EXAMINING SEXUAL NORMATIVITY IN *WELCOME TO NIGHT VALE* SLASH FICTION

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degree of Master of Arts

by

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF FAN FICTION

“Writing and reading fanfiction isn’t just something you do; it’s a way of thinking about the media you consume, of being aware of all the implicit assumptions that a canonical work carries with it, and of considering the possibility that those assumptions might not be the only way things have to be.”

–Anne Jamison, Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World

My thesis investigates the phenomenon of slash fan fiction, specifically focusing on the way norms of gender and sexuality appear in several instances of Welcome to Night Vale slash fiction. Slash fiction is a subgenre of fan fiction that evades a clear cut definition. Broadly understood, slash fiction emphasizes a non-heteronormative worldview and typically features same-gender relationships between canonical characters of popular media. Welcome to Night Vale, a science fiction/fantasy podcast, canonically features two men in a romantic and presumably sexual relationship. Because slash fiction has a tradition of involving canonically straight characters in same-gender relationships, scholars often see slash as a genre of transgression and rebellion. However, characters who are already gay in the canon raise questions about slash fiction’s relationship with transgressing norms. Many slash authors write Welcome to Night Vale stories that continue to strive for rebellion by dealing with topics that are still transgressive of heteronormativity (the heterosexual-centric worldview of the dominant culture), like polyamory and male pregnancy. However, my case studies show how even these
topics have the potential to simultaneously reject and embrace sexual normativity. In order to fully communicate my findings, this introduction will attempt to create a framework of understanding genres like fan fiction, a framework that focuses not on structural qualities but rather how the genre commonly interacts with social norms, particularly those of gender and sexuality. Although I do focus on many structural qualities in my close reading of slash fics, I strive to put these qualities in relation with slash’s social purposes.

Fan fiction, or more increasingly “fanfiction,” is in its broadest sense any creative written work that draws upon settings and characters from already existing media, including television shows, novels, and films. The discourse communities built around unpublished online fan works have developed their own specialized vocabularies in order to develop and discuss these stories, which are commonly referred to among fans as “fics” discretely, or “fic/fanfic” as a whole. To define fan fiction as a cohesive, singular genre can be difficult, however, because there are so many differences among types of fan fiction. Attempting to assign a set of steadfast qualities to the genre is a daunting task. One point of agreement among most scholars is that fan fiction differs from traditional adaptations, homages, and pastiches (Barnes; Hetcher; Tosenberger). This difference does not stem from content, necessarily, but from fan fiction’s non-traditional means of publication and distribution, which primarily include fan magazines (in the pre-internet era) and modern fan fiction websites. Jennifer L. Barnes and Steven A. Hetcher respectively limit fan fiction to those stories “not written for profit” and “not produced as ‘professional writing’” (Barnes 71; Hetcher 1870). Catherine Tosenberger agrees that “Fanfiction . . . differs from other forms of ‘recursive’ fiction (Langford 805)—such as Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Geraldine Brooks’s . . . *March*, and every Sherlock Holmes pastiche ever created—by its unofficial methods of distribution” (185, ellipses added). Although some
stories that began as fan fiction have made it to the published mainstream with the revision of trademarked characters, most notably E.L. James’ *Twilight* fan fiction *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the majority of modern fan fiction exists solely on the internet.

Although these online works may not be the only works considered fan fiction to some, they are the focus of this study due to their unique cultural value. Online fan fiction is unique because unlike traditionally published material, it does not have to pass through editors and publishers, and therefore it creates a more intimate link between writer and reader that often involves direct communication. Fandoms, groups of fans of a certain piece of media, are often tight-knight communities of people who exchange ideas among themselves. Because of this, fans have developed a specialized vocabulary that is almost indiscernible to those unfamiliar with the genre. For example, the phrases “WIP AU fic” or “genderswap PWP fic,” although understandable to a frequent fan fiction reader, may be more difficult for others to decipher. Language is just one instance of how online fan works are interesting from a cultural standpoint. Online fan works often promote different cultural values from the mainstream, or at least speak about divisive issues more frankly. However, not all fics are the same. Even limiting the definition of fan fiction to non-traditionally published works can still present us with a large variety of works, as online fics come in many different forms. Because genre theorists often debate how to define genres, it is helpful to draw upon genre theory in order to better understand fan fiction.

Genre theorist Amy J. Devitt argues that perhaps we should classify genres not only on conventions of form or structure, but also based on what these genres do, or what function they serve for the participants (696-697). In “Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre,” Devitt writes that an effective theory of genre defines them “less by their formal conventions
than by their purposes, participants, and subjects: by their rhetorical actions. Genre, as redefined in rhetoric-composition in complex and myriad ways, is defined by its situation and function in a social context” (698). In other words, structure is a result of how authors and readers create content in order to fulfill specific purposes. Structure and formal characteristics of a genre are still significant, but they may be the result of larger social factors rather than the definition of a genre itself. For example, online fan fiction’s medium of publication is not only interesting from a structural standpoint, but also because scholars can consider what significance this medium has for online writers’ purposes, especially because profit is not a goal. In addition, because most fans and scholars see a same-gender relationship as the formal quality necessary in order for something to be considered slash, it is important to consider the social purpose of slash fic that leads many to this definition.

In favor of applying her theory to a diverse group of genres, Devitt is attempting to “integrate the scholarship” of the fields of literature and rhetoric-composition studies, which some regard to be at odds with each other regarding which genres they study: “What we in English would seem to have in common is the study of discourse, especially of text, although the definition of ‘text’ varies” (Devitt 696). Devitt explains that “One of the great divides between literature and rhetoric-composition—the study and valuing of what are considered extraordinary texts versus the study and valuing of everyday texts—appears prominently in this rhetorical reconception of genre” (698). Rhetoric-composition scholars traditionally focus on “everyday” texts like birthday cards and pamphlets, with an emphasis on texts that are exemplary of a genre. Literature scholars often focus on “extraordinary” texts like novels and poems, especially ones that break the conventions of a genre rather than conform to them (Devitt 698).
Fan fiction, a fascinating mixture of the highbrow and lowbrow, is an ideal place to apply Devitt’s proposed integration of the worldviews of rhetoric-composition and literature scholars. Fan fiction is arguably a literary, or “extraordinary,” genre, yet it lacks and even questions the prestige of traditional literature. Henry Jenkins describes the stigma of fan fiction and fan activities in *Textual Poachers*, explaining that fans often appear in popular media as “‘kooks’ obsessed with trivia, celebrities, and collectibles; as misfits and ‘crazies’. . . in short, as people who have little or no ‘life’ apart from their fascination with this particular program” (Jenkins 11, ellipses added). In other words, mainstream culture often derides the type of people who write fan fiction, an act which differentiates fan fiction from more mainstream forms of literary texts. Fan fiction scholars such as Henry Jenkins, Anne Jamison, and Francesca Coppa (among many others) are concerned with not only the often-ignored literary merit of fan fiction but also its social causes and effects, making fan fiction an interesting place to apply Devitt’s integrated theory of genre.

According to Devitt, a view of texts as being defined “as rhetorical use of symbols in frequently encountered contexts in order to accomplish writers’ and readers’ purposes” fits comfortably into both the rhetoric-composition and literature fields. Although this view may seem more fitting for rhetoric-composition scholars, Devitt argues that “. . . this social and rhetorical theory of genre . . . fits neatly with some current views of literature, especially those deriving from new historicism and cultural studies, and it offers new insights into the traditional literary genres (698, ellipses added). Devitt’s integrated theory of genre combines elements of rhetoric-composition as well as some elements of modern literary theory. Both fields of English can use Devitt’s theory to their benefit, provided that they accept some ideas from each other. For example, the rhetoric-composition field must “deal with desirable variations within literary
genres,” accepting “texts that break the rules of a genre” as literary theorists do (705). The literature discipline must distance itself from New Criticism, which treats literary works as aesthetic productions existing in a vacuum, disregarding historic and cultural context.

In order to understand why purpose would be an effective way to categorize fan fiction over form or structure, let us consider the numerous forms fan fiction can take and the overall little importance fan communities, or fandoms, place on these structures. We make a distinction between novels, poems, and short stories when referring to traditionally published works. Fan fiction, however, is not subject to these clear cut distinctions. Fan fiction is still considered fan fiction whether it is made up of one chapter or fifty. Fan fiction can take the form of prose, letters, poetry, plays, or dialogue. I have even seen fics that alternate between two or more forms. Most interesting is that structural characteristics seem to have little bearing on a fic’s categorization on fan fiction websites. An epistolary fic and a prose fic which both deal with themes of loss and angst are more likely to be grouped together than two epistolary fics with different themes. If I wanted to use the “advanced search” option on fan fiction websites like Archive of Our Own or FanFiction.net in order to find a fic based on structural qualities, I would not have much luck. Although I could limit my search to only stories with one chapter or those with fewer than one thousand words, a search for Hamlet fan fiction may return both prosaic fics and entire plays written in iambic pentameter. I would have to specifically search “Hamlet poetry” if that was the form of writing I wanted to read.

Due to the variety of structural differences in fan fiction, as well as the genre’s rather nonchalant attitude toward structural categorization, Devitt’s conception of defining genre through a social lens is especially useful. Devitt adds that “people use genres to do things in the world (social action and purpose) and that these ways of acting become typified through
occurring under what is perceived as recurring circumstances” (698). Therefore, what many see as fan fiction’s conventions of form, although they are not necessarily applied to every individual fic, are not how we should define fan fiction but rather consider as a product of fan fiction’s context and content.

The goal now is to identify just what purposes fan fiction serves for fandom communities. Just like any other genre, fan fiction can have multiple social functions for the writers and readers. Some fan fiction authors may write in order to hone their writing skills in an anonymous environment and to receive feedback on their stories, which is a personal reason for which I have written fan fiction. Some readers seek out fan fiction in order to consume high quality entertainment for free, or because they want to read more about their favorite characters. Other authors and readers have more political goals, which is what I aim to explore in this thesis. Although I do not interview any writers or readers directly, I still aim to ascertain possible social purposes of fan fiction through the analysis of fan fiction stories. Prior scholarly research allows me to make the claim that authors often intend to create social change. For example, in Ann McClellan’s investigation on Sherlock fan fiction that changes Sherlock Holmes’s gender or sex, she writes that many fans are deliberately responding to the lack of female characters in the television show:

... writer Parachute_Silks explained that she turned all of the male characters into women “as a slightly desperate reaction to this show's female character problem” (Parachute_Silks 2010a). Parachute_Silks seems to be referring to what is commonly known in fan lore as “Rule 63,” a feminist response to the underrepresentation of women in television and film: “For every given male character, there is a female version of that character, and vice versa”
McClellan’s article alone proves that fan fiction can indeed be deliberately political and invested in social justice; in this case, the social function of Parachute_Silks’ fic is to protest and attempt to resolve what she sees as a problem in the *Sherlock* canon.

The particular facet of fan fiction in which I am interested is the fan fiction genre’s response to cultural norms of gender and sexuality. I use the term “respond” because it is neutral and does not suggest that fan fiction always supports or always rejects these norms. The authors and readers of fan fiction are diverse, so responses are therefore not universal across all fics. I acknowledge that gender and sexuality are by no means the only issues that fan fiction writers deal with in their work, yet these concepts appear so often in fan fiction that they are clearly significant to many writers and readers. The fandom world seems to be a safe place to explore themes of sexuality and gender without fearing judgment. Fics are often a unique blend of well-crafted plot and hardcore eroticism, and no seasoned fan fiction reader bats an eye at what might be a startling juxtaposition in other genres.

Fan fiction is an ideal place for writers and readers to explore gender and sexuality due to the genre’s inherent quality of transformation. Unlike traditional literature, fan fiction is automatically a reworking of one or more preexisting texts. Even when a fic is canon-compliant, there must be some sort of change from the original (in content and/or form) to differentiate it from copying and pasting an already existing text. This means that fan fiction authors are always conscious of their works’ relationship to the canon, as well as what they can do by altering the canon. Fan fiction writers have the opportunity to change or maintain any elements of the
original work that they see fit, allowing them to either conform to or question social norms. What the author decides to keep the same or change can vary greatly.

According to Sheenagh Pugh, those who write fan fiction typically either want “‘more of’” the source material (i.e., more of the same), or “‘more from’” the source material (i.e., going beyond the canon in order to explore different concepts and themes) (19). An example of wanting “more of” the canon could occur when a television show is prematurely cancelled. Fans, unable to watch more of this show, may write or seek out fan fiction as a replacement. Pugh writes that when Arthur Conan Doyle passed away, fan writers of the time “were simply trying to continue the story” of Sherlock Holmes without doing “anything differently” (Pugh 19). “More of” fan fiction can also occur when writers try to explain what happened in missing scenes, although if the source material is a series in progress these fics could eventually prove to deviate from the canon. Alternatively, writers that want “more from” the canon typically change more elements from the original. As mentioned above, fan fiction featuring a female Sherlock Holmes could be a response to a possible lack of primary female characters in the canon (Hellekson). A fan fiction story about a Sherlock Holmes who is transgender, or black, or even a vampire is clearly not just a continuation of Doyle’s stories. This type of fan fiction is a transformation.

Many scholars have focused exclusively on the transformation “more from” function of fan fiction and have disregarded the continuation function entirely. Henry Jenkins’ view of fandom, for example, is one of rebellion and transgression. Jenkins believes that fan writers, advertently or not, promote rebellion against dominant social norms in their stories: “The fans’ transgression of bourgeois taste and disruption of dominant cultural hierarchies insures that their preferences are seen as abnormal and threatening standards” (Jenkins 17, ellipses added). Anne
Jamison agrees that “fanfiction isn’t just an homage to the original—it’s subversive and perverse and boundary-breaking, and *it always has been*” (xii, italics in original). There is much truth to Jenkins’ and Jamison’s statements; fan fiction certainly has the potential to complicate, destabilize, undermine, and subvert conventional social constructs like heteronormativity. A genre such as fan fiction can “participate in legitimizing social practices” that have been previously deprivileged or stigmatized (Bawarshi and Reiff 25). This is one reason why fan fiction writers alter elements of the source material.

However, social subversion is not always the effect of fan fiction. Although Jenkins has a point in asserting that the unpublished nature of fan fiction can in itself be transgressive, “more of” fan fiction typically does not promote rebellion content-wise (17). Even “more from” fan fiction has the ability to reproduce and support traditional norms. A fan fiction author’s changes to the original text might be more compliant in supporting traditional conceptions of sex and gender than even the source material. Using Sherlock Holmes as an example again, let us imagine that someone has written a story in which Sherlock Holmes and John Watson are romantically involved. At first glance, this would seem to be a clear cut case of making the Doyle canon more radical, as the two men are not in a canonical relationship, at least not overtly. However, what if in this story, John Watson is a woman? Although the existence of Jane Watson may put a feminist twist on Doyle’s stories, the Holmes/Watson pairing becomes heteronormative and erases the homosexual subtext from the canon that some argue is present (Phillips). Fan fiction has the potential to be rebellious, but the genre does not automatically promote rebellion or conformity. Although some writers may not be aware of it, any element of the canon that they change or maintain can send a message to the readers.
This thesis does not significantly delve into the importance of fan fiction readers, but the collaborative nature is an important aspect of the genre, and it is important to note that just like writers, readers also have an active role in promoting or rejecting cultural norms. Jenkins claims that readers of fan fiction are far from passive consumers; they play a large part in privileging nontraditional forms of literature, as fans read “popular texts as if they merited the same degree of attention and appreciation as canonical texts. Reading practices . . . acceptable in confronting a work of ‘serious merit’ seem perversely misapplied to the more ‘disposable’ texts of mass culture” (Jenkins 17, ellipses added). Those who believe that these reading techniques are “misapplied” are those detractors of the fan fiction genre who believe it to be a lesser form of literature than traditional fiction. Jenkins posits that readers who treat fan fiction with the same respect and admiration as traditional literature, if not more, are therefore helping writers to blur the distinction between supposedly high and low forms of writing. This blurring of boundaries is itself a social action that helps to shape the genre of fan fiction.

Fan fiction readers not only have the ability to consume and admire a story, but to alter a story through communications with the author, becoming creators themselves. Popular online fan fiction websites allow readers to make comments on individual fics. In addition, readers can provide prompts for writers and request story themes on popular blogging websites like Tumblr. These direct reader-to-author communications, mostly unavailable in traditional literature, can inspire a writer to create a work or even to change the direction of a work-in-progress (WIP) fic. Maria Lindgren Leavenworth describes the function of fan fiction paratext, that is, extra-textual material such as author’s notes, tags, and communications between the author and the readers of the story. Paratextual material in WIP fics can influence the way in which an author writes the rest of the fic and gives agency to the readers as contributors of the story:
The text is not finished, and readers reacting negatively to some aspects may be rewarded by alterations in the next chapter. If information seems to be missing, [the author] can add it, and if there is any indication that interpretations move in other directions than the one she intends, she protects herself from criticism by forcefully demonstrating precisely how her appropriation is to be received. ("Paratext" 52)

Ultimately, the author is the one who makes any decision about her story, but readers have a much louder voice in fan fiction than they do when reading a published (and complete) novel on their own, or even when watching an in-progress television show. The audience of fan fiction can become further involved in a fic’s creation by becoming beta readers. Beta readers have a preview of an author’s fic before it is published and offer advice on both technical issues and the plot itself. Because betas can often have such a large influence on the plot of a story, they can influence the message an author communicates with a fic. These reader-author communications are not solely for entertainment value. Socially-conscious readers often notify writers if there are problematic elements in a fic such as transphobia or sexism. The authors can alter these elements at their discretion, but the readers’ comments may affect how others read the work or even steer away potential readers, which is motivation for the author to consider these comments. These are matters of social justice, reinforcing the notion that the fan fiction genre can promote social action both through its writers and its readers. This also supports Devitt’s idea that our understanding of a genre can come not only from writers or critics, but also from readers and contexts (702).

Clearly, both fan fiction writers and readers have an active role in the way fics interact with canonical texts. When discussing the purposes of fan fiction, this sense of collaboration is
essential. Writers and readers not only deal with norms of dominant society but also the norms within fan communities. Although I primarily focus on the work of fan fiction authors in this thesis rather than the authors themselves or their readers’ roles, I still want to emphasize how important interaction and communication are in the fan fiction universe. Fan fiction does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, the genre is in constant conversation between not only writers and readers but between the canon and the fan fiction itself.

As I have stated, my primary interest in fan fiction is how the genre responds to cultural norms of gender and sexuality. The main focus of this thesis is the fan fiction subgenre of slash fiction, more specifically fics from the *Welcome to Night Vale* fandom. The fics I have chosen to study are not only some of the most popular *Night Vale* stories on Archive of Our Own, but also some of the longest and best developed. “Past Performance Is Not a Predictor of Future Results” by pallidvixen and “I Cannot See Your Smiling God” by DeathPalmNut feature Cecil and Carlos in polyamorous relationships with other characters, and in Chapter Three I will be exploring how these fics, although they reject heteronormativity, have a more complex relationship with homonormative values. Chapter Four focuses on the fic “Unlikely Existence” by Linpatootie and the “Eggs” series by Watchinginthedark. In all of these stories, Cecil becomes pregnant, and therefore the fics deal with not only non-traditional physicality but norms of gender roles.

Sex and gender are not new topics in the fan fiction discourse by any means, but slash fiction involving canonically non-heteronormative characters is a relatively new concept and I aim to elucidate not only its social function but also how it fits into the slash fiction subgenre in general. Although slash fiction is more narrowly defined than fan fiction, is still a nebulous classification for an extremely varied group of fics. In Chapter Two, I will discuss not only the ambiguity of the term “slash fiction,” but also how this genre can respond to dominant cultural
values of gender and sexuality. As I mention above, Chapters Three and Four will explore two subsections of *Welcome to Night Vale* slash fiction, polyamory and male pregnancy, in order to further analyze these responses. In the conclusion, I will summarize my findings and show where more work still needs to be done.
CHAPTER TWO

WHAT IS SLASH?:

THE AMBIGUOUS NATURE OF SLASH FICTION AND HOW IT IS CHANGING

“Media fandom may now be bigger, louder, less defined and more exciting than it’s ever been.”

–Francesca Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom”

The genre of fan fiction, and slash fiction in particular, is perpetually changing and difficult to define. The type of stories that used to be relegated to fan magazines are now widely available through the internet. In addition, what used to refer to only a fan’s rendition of a fictional world can now apply to fiction about real-life people, and some content material that was once considered taboo is now commonplace. The fast-paced nature of the internet means that fan fiction must rapidly adapt. Terms that appear frequently in articles from just a decade ago (e.g., “vidding”) are unfamiliar to those entering the world of fan fiction today, as some words used now will surely sound foreign in another ten years. In addition, the mainstream media’s increasing representation of previously-marginalized people is causing increasing canon-compliance (adherence to the source material) in fan fiction, as the need for inclusion is becoming satisfied through already-existing cultural works.

Slash fiction is especially subject to change and lack of a clear-cut definition. This chapter does not set out to define slash fiction in one limited way because the term “slash,” just as the idea of fan fiction itself, is something that frequently changes and can have multiple meanings. Of course, there are certain qualities of slash fiction that stay constant (the
aforementioned questioning of heteronormativity), or else one could label anything as slash, which would be counterproductive for studying it. However, there is plenty of gray area regarding the term. Rather than privileging one definition of slash, this chapter considers the many forms slash fiction can take, and what impact these forms have on the ways fan fiction authors interact with social norms regarding, in this case, gender and sexuality, which can be equally undefinable terms.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, fan fiction lends itself well to Devitt’s integrated theory of genre due to its blurring of high and low culture and its myriad social functions. Slash fiction, a subgenre of fan fiction, often is especially motivated socially due to its interactions with sexual norms. Ostensibly, slash fiction often aims to present a non-heteronormative view of a heteronormative text, but this is not always the case, and the purpose of slash varies just as the authors and audiences do; no two authors want exactly the same outcome from creating a slash fiction story, and readers can draw different meanings from the same fic. To avoid generalizing a genre of so much variation, I want to say with more accuracy that slash fiction often reacts and responds to heteronormativity, whether this heteronormativity is in the original source material or not. Just as with fan fiction in general, I cannot claim that slash always condemns normative practices nor wholeheartedly accepts them; it likewise does not always condemn or accept non-normative behavior. The ambiguity of slash’s relationship with normative social practices merits a critical view, but to better understand the slash fiction genre, one must first explore its history and issues associated with its nebulous definition.

A Brief History of Slash Fiction

Although the term “fan fiction” is relatively recent, genres in the same vein as fan fiction have existed for centuries in the form of imitation and pastiche. Many of William Shakespeare’s
plays are based on already existing stories. *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, is based on “a story, ‘Rhomeo and Julietta,’ that was written in 1561 by William Painter . . . [Shakespeare had] also read it in a poem printed a year later entitled *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*” (Lemay 18, ellipses added). Fan fiction closer to how modern audiences understand it existed as early as the 1800s. I have mentioned the Sherlock Holmes writings that fans produced after Doyle’s death, but even during Doyle’s lifetime, after he killed off Holmes in “The Final Problem” (only to resurrect him later), distraught fans began “bringing Holmes to life in other ways: on the stage and in parodies and pastiches—some fully legal, some merely unchallenged” (Jamison 43). Although the term “fan fiction” was not applied to these sorts of texts until recently, and most fan fiction scholars today would not classify these adaptations as fan fiction anymore, writing about an already-existing story is not a new idea.

Slash fiction, however, is a more modern phenomenon. In the 1960s and 1970s, the *Star Trek: The Original Series* fandom produced not only some of the first modern fan fiction but some of the first slash fiction, which in this case was primarily centered on developing a romantic and sexual relationship between male characters Spock and Kirk (Jamison 84). Although there were other popular fandoms that produced fan fiction during the time, “*Star Trek* was the first fandom where fanfiction became so central it could sustain multiple fanzines [fan magazines] devoted exclusively to fic” (Jamison 84). Not all *Star Trek* fan fiction paired Kirk and Spock together, and some of it featured no romantic or sexual relationships at all, but fan fiction that paired these two men made up a large part of fans’ written work. Fans categorized these stories as “Kirk/Spock,” or “Kirk slash Spock.” This punctuation is where the term “slash” originated. Slash refers to not only the relationship between characters, but also this genre of fan fiction in general. Despite the popularity of slash fic during the time, the genre was stigmatized.
According to Francesca Coppa, “slash zines had often been sold at cons [fan conventions] literally from a box under the table” (54). The taboo nature of slash fiction likely had to do with prevailing attitudes about homosexuality during the time, but sexism was an issue as well; the majority of slash writers were (and still are) women, an issue that will be further discussed later in this chapter (Coppa 47).

With the creation of the internet, fan fiction has moved almost exclusively online, fanzines all but gone. The internet has made it easier to access fan fiction, and slash fiction has become more openly consumed and discussed:

The movement of media fandom online, as well as an increasingly customizable fannish experience, moved slash fandom out into the mainstream . . . the Internet allowed for slash-specific lists that fans who wanted to read homoerotic stories could join and that other fans could easily avoid. Similarly, slash-friendly discussion lists allowed these fans to consolidate and talk openly to each other; many began to articulate their reasons for slashing, reading strategies, and politics. (Coppa 54, ellipses added).

Slash fiction is currently available to read alongside other forms of fan fiction on popular fic websites such as FanFiction.net and archiveofourown.org. In fact, stories featuring same-gender relationships far outnumber those featuring different-gender relationships on both of these fan fiction websites. However, although slash fiction is clearly popular within the fan fiction community, this is not to say that no criticism of slash fiction exists today, or that there are not issues related to the definition of slash fiction. The following sections will outline some common debates related to the slash fiction genre and how they affect our idea of what slash fiction is.
Demographics of Fan Fiction Readers and Writers

Although they are not the only participants in fan culture, women make up a large percentage of slash fiction readers and writers (Dennis 749). In light of Devitt’s theories of defining genre as a social action, it is important to consider what reasons women have for reading slash fiction and why they make up such a large percent of fandom. Scholars have posed several explanations for the prevalence of women in fandom (Davies; Jenkins; Dennis; Scodari). One reason slash fiction has come under criticism is because many believe it to be merely erotica for straight women and nothing more. These critics are not only members of the general public, but also fan fiction scholars who accuse the writers of slash to be sexually-repressed women writing only for erotic fulfillment, whether this is through the fetishization of gay men or the jealous removal of women who might steal their fictional crushes (Davies; Scodari).

For example, Christine Scodari writes that slash fiction could be “comparable to that associated with male-targeted pornography featuring lesbian encounters—namely, removal of the competition and the desire to frame both attractive characters of the opposite sex as performing for and serving only the individual indulging in the fantasy” (114). Raven Davies, who studies the men who read slash fiction with great nuance, presents a rather limited view on the women who write and consume slash fiction. Davies claims that “Straight women are possibly the best and most prolific Slashers due to their interest and love for men, all men,” and their unwillingness to share these men with other women, even fictional female characters (199). Although this may account for some slash fiction, Davies’ explanation diminishes the artistic capability of female fan fiction writers, reducing these women to jealous, lovesick fans who live vicariously through their characters.
This criticism also appeared in an interview with actor Benedict Cumberbatch for *Out* when he declared that slash fiction about *Sherlock* (in which he stars) is “about burgeoning sexuality in adolescence, because you don’t necessarily know how to operate that. And I think it’s a way of neutralizing the threat, so this person is sort of removed from them as somebody who could break their heart” (Hicklin). I will admit that there may be some slash fiction that is written by straight women for reasons that Scodari, Davies, and Cumberbatch posit. However, limiting slash fiction to *only* fics written by heterosexual women who are confused about sexuality or jealous of female program characters is highly reductive and ignores all the slash fiction that does not fit into this category.

I am not the only one who feels this way. Cumberbatch’s remark incited anger from many fan fiction authors and readers, who claimed that Cumberbatch not only infantilizes fan fiction authors (many of whom are post adolescence), but also limits slash fiction to only erotic stories. For example, in the comments section of the article, one person writes, “. . . it hurts to see him poke fun at fanfiction stereotypes as if that's all there is to it. . . . there are also beautiful pieces of literature by fans . . .” (Theunissen, ellipses added). Tumblr, a personal blogging website that attracts many fan fiction readers and writers, was also filled with debate over the *Out* interview. Some fans defended him but still supported the idea that slash fiction can be more than erotica. For example, one blogger opines that Cumberbatch is merely unfamiliar with the complex fan fiction that exists and lacks a good frame of reference: “I do not believe [Cumberbatch] is the kind of person that comes home and proceeds to read a multi-chapter fic for hours, I don’t even think he reads one shots [single chapter works] that are deep and involve other subjects that [are] not smut, most of the things he crossed are probably one shot smut fics . . .” (anotherweirdpage). However, other bloggers argued that the words were still hurtful to the
fan fiction community. One writes, “… under no circumstance is it okay to call your fans … disillusioned [sic] and desperate to neutralize any female threats when writing about their favorite character. Not only did he assume every fan was heterosexual, but he assumed all of his fans were sexual at all” (whataboutfuckingnow). Both bloggers seem to agree that the problem is not that smut (erotic fan fiction) exists, but rather that much of the general public believes that fan fiction is inherently smutty and lacks complexity and depth, and that all slash writers are heterosexual women.

Henry Jenkins has posed more complex reasons for the popularity of slash among women. According to Jenkins, slash fiction is appealing to female readers because it “represents a reaction against the construction of male sexuality on television and in pornography; slash invites us to imagine something akin to the liberating transgression of gender hierarchy” (189). In this way, slash fiction is a feminist activity that can be appealing to straight women because it unbalances heterosexual male privilege. Jenkins asserts that we cannot label slash “in purely negative terms . . . We need to consider the particular fascination of these male characters and the degree to which the questions [about gender and sexuality that] slash explores can be expressed most effectively through the representation of male-male romance” (198, ellipses added). Jenkins makes a list of the myriad reasons an author would choose to write slash fiction; only one of them related to eroticism. According to Jenkins, besides eroticism, slash fiction can also fulfill the functions of creating a romance in which both partners are equal in a sexist society because they are the same gender (193). In addition, male/male slash fiction can allow women to explore “multiple identifications” and write from a different point of view (Jenkins 200). Of course, outside of all these scenarios that Jenkins presents, some slash fiction authors may simply find the characters interesting and want to explore situations involving them.
Despite accusations of slash fiction being inherently erotic and a means for authors to figure out their sexualities, a great deal of slash fiction exists that contains no sexual content at all. As of March 2016, on Archive of Our Own there are actually more fics rated “G” for “General Audiences” than there are fics rated “E” for “Explicit” (“Search Results”). Although this fact does not negate that there is a great deal of explicit slash fiction, the creation of erotic material is only one reason among many that people write slash fiction, and even E-rated fics can offer more than mere eroticism.

In addition, no one should assume that straight women are the only people reading and writing slash fiction. After all, there are lesbian and asexual writers of male/male slash who may not have an interest in the characters as sexual objects, but still have an interest in producing this type of fan fiction. Writers of varying orientations also write F/F femslash (Kapurch). Both Davies and Jeffery P. Dennis reveal that more men may be writing slash fiction than we assume. Dennis states that “the profiles on FanFiction.net reveal that one third or more [writers] are male, probably gay male adolescents or young adults, envisioning a homoerotic fantasy without heterosexual intrusion” (749). Davies writes that she “discovered how many bi and gay men do read good Slash, if they can find it,” (199). There are also fan fiction and slash fiction writers who are gender non-binary, as evidenced by the Tumblr blog “Non-Cis Rec Project,” which aims to provide a “non-cis[gender] fic rec[ommendation] list for non-cis people” ("Non-Cis"). In other words, although women seem to dominate not only slash fiction but fan fiction in general, not all of these women are heterosexual, and there is a sizeable amount of non-binary and male readers and writers as well.
Defining Slash

Slash fiction, as understood through the lens of social purpose, is fan fiction that rejects heteronormativity (Tosenberger; Jenkins; Black). Heteronormativity is the worldview of the dominant culture that privileges straight and cisgender identities, as well as traditional values like monogamy and family; Adrienne Rich famously relates this phenomenon to “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich). However, despite this basic definition, heteronormativity can be difficult to understand because sexuality and gender are not always easily-defined terms. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler discusses how difficult it can be for us to come up with a satisfactory definition for gender and sexuality, which are concepts that allow us to understand heteronormativity. Because of this, it makes sense for heteronormativity, and in turn slash fiction, to be similarly nebulous in definition.

Scholars and fans have not always accepted this ambiguity of definition, preferring to categorize slash fiction in one set way. For example, despite the fact that heterosexual couples in fan fiction often have a slash punctuation mark between the characters’ names (e.g. Mulder/Scully), I have never read from a fan or scholar that a heterosexual relationship would count as slash fiction. Some scholars outside of fan fiction studies, like Richard Fantina in *Straight Writ Queer*, argue that heterosexual relationships can be non-heteronormative, and if we define slash fiction by its purpose (subverting heteronormativity) rather than a formal characteristic (a non-heterosexual relationship), an F/M relationship could potentially qualify. However, this seems to go against the consensus of most fan fiction writers and readers, who believe that an F/M relationship as depicted in fan fiction is most definitely not slash.

Catherine Tosenberger, for instance, asserts that although “there are some who attempt to define ‘slash’ as ‘any romantic/erotic pairing’. . . this is incorrect; fans, and the vast majority of
scholars, reserve ‘slash’ for same-sex pairings only” (Tosenberger 203, note 3, ellipses added). On popular fan fiction websites, the term “het” describes heterosexual pairings (while “gen,” for “general,” is used for non-romantic/erotic fiction). The “het” term would not be necessary if “slash” included all romantic and sexual pairings, supporting Tosenberger’s notion that slash deals exclusively in same-gender or non-heterosexual relationships.

Although I understand the reasoning for considering non-heteronormative F/M relationships as slash, I feel that the consensus of fans, especially in an egalitarian genre such as fan fiction, is important. In addition, slash fiction has long been a safe space for LGBTQ+ writers and readers, and including heterosexual relationships in the definition of slash seems like a misappropriation of this space. Because of this, and the difficulty of defining heteronormativity itself, I am wary of providing a concrete definition to the term “slash fic” that includes or excludes F/M pairings, as the genre, just like gender and sexuality itself, can be fluid and not clear-cut. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss in more detail some of the debates surrounding slash’s definition and exemplify just how ambiguous slash can be.

Even if we agree with Tosenberger that M/F relationships have no place in slash fiction, it is important to note that the characters participating in same-sex relationships in slash fiction are still not necessarily homosexual or homoromantic. Although many characters in slash fiction do consider themselves to be homosexual/homoromantic, others are bisexual/biromantic, pansexual/panromantic, somewhere on the asexual/aromantic spectrum, a mixture of these orientations, or heterosexual “with an exception” for a certain individual. Many people dislike this last “orientation” because it “refus[es] sexual identity to these male-male lovers” and often supports bisexual erasure, but despite criticism, it is still a common trope in slash fan fiction (Jenkins 220).
Further complicating the term “slash fiction,” Archive of Our Own also provides an “other relationships” label (separate from M/M, F/F, and F/M). The “other relationships” label often refers to characters with non-binary genders, that is, characters who do not fully identify with either male or female, or identify as both (or some other variation that typically avoids the binary opposition of genders). Whether or not pairings involving genderqueer individuals are considered slash fiction is not an issue that appears in any scholarly studies to my knowledge. However, because there are fics that include both the tags “genderqueer” and “slash” simultaneously, it would be reasonable to classify these fics as slash provided that the fic is broadly non-heteronormative in some way. Slash has a history of being the non-heteronormative voice in fan fiction, and a pairing involving genderqueer character(s) could certainly be classified as non-heteronormative. However, the consideration of genderqueer characters in slash fiction again demonstrates just how difficult it becomes to define non-heteronormativity in fan fiction, often because authors may interpret their characters’ sexual and romantic orientations in different manners. For example, an author may write about a character who identifies as asexual and heteroromantic and considers herself a part of the LGBTQ+ community, while another author’s character with the same orientation may not feel that she belongs to the community.

Judging from fan fiction tags, some fans believe that slash fic can include transgender characters, provided that the transgender character is still in a same-gender relationship. For example, if a character is female-to-male transgender, and is in a relationship with another male, the fic would often be labeled “M/M,” as both characters identify as male. However, if this same FTM character was in a relationship with a female, the fic would be F/M and would not typically be considered slash. One could argue that this F/M relationship does not support heteronormativity and should be considered slash, but this point of view seems potentially
harmful in that it implies that transgender individuals could never fully be the gender with which they identify. In a real-life relationship, it is ultimately up to a couple to define (or refuse to define) where they fit in a heteronormative society. In fiction, this is more difficult, and perhaps in this case it is best left up to the respective writers to categorize these F/M fics involving transgender characters as slash or not slash.

Further complicating the idea of gender in slash fiction is genderswap fic, in which a character’s gender, biological sexual characteristics, or both are different from the canon. In Ann McClellan’s study on genderswap fan fiction she describes how this subgenre allows writers to transgress norms of gender but also allows for reinforcement of traditional ideas. McClellan notes how genderswap fic “grapples with the relationship among gender behavior, identity, and embodiment,” important questions that often subvert cultural expectations (McClellan). However, genderswap fan fiction also “risks reinforcing and potentially limiting common cultural understandings of the differences between” sex and gender, as these terms are often conflated in this genre. McClellan writes that “genderswap by definition depends on gender as its primary category when describing stories about characters swapping sexed bodies,” which is problematic because “sex is generally considered to be biologically determined while gender is considered to be culturally constructed” (McClellan). Genderswap’s frequent conflation of sex and gender can make it difficult to determine where in fits in terms of slash fiction and whether or not it supports heteronormativity.

Although I suggest that female/female relationships clearly belong in slash fiction because they typically promote a non-heteronormative worldview¹, many scholars seem

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¹ Although by nature a same-sex relationship is technically not heteronormative, both M/M and F/F fan fiction can still promote normative values, a concept Lisa Duggan calls “homonormativity.” I elaborate upon this idea in Chapter Three.
conflicted in whether or not slash fiction can refer to fan fiction including relationships between women, or if it solely refers to same-gender male relationships. Mark McLelland is one scholar that includes female/female pairings in the definition of slash fiction:

Slash fandom has mainly been interested in male/male pairings since, until recently, there were few heroic roles for women in television and movies, and relationships between female leads were less developed than those between male stars. However, lesbian relationships are increasingly being written about in the context of ‘girl power’ television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*. (1)

In Rebecca W. Black’s *Adolescents and Online Fan Fiction*, however, she first describes slash as “fiction depicting noncanonical homosexual relationships,” seemingly including F/F fics, but then specifies that fan fiction depicting female/female relationships is called “femslash” (12-13). Whether the term “femslash” distances F/F fan fiction from slash or merely classifies it as a subgenre of slash is unclear in Black’s book.

Henry Jenkins’s groundbreaking 1992 book *Textual Poachers* is one of the earliest examples of lengthy academic research on fan fiction, but the book is also unclear about where F/F relationships fit in when discussing slash fiction. Jenkins devotes a chapter to slash fiction titled “‘Welcome to Bisexuality, Captain Kirk:’ Slash and the Fan-Writing Community,” which centers mostly on early *Star Trek* fan fiction with male homosexual themes. In this chapter, Jenkins develops his own definition of slash fiction. Slash, he writes, “specifies a genre of fan stories positing homoerotic affairs between series protagonists” (186). Later in this chapter, he specifies slash as centered on solely “male program characters” (189). “‘Welcome to Bisexuality’” indeed focuses on homosexual male relationships only; although Jenkins discusses
the predominance of female fan fiction authors, there is no mention of fan fiction concerning lesbian or bisexual female characters. The lack of reference to female/female fan fiction is perhaps because male/male fan fiction was more common during the time, or perhaps because Jenkins wanted to just focus on one form of fan fiction. In the introduction to the Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition of Textual Poachers, Jenkins now references “femslash” as a phenomenon, but it is still unclear whether or not this distances femslash from slash fiction in general.

The fluidity of the definitions of sexual orientation, gender, and terms within fan fiction itself can make the term “slash” just as difficult to define, which makes studying slash in conjunction with gender and sexuality particularly fascinating. The following section explains how the uncertain definition of slash fiction is leading to new ways of classifying fan fiction that are more easily defined.

**The Move Away from Traditional Terminology**

Some of the difficulty in determining how fan fiction authors view terms like “femslash,” as well as how much femslash exists separate from male/male slash, comes from the difficulty gleaning statistics from many fan fiction websites. For example, on popular fan fiction website Archive of Our Own (commonly known as AO3), the search “slash” will deliver a list of stories containing either “slash” or “femslash” in the tags. This seems to indicate that, at least according to the search function on AO3, femslash belongs under the slash umbrella. The search for “femslash,” however, will not return any fics labeled with the “slash” tag, indicating that femslash is a specific subset of slash fiction. On FanFiction.net, the search for “slash” does not seem to return any results for “femslash,” indicating a larger divide between the two genres from that website’s perspective.
It is perhaps due to nebulous terms like “femslash” and “slash” that many authors are turning toward different tagging systems. On Archive of Our Own, many authors use the tags “M/M” (male/male), “F/M” (female/male), “F/F” (female/female), etc., to label fics. There is another tag category as well focused exclusively on a fic’s relationships, where these labels are still used, but return different results when searched. In Fig. 1, it is apparent that search results can greatly vary depending on which tags the searcher uses (Fig. 1). On FanFiction.net, the tags “slash” and “femslash” are more common, although the tagging system on FanFiction.net is more difficult to work with than Archive’s, and there is no separate tag for relationships (Fig. 2).

FIGURE 1: VARIATIONS OF SLASH/FEMSLASH TAGS ON AO3 AND THEIR SEARCH RESULTS (AS OF 9/20/15)
Fig. 1 shows that writers do not frequently use the terms “slash” and “femslash” on Archive of Our Own. The majority of fan fiction authors on AO3 seem to prefer labeling their stories with the M/M or F/F tags (both relationship and regular) instead. FanFiction.net’s lack of a tagging system makes it more difficult to ascertain labeling trends, but on this website the terms “slash” and “femslash” appear to be more popular than other forms of labeling fan fiction (Fig. 2).

Based on my own interactions with fan fiction authors and readers outside of this thesis, I would argue that Archive of Our Own is becoming the more favorable choice for posting and reading fan fiction and that FanFiction.net is declining in popularity. It is difficult to prove this objectively, but perhaps we can look toward the sheer number of fics on the newer AO3 (launched in 2009) compared to FanFiction.net (launched in 1998) to show that the former is attracting great numbers of writers in a short amount of time (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). Archive of Our Own appeals to many fan fiction writers and readers not only because of its thorough tagging system, but also because, unlike FanFiction.net, AO3 allows explicit stories and Real Person Fiction (RPF), both of which are popular among fan fiction readers (“FanFiction Content
Further suggesting its mass appeal, Archive of Our Own is the first fan fiction website to make it onto *Time*’s Best Websites List (Baker-Whitelaw; Grossman). If indeed FanFiction.net is becoming a less popular choice than Archive of Our Own, it is likely that AO3 is a better predictor of trends in regard to terminology for fan fiction.

If this is the case, and the terms “slash” and “femslash” are becoming outdated, perhaps this is due to their nebulous definitions. However, although the term “slash” itself may be decreasing in usage, the phenomenon of slash fiction is still very much alive. No matter how fans and scholars refer to fan fiction that subverts or attempts to subvert heteronormativity, it is something that merits study in regard to its relationship with sexual and gender norms of the dominant culture. This is especially true today, a time when non-heteronormative people’s struggle for equality is becoming better known. Mainstream culture is becoming more inclusive, depicting individuals that, until recently, would have been only depicted in fan fiction. Because of this, the relationship between fan fiction authors and their source material can be markedly different than it was thirty years ago.

**How Do Canonically Same-Gender Relationships Affect Slash Fiction?**

There has been an influx of characters in popular media who are canonically not heterosexual or cisgender, and it is therefore important to consider how slash fiction fits in with this phenomenon. “Canon” refers to something that happens in the original source material. For example, it is canon that Harry Potter is a wizard. The romantic relationship between Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley is canon because it actually occurs in J.K. Rowling’s novels. A romantic relationship between Harry Potter and his adversary Draco Malfoy, however, is not canon because it does not occur in the novels. Canon seems to be a relatively simple idea to grasp, but critics such as Tosenberger have pointed out that canon is often a murkier concept.
than it appears to be; due to differing interpretations of a text, “... what constitutes “canon” is never a clear-cut issue. ... A number of slash stories and pairings build upon on a reading of subtext that fans claim is present in the canon” (187, ellipses added). Tosenberger uses the example of the relationship between Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald in the Harry Potter series. Although Rowling never explicitly states in the novels that Dumbledore and Grindelwald were romantically involved, Rowling “confirmed the speculations of many slash fans, and announced, in response to a fan’s question, that Dumbledore was gay and had loved Grindelwald” (Tosenberger 187). Does this mean that Dumbledore is canonically gay because Rowling said so (which leads to assumptions regarding authorial intent)? Or is Rowling’s after-the-fact assertion invalid because the books do not specifically state Dumbledore’s sexual orientation? Or, perhaps, are the hints and subtext regarding Dumbledore’s sexuality in the novels enough to confirm it? Questions such as these complicate the debate over whether canonically non-heteronormative pairings can be considered slash, as the idea of canon itself is somewhat troublesome.

Although slash fan fiction has a long history that spans several decades, the debate over whether canonical relationships can be considered slash is a relatively new one. This is due most significantly to the dearth of non-heteronormative canonical relationships in popular media until recently. Anne Jamison’s book Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World is one of the most recent academic studies on fan fiction. In the chapter “I Am Woman, Read My Fic,” Jamison defines slash as “homoerotic romance, usually between characters canonically portrayed as straight” (85). The “usually” is an important qualifier. Because gay characters have been severely underrepresented in media, it was nearly impossible to say that any slash fic was based on canon until recently. Therefore, the massive archive of slash fiction stretching from the mid-
1900s to today is usually noncanonical because, in the past, there were no canonical queer relationships on which to base fan fiction, not because slash fiction has the inability to include canonically queer relationships.

More recently, however, LGBTQ+ characters have become quite prominent in popular media. Television shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, movies like *Brokeback Mountain*, and books like *The Mortal Instruments* series have brought gay and lesbian characters to the mainstream. The *Welcome to Night Vale* podcast, the focus of this thesis, features a gay protagonist and his boyfriend. Because of the recent influx of gay characters in popular media, it is now easier to write a slash fic about a couple who are also a couple in the source material. The question remains: do these fics count as slash? According to Tosenberger, limiting slash to non-canon is problematic for several reasons:

First, it does not reflect common usage within fandom. . . As no one places a similar limitation on het fics—stories that concern canonical heterosexual pairings . . . are still labeled “het”—most fans reason that it doesn’t make sense to apply the restriction to slash. Second, no one has ever come up with a satisfactory term for fanfic that concerns canonical same-sex relationships; in the fandoms for television programs such as *Queer as Folk* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, fan stories about the canonical homosexual relationships are still usually called “slash.” (Tosenberger 186-187, ellipses added)

In addition, aligning slash with canon allows us to de-other gay individuals; slash fiction becomes just as canonically valid as het fiction, and being heterosexual is no longer the default. Tosenberger sums this up beautifully in her article: “. . . the insistence that slash must transgress the existing canon rather troublingly assigns to the canon a heteronormativity it may not
necessarily possess. Moreover, it reinforces the assumption that queer readings are always readings ‘imposed’ from the outside” (187, ellipses added). By insisting that only noncanonical slash can be slash, this ignores the increasing representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in the mainstream media. For all of these reasons, it seems imprudent to only consider noncanonical relationships to be slash. Slash is changing, yes, but rather than claiming that these changes do not count as true slash, fan scholars need to consider how these changes are important and what they say about the relationship between fan fiction and the dominant culture. If we choose to categorize the slash genre by its social purpose, as a genre that primarily subverts heteronormativity, canonical relationships could still be slash fiction because the portrayal of these relationships may achieve a similar effect as portraying a noncanonical relationship. A canonical slash fic can still subvert heteronormativity even if its source material is doing the same thing. For these reasons I argue that slash fiction, although traditionally noncanonical, can also include the newer phenomenon of canonical homosexual relationships.

It is important to study canonical slash fiction for several reasons. First, canonical slash fiction is a previously understudied subgenre of slash fiction. Due to the newness of the subgenre, slash fiction about canonical gay relationships has not been widely discussed among academics. Indeed, there is little mention of it in most major studies on fan fiction until recently. Because same-gender relationships in canon will presumably only become more prevalent in the future, with fan fiction about it likewise increasing in number, scholars cannot ignore the phenomenon.

In addition, there is a stereotype about the authors of fan fiction that suggests that these writers are wishfully thinking about things that will never happen in the original source material. It is a fact that “Slash fans . . . are often accused of ‘distorting’ or ‘misreading’ texts”
Canonical slash fiction diminishes this common stereotype of slash authors as delusional fans. Although there is still the potential for female fan fiction writers to fetishize gay men in their slash fiction, it is impossible to say that fan fiction authors are misunderstanding the sexuality of the characters about which they’re writing when the characters are canonically non-heterosexual.

Perhaps the most important reason for studying canonical slash fiction is to understand how the genre negotiates with the dominant culture over sexual and gender norms. This is the issue I will study in later chapters, with a focus on *Welcome to Night Vale* slash fiction. Slash fiction has long been lauded as transgressive (and I am using this word in its positive connotation), a genre that challenges traditional conceptions of gender, sexuality, and romantic orientation (Jenkins; “Lover Revamped”). Transgression of societal norms is greatly important to many individuals in the LGBTQ+ community, as they often suffer from othering and discrimination and want to promote a new vision of culture.

Some scholars worry that labeling slash fiction as inherently transgressive ignores the cases in which the mainstream media positively portrays non-heteronormativity (Tosenberger; Jones). Sara Gwenllian Jones, for example, claims that rather than fan fiction being a radicalized form of an existing piece of media, “It is the cult television series itself which implicitly 'resists' the conventions of heterosexuality; the slash fiction stories written by some of its fans render explicit this implicit function and, more importantly, are a reflection of cult television's immersive and interactive logics” (90). In other words, cult television has the potential to resist heteronormativity on its own.

Because of the way the media is changing in favor of positive portrayals of gay, bisexual, and lesbian characters, one could argue that there comes a time in which continuing to label
these orientations as inherently transgressive begins to have a reverse effect on gaining rights for marginalized groups. If the majority of people continue to define non-heterosexual orientations as something counter to our culture, some might continue to think of them as immoral even when they have the opportunity to become normative. The idea of non-heteronormativity automatically being transgressive therefore could have the adverse effect of further othering non-heterosexuals.

In addition, some critics go further and assert that slash fiction still has the responsibility of transgressing social norms even in our more-inclusive modern society; these critics accuse a great deal of contemporary slash to be overly reliant on the norms the genre has the potential to defy (Åström; Hunting; Flegel and Roth). Flegel and Roth, Åström, and Hunting respectively discuss how some modern slash fiction does not live up to its transgressive potential and how this can be damaging to the LGBTQ+ community. In other words, the work done by these critics suggests that even if homosexual characters are canon, slash fiction is no longer transgressive unless it goes *beyond* the canon by promoting still stigmatized activities and ideas such as polyamory and male pregnancy, though the inherent transgressive nature of these concepts is debatable as well.

In the next two chapters, I will explore the ideas of transgression and normativity related to the aforementioned conversations. My research will be in relation to two different subgenres of slash fiction in the *Welcome to Night Vale* fandom. These subgenres are polyamorous slash fiction and mpreg (male pregnancy) slash fiction. Without making judgments on whether or not homonormativity (as theorized by Lisa Duggan and Nikki Sullivan) is a positive or negative concept, I aim to show how these subgenres of fan fiction allow the writers to interact with cultural norms, i.e., which ways canonical slash fiction can either transgress or support
homonormativity. By answering this question, we can better understand slash fiction as a genre that is by nature ambiguous, and how it fits into both mainstream culture and fandom.
CHAPTER THREE

“TWO SCOOPS, TOGETHER, ON THE SAME CONE”: THE TRANSGRESSION OF HOMONORMATIVITY IN POLYAMOROUS WELCOME TO NIGHT VALE SLASH FICTION

“Slash may thus rewrite dominant scripts and subvert heteronormative tropes, but it should not be assumed that the genre automatically produces resisting narratives.”

–Berit Åström, “Let's Get Those Winchesters Pregnant”

Welcome to Night Vale and the Promotion of the Abnormal

In this case study, I will focus on two instances of slash fan fiction of the popular Welcome to Night Vale, a bimonthly science fiction podcast that Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor created in 2012. Known for its bizarre characters and paranormal plot points, Welcome to Night Vale takes place in the fictional American desert town of Night Vale. It is presented as the public radio show of protagonist Cecil Gershwin Palmer, voiced by Cecil Baldwin. Although the character of Cecil begins as a nameless narrator largely devoid of personality, he acquires a name in episode five, “The Shape in Grove Park,” and his character likewise has become more complex as the series has progressed.2

In the Welcome to Night Vale podcast, characters treat the supernatural and bizarre as everyday and mundane. For example, when one of the radio station’s interns unexpectedly dies, Cecil’s blasé response is: “Leland just got vaporized by a strange red light emanating from the

2 From now on, all references to “Cecil” will refer to the character, Cecil Palmer, not the voice actor Cecil Baldwin.
station entrance. To the family of Leland, we thank you for his service to the cause of community radio, and join you in mourning his loss. And, without further ado . . . let’s go to the weather” (“The Shape in Grove Park,” ellipses added). In this way, the characters often behave irrationally, but this is fuel for fans’ creativity. Due to the illogical nature of the podcast, as well as the fact that few characters have a canon physical description, fans of *Welcome to Night Vale* let their imaginations run wild. For example, fan art of Cecil, who mostly lacks a physical description, often gives him tentacles or a third eye, although his physical features and ethnicity often vary.

Although the medium of *Welcome to Night Vale* invites interpretation, the *Welcome to Night Vale* fandom is protective of the podcast’s canon in terms of the characters’ sexualities. Cecil Palmer is canonically gay, and as of episode twenty-five, “One Year Later,” the radio host has been in a relationship with a scientist named Carlos (briefly voiced by Jeffrey Cranor, then by Dylan Marron beginning with “Condos”). If we choose to draw on Lisa Duggan’s ideas of homonormativity, explained below, the relationship between the two men is the definition of homonormative, as they are monogamous, loyal, and domestic (having moved in together after “Condos,” although they spend time apart when Carlos is stuck in another dimension). Despite this, *Welcome to Night Vale* is uniquely suited to prompt transgressions of societal norms due to its acceptance of the abnormal and bizarre.

**Homonormativity in Fan Fiction: The Theory**

As I explored in Chapter One, an important step in understanding a genre is to understand what the genres does, or what purposes it fulfills for their participants. Slash fiction can be one of the most socially-motivated subgenres of fan fiction. Traditionally, critics of slash fan fiction have declared it to be primarily transgressive against dominant ideology (Jenkins, “Lover
Revamped”). Although Henry Jenkins presents us with slash’s contradictory nature in Textual Poachers when he suggests that slash “represents a negotiation rather than a radical break with the ideological construction of mass culture,” he also asserts that “slash . . . has many progressive elements: its development of more egalitarian forms of . . . relationships, its transcendence of rigidly defined categories of gender and sexual identity, its critique of the more repressive aspects of traditional masculinity,” (Textual Poachers 219). In a recent interview, Jenkins asserted that fan fiction, despite changing attitudes toward non-normative sexualities, is “transgressive now more than ever,” if not due to content, then still due to its unauthorized nature in relationship to the original creators (“Where Fandom”). Maria Lindgren Leavenworth agrees that in slash fiction, “it is predominantly heterosexuality and heteronormative structures which are questioned and resisted, resulting in plot developments [centering] on homoerotic encounters” (“Lover Revamped” 442). This attitude is not uncommon; slash fiction, a genre that privileges the non-heteronormative, often seems to be automatically working against traditional social constructs.

In many recent studies done on slash fan fiction, however, critics often argue that the relationship between fan fiction and societal norms is not necessarily progressive ideologically (Busse and Hellekson; Flegel and Roth; Hunting; Åström). Although slash fiction can often transgress traditional norms of sexual and romantic relationships, it can simultaneously reinforce oppression. Busse and Hellekson assert that fandom is “a contradictory and contentious space” that cannot be interpreted in a one size fits all manner (21). Indeed, it would be unwise to classify all slash fiction as the same; there is a great variety of forms of slash fiction. Just as fan fiction’s response to cultural norms of gender and sexuality can be both dismissive and supportive, slash fiction’s relationship to heteronormativity can be complicated.
Some critics have noticed what they see as a disturbing trend of normativity in slash fiction (Hunting; Flegel and Roth; Åström). These critics ask whether being gay is enough to be transgressive in the twenty-first century, when homosexuality is more accepted and audiences can easily consume media with gay characters just by turning on the television. According to scholars like Lisa Duggan, de-radicalized movements for gay rights can actually be detrimental to the cause (65-66).

In their case study of a common pairing in *Supernatural* fan fiction dubbed “J2,” which centers on the fictional real person relationship of two of the actors from *Supernatural*, Monica Flegel and Jenny Roth came to the conclusion that homosexuality in fan fiction does not necessarily subvert heteronormativity: the category of fics they studied “certainly subverts normative sexuality with its male/male relationship(s), but ironically it often bolsters normative sexuality by its use of heteronormative tropes—possibly an inevitable effect of the romance formula, which is itself embedded in a history of heterosexual signifiers” (Flegel and Roth). The authors expand their findings to encompass M/M fan fiction in general: “It just might be the case that happy endings for male/male pairs do not necessarily signal transgressive or subversive romantic relationships, and that directly dealing with issues of homosexuality does not necessarily signal a break from heteronormative narratives of romance and partnership” (Flegel and Roth). These critics have not been the only to suggest that slash fiction is not inherently transgressive.

Kyra Hunting expands on Flegel and Roth’s idea in the article “*Queer as Folk* and the Trouble with Slash.” In the television show *Queer as Folk*, Hunting explains, some of the primary homosexual characters participate in open relationships and casual sex. In much of the *Queer as Folk* fandom’s fan fiction, however, there is a push to celebrate “traditional romance,”
such as monogamy, the desire to have children, and the use of pet names (Hunting). This tendency to prioritize traditional values over the values the canon presents, Hunting argues, causes some slash fan fiction to become the opposite of transgressive because the fics often uphold traditional heteronormative values despite their portrayals of same-gender relationships. Hunting describes the *Queer as Folk* fics that uphold traditional sexual values by drawing on Lisa Duggan’s idea of “homonormativity” (Hunting).

In *The Twilight of Equality?*, Lisa Duggan defines homonormativity as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan 50). The goal of gay rights groups that subscribe to homonormativity is to “bring the desired public into political salience as a perceived mainstream,” i.e., to promote the notion that non-heterosexual people are just as common and normal as heterosexual people (Duggan 50-51, ellipses added). Duggan’s concept of homonormativity correlates with the idea of assimilationism in Nikki Sullivan’s dichotomy of assimilationism vs liberationism. Sullivan states that there are two forms of queer people’s reactions to the heteronormative mainstream culture: assimilation and liberation. For homonormative assimilationist groups, “the assumption was/is that tolerance can be achieved by making differences invisible, or at least secondary, in and through an essentialising, normalizing emphasis on sameness” (Sullivan 23). Liberationists believe, on the other hand, that “the imperative was to experience homosexuality as something positive in and through the creation of alternative values, beliefs, lifestyles, institutions, communities, and so on” (Sullivan 29). In other words, liberationists desire not to make existing norms more inclusive, but to create new norms altogether.
Duggan’s and Sullivan’s theories can be exemplified through the concept of same gender marriage. Marriage, a traditionally heteronormative institution, is often the goal of many homonormative assimilationist gay rights groups, who desire to obtain the same rights as heterosexual couples. Same gender marriage is a revamping of a traditional institution to make it more open toward diverse groups of people. For liberationists, however, the idea of marriage itself would likely be off-putting, as marriage is a part of the heteronormative society that has oppressed non-heterosexual people for centuries.

Unlike Sullivan, who categorizes “liberationists” and “assimilationists” without necessarily favoring either, Duggan opines that assimilationist gay rights groups can have a detrimental effect on the lives of gay people in general:

This new homonormativity comes equipped with a rhetorical recoding of key terms in the history of gay politics: ‘equality’ becomes narrow, formal access to a few conservatizing institutions, ‘freedom’ becomes impunity for bigotry and vast inequalities in commercial life and civil society, the ‘right to privacy’ becomes domestic confinement, and democratic politics itself becomes something to be escaped. All of this adds up to a corporate culture managed by a minimal state, achieved by the neoliberal privatization of affective as well as economic and public life. (Duggan 65-66)

Transgression of norms, for Duggan, is necessary for the LGBTQ+ community to achieve true freedom from an oppressive society. Duggan believes that is not enough to fit in with the rest of society; inequality and injustice will still remain for those gay people who are not members of the homonormative elite.
If we apply Lisa Duggan’s ideas to the genre of slash fan fiction, long lauded for being radical and transgressive in its presentation of the non-normative, we may consider that perhaps it is no longer sufficient for a fic to feature an M/M relationship in order for it to qualify as revolutionary. Duggan would likely assert that there must be a constant contestation of norms. Perhaps fan fiction in which the homosexuality of the protagonist is noncanonical, but present in the slash, fulfills the transgressive nature of the genre of slash fiction by challenging the heteronormativity of the canon material. When the protagonist of the slash fic is not heterosexual in both the fic and in the canon, however, perhaps more is needed to successfully transgress societal norms.

Unlike Duggan, I do not believe that there is anything wrong with homonormativity provided that the individuals engaged in homonormative behavior are happy with their lifestyle. Suggesting that same-gender couples wishing to marry or have children are wrong in their desires to me seems harmfully divisive. Therefore, this chapter is not a condemnation of domesticity, monogamy, or parenthood, but rather an exploration of how slash fiction can change the nature of canonically homonormative relationships to make them transgressive of societal norms. Not all slash fiction must be revolutionary in its depiction of same-gender relationships. However, if an author wanted to be transgressive, what would he or she have to do in order to challenge norms in a society that is more accepting of non-heteronormativity than ever? In this case study of Welcome to Night Vale slash fiction, one way in which authors challenge normativity is through the portrayal of polyamorous relationships.

**Polyamory in Welcome to Night Vale Slash Fiction**

In the majority of Welcome to Night Vale fan fiction that focuses on Cecil’s romantic and sexual relationships, Cecil and Carlos are the two characters involved in the relationship. Fan
fiction of this sort is not inherently transgressive, as it obeys the *Night Vale* canon and does not contest the podcast’s arguably homonormative worldview. Fan fiction that portrays Cecil in a relationship with someone other than Carlos (most commonly Cecil’s childhood friend Earl Harlan or his nemesis Kevin) is sometimes, but not necessarily, more socially transgressive than Cecil/Carlos fics. Sometimes noncanonical stories are just as conservative as Cecil/Carlos fics tend to be, with an emphasis on monogamy and romance.

If we take into consideration that noncanonical romances are not necessarily transgressive, we must look elsewhere to find *Night Vale* fan fiction that is more inherently transgressive. Some of the most truly radical *Welcome to Night Vale* fics are those that involve Cecil, Carlos, and another party in a polyamorous relationship. These stories eschew the homonormative idea of monogamy that both the podcast and much of its derivative fan fiction upholds. However, even in these fics there are hints of normative ideals.

“Past Performance Is Not a Predictor of Future Results” by pallidvixen is one example of a Cecil/Carlos/Earl fic. I have chosen this fic to study because, in addition to its popularity among *Night Vale* fans, the author takes a great deal of time (fifty chapters) to explain the development of this polyamorous relationship rather than leaving that to the reader’s imagination. I do not mean to devalue PWP (“Porn without Plot,” or “Plot? What Plot?”) fics, which have their place in many fandoms, but in order to study slash fiction’s transgression of (or adhesion to) social norms, it is often necessary to study fics with more detailed plots, especially ones that reference societal issues. Although “Past Performance” has a great deal of sexual content, pallidvixen also details the struggles and hesitation involved in transgressing social norms; the three main characters reach the point of polyamory only after lengthy consideration. Although “Past Performance” ends on a cliffhanger and the follow-up has not been posted yet,
the story arc of the polyamorous relationship is satisfactorily completed within the first installment.

The other fic I have selected for this case study is “I Cannot See Your Smiling God” by DeathPalmNut, a completed, single-part work. (The title refers to the malevolent “smiling God” that Kevin worships in Welcome to Night Vale.) In this fic, Cecil, Carlos, and Kevin enter into a polyamorous relationship, and there are hints of a former Cecil/Earl relationship as well. I have chosen this fic as a contrast to the Cecil/Carlos/Earl relationship in “Past Performance”; these two polyamorous pairings are the most common in Night Vale fan fiction. In addition, there is no graphic sexual content in “I Cannot See Your Smiling God” as there is in “Past Performance.” By comparing two Night Vale fics that have little in common besides the theme of polyamory, we can determine different ways polyamory is presented in the Night Vale fandom and what this means in terms of the fics’ relationship with normativity. Despite their differences, both of these fics develop similar themes regarding the commencement and maintenance of a same-gender polyamorous relationship.

Both fics also rely on the common trope of romantic partners being pushed together due to unavoidable physical immediacy. This nearness to each other draws these trios together, forcing them to deal with their inevitable attractions and the possibility of a non-homonormative lifestyle. “Past Performance Is Not a Predictor of Future Results” and “I Cannot See Your Smiling God” start similarly, with Cecil and Carlos in an already-established relationship. In “Past Performance,” Carlos is forced to harbor Earl Harlan in his lab, as Earl is a fugitive hiding from StrexCorp, an evil corporation that has begun to take over Night Vale. In “I Cannot See Your Smiling God”...
Your Smiling God,” Carlos rescues an injured Kevin from a parallel dimension and brings him back to Night Vale, where he and Cecil realize that Kevin has lost all memories of his evil doings. Due to Kevin’s suddenly kind nature, Carlos and Cecil allow him to live with them while he recovers.

In “Past Performance,” Carlos’s decision to allow Cecil to explore his feelings for Earl is made only for Cecil’s sake, indicating that the idea is not necessarily easy for any of the characters to accept at first. Open relationships are not always accepted in mainstream society, so Carlos’s hesitation is believable, especially because he is an outsider to Night Vale’s typical non-normativity. However, when Carlos begins to realize the depth of his partner’s feelings for Earl, Carlos muses that “He had a choice. He could fight for Cecil and, and possibly lose. He could give up on him and let Earl have him. Let them have whatever shot they seem to keep missing and give them a chance to be happy. Or. Or...” (pallidvixen, ch. 19). This “or” is the beginning of a radical idea:

. . . No, it didn't have to be a war at all. This doesn't have to be a zero sum game. Life didn't have to be a zero sum game. As [Carlos] felt the gears in his mind start to shift, a new paradigm replaced the old one. It was radical. It was, well, rather unconventional. But then again, what in Night Vale wasn't? Unconventional could be okay. It could be okay. As he opened himself up to the possibility the more and more he thought about it, the more okay he felt with his decision. (pallidvixen, ch. 19, italics in original, ellipses added)

In an attempt to keep Cecil happy while still maintaining their relationship, Carlos agrees to allow Cecil to pursue an additional relationship with Earl.
Cecil’s initial reaction to Carlos’s proposal is indicative of the traditional concerns about non-monogamy that Hunting mentions, i.e., that fan fiction readers and society in general “‘can't believe [characters in a relationship would] be happy [having sex with] other people’” (Vamphile qtd. in Hunting). As an initial adherent to this belief, Cecil worries that “No relationship could possibly withstand something like this. He couldn’t lose Carlos” (pallidvixen, ch. 23). However, when Cecil realizes that his affections for Earl might cause him to cheat on Carlos, he decides that this option is preferable: “This way Carlos was giving him permission. Condoning his behavior” (pallidvixen, ch. 23). Cecil’s understanding that this decision might actually benefit his and Carlos’s relationship demonstrates pallidvixen’s rejection of concerns regarding traditional romances, concerns that still appear frequently in fan fiction.

Earl also still ascribes to a homonormative view of relationships as monogamous and has difficulty accepting Carlos’s revamping of traditional romantic relationships. Earl’s dialogue with Cecil reflects his discomfort with Cecil’s participating in an open relationship:

“When are you going to leave [Carlos]?”
“I’m not.”

[Earl] felt his heart stutter. He pulled back from Cecil.
“You’re not going to leave him?”
“No.”

His heart deflated. He had been with Cecil before when he had been with others, but it wasn’t what he wanted. He wanted Cecil all to himself.
“No, I’m not leaving him. I love him. And he loves me. He said—”
“You talked to him about this? About me? About us?”
“Of course I did.”
Earl was reeling. “I don’t understand.” (pallidvixen, ch. 23)

Earl’s hesitation and jealousy betray his definition of a true relationship, which at this time in the story is something he believes can only happen between two people. It takes some time, but Carlos finally convinces Earl to accept the arrangement: “‘This isn’t about you or me. It’s about him. Don’t you see that? I love Cecil and I think that you love him too. And his happiness is important to me. If he's happy with you too, then I can be okay with that, if he chooses to share himself with you’” (pallidvixen, ch. 23). Here, the story presents open relationships positively, as something feasible as long as all of the participants are consenting in the arrangements. Carlos establishes the new relationship as a matter of love, something that promotes a non-homonormative worldview while still ascribing to traditional values.

“Past Performances” goes on to promote different forms of polyamory by extending the relationship to include an attraction between Carlos and Earl. At first, Carlos refers to the relationship between Earl, Cecil and himself as a “‘vee triad,’” which is “‘a circumstance in which two people each have a sexual relationship, or a strong emotional relationship with one person, but not necessarily with each other. This is a perfectly healthy relationship that can be fulfilling for all parties involved’” (pallidvixen, ch 37). The last sentence in that passage is important because, after Earl and Carlos become involved, it clarifies the fic’s message that multiple forms of polyamory are acceptable and can be healthy. After Earl and Carlos eventually agree (with Cecil’s approval) that they will also be romantically and sexually involved, Earl muses that “he couldn’t help but feel that he was right where he should be” (pallidvixen, ch. 45). Earl, Carlos, and Cecil’s acceptance of their new polyamorous relationship and happiness with this relationship indicates that “Past Performance” truly transgresses homonormative standards.
“I Cannot See Your Smiling God” is another example of polyamory becoming normalized in fan fiction, which can be seen in how the characters react to the idea. In “Smiling God,” Carlos and Cecil’s relationship is already established as an open one as evidenced by Carlos’s dialogue in Chapter 12: “Cecil believes more in ‘yes, and,’ as opposed to ‘either/or’” (DeathPalmNut). Kevin is wary about the situation and represents traditional fan fiction readers’ objection to non-monogamy. Kevin worries that his addition to the relationship will harm the bond between Carlos and Cecil: “I get worried, and sometimes confused . . . I feel so much for both of you but I never wanted to say anything. If I did anything that caused a problem or made me lose either or [sic] you, I couldn’t live with that” (DeathPalmNut, ch. 12, ellipses added). Kevin’s hesitation indicates that he is concerned that a polyamorous relationship cannot be maintained because one member of the group will inevitably get hurt. However, the fic is quick to offer a counter to this viewpoint. Carlos reassures Kevin by saying, “In physics, you learn matter can neither be created nor destroyed, right? Love and affection aren’t like that. The more you make the more there is. You say you like us both so much, so where’s the problem? We both like you, so who’s left out to be jealous?” (DeathPalmNut, ch. 12). This reassurance is directed not only toward Kevin, but toward the audience of the fic, who may share some of Kevin’s concerns.

Kevin eventually finds that his relationship with two men can be just as fulfilling as a relationship with one, further promoting the story’s idea that polyamory can be an acceptable style of relationship, and can even be more rewarding than monogamy in not just sexual terms but in regard to love. “I Cannot See Your Smiling God” uses the metaphor of ice cream to support the idea of a healthy polyamory relationship. Carlos muses, “You’ve seen [Cecil] choose ice cream, right? If he likes licorice and blood orange or whatever the heck, he won’t pick. He’ll
just order two scoops, together, on the same cone” (DeathPalmNut, ch. 12). In the same way multiple ice cream flavors can intermingle on one cone, the three men find that they can successfully coalesce. Ice cream appears again in the last chapter to symbolize Kevin’s transition into a member of a stable relationship with Cecil and Carlos:

“Is the bug subject to ice cream headache?” Carlos wondered, sucking the remaining chili mango sorbet from his tasting spoon.

“You know…I don’t know. I’ve never tried to brain freeze it.” Kevin smiled considering the fresh batch of honeyed cinnamon and chrysanthemum gelato Lucy was lowering into the display freezer.

She raised her eyebrows at Carlos.

“Two scoops then.” He told her. “For science.” (DeathPalmNut, ch. 22, ellipses in original)

Just as in “Past Performance,” the happiness of the three members of the polyamorous relationship is evident. The status quo has been broken, as well as both heteronormative and homonormative standards, and the characters are better off for it.

**Conclusion**

Even polyamorous relationships such as those in these two examples of fan fiction can uphold arguably homonormative ideals such as romantic love and domesticity. However, polyamorous relationships by nature cannot be considered either heteronormative or homonormative in our current culture; romantic and sexual relationships involving more than two people are not accepted as typical in modern society. The trios in both “Past Performance” and “I Cannot See Your Smiling God” subvert conventional expectations of sex and love, and, most importantly, they benefit from doing so. Returning to Kyra Hunting’s article, we can
compare these *Welcome to Night Vale* fics with the *Queer as Folk* stories she denounces as homonormative. Hunting claims that in many *Queer as Folk* fics, the characters may have lax attitudes toward sex and exclusivity, but they suffer from it:

Occasionally fiction in this vein will directly address a sexual encounter with another partner. However, this type generally focuses on instances in the canon where the specific extrarelational sex has negative connotations and generally casts these stories in terms of jealousy or pain. While not explicitly denying the sexually nonexclusive nature of the relationship in the canon, this strand of fan story minimizes or pathologizes nonexclusive sex, emphasizing a more exclusive version of the romantic pairing. (Hunting)

A fic truly breaks social norms, then, when the characters are happy to live their lives in a non-normative way. pallidvixen’s “Past Performance is Not a Predictor of Future Results” presents Cecil, Carlos, and Earl content to share each other as lovers and sexual partners. “I Cannot See Your Smiling God” substitutes Kevin for Earl, but still portrays the same type of loving relationship between three people. Although *Welcome to Night Vale* fan fiction is not universally transgressive in its treatment of romantic and sexual norms, there is ample material to indicate that the podcast lends itself well to these types of radical fics that transform not only the source material but the way in which people view relationships.
CHAPTER FOUR

“HOW IS CECIL GOING TO GIVE BIRTH?”: NON-NORMATIVE BODIES AND MALE PREGNANCY IN WELCOME TO NIGHT VALE SLASH FICTION

“Normal becomes a relative term in Night Vale.”

–Linpatootie, “Unlikely Existence”

The Mpreg Fic Debate

To an audience unaccustomed to the culture of fan fiction, the concept of male pregnancy could be a shocking one. Although there have been female-to-male transgender individuals who have become pregnant, and there are new technologies that suggest cisgender male pregnancy may be feasible in the future (Grady), the concept of cisgender male pregnancy is not widely discussed in real life terms. Male pregnancy fan fiction, or mpreg fic, however, has long explored the subject. Mpreg fiction comes in a variety of forms, but it is most commonly associated with male/male slash relationships and therefore is most often a subgenre of slash. Just as with slash fiction itself, some critics believe mpreg fiction to be inherently subversive in its alternative conception of male bodies. Others claim that mpreg supports normative conceptions of family and parenthood. After investigating several examples of Welcome to Night Vale mpreg fan fiction, I have found that there is no one way that mpreg slash fiction deals with social norms; it can be both transgressive and normative, or a combination of the two.

Scholars who believe that the concept of male pregnancy is transgressive state that it is a novel way for people to ponder ideas of gender and sexuality in terms of the characters’
physicality. Emma Parker, although writing about male pregnancy in media outside of fan fiction, asserts that the concept itself is liberating to non-heteronormative men provided that the pregnant male is not made depicted in jest or presented as something to be feared:

In contrast to heterocentric representations of male pregnancy characterised by anxiety and hostility, [writer Paul] Magrs affirms the role male pregnancy has played in queer subcultures. From the ritual mock births conducted in the ‘molly’ houses of eighteenth-century London documented by Rictor Norton to the camp romantic comedy Pillow Talk (dir. Michael Gordon, 1959), in which the male protagonist – played by the closeted gay actor Rock Hudson – pretends to be pregnant, male pregnancy has historically been employed to articulate and affirm non-normative genders and desires. (1037)

In “Conceiving Male Pregnancy,” Mary Ingram-Waters agrees that male pregnancy, specifically as it is represented in mpreg fics, allows the authors to challenge the connection between pregnancy and gender, and therefore challenge traditional conceptions of gender as a whole. There are hints of normativity in mpreg fics when “The person who receives sperm during a sexual act of intercourse, the woman in a heterosexual pairing and the ‘bottom’ in a homosexual pairing” is the character who becomes pregnant (“Conceiving” 28). However, Ingram-Waters states that in her interviews with several fan fiction authors, the majority said that feminizing the man who is carrying the child without also emphasizing his masculinity is not the goal: “When asked further about how gender roles might change during a male’s experience of pregnancy, nearly every interviewee responded by indicating that balancing masculinity and femininity during male pregnancy was a crucial part of getting male pregnancy ‘right’” (“Conceiving” 29).
Although feminizing may occur in an mpreg fic due to the nature of pregnancies, mpreg authors do not aim to present the pregnant male character as a woman.

Ingram-Waters describes her experiences as a pregnant woman interviewing mpreg authors to highlight the inherent cultural subversion of male pregnancy: “Where I was (presumed to be) heterosexual, married, healthy, and female, I stood in stark contrast to the characters that these female authors had spent countless hours writing about: their characters were male and homosexual, and many of their pregnancies were fantastically exciting because of the inherent danger of such risky pregnancies” (“When Normal” 6). Through the telling of this story, Ingram-Waters casts male pregnancy in a culturally non-normative light by contrasting it (and showing how mpreg authors contrast it) with traditional female pregnancy.

Due to the non-normative physicality featured in mpreg fics, these stories have the potential to challenge patriarchal conceptions of the body and gender roles despite being focused primarily on male characters. Kristina Busse acknowledges that “one of the criticisms of mpreg is that it often replicates rather than critiques the portrayal of women by embracing stereotypical gender roles,” but asserts that mpreg has the potential to question norms of sexuality and gender (320). Busse primarily discusses Alpha/Beta/Omega fiction in this piece (fan fiction focused on characters whose biology classifies them as sexually submissive, dominant, or other), but her statement applies to mpreg fiction as well, especially because A/B/O fiction frequently features male pregnancy:

. . . there are those stories that play with the tropes only to subvert them: Tony Stark all but loses his company because investors don’t trust alphas; Erik and Charles have an illicit alpha/alpha relationship; . . . All these stories use A/B/O tropes to interrogate gender and sexuality as well as sexual orientation and
cultural assumptions. And when successful, these stories are not only hot and allow our beloved sex objects to get and stay together in bonded bliss but they also interrogate some of the issues and prejudices of our day. (Busse 320-322, ellipses added)

Ingram-Waters and Busse show how mpreg fics can be transgressive of heteronormative standards, and perhaps even homonormative standards due to the (as of now) abnormal physicality of pregnant men.

Despite this view of mpreg fic as going against cultural norms, there are other scholars who label the majority of mpreg fic as homonormative to the highest degree. Berit Åström posits that although mpreg fics may have the potential to challenge sexual and gender norms, most mpreg fics do not live up to this potential due to their focus on the emotional and the domestic rather than biologically non-normative:

Rather than placing the focus on issues of biology and gender, the emphasis is on interrelational and emotional aspects. Pregnancy as a theme in popular culture narratives is commonly accompanied by a number of structures and conventions that are transferred, with very little change, into mpreg stories. In some narratives, the queer theme of male pregnancy therefore results in quite heteronormative stories. (Åström)

Åström is correct that some mpreg fics do indeed promote normative worldviews, although (as Ingram-Waters and Busse assert) there are also fics that do the opposite. If scholarship is anything to go by, mpreg fan fiction does not interact with cultural norms of sexuality in gender in one set way. The aforementioned scholars all acknowledge this ambiguous relationship, although they tend to take a side one way or the other. I aim to show that not only can the mpreg
genre as a whole be both transgressive and normative, but individual mpreg fics themselves can also blur these distinctions, simultaneously presenting both anti-normative and homonormative messages.

**Welcome to Night Vale’s Rejection of Traditional Biological Narratives**

*Welcome to Night Vale* is a prime example of the blurring between normative and anti-normative messages, so it makes sense that the fan fiction written about it would be similar. Several instances in the *Welcome to Night Vale* podcast introduce the idea of non-normative physicality, a theme that is dominant in mpreg fiction. In the podcast, for example, there is a character named Megan Wallaby who, without explanation, is born as “an adult man’s detached hand” (“The Traveler”). The character of Megan, who also seems to age at a rapid pace, demonstrates *Night Vale’s* canonical rejection of traditional conceptions of the body. Despite Cecil Palmer’s relatively easy acceptance of Megan’s physical form, it is implied in “A Beautiful Dream” that Megan suffers from teasing and has limited access to resources at school due to her unusual body. Cecil appeals to the town over the radio to treat Megan with respect: “Night Vale, there is a girl in need. There is a girl who only has a grown man’s detached hand as a body. I cannot relate to her experience. I doubt you can either, listeners, but we can all empathize” (“A Beautiful Dream”). By presenting Megan as relatively unsensational, yet someone who is still othered due to her physicality, *Night Vale* complicates the narrative of “weirdness to be weird,” instead showing how alternative bodily appearances can both be commonplace, yet a source of pain for those who are non-normatively bodied.

The topic of non-traditional physicality in the form of male pregnancy occurs briefly in *Welcome to Night Vale*, but it is in the context of a male cat named Khoshekh, who lives suspended four feet off the ground in the radio station’s restroom. When Khoshekh gives birth to
a litter of kittens, Cecil acknowledges the questions that people might have, then dismisses them: “How does a ‘he’ cat give birth? Well, how does a ‘he’ cat hover in an immobile spot in a radio station bathroom? Some things just aren’t meant to be questioned. Most things, actually” (“Eternal Scouts”). Just as with Megan Wallaby, Cecil somewhat acknowledges the non-normative physicality of Khoshekh, yet does not see it as a cause for concern and encourages others to not let it bother them. Cecil’s love for Khoshekh is evidenced in many Welcome to Night Vale episodes, again suggesting that individuals with non-traditional bodies should be accepted.

Welcome to Night Vale Mpreg Fan Fiction: Embracing the Contradictions

This same complex message, that non-traditional bodies can be commonplace yet often a source of hardship due to the unaccepting nature of the general public, also appears in many male pregnancy Night Vale fics. As Busse says, “Mpregs come in all shapes and sizes and, as a result, can fulfill a vast variety of fan desires,” and this holds true for Welcome to Night Vale mpreg fics (320). Night Vale mpreg fics vary greatly in their depictions of male pregnancy; sometimes the characters treat male pregnancy as an everyday occurrence, while other fics emphasize the non-normativity of the phenomenon. Often, it is a combination of both, with some characters reacting in surprise to a pregnancy, while others in the same fic accept it without question.

The characterization of pregnant males in Welcome to Night Vale slash fiction often subverts expectations of the mpreg genre. Åström believes that pregnant male characters in fan fiction “are never constructed as unnatural, monstrous, or threatening. Instead the pregnancies are, most often, described as life-affirming experiences resulting in the joy of fatherhood” (n.p.). Åström may be incorrect in this respect as far as Welcome to Night Vale fan fiction goes, as
Night Vale mpreg fics quite often present the pregnant male as, while perhaps not threatening, still monstrous. The tag “eldritch abomination” frequently occurs in conjunction with the “mpreg” tag in Night Vale fan fiction. The term “eldritch” is related to the H.P. Lovecraft corpus and refers to something “‘otherworldly’—which is congruent with the definition in the Scottish National Dictionary: ‘weird, ghostly, uncanny, unearthly, hideous, esp. of sound; often applied to persons, things and places, usually to denote some connection with the supernatural’” (Hall 22). The pregnant male in Welcome to Night Vale mpreg fiction is frequently of the unearthly and even horrifying variety. However, it often happens in these stories that the pregnant man, although monstrous, is still worthy of love and acceptance.

Cecil often assumes the role of the pregnant man in fan fiction, perhaps due to his role in the Night Vale podcast as the more unconventional one in the relationship, while Carlos is often the voice of reason both in the podcast and in fic. Pregnant Cecil in Night Vale mpreg fiction is often monstrous: he sometimes has tentacles (“Not on the Agenda”), lays eggs (“Cycle”), or gets pregnant only to have the inhuman baby bite its way out violently (“The Night of Silver Teeth”). Despite this, Cecil never appears as something to be feared in mpreg fan fiction. He may be unusual, and frightening things may happen because of it, but Carlos’s love for him rarely wavers.

Linpatootie’s mpreg fic “Unlikely Existence” is an example of a Welcome to Night Vale fic that, while keeping Cecil physically human, reflects the podcast’s multifaceted perspective on non-traditional physicality. I have chosen this fic to study not only because of its in-depth exploration of Cecil’s pregnancy and its logistics, but also because of the author’s dedication to preserving the canonical personalities of Welcome to Night Vale’s canon. In “Unlikely Existence,” Carlos stays true to his identity as a scientist who is never content to let a question go
unanswered, while Cecil readily accepts his changing physicality without wondering about the implications. In addition, this is one of the longest *Night Vale* mpreg fics available. Because *Welcome to Night Vale* is a relatively new podcast, there is still limited fan fiction related to it, and although there is still plenty of mpreg fan fiction in the *Night Vale* fandom (and more added every day), many of the stories are fairly short or have yet to be completed. “Unlikely Existence,” with five chapters and a completed storyline, contains a great deal of contemplation on the nature of male pregnancy in the *Night Vale* universe and therefore can help us to understand one way in which the *Night Vale* fandom deals with the mpreg subgenre of slash fiction.

When Cecil becomes pregnant in “Unlikely Existence,” Carlos has difficulty accepting it due to Cecil’s biological body, which Carlos believes should not be able to bear a child. Carlos’s reluctance in accepting the pregnancy defies the homonormativity of which the mpreg genre is often accused. Carlos asks Cecil, “‘Are you suggesting I got you pregnant via anal intercourse? You do realize that’s not how pregnancy works?’” (Linpatootie, ch. 1). Carlos resists falling into the ease of parenthood and domesticity; instead he insists on questioning things. Carlos tells Cecil, “‘You’re a man. You’re not pregnant’” (Linpatootie, ch. 1). Cecil, however, retains his canonical acceptance of the unexpected in the fic: “‘I know how pregnancy works, Carlos. I know I’m male, and probably should not be able to conceive. But I also know there’s no such thing as mountains, yet you keep insisting those are real. How is this different? Maybe sometimes things that are difficult to believe can exist, after all’” (Linpatootie, ch. 1). Cecil’s acceptance of the pregnancy represents the homonormative qualities of the mpreg genre; Cecil is willing to let go of the scientific questions, instead focusing on parenthood and his relationship.
with Carlos. Right away, we can see how this mpreg fic can both reject and accept homonormativity.

In “Unlikely Existence,” Carlos’s eventual acceptance of the fact that he and Cecil will be fathers indicates his shifting worldview and acceptance of the non-normative. However, Carlos still acknowledges the strangeness of the situation. Carlos’s musing about a future with a child reflects both the normativity and subversion of male pregnancy. His thoughts start off idealistic: “Carlos sees birthday cakes and Christmas trees. Band-Aids on scraped knees, a swing set squeaking in their tiny backyard, little arms wrapped tightly around his neck and sticky kisses on his cheeks” (Linpatootie, ch. 1). However, Carlos’s fantasies immediately become darker: “He knows this is Night Vale. He knows the birthday cake might not be edible, the Christmas tree might be full of tarantulas, and the swing set might be the worst idea anyone has ever had” (Linpatootie, ch. 1). Although some critics accuse mpreg fics of promoting blissful domesticity without questioning the normativity of pregnancy narratives, “Unlikely Existence” acknowledges the problematic nature of Cecil’s pregnancy, and makes it clear that this is not the same situation as a traditional female pregnancy. In this way, “Unlikely Existence” shows how male pregnancy fan fiction can question the idealism of pregnancy, complicating the idea of mpreg fic as inherently normative in its conception of childbearing and parenthood.

The author’s choice to have Carlos attempt to figure out how Cecil became pregnant (once he has accepted Cecil’s pregnancy) again indicates that “Unlikely Existence,” despite presenting male pregnancy as a reality, does not treat it the same as female pregnancy. When fellow Night Vale resident John Peters asks Carlos how Cecil managed to become pregnant, Carlos reveals that he has a scientific theory:
“I’m working on a theory revolving around a kind of osmosis . . . Cecil’s body absorbed my genetic material and merged it with his in a non-traditional variation of cell fertilization, creating a zygote which started dividing its cells to become a fetus. Cecil’s body then formed a gestational sac around it to nourish and protect it, though I haven’t managed to explain that reaction yet.” (Linpatootie, ch. 4, ellipses added)

In response, John reveals that Cecil is not alone in his atypical pregnancy: “‘I have a cousin who gave birth. He was abducted . . . These three men in black suits came and pulled him right out of his garbage truck. Came back six months later . . . pregnant with triplets. One of them has eight eyes, like a spider. Bright little thing, won the Night Vale spelling bee last April!’” (Linpatootie, ch. 4, ellipses added). John Peters’ last comment negates the strangeness of the preceding alien pregnancy concept by treating the progeny as commonplace within Night Vale’s culture. However, Carlos’s response—“That’s... nice.”—and his awkward smile indicate that he is still somewhat surprised by John Peters’ story; Carlos has not stopped questioning Night Vale’s strangeness, although he has finally learned to accept it, including Cecil’s pregnancy (Linpatootie, ch. 4, ellipses in original). That “Unlikely Existence” never decisively answers the question of how Cecil managed to become pregnant is not important; the fic’s concern is how the pregnancy affects the characters, especially scientifically-minded Carlos. Presumably, our role as readers is to consider Cecil’s pregnancy in a similar manner: accepting its existence without denying its non-normativity.

In the epilogue, “Unlikely Existence” maintains its ambiguous relationship with normativity, at times adhering to it, at other times rejecting it. At first, the epilogue veers into
homonormative territory with its idealistic depiction of a same-gender couple raising their child together in happiness:

Best enjoy it while he can, these quiet moments, with Julius in his soft cotton Hello Kitty pajamas and his curly black hair an inkblot between their pillows. He was starting to lose his baby teeth now too, two of them already sitting in a little wooden box Cecil had purchased just for the occasion. (Linpatootie, ch. 6)

However, the author’s inclusion of several examples of non-normative physicality keeps the story from becoming too predictable. After Carlos muses about his son’s baby teeth, he remarks that Julius’s “mouth now boasted two sharp teeth” instead (Linpatootie, ch. 6). This frightening image contrasts with the domestic bliss of the final chapter, muddying the boundaries between normative and non-normative.

The “Eggs” series by Watchinginthedark, including the stories “Cycle” and “Offspring,” is another instance of Welcome to Night Vale mpreg fan fiction that demonstrates a balance of the homonormative and the non-homonormative. The series is only slightly shorter than “Unlikely Existence” and is still able to devote ample time to musing on the nature of Cecil’s pregnancy. In addition, “Eggs” is one of the most popular Night Vale mpreg series on Archive of Our Own, totaling almost 20,000 views between the two fics. The popularity of the “Eggs” series suggests that that it is what many fans of Welcome to Night Vale mpreg fiction are looking for, whether that is in terms of characterization or content. Just like “Unlikely Existence,” both “Cycle” and “Offspring” blur the lines between normativity and non-normativity in their depiction of male pregnancy and family.

Although the method of parenthood in the “Eggs” series is biologically non-normative, Carlos’s desire for parenthood is not. In “Cycle,” Carlos learns that every six years, Cecil and
many other Night Vale residents inexplicably gestate and lay eggs. Although Carlos questions the biological possibility of this as he does in “Unlikely Existence,” he is much more willing to accept his partner’s unusual physicality in “Cycle.” This is not to say that Carlos’s characteristic sense of scientific inquiry is absent from his characterization, but he is quicker to believe in the unusual in the “Eggs” series. Carlos admits that the idea of Cecil laying eggs is “‘a little weird for me, as an outsider,’” but he quickly reconciles himself to the idea. Once Carlos accepts that Cecil occasionally lays eggs, his only question is whether Cecil could potentially get pregnant if the eggs were fertilized (“Cycle” ch. 1). Carlos finds himself entranced by the idea of a family with Cecil. When Cecil lays his (empty) eggs, Carlos examines one, wistfully thinking of becoming a parent: “[The egg] was empty, just like he’d been told it would be, but something tugged at his chest anyway. In his mind, he could imagine a little being curled in the egg that he now held cupped in his hands. A tiny creature that would be a perfect mix of he and Cecil’s genes, primed to hatch and become a child that they could call their own” (“Cycle,” ch. 1).

The homonormative attitude toward parenthood (seen in Carlos and Cecil’s enthusiasm toward having children) continues in the sequel to “Cycle,” which is titled “Offspring.” “Offspring” is set six years later. The fic begins with Cecil announcing over the radio that he is pregnant with six eggs. He and Carlos are now married, and their joy at their impending parenthood is evident:

“God, Cecil, I couldn’t get here fast enough when I heard it. It really worked? You’re pregnant?” Carlos gently pressed his hand to the soft swell of Cecil’s stomach that would be expected at this point in his cycle, the other man placing his own hand over it, his smile wide and bright.
“Yes! It’s really happening! I’m pregnant!” Cecil seemed to vibrate with joy and Carlos chuckled before kissing his husband again, smiling against his lips.

(“Offspring,” ch. 1)

Dissimilar to “Unlikely Existence,” there is no resistance from either man regarding the pregnancy. However, the author still reminds us that this is not a traditional pregnancy. For example, when Carlos fantasizes about being able to put his children’s artwork on his desk at work, he imagines the “beautiful, gory crayon drawings” (“Offspring,” ch. 1). The terms “beautiful” and “gory” contrast; that the drawings would be “gory” detracts from our traditional conception of innocent childhood. However, because the “gory” drawings are also “beautiful,” Watchinginthedark also asserts that concepts such as male pregnancy, while non-normative, can still be beautiful. In this way, the “Eggs” series’ relationship with normativity is more complex than we might assume.

The reference to the “gory” yet “beautiful” drawings is only a subtle reminder that Cecil’s pregnancy transgresses normativity. The fact that Cecil is pregnant with eggs, which is less humanlike than other forms of male pregnancy in fan fiction, again reminds us that there is something unusual about Cecil’s condition. However, despite the manner of pregnancy, the description of Cecil’s pregnant body is fairly traditional. Cecil has morning sickness, for instance, and his abdomen grows as the eggs do. At one point, the author mentions that “The radio host glowed, always smiling and excited, a hand almost always lovingly cradling his stomach,” a romanticized depiction of pregnancy (“Offspring,” ch. 1). Cecil’s pregnancy veers from the traditional when, instead of giving birth, he lays the eggs, and he and Carlos must wait for them to hatch.
It is when the eggs begin to hatch that “Offspring,” which until this point has been a somewhat normative depiction of male pregnancy, truly veers into the bizarre with its descriptions of Cecil and Carlos’s children. From the first and second eggs come two brown and scaly “‘six legged lizard[s],’” followed by a purple-skinned baby with webbed hands, a telepathic boy with “green hair,” and lastly, a girl who is “completely normal in every way” (“Offspring,” ch. 1). Carlos is somewhat surprised by how some of his children look, but both he and Cecil express unconditional love for the newborns: “The little boy nuzzled and hid in the crook of Cecil’s arm and his heart melted. Their girl was looking at her shy little brother curiously and Cecil was already starting to feel like a family” (“Offspring,” ch. 1). Despite the strangeness of the children’s appearances, Cecil and Carlos do not let this get in the way of their affection.

The bizarreness of this fic (eggs, lizard babies, and Cecil’s pregnancy) juxtaposed with tender familial moments of love and loss again suggests that mpreg fics can both accept and reject norms simultaneously. To Carlos and Cecil’s sadness, the sixth egg never hatches. Although Cecil is distraught and at first refuses to accept the child’s death, he eventually collects himself for the sake of his family after Carlos pleads, “Your children need you, Cecil. I can’t do this on my own…” and convinces Cecil that the egg will not hatch (“Offspring,” ch. 1). Carlos buries the egg in the desert and asserts that despite their sorrow, “They were a family, and families got through things together” (“Offspring,” ch. 1). The bittersweet ending of “Offspring,” which emphasizes familial love without rejecting the bizarre, demonstrates the simultaneous existence of standard and nonstandard conceptions of family.
Conclusion

The treatment of male pregnancy in slash fiction can vary greatly in not only method of pregnancy but how the characters react to it. Just as with the fan fiction genre in general, mpreg fic can fulfill multiple and contradictory social purposes. Within the *Welcome to Night Vale* fandom, unusual and even frightening depictions of bodies can exist next to touching descriptions of love between spouses and children. This may seem contradictory, but the entire mpreg genre is in itself contradictory, which seems to be a common pattern in fan fiction. Because of this, we cannot state that the mpreg genre of fan fiction is inherently homonormative or that it consistently transgresses homonormativity, because it can do both, and sometimes it can do both simultaneously. This ambiguity may be a reflection of society’s conflicting attitudes toward the idea of male pregnancy and what necessarily defines a “man,” whether it be physicality, self-identification, or something else.
CONCLUSION

Gender, sexuality, and genre play with expectations and evade concrete definitions, so defining any of those terms without leaving room for ambiguity is ultimately futile. For a genre like slash fiction that specifically deals with gender and sexuality, claiming to have the last word on its definition would be impossible. However, we can still try to better understand slash fiction. In order to understand a genre, it is important that we consider what functions the genre serves for its participants and how a genre’s formal qualities can be related to these functions. Fan fiction, and slash fiction more specifically, come in a variety of structural forms, but to many fans, the most important quality of these genres is the purposes they serve. One important function of many slash fiction stories is to explore cultural assumptions about gender and sexuality through the change and preservation of canonical elements.

The *Welcome to Night Vale* slash fiction that I have studied relates a variety of stories about Cecil and Carlos that both reject and support traditional narratives of romance, sexual orientation, relationships, and parenthood. Themes that may seem incredibly transgressive at first, including same-gender polyamorous relationships and male pregnancy, can indeed be transgressive at times, but can simultaneously promote traditional values. We therefore must reject the idea that slash fiction is inherently subversive, because it deals with norms of sexuality and gender in complicated and often ambiguous ways. It is important to acknowledge instances of slash fiction that are not completely transgressive or subversive because if we do not, we are limiting not only the definition of slash (and I have explained why limiting definition is not ideal), and also excluding a great deal of fan fiction that still merits study. As Devitt implies,
there is nothing wrong with studying “everyday” texts and those that conform to what we expect a genre to be or to do. However, there are a number of “extraordinary” texts that break the supposed conventions of a genre, and studying these can tell us a lot about not only the genre but also our cultural values.

There may still be critics who claim that the stories I studied do not count as slash fiction at all because Carlos and Cecil are canonically involved in the source material. I must disagree with this limitation of slash, however. In popular fandom lexicon, the Night Vale fan fiction that I have discussed would be considered slash. The opinions of non-scholars are important, especially in such a genre as fan fiction where anyone can have a voice. Constraining the definition of slash fiction to include only fics that change the sexual orientation of the source’s characters will cause us to miss out on a great deal of stories that still have much to say about sexuality and gender.

Sheenagh Pugh writes that “some feel slash as it was had a limited life, with the advent of stronger female roles and overtly gay characters” (99). I believe that slash fiction is entering into a new era of increasing collusion with the canon, but this does not mean that the genre is dying, only changing. Even if the term “slash” becomes less common, the phenomena of questioning heteronormativity in fan fiction is still alive and will continue to live as long as there are television shows, novels, films, and other pieces of media that appeal to people. The future of mainstream media is likely to become only more inclusive and accepting of individuals with non-normative genders and sexualities. It is only fitting that our views on slash fiction will change as culture itself changes.

More research still needs to be done in a variety of subjects related to slash fiction, and fan fiction in general. The first of these is fan fiction involving characters of non-binary genders.
There has been research done on genderswap and transgender characters in fan fiction (McClellan; Kerry), but I have been unable to find any studies on characters who are outside of the male-female binary. Fics featuring these characters do exist, as seen by AO3’s “other relationships” category, so there is definitely something to be gained from learning more about these stories. For instance, is it the practice of writers to categorize fics involving genderqueer individuals as slash? If so, does this change our view of what slash fiction is as a genre? I touched upon this idea in Chapter Two, but that was only skimming the surface of a complicated issue.

Another beneficial area of inquiry would be to obtain more comprehensive demographics on fan fiction authors and readers. When studying the ways slash fiction interacts with heteronormativity, it would be especially interesting to know more about fans’ genders and sexualities. This is a difficult undertaking to be sure, as many authors do not list their personal details on their profiles, and many people are unwilling to volunteer these details online. Of course, people are entitled to their privacy, but if some readers and writers were willing to offer this information, it could benefit our study of slash fiction. Although I do not want to presume an author’s intent, the author’s personal experiences can certainly inform the themes and message of a fic. In addition, there are still many people who are convinced that only heterosexual, cisgender women write fan fiction, and this is not the case. If survey-takers are able to determine that fan fiction writers (and readers) are more diverse than many assume, it would be interesting to see if common interpretations of the act of writing and consuming fan fiction would change.

Lastly, there needs to be more research done on slash fiction involving canonically non-heterosexual characters like Cecil and Carlos. Presumably, we are to see more and more characters of diverse sexualities in television shows, movies, and other forms of popular media.
Fan fiction scholars must adjust to modern norms and reject the notion that slash fiction can only involve characters who are heterosexual in the original source material. I have studied *Welcome to Night Vale* slash fiction, but this is only one instance among many. My study was limited in scope so that I could study several fics in depth, but because of this I cannot make any generalizations about slash fiction as a whole, or even assumptions about all *Welcome to Night Vale* fan fiction. It may be that the patterns I have seen in the fan fiction I have studied do not necessarily apply to other fics. However, I believe that trends in even small samples of fan fiction can be indicative of larger trends in the genre. It would be interesting to see studies on fandoms that are similar to *Welcome to Night Vale*, or more studies on *Welcome to Night Vale* fan fiction itself.

In Episode 70B of *Welcome to Night Vale*, Cecil Gershwin Palmer invites us to become co-creators of the show and of the very concept of “Night Vale.” He tells the audience, “. . . let’s keep working on this town, this collective idea, this Night Vale. Whatever we want that name to mean, we can always start over if we have to. Rededicate ourselves. Do it right” (“Review,” ellipses added). Fans of *Welcome to Night Vale* have taken this advice to heart and created their own versions of *Night Vale* that remix and alter the canon while still treating the characters and the town itself with affection. Even for fan writers that want “more from” the canon, there is always something in the canon that appeals to them enough so that they want to immerse themselves in these universes (Pugh 19). Fan fiction therefore becomes a mixture of tradition and newness, conformity and rebellion, and will continue to do so as long as there is media to inspire us.
WORKS CITED


