

“Happy Consensual Gangbangs”: Deconstructions of Sports Cultures and Hegemonic Masculinity in Football RPF

Milena Popova

Abstract

This paper uses a close reading of two stories within the gangbang/team sex subgenre of Football Real Person Fiction to investigate how marginalized sports fans can use fan fiction to negotiate the challenges posed to them by hegemonic masculinity within sports culture. These stories engage with themes of safety and vulnerability, hierarchies of masculinity, and issues of sexual consent through common fan fiction reading and writing practices, which allow readers and writers to make meanings from the similarities and differences between the fictionalized representations they create and their knowledge and experience of marginalization within sports culture. In this way, they are able to issue their own challenge to structures of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity in their fan object - albeit one which is limited in scope.

Bio: Milena Popova is a fan, researcher, and activist. Their current research focuses on representations of power and sexual consent in erotic fan fiction as a form of cultural activism, and this spills over into some of their activism.

Slashing hegemonic masculinity

On October 14th 2016, Welsh football player Ched Evans was found not guilty of rape at retrial at Cardiff crown court, having already served a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence

for the crime (Morris & Topping, 2016). Male professional athletes from a range of team sports across Western cultures are accused of sexual assault with some regularity (see Nurka, 2013; Toffoletti, 2007), though convictions - such as Evans' original conviction - are much rarer (Burke, 2015). Writing about sexual assault in Australian professional team sports, Nurka (2013) characterizes the Australian football leagues and other "masculine sporting codes" as "privileged sites of the cultural construction of heterosexual masculinity in a homosocial setting" (p. 43). This exclusive and often hostile environment presents a number of challenges for women both as participants and as fans of sport.

Reports of rape allegedly committed by professional athletes gain attention from media (Toffoletti, 2007) and sports fans (Nurka, 2013), but the discourses in both cases seek to silence and blame victims while exonerating the alleged attackers. As Nurka indicates, such challenges are rooted in the highly masculine construction of sports culture, a construction congruent with ideas of hegemonic masculinity. Connell (1995) defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (p. 77): it is a historically and socially contingent construction legitimizing gendered power relations.

Women, as spectators and fans of sport, struggle with the challenges posed by this frequently outright hostile, highly homosocial environment, where sexual violence is only the extreme end of a range of negative, discriminatory, and marginalizing experiences rooted in enactments of hegemonic masculinity. Gosling (2007) provides a comprehensive overview of the marginalization of women sports fans. Esmonde, Cooky & Andrews (2015) examine the complex ways in which women negotiate this marginalization. They find that women fans frequently police their own and other women's expressions of fandom, and even use gendered language in their definition of fandom, devaluing women's involvement as sports

fans. One key strategy used to de-legitimize women's sports fandom is the allegation that they are sexually attracted to the players rather than genuinely interested in the sport, which in turn can be used to invalidate allegations of sexual violence on behalf of players. Women sports fans consequently developed strategies which let them challenge these stereotypes and other discourses used to marginalize them: redrawing the lines around what it meant to be a sports fan to either be more inclusive of some women and femininities while still excluding others or, alternatively, to disclaim a fandom identity thereby lowering their own personal stakes in the culture; denying or minimizing the exclusion they faced; and negotiating their relationship to common stereotypes of women sports fans. These strategies, however, frequently still built on dominant discourses of masculinity and the associated devaluing of femininity in sports and sports fandom. In this way, women's legitimacy as sports fans remained contingent on being able to construct themselves as an exception to the negative stereotypes associated with women sports fans. Yet as Esmonde, Cooky and Andrews argue, "it is possible to both love the game *and* Aaron Rodgers' eyes" (2015, p. 43), and for some women fans an aesthetic appreciation of, or even sexual attraction to, the players is indeed a key part of their sports fandom.

Waysdorf (2015a) traces the different forms women's sports fandom takes in different spaces. Football Real Person(a) Fiction (or RPF) is one such expression of (predominantly) women's love of the game and their attraction to the players. Football RPF is fan fiction centered predominantly around high-level European football (soccer) teams and players, and generally featuring sexual or romantic relationships between fictionalized versions of the real-life players. Some writers and readers of Football RPF start out as football fans first and come to fan fiction later. Others find it through other types of fan fiction (for instance by following a favorite author from the fandom of another media product), though many go on

to develop an interest in football as a sport as a result (Waysdorf, 2015b). Waysdorf (2015a) argues that Football RPF is a space where certain kinds of fannish behaviors are normalized which elsewhere are typically associated with women fans and used to police and undermine their identities as fans, and that participation in Football RPF is just as much an expression and performance of women's football fandom as attending matches and discussing trivia in other online forums. Given the hypermasculine culture of team sports and the frequency and regularity with which professional athletes across a variety of team sports are accused of rape and other kinds of violence against women, the appeal of football players to the slash community - consisting predominantly of women and non-binary people, many of whom identify as members of gender, sexual or romantic minorities (centrumlumina, 2013b, 2013c)ⁱⁱⁱ - is striking.

Waysdorf (2015b) identifies key features of football as a sport and media spectacle which make it an attractive site for RPF. The media narrative surrounding the sport - official promotional material, outsider perspectives such as journalistic reporting, and increasingly social media interactions - creates a set of paratexts around the sport itself. Teams promote individual players as a way of fostering fans' personal investment in the sport. This in turn has the effect of turning star players into celebrities highly attractive to RPF communities. Seasons and tournaments provide an overarching narrative framework, so that individual games acquire meaning beyond the ninety minutes of play time. It is these individual and team narratives and the interplays between them, as players emerge as stars, are traded, or retire, that provide the starting point for sports-based fan fiction. Writers and readers of football RPF pay attention to the real-life physicality of both the sport itself and the players in their interactions with each other. Casual touches, goal celebrations and even the occasional joking or celebratory kiss between players are taken out of their homosocial context and

imbued with emotional and sexual meaning. Yet these highly “slashable” elements of football do not erase, and are indeed often in conflict with, the homosocial, hypermasculine facets of sports culture.

There is a tension, therefore, in Football RPF between the popular, and homosocial, reading of sport and sports culture, and RPF writers’ and readers’ against-the-grain readings of homosexual desire. Investigating sports teams in a higher education setting, Dempster (2009) finds a strong link between sports and lad cultures at a UK university and identifies three key components present in both: sexualized behaviors (including the indictment of homosexuality), aggression and violence (especially in the sports context when there is a perceived threat to the player’s position and standing within the hierarchy), and heavy drinking. Propositioning women is seen as a key “laddish” behavior that players of team sports engage in to position their own masculinity “as both different from, and superior to, women and femininities” (p. 488). In Football RPF, on the other hand, women - even players’ real-life partners - play small and marginal roles if any (Waysdorf, 2015b), and the players’ sexual and romantic desire is redirected at each other. This stands in stark contrast to Dempster’s (2009) finding that “indictments of homosexuality was a key means through which male Westchester students policed masculinities” (p. 488). This reflects the conflicted relationship of women sports fans with their fan objects, who are steeped in a culture that is deeply misogynistic and homophobic, and which frequently marginalizes women and queer players and fans. It also raises the question of how such conflicts are resolved - or at least negotiated - in the community’s fiction output.

In this chapter I explore how groups typically marginalized and even threatened by sports cultures rooted in hegemonic masculinity - women, non-binary people, gay and bisexual men

- create spaces for the expression and critical exploration of their own relationships with these cultures, and thereby with hegemonic masculinity, particularly as fans. My focus is therefore on how stories circulated within the Football RPF community both reproduce but also challenge and deconstruct the trappings of lad and sports cultures. I use as my case study the subgenre of gangbang and team sex stories. These are the stories which not only crystallize the homosocial bonds between individual players into fictional homosexual relationships but also most clearly set these relationships within the wider context of the hypermasculine sports team culture. I perform a close reading of two such gangbang/team sex stories: a story published by Anonymous (2011) which I shall refer to as *Story A* and *firework boy* by meretricula (2011). The two stories are complementary in that they both contain elements both typical and atypical of the gangbang/team sex subgenre. I relate these elements to wider theories on lad and sports cultures, meaning-making in fan fiction, and sexual consent, in order to show how Football RPF stories engage with and deconstruct the challenges and threats which sports culture and hegemonic masculinity present to the groups they subordinate or marginalize.

Team orgies and gangbans: two stories

Intertextuality plays a key role in meaning-making in fan fiction based on other fiction. Derecho (2006) argues that fan fiction works add to an “archive” around the originary work and is particularly interested in the way fan fiction repeats and alters certain elements from the original. Such “repetition with a difference” (p. 73), she argues, allows for both works to be read at the same time, side by side, creating new meanings from the similarities and differences. In this way, each addition to the archive alters the entire archive, shedding new light on both originary work and other “archontic” works. As Waysdorf (2015b) argues,

European football can be read as a media text in similar ways to TV series, books, or films, and so RPF too can be seen as characterized by intertextuality in similar ways. Willis (2006) also emphasizes the intertextual nature of fan fiction reading and writing, but provides a mechanism for resources beyond the immediately obvious texts to enter into a relationship with the fan fiction work. She argues that fan fiction readers and writers bring their own knowledge of the world to their readings of media, and this is a key mechanism by which the “gaps” which fan fiction fills are created. So in the case of Football RPF, a fan fiction reader or writer would not just refer to “canon” events and the media narrative around their favorite player or team, but also use extratextual resources such as their understanding of sports cultures in their engagement with fan fiction stories. This intertextuality and use of extratextual resources in readings is key to understanding how Football RPF may provide fans marginalized by sports culture and mainstream, masculine fan communities with ways to engage with and challenge the culture.

Such intertextual readings are evident across Football RPF stories. A common thread in such stories is the sense of belonging to a team with a shared goal and the accompanying joint celebrations of successes or commiseration over losses. In this context, the team orgy or team gangbang is a popular subgenre within Football RPF. Typical ways to position this are the team bonding experience, the celebration of a major win, consolation after a big loss, or the team rewarding or “taking care” of a key player. *Story A* by Anonymous (2011) and *firework boy* (2011) by meretricula fall under the category of the “reward” story. A clue to this can already be found in the titles, both of which convey appreciation and celebration of someone’s accomplishments. Both stories were also originally written in response to requests posted on online Football RPF communities. *Story A* originated on a Football RPF “kinkmeme” - an online forum matching anonymous requests for particular types of stories

with equally anonymous writers, and *firework boy* originated in a community where prompts may, but do not have to, be anonymous. While both stories have elements typical of the Football RPF team sex/gangbang subgenre, both also play with variations on the generic conventions - a key fan fiction technique for creating meanings (Derecho, 2006).

Stylistically, both stories are written in very close third person from a single point of view - the character at the center of attention in the orgy or gangbang. This allows the reader an insight into the character's intimate thoughts and emotions without fully immersing them in that character as a first-person narrative might. This is common in recent fan fiction, and particularly in RPF where a first-person narrative can often be experienced as too jarring and invasive, given that characters are based on real-life celebrities. Like a significant proportion of fan fiction and the vast majority of the gangbang/team sex subgenre, both stories are sexually explicit. Overtly erotic and sexual scenes in slash have an effect of "physicalising emotion" (Pugh, 2005, p. 102), and fan fiction writers often use such content to provide further intimate insight into characters. Gangbang stories also often feature some commentary alongside the text, for instance in tags and author's notes, with regards to the consensual - or otherwise - nature of the gangbang. The phrasing of such notes and tags varies, but some examples are "HAPPY CONSENSUAL GANGBANGS", "emotional resolution through gangbang", "consensual gangbang", or "comfort gangbang". Neither story comes with such accompanying material in any of their published versions, but themes of consent and overt consent negotiation are present throughout.

Fan writer meretricula's *firework boy* (2011) is set after the Champions' League semifinal game between archrivals Real Madrid and Barcelona on April 26th, 2011. The point of view character is Sergi Roberto, a relatively junior player for whom the match was his Champions' League debut and therefore an important milestone in his career, a fact which singles him out

for celebration and reward by his teammates. The other participants in the orgy are Lionel Messi (the team's star, and widely acknowledged as one of the best players in the world), Thiago Alcântara, Ibrahim Afellay, Gerard Piqué, and David Villa, while a number of other team members - notably Xavi Hernández - are shown to watch from the sidelines or decline to participate.

The premise of *Story A* is that the Spanish national team offer to reward midfielder David Silva after a particularly good performance in a friendly match against the US. After initial reluctance, Silva agrees to the proposal, as being gangbanged has been a long-standing fantasy for him, and eight other players take part in the gangbang: Carlos Marchena, Raúl Albiol, Álvaro Arbeloa, David Villa, Pepe Reina, Fernando Torres, Fernando Llorente, and Santi Cazorla. To aid clarity, from this point on I will use the full name to refer to the real-life football players and either the first or last name only, depending on predominant usage within the story, to refer to the fictional characters.

The various relationships and histories these players have with each other both within and outside the Spanish national team provide several emotional focal points. Many Football RPF gangbang stories feature more romantic or emotionally involved relationships between couples of players within the wider team environment. In reward stories it is often the player's longer-term romantic partner who will arrange the gangbang with the team and direct the action. *Let's Hear It for the Boy* works both within and outside this template. Instead of a central pairing, the story focuses on the relationships between three players: Silva, Villa, and Carlos. Silva and Villa's past sexual relationship provides a counterpoint for Silva's long-standing and, as he believes, unrequited romantic feelings for Carlos. Similarly, *firework boy* also differs from the central romantic couple template: there are several established pairings, but as a player relatively new to the team Sergi isn't part of any of them.

The reward for a good performance scenario is a fairly common trope in setting up gangbang stories, but a key contrast between the two stories is that whereas *firework boy* is set within the regular league team setting, *Let's Hear It for the Boy* takes place at the national team level. Relationships between players on national teams are often portrayed in Football RPF stories as more diverse and ambiguous, as well as less established than those on league teams. Stories are more commonly set in league teams, so the contrast here is a crucial resource for meaning-making and an important driver behind some of the stories' key themes: the interplay between safety and vulnerability; the exploration of hierarchies of masculinity; and masculinity, power, and sexual consent.

Safety and Vulnerability

The team environment in Football RPF stories is often presented as a safe space where long-standing homosocial bonds mean that everyone on the team can automatically be trusted. This is a contrast to, for instance, Dempster's (2009) findings of the importance of hierarchy and position within the lad cultures of university sports teams. This view of the team as a safe environment is particularly true of stories set in league teams, where players spend most of their time and effort and are often shown to have the greatest emotional investment in, and this is reflected to an extent in *firework boy*. As Sergi, the point of view character in the story, is relatively new to the team, he himself does not have the longstanding relationships and bonds with his teammates that they do with each other. Yet those bonds among the other characters are clearly shown in the story, through Sergi's point of view. The banter he observes among his teammates is clearly long-established, as are their post-game rituals. While one group of players engages in sexual acts in the dressing room, another goes about

the business of post-match cooldown, both groups still interacting casually with each other. Initially this serves to highlight Sergi's status as a newcomer and outsider, underscoring his sense of vulnerability in the new environment. Both groups of teammates, however, quickly move to include Sergi in their activities, congratulating him on his Champions' League debut, and making him feel like a welcome and legitimate part of the team. By the end of the story Sergi feels confident enough to take part in the banter and interact with his teammates on an equal footing, even though only ten minutes have passed. The new team environment has been made safe for him.

The setting of *Let's Hear It for the Boy* in the national team environment is an interesting counterpoint to the more usual league team story. National teams are often composed of players who during the regular league season are bitter rivals, players who may have once been on the same league team but have since transferred to other teams, or players who have little contact with each other because they play in different leagues. Football RPF writers often use their knowledge of the players' backgrounds and the real-life events in their sporting careers as a backdrop to the plot of stories (Waysdorf, 2015a). Therefore, this national team dynamic is one key factor in creating a sense of vulnerability for Silva, the point of view character in *Let's Hear It for the Boy*. Another element of vulnerability is introduced through references to a past sexual relationship between the fictional versions of Silva and Villa, who in real life played together for Valencia between 2006 and 2010, and indications of long-standing romantic feelings Silva harbors for Carlos, another real-life former Valencia teammate. This triangle forms the emotional core of the story, with Villa constantly challenging and pushing at boundaries while Carlos is depicted as caring and protective. This sense of vulnerability, however, is partially offset early on in *Let's Hear It for the Boy* by a sense of homecoming. The story is set shortly after the real-life events of David Silva's transfer from Valencia to Manchester City in June 2010, where he was initially

seen to be struggling with adjusting to a new country, team, and language. The fictional Silva in the story is surrounded by Spanish-speaking teammates, and “all he can think is home, home, home” (2011, p. 2). This bubble of safety is broken as soon as Villa extends his offer to give Silva something Villa claims Silva has always wanted. Silva remembers his past relationship with Villa, including an incident where he attempted to withdraw consent during a sexual encounter. He becomes aware of the other people present in the room, nervous of their looks and their judgment. The tension between the safety of the team environment and the vulnerable position Villa’s suggestion of a gangbang puts Silva in takes the form of ambivalence on Silva’s part. The close third person style further highlights this by giving the reader insight into Silva’s emotions. He is almost paralyzed with indecision, simultaneously aroused and embarrassed. Silva’s indecision is resolved by Carlos. The two have a private conversation in which Carlos is shown as being protective of Silva, which is what finally gives Silva enough of a sense of safety to agree to Villa’s proposal. Yet Silva’s ambivalence reappears as soon as he is faced with his teammates again, and he is described as feeling simultaneously thrilled and horrified. This ambivalence and only fades gradually over the course of the story.

As the story progresses, various teammates’ actions contribute to settling Silva’s ambivalence. Raúl’s smile and wave brings back a sense of normality and the training ground. Villa’s acknowledgement and acceptance of Silva’s vulnerability provides reassurance. Carlos makes Silva focus only on him when the attention of his assembled teammates makes him balk. This progressive shedding of vulnerability culminates when,

after three or four of his teammates have fucked him, Silva experiences even his audience as pure thrill, no longer afraid of judgmental stares.

This thrill then fades back into a feeling of safety at the end of the story, as Carlos is shown to provide physical and emotional aftercare for Silva.

Read side by side with fans' extratextual knowledge of sports culture, the interplay between safety and vulnerability in both *firework boy* and *Let's Hear It for the Boy* becomes a sophisticated commentary on that culture. Where in an actual sports team a new player might expect to have to engage in prolonged jostling for position in the team hierarchy (Dempster, 2009), in *firework boy* the initially unfamiliar and threatening new team environment is rapidly made safe for Sergi by his teammates. This recreation or repetition of sports culture with a difference (Derecho, 2006) highlights the problematic elements of sports culture and at the same time opens up new possibilities for it. In *Let's Hear It for the Boy*, the long passages where the point of view character is ambivalent towards his experiences are particularly significant. When it comes to the real-life counterparts of the fictional characters depicted in stories like this, allegations of harassment, sexual assault and rape surface in the media with some regularity, with many of the high-profile cases involving allegations of gang rape or involvement of multiple players in the assault (e.g. Burke, 2015; Nurka, 2013; Toffoletti, 2007). Fictionalizing this scenario in Football RPF opens up the potential of undermining the sexually aggressive culture of sports. The sexualized behaviors of sports culture are no longer directed outwards at women, but inwards at teammates who can be seen as equals.

Reading homosexual desire into homosocial environments is typical of slash fiction, and doing so in the context of the sports team as a dominant expression of homosocial sports culture challenges its claim to a privileged position within heterosexual hegemonic masculinity. Having Sergi's new teammates in *firework boy* acknowledge his vulnerable position and actively work towards including him immediately counters expectations of how such cultures operate. Similarly, for all the ambivalence and vulnerability Silva feels in *Let's Hear It for the Boy*, there is a certain kind of safety implied in being able to show that vulnerability, have it acknowledged by his teammates, and ultimately derive sexual and emotional pleasure from it. Positioning the team environment as a safe space for homosexual desire in this way opens up the possibility of inverting sports culture, mellowing its aggression and retargeting it inwards towards the players themselves rather than outwards towards marginalized fans. This in turn makes exploration of these themes safer for those outsiders, such as women, non-binary people, and gay and bisexual men, who are normally threatened by it. This opens up a space for expressions of sports fandom which include a sexual attraction to the athletes in an environment where such desires are otherwise not only stigmatized but also fraught with anxieties around real-life sexual assaults and other dangers sports culture poses to marginalized fans. Yet, both stories retain key elements of sports culture, particularly the fear of the judgment of one's peers and the emphasis on hierarchies within the team. The repetition with a difference of these elements both serves to anchor the stories firmly within sports culture and to challenge the version of masculinity that culture is built on.

Hierarchy

Elements of lad and sports cultures are used as extratextual resources in reading and writing Football RPF - both the similarities and differences between sports culture as fans experience

and know it on the one hand, and as they depict it in their fiction on the other, feed into the meanings readers and writers of Football RPF create through their stories. Dempster (2009) notes the importance of hierarchy in lad cultures. University sports teams often have elaborate initiation rituals, many of which involve heavy drinking. Undergoing such initiation affords access to the privileges of being part of the team and therefore at the top of the hierarchy. Yet once achieved, this position then needs to be maintained, and Dempster identifies a number of ways of doing this: banter within the in-group and aggressive behavior towards any outsiders perceived as a challenge; “regular sessions of heavy drinking” (p. 490); and sexualized behaviors towards women as well as “indictments of homosexuality” (p. 488). *Let’s Hear It for the Boy* explores the shape hierarchies take within the team. Key ways in which the team hierarchy is established within the story include banter, and the demonstration of sexual competence or lack thereof. Notably, however, the banter never quite spills over into overt aggression even in the sometimes borderline hostile interactions between Villa and Carlos, and alcohol is entirely absent from the story. These differences and similarities between sports culture as fans know it and sports culture as it is presented in the story are a key part of fans’ meaning-making activities. There is, however, another more complex layer of simultaneous reading available here: there are two possible and quite different readings of the hierarchies depicted in *Let’s Hear It for the Boy*, available at the same time, in the same text, to those readers who have access to the extratextual resources and knowledge of sports culture to make sense of them. These alternative readings are a key way in which the trappings of sports culture are challenged in Football RPF fan fiction.

The first possible reading, within the dominant hegemonic grain of sports culture, would position Villa and Pepe at the top of the team hierarchy. Villa’s dominance is clear from early on as he is the one to propose the gangbang and clearly holds enough sway within the team to

organize it. He is portrayed as sexually confident and competent, both in Silva's memories of their past relationship and during the gangbang. His skill as a football player and experience also play a role here, as indicated by Silva's reaction to praise from Villa. Silva is reminded of his early days playing on the same team as Villa, and how much Villa approval had meant to him then, reflecting that he still craves that praise and approval.

Pepe's position is similarly demonstrated by his sexual competence and his banter. Moreover, he positions himself as a mentor of Torres. In real life, Pepe Reina and Fernando Torres played together in Liverpool between 2007 and 2011. Pepe refers to Torres as "my Fernando", and while this may be partly to distinguish him from the character of Fernando Llorente, it nonetheless also expresses a certain possessiveness - and by extension a hierarchical relationship. He also refers to Torres as "Niño" (Spanish for "kid"), which is Torres's real-life nickname due to the young age at which he became a star, but which further serves to underline the inequality between them. Finally, Pepe positions himself as having the power to grant Torres a reward in the form of a blowjob from Silva.

Other players then slot into the hierarchy based on their relationships with Villa and Pepe, their relative sexual inexperience and portrayed lack of confidence, and to an extent the sexual acts they are willing to engage in, which puts Silva at the bottom of this hierarchy. This raises interesting issues for sexual consent in the gangbang scenario, where a player higher up in the hierarchy can be seen as having control over others' bodies and consent.

Pepe's "reward" for Torres is a good illustration of this, as Pepe assumes he can make consent decisions for both Torres and Silva. In a reading with the grain of sports culture, this serves to underscore the hierarchical relationships within the team. Notably in this interpretation, Carlos and Santi can be read as refusing to participate in the hierarchy. Carlos engages in a struggle with Villa for dominance over Silva throughout the story, and this set of relationships forms the emotional core of *Let's Hear It for the Boy*. Yet he does not engage in banter with the rest of the group and openly shows not only tenderness but also affection towards Silva. Santi's potential position outside the hierarchy is primarily determined by his open and sincere offer to perform oral sex on Silva, regardless of any loss in status this may cause, and his skill at this.

The alternative reading of the team hierarchy in *Let's Hear It for the Boy*, however, goes against the grain of real-life sports culture. In this interpretation, all the players can be read as equal and refusing to engage with the hierarchical culture, with the exception of Villa and Pepe whose banter and jostling for position marks *them* as outsiders to this group of equals. Both Villa and Pepe are portrayed as reluctant to show emotion or empathy in their interactions with others. Villa only does so twice, once when he smiles at Silva in a way Silva thinks is meant to reassure him and once, briefly, after his orgasm. The vast majority of Pepe's dialogue in the story consists of banter which leaves little to no room for genuine emotion. By contrast, most of the other characters express a range of emotions throughout the story: surprise, curiosity, shyness, a sense of being overwhelmed, and perhaps most notably tenderness on multiple occasions. Álvaro, for instance, tenderly ruffles Silva's hair and check that he is indeed enjoying himself.

It is this refusal to engage in banter, as well as the characters' relatively unselfconscious engagement in sexual activities they don't necessarily feel confident or competent at, that are the strongest indicators that these characters may not be taking sports culture hierarchies at face value. Raúl, while not being skillful in his lovemaking is enthusiastic, an enthusiasm not curbed by Pepe and Villa's banter. Álvaro is mostly lost in his romantic attraction to Raúl and surprised when Silva offers him a blowjob, and Llorente's technique is described as a mix of some of the other characters' enthusiasm and hard thrusts.

While one of these readings goes with and the other against the grain of sports culture, neither reading particularly goes with or against the grain of the writing in *Let's Hear It for the Boy*. It is the fact that both of these readings are equally plausible – the fact that, in Derecho's (2006) terms they can be read side by side not only with sports culture as an extratextual resource but with each other, within a single story - that makes the story such a powerful challenge to the norms of sports culture. Notably, both readings have the potential to be deconstructive, as ultimately the story focuses on homosexual relationships and acts within the team, something completely taboo within sports culture. With either reading, homophobia is not an element of the setting. Yet because the reader brings with them a knowledge of real-life sports cultures as an extratextual resource for their reading (Willis, 2006), this absence has the effect of highlighting the discontinuity between fan fiction and real life. The repetition with a difference of sports culture in the fan fiction text makes visible the contradictions and arbitrariness inherent in the privileging in sports culture of certain types of masculinities and homosocial relationships over others, and opens them up to questioning and critique.

In *firework boy*, a slightly different approach to both establishing and deconstructing the team hierarchy is taken. Here, the key factors which can be read as determining a player's position in the hierarchy are all related to their skill and experience on the team. Sergi, being a relatively new addition to the team is shown to be overwhelmed and slightly intimidated by the proximity to older, more experienced, and in some cases extremely skilled and famous players. However, it is his own expectations of the team culture more than anything else that construct this hierarchy, and this is shown in the way his teammates treat him as an equal, as someone worthy of celebration and inclusion within the team. Observing his new team's exuberant post-match banter, Sergi is comforted to find that "it wasn't that different from the B-team, after all" (2011, p. 1). As part of the team's celebration of Sergi's Champions' League debut, it is Messi - the star player, arguably the man at the top of the team hierarchy - who offers to perform oral sex for Sergi. Dialogue between other characters also serves to level any remaining sense of hierarchy as Piqué declares, "There are no children in a Barcelona locker room! Tonight they all are men!" (p. 2). Sergi's initial expectations of a strict team hierarchy determined by players' experience and skill can be read as reflecting fans' own experiences and expectations of a hypermasculine, strictly hierarchical sports culture. The team's efforts to make Sergi feel welcome as an equal then work to subvert these expectations and open up the possibility of different, less aggressive masculinities within the team and within sports culture in general.

Wellard (2002) demonstrates how attempts to make sport more inclusive can result in the reproduction of ideas of hegemonic masculinity. Such attempts, he argues, do not result in a dismantling of the hierarchies of hypermasculine sports cultures. Rather, they lead to the establishment of new such hierarchies modeled on the ideas of masculinity prevalent in mainstream sports culture, or a redefinition of who is in and outside those hierarchies. This in

turn leads to further struggle for position, expressed yet again through appeals to traditional hegemonic masculinity and the denigration of women and non-straight sexualities, reflecting the complicity of these efforts in sustaining hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy, as identified and explored by Connell (1995). In a more recent study of a rugby team at another UK university, Anderson and McGuire (2010) find less evidence for the prevalence of misogynistic and homophobic discourses in this environment. They argue that their participants are performing a more “inclusive masculinity” than that found in previous studies and link this to an overall reduction in homophobia in English culture. They do, however, also acknowledge that these findings cannot be universalized, and that sporting culture continues to have a public reputation linked with misogyny and homophobia.

In many ways, the masculinities presented in both *Let's Hear It for the Boy* and *firework boy* better reflect and even extend Anderson and McGuire's reported inclusive masculinity than the traditional hegemonic or complicit masculinity associated with sports culture. This is not to say that fan fiction readers and writers believe that these different masculinities reflect reality - it is precisely the fact that they don't which makes them valuable as a vision of new possibilities. The multiple, simultaneous, contradictory possible readings of how the internal team hierarchy functions in *Let's Hear It for the Boy* - available side by side, at the same time, in the same text - and the very clear and direct subversion of hierarchy in *firework boy* allow for precisely the kind of undermining and dismantling of masculine sports culture that Wellard (2002) does not find in other attempts to make sports more accessible.

Masculinity, Power, and Sexual Consent

The examination of hierarchies in *Story A* and *firework boy*, and particularly the role sexual confidence and competence play in it, also has an impact on how sexual consent is depicted

within the stories. As lad and sports cultures have been linked to sexual violence, and as both stories overtly deal with issues of sexual consent, it is worth understanding key feminist thought around consent in order to explore how it may apply to depictions of sex in Football RPF stories.

Two broad schools of thought have emerged in the feminist academic space around consent. Radical second-wave feminism asks key questions about structures of power and oppression which limit particularly women's ability to meaningfully consent to sexual activity with men. MacKinnon (1991), for instance, argues that the dominant discourses around gender and sexuality form an oppressive structure by socializing women to view their own bodies as “for sexual use by men” (p. 1212). A key issue with this school of thought is its foundation in essentialist notions of gender, which limit its analytical use for more complex and intersecting modes of oppression. The second strand of work on consent focuses on agency, and particularly the practicalities of consent communication from both a legal and a psychological perspective. Pineau (1989) identifies a dominant "contractual" model of consent, where unrelated actions such as accepting a drink or wearing a short skirt are read as consent for penile-vaginal intercourse. She goes on to propose an alternative model of “communicative sexuality” where both partners engage in verbal and nonverbal communication throughout the sexual encounter, driven by the desire and moral obligation to “promote the sexual ends of one's partner” (p. 235) as well as one's own. Anderson (2005) proposes a model of negotiating sex where both partners have an exchange of views and reach a mutual, generally verbal, agreement to penetrative sex. Moving beyond theoretical models, Jozkowski and collaborators have produced extensive work on the types of behaviors college students use to communicate consent (e.g. Jozkowski & Peterson, 2012; 2013; Jozkowski et al., 2014; Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015). Their findings include gender differences in both how consent is communicated and how consent communication is

interpreted. Specifically, they find that such communication is shaped by traditional conceptions of gender roles, where men are seen as the initiators of sex and women as gatekeepers. Thus, men tend score higher on “initiating behaviors” while women tend to express consent through passive acceptance and nonverbal signals of interest.

There are elements in both *Let's Hear It for the Boy* and *firework boy* which examine consent negotiation at the interpersonal level. However, the potentially unequal relationships depicted also create a space for the exploration of socially constructed inequalities and their impact on individuals' ability to meaningfully consent to sexual acts. The fact that within the context of Football RPF all participants in the sexual acts depicted are men also allows for different approaches to issues of power, gender, and consent than those available from most academic research. Early studies of slash fan fiction have often emphasized the more equal relationship dynamic which can be enabled by both characters being the same gender (e.g. Lamb & Veith, 1986; Russ, 1985; Kustritz, 2003), so the fact that within the context of Football RPF all participants in the sexual acts depicted are men also allows for different approaches to issues of power, gender, and consent than those available from most traditional academic research. However, while some slash stories clearly do use same-gender relationships to successfully explore the effects of the leveling of socially constructed inequalities on sexual and romantic relationships, stories in the Football RPF gangbang subgenre more often than not explicitly examine the hierarchies and inequalities still possible within same-gender relationships. *Let's Hear It for the Boy* is ultimately just one such case.

As explored in the previous section, hierarchies operate on multiple different levels within *Let's Hear It for the Boy*. Banter, sexual confidence and competence, as well as characters' skill as football players can all be read as being used to negotiate position within the team.

Age is another key element, particularly within the Silva – Villa – Carlos relationship triangle. Silva is the youngest of the three, aged 25 at the time the story is set; Villa is 30 and Carlos 32. Both Silva and Carlos are portrayed as at least partially aware of these age gaps and the issues they raise in terms of power differentials. Silva's past hero worship of Villa is evident in his reaction to praise from him, whilst Carlos' reluctance to engage in a sexual or romantic relationship with Silva is clearly motivated by the age gap and concerns over the power he wields over Silva as a mentor. Carlos' reluctance extends to participating in the gangbang, although it is also made clear that this is not for lack of desire. He does agree to take part upon Silva's specific request, and remains very protective of Silva throughout the story. The two have a private and very clear conversation about consent, in line with Anderson's (2005) negotiation model, in which Carlos promises to ensure Silva's boundaries are respected and that consent withdrawal will always be an option available to him. In contrast, both Villa and Pepe use their self-appointed positions in the hierarchy to put pressure on others for their own sexual and social ends. Villa consistently pushes against Silva's boundaries, shutting down opportunities for consent to be denied or withdrawn. Pepe uses his sexual competence and Silva's arousal to put pressure on him to give Torres a "reward". This serves to establish his position in the hierarchy, relative to both Torres and Silva.

It is the characters who are portrayed as less sexually confident and competent, and who are either at the bottom of the hierarchy or not engaging with it at all (depending on which reading one chooses) that are particularly interesting when it comes to interpersonal interactions and consent negotiation. Torres, having witnessed Pepe put pressure on Silva,

makes it clear that Silva is under no obligation to give him a blowjob if he does not want to. Llorente and Raúl either ask or wait for explicit verbal consent. These are also the characters who show the most tenderness and care for their partner. The two different possible readings of the hierarchy within the team then clearly correspond to different approaches to consent. Pepe and Villa, at the top of the hierarchy when the story is read with the grain of sports culture, represent the power relationships of hegemonic masculinity: the characters embodying that masculinity are willing to use their power for their sexual ends regardless of their partner's consent. Other characters whose behavior is more in line with "inclusive masculinity" (Anderson & McGuire, 2010), on the other hand, seek to dismantle power structures and ensure that Silva's autonomy and consent decisions are respected. In this way, the story offers clear challenges to hegemonic masculinity and shows how other kinds of masculinity may be able to counteract it. This inclusive masculinity, however, also has its limitations. Most notably, women are entirely absent from the story and thus there is no engagement with gendered power relations.

The multiple available readings of the team hierarchy and how they interact with issues of sexual consent in *Let's Hear It For the Boy* clearly contradict views of slash as a genre of equality. While gender is not a factor in the power relationships in slash, other sources of inequality and power differentials are introduced. In the case of Football RPF team sex and gangbang stories these inequalities are frequently embedded in the team hierarchy and the hierarchy of masculinities that represents. What stories like this do, then, is explore ways of negotiating power differentials in intimate relationships and the ways in which consent in these situations can be made truly meaningful – as well as the limits to this.

It is also worth noting the absence of a key element of lad and sports culture from *Story A*: alcohol. Drunkenness and alcohol feature prominently in a significant proportion of Football RPF and especially gangbang stories, partly because so many gangbang stories tend to be set during the celebrations after major victories. The setting of this story after a low-key friendly match rather than a major international tournament makes the complete absence of alcohol more plausible and allows for focus on other elements of sports culture. Dempster (2009) finds that heavy drinking is a key part of sporting culture and alcohol consumption is often a point of contention when rape and sexual assault allegations are made against professional athletes. A rape victim's drunkenness is often interpreted as consent, which in turn allows for public discourse to silence, shame and blame them (Burke, 2015; Nurka, 2013; Toffoletti, 2007). While pressure is exerted on Silva and other characters in various ways throughout the story, alcohol is not one of them. Reading *Let's Hear It for the Boy* as one story within the collective archive of the gangbang/team sex subgenre, one potential effect of this omission is to further foreground and crystallize the other factors which affect characters' behaviors and decisions with regards to consent, including the complex effects of the interpersonal relationships and social hierarchies at play within the team in the narrative.

In *firework boy*, there is a different, in some ways more direct, approach to issues of power and consent. As Sergi is relatively new to the team and has no pre-existing relationships with his new teammates, he automatically assumes himself to be at the bottom of the team hierarchy. When presented with the overtly homoerotic and homosexual behaviour of his teammates - particularly Messi, whom Sergi looks up to as a player and a leader - he is initially shocked. Once he is invited to join them, there is a clear sense of uncertainty and ambivalence on Sergi's part. This can be read as linked to Sergi's own perception of his place in the team hierarchy in several ways. On the one hand, the players inviting him to join them

- Messi, Piqué, Villa - are all senior to him, and there is a sense of Sergi, as the new player on the team, questioning his own worth in comparison to them. On the other hand, these players' seniority and therefore relative power over Sergi raises the question of whether Sergi could meaningfully refuse their offer and not suffer any negative consequences to his position on the team or his career. Sergi's indecision is resolved through the intervention of other senior players, particularly Xavi, who make it clear to him that he does have a genuine, free choice in the matter:

"Kid, you don't have to," Xavi said quietly. Sergi jumped; he hadn't heard Xavi come up beside him, and also Xavi was naked, which under normal circumstances he wouldn't have thought twice about but now seemed extremely relevant. "Seriously, if you're not interested, just ignore them. You don't have to participate. Most of us aren't going to." (meretricula, 2011, p. 2)

On the surface level, this conversation is an overt and verbal consent negotiation, in line to some extent with Pineau's (1989) communicative sexuality or Anderson's (2005) negotiation model. What is, however, interesting about it is that in the context of the story, and of Sergi's at least potentially hierarchical and unequal relationship with the other players on the team, the conversation clearly acknowledges the power imbalances and validates any concern Sergi may have over how much agency and choice he has in this situation. At the same time, he is given a clear message that the choice is genuinely his, and he is shown senior, successful role models to follow if he does not wish to take Messi up on his offer. In *firework boy*, then, interpersonal negotiation and issues of hierarchy and power are very clearly shown to be inseparable, as Sergi's negotiating position is shaped by the power structures he is embedded in.

Both *Story A* and *firework boy* therefore explore consent issues both at the interpersonal communication level and the level of socially constructed power differentials, and intertwine the two in complex ways. *Story A* is less explicit in its linking of negotiation and power, but the way consent issues are depicted in the story is also very specific to its sports culture setting. The characters who have the greatest investment in the team hierarchy and who exhibit the greatest adherence to hegemonic masculinity are also the characters shown to have the least respect for their partner's boundaries and consent decisions. Conversely, characters with less investment in the hierarchy and hegemonic masculinity also show tenderness, care, and a genuine concern for Silva's wishes and wellbeing. In this way, the story presents different kinds of masculinity and explores their effect on issues of consent. On the other hand, *firework boy* explicitly depicts power and negotiation as inseparable. While the power structures depicted in the story are not the gendered structures the readers and writers of fan fiction frequently negotiate in their own lives, they are still made explicit in the story, allowing readers and writers to explore their effects and providing the opportunity for fans to attempt to find effective ways of negotiating them.

Conclusion

Professional team sports and sports cultures rooted in hegemonic masculinity present significant challenges for fans who are oppressed, excluded and marginalized by structures of patriarchy and masculinity. Women, non-binary people, and gay and bisexual men in particular frequently struggle to access sport both as participants and fans, and professional athletes at all levels and across many team sports are frequently associated with sexualized behaviors towards women, the denigration of homosexuality, and in extreme cases rape and

sexual violence. Against this backdrop, marginalized fans employ a range of tactics to negotiate the challenges of their involvement with professional sports culture and the fandoms surrounding it. The production and consumption of Football RPF is one such tactic, where the expressions of fandom which are denigrated in mainstream spaces (such as sexual attraction to the players) are legitimized and celebrated. Football RPF, however – particularly as reflected in the team sex/gangbang RPF subgenre - also allows readers and writers to engage in a highly sophisticated exploration of, and challenge to, sports cultures and hegemonic masculinity.

By reading homosexual desire into the homosocial environment of the football team, Football RPF stories challenge dominant constructions of sporting masculinity, and create spaces for the expression of vulnerability, care, and tenderness in these environments. These stories stand in stark contrast to the often hostile realities of sports culture which readers and writers of fan fiction are familiar with, and it is this contrast which serves as a challenge to the sports team's claim to a privileged position within heterosexual hegemonic masculinity. Through their treatment of the concept of hierarchies within sports teams, both stories examined in this article construct different, more inclusive versions of masculinity, outright challenging the hierarchical structures of patriarchy. Through their engagement with issues of sexual consent, both stories also directly address the challenges that the frequent sexual violence allegations against professional athletes present to an expression of fandom which incorporates a sexual attraction to the players. Moreover, both stories problematize issues of sexual consent beyond mere interpersonal negotiation and show how power relationships are inextricably linked with such negotiation. In these ways, Football RPF team sex/gangbang stories allow readers and writers to negotiate the complex challenges posed to them by their engagement with a fan object which is highly problematic in its enactment of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy. Alternative, fictionalized, non-threatening versions of masculinity which are read side by side

with readers and writers' knowledge of the realities of sports culture allow the Football RPF community to issue their own, albeit limited, challenge to the cultural structures which marginalize them as fans. Within the wider context of slash – frequently seen as a genre of equality – stories like *Let's Hear It For the Boy* and *firework boy* clearly explore issues of inequality in intimate relationships and sexual situations beyond gender relations. The emphasis on hierarchy within the professional team sports environment allows for a re-introduction of power relations into an environment supposedly devoid of them since gender is removed from the equation. Thus the focus in both stories on sexual consent then serves to further highlight and problematize inherent inequalities. What is, however, truly transformative about these works is that they explore ways of negotiating around power relations, challenging hierarchies, and making consent meaningful within the constraints of patriarchal structures. Viewing slash as a literature not of equality but of *negotiated inequality* opens up new avenues of research around the kinds of inequalities presented and explored in slash stories, and particularly their intersections (or lack thereof) with issues of gender and sexuality.

Notes:

The “AO3 census” was a fan-run effort conducted by centrumlumina to gather demographic data on the community of fan fiction readers and writers who use the Archive of Our Own (AO3), one of the current primary sites of fan fiction activity. Due to the way the survey was promoted, there are some limitations (centrumlumina, 2013a) to the findings and it is likely that rather than representing the demographics of AO3 users it represent a more selective (and self-selected) sample consisting predominantly of AO3 users who also use the social networking site Tumblr. Nonetheless, much of the data corroborates and expands existing small-scale ethnographic work and despite the known limitations provides useful insight into the demographics of some parts of the fan fiction community.

² See Jozkowski & Peterson, (2012); (2013); Jozkowski et al., (2014); Jozkowski & Wiersma, (2015).

References

- Anderson, E., & McGuire, R. (2010). Inclusive masculinity and the gendered politics of men's rugby. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 19(3), 37–41. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2010.494341>
- Anderson, M. (2005). Negotiating sex. *Southern California Law Review*, 41, 1401–1438.
- Anonymous. (2011). *Story A*. Footballkink2. Retrieved from <http://footballkink2.livejournal.com/>
- Burke, L. (2015). The right to rehabilitation after punishment? *Probation Journal*, 62(1), 3–6. doi:[10.1177/0264550515573103](https://doi.org/10.1177/0264550515573103)
- centrumlumina. (2013a, September 30). Limitations and Uses of the Data [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/62748999135/limitations-and-uses-of-the-data>
- centrumlumina. (2013b, October 1). Gender [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/62816996032/gender>
- centrumlumina. (2013c, October 2). Gender, Sexual or Romantic Minority [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/62890602051/gender-sexual-or-romantic-minority>
- Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Dempster, S. (2009). Having the balls, having it all?: Sport and constructions of undergraduate laddishness. *Gender and Education*, 21(5), 481–500. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09540250802392299>
- Derecho, A. (2006). Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction. In K. Hellekson & K. Busse (Eds.), *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays* (pp. 61–78). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.
- Esmonde, K., Cooky, C., & Andrews, D. L. (2015). “It’s Supposed to be About the Love of the Game, not the Love of Aaron Rodgers’ Eyes”: Challenging the Exclusions of Women’s Sports Fans. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 32(1), 22–48. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2014-0072>
- Gosling, V. K. (2007). Girls Allowed? The Marginalization of Female Sport Fans. In J. Gray, C. Sandvoss, & C. L. Harrington (Eds.), *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (pp. 250–260). New York and London: New York University Press.
- Jozkowski, K. N., & Peterson, Z. D. (2013). College Students and Sexual Consent: Unique Insights. *Journal of Sex Research*, 50(6), 517–523. doi:10.1080/00224499.2012.700739

- Jozkowski, K. N., Sanders, S., Peterson, Z. D., Dennis, B., & Reece, M. (2014). Consenting to Sexual Activity: The Development and Psychometric Assessment of Dual Measures of Consent. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *43*, 437–450. doi:10.1007/s10508-013-0225-7
- Jozkowski, K. N., & Wiersma, J. D. (2015). Does Drinking Alcohol Prior to Sexual Activity Influence College Students' Consent? *International Journal of Sexual Health*, *27*(2), 156–174. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2014.951505>
- Kustritz, A. (2003). Slashing the Romance Narrative. *The Journal of American Culture*, *26*(3), 371–385. doi:10.1111/1542-734X.00098
- Lamb, P., & Veith, D. (1986). Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and Star Trek Zines. In D. Palumbo (Ed.), *Erotic Universe: Sexuality and Fantastic Literature* (pp. 235–256). New York: Greenwood Press.
- MacKinnon, C. A. (1991). Reflections on Sex Equality under Law. *Yale Law Journal*, *100*(5), 1281–1328.
- meretricula. (2011). *firework boy*. Archive of Our Own. Retrieved from <https://archiveofourown.org/>
- Morris, S., & Topping, A. (2016, October 14). Ched Evans: footballer found not guilty of rape in retrial. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2016/oct/14/footballer-ched-evans-cleared-of-in-retrial>
- Nurka, C. (2013). Shame and disgrace in Australian football culture: Rape claims and public affect. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *38*, 43–51.
- Pineau, L. (1989). Date rape: A feminist analysis. *Law and Philosophy*, *8*(2), 217–243.
- Pugh, S. (2005). *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context*. Bridgend, Wales: Seren Books.
- Russ, J. (1985). Pornography By Women For Women, With Love. In *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans & Perverts: Feminist Essays* (pp. 79–99). Trumansberg, NY: The Crossing Press.
- Toffoletti, K. (2007). How is gender-based violence covered in the sporting news? An account of the Australian Football League sex scandal. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *30*(5), 427–438. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2007.07.004
- Waysdorf, A. (2015a). My football fandoms, performance, and place. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *18*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0636>.
- Waysdorf, A. (2015b). The creation of football slash fan fiction. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *19*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0588>

Wellard, I. (2002). Men, sport, body performance and the maintenance of “exclusive masculinity.” *Leisure Studies*, 21(3-4), 235–247.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0261436022000030641>

Willis, I. (2006). Keeping Promises to Queer Children: Making Space (for Mary Sue) at Hogwarts. In K. Hellekson & K. Busse (Eds.), *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays* (pp. 153–170). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.

i
ii