

‘Dogfuck Rapeworld’: Omegaverse fanfiction as a critical tool in analysing the impact of social power structures on intimate relationships and sexual consent

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Abstract

This paper examines the Omegaverse - a subgenre of sexually explicit fanfiction - and its engagement with issues of socially constructed power differentials and sexual consent. I argue that sexually explicit fanfiction, and the Omegaverse in particular, can be used as a critical tool to examine the relationship between power and consent in accessible ways which allow for affective, emotional and intellectual engagement with the issues.

I approach the Omegaverse as a body of work marked by intertextuality, where individual stories are in dialogue with not only the source material but also each other and with writers and readers' knowledge of the real world. I apply sexual scripts theory to the analysis of three Omegaverse fanfiction stories to examine how such stories articulate and explore disjunctures between sexual scripts at the socially and culturally mediated, interpersonal, and individual levels. I draw from theories of sexual consent and insights from fan studies to show how the Omegaverse offers strategies for negotiating meaningfully consensual intimate relationships within wider power structures and dominant sexual scripts.

Keywords: sexual consent; fanfiction; Omegaverse; sexual scripts; romance; pornography

Introduction

This paper examines the Omegaverse - a subgenre of sexually explicit fanfiction - and its engagement with issues of socially constructed power differentials and sexual consent. I argue that sexually explicit fanfiction, and the Omegaverse in particular, is being used by the communities which produce and circulate it as a critical tool to examine the relationship between power and consent in accessible ways which allow for affective, emotional and intellectual engagement with the issues.

Sexual consent is a key part of intimacy. While as a topic it has gained some attention in social media discussions over recent years (Barker 2013), discussions of it in mainstream media, and representations in both fiction and non-fiction, such as sex advice literature, remain simplistic at best and entirely lacking at worst (Attwood et al. 2015). Questions of social power differentials, so important in second-wave feminist thought (Dworkin 1983; MacKinnon 1989), have been sidelined in favour of discourses of agency and interpersonal consent negotiations (e.g. Jozkowski and Peterson 2013). I use the lens of sexual script theory (Simon and Gagnon 1986) to examine fanfiction texts and the way they address consent issues at both the social and the interpersonal levels. I show that Omegaverse fanfiction uses intertextual readings to provide a nuanced commentary on Western gender roles and sexual scripts and how they relate to power and sexual consent.

A range of media and cultural outputs from romance and pornography to women's magazines has been implicated in reproducing gendered, heteronormative dominant sexual scripts. Yet such work frequently relies only on an analysis of the texts themselves, rather than what audiences *do* with them. My interest lies in how such mediation of consent issues may be

explored in-depth and even challenged by audiences through amateur-produced erotic fiction. I examine three stories representative of the wider body of fanfiction work that is the Omegaverse - a science-fictional setting which blends elements of animal and human sexuality, and ideas about gender inequality, domination and submission in frequently sexually-explicit stories. I show how the Omegaverse offers strategies for negotiating meaningfully consensual intimate relationships within wider power structures and dominant sexual scripts.

The mediation of sexual consent

Two broad schools of thought have emerged in feminist academic and activist discussions of consent, though in both cases the starting point of analysis is often rape or sexual assault rather than consent itself. 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. Dworkin (1983) identified exemptions in rape law for marriage (which still existed in most Western countries at the time and still do in some parts of the world today) as a type of oppressive structure which invalidated women's agency and ability to meaningfully consent. MacKinnon (1989) argues that in a male-dominated society, it becomes difficult for women to distinguish between intercourse and rape.

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' (1989, 234) 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' as well as one's own. Anderson (2005) proposes a model of verbally negotiating penetrative sex, while other researchers have focused on the behaviours college students use to communicate consent (e.g. Jozkowski and Peterson 2013). Yet in its focus on the interactions between individuals, this work often fails to account for wider social inequalities and power imbalances and the way they map onto intimate relationships, potentially limiting individuals' ability to meaningfully give consent to sexual activities. Pineau's (1989) communicative model and Anderson's (2005) negotiation model both assume that communication and negotiation happens on equal terms, that all partners are free to know and express their own desires and limits without any external pressures or power structures. Work focusing on power structures, on the other hand, often results in a rather bleak outlook for positive change in sexual violence prevention, and particularly struggles to account for individual agency.

Here, sexual script theory may offer a way of partially reconciling these two approaches. Sexual scripts are the unspoken social rules of how a sexual interaction should unfold: what behaviours are acceptable, who may perform them, in what order (Simon and Gagnon 1986). While some variation exists, the sexual scripts dominant in Western cultures are highly gendered and heteronormative, with men seen as initiators of sexual interactions while women are passive gatekeepers (Ménard and Cabrera 2011). Sexual script theory remains a useful lens on sexuality and has been applied to popular culture. Ménard and Cabrera (2011), for instance, examine how such scripts are reflected in the sexual behaviours depicted in popular romance novels. Hust et al. (2013) identify a link between reading men's and women's magazines and individual consent behaviours. Power, McNair, and Carr (2009)

show that lesbian and bisexual women feel excluded from dominant sexual scripts, leading to significantly lower engagement with safer sex practices. Philadelphoff-Puren (2005), while not referencing sexual script theory directly, examines depictions of the ‘token resistance to sex’ myth in popular romance fiction and argues that such discourses are mapped from romance fiction straight onto legal discourses about rape. Masters, Casey, Wells, and Morrison (2013) identify disjunctures between scripts at the cultural, interpersonal and individual levels as they seek to explain continuity and change in sexual scripts. They find three different strategies for individual and interpersonal engagement with dominant cultural sexual scripts: conforming; exception-finding; and seeking to transform cultural scripts. This model of interaction of sexual scripts at different levels is useful. It provides a way to analyze how consent negotiation at the interpersonal level may be shaped by, but may also challenge, social and culturally mediated power structures.

While romance fiction has been investigated for its representation of sexual consent (Philadelphoff-Puren 2005; Ménard and Cabrera 2011), pornography is by far the most-examined cultural output in relation to consent. It is often blamed by radical feminist scholars and activists for the prevalence of violence against women (e.g. Dworkin 1981; Itzin 1992). MacKinnon (1987, 176) goes as far as defining pornography as ‘the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or words’. Other feminist scholars have rejected this approach as having no basis in evidence of harm and being overly simplistic in placing the blame on a single factor (Segal 1993). There is an increasing drive towards more nuanced analysis of pornography and erotic material. Some academics and activists distinguish between ‘pornography’ as exploitative material and ‘erotica’ as empowering (Wilson-Kovacs 2009). Schorn (2012) identifies a recent rise in commercial feminist and queer porn explicitly framed by its creators as an act of resistance against exploitative mainstream pornography.

Smith (2009, 22) examines written BDSM pornography and argues that, far from eroticizing the subordination of women, ‘descriptions of bodily discomfort, pain or shame are used in the stories to produce an emotional experience of sexual pleasure centred on bodily sensation’.

Methodology

This paper is part of a larger project examining approaches to sexual consent in fanfiction works and the communities around them. The field of Fan Studies has traditions both of studying fan communities and fanfiction as a social phenomenon and collection of practices (e.g. Bacon-Smith 1991; Jenkins 1992; Kustritz 2003) and of approaching fanfiction as literary text through textual analysis (e.g. Derecho 2006; Stasi 2006). It also has a tradition of insider or autoethnographic work (e.g. Jenkins 1992), as many Fan Studies scholars are also fans themselves. These traditions are reflected in my approach to the Omegaverse. I have been a member of the fanfiction community for considerably longer than I have been a researcher. I have leveraged this dual position in both data collection and data analysis for this project. I conceptualize fanfiction as a textual practice that is both densely intertextual (as I discuss below) and intensely communal. Studying fans and studying texts therefore go hand-in-hand by necessity: to make sense of the text, one needs to understand the community the text comes from. My approach is shaped by recognizing the uncomfortable but productive tension between my roles as researcher, fan, informant and analyst (Anderson 2006; Voloder 2008). My work is autoethnographic in the sense that my ‘field’ is also my ‘home’ and I am studying a community I am also a member of. It is also partially autoethnographic in the sense that I am adopting the role of informant and using my own experiences of online fanfiction fandom to inform my data selection, collection, and analysis while situating these experiences firmly ‘within a story of the social context in which [they occur]’ (Reed-Danahay

1997). For these reasons, my work extends beyond a textual analysis of fanfiction stories, and draws on the wider contexts of the communities in which Omegaverse fanfiction is situated. Finally, in line with Fan Studies best practice and to protect the privacy of individual fans and fan authors, I have not provided complete URLs for fan works.

Fanfiction, slash fiction, and inequality

Fanfiction is amateur-produced fiction based on existing media properties. It is predominantly non-commercial and circulates in online communities hosted on platforms like Tumblr, LiveJournal, Dreamwidth or the community-owned Archive of Our Own. Surveys conducted by the fandom community reveal that it is produced predominantly by women and non-binary people (Centrumlumina 2013a), a majority of whom identify as non-heterosexual (Centrumlumina 2013b). A significant proportion of fanfiction is sexually explicit, and much of it - known as slash fiction - involves same-gender and particularly male/male relationships (Destinationtoast 2013a, 2013b).

Intertextuality is a defining feature of fanfiction. Fan-written stories are always in dialogue with the source material - books, TV series or movies - they are based on. Stasi (2006, 119) compares slash fiction (though the argument holds for most fanfiction) to a palimpsest: 'a nonhierarchical, rich layering of genres, more or less partially erased and resurfacing, and a rich and complex continuum of themes, techniques, voices, moods, and registers'. She argues that through this constant dialogue with the source text, works of fanfiction are able to compress meaning in ways more similar to poetry or mythological cycles than modern prose. She also identifies what she calls 'intertextuality in the second degree' (2006, 126) where fanfiction works reference not only the source material but also other texts, including other

fan works. Kaplan (2006) showcases how such intertextuality is used by fan authors in aid of subtle and nuanced characterization. Derecho (2006, 70) extends the concept of intertextuality in fanfiction, arguing that fanfiction is part of what she calls *archontic literature* - literature deliberately making use of and building on pre-existing work. Fanfiction works contribute to an always-open, never complete archive of works which are constantly in dialogue with each other: 'every addition to the archive alters the entire archive'. While the majority of analysis of fanfiction focuses on its relationship and dialogue with the source text, both Stasi (2006) and Derecho (2006) acknowledge the possibility of interaction between fan texts themselves. It is this kind of second-degree intertextuality that is particularly pertinent to the Omegaverse.

Derecho (2006, 73) identifies another crucial feature of fanfiction: that of 'repeating with a difference'. Multiple works of fanfiction (or sometimes even the same work) will often examine a single scene, aspect or idea in the originary text from different points of view. This has the effect of allowing the reader to read both the originary text and the one building on it at the same time. Kustritz (2003) also examines the tendency in fanfiction to repeat motifs over and over, particularly in 'challenges' - events where one member of the community suggests a theme and others write variations on it. Both Kustritz and Derecho suggest that this mode of reading and writing allows for comparisons between the different texts and that it is the similarities and differences between them which are used to construct meaning.

The prevalence of slash fiction within fanfiction has been examined by many fandom scholars. Three key themes emerge from these investigations: the ambiguous relationship of slash with both romance and pornography; its effect of removing gender as a site of power and inequality in relationships; and the extent to which slash is a queer practice. All three of

these themes are relevant to the Omegaverse genre so it is worthwhile reviewing existing literature in brief.

Approaches to slash centering on gender often invoke comparisons with romance, pornography or both. Lamb and Veith (1986), for instance, see slash as a variant of romance fiction. They argue that in an inherently sexist cultural context women find it difficult to write heterosexual romantic relationships as equal and unencumbered by dominant cultural discourses and power differentials. Similarly, they say, it is difficult to overcome our cultural expectations of women's sexual passivity, so in order to portray a relationship which is equal, fan writers resort to using male characters in relationships with each other, and these characters often take on androgynous characteristics. Russ (1985, 79) views slash fiction as 'pornography by women for women, with love'. She broadly agrees with Lamb and Veith (1986) on the effect of slash as an equalizing factor, though she disagrees on how this is achieved. She argues that the male characters in slash are effectively coded female, and that certain tropes in slash effectively eroticize the restrictions put on women's sexuality by patriarchal society. Kustritz (2003, 377) also emphasizes the tendency of slash narratives to 'meticulously create an equality relationship dynamic'. She sees slash as closer to romance than pornography as it focuses on the emotional aspects of sex. She argues, however, that gender in slash fiction is not a key issue and is 'basically unimportant' (2003, 379). Driscoll (2006) considers both het (fanfiction focusing on heterosexual relationships) and slash as blending elements of pornography and romance.

Jenkins (1992) does not classify slash as either pornography or romance though he sees in it a primarily gendered critique. However he foregrounds masculinity in his analysis. He argues that by allowing for the 'realization of homosocial desire, slash unmasks the erotics of male

friendship' (1992, 205) and thus poses a challenge to patriarchal masculinity and male sexuality.

Other scholars move beyond gender and approach slash from a queer theory perspective. Jung (2004) sees in slash fiction 'a communal grass roots critique not only of popular culture but also of heterosexual hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality'. Bury (2005) also focuses her analysis on the queer pleasures and political potential of slash, yet the question of the appropriate gender-coding of slash characters is repeatedly brought up by her study participants. While in conversation they construct themselves reluctant to read stories about 'falsely feminize[d]' (2005, 79) characters, Bury finds that popular slash stories within the community nonetheless feature scenes of domesticity and a greater focus on intimacy and emotion than gay male pornography aimed at male audiences. Examining this focus on intimacy, Woledge (2006) defines a new literary subgenre of *intimatopia* which she argues is present not only in slash fanfiction but also in professionally produced fiction. Intimatopia is characterized by a focus on connecting sex and intimacy between the male protagonists, rather than separating them as romance and pornography do. She argues that social hierarchies, rather than equality, play a key role in intimatopic fiction, as they enhance the sense of intimacy between the characters.

The focus on same-gender relationships and the sexually explicit nature of the material make fanfiction an interesting case study for exploring how pornography, romance, or genres which blend the two can function as an analytical tool around issues of power and consent. The Omegaverse in particular raises questions about claims that slash is a literature of equality.

The Omegaverse

The densely intertextual nature of fanfiction requires an analysis not as individual texts but as an archive (Derecho 2006) or palimpsest (Stasi 2006) of texts which are constantly in dialogue, not only with the source material but also with each other. Tosenberger (2014) argues that this reliance on intertextual knowledge makes fanfiction unpublishable and is one of the key literary strengths of the medium. Writers build on each other's understanding of the canon material, or challenge it by creating alternate universes. The use of tropes is both frequent and conscious. Favourites range from coffee shop settings to arranged marriages, and fan writers are highly skilled at using the features of a trope to the greatest effect, but also inverting, subverting and deconstructing them in a variety of ways.

The Omegaverse, also known as Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics or A/B/O, is a genre of fanfiction characterized by the re-use and repeated combination of several common tropes. Little academic work is available about A/B/O (Busse 2013), but fans themselves have produced a large amount of so-called meta: histories of the genre's emergence (e.g. Netweight 2013), guides to its common features (e.g. Norabombay 2015), and other commentary. Netweight (2013) traces the origins of the A/B/O genre to the fandom of horror-fantasy TV series *Supernatural*, and particularly Real Person(a) Fiction (RPF) - the part of the fandom which focuses on the actors in the series rather than the characters they play. The first stories recognized as A/B/O emerged in mid-2010 and what began as another trope has evolved into a genre and gained popularity across a number of large fandoms, including *Supernatural*, *Teen Wolf*, and *Sherlock*, since. As of January 2016, there are nearly 12,000 works labelled as 'Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics' on the Archive of Our Own, which accounts for around 0.5% of works on the archive and is comparable to popular tropes such as the coffee shop setting.

A/B/O is an amalgamation of several common tropes, and the exact interpretation and configuration varies by author and story. Generally, as well as being male or female, characters in the Omegaverse have a ‘secondary gender’ which may be Alpha, Beta or Omega. Betas are effectively ‘normal everyday humans as you know them’ (Norabombay 2015). Alphas are socially, and in some interpretations biologically, dominant, while Omegas are submissive. The A/B/O premise effectively yields six possible genders, though the vast majority of stories focus on male/male relationships (Destinationtoast 2013c), and particularly on the Alpha male/Omega male configuration. Other common elements in Omegaverse stories include human anatomy, sexuality and social behaviour altered to resemble that of dogs or wolves (including a heightened sense of smell, mating cycles/heat, and Alpha male characters possessing a penis similar to a dog’s); male pregnancy; and a potentially life-long psychic bond with a partner (Busse 2013; Norabombay 2015).

The fact that Omegaverse stories can be found across a number of different fandoms indicates that the genre has an appeal of its own, beyond the particular fandom and source material where it originated. Particular variations of the Omegaverse are especially popular in some fandoms, such as more pronounced dog or wolf characteristics in stories set in the *Teen Wolf* fandom, or social structures which emphasize sexual dominance and submissiveness in Hockey Real Person(a) Fiction. Yet readers and writers also follow Omegaverse stories across fandoms and tend to be familiar with the generic conventions. The variations on the particular elements adopted or foregrounded in any given story, therefore, are read against this background knowledge of the Omegaverse as a whole, and both differences and similarities are used in storytelling and interpretation. Reader comments on stories will often highlight especially innovative elements or compare how the author has handled an aspect of

the setting to its treatment by other authors. The Omegaverse as a whole can then be read as an archive (Derecho 2006) or palimpsest (Stasi 2006) where stories build on each other as much as on the source material.

There is little published academic work on the Omegaverse, although in a conference paper Stasi (2013) argues that the genre displays a new kind of gender essentialism, along with homophobic and heteronormative elements. Rose (2016), on the other hand, sees the potential for transgender readings in A/B/O. Even within the fanfiction community, the A/B/O genre is highly controversial. Many readers and writers object to its roots in bestiality fiction or to the highly gendered power imbalances inherent in the setting. Some fan communities have dismissively dubbed the Omegaverse ‘dogfuck rapeworld’ (Norabombay 2015), an indication that consent issues are of concern to the community. The vast majority of Omegaverse stories are highly pornographic in the sense that they are both produced and consumed with the intention to arouse, as reflected in exchanges between readers and writers in the comment section of stories. As of January 2016 nearly three quarters of stories tagged as A/B/O on the Archive of Our Own are rated ‘mature’ or ‘explicit’. Yet many of these stories also follow the recognizable patterns of romance novels and the resolution to the plot is often the beginning of a long-term, monogamous romantic relationship between the characters. This blending of elements of pornography and romance is characteristic of some fanfiction (Driscoll 2006), but it is the setting explicitly built around the social inequality of the romantic leads which many fans express concerns about. However, examining A/B/O stories in detail reveals that readers and writers who enjoy and embrace the genre are highly conscious of the consent issues involved, and actively use the generic conventions of the Omegaverse to explore them.

Three stories representing the Omegaverse

Because so many A/B/O stories are in dialogue with each other as well as the particular canon they are based in, the Omegaverse can be treated as a single body of work collectively created by the fandom community, rather than individual, unconnected stories. Analyzing any single A/B/O story needs to happen within the context of the wider genre. To that end, I have selected three stories which are representative of different aspects of the Omegaverse: a standard interpretation of the generic conventions and tropes involved in the Omegaverse; a more complex interpretation with elements which can be seen as exploring and challenging the limits of the setting; and a story which takes the generic conventions of A/B/O fiction to their extreme.

All three stories are from the *Supernatural* Real Person(a) Fiction (RPF) fandom and centre around the two lead actors of the show, Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles. In all three stories, Jared is presented as the Alpha and Jensen as the Omega, reflecting perhaps the two actors' physical size difference. Additionally, an important part of the premise of each story is that Jensen has either never had sex or a relationship with an Alpha male, or has stopped doing so some time ago. Finally, all three stories are written in very close third person from Jensen's point of view, and two are written in the present tense. This is a common style in fanfiction works, allowing the reader an insight into a character's thoughts and feelings and a sense of immediacy while still leaving some distance between writer, reader and character.

Heat: Between You And Me (Miss_Lv 2011) is widely acknowledged by the fandom community as one of the early stories which established the A/B/O genre (Netweight 2013). It was originally published in late 2010 in response to a request on the *Supernatural* 'kinkmeme' - an online forum facilitating anonymous requests for particular types of stories.

In this story, Jared (Alpha) and Jensen (Omega) have been sharing a house and secretly harbouring romantic feelings for each other. When Jared announces his engagement to Genevieve Cortese, Jensen - who up to this point has never engaged in sex or a relationship with an Alpha male - decides to get over his feelings for his colleague by having a one-night stand with another Alpha. This plan is thwarted when Jared returns early from a trip away. Jared and Jensen have heat-fueled sex followed by a serious discussion about their mutual feelings and agree to begin a romantic relationship. What is striking about this story is that even in this early version of A/B/O there are clear attempts at exploring and challenging the power structures inherent in the Omegaverse, as I will show below.

Sure To Lure Someone Bad (Mistyzeo and Obstinatrix 2011) is a relatively straightforward example of the A/B/O genre. In this story, Jared and Jensen are not colleagues and actors. Rather, they meet on the subway as Omega Jensen is making his way home in the early stages of his heat, and Alpha Jared makes a move. Again, the two characters have sex, initially positioned as a one-night stand, but by the end of the story they agree to see each other again.

Slick (Tryfanstone 2012) takes the biological imperative ideas behind parts of the Omegaverse to their extreme. In this story, a manipulative Alpha Jared tricks Omega Jensen into heat, and proceeds to repeatedly rape him, probably impregnate him and trap him in an abusive long-term relationship.

Consent and the Omegaverse

The features of the A/B/O genre allow for the exploration of themes of power, desire, pleasure, intimacy, romance, control, and consent in a variety of ways. By positing a world with a radically different configuration of genders and sexualities to ours, readers and writers playing in this shared universe can examine gender roles as either driven by the strange biology of the Omegaverse, or socially constructed, or a mixture of both. The distance created by the unfamiliar setting enables questions to be asked about the power structures and inequalities around gender, and how they map onto intimate relationships. Sexual script theory (Simon and Gagnon 1986) is a useful lens through which A/B/O stories can be read in order to examine how issues of consent are handled in these stories. The biological or social construction of different genders and sexualities can be seen as leading to sometimes radically different, and sometimes strikingly similar, dominant sexual scripts in the societies depicted in Omegaverse fiction. What is interesting is how A/B/O stories explore these sexual scripts, and how the characters in them negotiate the disjunctures between the dominant scripts and their desires in their own lives and interpersonal relationships, similarly to the kinds of negotiation Masters et al. (2013) found their study participants performing.

Sexual scripts in the Omegaverse: a question of gender

It is common for Omegaverse stories to feature significant elements of world building near the beginning, and this is the case for the stories discussed in this paper. This is the author's way of providing information on how their particular interpretation of the A/B/O genre works: which of the standard elements they have adopted and what their precise effects are on the society depicted. This has the effect of anchoring the story within the wider Omegaverse body of work, and gives the reader an indication of what the similarities and differences to that standard template may be (Kustritz 2003). Even so-called Porn Without

Plot stories set in the Omegaverse - like *Slick* (Tryfanstone 2012) - often have some element of this kind of world building, though they may be more subtle. It is therefore worthwhile to examine what information can be gleaned from the three stories about the social power structures and resulting sexual scripts that operate in the three versions of the Omegaverse they construct.

In two of the stories, Alphas are clearly established as the dominant and privileged social group, and all three stories at least hint at Omegas being oppressed or disadvantaged in some way. *Sure to Lure Someone Bad* (Mistyzeo and Obstinatrix 2011), on the other hand, establishes a society dominated by Betas, in which both Alphas and Omegas are relatively rare. It becomes clear early on, however, that even in this society, Alphas are seen as domineering and Omegas as submissive, and that submissiveness is viewed negatively:

Some people got domineering, type-A personalities to go with their thick cocks, and some people got an urge to submit and the ability to self-lubricate. Jensen's done a solid job busting the stereotypes about Omegas (...)

The opening paragraphs of *Heat: Between You and Me* (Miss_Lv 2011) reveal another society with significant power imbalances between Alphas, Betas and Omegas but also introduce more complexity. In this world there have been 'equality movements' leading to changes in legislation and an improvement in the situation of Omegas. At the same time negative stereotypes about Omegas still persist, and there are significant geographical and cultural differences in how strictly 'gender' roles are enforced: 'Going from Texas where the stereotypes were encouraged, expected even, to the free-minded LA had been liberating for [Jensen]'

Slick (Tryfanstone 2012) presents the most overt and significant power imbalance between Alphas and Omegas. So strictly are Omegas controlled that Jensen has had to hide his true status as one in order to be able to work. There are indications that Omegas in this setting do not live independently and are instead owned by Alphas. The revelation of Jensen's status has dire consequences: 'His career's shafted, contracts void, fuck, he's gonna lose the house without an Alpha co-sign -'

Having established these power structures and imbalances, all three stories examine their effects on dominant sexual scripts. While the Omegaverse has six genders and therefore one may expect sexual scripts to be considerably more complex and varied, the focus on the male Alpha/male Omega pairing which is predominant in most A/B/O fiction effectively reduces the complexity back to two genders. The resulting dominant sexual scripts feel remarkably familiar to Western audiences, with a few key differences. The sexual script for the male Alpha maps onto the Western male script, whereas the male Omega script exhibits significant similarities to the Western female sexual script. The differences, however, are also important. Instead of penile-vaginal intercourse which is seen as the default sex act in the Western heterosexual script (Anderson 2005), in the Omegaverse the default is anal penetration with the Omega as the receptive partner. 'Knotting' - the swelling of the Alpha's dog-like penis to keep it anchored in the Omega's anus for up to an hour - is also of key importance, and in many interpretations of the Omegaverse has connotations of bonding or ownership. While in the Western heterosexual script men are seen as the active initiators of sex and women as passive gatekeepers (Ménard and Cabrera 2011), the Omega's mating cycle or 'heat' in A/B/O fiction complicates these roles. Omegas in heat are often seen as the initiators of sex, though in a parallel with the Western male sexual script, Alpha males are often represented as

unable to control themselves around Omegas in heat. This is variously presented as a biological inevitability or a social construct, but in both cases serves to further underscore the power imbalance between Alphas and Omegas.

There is a kind of second-order intertextuality (Derecho 2006) here, not just between different Omegaverse stories, but also between these works of fanfiction and the dominant Western sexual scripts. Readers and writers in the fanfiction community are able to interpret the small differences between variations on the Omegaverse, or between fanfiction stories and the originary texts. It can be argued that they are able to interpret and construct meaning from similarities and differences between the sexual scripts shown in the stories and those they are familiar with from their everyday lives in much the same way. This suggests that at least in some of the Omegaverse stories the parallels and deviations from the Western sexual script and how characters negotiate their sexual scripts are deliberate and used as a tool to examine issues of social power inequalities, sexual scripts, and consent.

Negotiating disjunctures in sexual scripts

Masters et al. (2013) find that disjunctures exist between sexual scripts at the social, interpersonal and personal levels, and that individuals adopt three key strategies for managing these disjunctures: conformity, exception-finding, and transformation. Such disjunctures are also often focal points of Omegaverse fiction, with narrative suspension being provided by how individual Alphas and Omegas negotiate their positions and their interpersonal relationships within the restrictions of their societies and dominant sexual scripts.

In all three stories the primary way of negotiating sexual scripts available to the Omega characters is through their choices of partners. In all three cases Jensen has either never had or has stopped having sex or relationships with Alpha males. The motivations for this are fairly similar across the three stories: to avoid discrimination and playing up to negative stereotypes of Omegas.

What was really annoying was that Jensen had lived his life vehemently opposed to being under anyone, much less an alpha. Being an omega was no cakewalk, while equality movements had changed the laws in the last century, discrimination was still present. Old way thinking and stereotypes still surfaced from time to time and it was hard when someone would off handedly suggest Jensen belonged under someone, under an alpha, even a beta, just *under*. (Miss_Lv 2011)

The abstinent Omega or Omega who does not have sex with Alphas could be seen to reflect second wave radical feminist concerns about the dominance of male sexuality and the impossibility of women meaningfully consenting to sex with men under conditions of patriarchy (MacKinnon 1989). The trope echoes the political lesbianism of the 1970s (Segal 1994). The three stories present both similarities and differences to this position. In all three cases, Jensen's choice of sexual partners (or abstinence) is presented as an individualized form of resistance to the oppression of Omegas. However, in none of the stories is Jensen formally part of a political movement or even support network of like-minded Omegas, though the existence of 'equality movements' is sketched out in *Heat: Between You and Me*. A sexual script approach to the abstinent Omega trope in A/B/O fiction, however, allows for a more nuanced approach to the negotiation between social power imbalances and intimate relationships. Through this lens, Jensen's celibacy or choice of non-Alpha partners can be

seen as seeking to transform dominant sexual scripts by eliding them entirely. Rather than being excluded from dominant sexual scripts as many non-heterosexual people find themselves (Power et al. 2009), Jensen removes *himself* from them.

An additional reason for Jensen's abstinence is given in *Sure to Lure Someone Bad*:

Something about Jared makes him yearn to be that idiot again. God, it's not like he doesn't remember all the reasons he decided it was a bad idea, the dangers that accompany surrendering himself like that. Alphas fuck hard, relentless, and Jensen in heat is too pumped up on pheromones and need to recognize when things are getting out of hand. (Mistyzeo and Obstinatrix 2011)

As the story progresses, Jared is presented as an atypical Alpha, giving Jensen a sense of safety. This can be read as a strategy of exception-finding (Masters et al. 2013), where individuals do not seek to change social sexual scripts but do work to establish exceptions to them in their own relationships or find partners whom they view as exceptional and non-conforming to the gendered script. Even in the story which is most typical of the A/B/O genre, such negotiation of sexual scripts is given prominence.

The exact tactics of negotiating power imbalances and sexual scripts available to characters are clearly determined by the nature of the power structures of the setting. *Slick* (Tryfanstone 2012) is the story with the most extreme social power differentials between Alphas and Omegas and features an in-depth exploration of sexual scripts around initiating sex and being able to control sexual urges, taking the generic conventions of the Omegaverse to their extreme. When Jensen agrees to have sex with Jared during his heat in this story, he is under

the impression that Jared is a Beta. However, it turns out that both actors have been hiding their true status, and while Jensen is an Omega, Jared is an Alpha. Jensen makes an immediate attempt to withdraw consent, but Jared is able to both physically overpower him and use Jensen's heat against him in order to get what he wants.

Throughout the rest of the story, Jensen's heat is used as leverage against him. What is interesting here is that on a superficial level, there is a verbal consent negotiation conducted (Anderson 2005), as Jared repeatedly asks Jensen what he wants and reduces Jensen to begging to be fucked. However, this verbal consent is made meaningless by the effects of Jensen's heat on his decision-making: there are repeated references to 'his head [being] a mess', 'his mind running in circles'. Additionally, even when Jensen is able to clearly verbally deny or withdraw consent, this is ignored, and his physical arousal taken as evidence to the contrary. Finally, while Jensen is portrayed as completely vulnerable and out of control due to his heat, Jared, in opposition to the dominant sexual script for Alphas, seems to be in complete control of both himself and the situation throughout. By the end of the story, Jensen has no choice but to reluctantly conform to dominant sexual scripts. He is legally owned by Jared and probably pregnant, leaving him trapped in an abusive relationship.

Comment exchanges between readers and the author give an insight into both authorial intent and reader reception of *Slick*. The story is repeatedly described as both 'hot' and 'unnerving', 'horror sex', or 'disturbing', often by the same readers, showing a complex blend of affective, emotional, and intellectual reactions to the story and its depiction of rape. One reader commented:

This was wonderful in so many ways. It was wrong and I just wanted to rescue Jensen from the destruction of his person but then he presented his ass so pretty and I wanted it to keep happening. I love stories that dig deeper into ideas and present the not so pretty injustices.

The reference to ‘dig[ging] deeper into ideas and present[ing] the not so pretty injustices’ makes a clear link between the affective reactions *Slick* produces in its readers and a much more intellectual level of analysis of the story which readers engage in simultaneously. The strong affective reaction blends into other forms of reading shaped by expectations generated by Western sexual scripts. Several comments, for instance, referred specifically to how the generic conventions of the A/B/O subgenre provide constraints to characters’ agency and ability to seek, give or withhold consent. Viewed through the lens of sexual scripts, these comments clearly show how expectations generated by familiarity with Western sexual scripts, including what a loving romantic relationship between equals looks like, are read side by side with the Omegaverse sexual scripts presented in the story. There is a clear sense of what is happening to Jensen being wrong, and both the author and readers repeatedly refer to the events of the story being no basis for a healthy romantic relationship. This sense is generated through a side by side reading with a range of discourses on sexuality which include ideas of what a healthy romantic relationship should look like. In response to requests for a sequel, the author has indicated that she would find it difficult to write one, as the power imbalance and abuse of trust described in the story are so great that a romantic resolution would be impossible. Such comments indicate that, while readers clearly experienced ‘sexual pleasure centred on bodily sensation’ (Smith 2009), they also acknowledged and were affected by the non-consensual nature of the sexual encounter described. This in turn calls into question Wilson-Kovacs’ (2009) distinction between exploitative pornography and

empowering ‘erotica’: *Slick* does not sit comfortably in either category, highlighting instead the complexity of readers’ engagements with the material. Despite this, readers were clearly able to simultaneously derive pleasure from it and critically analyze it. The sexually explicit nature of the story allows for engagement with issues of power, consent, and rape on multiple levels, including the affective, emotional and intellectual.

The negotiation between social and interpersonal sexual scripts is most complex in *Heat: Between You and Me*. The story subverts both the social power structures and sexual scripts of the Omegaverse in several sophisticated ways. Unlike the other stories, Jared here is shown to have been respectful of Jensen’s choice to not have sex with Alpha males throughout their friendship, despite harbouring romantic and sexual attraction towards Jensen. Even when Jensen goes into heat for the first time while sharing space with Jared, Jared chooses to remove himself from the situation rather than force himself on Jensen, contrary to the dominant script of the out-of-control Alpha. It is made explicit that Jared’s behaviour and respect of Jensen’s boundaries are unusual within the setting, indicating a mix of exception-finding and transforming strategies employed by both characters.

‘No offence man, but up until last night,’ Jensen refused to fucking *blush*. ‘I would have sworn you were a omega.’ He expected Jared to grin, flush sheepish or roll his eyes like he always did when Jensen teased his lack of alpha drive. (Miss_Lv 2011)

Jared and Jensen’s close friendship and sharing of living space in this story can also be read as a challenge to dominant sexual scripts. Segregation of unbonded Alphas and Omegas is typical of the sexual scripts in many A/B/O stories. *Heat* is one of the very early Omegaverse stories so it is possible that this simply wasn’t an established feature of the shared setting at

the time it was written. However, reading this story within the wider context of the Omegaverse that followed it increases the significance of this feature. Jared and Jensen's cohabitation as friends and colleagues serves to set up and underline their later sexual and romantic connection. It is, however, also possible to read their deep friendship as defying social norms, or as an implicitly queerplatonic life partnership which flouts social expectations and transforms dominant sexual scripts in what, for two popular actors, would be quite a public way.

Finally, once Jensen realizes how fulfilling he finds sex with Jared, he re-examines his own attitudes to his social position as an Omega and his sexual activities. Rather than endorsing the dominant discourse of his society - that of Omegas' biologically determined submissiveness - Jensen chooses to reframe his experience as a 'newly discovered kink':

Not that he would ever admit that out loud just yet but Jensen was man enough to realize in the safety of his own mind that he had gotten off hard while being dominated, it wasn't just his heat alone. It was something to think about later, and suddenly he felt like an ass for every time he belittled an omega happy under an alpha. (Miss_Lv 2011)

Jensen links this insight to his own masculinity, thereby reclaiming some status within the gender hierarchy of his society. He is also willing to admit that a similar framing may apply to other Omegas in happy relationships with Alphas, extending his own transformation of the sexual script beyond the sphere of his relationship with Jared.

The fact that such nuanced and complex negotiation of sexual scripts and power structures features so prominently in one of the earliest Omegaverse stories indicates that issues of inequality and consent have been at the core of the genre right from the beginning. A/B/O fanfiction is often dismissed by parts of the community as pornography which romanticizes and glorifies rape, and there are certainly stories which do that. Yet the careful consideration of consent and social inequality which features in a lot of A/B/O stories right from the inception of the genre indicates that readers and writers of Omegaverse fiction are using it as a tool to articulate and think through consent issues in unequal relationships. Far from ‘meticulously creat[ing] an equality relationship dynamic’ (Kustritz 2003, 377), stories from the Omegaverse often work to highlight issues of socially constructed inequality and its relationship to pleasure, and explore in detail strategies for managing it in interpersonal relationships. While stories often at least partially follow a romance formula, such in-depth exploration of issues of inequality and consent is not a feature usually found in either pornography or romance. Woledge’s (2006) *intimatopia*, with its emphasis on the connection between sex and intimacy, and the use of inequality to heighten intimacy, is perhaps the closest characterization of at least some A/B/O stories. On the other hand, *Slick* shows that some readers and writers in the Omegaverse use the social inequalities inherent in the setting for more than enhancing intimacy. They consciously play with different power configurations in order to explore their effect on intimacy and sexual consent.

The way the characters evolve both within and beyond the social power structures of their settings, particularly in *Heat: Between You and Me* and *Sure to Lure Someone Bad*, allows them to negotiate disjunctures between sexual scripts at the social, interpersonal and individual levels in their intimate relationships. These stories provide detailed explorations of

the relationship between structure and agency and between sexual scripts at the societal and interpersonal level in ways accessible to the fanfiction community.

Conclusion

A/B/O stories often establish settings where gender inequality is not only present but taken to extremes. This clearly contradicts many theories of slash fiction (Russ 1985, Lamb and Veith 1986, Kustritz 2003) which see in it a way of removing gender as a site of power in intimate relationships. Instead, these features of the Omegaverse, combined with the sexually explicit nature of many stories, allow fan readers and writers to explore the impact such power structures may have on pleasure and consent in intimate relationships. Viewed through the lens of sexual scripts, they also outline possible strategies for subverting power structures and managing disjunctures between sexual scripts at the social, interpersonal and individual levels, both within the story itself and, as shown through reader comments, in the real world.

The results of such exploration also clearly contradict second wave feminist theories of power and consent, for instance MacKinnon's (1989) argument that in a male-dominated society, it becomes difficult for women to distinguish between intercourse and rape. The stories often follow a romantic formula and do to an extent eroticize and romanticize the power structures inherent in the setting. For this reason, the blending of pornography and romance in Omegaverse stories is often criticized by parts of the fanfiction community. In line with more nuanced understandings of pornography, however, readers do experience 'sexual pleasure centred on bodily sensation' (Smith 2009, 22), but the impact of the stories goes beyond this. As evidenced by reader comments, readers engage with the stories at an affective, emotional, and intellectual level. Characters in and readers of the stories are clearly

able to distinguish between rape and intercourse in nuanced ways that take power differentials into account.

A/B/O stories set up clearly unequal, gendered relationships while at the same time removing them from our everyday understanding of gender. The intertextual nature of the Omegaverse, where stories are in dialogue with the source material, each other, and dominant Western sexual scripts, allows a reading which emphasizes similarities as well as subtle differences which in turn function to foreground nuanced explorations of issues of inequality, power, and consent. All three stories explore the female-coded character's internal feelings and external communication of consent or non-consent. They show three very different yet believable scenarios of individuals meaningfully negotiating power differentials and sexual scripts in intimate relationships - or in the case of *Slick*, failing to do so. Rather than uncritically accepting gendered sexual scripts and socially constructed power differentials, stories set in the Omegaverse are used by the communities which produce and circulate them as a critical tool. They clearly problematize issues of power and consent and offer ways of negotiating meaningful, consensual intimate relationships within wider abusive social structures.

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