voice and letting them express their own preferred identity labels (or lack thereof). I saw my own researcher position not as an outsider looking in, but rather as a fellow fan and as a researcher eager to learn more and then presenting the discoveries I made back to the community.

1.2 Original Articles

The original articles in this dissertation illuminate the rich and varied understanding modern slash fiction and kink meme communities have on the sensitive and much debated issues of gender, sex, and sexuality. The articles show different sides of fan fiction writing, highlighting the rich culture of fan fiction and the deep awareness of, and personal relationship to, the socio-political struggles and aims of feminism and queer culture that many fans have. The articles show fan fiction and especially slash fiction not only as a beloved hobby, but as a site for feminist and queer activism and change. In addition to the political side, fanfics are often also compelling pieces of literature that can create rich and imaginative story worlds where interesting discussions on identity, history, love, trauma, and media representations can be had. The main contribution of the dissertation is a better understanding on how slash fiction and kink meme communities can contribute to the cultural discussions on sexuality, gender diversity, identity, and the transformative potential of sexually explicit material made by women and queer people.

Article I introduces three different slash fics written in three different fandoms. Applying a queer sensitive close-reading method it presents three thematic lines of how the formation of sexual identity can be discussed in slash. The thematic lines are compared to theoretical literature on the construction and formation of different aspects of identity. The article discusses shortly the history of different sexual identity models and introduces three contemporary ones that are compared to the themes found in the fics. The findings show how many ways identity can be discussed in slash fiction, even in the admittedly limited scope of white, cis-gendered, able-bodied men.

Article II introduces kink meme communities and shortly explains how they operate and what kind of fan literature is commonly written there. The article takes into consideration the mpreg, or male pregnancy subgenre of slash fiction. The history of pregnant men in mythologies, literature, and media is shortly introduced. The article applies a gender sensitive close-reading method and analyses a mpreg fic “Nesting” (2016). This analysis is framed with shorter analyses on two other mpreg fics, called “Alien” (2015) and “And Baby Makes Three” (2015). All three fics belong to the horror/fantasy series *Supernatural* (USA 2005 – 2020) fandom and were first published in a *Supernatural* kink meme community. The show is shortly analysed as a neogothic media text that has many ties to the gothic genre and especially the US-based genre of Southern gothic. Both gothic and Southern

gothic often discuss gender, family, and incest. The article discusses how gender and especially the gender dichotomy are negotiated in mpreg fics and how the body of a pregnant man can queer both gender and pregnancy. The article finds three basic methods how a male character gets pregnant in mpreg fiction. These are named thematically 1) Through biology, 2) Through magic, and 3) The alfa/omega universe. The third category is analysed closely through the close-reading of the fic “Nesting”. Through close-reading against the theoretical background of queer theories and Southern gothic the article reveals three different ways gender and pregnancy are rewritten and shows how inadequate the dichotomic male/female idea is in describing reality with its infinite diversity in infinite combinations.

Article III dives deeper into kink meme communities. The article reports the findings of an online survey ($n = 78$) that was circulated among people over the age of eighteen who frequent or have frequented one or more kink meme communities. The survey consisted of ten questions, three of which were preliminary, collecting data on the respondents’ age, gender and sexual identity, and educational background. The remaining seven were open-ended questions that queried about the role of kink meme communities in the respondents’ lives, how the respondents would situate kink meme fan fiction in the larger framework of pornography or erotica, the motivations or feelings when prompting or writing sexually explicit fics, and how the respondents view the “taboo” subjects in kink meme writing, such as rape or incest. The survey was hosted by the online platform SurveyMonkey, and the data was analysed using qualitative content analysis. The data set of seventy-eight was read through multiple times, with every round collecting and placing similar themes into tighter categories, until five different categories emerged. The article applies a large theoretical framework that discusses the role of sexual fantasies in identity development, the role of female-centred and queer sexually explicit material in making pornography more diverse, and fan fiction as queer female practise. The categories reveal how important kink meme communities are to the respondents. They are seen as safe online spaces where the issues concerning female and queer sexuality, desire, and fantasies can be discussed and where sexually explicit material catered to and created by women and queer people can be published. Kink meme communities are also revealed to be places which, while open to all kinds of kinks and fantasies, also have deep internal dialogue on the acceptability and role of taboo or unsettling subjects, such as rape.

2 Theoretical Frameworks

The work presented in this dissertation falls within three main theoretical frameworks that discuss the rich field of sexual identity development and the role different kinds of media texts can play in its construction. More specifically, my dissertation utilizes the theoretical backgrounds of fan fiction as queer female practise, the way identity formation can be informed and aided by reading, and how specific sexually explicit material can aid women and queer people in coming to terms with their sexualities and identities. I start by briefly introducing the history of fan fiction studies. I then move on to fan fiction as queer female practises, the construction site of sexual identities, and kink meme communities and women's porn.

2.1 A brief history of fan fiction studies

Fan fiction has been studied since the late 1980's and early 1990's. Much of the early discussion was centred around the questions of "how" and "why". How does fan fiction work and why do some women find it so appealing? Fans were not always treated very kindly by researchers and media representations alike. All fans were often lumped together into the stereotype of an infantile, sexually immature, and socially awkward man-child, or the star-crazy woman who cries and faints at the sight of her idol and fantasizes on marrying them. The term *fandom* was first applied to sports and theatre fans before it was adapted and further developed by science fiction enthusiasts in the 1920's (Coppa, 2006, 42). The first generation of fan fiction studies were not always very helpful in challenging the stereotype of fans as weird. Indeed, Camille Bacon-Smith's (1992) work focused on the quirky facets of fandom and fannish communities. In the same year, however, emerged Henry Jenkins' ground-breaking work on fan fiction as textual poaching (Jenkins, 1992). Jenkins' approach to fan fiction writers was influential in representing fan fiction writers and readers as intelligent, well-educated women who have a nuanced and rich understanding and appreciation of fandom and the media texts that they love. And while Jenkins did not really look at fan fiction as literature, he begun the scholarly tradition of searching for the textual history and continuum to which fan fiction might belong to. He placed fan fiction in the long history of derivative literature, which has its origins in the telling and retelling of ancient myths. In the next section I briefly go through the main lines of study concerning the history and origin of fan fiction. The two main lines are the long history model and the short

history model. I briefly go through the main arguments in favour of both and explain why I personally prefer the short history model. The long history model, as I will show, strongly favours the view of fan fiction as a modern re-telling of ancient myths. I go through the argument to show its problems and to explain why I do not favour it.

2.1.1 Fan fiction and the modern myth

Texts that comment and explore other texts are nothing new, of course. Indeed, one could argue that the whole history of Western literature is based on that practise, and for most of human literary history authors and poets did not view the material written by their ancestors as sacred objects not to be touched. History, myths, legends, and the stories based on them were freely used as inspiration by most Mediaeval and New Age writers. (Pugh, 2005, 13.) Indeed, a certain authorial modesty and disguising the author by claiming that the writer of a particular story did not actually pull the story out of their own head but rather “found” it hidden away somewhere, was long part of the telling of Ancient and Mediaeval myths.

Among fan fiction scholars, there are roughly three main lines concerning the history and origin of fan fiction writing (Derecho, 2006, 62). Those could be dubbed as long history, the idea that fan fiction is just one part in the several Millenia old story telling practises that originated in the oral telling of ancient myths; and short history, which claims that if any text or story that refers or comments some older text is called fan fiction, fan fiction as a practise and genre loses all meaning. The third line takes a middle road, admitting that while all pieces of literature are connected to each other through culture and intertextual references, the long history model might be too broad and the short history too narrow. A middle ground could perhaps be found, which both takes into consideration the derivative or intertextual nature of all literature and acknowledges fan fiction as an offspring of the modern popular culture.

Myths as a concept and as literary and cultural practise have long been used in trying to analyse and understand fan fiction (Willis, 2016, para. 1.2). Camille Bacon-Smith named her work *Enterprising women: Television fandom and the creation of a popular myth* (Bacon-Smith, 1992), a sentiment which Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (2014) echo. The concept of myth can be used in understanding and analysing fan fiction on three different level: content, form, and theory (Willis, 2016, para. 1.2).

On content level, myths and mythical heroes and gods, such as Thor or Loki or the various Greek gods, goddesses, and heroes, offer fans plenty of material from which to draw on, either in their “original” form or in their modern counterparts, such as the Marvel comics or movies. On a formal and theoretical level, fan fiction can be seen keeping the ancient myths alive and interesting to new generations of readers and storytellers. Fan fiction and myths also have a lot in common as narratives: both are characterized by their multiple, self-contained but potentially overlapping story worlds. More importantly, fan fiction is often understood as and praised for its counterhegemonic and resistant practice of mythopoesis. (Willis, 2016, para. 1.2.) Especially slash and its potentiality to reshape our cultural understandings of sexual identities and question the essentialist notions of sex, gender, and sexuality has received much attention from scholars over the years (Booth, 2014; Busse, 2006; Driscoll, 2006; Jenkins, 1992; Jung, 2002; Lackner et al., 2006; Woledge, 2006).

Fan fiction as a popular and contemporary myth has also been used by scholars defending fans and fan art against the accusations that fan fiction is a copyright infringement against the author of the original text (Montano, 2013).⁶ Natalie Montano argues that fan fiction writers are keeping alive and perpetuating myths that are an inseparable part of being human (Montano, 2013, 695). She defines myth as a societal story, an essential social narrative that uses and draws from archetypal figures and forms to offer ideologies, values, and models for social life. In this, she cites the study of Joseph Campbell (1973) who in his treatise *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* shows that most of the fiction that we would consider original use the same archetypal characters, figures, and story lines. This argument is problematic because it defines myths and mythologies simply in terms of content and does not consider the cultural differences in context and content of storytelling. This is important because especially classical myths are socially embedded in their culture of origin, and therefore the surface-level similarities in stories do not merit calling every story that has a returning hero a reworking of the ancient myth (Buxton & Buxton, 1994). Nor does fan fiction, which uses such diverse story worlds as inspiration, automatically operate in the world of mythopoesis.

⁶ In US copyright law there is a build-in defense for derivative work that transforms itself beyond being merely derivative, under which fan fiction does arguably fall quite neatly. The argument can be summarized, as Nathaniel Noda (2010, 140) does, as readers right to interpret and analyze a piece of literature as they wish. In short, the author has no power over how the audience interprets their work, and sometimes this interpretation may include the use of the original work in a subsequent work, such as a review, parody, or fan fiction. Fans themselves do take property rights very seriously, and every fan work has a disclaimer that acknowledges the original author or copyright holder.

It is particularly the perceived ability for resistance and counterhegemony that compels some scholars to compare fan fiction to myths. Henry Jenkins, (1992, 36) citing Michel de Certeau (1984) affectionately dubs fans and fannish reading practices as nomadic, not concerned with property rights, but forever travelling from text to text, appropriating new materials and making new meanings. In an early essay about slash fiction, Anne Kustritz (2003) praises fans for their effort in claiming as their own popular culture texts that receive none or little formal appreciation from scholars, seeing fans as heroes taking the ownership of stories from the hands of greedy media companies back to the 'people'. This argument falls short, however, when we consider that fan fiction writers use such 'highbrow' cultural texts as Shakespeare as inspiration, and many fans are well read, referencing many classical works and ideas in their fics. Furthermore, when we consider that most popular, big budget movies and tv-series nowadays are part of huge franchises, owned by a handful of global media companies, it could be argued that fan fiction adds to the power of these companies, by creating for free material that could be viewed as advertisement, making the franchises and characters even more popular. That being said, fan fiction does also have the power to criticize and resist the original works, as the popularity of "fix it" fics shows. Fans mend and critique poor narrative choices and unpopular endings to shows, and many loyal fans are also the harshest critics when a show or a franchise does not live up to its potential.

The idea of fan fiction as a newer version of folk culture that Kustritz (2003) and later Henry Jenkins (2006) and Natalie Montano (2013) praise, is in danger of de-historicizing and romanticizing traditional societies and folk cultures as more 'natural' than our modern, capitalist models of privately-owned storytelling (Willis, 2016, para. 2.12). As Willis shows, the idea of myths as the primordial, authentic, and organic form of knowing ultimately leads back to the 18th century and to Johann Gottfried Herder who borrowed and reworked Plato's Mythos/Logos binary. Where Plato viewed mythos as irrational and misleading speech, Herder valorized it as authentic and organic form of knowing (Willis, 2016, para. 2.13). Therefore, valorizing fan fiction as modern folk culture, is rooted in Herderian model of myth, which sees myth as the unifying factor that defines and produces an authentic community, be it a nation or a culture (Willis, 2016, para 2.14). And while fan fiction may with good reason be seen as operating somewhat outside the capitalist economy, (Hellekson, 2009) viewing fans as heroes taking back what belongs to the people is in danger of falsely associating myth with nature and folk culture with authenticity and purity. This theory does disservice to fan fiction

practices and their ability to deconstruct our cultural ideas of power, gender, and hegemony.

In the next section, I briefly go through the short history model of fan fiction to explain its strengths and weaknesses and why I as a researcher prefer it over the long history model.

2.1.2 The short history model

As previously explained, fan fiction as retelling of old myths is one view concerning the history and origins of fan fiction. The so-called short history model places the birth of fan fiction at the beginning of the 20th century and the early days of media fandoms. The proponents of this model argue that the long history model is too broad, as surely not all derivative work can or should be labelled fan fiction. Fan fiction is more specific than the myth model would allow. As Willis (2016, para. 3.2) argues, focusing on myth and cultural ownership does not offer a sufficiently complex understanding about the relationship between stories, culture, and power. Citing Lincoln (1999, 149), Willis argues for better understanding of how agency operates in the act of narrating, or how narrating and being able to modify the details of the texts according to our own subject positions and interests is a political act. And while the seminal works of Henry Jenkins and Constance Penley linked fan practices to the female-voiced, counterhegemonic discourse of mythopoesis, I argue for a narrower approach. Fan fiction undoubtedly has a lot of common with feminine storytelling practices as argued by second-wave feminists, but if we are to better understand the relationship between the act of narrating, culture, and power that is in play in fan fiction writing today, it is not necessary to start from too far in the past.

The questions of how an audience can interact with and talk back to the authors or owners of media companies began to rise in the beginning of the 20th century and can be linked to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his decision to kill off his most famous creation, Sherlock Holmes. 20 000 subscribers to the *Strand Magazine*, where Sherlock Holmes stories were first published, called off their subscriptions in protest, marking perhaps the first big scale public reaction to a fictional character. In terms of audience and power, the Holmes case showed how an audience can view a fictional character as their own and hold power over the creator of the character. As such, the incident is a precedent to modern audience battles against authors or media companies. To incite such passionate feelings in readers requires a modern understanding of literature and readers. The idea of professional authors

and a reading public emerged in the Enlightenment, but modern media fandoms where the audience can interact with the authors and each other did not emerge until the 1920's. The rise of modern media fandoms can be traced back to the science fiction pulp magazines of the day, whose letter columns offered fans a place to talk to the editors and to other fans, marking the beginning of readers interacting with each other and forming fan communities (Coppa, 2006, 42). The magazines published the addresses of the people writing to the letter columns and thus abled the fans to contact each other in person. Fans began to organize and publish their own fan zines where they published discussions about the stories in the professional magazines, as well as amateur stories and art. In 1939, some British science fiction authors, including Arthur C. Clarke, organized the first World Science Fiction Convention in New York City (Coppa, 2006, 43). The modern media fandom had emerged.

With the history of fan fiction, however we cannot overlook the year 1966, when the first episode of the original *Star Trek* (1966 – 1969) was broadcasted. With *Star Trek*, female science fiction fans truly became visible. From the start women fans were drawn to the speculative, equalitarian world view that *Star Trek* offered, and especially to the alien First Officer Spock whose half-alien, half-human inheritance often marked him as other among the otherwise all-human crew. Especially women scientists saw reflected in Spock some of the same struggles they had to face in the masculine world of science (Coppa, 2006, 45). And from *Star Trek* and especially the deep and intimate friendship between Spock and his captain Jim Kirk, slash fiction emerged. Gene Roddenberry's vision of the future did not only include fascinating spaceships, alien worlds, and faster than light travelling, but was equally ready to present intimate relationships between the crew members and same-sex characters. Subsequently, some fans saw the opportunity to imagine how homosexuality might be seen in the 23rd century. The first fan zines dedicated to *Star Trek* fan fiction did not publish slash, but slash stories were written and circulated among a selective group of fans, although not necessarily published. Come the 1970's, some adult zines (such as *Grup*, established in 1972, the first *Star Trek* zine to publish adult content) began to publish slash. It was in *Grup* #3 that the story labelled *A Fragment Out of Time* (Diane Marchant, 1974), often claimed to be the first Kirk/Spock slash fic ever published, first emerged. The story is a short, two-page fragment depicting the love making of two unnamed people, the other identified as male by the masculine pronouns, while his companion is not given gendered pronouns at all. While the artwork published with the story depicted Kirk and Spock, the story itself was written so opaquely that the

identities of the characters were not immediately clear to the readers. *A Fragment Out of Time* was not the first K/S slash fic written, however. That honor might be given to the short story *The Ring of Soshern*, written by Jennifer Guttridge in 1968. The story was only meant for hand-to-hand circulation, although it was later published without the author's consent in 1987 in a print zine *Alien Brothers*. Unlike Diane Marchant's story, *The Ring* leaves no uncertainty about the identities of its characters or about their relationship. It is perhaps the first story to use the now ubiquitous "Pon Farr forces the first sexual encounter between Kirk and Spock"⁷.

In the next section, I dive deeper into slash fiction and discuss the theory of slash as queer literature, which I introduced in article I.

2.2 Slash as queer literature

Since the early fan fiction studies, researchers have pondered about slash fiction. Perhaps because of the perceived oddity of women writing what is often summarily dismissed as either trashy romance or pornography, (Stasi, 2006, 116) slash fiction has received plenty of academic attention. Especially many early scholars tended to be oriented around the idea of slash and fan fiction in general using a resistant reading practice, countering the limited role women in many television shows get by appropriating the bodies of men and, by 'misreading' male-on-male homosocial relationships as homoerotic, ignoring the clearly implicated heterosexuality of the characters (Jones, 2002, 81). This suggests that all texts that slash writers contend with are inherently heterosexual and devoid of any 'queer' meanings or content (Willis, 2006, 154). Jones argues that rather than ignoring the preferred reading of texts, that is, the heterosexual readings, slash writers are actualizing latent textual

⁷ Pon Farr is part of the mating cycle of Vulcans. Every seven years, postpubescent Vulcans face Pon Farr, a mating season, and must mate with someone they are empathically bonded with, or failing that, risk the possibility of dying. Pon Farr was first introduced in the episode "Amok Time" in season two of the Original *Star Trek*. In the episode, Spock, who had so far not gone through Pon Farr perhaps due to his Vulcan-human hybrid physiology, has to face the harsh realities of the mating season. Together with Captain Kirk and the ship's Chief Medical Officer Dr. McCoy, Spock travels to Vulcan. There he discovers that his intended bride T'Pol does not wish to mate with him, forcing Spock to fall into a dangerous blood fever, called Plak Tow. T'Pol forces Spock to duel with her chosen champion for her hand in marriage. She chooses Kirk to fight for her. Kirk and Spock duel, which ends when Kirk presumably dies. This rouses Spock from his blood fever and sates his desire to mate. Kirk, of course, is not really dead, and the episode ends with Spock smiling widely and exclaiming delightedly "Jim!" and grabbing Kirk's arms, a behavior most unbecoming of a cool, logical, unflappable Vulcan. The possibilities and implications of Pon Farr have been discussed by slash writers unnumberable times.

elements already present in the texts themselves (Jones, 2002). Jones, together with many others, utilize the view that slash writers are resisting patriarchy by deconstructing seemingly heterosexual texts and finding the queer implications within (Booth, 2014; Derecho, 2006; Driscoll, 2006; Jones, 2002; Lackner et al., 2006; Woledge, 2006).

Driscoll finds similarities between slash and pornography and romance, while Woledge (2006) places slash in a utopian world she calls 'intimatopia'. Intimatopias are to Woledge homosocial worlds where intimacy is engendered by the social closeness of male characters. She quotes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who showed that homoerotic and homosocial relationships do not rule each other out, but rather homosexual desire can be expressed in homosocial relationships, depending on the political and cultural circumstances (Sedgwick, 1985, 6). According to Woledge, intimatopic texts are those where the homoerotic possibility in homosocial relationships is supported. This can happen by accentuating even further the common theme of placing men in a male-centric, often high-risk environments, like the army or a battlefield, or by appropriating historical settings where the rules controlling same-sex relationships were different, like in Ancient Greece. (Woledge, 2006, 101.) By placing the characters in an environment where they are isolated from the wider heterosocial society, intimatopic texts, slash included, can explore the 'logical' evolution of platonic relationships into erotic ones. Deep homosocial bonds between men have been a staple in the nineteenth-century male-authored American literature as well as in many television and movie genres. It is no accident that all the fandoms I studied for my dissertation have deep male-on-male homosocial relationships at their core. In homosocial, devoted relationships all the intimacy, love, devotion, and possible heartache are already established, and the slash writer needs only to find the ways to make the characters realize the non-platonic possibilities in their friendship.

In intimatopic texts this evolution from platonic to non-platonic is often a seamless slip, with homophobia conspicuous in its absence (Woledge, 2006, 102). With homophobia simply wiped away, there is hardly a need to discuss the real-world struggles gay people face. This idea is discussed in article I, where I explain why and how modern slash fiction is deeply immersed in queer politics. Woledge argues that intimatopic texts, like slash, knowingly distance themselves from the real homosexual or queer subculture, which has made some critics accuse slash of appropriating gay male bodies and expressing homophobic views (Woledge, 2006). However, as Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian (2018) argue, slash fiction has changed significantly over the years, with slash's relationship to queer culture

evolving in major ways. And as my dissertation shows, most slash fiction today has deep ties to queer culture and to the issues real queer people face. In rewriting the canonical relationships, slash writers utilize many queer and after-queer reading practices, which are much more nuanced than the ‘homoindifferent’ utopia of intimatopias (Woledge, 2006, 103).

In the following sections I go through the theoretical literature I used in my dissertation. I start with article I, introducing queer and after-queer reading practices, the role of literature in identity building, and some main theories on how identities, especially sexual identities, develop. I then move on to women’s role in consuming and creating sexually explicit material, as introduced and developed in articles II and III.

2.2.1 Queer and after-queer reading practises

The history of queer representations in the media is a complicated one, full of silences and omissions. The birth of the modern political gay or queer movement can be traced back to 1969 and the Stonewall protests, but queer people, or people having loving, sexual relationships with members of the same sex, have always been here. As Vito Russo (1987) demonstrates in his classic work, queer-coded characters have been a staple in American cinema almost since the very beginning, although the representation of homosexuality was prohibited or strictly regulated, even after the Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays Code as it is commonly known as, was lifted.⁸ It has long been known that media role models can positively influence the way young LGBTQA+ people see themselves and their sexuality. Seeing positive role models on TV or belonging to supportive online groups can help people in their coming-out process. (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, 339.) However, historically these representations have been scarce, and many queer people learn to read the media they consume differently, forever scanning the contents for any references or allusions to queer sexuality, and often reading between the lines, finding representation even where it is not readily available. As Fryberg and Townsend (2008) explain, underrepresentation can take two forms – absolute invisibility or relative invisibility. For older queer people, they had to grow up in absolute invisibility, devoid of any meaningful queer representation, for

⁸ The Motion Picture Production Code (1934 – 1968) was a series of industry guidelines for the motion picture industry for regulating what was appropriate content for movies. Any references to “sexual perversions”, including homosexuality, were prohibited under the Code.

although queer-coded characters might have been available, these representations were mostly negative. In the early 1990's, what could be called a queer moment (Marshall, 2010, 65), the media atmosphere changed from absolute invisibility to relative one, where some representation is available, but it is often limited or stereotypical in nature (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, 339).

When representation is hard to come by, many queer people adopt a queer reading practise that Marshall (2010, 76) calls "reading in". In search of representation, queer audiences become sort of detectives, scanning the media for the right clues that hint at the possibility of a queer reading (Lipton, 2008, 177). In other words, queer audiences must read themselves into the heteronormative texts that refuse to offer them representation otherwise. Queer reading practises, or queer reception, is not dependent upon one's sexual identity, however. In other words, even straight people can apply queer reading practises and read themselves in the narratives of intimate male-on-male relationships. (Doty, 1995, 84.)

Since the late 1990's when mass-produced representations of homosexuality begun to increase in mainstream Western television and cinema, queer reading practices changed from reading into to reading out of. If before queer audiences were detectives, searching and cracking open clues in heteronormative texts, and reading themselves into them, after-queer audiences learned to analyze and respond to mass-produced representations, many of which maintained and repeated the stereotypical view of queer youth as victims of homophobia. (Marshall, 2010, 77.) This change does not mean that the previous reading into practices were completely supplanted by the newer after-queer reading practices, as indeed not all mainstream movie franchises have embraced the changing ethos of offering representation to queer people. The increase in representation has meant, however, that audiences are ever more aware and critical of the representation offered to them and use resistant and critical reading practices to deconstruct the harmful texts and to shed light to the issues not yet addressed by mainstream media.

Since the 1970's, slash fiction has had a critical role in offering women viewers a chance to engage with the media they love in their own terms and to critically examine it. Since the beginning, slash writers and readers have been predominately women and probably most of them have been and are straight, although queer-identified members have always been a substantial group. This goes to show that not only queer audiences use resistant and deconstructive reading practices. Further, as established in the previous section, many fan fiction scholars view slash and slashing as a queer, resistant practice, aiming to challenge the male-oriented, heteronormative texts. Slash writers' methods and intentions have changed

drastically from the first slash fics of 1970's, however, and this change can be traced by analyzing the relationship between slash and queer culture. This has also meant a change in reading practices, from reading into to reading out of, with contemporary slash utilizing both but mostly preferring the reading out of model.

Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian (2018) find three waves in the relationship between slash and queer culture. These waves illustrate the on-going negotiations between slash fiction and queer movement as political activism. However, slash is not and has never been a monolithic genre, and slash writers have different agendas and practices. All slash is not queer, feminist, transformative, or resistant. However, common themes can be found in sufficiently large set of data, that is, slash fics, and the change in relationship between slash and queer culture can be traced together with the change in our cultural understanding and acceptance of queer sexualities and women's role in media.

The first wave of slash fiction could be seen as a response to the ways women and heterosexual relationships were often depicted in television and movies. While most of the fan fiction in the 1960's and 70's was canon-based adventure and action stories with canonical heterosexual relationships, early slash writers began to write out their desire for more equalitarian romances and relationships between men and women. This was easier to do when both lovers have male bodies and are thus not subject to gender oppression and sexual violence the way women are. Therefore, it might have been easier for many women writers and readers to immerse themselves in the texts and their erotic and romantic daydreams when the oppression and risks present in their own lives and in the lives of women in general were removed. While there were a lot of oppression facing gay people in the 1970's and 80's, the slash writers of those periods did not usually address it, concentrating more on the emotional self-engagement with the characters. In other words, when early slash writers were writing about the romance between Kirk and Spock or Starsky and Hutch, they were writing more about their own desires and anxieties than the real-live experiences of gay men (Busse & Lothian, 2018, 119). This becomes especially clear when reading the sex scenes in early slash fics. The men get multiple orgasms and engage in anal sex with no extra lubrication needed, showing that the woman writing the scene was thinking about the mechanics of vaginal penetration.

In many tv-shows of 1960's and 70's that were popular with slash writers the female characters were mostly very thinly drawn and their relationships with the male protagonists often did not continue longer than a single episode. The relationship between the men, like Kirk and Spock or Starsky and Hutch, were the glue that held the whole show together. Therefore, it is not hard to understand why

early slash writers dressed up their hopes and dreams of a passionate and more equalitarian romances in male clothes. Using the terms Daniel Marshall (2010) employs, the women writing these early slash fics read themselves into the narratives, often taking over or colonizing male bodies for the sake of female pleasure.

These early slash fics began a trend that still echoes to this day. Taking their cue from canonical buddy show representations which often insulate the two male protagonists in their own little world with little need for meaningful relationships outside of it, many slash writers from early on took the somewhat claustrophobic just-the-two-of-us relationship model as the highest romantic ideal. This sometimes meant purposefully alienating the two lovers from larger queer culture which was often depicted as shallow, unloving, and fraught with homophobia and fear (Busse & Lothian, 2018, 120). This often meant not purposefully naming the protagonists' relationship as homosexual, but rather placing it in a category of its own, what Woledge (2006, 103) calls "homoindifferent" intimatopias. These intimatopias began to break and let the realities of outside world in with the cultural change of the 1990's. With gay people and queer relationships slowly gaining more visibility in mainstream television, slash writers began to value direct engagement with queer communities and important topics of the day, such as the AIDS crisis. The shift in publishing, with Internet gaining ground and the increasing number of fan fiction writers moving online, might have facilitated slash becoming more realistic, because the move to online meant more people finding and taking part in fan fiction.⁹ The second wave of slash began to employ different reading methods, moving away from the straight women reading themselves into the texts, and towards a critique of heteronormativity in media. And although the insulated relationships outside of sexual identity labels were still very much the norm when I first began to read slash in the early 2000's, a clear shift towards more realism and queer representation was in the process of taking place (Busse & Lothian, 2018, 123).

This shift continued and gained speed in the following decades, and the third wave of slash writers are increasingly identifying themselves not only as allies and members of queer communities, but also taking into consideration the issues of intersectionality, power, and racial justice (Busse & Lothian, 2018, 124). In simple

⁹ In the 1990's a gay male slash fan using a pseudonym Minotaur published online "Sex tips for slash writers", (https://fanlore.org/wiki/Sex_Tips_for_Slash_Writers) offering research and his own personal experiences for slash writers to help them write more realistic sex scenes, both anatomically and culturally.

terms, this is shown with slash writers increasingly comfortable with labeling their characters as gay, bisexual, queer, or any number of other identities, and slash writers taking on the questions of power, race, privilege, and gender together with issues of sexuality. This has also meant slash writers becoming more and more aware and vocal of their position in subcultural queer communities which helps them express their own (female, non-binary, trans, and queer) desires that the surrounding culture silences. This is very much visible in my thesis, especially in the third article. The articles I and II also show a clear change in queer reading practices that the fans employ. More and more, in more ‘traditional’ slash as well as in kink writings, the writers are delving deep in the canon texts and bringing to surface more nuanced readings concerned with issues of identity, power, gender, desire, and queer activism (Busse & Lothian, 2018, 124).

2.2.2 Building identities through reading

The question of what happens when we read, when we encounter texts and immerse ourselves in them is one that researchers have pondered about for decades. While literary theorists understood early on that readers encounter and approach texts differently, and that the text is finalized and becomes real only after someone reads it, the ways the readers’ gender, sexual identities, race, etc. affects the way they read was not clearly understood. While there is no need to go deep into the literary theory of reading and readers here, a few words about the role of reading in the lives of women and queer-identified people is in order. Second-wave feminists expressed the idea that women are from early on socialized to read ‘like men’, and to avoid that, women need to enter the texts they read from a different angle, to make the texts their own (Flynn & Schweickart, 1988). This idea of deconstruction of texts and finding new meanings within is also behind some analysis of fan fiction (Derecho, 2006; Jenkins, 1992; Pugh, 2005). Lynn Pearce (1997) conceptualized reading through the affective relationships female readers create with what she called the ‘textual other’. Paulette Rothbauer (2004a, 59) identified reading as a tactic that offers non-straight young women chances to resist heterosexists discourses in mainstream society.

Gomillion and Giuliano (2011, 338) found that many young people looked for more nuanced representations of queer families and queer individuals in media. Their study, together with Marshall (2010) and Rothbauer (2004) informed my study in article I of how slash writers use queer reading practises to offer more nuanced readings of the development of queer identities. While identity

development is a complicated issue with multiple variables, as will be discussed in later sections, involvement in safe online spaces has been established to help young people discover and develop their sexual and gender identities (Attwood, 2009; Craig, 2014; Harris, 2001; Neville, 2018). As established in the previous section, while slash fiction began as some women's opportunity to express their erotic and romantic fantasies dressed up in male gay clothes, slash writers and readers today look for and create much more in their stories. Slash fiction is much more than an escapist fantasy to many slash writers and readers. The lesbian, bisexual, and queer women interviewed by Paulette Rothbauer expressed that to them, reading and finding depictions of queer sexualities was much more than a chance to escape the realities of their lives. While coming to terms with one's non-heterosexual identity can be stressful and tarnished with homophobia, young people look for stories that deal with sexuality from a more nuanced angle than most coming-out stories provide (Rothbauer, 2004, 64). Seeking depictions of possibilities, of happy romantic relationships as well as unhappy ones, young queer readers turn to books for instruction and identity tools with which to define themselves (Rothbauer, 2004, 65).

Reading different texts can be an important aid in how queer people orient themselves into the world as non-heterosexuals. Encountering different textual depictions of sexual identities can inform the readers in their own identity development. Sexual identities are multifaceted and can be constantly shifting, like construction sites that are never finished. Because sexual identities and how they develop are an essential part of my thesis, especially in article I, the next section looks at different theories on how sexual identities develop and how they are constructed together with other parts of one's identity. This dissertation does not, strictly speaking, study how sexual identities of real people develop. It rather focuses on how slash fiction presents the identities of fictional characters as shifting and changing, as I argue in article I, and shows how behind the fictional characters are the real people writing about them. The occurrence of interpretive work and its public dissemination by queer people themselves is an agentic practice (Marshall, 2010, 75), and the fans who write about the sexual identities of fictional characters may be studying their own understanding of sexuality and/or gender or using fiction to develop their own sense of self. Therefore, it is important to go through some basic theories on identity development, to better understand what identities are. As shown in article III, many fans turn to fan fiction to better understand themselves (and others) as sexual beings.

2.3 The construction site of sexual identity

Identity is a deep, very human issue that researchers have discussed for decades, without finding a final answer to how and when identities develop. Identity cuts to the core of who we are as human beings; not only who we feel like we are deep inside our own mind, but who we are in relation to other people who share the same characteristics, values, or interests that we do, and equally importantly, who we are in relation to people that do not share these aspects of our lives. Identity in simple terms thus answers the question “who am I?” (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011, 2). The answer to that question depends on whether the one answering it is thinking about themselves personally, (“I am a woman, a humanist, an atheist”) in relation to a smaller family unit or other group, such as workplace, (“I am a daughter, a sister, and an aunt”) or in relation to larger social groups or communities (“I am Finnish”). These examples illuminate the three ‘levels’ that identity is often understood comprising of: individual, relational, and collective (Vignoles et al., 2011, 3).

The three different levels of identity do not exist independent of each other. The way that a person identifies as a woman or as a humanist or an atheist is dependent upon the social and cultural context they live and form their identity in. For example, womanhood and what it means to identify as a woman is informed by the culture and society one lives in, which is why a movement fighting for the rights of women must take into consideration the different social and cultural contexts that form the individual’s identity as a woman. What womanhood means for a white, secular, cis-gendered European, might not be same as it is for a Black Muslim transwoman. Likewise, vis-à-vis sexuality, the possibilities of an individual to identify as a non-heterosexual, for example, are dependent upon, and informed by, the society and the historical timeframe they live in. Categories such as homosexual or heterosexual are rather new in our European culture, and the meanings that are given to these social groups have changed and will change over time (Vignoles et al., 2011, 4). Therefore, all aspects of identity, even the ones that feel most personal to us, are also inescapably social, both in content and in the processes by which they are formed, maintained, and changed (Vignoles et al., 2011, 5).

Identity is difficult to form in isolation, and even if one were to claim an identity inside their own head, it only gains meaning and recognition in relation to other people. These questions are discussed in detail in article I, in the close-reading of the Captain America fic “All the Angels and the Saints” (2014). The fic follows

the story of a young Steve Rogers as he struggles with his sexuality and his Catholic upbringing. The writer Speranza asks what happens to a person's identity when he suddenly finds himself seventy years into the future, in a world which has mostly forgotten about the man Steve Rogers and only remembers the national icon of Captain America. How can one build their sense of self when all their peers are long gone and there is nobody left who could see behind the public persona? In other words, what becomes of a person without the cultural and social context they used to live and develop their identity in?

How, then, does identity form and what kinds of processes inform the ways we develop our identities? Identities both form and are developed through processes one is not aware of, and through conscious efforts to explore and commit to different values, beliefs, and social groups (Vignoles et al., 2011, 5). Some aspects of our identities, such as our self-esteem, may form without our conscious effort, and the ways some aspects of our identity shift in accordance with different social contexts is also happening largely without our awareness. In the following sections I look at how our understanding of sexual identity formation has evolved over the years and trace a few contemporary models that aim to describe how non-heterosexual identities develop.

2.3.1 The social construction of sexual identities

Throughout human history there have been people who seek love and sexual satisfaction among members of their own gender. The significance ascribed to this love has changed many times over human history. Sexual identity is a term a person assigns to themselves based on important sexual aspects of their life, such as who they are sexually attracted to, their erotic fantasies, desires, behaviours, and values (Savin-Williams, 2011, 671). Sexual identity is not dependent upon whether one has sex or even desires sexual contact.

As explained above, sexual identity is largely dependent on cultural and social contexts and it can change many times during a person's lifetime (Savin-Williams, 2011, 672). Sexual orientation, on the other hand, describes towards which gender(s) one's sexual and emotional affections, fantasies, and needs are predominantly aimed at. Sexual orientation may or may not be the same as the label one applies to oneself. Sexual identities or sexual orientation labels can be chosen and un-chosen many times, whereas sexual orientation cannot (Savin-Williams, 2011, 672).

Sexual orientation labels are culturally dependant. In a society that has no words for sexual and romantic relationships between members of the same gender,

developing a distinct sexual minority identity is very hard, as language guides and develops our understanding of ourselves and others and constructs the way we view the world we live in. Some historians trace the origins of our modern understanding of male homosexuality to early Eighteenth century and to large cities, such as London, where certain taverns or “molly houses” became important venues for men seeking relationships with other men. Within these premodern sexual subcultures, people fostered distinct minority identities. (Beachy, 2010, 802.) This is remarkable since Michel Foucault in his work *L'Histoire de la Sexualité* (1976) argued that hetero/homosexual binarism only emerged after the coinage of the term “homosexual” in the latter half of the Nineteenth century. Following Foucault, the ability to form a distinct homosexual identity follows the coinage of the term and the medicalization of same-sex love and sexuality that took place in the Nineteenth century. While this may well be true, the men meeting in the early Eighteenth-century molly houses may well have developed a distinct sexual identity, although the labels they applied to their identities might have been very different than what we mostly use now. In other words, with our modern understanding we cannot really call these men homosexuals, as that term had not been invented yet, nor can we really know whether their sexual minority identities match the labels we have in usage today.

This confusion on what to call and how to appraise the sexual and romantic relationships between members of the same gender prior to the Nineteenth century and the subsequent medicalization of homosexuality is a difficult subject. The confusion comes from whether we understand homosexuality as a psychologically essential part of a person which can be found with little variation throughout history, or whether we see homosexuality as culturally and socially constructed. The social constructionist view was first argued by Mary McIntosh in her 1968 article “The Homosexual Role”. In it, McIntosh argued that homosexuality was better understood not as an essential, largely immutable part of a person, but rather as a group of social and cultural activities between members of the same gender, which may or may not be socially understood as homosexual (Juvonen, 2002, 16). The argument McIntosh introduced in her article led to a re-evaluation of the essentialist understandings of sexuality in the 1980’s. This re-evaluation led in turn to new models which tried to explain the development of homosexual identity, as seen in the following sections. I go through these models because they form the theoretical basis for article I.

2.3.2 The linear development models

Linear development models present the development of sexual identity as a series of subsequent steps from the initial confusion of an individual towards fully realized and openly disclosed sexual minority identity. It is important to note that while the development of sexual identity was seen as an important task of youth, the sexual identity development models were only applied to non-heterosexual teenagers. Heterosexuality was not seen as a sexual identity. (Savin-Williams, 2011, 673.) This was probably due to the influence of Erikson (Erikson, 1983 [1968]) who saw heterosexuality as an inevitable part of healthy identity development and a natural part of one's identity which did not need to be developed, unlike homosexuality.

Sexual identity development models were first introduced in the 1970's and they situate the development of non-heterosexual identity in adolescence and early adulthood. The most often cited and tested linear model was developed by Vivienne Cass (1979). In their model there are six subsequent stages. The first stage is *identity confusion*, which takes place in early adolescence and where the individual begins to understand that their feelings of being different than other people might be because of homosexuality but they are not yet ready to accept this possibility. The next stage is *identity comparison* during which the individual compares their sexual feelings and thoughts with those of their peers and begins to tentatively accept that they might be gay or lesbian. In the next stage, the individual begins to accept that they most likely are homosexual and begins to seek out other gay people and form relationships with them, which leads to fully accepted identity. The fifth stage consists of the individual confronting the incongruity between their homosexual identity and the heteronormative world and choosing to associate mostly with other likeminded people, which generates pride in their in-group minority identity. In the final stage, the individual can integrate their minority identity with other aspects of themselves, leading to a synthesis where sexual identity is an important but not the determining aspect of their identity.

While these sexual identity models were born out of the need to explain how homosexual identity develops in the interaction between the individual's inner world and the surrounding culture, the linear development models still see homosexuality as an essential part of a person and the development of non-heterosexual identity as a universal process. This is one major criticism against these models. They also over-simplify sexual identity development to involve only the coming-out phase and reduce sexual minority identities to just gay and lesbian.

Bisexuality and other LGBTQ identities are not taken into consideration. And as Savin-Williams (2011, 675) concludes, there is no empirical evidence that sexual identity actually develops in stages. Rather, the development varies from person to person, and as sexual identity is socially constructed, the very idea of sexual identity is in constant flux. As non-heterosexuality becomes more and more accepted and normalized at least in the Western world, young people of all sexualities are resisting the limiting sexual identity labels (Savin-Williams, 2011, 673). That is not to say that sexual and especially gender minority kids today are not facing discrimination and bullying, nor is the need for open and accepting spaces for queer youth diminishing. As my study shows, fan fiction writers today are deeply aware of the need for representation for queer people and in their stories present many ways sexual identity develops and changes, not only in adolescence but throughout life.

2.3.3 Sexual landscape model and the figured worlds model

As we have seen, linear identity development models do not accurately represent the multifaceted, often in flux nature of sexual identity and sexual orientation. Linear models oversimplify the formation of sexual identity and constantly overlook other identities than gay/lesbian (Rust, 1996, 65). To better understand the many paths people take to form their identities, both personally and communally, Paula Rust (1996) formed her model of sexual landscape. Sexual landscape is a description of an individual's location in relation to other people, institutions, and social groups, which form landmarks in the individual's sexual landscape. Rather than discovering one's authentic self through series of subsequent steps, Rust describes the change in identity and sexual orientation labels as a process of modifying one's self-description in response to changes in the location of self on the sexual landscape (Rust, 1996, 66). For example, if a woman who previously identified as mostly lesbian were to meet a man to whom she was sexually attracted to, this man might form a landmark on her sexual landscape and inspire her to change her view of herself and the label she applies to herself from lesbian to bisexual. This change would represent a shift in her location on the sexual landscape in relation to an individual person, the man she was attracted to, or to a larger social group of men, meaning that she might possibly be attracted to any man, signifying that her previous sense of self as a lesbian might not be completely accurate after all. In article I, I read the *Starsky & Hutch* fic "The Outcome" (2010) in the light of the Sexual landscape model to explore a trope many slash writers use

to get their characters together. The “pretending to be a couple makes them realize their feelings” trope might seem as sidestepping the issue of sexual identity all together, but as I show in the article, the sexual landscape model can help explain how one person or a small change in viewpoint can shift person’s view of themselves.

It is not only individual people that can act as landmarks and signify a change. As our understanding of sexual identities and the labels we apply to different sexual orientations are socially constructed, one’s view of themselves sexually might shift according to the language available to them to describe themselves and their location on the sexual landscape. In other words, as language changes and the terms we use to describe different sexualities are altered, so can the labels we apply to ourselves change with learning new terms or joining groups where different words for our experiences are available. (Rust, 1996, 72.) We might also change the language we use and the terms we apply to ourselves depending on the social context and the people we interact with. For example, the label “queer” might not be understood by all people in a same way, so one might identify themselves as bisexual with people who are not as familiar with the more complex terms. And as language changes, so does our cultural understanding of sexuality through the development of social and political movements. These historical changes, such as the feminist movement or the queer movement may transform one’s sexual landscape. For example, the feminist movement in the 1970’s saw a link between lesbianism and feminism, creating the category of a political lesbian. This led some women in the feminist movement to adopt a lesbian identity as an expression of commitment to the movement. (Rust, 1996, 71.) Rust labels this a change in the sexual landscape itself, rather than a change in one’s location on it.

Liahna Gordon and Tony Silva (2015) have further developed Rust’s model. While Rust described how one’s sexual identity and the labels they apply might change with shifts in the sexual landscape, she did not actually posit a theory on how sexual identity and sexual orientation form. Gordon and Silva build on the concept of sexual landscape and develop a multidimensional approach to the development of both sexual identity and sexual orientation. Utilizing three theoretical perspectives: social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, and scripting theory Gordon and Silva explain how the sexual landscape we inhabit is constantly changing and how these changes help form our sense of self as sexual beings. Sexual landscape as Gordon and Silva envision it is not merely a social environment but also a physical space, inhabited by real people, and shared by people. We are all landmarks to each other in our sexual landscape, some more

significant than others, and as we interact with each other we are constantly building and changing our identities and our sense of self (Gordon & Silva, 2015, 507).

The figured worlds model

In linear development models the final stage is a complete integration and a disclosure of homosexual identity. The obvious fault in this is the fact that all people hold many simultaneous identities that may come in conflict with each other, making a seamless integration very hard if not impossible. To examine how these multiple identities develop and how different aspects such as class or ethnicity affect the ways our identities develop, Susan Jones and Marylu McEwen (2000) created a model of multiple dimensions of identity. In their model, significant identity dimensions, such as class, race, or sexual identity, surround a core sense of self which consists of one's personal attributes, characteristics, and a personal identity. Jones and McEwen (2000, 410) describe these identity dimension as overlapping rings, signifying that each ring influences and informs another, for example, sexual orientation is informed by one's racial identity. Each identity dimension holds a different level of importance to one's core sense of self. The salience of each dimension is in constant flux, meaning that at one time sexual orientation might rise to greater importance than racial identity, but this might change over time. Surrounding identity dimensions and the core is the context within which the individual experiences multiple dimensions of identity, such as family background and sociocultural conditions. The model has been developed further by Abes and Jones (2004) and Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007).

While the model of multiple dimensions of identity may help understand how different aspects of identity develop and influence one another within a particular context, it does not address what happens when the different dimensions conflict with each other, forcing the individual into identity negotiation. To explain this identity negotiation, Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) present four contexts of identity: figured worlds, positionality, space of authoring, and making worlds. A figured world is a person's own understanding of the world that surrounds them, for example one's childhood hometown. Social norms, expectations, and accountability positions a person within a figured world. When figured worlds come in conflict, for example when one's religious upbringing and identity as a Christian collides with one's non-heterosexual identity, the individual must "answer" to the conflict and negotiate their identities. This conflict is at the core of

the fan fic “All the Angels and the Saints” (2014). In the fic, Steve Rogers’ first figured worlds are the Catholic church and his faith that his father, who died in the first World War, was a hero. These come in conflict with Steve’s growing social conscience, which condemns futile wars, and his realization that the Catholic church may not be infallible. His realization that he is in love with his friend Bucky Barnes causes Steve to question what the church teaches about homosexuality, thus forcing Steve to “answer” to the conflict between his figured worlds. This is dubbed by Holland et al. as the space of authoring. Through this conflict one can build their own figured worlds. The creation of a third figured world happens by different means of self-empowerment and might mean keeping the conflicting identities apart from each other, creating a sort of identity buffer (Peña-Talamantes, 2013, 278). In Speranza’s fic, this identity buffer is made by Steve’s conviction never to “confess” his relationship with Bucky to a priest.

Theories on how sexual identity develops form a significant part of my thesis’ theoretical background. In the following section I turn my attention to the other major part of my study, the sexually explicit material created by women and the importance of safe online spaces for women and queer people.

2.4 Women and porn

An important part of my thesis was to study what kind of erotic or pornographic material is created in kink meme communities and how kink meme communities operate in producing sexually explicit material for the enjoyment of a mostly female-centric audience. I was interested to find out what kinds of depictions of gender and sexuality are presented in kink meme community fan fiction. Especially the phenomena of writing pregnant (cis) male characters and treating the male pregnancy and the sexual acts leading to pregnancy as erotic and sexually arousing caught my attention, mainly because of the many interesting possibilities these stories offer in transgressing gender, gendered bodies, and homo- and heterosexuality. The myriad, sometimes strange and fantastical sexual fantasies, which male pregnancy is one of, present in various kink meme communities caught my scholarly interest because of the many possibilities they offered to the study of how genders and sexualities are represented in pornography written mostly by women for the enjoyment of other women.

Women and pornography, especially pornography by and for women, is an intriguing subject, not least because of the seeming controversy of women enjoying and even making their own porn. Women and porn have had, and in many ways

continue to have a difficult relationship. Laws regulating and sometimes censoring pornographic and sexually explicit publications have often been justified by the propensity of pornography to ‘corrupt’ the innocent, that is, children – and to some extent – women, or by the idea that porn is inherently harmful because it contains and depicts material that subordinates, objectifies, and dehumanizes women. Indeed, anti-porn feminists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin (1997) went as far as to define pornography as a systematic practise of exploitation and subordination of women based on sex. This makes pornography harmful to all women, and therefore women who might enjoy and consume porn would do so against their own best interest. Mass media, such as news articles, popular women’s magazines, etc. often declare porn to be addictive, bad for intimate (heterosexual) relationships, and causing men to be increasingly violent against women. Research, however, either lags behind or does not support these accusations. (Montgomery-Graham, Kohut, Fisher, & Campbell, 2015.) The same kind of moral panic is emblematic in the discussion about young people’s use of pornography. Instead of relying on relevant research findings, the public discourse on young people and porn is usually shaped by viewing sexual cultures as inherently dangerous for young people, and young people as vulnerable and easily harmed by sexually explicit material (Spišák, 2016, 130).

Despite the bad reputation – or indeed – because of it, sexually explicit material seems to be everywhere. Indeed, many of the visual cues often associated with pornography have found their way into mainstream advertisements and popular media, so much so that our Western culture has been called ‘pornified’ (Paasonen, Nikunen, & Saarenmaa, 2007). The advent of Internet has made porn more readily available to more people, which in turn has increased the variety of sexually explicit material (Paasonen, 2011). The bigger variety there is in people making porn, the better porn can cater to the needs of more and more people. Pornographic fan fiction is one such ‘genre’, making visible the erotic needs and fantasies of some women and queer people who feel they are unable to find suitable and arousing material elsewhere. In the following sections, I briefly discuss the difficulties in defining pornography, ‘minority porn’ in relation to ‘mainstream’ porn, women as porn makers and consumers, and how these issues relate to my study of kink meme communities.

2.4.1 What is pornography?

Porn is a notoriously difficult subject to pin down, as it seems to evade definitions. While we talk about, are worried about, consume, and even make our own pornography, we seem to have difficulties in agreeing what precisely it is we masturbate to and should warn our children about. What one person declares pornographic, another may view as art. Sometimes, a change in where a picture is published is enough to change it from 'naughty' or pornographic to art (Rea, 2001, 118). One definition of porn stresses the intent of the publisher: if the maker or the publisher of the picture or other material intends it to be sexually arousing, this makes it pornographic. Another definition places the 'blame' on the audience: the intent of the audience to use a material for masturbation is what makes the material pornographic, therefore any material that someone might find sexually arousing could be viewed as pornographic. Both definitions are problematic, but they do hold a kernel of truth. When a famous Finnish artist Touko Laaksonen, or Tom of Finland as he is better known, first published his highly erotized drawings of men in the men's bodybuilding magazine *Physique Pictorial* in 1957, the publisher probably did not intend for the pictures to be viewed as gay pornography. However, it is quite probable that at least some of men buying the magazines did view them that way. Does that make the pictures pornographic? And when the Finnish textile business Finlayson produced a very popular collection depicting Tom of Finland drawings in 2014, did that somehow undo the pornographic 'stigma'? As Susanna Paasonen (2019, 447) points out in her article, Tom of Finland remained for decades an underground figure until the commercial world eagerly took the artwork of Laaksonen as their own – albeit only after cleaning away the most sexually explicit aspects of the drawings. What does this 'sanitizing' do the pornography of Laaksonen's art?

Michael Rea (2001, 120) attempts to answer this kind of dilemma by offering a twofold definition of pornography. Part one of his definition stipulates that x is used or treated as pornography by a person S . X is a piece of some sort of communicative material, be it a picture, a piece of text, etc. X 'becomes' pornographic if S desires to be sexually aroused or gratified by its contents and would have at best a weak desire to attend x 's content were the power of x to sexually arouse S removed. Part two of the definition states that x is pornographic if it is reasonable to believe that x would be used as such by most of its audience. By Rea's definition, if it is reasonable to believe that the Tom of Finland drawings would sexually arouse at least some of the men buying the *Physique Pictorial* and

that those men would buy the magazine for that reason, the drawings could reasonably be defined as pornographic. And when the drawings were printed on Finlayson tote bags and curtains, it was reasonable to believe that most of the people buying them would not be using them as pornography. However, one could argue that because these drawings can be transferred onto artistic, high-value textile products, this would 'prove' against their pornographic nature because, as Rea's definition states, a pornographic material has little or no other value to it other than the power to sexually arouse a person.

The sub-clause in Rea's definition, that pornographic material only attracts an audience by sexually arousing them, indicates a rather limited view of pornography. If pornographic material has no other use than to sexually arouse a person, how would one define erotic novels, for example? They hold numerous explicitly sexual scenes that no doubt arouses some of the readers but surely, they have other, more aesthetic value as well. Can a material contain pornography without becoming pornographic? Our culture places much value to written word. If a piece of text is elevated to the status of literature, it would seem to indicate a higher aesthetic value that would remove the 'stain' of pornography from the text. This cultural bias towards the written word has allowed women to have their own erotic, sexually arousing material under the guise of literature that promises to depict the complexities of the female desire, without being tainted as pornographic (Juffer, 1998, 105). This would seem to indicate that erotica is in a class of its own, arousing yes, and perhaps even pornographic, without being pornography. How should we approach this? Is the question of value and aesthetics what 'elevate' a material from pornography to erotica? Susanna Paasonen (2010, 139) argues that the terms 'porn' and 'erotica' can be used to label categories with particular kinds of dynamics and affective power. A material that mainly affects an audience through sexual arousal, could therefore quite comfortably be labelled as pornographic, while a material that stimulates the intellect as well as the body could be viewed as erotic, without placing one in a higher tier than the other. In fan fiction the question of how to label a piece of text comes up in interesting ways, as some readers might label a fic pornographic, while others would not, and as my study shows in article III, even people in communities primarily meant for sexually explicit and sexually arousing material do not all use the material for same purposes.

While the explanation offered by Paasonen does not ultimately solve the question of what pornography is, it offers a working definition without an added value judgement. Pornography mainly affects the body, and erotica is porn with added plot, more complex characters, and more complex depictions of desire or,

for example, innovative and aesthetically interesting visual expression. To avoid making value judgements, I opt to use the term sexually explicit material, which includes both pornography and erotica. Historically, erotic novels have offered women, gay men, and people of color a chance to have their desires and sexual identities represented (Juffer, 1998). In the following section I turn to the value and importance of safe online spaces for women and queer people to consume sexually explicit material and to discuss sexuality and desire.

2.4.2 Women as consumers of sexually explicit material

Juffer (1998, 105) argues that because erotic literature can claim to have aesthetic value and because our cultural discourses help produce this value, erotica domesticates porn and helps women gain control over sexually explicit material in the privacy of their own home. Under the legitimating auspice of aesthetic discourse, women through erotic novels could take control over their own sexuality and study the complexities of female and even queer desire. And as Juffer further explains, this did not only benefit the white, middle-class women. As different ethnic identity groups and gay men began to publish their own erotica, it made erotica a more democratic and accessible venue for women, people of color, and gay men (Juffer, 1998, 105). ‘Domesticated’ porn also raises a question of what it is that is being domesticated and why is the domestication necessary? Juffer argues that while erotic novels might have made porn more accessible to women, the question of domesticated porn is partially produced by conservative conceptions of the relationship between ‘home’ and pornography (Juffer, 1998, 105). The claim that erotica captures the more nuanced depictions of women’s desire, which sets erotica apart from the ‘crass’ representations of pornography, raises a question of why is this necessary? Is women’s sexuality and desire so markedly different and more complex than that of men? And if so, which women are we talking about? Is all female sexuality and desire created equal?

The idea that women are better able to ‘speak’ sex in an authentic and non-colonized manner has been discussed by scholars. Susan Sonnet (1999) shows that commercial women-centric erotica has been sold on the idea that only other women can express something essential about female sexuality. While Juffer and Sonnet write in the context of the 1980’s and 1990’s, and while some women’s and queer people’s access to and freedom to enjoy pornographic material has much grown in the twenty-three years since she published her book, further studies, including my own, have shown that the questions of representation in erotic material and the

importance of having a safe space to discuss and depict desire and sexual identities have not lost their meaning. Contemporary feminist theory does not entertain the idea of universal female experience or that some forms of sexuality are more authentic than others. However, especially young women's access to sexually explicit material is still being restricted in many ways, and many young people long for a more nuanced discussion about sexuality and explicit sexual material than is being offered by teachers and other adults in their lives (Spišák, 2016).

The public discourse about young people's access to and use of sexually explicit material, especially online, is often risk-oriented and accentuates the harmful aspects of early encounters with online pornography (Spišák, 2016, 131). As I have discussed earlier, the role of sexually explicit material in women's lives is often talked about in tones that accentuate the perceived harm that pornography does to intimate, heterosexual relationships (Montgomery-Graham et al., 2015). It has been suggested, however, that women represent one of the fastest growing groups of online pornography users (Smits, 2016, in McKeown, Parry, & Penny Light, 2018, 341). According to the study by McKeown, Parry, and Penny Light (2018, 347), personal computers and smartphones with reliable Internet access have made the consumption of sexually explicit material more available to women users, who can access and consume sexually explicit material safely from home without having to talk to other people about it. Having a personal computer or phone with a personal Internet access is especially important in more conservative places like urban India, where women's sexuality and online behavior is more scrutinized (Chowkhani, 2016, 446). Despite the risks or the shame, the pleasures of consuming sexually explicit material and the possibilities to gain a greater acceptance of their own sexuality and body, often win out for women. Having the freedom to select and consume the sexually explicit material they wish makes women feel empowered and helps them focus on their own sexual pleasure and gain a better understanding about their own sexuality beyond an intimate relationship with another person (McKeown et al., 2018, 347).

Consuming sexually explicit material in a safe, non-threatening place helps women take control of their own sexual pleasure, explore their sexual interests, connect better with a sexual partner, and have their sexual desires socially validated (McKeown et al., 2018). Women's experiences are similar across the board, whether they consume audiovisual pornography or written erotica (Paasonen, 2010). And as I show in article III, kink meme fans cite similar reasons for consuming sexually explicit fan fiction. Women and queer people in particular need privacy and safe spaces to consume sexually explicit material, because the risks

involved in ‘getting caught’ or outed are usually higher than for cis heterosexual men. Female fans have from the early days of the Internet chosen to develop and maintain their own online spaces rather than share the public fan spaces created by and for science fiction and music fans because in those public, male-dominated places women fans faced varying degrees of harassment and denigration (Bury, 2005, 2). The lived experiences of countless women and queer people have proven false the dream that the first-wave cyber-theorists had of online spaces rendering irrelevant such physical markers as gender, race, or sexuality (Bury, 2005, 3).

In the following sections, I go through the research data I collected and used in my PhD study.

3 Research data and methodology

The research data I collected consists mostly of slash fics, except for the third article for which I implemented an online survey. The data I collected through the survey was analysed using the method of content analysis. The bulk of my research data for first two articles consists of six fan fiction short stories belonging to four different fandoms. The fandoms are organized around the tv-series *Supernatural* and *Starsky and Hutch*, and the *Captain America* movies, which belong to the large Marvel cinematic universe franchise. For the analysis of the fics I utilised the method of gender- and queer-sensitive close reading. For my research, this method means diving deep into the chosen text and paying close critical attention to the ways gender and sexuality are represented. Keeping a close eye on how the normative understandings of gender and sexuality are re-defined, developed, or kept intact in the fics, my research shows the myriad ways contemporary slash fiction discusses our cultural understandings of gender, sexuality, sex, and love.

In the following sections I briefly introduce each of the four fandoms. I analyse each fandom from the point of view of how they discuss the ideas of gender and sexuality. In last sub-section, I introduce the survey data and explain how it was collected and analysed.

3.1 The neo-gothic world of *Supernatural* and the spectre of incest

Supernatural (2005 – 2020) is an American horror fantasy TV series. The main characters are Sam and Dean Winchester, two brothers from Kansas, whose mother died in a mysterious house fire when Dean was four and Sam was six months old. The boys' father John, in his desperate effort to find out why his wife Mary died, learns the truth about the world: ghosts, vampires, werewolves, demons, and nearly all others mythical, supernatural creatures are real, and there exist a select group of people who hunt them. With his young sons in tow, John embarks on a wild and desperate journey to find out who killed his wife. Traveling from town to town, living out of motel rooms and his 1967 black Impala, John and his boys lead a nomadic lifestyle, always on the road, forever searching for the creature responsible for Mary's death – which later is revealed to be a yellow-eyed demon named Azazel.

Especially during the first three seasons, the show is a mixture of road movie and modern day western. The brothers ride to town, usually a smallish mid-western place, they learn there is a monster lurking nearby, killing and tormenting the residents. Sam and Dean fight and kill the monster and then ride off – sometimes

after kissing a pretty girl. Hard rock music accompanies the modern-day cowboys as they drive around the United States, at first looking for their father whom, we learn in the first episode, has left Dean to go on a hunting trip and has not returned. The show is influenced by such 1990's classics as *The X-files*, which is no wonder, as director and producer Kim Manners worked in both. *Supernatural* references *The X-files* many times, sometimes even reproducing scenes from the show.¹⁰

Despite its road movie, modern day western trappings, the show has many neo-gothic elements. Neo-gothic can refer to the 19th century architecture which draw heavily from the original Gothic style. In literature it can refer to all Gothic art emerging after the original Gothic literature from 1764 to 1824. I refer to the modern-day horror fiction like *Supernatural* as Neo-Gothic because it uses many of the themes and trappings which are easily recognizable as Gothic, such as ghosts, old, haunted houses, supernatural threat, and close, even claustrophobic family relations which might be suspected of having the spectre of incest hovering over them. Modern day horror fiction often moves the supernatural threat away from haunted, isolated castles prevalent in the first wave of Gothic novels, and brings it close to home, revealing the horrors that may lie in our own back yards.

Supernatural as a Gothic text

The very first Gothic novel – Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764) – brings to the Gothic tradition such iconic themes and places as an ancient, dilapidated castle, family tombs, and a beautiful innocent maiden who encounters unexplained horrors and a mysterious, hidden family history filled with forgotten wrong-doings. While the dilapidated castle with its forgotten mysteries and many secret passages was long the hallmark of a Gothic novel, later Gothic traditions change the milieu to convents, churches, and finally to an old family home and its mysteries that rise from the previous generations' secrets (Raipola, 2021, 69). In this 'home Gothic' tradition, the horrors and mysteries are brought close to home, to the everyday world, where the bourgeoisie class must come face to face with its past (Raipola, 2021, 75). This tradition especially, with its family mysteries and themes that blur the line between the everyday and supernatural, the past and the present, and the

¹⁰ *Supernatural* proved an instant hit, especially with certain women viewers. The relationship between Sam and Dean intrigued people, who perhaps saw the tragic and romantic possibilities of two handsome men living and dying only for each other. The first *Supernatural* fic was published online on 14th of September 2005, a day after the show aired. The fic is called "Reunion" by author janedavitt, and it was published on a now removed LiveJournal account "Supernaturalfic".

proper and degradation is easily recognizable in many modern-day horror fiction – including *Supernatural*. From the very beginning, *Supernatural* takes its place in this tradition. A peaceful, middle-class family life is destroyed by a senseless tragedy: The mother Mary burns to death – pinned to the ceiling by an unseen force. Later in the same episode, Sam’s girlfriend faces the same faith, with Dean again carrying his little brother to safety.¹¹

The inability to escape the past and its burdens is one very common theme in Southern Gothic. Southern Gothic is a North American subgenre of Gothic which is situated in the southern parts of the United States, taking certain elements of the Gothic novel, and placing them in the context of the southern states. Small, claustrophobic, heavily religious towns and the stifling, humid heath of the deep south are some of the elements that form the oppressive feel of the Southern Gothic novel (Cherry, 2013; Gleeson-White, 2001). Thematically and topographically *Supernatural* can be linked to the Southern Gothic, as indeed I have done in article II, where I do a reading of a *Supernatural* male pregnancy fic “Nesting” (2016), placing it in the context of the Southern Gothic.

Another important hallmark of a Gothic text is the feeling of sublime. The idea that a sublime view – a majestic mountain or a deep ocean for example – or a sublime experience can be terrifying as well as beautiful and awe-inspiring was first introduced in Edmund Burke’s work *On the Sublime and the Beautiful* in 1756. In Gothic texts, the experience of sublime is in close contact with the unexplained and the Other. (Raiola, 2021, 66.) In *Supernatural* the unexplained and the world behind the veil of death is never far away. Ghosts especially prove that there is life after death and many of the ghosts that Sam and Dean encounter are sad and pitiful as well as terrifying – or awe-inspiring, like Mary’s furious, fiery apparition in their old house. The feeling of sublime as a bridge to the other world becomes apparent in season four of *Supernatural*. At the end of season two, Sam dies and Dean in his grief sells his soul to a demon to save him. The demon gives Dean one more year with Sam, and at the end of the third season, the deal comes due, and Dean goes

¹¹ The theme of past coming back to haunt us and the inability to escape the past are very prevalent in the show. In season one, the trauma of Mary’s death is revisited yet again when Sam and Dean inspect a poltergeist in their old childhood home. The house has been rebuilt and its new denizens are being tormented by a poltergeist and a fiery apparition, which is revealed to be ghost of Mary. In season four, Dean is sent back in time to the 1970’s, where he meets his parents and learns the family history: Mary’s family has been hunters as well, and Mary had made a deal with the yellow-eyed demon, granting it access to her home and baby Sam, which leads to Mary’s death. True to Gothic fashion, family is shown to be Sam and Dean’s downfall, who must carry the sins of their forefathers.

literally to Hell.¹² At the beginning of season four, Dean is resurrected, his body made a-new, with all his old scars wiped away. On his right arm, however, is a strange, big handprint-shaped burn mark, the handprint of the angel that rescued him.¹³ Dean's raise from perdition marks him as a Righteous Man, touched by the Divine. The terrifyingly beautiful experience of sublime is made clear to the brothers as well as the audience when Sam and Dean meet the angel that rescued Dean for the first time. "I am an Angel of the Lord!", the being intones, and he is so terrifyingly bright to look at that it burns out the eyes of the woman that was with Sam and Dean when the angel appeared. This sublime experience is later mollified rather comically as the angel takes his physical form and is revealed to be an average-looking white man in a tan trench-coat.

According to David Punter, (1996, 200–201) the Gothic has three basic elements – barbarism, taboo, and paranoia. Barbarism is the fear of degradation, the degradation of history, the aristocracy, and of humans. In *Supernatural*, barbarism is represented by the supernatural monsters which threaten humans very literally, but also by the fear that the line between monsters and humans might be blurred and humans could become monsters. This indeed happens many times: Sam is fed demon blood as a baby, giving him special powers, and marking him as the intended human vessel of Lucifer; demons possess people on regular basis, Dean is turned into a vampire and later into a demon, etc. This blurring of lines between the natural and the supernatural represents the breaking of taboos, another basic

¹² The brother's journeys to Hell and Heaven are another theme that link *Supernatural* to the Gothic tradition. The Gothic novel continues the motif of visiting the underworld. Falling from our reality to a world beyond, the protagonist seeks out secrets and further learns that reality is layered (Raipola, 2021, 67). In Hell, Dean is forced to acknowledge his dark side, as after thirty years of torture he takes up the knife and begins to torture other souls.

¹³ Suzette Chan (2010) makes an interesting argument that the handprint on Dean's shoulder, as one of the few physical marks that are allowed to remain on his otherwise unmarred skin, represents ownership. Chan argues that from childhood Dean's fate and his body have not been his own. His first 'owner' was his father who physically and mentally groomed Dean to be a perfect soldier, an obedient attack-dog, as Dean himself claims in episode ten, season three. In Hell, the demon Alastair takes over as a perverted father-figure, grooming Dean through torture to pick up the knife and become a torturer himself. After his resurrection, while all other scars are wiped away from his body, the angel Castiel's handprint is allowed to stay, marking Dean as the property of yet another father-figure – this time the Christian God, whose existence Dean has previously doubted (Chan, 2010, para. 2.4). Dean's obedience to his father and his reverence to older, authoritarian males is easy to read as an indicator that John's psychological abuse might have had a physical, perhaps even sexual aspect to it. The show itself seems to hint at that in season one when the yellow-eyed demon possesses John. The demon presses Dean against a wall and invades Dean's personal space, taunting him and standing way too close, while the camera lingers on a close-up of Dean's face as he tries to hide his anguish and fear. The scene has a perverse sexual vibe to it, which makes the viewer uncomfortable, and plays into the interpretation that equates demon possession with sexual assault.

element of the Gothic. Taboo in Gothic means breaking and questioning that which is held as natural: the family, heterosexuality, and monogamy (Raipola, 2021, 68). Many *Supernatural* slash fics discuss sexual norms and how breaking them seems to be a prevalent subtext of the show. Normative, heterosexual, monogamous relationships seem to be doomed in the bleak world of the show, and especially Sam's attempts at finding a girlfriend always lead to a disaster or heartbreak, or both. In lieu of heterosexual, normative relationships, family and strained, even nonnormative familial relationships rise to utmost importance, giving fans plenty of material to imagine what other kinds of monsters could be hiding in the closet of the family home. Especially the painful hero-worship Dean has towards his father make some fans ask what such a relationship could at worst lead to, as I show in article II.

Especially the blurring of lines between the normative, heterosexual sexuality and the illicit forms of sexuality, many times represented by incestuous relationships between siblings, is a very important part of the Gothic tradition, and it is to that element that I turn my attention next.

The spectre of incest

In the Romantic era, both the sentimental and the Gothic novel were fascinated with familial love and the threat of incest, but the two genres' approach to the subject was markedly different. In many sentimental novels, love between two non-blood-related people who nevertheless see each other as family was seen as the highest ideal of love. A son of a prominent family might grow up with his family's female ward and regard her as a sister, and later in life come to love her as a spouse. While our modern sensibilities may balk at this, in the Romantic era novels these virtually incestuous marriages were seen as the reward for the woman, a promise of a happily ever after (Voss, 2015, 499–500). Julie Shaffer (1999, 68) argues that familialization, of non-blood-related people seeing each other as family, is based on an Enlightenment dream of total harmony where all oppositional elements in human relationships have been eliminated. Alan Richardson (2010, 100) argues that sibling attachment, fused with sexual desire, constitutes an idealized erotic love. All in all, the idea of first loving one's spouse as a sibling or a parent-figure, was not seen as incestuous in a negative way in the Romantic era sentimental novels. In the Gothic novel, however, the horror we apply to incestuous relationships could be discussed. If the sentimental novel saw good brother-figures making good husbands, (Voss, 2015, 500) the Gothic novel would often discuss actual incest

between blood-related people, especially siblings. As the Gothic novel moved further away from the supernatural and towards depicting people, rendered monstrous and grotesque by their incongruous passions, as the true source of horror (Bailey, 2010, 269), queer and incestuous relationships became one more horror element.

Anne Dalke (1988) shows in her article that incest was a common theme in literature of the early United States, before 1830. In many of the novels discussed by Dalke, incest was committed unwittingly and often resulted in death or madness. She shows that the early American novelists demanded in their fiction a careful maintenance of social and economic difference, and that incest symbolized the absence of a well-defined social system (Dalke, 1988, 188). Incest, therefore, could be said to symbolize the threat that results from breaking the laws of society, of committing to relationships that society sees as unnatural or undesirable. In that sense, both incest and queerness bear a similarly conflicted relationship to normative sexuality (Tosenberger, 2008, ch. 1,6).

As I have shown, *Supernatural* as a text has many Gothic elements. It is not therefore perhaps unsurprising that a deeper dive to the themes of the show reveals many queer elements that seem to flirt with the possibility of incest. Catherine Tosenberger argues that instead of shying away from the queer and incestuous implications, the show often calls attention to its own homoerotic energy (Tosenberger, 2008, para. 1.5). Indeed, by placing Sam and Dean in a hostile world where every attempt at a 'normal' relationship ends in horror and heartache, the show celebrates and valorises the brothers' Romantic, transgressive Otherness (Tosenberger, 2008, para. 1,5). In a world filled with ghosts and demons, where every attempt at a normative relationship – be it platonic or romantic – inexorably ends in a bloody death, Sam and Dean only have each other to rely on – and love. Their world is a small, claustrophobic one, which neither can escape or break out of, despite their many efforts. Even in an alternative universe, where the brothers are not related and do not know each other, they manage to find each other and bond.¹⁴

¹⁴ In season four, episode seventeen, the angel Zachariah, attempting to manipulate Dean to accept his fate as a hunter and the archangel Michael's intended vessel, sends Dean into an alternative universe where he is a successful businessman with living parents and a sister – but no brother. He meets in the office the new tech support person, Sam Wesson, and the two seem to be drawn to each other immediately, despite having nothing in common. They stumble upon a ghost hunt, which they solve, despite having no knowledge of ghosts or how to hunt them, after which Dean contemplates dropping everything and continuing to hunt supernatural things with Sam. Even in a world where Sam and Dean

Because the show continually places Sam and Dean outside of normative social circles and customs, their isolation raises an interesting question concerning social norms and taboos. According to the structuralist viewpoint, incest only becomes condemned when laws and social norms dictate it as wrong and unnatural (Pollak, 2003, 9). Tosenberger argues that heterosexual exogamy – the practise of marrying outside of one’s own tribe or social group – is made possible by blocking incest (Tosenberger, 2008, para. 2.2). If that is the case, what happens when heterosexual exogamy itself is locked away? Sam and Dean live in a world where there is little space or need for other people and where they must break many other laws and social norms to survive. Even the laws of nature seem to bend when it comes to Sam and Dean. Despite having some friends and allies, ultimately Sam and Dean live in world of just the two of them. All others are expendable. This keeps their love in an eternal feedback loop, referring back only to itself (Tosenberger, 2008, para. 2.2). The argument, that because Sam and Dean already live outside of so many other social norms and customs a romantic or erotic relationship between them would hardly be a blip in a radar, gets discussed by slash writers many times. They argue, as Tosenberger (Tosenberger, 2008, para. 1.5) notes, that *Supernatural* slash writers’ most significant subversion of the show is not the queer incestuous reading but rather the theme of making things happy for Sam and Dean, of giving them the comfort and happiness they are continually denied in the show. In the women’s novels of the nineteenth century, the virtually incestuous relationships between brothers and sisters were not destabilizing acts but did, in fact, create stability by consolidating family relationships (Voss, 2015, 504). In a similar manner, in many slash fics a romantic relationship between Sam and Dean heals the rifts in their bond, as I show in my reading of the mpreg fic “And Baby Makes Three” in article II. In other fics, however, the possibility of an incestuous relationship between Sam and Dean gets discussed in terms of isolation, intensity, and exclusivity, thus illuminating dangers at the heart of the one-true-love trope (Flegel & Roth, 2010).

Tosenberger notes that *Supernatural* often treats romantic and familial love as mirror images (Tosenberger, 2008, para. 2.3). The monsters they hunt and the people they save both represent unresolved emotional drama, often in the context of family life, and often the cases Sam and Dean solve correlate with the issues and drama in their relationship. This makes an interesting mix of familial and romantic

do not know each other and have all the possibilities to form relationships outside of each other, they still manage to find each other and forge a relationship that only has room for the two of them.

love that often gets tangled together. If a case concerns family issues and families in peril, Sam and Dean often are mistaken for a romantic couple¹⁵.

In season two, episode eleven – the most overtly Gothic episode in the whole series – Sam and Dean investigate a series of strange deaths in an old inn. The inn has all the outside trappings of a Gothic novel: an old house, a family with a tragedy in their past, long dark corridors, mysterious servants, creepy children, dolls that bear the resemblance of the house’s occupants – and of course, a secret in the attic. From the moment Sam and Dean step inside the inn, they get mistaken for a couple – twice. The inn owner has a young daughter who the audience sees playing with another little girl. The daughter calls her friend Maggie. It turns out, however, that Maggie is an imaginary friend. When Sam and Dean investigate the deaths that have happened in the inn, they come across the family’s history. The current owner’s mother had a Creole nanny who taught her Hoodoo. It turns out that Maggie is actually the ghost of the grandmother’s sister who drowned in the inn’s pool as a little girl. The grandmother had kept the ghost away using Hoodoo, but after having a stroke has been unable to do so. When the brothers investigate the case, they find the old woman in her small room up in the attic. Maggie does not want to leave her home and tries to kill the daughter so they could play together forever as ghosts. The grandmother, however, calls Maggie and makes a deal with her: her life for her granddaughter’s. Maggie kills her sister, and in the final scene we see two little girls skipping rope in the old empty inn – playing together for ever and ever. Once again, a family in peril and a close sibling relationship mirrors the issues in Sam and Dean’s relationship and their fears and desires. Just before his death, John had whispered to Dean that he fears Sam might someday turn evil, and if that were to happen, Dean would have to kill Sam. In the middle of the case in the inn Sam gets drunk alone and confronts Dean about John’s words. In a tight shot, we see Sam and Dean very close to each other, with Sam caressing Dean’s face and begging him to “watch out for him”. Dean shoves Sam away who lands on his belly on the bed – and the camera and Dean’s eyes follow as Sam writhes on

¹⁵ In season one, episode eighteen, Sam and Dean investigate a case of a mysterious creature sucking the life force out of little children. Dean confesses that many years ago, their father had hunted the same creature. In the previous hunt, Dean had left little Sam alone in their motel room where the creature attacked him. In a nick of time, John appears and scares the monster away but does not manage to kill it. In the present time, Sam and Dean meet a single mother and a young boy whose little brother is in the hospital after encountering the monster. The family instantly reads Sam and Dean as a couple. The relationship between the two boys closely mirrors the unresolved issue of Dean abandoning Sam in the past, and in the face of a family in crisis Sam and Dean’s attachment shines out as more than brotherly.

the bed. The scene, and the whole episode, is claustrophobic, which the camera work accentuates, and disturbingly erotic.

As we have seen, queer themes haunt the show and Sam and Dean's relationship, with the possibility – or threat – of incest always hanging above them like an unseen spectre, impossible to get rid of. The romantic ideal of being together with one's soulmate forever is discussed in the show many times, like in season four, episode fourteen¹⁶, and finally culminates at the end of the final episode in the series. Sam and Dean are both dead, finally and for the last time, and we see them embracing each other in Heaven: together, finally, for ever and ever.¹⁷

3.2 Re-Imagining a queer past in Captain America comics and movies

Captain America is an American superhero who first was introduced in Marvel comics in 1941 in the comic *Captain America # 1*, written and drawn by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon. Captain America's superhero origin story, as versioned in the movie *Captain America: The first Avenger* (2011), is a story of the American dream, perseverance, and the American ideals. A poor and sickly budding artist, named Steve Rogers, from Brooklyn, New York, is desperate to join the army and get the chance to defend the free world from the terror of the Nazi Germany. Due to his poor health, however, he gets rejected multiple times, until a German-born scientist Dr. Erskine sees him trying to enlist and appreciates his perseverance and convictions. Dr Erskine gives him a chance to serve his country and offers him an experimental serum that was developed to help the American war effort by turning an average soldier into a super soldier, with a nearly indestructible body and

¹⁶ In season four, episode fourteen, Sam and Dean encounter a Siren, a creature forever looking for love and forcing its victims to kill the ones most dear to them to show their devotion to the Siren, who represents the victim's ideal mate. The Siren takes the form of a handsome young FBI agent, whom Dean instantly bonds with. The Siren poisons Dean, and when Sam finally figures out who the young FBI agent actually is, the creature explains itself, saying he gave Dean everything he wished for: "And it wasn't some bitch in a g-string. It was you." The Siren poisons Sam with his venom as well – interestingly, by spraying some whitish liquid on Sam's lips – and forces the brothers to fight each other to death. The one who survives gets to be together with the Siren forever.

¹⁷ The fact that Sam and Dean are together in Heaven is another nail in the coffin of their special relationship. In season four, episode sixteen, some angry hunters shoot Sam and Dean, sending them to Heaven. There they meet their dead friend Ash who explains how Heaven works. Everybody gets their own little corner of Heaven where they live happily ever after, wallowing in their happy memories. Some 'special cases', however, get to share their Heaven. That Sam and Dean are together, proves that they are one of the special cases – soulmates – as Ash explains. As soulmates, they are meant to be together forever.

physical strength that far exceeds that of a normal man. The serum works, and out of the machine emerges Steve Rogers 2.0. He gets an American flag costume and a red, white, and blue shield, and is sent with the USO tour to entertain the troops and to sell war bonds. With his stage-persona Captain America he is supposed to embody the ideals of America and to help keep the morale high. “America is safe while its boys and girls believe in its creeds!” as Captain America declares in *Captain America battles the Camera Fiend and his darts of doom* (*Captain America* # 6, 1941).

The most commonly accepted view of the world is the ‘international system’, in which the landmasses and sometimes ocean spaces are divided into mutually exclusive territories that are politically and culturally independent (Dittmer, 2007, 403). And while the size of the territories might change with borders being drawn and re-drawn, the idea of nation-state lives on in the popular consciousness. Nationalism and national identities are not born organically. Rather, they are imagined into existence because while the people living in a same territory might not have much in common, in their minds lives the image of a communion, of a shared national identity (Edwardson, 2003, 185). In the creation of ‘imagined communities’, art and popular culture play a big part.¹⁸ The master narratives of national myth, as disseminated by popular culture products, not only detail who belongs to the nation, but also what belonging to a nation means, and importantly, who does not belong (Dittmer, 2007, 403). The people, ideas, or values that do not represent the national ideals are often depicted through enemy portrayals – be they the Nazis or the Russians – but also through omissions and silences.

National superhero comics do not only disseminate a jingoistic view of national politics or national identity, however. Despite his ‘All American’ name, uniform, and superhero persona, Captain America was never a right-wing, ultrapatriotic, flag-waving nationalist. While he is an anthropomorphized version of the American identity through which young readers can imagine themselves as a patriotic superhero, (Dittmer, 2007, 405) different groups of readers can claim him as their own and see beyond the character’s star-spangled persona.¹⁹ Captain America was

¹⁸ While art and popular culture help develop and establish nationalism, it is prudent to ask what happens to national identities when one nation’s popular culture products dominate the market? For example, Finland does not really have its own national superhero comics. Instead, we have taken such American icons as Donald Duck and in a way made him as our ‘national antihero’. Donald Duck’s popularity in Finland far exceeds his readership and popularity in USA.

¹⁹ In a way, that was how Captain America came to be in the first place. He was born out of the imagination of two Jewish men, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, who – like many Jewish people in the comic

from the beginning a multifaceted character, despite his ‘cult of the flag’ uniform and superhero name. His transformation from a scrawny, sickly young man to a chiseled jawed, uncompromisingly masculine, muscle-bound hero is inspiring and represents the American ideal of achieving greatness through hard work (Dittmer, 2007, 410). His uncompromising masculinity, which is often accentuated in the comics through detailed depictions of his physicality and muscles, as Dittmer (2007, 410) shows, places him in the continuum of showing the male body in eroticized manner only under the guise of battle or bodybuilding. What makes Captain America’s masculinity interesting, however, is his – or Steve Roger’s – pre-war life in Brooklyn, New York. Steve Rogers grows up poor and his apartment is – at least in some stories – set near to both the Brooklyn naval yard and the district known as DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge), both of which, as many fans have pointed out, were big ‘hot spots’ for queer people, homosexual cruising, and prostitution. It is interesting that the superhero, created by Jewish men as the embodiment of how America could be, is later situated in the middle of the secret queer geography of the New York City. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that many fan fiction writers have imagined Captain America representing the often silenced and unsung heroes, the queer men in the army.

The field of queer geography studies the intersections between sexuality and space. The field of geographies of sexualities emerged in the 1970’s and 1980’s as some geographers begun to contemplate the location and development of the social, commercial, and residential urban spaces of gay men. (Gorman-Murray & McKinnon, 2015, 759.) Queer geography develops the field, not merely examining homosexual (or queer) space as the non-normative Other, as opposed to the normative heterosexual space, but rather encouraging a queer approach to space which rejects the binary notion of homosexual/heterosexual (Gorman-Murray & McKinnon, 2015, 759). Many Captain America slash writers continue the work of the geography of sexualities, reading closely both the comics and the movies and making notes of where Steve and his best friend Bucky are said to have lived, and cross-referencing this information with what is known of the prewar queer areas of New York. In that way, the slash writers draw a new map of New York City, one

industry – were horrified about the news coming from Europe and frustrated about the isolation politics USA and President Roosevelt upheld. In a time when America had not yet joined the War and when anti-Jewish sentiments were increasingly being heard in America as well, Joe Simon created a character who was supposed to symbolize a different kind of America, one that did not sit idly by but actually went over to Europe and punched Hitler in the jaw (Dittmer, 2007, 407). Thus, Captain America was created to symbolize not so much what America was but what it could be, as imagined by people who many did not view as being a part of their national narrative.

that depicts the true queer history of the city, as seen and experienced by a fictional character. Doing so, the slash writers not only queer the personal history of the character Steve Rogers, but also make visible the often-forgotten queer spatial history of New York and – more importantly – force the reader to see nationalism in a new light. As I show in my reading of the fic “All the Angels and the Saints” (2014) in article I, Captain America slash writers use the queer geography of New York City to paint a different picture of Steve Rogers and to emphasize the trauma that being seen only as a living legend causes him. What happens when one is forced to live in a world where they alone remember the past as it really happened, even the secret and silenced parts? All the modern world sees is Captain America who, after all, cannot be gay because that would oppose the perpetuated myths of national superheroes and the society’s view of masculinity (Beyvers & Zitzelsberger, 2020, 11).

Focusing on the real-life queer spaces of the past and placing Steve in them, Captain America slash writers reimagine and make visible a queer past. They show a continuum of queer lives and struggles and reveal a past that is not as conservative and heteronormative as we often imagine. Focusing on the lives of queer people in the 1930’s New York, these fics also show us that the fight for equal rights is not a straight-forward path from victory to victory that begun when the first stones were cast at the Stonewall riots in 1969.

3.3 The Allegorical Other in the *X-Men* franchise

The *X-Men* franchise begun as a series of Marvel comic books, created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, in 1963, and was adopted as a film series in the year 2000. The franchise is set in a post-World War II universe where some people are born with the ‘X-gene’ that allows them to have a plethora of abilities, such as telepathy, physical transformation, telekinesis, teleporting, etc. The X-Men are a paramilitary group, led by Professor Charles Xavier, codename Professor X, who fight for social acceptance and civil rights for all mutants. In addition to this, Professor X also leads a school for mutant children where they can learn to control their powers and have a nurturing, mutant-positive atmosphere, which many of the children lack at home.

The adversaries of the X-Men are the political and state groups who oppose the peaceful co-existence of humans and mutants and who wish to control the mutant population through a series of political edicts, such as mandatory registration of every mutant individual and the technology to identify mutants, especially those whose mutation is invisible or whose abilities have not yet manifested themselves.

The X-Men also regularly fight against another mutant group, The Brotherhood of Mutants, led by a Holocaust survivor and Professor X's old friend, Erik Lensherr, codename Magneto. Magneto and the Brotherhood do not see the peaceful co-existence of humans and mutants as possible or recommendable. Magneto especially, with his experience of seeing the Germans turn against the Jewish people, as well as people of colour, queer people, and anyone who opposed the Nazi regime, feels very strongly that the oppression of mutants cannot be overturned by peaceful means. While both mutant groups oppose the humans who wish to oppress or eradicate mutants, their means of achieving equality differ drastically. Magneto, emboldened by the Darwinian idea of a survival of the fittest, sees mutants as the next link in human evolution, the better, stronger people who can and ultimately must supplant the regular humans, while Professor X relies on education, assimilation, and peaceful relationships with humans to end the oppression. Magneto, scarred by his trauma and led by his rage, loves Charles but feels that peace is never an option – not with humans and not even with Charles.

The allegorical references to the Civil Rights movement of African Americans, antisemitism, and the struggle for human rights for gay people is easy to see throughout the franchise. Indeed, the characters of Professor X and Magneto have been likened to Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, respectively, and the struggle of the mutants have commonly been seen as a metaphor for the progressive struggles for race- and sexuality-based civil rights (Zingsheim, 2011, 224). Especially mutation as a metaphor for homosexuality has caught the eye of the researchers (Earnest, 2007; Lecker, 2007; Loadenthal, 2014) and comic readers alike (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). The similarities between mutants and many young people who realise they are queer are many, as Lecker (2007) notes in his article. Firstly, the manifestation of powers happens usually when the individual is approaching pubescence. At this age, many queer children also begin to realise their sexuality. The initial manifestation of powers can happen during moments of heightened emotional state; for example, during sexual encounters, akin to how many queer people learn about their sexuality (Lecker, 2007, 681). Beyond these superficial similarities, the themes of suppression, self-acceptance, traumatic or negative experiences at home and among peers, and political opposition to mutants and the many attempts to solve 'the mutant issue' may well speak to many young readers who feel they are all alone and have relatively few good media representations against which to mirror themselves and their experiences.

As have been noted many times, and as my study also shows, positive media representations are vitally important to minorities. When representations are not

readily available, queer people especially often rely on interpretation and reading against the grain texts that might not on superficial level speak about queer issues but can be interpreted that way (Lecker, 2007, 680). This interpretation is still needed today because although the X-Men comics have had queer characters and relationships over the years, to my knowledge, none of them have actually made it to the movie franchise. As is the case with many blockbuster movie franchises these days, LGBTQ+ issues are still only hinted at, if recognised at all. Queer characters are not the only ones who have been omitted or made more mainstream in the movies. As Zingsheim (2011, 230) notes in his article, non-American characters in the comics have been either made more American in the movies or are on the side of the villains or are given minor roles. The characters are also predominately white, and even when their natural mutant skin colour is something else, like blue, as is the case with Mystique and Beast, they are played by white actors and several times appear in white-skinned human disguise, making them one with the standard group of white, American heroes.

Mystique and Beast – or Raven and Hank – as their human names are, are especially interesting characters to focus on when discussing themes of assimilation and hiding. Raven is Professor X's adopted sister, as explained in the movie *X-Men: First Class* (2011). She is a shapeshifter who can take the appearance of anyone, and although her natural form is blue-skinned with vivid red hair, she has taken to hiding in a disguise of a beautiful blond-haired and white-skinned woman (actor Jennifer Lawrence). Her brother Charles encourages this, reminding her of the danger she would be in were she to ever show her true form to humans. Because of this, Raven believes her true form to be ugly and has grown to hate herself. She is bitter to Charles, accusing him of not understanding what it means to hide because his mutation – telepathy – is invisible. If we were to continue the theme of interpreting mutant as an allegory of queer, Charles could be interpreted to represent the privileged, white, cis-gendered gay man, while Raven represents someone whose identity is not as easily hidden, a non-passing trans person perhaps. Indeed, the fic “Good Boys” (2011), which I discuss in article I, develops the themes of assimilation and hiding. In the fic, Charles is a repressed gay man who passes as straight and cannot accept his sexuality, until he meets Erik, who proudly flaunts who he is: a queer, Jewish Mutant. The fic discusses the themes of privilege, fear, shame, and pride, which can be read from the comics and the movie franchise as well.

In *X-Men: First Class* (2011) Raven's self-acceptance is helped along by Erik. When Raven meets Erik, whose trauma and anger towards anyone who would force

people to be ashamed or afraid of their differences has made him a proud mutant, Raven starts to learn what it means to truly be proud of who she is. In a way, Erik plays the part of an older mentor who has come to terms with who he is and is able to guide Raven. The simile is not perfect, as Erik (played by actor Michael Fassbender) is able to blend in very easily. His mutation (ability to command and alter metal with his mind) does not leave visible marks on his body, he speaks multiple languages and does not have a recognizable German-accent, and beside his concentration camp number tattoo, his Jewish heritage is only hinted at briefly in a flashback.

Hank is a young scientist who works for the CIA. When Charles and Erik are recruited by CIA, they meet Hank who is working in a laboratory. Before they are introduced, Charles says: “How wonderful! Another mutant already here!” Presumably, Charles had read Hank’s mind but did not realize Hank had not told anyone. Charles apologizes for ‘outing’ Hank, and when the CIA agent asks why Hank had not told them, Hank shrugs and replies: “You didn’t ask, so I didn’t tell”. This of course is a clear nod to the ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ policy of US military. Hank then takes off his shoes and socks, revealing his unnaturally large feet and his ability to use his toes to hang upside down, so far the only physical indicator of his mutation. Hank has been making a serum which he hopes would normalize the appearance of his feet. He offers the serum to Raven as well, whom he recognizes as a kindred spirit, one who also has a lot of self-hatred. The serum represents the many unsuccessful attempts at ‘curing’ homosexuals, and like conversion therapy, it too does not work. When Hank injects the serum, his mutation finally manifests itself completely, turning Hank into a large, blue-haired ape-like creature. The meaning is clear: Do not try to change who you are, because who you are is who you were meant to be.

The allegorical Other – be it sexual or gender identity or race-based – is clearly present in the *X-Men* franchise, and despite the poor representation of non-white and non-heterosexual characters in the movie franchise, the fandom is interesting in how it enables discussions about identity and oppression.

3.4 The Queer implications in *Starsky and Hutch* buddy show

Starsky & Hutch is an American cop/buddy show that aired originally from 1975 to 1979. The show is set in a fictional Bay City (probably meant to be a Los Angeles lookalike) and it follows two plain-clothes detectives David Starsky (played by Paul Michael Glaser) and Kenneth ‘Hutch’ Hutchinson (David Soul) as they solve

crimes and catch criminals, a work which often requires them to go undercover in various criminal organizations. With its fast-paced action, car chases, and undercover missions, the show targeted young male viewers but it's the relationship and dynamics between the leading characters that really made the show what it is. Trying to attract female viewers, the show often let the two men parade around half naked. This, together with constant touching, sidelong glances, and a relationship which leaves very little room for anyone else, made the show a hit among slash fans, a legacy which continues to this day. *Starsky & Hutch* is one of the earliest fandoms popular with slash fans especially. It began its life in several fan zines, some of which were especially dedicated to slash readings, and has remained popular to this day, even though the show has not been on air for decades and has not, except for one movie, (*Starsky & Hutch* 2004), been attempted to resurrect.

The history of the American police drama is a long one and the way the police are represented has changed many times. In the 1950's and 1960's, the lead policemen were usually older, authoritarian, by-the-book men who solved crimes and caught the criminals while upholding a strong moral fiber. By the middle of the 1970's, however, the trust for authorities and old certainties were quickly eroding for many Americans. The horrors of the Vietnam war, escalating antiwar protests, the Watergate scandal, and high unemployment rates changed the nation's sense of self and confidence (Bavaro, 2020, 68). Fueled by these national crises and upheavals, together with escalating Civil Rights battles, feminism, and the gay-liberation movement, the police shows of the 1970's present a drastically different view of the law-enforcement than the authoritarian policemen of the previous decades. Starsky and Hutch are 'hip', with faded bellbottom jeans and collar-length hair. They have very little respect for authorities, often going against the commands of their superior, Captain Dobey. Their circle of friends and informants consists of low-level criminals and colorful characters who operate flexibly on both sides of the law, and the criminals they pursue are often rapists, drug-sellers, abductors, and murderers. The city Starsky and Hutch operate in is inhabited by thugs and low lives of all kinds, and as the show develops, so does the cynicism and lack of trust for anyone outside of their partnership. From the very first episode, it is made clear that when push comes to shove, the only people either of them can trust is each other. "Who in the Hell are we supposed to trust now?" asks Starsky in the pilot episode, after learning that someone from the police department is trying to kill him. "Same people we always trust. Us.," replays Hutch. The question of who do we trust gets repeated many times throughout the show, and the answer is always the same: Me and thee.

In his reading of *Starsky & Hutch*, Vincenzo Bavaro (2020) sets himself in a position of ‘disidentification’, a term coined by José Muñoz in 1999. The term refers to a multifaceted and heterogeneous survival strategy performed by – for example – a queer minority in a repressive public sphere that aims to marginalize them and erase their identity. In an appropriative gesture that is neither identification nor counter-identification, disidentification marks the inhabitation of a hostile place that is transformed into a playground of possibility. (Bavaro, 2020, 66.) Arguably, *Starsky & Hutch* could be said to form a hostile place that seeks to re-establish the power of the white man and sanction violence performed by the police and the state. Although the show has two major black characters – Captain Dobey (played by Ernie Hamilton) and a flamboyant bar owner/pimp/informant called Huggy Bear (played by Antonio Fargas) – the show makes it clear that who ultimately make the decisions and have most of the power are the two white protagonists.

While Dobey is nominally their superior and there is a mutual respect between him and Starsky and Hutch, many times the plot requires Starsky and Hutch to make decisions and go over Dobey’s authority. Dobey, while initially angered by their recklessness, never ultimately punishes Starsky and Hutch for their insubordination. They are free to rely on their own best judgement in solving the crimes, often using excessive violence and shooting the perpetrators dead instead of bringing them before the law and giving them a chance for a fair trial. Both Dobey and Huggy Bear also represent a neutered, non-sexual and therefore non-threatening black masculinity. Dobey is a somewhat over-weight, paternal, married man whose masculinity is presented in a jovial and non-threatening manner. Huggy Bear is eccentric and is shown operating flexibly on both sides of the law. He dresses flamboyantly in colorful polyester suits, fedoras, and bowties, performing his masculinity outside of the realm of sanctioned manhood. Part pimp, part childish figure, part queer-coded (although always nominally established to be straight), he offers no contest to the superior hegemonic masculinity performed by Starsky and Hutch (Bavaro, 2020, 75).

Despite the show’s celebration of hegemonic, white masculinity, it nevertheless opens a place for nuanced, caring, queer-friendly if not intentionally queer masculinity. Starsky and Hutch treat the queer-coded characters (and one confirmed gay man) with respect and kindness, and their relationship subverts even the standards and norms of the traditional 1970’s buddy show. The genre of buddy movie, as its generally understood, was first introduced in 1969 by three films, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance kid*, *Easy Rider*, and *Midnight cowboy*. Close,

exclusive relationships between men are nothing new in American literature and cinema, of course; indeed Leslie Fiedler (1967) argues that in American literary tradition, traceable to the early 1800's, women have a contradictory dual role as both the ruined virgin bride and the forgiving mother. This image of the woman conflicts in the mind of men, who cannot desire a woman sexually without also wanting to maintain the image of the unsexual mother. This paradox is solvable only by rejecting maturity with its responsibilities and expectations of marriage all together. Aiming to escape the confines of the marital relationship and the civilized world with its responsibilities, the heroes in American novels escape to the untamed frontier, where they form intimate relationships with other men as the innocent substitute for marriage with women. Therefore, close homosocial relationships between men come to symbolize the immature fantasy of men, wishing to escape adulthood and replace adult relationships with women with 'pure' bonds between men.

The same themes of escape, homelessness, and substitution of women with male buddies, can be found in the buddy movies of the 1970's. Robin Wood (2003, 203-204) defines buddy film as a genre with six distinctive components: 'The journey', marginalization of female characters, the absence of home as an anchor for the protagonists, a 'male love story', the presence of a homosexual character, and death of at least one of the protagonists. The journey can be aimless wondering through America, as in *Easy rider*, or a never-ending bus ride to Florida, as in the end of *Midnight cowboy*. Important is the journey itself, being on the road with the male buddy, forever escaping the drudgery of home and marriage, which the absent female characters represent. Women are only present in the margins, as convenient love interests to assure the viewer of the men's heterosexuality and disregarded or killed off when they have fulfilled their role. The emotional center of the story and the main emotional charge is in the relationship between the two men, making the films male love stories, distinct from the classical Hollywood narrative of heterosexual union and the assured continuance of the nuclear family. This love story must appear unquestionably heterosexual, however, which is why the presence of a homosexual character – often either a villain or a humorous sidekick – is there to set the homosocial relationship between the protagonists apart from the homosexual Other. The male relationship must never even theoretically be able to be consummated, which is why one or both men must either die or be otherwise made unavailable. Next, I briefly discuss how *Starsky & Hutch* relate to the buddy film genre.

The lack of meaningful female characters in the 1970's buddy film has been explained as a backlash against the women's liberation movement (Haskell, 2016). In leaving behind women, however, buddy films – or their male protagonists – also reject the normative systems of heteronormativity, marriage, and the continuation of the nuclear family (Wood, 2003, 203). This opens a brief window of possibility for a new and more inclusive male identity that in some sense is in open conflict with traditional embodiments of hegemonic masculinity (Bavaro, 2020, 66). *Starsky & Hutch* can be seen as taking advantage of this brief window in time, before Reaganism and the neoconservative backlash of the 1980's shut it close again. Keeping with the tradition of the buddy film, *Starsky & Hutch* focuses almost solely on the relationship between the two men. While action sequences, car chases, and silly undercover missions are a big part of the show, in the heart of it is always the deep friendship, loyalty, and love between the protagonists. They spend most of their time together, either working or hanging out, playing basketball, cooking each other dinner, or going out together. When seen dating women, they are often on a double date, even having picnics in a same park, sitting in close proximity to each other with their dates. The women they are dating are often only mentioned briefly, often not even appearing on camera, highlighting their unimportance. Starsky and Hutch, meanwhile, do everything together. They are often seen having breakfast together at the beginning of an episode, and then going to dinner at the end of it. They stand and sit very close to each other, sometimes sitting on a same chair, and their physical closeness is amplified by their constant touching. Their interactions are peppered with brief touches; hand on a shoulder, a brief pat on a chest, one resting his head on the other's shoulder or chest, being thrown together by an explosion or a rickety stair... Not to mention long, tight, desperate hugs when either one is in distress. Clearly, the two men are very comfortable with physical closeness, even while half naked.

As Wood (2003, 203) notes, the theme of journey is important in buddy films. In *Starsky & Hutch* the scenes are mainly set in one city; however, a sense of rootlessness can be detected. Most of the scenes happen outside, in public, on the streets, or in shady bars, restaurants, or discos. Information about the personal lives of Starsky or Hutch is given slowly and only partially. We learn that Starsky is originally from New York, that his father is dead, and that he is close with his mother. Hutch, we learn, has studied in college and has been married at least once, maybe twice, and he does not have a good relationship with his ex-wife. Their homes are shown only periodically, and when we do see them at home, usually either something bad has happened in there or both men are there together, having

dinner or watching television. This highlights the sense of rootlessness: Home is not really an anchor to tie them to normative relationships, not unless they are both there together. Home, for Starsky and Hutch, is the city they live in and – more importantly – the relationship they have together.

Wood (2003, 204) notes that the presence of a queer character in buddy films works as a disclaimer: The protagonists are not like *that*. In *Starsky & Hutch* there are no named and acknowledged queer characters, but Huggy Bear and few of the peripheral characters the men use as informants can be argued to be queer coded (Bavaro, 2020, 78). In season three, episode five “Death in a different place” we are introduced to a police officer John Blaine, who used to be Starsky’s mentor and surrogate father-figure. He is shown in a gay bar and later bringing a man to his motel room, where he is later discovered dead. Starsky and Hutch investigate his murder and take the investigation very seriously, which was not always the case with the police in the 1970’s. The issues of homosexuality, homophobia, and the changes in politics and people’s attitudes are discussed carefully and with compassion in the episode, with some very interesting hints at the characters’ inner lives. Starsky and Hutch go undercover in a gay bar and ask Huggy Bear to go with them. Huggy answers cryptically that he “has been undercover all his life”. That could very well be seen as another hint that Huggy was meant to be a queer coded character. What is most interesting, however, when comparing the show to other 1970’s buddy films, is the last scene of the episode. If gay characters were meant to act as a disclaimer of how not to read the buddy relationship, it could be argued that the last in scene in “Death in a different place” does something quite different. We see Starsky and Hutch in Starsky’s car. Hutch is driving and Starsky is in the back seat. Hutch asks whether Starsky would consider that a man who spends seventy-five percent of his time with another man “has got certain tendencies”. Starsky says yes and asks if Hutch means that was the case with John Blaine. “No, that is the case between you and me. --. Seventy-five percent of the time we spend together, and you are not even a good kisser!”

Rather than highlighting how different John Blaine as a gay man and his relationships are from the definitely straight friendship between Starsky and Hutch, the show compares their relationship to a queer relationship, thus drawing both the audience’s and the protagonist’s attention to the queer implications. Paying attention to the queer implications and the potentiality in Starsky’s and Hutch’s relationship, the show actually resembles the bromance narratives of today, although the term was not coined until the late 1990’s. Bromance is a homosocial bond between men that crucially depends on a shared physical and emotional

intimacy, and while steering away from naming the relationship homosexual, nevertheless acknowledges the implications and appropriates the cultural codes of homosexuality (Bavaro, 2020, 77; DeAngelis, 2014, 11). Women are marginalized in both narrative types but whereas in buddy films they are either simply absent or killed off, in bromance narratives women represent home, stability, growing up, and taking responsibility, effectively implicating that male-male relationships belong to the adolescence. Women in bromance narratives become the archetypal ‘ball-and-chain’, planning weddings, and annoyingly interfering in the homosocial male-on-male relationships with their demands of marriage and security (DeAngelis, 2014, 12). Women in bromance narratives are allowed to come in the middle of the homosocial relationship, whereas in buddy films they are kept securely out of the way. In this way, *Starsky & Hutch* belong more to the buddy film genre. No girlfriend lasts long, and the ones who are allowed to step a little closer, are always killed off.

If death is the final obstacle that separates the buddies from each other and from any possibility of the relationship evolving into something else, (Wood, 2003, 204) *Starsky & Hutch* make yet again a rather interesting exception to the rule. In the end of season four, Starsky is shot badly. Hutch moves heaven and earth to catch the shooter. In the final scene of the final episode, we see Starsky waking up from coma, with Hutch by his side, and the final shot is of Hutch climbing into bed with his partner and hiding under the covers. For once, death does not part the buddies and their relationship is left hanging in the air with all its possibilities, ready to be consummated in innumerable slash fics. The fic “The Outcome” (2010) continues the story of Starsky and Hutch, developing their lives after the shooting and after they quit the police force, as I show in article I. The fic discusses how their relationship is so close and intimate already that the men can hardly see the possibility of it developing into something romantic and sexual, until a friend points the possibility out to them.

3.5 The empirical data for article three survey

The third part of my study consists of the data I collected among kink meme community members. Kink memes as a subcategory of fan fiction is relatively understudied among fan fiction scholars. I knew relatively little about them, apart from some interestingly controversial material being written there. Kink meme communities can seem difficult to penetrate. They are hidden away behind warnings and age limit tests, even if most only require you to check the ‘Yes, I’m

over eighteen' box. Once inside, the uninitiated person is confronted with long lists of rules and lots of specified community lingo. As an aca-fan, I lurked in the shadows of various kink meme communities, although the one I returned to most often was the *Supernatural* kink meme community. Lurkers are those who only read the fics or peruse through the contents of the site but do not comment or write a prompt of their own. As a lurker, I learned the lay of the land, so to speak, getting to know the customs and learning the community lingo. Once I felt sufficiently initiated, the academic part of me took over and I began to see a rich, practically unstudied community with lots of interesting new aspects of fan fiction culture.

When I began to plan how to broaden my research beyond close-reading and analyzing fan fiction, I quickly realized that if I wanted to understand what impact reading and writing fan fiction has on one's understanding of sexuality, I needed to go where sex and sexuality are on the forefront. Fan fiction as a whole is far too large a genre with many subgenres that have very little to do with sexuality. Even slash fiction is bit too large a genre to tackle in one study. Kink meme communities, meanwhile, are little known among fan fiction scholars and most of them have the titillating issues of sex, kinks, and female sexuality on the forefront. I realized that if I wanted to understand how these communities work and what one can learn about female sexuality from them, I needed to talk to the members. Merely analyzing the content of these sites would not be enough. I also knew that to get reliable results, I needed to earn the trust of the potential respondents. Far too much research has been done from outside in, with a researcher who has little interest in the communities and the people, except as study subjects. I, however, as a fan have an avid interest to see fan fiction and fans represented fairly, and even if kink memes were not as big a part of my life as slash fiction, I wanted to show respect to these communities and represent them as best I could.

In the following sections, I explain the process of conducting the study, collecting the data, and analyzing it using qualitative content analysis.

3.5.1 Data collection

I created an account on LiveJournal and contacted the moderators on *Supernatural* kink meme community. I introduced myself and explained my research plan and my wish to study kink meme communities. I asked permission to post a link to my online survey. I then went on to contact other kink meme and fan fiction sites, as well as some newsletters circulated among students and faculty of media studies. Once I received permission to post from the moderators, I posted a link to my online

survey hosted by SurveyMonkey. With each post, I provided an explanation of my research project, a contact email both for myself and my main supervisor, an explanation of what I intended to do with the data, and an assurance that filling out the questionnaire was completely voluntary, and all answers would be analyzed confidentially. No personal data, which could be used to identify the respondents was collected.

Recruiting was done purposefully, aiming to attract those people who had some knowledge about kink meme communities and who had been or were currently a member in at least one. After a slow start, I got the permission to post to Archive of Our Own, a very popular fan fiction site. After that, the traffic to the survey site increased rapidly, and I collected eighty submissions in a relatively short period of time. After that, the interest began to dwindle, and I decided to end the collecting phase. After the first read-through of the data, two submissions were disregarded due to incomplete answers, and I determined that seventy-eight submissions were a large enough data set to get a picture that was comprehensive enough to be reliable. In addition, once I had read through the data once or twice, I began to see that the responses had enough similarities that I determined that I had collected a large enough data set.

The survey had ten questions: the first three were preliminary questions about the respondents' demographic characteristics (age, gender, sexual orientation, and educational background) and the rest were open-ended. The open-ended questions inquired about what kink meme communities the respondents belong to and in what capacity they operate there, what importance and meaning the communities hold for the respondents, how the respondents would situate the sexually explicit material published in the communities in the larger framework of pornography or erotica, and finally, how the respondents view the potentially unsettling or taboo subjects, such as rape, incest, or childhood sexual abuse, which some of the material discuss. The aim of the survey, in the framework of my whole dissertation, was to establish kink meme communities as online spaces where female and queer desires meet, and where members can explore and discuss sexual fantasies and sexual and gender identities. I wanted to understand how the kink meme communities, that I introduced in article II, look like from the inside, and how the results I got from my previous two studies hold out in the lives and experiences of the fans who write and read the fics I studied. In other words, I wanted to understand how kink meme communities, where the fan fiction discusses sexuality and gender so openly and diversly, affect the ways the members view these subjects themselves.

3.5.2 Data analysis

The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis. This method was chosen because it is well suited to analyse data that explores personal or social meanings and requires active interpretation by the researcher (Schreier, 2012, 21). So many interesting themes rose from the data that active reduction of the data was needed, and for this purpose qualitative content analysis is well suited because it focuses the analysis on selective aspects that are relevant with the research questions (Schreier, 2012, 7). As relatively little is known about kink meme communities, I initially cast a wide net with the survey questions, hoping to attract a variety of views. When conducting the survey, I had a hypothesis that the views of the respondents would vary according to which kink meme communities they frequented. Therefore the first two open-ended questions inquired upon what fandoms and kink meme communities the respondents belong to and did the meaning and importance of these communities vary between fandoms. This, however, turned out not to be case. For this reason, the questions that inquired about the fandoms and characters that the respondents favoured, were not relevant in the analysis. In selecting the relevant aspects of the whole data, the reductive nature of content analysis was a big help.

Once the data was collected, it was read through multiple times keeping an eye on emerging meaning units, or chunks of texts describing similar themes (Belotto, 2018, 2624). These were named with codes. The whole data was coded manually by underlining the meaning units and marking them with the code marks. In the next phase, often repeated phrases were collected and named word to word as they appear in the text. The original phrases were then condensed to their bare bones meaning. This stage revealed twenty-five original and condensed phrases. In the next stage, the condensed phrases that were thematically linked were clustered together. These clusters were named with terms arising from the data. Next, the clusters that had similar themes were put together, reducing the data until five distinct categories emerged. These categories were named according to their themes as *Shame/Desire*, *We are not alone*, *Authentic female sex talk*, *Porn with ethics*, and *Literary pursuits of Kink meme writers*. These five categories could not be reduced any further with the risk of losing too much specific information. I deemed that these five categories illustrate the whole data with its multiple themes and views quite well, and I hope the analysis manages to represent the seventy-eight respondents who so kindly offered their time and were willing to discuss sensitive and personal topics with me.

In the following sections, I go through the main results of my study.

4 Results and discussion

This dissertation set out to discover how slash fan fiction discusses the formation of sexual and gender identities, and how the fans rewrite the canon depictions of manhood and intermale homosocial relationships to represent the rainbow of human sexuality and the real-life issues of homophobia, restrictive gender roles, and reproductive rights of queer people. In addition, I wanted to determine how the fans in kink meme communities, where the fics discuss sexual fantasies and queer desires in multiple ways, view these topics themselves and how these communities affect the ways the fans view themselves as sexual beings. This section focuses on presenting and discussing the main findings and implications of this dissertation.

4.1 Sexual and gender identity formation: more than straight men falling in love with other straight men

One of the first theoretical questions I began to form when starting my dissertation was born out of the incongruity between fan fiction research and the fan fiction I was reading. Previous research is almost unanimous in presenting slash as a revolutionary practise of women writers queering and deconstructing heteronormative texts (Booth, 2014; Derecho, 2006; Driscoll, 2006; Woledge, 2006). Slash writers seem to build an imaginary world, a sort of utopia, where heterosexual men can transit seamlessly from platonic, albeit intimate and exclusive friendships into sexual and romantic relationships, often without having to even ponder such questions as homophobia or sexual identity (Woledge, 2006). This narrative of resistance and deconstruction is a powerful one, and one to which I myself subscribed to when writing my Masters' thesis. The narrative seemed to be in direct conflict with the many slash fics I read, however, which openly and directly discussed questions of homophobia and sexual identity, and in which the male protagonists were re-labelled as gay, bisexual, queer, etc.

Aiming to explain the difference between what bulk of the slash studies said and what the fans themselves were expressing through their writing, I set out to study how sexual identity and its formation is discussed in slash fiction and what kind of identity development narratives can be found from slash fics in different fandoms. After reading hundreds of fics from various fandoms, I selected three fics from three different fandoms: *Captain America*, *The X-Men*, and *Starsky & Hutch*. These fandoms were selected because they are all older fandoms that have enjoyed a big revival in recent years and because each fandom is situated at a different point

in history, making it possible to study sexuality and sexual identity as a historical construct. Contemporary understanding sees sexuality and sexual identity as a cultural and historical construct. While love and relationships between people of same gender have probably always existed, the surrounding culture will determine how those feelings and relationships are understood. In the Western world, sex between two men was not seen as an indicator of homosexual identity until the late 19th century. Even the word homosexual did not exist until then. Even as late as the 1950's, homosexuality was culturally seen as a series of acts and choices, a vice or a sickness which any man could potentially fall into, rather than a part of one's identity (Juvonen, 2002, 88).

My study is situated in the tradition of queer studies. Postmodern queer studies do not view a phenomenon, in my case queer identity, as an essential part of an individual but rather as a historically constructed and upheld discourse, which is constructed and reconstructed through speech and acts concerning homosexuality (Juvonen, 2002, 29). In my study, the fics I selected are written from the modern perspective, imaging and reimagining the ways queer sexuality was talked about and constructed in previous decades. In this way, fan writers today make visible parts of queer people's history and reconstruct – or deconstruct – the way we see queer people and queer sexuality of the past.

While I treat the fics as individual pieces of literature, the communal nature of fan fiction cannot be ignored. The fics all have a different identity development narrative, but they also illustrate broader themes and tropes in slash fiction. These tropes I named as I) "I'm not gay, you are the only man I love", II) "In denial", and III) "Success stories". These tropes also illustrate the ways slash fiction's and queer culture's relationship has developed through the ages (Busse & Lothian, 2018). As I have previously discussed, the first wave of slash fiction, roughly from the 1970's to the 1990's, is characterized by female fantasies about ideal, egalitarian relationships and "colonizing" male bodies to discuss female sexuality and fantasies (Busse & Lothian, 2018, 118). First wave fics seldom discuss queer politics or queer culture, and when they do, they juxtapose the slash relationship, which is presented as exclusive, monogamous, and based solely on love, and the "shallow" queer culture with its one-night stands and non-stop search for sexual gratification (Busse & Lothian, 2018, 120). I identify the *Starsky & Hutch* slash fic "The Outcome" (2010) by lamardeuse as a modern version of the first wave trope "undercover in a gay bar". The fic offers astute perceptions about the prejudices and fears against gay culture in the early 1980's and outlines a sexual identity narrative which I interpret with the help of Sexual landscape model (Gordon &

Silva, 2015; Rust, 1996). The model presents sexual identity not as a continuum but as a landscape, which is formed by physical, relational, and ideological environments (Rust, 1996). A change in landmarks can cause a shift in one's understanding of their sexual identity (Gordon & Silva, 2015). In Lamardeuse's rewriting of the "undercover in a gay bar" trope, Starsky and Hutch attempt to help their young friend in his coming-out process, and this causes the men to re-evaluate their devotion to each other. Lamardeuse writes a sexual identity narrative which is not about coming out and adapting to life as an out of the closet gay couple, but rather about a personal journey from friendship to a realisation that the love Starsky and Hutch had been searching for had been under their nose all along.

The second fic I discuss is "Good Boys" (2011) by the author zamwessel, a X-Men slash fic about Charles Xavier and Erik Lensherr. The fic discusses sexual orientation and sexual identity as two potentially separate things and shows Charles struggling with accepting and naming his sexual identity. While Charles knows he is mostly sexually and emotionally attracted to men, a gay identity goes against the ingrained view of himself. The fic juxtaposes queerness with mutation. Erik, who is comfortable with who he is, rebukes Charles for deliberately hiding away parts of himself. Like Charles's mutation, his gayness is also invisible. In other words, Charles can pass as a privileged, heterosexual human, and this privilege he uses as a shield against the fears and prejudices humans have against mutants and queer people. Erik, meanwhile, whose mutation – the ability to control metal – is harder to hide, has as a Holocaust survivor already faced the worst hate imaginable, and has come out determined not to hide who he is – a mutant, a queer man, and a Jew.

If "Good Boys" discusses the difficulties of combining one's sexual orientation and sexual identity, the third fic in my study, "All the Angels and the Saints" (2014) by Speranza discusses what happens when different dimensions of one's identity come into irreparable conflict with each other. For Steve Rogers in Speranza's fic, these identity dimensions are his Catholic conviction, his queerness, and his homosexual relationship with Bucky Barnes. The two identity dimensions cannot comfortably be combined. The Catholic church is famous for its strict stance on homosexuality, but in Steve's case his role as Captain America and the embodiment of the American ideals adds to his difficulty of combining his religious and national convictions with his sexuality. Speranza creates a compelling narrative about different aspects of identity, the loneliness of trying to find oneself in a mirrorless world, without people against who to check one's identity, and the danger of placing one man on a pedestal and hailing him as the embodiment of national ideals. Nationality and national ideals cannot be tied to any one person because nations

are imagined communities formed by people from various backgrounds, and all master narratives about nationalism are built on omissions and silences (Dittmer, 2007, 403). Steve Rogers cannot admit his lifelong homosexual relationship with Bucky because Captain America, the embodiment of the American national master narrative, cannot be gay. And in a modern world which has forgotten all about the queer, socialist, and feminist subcultures of the 1930's New York, Steve realizes that the world has forgotten him as well, only remembering the national myth of Captain America.

I read Speranza's fic against the Figured worlds identity model (Holland et al., 1998; Peña-Talamantes, 2013) and show the many ways Speranza discusses identity development, sexuality, religious convictions, and nationality in her fic. Far from the simplistic, uncomplicated narratives of sliding from friendship to a homosexual relationship, all the fics I studied show a deep understanding of the multifaceted nature of identities and how they form. Some critics have expressed concern that the queer lives on show in slash fiction are entirely fictionalized and have no reference to social reality, and that slash readers and writers could consume slash's queerness without doing the work of being anti-homophobic (Akatsuka, 2010, 172) This certainly may have been a valid concern earlier in slash fiction's history. However, as Neville (2018) shows, modern slash fiction is deeply imbedded in queer politics and involvement in slash communities has contributed to the slash fans' understanding, attitudes, and practices with queer issues.

The narratives I identified reveal an understanding of sexuality as a historical and cultural construct and show slash fiction's evolution over time. The other two tropes I identified, "In denial" and "Success stories", illustrate the struggles of combining two or more incompatible identity dimensions and learning to let go of harmful views of oneself. While these narratives are "merely" fictional accounts of fictional queer lives of fictional people, they can and do affect the way slash fans view queer issues. As there seems to be a diminishing boundary between online erotic content and real-life sexuality (Arvidsson, 2007, 74), and as online communities and social media are increasingly where young people are developing their identities, (Craig & McInroy, 2014) we should not overlook the ways slash can affect the real lives of the people reading and writing it. Writing robust and compelling queer characters and love stories, slash writers answer to the need queer youth has identified, of more stories about same-sex families and happy queer relationships which contest the typical modernist coming-out narrative (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Rothbauer, 2004b).

4.2 Male pregnancy and the possibility for genderqueer

As I showed in the previous section, modern slash fiction offers many sexual identity development narratives. Far from shying away from broader queer culture and the issues of homophobia and cultural heteronormativity, modern slash fiction in many ways is in the forefront of telling compelling queer love stories and even celebrating queer culture. This celebration is not limited to sexual identity and orientation, as the following section will show. Gender and cultural gender norms are also under scrutiny in many modern slash fics.

To better understand how modern fan fiction can discuss gender, I turned my attention to kink meme communities and to the very popular genre of male pregnancy fics. Mpreg fics, as they are fannishly called, discuss the heavily gendered concepts of childbearing and giving birth. They give canonically cis-male characters the ability to become pregnant and give birth, thus opening a possibility for queer pregnancies and families. The idea of cis-men becoming pregnant and giving birth is culturally nothing new. Many of our cultural myths, from the Greek myth of the goddess Athen appearing fully formed from Zeus's head to the Christian idea of Adam "giving birth" to Eve, can be read as male pregnancy narratives (Parker, 2014, 1036; Zapperi, 1991). Male pregnancy as a cultural and mythological narrative is a fantasy about the unlimited power of men (Johnson, 2009, 17). In addition to myths, the figure of a pregnant man has been used to offer comical – and somewhat alarming – speculations about future advances in medical science, as a monstrous figure co-opting the woman's role in reproduction, and to queer and destabilize the heteronormative, binary gender system (Kerry, 2009; Maher, 2008; Parker, 2014).

My study shows that fan fiction's mpreg stories are another link to this continuum. In kink meme fan fiction, the image of a pregnant man can be used as an erotic fantasy, but more than that, mpreg stories help draw and redraw the boundaries of what is considered normative gender expression. By removing the highly gendered concept of childbearing from the female body and giving it to men, mpreg stories point out the cultural norms regarding pregnancy and parenthood and challenge our notions about them. Slash fiction, as I showed in the previous section, can be political in a way it queers our cultural understandings about men and non-straight sexuality. In a similar fashion mpreg stories may challenge and queer our notions about normative, gendered bodies. By making visible bodies that do not fit in the normative binary model of male/female, mpreg stories add to the cultural and political discussion about trans and non-binary people.

In my study I made a gender sensitive close reading about three mpreg stories that were first published in the *Supernatural* kink meme community. I sketch out three basic narratives: pregnancy through biological means, pregnancy through magic, and alfa/beta/omega stories. The last one is a trope which was first born in kink meme communities but has become so popular it has spread to other fan fiction as well. In *Supernatural* kink meme community, the trope has become so ubiquitous it has all but taken over the community, with a majority of filled prompts using the trope in some way. A/B/O trope sets the characters in a universe where all people, despite their sex or gender, are divided into two or three groups. Alfas are the ones who inseminate and impregnate the betas and omegas. Omegas are the breeders who carry the pregnancy to term and whose animal-like heat cycle determines when the copulation happens. A/B/O trope borrows the basic concepts, like heat, nesting, and knotting from canines, making humans into a kind of canine-human hybrids. What makes the trope especially interesting is the way it modifies the human body and mixes up the gendered traits. Female Alfas can have a penis that might come out only when the Omegas are in heat, male Omegas can have a womb, a vagina, and a penis, or the impregnation can happen anally. The A/B/O universe is usually very hierarchical, with the active Alfas on top and the passive Omegas on the bottom. With this, the trope plays with and carnivalizes the conservative views on sexuality and gender. Through omegaverse, fan can examine the relationship between power and consent in accessible ways (Popova, 2018, 175). Making men slaves to their biology, the trope offers a fun house mirror image of the neo-conservative political movements and their efforts to control women's reproductive rights.

Mpreg stories make visible the non-binary bodies and people outside the binary gender system. They are not necessarily trans narratives, however. Rather, I argue that mpreg stories offer a genderqueer space, an extension of epistemologies, praxis, and identities that have been placed under the rubric of trans, but which cannot so easily be located in the movement between male and female (Kerry, 2009, 702). Although male pregnancy narratives blur the line between biological male and biological female, the men in those stories usually do not identify as being trans. Moreover, as I show in my article, mpreg narratives are varied, with multiple ways of getting a male character pregnant. In pregnancy through magic narratives, a spell or a cursed object may accidentally give men the ability to get pregnant, without much consideration for *how* the pregnancy actually occurs. The disruption of the linear alignment of the body and gender identity is minimal, and the only changes to the male body are the gradual swelling of his belly and perhaps some

stereotypical psychological changes, like mood swings and overprotectiveness. One of the fics I analyse in my article, “And Baby Makes Three” (2015), utilizes the pregnancy-through-magic narrative. In it, Dean Winchester accidentally impregnates his brother Sam, who has been cursed by a witch. Sam is and remains a very masculine cis-male throughout the fic, and his pregnant body repeats the stereotypical gendered behaviours and feelings. He is very protective of the foetus, although he had no reason to believe he even could become pregnant, and Dean treats him differently, repeating the cultural ideas of a pregnant body being fragile and in need of specific attention and protection. This disarms the potential threat that the pregnancy poses for Sam’s male body and his male identity (Kerry, 2009, 707). Although the character Sam Winchester is queered both by his incestuous gay relationship with Dean and his subsequent pregnancy, as a male pregnancy narrative the fic relies on traditional, gendered themes. Rather than focusing on gender or biology, “And Baby Makes Three” like many other mpreg fics explores more conventional themes of love, trust, and homemaking, transforming the queer themes into rather heteronormative stories (Åström, 2010, para. 1.1).

Many mythical male pregnancy narratives sanitize pregnancy, omitting the corporeal reality of it: Removing the large belly and the unruly, uncontrollable female body, mythological male pregnancies reinvent having a baby as a clean, intellectual process (Parker, 2014, 1036). In such narratives epistemological or aesthetic creativity is posited against female conception, gestation, and birth, while in the modernist era the image of a pregnant man has moved from a metaphor of creativity to an example of biofuturist potentiality (Davidson, 2010, 210). When reproduction is loosed from its putative organic site in female body and placed elsewhere, for example a test tube or a male body, it has potentiality to queer the normative attitudes towards reproductive health (Davidson, 2010, 210). Fan fiction male pregnancy narratives have the potential to do the same. While they sometimes can end up reproducing heteronormative values and narratives, they can also offer astute perceptions about people’s right to choose whether, when, and how to become pregnant by creating a world where reproduction follows strict biological and political rules and the people capable of getting pregnant are stripped of their right choose whether to have a baby and even who to have the baby with. While such dystopian narratives are very popular nowadays, mpreg fics can make the message even more impactful by replacing the suffering handmaid with the image of a very masculine man reduced to a childlike babymaker, complete with leaking breasts and a huge, swollen belly. Switching the genders is important and impactful

because it can queer our notions of reproductive rights and make us rethink gender, not so much as a biological fact but as a culturally produced construction.

4.3 Actualising the potential

Slash fiction has for a long time been closely connected to queer literature and queer activism (Booth, 2014; Neville, 2018). Many earlier studies have only looked at the slash fics and not paid much attention to how the fans view the texts they write and the fan fiction communities they belong to. I wanted to fill this gap in knowledge. I wanted to examine how the queer potential of slash fiction might be actualised in the communities the fans create online. I chose to study kink meme communities because they connect fan fiction, pornography, and intimate discussions about sexuality and desire in interesting and unparalleled ways. I took my initial cue from Lothian, Busse, and Reid (2007) and Kristina Busse (2006) who identified slash fandom as a queer female space where the erotics of slash writing can be transferred to the ways fans communicate together and where the queerness of writing and fannish interactions can become manifest in offline lives. Lothian, Busse, and Reid organised an online roundtable discussion with slash fans about gender, sexuality, and queer practises and politics in slash fandoms. The discussions, especially about the ways slash fandoms can become important queer spaces for closeted individuals, were a steppingstone for my study. I wanted to examine how the sometimes carnivalistic world of hyperbole and pornography of kink meme communities might affect how the fans see themselves as sexual beings and what importance these communities hold for them.

In my first article I examined the many ways sexual identity is constructed in slash fiction and showed how the fans seem to have a rich and sophisticated view of identity and the many ways it can form. For my third article I was interested in examining whether the ways fans discuss sexuality and gender in their fics might even influence their offline lives. Many respondents in my survey discussed identity and the importance of safe online spaces for women where they can learn about their erotic likes and dislikes and perhaps take the first tentative steps towards queer sexuality. Especially for young people, the construction of sexual identity happens increasingly online (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Szulc & Dhoest, 2013) and especially underrepresented women can through online platforms and connections perform their identity and find other people like them (Anarbaeva, 2016). As Katariina Kyrölä and Susanna Paasonen (2016, 2) explore in their article about pornographic archives, encounters with sexual acts and scenarios, for example in

form of porn, accumulate, actualize, and resonate as embodied memories and sensations, forming patterns of carnal knowledge. Kink meme communities can be such a platform for women who feel the society they live in inhibits their exploration and development of sexuality and sexual identity. As one of my respondents wrote, in societies where restrictive and harmful expectations of sexuality are being fed to young girls through limited or non-existent sex ed, safe, openminded online communities can become important places for learning about and discussing sexuality. This was one of the findings of the third article. The category I dubbed *Shame/Desire* highlights the many ways sexuality and shame walk hand-in-hand, and how safe, sex-positive spaces and one's ability to question one's own sexual identity can be tightly connected.

Although kink meme communities can be places for learning about sexualities, they are often first and foremost used for writing and sharing sexually explicit fan fics. As such they are a part of feminist or female-friendly pornography or erotica. DeVoss suggests that when women take control of sexual representation, a different perspective of bodies and sexuality is created (Devoss, 2002, 76). This different perspective is not necessarily visible in female-directed mainstream pornography, however, as both female and male directors are as likely to represent aggression towards women, and frequently show sexual pleasure as contingent upon and derived from aggression (Sun et al., 2008, 321). However, even if there is little difference between male and female-directed mainstream porn, women's access to sexually explicit material can have a positive effect on their lives and their acceptance of their sexuality, bodies, and sexual desires (Chowkhani, 2016; McKeown et al., 2018).

The sexually explicit material published in kink meme communities differs in many ways from mainstream pornography, naturally, and most respondents preferred fan fiction porn over mainstream audio-visual pornography or even other literary erotica. As my study shows, the respondents appreciated the ways kink meme fics represent female and queer desire and felt that kink memes offer people a chance to consume sexually explicit material that is specifically catered to their needs and desires. Moreover, as one the respondents wrote, familiar characters and fandom-specific practises are among the main reasons why many of the respondents prefer kink memes to other erotica. Using familiar characters that the readers and writers have an emotional attachment to create more unique and emotionally satisfying stories, where the sex is motivated by something other than need to have sex.

Another important finding of my study was the playful and kink-positive atmosphere of kink meme communities. As one respondent lovingly and vividly described, fandoms can inspire truly imaginative and fantastical porn that nevertheless remains true to the characters. To be able to play with different erotic fantasies was seen as helpful especially for young people, who could through fantasies discover new aspects of their sexuality. As Susanna Paasonen (2018) describes in her article, sexual play probes and stretches the horizon of what people might imagine themselves as liking or doing. In a similar fashion, my respondents described fantasies as building-blocks of their sexual identities.

While sexual play can be freeing, joyful, and healing, sex can also be used to hurt us. As my study shows, kink meme fans are very concerned with the ethical side of sexually explicit material and sexual fantasies. The respondents discussed the ethics of pornography in many ways, and many felt that kink memes represent a softer, more ethical way of consuming sexually explicit material, while others expressed concern over some of the material published. Some felt that using fictionalized characters offered them protection to discuss kinks that would otherwise be immoral or illegal to feature. This was not seen only as a chance to write about difficult subjects, but also as a potentially therapeutic practise for some rape or sexual abuse survivors, who could use these stories to overcome their trauma and reclaim their own sexuality.

Kink meme communities can be places where female and queer desires fuse together and where slash fiction's multifaceted representations of sexuality and gender can be actualised in the ways the fans discuss sexuality and gender and discover new aspects of their desires and sexual identities. Kink memes offer the fans a chance to see their desires and fantasies represented in a more nuanced and ethical manner.

5 Conclusions

Fan fiction as a field of study is now, like this researcher, in its comfortable thirties. The first bloom and sometimes awkward adolescence are firmly in the past, and fan fiction studies has found its place among larger fields of study, like gender studies, queer studies, popular culture studies, etc. That does not mean there is nothing new to be expected, however. Fan fiction as a phenomenon is ever evolving and growing, as new people are finding it and the older generation is slowly on their way out, making room for younger generations to play in the sandbox. I began my journey as a fledgling researcher in my twenties. As a twenty-something, fresh-faced MA, in the first flush of infatuation, I jumped head-on into the world of fan fiction studies and was somewhat surprised to find not the undiscovered land I had expected but a thriving, cultivated field, full of people busy at work trying to make sense of this wonderful place where new interesting species of flowers are popping up everywhere around them.

The original articles in this dissertation are my attempt at making sense of the small corner of the field I had settled on to study. They approach the topics of identity, sexuality, gender, and pornography as they apply to slash fiction and kink meme communities. Each study has a slightly different angle, but they all aim to understand how slash fiction discusses identity, how fans work to increase and advance the representation of queer sexualities and people outside of normative gender dichotomy, and how belonging to fandom spaces may affect the way fans see themselves and how they understand gender and sexuality. Globally, people are moving away from old, patriarchal, heteronormative and gendernormative values and trying to make room for and amplify the voices of minorities, people who historically have been silenced and made invisible. The Me Too movement, Black Lives Matter movement, and the discussions about trans rights are all trying to give voice to voiceless and power to powerless. Fan fiction has from the beginning been taking part in these struggles, first by making visible women and their desires and sexualities, later allying with queer movement, and now making room for further discussions about race, gender, class, etc. The stories fans tell are still mainly about white and cis-gendered people, perhaps because so are the stories fans base their works on, but the world is expanding and changing even in Hollywood and mainstream television studios, and fans are taking part, advancing, and reacting to these changes.

One clear finding regarding slash fiction is how rich, complicated, and layered stories fans tell about sexual identity, realizing and coming to terms with one's

sexuality, and how society and culture affect and change the way we view sexuality and identity. Far from shying away from labeling the characters gay, bi, etc., as previous slash studies have suggested, modern slash fiction is very much aware of and in tune with queer movement and queer cultures. While the romantic idea of one true love is very much alive in slash, finding one's soulmate is no longer incompatible with the political and cultural queer movement.

Another finding sheds light on gender and how non-normative bodies and genders are discussed in fan texts about pregnant men. While many male pregnancy stories end up enforcing heteronormative ideas, fans have many ways to queer our normative views on gender, pregnancy, and the power structures in families. Especially Omegaverse, or Alpha/Beta/Omega stories, can be used as a critical tool to examine the relationship between power and consent (Popova, 2018). Stories about people whose bodies set them apart from our normative gender dichotomy can make visible the arbitrary way we divide people based on their reproductive organs and advance the discussion about power relations and consent in intimate relationships and families.

The third major finding explores and makes visible the real people behind the stories. The data I collected among kink meme community members explores the many ways fans use fandom communities and kink memes not only for sharing fan fiction but for discussions about desire, sexuality, traumas, etc. Kink memes are not just for porn and porn is not just about getting off. Kink memes are important social spaces where women and queer people can learn about and discuss desire and the many aspects of sexuality and sex, some of them difficult and painful. One of my respondents wrote how she believes the biggest role of kink meme communities is the exploration of sexuality and desire in a context where neither is forbidden or feared. In my opinion, this beautifully sums up the best aspects of fandoms and fan communities. In a world where we are constantly divided based on our gender, sexuality, or skin color we need places where people can come together to create and explore strange new worlds and – in the immortal words of Captain Kirk – to boldly go where no one has gone before, at least in their imagination.

Allowing the fans to speak for themselves helps fan fiction studies move away from outsider researchers looking in and making observations from outsider perspective. My researcher position as an Acafan sets me as a member of the fandoms I study. I want to represent the fans and fan fiction as fairly as possible because I am also a fan and fan fiction is a big part of my life. Especially in studying different minorities it is important that the researcher is respectful towards the people and cultures and that the work can give something back to the people and

cultures being studied. It is my firm wish that with this dissertation I have managed to represent respectfully and accurately the fandoms, the fics, and the people who are so dear to me.

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Original articles

- I Kukka, S. (2018). Many roads to love: Sexual identity formation in slash fiction. *Lambda Nordica*, 23(1-2), 80–110.
- II Kukka, S. (2020). Kink meme -yhteisöjen raskaaksi tulevat miehet sukupuoliä ylittämässä. *Sukupuolentutkimus*, 1, 35–49.
- III Kukka, S. (2021). "Fandom's pornographic subset": Kink meme communities as queer female practices. *Lambda Nordica*, 26(1), 53–80

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