Fanfiction and the Author

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1. From Foucault to Fanfic

Foucault and Language

A great deal of previous work on fandom takes Pierre Bourdieu's work on socio-cultural capital as its theoretical grounding. For Bourdieu, participation in culture is a matter of distinction and habitus: in demonstrating appreciation of those works to which our upbringing and social position inclines and equips us to interpret, we gain position in relation to other social agents, contrary to artistic ideologies of disinterest and self-sacrifice ([1979] 1986, [1992] 1996, 1993). For Bourdieu, even supposedly 'pure pleasure' is a matter of 'playing the cultural game well, of playing on one's skill at playing, at cultivating a pleasure which “cultivates”' (Bourdieu 1986, p. 498). In his formulation, 'taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (p. 6). The double application of this insight, which allows a deconstruction of dominant culture's derogation of fandom in terms of devalued emotionalism (Jenson 1992), and an understanding of inter-fan struggle and bids for distinction over the capital of particular subcultures (Thornton 1995), has influenced a wide range of scholars: see Bacon-Smith (1992); Jenkins (1992); Thornton (1995); Baym (2000); Hills (2002; 2005); Williams (2010); and Milner (2011). Bourdieu's work is useful for many studies and certainly not antithetical to this one, but Michel Foucault's work on language and power is more suited to a study dealing with primarily with text and its workings.

For Foucault, what language means is less important than what it does. Language is active, and not a reflection or sign but 'some sort of practical intervention' (Callewaert 2006, p. 91). We will not go 'from discourse towards its interior' in search of some posited hidden meaning or 'true' signification, but study 'discourse itself, its appearance and its regularity' and 'go towards external conditions of possibility' (Foucault 1981, p. 67). I am demonstrating something fanfic does and how it does it: that is, change popular cultural texts and thus cultural conditions of possibility. Foucault calls language in action 'discourse', and as the term has been so widely taken up, it will be useful to recap what he meant by that. Discourse, after all, is language without a fundamental Truth from which to interpret its meaning, language devoid of an underlying Text to provide the ultimate meaning of signs:

One no longer attempts to uncover the great enigmatic statement that lies hidden beneath its signs; one asks how it functions, what representations it designates, what elements it cuts out and removes, how it analyses and

Discourses, in the plural, are the contingent codes according to which a society operates and understands itself: they are not True in any essential sense, but produce the necessary ‘truths’ of particular cultures. Discourses are active and productive, as well as exclusive and repressive, making this method of analysis apt for the regulated and transformative productions of fandom.

The unity of a discourse, which Foucault calls a ‘formation’, is not some pre-defined topic or concept, but the rules that determine how topics or concepts are formulated, what possibilities are thereby brought into creation (Young 2001, pp. 400–401; Andersen 2003, p. 8). Discursive formations are systems of production and organization. Discursive formations pass thresholds in their development. After a certain point, they begin to produce statements about their own norms (pp.186–87). Ample evidence of this can be found in fans’ commentary and analysis on fandom, much of which is archived at Fanlore.org (2015).

Discourses are comprised of ‘statements’. Foucault’s definition of the statement is largely negative (demonstrating that it is not a speech act, not a grammatical unit, etc.) and ultimately unhelpful—Young perhaps makes best use of it in stressing the statement as material event, an ‘incision into a discursive field’ (Young, p. 402; cf. Foucault 1989, p. 28). Statements may be visual/imagic as well as linguistic. The statement’s primary effect is change and discontinuity; yet, it must also have a relation to sameness and regularity in order to function within the discourse it affects (Young, p. 402). This accords with Foucault’s purpose
to show that to speak is to do something—something other than to express what one thinks; to translate what one knows, and something other than to play with the structures of a language (langue); to show that to add a statement to a pre-existing series of statements is to perform a complicated and costly gesture, which involves conditions […], and rules […]; to show that a change in the order of discourse does not presuppose ‘new ideas’, a little invention and creativity, a different mentality, but transformations in a practice, perhaps also in neighbouring practices, and in their common articulation ([1969] 1989, p. 209, my emphasis).

I would add that, in their relation to sameness, statements can also solidify and reinforce structures, the primary function Edward Said attributed to them (2003). We will see this quite often in fanfic, as visual statements
from the television texts are repeated and consolidated in stories. At the root of a discourse are governing statements, and other statements branch off according to the ‘conditions of possibility’ of this discourse (Foucault 1981, p. 67). So in Young’s example, one would not interpret instances of colonial discourses in order to reveal their hidden meaning, an ‘imperial unconscious’, but attempt to formulate their rules of possibility and see how these enabled specific statements (p. 408). The governing statements are the fundamental core of a discourse, and various options will be developed at the peripheries, some of which may contradict each other (2001, p. 405). Foucault compared governing statements to the roots of a tree, opening up and demarcating the most general domain of possibilities for other statements, analogous to branches (1989, pp. 147–148). For instance, if I were to read one hundred examples of fiction about reproduction available at mainstream bookshops, I might find a governing statement like ‘reproduction is achieved by penetrative intercourse between a male and a female at the time of the female’s fertility’ as a condition of the discursive formation ‘reproduction’, but many varied statements constructing ‘reproduction’ at the peripheries. The source texts are one obvious of governing statements, for the fic I study would not exist without it, but these consistent regularities can also have their sources in broader culture. Carabine writes that ‘discourses “hook” into normative ideas’ from broader society as shortcuts to complex meaning (2001, p. 269), and I find this an apt term to utilize. It would be more precise to say that statements in particular discourses ‘hook’ into elements of broader, normative discourses circulating in larger social contexts, and this is how I will be using the term.

Finally, for Foucault, the concept of the ‘archive’ is derived from all the various systems of statements operative in a culture at a particular time. It seems to be something like an arch-discourse, ‘the general system of the formation and transformation of statements’ (1989, p. 130). It is a hypothetical construction rather than a theoretical-methodological tool, for he states it would be impossible to describe the archive ‘in its totality’ (Ibid.). Our hypothetical archive might be ‘media’, and I would suggest that transformations in a discourse begun at the level of statement may come to have broader effects on the archive and so on culture. As Fairclough and Fairclough put it, discourse is ‘on the one hand an effect of social life, and on the other, ha[s] effects on social life, both helping to keep existing forms in existence and helping to change them’ (2012, p. 79). As we will come to see, the broadcast of Supernatural 10x05 at the end of 2014 demonstrates this process in action, proving the concrete effects of transformative work on the public sphere.
Foucault’s understanding of the function of authorship is also crucial to this study. Following Barthes’ seminal essay ‘Death of the Author’, a call to arms for the liberation of the reader from pre-inscribed meaning, Foucault argued that whilst texts are certainly not complete and unified at their point of origin, it was not enough to simply claim that the author had simply disappeared, liberating the reader to make of a text what s/he will. Foucault contended that the author has not vanished, but serves as a principle by which the meaning of a text is constrained, and the text valued. Foucault uses the phrase ‘author-function’ to describe those cultural/institutional operations by which an ‘author’ is symbolically constructed as the principle of textual interpretation (1991). In addition to writers themselves, critics, networks, studios and fans themselves all contribute to this work of attribution. We utilize the figure of the author to limit the meanings of text: ‘the Author is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses’ (p. 119). Author figures like George R. R. Martin or Eric Kripke are often held up as the key to the real meaning or true text behind a franchise involving the labour of thousands (Jenkins 1995, pp. 188–191) and, as we will see, Martin makes much use of this discursive construction in public comments on his work. Fanfiction sometimes consolidates the construction of the author figure in this way, especially regarding Game of Thrones. At the same time, fanfiction itself, in which the author’s pseudonym stands purposely and demonstratively for a body of text, whilst the body of text forms the only clue by which one can decipher the supposed master-key of the author, seems a fruitful site to substitute the questions of discourse Foucault finds outdated—‘who really spoke? And with what authenticity?’—with the more pertinent ‘what are the modes of existence of this discourse?’ (p. 120). These questions grant us perspective on how fanfiction changes popular texts, and equally how far it consolidates their discursive formations.

Henry Jenkins began the application of the author-function to fan studies, with an analysis of Gene Roddenberry’s function in the original Star Trek series. He concluded that the figure of ‘Gene’ helped fans ‘classify the relationships between texts, explain textual events (or neutralize discrepancies), and to demarcate a text’s value through his authorship or approval’ (1995, pp. 188–191). Since then, Hills (2002; 2010a); Wexelblat (2002); Gray (2010); and Kompare (2011) have discussed the function in Doctor Who, Babylon 5, Lord of the Rings and Lost. Newman and Levine have discussed the strategic positioning of author figures to increase the cultural capital of television texts, a strategy of cultural legitimation invested in the Romantic ideal of a sole genius author (2012, pp. 963–1393). Scott is concerned with the
gendered institutional power and strategic self-presentation of cult TV figures who wield an author-function, whom she calls ‘fanboy-auteurs’. These men—and they are, still, largely White men—perform self-abnegation and liberality to their fans through text and paratexts. At the same time, they retain an economic and institutional position of control over the text:

Borrowing a term from Jonathan Gray, we could frame the fanboy auteur as an ‘undead author,’ or an author who understands that metaphorically ‘killing himself’ is an ideal way to engender fannish solidarity, and [to] ‘fashion himself as “just one of the fans”, when he is decidedly privileged in the relationship’ (Scott 2011, p. 168, quoting Gray 2010, pp. 112–113).

As we will see, writers and showrunners make varied usage of the author function in paratexts, including claims to fannish identity and solidarity. These claims set up a construction of authorship that fanfic both consolidates and transforms.

Fanfiction in the Academy

Fandom scholarship begins as development and response. Its seminal texts are a development of recuperative work on popular media by cultural critics in the second half of the twentieth century, notably Hall’s encoding/decoding model of texts (1980) and Fiske’s work on selective and resistant uses of popular media (1990a, b). It developed these theories into a response to the popular and academic pathologizing of fans (Jenson 1992; cf. Scott 2011, p. 19). This pathologization—of fans as outcasts, obsessive, dangerous—has not disappeared, but is complicated both by democratizing movements within education and a certain popular understanding that, in a mediated society, ‘everyone’s got to be a fan of something’ (Hills 2005, p. 35). In this section, I trace a trajectory from celebration of fanfiction as a political resistance to corporate media (Jenkins 1992), and/or the expression and binding material of an alternative female society (Bacon-Smith 1992), through to more sceptical and reserved readings of fanfic by contemporary critics. Then, I consider perspectives treating fanfiction as literature. As work on slash (same-sex erotica) still comprises a substantial amount of the extant work and follows its own more specific narrative, I treat that separately below.

The academic history of fanfiction in general begins with Henry Jenkins’ Textual Poachers, casting the resistant fan as a resistant reader who steals fleeting pleasure from the territory of the producer (1992, pp. 24–27).
Unlike the nomad, the writer creates an artefact; thus, a community can evolve around a new corpus (pp. 44–49). Jenkins, Camille Bacon-Smith and Constance Penley dominate the early phase of fan studies, which we might call the ‘valorizing of resistance’: resistance to capitalism, gender conformity and the shallow, materialistic way of living Jenkins called ‘mundania’ (Jenkins 1992, pp. 262–264). Though broadly political in impetus, this phase overlaps with responses to pathologization, challenging the stereotype that fans have ‘no life’. Penley invokes De Certeau, to theorize fans’ utilization of hegemonic material to their own ends, in a process of cultural *bricolage* or recombination of given elements. Recombination is important, as fans typically appropriate from a wide variety of media sources, creating new meanings by recontextualizing as well as reshaping texts. As we have seen, the New Media context of convergence has dated the poaching metaphor.

Jenkins argued that fanfiction communities work according to a moral economy (2006b). This term was first utilized by E. P. Thompson to explain the morality of those historical actors behind De Certeau’s metaphor. Thompson thought that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century peasant leaders legitimized their revolts through an appeal to ‘traditional rights and customs’ and the ‘wider consensus of the community’, claiming that their actions protected pre-existing property rights ‘against those who sought them abuse for their own gain’. They found ‘consensus […] so strong that it overrode motives of fear or deference’ (Thompson 1971, pp.78–79). Jenkins draws a parallel with fanfiction writers who see themselves as protecting the characters they love according to a communal idea of moral right, against those who would exploit or abuse them for profit (Jenkins, 2006b, pp. 54–57). Jenkins probably exaggerates in invoking Thompson’s reference to ‘fear’ of traditional owners, though ‘deference’ might apply in some places. Contemporary fanfiction practices both exhibit and contradict a feeling of communal ownership: on the one hand, it is popular to refer to the appropriated characters as ‘ours’: see, for instance, the deliberately provocative subheading/assertion, ‘We love our boys bloody’, of a community dedicated solely to the hurt/comfort trope in *Supernatural* fanfiction (http://spn-hurtcomfort.livejournal.com/). On the other, the practice of disclaiming ownership of the characters used in the heading for individual fictions serves as a pre-emptive defence against alleged wrongdoing: the claim that one is taking some limited liberty with the property of another, but ultimately recognizes their rights of ownership (cf. Bailey 2005, p. 191).

Bacon-Smith (1992) inaugurated the ethnographic tradition of fanfiction studies. She argued that dominant culture silences women’s pain and experiences, and makes male/female relationships difficult. The processes
of creating fanfiction enable an alternative female community; whilst fanfiction, especially hurt-comfort, gives voice to the pain and vulnerabilities that people, especially women, are denied the expression of in life (Bacon-Smith 1992, pp. 270–279). Actually, there is a significant subsection of hurt-comfort invested in the rather less properly-feminist exploration of sadomasochism, as the community header above seems to perform. Bacon-Smith is aware of this (p. 270), yet goes out of her way to deny the possibility of erotic appeal in her archetypal story (p. 259) and suggest that sadomasochistic fantasy is ‘limited to a small group’ of non-American fans ‘specifically interested’ in using the source material for this purpose (p. 280, 141). She considers that fanfiction and the fan community have reformist potential, but, like Geertz’s deep play (1973), could also retard social change by providing means for the expression of tension whilst maintaining the status quo (Bacon-Smith, p. 287). Under a guise of play, fanfiction creates an alternative culture and alternative narratives to express their experience (pp. 292–294); but Bacon-Smith is not prepared to claim this can alter hegemony. Bacon-Smith does not account for the ability of discourse to affect transformations in neighbouring discourses, or the media ‘archive’.

Jenkins’s later work casts fanfiction as a point of potential convergence between corporate and grassroots media. He stresses the educational potential of fanfiction for teenagers, who are creatively utilizing ‘affinity spaces’ useful to the types of work and learning they will need as adults in the present economy (2006a, pp. 169–177). This potential of fanfiction as training in new literacy is increasingly noted by education researchers, teachers and librarians. The most prolific writer on this topic is Rebecca Black, whose Adolescents and Online Fanfiction (2008) comes endorsed by Jenkins.

Others have followed Jenkins and Bacon-Smith in the study of fanfiction by adults. Here, perspectives diverge. Jenkins notes that one reservation he has about Textual Poachers is that it encouraged academics ‘to read fanfiction in primarily political terms’ (2006b, p. 37). I agree, but observe another tendency, rooted in the literary tradition, to embrace the opposite extreme, bracketing politics to construct a discourse of fanfiction as art, specifically a postmodern art, worthy of studying like any other literature but exempt from theorization of what fiction is and does. This is the impression one gets from Pugh (2005). Pugh’s work studies intertextuality; the communal writing process; genres and tropes; authorial voice; and the different experiences of professional and fanfiction writing. However, it lacks theory, and leaves one wondering what the argument is. Despite Pugh’s appreciation of
intertextuality, the book actually falls into the Modernist trap of the literary work as self-sufficient, existing without social context.

Other literature-orientated theories of fandom include Stein's models of boundaries and opportunities: fanfiction, she theorizes, thrives within communal and practical limitations such as the use of canon, use of fantext (fan-originated ideas regarding character, theme and plot that have come to be commonly accepted within discrete communities), genre expectations and technology. These boundaries place restrictions on fic, but simultaneously create its possibilities and impetuses (Stein and Busse, 2009; Stein 2006, 2008). These concepts integrate neatly with Foucauldian discourse analysis, with canon, fantext, genre and technology being observable factors in the development of discursive formations. In collaboration with Busse, Stein suggests that fanfiction might be viewed as part of a tradition that celebrates reproduction, mechanical or digital, and therefore poses a challenge to concepts of originality as creativity and the ownership of art (Stein and Busse, 2009, p. 193). The creation of fanfiction in practice challenges notions of originality as being the condition of creativity; however, Stein and Busse also observe that the rhetoric of fandom tends to stress the innovative qualities of fic writing rather than appropriative remix. Jenkins thought that ‘a poached culture requires a conception of aesthetics emphasizing borrowing and recombination as much or more as original creation and artistic innovation’ (1992, p. 224), but, in fact, fandom's rhetoric of originality suggests lingering adherence to older models of cultural authority (Stein and Busse 2009, p. 205). This residual tendency supports the legitimation paradox in that it affirms the legitimacy of a fanfic, a practice of pastiche, via a lexis of authorial genius and completeness. For example, performances of speechlessness or incoherence in the face of brilliance are expressed as random lines of keyboard characters, or claims to have ‘died’ from the experience of reading. Another dialogue-closing gesture is the expression ‘You win the internets', which performs resignation of the discourse into the hands of the most accomplished, most creative writers. All three of these tropes can be observed in the hundreds of comments on an acknowledged fandom masterpiece, Fleshflutter’s hilarious yet profoundly moving epic farce, The Incestuous Courtship of the Anti-Christ’s Bride (2009). I suggest we understand these as statements in a construction called the author, which informs the fifth chapter of this thesis.

Still privileging a traditionally literary perspective, Derecho (2006) suggests that fanfiction be viewed as a form of archontic literature: this concept, again adapted from Derrida, views fanfic as an always-open archive of text of the sort historically used for cultural critique by marginalized groups.
The main problem with this, aside from the dialogue-closing gestures noted above, is Derecho’s too-easy comparisons between fanfic and early forms of literary appropriation. She claims that

Historically, writing archontic literature has been a risky undertaking for women, and this is as true of contemporary fanfic authors today as it was for the first published women authors. Today, women who write fanfiction write under threat of legal prosecution (p. 72).

Derecho writes that ‘many’ fanfiction participants have ‘received warnings or cease-and-desist letters’ (p. 72), a rather disingenuous generalization considering the millions of fanworks in existence versus the proportion that have drawn corporate attention. To the individual, the chances of being noticed by the corporate owners of her fanfiction characters, and that said corporate owners would consider it worth pursuing the particular infringement, are insignificant. Lindgren Leavenworth and Isaksson have taken up Derecho’s theory to analyse specific works of fanfic from a literary perspective, contending that ‘canon works occasion fanfic in the first place and fanfic, in turn, deposits interpretations and associations into the archive which may influence any new reading of the canons’ (2013, p. 12). This may be so, but their lack of attention to inter-fan or fan-producer tensions and hierarchies fails to account for the fact that different statements in fanfic make different levels of impact on fandom and canon, and some make no impact at all.

When critics write about fanfiction as ‘works of literature’ (Kaplan 2006, p. 135), they typically address those texts that exhibit literary cultural capital in a scholastic context. That is, texts that are polished, stylish, complete, conform to Standard English spelling and grammar, and exhibit the sort of literary tropes, jokes and references that suggest a degree of higher education in the arts. Kaplan goes some way towards acknowledging this omission when she notes the question of ‘whether only literature of a certain quality rewards literary analysis’ (2006, p. 151, in). I am not content with her continuation that ‘regardless, there exists plenty of fanfiction which meets the criteria of quality usually desired by literary critics’ such as that she analyses. Fic that meets these standards is still more likely to make an impact on the discursive formation in question, but we should also pay attention to how and where lack of these capitals minimize impact or how fic can wield impact despite lack of them.

address class and language use. Wright’s ‘discourse’ is different to my use of the term: she means, following Bakhtin, ‘the centripetal and centrifugal struggles of the fanfiction (discourse) community’ (p. 13). She is not concerned with fiction so much as the textual power struggles between older, established fans and less literate newcomers. She primarily chooses fic according to the fan-profile of the author (p. 66). The actual texts she cites are reviews and interviews. Still, her work provides useful insight into some discursive practices constructing proper/legitimate fanfiction and silencing, segregating or normalizing that fanfic constructed as inferior, notably due to literacy and the inferred aged of its authors. Here, Bourdieu’s theories of capital can be utilized to observe how degrees of cultural and educational capital influence the impact of statements on discursive formations. Wright documents strong peer pressure for Standard English (pp. 79; 99–100; 115; 139; 141; 159; 160). Bury, too, analyses a fanfiction community’s language use, revealing commitments that are unsurprising after Bourdieu: to a traditional model of education and the valuation of distanced aesthetic criticism over emotional or voyeuristic engagement, though the tongue-in-cheek performance of such was permitted (pp. 108–130). Bury asks participants what sort of fanfiction they avoid at all costs: their replies include work with poor spelling, grammar, lack of style, lack of the canon knowledge, and headers implying that the author has written the fic due to an experience she had, which she would like to see the characters negotiate. This last stricture, which not all participants agreed with, demands as Bury notes a critically proper degree of distance between author and artefact (pp. 98–103). The more personal, emotive involvement is viewed by some as amateurish and naïve. Overall, ‘there is a strong bent towards quality literature’ and ‘a concern for quality is highly normative in terms of class’ (p. 103), and quality can be defined as exhibiting a high degree of cultural and literary capital.

More critics are coming to recognize, then, that fanfiction should not be hastily generalized as radical (cf. Bury, p. 205), but has both ‘transformational’ and ‘affirmational’ properties (fan obsession_inc, quoted in Booth 2015, p. 12), often simultaneously and within the same text. Several essays in Internet Fictions (2009) take this perspective (Grandi; Pimenova; Leppännen). For Leppännen, fanfic is simultaneously about change, innovation and creativity, as well as about insuring that what gets communicated is comprehensible and appropriate, i.e. about regulating and constraining what can be said and written, in what ways (Leppännen 2009, p. 64).
She likewise observes that fic is regulated by normative measures and controls and is therefore inseparable from politics and language ideologies (p. 63). Further, the transgressive nature of the driving question behind fic, which she calls ‘what if’, is somewhat neutralized by the conventionalization and categorizations of the fanfiction archive. I, too, understand the archive as a code-based normative organizational principle, but it should be remembered that the degree to which fic communities are moderated is variable. (For further perspectives on fanfiction with a literary/linguistic slant that neglects socio-political context, see Grandi; Collin-Smith 2009).

Now, we must outline the academic history of a particular kind of fanfic. Same-sex erotica and/or relationship-focused stories have a strong presence in fandom, and the history of slash in academia, despite its narrower focus, pre-dates academic attention to fanfiction in general. Nonetheless, we can discern a similar movement in terms of a valorization of resistance giving way to more situated, sceptical perspectives.

In 1985, Joanna Russ published two versions of the same essay. Intended for a scholarly audience, ‘Pornography for women, by women, with love’, appeared in an academic book (1985a), whilst ‘Another addict raves about K/S’ appeared in the Star Trek fanzine Nome (1985b). The central argument was the same: that Kirk/Spock slash fanfiction is not about homosexuality, but a coded exploration of ideal love as desired by women: the perfect union between egalitarian partners, free of gender roles and dominance. Russ theorized that this was impossible to envisage in a heterosexual union. In a similar vein, Lamb and Veith (1986) described Kirk/Spock as an ‘androgynous’ union uniting and emphasizing the culturally-masculine and culturally-feminine qualities of both characters (pp. 242–244). They found that egalitarianism in a heterosexual relationship was extremely difficult to write (1986, pp. 239–240), This idea of slash as gender-transcendence and the elision or bracketing of the gendered body reaches its height in Lamb and Veith’s assertion that K/S is ‘not about sex’ (p. 254). The idea used to be quite influential: Russ drew heavily on it from the pre-publication and conference papers of Lamb and Veith (1985a, pp. 83–84). Bacon-Smith appears to endorse it when she repeats the question Lamb and Veith attributed to the slash writer: ‘Not, why can’t men be more like women, but why can’t we all just be human?’ (1992, p. 249).

Likewise, Falzone (2005) insists that slash is more a matter of spiritual unity than a genre of the body, repeating the myth of the reunification of two halves of a complete being, which Plato attributed to Aristophanes (pp. 254–255). Yet, this article also attempts to import the lenses of queer theory and post-Marxism: K/S, Falzone claims, ‘has defeated the system
of market reappropriation, and in its aberrancy, remained somehow pure’ (p. 250). Moreover: ‘In the same sense that mechanically reproducible art was useless for purposes of fascism, slashed narratives are useless for purposes of patriarchy, heterosexism, and commodification’ (p. 251).

Even if Falzone is unaware of the feminist and queer problematization of slash (see below), I would question how, given the sheer proliferation and ever-surprising variation of slash online by 2005, academics could still be attempting to valorize it as something ‘pure’. Further, Kripke’s introduction of slash to *Supernatural* demonstrates that ‘slashed narratives’ certainly can be re-appropriated and utilized by industry (see episodes 5x01; 5x18).

This gesture does not necessarily deflate all subversive potential: some fans thought the official ‘approval’ of incest slash a delightfully progressive introduction of outsider-statements to mainstream TV discourse. Arguably, it inscribes in popular myth a relationship with genuinely radical potential. But it is certainly not ‘pure’ fannish resistance to the market.

Bacon-Smith also broaches some different theories of slash. She briefly admits the possibility that women just like writing about attractive men having sex with each other, moving swiftly on to the consideration that, at the time of writing, there were not many female characters in the media and fewer still interesting enough to write about (pp. 239–242). She also suggests that women identify ‘within’ the television screen, finding sensuality in the relationships between characters, as opposed to projecting an objectifying gaze across it. Therefore, literature dealing with connections between three-dimensional characters, which at the time of her writing usually meant male ones, was more likely to bring pleasure to women (pp. 193–197).

In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins sees slash as a female-orientated critique of ‘masculinity’. He suggests that slash breaks down the artificial barriers and restrictions patriarchy imposes on male/male relationships, denying the continuum between friendship and love (1992, pp. 202–219). The central issue with this is a problem underlying the treatment of ‘masculinity’ in many slash theories (Bacon-Smith 1992; Kustritz 2003; Lamb and Veith 1986; Russ 1985a; Penley 1997; Woledge 2006): it is pervasively Western-centric. On the pleasures and problems of slash for a woman raised partly or wholly according to Eastern social norms—the present writer included—wherein strong and demonstrative same-sex bonds are a very *condition* of masculinity and sociality in general, academia is silent.

Jenkins expands on the ‘critique of masculinity’ model in the brilliantly titled ‘Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking’ (Green, Jenkins and Jenkins 1998). There is deliberately no unifying theory here: the article is written in discussion with the slash writers, some of whom espouse earlier theories,
including the reconstruction of masculinity and the lack of interesting female characters in media, but others of whom take the unapologetic sex-radical position implied by the title. ‘To be honest,’ says one informant, ‘I don’t even identify with any of the characters. I’m just fascinated by them. Plus, I’m prurient and salacious and simply adore to watch’ (p. 17). The article also notes some problems recognized in and around slash: the potential misogyny of erasing women from the narrative (pp. 20–22); the separation of gay sex from queer political experience; the homophobic overtones of the trope noted by Penley, wherein characters are portrayed as ‘normally’ straight, yet irresistibly in love with each other (pp. 22–30); and the tension between ‘acceptably feminine’ narratives (p. 32) and stories depicting, for instance, rape, sadomasochism and alienation. Cynthia Jenkins observes a tendency to divide ‘good porn’, which is ‘relationship orientated as hell, oh so caring and tender’, from ‘bad porn’, which is neither (pp. 32–33). Relatedly, Lepännen suggests that it is ‘because [slash] does not involve women’ that it can be a ‘neutral’ way for girls and young women to explore sexuality (Leppänen 2008, p. 170). The absence of female bodies probably makes for a safe read given that ‘no female characters are taken advantage of or abused’ (p. 170), but I would question the descriptor of ‘neutral’—slash often involves distinct power inequalities, variably related to Western constructions of masculine and feminine sexuality.

Cicioni (1998) considers slash more radical than romance fiction, because it voices women’s desires outside the dominant notions of acceptable heterosexual relationships. In her work, we see the beginnings of a newer influence on slash critics: queer theory, which tends towards a broadly Foucauldian conception of resistance as multiple and polymorphous pleasures, a ‘creative practice of producing new ways of relating to others and ourselves’ (Hayes and Ball 2010, p. 224). Slash, writes Cicioni, is queer in the sense of a non-heterosexual response to mass culture—a response from people who do not share the orientations supplied in the texts they respond to (p. 175). This conception of queerness is from Doty (1993, xviii), a strong influence on slash theory since the mid-2000s.

If a queer perspective and methodology is the first hallmark of recent slash theory, the second is scepticism towards anything ‘inherently’ resistant-feminist or subversive in slash (see especially Scodari 2003; Flegel and Roth 2010; Booth 2015, pp. 131–135). Contemporary critics are alert to the alternative potential in slash: to re-inscribe both sexism and heteronormativity through its treatment or elision of women, and its attitudes to power roles in relationships. Thirdly, it should be recalled that contemporary theorists are working in the context of fandom post home-internet, which
amongst other changes, has prompted an unprecedented increase in the volume and visibility of slash, wider demographic variation in its author/readership, and erased the complex initiation and barriers to entrance Bacon-Smith detailed in print-zine culture.

The phrase ‘queer female space’ as a way of thinking about slash was coined by Busse (2005, p. 105). She points out that slashers have a great variety of sexual identities, and argues that the subversive nature of slash is the erotic space in which readers and writers can experience, explore and connect through sexualities outside the heteronormative binary. She takes up queer theory's focus on the performative, non-essential nature of gender, especially flexible in cyberspace. Busse's paradigm has been taken up by Lackner, Lucas et al. (2006) and Lothian (2007; Busse and Lothian 2009). Lackner, Lucas et al. note that the complaint that women are absent from slash only makes sense in terms of a Modernist conception of the text as eliding the reader and writer (pp. 195–196). Busse and Lothian (2009) extend the focus on multiplicity and inessentiality by discussing the queer potential of genderswap slash, wherein the trope of two straight men who happen to love each other often gives way to depictions ‘less definable in terms of sexual orientation,’ and ‘rather than the attainment of a pre-destined love despite bodies, this relationship happens because of the ways that bodies trouble identities and desires’ in the realization of a queer commonality (pp. 116, 119). Elsewhere, however, Busse notes that a playful performance of queerness in a safe online space can be problematic when disconnected from queer identity and activism in real life, and may be seen as ‘exploitative and offensive’ to those who live with the oppression and risk of being queer in daily life. The negative potential is for a ‘fetishization of gay sex and the lack of a clear sociocultural and historicopolitical context’ discrimination (2006, p. 211).

This concept of queer female space has the advantage of being more flexible than the old binary of resistance or misogyny, is better informed by postmodern gender theory and is sensitive to the new online context of fandom. Russo stresses the interactive, not-for-profit nature of the online slash community as a microcosmic manifestation of the new sorts of queer possibility slash narratives make manifest (2002, pp. 24–28). However, I question the blanket employment of ‘female’. Male slash writers are numerically few, but I can attest from thirteen years of experience in slash communities that they a) exist; b) identify as men; and c) identify their work as slash. According to Dennis (2010), at least one third of the slash writers on Fanfiction.net are male. His source is their profiles (p. 749), a questionable gauge of accuracy, but as queer relations gain in acceptability, especially
amongst young people, it is not unreasonable to assume that at least some of them are telling the truth.

Two further questions have been raised regarding the resistant or subversive nature of slash: firstly, do slash writers subversively create a queer subtext in the source, by way of a resistant reading, or are they making latent what is already there? The latter is Jones’s (2002) opinion: slash centres on ‘cult’ texts, she argues, precisely because these fantastic, open-ended narratives resist the stability and closure of domestic heterosexuality. Woledge also focuses on latent elements, though pace Jones, she considers these to be the intimacy of the Kirk/Spock relationship rather than Star Trek’s cult qualities (Woledge 2005a, p. 238). She therefore reads the pairing using an encoding/decoding model, considering slash a decoding of the encoded relationship. Tosenberger, too, takes this perspective, on Supernatural slash, noting that ‘too strong a focus upon slash as a subversion of canon can mask consideration of the ways in which the canon itself may make queer readings available’ (2008, 1.3). She cites Doty’s observation that

to base queer readings only upon notions of audience and reception leaves you open to the kind of dismissive attitude that sees queer understandings of popular culture as being the result of ‘wishful thinking’ about a text or ‘appropriation’ of a text by a cultural and/or critical special interest group (Doty 2000, p. 4).

From a Foucauldian perspective on language, slash need not be either extracted/made latent, or radically invented, because new statements in a discourse alter discourse: there is no clear separation between source text and fandom, but the creative language use of fandom creates possibilities in the text and vice versa. Fanfic inflects and alters statements from the source text through reiteration with variation, using hints, lines and references to create alternative explanations and expansions, which are then read back onto the source text and, in some cases, taken up by the producers for explicit reference. Regarding Sherlock and Supernatural, this is highly and demonstratively relevant due to canonical reference to slash, and the fact that its most-slashed protagonists will never actually become a couple on screen according to the showrunners’ denials. I would note, however, that cult texts are increasingly open to textual exchange with their fandoms, and only Western-centric, ‘heterosexist logic’ (Jenkins 1992, p. 204) assumes that everybody is straight until proven otherwise.

No recent attempts have been made to present a universal theory of slash, and this is probably due to a tacit acknowledgement of its endless
variation. Slash can be progressive or regressive, transgressive or traditional, pornographic, romantic or both (Driscoll 2006). The term covers relentlessly brutal tales of alienation and violence, and sweetly domestic vignettes. It can be homophobic or gay-positive, parodic or serious, and depict anything from hand-holding to gang rape. It is more productive, I think, to take a focused perspective on slash in a particular fandom. This project, then, offers a perspective on fanfic that affords precise attention to its social, cultural and technological situation, without losing focus on the specificity of what fiction is. The theoretical tools best suited to this are drawn from Foucauldian discourse theory, with attention to the influence of cultural and literary capitals recognized by Bourdieu. It does not attempt to account for ‘slash’ as a specific phenomenon, but as one of those discursive practices where, in the recombination of statements of varied provenance, assumptions may be revealed and alternative possibilities suggested. The next chapter lays out the exact process.