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From Slash Fan Fiction to Crip Fan Fiction: What Role Does Disability Have in Fandom?

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Abstract: Slash fiction is perceived by scholars like Henry Jenkins as capable of presenting a counterhegemonic message that critically questions and disrupts power structures in the production of fiction. Slash fiction presents a critical queering of characters, disrupting the heterocentrism of canonical fiction. Slash fiction is a creation of fan fiction where canonically heterosexual couples are paired with one another in love relationships, allowing for an imagined queer potential.

Even though slash, with its queering of relationships would seem to be a doorway into empowerment for disability fiction - replacing one oppressed identity (queer) for another (disability), many of the conventions of slash, mixed with the overwhelming social power of stereotypes around disability serve to further replicate patterns of oppression upon disabled characters. One of the conventions of slash fiction is the need to make canonically straight male characters more vulnerable, more willing to explore their vulnerability in relationships. This vulnerability allows for male protagonists to disrupt the rigid boundaries of patriarchal, heterosexist constructions of masculinity by making the characters more open to vulnerabilities, which tend to be constructed as threats to the construction of patriarchal masculinity. Because of disability's cultural association with vulnerability in the cultural imagination, disablement is often utilized by slash fiction authors as a means of achieving vulnerability of the characters in a slash fiction relationship. These relationships are often referred to as "Hurt/Comfort" or "H/C" and often depend on the assumption that disablement represents a weakening of the disabled character, problematically representing disability as weakness.

Through an examination of the association between slash and disability on the popular fan fiction site *Archive of Our Own*, this paper illustrates that although slash fiction has the *potential* to represent a liberatory counterhegemonic text, it fails to do so where disability is concerned and relies on tropes and assumptions about disability in order to 'queer' hegemonic texts.

Keywords: disability; fan fiction; slash fiction; queer; counterhegemonic texts

From Slash Fan Fiction to Crip Fan Fiction: What Role Does Disability Have in Fandom?

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This paper will examine issues of masculinity and sexuality in the depiction of disabilities in slash fiction, specifically focusing on M/M (male-male) slash fiction. Examining a framework of slash fiction will provide a basis for the exploration of disability in fan fiction texts and connections will be made from the liberating practices of slash fiction to the portrayal of disability in fan fiction and the explicit and implicit connections between these two types of fan fiction. Due to limited space, only a few examples will be explored at this time to examine the interweaving between these themes and this is a foundational theoretical piece for a larger future project. To position myself in relation to this text, I am a queer, disabled person who regularly engages in fandom.

Alison Kafer suggests that:

What is needed, then, are critical attempts to trace the ways in which compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness and compulsory heterosexuality intertwine in the service of normativity; to examine how terms such as 'defective,' 'deviant,' and 'sick' have been used to justify discrimination against people whose bodies, minds, desires, and practices differ from the unmarked norm; to speculate how norms of gendered behaviour – proper masculinity and femininity- are based on nondisabled bodies; and to map potential points of connection among, and departure between queer (and) disability activists. (Alison Kafer – *Feminist Queer Crip*, 16-17).

There is an intertwining of disempowerment between hegemonic heterosexism and entrenched ableism that seek to portray one body type as the only way to engage with the world, and texts like fan fiction have the power to put character development into the hands of the fans to determine alternative ways of seeing character relationships and bodies and therefore allow for a polyphony of texts that counteract hegemonic cultural messages.

Henry Jenkins sought to shift the image of people in fandom communities from passive consumers to actively engaged, critical viewers who could assess their own engagement with popular media. He sought to create "an alternative image of fan cultures, one that saw media consumers as active, critically engaged, and creative" (2006: 1). These fans were participants in their consumption of media, debating, critiquing, and questioning the messages they received from popular cultural venues.

Matt Ratto and Megan Boler bring attention to the power of bringing questions to cultural media in what they call "DIY citizenship", a do it yourself approach to questioning hegemonic systems and the messages they convey (2014: 3). The critical makings by community members, those moments of creating materials that interact with and intervene in systems of authority, provide a space for engagement in the items or ideas they create. Ratto and Boler bring attention to the process of making materials as a potential critical activity "that provides both the possibility to intervene substantively in systems of authority and power and that offers an important site for reflecting on how such power is constituted by infrastructures, institutions, communities, and practices" (ibid: 1). These critical makings can be politically transformative activities both for those who are participating in the making itself, as well as the recipients of the finished, created items. For this reason, fan fiction writing serves as a powerful critical making activity, constructing alternative messages to those delivered by the cultural mainstream. Fan

adaptations of texts allow for the insertion of alternative voices, new ideas, and countercultural messages that critically question hegemonic authority systems that are generally reproduced in mainstream popular cultures.

Critical making practices have the potential to invite questions about

“how and when individuals and communities participate in shaping, changing, and reconstructing selves, worlds, and environments in creative ways that challenge the status quo and normative understandings of ‘how things must be’.” (Ratto and Boler 2014: 5).

This critical re-making has resonance for the potential in the literature of the fantastic to envision an alternative world and imagine new possibilities. Indeed, Sherryl Vint defines science fiction as “a genre whose founding trope is the image of the world otherwise: in the future, elsewhere, even in the present if this present is arrived at by a different path” (2004: 119). She defines science fiction as a genre that inherently attracts “those who are dissatisfied with the way things are” (ibid). This may account for why so many fan fiction materials focus on speculative fictions (science fiction, fantasy, and horror) as sites for critical re-writings of hegemonic texts. The norms of society are already in question in speculative texts, which often serve to provide a creative distance from ‘the real’ (the accepted as ‘normal’). Yet, despite the power of speculative fictions to produce new modes for engaging with and questioning norms, authors and cultural producers often replicate dominant hegemonic understandings of the world, reifying the *status quo*. Despite this, there is still a potential within the speculative for inviting questions, examining the *status quo*, and critiquing hegemonic power structures. Part of this power is involved in the need for speculative texts or the literature of the fantastic to invite the reader into the process of constructing the alternative, fantastic world. Mendlesohn suggests that

"the fantastic is an area of literature that is heavily dependent on the dialectic between author and reader for the construction of a sense of wonder, that is a fiction of consensual construction of belief" (2008: xii). Readers of the literature of the fantastic are constantly involved in a process of mediating between their own position in the real world and their position in the imagined world (ibid: xvii). This dialectic makes the fantastic a powerful space for examining the interaction between the producer of a cultural text and the reader or receiver of that medium. This interactivity positions the fan as an active participant in creating their worlds of wonder and this provides a close step to engagement in the writing and re-writing of texts - the practices of fan fiction.

The counterhegemonic and critically questioning message of fan fiction can be exemplified in the writing of slash fiction, which raises critical questions about masculinity, queerness, and sexual binarisms. "The colourful term, 'slash' refers to the convention of employing a stroke or 'slash' to signify same-sex relationships between two characters (Kirk/Spock or K/S) and specifies a genre of fan stories positing homoerotic affairs between series protagonists" (Jenkins 1992: 186).

This critical queering of characters may not seem particularly revolutionary now, but when slash originated in the 1970s, "slash was initially met with considerable resistance from fans... for many early fans, slash as a premise questioned the masculinity of the protagonists and challenged their heroic stature. This controversy continues to the present" (ibid: 187-188). Since popular media still reifies a largely patriarchal, heterosexist social structure, slash continues to level critiques about hegemonic structures by presenting a disruption of this implicit heterosexuality.

According to Jenkins, "Slash confronts the most repressive forms of sexual identity and provides utopian alternatives to current configurations of gender" (1992: 189). He observes that, "slash is not so much a genre about sex as it is a genre about the limitations of traditional masculinity and about reconfiguring male identity" (ibid: 191). Slash holds the potential for a reassessment of taken-for-granted assumptions about gender, complicating the simple categorizations projected by patriarchal heterosexuality and allowing a space for the critique of these gendered binaries and the oppressive frameworks they enact upon sexual identity and behaviour.

Wendy Pearson observes that, "For many people, however, sexuality – and particularly heterosexuality – can be envisioned only within the category of the 'natural'" (2003: 149). It is taken for granted as the only possible sexual position, and this reification of the singularity of heterosexual discourse shapes the types of fiction that are produced, with a vast majority of authors writing heterosexual relationships rather than homosexual ones. Pearson suggests that we should examine the type of sexualities that are depicted in our speculative fiction to examine whether they are "allegorical, expository, extrapolative", etc. (2003: 151-152), and this is of vital importance to examining slash fiction as well, inviting questions about how people are re-envisioning heterosexual popular culture texts as queer. An examination of why and how these texts are being changed are an essential part of the messages they impart.

Fan fiction practices like slash fiction, with its critical message and representation of an Othered position, contains the seeds for a possible critical remaking of ability and disability in popular culture and a way to engage fans in the critique of dominant messages around disability that are being projected to them. There continues to be underrepresentation of disabled characters

in popular culture, and in film, disabled characters are almost always played by able-bodied actors, eliciting acclaim for their ability to perform the disabled body.

Popular culture portrayals of disability continue to replicate images of disabled people that are disempowering and lack character complexity. Disabled characters are locked in often replicated tropes that serve to disempower the disabled body and erase the complexities of disabled experience. Even when disabled characters are not outright erased from narratives, their fates "often include cure, death, or reevaluation in the social narrative, a metaphorical quelling that disability stirs up in narrative" (Sandahl and Auslander 2005: 4), a metaphorical erasure of their identity and their potential for textual continuity.

Fan fiction, with its power of subversion and power to question has the ability to be a means of re-thinking the way that fans engage with topics of disability, by writing their own narratives. There is fan fiction about disabilities that exists and even a tag on the popular site *Archive of Our Own* for fiction involving disability (<http://archiveofourown.org/tags/Disability/works>) however, the representation of disability within this fan fiction does not question or interrogate ideas of disability as powerfully as it could. Many of the representations of disability serve to reinforce hegemonic stereotypes about disability by replicating dominant cultural portrayals of disabled people. Many of these stories constitute "inspiration porn" (using disabled characters to suggest if this disabled person could do this, why can't you as an able bodied person achieve the same or more), the disabled person as victim, the disabled person as helpless, the disabled person as damaged and in need of support, the use of disabled characters to illustrate the heroicness of the protagonist because s/he is either heroic by contrast or is heroic for showing compassion to the disabled person. Disability in these narratives is often still associated with the idea of tragedy and neediness.

Even though slash, with its queering of relationships would seem to be a doorway into empowerment for disability fiction - replacing one oppressed identity (queer) for another (disability), many of the conventions of slash, mixed with the overwhelming social power of stereotypes around disability serve to further replicate patterns of oppression upon disabled characters. One of the conventions of slash fiction is the need to make male characters more vulnerable, more willing to explore their vulnerability in relationships. This part of slash fiction allows for male protagonists to disrupt the rigid boundaries of patriarchal, heterosexist constructions of masculinity by making the characters more open to vulnerabilities, which tend to be constructed as threats to the construction of patriarchal masculinity. Jenkins describes the act of making men vulnerable as part of the disruption of hegemonic masculinity to create a space for a reciprocal relationship. He describes this as a "play with androgyny" where there is a sliding between traditional constructed binary gender roles as part of the struggle to achieve intimacy (1992: 193).

"Slash depends not simply on a mapping of conventional male and female roles onto the relations between two male characters, not in creating femme or butch versions... Rather, slash explores the possibility of existing outside of those categories, of combining elements of masculinity and femininity into a satisfactory whole yet constantly fluid identity" (Ibid).

Jenkins observes descriptions of slash with "men's bodies represented as smooth and womanly, male kisses described like the meeting of two vaginas, a cop depicted with china doll fragility..." (Ibid: 194). However, patriarchal masculinity is strongly embedded in our social systems and many slash authors search for ways to disrupt it in canonical texts. These moments

of fragility are often found in moments within the slash fiction texts where the character is subjected to a need to become temporarily vulnerable, allowing the masculine veneer to temporarily slip. The issue with this tendency to look for moments of vulnerability for the characters is that disability is so strongly represented as a state of perpetual vulnerability, a constant fragility. Disability is dominantly socially constructed as a place for the disruption of masculinity, a bodily insertion of vulnerability into an otherwise un-vulnerable subject. This tendency of associating disability with fragility and vulnerability makes it an easy position to be used by slash authors to achieve the desired fragility of their characters, to chip away at the patriarchal masculine veneer and find vulnerability beneath. As a result, disability is often used by authors to make the character vulnerable enough to engage in a slash relationship. It is an easy signifier of their fragility and willingness to be vulnerable in the slash relationship.

In exploring the association between slash and disability on the popular fan fiction site *Archive of Our Own* (<https://archiveofourown.org/>), patterns of association have illustrated a tendency for disability to be portrayed in slash fiction as a means of making the male subject vulnerable and thus more likely to be involved in the caring relationships that Jenkins outlines as characteristic of slash fiction. In examining stories with the "disability" tag, there is a pattern of association between this tag and the "caregiver" tag, illustrating the association between disability and ideas of care giving and receiving. These caring roles work into the common portrayals in slash fiction of men who enter into caring relationships with one another and the association with vulnerability that Jenkins notes is characteristic of many slash relationships (1992: 194). Jenkins observes that slash is more interested in the emotional intimacy between men than in physical sex (ibid.: 192). He reminds readers that "slash is not so much a genre

about sex as it is a genre about the limitations of traditional masculinity and about reconfiguring male identity" (ibid.: 191).

The "disability" tag or is also often associated with the "Hurt/Comfort" (or H/C) tag, indicating that disability and the perceived "hurt" that comes from being disabled is part of the process of allowing a male to feel open to being comforted by another male. This association between "Hurt/Comfort" and "Disability" may come from the need for slash fiction to find ways to make a character open to different kinds of intimacy.

"Slash involves both a set of generic formulas and an ideology about same-sex relationships. Slash stories centre on the relationships between male program characters and the obstacles they must overcome to achieve intimacy... there are considerable implications behind shifting our conception of male heroes, since a fairly rigidly defined and hierarchical conception of gender remains central to all aspects of contemporary social and cultural experience" (Jenkins 1992: 189).

The "Hurt/Comfort" aspect of slash fiction allows for a male character to comfort another male who has been harmed in some way, overcoming the strict barriers around hegemonic heterosexual male identity to permit an opening to different forms of intimacy. By using disability as a short-form for achieving a space of disruption for traditional forms of masculinity, authors participating in this form of fandom innately implicate the disabled body as fundamentally defined by its vulnerability.

Although there is only space in this paper to highlight a few examples, I hope that the examples below will bring attention to the interrelationship between disability and vulnerability in M/M slash romance narratives. These examples will focus on M/M slash rather than other

forms of queer slash to highlight the plethora of examples of assumptions that there is an intrinsic link between disability, homosexuality, and masculinity. The authors of these fan fiction texts frequently assume that disability is a feminization of masculinity and that male-male romance requires a feminization of one of the male partners, bringing attention to social constructions of masculinity.

The story "Between the Scars" by 'Snootiegirl' illustrates the close association between disability and vulnerability, portraying the Star Wars character Obi-Wan becoming disabled in a fire and achieving intimacy with Anakin through his need to rely on his apprentice for comfort:

"All his faults . . . all his weaknesses . . . all his deficiencies were on display for anyone who cared to look his way. And how many would care to look? They would all want to look once--for curiosity and all--but few would look again. Would Anakin be one of those who looked once and quickly away? Obi-Wan would know soon enough."

Obi Wan is forced to acknowledge his own physical vulnerability, but more importantly, his vulnerability slides into the emotional realm and his need to rely on Anakin for emotional support. The story contains descriptions of both Anakin and Obi-Wan's strength before the accident to highlight the changes they undergo after Obi-Wan becomes disabled. Terms of disability slide over into terms of emotional need in the narrative, with words like "paralyze" used to refer not to physicality, but to the emotional effect that is experienced. The close association between assumed weakness and disability can be illustrated when the author indicates "He hated being weak in front of Anakin, but better him than anyone else. The parameters of their relationship ensured that Anakin would not make him the object of ridicule throughout the Order." Weakness and ridicule are often part of the fears expressed by hegemonic

masculinity around the possibility of losing power or being demasculinized and these are part of what makes Obi-Wan both afraid of the emotional damage that could happen if Anakin were to treat him with ridicule and his comfort in the intimacy that Anakin offers which Obi-Wan sees as transcending normal male homosocial interactions within the Jedi Order.

Tanya Titchkosky observes that disability is frequently socially linked to notions of vulnerability and weakness (2007:4). Disability is generally depicted in our cultural imagination as an intrinsic weakness, a requirement to have some form of support. In her analysis of disabled men's conceptions about disability, Julie-Ann Scott points out that "In U.S. patriarchal culture, the physically disabled male body is often feminized, seen as incapable of the autonomy, bodily strength, and aggressiveness associated with dominant Western masculinity" (2014) situating vulnerability as an essential undoing of masculinity. Scott's narrators "expressed the unsettling nature of their bodies across cultural spaces. The lack of physical stability can potentially alter perceptions of self — reliance, strength, and independence — associated with preferred cultural performances of masculinity" (ibid). Her informants highlighted their reliance on care, particularly on care by their female spouses, as contributing factors to their perception of themselves as atypical males.

The caregiver role is again a vehicle for achieving intimacy in "Gift of Sight" by "torino10154". In this Harry Potter slash fiction, Harry is blinded and relies on Snape to assist him while his eyes are being healed. After being cared for by Snape, Harry states "I'm completely healed so I'll check myself out in the morning. Problem solved," Harry replied then after a moment's pause added, "Can I ask you something?"... "Would you have said anything [about our mutual affection]?" and Snape replies "No, probably not" indicating that Snape would not have opened up about his affection for Harry if he had not been in the role of caring for him.

This work also problematically deals with the idea of the cure and the notion that disability is solved in a narrative through the discovery of a cure. The intimacy of Snape and Harry waits until after he is able to be magically cured. Kathryn Allan observes that disability is "often characterised as a physical or mental impairment that is supplanted through the application of technology, transforming the disabled body into a figure of prosthetic awe and medical prowess" (2013: 8). Though referring to science fiction, Allan's comments draw attention to the overall popular culture approach of erasing disability through cures. In "Gift of Sight", this cure is magical, but is similarly used to express the medical prowess of Snape and highlight the perception that a narrative cannot achieve a happy ending without the cure of the disabled protagonist. Throughout the story, Harry constantly indicates that he relies on Snape for his sense of well-being and his faith in Snape's ability with potions allows Harry to take off his bandages over his eyes before they are supposed to be healed because he believes that Snape's prowess is such that he would be cured before the regular amount of time required for healing. In this narrative, the characters become emotionally intimate because of Harry's vulnerability, but it is only when Harry is healed that a space is opened up to pursue that intimacy.

Jane Stemp perceives of fantasy as a genre that is particularly prone to the danger of reinforcing the trope of the 'magical cure' due to the social desire for normative ideas of bodily perfection in addition to fantasy's particular danger of falling into a patter of replicating "mythical, perfect archetypes" and it is much easier to construct a magical cure in a world of magic than to suggest a method of living with a disability (2004). "Gift of Sight" focuses on the cure narrative for Harry, portraying him as incomplete until he is magically cured. The intimacy between Harry and Snape arises from their roles as caregiver and care-receiver, a medicalized relationship. Their relationship is situated in the notion that there is something wrong with Harry

that only Snape can "fix". This underscores a fundamental problematic power dynamic between medical practitioner and patient that is reinforced by the age difference between the two characters and Snape's dual role as Harry's teacher and doctor. This narrative relies on the idea of a power imbalance as a means of facilitating a homosexual relationship between the two characters, implicitly suggesting that Snape would not have become involved with Harry if not for his power over him.

In another Harry Potter-inspired story "A Hundred Tiny Threads" by "severity_softly" Snape is the one to become blind and throughout the narrative becomes a manifestation of the trope of the 'self-loathing cripple': "He supposed even they thought him useless now, no better than a Muggle". The text repeatedly refers to Snape's sense of himself as helpless and his desire to avoid any assistance from others. While Harry's blindness is cured in the previous narrative, in this narrative, Snape continues to be blind, which requires him to become comfortable with his new role of dependency on Remus Lupin:

"In spite of his vision, Severus couldn't help but feel more complete than he had in a long time. He had his wand back, which meant he was able to do more. He felt more independent for the first time in a long time. It was funny to realize this, actually. He wasn't independent. He was still bound to Remus, but... that somehow didn't seem to matter as much anymore."

The author reifies the idea that Snape cannot be completely independent and that he will be required to be dependent upon Remus. He is referred to contradictorily in this passage as both

independent and not independent, indicating the author's uncertainty with the disabled subjectivity and her characters' dependence on vulnerability as part of their intimacy.

Snape's dependency on Remus is made more acceptable to him based on his perception that they are now intimate with one another and that this intimacy and dependency are linked. The perception that blindness is particularly linked to dependency partially comes from the relationship that blindness has to guidance. As Rod Michalko notes "Whatever the individual circumstances guidance is an essential part of blind people's lives" (1999,6). Guiding is assumed by many sighted people to represent a dependence of the blind person on their guide. However, as Michalko highlights the fact that there is an interdependence between guide and guided person (ibid, 8). Snape relies on Remus in the relationship portrayed in "A Hundred Tiny Threads", but Remus also relies on him for emotional companionship, highlighting the complexity of the relationship between guide and guided.

In "It Takes Time to Mend" by "ThePenguinOfDeath", a story based on Star Wars: The Force Awakens, Finn has undergone damage to his spine and has been given cybernetics and organic surgery to repair his spine, but has a period of healing that necessitates his use of a wheelchair. Finn, like the characters referred to previously, feels a sense of loss and vulnerability due to his disabled status as well as an uncertainty around his relationship to other characters (fearing that he may be rejected due to his disabled status). His intimacy with Poe begins when Poe requests that he work on a special project in spacecraft weaponry. The feeling of being considered useful by another male colleague allows Finn to feel a sense of completeness: "Poe had requested him specially? That was enough for him". Many of the disabled male informants interviewed by Julie-Ann Scott indicated that an essential part of their masculinity was their ability to economically contribute since their ideas of masculinity were connected with economic

power (2014). Robert McRuer illustrates that disability is often configured in opposition to economic participation, noting that the neoliberal context for disability constructs disabled bodies as "unproductive bodies", situating them as the opposite of productive, its foil (2006). Parin Dossa reinforces this when she notes that "There is no room for Other bodies in a market-based economy that conflates productivity with able-bodies" (Dossa 2005: 2528). Disability and productivity are seen as irreconcilable, positioning disabled people as incapable of meaningful work. The association between economic independence and masculinity helps to elucidate why being asked to work is so essential to Finn's sense of self worth. It fulfills part of a definition of masculinity that disability is perceived as preventing him since he recognizes that he may be underemployed due to his disabled status.

When feeling uncertain about Poe's feelings about him, Finn is comforted when Poe smiles at him and it is this sense of being considered useful to Poe that allows Finn to acknowledge feelings he has for his colleague: "However, the first time Poe saw Finn in his wheelchair, his smile lit up the room. Finn felt something very strange flutter inside." Physical connection and comfort shape this relationship

"The little smiles of encouragement and gentle pats on his shoulder sent pleasant sparks through his body every time. Finn had been raised a Stormtrooper, so emotions hadn't really been part of his upbringing, but he'd gathered enough information to realize he was a little bit in love with Poe. That was torture in itself. Poe was the best pilot in the Resistance. He was a celebrity and he deserved that status. He'd flown missions that quite frankly should have been impossible, yet come out alive every time. Poe would never want someone as broken and pathetic as Finn. He deserved better."

Finn continues to feel a sense of self-loathing at his disabled status, believing that he is disappointing a potential love interest by being "broken and pathetic". Here, Finn enters into the trope of the 'self loathing cripple', whose world is shaped by the notion that he is incomplete and a burden to the social systems and people around him. This structure reifies the dominant social message that disability is a social burden and that the self-worth of a disabled person is dependent on the care given to them by an able-bodied person.

Rather than providing a complementary resistance to social oppression of disabled people, slash fiction often replicates oppressive frameworks around disability, disabling male characters to make them willing to engage in the "androgyny play" Jenkins described. Characters become disabled in these disabled slash plots in order to allow them to engage in the type of vulnerability that patriarchal masculinity forbids, becoming subjects who ask for assistance because they need it and who negotiate emotions carefully because they are perceived as emotionally vulnerable as they are perceived as physically vulnerable. This play with 'androgyny', rather than providing the fluidity that it does with able bodied masculine representations serves to further perpetuate the image of the disabled person as victim, as disempowered, and as desexualized, all of which are images of disability already projected in popular media. Disability, with the associated, taken-for-granted system of vulnerabilities that have been attached to disabled characters in popular media, provides an easy sub-in for slash fic authors to achieve the vulnerable position of the male protagonist they desire without much additional effort and since fan fiction is generally short, disability has been used in some representations as an easy way to shorten this process of becoming vulnerable.

Abbott, Jepson, and Hastie point out that disability is treated as inherently de-masculating and that "disabled men have traditionally been seen as incomplete men or entirely genderless"

(2016: 420). They observe that "Many disabled men have been seen as 'conditionally masculine', i.e. that the nature of the impaired body to mind means that disabled men will always be less than wholly male or wholly masculine as compared to non-disabled men" (ibid) and suggest that the focus of most texts about disabled men are focused on the idea of a 'reliant masculinity' in contrast to the hegemonic masculine image of independence (ibid, 421). One of the participants in their study suggested "They seem to be completely gender (it's not even gender)-neutral, because gender's not even in there. I think the actual impact of social care can be incredibly emasculating, if it is set up in such a way that it takes away your independence and your autonomy" (ibid, 424), and observed that aspects of hegemonic masculinity that were identified by informants included living independently, obtaining paid work, and appearing physically strong (ibid, 422-424).

Slash fiction centers its critique around the intersection of the body, identity, and structures of normativity and this should provide a model for disability fan fiction and the potential for disrupting norms around the construction of disability in fiction. This is an area that has the potential to develop further, but first requires a reworking of the social imagination about the disabled body, a dismantling of the assumptions around disability and a disruption of the categorical binarism around able-bodied/disabled. One area where slash fiction featuring characters with disabilities has begun to disrupt the social construction of disability is around the sexuality of disabled bodies. Frequently, disabled people are portrayed in popular media as unsexual bodies, distanced from sexuality, indeed Robert McRuer suggests that sexuality and disability are seen as antithetical to one another, observing that "Disabled people are more

commonly positioned as asexual – incapable of or uninterested in sex (2011:107)¹. Slash fiction, with its interest in intimacies, brings the disabled body and the sensual/sexual body together. Moreover, there is a seed of potential in the critical reworking of characters as disabled, disabling characters that are canonically represented as able-bodied to resist the erasure of disabled characters that predominates popular media.

Slash fiction stories that rely on disability frequently associate disability with dependency and link that dependency to ideas of intimacy. Scott highlights that disability scholars have often highlighted disabled male bodies as sites of deep emotional connection *through* dependency (2014), illustrating a wider trend of perceiving disabled males to be dependent and more emotionally available due to their dependency.

An effective "Crip Fic" would necessitate a further reworking of the notion of the pop cultural construction of the "hero". Much as slash fiction allowed for a break in the hegemonic sexual identity of the hero, crip fic would require a reworking of the basics of bodily normalcy for the hero. This reworking of bodily normalcy would have to transcend that done with disabled characters that exist such as Daredevil, who, although blind, has all of his other senses amplified to erase the impact of blindness upon him. Indeed, Jose Alaniz suggests that the super-body taps "into popular desires for a 'cure'" (2014: 5), an erasure of disability. Representations of the super body often reify the portrayal of hyper-masculinized and hyper-able vigor (*ibid*).

Rather than re-mapping an able-bodied character as disabled with all of the social tropes and assumptions about disability pasted onto that character, an effective crippling of these characters would need to assert new understandings of disabled bodies. These critical reworkings would need to avoid the trap of "the cure" and contest "the medical frame in which disability has

¹ For further discussion of disability and de-sexualisation, see Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* and *Sex and Disability*.

historically been placed" (Allan 2013: 5). There would need to be a shift in thinking away from the idea of the *person* as disabled and toward critical attention to the social and physical barriers that serve to make the world a disabling environment, recognizing that "human bodies exist along a spectrum of difference" (Allan 2013: 4). Care would need to be taken "in ensuring that the body is not reduced to mere[ly] a tool that we wield without reservation" (Allan 2013: 6), which would mean that authors of disability fan fiction would need to critically consider the implications of that fiction for the lives of real disabled people when writing crip fan fic.

Allan suggests that it is possible to reframe disability in a way that can be liberating for people with disabilities:

"through the reframing – or, perhaps more accurately, the *deframing* – of disability, there are two key modes of engagement within disability studies: the first is to expose and rewrite existing narratives of disability, using the lens of disability to produce new ways of thinking of the body; the second is to use DS [disability studies] as a site of advocacy for the rights of people with disabilities" (2013, 5).

Fan activism and fan fiction could provide a space for these critical re-workings, shifting the dominant popular cultural portrayals of disability to create new ways of conceptualizing the body.

Fan activism is a powerful means for promoting change and encouraging participation in changing social ideas. Jenkins defines fan activism as

"[F]orms of civil engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through

the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed with metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture" (Jenkins 2014: 65).

The power of fan activism can be an effective vehicle for promoting change, but that activism, as Jenkins indicates, needs to arise from within fan culture and fan interests and tie into what is already being practiced. Effective fan practices around disability would require that fans look past what they see as positive depictions of disability such as transcendence narratives (often portrayed in 'inspiration porn'), cure narratives (which are often seen by fans as a positive thing for the disabled protagonist), and care narratives (which are often unintentionally dependency narratives). A critical remapping of disability would require fans to become aware of the damage that these tropes do to existing disabled people rather than the simple assumption that portrayals of happy people cannot be damaging.

Fan fiction works at the symbolic level, at the level of shifting the symbols projected to a popular audience and disability studies similarly examines "the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disabled identity and asks how they enforce systems of exclusion and oppression" (Siebers 2008: 3-4 as cited by Allan 2013: 4). This resonance provides a space for the critical questioning of able-bodied hegemonies in popular culture through fan activities and fan subversions.

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