

MIRROR, MIRROR: THE HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY GENDER, SEXUAL, AND
ROMANTIC MINORITIES STRUGGLES AS REFLECTED BY THE SUBCULTURE OF
SLASH FANDOM

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At first glance, the television series *Star Trek* and the gay rights movement in the United States do not seem to have much, if anything, in common. One is a classic 1960s science fiction television series that has spawned tie-in novels, movies, and subsequent series within the same universe and has become a cultural phenomenon and a household name. The other is the very real, often brutal, fight that queer people¹ in America are still fighting today – to be protected under the law from discrimination at work, to be able to file joint taxes together as legally recognized married couples, and the right to be thought of as people first, and not as second-class citizens. However, gay rights and popular culture, particularly that which is thought of as “geek” culture, have much more in common than appears on the surface. From the 1970s through the early part of this century, mainstream culture poked fun at those who attended *Star Trek* conventions and spent their leisure time and money investing in learning the Elvish language from the world of J.R.R. Tolkien’s epic *The Lord of the Rings*. These people, whether they were called “geeks” or “nerds,” were looked on with derision and were the focus of many jokes. However, since the early part of this century, that tide has shifted - shows like *The Big Bang Theory* and the record-breaking box office numbers for *The Avengers*, a movie based on Marvel comic books, prove that the geek is no longer the social outlier he once was.

Geek culture has not suffered quite the same stigma that queer culture has, but both subcultures have enacted a revolution in a past few decades, becoming more prominent in mainstream society and popular culture, in ways that blatantly mirror one another. As a result

¹As discussed later in this paper, once considered a pejorative term, the word “queer” has since been reclaimed by the GSRM community and is often used as a blanket term.

there has been a definite shift over the past decade or so in the way Americans think about and view homosexuals, and this shift is reflected in the media being produced. Many television shows, movies, and books are portraying homosexual or genderqueer characters with increasing frequency. Consequently, the focus of fandom - or the group of fans that form socially around a piece of media and interact with it via discussion, fiction, art, role-play, etc. - has shifted, and increasingly, people involved with fan culture have seen media and the fandoms surrounding it as a space to discover and explore their own gender and sexual identities.

The Stonewall Riots in New York City forced the struggle of gay Americans into the national consciousness in 1969, and still remain a strong reminder of the necessity of homosexual acceptance and visibility to this day. Since then, homosexuals and other queer-identifying individuals have fought for tolerance and equal political rights under the law, as well as increased representation in a progressively media-driven society. There have been a number of milestones in this fight, both politically and socially.

Politically, gay activists have fought for numerous things, including having homosexuality removed from the books as a mental disorder, the repealing of sodomy laws, anti-discrimination laws, the passing of laws that would facilitate hate crime prevention, and marriage equality for same-sex couples. Socially, homosexual representation in the media has increased exponentially since the 1960s and 1970s. The evolution of queer characters and storylines has been closely mirrored by the increasing power and breadth of subcultures like fandom. The cultural shift that precipitated the Stonewall Riots and many of the other milestones after it were reflected in the media's treatment of male relationships in particular, which in turn affected fandom's interaction with the material and created a subculture centered around reading the

subtext of male-male relationships as sexual. In addition, many of the participants in fandom activity are themselves queer in some capacity, and proponents of gay rights activism.

Many today are familiar with the fights of gender, sexual, and romantic minorities (GSRM)² for equal rights and protection under the law from discrimination and oppression, as well as campaigns like The Trevor Project's "It Gets Better," to let GSRM youth know that they are not alone and that it does get better, as well as numerous anti-bullying campaigns. What many people may not be aware of is the nearly half-century of history that is behind the fight for marriage equality, the repealing of the United States' military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, and the reason why June is the month GSRM people everywhere celebrate Gay Pride. Many people even within the queer community are not aware of this history; very little of it is mentioned in school textbooks, and not every GSRM person has the means to access a Queer Studies course. However, understanding the roots of the movement can help shed light on the battles still facing GSRM Americans today and can help to make sense of the changing faces, and roles, of GSRM individuals in the media.

The Stonewall Riots, which occurred in New York City's Greenwich Village in June of 1969, are often credited with being the birth of the gay right's movement. Although this is more or less accepted as the beginnings of the modern gay rights movement in the United States, the queer community had started much earlier to work towards more visibility and solidarity, particularly after the end of World War II. Eric Marcus talks about these early efforts following World War II to "share information" and become organized in a "relentlessly hostile world," which resulted in the formation of organizations like the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of

² While for many years the acronyms LGBT or LGBTQ were used in reference to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer individuals, in recent years this usage has been criticized for not being inclusive enough of all sexual, gender, and romantic identities. In an effort to be more inclusive, the GSRM acronym has recently been adopted as a much more umbrella term and will be used throughout this paper in an effort to be as inclusive as possible of all sexual, gender, and romantic minorities.

Bilitis, and ONE, Inc. in his book, *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights*.³ The organization the Mattachine Society and others groups like it in the late 1940s and 1950s signaled that the homosexual community wanted to become a part of mainstream American culture.

With the climate of the 1960s, full of volatile protests and movements that brought into American homes the oppressed and marginalized of the country, the issue of gay rights was forced to the national stage and into mainstream culture. This clash between the police and patrons of the Stonewall Inn, a known gay bar, would become another such protest that brought into American homes the issues affecting the queer community. These riots sparked a movement that has done nothing but gain momentum in the nearly fifty years since they occurred. Although police trying to close the bar down for selling liquor without a license were what initially sparked the riots, the ensuing violence and outrage of the Stonewall patrons and other members of the queer community grabbed the attention of the news media and ignited a response never before seen from the queer community. The riots at Stonewall were reported in the *New York Daily News* as when “New York City experienced its first homosexual riot,”⁴ and while treated almost comically in its retelling, the article does end by noting that the police are sure that this would not be the last they heard from the members of the queer community – and they were right. Only a few weeks later, the first “Gay Power” meeting would be held in Greenwich Village, which was comprised of “street people, socialists, would-be revolutionaries, and members of the Mattachine Society.”⁵ Although this first meeting would not be very successful, ultimately, out

³ Eric Marcus, *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights, 1945-1960: An Oral History* (New York, Harper Collins, 1992), 2.

⁴ Jerry Lisker, “Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad,” *The New York Daily News*, July 6, 1969, accessed September 15, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/stonewall-queen-bees/>.

⁵ Leigh W. Rutledge, *The Gay Decades: From Stonewall to the Present: The People and Events That Shaped Gay Lives* (New York, Plume, 1992), 1-2.

of it would grow the Gay Liberation Front (GLF). While GLF would only exist a few years, until 1972, it would succeed in shedding light on, and in bringing media attention to GSRM issues. The early GSRM groups were small in numbers, but they had an enormous impact in bringing homosexuality into mainstream culture and in harnessing increasingly influential mass media in the forms of print news, film, and television.⁶

One of the most immediate outcomes to grow out of the Stonewall Riots, and one of the most lasting, is gay pride. The term “gay pride” is believed to be derived from the name of a 1960s organization that was formed to protest the handling of homosexuals, Personal Rights in Defense and Education (PRIDE).⁷ The tradition of celebrating gay pride, however, is directly tied to the Stonewall Riots and not to the PRIDE organization. A parade, dubbed the “Christopher Street Gay Liberation Day,” named for the street where the Stonewall Inn was located, was held to commemorate the first anniversary of the riots in New York City. Although many members of the homosexual community were afraid to walk the streets of New York and declare their sexuality so openly, they gained supporters as they marched and “the unlikely success of the ‘Christopher Street’ parade became a catalyst for local organizations throughout the U.S. and across the globe.”⁸ Celebration of gay pride is now a yearly event in most cities and has taken on a party-like atmosphere, unlike the early days when participants were unsure of their safety during their much more politicized march in 1970.

For years, homosexuality had been thought of as a disease and like other diseases, one that could be cured. As Michael Bronski notes in *A Queer History of the United States*, “These

⁶ Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2011), 214.

⁷ Tom DeSimone et al., *Lavender Los Angeles* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2011), 90.

⁸ Bianca Wythe, “How The Pride Parade Became Tradition,” *Inside the American Experience* (blog), June 9, 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/blog/2011/06/09/pride-parade/>.

psychoanalytic theories were predicated on deeply conservative ideas about sexuality”⁹ and these ideas also informed not only the already pre-existing social stigma associated with homosexuality, but also legal codes, often with dire consequences. Women who were involved in the military in World War II experienced a large number of Section 8 discharges, which denoted the service member suffered from a mental illness, towards the war’s end, when it was time for them to go back home. The trauma of receiving a Section 8 discharge would sometimes lead to the women committing suicide. Other members of the military subject to Section 8 discharges – both men and women - would also often be committed to mental hospitals, interrogated about their sexual history and partners, and, sometimes, male service members were even put into what Bronski describes as “queer stockades.”¹⁰ Influencing both laws about homosexuality and reinforcing social concepts of it, the idea that homosexuality was indeed a disease would last well into the mid-1970s. It would not be until after much lobbying by GSRM activists and members of the psychiatric profession that homosexuality would be removed as a disease from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in late 1973.¹¹ A paper presented at an annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association discusses the decision to remove homosexuality as a disease, stating:

This modification of nomenclature was based on the view that all mental disorders must necessarily be associated with either subjective distress or generalized impaired social effectiveness. There is no evidence that either the presence of homoerotic feelings or a history of erotic activity with the same sex must inevitably lead to distress or impair

⁹ Bronski, 186.

¹⁰ Bronski, 165-66.

¹¹ Bronski, 218.

effectiveness.¹²

With homosexuality no longer seen as abnormal by the medical community, gay rights activists began to fight for their rights under the law. They also began to seek positions of not only advocating change, but also actively affecting it by becoming elected officials. Although this effort took some years after Stonewall, members of the queer community began to enter the political arena, starting with Elaine Noble in 1975, who was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives, making her the first openly homosexual legislator in United States' history¹³, and then Harvey Milk¹⁴ in 1977, elected the first openly gay city supervisor in San Francisco.¹⁵ One of the first challenges these elected officials, but also the community at large, faced was repealing sodomy laws across the nation. These laws, which defined sodomy as an unmentionable, degrading act, did not mention homosexuals outright, but nevertheless affected homosexuals at a much higher rate than heterosexuals by their very design. Reproductive sex, which homosexuals could not engage in, was declared the only legal, moral kind of sex, thus outlawing homosexuality in an insidious way that was very hard to fight. By the end of the 1970s, however, twenty-nine states had taken their sodomy laws off of the books, either willingly or unwillingly. It took until 2003 to decriminalize sodomy at the federal level, when the Supreme Court decision in the landmark case, *Lawrence v. Texas*, nullified all sodomy laws entirely – a decision heralded as a turning point in the history of the GSRM community.¹⁶

Gay rights activists also turned their attention to the discrimination that many queer

¹² Robert L. Spitzer, M.D., "A Proposal About Homosexuality and the APA Nomenclature: Homosexuality as an Irregular Form of Sexual Behavior and Sexual Orientation Disturbance as a Psychiatric Disorder," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association, Honolulu, Hawaii, May 9, 1973.

¹³ Bronski, 219.

¹⁴ Harvey Milk has become better known recently due to a biographical movie of his life and assassination, starring Sean Penn, which was released in 2008.

¹⁵ Marcus, 234.

¹⁶ Marc Spindelman, "Surviving *Lawrence v. Texas*," *Michigan Law Review*, Vol. 102, No. 7 (June, 2004): 1615, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4141915>.

Americans faced in their everyday lives, and began to make strides to pass more and more anti-discrimination legislation. The first places to pass anti-discrimination laws were cities that were home to liberal universities, such as East Lansing and Ann Arbor in Michigan, both of which passed anti-discrimination laws in 1972. Other cities followed suit, including the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., among others, and by the year 1976 twenty-nine anti-discrimination laws were passed in all.¹⁷ Although gay and GSRM rights activists today have won many victories in the area of overcoming discrimination through legal avenues, there is still a lack of federal legislation protecting GSRM individuals from employment discrimination. The Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which passed the United States Senate on November 7, 2013, would protect all GSRM employees from discrimination, but it faces tough opposition in the House of Representatives and the GSRM community could be left, still, without anti-discrimination protection at the federal level.¹⁸

The workplace was not the only place where GSRM individuals could be discriminated against. In 1993, the Clinton administration enacted a policy that restricted the openness of homosexuality in the military. This policy, known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was "the first time restrictions against gay troops were ever written into federal law."¹⁹ Although there was already a ban in place on gays serving in the military, put in place partially by Eisenhower in the 1950s, and much more specifically by Ronald Regan in the 1980s in his Defense Directive, both Eisenhower and Regan's actions stated that anyone found to be homosexual (or, by the 1980s, bisexual), or committing homosexual acts, was to be discharged from the military. When Bill

¹⁷ Bronski, 219.

¹⁸ Jacqueline Klimas, "Senate Passes Gay-Rights Bill To Prevent Workplace Discrimination," *The Washington Times*, November 7, 2013, accessed November 10, 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/nov/7/senate-passes-non-discrimination-bill/>.

¹⁹ Nathaniel Frank, *Unfriendly Fire: How the Gay Ban Undermines the Military and Weakens America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), xiii.

Clinton ran for the office of President in 1992, he promised to lift the military ban, but never fulfilled that campaign promise. Instead, the compromise of Don't Ask, Don't Tell came about the year after Clinton's election – military members could, in theory, be homosexual and still serve, but they could not do so openly. This policy was kept in place until 2010, when President Barack Obama helped to repeal it. Many believe that Don't Ask, Don't Tell was “an ill-advised practice that cost valuable personnel and forced troops to lie to serve their country,”²⁰ and as the military has suffered no ill effects from the lift of this ban in the succeeding years, one would have to agree. The complete repeal of DADT represented a huge win for gay rights activists and would only help to propel the movement forward.

In other areas of the fight, GSRM advocates have not been quite so successful. The battle for marriage equality continues to this day. Colloquially referred to as same-sex marriage despite its potential ramifications for transgendered, genderqueer, and non-binary individuals, this fight has become central to the GSRM rights movement in the past two decades, so much so that it is viewed as the “dominant ‘gay rights’ issue in national politics in the U.S.”²¹ The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), passed in 1996 by the Clinton Administration, federally defined the term marriage to include one woman and one man. Seven years later, Massachusetts set precedent for states to oppose this act, in the ruling *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*²². Since this decision, other states have adopted similar laws to allow marriage equality, including California, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, New Hampshire, the District of Columbia, New York, Washington, Maine, Maryland, Rhode Island, Delaware, Minnesota, New Jersey, and, as of November 13,

²⁰ Carl Hulse, “Senate Repeals Ban Against Openly Gay Military Personnel,” *New York Times*, December 18, 2010, accessed November 18, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/19/us/politics/19cong.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

²¹ Miriam Smith, *Political Institutions and Lesbian and Gay Rights in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 109.

²² “Massachusetts Law About Same-Sex Marriage,” *Massachusetts Trial Court Law Libraries*, last modified November 14, 2013, <http://www.lawlib.state.ma.us/subject/about/gaymarriage.html>.

2013, Hawaii. Another monumental milestone was reached in June of 2013, when Proposition 8 (the proposition in the state of California which suspended marriage equality) and DOMA were struck down and declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.²³ The conversation surrounding why same-sex marriage is so essential to the rights movement has been a very involved one, and would take more space than this paper has available to explain. However, it is important to briefly note the practical reasons why this issue has become so important, if not the emotional or political. Marriage is one of the main institutions around which our society structures itself. Legal and economic benefits and protections come with marriage, like joint tax filing, right of inheritance, medical proxy, etc. Beyond any ethical or emotional need for equal marriage, these benefits are only given to those recognized as married in the eyes of the federal government, and so for that reason alone marriage equality is a necessity. The fight for this has not come so far purely through legislation, though. Changing social views have resulted in an electorate willing to put pressure on their representatives and government for these changes, and these views have been, at least in part, informed by the media portrayal of GSRM individuals.

Coinciding with increasing political awareness of issues affecting the queer community during the 1990s was a growing number of either homosexual characters or moments in mainstream media. Although there had been a growing presence of homosexual characters in mainstream media throughout the 1970s and 1980s, it was not until the 1990s that mainstream culture started to see a shift of not only more GSRM representation, but a more diverse and in depth representation. Perhaps one of the earliest of these moments is the lesbian kiss that occurred between Roseanne Barr and Mariel Hemingway on Barr's hit sitcom "Roseanne." The kiss, which occurred in 1994 amidst a swirling controversy about what was appropriate to show

²³ Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Bolsters Gay Marriage With Two Major Rulings," *New York Times*, June 26, 2013, accessed November 17, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/27/us/politics/supreme-court-gay-marriage.html?_r=0.

on television, with the implication that homosexual activity by definition was still perhaps seen as obscene in the eyes of many, was just what would become many queer moments in pop culture in the coming years.

Three years later, in 1997, brought what some call “the single most public exit from the closet in gay history”²⁴ occurred when comedian Ellen DeGeneres came out as a lesbian in both real life and in her fictional life on her sitcom. The episode which featured DeGeneres’ character’s very public coming out was a smash hit, not only with critics (it would go on to win an Emmy), but with the public as well.²⁵ Although the show would be canceled a year after the historic coming out episode, DeGeneres’ actions would mark a milestone in homosexual representation in the media, as it was the first television series to feature a homosexual leading character.²⁶ Rodger Streitmatter notes that not only were the events surrounding DeGeneres’ coming out significant just in terms of representation, particularly for lesbians who were rarely depicted in media (unlike gay men), but also signaled to the entertainment industry that making content that appealed to homosexuals could only benefit their bottom line.²⁷ It also denoted a turning point amongst straight people – particularly younger people – who would go on to consider themselves proponents of gay rights, or “straight allies.”²⁸

Shortly after, the sitcom *Will & Grace* debuted on NBC in 1998 and an iconic blend of shock-comedy and heartfelt friendships made it incredibly successful. Boasting eight seasons and a viewership of over nineteen million people at its peak²⁹, *Will & Grace* brought personality and humanity to the stereotypical image of gay men and represented more than just the effeminate

²⁴ Rodger Streitmatter, *From “Perverts” to “Fab Five:” The Media’s Changing Depiction of Gay Men and Lesbians* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 104.

²⁵ Streitmatter, 106-7.

²⁶ Streitmatter, 112.

²⁷ Streitmatter, 114.

²⁸ Streitmatter, 114.

²⁹ Streitmatter, 115.

gay most people were used to encountering in media. While *Will & Grace* and its titular characters dealt mainly with the relationships between gay men and straight women, something that might be deemed a safe strategy, in 2003 the reality show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* began to do just the opposite. Not only did the show feature five actual gay men, but also most of the interactions taking place on the show were between the five gay men – or the “Fab Five” as they became known – and a straight man. Although subtle, these interactions helped to battle assumptions that gay men are sexual predators.³⁰ While “building bridges”³¹ with straight men and showing the world the diversity amongst gay men, the show also helped to reclaim the word “queer,” which had been used for many years as a pejorative term for homosexuals in mainstream culture. Rodger Streitmatter notes that this feat “is no small matter, as it meant that the members of a stigmatized minority group were becoming culturally empowered.”³²

Two years after the debut of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Brokeback Mountain* premiered in theaters. Based on a short story by Annie Proulx, this major motion picture was centered on a same-sex romance between two characters who “belied the common gay stereotypes”³³ and were portrayed by two well-known Hollywood names. Both critically acclaimed and commercially successful, *Brokeback Mountain* made homosexual relationships emotional rather than just comical, and further dismantled the stereotype of the effeminate gay man, instead encouraging the idea that gayness was only a facet of a larger personality. In 2009, both *Modern Family* and *Glee* debuted, with the former featuring two gay males as main characters and the latter including both male and lesbian characters in the main cast, as well as

³⁰ Streitmatter, 143.

³¹ Streitmatter, 139.

³² Streitmatter, 144.

³³ Streitmatter, 171.

gay romance storylines.³⁴ The idea of including gay and lesbian main characters into any cast would have been nearly unthinkable in 1990, but not quite twenty years later two largely successful mainstream television shows, on major networks, not only frequently feature storylines depicting romance between homosexual main characters, but celebrate and laud the award-winning actors and actresses who depict these characters and their lives. As a result of the incredible success of these shows, homosexuality has become normalized to those viewers. It is no longer a case of a friend-of-a-friend who knows a gay person, but an identifiable and beloved character that enters the home week after week. This familiarity and normalization has allowed *Glee* and *Modern Family* to tackle homosexual stereotypes, as well as the political and social consequences of gayness. *Modern Family*'s gay couple adopted a child in the show's pilot episode; *Glee*'s male couple recently became engaged, and there are rumors that the show may use these two characters' commitment as a way to comment on the current oppressive situation in Russia. The blatant challenging of stereotypes and the political commentary of these television series show how far the gay rights movement has come, as the storylines and characters aired weekly on both *Modern Family* and *Glee* are things that would have never been deemed possible at the time of the Stonewall Riots.

To this point, much of this paper's focus has been on documenting the gay and lesbian struggle. It is essential to note, however, that other factions of the GSRM community have begun to see more representation in media as well. Transgendered and intersex people in particular have only recently come to the attention of mainstream society in a serious way, where often in the past they have been ridiculed as "traps," portrayed as mentally disturbed, or callously misgendered in media and in everyday life. Some of the most famous examples of transgendered people in media include the 1999 movie, *Boys Don't Cry*, featuring Hillary Swank as a

³⁴ Bronski, 237.

misgendered male, and *The Silence of the Lambs*, wherein transsexual serial killer Buffalo Bill skins his female victims so that he can wear their hides and outwardly become a woman. However, many of these representations focus on the character's gender identity to the exclusion of all other personality traits. In a recent episode of *Elementary*, a modern adaptation of Sherlock Holmes currently airing on FOX network, a new character was introduced that ignored this tradition completely. Ms. Hudson, repurposed from the original Sir Arthur Conan Doyle stories, is introduced to the viewers at first without mention of her status as a transgendered woman. Sherlock is effusive with praise over her incredible intellect, the audience is given an emotional tether in the form of Ms. Hudson's recent break-up, and the scene in which she is revealed to the audience as transsexual is short and inconsequential to the plot and how Ms. Hudson is treated by the main characters. In addition to a positive on-screen introduction, a transsexual actress plays Ms. Hudson, which further legitimizes the role. Like *Glee* and *Modern Family*, this shift in representation serves to normalize the identity of transgendered people and open up new doors in the struggle for transgender rights.

Having discussed the history of the GSRM rights movement, the development of fandom over the same time period must be explicated before the reflection of it in fan subcultures can be explored. From slash's earliest conception in the early 1970s, where physical mailing lists, fanzines, fan clubs, and conventions were the means of the communication, through the early internet age on Yahoo! Groups and ListServ in the 1990s and, later, blogging sites like LiveJournal and Dreamwidth in the early 2000s, to the microblogging platforms of today, fandom has evolved into an empowered and interactive subculture. Consequently, fans have found their voices among each other and within the general structure of media.

Although fandom as a whole existed well before the 1960s, particularly surrounding

science fiction texts, modern slash fandom can most likely be traced back to *Star Trek* in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Though male main characters dominated many contemporary shows, *Star Trek*'s unique and inclusive futurism combined with the undeniable emotional closeness between Captain Kirk and First Officer Spock proved to be a perfect medium for the exploration of changing societal views. Henry Jenkins notes in his description of what he calls a “vintage example of Kirk/Spock erotica”³⁵ that the formula of early Kirk/Spock fan fictions often included a hefty dose of textual exploration over how to integrate homoerotic sexual encounters with masculinity and self-identity – something, it should be noted, which has all but disappeared from most slash fiction in today’s community. Widely accepted in fandom today as one of the original slash “ships” – a popularized shortening of the word relationship widely used in fandom circles – the initial influx of Kirk/Spock fan fictions were met with opposition, many fans within the fandom community decrying it as wrong, character assassination, or “improper use of program materials.”³⁶ Even though there was early opposition to slash, people were also very clearly drawn to it. Perhaps due to the rapid social changes occurring at nearly the same time as the first slash ship, this new exploration of the text via homosexual relationships soon spread to other fandoms beyond *Star Trek* – including shows like *Starsky and Hutch* and *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, among others. *Star Trek* fandom, aside from being what modern shippers call the origin of slash fandom, was groundbreaking in other ways.

While conventions had been in existence for decades before the *Star Trek* franchise even existed – Camille Bacon-Smith notes the first science fiction convention was held in 1936³⁷ - *Star Trek* fandom set the bar for television and movie media conventions, with early *Star Trek*

³⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 186.

³⁶ Jenkins, 187.

³⁷ Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth in Series of Contemporary Ethnography*, edited by Dan Rose and Paul Stoller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 9.

specific conventions drawing crowds in excess of fifteen thousand each.³⁸ *Star Trek* fans flocked to these conventions, and later to smaller regional conventions, to share fan-published fiction and art in publications known as fanzines, cosplay – or role-play by donning imitative costume – their favorite characters, interact with actors and creators, and share ideas with fellow enthusiasts. These fanzines and fandom-centric newsletters – sold for cost, rather than profit due to the technically illegal nature of using existing, copyrighted media as their basis – were the main mode of communication via the postal service or at in-person meetings or fan clubs for the majority of the 1970s and 1980s.

In the 1990s, however, the start of widespread use of personal computers and the introduction of the World Wide Web in the early part of the decade changed the way fandom interacted amongst its own members, and eventually how it even interacted with creators of source material. One of the first modes of early online fandom was on GENie, which allowed for electronic correspondence, and then through Usenet, an electronic discussion board that required a subscription to access its content.³⁹ As Hellekson and Busse remark, “as new content-delivery technology became available, fans adopted it.”⁴⁰ As new technology was being introduced, the way that fandom shared information changed. Through the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, fandom continued to utilize Usenet for its fandom needs, while branching out to other online spaces, like Yahoo! Groups, which acted as a sort of electronic newsletter that one subscribed to, much like ListServ, another fandom space. Fandom as a whole was scattered, however, over mailing lists and personal websites defined by different shows, books, or movies, or even by ship. The advent of blogging sites, particularly LiveJournal, changed fandom from an entity

³⁸ Bacon-Smith, 12.

³⁹ Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, eds., *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), 13.

⁴⁰ Hellekson and Busse, 13.

dispersed across multiple websites to an entity concentrated almost exclusively in one place, and that conversion gave new power and enthusiasm to fans. Francesca Coppa also notes, in her essay *A Brief History of Media Fandom*, that the move of media fandom to online spaces thrust slash fandom into the mainstream – and not only did it allow fellow slash fans to meet, talk, and create together, but it also allowed for them to discuss their reasoning for participating in slash fandom and, perhaps, even their politics behind it.⁴¹

The move of fandom to sites like LiveJournal, which was the primary source for fandom interaction for much of the early 2000s, made fandom into a more cohesive community and put new focus on the people who participated in it, rather than the fandoms or ships they were interested in. This shift to a more personal fandom experience was due in large part to the structure of LiveJournal and how it entwined the fandom experience and what was going on in people’s “real lives” – their family, friends, school, and work outside of their fandom life. Fan fiction author unamaga who was, at the time, in the Harry Potter and Supernatural fandoms, experienced what she called a “shift in fandom slang and behavior.”⁴² Around the same time that marriage equality was being grappled with by state legislative bodies, fandom’s self-perception shifted to include more queer flirtation among fans. While affection among fans had always been accepted and normal, more and more users were beginning to seriously explore new gender and sexual identities within the community, not just by way of fictional characters. The new personal nature of fandom on LiveJournal encouraged this behavior. unamaga said of the phenomenon, “A lot of the social justice aspects of fandom came later. Sure, we talked a lot about racism and gender and sexuality, but as a whole it seemed like a lot of us were just trying to find our feet in the sphere of gender, sexual, and romantic identities. LiveJournal, in that way,

⁴¹ Francesca Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom,” *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2006), 54.

⁴² unamaga (fandom member) in discussion with the author, October 2013.

was perfect. You had a safe, self-regulated space where you talked about nothing but puppies, your favorite kind of hot chocolate, and the best episodes of Stargate, but you could simultaneously be over in a friend's journal having a probing discussion about what it meant to be bisexual."⁴³

The structure of LiveJournal also allowed people to join fandom communities on LiveJournal, places that focused on particular shows, ships, or characters. Within these communities, which were separate from people's personal LiveJournal accounts but still run by fans, challenges for fan fiction writers would often emerge – flash fiction, or fiction written within a set time limit, like the Stargate Atlantis Flashfiction community,⁴⁴ big bang challenges, which involved fan fictions in excess of a certain word count, usually upwards of twenty-thousand, and paired fan fiction writers up with fan artists who would create work specifically for the fan fiction written for the challenge, like the Supernatural and J-Squared Big Bang Challenge,⁴⁵ and holiday themed festivals that translated the idea of Secret Santas into fandom experiences, with participants writing fan fiction for one another and “gifting” them to others on specified days. The most famous of these holiday themed festivals – and one still currently being held – is Yuletide, which happens yearly around Christmas (though stories need not be based on Christian holidays) and centers around fandoms that are obscure or rare – meaning they have less stories written about them than other larger, more active fandoms, such as *Harry Potter* or *The Lord of the Rings*.⁴⁶

With a growing presence on sites like LiveJournal, and a growing number of not only fan

⁴³ unamaga (fandom member) in discussion with the author, October 2013.

⁴⁴ “Stargate Atlantis Flashfiction,” *LiveJournal*, last modified April 5, 2013, <http://sga-flashfic.livejournal.com/profile>.

⁴⁵ “Supernatural and J-Squared Big Bang Challenge,” *LiveJournal*, last modified August 29, 2013, <http://spn-j2-bigbang.livejournal.com/profile>.

⁴⁶ “Yuletide FAQ,” *Yuletide*, last modified September 2007, <http://www.yuletidetreasure.org/faq.shtml>.

fiction writers, but also fan artists and “vidders” – people who made fandom-centered music videos taken from source materials – fandom felt like it had found a permanent home on LiveJournal. In 2007, however, that all changed, when various fan artists active in the *Harry Potter* fandom had their accounts deleted without notice and without a given reason from the LiveJournal staff. The resulting conflict was named “Strikethrough”, for the way journal names appeared with a line through them in existing comments and posts after having been deleted. A news post by the LiveJournal staff on May 25, 2007 was overtaken by fans five days later demanding comment on the debacle, but it took until May 31 for a reaction, when the CEO of SixApart, Livejournal’s parent company, made a post admitting, “what was supposed to be a planned attempt to clean up a few journals that were violating LiveJournal’s policies that protect minors turned into a total mess.”⁴⁷ Despite the attempts to reconcile, fandom’s attitude towards LiveJournal and its safety changed overnight – no longer were fans secure in the knowledge that their space was their own. While many fans remained on LiveJournal regardless, new journaling sites, based on LiveJournal’s Open Source code, emerged where fans unwilling to remain could go: JournalFen, GreatestJournal, and Insane Journal to name the most popular. However, even these new – or repurposed – sites were unfriendly to fandom or unable to host the massive number of migrant fans, and as a result many fans began to imagine a journaling site built by and for fandom.

Formed amidst the chaos of the “Strikethrough” scandal was the Organization for Transformative Works. Defining itself as “a nonprofit organization established by fans to serve in the interests of fans by providing access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan

⁴⁷ Barak Berkowitz, “Well we really screwed this one up...,” *LiveJournal news* (blog), May 31, 2007, <http://news.livejournal.com/99159.html>.

culture in its myriad forms,”⁴⁸ this organization, staffed by veteran members of fandom would help fandom take the next step in its evolution, particularly in the realm of online fandom. Run by volunteers, this organization would work to develop a fan run fanwork archive, Archive of Our Own, which launched in 2009, as well as offer legal advocacy “committed to protecting and defending fanworks from commercial exploitation and legal challenge,”⁴⁹ as well as creating a peer-reviewed academic journal that promotes scholarship centered around fandom culture and its products. At the same time that members of fandom were working feverishly to develop and implement the Organization for Transformative Works, other fans were working towards creating a new journaling site that would also be a safe space for fandom endeavors, run for and by fandom. In 2008, a year after “Strikethrough,” Dreamwidth Studios was announced and a year after that, in April of 2009, it launched, basing the site on the codebase offered by LiveJournal but “updated, modernized, and streamlined...”⁵⁰

As fandom went through an upheaval in the aftermath of “Strikethrough,” it began to disperse over new microblogging sites, despite the availability of new fandom friendly blogging sites like Dreamwidth. Many fans turned to Twitter, but even more turned to Tumblr.

Microblogging is defined simply as “a social media site to which a user makes short, frequent posts,”⁵¹ and in the past few years, it has become the primary method of fandom interaction. The new popularity of microblogging, even beyond fandom circles, has lead to new forms of advertising of products and new marketing campaigns for television and movies. As a result, many celebrities – or celebrity representatives – have joined sites like Twitter and Tumblr for

⁴⁸ “What We Believe,” *Organization for Transformative Works*, last modified November 22, 2013, <http://transformativeworks.org/about/believe>.

⁴⁹ “Our Projects,” *Organization for Transformative Works*, last modified November 22, 2013, <http://transformativeworks.org/our-projects>.

⁵⁰ “About Dreamwidth Studios,” *Dreamwidth Studios*, accessed November 19, 2013, <http://www.dreamwidth.org/about>.

⁵¹ “Definition of microblog in English,” *Oxford Dictionaries*, accessed November 20, 2013, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/microblog.

personal and professional reasons. Fandom, then, has been able to interact in new ways with other fans, but also with the cast and creators of their favorite source materials.

This increased interaction has helped to what fandom members describe as the “breaking of the fourth wall,” which traditionally meant direct address of an audience by a member of a cast, but has come to mean the acknowledgement of fandom and fan culture by those involved in the production of source materials, whether in the source material itself or by means of interviews, fan questions, etc. Very recently, perhaps the best example of this would be the participation of Orlando Jones in the fandom of his own show, *Sleepy Hollow*. The actor, who maintains his own Tumblr, theorlandojones.tumblr.com, interacts with fans in a respectful manner, discusses shipping, other fandoms, and even creates his own fanworks. This dissolution of the fourth wall between creators of content and fandom is evidence of how far this subculture has come in the past twenty or so years. Once relegated to the shadows of mainstream culture, this activity is now celebrated and widely known. With this newfound security of status, fandom has recently turned its considerable focus towards political and social issues. While fan culture has always carried elements of “other” within it, and discussions surrounding sexuality, race, gender, and gender identity have always had a place within the fandom conversation, recently these discussions have turned into activism.

It is not surprising to realize that since both queer culture and fandom culture, particularly slash fandom, were long considered “other” by mainstream culture that there would be an overlap between the two. Fandom has long been recognized as a place for people classified as misfits, either by themselves or society, and has become a relatively safe space. It is not, surprising, then, how many members of fandom identify as a member of GSRM. Although a much more recent way of thinking, as it was long assumed that all slash fans were both

cisgendered females and heterosexual, recent surveys offer evidence to the contrary. A survey done recently of over ten thousand Archive of Our Own users showed that the majority of the respondents did not identify as heterosexual, and although many may still identify as female, they may not necessarily cisgender females.⁵² In fact, Tumblr user *centrumlumina*, who conducted the survey and posted the results to their personal Tumblr, found that “the largest demographic in M/M fandom is bi/pansexual women.”⁵³ This challenged long-held traditions regarding fandom that the majority of slash fans were heterosexual. From this data, it is easy to argue that such a large percentage is not only due to the accepting nature of fandom as a whole to those that mainstream culture ostracizes, but also due to the shift in mainstream culture itself over the last few decades towards a more general acceptance of those that fall under the GSRM label.

With this shift in mainstream culture towards acceptance and less tolerance for homophobia and bullying due to sexual orientation or gender identity, there has also been a shift in fandom towards the same. As fandom became more open about its sexuality within its own boundaries, it began to see a need to devote energy towards fighting for the rights of members of the queer community as a whole. Fandom’s efforts in activism are not limited to battling for rights for the queer community, but are interested in combatting sexism, racism, and other inequalities inherent in media and mainstream culture. “Tumblr fandom is hard to pin down in a lot of ways,” fan author *unamaga* says of this activism, “but social justice is kind of an inherent part of the experience nowadays. There are just so many of us that don’t – or can’t – conform to mainstream identities, there’s almost no sexuality or gender identity you could list that isn’t

⁵² *Centrumlumina*, “Heterosexual Female Slash Fans,” *Tumblr* (blog), October 4, 2013, <http://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/63208278796/ao3-census-masterpost>.

⁵³ *Centrumlumina*, “Heterosexual Female Slash Fans,” *Tumblr* (blog), October 4, 2013, <http://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/63208278796/ao3-census-masterpost>.

represented by someone I follow. And we've learned, for better or worse, that when we're loud we usually get our way. Why not shout about something we're personally invested in?"⁵⁴

Although queer representation in the media is no longer a thing of the past, one thing that draws the gay rights movement and fandom together, particularly slash fandom, is that while there might be some representation, it is not nearly enough. Some representations, too, like that contained within *Will & Grace*, simply show a gay person –that is their personality, honed down to the single trait. Many members of fandom are hoping for a much more diverse sort of representation – like the kind found in the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale*, whose creators stated that while one of the main characters may be queer, it is just one facet of their personality and does not define their characterization, unlike many other queer characters who exist in other mediums. Cecil Baldwin, who portrays the local radio announcer of the fictional town of Night Vale in this podcast, recently said:

As someone who identifies as gay, I remember growing up and going to the bookstore and going to the gay and lesbian section and thinking to myself, “This is it. This is what we have. This one shelf. That’s it.” And, you know, we have some short stories, and we have some history, and stuff like that, but you know, like, the fiction all centered around being gay. Like, it was defined by that. And so, I think what I hear a lot from the fans, and I share their sentiment, is, here is something where being gay is just one aspect of a much larger world that we live in. [...] Like, just one aspect of Cecil is his sexuality. And, on top of that, in this crazy world of Night Vale, his sexuality and his relationship with another man is the least weird thing to happen on a daily basis. [...] We’re pushing boundaries out, and saying, “This isn’t a gay podcast. We’re not gonna check your card at

⁵⁴ unamaga (fandom member) in conversation with the author, October 2013.

the door.” I love that.⁵⁵

While this lack of representation still vexes, it is important to note that *Will & Grace*, and others like it, were vastly important for the representation it did provide. However, in the fifteen or so years since it began to air, the cultural and social climate of America has shifted. People already comfortable in their sexuality within the fandom sphere are hungry for this kind of representation, as they feel that while someone may be a member of the queer community, being queer is not the defining characteristic of their person. As for younger people, who often stumble onto fandom in the course of a life of possibly feeling like an outsider, slash fandom can sometimes help them to come to terms with their own sexuality, whereas they might not have otherwise, be it because of their upbringing, or not being overly exposed to any sort of queer media or material. Fandom, especially on the micro blogging site Tumblr, has become a safe space for people like this, and for those whose sexualities or gender identities are not yet recognized by larger society. Compared to the early days of fandom, it is much more socially acceptable to not only be “out” as a queer member of society, but also as a member of fandom.

The GSRM rights movement and the modern slash fandom community have both made great strides since their beginnings in the late 1960s. Fandom, particularly slash fandom, is no longer something to be ashamed of or hidden away from mainstream culture, and, in fact, many fandoms interact directly with the creators of the source material without fear of recrimination. Members of the queer community have gained many rights and privileges once never thought possible – illegalized discrimination in the work place, the ability to serve in the military, decriminalized sodomy, the reclassification of homosexuality as not a mental disorder, to name a few – although the fight for full equality and freedom from oppression is still far from over and

⁵⁵ “Nerdist Writer’s Panel: Welcome to Night Vale,” *Nerdist*, accessed November 20, 2013, <http://www.nerdist.com/2013/11/nerdist-writers-panel-116-welcome-to-night-vale/>.

will likely stretch on for decades to come. Likewise, the mutual struggle within the GSRM movement and fandom for representation in media and everyday life continues. Though there have been incredible examples in recent media that portray GSRM individuals, these examples are few and far between, and the intersection of slash fandom and GSRM persons truly proves the need for more.

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