

The Intimate Fandoms of Men's Hockey Real Person Fanfiction

by

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## **Author's Declaration**

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## Abstract

Using queer phenomenology, rhetorical genre theory, and fanfiction written about National Hockey League (NHL) athletes, this dissertation develops the concept of intimate publics of fandom: small, reciprocal and protective groups of fans who write to and for each other to assuage desires otherwise unmet by public fandom. Historically, fan scholars convincingly argued for the literary and social value of the political and interpretive work of slash fandoms that write fanfiction where two otherwise straight male characters are reimagined in a queer relationship. In this way, slash is seen as a powerful, subversive fandom that poaches material from texts that uphold oppressive norms. However, most of the slash studied has been based on fictional characters, because Real Person Fanfiction (RPF) or RPF slash is frequently seen as immoral and shameful by both fans and fan scholars. Even though RPF slash is common in many fandoms, such as boy band fandom (e.g. Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson from One Direction), or actors who are popular slash pairings (e.g. Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman who play Sherlock and Watson in BBC's *Sherlock*), RPF slash has not received the same scholarly attention as slash based on fictional characters. In this dissertation, I argue that this gap exists in part because of fan studies' attachment to the metaphor of poaching to empower slash-fans as subversive interpreters, which would make RPF slash an infringement on a real person's autonomy. Understanding that some fandoms function as intimate publics, however, makes it possible to see some RPF slash not as a subversive interpretation, but as a shelter from public fandom.

To develop the framework of intimate publics of fandom, I use my experience as a hockey fan as the case for this dissertation. Through Men's Hockey RPF, I find queer joy and community that is absent to me in the traditional, public spaces of hockey fandom. I trace this journey through 5 chapters, each addressing a different facet of intimate publics of fandom. Chapter 1 develops squatting as an alternative metaphor to poaching and argues that, where poaching comes from the antagonistic mode of suspicious reading common in literary

studies, squatting comes from reparative modes of reading which do not require a hostile relationship between reader and text. Chapter 2 uses feminist literary theories and rhetorical genre theory to define intimate fandoms through hockey's public fandom in Canada. Building on those first two chapters, the next three chapters offer close readings of my own intimate fandoms to test the usefulness of the framework. Chapter 3 demonstrates that understanding Hockey RPF slash as an intimate fandom allows us to see how fans use Hockey RPF as a shelter from the relation of cruel optimism to the NHL. Chapter 4 argues that the framework of intimate fandoms makes it more possible to see the ways in which even fanfiction that seems subversive may still uphold other norms, such as the white supremacy of hockey. Chapter 5 tests the limits of intimate fandoms by reading fanfiction that makes erotic monsters out of NHL athletes to argue that intimate fandoms help us better understand the desires that create 'creepy' slash. I close the dissertation with a short conclusion that reflects on the end of my attachment to hockey, and how the framework of intimate publics allows me to trace the shift in desires that move me into new intimate fandoms.

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# Chapter 1

## Squatting in Slash: Fan Studies Methods

### 1.1 The Kiss

There's a picture of Stefan Fournier and Jonathan Drouin kissing, taken in 2013 when they won a playoff game (Sager), and fills me with a queer kind of joy. It's a queer joy not just because they are two men kissing in a decidedly non-platonic way, but because that joy is tinged with shame and paranoia. When I look at this picture, I really want to be able to say, "This is queer," but I can't, for so many reasons. Because they're real people and neither of them has said they are gay, because Drouin is a relatively famous NHLer now and there aren't any out gay men who play on an NHL team, because they made it very clear in the accompanying interview that everyone's straight here, no homo. Although we learn that Fournier "likes to kiss [Drouin] all the time," and that "there aren't many guys on the team who haven't gotten a kiss from one of us," it's all said in the spirit of bromantic affection (qtd in Rankin 16). What we are told to see, then, is just two lineys cellying after a goal; nothing queer about that. The interview concludes with a reaffirmation of heterosexuality, as Fournier exclaims, "by the way, for all the ladies out there, Jo's a great kisser" (16). So: I know that I'm not supposed to look at this picture and think, "They're gay," because they've told me they're not. It's strange, as someone who reads and writes fanfiction about two or more fictional men in sexual/romantic relationships – aka a slash-fan – in slash's modern era, to encounter this kind of shame.

My experience of slash fandom has generally included a kind of pride that it's subversive to want to see characters of the same gender get together romantically, to ship them, in other words, when the authors of the story might disagree. When we're talking about fictional characters, like, say, Poe and Finn in the third *Star Wars* trilogy, it's easy to feel like you're doing something morally good: to imagine two men of color in love within an otherwise straight, white masculine fantasy feels like a moral high ground. It's a bit more complicated, but that's generally the story we've told ourselves, as fans and as fan scholars, about slash-fandom. However, Poe and Finn are fictional characters, so their sexuality is always up for interpretation, even if their characters say out loud that they're straight. That proclamation could be a lie, after all – and if their authors tell us that it's not, well, the author is dead, isn't he? But that pride is not easily accessible when the two men I ship are real. Not only will outsiders to slash-fandom shame me for the weird practice, but slash-fans who believe that shipping real people is unethical will also shame me. Relatively few fans support real person fandom/fanfiction (RPF), whether that RPF is the straight, self-insert kind of fandom where women write about celebrity men falling in love with them or the queerer RPF slash where fans imagine two celebrity men (or, more rarely, two celebrity women) falling in love with *each other*. The things that make slash subversive and powerful when it's about fictional characters also make RPF feel deeply unethical.

When I look at this picture of Drouin and Fournier, then, my joy is queer because I know I'm not supposed to feel that joy in this moment – but that is, of course, a familiar feeling for queer people. My attachment to Drouin and Fournier is, in fact, no different than

my attachment to Poe and Finn: I will never meet them in person, my actions will never affect them, and they have no idea nor concern about who I am. They are as inaccessible as fictional characters – so why does it matter what I feel about them? The obvious answer is that slash about fictional characters is safely *fictional*. Making Poe queer changes nothing about our real world, because there are no closeted Resistance Fighter Pilots struggling to balance their desire to fight the Empire against their desire to be out to their compatriots. Making Drouin queer changes a lot about the real world, because there *are* closeted NHLers struggling to balance their desire to be a good team player with the knowledge that hockey culture hates who they are. The less obvious answer is that the belief that slash based on fictional characters is a moral good is just that: a belief in a comforting story. For as many ships as there are like Finn and Poe, where fans reshape a straight, white story into something queerer by centering a Black and a Latino man in a loving relationship, there are many more ships like Kylo Ren and General Hux, which centers the story on two white men who lead an obviously fascist, genocidal Empire. In other words, slash about fictional characters is not automatically a moral good, despite fans and fan-scholars' desires to see it that way.

## **1.2 The Problem of RPF**

Although slash is not quite the shameful secret that it used to be, now that we have showrunners, actors, writers, and other people with authority over the official canon dipping their toes into the world of shipping, there are still some parts of slash fandom that most people would prefer we keep hidden. However, I've found that the discomfort people feel about slash is about how real(ly queer) the fan's feelings are. As long as fans can disavow

their slash as pure fantasy, and something entirely separate from the ‘canon’ of the show (the official, authorized story), slash and fanfiction is mostly acceptable these days. That is, where showrunners like Stephen Moffat might brag about “writ[ing] Sherlock Holmes fan fiction [sic] for a living,” (Moffat, quoted in Hibberd), they are still quick to dismiss fans who argue for canonical queerness in their shows. Despite being an avowed fic-writing fan himself, Moffat argues that fans who look for proof of Holmes and Watson’s canonical queerness “are taking a serious subject and trivializing it beyond endurance” (qtd in Hibberd). Similarly, at a fan convention where attendees are encouraged to ask actors questions to learn more about their characters, Jensen Ackles (Dean from *Supernatural*) said, “Don’t ruin it for everybody, now,” to a fan who explained that as a bisexual person themselves, they identified with his character (Ackles, quoted in Romano, “How 1 question triggered a ‘Supernatural’ meltdown”). In short, people turn tense when it becomes clear that the fan re-imagining their characters has more than a detached – call it scholarly – interest in interpretation. Once these author-figures sense that fans might actually want the queerness to be real, it becomes necessary for them to shame or mock us.

This explains why RPF is still a shameful secret. However real your feelings about a fictional character are, they can be safely bound by the term “fictional.” It’s just a story, after all. RPF, though, *isn’t* just a story. So, it’s common for fans to say that they ship m/m slash, but that RPF ‘squicks’<sup>1</sup> them out. I’ve also experienced my share of conversations with

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<sup>1</sup> According to popular fannish wiki, Fanlore, squick refers to “a deep-seated, visceral turn-off for the fan” (“Squick”) It is frequently used in opposition to ‘kink,’ a term that encompasses “non-sexual preferences” such

people who start out curious and interested in the concept of slash but become hostile and uncomfortable once they feel I've crossed the line from harmless fan who likes to write about fictional men to obsessive weirdo who thinks about real (straight) men being gay. Shame about RPF slash, then, is widespread. To many slash fans, RPF feels like an unethical imposition of the fan's fantasy upon a real human body, something that fans are increasingly aware of as the barriers between fan and celebrity decrease through access to them on social media. As a result, major sites like Fanfic.net where fans post, share, and read fanfiction do not allow RPF (Fanlore "FanFiction.Net's NC-17 Purges: 2002 and 2012"); in fact, one of the things that made Archive of Our Own (AO3) such a ground-breaking archive was that it was agnostic to things like slash, RPF, and the depictions of things other sites had banned (including slash, explicit pornography, rape/non-consensual play, and so on). Just because RPF is allowed, however, doesn't mean it's celebrated, and it's common for writers to "lock" their work, making it inaccessible to people who aren't logged into AO3. Even within fan studies, discussions of RPF are rare. We acknowledge that it is a "controversial and contentious" fandom (Piper 2.3) and describe it as one of the morally grey areas of fandom (Thomas; McGee). When fan scholars do study RPF, it tends to be within fandoms that are relatively close to fiction: within actor RPF, for example, scholars can make the case that fans are just extending or recontextualizing "textual fragments of the star image" into a kind

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as "particular imagery, story-tropes, or elements that they enjoy so much they are worth considerable effort to find and collect" (Fanlore, "Kink").

of alternate universe (AU) in which their personas are simply another fictional-ish character to be interpreted by fans (Piper 3.1).

The problem with that interpretation of RPF, however, is that it simply moves the goalpost: if imposing your will on a real person is unethical, then we redefine who a real person is, and argue that celebrities do not fit that new definition. According to this framework, fans never actually get to experience the real person behind a celebrity; all we get is the *star image*, or “the complex configuration of visual, verbal, and aural signs” that they perform in “all kinds of media texts” like magazine interviews and behind-the-scenes-documentaries (Dyer 34). We construct the star image from those signs, and even sometimes those signs written by others, like gossip items in tabloids, promotional materials, and any characters they may be typecast as. In this way, we can read transformative works of celebrities as mirrors of transformative works about fictional characters. We take the canon – the star image – and fill in the gaps with fanfiction. However, typical “stars” are actors and pop stars, people who cultivate stardom, and whose successes rely on their ability to perform a fantasy: Marilyn Monroe, Madonna, Elvis Presley, Lady Gaga, Freddie Mercury, Audrey Hepburn, Robert Downey Jr., and so on, all have larger-than-life personas that draw audiences in and work in conjunction with their art. As such, the argument only really works for those celebrities who are already embedded in the fictional: actors and other stars with “mediated identities” like pop stars (P. McDonald 6). These celebrities make it easy to see “that any belief in clear separation of the real and fictional are illusory” (Busse, “My Life is a WIP” 223). That is, there is no ‘real’ when it comes to celebrity figures, because their

identities are always mediated by the fiction of stardom. Nonetheless, RPF fans and those who study them are still always eager to remind readers that what we are writing is “Real Person(a) *Fiction*,” because even this logical explanation doesn’t remove the shame surrounding transformative RPF fandoms (Arrow 332, italics in original). In addition, this explanation has no room for those celebrities who are more real than fictional.

Athletes, for example, are much further down the line of RPF acceptability than actors. Athletes do still have star images: famously, Michael Jordan’s persona of super-human skill is communicated through sponsorships (“Air Jordan” implies a superhero-dom) and the seemingly infinite write-ups, articles, and op-eds celebrating him as the GOAT (Greatest Of All Time) of GOATs (McDonald and Andrews 24). However, he gets none of that star image without legitimate athletic skill. Benedict Cumberbatch doesn’t actually have to be a tempestuous genius for that to become part of his star image; he just needs to play a few people who are (Sherlock, Alan Turing, Victor Frankenstein...). Michael Jordan, on the other hand, only becomes Air Jordan because he can jump as high as he does. That is, unlike actors or pop stars, for whom fantasy is a close ally and who “actively cultivate public interest in their own personas,” it is the “actual achievements” of athletes that “garner positive notoriety” (Andrews and Jackson 2). Since success in sport requires that the individual be skilled, the assumption is that sport is “fundamentally meritocratic” and that it is an opportunity to see “*real* individuals participating in unpredictable contests (8). That is, as much as actors and pop stars have real bodies, we understand that they participate in

mediated and produced fictions. Athletes, on the other hand, have skilled, well-trained, well-built bodies that are both real and the reason for their real success.

This realness makes sport RPF more dangerous (and therefore shameful) than other forms of RPF. Because celebrity athletes are considered more real than other celebrities, who have clearer distinctions between on- and off-stage that athletes do, star images of athletes are more fraught. Even though post-modern sport, which requires “mass spectatorship and the dehumanization of the athletic labor within capitalism” to turn it into profitable entertainment (Kalman-Lamb 518), it is inextricable from other ‘real’ things like national politics and identity, so a threat to sport is also a threat to the nation. We can see this connection in the racist responses to athletes kneeling during the anthem in protest of police brutality. When Colin Kaepernick kneels, he rewrites the relationship between football and the U.S.A to be antagonistic, rather than supportive. As a result, he is rewritten as an outsider to his own sport in order to return sport to its normal position. Hockey in Canada has a similar relationship, where men’s hockey players are expected to uphold ideals of Canadian masculinity. Even though hockey as played in the NHL is a “structured, marketed, mediated” experience where there are identifiable heroes (your team) and villains (the superstar on the other team), it is still deeply connected to real feelings, memories, political ideals, and ideologies. (Andrews and Jackson 7). As audiences, we are encouraged to “possess (or develop) some kind of affective attachment” to the athletes, teams, and cities and/or nations they represent (7). As a result, even though sports are not *really* real (because they are



mediated), they mean *really real* things to their fans and nations – and the queer things we do to those *really real* people are more threatening and deserving of shame.

When we write Men’s Hockey RPF slash, then, we are doing more than reimagining that an actor’s star image includes a torrid love affair with his male co-star. To write Men’s Hockey RPF slash is to rewrite hockey to include queerness, and that has political repercussions beyond the individual athletes involved in the slash. The threat of recontextualizing an athlete’s body into something queerly monstrous is not just a threat to that athlete, it’s also a threat to the dominant norms of masculinity, heterosexuality, and nationalism that his body represents. When I read and write stories, then, about Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin falling in love, having sex, and negotiating a polyamorous relationship with Alexander Ovechkin, I’m not *just* blurring the lines between reality and fiction by recontextualizing their star images. I’m turning literal representatives of their respective nations and symbolic (if contested) representatives of ideal masculine comportment in the NHL into gay sex objects. In Canada, where hockey has always been more than entertainment, the transformation of Sidney Crosby from Sid the Kid to Sid the Gay Threesome Haver is not some intellectual exercise about the illusory nature of reality and fiction; it’s a threat to Canadian national identity.

The reason why something as absurd as a threesome between Sid, Geno (Malkin), and Ovi (Ovechkin) can be dangerous is that hockey culture in Canada is fragile – brittle, because it is hard and unyielding (Ahmed “Hard”). Consider a ceramic mug: it is hard, meaning that it is resistant to scratches and dents, but it is also unyielding, which means that

it will shatter if you drop it, or even if you knock it against a sharp corner. Objects that are hard and unyielding are brittle, and thus vulnerable to cracks, such that we must protect them from dangerous corners and hard surfaces. A TV host remembers, on air, the young white men of her youth who were bullies and hockey players and she becomes a sharp corner, so hockey fans spend the next week inundating her with angry demands that she apologize to their kind sons and daughters who play hockey and aren't bullies (Canadian Press "CTV, Jessica Allen apologize for hockey remarks after Don Cherry's firing"). They do this until she apologizes, and her sharp corner is blunted. A Black man complains about abuse from his racist teammates and coaches, and he becomes a hard surface against which hockey might break. Instead, he gets labeled a 'problem player' and punished: "they will pummel you mercilessly until you break, or until you give in" (Aliu "Hockey is Not For Everyone") In both cases, the threats to hockey are neatly removed before they can have any impact on the sport. A Black player designs skates with the message "hockey needs more colour" and the comments on the NHL's YouTube video disavow the act, claiming that Dumba has "now politicized hockey and [is] alienating the fans that drive cash flow" (Caveman044, comment on "Dumba creates BLM skates"). The video has almost three times as many 'dislikes' as likes (908 to 388 at the time of writing, though 'dislikes' are no longer visible on YouTube), meaning that this message will eventually be hidden by YouTube's algorithm. Those of us who insist on talking about misogyny, racism, and homophobia are felt as dangers, outsiders bringing threats into the safety of hockey. In much the same way that a person who complains becomes the complaint (Ahmed "After Complaint") our sharp corners and hard

surfaces that pose a danger to hockey become the thing that must be broken or removed for hockey to continue. If hockey were strong, it could withstand these threats, remolding itself into a new shape to accommodate the new edges and surfaces; but hockey is fragile. So, some NHLers, like James Reimer and Ivan Provorov won't even participate in the paltry allyship of pride jerseys during warmups, which should tell you how terrified they are of the damage queerness might inflict on their brittle bodies (Haring "Second NHL Player Refuses to Wear Pride-Themed Jersey in Support of LGBTQ+ Community"). It is safer, then, to avoid such conversations in hockey than risk it all shattering into pieces.

It makes sense, then, that bringing up something like Hockey RPF is scary. In fact, it might be safer not to talk about it at all. There's a reason most Hockey RPF is hidden behind the login on AO3. But to avoid talking about it would be to make the same mistake that Fan Studies has made as a whole: to ignore the parts of fandom and fan scholarship that makes us uncomfortable (Pande, "How (not) to talk about race" par. 2.2; Pande and Wanzo "The State of Fandom Studies"; Vist, Largent & Popova, "What does Fan Studies feel like?" 23; Wanzo 2.2). Relatively few people study the transformative fandoms of RPF (Arrow; Busse; Bury; Coombe; Fathallah; McGee; Piper; Popova; Thomas and Brown; Waysdorf, to name them all). Despite one of the foundational texts on online women's fandoms being about David Duchovny's Real Person Fandom, fan studies scholars focus primarily on fandoms whose objects are fictional (and frequently science-fictional). A count of the University of Iowa Press's Fan Studies collection, for example, reveals that only one of 18 books is about a real person (*In Dylan Town*, by David Gaines) and of the 20 books in the Fan Phenomena series

published by Intellect books, only 3 are about real people (*Audrey Hepburn*, *Marilyn Monroe*, and *Jane Austen*). There are also well-known scholars of celebrities and their fans (Barron; Duffett; Dyer; Gamson; Lee and York [together and separately], to name a few) but none of *those* texts are about transformative fandoms. So, rather than tackle the difficult morality of RPF, most fan scholars have taken a decidedly fannish approach: don't like; don't read.

But the very thing that makes RPF slash difficult is what makes it interesting to study. Its complexity reveals some unquestioned assumptions that fan studies has made about slash and transformative fanworks in general, because the easy answers we've gotten used to when the characters that fans write about are fictional are no longer so easy to say. Two specific assumptions are worth examining in closer detail. The first assumption is that transformative works, in particular slash, are heroic, or otherwise morally good because they follow a model familiar to literary scholars. Historically, slash has been conceived by fan scholars as important political work, freeing (heterosexual, white) women from repressive sexual norms and/or allowing queer fans to center themselves in (at best) heteronormative media, much like the practice of suspicious reading. However, the existence of transformative RPF slash makes it harder to argue that slash is morally good. For example, very real boy-band stars have expressed that RPF slashers impact them negatively, as Louis Tomlinson does when he explains that Louis/Harry shippers "were a factor in their friendship struggling" (Tomlinson, qtd in Wootton). This real impact means that we cannot make the same argument for readerly interpretation as we can with someone like Sherlock Holmes, who is not real. The second

assumption in fan studies is that transformative works and “poaching” have become essentially synonyms. In the foundational fan studies text, Jenkins argues that transformative works, like the crime of poaching, are a way to take ownership away from corporations and move contemporary myths into the hands of fans who “operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness,” “peasants” who can then rewrite these stories for their own use (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 27). The myth of poaching has since become the most important metaphor for understanding transformative fanworks, influencing how we understand not just transformative works, but the fandoms that create them. However, people who make RPF fanworks cannot be said to be taking something ‘out’ of a fandom and ‘into’ a new reality, because the reality in which the fanwork and the fannish object exist in is the same one. The ‘canon’ that we ‘poach’ in RPF is also the world in which we live, and it’s difficult to draw clear lines around fiction and reality when dealing with celebrity personas. I propose, then, that we can accept that poaching may be accurate to some transformative fandoms, but it is not the only metaphor we can use: it is not the only way to understand the work and affect of creating transformative fanworks about a fannish object. By studying RPF, these mis-fit assumptions become more visible, *because* RPF fits uncomfortably in the myth of transformative fandom as heroic poaching.

### **1.3 Assumption One: Transformative work is heroic if it is suspicious**

The first assumption of fan studies is that the work of transformative fanfiction is heroic, politically subversive, and the work of those oppressed and/or erased by canon. This

assumption is not entirely wrong, and for much of the history of fan studies, it has been necessary to use this element of transformative fandom in order to legitimize what might otherwise be seen as an unruly, womanish practice – one unworthy of academic study and approval. That we as a field have come to assume that transformative fanfiction is subversive work is the end-result of a hard-won fight against misogynistic academic norms. Before fan studies was *a thing*, it was necessary to write about slash fans as heroes for two reasons: first, to be trusted by academia, which had come to value suspicious reading over close reading; and second, to be trusted by the very fans we were writing about, who were too used to being read suspiciously themselves, often by men looking to diagnose their fandom as some kind of sexual deviancy (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 15, 53). I will trace how this move came about and why it has been so effective, but the end of the story is not a happy one: it's long-past time to acknowledge that this story of heroism is a fantasy that has become untenable. Once we acknowledge the whiteness of slash fandom and its study, we must acknowledge the power that whiteness continues to hold even in fandom spaces that are apparently subversive of patriarchal norms. We cannot always assume that the slash-fan is always a subversive poacher, because in many cases she holds (and upholds) the power that she claims to subvert (Hutton; Pande; Wanzo).

Before we had a name for textual poachers, women who created fanworks, especially slash fanworks, were perceived as broken, sick, bad women whose weird, perverse desires tainted beloved texts. As a result, early fan scholars, notably Jenkins, Camille Bacon-Smith, and Joanna Russ, had to work hard against that assumption in order to provide a diagnosis

not of illness, but of activism of a sort. Slash was thus recontextualized as a safe way for women to express their sexual desires without the pressure of patriarchy (Penley; Russ; Salmon and Symons), or a tool for unsatisfied women to imagine the ideal relationship in which gender poses no barrier to equality (Bacon-Smith; Lamb and Veith). Other suspicious readings of slash have argued that fans' relationship to their fandom is "transvestitism" or "voyeuristic" and that it offers "a reconceptualization of the position of female viewing and femininity itself" (Flitterman-Lewis 9). Once we named them poachers of patriarchal texts, these fans became a symbol of morally righteous fandom. This story of slash, where undervalued women create their own pleasures by smashing through the limitations of canonical heteropatriarchy, is an empowering one. Because it makes us (both scholars and fans!) feel good, we continue to tell it to ourselves as a way to explain *why* slash is worth doing and studying. *You think it's weird that we read and write stories imagining that Spock and Kirk have sex after they save an alien race? We say to real and imagined opponents of slash and Fan Studies, Well guess what: we're textual poachers, and what we're doing is important work. What are you doing to dismantle the heteropatriarchy?*

One of the ways that this recontextualization happened was by drawing comparisons between literary analysis and the work of transformative fans. Instead of focusing on the fantasy of slash fandom, the model of the textual poacher allowed scholars to focus on the literary reality of slash fanworks. In this story, the textual poacher, like an ideal literary scholar, is critical, suspicious, and intellectual, motivated less by messy desires and more by a clinical interest in working against the text to uncover its hidden truths. One model of

literary interpretation that is a good fit for this kind of transformative fandom is suspicious reading. A suspicious reader “steals the narrative ... [in] a system of power relationships that does not easily abide change” (Farwell 16), much like the textual poacher. This conceptualization of the slash-fan makes her legible to other scholars *as* a kind of scholar, rather than a crazed fan who confuses her desires with reality (or canon). That is, slash fans who are textual poachers don’t just make things up out of whole cloth, we go into these texts and find evidence for our legitimate interpretations of the text. Much like the poacher reclaims “modern myths” from “corporate legal wrangling” (Durack, qtd in Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 153), the ideal suspicious reader reclaims those myths from straight white male authors. By calling attention to the ways in which fans are poachers, fan scholars can translate the slash-fan through language familiar to us as (humanities) scholars: interpretation, sub-text, meta-textual analysis, adaptation, subversion, intertextuality, and other words from an intro to literary theory course. The fact that many slash-fans have taken literature courses in high school, if not university, only makes this comparison more appealing. How can we shame fans for doing exactly the kind of work we have been teaching them to do in every single English Literature class?

### **1.3.1 I have been a poacher**

When I was a part of the *Supernatural* fandom, reading meta; writing, reading, and sharing fanfiction; analysing gifs, scenes, promos, and interviews with actors; and attending conventions to create some kind of connection between my experience of the fandom



and The Powers That Be (a fannish name for the people in charge of canon). My orientation to the text was antagonistic, one of suspicious poaching, where I was determined to uncover the subtext, to argue for its textuality and realness. On Tumblr, I used tags like #BisexualDeanWinchester and #DestielIsCanon as a way to signal that orientation to other fans: they would know, stumbling upon my blog, that I understood the text in this particular way and that my fandom was grounded in the reality of the love between Dean Winchester and the angel Castiel. But the problem with poaching in this way is that it's exhausting to always be failing to persuade people who don't want to be convinced - because unless The Powers That Be acknowledge that your interpretation has merit, you're stuck arguing for something that will never hold as much weight as canon, and anyone interested in dismantling your argument only has to point to the reality of canon to dismiss it. So, you poach, but you also start to claim that it *should* be canon because that's the barometer of truth in fandom. Desire, intellectual curiosity, affinity, all get turned into an antagonistic, suspicious, detecting - something that stopped being fun for me, because no matter how fictional the story was, the feelings I had for it were real...and painful. But I am no longer in this fandom. It became untenable to hold myself in this

painful orientation, constantly on guard for the moment when I might step into a trap, might have to find a way to deal with yet another denial of my interpretation, yet another fourth-wall-breaking tease that turned out to be nothing at all, yet another crash after an episode dashed my high hopes. I still believe that Dean is bisexual, and that Cas and Dean are, in fact, in love with each other, but I no longer want to participate in that story. It hurt too much to force myself to find, over and over again, evidence of the queerness that I felt, and so I left. Of course, hockey hurts me too, but I'm no longer invested in *proving* anything about my feelings, and so I can enjoy RPF in a way that I stopped enjoying Destiel. Sometimes I wonder if I could come back – now that I have a new orientation to fandom, could I return to *Supernatural* and enjoy it in the same way that I enjoy hockey? But part of what draws me to hockey is that it is real – and any queerness that does or does not exist is not up to some single author and his desires for a story about bros being dudes, not up to The Powers That Be and their concerns for the marketability of their show: queerness exists in hockey whether anyone likes it or not.

The suspicious poacher model is appealing because it allows fan scholars to position slash-fans not as hysterical women acting out depraved fantasies, but as careful and heroic

*readers*. Suspicious reading is an important tool in queer, racial, feminist, crip liberation, and much of the radical literary work of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and the establishment of fields like Queer studies and Critical Race studies) would be impossible without it. In its ideal state, suspicious reading creates room for readers and critics to wrest power from an Ideal White Male Author, reframing and rewriting accepted truths about the text. Through this mode of scholarship, we uncover moments of anxiety, erasure, contradiction, and construction in the canon of western literature that the ‘we’ of literary scholarship has not yet been properly oriented to sense. When suspicious readers are relatively powerless compared to the Ideal White Man who writes and studies the canon, we can posit an *alternate* reading of the text. Not *the* truth, but *a* truth. When we are trained to be suspicious readers, we become “practiced at rereading and rewriting texts” in search for the person or thing that we can recognize as ourselves (Farwell 7) – a task that is familiar to anyone who has sought out fanfiction in order to fulfill a need we may not have been able to articulate until we found (or wrote) *that* fic. Suspicious reading, well-applied, can make sensible a truth that was hard to feel before, because it has been relegated “to a location that resists telling” (Crenshaw 1242; quoted in Han 180), or hard to feel because we are not oriented towards it (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 27). But this relationship is necessarily agonistic: the text – and its author – is the villain to the suspicious reader’s hero, and we readers can never relax in the villain’s presence. We become, as Sedgwick calls it, paranoid readers, otherwise we risk being accused of “theoretical naivete” (Farwell 14) and of being too “naïve, pious, or complacent” (Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading” 126). If we relax, if we let ourselves be drawn in by its

untrustworthy monologuing, we respond in “automatic and unthinking” ways and thus fail as critics (Felski, *Limits of Critique* 71). When the text is invested in the interlocking scaffolds of patriarchy, white supremacy, homophobia, racism, and ableism, this suspicious eye is necessary (and the paranoia warranted).

To read suspiciously is to be a detective of the text (Felski, “Suspicious Minds” 215) grappling with the suspect (author) who has something to hide, in order to reveal and expose (Sedgwick 138). The clever detective, Sherlock Holmes the Lit Scholar, rips away the surface of the text to uncover erasures and falsehoods, to reveal hidden truth, and to do so while showing the bumbling Lestrade the Poor Reader what he has failed to see. *See*, we say to our loyal Watsons, *he thought we wouldn't see the secret he hid behind his metaphors, but we are smarter than he is*. The suspicious reader, who holds “the conviction that the most rigorous reading is one that is performed against the grain,” is necessarily adversarial (Felski, “Suspicious Minds” 217). When the adversary is a straight, white, male canon determined to erase and forget the contributions and lives of queer, disabled, feminine, and racialized people, suspicious readers truly are heroic. In that case, reading against the grain is a matter of ensuring our stories survive at all, and post-colonial scholars (e.g. Bhabha; Said; Spivak; etc.), queer scholars (e.g. Butler; De Lauretis; Foucault; etc) and psychoanalytical feminists (e.g. De Lauretis; Irigaray; Kristeva, etc.) all revealed the white Western masculine heteronormative canon as a fantasy.

### 1.3.2 I have been a suspicious reader

Reading against the grain can feel like ganging up on someone who's already facing an attack when you are not careful about whose grain you are resisting. In my own journey as a literary scholar, I felt this tension. In a course on Post-Colonial literature with a focus on the intersections of gender, sexuality, and race, I had to un-learn suspicious reading to read without feeling like I was enacting further violence upon the authors of the texts I was studying. I struggled to read books like *The Lonely Londoners* by Sam Selvon, a book about West Indian immigrants to London; *Wanting in Arabic* by Trish Salah, poems about the contradictions of gender and the pain of transitioning; or *Cereus Blooms at Night* by Shani Mootoo, which tells the story of a Trinidadian woman's life and the search for her sister. I struggled to read these books because I had only ever been trained in literary criticism that required me to enter the text with the intention of taking it apart, finding its contradictions and erasures. I didn't *want* to take these texts apart, but I only knew how to dig into the words and claim space for myself and my ideas. I only knew how to turn chapters inside out and theses upside down: I could make a text say what I wanted it to say, but I had no idea how to listen to it. I asked – so often it became

a refrain – “What right do I have to read this?” because I had no sense of how to read at all without reading suspiciously.

When deployed without care as a “uniquely sanctioned *methodology*” (Sedgwick 126, italics in original), suspicious reading can too easily fall to the misconception that not only is there *a* hidden truth to the text, but that *the* truth is something we can uncover – and uncover only by reading against the grain. In fact, “the very productive critical habits embodied in...the hermeneutics of suspicion” have become “nearly synonymous with criticism itself” and is now “a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities” (124-5). The ideal scholar, now, is suspicious, and avoids apparent distortions and misreadings that would be caused by an unseemly closeness to the text (Best and Marcus; Cheng; Felski; Moretti; Sedgwick). Scholars of my generation have been trained to be suspicious readers – of texts, but also of ourselves as critics, always on the lookout for the moment we become uncritical (Felski, *Limits of Critique* 2). We do not like to think of the text as an object with people who read (and write) it, to the extent that we allow the text itself to disappear (Moretti, par. 9) or to allow metaphors to stand in for real lives (Farwell 9; Han 180). Like the “mind steeped in maleness” that fails to feel the “full range of questions and experiences” of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Zora Neale Hurston, as read by Johnson), the position of the suspicious reader can still make certain theories invisible (Johnson, *The Barbara Johnson Reader* 120). Depending on the reader’s relation to the text, taking on a suspicious eye can make it possible to “discount” the real bodies of the text in order to make the reader’s truth apparent (Farwell 7). But suspicious reading has become a de facto tool, to the extent that

most literary scholars trained and training today understand it to be the *only* tool, “an institutionally mandated attitude” (Felski, “Suspicious Minds” 221). Indeed, when analysis is “motivated by a desire to see what we like as somehow subversive because doing so provides the illusion that we have challenged the story” (Roof 176) scholars run the risk of ignoring the ways in which fanworks may fail to challenge the story – and may not even desire to challenge the story. As useful as suspicious reading is, it is limiting if it is the only tool that we use.

The slash-fan-as-suspicious-reader also limits our understanding of slash-fans to the very same model as the ideal suspicious critic. For some fans, mining the text for nuggets of hidden truth is an empowering, enjoyable act of fandom. Some fans express their suspicion in *meta* that deconstructs a scene, or an interview, or some other communication from The Powers That Be (TPTB; a fannish term that encompasses the wide range of people who are understood to have some kind of authorial control over the text). Other fans express their suspicion through more traditional poaching – becoming “practiced at rereading and rewriting” the texts of canon (Farwell 7). When a fan reimagines John Watson and Sherlock Holmes in a romantic and sexual relationship, they are marking arguments that are all grounded in the evidence of the text. Their slash becomes evidence of the truth that was hidden from readers of the original text: that every time Sherlock and John ejaculated conversationally, they also ejaculated sexually. However, empowering this model may be for some fans and fan scholars, it limits the experience of fandom to a scholarly, evidence-based one. If a fan wants their pairing to stand on its own, the answer must be that they are actually,

textually, queer – even if that queerness is hidden by its author and resurfaced through the fan’s rereading and rewriting. In order to argue that the Sherlock Holmes they want to see – one who is queer – is a tenable interpretation, the reader must translate their desire through a normative, rational mode of reading if they want others to trust their interpretation.

In addition, this translation can also be, ironically, an act of straightening. Although the outcome is evidence for a queer pairing, the fact that evidence is needed to explain, identify, or prove queerness is a kind of suspicious reading that is in service of normativity rather than against its grain. As Ahmed explains, “what is evident [is] a matter of perception” (“Evidence”) and when we make queerness *evident* it is because we are doing it for people who have not been able to (willing to) perceive it. When we accept that we require evidence and proof of the truth of queerness, we straighten it, because we turn the twisting, fuzzy edges of queerness into certainties legible to straight people. Take, as a kind of counterexample, Havelock Ellis’s straightening of lesbians: his desire was for a world without queerness, so he found evidence to prove that although on the surface we could see two women in love, *underneath* (within) was a woman who was *really* a man. Even if both women said they were women, Ellis knew better: since a vagina is made to be penetrated by a penis, anyone who desires someone with a vagina must therefore have a penis, even if it is only metaphorical. Of course, we can read Ellis’s straightening suspiciously (as Ahmed, Butler, and Irigaray have done) exposing the misogyny and homophobia of his work. But it is an important reminder that suspicious reading is not inherently queer, since it can “function[] as an instrument of ideological containment as much as a tool of subversion” (Farwell 195).



When we rely on an evidence-based, straightening model for expressing fans' interpretations of texts, we limit the kinds of interpretations that are possible – or ethical. Under this model, Ellis's straightening of these real queer women is no different than my queering of real straight men.

When I read and write Hockey RPF slash, then, I may not be using cisnormative, homophobic language to do it, but I am still denying the stated reality according to the bodies I “reread and rewrite.” It is absurd – and horrifying – to say that despite what Sidney Crosby says, I know he is actually queer because I have combed through the subtext of his speech to contradict him. It's absurd, and untrue: I don't feel like I'm seeking to prove Crosby's queerness – and that's not what I would say, were I asked about it. I am not looking for evidence to translate my desires into tenable interpretations, because whether or not Crosby is actually queer is irrelevant to the fact that he *feels queer to me*. My Hockey RPF slash expresses the reality that when I look at Crosby, *I feel queer*. The difference is not that slash about fictional works is logical and critical whereas slash about real people is absurd and delusional, but that slash that can be understood through the lens of the suspicious poacher is only one way to engage in slash fandom. The scholars who first identified the suspicious, poaching, subversive scholar-fan were working from an incomplete sample. The transformative slash-fans who informed Bacon-Smith and Jenkins' work were only one kind of slash-fan: mostly university-educated white women who were fans of *Star Trek*. The incomplete sample, and the desire to make slash-fans' actions understandable to other

scholars, means that as much as the suspicious poacher was an effective model, it should not be the only one.

#### **1.4 Assumption Two: Poaching is a synonym for transformative works**

It becomes easier to untangle transformative works from the myth of subversive heroics when we understand that poaching is not a synonym for the act of fannish transformation, but an orientation to fandom. RPF helps us understand that it is an orientation, because being in an RPF fandom makes it difficult to have a poaching orientation – the discomfort makes it clear that we are out of alignment with something. In addition, understanding that poaching is an orientation can help us understand other (even non-RPF) fandoms that previously seemed strange, or out of line with the myth of the subversive, suspicious poacher. Because of the appeal of poaching as a metaphor, which posits that the creation of transformative works is a heroic act of poaching the story from its corporate owners, it is tempting to say that all transformative work is poaching (and all poaching is transformational). However, this conflation erases the ways that fans and fandoms create and shore up normativity. While you can certainly engage in transformative works by poaching subversively, it is also possible to engage in transformative works that poach to *reinscribe* white heterosexuality, as in the cases of the fandoms' treatments of Black characters such as Finn from the *Star Wars* movie franchise and Abby from the television show *Sleep Hollow*. It's worth noting that those reinscriptions of whiteness are often taken up again by corporations, The Powers That Be – further proof that transformative works are not always the heroic subversions that fans and fan scholars would like them to be. In addition, it's

possible to engage in poaching without transforming the text, and in fact to engage in poaching while denigrating other forms of poaching for transforming too much. Despite empowering women who felt out of place in the *X-Files* fandom to poach the *X-Files* lore and mythos, David Duchovny Estrogen Brigade (DDEB) members made sure that slash-fans felt out of place in *their* fandom. If poaching is a kind of transformative work, and transformative works are supposed to be heroic and suspicious of normativity, these are all contradictory fandoms. However, if we understand poaching as an orientation to fandom, dependent on the fan, their fandoms, the objects, and the scholars analysing it all, then they are no longer outliers, or strange examples that must be set aside in order to tell a coherent story about fandom.

The greatest cost to fan studies of telling this story has been the erasure of whiteness. That is, in telling the story of transformative fandom as subversive poaching, white fan scholars have ignored the reality that whiteness shapes many of these apparently subversive spaces. Thanks to the work of scholars of colour, notably Rukmini Pande, Rebecca Wanzo, and Zina Hutton who remind white scholars that the “romanticization of fan exceptionalness has perhaps produced resistance to emphasizing the normativity of some fandoms” (Wanzo 2.2), Fan Studies as a field is beginning to reckon with this reality. As a result, we can start to see the gaps in our myths of fandom and to recognize that fans of colour are frequently discouraged from and punished for “speaking out about issues of race and racism within spaces that function...as places of fannish synergy” (Pande 30). Within spaces of traditional poaching fandom, white heterosexuality is still a powerful norm.

For example, some of the transformative fandoms of the Star Wars movies and extended Disney+ universe may be in an orientation of poaching, but they are also oriented towards normativity. Although its fans argue that the transformative fandoms around the Reylo ship (Rey/Kylo Ren from *Star Wars*) are an exploration of the effects of toxic masculinity and the path to redemption, Hutton shows that the outcome is the prioritization of white masculinity at the expense of Black masculinity, since the Reylo ship requires the erasure of Finn as a main character alongside Rey (Hutton, “White Prioritization”). Even though the movies end up supporting their interpretations, making Reylo (somewhat) canon, their position as transformative fans allows Reylo shippers to occupy the position of the oppressed fan, writing aggrieved op-eds about the hate they received from ‘anti-fans’ (aka fans of colour frustrated at the erasure of Black and Brown characters) (Hutton). However, fan scholars must not ignore the outcome of their poaching: by replacing Boyega with Driver, fans transform the promotional material, poaching the narrative of Black heroism from Disney, in what is ultimately a racist act (Hutton, “White Prioritization”). In order to reconcile this racism with their desire to be subversive and heroic, some fans even read Driver’s ethnicity suspiciously, claiming that “his facial features imply that he has some sort of ethnic background” (“When White Characters”). By the end of the three-movie story, Finn all but disappeared from the main story, and (definitely white) Kylo Ren got his redemption (and rebirth as the still-white “Ben Solo”) in the moment of Rey’s kiss. The transformative fandom around Reylo is ultimately successful in arguing for their interpretation: Reylo is endgame, and Finn is a bit player, not worthy of narrative focus. In this way, these fans can

“reread and rewrite” the narrative of the Black stormtrooper-turned-force-sensitive-hero into the redemption of a violent, white man through the love of the white woman he has tortured. Despite its unpleasant thesis, this is still poaching: it is still reading the text to prove a particular interpretation (Reylo is endgame) – and one that TPTB paid attention to.

It is also possible to be a poacher without transforming something, as Rhiannon Bury shows in her analysis of the DDEB. This listserv was created by women who felt alienated by the alt.tv.x-files board in the 1990s, in particular by the “flack from men” that they would receive any time they expressed attraction to men. In response, they created their own space in which they could engage in the same kind of suspicious reading that characterized *X-Files* fandom, but away from the men who disdained their contributions. DDEB members engaged in meta and other forms of analysis, positing and predicting ‘mytharcs’ (the overarching narrative of the series, separate from the plot of individual episodes) and finding evidence of their interpretations. However, these poachers did not engage in traditionally transformational fandom, and “explicitly rejected romantic fantasy in favour of the objective gaze of the active heterosexual female spectator” (Bury 37). DDEB did not allow shipping (55), nor did they write or share fanfiction (206), and they distanced themselves from what they saw as fangirl behaviour (39). Nonetheless, they were still suspicious readers of the text, “rereading and rewriting” its clues, conspiracies, and hints to reveal the truth (which is, of course, *out there*). That they did not take these interpretations and turn them into fanfiction means that they were not *transformative* poachers, but they still engaged in suspicious reading and subverted norms of masculine fandom to include their own desires. If the

poacher is synonymous with the transformative fan, DDEB fans are contradictory and difficult to understand, but if poaching is an orientation that can include (or not) the creation of transformative fanworks, DDEB is no longer difficult to understand: they are a fandom in a poaching orientation, without the desire to create transformative works.

Men's Hockey RPF is also difficult to understand if poaching is synonymous with the creation of transformative works. In contrast, where DDEB poaches without creating transformative works, Men's Hockey RPF creates transformative works without poaching. Fans and fan scholars do not have to deal with DDEB's poaching because there are no transformative works to spark concern for the 'ethics' of it all, but the existence of Men's Hockey RPF slash means that it must be dealt with *somehow*. That 'somehow' is shame, secrecy, and erasure, because Men's Hockey RPF complicates the myth of the suspicious, subversive, transformative poacher. To make Men's Hockey RPF slash fit the suspicious poacher model not only makes it absurdly unethical, but it is also inaccurate. No amount of fanfiction can change the reality of Sidney Crosby's sexual orientation, not even for those of us who read and write it. But no amount of disapproval will change the fact that Sidney Crosby *feels* queer to me – or more accurately, that my orientation to him is queer. In traditional hockey fandom, I 'should' be attracted to him (since I am perceived as a woman), as a slash-fan I 'should' read his star image for hints of queerness, and as a scholar I 'should' read my reaction to his body suspiciously. I don't want to do any of those things. Instead, I want to say that my interpretation of Crosby is not in any way the actual truth – or even a

potential truth – about his sexuality *and* that the reality of his sexuality has absolutely nothing to do with my experience of him within the fandom of hockey.

I read and write Men’s Hockey RPF not to rewrite hockey as my own gay fantasy, but to find other people who share the same orientation to it as I do. I can see why people mistake this for poaching, because I am entering into a space that belongs legally, financially, and morally, to someone else and doing things its owners probably don’t like. Unlike poaching, however, I am not claiming ownership over its stories; rather, I am simply existing within it and refusing to move. Hockey does not become mine through the creation of fanfiction, but I can exist within hockey when I write fanfiction. Not poaching, but squatting. The two orientations are similar, and according to the original definition, it might even still be accurate to call this poaching. However, the myth of the transformative poacher has evolved beyond Jenkins’ initial conceptualization to become a fannish legend: a wily hunter in the style of Robin Hood heroically taking from The Powers That Be to redistribute canon to the oppressed fans. In order to avoid mythologizing *or* shaming Hockey RPF fans, then, I choose a similarly loaded term, but one with fewer connotations of underdog heroics. Both poaching and squatting are illegal interactions with property, but where poachers are expected to take their gains elsewhere, squatters don’t leave. It is not the action of the squatter but their *existence* in a particular space which is in breach of law and morality, no matter how well they keep the home they inhabit illegally.

## **1.5 A Different Orientation**

Using squatting as a metaphor allows me to express a different orientation to fandom, one that is not grounded in suspicion, with its attendant assumption of heroics. Once we move away from suspicion as the founding metaphor for a fan's relationship to fandom, we can also move away from suspicion as the founding metaphor for a fan scholar's reading of fanworks. Other ways of reading that allow us to "think of the text as gradually yielding up its interpretive riches, rather than being proved for its unconscious contradictions" (Felski, *Limits of Critique* 68). What Sedgwick calls "reparative knowing" or "reparative reading" can "do better justice" to the lived reality of a thing than the suspicious desire to "see[] through to an unfleshed skeleton" (149). Instead, Sedgwick recognizes that reading from a reparative position allows scholars to view "startling, juicy displays" that are "passionate" and "disorienting" that a suspicious reading would miss (150). This not to say that squatting is a mode of reparative reading. For instance, unlike reparative reading, fans also tend to share suspicious reading's fear of surprise. We are not always willing to "surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as *new*" in our fictions (146). However, it is a mode of reading that allows us to "extract[] sustenance from the objects of a culture ... whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain" us (150-151). Because "fandom is always performed against a back-drop of real-world events, constraints, and subjectivities" (Hitchcock-Morimoto and Chin, "Reimagining the Imagined Community" 181), reading fanworks from a reparative position allows for the possibility that the way the text *works* for different groups of fans will change.



In this orientation, it is possible to stay in the uncomfortable excess of different fandoms and *take things as they are*.

By taking things as they are, I can side-step the pain of reading myself and my desires suspiciously when I encounter queerness in (men's) hockey. When I assume an orientation of suspicion, I read my reaction to the kiss between Drouin and Fournier as a 'poaching' of their sexuality. But that is a misreading of my queer feelings that would also invite straightening from hockey insiders who have a vested interest in keeping hockey straight. They would say: they are not queer. But "we cannot trust the manifestations of what some people would call queerness in the present" (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 22), because there are moments that feel queer, that "burn with anticipation and promise" of a "then and there" of queerness (26), even if the subjects cannot be named as queer in the "limited vista of here and now" (22). That is, the kiss between Drouin and Fournier, when I look at it, is a "moment of queer relational bliss" (25), not between Drouin and Fournier, but between me and the image. When I carry the image – and those like it – around with me, and refuse to straighten them away, I carry a "hope that is distinctly utopian and distinctly queer" (25). Looking at the picture and holding it without trying to argue that it makes the people in it queer is squatting, and it allows me to feel the horizon of queerness that is not-yet-here. I am not challenging the "heteronarrative" (Roof), because I don't *have* to: I am queer, and I am, in fact, here.

Instead of interrogating every moment for the real queerness or straightness or other problematics, weaving myself into gordian knots of suspicion until I can't move or breathe or feel anything but the constriction of my body, I would rather sit with my queer feelings. I can

squat: I can say that I don't know what that kiss really means, that I have no way of knowing what any of the hockey players involved in any kind of locker-room/on-ice kissing feel about their own sexuality, *and* that seeing that kiss fills me with queer feeling, queer hope, and the desire to write that queer hope into fiction. Queer is not, as Ahmed reminds us, freedom from the heteronormative; it is the feeling of queerness *amid* heteronormativity (*Queer Phenomenology* 155), and two men kissing on an Ontario Major-Junior Hockey League rink is *right* in the middle. So instead of saying "they're actually gay/straight and I'm actually a hero/oppressive," I can say: "This picture may not depict a Truly Queer Moment, but looking at this picture creates, in me, a queer feeling." I can, instead of queering and poaching, simply squat and not straighten. I don't have to diagnose, to interpret the queerness into being, because that queerness already exists in me, and in describing the queer feeling of that kiss, I am "reflect[ing] the rhetorical experience of those who create and interpret the discourse" (C. Miller 152). I can explain that I share this image and make it the lockscreen on my phone because it reminds me that there is a future in which there is an active, out, gay hockey player in the NHL. That future isn't "here and now" (Muñoz, *Cruising* 1), and that future doesn't even require Drouin and Fournier to be queer themselves, but that future is imaginable when I look at that picture. Just as Rita Hayworth does not have to actually be Black for fans of hers to see her as "so beautiful, she looks black" (*Disidentifications* 29), Drouin and Fournier don't have to be queer to feel queer: their kiss is, as I've described it to friends, "so tender, they look queer."

I can't say "they *are* queer," because to do so is to mis-read my queer feeling as some kind of barometer of reality and to do so would be to invite straightening from hockey insiders who have a vested interest in keeping hockey straight. Firstly, no one but Drouin and Fournier can say if they are actually queer, not only because we don't know who they really, but because "we cannot trust the manifestations of what some people would call queerness in the present" (*Cruising* 22). That is, there are moments that feel queer, that "burn with anticipation and promise" of a "then and there" of queerness (26), even if the subjects cannot be named (or trusted) as queer in the "limited vista of the here and now" (22). The kiss between Drouin and Fournier, when I look at it, is a "moment[] of queer relational bliss" – not necessarily between the two young men, but between *me* and the image. *That* is the queer affinity that I have in Hockey RPF. I relate to that image and images like it queerly, and I am filled with a kind of bliss when I look at it. When I carry it around with me, I carry hope, too. To have queer feelings that I don't immediately straighten away is to have "hope that is distinctly utopian and distinctly queer" (25). This act of queer affinity, of relating to that image queerly, of carrying it around as an emblem of hope for a queer "then and there," is a dangerous one, because it destabilizes the narratives of heteronormativity that are so important to masculine cultures of sport like hockey.

There are other scholars who have addressed this gap in fan studies knowledge, since in our daily lives *as* fans, we recognize that not everyone does fandom in the same way. For example, Hitchcock-Morimoto proposes the theory of contact zones to describe the places where fans with different values meet and negotiate those values where contact creates

fannish identities that are in flux, in response to, in opposition to, in accordance with those other fans in the contact zone (Hitchcock-Morimoto, “From Imagined Communities to Contact Zones; Hitchcock-Morimoto and Chin, “Towards a Theory of Transcultural Fandom”). This theory takes as given that fans are not a monolith, even within the same fandom, an understanding expressed in Hitchcock-Morimoto’s work on transcultural fandom. Transcultural fandom is a picture of fandom where fans and their object of fandom do not share the same culture, such as American fans of C-pop (Chinese pop music) and K-pop (Korean pop music). Not necessarily exploitative or fetishizing, transcultural fandom can be a way to learn, identify, and express those different values. However, when transcultural fans impose their home-culture’s values on their fellow fans, or their objects of fandom, we start to see conflict. Through this theory, Hitchcock-Morimoto argues persuasively for the fact that even within ‘a’ fandom, there can be multitudes of fans, identities, desires, and needs. The focus on US-Asia contact is increasingly important, as K-pop becomes popular in North America, and hints at further transcultural breaks – and contact zones – on either side of those borders.

Zubernis and Larsen provide another appealing model for the differences between fans, by categorizing fans along the axes of skill (as delineated by Abercrombie and Longhurst) and public acceptance. Under this model, it’s easy to see how fans “engage in a wide array of fan practices” depending on the kinds of fannish labour they engage in and the need for privacy (16). Some fannish endeavours, like information-gathering about canon, are more technical than interpretive, and are also more publicly acceptable – as a result, those

practices are “mainstream enough to make public spaces comfortable” (17) for fans who engage in them. In hockey, for instance, this kind of technical-public labour would be collecting and analyzing statistics on hockey players and determining fannish favs from the list of objectively ‘best’ players. On the other side of the spectrum are those interpretive-private fans, whose fanworks are less interested in the objective truth of canon and more interested in subjective realities, which do not align with public values. An example of this, of course, would be Hockey RPF slash, in which the interpretations of fans are decidedly not acceptable in public spaces. This theory, however, posits that this difference in fandom exists on the fandom level. That is, Zubernis and Larsen argue that a single fan might engage in different practices, depending on the fandom they participate in. In this model, normative practices for an interpretive fan of a text are the same for all interpretive fans of that text.

Unfortunately, these theories, like those developed by Abercrombie and Longhurst (whose genres of fandom are determined by the level of production), Jenkins (who described literary genres of fanworks and the publics who consumed them), and Brunner (who posited demographics of fans along a femme-butcht spectrum) are taxonomies of fans that tend towards closed sets. A closed set struggles to deal with those items at its periphery that could but don’t quite fit and tends towards generalization over specificity. As a result, it is difficult to fully understand the reality of fandoms, which are messy and often in conflict with themselves. There is still room to further describe how those conflicts create not a fractured fandom, but new fandoms entirely. This is what I intend to show in the next chapters of this dissertation: that we can better understand fans when we start thinking about fandom as a

verb rather than a noun. Not “Why do women write slash in their fandom?” but “What needs and desires are being met and communicated through the acts of fandom?” In this dissertation, I will try to “reflect[] the rhetorical experience of the people who create and interpret the discourse,” where the goal of this rhetorical fan scholarship is not to “provid[e] a taxonomic system” that diagnoses particular utterances (C. Miller 152), but to listen to the things that fans say and do to understand how they do their fandoms. That is, this dissertation takes the bottom-up approach of rhetorical genre theory instead of the top-down approach of literary genre theory, a relation that seems more appropriate to the study of fans, whose needs, values, desires, and identities are varied and impossible to categorize neatly.

Chapter 2, “Hockey’s Fandoms,” defines and describes the concept of intimate fandoms, which takes Berlant’s and Morrison’s intimate publics and applies it to the nebulous, interrelated spaces of fandom. This understanding of fandom is also informed by Sara Ahmed’s theories of orientation and affect, which provide the framework for understanding why some needs are met by public fandom and others are met by intimate fandom. By describing the normative, expected hockey fandom in Canada (which I call hockey’s public fandom), I show why there is a need for intimate fandoms of hockey, and why some of those needs are met by fanfiction that depicts romance and sex between real-life hockey players. Chapter 2 also extends this chapter’s call for a rhetorical genre theory approach to fan studies. Using this approach allows me to show how hockey fandom, RPF fandom, and slash fandom all describe and negotiate the difference between “us” and “them” in different ways and sometimes in combination, which constitute the borders of intimate

fandoms. The definition of intimate and public fandom in Chapter 2 will then inform my readings of the Hockey RPF fanfiction created by these intimate fandoms in the next three chapters.

Chapter 3, Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 use the frameworks and theories developed in Chapters 1 and 2 to describe a particular rhetorical genre of Hockey RPF fanfiction. Because each of these chapters describes, reads, and interprets fanfiction created in intimate fandoms, I have chosen to pseudonymize the authors and their fic titles in order to maintain the boundaries of the fandom while still describing them. These works are posted on the most well-known fannish archive AO3, and thus do not require direct permission to cite (Larsen, “Don’t Try This at Home, Boys and Girls” 88), and although some fan scholars argue that gaining permission to access even publicly posted fanworks is ideal, they acknowledge that “researchers of contentious spaces” may need to use different standards (Drouin 69). The fic I have cited are published on the fanfiction archive *Archive Of Our Own* (AO3), posted to the Hockey RPF fandoms, and clearly tagged with the romantic/sexual pairings of the real-life hockey players. Most of the fic I describe are publicly visible, even to those without an AO3 account. However, they were created within the context of their intimate fandoms, which (as Chapter 2 argues) do not constitute complete publicity. They are written for an audience of readers and writers who already understand, feel, and desire the particular need that is met by the fic, and are not intended to be read by outsiders who might stumble upon them. Because the topic of RPF is contentious even within academic spaces, more contentious in slash fandom spaces – and much more in traditional, public fan spaces, I believe the best

compromise to both study these fic and protect myself and its fans is to pseudonymize my references. For that reason, I will not link these fic in this dissertation, nor will I name their titles or authors. I have done my best to describe the fic in such a way that a reader in the intimate fandom – someone who is familiar with the language, tropes, moves, and desires – will be able to identify them (or, at the very least, search for them in AO3 and recognize them when they find them), but that someone who is unfamiliar with the fandom will not be able to find them without effort. In other words, my goal is to mimic the boundaries of the intimate fandoms through my citation and reading practices.

In Chapter 3, “Schrodinger's Queer”, I argue that one of the needs that Hockey RPF meets is that it makes sensible the queerness that many hockey fans feel and desire in public hockey fandom. In public fandom spaces, queerness is rendered more than invisible – it is rendered insensible, or nonsense. This chapter is informed by scholarship across multiple disciplines, including fan studies, celebrity studies and sports studies. In particular, I use Ahmed’s queer phenomenology in combination with Berlant’s cruel optimism to understand why Hockey RPF slash-fans remain in hockey fandom even as it calls their desires nonsense. When public fandom deems some desires as real and others as nonsense, it creates a relation of cruel optimism that the fic produced in intimate fandoms can assuage (and, ironically, maintain). For example, the NHL frequently promotes narratives of bromances between pairs of athletes while simultaneously denying the possibility that those romances could be romances. Men’s Hockey RPF slash, then, uses the genre of bromance-to-romance to return that absent queerness. The return of queerness to the narrative of the bromance allows those



hockey fans who *feel* queerness in the bromance to experience it in the fic, which soothes some of the pain of being nonsense in the public fandom and allows fans to maintain their attachment to the NHL.

Chapter 4, “Fantasies of (white) Hockey” argues that not all desires and pains are equally assuaged in the texts that intimate fandoms create. Using Muñoz’s theory of disidentification, I argue that the intimate fandoms of hockey that I have access to are unable to imagine Blackness in hockey in the same way that we can imagine queerness. As a result, we tend to subsume Blackness under the umbrella of queerness in fic that includes Black players, if we engage with it at all. While this critique is not unique to Men’s Hockey RPF, since most slash fandoms are overwhelmingly white, part of understanding where the “us” and “them” of an intimate fandom requires understanding what is excluded (even silently). Part of what delineates one intimate fandom from another is the desires that are felt and named through the tags, tropes, and pairings, but equally important are those desires that are not felt or named. In the intimate fandoms of hockey that I have access to, those desires are centered around white queerness rather than Blackness. However, just because I don’t have access to them, and just because my intimate fandoms don’t feel them, does not mean that those desires are not being felt – and met – by intimate fandoms of hockey (and Men’s Hockey RPF). Instead, it’s likely that those needs are being met by intimate fandoms that exist beyond my own network of intimate fandoms.

Finally, Chapter 5, “Sidney Crosby’s Monstrous Butt,” takes on those desires that are felt by most – even those within the public of slash and the larger umbrella of Men’s Hockey

RPF – as creepy. In hockey’s public fandom, the desire for athletes’ bodies is always on the edge of creepiness (depending on who is doing the desiring, and how they frame that desire). I show how the (creepy) desire for Sidney Crosby’s body – in particular his butt – in public hockey fandom is taken up in particularly monstrous ways in the intimate fandoms of Men’s Hockey RPF. In some cases, the monstrosity is metaphorical, as the fictional Sidney explores (and loves) anal sex – an act that is especially monstrous in public hockey fandom. In other cases, Sidney (and other NHLers in his orbit, like Evgeni Malkin) is transformed into a literal monster, a not-quite-human creature exists in one of slash fandom’s most shamed genres: Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics (ABO) otherwise known as Omegaverse. Because of the shame that surrounds ABO (even from other RPF slash-fans), it is difficult to talk about as fans and fan scholars. However, I argue that it becomes more possible to discuss it through the framework of intimate fandoms. Using intimate fandoms and rhetorical genre theory, we can understand the desires that are met and the pains that are assuaged in this particular genre even if the genre itself feels creepy to those who are not in the intimate fandom.

## Chapter 2 The Intimate and Public Fandoms of Hockey

I am both a weird kind of hockey fan, and a weird kind of slash-fan. Should you describe me to an average hockey fan, the gay stuff feels weird, off – creepy. Alternately, should you describe me to an average slash-fan, the fact that I’m focusing my slashing energies on real athletes and not fictional characters also feels weird, off and creepy. That is to say, that as a hockey RPF slash-fan, I am neither a good fit for hockey fandom *nor* slash fandom, but these two camps also represent the broad understanding of fandoms. If we define fandoms by their objects, that is the person, place or thing at the centre of fannish attention, then I should be a hockey fan (cf. Jenkins on fannish publics). If we define fandoms by their actions, that is the way(s) we express our fannish attention, then I should be a slash-fan (cf. Abercrombie and Longhurst’s spectrum of fannish practices). What this tells me, then, is that the ways we’ve traditionally described fans and their fandoms isn’t quite telling the whole story, because I am both, therefore I am also neither. We could look at the community of people with which I express my fannish attention towards various objects, that is other people who also read and write Hockey RPF, and that gets us closer (Bacon-Smith; Hitchcock-Morimoto and Chin; Jenkins; Zubernis and Larsen). Although that community-based understanding of fandoms describes what we do as a group, it still leaves us *as a group* relatively unidentified. Additionally, this broad community description risks missing out on the fact that I engage in practices of Hockey RPF slash that even other Hockey RPF slash-fans might find weird, off, and creepy (and there are Hockey RPF slash-fans that *I* find creepy). These ways of understanding the boundaries of fandom, where the “us” of a fandom

becomes distinct from the “them” of another fandom are not inaccurate, but they are incomplete.

Therefore, as an extension of the framework of fandom as community or public, I argue that we can understand some fandoms as *intimate* publics online. These intimate publics of fandom negotiate the boundaries of the community through the genres and language they use to express particular orientations to the broader public of the fandom they find themselves in (cf. Morrison, “Suffused by feeling”). Although publics of fandom are not as powerful as a nation’s publics, which shape the culture, laws, and norms of the state and its citizens, publics of fandom still exert normativizing power that shapes the space and the people who inhabit it. As a result, thus some members of the public are felt as “all wrong” (Berlant, *Female Complaint* 3) and need a space in which they do not constantly contend with that misfit (Morrison). In the case of hockey, then, we can see the public fandom of hockey that is shaped around the “Good Canadian Boy” (Allain, “A Good Canadian Boy”), which requires whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity, and excludes others as “all wrong” in that space. Members of hockey’s public fandom, then, express their orientation to the public and its norms through particular genres of fannish communication, like YouTube rants, face-paint, swearing at televisions, and rioting in the streets of Vancouver (among others, of course). If your body and desires are expected and welcomed in the public fandom of hockey, you fit the *common sense* of the public (cf. Ahmed). That is, your orientations in that public space *feel* like a good fit to its other subjects. If you are not expected and welcomed, you may choose to make yourself fit by conforming to this common sense, by

communicating in the expected genres and re-orienting your desires. If you do not choose to make yourself fit, however, you will find yourself pushed out, sometimes violently. Those of us who do not fit, and who choose not to make ourselves fit, may also find ourselves in need of a space in which our bodies and desires *are* expected, *are* welcomed and, importantly, are shared by others. In that case, we find ourselves intimate fandoms that orient themselves to the objects of fandom in different ways. For example, my intimate fandom of hockey is oriented towards queerness, social justice, and intimacy, and expresses that orientation through Hockey RPF slash that tells stories of found families, queer awakenings, and monstrous desires.

## **2.1 Public Hockey Fandom**

There is no singular correct way to be a hockey fan, of course. A person who casually watches games at the bar with their friends is as much a hockey fan as the person who buys season tickets and bids on hockey paraphernalia on eBay. To say that there is a public fandom of hockey, then, is not to say that there is a set of rules that creates a singular kind of fan. However, publics are shaped by and for a common orientation to the world, a common sense of what is right and “all wrong.” Publics, of fandom or otherwise, have a common sense: of the bodies they welcome, of the objects they celebrate, and the orientations they support. When something suits the common sense of a public, we can also say that the impressions and orientations of objects and subjects in a space are comfortable, or happy (cf. Ahmed). That is, when objects “leave me with an impression; they impress and impress upon me” (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 6), that impression can be comfortable or painful,

and two people encountering the same object can be affected very differently, depending on where they stand in relation to it (Ahmed, “Happy Objects” 32). Where we stand in relation to objects is itself informed by our orientations, as “orientations of the body shape not just what objects are reachable, but also the ‘angle’ on which they are reached” (*Queer Phenomenology* 67). In other words, our experience of objects is shaped by our encounters, which are themselves influenced by our orientations: even a cube, which has six faces of identical dimensions, can feel different, depending. If you come at it not straight on, but queerly, you might find yourself facing a sharp, triangular corner, rather than the flat, smooth face. If the people who construct the spaces of the public all experience the object in the same way, if they all feel the flat, smooth face, they might name that object as comfortable, as “happy,” even though that object hurts *you*. In the public fandom of hockey, then, hockey (the game, the culture, the philosophy...) is shaped most broadly around the assumption that hockey is itself a happy object.

In Canada, hockey fandom is also part of the nation’s happy objects, so it can be difficult to distinguish hockey fandom from Canadianness. However, there is a difference between the dominant public of Canada and the public of hockey. Like the traditional understanding of a public, a public of fandom is a normativizing force, but a public of fandom is already made up of people who love something more than they should or in ways that they shouldn’t, so publics of fandom often exist in specific digital locations, such as social networking sites (SNS) or in particular physical locations. For example, a public of sports fandom might congregate in the space of a sports bar, where wearing face paint and

yelling at the television is not the disruptive act it might be at the gastro-pub next door, or it might exist on AM Radio talk shows, where people seek out particular genres of hockey talk absent on CBC. Similarly, slash fandom found a home on Tumblr, a space of fandom “in which millions of people are writing, reading” with each other in “entire creative universes” (Coppa, “Writing Bodies in Space” 235). Although slash fandom may seem less public than hockey fandom, slash-fans number in the hundreds of thousands, making millions of slash-fanworks. This means that it is normal within these spaces to create elaborately recontextualized gifsets, for example, to argue for a particular slash pairing. Although these fannish actions are not shared by every fan, they are normalised within the large, publicly accessible space of Tumblr and other fannish communities online: just as a sports bar creates a space for the public fandom of hockey, for instance, SNSs like Tumblr and Twitter create space for a public fandom of slash.

A public of fandom, in other words, is not only the object of fandom (hockey, e.g.) or even the location (a sports bar vs Tumblr, e.g.), but is more accurately the set of norms that determine which actions, desires, bodies, and discourse are sensible in a space of fandom. The shape of the public is what primes us “to anticipate, to be gratified, to respond a certain way” (C. Miller 159). Form “shapes the response of the reader or listener [or fan] to substance by providing instructions, so to speak, about how to perceive and interpret (159). So, when we recognize or learn the form of the public, we know how to act within it. We know which genres to use to “connect[] the private with the public” and make ourselves known (163). Or, rather, the public *is* the common sense of which genres we are expected to

use to make our expected selves known in expected ways. Within the space of fandom, some “bodily actions” create paths, “which produces what we call the bodily horizon, a space or action, which puts some objects and not others in reach” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 66). It makes some bodies *somebodies* and others *nobodies* – some bodies become all right and others “all wrong” (Berlant, *Female Complaint* 3). And the all-wrong-nobodies become disruptions when they make themselves known, so the public polices expression in order to maintain public comfort.

Take the sports bar as an example, where women are carefully watched: *Is she there with a boyfriend? Does she know anything about hockey? Does she know the stats of the player whose name is on her jersey, or does she just think he’s hot? If she does know his stats, is she a lesbian?* Her presence in the sports bar is a disruption, and her body creates a need for those questions. Women “risk being denigrated as overly masculine” if they are fans of sport, because their presence is a threat that must be “regulated” (Toffoletti and Mewett 105). She may therefore choose to explicitly express her heterosexual femininity by sexually objectifying male athletes to avoid this denigration, but doing so is also “a potential threat to male sporting authority” that requires an answer (103): she’ll be mocked as a puck bunny only there to pull a hot hockey guy. That is, no matter how a woman acts in the public of hockey fandom, her body needs someone to answer for it: a boyfriend who dragged her along, a queerness that can be reinterpreted as masculinity, or a perfect performance of fandom to assuage fears that she will further disrupt the space. Or the other fans will make her so uncomfortable that she won’t come back, thereby solving the problem of her presence.



She may choose, then, to move somewhere like Tumblr or Twitter, where she can find fans who are more like her, where she can become the expected somebody that she couldn't be in the sports bar. However, this somebody-ing relies on her whiteness, as women of color find their expressions of desire and pain ignored, erased, or reframed as disruptions to the fandom space, even (especially) in so-called progressive spaces of women's fandom online (Pande, "How (not) to talk about race" par. 2.13). In any public there will be some bodies who are sensible – who fit into the common sense understanding of what a fan is and should be – and those who are nobodies. Publics, in the traditional sense or publics of fandom, require that their members follow common rules of action, expression, orientation, and desire in order to fit, and thus require that others do not fit.

The public fandom of hockey, or what we might call 'hockey culture,' is thus the set of expectations for the actions, attachments, and expressions of the athletes and fans that only ever exists in the ideal. If your performance of desire for the sport reinforces heteronormativity, white supremacy, and hegemonic masculinity, then you will, generally, belong in the public fandom of hockey. Although no hockey fan will ever meet all requirements perfectly, they will be able to perform, acceptably, the actions of a fan who does. This performance may be more genuine in some than others, but for those who fit into the public, the performance itself will not be painful. All hockey fans who fit comfortably in the public of hockey are able to do so because hockey is, to them, a "happy object." Hockey culture is powerful – and, as Ahmed might call it, "hard": that is, "it has to keep standing to keep things standing" ("Hard"). It is both incredibly powerful, exerting a force on the culture

around it, and incredibly fragile, afraid of any threat. It's fragile, because when hard things can't bear pressure, they shatter (in contrast to malleable objects, which bend and shift in response to pressure) – to avoid being shattered, hard things are aggressive in the face of threats. As a result, it's hard work to affect the public of hockey.

In Canada, hockey culture stands firm, even as the rules and popularity of the game shifts, because hockey culture is not the same as the game itself: although “it's entirely possible that hockey as a sport is great [...] hockey as a culture is stuck up, entitled, elitist and way behind the times” (@JeffVeillette Aug 22). To use more specific words than Veillette's pithy tweet, hockey culture both requires and constructs the “Good Canadian Boy” (Allain), who, man or not, is oriented straightly towards heterosexual masculinity and has a hockey lineage constructed by white kinship. The “Good Canadian Boy” does not even have to be morally Good, as the news that Hockey Canada has a payoff fund for sexual assault proves: a Good Canadian Boy can also be a Canadian Boy who rapes women, as long as he does it while playing Good hockey (because boys will be boys, after all). It is also possible to fit into the public of hockey fandom even if you are not literally a Good Canadian *Boy*, as long as you desire that subject (in the correct way), and do not resist or critique the structures that uphold that Boy. For instance, a mother who takes her son to hockey practices, devotes her considerable time and money to his hobby, and thus raises a Good Canadian Boy might be called a “Hockey mom,” an important part of hockey culture, and thus a welcome member of hockey's public fandom. Even though she might not otherwise fit in hockey's public fandom, then, a white woman who upholds whiteness, hegemonic masculinity, and heteronormativity

has desires and expressions that are “mainstream enough to make public spaces comfortable” (Zubernis and Larsen 19). Those for whom those orientations are comfortable, and those who are willing to make themselves fit into those orientations, then, can participate in public hockey fandom, simply.

To participate in hockey fandom, simply, does not necessarily mean that it is easy, or even always pleasant: to be a man existing under the pressures of patriarchy and heteronormativity is difficult and paranoid. However, fitting into the public fandom of hockey comfortably makes those challenges easier. Even though hockey culture requires unassailable hypermasculinity and heterosexuality from its athletes and fans, that very pressure is what allows hockey to “de-feminiz[es]” the men who associate themselves with it, by simple virtue of the association (Krebs 33), “bolster[ing] a challenged and faltering ideology of male superiority in the 20th century” (Messner, “Sports and Male Domination” 198). The structure of hockey as both a game and a fandom “valorizes hypermasculine violence and puts the white [...] male in a position of reverence to be emulated” (99). The public fandom of hockey, then, is a “cloning culture” in which the “preference for real or imagined replica and homogeneities” creates a mob of young white men with the same look, the same gestures, and the same (expressed) desires (Essed and Goldberg 1068). In hockey culture, as in Canada’s larger dominant publics, these men are heterosexual, cis, and “manifestations of masculinity and morality” (Poniatowski and Whiteside 5). This Good Canadian Boy-as-athlete is a humble, polite, quiet, white man who is “rough and tough” (Allain, “A Good Canadian Boy” 115) and “not afraid to go into the corners” for his (white)

teammate when it counts (“Kid Crosby” 13). These hockey clones are the men that Don Cherry spoke of weekly in rapturous tones on *Coach’s Corner*, celebrating their gentlemanly violence. Even if any individual will only ever be an “imperfect clone” (Essed and Goldberg 1078), and even if a Good Canadian Boy raised in hockey culture doesn’t make it to the NHL, hockey’s public fandom is oriented towards wanting/wanting to be him. The spaces in which these hockey men grow up are shaped by the feelings we’re supposed to have about men and sport, which are then reinforced by the successes of those very people for whom that space was made.

That these Good Canadian Boys are white is as true in the NHL as it is in the larger public of hockey. There are, of course, some successful examples of Black athletes (P.K. Subban), Indigenous athletes (Carey Price), and athletes of color who have made it to the NHL (Nazem Kadri, Nick Suzuki, Jujhar Khaira). However, these are exceptions to the overwhelmingly white NHL, where team diversity is likely to refer to the fact that the team has white athletes from across Europe and North America, since it is rare enough to be notable if a team has more than one athlete of color on its roster. Hockey masculinity is dependent on playing “the white way,” which requires adhering to all the rules of masculinity and putting hockey before all else, with “Western flexibility” (Sztó “Playing the White Way”). That is, Nazem Kadri is welcomed in hockey’s public fandom as a Muslim only because he does not let his religion impact his white fans: for example, he avoids fasting during the season to ensure his performance does not decrease (Sztó). Although there are official initiatives in the NHL and hockey more broadly to be more inclusive of athletes and

fans of color, these initiatives also require that fans and athletes participate “the white way.” Specifically, *Hockey is For Everyone* (HIFE), the NHL’s official racial inclusivity initiative, makes its titular claim despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary: the NHL is still roughly 94% white.<sup>2</sup> Hockey is only for “Everyone” who already fits into hockey: only if you are “*white enough*” (italics in original) then you are invited into hockey culture (Lorenz and Murray 97, cited in Szto).

This public fandom is also deeply important to the work of Canadian nation-building. In both hockey’s public fandom and Canada’s national public, to be “white enough” is synonymous with being Canadian. Ads for hockey and its sponsors (like Molson beer) star white men who celebrate Canada as “the first nation of hockey” (Hunt) and claim that “Canada didn’t just invent hockey; hockey invented Canada” (Sportsnet Creative). The ad for the 2016 World Cup of Hockey, “Who Owns Hockey?”, that makes this claim shows hockey fans who cheer with nationalistic fervour amidst a smiling crowd that is significantly more diverse than the team Canada sent to the games. This ad would like us to believe, as with HIFE, that hockey as Canada’s national sport is welcoming to Black and Indigenous Canadians, but even this attempt is hindered by the ad’s own desire for whiteness, as it literally centres two white men. Through texts like this ad, “hockey players embody the nation, and the nation embodies them” (Krebs 86). The public fandom of hockey makes it

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<sup>2</sup> This number comes from my own math: literally counting the very few Black, Indigenous, Asian, and South Asian athletes in the league in 2022.

clear that to be Canadian is to love hockey, and to love hockey is to be a just-about-middle-aged white man who supports his country and its sport without comment or critique.

The ‘team-first’ mentality of hockey serves the nation, the league, and the team by creating the moral expectation that criticism is tantamount to betrayal. Just as teams are expected to be collectives of men working towards the same cause, with a shared sense of the game, fans are expected to have the same goals, the same common sense. Fans and athletes, then, who feel out of place in this narrative are *felt* as out of place in the spaces of hockey fandom. All publics share a need to maintain norms, to protect the in-group from the out-group, but hockey’s public fandom is also a team sport, which means that loyalty to the in-group is not a side-effect of being in a public, but is instead one of the foundational philosophies. To be a Good Canadian Boy (or to desire a Good Canadian Boy, if you aren’t a boy) means being a team player. In hockey, this loyalty to team is expressed by athletes who will “go into the corners” as needed, take a hit for a teammate, fight an opponent to protect a teammate’s honour or for what you want and deserve (Bélanger 297). By fans, this loyalty is expressed by a devotion to a team, rather than an individual athlete. Whereas in other team sports, like the NBA and NFL, where individual athletes have strong brands, their own fanbases, and fans who will follow them from team to team (McDonald and Andrews 22) hockey’s star players are secondary to their teams. As the famous line from the movie *Miracle on Ice* puts it, “the name on the front [of the jersey] is a hell of a lot more important than the name on the back.” What this means for hockey’s public fandom, then, is that athletes who stand out for anything but what they offer their team, fans who support

individual athletes over the teams that built those athletes, and fans who criticise hockey as exclusionary for any reason become killjoys (cf. Ahmed *Promise of Happiness*, 20) who are necessarily removed from hockey's public fandom. Loyalty to team is central to hockey's public fandom, whether that is a literal team, or the broader 'team' of hockey culture's Good Canadian Boys.

Hockey's public fandom thus requires – and rewards – white *kinship*. That is, hockey's public fans are expected to be not just white, but also a “good team player” and part of “a good group of guys” (Poniatowski and Whiteside 10-12). You can demonstrate this kinship by not criticising hockey culture, but also by displaying a hockey lineage. The language of hockey fandom, where home team fans are good and ‘bandwagon’ fans are bad, tells us that it's not just the fact of liking a team that matters, it's how you like them that matters. Both fans and players are expected to have a family history of hockey fandom, where they cheer for their home-town teams that their fathers and grandfathers loved. This is, thus, another tool of hockey's cloning culture that not only “produc[es] *more of the same at the same time*” but also “*more of the same across time*” (Essed and Goldberg 1077; italics in original). This mode of fandom necessarily leaves out those who are new to Canada, who didn't have fathers who loved the game. For people who are able to narrativize their fandom as a lineage, for whom the smell of hockey is familiar and comforting, hockey works for them: in fandom, but also in public life. The network of hockey works for you *if* you are the kind of Canadian who has roots in Canada, who can signify your public importance by associating with hockey and with those who love hockey (Wamsley 34). If you belong well

enough, you find (or are) friends – coaches, trainers, ex-players – who will hire a buddy, or know someone (or be someone) in the legal system who dismisses your sons’ crimes as “mischief” rather than assault (Krebs 95). The reward of performing white kinship through hockey fandom, then, is security and power in the public spaces not just of hockey, but of Canada.

### **2.1.1 I could not be Dart Guy**

Picture a hockey fan.

Is this fan a man? white? A little overweight? He probably drinks beer, shouts a lot, maybe wears his team colours for good luck and firmly believes that his actions have any bearing at all on the events that occur on the ice. That’s who I picture – even now that I consider myself a hockey fan. It’s just one of those images that’s hard to unlearn.

It’s especially hard to unlearn when the entirety of hockey Twitter in Canada had his face as their profile picture for about a week one April.

Few of us will ever be “Dart Guy”, as Leafs hockey fans immediately named Jason Maslakow when he appeared on screen in Washington, but we will recognize him as a symbol of hockey fandom. He’s got a full beard, a face painted with a blue maple leaf, a Stanley Cup shaved into his head, and a cigarette hanging – unlit – from his lips. He’s wearing an Auston Matthews jersey and has driven from Waterloo to Washington, D.C. to watch his team play. He is what we might call a “big boy” – overweight, but not horrifying, not *fat*. He is, according to Sportsnet, “the mascot/meme/superfan the Leafs deserve” (“Maples Leafs fans go crazy”).

And honestly, I can’t really argue with that. Named for the “dart” hanging from his mouth (this is, apparently, Canadian slang I was supposed to know), he looks exactly like the kind of small-town Ontario boy devoted to his Leafs I expect.



And he definitely resonated with a lot of people: we didn't just see Leafs twitter erupt into a mass of Dart Guy profile pics - we also got treated to a week of Dart Guy coverage. We watched as he got invited to see the Leafs play in Toronto. Before the game, we watched him on stage at the Air Canada Centre to rally the crowd. We heard him on the radio, interviewed by AM and FM sports radio hosts. We learned that he was given a customized "Dart Guy" beer fridge from Molson, that Nicorette offered him a partnership to help him quit smoking (McCarthy). In the end, he saw at least two free Toronto playoffs games (and those games are *not* cheap), got his fifteen minutes of fame, and Auston Matthews' parents sought *him* out for a picture.

As far as anyone can tell, Maslakow seems like a nice enough guy. If he gets to see some free hockey and make some sponsorship money by dressing up, that's cool.

But - well. Only someone exactly like him would get free tickets and gifts of beer, right? If he were a woman, for example - if it was *me* in sweaty face-paint on the Jumbotron, I suspect the reaction would be ... different.

I'd probably get a mix of death threats, rape threats, and insults about my weight. People would probably complain that I was only doing it for attention. The fact that I was wearing a Matthews jersey would mean, paradoxically, that I wasn't a real fan - just a bandwagon fan, liking only the hottest newest hockey player. Any gift or profit I received would also be proof of my duplicity.

Maybe they wouldn't - maybe I'm severely underestimating hockey fans (I'm not) - but I've seen what happens to women who get attention online, whether or not they wanted that attention, enough times to know what that would look like.

I know that I wouldn't become, quite literally, the face of hockey fandom.

Take, for example, the story of Jason Maslakow, or Dart Guy. His reward for participating perfectly in hockey's public fandom was public acclaim, professional success, and authority on hockey as both a game and a culture. Dart Guy was, briefly, a hockey

celebrity, after he was filmed during a playoff game decked out in face paint, hair shaved into a maple leaf, and with a dart – a cigarette – hanging unlit from his mouth. The image of a Leafs fan alone in a sea of Washington jerseys was striking, and for a while he became the avatar of Canadian hockey fandom. He *was* the Good Canadian Boy: white, loyal, and with the ability to afford the cost in both time and money to drive to Washington from Waterloo for a playoff game with a brand-new Auston Matthews jersey *while also* feeling like a hometown *aw-shucks* hockey fan. His orientation to hockey aligned neatly with hockey's public fandom, who turned him into a beloved meme online as many hockey fans changed their avatars to the picture of Dart Guy. This orientation in combination with public attention gave him authority over public hockey fandom, which he used to criticise fans who didn't (or couldn't) express their fandom correctly. In response to the Ottawa Senators failing to fill their arena during the playoffs, Dart Guy tweeted "10 hours Waterloo to Washington, I was there for my team, 1 1/2 hours Waterloo to Toronto, I was there for my team...tell me more Sens fans" (@LeafsMaz20 April 28, 2017). Dart Guy saw the empty arena as a failure of *fandom* rather than the unfortunate circumstance of severe flooding in Ottawa at that time combined with the organisational failure that placed the arena for an Original Six team in the middle of nowhere. As a reward for his devotion to hockey's public fandom, he received offers of sponsorship (from Nicotine, to help him stop smoking and from Molson, just because) and jobs: he was hired as the host of a weekly radio show on TSN where he provided "an in-depth look and analysis of the Toronto Maple Leafs by Leafs fans for Leafs fans" (Maslakow and Drury) and as head scout for a minor-league hockey team, finally

“back in[] hockey” where he belongs” (Fitz-Gerald “A Year of Dart Guy”). The expressions that hockey fandom expects, the ones that are legible and appropriate rhetorical moves, are shaped by the white men for whom the public fandom of hockey is empowering, profitable, and comfortable.

The public fan performs the expected movements, gestures, looks and genres well enough that they are welcome in a public space, but there are fans who feel wrong to that public space: these fans create a need for gatekeeping. Because gatekeeping is the reaction to the actions of fans who don’t align with the accepted and expected genres of fandom, and it serves “largely to reinforce traditional norms” (Coddington and Holton 242), we can use it to see what the genres of a fandom *are*. For example, when Leafs fan Steve Dangle posts hundreds of hours of rage-filled rants on YouTube about how angry he is that his team is losing, he is a profitable internet sensation who becomes, like Dart Guy, an authority on hockey. In contrast, the fan who criticises hockey *culture* is told that “if you don’t like it, leave.....please” and that “to understand hockey culture, you need to be a part of it” (@BAMHockey74 Aug 22 in reply to @JeffVeillette). When you fail to live up to the ideals of the public hockey fan, you “lack the credentials to discuss, and especially criticise the national passion and perhaps even the nation itself” (Krebs 98). Both Dangle and the Veilliete complain about hockey, but only one of them is a hockey killjoy. That is, to criticise hockey is to destroy hockey’s promise of happiness by hoping for something that hockey is not otherwise oriented towards. These killjoys become “matter out of place” (Douglas), an impurity necessitating a response. So, if you do not want to leave, and do not want to be a

hockey killjoy, then you must perform according to the norms of fandom: wear the official jersey, yell at the refs, support the trade decisions of your team, riot when your team loses. Otherwise, when your consumption or production doesn't serve the public comfort, your fandom will be examined, judged, and deemed unacceptable, because otherwise your presence creates wobbles in the scaffolding of a public that is strong as long as no one moves in unexpected ways.

## **2.2 Hockey's Counterpublics**

This is not to say that there is a monolithic hockey culture. As trust in the math and 'objective' evidence-based analytics increases, a change that occurs in time with the growth of hockey bloggers as trusted hockey news sources, the rift between the 'old' and the 'new' in hockey widens. Old – or more kindly, 'traditional' – hockey fandom finds its avatar in Don Cherry, whereas new hockey fandom is represented by people like Kyle Dubas, the youngest General Manager (GM) in the NHL, and one who has made an explicit commitment to diversity and analytics (both equally terrifying to traditional hockey fans). Ironically, the way that Julie Rak describes Don Cherry sounds a lot more like my hockey fandom than hockey fandom as symbolised in people like Dubas. Rak argues that "Cherry's talk functions as the node of an intimate public for hockey where affect and passion matter more than an analysis of the contemporary game and how it works as a business" (113). However, because Cherry's intimate public is not online, but is, in fact, the more abstract, neoliberal intimate public as described by Berlant, its coherence lies in *Cherry's* presence on the air and his ability to shout things that people (not-so-secretly) desire. That is, what

maintains the existence of Cherry's intimate public is the fact that the CBC continues to run Coach's corner with Cherry as its star (and Ron McLean as the man who must stand silent witness as punishment for, I assume, a deal with the devil). Without the public support of Cherry's fandom, as expressed through his continued presence on the CBC, there would be no "node" and the members of the intimate public would have to find new attachments – which is not to say that it would be difficult for them to do so (there's no shortage of people willing to mourn the loss of 'real' hockey, using coded racist, sexist, and homophobic language). On the other hand, the intimate publics of hockey that exist online have no single node through which they are formed – we form our intimate publics through our relations to each other, and because we share (cruel) attachments of feeling to the sport. Cherry and his intimate public fits much more easily into the public of hockey fandom than I do, even if his views are quickly becoming outdated, because he is still a straight (if a potential "camp icon" [Rak 112]) white man with a professional hockey lineage – if his feelings are a bit extreme, they are extreme versions of the feelings that are already allowed in hockey. In contrast, my performance of desire for the sport is so different as to be antithetical to Cherry's, and my feelings for hockey are wrong in hockey's public spaces.

Even fannish actions that do not quite align with the expectations of the traditional hockey fan, such as writing fanfiction, can still fit within the public of hockey, provided they are oriented correctly. That is, fans who write heterosexual RPF maintain hockey's heterosexual norms, where women desire hockey men for the right reasons. On the surface, they might look like they belong in the same fandom as RPF slash-fans, because their actions

look the same: writing romantic and sexual transformative fanfiction starring NHL athletes. However, the orientation to NHL athletes in heterosexual RPF casts them as “chiselled doppelgangers of Marvel Superheroes and Disney Princes” (Borelli) rather than the queer, weird, sexual creatures (both literally and metaphorically) of RPF slash. That this fandom is the star of a positive – if slightly gawking – article in the Chicago Tribune shows that it is at least partially welcome in the public of hockey. When describing the women on Wattpad who write fantasies of falling in love with Chicago Blackhawks captain Jonathan Toews, Borelli might complain about the “maturity that’s lacking in many Blackhawks stories,” but he also recognizes that fic writers craft relationships that are “thoughtful, even profound” (Borelli). The occasional jab at the naivete and immaturity of Blackhawks fanfiction writers makes it clear that this is not an *ideal* mode of hockey fandom, but Borelli doesn’t demonise the women he writes about: he acknowledges their fandom as odd, but still within the sphere of hockey fandom. However, there is no mention in this article of the many, many more Hockey RPF slash-fans on AO3, who do not write about Canadian Prince Charming Jonathan Toews sweeping them off their feet, but write instead about the hot sex Toews has with linemate Patrick Kane in their hotel room between games (and sometimes about how actual Canadian Prince Jonathan meets and falls in love with American Royalty Patrick). Although both heterosexual RPF and RPF slash writers transform the ‘canon’ of real people, creating fiction/fantasies that involve romance and sex, the *why* and *to what end* of that transformation differs.

Although gatekeepers would like to believe that there are only two options: stay and conform or “leave....please,” there are other options. Fans who wish to create a different public than the one they currently experience may form a counterpublic: an explicitly political space in which they challenge and subvert the norms of the original space. In hockey, there are two counterpublics that challenge, respectively, the masculinity and whiteness of hockey's public fandom, and are pushed out of the spaces of public fandom as a result. The first is professional women's hockey, which is not quite part of hockey culture. Despite women's hockey games consistently achieving high viewerships during the Olympics, women's professional leagues struggle to make enough money to pay their athletes at a similar level as the men's league. As a result, counterpublics like #ForTheGame develop to create space for women's hockey within hockey culture. Currently, women's hockey does not get equal airtime or compensation in comparison to men's hockey. For example, Sportsnet, a private television network, regularly airs, among others, the entirety of the U-18 (Men's) World Junior Hockey tournaments each year and multiple Canadian University Sports (U Sports), but aired only 4 out of the 84 CWHL games in the 2018-2019 season (Whelan). Although the PHF has a six-year agreement with ESPN+ to stream regular season games for American viewers, none of those games are aired on television (Krotz). Even in the so-called nation of Hockey, women's games do not get national airtime, such as on “Hockey Night in Canada” despite being, frequently, hockey in Canada played at night (Szto, quoted in Tremonti). In the rare moments when women's hockey *is* on a national network, such as when national teams play in the Olympics, the athletes are still not treated

as such. Instead, they are “described in terms of their physical desirability to men ... or in their domestic roles as wives and mothers” (Messner, “Sports and Male Domination” 205). Even when we pay attention to women’s hockey, we must find ways to make it feel more like men’s hockey. There must be a public reaction – constraining – of women’s participation in men’s sport, because their presence is “an active threat to popular assumptions about sport and its unifying principle” and women’s success in a masculine athletic endeavour is a contradiction that calls into question (without entirely rejecting) male hegemony (Hargreaves, quoted in Messner, “Sports and Male Domination” 204).

If Canada’s game truly was hockey, and not actually *men’s* hockey, women’s hockey would not struggle to be profitable, and it would not have to beg mainstream sports networks to air its games. In response to this disparity, then, athletes from the American and Canadian national teams started the hashtag #ForTheGame, a campaign intended to advocate for equity between the national men’s and women’s teams, in addition to fair compensation from their own leagues. This hashtag, and the women’s hockey fandom, functions more like a *counterpublic* than a public. We might hope that a desire to devote themselves fully to hockey would be welcomed by hockey culture, which encourages boys as young as 10 to spend every moment of their lives in training, but these are women, and so they must work very hard to convince the world that they are not selfish. How do you feel joy in recognizing the Good Canadian Boy when they’re *girls*? You have to learn a new sense of hockey, a new genre of hockey fandom, to love women’s hockey, because it is, as far as the feeling of it goes, a different game. It expects and requires different genres of attachment, and only time



will tell if the women of the PWHPA are powerful enough to reshape our sense of hockey enough that it allows those different feelings. Their hashtag, “#ForTheGame,” is a reminder that they do this not for themselves, but for hockey – and hockey culture.

The other counterpublic that works to reshape hockey culture are the Black hockey fans who explicitly call out the anti-black racism of the NHL and hockey culture more generally. One very successful example of this counterpublic is the #BlackGirlHockeyClub (BGHC), run by Renée Hess. Hess, a long-time hockey fan, sought a way to connect with and celebrate other Black girl hockey fans, and started the hashtag on Twitter, which eventually led to a website and a formal collaboration with the NHL. In addition to explicitly fighting Anti-Black racism in hockey, Hess and the BGHC model a different kind of hockey fandom that allows fans to cheer for individual players over entire teams. For example, BGHC’s blog series, “Our Stars of the Game” highlight the not just the career of a Black athlete, but also their advocacy and politics. In hockey’s public fandom, this kind of fandom is inappropriate, where athletes are meant to be replaceable figures in the overall team, and definitely aren’t meant to express their own politics. BGHC, however, explicitly invites fandom that celebrates anti-racist politics, particularly in their “#GetUncomfortable” campaign, which encourages both fans and athletes to “disrupt racism on and off the ice and make hockey welcoming for EVERYONE” (BGHC, “Get Uncomfortable”, capitals in original). The all-caps of “everyone” here is a fairly explicit call out of the NHL’s lukewarm “Hockey Is For Everyone” campaign, which only started engaging in anti-racist events after BGHC’s founding. That is to say that BGHC is a successful counterpublic, changing the face

of public fandom and directly influencing the authorities of hockey fandom through the NHL. Engaging in a counterpublic that pushes back against central ideologies, like whiteness and masculinity, is hard, exhausting work, even as that work shifts how the NHL defines itself.

### **2.3 Hockey's Intimate Publics**

Although official NHL communications have started to lean into anti-racist and pro-LGBTQ allyship, the inclusion of queer folks and people of colour in the public of hockey fandom is still contested, often violently. As a result, intimate publics of fandom, or intimate fandoms, are an alternative to the most obvious choices: leave, stay and accept the culture as it is, or stay and fight back (and suffer the gatekeeping and harassment). Based on Morrison's "intimate publics online," I theorise intimate fandoms as spaces where fans can push back against the expected genres and orientations of their fandom without needing to always be visible as an agent of political critique and counterculture. In these spaces, fans may or may not gather based on the fannish object, instead prioritising the *orientation* to the objects and genres of fandom that support their desires. For example, I entered Hockey RPF not through hockey fandom, but through queer slash fandoms when a trusted fellow fan (Hi, Emily!) recommended a Tyler Seguin/Jamie Benn fic. Knowing that the fic was as much about queerness and coming out as it was about hot guys kissing was more important to me than caring about hockey – I didn't even look up the athletes until I'd read several more Bennguin fic. That is, the object of fandom is not always the thing that gathers intimate fans together; instead, it is their queerness in some public space that joins them. When they feel "all

wrong” in the dominant publics, they can find other fans whose shared experiences become ‘all right’ in their intimate spaces (Berlant, *Female Complaint* 3).

Intimate publics of fandom are distinct from Berlant’s intimate publics and function instead like Morrison’s intimate publics *online*. Although Lauren Berlant’s intimate publics have been theorised “as a harmful neoliberal trading on the personal that distracts citizens from substantive issues of public politics...fully complicit with neoliberal affective regimes” (York, *Reluctant Celebrity* 11), those intimate publics are constructed by corporate or political publications. Morrison’s intimate publics online, however, are built through the sharing of experiences by the people who make up those intimate publics: they may still distract citizens, but they do so in service of those citizens’ deeply held need to be distracted from a public that is harmful. In Morrison’s intimate publics online, participants have feelings they “can’t express otherwise in today’s society” (“Suffused By Feeling”, 41) and thus turn to other people who share that orientation in a space that “enables and supports intimate friendships among bloggers” (44). This “little community” is a space in which their feelings (and their expression of those feelings) are not just tolerated but expected and reciprocated. Although Hockey RPF slash-fans do not necessarily have the same feeling as Morrison’s mommybloggers, they do share in common the recognition that they “can’t express” the feelings they have in their relevant publics (in this case hockey *or* slash). Instead of writing about the intimate details of “pumping during a business trip” (“Suffused By Feeling” 44), intimate fandoms of hockey write about specific slash pairings with heightened romantic and sexual language that elicit statements of identification from fellow slash-fans in

the form of reblogs, retweets, keyboard smashes, fanart, and other expressions of similar feels. Although the intimacies revealed and shared are not necessarily personal details about the hockey fans' daily lives, they are still intimate details about sexual and romantic desires, as well as personal experiences of being queer in this world.

In the public of slash fandom, its intimate publics are most visible through fic exchanges, which allow fans to express their own desires in a shared community. That is, they craft a community around a shared orientation to canon (and even the pairing) and with shared genres of slash. Participants submit prompts or requests for certain stories and pairings, and give a broad description of the kinds of prompts they're able or willing to fulfil. Then, the organisers match prompts to other authors, who are then given their assignments and time to craft a fic in response. Authors who finish their assigned fic then submit them to a collection (often on AO3) revealing their work to their prompter. On AO3, these are literally categorised as "gifts" in the system, so users can also see not just what collections an author has participated in, but which of their fic are gifts. For example, a giftee might submit a prompt for a Sid/Geno Merfolk AU in which the pair experiences sex underwater for the first time. Then, the organiser will assign the prompt to a gifter who has listed their comfort with Sid/Geno, AUs, Mature or Explicit prompts, and has not listed any of the prompt elements as a "Do Not Want" or DNW. The author then responds to the request with their gift of a fic, usually linking the giftee's account and acknowledging their role as a muse. In larger fandoms, these exchanges can have dozens of participants (and sometimes can organise "Big Bangs," where fic writers are paired with fanartists to create illustrations for

their work), smaller fandoms like Hockey RPF have a median participation of around 17 and an average of 28. Although these prompts don't share personal details about the participants' lives, as you might find in an intimate public of mommybloggers, they do still share intimate details. Giftees will request specific "kinks" (a term which generally means, in fandom, 'sexual or romantic tropes you like to see in fanworks'), and anonymous fic exchanges – also called "kink memes" (FanLore "Kink Meme") – can lower the social cost of sharing this information even more than a matched fic exchange. It is telling of the level of intimacy involved that the sharing and collecting of slash fic that assuages a particular need – whether that's sexual or not – falls under the term "kink." You share your kinks with someone you trust to respect *and reciprocate* them, after all.

As a result of these shared intimacies, intimate fandoms are necessarily small, relational/reciprocal, and protective, because anything else is vulnerable to outsider violence. They are small, because once an intimate fandom reaches a certain size, it risks fracturing, as its members fail to find reciprocal feeling with all members. This 'certain size' is, of course, dependent on the community, and "small" can mean two to three people or more than a dozen, depending on what it is that brings these people together. The ability of its members to relate to each other is what determines the size: members of intimate publics online must be able to write to and for each other: first, they must be able to respond, in some way, to each other's work (e.g. through added commentary on a reblogged post, or a comment on a fic), and second (and more importantly) they must be able to *relate* to each other in these responses. That is, it is the act of seeing oneself in another's work, and expressing those

shared desires in the reciprocal writing that makes it an intimate public online. Because these small communities are closely knit, they share intimacies that might not otherwise be shared online – mommybloggers share personal experiences of motherhood that might get them shamed in other spaces; hockey RPF slash-fans share kinks, sexual and romantic desires, and expressions of fandom that might get them shamed in both hockey and slash-fandoms.

Public fandom that seeks to shame fans into expressing the correct desires uses tactics like writing articles about how strange we are (e.g. Borelli), outright mocking us, or even flooding our fandoms online with triggering images (KnowYourMeme, “2014 Tumblr-4chan-Raids”). As a result, these intimate fandoms are also protective: they close ranks against an intruder who does not share their expressions of desire and may even password-lock their blogs or fic. For example, over 50% of Hockey RPF slash-fic on AO3 is locked, meaning that only users with an AO3 account can find and read them – this is in contrast to other fandoms on AO3, in which the majority of fic are available publicly. That intimate fandoms are protective is what makes it possible to express those shared desires, but it’s important to note that intimate fandoms aren’t inherently *progressive*. That is, intimate fandoms can close rank against an intruder who critiques their fixation on white celebrities, to the racist exclusion of Black celebrities, for instance (cf. Stitch’s “Who Gets to Escape Into Fandom”). Although the small, relational, protective intimate fandom can indeed be a haven from a harmful public fandom, those very drives can also create the need for a haven from that intimate fandom itself. As a result, there is no such thing as *the* intimate fandom,

say, of Hockey RPF slash, but instead a varied collection of intimate fandoms that may overlap in some spaces.

In the public of hockey fandom, then, because there are many ways your desires might mark you as “all wrong” there are many desires, expressions, or orientations that create the need for an intimate fandom. As a result, there are as many intimate fandoms of hockey: my intimate fandom of hockey is the one in which I feel expected, where I fit. My intimate fandom of hockey includes Hockey RPF slash, for both men’s and women’s hockey (but primarily men’s) and focuses on those athletes and teams that give me a bit of room to “squint, to strain [my] vision ... beyond the limited vista of here and now” (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 22) that is the traditional, hypermasculine public hockey fandom. I don’t come into Hockey RPF hoping to prove that queerness is really *in* hockey, or because I believe that my interpretation of Sidney Crosby, say, as queer is true or logical or even canon but because hockey gives me queer feelings that aren’t expected or expressed in public hockey fandom. I know that what I feel is not expected, not normal, but I do still feel it. When two hockey players kiss on the ice, or give each other a flirtatious look, it brings me joy to feel a queer affinity in those moments.

When I express those feelings, though, I know I’m speaking in the wrong genre, because I am (sometimes gently, as though I’m a child being taught how the world really works) reminded of the “here and now” of hockey that straightens away any queerness in the moment. So, I have chosen a turn towards Hockey RPF as a way to top up my queer feelings. By reading Hockey RPF, by sharing images and gifs with queer-minded fans, by writing

stories where Sidney is, like me, a little too queer for the world he inhabits. I *have* to top up those queer feelings, because the here and now of hockey includes a professional league that continues to employ and celebrate abusers and accused rapists, where the only out professional hockey player “in” the NHL isn’t actually *in* the NHL. Because the public spaces of hockey are shaped for needs that are not mine, I have to work hard to be a part of them, and even harder if I want to work against them. Sometimes, then, I need a break from fighting for hockey’s queer, feminist, anti-racist counter-publics. In my intimate fandoms of hockey, I don’t have to work as hard to be understood, and I don’t always have to be on guard from people eager to tell me how stupid, how naive I am.

Unlike Morrison’s mommybloggers, who use coded language so that pedophiles don’t find their blogs, Hockey RPF fans don’t have to worry about accidentally becoming someone’s child pornography. However, we do still protect ourselves from the shaming gaze of public fans, of hockey or of slash. When I used Tumblr in my intimate fandom, I used tags like “Emmy Winner Sidney Crosby” and “sidgeno” rather than tagging posts with “Sidney Crosby” and “Evgeni Malkin,” because I wanted it to be more difficult to stumble upon my blog if they were just interested in pictures of Crosby and Malkin being good at hockey. I also used language that limited the reach of my posts even to other Hockey RPF slash-fans. I didn’t want people to find my blog unless they were looking for slash involving Sid and Geno, because there were Hockey RPF fans whose comfort was threatened by the way I desired hockey. For instance, the friend who introduced me to Hockey RPF would find my blog genuinely unpleasant to follow, considering they’re a Flyers fan and hate Sidney



Crosby. I don't send them screenshots of Crosby smiling, like I do for my fellow Penguins slash-fans, because doing so would be to write outside of the rhetorical genre of Hockey fandom that I speak in with this friend. Granted, a mistake in genre with this friend is relatively low stakes: they will forgive my Crosby fangirliness because they love *me*. Still, it's polite for me to avoid using Crosby in our communication, and polite for *them* to avoid mocking him to my face. We've agreed, however unspoken that agreement was, to talk hockey in ways that don't involve any (non-animal) penguins.

However, there are problems with higher stakes than a friend who isn't a fan of your fav: the Patrick Kane problem has real impact in the intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF slash. Before Kane was accused of assault in 2015, he was a very popular character in Hockey RPF slash as a member of the most popular pairing at the time: Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane from the Chicago Blackhawks. After his assault, many people stopped writing Toews/Kane fic, and many also left the fandom entirely (Popova, "When the RP gets in the way of the F") However, public hockey fans were "widely sympathetic towards Kane" (Glenza) and within the intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF slash, people continued to write Kane/Toews and the boundaries between those who continue to deploy Kane as an attractive character in slash and those who do not is carefully maintained. My sense of Kane – the sense of Kane that is common in my intimate fandoms – is that he is a rapist who should not be playing in the NHL, but I also know there are people who disagree, vehemently, in other Hockey RPF slash fandoms. For them, he has never been arrested or found guilty, as the women who accused him eventually dropped their charges and disappeared from his official NHL story, where he

continues to be a face of the NHL. So, in order to protect myself from his angry fans (and, to a lesser extent, to protect his fans from *my* anger), I didn't use his name on my blog. I used "PK\*ne" or "K\*ne" to avoid showing up in casual searches for his name. This tactic is not perfect, as it's a pretty common strategy – so a motivated searcher could still find me – but blocking out his name signals that I don't really consider him – or his fans – part of my intimate fandom. Using coded language then, keeps me isolated from people who aren't already in my intimate fandom, signals to people what belongs and doesn't belong in my intimate fandom, and lets other fans see at a glance what kinds of relationships I have to hockey.

In other words, using specific language, whether that's a cute phrase like "Emmy Winner Sidney Crosby" or blocking out a name like "K\*ne", is how fans maintain the boundaries around our intimate publics – and it is through these boundaries that we express our orientations to canon. By understanding the "collective understanding of a social situation's boundaries" as expressed through our language choices, we can understand what a fandom prioritises (boyd, "Privacy and Publicity"). Even though people who are committed to seeking out those posts will eventually discover and learn the code, the existence of the code is proof that we're trying to minimise contact (boyd). Not only does the boundary between "Kane" and "K\*ne" tell us about a rift in Hockey RPF's intimate fandoms, but the lack of a boundary to another "Kane" also tells us that Hockey RPF's intimate fandoms prioritise whiteness. The other Kane in the NHL, Evander Kane, has also been accused of violent assault, and also not been criminally charged with any wrongdoing. This Kane,

however, does not have the same support in the NHL (he's frequently suspended for violations like submitting a fake Covid-19 vaccine card (@PR\_NHL, October 18 2021), or in-game acts of violence) and also does not appear in Hockey RPF slash fandoms. Where Patrick Kane has long since reigned as *the* American NHLer, with his mullet and heartbreaker celly, Evander Kane is known as a "rebellious malcontent" who needs to change his ways (Muir). Evander Kane is also Black. Accusing Patrick Kane of sexual assault challenges both the public and intimate fandom's feelings about him: how can he be a face of the NHL or a sexy romance lead if he's a rapist? He can't: so instead of choosing someone else to be a face of the NHL or finding a different pairing than Toews/Kane to write about, fans decide he isn't a rapist. There is no similar challenge to common sense about Black hockey players, however, when Evander Kane, who "refuses to conform" and is "not an easy guy to like" is embroiled in yet another scandal (Friedman, "Why 'fiercely independent' Kane must change ways"). The expectation is, in public hockey fandom, that a Black hockey player will be too "independent" and attract too much of the wrong kind of attention: Evander Kane doesn't challenge this expectation. The expectation in intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF is that Black hockey players just aren't interesting enough or attractive enough to be members of popular pairings: Evander Kane, accused of multiple assaults and domestic violence, doesn't challenge this expectation. Few hockey fans, public or intimate, would come out and say those things explicitly, but where there are always fans, public or intimate, ready to defend the white Patrick Kane, to explain away his reputation as a violent man, there are no such legions of fans to defend Evander Kane. There is no need, then, to write

“Ev\*nder K\*ne” because no one is really searching for “Evander Kane,” because hockey fans already don’t see him as part of their fandom. This lack of boundary between “Evander Kane” and “Ev\*nder K\*ne” tells us there was no discomfort to manage, no conflict between the intimate fandom’s perception of Evander Kane and his canon.

The boundaries that exist within intimate fandoms, then, are traces of a past or ongoing conflict. In fact, the possibility of painful contact is always there, because it’s in that contact that the borders of our fandoms are defined. Those are the moments when we start to describe ourselves as an “us” and others as “them.” Fannish spaces like Tumblr and Twitter, where different groups from different contexts meet and interact are “contact zones” (Hitchcock-Morimoto and Chin). Just as there is no one “hockey fandom,” there is no one “intimate hockey fandom.” Faced with Dart Guy, I find the language to describe my “us” against his “them.” Encountering fans of Patrick Kane, I find a finer distinction. Fans of Hockey RPF who are fans of this Kane might look a lot like me, from the outside – unlike Dart Guy, who is hard to mistake for me and my fellow slash-fans. Kane’s fans, however, display she/her or they/them pronouns on Tumblr. They’re slash-fans who talk about homosexuality in the NHL. They would be as unwelcome in the spaces of hockey’s public fandom as I am, because they look more like slash-fans than hockey fans. We might use them as the general figure of the Hockey RPF slash-fan, then. But in the moment of contact between my intimate fandom and theirs, the similarities we share are overshadowed by the important difference of our feelings about Patrick Kane. When I call Kane a rapist, and when I talk about the problems I have with reading porn starring Kane that focuses on his “oral

fixation” (in response to the allegations that he bit one of his victims), I am very much not a part of their *us* (Popova, “When the RP gets in the way of the F”). Kane is one of the many objects that you encounter in Hockey RPF slash that, depending on your orientation, your attachment, you will find yourself shifting in response to. In encountering the boundary of “Kane/K\*ne,” you will have to name your orientation to Patrick Kane and find yourself in a slightly different fandom than the one you were in before. Your orientation to the object and to the other fans who have some kind of attachment (of desire, of hatred) to that object is different now, even if that difference is not immediately apparent to an outsider. We can’t, then, use *either* fan as the representative of Hockey RPF slash: neither the fan who uses *Kane* nor the fan who uses *K\*ne* can stand in for all Hockey RPF slash-fans.

## 2.4 Studying Intimate Fandoms

If fan scholars want to describe Hockey RPF slash-fans, then, we need to understand more than the literary genres of slash that they write, we also need to understand the rhetorical genres their intimate fandoms communicate in. The general literary genre of “transformative fanwork” for instance, is not a wrong or useless genre: the categorical and demographic descriptions are generally accurate. However, they are *generally* accurate. When we’ve asked, “Why do (white) women write transformative fanworks like slash?”, for instance (Coppa; Jones; Lamb and Veith; Penley;’ Russ; Salmon and Symons; Zubernis and Larsen; etc.) we’ve relied on assumptions about primary categorizations of “women” and “transformative” and “slash.” The benefit of using those categories is that we can compare them to others in a set, or if necessary, exclude them from a set (Giltrow and Stein 5). The

framework of literary genres tells us that slash empowers women to express their romantic (Russ) and sexual (Bacon-Smith) desires in a world that not only denies them that joy, but also traumatises (Zubernis and Larsen) and disempowers them (Jenkins; Penley). However, the genre of fandom that these interpretations use also assumes that slash is by and for straight white women (Coppa; Salmon and Symons). This framework requires that we describe fans and fanworks as though they fit neatly into these ideal categories, rather than describing the messy ways fans exist and interact within the publics that inform their daily lives (Stanfill, “Unbearable Whiteness” 307). Even when we frame fandoms as publics, called into being by a text or in opposition to another public, which we do in order to distance fans from the passive-seeming term ‘audience’ (Jenkins et al, *Spreadable Media* 166), we tend to flatten those publics unintentionally, in order to close the set. That is, in order to make the set make sense *as a set*, we tend to generalise and flatten differences to make them fit.

In that case, the difference between heterosexual Hockey RPF fans and Hockey RPF slash-fans is not important to someone for whom the category of “transformative fanfiction” is paramount. However, where heterosexual Hockey RPF shores up the struts of hockey masculinity, the very idea of slash threatens it. So, although both groups are displaced from the centre of hockey fandom by men who suspect and are offended by their desires, there are certainly women who write heterosexual Hockey RPF who would be equally offended by the idea of a gay Jonathan Toews. There are also slash-fans who would mock the Mary Sue, self-insert nature of heterosexual Hockey RPF, which usually includes an original female main

character modelled after the author for the athlete to fall for. There are also other slash-fans for whom the very nature of RPF makes both heterosexual Hockey RPF and Hockey RPF slash incompatible with their norms of transformative fandom, which is why many fic archives before Archive of Our Own purged or outright banned RPF from their site (FanLore “Fanfiction.Net’s NC-17 Purges”; Coppa, “An Archive of Our Own” 305). There will always be stories on the fuzzy edges of the genre (cf. Mendlesohn) and a reader of literary genres can choose to exclude those edges from the centre. That is, although I might look to an outsider like a slash-fan, there are slash-fans for whom my fandom is disturbing, so it is easier to pretend I don’t really exist. I might also look to an outsider like a hockey fan who makes transformative works, but I feel very little affinity for heterosexual Hockey RPF, and I am absent from the public stories that celebrate such fic. Those differences are meaningful, even though they are hard to see from the outside.

What we need, then, is an understanding of what the fandom (or its output) does for the people who participate in it: a rhetorical understanding of the genres of fandom. Where literary genres are universalizable but not holistic, conclusions drawn from a rhetorical genre study are not universal (they cannot be generalised to the entire fandom), but they are holistic (they let us see what is actually happening in an intimate fandom). The information gathered may not be able to tell us what’s actually happening in a different intimate fandom, but it will still provide useful boundaries where we can say *like this but not like that*. When we understand that “community is the source of genre,” we can learn how “people absorb and reconstitute the types [of speech] from their experience of doing things together” (Giltrow

and Stein 7). The community determines for itself when something is “fitting or indicative of the situation (or not),” which means that what is appropriate in one community may be profane in the other (5). What is thus liberating for straight white women may be oppressive for women of colour and/or queer people. What feels good to white queer folks may be uncomfortable for white straight folks, or queer folks of colour. That is, if we open our closed sets of literary genres to the bottom-up rhetorical genres, we can understand that slash written by/for straight white women is a specific rhetorical genre of slash that does not have to stand in for all of slash, just as a workplace incident report, for example, exists within the closed literary genre of “narrative” but does not otherwise share much in common with a novella (4). Fan scholars are starting to look at the discourse community of fans who collaboratively develop rhetorical genres when they describe slash written by and for queer fans and/or fans of color, so we are well positioned to make this shift in fan studies more generally (Hansal; Hitchcock-Morimoto and Chin; Fazekas, Pande and Moitra; Popova; Spacey; Wanzo; etc.).

Rhetorical genre prioritises the very thing that makes fandom *fandom*: it’s a bunch of people doing it and making it up together. It’s not just the text, or the object, or even the things we make with it that makes a fandom, but the “discursively enacted relation *between* someones” (Grafton 93; italics in original). If we stop thinking of the genre of slash and start considering the rhetorical genres that are expressed through utterances of slash, we can note the ways that slash-like things are used to express internalised misogyny in some instances and feminist arguments in others, without creating an ouroboros of exceptions. What makes



fandom are the connections between the people who do it, as well as the explicit *disconnections* between the people who do it differently. We might all do fandom in our own idiosyncratic way, but that way is constantly informed and informing the people in our proximity, so the spaces in which we do our fandom are as important as the things we say and the people we say it to. In fact, the spaces of fandom *are* the people and their attachments. Since fandom is the people and the space, fandom is thus different in different contexts, even if the object of fandom is the same. We can still generalise, still define the literary genre of slash, but we can also recognize that the same genre of slash will feel different, depending on which space of fandom it's used in, depending on the "pressing and non-unique need" that drives a fandom to coalesce (Morrison, "Autobiography in Real Time" par. 10). The meanings and feelings of slash will differ, depending on the context. When asking what needs are met by a fannish utterance, we can still describe their skills, the marginality of the demographic, their orientation to the media object, and so on, all without requiring either form, content, or identity of the fan to define the entire fandom. And rather than universalizing genres, we will find ourselves with particular and distinct groups with their own unique language, norms and practices.

Intimate fans are thus those fans whose relation to the object of fandom does not serve the public comfort, and who have decided to congregate where their desires for the object are "all right" rather than "all wrong." For intimate hockey fans, that space includes Tumblr and Twitter and the AO3 "Men's Hockey RPF" tag. These disparate spaces make it hard to determine when someone is 'in' the fandom or not, because there's not always a

virtual gate (like a Discord server) or a physical one (like a convention badge). And even if there is a virtual or physical gate, that space is not the only one in which fandom happens. In the end, “you are part of the fandom when you think you are” (Hillman et al 287) *and* when others acknowledge that you are part of “us” and not “them.” To be part of an *intimate* fandom is to be welcomed into a group where you belong, when people share your feels, when they encounter your feelings and recognize and respond to them in language that makes sense to you, that resonates with your own desires. On Tumblr, this might look like someone reblogging your post, an act that tells you that they recognized something in that post too – that they want to use that post, too, to express some aspect of their fandom. That is, it is in the construction of a rhetorical genre, when “people take up a text, however fleetingly, however distracted” that fans become “members of [the] public” (Grafton 93). When I encounter someone else’s feelings and name them as my own, I let that person know that I share their attachment. In my intimate hockey fandom, this means letting people know that my relation to the object of hockey is as twisty and queer as theirs and that we are not alone.

### Chapter 3 Schrodinger's Queer and The R and F in RPF

Sidney Crosby definitely has secret gay parties in his Cole Harbour hideaway. Tyler Seguin does homophobic things because he's desperately afraid that we all know he's bisexual and he weaponizes homophobia to keep himself safe. Does saying these statements out loud make you uncomfortable? Remember: the "RP" in RPF stands for a real person with their own desires, which changes the stakes of calling them gay. To call an NHLer like Crosby or Seguin gay or bisexual when the context they live and work in is not safe for queer men is dangerous. In either situation, claiming the power to interpret the sexuality of a real person is unethical – and when the sexuality being interpreted is *queer*, it's not just unethical: it's entirely out of line with the structures of heteropatriarchy that ensure comfort for those who fit into it. When the comfort of heteronormative publics is threatened, straightening and other punitive actions are soon to follow, which is why fans of Hockey RPF retreat to intimate publics to express our desires. But unethical actions done privately are still unethical, so either RPF is bad or something else is going on.

Celebrities, although they are played by real people, are not *quite* as real as the people in your life. There are people for whom celebrities *are* real people – their parents, their loved ones, their friends, and colleagues, for whom they are not celebrities – but for most of us, celebrities are not real. And although celebrity athletes are, as I argue in Chapter 1, more 'real' than famous actors, the way the average fan *knows* them as a real person is still highly mediated and distant. That is, when an athlete is famous, they do still become characters, figures who stand in for feelings of nationalism, often a consumer good sold to us by (and

reselling us) Gatorade. Those feelings (and bottles of Gatorade) are real, but the person is *not quite*. Fans of Hockey RPF play with those characterisations of these celebrity NHLers as if they were fictional, with the awareness that the celebrity character exists in the same world we do. Unlike fictional characters, whose actual, canonical lives are available to us through the primary text and any relevant paratexts, our access to the ‘canon’ of the Real Person of RPF will always be limited by what they choose to perform publicly. That is, although Sidney Crosby is an actual person, I will never know him: I will only ever have access to the public persona of Sidney Crosby. In RPF, then, what we do is disidentify with the *character* of the athlete as they are constructed through public hockey fandom to construct a new character that more easily fits into our intimate fandom (cf. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*). Not entirely fictional, but not entirely real, either, characters in Hockey RPF are expressions of fans’ (real) queer desire and queer feelings for (real) hockey players, both of which are deemed nonsense (not-real) by hockey’s publics.

### **3.1 All canon is fanon in RPF**

The common sense of a hockey player is their star image filtered through hockey culture: it is the amorphous collection of information gleaned from interviews, on-ice performances and game-day interviews, behind-the-scenes tidbits, tabloid headlines, autobiographies, documentaries, and so on (Dyer). Just as the star image of a pop star must adhere to popular culture’s ideals of femininity and performance, the hockey player’s star image should uphold the ideals of hockey culture, which includes hockey’s specific version of heterosexual masculinity (a slightly more intense version of Messner’s “Televised Sports

Manhood Formula”). Although athletes are distinct from celebrity actors who perform fictional roles (since we think of athletic performances as ‘real’), athletes – specifically *star* athletes – are more to us than the actions they take on the ice/pitch/field/mat/etc. They do use their bodies in unscripted performances with real-world consequences (victories and losses, but also injuries), but sport-as-entertainment is “structured, marketed, mediated, and experienced as contests between identifiable individuals (or groups of individuals) with whom the audience is expected to possess (or develop) some kind of affective attachment” (Andrews and Jackson 7). In other words, televised sport like NHL hockey is “media-driven celebrity entertainment” that has athletes instead of fictional characters as its main players (Pierce, qtd in Andrews and Jackson 7). The fact of the real bodies in sport (that risk real injury, real triumph, real loss), however, changes the relationship to, well, *reality* and *truth* in sport fandom.

Where fans of fictional characters have a relatively simple canon with which to relate, fans of athletes have a much more complicated relationship. The term ‘canon’ for fans is distinct from the literary term ‘canon’ and it can be better understood as “pop culture canon,” the “body of work that establishes its own internal storylines” as it is published and “deemed to be ‘official’ by either the creator or publisher” (Chaney and Liebler 3). While canon is most frequently used in fandoms of fictional objects (for example, the set of world-building and narrative truths within the *Star Wars* canon), even fans of actors and musicians have the various canons of their performances, the “fictive identities within their primary performative realms” they “routinely adopt” in addition to their star images (Andrews 69). Because fans of

athletes have no “story as told by the original author” (not even an original fictional narrative, as in a movie or a music video) it is tempting to assume that *reality* and *canon* are one and the same (Jamison, cited in Kahane 3.1). In the realm of sport, “there is a perception that spectators and viewers are confronted with *real* individuals,” because their unscripted performances create real-world consequences, such as victories and losses for their teams or nations (Andrews 69).

However, sports celebrities negotiate with and perform star images too, although their narratives are frequently couched in terms of actual achievements, “heroic or cowardly, triumphant or failing” (Andrews 69). As such, fans of Hockey RPF have a different relationship to canon than fans of fictional characters – and even fans of actors – because “official or sanctioned ‘reality’” feels like *actual* reality (Arrow 328). Athletes feel more real than actors (for instance), even though fans of athletes only have access to “the tiny portion of manufactured ‘reality’” that the athlete’s star image presents (Arrow 328), which is itself heavily mediated by the “sporting-media-industrial complex” of league corporations, sports media, and national propaganda (Andrews 67). The power of the “sporting-media-industrial complex” to construct and direct those narratives along normative storylines means that we might call that conglomeration of ideologies canon. The narratives constructed by the sporting-media-industrial complex delimits what counts as official reality, much in the same way that, say, *Star Wars* has an official canon. However, there is no real Jedi called Luke Skywalker, but there is a real NHLer Sidney Crosby, so the relationship that a fan has to a

canon of an athlete is necessarily different than the one they have to a canon of a fictional character.

The ‘source material’ of a hockey player is much more complex than that of a fictional character. In Hockey RPF, that source material is the public fandom of hockey, rather than any single text, and the canon is the interpretation of the athlete-character most commonly accepted as true, based on evidence that public hockey fandom deems appropriate and sensible. This evidence, to be *evident* in public hockey fandom, must lead to conclusions that are not too big a shock to hockey culture’s ideologies of heterosexuality, orthodox masculinity, and nostalgic Canadian nationalism. That it is a “random jumble of marketing ploys and happenstance, crafted constructs and slips of actual personality about which fandom at large comes to a consensus” does not change the fact that it is accepted as reality (Arrow 328). Evidence, after all, is not itself objective reality, but rather “what is perceptible, clear, obvious or apparent,” and just because something is perceptible or apparent to one person does not mean that it is perceptible to others (Ahmed “Evidence”). The canon of an athlete, then, is whatever is the common knowledge of the publics who consider them stars, or the *common sense* of the public. What is common knowledge and common sense, though, is not necessarily what is true. If the common sense of a celebrity were always true, celebrities would not need to come out, to set the record (not-so)straight. The common sense a public has of a celebrity – the public canon of a celebrity – is simply a widely accepted fanon.

Fanon is the neologism that fans developed to describe the things that are “derived from canon,” but not beholden to it (Kahane 6.6), or “the ideas and concepts that fan communities have collectively decided are part of an accepted storyline or character interpretation” (Chaney and Liebler 1). Where the edges of canon are fuzzy, fanon develops: a group of fans determine that something is true enough for their purposes, and it becomes a kind of canon to that particular group of fans. We might trace the edges of intimate fandoms along fanon lines, in some cases, as people agree and disagree on the interpretation of a canon event, “reflecting fans’ own wants and needs” (5). When John Watson tells Irene Adler that he is “not gay,” in the BBC adaptation *Sherlock*, that statement is canon. Whether that means he is *not queer*, however, is a matter of fanon. In some intimate fandoms, then, the fact of John’s queerness is authorized not by the author but by the fans themselves who agree on the interpretation of that phrase. Fandoms of fictional texts can choose how much they cleave to canon, letting go of those parts that no longer fit and coming up with new ones that do, and they will often signal this by noting their place on the “sliding scale” of canon compliance (Fanlore “Canon Compliant”). For RPF fans, however, there is no canon to be compliant with: fanon is *all* we have. The most authoritative text we have is the fanon that is accepted as fact, the fanon we call canon: the media narrative associated with and performed by the athlete, or the *ideal* of this character, as developed in the public fandom. Sidney Crosby is Canada’s golden boy (Allain, “A Good Canadian Boy”) and Tyler Seguin is a reformed bad boy (Campbell 36). There’s also fanon that’s true enough for most, even if the athlete themselves might not approve: Crosby is the diving, whining Kid (Allain 14-15) and



Seguin is the sexiest hockey player (Campbell 36). And then there's the fanon that is true enough for some, but offensive to public hockey fandom (never mind the offense I take at some of public hockey fandom's fanons): Crosby is autistic (Fanlore Wiki) and Tyler Seguin is a "real life twink porn star" (glovehand). As Waysdorf explains, sports RPFers seem to "require[] very little in the way of evidence," as fic and slash pairings are launched with little more than "a picture, a quote, or an idea that two players would be good or hot together" (3.15). So, although there may be more people who believe that Seguin is sexy than people who believe that he acts like a gay porn star, at least 1681 people have seen the images from glovehand's photoset and reblogged it, claiming this fanon as part of their fandom. All it takes to make fanon is for your feelings about a character to resonate with others.

Regardless of what is actually true, the ideal version of these athlete characters – what is common knowledge in their public fandoms – is that they are *not* queer, because the common sense of the world is that men who play hockey are not queer, and queer women who play hockey are complicating. In our world, but especially in men's hockey, "heterosexuality [is] a script for an ideal life" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 147), so when we do read about gay men who play(ed) hockey, it's always a story about a man who did not make it to the NHL (because hockey culture makes it impossible). Even Luke Prokop, currently touted as the first gay NHLer, hasn't actually played an NHL game, playing instead for the Edmonton Oil Kings. Just as questions that assume heterosexuality (asking a woman if she has a husband, for example) "position queer subjects as failed in their failure to live up to the 'hey you too' of heterosexual self-narration" (Ahmed, *Cultural*

*Politics* 147), narratives of gay men in hockey that are always about *not* playing in the NHL position gay hockey players as “failed in their failure to live up to” the life-plot of the Good Hockey Man. In hockey and everywhere else, compulsory heterosexuality is both a norm and a punishment, a reminder that *this is the way it is*, just in case anyone is considering an alternative. Regardless of the fact of queer people, the *canon* is heterosexuality, because queerness is not sensible in heteronormative publics. In hockey culture, it is all the more urgent that heterosexuality is canon, so the punishment for failing is commensurate.

### 3.1.1 I want Tyler Seguin to be queer

There is a video from ESPN’s 2015 *Body Issue* where they shoot Tyler Seguin sitting naked on a Zamboni sucking (seductively?) on a popsicle (ESPN). This photoshoot is the reason this dissertation exists. Whenever I doubt myself, I come back to it and remember that, yes, there’s something to this whole gay hockey thing. It’s a perfect combination: he’s naked, he’s staring, unflinching, at the camera, he wraps his lips (sensually?) around a phallic popsicle, and images from the shoot give us brief hints of a cheeky grin. It’s so *gay* and I love it so much, because it’s like *he knows*. That grin says “I know what you want” and then he puts his lips around the popsicle because *that is what we/I want*.

Sure, there’s a lot of *evidence* that Seguin is as homophobic and straight as they come. He (ignorantly, apparently) outed a fan on Twitter, has used the phrase “no homo” because he was worried we’d think he was gay for lying on his bed listening to his male friend’s song (no, Tyler, that’s not gay, but *sucking on a popsicle while naked kind of is*), and has implied that twins Daniel and Henrik Sedin are not just brothers but lovers. He’s said – to the horror of the person interviewing him for a fluff piece about pizza – that he’d like to have lunch with Donald Trump. And I’m positive he’s done other things that I haven’t learned about yet. I believe it. He’s not a *great* dude.

But he’s also done things and said things that even in context are *pretty queer*. He’s said that “the women and the men” of Dallas are beautiful (quoted in Toland). He claims to “prefer stallions” in

a manner that feels flirtatious when teammate (and ship partner) Jamie Benn asks him if he likes horses (Larkin). He drinks from a bottle of vodka in a picture that looks like a scene straight out of bad gay porn. I don't play "Tyler Seguin or Gay Porn" because the answer is always "gay porn," after all. I play it because it's *always* Tyler Seguin.

He's never said he's gay. But he's never said he's straight, either, or bisexual or queer or anything. There's no proof of his sexuality other than the knowledge that he has dated women (and is currently engaged to one) and all that really tells us is that he likes women. There's no evidence of *anything*, just the part of me that recognizes the way he moves through the world (and the part of me that enjoys telling people that I think Tyler Seguin is bisexual and having the light of realization flicker on in their eyes).

So, I'm conflicted, because I see him and I shake with recognition. I feel so (much) gay when I look at pictures of Tyler Seguin, which I admit is a strange thing to say, but that's what it is. I look at Seguin and I *feel gayness* and *feel gayer*. But I also don't like the outcomes of what I feel: he's the stereotype of the closeted homophobe that excuses violence against queers as self-hatred. He's a misogynistic frat-bro and I shouldn't feel *bad* or *anything but disdain* for him. He's rich enough that I really should devote my attention, my feelings, to other people, no matter how sad he might be on the inside.

But I still want him to be soft. To be queer. I *want* his "no homos" to be missteps in an attempt to rescue a flailing career from one too many sexual scandals. I want the real Tyler to be the one seductively sucking a cock/popsicle/bottle of vodka who also happens to not quite be smart or mature enough to understand the pain that he causes, and for him to cause that pain unintentionally. I want all that and I know that wanting that makes me naive, or problematic, or a bad queer, or a weird hockey fan.

But I still want it.

### **3.2 Queerness is and is not canon in hockey**

There is queerness in hockey, there are queer people who play hockey – even in professional men's hockey, and yes, even in the NHL. There *are* men playing hockey in the

NHL who desire men, who have sex with men, and/or who would like to marry a man someday, *obviously* (Lebrun; Pronger; Anderson). However, “even something self-evident [...] can be deemed not evidence if the self to whom something is self-evident is suspect” (Ahmed “Evidence”), and Pronger and Anderson have stated interests in the presence of queer men in sports. They want queer men in the NHL, therefore their (anonymized and private) evidence that there are gay and bisexual men playing hockey *right now* is not trustworthy. Even the use of statistics is not helpful when people are determined that something is not evident. Using quantitative data, we can say that if a conservative 5% of men identify as gay or bisexual (Carlson), there could be around 40 gay or bisexual men in the NHL today, despite only Luke Prokop (a prospect for the Nashville Predators who has yet to play a game in the NHL) having come out. ‘But gay and bisexual men probably avoid hockey, because it’s so homophobic,’ I hear in response, even in my mind. After all, it’s easy to trust that “at the pivotal age when they needed to make a decision, [gay hockey players] said ‘F\*\*k this, I’m out of here’ and they quit hockey” (Tucker). The canon of hockey, then, is that there are no gay men in the NHL, because few gay men play hockey – and those that do drop out before they make it to The Show.

Even though we know there are men who look to violent and aggressive sports in order to cover up their queerness, for whom “athletics is a hiding place” (Pronger, *Arena* 3), there will be people whose response to the above use of data is that just because 5% of men identify as gay or bisexual does not mean that 5% of *hockey players* do, because we *know* that hockey players aren’t queer (no matter how tautological it is to say that hockey players

can't be queer because hockey players aren't queer). So: let's perform a thought experiment and believe that half of the gay and bisexual hockey players quit before the NHL. Let's halve that 5%, then, for no reason other than we want to (because 5% is already a somewhat arbitrary choice, when American statistics say the number is anywhere from 4-12%) and say there are 20 gay or bisexual men in the NHL. That's within the realm of possibility, according to the 'canon' of LGBTQ statistics in North America. But it's also 'canon' that team sports like hockey are more masculine, less queer, than the average public, so we should not compare the demographics of an elite sports league to the average. We should instead compare hockey to a popular team sport where some men *have* come out, like rugby. In the history of professional rugby, 4 men (three players, one referee) have come out: Nigel Owens, Gareth Thomas, Dan Palmer, and Campbell Johnstone (Ramsay). We could assume that those four men were the *only* gay men out of approximately 28, 648 adults who have played Rugby Union in New Zealand, or 0.01% (Wikipedia "Rugby Union in New Zealand"). If that percentage holds in hockey, out of the 41,109 NHL athletes who played sometime between the 1917-1918 season and the 2018-2019 season, there would have been 5 gay NHLers in those 100 years – more than is 'canon' at this point in time. However, since both rugby and hockey have been played competitively when homosexuality was criminalized in the Commonwealth, it's highly unlikely that every single gay man in either sport could come out without being thrown in jail, so the percentage – and number of actual gay or bisexual men in the NHL – *is* higher. Is it 0.1%? 1%? 5%? Hopefully, at this point, your feeling is that these numbers are meaningless – are nonsense, in fact. Quantitative data

becomes a feeling in the face of the canon of heteronormativity because heteronormativity is already a feeling. Anyone can shape quantitative data to make it evidence of straightness, but it is only my queer evidence (the knowledge that queer people experience closeting) that is felt *as a story* and not as truth. The fact (and it *is* a fact) that there are gay and bisexual men playing today in the NHL is not evident, despite being true. Things can be true and not evident, depending on the observer, and in fandom, the word for something that is true but not evident is *fanon*.

It's all well and good to say that everything about a celebrity is fanon, but some fanons are more canon than others – so, what determines the acceptability of a fanon? If an interpretation of a celebrity gratifies public expectations, if that interpretation can be used, easily, in the rhetorical genres common to that public, then it might as well be canon. If the interpretation is common sense, if it is safe or comforting to dominant ideologies, it's true enough. Sidney Crosby is probably not autistic. Tyler Seguin is probably still kind of a bad boy, but he's attractive enough and harmless enough that we don't mind. There will be few people for whom those statements don't resonate – they exist, but they're *already* affect aliens, so their discomfort (as long as it's silent) is acceptable (Ahmed, "Happy Objects" 30). My fanon – that Sidney Crosby is gay and neurodivergent, that Tyler Seguin is a bisexual bro – doesn't fit into heteronormativity, or our ideas of masculinity and athleticism, and they're dangerous to the ideologies that make up hockey culture. My sense of these characters – the versions of these athletes I have access to as a fan – is not the common sense of them, because the common sense is what is most comfortable in the dominant public. The common

sense of these athletes is straightness. I, on the other hand, have a queer sense of these characters – which makes sense, because I am queer: I feel things in my favourite athletes that heteronormative fans don't feel, not because it's impossible for a straight person to feel queerness in a celebrity (there are heterosexual people who desire queerness in their media if not in their bodies), but because my queerness changes the angle of approach making “the world acquire[] a new shape” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 31). However, when I feel queerness in an athlete, I can never be sure it's really there, because it's not felt by others – it isn't evident to them like it is to me. It's no more or less ‘really there’ than the feeling of straightness that someone else might feel, but common sense says that straightness is there and queerness is not. My queer sense is nonsense to the common sense.

In fiction, we can navigate the pain of having queer sense amid common sense, of “being a stranger in one's own home” (Pronger, *Arena of Masculinity* 1). When we can't quite trust our feeling of an object in fiction, because common sense tells us those feelings are wrong, we can talk about queer subtext or queerbaiting: is the queerness we feel *actually* there, but simply covered up enough that straight people don't have to come into contact with queerness if they don't want to? Is the queerness there enough to grab our attention, but not there enough to ever be real? Are we sensing something that is foreshadowed, to be revealed at a dramatically appropriate moment? We can discuss and argue and express our pain and sorrow and joy over these things – we can even get mad at the people who did it to us, and we can be fairly sure of getting an answer, someday. Jessica Mason of *The Mary Sue* coined the term “Schrödinger's Queer” to describe the feeling of always waiting for the day that

queerness is confirmed by “the word of god” or “nothing short of a Pride parade on screen.” Mason is referencing the infamous Schrödinger’s Cat paradox, a thought experiment intended to mock the conclusions of quantum physicists at the time. Erwin Schrödinger presents what he says is a paradox: you put a live cat and a radioactive source in a box. Already in the box is a vial of poison and a hammer with a switch mechanism. After you close the box, if the mechanism detects a single decayed atom from the radioactive source, the hammer will fall and break the vial, releasing the poison and killing the cat. According to Schrödinger, contemporaneous understandings of quantum physics would state that until we open the box to reveal its contents, as long as the contents of the box are unobserved, the cat is not alive *or* dead, but alive *and* dead. This is a paradox because it is impossible: *of course*, the cat cannot be both alive and dead, since those are mutually exclusive states. Schrödinger’s lesson, then, is that we must reject any understanding of the world (any sense) that allows that conclusion. Mason’s Schrödinger’s Queer, then, is a tool used by people who desire or feel queerness in fiction in order to mitigate the feeling of feeling something that is not evident. Schrödinger’s Queer is the character people hope and think is queer, but we are told (by showrunners, by other fans) to wait, until it is revealed or until the show ends. It is not comfortable to be in contact with Schrödinger’s Queer. If the story ends without some undeniable, absolutely evident statement, we have opened the box to reveal that Schrödinger’s Queer is dead, because an unevident queer is a straight character. It is a way to name the fact that we have to wait for someone else to open the box and make it evident.



However, almost a century has passed since Schrödinger put forth his paradox, and our understanding (I say ‘our,’ but I don’t understand quantum physics) of the world has shifted: superposition is not a matter of either *or* both, but of a cloud of possibility. The cat is not, of course, both alive and dead, but it *could* be, and the universe treats “could” almost the same as it treats “is.” If only our social world worked the same way as the universe – then any person’s sexuality would be simply a cloud of possibilities, only accessible to other individuals once it is revealed to them, and otherwise unimportant in their interactions. It doesn’t, though, despite the fact that desire, which Lauren Berlant defines as “the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between the object’s specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it,” is often impossible to resolve into objective reality (*Desire/Love* 6). Socially, we’re still working with the understanding of possibility that Schrödinger had in 1935, where it is nonsense to treat the cat as both alive and dead until a subject opens the box. In Schrödinger’s *Queer*, the writer/actor/showrunner/celebrity/authority is the subject who opens the box (by having the character come out or having the story end) revealing that the cat is dead or alive – the maybe-queer character is straight (dead) or queer (alive). The problem with calling this a paradox, however, is that as soon as you consider the cat a subject whose perception of the world counts, it stops being paradoxical. According to Schrödinger, the cat is the *object*, so its observation of its own slow death by poisoning is not evidence of that death occurring. What it senses – the sound of glass shattering, the feeling of its body rejecting the poisonous air and struggling to breathe, the experience of dying (or, if it’s lucky, the lack of all those things) – is not sensed by Schrödinger, and so it has not really occurred

until he opens the box. In fact, it's *because* the cat senses those things that it cannot be the observer – its sense of the world (and its desire for a particular outcome – life) disqualifies it from the position of the subject, because its sense of the world is suspect. We queer yearners would like to be Schrödinger, with the power to open the box and say “yes, this is real,” but *we* are not the subjects: our sense of the world is not common. In saying that a character *could/should* be queer, we lose our positions as observers with common sense and join the cat in the box, where we wait for someone with no personal stake in the cat's queerness to open the box and observe: these cats are/not queer.

Post-modern epistemology and suspicious reading would say that calling the cat a subject *is* my power as a reader, that it is within my authority to reshape the story and make the cat an observer and in doing so reconfigure Schrödinger's lesson, as I have done. This is true, but it is not true, too: there is a limit to my power as a reader, determined in part by the author (who will say “I always thought of Dumbledore as gay” [Rowling, “J.K. Rowling at Carnegie”] or “It is infuriating, frankly ... to have Twitter run around and say oh that means Sherlock is gay” [Moffat, quoted in Parker]), and in part by the common sense of the public to which the text is addressed. For example, despite Rowling's late description of Blaise Zabini as a “British boy of African descent,” many fans continued to write Blaise in their fanfic as a “ghostly pale white male,” denying what should be canon for the more widely accepted fanon, and denying readers for whom a black Hogwarts student was meaningful that canonical reality (Chaney and Liebler 5). Therefore, if someone expresses meaning in a story that causes the author or the public of their text to feel too much discomfort – as is the case

for slash, frequently – the reader’s authority can be revoked by dismissing it as *only* interpretation.

This happened frequently in *Supernatural*, a show I used to watch until its consistent queerbaiting/queerdenying got to be too much. I remember one instance in 2013 very vividly: *Supernatural* producers Chad Kennedy and Russ Hamilton took to Twitter to deny the interpretations of slash-fans in the wake of the episode “I’m No Angel” (episode 9x03). In this episode, the angel Castiel (a queer- and slash-fan-favourite) was shown in the afterglow of sex with a woman (which, for complicated lore reasons that would take too long to explain, was technically rape [Kim, “Supernatural 9x03 I’m no Angel: The Good, the Bad, and the Social Media Fallout”]) and his gaze (as translated through the camera) was egregiously male gazey in its objectification of women. That is, Castiel, beloved of queer fans of *Supernatural*, became a heterosexual man who objectified women (at best). I remember feeling betrayed. Up until this point, the only canon statements about his gender and sexuality were that, despite possessing a man’s body, Castiel was a genderless being without the capacity for sexual desire. Since his sexuality was not addressed otherwise for several seasons, fanons of Castiel as queer, whether through asexuality or genderqueerness, arose. To see him not only having sex, but for that sexual encounter to be transmitted through objectifying and heterosexual tropes, then, was particularly painful for his fans. In response to the outpouring of grief on Twitter, where fans expressed their anger that the show would make such a drastic change to a beloved character, producer Hamilton explained condescendingly that “it’s called FanFiction &not FanReality,” letting fans know that the

interpretation of Castiel as queer could only ever be “FanFiction” and never “FanReality” (@RUSS\_MOVIEGOD). Script producer Chad Kennedy tweeted at this time that “it is not our intention with these char[acter]s” to make them bisexual, staking a strong authorial claim over the impossibility of queerness in the show, but he also held open the door for Schrödinger’s Queer by saying “I don’t know if we’ll ever go there, but don’t know for sure that we never will...” (FandomDebunker). There are many other examples of authors denying fans the right of interpretation, but this is the one that hurt me most: even now, years away from “9x03” (as we called it on Tumblr and Twitter), I remember the pain, and I learned my lesson. I can’t trust canon to keep (my) queer feelings in mind, because when queerness becomes too possible, authors will remind us that queerness is always “fanfiction” and toxic heteronormativity is “fanreality” (as though we need reminding).

Gentle and not-so-gentle reminders of the impossibility of queerness come out when fans of fictional media get too hopeful, and when the person at the heart of the interpretation is a real person, it becomes even more urgent to limit the power of readerly authority. Those limitations come in the form of calling it unethical to claim authority over a person’s body, or gross to assume someone’s sexuality, or icky to note a favourite celebrity’s queer-isms when they haven’t come out. So, I have to say, then, when I feel like Sidney Crosby is gay and/or autistic, I am not claiming authority over his body. Of course, I never had authority over his body – no matter how loudly I shout about my feelings, I will never have authority over his white, male, cis, wealthy, (hyper)able body. The very fact that I sense queerness in him disqualifies me from an authoritative position, because I am “the self to whom something is

self-evident” and therefore I am “suspect” in this case (Ahmed, “Evidence”). To feel Schrödinger’s Queer in a real person is not to *know* that a real person is queer but to feel as though queerness could exist and imagine situations in which it does. To feel Schrödinger’s (Real) Queer is to have a sense of a character as queer when common sense says they are not. But common sense doesn’t change *my* queer feelings – all it does is marginalize my queer feelings. Having queer sense in public leaves me open to straightening (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*) and shaming or erasing (Berlant, *Female Complaint*) so it’s just easier to keep my queer feelings in my intimate fandom, despite the fact that my queer feelings are no more or less true than the feelings authorized by common sense.

We can easily predict what will become common sense, because what counts as common sense and what fanon is accepted into the public fandom will be the interpretations that strengthen, rather than disorient, dominant ideologies and needs. We might ask, for example, why Sidney Crosby doesn’t have much to talk about that isn’t his hockey career and find our answers in public or intimate fanon. Public fanon tells us that his dedication to hockey is the answer. Take the 2006 RBK commercial, whose thesis (according to Dreamwidth user thefourthvine) appears to be “if you can still be happy or have fun, you aren’t dedicated enough.” Dreary images of empty arenas and locker rooms accompany Crosby’s narration of important childhood social events, like “Thanksgiving,” “summer vacation,” “prom” and “spring break.” This is “time well spent,” because he became Sidney Crosby, Hockey God. Sidney Crosby doesn’t have anything to say about things that aren’t hockey because he has spent his entire life 100% dedicated to the sport: if he has no

personality, it's because he didn't have time to develop one when he was developing as a player – and this is supposed to be something to celebrate. Intimate fans have our own answer to the question of Crosby's obsession with hockey. Hockey (and the interest in WWII history that pops up in rare interviews [Mackey]) might be a special interest, a term used by autistic people to describe the “narrow but deep” interests that inspire “deeply focused thinking” (ASAN). He gives robotic performances in interviews (as though reading from a carefully prepared script), he has an off-kilter sense of humour sometimes visible in NHL promotional videos, he has an aversion to change that has him using the *same jock* he's used since he was a teenager, replaced bit by bit and very carefully by Penguins' equipment manager Dana Heinze, and he has so many more rituals that range from the benign (having the exact same peanut butter and jelly sandwich every game day), to the offensive (not speaking to his female relatives on game days), to the worrisome (becoming visibly angry and agitated if someone touches his sticks after he's prepared them). These things all seem *familiar* to those of us on the spectrum, but to call Crosby autistic would be to *accuse* him of autism. Both answers to the question of Crosby's strangeness are fanon, but they are not equally fanon. Call Sidney Crosby dedicated to hockey to the exclusion of all else and people will nod, but say he's autistic and people will worry.

There is no canon to a person's life beyond what they know of themselves, but there is an *expected* interpretation that creates attachments of cruel optimism. We *expect* an athlete to be devoted and dedicated, to sacrifice parts of their lives we consider normal – in fact, to call someone an athlete, to grant them entry into “athlete citizenship” creates an expectation

of “bodily purity” that departs from normative, even idealized ability, gender, sexuality, and so on, disrupt (Henne 3). In fact, this is how homonationalism functions: gay heroes of 9/11, for instance, become straightened in order to tell the story of American tragedy/resilience in the face of terrorist outsiders (Puar 41). Elite athletes, like NHLers, “symbolize a kind of optimized body attributed to an ethic of discipline” (Henne 20), as well as the “desired mental and physical attributes that people should strive for” (Boutilier and SanGiovanni 97-98). Even if individual athletes fail to live up those expectations, the figure of the athlete is entwined with the public desire for good bodies. This is especially true for hockey-playing Canadian men: we expect them to be the very symbol of manliness, with no room for queer desires, minds, or bodies. Public fanon – what functions as the canon of RPF – fits into a space already shaped by heterosexuality, by patriarchy, by white supremacy, by ableism. It takes more work to claim that canon is a different shape than it takes to claim that canon is business as usual, and so the affect of a Schrödinger’s (Real) Queer is ambiguous, ambivalent, and cruelly optimistic. The attachment to a Schrödinger’s Queer is painful, cruel, because it “actively impedes the aim that brought [us] to it initially” but you endure the pain because the attachment gives us “something of [our] sense of what it means to keep on living and to look forward to being in the world” (Berlant, “Cruel Optimism” 20). The attachment gives us hope, pleasure, comfort, relief, *and* anxiety, pain, discomfort, fear. I want Sidney Crosby to be autistic, but I don’t: I’m not sure I could handle the way that truth would exist in the world. I want Sidney Crosby to be gay, but I don’t: it’s very clear he would be a poor spokesman for queers (I can’t help but feel he’d be *one of those* white gays). *Desiring*

Crosby's queerness, though, that I can do. It's not always fun, because I know that my hope "that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help [me] or the world to become different in just the right way" is in vain (or I am told that I should know it is in vain), but you need hope "to keep on living" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 2; italics in original). A public fan, with no queer desires for their favourite athletes, has only an optimistic relation: the hope that the world will be "different in just the right way" is entirely attainable, or we expect it to be entirely attainable. There is no one telling the fan who hopes Crosby or Seguin is straight that their hope is irrational and the outcome is unlikely. The orientation of the straight fan to hockey canon is simple, and often unstated.

### **3.3 (B) Romance is canon in the NHL**

Those of us with a queer orientation to hockey, however, must carefully communicate that orientation: enough to find people who feel the same, but not so much that we attract dissenters, correctors, straighteners. In the intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF slash, fans make use of tags on fic to tell us their orientation to canon. In other words, the tag-wrangled folksonomy system of AO3 enables fans to generate and signal the fanons of their intimate fandom. A tag is both a literal categorization of a fic on AO3 and, as Chaney and Liebler explain it, a metaphor to describe the folksonomy of fanon, in which "content emerg[es] through bottom-up consensus by the public, or in this case, fan communities" (1). However, in *fanfiction* communities like Men's Hockey RPF on AO3, where "fanon is usually established and perpetuated" (5), we literally signal our fanons through the words we attach to our fic as tags. On AO3, the combination of freetagging and controlled vocabulary tags



creates the ideal conditions for intimate fandoms and their myriad fanons to find each other (or distance from each other). Freetagging is a system in which users input their own text, rather than choosing from a pre-generated list of tags, tagging their content with the exact language that they choose. The benefits of freetagging are primarily the accuracy of the tag – no need to choose between two slightly-off tags when you can input your own exactly accurate words – and the creativity it enables. Tags on AO3 range from the purely categorical (e.g. “Jamie Benn/Tyler Seguin”) to those that offer commentary on the fic, the author, the fandom, or the canon (e.g. “Sidney Crosby Needs a Hug,” currently attached to 12 fic on AO3). The consequence of this creativity is that intimate fandoms can develop their own highly specific fanons. In the case of “Sidney Crosby Needs a Hug,” the 12 fic express a particular interpretation of Sidney Crosby, not as highly accomplished hockey superman, but as an overworked and lonely man who really just...needs a hug. The downside of freetagging is that they can become unsearchable – unless you know to search for a tag, the tag itself is only useful as a description of the fic it’s on. AO3’s solution has been to adopt the use of tag-wrangers, a “behind-the-scenes ... knowledgeable volunteer base” to link related tags to make fic findable while maintaining the intended meaning of the original tag/fanon (S. Johnson 3.10). For example, a knowledgeable tag wrangler for the “Men’s Hockey RPF” fandom on AO3 would know to link “Bennguin” to “Jamie Benn/Tyler Seguin” and not, say, “Jamie Benn becomes a Penguin.” This hybrid folksonomy affords searchability of the archive (where freetagging does not) and the creation of fanon (which controlled vocabulary tags do not). Thus, through tags on AO3 fic, fans can signal their orientation to canons and

fanons through tags like “goalies are weird” (as in “Soft” and 49 other fic) in combination with the tag “the most accurate tag ever” (only on “Soft”). This combination of shared tags and commentary tags ensures that fic can be findable in the system and still signal the particular orientation to canon of the specific fic.

The myriad orientations to canons are especially visible in Hockey RPF slash that engages with the canon of bromances in the NHL. When people’s fanons are not accepted in the public of their fandom, they learn to contextualize their interpretations – in other words, they learn to tag their fanon. For example, because it is within the rhetorical genre of hockey’s public fandom to say that Jamie Benn and Tyler Seguin have a bromance (i.e. their bromance is canon), Hockey RPF fans deploy tags around the term ‘bromance’ to signal our disidentification with its narrative, sometimes using it as-is, but more frequently creating freetags that include the word, like “bromance to romance,” which makes that fanon findable and sensible *as* a fanon. Even if there’s only one fic that uses a tag, such as “bros with benefits to lovers,” its use signals that interpretation, that fanon. In the case of “bros with benefits to lovers,” the writer signals their participation in *and* expresses the fanon of hockey players engaging in non-romantic sexual relationships that, of course, develop into *romantic* sexual relationships. “Romantic” provides the following tags for their “Jamie Benn/Tyler Seguin” fic (along with the Explicit rating that tells readers there will be graphic depictions of sex): “emotion play,” “Tyler discovers romance and is like WOW,” “bros with benefits to lovers,” “food porn,” “injury,” “caretaking,” “hat trick blowjob,” “fluff,” “romantic

nonsense,” and “kink bingo.”<sup>3</sup> Had I not read this fic, my familiarity with Hockey RPF would tell me that the tag “bros with benefits to lovers” is a signal that Jamie and Tyler are in a bromosexual relationship – non-romantic sexual intimacy between ‘bros’ – that becomes romantic. My knowledge of Tyler/Jamie fanon, and the tag “Tyler discovers romance and is like WOW,” tells me that the shift into romance is likely a result of Jamie’s insistence that they be more than bros, because Tyler is often written as someone unfamiliar with romantic relationships. The “injury” and “caretaking” tags are signals that the author is avoiding the tag “hurt/comfort,” which is a very specific genre of fic that is not particularly common in Hockey RPF. And finally, the last three fic tags, “hat trick blowjobs,” “fluff,” and “romantic nonsense” promise a fic that earns its explicit rating through pornographic depiction of blowjobs (at least) but it is not purely devoted to sex: it’s not a “Porn Without Plot/Plot What Plot” fic. A commenter notes that the writer of “Romantic” “put thought into the porn and thought into the romance” (Comment September 13 2014), placing this fic in a genre of Hockey RPF that uses sex as a part of the love story, rather than as a reward at the end of the fic. I can tell, looking at the tags – and the lack of other tags, like “angst,” or “darkfic,” or “rape/noncon” – that this will be a relatively conflict-free story about Jamie and Tyler turning their bromance into a romance, confronting Tyler’s assumptions about homosexual and homoromantic relationships along the way.

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<sup>3</sup> “Kink bingo” refers to a community game in which authors and artists have a “bingo” card full of fandom tropes and “kinks” (pornography tropes/preferences) that they must fill by including them in fanworks. The inclusion of this tag shows that “Romantic” is created in the context of an intimate public of pornographic fic.

Queer and/or slash-fans have a love/hate relationship with the term “bromance,” because it gives us so many gaps and spaces to play in, but also requires that queer romance is itself a gap and an empty space. The strength of the narrative of “bromance” in hockey is such that any intimacy between NHL athletes can be straightened away through its deployment, along with the implication that to imagine queerness in that intimacy is to sully an otherwise pure friendship. When bromance is deployed as a straightening device, queerness itself – not a character or a person – takes the place of the cat in Schrödinger’s box. Depending on the self that is seeing the evidence of bromances in the NHL – depending on who gets to be Schrödinger opening the box – queerness is im/possible, but public fandom is always assumed to be the only appropriate subject to open it. That is, when we use the word bromance to describe the intimacy between men, we make queerness alive/dead, and assume that the person who wants the answer to be “dead” is the only one capable of opening the box, of making that determination. Public fandom opens the box and determines that a bromance is a non-sexual, non-romantic homosocial intimacy. Intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF, however, see deep affection in the development of romantic love when we peek inside the box. In fic that includes the members of a highly promoted bromance, like Tyler Seguin and Jamie Benn (among others: Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner, Gabriel Landeskog and Tyson Barrie, Sidney Crosby and Nathan MacKinnon...), authors signal their disidentifications with the bromance/no-homo narratives that follow the pair around IRL through tags. Authors will use tags to let us know how they’re using the bromance, and readers of slash expect not bromance but “bromance to romance” or something similar.

Where public fandoms use bromance as a narrative used to straighten homosocial intimacy among men, the intimate fandoms of hockey RPF use the public definition of bromance as the misunderstanding that gets in the way of m/m romance.

In public hockey fandom, bromance is deployed to solve the problem of hockey's paradoxical relationship to that intimacy. Hockey players, especially important teammates like Benn and Seguin, are supposed to have chemistry. They're supposed to get along and be buddies, because instability in the locker-room and intra-team conflict is dangerous to team cohesion, so we want to see teammates hanging out and being BFFs. However, that BFFdom must be policed so that it stays on *this* side of gay, and that's where the bromance becomes a useful tool. Hockey culture requires the disavowal of romantic love between men, but also celebrates on- and off-ice chemistry, so you get sports writers and team social media using words like "bromance" to describe the chemistry between players, waxing poetic about their partnership as "some sort of long forgotten chemistry lesson, greater than the sum of the two parts and, at the risk of entering into flat-out hyperbole, creating something that often approaches the magical" (Burnside, "Seguin-Benn"). You would be forgiven for thinking that Burnside's praise comes straight out of fic, considering the summary of one of my favourite Jamie/Tyler fic, "bleeding": "they are a chemical reaction, fizzing out of control" and the accompanying apology for "anything too egregious" as well as a blanket apology for "Tyler in this fic in general." Tyler and Jamie go well together, and so do Seguin and Benn: they get paired up in fic, but they also get paired up in interviews, by coaches, and by hockey fans, because there is *something* about their interactions that makes hockey fans happy.

Public fandom calls it a bromance, because that's easier (straighter) than saying they make a good couple, even though Jamie Benn's straight-man to Tyler Seguin's goofball (bisexual) is an odd-couple hetero-romantic pairing straight out of sitcom history. That there's also a storied history of same-gender odd couples, such as the eponymous Oscar and Felix, is further proof of the appeal of the not-gay gay couple, since their appeal is the heterosexual deniability of their intimacy (Radner 54).

Bromance is an act of straightening, meant to deny the possibility of queer love while continuing to exploit the feeling of same-gender intimacy, in the same way that Schrödinger's Queer in fictional narratives is meant to (infinitely) delay the reveal of a character as queer while continuing to exploit the desire for such a revelation. Just as the homosexual paradox of sport rests on the necessity of admiring and desiring men's bodies while always denying that desire (Pronger), the bromantic corollary of hockey rests on the obsession with relationship narratives (linemates, Cs and As, rookies, mentors, roommates, etc), all heavily no-homoed by bromantic language. "Bromance" functions culturally to access emotional and/or physical intimacy between men without necessarily casting them as queer. Some white university-aged athletes do, in fact, identify as bromantic and straight: they date women but are physically, emotionally, and/or sexually intimate with their bros (Robinson et al). Robinson et al. note that the homophobia of western culture has robbed "a generation of heterosexual men" of the "intimacy to which they should have been entitled" (95), so they struggle to describe emotionally intimate friendships as something beyond friendship and distinct from romantic partnership, which reframes bromance as an important

political identity. I have no desire to erase the reality of those men and their intimate relationships, but once bromosexuality or bromance leaves the individual and becomes an identity alongside – but separate from – queerness, I become suspicious. Words for romantic and/or sexual desire for people of the same and different genders than your own already exist: pansexual and bisexual. The decision to use a word like “bromance” *denies* the possibility of queerness.

The explanations their participants give make clear the internalized homophobia and misogyny that necessitate the label “bromance” (95). Just as the Chinese culture of *jiqing* (translated by Wei Wei as “gay affection”) “consolidate[s] heteronormative expectations of men” (Wei Wei “China’s Love of Bromance”), and the “down-low” culture of homosexual sex in Black American men is rooted in homophobia and misogyny (Martinez and Hosek; Ward), Robinson et al.’s bromantic athletes make *particular* note that they are not gay. Their relationships may be intimate, but they are frequently “not sexual, though,” so they maintain their identities as heterosexual men (Robinson et al. 98). When they do describe sexual relationships with other men, they describe it in the context of a joined sexual conquest of women: they have foursomes where each bro has a girlfriend and it is “something that you high five each other about” (101). When they want sex, they turn to women, but when they want intimacy, they turn to their bros, because bromance is “motivated by your interest in that person, love and friendship, and not because you want sex [unlike with a woman]” (100, parenthetical in original). This is misogyny and homophobia. As individuals, I can’t say what kind of interpersonal relationships these young men have, but as a group, these bromantic

athletes are not symbols of an enlightened masculinity. When the only difference between a physically or romantically intimate bromance and sexual or romantic bisexuality is the desire to be read as straight, it's homophobia; when men view women as sex-givers and their bros as intimate friends, it's misogyny. There are individual men who identify as straight and as participants in bromances, but the bromance is *named* as such in service of heteronormativity and orthodox masculinity – so when slash fans ‘turn’ bromances queer, they are accused of adding queerness into something straight. Lesbian and bisexual women are mocked for imagining that ‘gal pals’ are actually girlfriends (sometimes by slash fans who do the very same thing to men [Stanfill, “On Dressing Homonormativity”]) and slash fans are called predatory or creepy for tainting a pure, loving friendship with gross sexuality. On a large scale, bromance works to erase queerness, and we see this in hockey as much as we do in Hollywood.

Bromances in hockey vary in hockey as they do in film and television, so they are not limited to Jamie Benn and Tyler Seguin in the NHL. Other teams have taken up the term, including the Philadelphia Flyers, who asked players to vote for which two of their teammates had the best bromance; the Colorado Avalanche, who have a yearly romance competition where Gabriel Landeskog and Tyson Barrie compete to write the other the most romantic Valentine’s Day card; the NHL’s official website asking fans to vote for the best bromance, “the teammates whose chemistry extends far beyond the rink” (“NHL Fan Choice Awards”); or the Montreal Canadiens whose official YouTube account has posted two videos in their “Habs Bromance” series, compilations of clips from other videos showcasing the



relationships between Brendan Gallagher/Alex Galchenyuk and Brendan Gallagher/Nate Beaulieu. Fan-produced vids often present a ship's best moments with "subtext-revealing music" (Coppa, "Women, *Star Trek*" 0.1), with that subtext frequently being homoerotic. In much the same way, "Galchenyuk & Gallagher BEST MOMENTS" pairs tender (and subtextually flirtatious) moments between Gallagher and Galchenyuk with Queen's "You're My Best Friend." Although the song is ostensibly about (best) friendship, it's obviously about a romantic partnership – so it's a perfect choice for a bromance vid. The video opens with Galchenyuk shaming Gallagher for not knowing his birthday and forgetting to get him a gift, then segues into a montage of smiling, hugging, and shirtless Gallys. The tension of the video is that it is very obviously about the non-romantic "bromance," but the design choices – pink, cursive text and the paper-doll versions of the Gallys in a prom-photo embrace – make it easy to understand the video as a celebration of the playful and flirtatious teasing between two teens who don't quite know how to be romantic. Just as they ask "BFFS? You be the judge" in the Gallagher/Beaulieu video (which consists of a montage of Instagram posts of the two with their arms slung around each other as well as clips from their trip to a haunted house, where they cower behind each other for protection), the bromance series seems to be asking "Boyfriends? You be the judge."

### **3.4 Queering Bromance in Hockey RPF**

These videos, as queerly as they can be read (and not *misread*), are in service of stabilizing hockey's homosexual paradox. They provide proof of the chemistry between their players while simultaneously pointing away from queerness, and towards the no-homo of

bromance. However, bromance is taken up and twisted by Hockey RPF into something queer-again. Despite the attempt in public fandom to veer away from queerness, slash-fans know that bromance is just romance with a bit of homophobia tacked on, so we do our best to take it out again. Although the tag “bros with benefits to lovers” is a freeform tag, its expression in “Romantic” has much in common with AO3’s canon tags, “friends with benefits,” “bromance,” “fuckbuddies,” and “bromance to romance.” All of these involve some form of close male friendship that develops into something more, the distinguishing feature being the narrative timing of sex. Fic tagged “fuckbuddies” like “Custom,” “Tangled”, “Blade” and “Weekend” depict or refer to sex between the main pairing within the first two paragraphs (or in the first line, as in “Blade,” which opens “The first time they fuck, it sucks.”), establishing a routine sexual relationship. Fic tagged “friends with benefits” focuses first on the friendship and refers to the sexual relationship before the climax of the fic: half-way through “Letters,” a quarter of the way through “Bloom,” and half-way through “Words.” Both “fuckbuddies” and “friends with benefits” depict sex as a convenience until the emotional climax, in which one member can no longer sustain the pretense that there are no romantic feelings. “Bromance to Romance” tends to hold off on sex, choosing to depict the emotional co-dependency between the members of the pairing before delving into sex (and may not depict sex at all, depending on the fic’s rating) but like “friends with benefits,” sex occurs *before* the emotional climax, as in “Blow,” “Codependent,” and “Mess,” all of which open with domestic scenes and depict sex in the second half of the fic. How they get there is different, but teammates will eventually find themselves in sexual and/or co-

dependent relationships and will end up choosing to make their relationship explicitly romantic. They all intentionally drop the ‘b’ from the bromance they start in. We “shuffl[e] between production and rejection” of the bromance narrative by producing loving relationships that reject the homophobia inherent to the term bromance (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 25).

For a closer reading, I’ve chosen to focus on “Romantic” primarily because the Tyler in this fic is well-loved by their readers, a number of whom state “*your Tyler is the best*” (katwalking, September 13 2014; mriaow, September 14 2014; thismuchmore, October 23 2014; angelheadedhipster, January 18 2017; italics mine). Another freeform tag, “Tyler discovers romance and is like WOW,” captures this fan-favourite representation, in which his lack of emotional intelligence is forgiven because he is generally happy and excited about having feelings (unlike Tyler’s thematic opposite, Sidney, who is more often than not horrified by the presence of emotions). Reader smithereen says, “his open-hearted, enthusiastic bro-ness is charming” (comment September 14 2014) and angelheadedhipster says, “my goal for 2017 is to be as much like *this tyler seguin* as possible. Stoked about being bi, about love about his friends about what he does ... constantly surprised and amazed and delighted about the world” (Comment January 18 2017; italics mine). *This* Tyler is not terrified by his queerness and doesn’t need to hide behind a mask of homophobia – instead, he’s excited about his bisexuality, just as those of us intimate fans of his are when we see hints of queerness in his actions. This Tyler is not free from the straightening narrative of the bromance, having rationalized his homosexual relationships as the extension of his

bromances, but as soon as he learns that romance (not just bromance) is an *option*, he jumps wholeheartedly into a romantic relationship with Jamie. By deploying this fan-favourite depiction of Tyler, the writer of “Romantic” can more easily create a space in which to disidentify with hockey’s no-homo bromances, because they don’t have to create from whole cloth the idea that Tyler is emotionally naïve, or that Jamie and Tyler have off-ice chemistry well-suited to a sweet romantic relationship. The first idea is fanon that helps us compartmentalize the parts of Seguin that we don’t love so much (Popova, “When the RP gets in the way of the F”) – he’s just naïve and unworldly, which is why he puts his foot in his mouth so frequently, right? – and the second comes straight from the NHL’s public fandom.

As in real-life bromances, it is the erasure of queerness that enables the sexual relationship between men at the beginning of bromance fic in Hockey RPF. Sexual bromances *require* the impossibility of queer love (just as hockey culture does), so as long as neither man is in love with the other, sexual bromances can occur without fear of too much queerness. However, the fantasy of queerness in hockey eventually asserts itself in Hockey RPF, and queer love is returned to the story of sex and intimacy between men. Tyler in Hockey RPF is the poster child of queer sex without a thought for queer love, and he is frequently the bro-who-has-regular-sex-with-his-bros in fic (inspired by the almost infinite supply of images of Seguin cuddling, touching, and cavorting half-naked with his bros – he is a white 20-something athlete, after all, just like the bromantic athletes in Robinson et al). Although *Seguin’s* attempts to distance himself from queerness are likely intentional and

definitely hurtful, in fic, *Tyler's* lack of thought for queer love is not malicious. Rather, Tyler is simply unable to imagine queer love, having never been offered it as an option. In fic, Jamie is usually the one to offer it to him (or demand it of him). Generally, Tyler in fic is not ashamed of his queerness, but he often comes to the pragmatic conclusion that he is not allowed to get love from men, and so it is not worth it to try. We know he's not ashamed, because when Tyler is one of the bros who benefits from the bromantic paradox of hockey, he's often a generous and enthusiastic lover, albeit oblivious to the romantic relationship he's found himself in. In "Romantic," Tyler is eager to give Jamie the apparently traditional "hat trick blowjob," a tradition he loves "no matter what end of them he's on" (par. 49). He's not afraid to take on the heteronormatively feminine position of being penetrated and he enjoys the "crazy mix of power and vulnerability" that comes from giving oral sex (57). There's no doubt that he enjoys sex with men (and Jamie in particular), but there's also no doubt that he's placed sex with men firmly in the "bros" category. Bromosexuality offers Tyler the opportunity to be physically and sexually intimate with men in a way that he would otherwise miss out on, because he doesn't believe that romantic relationships with men are possible.

What we come to realize (and the fantasy of fic like "Romantic") is that Tyler has been unaware of the emotional relationship he was *already* in. It's not a bromance because Tyler's afraid of being out – when this Tyler realized he was bisexual, he "told basically everyone he knew in the first 24 hours because it was just so awesome" (par. 364). The relationship is 'bros' not because Tyler is ashamed of being attracted to men, but because he

can't imagine anything but queer *sex*. When Jamie admits to Tyler that he wants more than sex from their relationship, Tyler isn't angry or upset; he's confused, because love has never been an option before. Until now, he has categorized his relationship with Jamie as "good sex and good hockey" (132), and he's learned that the good sex only happens "behind closed doors" because the good hockey requires it (222). He has been happy in his bromances, unaware that romantic relationships are possible. As a result, he misses several cues that Jamie is unhappy with their bromantic relationship, noticing but unable to decipher the "super weird expression" (75) and the "weird face that Tyler can't immediately interpret" (27). Until Jamie explains that he's in love with Tyler, he has no understanding of what those expressions mean. Fanon turns the cow-eyed, slow-speaking Jamie Benn into the sweeter, more tender Jamie who wants queer love as well as queer sex from Tyler, so the turning point of "Romantic" is when Jamie states that he can no longer accept the sex without the love. Much like us queer fans, who want something more from Seguin than the bromosexual cuddling and deniably queer pseudopornography he gives us, Jamie has been in a relation of cruel optimism to Tyler, a relation he can no longer sustain. Because this is hockey RPF, we can live – briefly – the fantasy that given such an ultimatum Tyler not only agrees to make the relationship romantic but ends up "really dig[ging] the romance shit" (364). As he did when he discovered his bisexuality, he wants to tell everyone how great it is to be in love with Jamie, and this desire returns queer love to the story of bromances in Hockey RPF. Resolutions like those in "Romantic" that explicitly tie queer love to sex may seem like old clichés about the inevitability of love, but these stories are told in the context of bromances,

where queer love is never inevitable. Stories like “Romantic” are what sustain our real-life relations of cruel optimism to Seguin’s absent – erased – queerness.

I feel comfortable with Hockey RPF that reinterprets hockey bromances as hockey romances: I’ve long since come to terms with the ethics of wanting (real) men to be queer, especially in a sport that does not already stereotype its male athletes as necessarily queer. However, the queer desire I have for *women* who play hockey is less stable. The gendered binary of sport means that some sports, like figure skating or gymnastics, are feminized (Kane; Messner), whereas more competitive/combatative sports – like hockey or football – “confirm masculinity” (Messner, “Sports and Male Domination” 200). Wanting a men’s hockey player to be gay does not feed into the gendered stereotypes that police athletes’ desires in the same way that wanting a women’s hockey player to be a lesbian would, especially since “lesbians, like female athletes, are considered highly suspicious women” (Kane 211). Not only is claiming authority over a woman’s sexuality already problematic, since the rewriting of women’s desires is a pillar of patriarchal oppression, but calling a women’s hockey player a lesbian (an identity homophobically conflated with masculinity) confirms “the public expectation that [heterosexual] femininity conflicts with sports participation” (Wughalter 12), and we know that “words such as tomboy, mannish, unladylike, and lesbian serve the function of keeping women’s participation [in sport] at socially acceptable levels and types of involvement” (Boutilier and SanGiovanni 107). Many women in competitive or team sports like hockey use what Jan Felshin calls “the apologetic,” which are the “strategies for reducing the cognitive dissonance and role conflict that is

experienced by women in sport” (Boutilier and SanGiovanni 109). In order to be accepted in the public of sport, “the woman athlete must document the validity of her womanhood within the cultural connotations of femininity,” which also includes heterosexual reproduction (Felshin 37).

### 3.4.1 I want Hilary Knight to be queer

I remember the day I saw pictures of Hilary Knight modeling for queer/butch clothing line Wildfang. I sent a picture of Knight in a patterned button up and beanie, perfect futch style at the time, to my friend Emma *immediately*, demanding that she confirm my gaydar. Surely a straight woman wouldn’t even *know* about Wildfang, much less model for them, right? I say that and immediately think: that’s sexist. It’s so *wrong* to assume that a woman who dresses like that must be gay, leaving no room for straight tomboys to express their gender in a way that is comfortable to them.

Just because Knight looks like every single gay, soft butch woman in Toronto doesn’t mean *she’s* gay. Just because she wears clothing that I would buy for the very fact that it signals queerness doesn’t mean she’s trying to signal queerness. After all, Wildfang sells “tomboy style”, not gay style. Just because their first lookbook stars lesbian icon Shane from *The L Word* doesn’t mean that... and so on.

Yes, it’s *entirely* possible that she is a straight tomboy showing off that you can be a sexy woman even if you aren’t wearing a dress. But she looks so good in a suit that I know my butch friends would drool over (and look at those short fingernails...). All I want to do is hold onto that gay feeling a little longer.

Because Hilary Knight is a woman who plays in a traditionally masculine sport, the spectre of homosexuality already hovers over her, and I do not feel comfortable feeding into that misogynistic desire – even if my rewriting comes from a desire *for* queerness instead of against it. Knight’s body, which is not just the body of a hockey player, but that of a big, muscular, “bulldozer” of a hockey player (Knight, qtd in Ain, “Hilary Knight gets puck



naked”), already makes her suspicious to heteronormative publics that desire slim, lithe bodies in their female athletes. She “take[s] sport seriously,” so she is “felt to be jeopardizing [her] claim to being feminine” (Boutilier and SanGiovanni 107). Thus, she likely faces some pressure to “present [herself] as unequivocally heterosexual in appearance and behaviour to avoid the ‘lesbian label’” (Lenskyj 174). Hilary Knight definitely understands the need to remind people of her femininity, although she pushes back against the expectation that femininity has a certain look associated with lithe: she explains to ESPNW that, she “definitely still felt feminine” when she was at her Olympic weight of 185 lbs (heavier than some of the NHL’s up-and-coming stars) (Knight, quoted in Ain). Femininity, which in the common sense is code for *heterosexual* femininity, is a tool that women athletes must use in order to continue to play their sport. Although hockey players in women’s leagues have more freedom to express their gender and sexuality than male hockey players, as the number of professional and Olympic hockey players who are out attests to,<sup>4</sup> those who are not out, or those who are but are not interested in having the ‘lesbian label’ affixed to their career, must constantly be aware of their gender performance. However, unlike the women that Boutilier and SanGiovanni, Felshin, Kane, and Lenskyj describe, Knight does not perform femininity as required. She doesn’t engage in the “exaggerated use of feminine accoutrements,” since she is more frequently seen on her Instagram wearing the more soft-butch/futch, androgynous style of shorts, a snapback, and an oversized t-shirt (Boutilier and SanGiovanni

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<sup>4</sup> Including Harrison Browne, who came out as a trans man in the fall of 2016 and continued to play for the NWHL until he began his physical transition.

109). She also doesn't espouse "a more traditional, conservative view of women's role in society" as she is one of the most vocal women hockey players calling for more equitable pay and support for professional leagues and national teams (109). Knight is redefining what it means to be a professional women's hockey player by refusing to be grateful for the pittance offered by professional and Olympic organizations while wearing tomboyish clothing that does not emphasize stereotypical femininity.

For me, then, to call Hilary Knight queer because of the way she speaks and dresses feels like a kind of violence – complicated further by the fact that my queer desire is not just for her to be queer, but for *her*, full-stop. The pressure on women who are attracted to other women not to perpetuate the male gaze (and to assume that their desiring gaze *must* be the oppressive gaze of a heterosexual man) is heavy, and hard to live under: we must always be aware of the oppressiveness of our "male" gaze, because the "fundamental contradiction of female ... consumption – in which women are tutored in looking at, admiring and identifying with other women's bodies – is a potentially eroticized experience for all women readers" or we are bad queers (Lewis 93). However, Knight seems to be disidentifying with femininity, taking the image of the feminine athlete and rewriting it to include strength and muscularity, because "women in general, we tend to shrink ourselves and [...] since gaining 15 lbs to be at the top of my sport, I've tried to shatter the body image that muscular isn't feminine" (Knight, quoted in Ain). Her choice to model for Wild Fang might be a sign, since "clothes function as a marker of recognizability to other gays" (Lewis 93), or it might simply be an expression of her tomboy identity. I am right, therefore, to worry that I am denying Knight

autonomy in deciding that she's queer, but *part* of that anxiety comes from the pressure of heteronormativity which says that my desire is oriented to the wrong object (cf. Ahmed). To avoid calling Knight queer out of fear of denying her heteronormative femininity (which she does not perform) is a consequence of heteronormativity.

Compared to Sidney Crosby or Tyler Seguin, there is not a lot of fic starring Hilary Knight on AO3: this is of course partly due to the disparity between m/m slash and f/f slash (or femslash) in fandom more generally. It is true that, as is the case in most media fandoms, “femslash is a minoritarian form of shipping” (Stanfill, “Where the femslashers are” par. 1). The tag for Men’s Hockey RPF on AO3 is much larger than the Women’s Hockey RPF tag (29,659 fic to 353) and, ironically, has more fic tagged F/F (Men’s Hockey RPF has 455 F/F fic compared to the 252 in Women’s Hockey RPF). Given that Women’s Hockey RPF has the “primary homosocial intensity” that Stanfill names as one of the main characteristics of lesbian media (par. 4), we might expect Women’s Hockey RPF to be a bustling space of femslash content, as in other femslash empires like *Xena*, *Rizzoli and Isles*, or *Supergirl*. However, the criteria Stanfill lays out also requires “transient heterosexuality, and homosocial-homosexual slippage” (par. 4). In the case of women’s hockey more generally, there is no slippage – queerness in women’s hockey is “lesbian existence and actuality” (par. 9), with athletes like Julie Chu and Caroline Ouellette married to each other. Although there are straight athletes in women’s professional hockey (as commentators like to remind us, especially when those husbands are connected to the NHL), women’s hockey’s most popular

athletes are as likely to be queer as not. When the desire for lesbians in women's hockey arises in a queer fan, it is easily met by *actual lesbians*.

### 3.5 The Cruel Optimism of Queer Fanons

The queerness I am drawn to in my favourite hockey players is actively impeded by the heteronormativity of the world generally, and by the insistence on hockey as a heterosexual and masculine haven more specifically. The very structure of male sport *requires* heteronormativity (Pronger, "Fear and Trembling" 182), so any queer desire I have will be thwarted by its public fandom by necessity. I could, as many fans would tell me to, *just leave* – for some fans, that's the only option when an athlete has made it clear that he's never going to acknowledge, address, or simply care about queerness in any way (as Phil Kessel did when his statement on visiting the Trump White House was that "We don't care" [Kaplan]). I have left fandoms that kept me in a relation of cruel optimism – this dissertation was once about *Supernatural*, after all. But for now, what I get from hockey is just enough to keep me coming back. I can *know* that Sidney Crosby is unlikely to come out even if he *is* gay. I can know that it's not going to be a queer utopia if Tyler Seguin dates a guy. I can know that *Hockey is For Everyone* is less a real desire of the NHL's and more a marketing ploy. Knowing all of that, I am still a hockey fan. Some might call me irrational for refusing to detach from something that I *know* hurts me, but to do so would be to miss the fact that there's something that draws me to it in the first place. I can know a whole lot and still feel and want something different, and that is why my attachment is one of cruel optimism. It's not that I am unable or unwilling to see the truth, but that the feeling I have in my attachment

is worth something more to me than the truth. The feeling of queerness is what draws my attachment – it is also what impedes my attachment, because the expression of that feeling requires correction – but that feeling is also what draws my attachment to other queer fans, people with the same cruel optimism as me. The people who share this attachment become part of my intimate fandom, and we soothe ourselves by reminding each other that our feelings come from somewhere, that we feel things because we come into contact with them, despite the fact that, to others, they “might simply be air,” because “what is a phantom for some for others is real” (Ahmed, “Hard”).

Crosby and Seguin are Schrödinger’s Queers. Crosby is a Schrödinger’s Queer because he has very carefully hidden *anything* about himself that he does not want us to know, and there’s nothing like secrets to make people wonder what they are. Seguin is a Schrödinger’s Queer because, as homophobic as the phrase “no homo” *is*, few hockey players are as Gertrude-like in their denial, nor they do as many things that look gay enough to require a no homo as Seguin. For both, we can sense the space where queerness could be, but common sense dictates that we can never actually make contact with it in reality. Common sense would tell us to stop reaching out, but queer sense tells us that there is space there: that there is (currently) nothing in that space does not mean that it is impossible for anything to take up that space. With queer sense, we can “squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now” (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 22). The straining makes the optimism cruel, but that there is something different when we squint makes it optimism at all (which my reflexive use of ‘currently’ above

signals). When we find others who strain their vision in the same way, the pain of squinting is soothed somewhat. In an intimate fandom, it feels less like straining our vision and more like shading our eyes from the too-bright light of heteronormativity. When you love something that doesn't love you back, that you keep loving even though it hurts you, because it would hurt more to let go, it helps to know there are others who feel the same way.

Cruel optimism is the result of not fitting into the common sense of the world, so when we feel cruel optimism, we seek out intimate publics, where we can “trade paradigms for how best to live on, considering” (Berlant, “Cruel Optimism” 3). When we squint in the same way (cf. Muñoz) – when we are oriented similarly to the same objects (cf. Ahmed) – we can feel each other as *somebodies* rather than “nobody, or worse, [...] presumptively all wrong” and construct the intimate public where our queer sense becomes common (3). In the intimate public online, what we know about ourselves, about the world, gets to be common sense. We turn queer feelings into knowledge, irrationality into hope by using tools like Schrödinger's Queer, like Hockey RPF to help us navigate the relation of cruel optimism that we have to maybe-queer characters. At least in our intimate fandoms, we get to be the cat who decides whether or not he's alive *before* Schrödinger opens the box. A queer shipper – a shipper who is queer and who ships queer pairings – yearns for queerness. Outside of intimate fandoms, the desire for queerness is “distinctly utopian” because it is “always directed at the thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with anticipation” (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 25-6). Within an intimate fandom, we know the anticipation will be relieved. The vibrating, tense feeling of being drawn to something “not yet here” but that

nonetheless *resonates* settles in an intimate fandom, where we know that we are alive: we're here, we're queer, and everyone's already used to it. Even if the Schrödinger's Queer eventually resolves into a Real Queer – if Crosby were to come out, for example – we would still need our intimate fandoms, because even if someone opens the box to find that Schrödinger's Queer is alive, it doesn't change the fact that they've been in a box full of poison this whole time. The fact that the person opening the box might have preferred to find you dead doesn't help, either. Heteronormativity pushes against queer people even when they've come out, after all.

Talking about ships, queer interpretations, queer hopes and desires, and even queer athletes outside an intimate public is therefore always a careful balancing act, if we want to avoid the straightening, shaming, and censure that is heteronormativity's response to the presence of queer desire. We must “deploy various strategies to diminish the potential threat to masculine sporting authority” (we must “trade paradigms for how best to live on” [Berlant, “Cruel Optimism” 3]; we must engage in “strategies for reducing the cognitive dissonance” of women athletes [Boutilier and SanGiovanni 109]) if we want to be allowed into the clubhouse, especially if our desire “undermines male primacy in the sporting arena” (Toffoletti and Mewett 103). Considering that “hegemonic versions of masculinity” are heavily reliant on heteronormativity (105), any suggestion that our desire for a male athlete is not just the desire of a heterosexual woman for a heterosexual man, but the *queer* desire of a potentially queer woman is doubly threatening. Heteronormativity ensures (and reassures) heterosexual comfort, which requires queer discomfort, in the same way that the average

requires the above- and below-average in order to exist (Cryle and Stephens). If queer desire were imaginable and simply optimistic, there would be times when heterosexual desire became cruelly optimistic – and that is unacceptable to the heteronormative public. The presence of queer desire threatens heteronormative comfort because it makes it harder for straight bodies to forget “where one’s body ends and the world begins” (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 148). Discomfort occurs when there is something about the contact with the world that rubs, scratches, pokes, or otherwise hurts in unexpected ways, and the privilege of power is in shaping the world to expect your body. Intimate fandoms offer a way for queer fans to “contain[] homoerotic tendencies” without suppressing them entirely (Toffoletti and Mewett 107). It is a compromise that allows heterosexual comfort to be maintained in public fandom while also ensuring that queer comfort exists *somewhere*. It may not be ideal, since ideally queer bodies would be as comfortable in public fandom as they are in their intimate fandoms, but we are not. We live in a “world that is wearing ... a world that does not accommodate a body” (Ahmed, “Queer Fragility”). It is wearing because it wears us down, and our intimate publics and intimate fandoms offer us relief.

Intimate fandoms of RPF, as well as offering relief from the pain of living in a world of common sense when you are queer, also allow us to engage in fantasies about celebrities without ever forgetting the difference between the celebrity character and the real person behind that celebrity. RPF does blur the boundaries between reality and fiction (Coombe) and shows that “any belief in the clear separation of the real and the fictional are illusory” when it comes to celebrity (Busse, “My Life is a WIP” 223). However, sports RPF exists because the



mediated narratives of professional sport feel the same way to its slash-fans as any other media text (Waysdorf 3.9). Just as slash-fans of fictional texts make distinctions between canon and slash, RPF slash fans also recognize that our fic is, well, *ours* and *fictional*. It is common for writers of all kinds of slash to include disclaimers in their author's notes, in an attempt to protect themselves from claims of copyright infringement, but that also has the "nearly opposing function[]" of "overly lay[ing] claim to their power as producers" (Herzog). Disclaimers such as the one used by the authors of the fic "Kissed," where they warn readers that "if you got here by googling yourself or someone you know, the back button is a good idea," or another author's somewhat desperate request that "if you got to this link by googling your name, omg please turn back around" in their fic "Love Story," are meant to make clear the difference between canon, which exists outside of AO3, and fanon, over which they claim ownership. That is, these disclaimers mark Hockey RPF as disidentifications of the world of hockey and the hockey players that inhabit it: it is built from the same names but is otherwise ("except for box scores") completely fictional and the product of the fic-writer ("Limits"). The author of the now-orphaned "On the Line" offers a quintessential disclaimer, beginning with the fairly benign statement that "obviously this is all fiction." They make a clear claim for the compartmentalization of the fic character from the celebrity persona by explaining that what they have written has "no bearing on the real lives of any of the people who share the same names as the characters." To reiterate their distance from the non-fictional world, they state unequivocally that they are "not claiming that this is true" nor are they "making any money off of this." "WHO WOULD PAY ME

FOR THIS NONSENSE,” they wonder, concluding their disclaimer by reminding the reader that what they have created is not common sense but nonsense, or, more accurately, queer sense.

These author’s notes may seem a little excessive, since the “F” in RPF stands for *fiction* as well as *fandom*, and it would be shocking if there were someone who read the most popular Hockey RPF and confused them for non-fiction. However, author’s notes are there less as a reminder that what we are reading is fictional than they are a reminder that the *author* knows that it is fictional – a pre-emptive tactic (an apologetic) to avoid the accusation of delusion or irrationality. You can’t tell me that what I wrote is nonsense if I call it nonsense before you even start reading it, after all. These author’s notes are proof of the edges of the boundaries of the intimate fandom, proof of the fear that someone from the outside will come in and make it impossible for us to be comfortable even here in our intimate fandoms. This fear is so strong that these disclaimers appear in even fic that are locked on AO3, meaning that only users with an AO3 account can access them, and they will not show up in the Google search that the first two authors worried about. The fear, then, is not just that outsiders to fic will find the works (that Sidney Crosby will Google himself one day and find their porn), but that outsiders to *RPF* will – people who have AO3 accounts but believe that RPF is immoral. However, those fears are not enough to remove the fic entirely: whether or not the authors have orphaned the fic, the fact that these works remain on AO3 show that there is a need for the expression of these desires, despite – or because of – the fear that leads the authors to write their disclaimers. It is not always easy or comfortable to

engage in the disidentification of hockey players whose identities are tangled up in heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity, but it soothes the raw edges of our bodies, worn down by the “world that is wearing” (Ahmed “Queer Fragility”). To play with the possibility that the Schrödinger’s Queers of hockey might be simply queer is relief from the wearing world of hockey, and that relief is worth the chance that we will encounter a subject whose comfort is threatened by ours – especially when we lessen the possibility of that encounter occurring through our use of intimate fandoms and the sharing of “how best to live on” (Berlant, “Cruel Optimism” 3). The attachments that impede us are dangerous, but we endure them because those attachments also offer us access to the intimate fandoms that give us relief.

## Chapter 4 Il est très noir: Blackness in Hockey RPF

P.K. Subban, during his NHL career, was the NHL's most popular Black athlete. He was also arguably one of the most popular NHLers, full stop. He may not be the pride of the nation like Sidney Crosby or bear the weight of resuscitating a franchise like Connor McDavid or Auston Matthews, but he is not the disrespectful pest that white hockey commentators told us he would be when he first joined the league in Montreal. Instead, he's a recurring All-Star, the face of *EA Sports NHL '19*, a fan-favourite in most of the cities he plays in, and he has a just-this-side-of-egotistical personality that is made for social media stardom. Where other NHL athletes prefer to avoid the limelight, Subban seems to revel in it, wearing flashy suits, posting videos of his parties on Instagram, gently mocking Don Cherry on Sportsnet, and otherwise displaying a personality, something generally not preferred in NHL stars, where Sidney Crosby the Robot Captain is the mold. In other words, Subban transgresses many norms of hockey stardom: on the surface, his race marks him as visibly different, and the fact that he does not quiet his friendly, jovial personality to better fit in exacerbates this transgression. He is not a silent, polite outsider, grateful to be let in: he is loud, brash, and confident in ways that pushes against hockey's norms of white gentility. In return for his transgressions, public hockey fandom names him as egotistical, someone who is bad for the locker room, who would steal the show rather than share it with his teammates, and is thus more trouble off the ice than he's worth on it. This despite the fact that, unlike many, many other NHLers, Subban has never been accused of domestic or sexual violence, nor has he ever been arrested for any drunken shenanigans. In other words, Subban is not

your average NHL star: because of his race and his persona, he stands out in a field of bland clones.

Because he transgresses many of hockey's norms, you might then expect that he's a popular figure on AO3, given that the previous chapter of this dissertation argues that Hockey RPF takes as its canon those athletes who are a mis-fit in one way or another for hockey culture. However, Subban, with all the ways he pushes against the norms of public hockey culture, is not popular on Archive of Our Own. He does appear in some fic, and he has a few devoted fans who read and write his most popular pairing (with Carey Price<sup>5</sup>, goaltender for the Montreal Canadiens), but he is less popular than you might assume, given what Hockey RPF slash-fans seem to look for in their characters. Unless, of course, you recognize that White Hockey RPF fans are, if not as racist as public hockey fans, at least more racist than we want to believe we are. white Hockey RPF slash-fans who read and write Hockey RPF, like me, don't seem to know what to do with P.K. Subban. His Blackness is not just a source of contradiction in the very much imagined ideal of (Canadian) hockey as a place of inclusivity and diversity and even in his own star persona, but also in the similarly imagined ideal of transformative fandom as inherently progressive. That is, Subban creates discomfort for Hockey RPF slash-fans because his presence, and his lack of popularity in the

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<sup>5</sup> Carey Price is one of the NHL's few Indigenous athletes, but the fic I include in this chapter do not address or mention it. While there are some fic on AO3 that focus more on Carey, which may engage with his Indigeneity, these fic do not. Written from the perspective of P.K., the exploration of race is limited to P.K.'s Blackness. This may be a result of the erasure of Price's Indigeneity in public hockey fandom. I remember learning about Price's Indigeneity through a post on Tumblr and have witnessed other people be surprised by this fact: although it isn't something Price hides, it's not central to his public canon. This elision of Carey Price as an Indigenous hockey player in both public and intimate fandoms of hockey is complex enough to demand its own chapter in another dissertation.

fandom, exposes the reality (to white fans) that the fandom is not the progressive space we believe it to be (Black fans always knew this). Fans and fan scholars historically want to see their fandoms as transgressive of oppressive norms and morally good. While that's true enough when it comes to imagining and celebrating queerness, our treatment of Black NHLers like P.K. Subban shows that we are as flawed as the rest of hockey fandom when it comes to imagining the complexity that is Canadian Blackness.

#### **4.1 Imagining Blackness in Hockey**

I say imagining intentionally: even though there are Black men in the NHL, they are required to ignore – if not disavow – that Blackness in favour of playing hockey “the white way” (Szto, Lorenz & Murray). Blackness is not simply skin colour but is instead a complex mix of signifiers: a sign constructed by white supremacy in opposition to whiteness (cf. Hobson), a sign that Black people use to collect the histories of Black culture and pride (cf. Walcott), and a visible sign of American Blackness in particular (cf. Fleetwood). However, the cost of playing hockey in the NHL is that any relationship to Blackness must be erased in favour of loyalty to white hockey masculinity. In other words, although Blackness consists of much more than the colour of a person's skin, the NHL does not have room for any other signifier of Blackness. For example, When P.K. Subban was first called up to the Montreal Canadiens, Jeremy Filosa wrote that he was “Pas un peu noir, il est très noir” (literally: not just a bit black, he is very black) (Filosa, quoted in Décoste). Filosa is a white Québécois sports journalist, writing to mostly white Francophone hockey fans, who would have been

shocked that someone who is “très noir” could play hockey for *Les Habitants*, a bastion of French-Canadian pride. This focus on his skin colour marked Subban’s entry to the NHL, and it shaped how Montreal’s public of hockey related to him for the entirety of his career with them. Subban’s story is emblematic of the Black athlete’s experience of the NHL: their skin colour is marked, notable, unignorable, but any other expression of or connection to Blackness must be subsumed in favour of bland hockey whiteness.

We may not need to literally imagine that there are athletes in the NHL with Black *skin* in the same way that we must imagine that there are out queer players, but regardless of the reality of Black hockey players, the ideal of hockey simply doesn’t include a cultural comfort with or love of Blackness. Hockey players with Black skin exist, of course, but that existence is dependent on their willingness to *play* “the white way” (Szto; Lorenz and Murray) So even when the colour of their skin marks them as visibly Black, we ask them to disavow any connection to Blackness and pretend their skin colour doesn’t affect their lives. Blackness, in contrast to the name of the colour Black, is “a sign, one that carries with it particular histories of resistance and domination” (Walcott 27). And although we cannot ignore the realities associated with hockey players’ skin colours – and although those histories are not just “messy and contested” (28) but deeply violent – in Canada and hockey especially, we erase and ignore the histories of Black culture and pride, as well as the oppression of racism. If someone wants Blackness to be part of hockey, then, they must still imagine it, because hockey as it is now doesn’t allow for it. Blackness is transgressive in Canada and in hockey. Canada as it is now (and has always been) doesn’t allow for it, with

“state institutions and official narratives [that] attempt to render Blackness outside of those same narratives, and simultaneously attempt to contain Blackness<sup>6</sup> through discourses of Canadian benevolence” (44). Exceptional athletes like P.K. Subban must carefully construct their star personas to avoid coming across as too invested in Blackness, because in the ideal of hockey, which is the ideal of Canada, Black Canadian is an impossible identity, a “counter-narrative ... that calls into question the very conditions of nation-bound identity” (103). The hockey man, as expressed through the ideal of hockey, is white. He might also have a bit of a dad-bod (and an enormous hockey butt that we agree to call glutes or quads because butts are too sexy – see chapter 5), missing teeth, and a blonde (or brunette) white wife, but it’s his connection to whiteness, especially Canadian whiteness, that marks him as a *good* Hockey Man. This ideal figure is the representative of gentlemanly kinship, and someone who aspires to be him will have literal family ties to hockey’s history, whether that’s in his lineage or in more nostalgic ties in the form of childhood fandom, where he has learned how to correctly *do* sports fandom from older model fans (Crawford 40). Of course, not every hockey fan will look like this hockey man, but he is the man we are supposed to identify with, whether we want him (as a heterosexual woman) or want to be him (as a heterosexual man). Hockey is a sport that desires (to be) the “white” kind of man, and when we don’t fit into that ideal – because we don’t identify with the Hockey Man, or because we

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<sup>6</sup> Although I have taken my cue from Black activists (Touré; Kapitan;) in capitalizing Black and Blackness, Walcott does not capitalize Black, Blackness, or Black Canadians, so I have left his style intact.



*do* but incorrectly – then public hockey fandom will police our expressions of desire, our identification with those bodies of hockey.

Policing desire and policing identification are about the same problem, because identification is a matter of desire, of wanting to be *like* or wanting to be *with* (Ahmed, “Happy Objects” 37; Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 127). When your desires are directed at the wrong object, or to what would be the right object if you did it along a different line, your identification is seen as queer, as non-normative, as incorrect. Your desires transgress the norm. A man who desires to be *with* the Hockey Man desires the wrong object, or desires the Hockey Man in the wrong way: he should want to be *like* him. Although outside of hockey it would be considered straight or normal for a woman to want to be *with* the ideal man, within the public fandom of hockey even that expression of desire is incorrect. Any woman who has been told that she’s only interested in hockey because the men are attractive, like @homenotahotel who was “at a cup final game [and] was told that I was only there because I wanted to see Sidney Crosby naked,” has had their (perceived) desire for the Hockey Man policed. Instead, she should want to be like a Hockey Mom, who, like the men who want to be like the Hockey Man, has a nonsexual admiration for him. However, a woman who wants to be *with* the Hockey Man is still better than the woman who wants to be like him, because at least then her desire is directed *along* the right line, if not exactly – parallel to the right line, but still a little *off*. And this is all assuming that the Hockey Man you desire (to be) is the right kind of man. If the Hockey Man you identify with doesn’t even look like the ideal hockey man – because he is queer, because he is Black,

because he isn't even a man – you probably don't fit into the public fandom of hockey: to desire the wrong kind of Hockey Man requires imagining a new kind of hockey. Others might call that different Hockey Man a fantasy, a delusion, a wish, or a hope, depending on how kind they want to be to the dreamer, but it's important to remember that all Hockey Men are fantasies: the straight white Hockey Man is simply the public ideal – the image that state institutions, national narratives, and popular texts want us to believe is the norm.

Even when the NHL says that “Hockey is For Everyone,” (both a slogan and a charitable organization, abbreviated as HIFE) or “If you can play, you can play” (the slogan of *You Can Play* or YCP) they mean that hockey is for everyone whose desires are legible within the context of the public ideal. That is, HIFE and YCP may strive to include LGBTQ hockey fans and fans of color in the public fandom of hockey, but they invite us only if we are hockey fans who want to express our desire for the sport along the already established lines set out by hegemonic norms. This means that they seek fans who will buy rainbow-embazoned merch and who are happy to have teams reach out to them only during the one (mandatory) YCP game or during HIFE month (February, which is also Black History Month). HIFE and YCP are capitalist, homonationalist expressions of inclusion, in which “some (homosexual) bodies [are] worthy of protection” because of their willingness and ability to spend money in the right ways (Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism” 337). The bodies of LGBTQ fans who are willing to let go of (or never had) radical politics are welcome in the public fandom of hockey, because they ask for little change. Fans who call for systemic change, on the other hand, such as the removal of homophobic athletes and staff

and the assurance that an out gay or bisexual athlete would not suffer are not welcome in the public fandom of hockey. We see examples in other leagues of Black men taking the risk of being out: Michael Sam, the first out gay NFL draftee who never quite made it to the league, and Ryan Russell, who recently came out as bisexual, and we are worried and angry.

Whether or not Sam was skilled enough to play was never the biggest question about his drafting: instead, we wondered what team would take him and the risk of his sexuality.

Although he was drafted by the St. Louis Rams, he never played in the NFL, making it instead in the less illustrious CFL (Canadian Football League). After a year, he retired, citing “mental health reasons” (Dubin). It must have been a strain on his mental health, to be not only a figure of hope for gay football players, but also a threat to the masculinities of homophobic fans and teammates, despite the fact that, otherwise, he is the picture of masculinity. I can only hope he’s happy, wherever he is now. Russel, on the other hand, played, closeted, for several years and is coming out now because the chance to be happy in a relationship was worth the risk of being out. He seems happy, as we see him smiling and holding his boyfriend’s hand in paparazzi pictures, and only time will tell if he can be happy and have a career in sport at the same time.

When we ask for things to change, when we ask for it to be possible for everyone – not just straight, white, married hockey players – to express their identities fully in hockey, we are told to “stick to sports” (if we are otherwise seen as important hockey commentators

like Greg Wyshynski<sup>7</sup>) or, if public fans don't see us as powerful, we're told to leave (e.g. "if you don't like it, leave...please" [@BAMHockey74]). To want hockey to change beyond the gesture towards inclusion that is emblematic of contemporary homonationalism is at odds with public hockey fandom, so people who want a different kind of hockey make themselves outsiders to the Hockey that is apparently For Everyone. Similarly, to complain about the racism of trading P.K. Subban, or to point out the dogwhistle of legacy athletes like Max Domi (son of hockey royalty – who is in turn a son of immigrants – Tahir "Tie" Domi) who took to Twitter to blame immigration for violence in Alberta (Canadian Press "Max Domi calls for stricter immigration controls after Edmonton attack"), we mark ourselves as outside of hockey – even hockey that is supposed to be inclusive of *literally everyone*. And finally, to point out that the white Hockey Man is himself a fantasy, a persona that hockey boys are expected to learn to perform at the expense of their own personalities is to threaten the scaffolds holding public hockey fandom up. Paradoxically, although hockey is apparently for everyone, anyone who points out that hockey is not, in fact, "for everyone" isn't *for hockey* and thus has no standing to criticize it.

However, people who are willing to give up their position (if they ever had it) in public hockey fandom have made it clear that hockey has been built for white people *at best* without people of color in mind and at worst with the explicit intention of keeping people of color out (Szto "Hockey is For Everyone – a pretty good lie"). The history of hockey in

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<sup>7</sup> In response to an article about the Penguins visiting the Trump white House, Sam the Sens Fan said "Stick to writing about hockey. You're usually a pretty decent read" (@transconasam)

Canada is the history of white supremacy and patriarchy in Canada (Krebs; Szto; Wamsley). Hockey was deployed in “residential schools to shape the students’ approach to the world around them” (Krebs 82), the failure of Inuit players to play the white way was felt as proof of their effeminacy (91), and today Canada’s justice system, “from police through to Crown prosecutors, is intimately linked to the junior hockey establishment through ownership, coaching, and billeting of players” (95). Where sport in Canada has always a place to develop “paternalist class- and race-based masculinities” (Wamsley 27), hockey is the sport of the nation, and thus “continues to produce colonial relationships [...] by maintaining the hegemony of a white, masculine subjectivity to which all other subject position must refer” (Krebs 81). In fact, as “a conservative space that promotes and privileges white supremacy,” hockey has rigid hierarchies of ethnicity and masculinity that catches and criticizes European players like Alex Ovechkin and imperfectly masculine players like Sidney Crosby for their failures to live up to this imagined white masculinity (Szto, *Changing on the Fly* 27-28). Canadianness, whiteness, and hockey are interrelated, such that we use each to police the other, to the extent that it is impossible to untangle them: Hockey, Canada, and white supremacist patriarchy are effectively one and the same.

So, of course, Hockey is for white people. When YCP says that “you can play” regardless of your sexuality, their expression in hockey demands a man who is “rugged, virile, aggressively athletic, and white” (Davidson). The “if” in YCP’s motto stands in for a lot of assumptions about the body of the player – the same assumptions involved in HIFE’s “everyone.” However, although HIFE is ostensibly a way to invite people of diverse

ethnicities, races, genders, sexualities, and abilities into the sport, it tends to focus on LGBTQ inclusion, and most HIFE initiatives have also been *You Can Play* (YCP) initiatives, prioritizing sanitized queerness over the (frankly more difficult) conversation about the racism inherent in hockey cultures (Sztó; MacDonald). It is difficult, then, to disentangle race from queerness in the NHL, because racial identities that are not “white” are still *queer* – in the sense that it is not normative – in the NHL. To be queer or to be Black is to transgress what it means to play hockey, because hockey is about normative white masculinity. I sometimes wonder if it’s easier to hypothetically accept the presumed white queers that don’t (apparently) exist in the NHL than it is to actually celebrate the Black men who already exist in the NHL. Where the real Black men of the NHL have real bodies and real desires that create wobbles in the scaffolding of hockey’s fantasies, there are *apparently* no real queers in the NHL. Imaginary white queers can be perfect members of the nation and are therefore granted a reprieve from affect alienhood for their sexual desires, because we can imagine them as otherwise directed towards appropriate objects (Ahmed; Berlant; Davidson; Puar). The real Black people in the NHL make that imagined normativity harder to hold in place.

#### **4.1.1 I don’t want to ruin Christmas (but I do)**

On Christmas Eve, I’m trying to participate in the hockey talk my sister’s then-boyfriend and my uncle are sharing. They’re talking about the boyfriend’s favourite team – he’s French-Canadian, so it’s a family tradition to love *Les habitants*. He complains about the bad decisions General Manager Marc Bergevin is making, and I’m excited that I get to chime in with my agreement. The GM and the coach keep making decisions that prioritize *grit* and *heart* instead of skill – like the Subban-Weber trade, which broke so many fans’ hearts. It wasn’t just a bad skill-trade, but it was a cruel one, too: after

months of saying they'd never trade Subban, and the day before his contract would have allowed him to refuse a trade, they trade him to Nashville, getting an older, slower, *grittier* defenseman in return. We commiserate about this for a bit and I feel good!

This is what it's like to be a part of a hockey family: I know things that they know, we share feelings about the machinery of the NHL, and we get to connect across a gulf of personalities, interests, politics, and my own discomfort with this not-so-new family member who's closer to my sister and my dad than I am.

I feel good, then I don't.

After I say something about how bad the trade was for the Habs, the boyfriend's loyalty to the team reasserts itself. He walks back some of his complaints and explains that, actually, the trade was the right call because Subban just wasn't a good *fit* for the team. I agree, a bit: Subban seems to be thriving in Nashville, away from caustic Montreal media.

But somewhere, something shifts and I find myself not talking about hockey anymore, but about racism, because talk of his on-ice play turns to talk of his *personality* and his *flashiness* and his lack of hockey gentility. I'm a few (many) glasses of wine into an evening that I already knew would be stressful, and my ability to keep my mouth shut (never a skill of mine in the first place) is waning.

I say something like: "When people talk about Subban's personality, it's just thinly veiled racism."

This doesn't sit well. My uncle and the boyfriend react, as you'd expect, poorly.

"It's not racism, it's just a *hockey trade* -"

Implying, of course, that if I understood hockey better, I'd understand the value of the trade.

"Just because he's Black doesn't mean everything bad that happens to him is racism."

I've heard this before - I'm the racist for calling this racism.

But I think I've got this: "The way people speak about him - especially when he entered the league - is racist, though. They don't like him because he's a flashy Black man."

They say: "They don't like him because he's a flashy *guy*, full stop. He takes attention away from the team. Race has nothing to do with it."

I say: "But people used racist slurs and coded language to talk about him."

This was a mistake, because they say:

"Who? What's the evidence?"

I name someone. But he's not Montreal media, so it doesn't count. I name someone else, but that was ages ago, so it doesn't count. I can't remember all the names because I'm stressed and about to cry and I've had about a bottle of wine at this point and I just want them to stop telling me that the Subban trade had nothing to do with his Blackness.

So I break. I say things I shouldn't: "I've read dozens of articles about this. I've done the research. I can't remember all the names right now and I don't feel like defending my dissertation for you on Christmas Eve when I'm drunk and tired, but I *know* it's true. I'm *right*. But I'm done arguing. You can believe what you want; I'm done."

Silence.

Oppressive, awful silence.

I message my sister, who's sitting next to me, as I quietly cry:

*I'm sorry I ruined Christmas.*

My dad puts on a depressing movie about WWII where Estonian soldiers meet on a battlefield, half of them conscripted into the Russian army and the other half liberated by the Germans. They fight each other in a meadow without any Germans or Russians around.

The mood lifts.



However imaginary, the white Hockey Man is still a powerful ideal, and threatening that ideal is also to threaten the people whose collective desire shapes him. Hockey, in the public fandom, is supposed to be a place of gentlemanly violence, a “dominance-based masculinity” suited to Canadian patriarchy and thinly veiled white supremacy (Wamsley 34). When you are, like P.K. Subban, a man who plays hockey professionally at the highest levels, but is not *quite* a Hockey Man, then your life *must* be contradictory. Subban’s Black skin will always mark him as different in a sport where being different, being special is morally wrong. It is supposed to be, according to the iconic hockey movie *Miracle*, the name on the front of the jersey that matters, not the name on the back. Public hockey fandom would like to believe that it is also the colour of the *jersey* that matters, not the colour of the player’s skin, but that seems only to be true when the athletes are white. Racist taunts, such as calling Black hockey players monkeys or gorillas and telling them to “play basketball,” or shouting racist war cries at First Nations athletes and calling them “savages” is common in all levels of hockey (Arthur; Bell et. al; Brown). So how, then, does a Black man become a celebrity figure in a sport where whiteness, tradition, and humility are integral to the public ideal? With difficulty, contradiction, and a determined performance of identification with hockey’s traditions.

#### **4.2 The fantasies of Subban as a Black NHLer**

It is difficult enough to become a beloved NHL celebrity, but to do it while Black is a colossal achievement, because before he says or does anything, Subban’s body speaks for him. His skill may be (mostly) unquestioned, and his off-ice behaviour is (generally)

charitable and politically bland, but he still doesn't look like a hockey player. Either public hockey fandom has to work a little harder to make him into something identifiable or he does, and Subban works very hard – almost too hard. After his trade to Nashville, then another trade to New Jersey, the complaint about Subban was that he posted too frequently about his training regimen, with commentators like Andrew Walker asking “Hey has anyone seen any P.K. Subban summer workout videos? I haven't noticed. I sure hope he's training hard for the new season like all the other players” (@AndrewWalker650). Unlike the other Black athletes fans love to hate, like Jack Johnson, Dennis Rodman, or Colin Kaepernick, Subban does not overtly challenge white civility, heteronormativity, or nationalism (LaFrance and Rail; McDonald & Andrews; Ward), so public hockey fans must find another way to show his misfit, as though that isn't already apparent in his skin colour. Black people – athletes or fans – are still contested members of the NHL and hockey fandom more generally, and Black NHLers are often the only visible minority members on a team (Subban will have, for the first time in his career, a black teammate in Wayne Simmonds on the New Jersey Devils). It is, as Kyle Gipe for *The Hockey Writers* puts it, “non-traditional” to have “a black athlete in the NHL” (Gipe), and not only is Subban Black, “*il est très noir*” – according to Jeremy Filosa<sup>8</sup> when Subban was first called up to Montreal (quoted in Décoste).

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<sup>8</sup> The full quotation is: “Voilà que le Tricolore se retrouve aujourd'hui avec, dans ses rangs, peut-être le meilleur défenseur de la planète et il est noir. Pas un peu noir, il est très noir.” Décoste translates this as: “Now the Habs [tricolour, i.e. blue-white-red] find themselves with, in their ranks, perhaps the best defenceman on the planet and he is Black. Not just a little bit Black, he is very dark-skinned Black,” although a literal translation of the last would be “he is very Black.”

Although he is definitely not the NHL's first Black athlete (that's Willie O'Ree), or even the NHL's first Black star (that accolade might go, instead, to Jarome Iginla), he is noteworthy – he draws our attention. Adrian Harewood claims that he's the first NHLer to “perform[] his Blackness freely” (qtd in Patriquin), but the contradiction of Subban is that he's “very Black,” and we're not supposed to talk about it. He “performs his Blackness freely,” and he never mentions it. The paradox of being a Black player in the NHL is that the individual athlete – and his race – isn't supposed to matter, but he's playing in a league where 93-95% of players identify as white, where fans think it's acceptable to dress up as gorillas in Subban jerseys, and where racial slurs from teammates, opponents, referees, coaches, fans, and commentators are all too common. So: obviously it matters that he's Black, and we can't forget that he's Black, but good public fans of hockey are supposed to pretend that it has no impact on his career or our feelings about him. If you make it clear that your attachment to Subban is *because* of his Blackness, you mark yourself as a wrong kind of fan and are likely to be corrected (just as you might be if you claimed you disliked Subban because of his Blackness – you're supposed to use coded language, like ‘disrespectful’ and ‘flashy,’ instead). Talking about Subban's Blackness in public hockey fandom makes it clear that you have not learned how to speak in the rhetorical genre of public hockey fandom, because public hockey fandom requires adherence to the fantasy of colour-blind merit in Canadian hockey.

Subban is a good symbol of the contradictions of this fantasy: he is an excellent athlete, a generous celebrity, and a gregarious spokesman, even if his Blackness makes him

an imperfect, uncomfortable body to use as a representative of hockey masculinity. In a culture where being noticed is a cardinal sin, it is impossible not to notice P.K. Subban: in fact, he has carved out a successful professional and commercial career by being noticeable. Like other Black athletes who have been condemned by the public authorities in their sport, he's a *flashy, personality*-full player who gets under other players' skins – he definitely doesn't belong and his simple *presence* is an irritant. The paradox of Subban, or the cost of his success, is that he would prefer no one brought the fact of his Blackness up, but Blackness is part of what makes him *P.K. Subban*. As a result, Subban is an exceptional Canadian athlete whose value to his team is debatable *only* because his body doesn't look like the one we're supposed to desire. He transgresses the norms of whiteness in Canadian hockey both because of his skin colour and because of his ebullient personality. His body is contested by the public of hockey, *because* of his value to hockey (cf. Allain, *Canada's Golden Boy*) – if he were not a good hockey player, it would be easy to dismiss him, to take his transgressions of hockey whiteness and remove him from the sport. That he is a Black NHL *star* threatens the overall fantasy of hockey, so public hockey fandom must either disavow him, or find a way to explain how he matters for the right reasons.

Although Subban does have many loyal public fans, there are also coaches, players, commentators, and other fans who wish he would be more like that Hockey Man. They wish he would be more *respectable*, which we know is racist code demanding that Black people adhere, if not to white ideals of comportment, then to racist ideals of Black comportment in the presence of whites (E.F. White 36). In hockey, respectability is key: you should be

humble, quiet, and never take attention away from your team – but when you are Black in the NHL, your skin demands attention even before you speak. So, while Subban was playing for Montreal, Don Cherry loved to hate him for his flashy, un-hockey personality (Fitz-Gerald, “Don Cherry Scolds P.K. Subban”). His then-coach, Michel Therrien, forbade the “triple-low-five” celebration that Subban and his goalie Carey Price shared after victories, because Therrien wanted “every player on the Canadiens speaking team” and the triple-low-five is “not about team, it’s about P.K. Subban and Carey Price” (Berkshire, “Why did Michel Therrien kill the triple low five?”). Unlike Patrick Kane – alleged rapist and Chicago Blackhawks star – whose “heartbreaker celly” (a goal celebration where Kane outlines a heart with both hands then punches through the centre) was a sign of “the future of [the] NHL” (Johnston), Subban’s archery celly (he shoots an invisible arrow into the sky) was “wacky” (NHL, “Wacky Goal Celebration”) and “ridiculous” (Canadian Press, “Cherry: Subban celebration “ridiculous”). His “exciting personality” was not in line with how hockey should be played (Cherry, quoted in Reusch), and his “flashy” personality (Perry) was “excessive” and “absolutely ridiculous” (NHL). Even when he did something objectively *good*, like donate \$10 Million to the Montreal Children’s Hospital, he did it *wrong*: given through his personal foundation rather than through the Montreal Canadiens, the donation was seen not as a generous gift, but as a slight against the Canadiens, “robbing the organization of the ensuing public relations bounce” (Patriquin). His act of charity is re-written in public fandom as an act of ego, proof that he cares more about himself than his team. In contrast, when white francophone Jonathan Drouin donated \$500,000 through the

Canadiens' foundation, he explained that he did it "for myself and for the kids," and has not been accused of having an overlarge ego (quoted in The Canadian Press, "Habs' Drouin follows Subban's footsteps").

Although his job is difficult, because he is "*très noir*," Subban has been successful in his attempt to position himself as *almost* the Hockey Man. Subban's move to Nashville has seen his public standing rise, because it has allowed him to situate himself as in line with public hockey fandom. His team made it to the Stanley Cup Final, he was the cover of EA Sports NHL '19, he starred in "The P.K. Project," and his on-ice antics drew praise rather than ire. Part of this is due to his skill in front of a camera: he used both traditional and social media to portray himself as a friendly, charitable guy who just wants to play the game he loves. However, the move to Nashville was also a useful turning point. Subban found himself in a city where Black masculinity is if not entirely beloved at least not seen as an immediate threat. Subban used the trade as an opportunity to frame himself as an athlete who just wanted to play his sport, telling reporters that he was "really happy to be going to a team that wants [him]" (@KevinWeekes) and that he expected that his new team would allow him to "excel and feel good about [him]self coming to the rink every day" (@brooksbratten). This served the dual purpose of implying that the team, not Subban, was the problem, and reinforcing the image of Subban as a Hockey Man who just wants to play the game. This is not a normal response to a trade, which would see a player thank his *previous* team for the opportunity to play. However, by telling the story of the team limiting his ability to "excel and feel good about ... coming to the rink every day," Subban positioned the trade as a

fulcrum: a moment when he could become instead of a problem simply a hockey player again. Of course, the trade of a Black man from an original six team that never really liked him to an expansion team in the southern US was always going to be “less of a business transaction than a cacophony of issues involving language, race, media, franchise loyalty and wounded pride” (Patriquin), but Subban – like his father and brothers – explicitly does not talk about race and racism. In an interview after the trade, Subban acknowledged that there were personality conflicts, but made no mention of Montreal’s white francophone culture as oppressive (Engels). For the Subban family, racism might happen, but the best way to deal with it is to ignore it, because although we may all “know [he’s] Black,” the goal is to be known and spoken about as a good hockey player, not as “a Black hockey player” (Subban, quoted in Wyshynski “ESPN Profiles”).

Despite his preference, however, racists won’t forget his Blackness – and neither will fans for whom seeing a Black hockey player is exciting or affirming. Fans like @simplydiva71 who runs the Twitter account @BlackGirlsHockey, has this response to his unwillingness to claim his own Blackness: “it’s a copout and lets down a demographic that needs representation he isn’t willing to give. As a Black hockey fan, I know it’s impossible to separate that from his identity, IDK what he’s trying to prove.” Because he’s a Black man in a culture that expects athletes to play hockey “the white way” (Szto, “Playing the white Way”), he is faced with the choice to assimilate as best as possible, or to make himself *more* noticeable. It’s difficult to blame Subban for choosing the simpler, less terrifying, route to success, one that is closer to the route his white colleagues get to take. He has managed to

position himself as a kind of Hockey Man, if not quite the ideal one. However, it's also difficult *not* to blame him for refusing to speak about what is increasingly an important story in North American professional athletics. In the National Basketball Association (NBA), Black superstar athletes are increasingly vocal about their politics, both off and on the court. Their political expression is, to some extent, part of their careers, where questions about politics are routinely answered in post-game interviews, and athletes often express political views as a team through patches on their uniforms. In the NBA, which is about 75% Black (Lapchick and Zimmerman), Blackness is not swept aside in favour of a white gentility, because Blackness has become central to basketball's public fandom.

In contrast, the NHL *can* erase its Black athletes and their politics. Of the 34 Black hockey players in the NHL (as of June 2023) (Kumar) few are willing to speak about the racism they face, and none of them are as popular as Subban was in his prime. Although the response to their commentary depends heavily on their rhetorical choices, speaking up about racism as a Black hockey player comes with consequences. When Givani Smith, an OHL athlete, was called racial slurs by the opposing team during a game, he gave his opponents the middle finger. After, he required a police escort thanks to the death threats he received because his anger was perceived as inappropriate – giving the finger is not gentlemanly and is therefore proof that he doesn't belong in the sport (no one sent death threats to the men who used the slurs) (Rush). Devante Smith-Pelly routinely worked with Black youth groups in Washington (Khurshudyan), and made it clear that he did not visit the white House in 2019 (along with two white teammates, Braden Holtby and Brett Connolly [Associated Press,



“Hard Pass”]) when the Washington Capitals were invited, because “the things that [Trump] spews are straight-up racist and sexist” (Smith-Pelly, quoted in Traikos). When he played in Chicago in February 2018 (which is both Black history month and the NHL’s official *HIFE* month), hockey fans shouted “Go play bas-ket-ball! Bas-ket-ball! Bas-ket-ball!” while he was in the penalty box (Kaplan, “Washington Capitals winger”). Given that the NBA has a majority of Black players, and the sport is stereotypically associated with less wealthy Black neighbourhoods (who cannot afford thousands of dollars of hockey equipment each year), the message of that chant is that Black athletes in hockey are not just in the wrong sport, but that they are not in their proper place. Although it’s undeniable that Black NHLers receive racist harassment and are victims of racist violence, athletes like Smith-Pelly still “prefer[] not to make his race a point of emphasis” and Smith-Pelly must tell us that he “regrets his candor” when his anti-racist statements go viral (Kaplan). He has since been sent back down to the AHL and is called back up to the Capitals only rarely. That is the fate of the Black NHLer who acknowledges that he is a victim of racism: he is no longer a Black NHLer.

JT Brown and Wayne Simmonds are the NHL’s most vocal Black athletes. Brown was the only NHLer to raise his fist in protest of police brutality and in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick, and he and his (white) wife, Lexi LaFleur, and their then-newborn daughter – received (and continue to receive) death threats (Livingstone). LaFleur tweeted, “When JT raised his fist once, he received death threats, I was told to kill myself, and my daughter was called a n\*\*\*\*\*. We talked about how he may never play hockey again” (@LexiLaFleur).

Wayne Simmonds advocated for Willie O'Ree's<sup>9</sup> inclusion in the Hockey Hall of Fame and wrote about how soul-crushing it is to be a victim of racism, saying that "it's going to be impossible for me to totally explain the feeling to someone who hasn't experienced it, but it's like someone is trying to take away your spirit" (Simmonds). He may not have received death threats (at least none that he's spoken about publicly) but he has certainly been the focus of racist harassment from fans, like those who threw bananas on the ice when he played in London, and he speaks about the "lonely and infuriating feeling" of being a victim of racism in hockey (Simmonds). Soon after, his star in Philadelphia fell, and trade rumours surrounded discussion of his "physicality" (Boylen) and questions about whether he "has the right blend of talent and leadership" (Boruk and Hall). He's since been traded to New Jersey. Where Simmonds is willing to publish an essay in *The Player's Tribune* discussing the "feeling that probably every single Black player in the NHL can relate to" of being called a racial slur, Subban was noticeably silent. As long as Subban refused to acknowledge that part of what he represents is a Black hockey player, he could help maintain the irrational fantasy that hockey is both a white sport *and* "for everyone" regardless of race. Subban's complicity in the fantasy of whiteness in hockey – and Simmonds' refusal – is one reason that P.K. Subban was on the cover of EA Sports' *NHL 18*, and Simmonds was not. P.K. Subban may be 'very Black,' but he seems to accept that the price to pay for NHL celebrity is silence – adherence to public hockey fandom's desire that 'politics' exist outside of hockey.

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<sup>9</sup> O'Ree was the first Black man to play in the NHL and has been a tireless organizer in the decades since, encouraging and supporting Black children who play hockey.

### 4.3 Fantasies of Subban as a Black slash character

Making Subban fit into the fantasy that hockey is *meant* for straight, white men, and thus making him a figure of normative identification, is not the only option, however. The things that make him *not quite* the Ideal Hockey Man – an effect of his existence as a real human being – mean he needs to be straightened in public fandom before fans can identify with him, but they also mean that he should be a perfect candidate for *dis*identification and queering in intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF. There, it's possible to take his public persona and slot him into queerer fantasies, to rebuild him into a figure that is not the Ideal Hockey Man but is someone who represents our queerer hockey desires. When those of us who read and write Hockey RPF are faced with hockey's homophobic fantasies, we have found a pattern of disidentification that works for us: we take, ignore, reform, and refuse certain elements of canon to build a fanon we like. Of course, this push and pull with canon is not limited to Hockey RPF, or even other RPF slash. Fic in general is especially well-suited to the kind of disidentification that we see in Hockey RPF because it has a complex relationship to dominant media that is neither identification nor rejection. A lot of fic does come from the "balance of fascination and frustration" that creates the need for disidentification; we don't write fic for things we don't want to see fixed (Jenkins, "Fanfiction as Critical Commentary"). However, it's the strong communal practices that signal which intimate fandom is being addressed that make fic a disidentificatory gold mine. Although disidentification might feel natural to fic, because both are "always shuffling back and forth

between rejection and production,” disidentification doesn’t just happen: it takes work, and requires people to take apart that “raw code” (Muñoz 26).

For example, we might imagine that women’s professional and national hockey is ripe for femslash plucking: there are many out queer athletes in women’s hockey, including married lesbians and jock-ish maybe-gays who haven’t come out publicly (but if you know, you *know*). However, there really isn’t a lot of Women’s Hockey RPF on AO3. Take Julie Chu and Caroline Ouellette: both were previously the captains of their national teams, with Chu heading up Team USA and Ouellette leading Team Canada, until they started playing together as stars of the (now defunct) CWHL when they played for Les Canadiennes. The rivals-to-teammates trope is a popular one in Men’s Hockey RPF (especially in Olympics years), but there’s very little Julie Chu/Caroline Ouellette fic (only 19 on AO3 as of 2023) compared to, for example, the 333 fic for an incredibly rare pair: Sidney Crosby/Claude Giroux. This feels sad – like a testament to the lack of attention that caused the CWHL to disband – but I also recognize that when I want to feel queerness in women’s hockey, I don’t have to rewrite reality. There’s little to reject in the story of two high-profile women captaining their rival national teams to success, joining forces to play in the un-paid CWHL, becoming friends, falling in love, secretly getting pregnant and winning the Clarkson Cup together, then flooding their Instagram accounts with sweet, adorable pictures of queer, interracial domestic bliss for us to mainline. Their love story is basically an AO3 summary, so there’s no need to do the hard work of writing it down: it’s already there for us to love. We write transformative fic not about the stories that exist but the stories we *wish* existed and

mis/using the bits and pieces from those stories that do exist, even if we know they're impossible in the here and now – and that is the utopian work of disidentification. Fic might feel naturally disidentificatory, but it takes work to create the intimate fandoms that are addressed, to learn what kinds of work are most needed by the fandom and what battles we've decided aren't worth fighting, and to figure out how to speak in the right way to be heard: it's through this work, then, that we can find the kinds of stories our intimate fandom deems worthy of telling – and the ones we see as unworthy. Intimate fandoms are, then, not just smaller groups of people, but communities of fandom with specific desires – in the case of my Hockey RPF fandoms, the desires shuffle between identification and disidentification.

While it is true that Hockey RPF's intimate fandoms are much more welcoming of queer attraction to NHLers, whether that's the contextually queer but otherwise heteronormative desire that women have for attractive athletes or the desire for those athletes to *be* queer, those now-queer athletes are almost always white. We don't soothe all pain equally, because the fantasy of whiteness persists in many of hockey's intimate fandoms. The fantasy of queerness is often actually a fantasy of hockey gentility, where Blackness, if it is even relevant, is forgotten or hidden in service of the unity of the imagined queer team, just as the homonationalist fantasies of *You Can Play* or *Hockey is For Everyone* erase the realities of race to promote imagined white homosexuality. When we look at Men's Hockey RPF on AO3, we see that, in general, the intimate fandoms that gather here are interested in different kinds of queerness, since words related to nonnormative sexualities and romantic desire show up frequently in its tags. However, Blackness is absent – erased, ignored,

forgotten. Amid the thousands of fic that imagines queerness where it doesn't belong, it's striking how few of those stories include – much less celebrate – Black athletes.

Those of us who read and write fic, especially in those slash fandoms unwelcome in the public fandom, signal our membership in the intimate fandom by naming and canonizing (or fanonizing) our needs and desires through tropes, tags, authors' notes, rec-lists, and things like blog names, author pseudonyms, and in-group references. Those tools all help us ensure that the well-read fic reader – the member of our intimate fandom – already knows the basic shape of the story before they start reading, so that the author can focus on the particular *thing* they're disidentifying with. These practices developed in conjunction with the social networking sites and archives that have become home to intimate fandoms, like LiveJournal, Dreamwidth, Tumblr, Fanfic.net, and AO3, to name only a few, and those practices helped maintain the boundaries around distinct intimate fandoms. We need those boundaries so that different intimate fandoms don't accidentally overlap, which would cause confusion at best and pain and conflict at worst. For example, tagging not only for the characters, but the *primary* pairing ensures that a fan of Sid/Geno doesn't accidentally read a fic that starts with Sid and Geno in a relationship but breaks them up and concludes as a Geno/Anna fic. It would be chronologically accurate to tag such a fic with "Sidney Crosby/Evgeni Malkin, Anna Kasterova/Evgeni Malkin," but it would be *wrong*. Putting Sidney Crosby/Evgeni Malkin first implies that the main pairing is Sid/Geno, and that the other tagged relationship is secondary, temporary, or takes place in the past. These tags and references help us delineate what the fic does and does not do, essentially telling the reader what they can

expect (and therefore, whether or not they even want to read it). Looking at tags, then, is a way to identify what slash-fans consider noteworthy, and helps us trace the edges of the intimate fandom.

The pleasure in fic is not in being surprised: it's the opposite, in fact (I've been horribly surprised a few times reading fic, and that dark, sinking feeling stays with me even years later). The pleasure of fic is the "arousal and gratification" of our expectations (C. Miller 159); it's the "anticipation" of the moment our aroused desires are gratified that makes the "pleasure" of reading (Ryan 140). It's not lost on me that both Miller and Ryan's terms are sexually charged – there's no gratification without arousal, and it's in anticipation of pleasure that we find pleasure. This is as true in fic, in which so many pleasures are aroused and gratified, as it is in other rhetorical genres and narrative worlds. The pleasure in *writing* fic, then, is in using the expectations of the reader to imagine "what makes these characters tick and how they might well remain the same (or be radically different)" in a different setting, *not* in imagining what a wholly new character might do (Jenkins, "Fanfiction as Critical Commentary"). In fact, by using fic as the vehicle, the fic-writer can easily present a new possibility – the lost object of identification, perhaps – the not-yet, and do it repeatedly and more quickly than if each new story had to have new characters and tropes. If being shocked were central to fic enjoyment, we wouldn't rely so heavily on tags, content warnings, authors' notes, and romantic/sexual pairings as our primary sorting characteristic on AO3. We know, even before we click the link to the full story what the general plot is, which relationships are canon in the fic, and whether or not the characters will have sex with

each other (we may even know the broad strokes of what that sex will look like). We use this information to decide whether or not we want to read the fic at all, because tags are how the author signals what rhetorical genre the fic fits in. In other words, this is how writers and readers of fic work together to create particular genres that assuage the specific desires – identificatory or disidentificatory – of the intimate fandom. If we seek to understand intimate fandoms, then, tagged information also helps us see what things *don't* fit within the intimate fandom – if there are no “canonical”<sup>10</sup> tags for a trope, relationship, character, or event, then that thing is generally not important to the fandom (AO3 “Wrangling Guidelines”).

Although slash fans are sensitized to the violence of homophobia, as a *public* we are not so sensitized to the violence of race: at best we struggle to safely depict and warn for racism in the same way we depict and warn for homophobia and at worst we erase people of color, and especially Black people, from our fantasies. For example, Zina Hutton, also known as Stitchomancy on Twitter and Tumblr, collects instances of the sometimes very literal erasure of Black characters, such as fanart of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* that edits images of Adam Driver (the white actor who portrays the villain, Kylo Ren) over John Boyega, the Black actor who portrays the movie’s hero, Finn (Hutton, “White Prioritization”). There are slash-fans who are Black, and who are sensitized to this violence, but their critiques and requests are often ignored by the white slash-fans as irrelevant trouble-

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<sup>10</sup> Although authors can input any text they want as a tag on their work, “tag wranglers” (AO3 volunteers) determine which tags are “canon,” that is tags that are “a truce between what’s most common in a fandom and what best fits the guidelines the Wranglers use” (Fanlore “AO3 Tag Wrangling”). These canon tags show up in search suggestions and offer readers more options in terms of filtering search results than non-canon tags (which are still searchable, but not filterable). Only Warnings and Ratings tags are “enforceable” (Fanlore).



making. This trouble-making is framed as dangerous to the public of slash fandom, and those Black fans who make these critiques are silenced or pushed out of the public fandom. Even without witnessing specific conversations, we can see the erasure of Blackness in the tags that get used on Men's Hockey RPF slash. Although Hockey RPF tends away from dark!fic and angst without a happy ending, homophobia and racism still show up in some fic – sometimes in a villain's dialogue or the internalized bigotry of the protagonists. However, where there are more than four canonical tags that refer to the variations of homophobia that might be depicted in Hockey RPF, there is only one used to warn readers of racism in the fic. A search for each of the four homophobia-related tags found in Hockey RPF – “homophobia,” “internalized homophobia,” “homophobic language,” and “implied/referenced homophobia” returns 1,272 fic, or just over 4% of all Men's Hockey RPF. In comparison, the single tag for racism found in Hockey RPF (“racism”) accounts for only 10 fic, or 0.03% of Men's Hockey RPF. Whether it's out of a lack of desire to represent Blackness, a lack of awareness of the impact of Blackness on NHLers, or a result of unexamined racism, intimate fans work around Blackness, rarely mentioning it explicitly even when Black players exist in the fic. This is in line with – not transgressive of – public fandom's white homonationalism. The same tension that causes Subban to avoid conversations about his Blackness in reality also causes those of us who write about him in our intimate fandoms to avoid explicit depictions of his race, or racism. Instead, in Men's Hockey RPF on AO3, we subsume his racial alterity into depictions of his sexual alterity,

choosing to reinforce his queerness – in service of the slasher’s happy ending – instead of his Blackness.

Despite this, it is not impossible to disidentify with the racist fantasies that surround players like P.K. Subban – it just doesn’t happen in *my* intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF. The intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF as they are expressed through fic and tags on AO3 seems to have rejected Blackness from their self-image, imagining themselves “outside of ideology” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 17). Unfortunately, this rejection – as with identification – requires the acceptance of the “fact” that hockey has no room for Blackness. What disidentification requires in this case is not just the refusal of racist speech and stereotypes, but the refusal to reject Blackness from hockey. Disidentification may be a good fit for fic, but it requires the desire to “shuffle[e] back and forth between rejection and production” (26) and a need to “restructure stale patterns within dominant media” (29). The end result of disidentification is that we “represent[] a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (31), but since fic’s dominant cultures find Blackness unthinkable (Wanzo; Pande; Hutton; Coker and Viars), fic cannot easily disidentify with the anti-Black fantasies of hockey players in the same way that it can with the anti-queer fantasies. It’s not impossible, of course, but it is more difficult, because the celebration of Blackness is still a threat to white queerness, and intimate publics close themselves off from threats. Those who do disidentify with anti-Blackness and racism in hockey do so because they need to if they want to have any room in hockey at all. Disidentification gives them the space to participate in the culture of hockey while making

those changes to the fantasies of hockey – however small they are – that create cracks in the scaffolding of public hockey fandom. For those of us in relations of cruel optimism to hockey, we’re still making our way in structures built with white supremacy – not only the NHL, but Canada as well – which is tolerable to some and intolerable to others.

Of course, the erasure of Blackness in favour of queerness is not limited to Hockey RPF. It is a long-standing problem in fandom and fan studies. Although our fannish histories are more pleasing to recount when we imagine ourselves – fans, acafans, and scholars – as political outsiders fighting against The Man, the “romanticization of fan exceptionalness has ... produced resistance to emphasizing the normativity of some fandoms” (Wanzo 2.2). In fact, many media fandoms are entirely normative, for all the ways they may seem shocking to outsiders: slash may be all about gay sex, but it’s still all about *white* gay sex. The archive that is AO3 is telling of this wide-spread whiteness: whether the information comes from users (e.g. how authors tag their work) or from the platform operators (e.g. which tags are made official), Blackness is all but erased. There are few canon tags related to race and racism, for example. The three most popular main tags that relate to the race of a character, “LGBTQ Character of Color,” “POV Character of Color” and “Male Character of Color” account for less than a tenth of a percent (0.07%) of all fic on AO3 (and 3 Men’s Hockey RPF fic). A search for tags related to homophobia across the entire archive returns 38,601 fic, with tags relating to real-world experiences of homophobia, from the general “Homophobia” (14,037) and “Homophobic Language” (6,523) to the specific “Military Homophobia” (114), for example. Tags relating to racism, however, number only 5,215 fic, 776 of which comes

from tags like “Fantastic Racism” and “Omnic Racism,” referring to fictional reimaginings of racism against different species or life-forms, where “race is objectively real rather than socially constructed” (Young, “How can we untangle white supremacy from medieval studies?”). The top five canon tags for homophobia are all real, in that they refer to experiences of homophobia that a real person might have, whereas only three of the top five canon tags for racism are: “Racism” (2,751), “Racist Language” (495), and “Period-Typical Racism” (1202). Of course, many authors will have included (inadvertently or intentionally) racism in their fic and not tagged for it, so fans have asked for the ability to tag fic *as readers* so that they can warn other readers about racism in fic. Fears of censorship, however, mean that AO3 has refused to implement this ability (Hutton “#EndOTWRacism”). As such, it is up to authors to tag their fic as they choose, and readers to create intimate fandoms outside of AO3’s system.

AO3 has an apparently agnostic philosophy when it comes to content, a choice its founders made in response to a history of fan archives purging content or censoring fic in response to moral panic about slash and RPF. Their agnosticism goes as far as their hybrid folksonomic tagging, which ensures that “users can enter any tag, in exactly the form they want it,” while also allowing tag-wrangers to “make connections between tags” to “make tags as useful as possible to all users” (TOS FAQ: “How do tags work on the archive?”) and has made it clear “that *users are responsible for reading and heeding warnings provided by the creator*” (“TOS FAQ: Ratings and Warnings”; italics in original). Because AO3 prioritizes “protecting content rather than people,” anti-racist fans argue that AO3 is “siding

with” racists instead of the victims of racism (@Stichomancy, aka Zina Hutton). Although AO3 has policies about the inclusion of RPF, rape fantasies, depictions of underage sex and non-normative sexualities, it “has exactly ZERO POLICY on racist content...because the discussion is always overwhelmed by cries of BUT CENSORSHIP” (@RukminiPande). However, other kinds of content are curated by the archive, most notably in their “Archive Warnings,” which include “rape/non-con,” “graphic depictions of violence,” “major character death,” and “underage.” They do not require that authors use any tags beyond the “Archive Warnings,” and, even then, authors are given the opportunity to select “Choose Not to Use Archive Warnings.” However, the fact that authors must make a choice about whether or not to use those tags before posting any fic confers the tags structural importance, within both the technological and social systems of AO3. By *not* including “Depiction of Racism,” for example, in their “Archive Warning” tags, AO3 prioritizes protection from the other forms of trauma over the protection from the violence of racism. The choice, then, not to include racism as one of these “Archive Warnings” perpetuates at best a thoughtlessness when it comes to racism as violence and at worst an erasure of race entirely: the structure AO3 makes the erasure of race seem like a natural absence. But, of course, race is not absent from AO3, nor is it absent from slash and RPF. Whiteness abounds, regardless of the diversity of the original canon, and this is as true in Hockey RPF as it is in other media fandoms – all the more so because of the overwhelming whiteness of its “canon.”

Because there is no room for Canadian Blackness in the normative public of hockey, Walcott’s warning that “writing blackness is difficult work” is especially relevant to writers

and readers of Hockey RPF (25). Blackness is not a set of stereotypes, and to write it requires “a grammar of blackness” that is both “aware of the historical narrative and plays with that narrative” (156). That is, to write Canadian Blackness is to disidentify with national, normative, and oppressive narratives and to build narratives that “cement blackness to the nation and reconfigure the nation for the better” (156). However difficult it may be, though, “writing blackness remains important work” (26), and those of us who write Hockey RPF need to reckon with the fact that so many of us fail to do it in our queer fantasies. So few of us are willing to do the “difficult work” of writing Blackness that we write stories of marginalization and fantasy racism with white bodies. Even fic that star P.K. Subban show that we are afraid of writing Blackness, because we skim along the surface of his Black body and veer instead into his imagined homosexuality. In two of the most popular fic starring P.K., “Complicated,” a fuckbuddies to lovers fic and “Discretion” a crack-fic about leaked nudes, Canadian hockey media’s hostility to P.K. affects his relationship with Carey Price. However, that hostility is never named as anti-Black racism, and the solution is not the writing of Blackness. They refer to Subban’s flashiness, the old guard’s disdain for his personality, and they hover around a recognition that it is his Black body that changes how people feel about him. At each possible moment of acknowledgement, they offer only the moment of homosexual happy ever after as a solution.

“Discretion” and “Complicated” subvert – rather than disidentify with – tropes about Black men’s sexualities. The subversions serve to reinforce P.K.’s membership in the fictionalized queer hockey family, but they do so by *rewriting* his Blackness. To *disidentify*

with these fantasies of Black male sexuality instead would be to keep Blackness *and* queerness at the forefront, and to “represent a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (Muñoz 31), which is m/m white slash in this case. However, when fans use P.K.’s Blackness is to put him in homosexual relationships that forget his Blackness as soon as its connotations are no longer useful, those authors render his Blackness unthinkable – or perhaps, more accurately, unimaginable once again. Because they subvert these stereotypes of sexually voracious Black men who pretend to be queer gentlemen only to reveal themselves as cruel impostors, I want to give these authors the benefit of the doubt: as some of the very few people even *including* P.K. in their fic and also writing him as the primary, point-of-view character, these authors are very much not erasing P.K. from the queer stories of hockey that we tell in Hockey RPF. I might read this desire to give them credit suspiciously: I want my fandom to be good, so I give them the benefit of the doubt. A less suspicious reading of my desire to give the authors the benefit of the doubt: I don’t feel Blackness the way a Black person does and what is *evident* to other readers of these stories is not *sensible* to me. That they refer to the Mike Richards incident, the Darren Pang comments, and the interminable coded racism from Don Cherry tells me that they *know* how P.K.’s Blackness is felt in hockey’s public fandoms. However, as a reader of these fic, I struggle to disidentify with public fantasies of Blackness – I don’t quite know, or feel, those things that can be taken apart and rebuilt into something that feels better without the cushion of queerness. When reading stories where P.K. fits into hockey, it’s easier for me to imagine hockey as welcoming of his imagined queerness than as welcoming of his real

Blackness. Through fic like this, we can see that my intimate fandom of Men's Hockey RPF slash is just as color-blind as the NHL's public fandom.

Although including P.K. is better than not writing him, I worry that stories about P.K. that foreground his imagined queerness participate in a long history of writers who “use our [Black people's] presence to define whiteness” (White 151) – in this case, the white queerness of the reimagined NHL. In “Complicated,” the story of Carey and P.K.'s relationship is told from P.K.'s perspective as a pseudo-closeted man who allows himself “fuckbuddy” relationships with men but can't imagine being in a romantic relationship with another man. However, it's obvious to the reader that Carey wants a monogamous romantic relationship and we watch as P.K. hurts Carey's feelings again and again, oblivious to Carey's desires. Meanwhile, P.K. has been surviving his rookie year on the Canadiens, suffering the real-life micro-aggressions of journalists and other players who accuse him of not being respectable, or being too flashy. These two stories interweave, with P.K. frequently relying on Carey to help him through difficult moments with Montreal's hockey media. Each moment of real-life racism is followed by a narrative reinforcement of the recuperative power of queer love in the NHL. When P.K.'s Blackness arises, it is only ever subtextual: the fic opens with P.K. denying that he worries about his “reputation” in the league (par. 2), just as Subban refuses to speak about how racism has affected his career and real-life reputation, but the fictional reputation that P.K. refuses to worry about is that he is “really, really slutty” (par. 1) because he has sex with so many fellow NHLers.



Each time “Complicated” refers to a real-life moment of racism, like the “Mike Richards Incident” (par. 220), P.K. turns to Carey for sexual and emotional comfort. The “Mike Richards Incident” is a reference to the actual conflict between Subban and then-captain of the Philadelphia Flyers Richards, in which Richards uses coded language to position Subban as an imposter and trespasser. To reporters after a game, Richards complained that Subban “hasn’t earned respect” and was angry that “a young guy like that” could “so much as think he’s better than a lot of people” (Richards, quoted in Lebrun, “Mike Richards rips P.K. Subban in interview”). Once he finishes explaining how much work Subban will have to do to “get respect from other players” (“it takes a lot”), he threatens Subban: “I’m not saying I’m going to do it, but something might happen to him if he continues to be that cocky” (Richards, quoted in Lebrun). Although Subban called it “a crazy question” when a reporter asked him “if he thought he was being targeted because he was Black” (Lebrun), Richards was absolutely being racist. The use of the term “respect” is code for adherence to public performances of white gentility, and respectability for Black men means being “silent” about the things that white people find “intolerable to confront” (White 163). The head of NHL Player Safety, George Parros, owns a company called Violent Gentlemen that makes hockey’s philosophy on respect clear: “it runs deep and courses through the veins of a Violent Gentleman” (Violent Gentlemen, “About Us”). A respectable, violent gentlemen is part of the “brotherhood of upstanding individuals,” which – in conjunction with their “Make Hockey Great Again” t-shirts – should send shivers of white nationalism down your spine (“About Us”). Subban will never be a Violent Gentleman

because his Black skin is intolerable, something he cannot physically leave behind. However, he *can* perform an erasure of his Blackness – and he does. In reality, Subban refused to link Richards’ use of the word “respect” (which he used four times in seven sentences) to racism, and in the fiction of “Complicated,” P.K. calls it “serious bullshit” but never calls it racism (par. 203).

Instead, the racist moment becomes a catalyst for the romantic relationship between P.K. and Carey. When P.K. doubts himself, thanks to journalists “questioning if he’s honestly earned his place on the roster,” Carey takes him out for drinks to cheer him up (par. 204). When their night is over, Carey kisses P.K. in an alley – hidden from public view until they’re interrupted by other people walking by – prompting P.K. to thank Carey “for everything” and calling him “a great friend” (par. 216). Although Carey “frown[s] weirdly” at that, P.K. “feel[s] so much lighter than before” and returns to his hotel room to masturbate to thoughts of Carey kissing and “manhandling” him (par. 216-217). Readers of slash know, thanks to the common tropes of the dramatically ironic facial expression and the masturbatory fantasy, that Carey’s frown is a sign that he wants to be more than P.K.’s friend, and that P.K.’s attachment to the fantasy of making out with Carey in public is a sign that he is starting to feel the same way. The conflict between P.K.’s unreliable narration of his own feelings and Carey’s discomfort with their fuckbuddy relationship increases in the wake of “The Mike Richards Incident,” using the racist moment to further the fantasy of the queer romance, though we don’t get to see Subban dealing with the racist incident or moving

through it. Although queer love is, in my opinion, a better fantasy than white gentility, “Complicated” still creates this fantasy at the cost of disidentifying with the NHL’s racism.

The climax and denouement of “Complicated” argues that it’s possible to end a relation of cruel optimism by making the person you’re attached to acknowledge their part in making it *cruel*, offering a bit of hope to those of us in cruel attachments to hockey players. However, there is a mismatch between some intimate fans’ cruel attachments to Subban and Carey’s cruel attachment: where some fans want P.K. to acknowledge his Blackness, Carey wants P.K. to acknowledge his capacity for queer love. “Complicated” resolves this mismatch through slippage between Blackness and queerness. Like “The Mike Richards Incident,” “Complicated” depicts another moment of real-life racism in Subban’s career, where hockey commentator Darren Pang said that Subban didn’t play “the white way” on air (par. 375). After P.K. hears about this in the fic, Carey distracts him with emotionally satisfying sex that “made him feel better” (par. 428). In the comments, the writer lets readers know that this is the night that Carey “realizes how crazy in love with P.K. he is” (comment Jan 25 2012), as well as the night that Carey decides to end his cruelly optimistic relationship with P.K. This is also the last reference to the racism P.K. experiences. Carey tells P.K. to leave instead of staying the night, then starts encouraging P.K. to have sex with other players, like rookie Jeff Skinner, even though it makes Carey jealous (par. 479; par. 563). The fic reaches its climax when Carey believes he’s having dinner with P.K.’s new boyfriend, John Tavares, and leaves in a jealous huff, leaving John to explain to P.K. that Carey is in love with him – and that P.K. is in love with Carey. Without the inciting incident of Darren Pang’s

racism, Carey would never have removed himself from a cruelly optimistic relationship: we have racism to thank for their happily-ever-after – a phrase that should leave readers uncomfortable.

Similarly, “Discretion” uses racist tropes about Black male physiology to create a situation in which Carey and P.K. can express their desire for one another. This writer subverts the public narrative of Subban as “flashy” and “undisciplined” by framing his perceived lack of discipline as actually in line with the public ideal of the Hockey Man as loyal to his teammates. Taking its title from sports gossip site *Deadspin*’s tagline, “Discretion” imagines what P.K. would do to protect Carey from the kind of media scrutiny P.K. receives in Montreal. When an old dick pic of Carey’s gets leaked to *Deadspin*, P.K. quickly decides to anonymously leak his own (Black cock) in order to take the pressure off of Carey. P.K.’s penis, while being central to the story, is also always hidden from the readers who know it is a Big Black Cock but are never forced to confront the racist trope of the Black man’s penis head on. Instead, the Black dick pic inspires the rest of the white team to follow suit and Montreal media is faced with a horde of white penises that they cannot control. Through the trope of the Black man’s powerful penis, the sex-shaming and implicit homophobia of the media furor around Carey’s dick pic becomes instead the impetus for a romantic relationship between the two men.

The other references to PK’s Blackness are similarly coded, using the dog-whistle racism common in hockey fandom to create a situation where PK requires emotional support from Carey. In this case, the racism is clearly framed as a negative thing PK has to endure,

but it is not reconfigured: while the author clearly counters the racism and uses the pain of it to further the romantic plot, I can't sense any disidentification. The story opens first with a reference to "Don Cherry's latest incoherent rant about flashy, undisciplined players," similar to the real-life rants Don Cherry has directed toward Subban (par. 48), but the fic leaves unspoken the fact that "flashy" and "undisciplined" are coded racial terms that have haunted Subban's professional career. Instead of disidentifying with anti-Black racism in the NHL, this fic subverts its consequences to tell a queer love story. "Discretion" chooses to double down on his outsider position instead of complying with the demands of white hockey in order to save his goalie/teammate/crush Carey from public ridicule. However, his outsider position is never named as Blackness in the fic. P.K. may not perform respectability as non-hockey players might understand it, since the story revolves around the strategic leaking of dick pics, but what he does is in service of his team and teammate, and therefore in service of hockey's violent gentility: as long as you do it to back up your teammate, pretty much anything is excusable. He backs up his teammate by drawing attention to himself through the "leaked" image of his (Black) penis, choosing one that he likes (since "he's not going to send them a *bad* picture, he's got standards"), and does not include his face (par. 49). He sends the image with the comment that "all this fuss about Price's dick is missing the *bigger* story" (*italics mine*), taking attention away from a teammate that he wants to protect (par. 50). This frames P.K. as a hockey hero – someone who's willing to take the hits that your star player would otherwise suffer. However, "Discretion" does this by implying that P.K.'s penis is naturally bigger and more attention-grabbing, adhering to the long-lived racist stereotype of

the size of Black men's penises. This is subversive of public hockey fandom's view of Black athletes as inherently selfish, but it also upholds stereotypes of Black men's sexuality and genitalia in a way that – to me – does not feel disidentificatory.

Although obviously a ploy to draw negative attention away from Carey, it's impossible to ignore the fact that the subversion of the racist assumption that P.K. is a disloyal egoist is simultaneously a replication of the racist stereotype of the "Big Black Cock." This stereotype, especially popular in pornography, "(re)construct[s] the Black male body, especially the penis, as dangerous and as a threat to white male power" (Dines 291). This fantasy of Black phallic power serves as a warning about "what happens if Black masculinity is allowed to go uncontained" (293), and although "Discretion" deploys it not as a dire warning but as a subversive move, it is to the same end: P.K. Subban's big Black penis disrupts the power of white hockey media, throwing the entire team into chaos as the rest of the Canadiens player and staff also leak their own white penises, which are "like every other terrible white boy sexting pic," reminiscent (or stolen from) "'70s porn," or tastefully spornosexual and tweeted by media-savvy hockey wives. whiteness is named here, which implies the existence of the Black boy sexting pic, but the author shies away from naming it as such. At the centre of "Discretion" is P.K.'s (Black) penis – (Black) because the fic doesn't mention that he's the only Black man on the team, so the Blackness of his penis can only haunt the apparently flattering picture of his Big Black Cock. When the story concludes with Carey telling P.K. that his "dick pic was really hot" (par. 93), it serves to fold P.K.'s absent Blackness into queerness. As with the vast majority of Hockey RPF slash, the end

result is a happy one, with the pairing together romantically and sexually, and their teammates happy to support their union. “Discretion” rewrites the fantasy of Subban as egotistical and selfish into a fantasy where he manipulates the media’s perception of his egoism to the benefit of his team, but it uses the hidden/present threat of his Black masculinity to make that switch. His Blackness, as in “Complicated,” is only ever subtextual, as the mention of “white boy[s]” implies the Blackness that goes unspoken. Although the fantasies of both “Discretion” and “Complicated” refuse the racist public fantasies of Subban as a disrespectful, flashy narcissist in order to craft a new fantasy that highlights his kindness, generosity, and team loyalty, they both do so by subsuming his Blackness in favour of his queerness.

In all honesty, I continue to struggle with this claim, because *I don’t know* what it would it look like for people to write Canadian Blackness in Hockey RPF. Walcott explains that the “grammar for black” should move “beyond the dreary confines of an anti-racism discourse” (156), and recognize that “the sliding signifier of blackness intends to continue to slide and remain out of bounds” (25) – statements which acknowledge the historical situatedness of Canadian Blackness while also pushing back against the urge to create positive stereotypes in place of negative stereotypes. Blackness is not stable, and so writing Blackness cannot simply be a matter of “the struggle for happiness” (C.L.R James, qtd in Walcott 106). Hockey RPF is often about the struggle for happiness, whether that’s in the form of the normative happily-ever-after, or about the struggle for self- and team-acceptance of queerness, the attainment of which promises happiness. To write Hockey RPF is to write

into reality the world that makes me happy, in which those things that make the struggle for happiness insurmountable are no longer impossible to beat. The authors I have chosen for this chapter, the writers of “Complicated” and “Discretion” are the most prolific P.K. fic-writers. They write for each other, gifting fic that studies another aspect of Subban to one another, like “Believer.” “Believer” is, on the surface, a pretend-boyfriends fic (in which only P.K. knows they’re pretending) where Carey comes to the Subban household for Christmas. He is welcomed into the family by P.K.’s parents, his siblings, and his nephews. The majority of the fic takes place in the home of a Black Canadian family – not named as Black but, as Subban has said multiple times, we *know* they’re black – with holiday traditions centered on sharing food, love, and support. It’s *wholesome*. Maybe their fic feel only like subversion to me because I don’t know what disidentifying outside of whiteness looks like.

The limit of my imagination is a fandom where Subban is louder and prouder in his celebration of Blackness, both in fic and in reality. I desire this, even as it is apparent that my desire is not in line with the reality of Subban as a Black hockey player. If he ignores his Blackness, he lets down fans who see themselves in him, but if he acknowledges it too freely, white fans become – as best – uncomfortable, and at worst hostile. We can see Subban’s negotiation of this paradox when he does confront anti-Black racism in hockey. For example, when he received word from a fan that a Black child, Ty, was being harassed while playing hockey, Subban sent Ty’s parent (Reddit user hockey7676) a video in support, but once the video left the confines of a message between Black hockey players, Subban reinterpreted his



own words to include white victims of bullying *as well as* Black victims of racism. That is, he straightened (whitened) his expression of solidarity with another Black athlete. The initial message is still reminiscent of the Subban family's strategy, with advice like "you've got to believe in yourself" and a reminder that "when you're playing hockey, you play because you love the game and you want to play," but it's rare for Subban to even mention race, so his inclusion of the phrase: "Especially if it's because of the colour of your skin" is surprising (Subban). In the top comments in the Reddit thread below the parent's post sharing Subban's video, hockey fans express disappointment that racial slurs, although officially worthy of a gross misconduct penalty in Canadian minor hockey, are often unpenalized due to the racism of hockey parents, referees, coaches, and players. In the smaller – if not *quite* intimate – public of r/hockey, Subban's mildly anti-racist message is well-received. Despite this, and despite the resulting articles and blog posts celebrating Subban's Good Guy response to a child deserving of encouragement and celebration, when journalist Adam Vignan asked Subban about his now-viral video (though it "was never the plan" for the video to circulate), Subban explains that the child was "in a similar position that I've been in my life" and felt he could offer his perspective and he does reiterate that "you should never stop doing something because somebody doesn't think that you should do it based on the color of your skin" (Subban, qtd in Vignan). However, he also makes it clear that his message was for "all kids that are facing bullying or racism or whatever it is" and says that he "hope[s] people aren't taking it as just trying to help out Black kids that play hockey" (Subban, qtd in Vignan). When addressing the child in the implied privacy of a text message, Subban does

not refer to “all kids that are facing bullying” but to a child who is a target of anti-Black harassment and racism, but once the video leaves the context of a text message, Subban must rewrite his own message for the comfort of a normatively white public who would prefer to erase Blackness or any discussion of race in favour of a white and bland statement about “all kids that are facing bullying or racism or whatever it is.” In other words, to exist within the public fandom of hockey, Subban must erase his own Blackness.

There are fans, however, like college hockey reporter Jashvina Shah, who refuse to accept the rejection of BIPOC from hockey, because otherwise they would have to accept their own rejection. Although she knows she’ll “never belong in hockey” (Shah), Shah continues to participate, to change the shape of hockey through her work as a reporter, and as the founder of the “Stick to Sports” podcast, which “talks about sports ... and human decency” (@StickToSports). The name is obviously a reference to the common demand hurled at fans of hockey who refuse to accept the rejection of politics from the sport: we should “stick to sports” and keep politics out of the game, but that is, of course, impossible. Shah’s podcast discusses things like “how to still love the sport you love even when it treats minorities badly” (@StickToSports). You do it, of course, by finding people who feel the same way about hockey as you do. You do it like Renee Hess, who along with @danielle\_nicc and @Blackpkessel founded the “Black Girl Hockey Club,” or #BGHC, which hosts meetups at games, as well as tweeting and retweeting support for Black men and women professional hockey players. Their website includes posts about “the summer of Black hockey excellence,” the history of Black players in hockey, and an explanation of the

Black wage gap, especially as it affects women. Some characteristic @BlackGirlHockey tweets include the comment “RTing for the 2 Black girls at the 4 second mark” on a video about the Vegas Golden Knights; a retweet of a photo of Ryan Reaves with the phrase “Black boy joy,” and a tweet that reads “eyeroll in POC hockey fan” in response to the news that NBC will host Chicago Blackhawks’ games (despite the team’s lack of recent success and their continuing use of a racist logo). Overall, #BGHC creates an intimate public of Black women hockey fans where hockey is the main attachment, but Blackness (and specifically Black girlness) is *required*. #BGHC *assumes* there are Black women and girls who love hockey enough to go to a meetup, that Black women fans of hockey want to work in reporting or analytics, and that the attachments and struggles of Black women are in the forefront of hockey fandom. When they make this assumption, it turns out to be(come) true.

These intimate fandoms of disidentification with hockey’s whiteness are intimate fandoms of hockey that are not intimate fandoms of Hockey *RPF*. Slash or fic in general is not really a part of #BGHC: even if some of its members read it, they don’t talk about it within publicly accessible #BGHC spaces. Perhaps this is because it’s hard enough combatting racism in hockey; there’s no point adding RPF slash in to make life that much harder. Fans who do the (hard) work of calling out racism in slash fan spaces, like Zina Hutton (@stitchomancy), receive anonymous threats, hateful messages, and mobs of anonymous commenters who harass her whenever she posts about slash fandom racism. The reaction of white people to anti-racist work – even (especially) kinky, queer, feminist white women – is often defensive anger. The work, then, is important, but difficult, and made more

difficult by the unwillingness of people in intimate fandoms of slash to recognize our entanglements and complicity with the dominant whiteness that structures our attachments.

However, the *point* of Hockey RPF is to take the strange misfits of public hockey fandom and turn them into something queerer, something that fits more neatly into our fantasies. We have as much text to mine for gems in Subban's performances as we do Tyler Seguin's, for example, but where we find it easy to imagine Seguin outside of straightness, many of us can't imagine Subban outside of whiteness. Instead, fic refigures hockey's condemnation of Blackness into a celebration of queerness. The transgression that is Blackness in hockey becomes elided into the transgression of queerness, and we as fic writers are comfortable figuring out how we can make our fictional worlds celebrate queerness that the real world doesn't. It's so easy to do, in fact, that we let other transgressions – like Blackness in hockey – get flattened so they fit our normal patterns. Do we need to remind our readers that Subban is Black? No – like Subban, we know he's black. Do we need to say that the way people speak about him is racist, and not just mean? Maybe. But we don't need to make fic into a sort of white guilt apology for the racism of our fellow fans, or for the only way to write a Black man is to focus on his Blackness as a disadvantage. What would fic that “performs ... Blackness freely” look like? I don't have the answer to that question.

In fact, that's entirely likely that I would not recognize it if I saw it. Because I do not *desire* Blackness in my fic, in the NHL, in hockey, in my life in the way that a Black person does, I would likely not feel the fic that assuages that need. I don't yearn for it because its

absence is not a sharp corner. This points to one of the complicated tensions of fan studies: most of us study fandoms we're a part of – that we love. We join fandoms because they do something we need, so we see the ways people need the same things we do. We feel the power of fic as activism, of fandom as social justice, because we feel the way fandom assuages our particular pains. These feelings make us well suited to explain what's happening, because things are evident to us (cf. Ahmed) that are not evident to others. Unfortunately, this means that we likely aren't writing about fandoms we don't feel deeply, and if the 'we' of fan studies is mostly white, then those white feelings shape what gets expressed in our scholarships. The framework of intimate fandoms is not a complete solution to this problem, but I believe that it is part of that solution. That I can feel the contours of an intimate fandom that I can't enter – that I don't yearn for – requires me to at least recognize that my intimate fandom is not the only one. In fact, there *are* fandoms I am not a part of, that I am not welcome in, that I do not belong in, that do things that I don't need, and that may in fact assuage pains that I create.

The primary skill of slashers, whether we express it in writing, reccing, drawing, or archiving, is in finding the wobbles that denote *something queer* and collecting them for others to experience with us. There's no greater joy for an RPF slasher than to see a picture, read a quote, or watch a video and *know* that it will make a friend say “lskdjflak” and elicit a string of heart-eyes emoji – but it requires the ability to feel those moments, to need them desperately. Hockey RPF's intimate fandoms are dominated by people who need queerness, but don't need Blackness. Those of us slash fans who claim to be anti-racist, who can refuse

those moments of anti-Blackness that we recognize in public hockey fandom, but also let our desire for queerness override our desire for Blackness in slash must reckon with the fact that we find it easier to imagine a gay man in hockey than a Black one. We choose not to imagine Blackness, because we could, if we really wanted to: my intimate fandoms are full of werewolves, monsters, sci-fi creatures, magical beings, and many more things that absolutely do not exist in hockey, but the very real Black men who transgress public hockey's norms, who are succeeding despite the consequences of hockey's whiteness, are beyond our abilities to dream of.

## Chapter 5 Sidney Crosby's Butt

Sidney Crosby is not the only hockey player with a big butt, but his is the most captivating ass in the NHL. When he was a rookie, teammates called him “Creature” because his body was (and still is) so strange that he hardly seems human. He has “distended quads” (Joyce, “The A to Z of Sidney Crosby”) and a “freakish lower body” (Duthie, qtd in Cowan “How Sidney Crosby earned the nickname ‘Creature’”). When asked about Crosby, teammate Maxime Talbot explained that they tease him for his “lips” (often described in fic as pillowy) and then asks if he’s allowed to say “ass” on air. Another teammate at the time, Colby Armstrong, won’t even name the butt, simply saying that “*it* is kind of big” (Armstrong, qtd in Burnside, “Sidney Crosby” par. 55, italics mine). Among all the words that people use to talk about Crosby’s butt – quads, lower body, ass, caboose, glutes, back end – only one actually names it: ass. The rest are scientific terms for the machinery of his body (glutes, quads, lower body) or slangy side-references (back end, caboose) to the object we can’t help but notice but refuse to admit we see. Despite attempts to avoid the elephant on his body, we all agree that it’s almost inhumanly big. Public hockey fandom tries to de-gay the attraction to his ass by calling it the ultimate hockey butt, honed by decades of training and proof of his dedication to the sport. What public hockey fandom can’t erase, however, is what intimate fandom will attach itself to: Crosby has an amazing butt, and it is a sexy, if shocking, part of his body. His butt is an object of fascination that attracts both no-homo athletic admiration and sexually tinged desire that must be quashed as inappropriate fandom.

So, this chapter is about Sidney Crosby's butt. It's about how big it is, how weird it is, and about how many people write stories about putting things inside it. This makes people uncomfortable, of course, so this chapter is also about the relationships between monstrosity, creepiness, queerness, race, and disidentification. Monstrosity, creepiness, and queerness are often connected as evils, but they're also reclaimed – rebuilt and rewritten – by the people who are given such names. When someone names something as a creepy monster and someone else loves and desires that monster, depending on the context we might call that thing queer. Public fandom tries to contain the monstrous, creepy, queer feelings that Crosby's body engenders by only authorizing certain narratives about his butt, but some intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF use his butt in ways that feel creepy to outsiders, in order to create a space in which (his) monstrousness is reclaimed as a powerful queerness. But Crosby *is* a monster. He's a cyborg in the Harawayan sense: a 'leaky' body that blends human, animal, machine in a way that represents "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibility" (14). The capitalist machinery of the NHL constructs Crosby for the purpose of (selling) hockey, so he is measured, metered, and carefully tuned, before he is set free as a beast on the ice bent on destroying his opponents by virtue of his unparalleled control over his body. His body is built from intense application of fitness technology that pushes his body beyond the limits of normal human capability, with the addition of prosthetic tools like skates and hockey sticks designed precisely to give him an edge over his competitors. He is then mediated through the NHL, through sports commentary and sports



celebrity apparatuses, where we come into contact with him as an already monstrous figure. No wonder, then, that we do monstrous things to him.

### 5.1 The hockey butt

We, the intimate fans of Hockey RPF do monstrous things to Sidney's butt, but we, the public fans of hockey, are not supposed to look at it with sexual desire. Because Crosby is an athlete, the homophobic/erotic paradox of sport means that we *do* gaze at his butt with desire, but his "desirability is a by-product of [his] sport, not inherent in the activity itself" (Pronger, *End Zone* 160). In order to do so, though, we must view him as a machine: his strange body is frequently transformed into a tool, "'built' by human beings to do a specific job" (Messner, *Out of Play* 207). The erotics of competitive sports like hockey are organized around penetrating territories and dominating bodies (Dundes; Pronger), such that they have "no room for willing bottoms" (Pronger, *End Zone* 171). To be properly considered manly within these cultures is to perform the penetrating position, to refuse to "open one's self" to another (171). This is the paradox of Crosby's ass: it is at once a symbol of his dedication to hockey perfection, proof of his masculine dominance, *and* an unavoidable reminder of his anus, the space of potential homosexual submission. The ass itself, which is already doubly meaningful as "central to elimination, shit, the abject" and also the site of "eroticism, pleasure, affect, sexuality" (Allan 4), is further complicated by Sidney Crosby's position as The Hockey Man with the big butt no one can ignore.

The butt, and the body that it is attached to, is incredibly human too. In a culture that is obsessed with women's celebrity butts – Nicki Minaj, Kim Kardashian, Beyoncé, Jennifer

Lopez, etc – the cyborgian implication of Crosby’s butt is all the more fraught. Not only does he cross the boundaries of human/machine, but also man/woman. We see the negative reaction to that transgression in anti-Crosby fandom that ‘accuses’ him of womanhood or transness, but the positive reaction to his butt is suppressed in public hockey fandom for the queerness it implies. It makes sense, then, that those of us intimate fans of Hockey RPF who like Sidney Crosby focus on his butt, because the butt is already a complicated symbol, blending femininity, queerness, and sexuality: it is “the very ground zero of gayness” (Jeffrey R. Guss, quoted in Allan 5). The butt *means* a lot, no matter whose butt it is. In fact, the first butt I remember reading about in teeny-bopper-style tabloids (pre-Internet!) was Ricky Martin’s – his gyrating hips (like Elvis’s in his time) and tight jeans made him a sex symbol for pre/pubescent girls while it also made him a figure of queer speculation. We know now that Ricky Martin *is* gay, but he denied his queerness at the time, and I remember the speculation vividly. The butt itself is “implicated in gendered and racialized thought” (Allan 5), and in men like Sidney Crosby, the feminization comes out as queer speculation. So, Sidney Crosby becomes the Creature Crosby, because in turning him into a monster, we turn him into something that is appropriate to gaze at with desire and disgust.

However, even in a conversation about a rich, white man, it is impossible to ignore the fact that white supremacy has inextricably linked butts to the racist idea that black women are excessively sexual. The butt is a technology that has been used to make monsters of black women – in science (cf. the racist scientists who displayed women like Saartjie Baartman in life and death), in pop culture (cf. the vitriol directed at Nicki Minaj), and in

sport (cf. the racist rhetoric surrounding Serena and Venus Williams's 'sexy' uniforms). I have struggled to talk about butts without addressing the complex relationship to white supremacy and our "desire and disgust" for black women (McKittrick 119), and have come to the conclusion that I need to, at least, recognize that white people have learned to talk about butts at least in part by talking about Black women's bodies. Our obsession with black women and their butts, like Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, and Serena and Venus Williams, shows that they "serve as the subliminal signs for sexual excess that prominent backsides supposedly engender" (Hobson, 106). This is not to say that black women must/naturally have this idealized "big booty" (in which a wasp-thin waist is as important as the large backside) – Hobson notes that even Queen Bey must starve herself to construct the figure that Vogue lauds as "curvy" (107) – but that the butt as a symbol of sexuality is inextricably linked to white supremacist ideals of beauty, and to the history of white people's sexualized violence against black women (Gentels-Peart 2). Kim Kardashian – a white woman who profits from her ability to mimic signifiers of black femininity – is an excellent symbol of this always-happening-now history. When she poses on the cover of Paper magazine, she "break[s] the internet" (Goude and Fortini), but/and her pose was a direct reference to the photographer Jean-Paul Goude's earlier portraits of Grace Jones in his 1983 book *Jungle Fever*. Goude, a white man, made a career from making sexualized monstrosities out of his black models. He posed Jones as a modern-day Saartjie Baartman, and later posed Kardashian in Baartman/Jones's place. In all three images, the large butt, "curvaceous ...

ready to be spanked, pinched, and teased” (Allan 5), is the technology that allows us white viewers to imagine touching/using the black women.

The excessive butt is not something inherent to Black women, but is a technology of monstrosity that maintains white supremacy. Some real bodies are made monstrous through the technology of (fictional or metaphorical) monstrosity, since “the monster’s body, indeed, is a machine that...produces meaning and can represent any horrible trait,” which onlookers will understand to stand in for whatever Other is currently most threatening to white supremacy (Halberstam, *Skin Shows* 21). Baartman, the Khoikhoi woman who was taken by white colonist ‘scientists’ to Europe and “put on display” as a symbol of Black inferiority, was made into a monster whose history “is swept into and becomes a precursor for reading North American Black popular culture after her death” (McKittrick 118). When Black women today refuse to uphold white beauty standards, they are accused of being *excessively* sexual, animalistic, inhuman, and immoral – monstrous – so publics that uphold whiteness either ban their expression (as in the French Open banning of Serena Williams’s bodysuit [Ramaswamy]) and/or use their bodies “as a joke – a freakishly proportioned mannequin that can cause uproarious laughter” (Halliday 74). As a technology of white supremacy, however, the (Black) butt<sup>11</sup> can also be used as a symbol of white empowerment. When white women like Kim Kardashian, Iggy Azalea, Miley Cyrus, Taylor Swift, and so, so many more, call upon the signifiers of the (Black) butt, they use it as a symbol of sexual freedom, always in

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<sup>11</sup> I use (Black) here intentionally to signal the attempted erasure of blackness: it is the Black butt that is being deployed, but it is being deployed in the absence of any actual Black women.

service of the erasure of Black women (if not in service of violence against them) (Hobson 108). During Miley Cyrus's Black appropriation phase, we watched her twerk on Black women like they were props on stage. Here, the butt is used to claim sexual empowerment for white women at the cost of Black women's personhood. The butt – the Black women's butt – is a messy signifier that exists *even in the absence of Black women's bodies*.

Take Gritty, the Philadelphia Flyers' monster/mascot whose antics are hilarious/horrifying. Gritty's eyes are large, glassy, and all-/un-seeing, and he has a gaping, toothless maw. His bottom is round and jiggles when he shakes his strange body around for the pleasure of his onlookers. He flouts rules of civil behavior and his narratives call upon Lovecraftian tropes (he has, according to his 'bio,' been living underneath the earth for centuries before being awoken by construction). He feels like an eldritch creature. Within months of introducing this mascot, the Flyers released the image "Goodnight, internet," with the mascot posed as Kim-as-Jones-as-Saartjie. I doubt that the Flyers' creative team intended to call upon the racist history of the image, but this portrait of Gritty creates a direct narrative link from the violence enacted on Black women's bodies from European colonizers to the NHL. We are meant to think of this image of Kim Kardashian, which is meant to make us think of the portrait of Grace Jones, which is meant to make us think of Saartjie Baartman and other Black women like her, whose bodies were stolen in life and death to serve as lessons in the "racial and sexual alterity" of Black women (McKittrick 113). The monstrous butt, the excessive posterior, is both "repulsive and fascinating:" we need to look at it, but we need to make it clear that our gaze is not one of simple desire, but of horror (Halberstam,

*Skin Shows* 88). Whether or not people know the history of that pose, of those images, it doesn't really matter: the post itself and the attention the pose directs to the butt is a technology of monstrosity, which Gritty's own monstrousness multiplies.

We do not, however, need to identify against monstrosity as it is presented to us. I don't *feel* how to disidentify with the images of Kim-as-Jones-as-Saartjie-as-monster, but I can, at least, refuse to accept the identity of the laughing, gasping onlooker. Other monsters are better suited to my own feelings, are better representatives of the traits that have made me the perverted Other, and, as strange as it feels to say about a wealthy, hyper-able, white man, Sidney Crosby is one of those monsters: when I encounter him as a monster, I have queer feelings. That Crosby is not a Black woman does not mean that he is not affected by the ways we are trained to look at bodies. The symbol of the butt is wrapped up in the sexual objectification of women and Black women in particular: it is a technology of misogynoir that shapes so much of how we look at *any* body in popular culture. Crosby is already a complicated mess of contradictions: Sid the Kid who is also a powerful man, a weird little hometown guy and Captain Canada, The Official hockey man who is also Cindy Crysby. On top of that, he also has a butt that we literally cannot ignore. It is the marker of his hockey excellence and his dedication to his sport and it is a butt: round, sexual, appealing in ways we only understand how to talk about through the sexual objectification of Black women. His butt becomes this excessive site of contradiction and paranoia, and hockey fandom is obsessed with it, whether we're Crosby haters in hockey's public fandom, or his RPF slash-fans. In public hockey fandom, his butt stands in for everything good (powerful hockey

athlete) or bad (too feminine) about him, and in my intimate fandom, his butt is a site of the queerness we so desperately want from him.

While Crosby's butt still attracts the public desire to contain monstrosity as it is normatively understood, it also attracts my intimate, queer desire to reconceive of that monstrosity as something wondrous. That is, Crosby's butt attracts the desire to contain his body so that he can remain a figure of identification to the public of hockey *and* the desire to rebuild his body through the process of *disidentification* by hockey's queer, intimate fandoms. One way that disidentification occurs in the intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF is through fic that depicts Sidney as a monster – literally, sometimes, with inhuman biology that transgresses boundaries of gender, sexuality, and even sometimes taste – but a monster who desires, deserves, and receives queer love. While it is possible (and I will certainly indulge) to theorize this, I don't want to forget the specificities in the throes of academic analysis.

That is, I want to name some of this fic, at least, as pornography, for two reasons. One, I want to avoid calling it erotic literature, or otherwise trying to elevate the genre in an attempt to make it seem cleaner, neater, or morally better than *that other stuff*. While it can be tempting to “defin[e] erotic art as being superior to pornographic images” (Dodson, 24) those of us who read and write about media that includes depictions of explicit sexual acts must keep in mind that pornography can be a serious art form while still being pornography. That is, the goal of pornography is, among others, to “get[] people hot” (30). That is the second reason I want to call (some) fic pornography: it is important to remember that its goal is not necessarily to create an important artwork, or to comment seriously on some political

aim (although those may be consequences of some fic) but, in the case of pornographic fic, the goal is to “get[] people hot,” to arouse readers, to create a sexually appealing scene. About 7% of Men’s Hockey RPF on AO3 is tagged with some variation of “porn” (the canon tag, “porn,” which houses the freetags that tag wranglers have determined are related, collects 2351 fic). At the time of writing, PWP (either “Porn Without Plot” or “Plot? What plot?”) has 1762 results, “Porn with feelings” returns 376, and there are 154 tagged “Porn with plot.” Although I show that the pornography that people read, write, and share in Hockey RPF disidentifies with hockey’s homophobic fantasies, it is still pornography that involves sticking things like penises, monstrous genitals, dildos, butt plugs, fingers, and combinations of those and more inside Sidney’s butt because the idea of that is enjoyable, pleasurable to Hockey RPF slash-fans. The stories that I discuss in this chapter have been, for me and the other people who read and write them, powerful expressions of queerness, but they are first and foremost stories written to bring pornographic pleasure to a community of fans. They bring pleasure because we enjoy reading about the monstrously queer claiming their monstrosity and choosing to love in return those who love them as monsters, yes, but also because the sex scenes are sexy and are meant to arouse us – not only in some abstract sense of heightened emotions (though that is certainly part of it as well) but to *turn us on*.

## **5.2 Crosby’s Butt**

This is the last chapter of this dissertation because I had to work up to it, because it’s strange to realize as you’re writing a dissertation that it all kind of comes back to sexy stories about the butt of a star athlete you’ll never meet. Sidney Crosby’s butt is not the thing that



brought me into this fandom, but it's one of the few things that keeps me in it. Just like slash-fans who try to celebrate Blackness in hockey fandom matter, or public fans who aren't afraid to name queerness when they feel it matter, or intimate fandoms who protect vulnerable fans from public ire matter, Sidney Crosby's butt and the things we do to it matter. I have spent four chapters testing a method of describing certain hockey fandoms as intimate publics that use various tools to manage their mis/fit in public fandoms. I've tried to avoid the symptomatic readings of early fan scholarship and moved away from the celebratory advocacy of contemporary slash scholarship, in order to present a more holistic understanding of what brings the constellations of fans that make up the nebulous thing called 'fandom' together. But as strange as intimate hockey fandom is – as strange as RPF and RPF slash is – I've described fairly normal fannish cases. Slash may feel weird to an outsider, but it's full of the same romcom tropes we're used to in mainstream movies. It may seem strange to write slash about real male athletes, but it's not that weird considering the kinds of things mainstream sports media says about them, too. So, consider this chapter a test: what happens when I reach for a doubly-edged edge case, something that is not only weird to public fans of hockey, but that even some within the intimate fandoms of slash and Hockey RPF find disturbing? When looking at the works created within this particularly monstrous intimate fandom through the lens of my methodology, I come to realize that both public and intimate interest in Sidney Crosby's butt can be felt as creepy, but public fandom has determined what counts as a normal desire for his butt.

Not all fic that I discuss in this chapter creates a literally monstrous Sidney, but many of the stories reconstruct his body in a way that blends animal and human, transgresses gender, and depicts sexuality as messily intertwined with social desires and biological urges. We depict Sidney as monstrous and in doing so we become creeps ourselves. Some of our stories turn him into a monster by giving him monstrous genitalia, inspired by fantasies of (were)wolf sexuality, and a body beholden to a biological drive to find a (soul)mate. We also create that monstrosity in ourselves through an excess of desire for his excessive body: we want too much sex and too much sperm going in and on his too-big butt. Too many things go in and come out of his anus, making literal the slippery, leaky body of the cyborg, and we become monsters for wanting it. Some fic is written in a particularly monstrous genre of slash known as Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics (ABO) – also known as Omegaverse or “dogfuck rapeworld” (Popova) – which, in slash fandoms for fictional characters, is already felt as creepy, weird, gross, excessive, obsessive, and fetishistic for its play with gender, sexuality, genitalia, and consent. When we use ABO in RPF fandoms, it becomes all the more important to shame those who read, write, and share ABO, because all those crossed boundaries exist in a real person’s body who doesn’t deserve to be turned into a creepy sex-monster for someone to jerk it to. The argument goes: if Daisy Ridley should not be depicted, through AI and image manipulation, as a camgirl without her consent (Towle), real people shouldn’t be transformed, through fic and Omegaverse, into horny werewolf-sex-monsters. I’ll be honest: I don’t quite have an answer to this moral dilemma (which I have posed to myself on a number of occasions) that goes beyond ‘fic and fanart is different from

deepfakes.’ And that’s what makes these stories about Sidney Crosby so important for this dissertation. How do I talk about fandoms that feel weird *even to those who live inside them*?

We already know how to talk about fandoms so that they can be shaped for consumption by dominant publics: we turn the apparently weird thing into a normal thing by explaining how, actually, they’re politically subversive, morally good, supersmart philosophizing on the possibility of homosexuality in mainstream media. But I don’t want my rhetorically motivated study of intimate fandoms to work only on those fandoms that we can easily co-opt to tell the story of fans whose work is always (already) progressive, because we don’t need a ‘new’ way of looking at fans that recreates the ‘old’ way of looking at fans. Hockey RPF and its ABO fic takes something uncomfortable and allows it to stay uncomfortable, so I don’t want to make it comfortable through theorizing. I want to see what happens when I look at these fandoms of ABO and Hockey RPF as intimate fandoms that are not necessarily trying to change ‘our’ minds about the possibility of queerness in the NHL, but who take in fannish objects from hockey’s public fandoms and hold onto the uncomfortable feelings that the object creates. We can trace the shape of fandoms through the tensions that arise with the use of objects – like Sidney Crosby’s butt – as an utterance, and how the fandoms choose to soothe or agitate those tensions. Public hockey fandoms want to soothe tensions associated with Crosby’s butt, because those tensions are proof that public hockey fandoms are not the traditionally heterosexual masculine spaces devoid of unseemly attraction to men’s bodies. Intimate hockey fandoms want to agitate those tensions, because

those tensions are what call to us – they beg us to see what happens if we pull on them, if we tug, tighten, and pluck them into a new shape, a new sound, a new feeling.

Sidney Crosby, butt and all, is an emblem of my own ambivalent feelings towards and about men's hockey. He's a symbol of all that hockey is supposed to be, but he's also *weird*. He's a three-time Stanley Cup champion, a gold medal captain twice over, a gold medal goal-scorer, an NHL MVP, and the face of (men's) hockey, among many other accolades. He also wears yellow Crocs, he has a ridiculous honking laugh, he keeps his hands in his pockets when taking pictures with fans in a way that makes him look endearingly awkward, and he's got strange rituals that dominate game days. But what I love most about Sidney Crosby is his butt. I suppose it's sexy – butts are supposed to be sexy, after all – but I love his butt because it makes him seem more bow-legged, and makes his clothing fit oddly. I love Sidney Crosby's butt because it makes him strange. So, I send my friends pictures of him sitting, squatting, stretching, and walking, often accompanied by the word "BUTT" or one of those upside-down smiley-faced emojis meant to communicate a kind of "I don't even know how to react to this" reaction. I'm not alone in this obsession, either, considering there are Tumblr users with names like "sidcrosbutt," "Sidney-crosbys-butt," or "crosbysass" (which I constantly mis/read as "Crosby sass"). There are picsets like the one posted by user *becausethecup*, captioned "my heart says no...but the booty says yes," that compiles three different images of Crosby's butt. Or like *cakemakethme*'s post captioned "Bless Sidney Crosby ~~blessing us with those legs and ass,~~" rewriting the wholesome Tim Horton's ad into a reminder of his sexy butt. There's also *ehgtyseven*'s caption to a picture of Crosby boarding

a plane from the official Penguins' Snapchat, which added "The captain is thicc". All three of those posts display the same kind of ambivalence I feel towards Crosby and his butt: we are unsure if our desire is genuine, ironic, shameful, shameless, or some strange combination of all four. The caption "my heart says no...but the booty says yes" exhibits an ambivalence towards Crosby-the-person combined with a desire for his butt/booty, the use of the strikethrough and the lack of spaces in cakemakethme's caption demonstrates an awareness that a desire for "thoselegsandass" should be hidden, and ehgtyseven's use of "thicc" and the tagged admission that ehgtyseven "/may/ have edited this so you could see certain areas better" reframes the Penguins' post about "The captain, reporting for duty" as a sexual image, but also acknowledges the discomfort that reframing causes. We want (to look at) the butt, but we also know that we shouldn't – or, if we do, we should do so with an ironic acknowledgment of our own creepiness.

### **5.2.1 I don't want Sidney to read this dissertation**

I often wonder if someone on Sidney Crosby's PR team, tasked with trawling the internet for mentions of his name, will stumble upon this dissertation. Will it be the job of some poor intern to read it? (If so, hi and sorry!!) They won't be shocked that people talk about his butt, of course, but I know the fic I'll be summarizing later, and I worry that they'll feel like *that* is crossing a line. What if people on Evgeni Malkin or Alexander Ovechkin's PR teams find out? Homosexual "propaganda" is illegal in Russia – not to mention their close relationship to Putin – and surely fic where Ovi, Geno, and Sid have a messy, gooey threesome counts as propaganda. Gaining the attention of these athletes (or their agencies) is as much a fantasy as the fic I describe – but I am aware that the works I love and the things I care about would be considered defamatory, if not outright criminal, by others. The way I celebrate bodies in the fic I read and write is more or less

monstrous, depending on who's listening, and it's hard to stop being aware that some people would call what I love to do immoral, because it makes sexy, monstrous creatures out of good, wholesome athletes. I can remind myself that we aren't the ones making them into monsters, even if it sometimes rings hollow. We're just loving the monster that's already there: Crosby is "Creature" and, along with Malkin, a member of "The Two-Headed Monster" whose rival is Ovechkin, the "Russian Machine" that "never breaks." But I also understand that "The Two-Headed Monster" valiantly competing against the "Russian Machine" is a very different story than Sid, Geno, and Ovi sucking each other off and giving each other orgasms. One kind of monster is powerful, and the other is *queer*.

### 5.3 The Creepy Fan

I understand that people will find my hockey fandom creepy, and I'm not really interested in arguing that what I'm doing *isn't* creepy – because it is. I'm reading, writing, and sharing sexy porn stories about real people who would probably not be happy about it if they found it. That is creepy. But creepiness is also dependent on context (and the power to determine what context is normative): what's appropriate in one space is not in another, and "when we confuse or mix up behaviour accepted in one space with that accepted in another we run the risk of being creepy" (Alexander 26). I have no desire to make Crosby read my Sid/Geno fic, nor do most people who read, write, and share Hockey RPF. I understand that it would be wrong to confront Crosby with celebrations of his butt, which is why I don't do that. *I* don't do that, but that's because my position as a queer fan who writes fanfiction makes it creepy. If I were, say, a well-known sports commentator being paid to write for a respected sports news source, I could get away with commissioning an exaggerated illustration of his 'lower body' and spending an entire paragraph talking about Crosby's butt as long as I don't actually call it a butt (Joyce "The A to Z of Sidney Crosby"). It's creepy

when I say that Crosby's blush when he talks about Malkin is the sign of a crush, but ogling and interpreting the bodies and body language of hockey players is the bread and butter of NHL commentators. I have heard the Penguins' colour commentary men compliment Jaromir Jagr's "big backside and big stick" (because it gives him the ability to control other players' bodies on the ice) (Root Sports, October 25 2016), and describe the actions of players with sexually charged language: "here comes Monteur, thrusting in the middle" (May 22 2017), "Sidney Crosby not getting enough wood on that shot" (December 12 2016), "look how tight he is" (October 27 2016), or "Crosby trying to get in the backdoor, defenseman getting his big stick on it" (May 14 2017), among so many others.

I know, of course, that most of these quotations use innocent hockey slang: wood refers to the hockey stick (even though most sticks are made of carbon fibre these days), and backdoor refers to the attempt to score from behind the net. But it's only innocent slang in the context of hockey colour commentary. In fact, it's only innocent slang because of the power of hockey's dominant culture to erase any potential queerness. Outside of that context, talking about big men thrusting and getting wood – with big backsides and big sticks<sup>12</sup> – conjures pornographic rather than athletic images. But hockey isn't queer, according to hockey's public fandoms, so it can't possibly be sexy: hockey isn't gay so hockey can't be gay. Hockey commentators also do other things that don't need to be taken out of context to make them seem as 'creepy' as fic: they interpret the actions of hockey players and create

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<sup>12</sup> Fun fact: the possessive "s" can bleed into the "s" of stick, making something like "Crosby's stick" sound like "Crosby's dick" – which is why you'll often hear commentators say the very awkward but dickless "The stick of Crosby" instead.

narratives that align with their desires just as fic writers do, but their goal is to contain, rather than explode, queerness. Within the “talk” culture of sports, such as sports talk radio or the televised discussion broadcasts that happen before, during, after, and around sporting events, discussions of players are often “the sporting equivalent of literary deconstruction” as “fans (and coaches and players) interpret” plays, athletes, the game, and the arc of the season (Farred, qtd in Nylund 97). This literary deconstruction “works to generate a culture of appropriate hockey conduct ... premised on a rough-and-tough Canadian game” (Allain “Real Fast and Tough” 474). Even if, as David Nylund argues, sports talk radio is a place for “men to discuss and even raise their awareness of gender and sexual issues that they might not otherwise have,” these discussions exist within the confines of – and with the goal of upholding – sport’s hegemonic masculinity of violent whiteness and heterosexuality (144). That is, because the talk of sports is in service of heteronormativity and masculinity, it feels normal to interpret and rewrite the bodies, actions, feelings, and desires of athletes.

Take this relatively tame example (no butts in this one!), where the narrative interpretation of hockey players’ actions is acceptable in the context of hockey commentary. In 2017, Evgeni Malkin and Phil Kessel of the Penguins seemed frustrated with each other at the beginning of the game, but later, when Malkin assisted on Kessel’s game-winning goal, they celebrated with the traditional hockey hug. Hockey commentators provide a narrative to these facts, interpreting the argument as the two “verbally joust[ing]” on the bench after a frustrating shift, causing Kessel to rest his head against the boards and requiring Coach Mike Sullivan to “calm Geno down” (@PeteBlackburn). The spat resolves after the two men share



a goal together, when “all seemed to be forgiven as Malkin assisted on Kessel’s beautiful game winner” (Clarke). Kessel and Malkin hug on the ice, with no more tension marring their partnership. Clarke subtitles her post “Narratives don’t lie, folks,” making clear the interpretive work she and her fellow hockey commentators (like Blackburn) are doing in this instance to turn the moment of hockey-queerness – two players not only showing negative emotions on the bench but displaying a lack of team cohesion – into a larger story that returns them to normal, successful, happy hockey players in the end. The body language of hockey players is dissected and interpreted by the commentators whose jobs allow them the freedom to read and admire the bodies of athletic men (as long as it’s done in service of the narratives of hockey masculinity and no-homo heteronormativity).

In contrast, this moment feels like a fic prompt to me. *A lover’s spat that spills onto the ice as frustrations (perhaps the pressure of the cup run and the pressure of hiding their relationship might blend thematically) reach a peak. Hurtful things are said, but apologies are made through glances and subtle touches – they are always watched – and the feeling of working together combined with the pain of only being able to express their love through a socially sanctioned embrace, is the push the pair needs to come out if not publicly then to their team (who will, of course, be happy for them).* That I might take Kessel and Malkin’s spat as an opportunity to imagine a lover’s quarrel is creepy, because it is not appropriate to interpret NHL athletes’ actions as queer: to do so “mix[es] up behaviour accepted in one space with that accepted in another” (Alexander 26). Even though I would not go on air and make this interpretation of the events in the context of hockey commentary (god forbid

anyone ever asks me to do hockey commentary), it's felt as creepy even if it's only ever said in the intimate context of Hockey RPF. It becomes creepy because those of us in these intimate fandoms don't have the power to shape the context of hockey. While hockey commentators have the power to determine what is normative, because they speak for hockey players, hockey play, and hockey culture, I do not. Not only are sportswriters "a key part of the communicative chain that legitimizes" values of hegemonic masculinity (Hardin et al. 187), they have been given the responsibility to "carry out ideological repair work," always re-positioning hegemonic masculinity as the ideal form (Trujillo qtd in Hardin et al. 187). This means that commentators are also beholden to the expectations of public fandom, because they are expected to speak to hockey players, play, and cultures in a way that makes sense, that feels right, to hockey's publics. They have the power to interpret, but that power is limited to interpretations that uphold hockey culture, to interpretations that *feel right*.

When things don't feel right, they might get called creepy in order to maintain the very norms they're disrupting (Alexander). Sometimes, these norms need maintaining (we should *not* take upskirt pictures, for example), but other times the norms are harmful (gay people *should* be allowed to flirt with people they're attracted to without fear of being murdered in 'self-defense'). So, just because I call hockey RPF creepy doesn't mean I think it's shameful or morally wrong: what I mean is that the practices of Hockey RPF are out of line with sports fandom norms (which includes heteronormativity and the denial of women's sexual agency) and are thus felt as creepy. Creepy, in some cases, is simply another way to say queer. To look at Sidney Crosby's butt or Tyler Seguin's body and see anything other

than the muscles and training that created an ideal hockey subject is to be creepy and to demand policing from the public hockey fandom. So those gazing upon Hockey RPF from the outside will look at our obsession with Sidney Crosby's butt with horror and disgust, as something creepy, even though Crosby's butt holds an excess of meaning within Hockey RPF *and* within public hockey fandom. The difference is in what the meaning is. In public hockey fandom, it is not acceptable to look at the hockey butt with shameless desire, so we must maintain an almost scientific distance when it comes to the butt, never naming it as an object of desire (yet desiring its power). Those of us within Hockey RPF, however, have (mostly) accepted our desire for the butt. In some corners, we express this desire by (fictionally) putting things inside Sidney's butt – a dildo, a butt plug, a cock, *two* cocks – eager to marvel at its explicitly erotic role. I understand how this might feel creepy to an outsider, but it is joyful and wondrous to us.

One fic series illustrates this particular joy we take in Sidney's butt – and especially his anus, which may be “central to elimination, shit, the abject,” but is also a place of “eroticism, pleasure, affect, sexuality” (Allan 4). “Filthy/Gooney” tells the story of Sidney discovering his anal pleasure: first he learns the masturbatory joy of the anus, then he discovers the pleasure of anal sex with a sexual partner (Alex Ovechkin, whom the author calls “Ovi”), experiences the romance of anal sex with a romantic partner (Evgeni Malkin, aka “Geno”), and finally experiences polyamorous love in the second fic, “Gooney”. Although the first fic, “Filthy,” in this series uses “filthy” to describe Sidney's experience of anal pleasure, it is not derogatory. In each instance of anal sex, masturbatory or partnered,

neither Sidney, Ovi, nor Geno are ashamed of the pleasure they give or receive – none of them perceive the act as dirty or creepy. Their anal sex involves lube, condoms, mutual pleasure, and (like most porn) a lack of fecal matter. “Filthy,” instead is reclaimed as a term that describes the shameless desire for sexual pleasure, and although Sidney initially worries that “filthy” is incompatible with “love,” the first fic resolves when Geno celebrates Sidney’s masturbatory excesses, since they match his own. Sidney’s pleasure is excessive – like his butt, there is simply *too much* going on, but that excess is where he finds his joy. He buys so many sex toys that “he’s not entirely convinced that the packing peanuts aren’t something he ordered” (par. 22), he wears a butt plug on a short plane trip with teammates even though he knows he shouldn’t, he has consensually rough sex with Ovi in a hotel room after Ovi spots his butt plug, he wears a vibrating butt plug when Geno comes to visit him (to comical effect as the butt plug elicits reactions in Sidney that confuse Geno), and he vividly imagines working himself up to (and open for) a giant dildo.<sup>13</sup> Sidney’s queer awakening is traced through each subsequent masturbatory scene, as we join him in his new understanding of his own desires. Without these messy, pornographic scenes, the story itself does not exist: it has *no point*. I mean that not in the sense that there’s nothing in the story except for gratuitous

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<sup>13</sup> If this all sounds a bit, well, excessive, it’s partly due to the genre in which the author is writing. “Filthy” is tagged “crack,” which is not meant to represent any kind of canonically accurate characterisation, but is “generally written shamelessly and with no excuse beyond a desire to have fun” (Moonbeam “Fanfiction Terminology”). Crack!fic is named as such because the author is, presumably, high on crack while writing it, and it is as addictive as crack to its readers (Fanlore, “Crack”). Crack!fic is supposed to take characters and their settings to the absolute limit of believability (right before, I suppose, the fiction cracks).

sex; instead, the narrative, the character development, the plot all exists within these moments of pornographic excess.

“Filthy” refuses to hide the anus, and, by constantly referring to Sidney as *joyfully* filthy, refuses the “alignment with abjection, dirtiness, shame” that is traditionally anal (Allan 27). Just as most sports fans assume that Crosby is boring and polite, Geno initially assumes that Sidney is “shiny clean,” but he is happy, not horrified, to learn that Sidney is “filthy.” He is pleased to find the bright orange dildo on Sidney’s bed, because it means that Geno “will not freak [Sidney] out with all [his] toys” (par. 322); in this case, the symbol of Sidney’s anal pleasure eliminates any of Geno’s shame about *his* desires. While fic does align the anus with male homosexuality, as Sidney’s “approach to coming to terms with his sexuality is deciding one night that, if he is a bit gay, then he should probably investigate taking it up the ass” (“Filthy” par. 15), the relationship between the two is queer. In homoparanoid publics, men constantly worry if anal pleasure ‘makes them gay,’ even if they experience that pleasure in a heterosexual relationship (Allan 54). However, in “Filthy,” Sidney already knows he’s gay, and uses that as permission to explore anal pleasure: that is, anal pleasure doesn’t make Sidney gay, but being gay opens his world up to new kinds of joy. Being gay offers Sidney the opportunity to enjoy what self-identified “bottoms” describe as the “deeper, more real” and “distinct type of knowledge” that the filthy butt offers (Allan 61-62). When he buys himself an obscene number of sex toys, he experiences new kinds of pleasure, and when he has sex with Ovi and Geno, he learns things about them that he didn’t know before. If there were a moral to the series, it would be, as commenter implicated<sup>2</sup>

writes, that “filthiness, or kinkiness, or whatever you want to call it, is something to be celebrated” (May 22 2013).

Although “Filthy” ends with Sid and Geno in an apparently monogamous romantic relationship, the second fic in the series, “Gooney,” refuses the normative narrative of settling down with a spouse. In contrast to traditional expectations of what has been called pornography for women (Dodson, 25), the end of this story is not a monogamous romance. While the fic itself tells this story as Sid and Geno find themselves seeking out Alex as a sexual, and eventually romantic, third, we can also see this refusal of monogamy within the tags on both fic. Although AO3 does not consider tag order in its taxonomy, fannish practice is to place the ‘primary’ pairing first in the list, regardless of the chronological order of the sex or relationships. That is, the first tag tells the reader which relationship is most important and (usually) the ultimate one. “Filthy” has (among others) the tags “Sidney Crosby/Evgeni Malkin” and “Sidney Crosby/Alex Ovechkin” in that order, which tells readers that regardless of which pairing occurs first in the fic, the Sid/Geno relationship is the ultimate pairing – which turns out to be true as Sidney revels in the joys of anal sex in a mutually romantic relationship with Geno. However, even though Sid and Geno are in an established relationship at the beginning of “Gooney,” “Sidney Crosby/Evgeni Malkin/Alex Ovechkin” comes before “Sidney Crosby/Evgeni Malkin.” We should, then, understand that the Sid/Geno/Ovi relationship is primary. That is, tagging Sid/Geno/Ovi first tells us not only that the sex depicted in the fic will be a threesome, but also that the ‘happy ever after’ of the fic will involve the three of them together. “Gooney” lives up to its tag order: although Ovi

leaves Sid and Geno in bed together at the end, the three are all changed by the experience. By the end of the fic, Sid, Geno, and Ovi have not only shared a sexual encounter, but they have experienced – and expressed – love for each other. By putting that information in the tags, the author makes it clear that this threesome, both sexual and romantic, is essential.

Where “Filthy” is a celebration of and meditation on the “filthy” (par. 1), “pervert[ed]” (par. 33), and “kinky” (par. 99) queer sex that is accessible to queer people, “Gooney” imagines what filthy queer love might look like – although it does so without using the word “filthy.” This might imply that while queer *sex* can be filthy, queer *love* should be clean, but what we find instead is the transposition of “filthy” into “gooney.” The sexual encounter in “Gooney” starts with Sidney and Geno putting on a kind of strip show for Ovi, with Geno slowly divesting Sidney of his clothing as Ovi watches, aroused. Ovi teases them, telling them to stop being so “gooney” (par. 111). They’re “gooney” because they’re being tender – gazing into each other’s eyes and sharing private smiles – and filthy – stripping for a third sex partner they intend to have a messy threesome with – all at once. Gooney, it seems, is the sum of queer filthiness and queer tenderness, and the apex of gooeyness occurs, unsurprisingly, at the climax of the fic and the sex. Sidney, who up until this moment has been interested in sex with Ovi but unsure of his romantic feelings for him, is sandwiched between Ovi and Geno. Ovi and Geno are being tender, according to Sidney: “ludicrously intimate, holding hands when their cocks are snugged up against each other in Sid’s ass” (par. 218). As tender as they are, they are simultaneously filthy: Ovi climaxes first, then Geno, “with Ovi’s cock already softening inside Sid” (par. 225), and when both Ovi and

Geno offer to help Sidney orgasm, he “sees the semen smeared between him and Ovi and realizes he has already come” (par. 228). It is a messy, filthy moment, with multiple cocks, hard and soft, ejaculating lots of semen into and outside of an anus – but it’s also a tender moment, as Ovi and Geno rekindle a past emotional intimacy, and Sidney opens himself up to love from Ovi. It’s *so* gooey. The fic ends with a promise that Ovi, Sidney, and Geno will meet again and are likely to form a polyamorous triad: these shameless, gooey, lovers will live happily ever after in their loving queer filth. Instead of arguing that filthiness is only acceptable in service of monogamous, romantic love (which could be an interpretation of “Filthy” on its own), “Filthy” and “Gooey” as a series expresses a queer interrelation of love, anal sex, and sexual desire.

I can see why someone would find “Filthy/Gooey” and fic like it creepy, but it fills me with so much joy every time I read it. I’m happy to sit in my creepiness, to accept that reading it is a bit weird – but I would like everyone else to admit their love of the butt as freely. Sure, intimate fans have fetishized Crosby’s butt, and some people will certainly argue that we’ve done so excessively, but we aren’t the only ones who are obsessed with it. Public fandom is also obsessed, not only with Crosby’s butt (even Canadian joke account @Stats\_Canada gets in on the Sidney Crosby butt action with their tweet “Top NSFW searches on google.ca,” which lists (among other Canadianisms) “Sidney Crosby butt”), butt also<sup>14</sup> with the hockey butt in general. There is a non-sexual reason for the obsession with

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<sup>14</sup> You may find that after reading this chapter it’s really difficult not to make butt-puns for a while. Forgive me for my own slips – this chapter, and my head, is full of butts and it’s hard to resist.



butts in hockey: the power needed to skate quickly, to switch directions on the ice without falling down, and to muscle (literally) another athlete off the puck takes serious glutes and upper thighs, so hockey players tend to have a large, powerful backside – lovingly called hockey-butt. Cities where hockey is popular have stores that sell hockey-cut jeans, or as Gongshow Gear (a popular online retailer of hockey and hockey culture clothing) puts it, “beauty fit jeans,” which are made “for the typical hockey player, one who has massive legs and what is known usually as a ‘Hockey Ass’ – a bit bigger from hours of skating, squats, and overall just dominating life” (Gongshow, “Men’s Hockey Jeans for the Larger Hockey Ass”).<sup>15</sup> So, Sidney Crosby becomes the Creature Crosby, because in turning him into a monster, we turn him into something that is appropriate to gaze at with desire and disgust. This disgust/desire is erotic, even if the closest we get to an admission of this is Joyce’s explanation in his ode to Crosby’s body that his quads “could not be listed under A” in order to maintain the “family friendly” nature of the publication (“Q”). To acknowledge that the desire for Crosby’s body has anything to do with the butt as a site of potential homosexual submission would be to destabilize the carefully balanced homosexual paradox that keeps public hockey fandom from falling into a *filthy* mess of homoeroticism. Public hockey fandom is as obsessed with Sidney Crosby’s butt as the intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF, but where public hockey fandom represses that interest, intimate hockey fandom has no such

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<sup>15</sup> Gongshow Gear’s women jeans (the “Best Ever”) are described a little less bombastically than their men’s “Quadasarus” or “Hockey Thigh” jeans: “The first ever Girl’s Hockey jeans made for hockey players. These women’s jeans are built with hockey players in mind with a bit more room in the thighs and bum, combined with spandex stretch denim for maximum comfort” (“Women’s hockey jeans made for hockey players”). Men have “Hockey Ass” from “dominating life” and women have a “bum” that requires “maximum comfort.”

compunction. Our desire/disgust for Crosby's ass can be explicitly and pornographically explored, deconstructed, reconfigured and recoded: we can disidentify with the monstrous Creature's monstrous ass and enjoy it, without shame.

#### **5.4 The Creature Crosby**

Sidney "The Creature" Crosby has the ultimate Hockey Butt, and whether we choose to focus on his thighs or call attention to his "glutes," his *butt* is what makes him the Creature. His butt is simultaneously a symbol of his power, his hockey masculinity, and a symbol of his feminization. That is, his butt creates a simultaneous feeling of manliness and womanliness that *must* be monstrous in a heteronormative, gender-binary-obsessed public. He may have received just about every accolade it's possible to receive in the sport, but this lauded position means that the public of hockey demands that his masculinity is unquestionable. If he is to be a symbol of masculinity, any imperfection "requires attention and molding" (Allain, "Kid Crosby" 10). Throughout his NHL career, Crosby has been called "Cindi Crysby" and "Princess Crosby," he's been 'accused' of having a vagina, being transgender, and of being physically or mentally disabled. Thanks to my sister, who is my eyes and ears in the anti-Crosby fandom (being a proud member herself...), I learned of a post on the r/Flyers subreddit that encapsulates the most prominent slurs used against Crosby: misogynistic, transphobic, and ableist. User nigelwhistlenose posted an image titled "Crosby has a new emoji" and received 177 upvotes (for an 86% upvote ratio). The image nigelwhistlenose posted includes an emoji-fied version of Crosby among Apple's proposed emojis representing disabled people actively using mobility aids and prosthetics. Although

Reddit user Raxxappeal ironically complains that Crosby shouldn't be included in the list, they do so by reminding people that Crosby isn't disabled for being "a cheating crybaby." In another blend of misogyny and ableism, Reddit user dandc celebrates Crosby's inclusion in the list of emojis as a new "way to say pussy with emoji," providing the example, "my girlfriend is gonna give me so much *insert new emoji* tonight." Other commenters expressed a tangled blend of toxic masculinity, misogyny, and transphobia: MichaelMoniker joked that the emoji was inaccurate because the "eyes aren't filled with tears," McClellanWasABitch lamented that the post would get removed from r/hockey because you can't "call[] her a girl" there, and user Dark\_Knigget ironically wondered why calling Crosby a woman would get a user banned since they "thought her name was Cindy Crosby." This kind of commentary about Crosby is a normal, mundane, quotidian part of certain hockey fandoms. Because Canadian hockey media constructs Crosby as "a model of dominant masculinity and identity," Crosby is held to a higher, impossible standard, and any apparent failure to live up to the Canadian Hockey Man is therefore proof of his femininity, his queerness (Allain, "Kid Crosby" 10). However, we, as a public of hockey, cannot help but make his body into a symbol, because his body is something that we gaze at and yearn for, even as his performance fails to live up to gendered expectations.

Creators of monsters may use "traits that make a body monstrous – that is, frightening or ugly, abnormal or disgusting" to express "the difference between an other and a self, a pervert and a normal person," but those of us perverted, frightening, abnormal people who gaze upon those monsters have always seen ourselves (Halberstam, *Skin Shows* 8). Queers

are practiced in describing “themselves as a monstrous force in opposition to the overwhelming power of heteronormativity” (Paquesi 122-123). If we are spoken of as “creatures outside the wall” of heteronormativity (Halberstam “The Queer Season”), we will in turn “describe[e] ourselves as fierce creatures, something more powerful than human, as a way to be brave” (Paquesi 120). We understand that we are not actually monsters, but if our bodies are going to be used to create and signal monsters by the homophobic, then we might as well claim some of that power for ourselves. We might create for ourselves, then, instead of monsters that fill us with disgust at our desire, creatures that we want and want to be. In the place of Dracula, van Helsing, and Harker’s heterosexual combat on the field of Mina and Lucy, we get the homoerotics of Lestat and Louis and a long history of vampires who are not “manifestation[s] of our ‘grisly nightmares’” but “speak[] instead to our undead desires” (Williamson 29). Instead of Gill-Man, the eponymous “Creature from the Black Lagoon” who takes white women away from white men, we get the Amphibian Man, the slick and silky reptilian creature who helps Elisa Esposito rescue herself from the white men who would hurt her in *The Shape of Water*, a movie that my friends lovingly call “Fishfucker.” Instead of Frankenstein’s Creature, we get Frank. N. Furter’s Rocky Horror, the “muscle man” who awakens sexual desire in Brad and Janet. And instead of Princess Cindy “Creature” Crosby, we get – in some intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF – filthy, gooey, sexy, queer Sidney.

When we want to touch and taste the gooey monsters, when we want to be filthy, we might make use of a genre known as Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics (ABO), also known as

Omegaverse or “Dogfuck Rapeworld” (Popova; Busse). The variety of names for this genre is telling of its complexity and instability in fandom. It’s not an easy genre to define, because people’s interpretations of the “dynamics” that inform the gendered and sexual relationships within ABO can vary from fandom to fandom – and even from fic to fic. However, there are some things that you can assume will inform any given ABO fic – and it’s because of these givens that ABO is a contested genre in slash fandom. In ABO, there are primary sexes (male and female) and secondary sexes (Alpha, Beta, Omega), which combine to form 6 new designations that function as gender identities. Most ABO slash is m!Alpha/m!Omega, and it’s rare for a woman – cis or trans – to show up in Omegaverse. Fans have – rightly – argued that ABO can be used to further erase women from slash, since women are not even biologically necessary in Omegaverse: cis-men who are also Omegas can become pregnant, a term that fandom calls “male pregnancy” or mpreg. Omega men have a penis as well as a vulval opening near or in their anus, though the internal machinery is often ignored in fic (and occasionally diagrammed in art). The narrative and pornographic advantage of this genitalia is that, like many real-world vaginas and unlike real-world anuses, the Omega asshole is self-lubricating and has some way to funnel sperm to ovaries. The implication that “mpreg” can only occur in a fantasy world where Omega men exist also erases the reality of men with wombs in our own world. Not only does Omegaverse perpetuate the erasure of already-absent people from slash – cis women and trans people – ABO fic tend to rely on biological determinism to tell their stories. Many ABO fic include a deeply biological sex drive, where pheromones and instincts make m!Alpha/m!Omega pairings biological

necessities and animalistic mating behaviour leads to “dubcon” (sex with dubious consent) if not outright rape. This is what gives the genre the second half of its pejorative – “Rapeworld” (Popova 181). “Dogfuck” comes from the fact that the fantasy biology of Alphas, Betas, and Omegas is a fantasy of wolf/werewolf sociosexual dynamics. People who believe that ABO is a dangerous, immoral genre do so because they have encountered fic that is harmful: sexist and transphobic world-building, romances that rely on rape, and bestial sex scenes that culminate in excessive sperm and anally-secreted natural lubricant. It’s decidedly creepy, and I understand why many fans refuse to read it.

However, not every ABO fic uses every element, and there are many ABO fic that queer ABO norms – and the real-life norms that ABO is said to uphold. There exists ABO fic that explicitly questions or subverts the norms of ABO that have developed across many slash-fandoms over the last decade in order to disidentify with the narratives of cisheteronormative sex and love. For example, because ABO is known as a genre with poor consent, with the normative ABO world imagined as a place where an Alpha could assault an Omega because their instincts took over and it would be felt as romantic in the fic, other authors use ABO to “highlight issues of socially constructed inequality and its relationship to power,” rather than romanticize power and sex through rape fantasy (Popova 188). Similarly, normative ABO is recognized as a world built on a sex ternary, with Alphas mirroring a fantasy of masculine domination and Omegas as a feminine breeding stock. While I have absolutely encountered (and noped out of) fic that leans heavily into those dynamics, there are also ABO fic that queer the homonormative narratives of ABO: using the gender/sex

ternaries to show how queerness exists even within a world with such apparently strict biological imperatives. Not all ABO presumes an Alpha and an Omega are bound in the same way that heteronormativity assumes a man naturally desires a woman, even though that is what the genre was built to do.

In this way, ABO offers room for queer fans to explore our own “misreading” of gender and sexuality that makes us monstrous in our real worlds. Where normative ABO, in which m!Alphas and m!Omegas are natural mates whose bodies are built to reproduce with each other, is a kind of scrambling of heteronormativity into homonormativity that maintains normativity as a desirable goal, queer ABO refuses normativity in a way that might “reconstruct the encoded message of a cultural text” (Muñoz 31). The disidentification with cisheterosexuality that occurs in queer ABO takes the “universalizing and exclusionary machinations” of ABO that reinforces gender, sex, and romantic binaries, “and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications,” such as those bodies that do not fit the apparently natural social and biological expectations (31). Normative ABO might fantasize about the absence of queerness, where sex between men is as natural as sex between men and women, but queer ABO shows that there is room for queer bodies and queer loves, even in a world where homosexuality is made normal through monstrosity. That is, where normative ABO sees “nature” as a way to make nothing queer, to remove queerness from homosexuality, *queer* ABO is proof that queerness will (naturally) arise even when queerness seems impossible. Queer ABO, then, disidentifies with the restrictive construction of gender – in our real world or in normative ABO – that presumes a

person's genitals and/or genders could limit their sexual and romantic possibilities, and instead imagines a world in which joy and pleasure is taken in the infinite collection and combination of apparently monstrous bodies.

ABO has always been both an RPF genre and a monstrous genre, making it particularly difficult for outsiders to recognize as anything but monstrously queer. Kristina Busse describes the history of ABO through popular fandom tropes, including soul bonding, empathic communication, pheromones and the biological imperative to mate (commonly known outside ABO as “fuck or die,” modeled after the canonical Vulcan sexual crisis of Pon Farr in *Star Trek*). These tropes developed initially in *Supernatural*'s RPF fandom, as fans sought a way to incorporate the werewolves, ghosts, and monsters of the television show into their versions of the actors' romantic and sexual escapades. Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki were transformed into werewolves with monstrous genitals and biology in order to re-inject the urban-fantasy into the erotic RPF their characters inspired. ABO is also a monstrous genre because it was, to some extent, built to enable anal sex between men – through the natural lubrication of the Omega anus – and to turn it into a reproductive sex act. The Western fear of/obsession with anality, queerness, and sex means that ABO will always be seen as monstrous. People who participate in it can feel ashamed of their membership in ABO fandom, and outsiders to ABO, even if they are insiders to slash, will shame ABO slashers. This shame is compounded in Hockey RPF ABO, since RPF is already seen as a weird, wrong way to engage in sports fandom by public fandoms and a weird, wrong way to engage in slash fandom. Add on ABO, and ABO RPF becomes a weird, wrong way to



engage in RPF slash. To do all three – Hockey, RPF, and ABO – is almost impossibly queer, creepy, *bad*, even within slash fandoms. This shame extends even to scholars of slash and fandom, which perhaps explains why there have only been two published works on ABO – Milena Popova’s “Dogfuck Rapeworld” and Kristina Busse’s “Omegaverse.” I have attended conferences where people have presented papers on ABO, but when Milena Popova, Angie Fazekas, and Jonathan Rose presented on ABO in a Fan Studies Network panel, the discussion period afterward was contentious. I remember an audience member berating the panelists for studying a fetishizing, essentializing, immoral genre, as though the panelists weren’t aware of ABO’s essentializing potential – as though we should not study it because any connection to ABO is immoral.

However, this position ignores the transformative nature of fanfiction. Even though norms do develop in fic, as trends in fandoms rise and fall, as popular writers and Big Name Fans pick up and adapt new and old tropes, and as a genre from one fandom is ported into another through a multifandom author, there is infinite room for different interpretations. Not all interpretations are as powerful as others, however, and things like whiteness, wealth, popularity, and masculinity can limit what is *felt* as possible in certain fandoms. However, fanfiction is a space where what is felt as impossible becomes possible – even what is felt as impossible in its own fandom. ABO is especially complex and unstable, because it is a truly fan-made ‘verse – an amalgam of tropes mashed together to create the rules for a gender/sex hierarchy in which m/m relationships are normative. Although most ABO shares those “dynamics” and an understanding that the gender dynamics impact biology, sex, romance,

and social standing, *how* those dynamics work in each fanfiction world shifts by fandom and by author. Outside norms will still affect how those dynamics and interpretations are felt, but new norms develop, especially within intimate fandoms. That is, while there is a normative sense of ABO, and many fic written in the genre meet those expectations, it is possible to write against that normative sense of ABO *and still be writing ABO*. In fact, isolation – intimacy – helps to create the situations in which a new feeling of ABO can develop. In contrast to the 97% of ABO fic on AO3 that is unlocked, only 46% of Hockey RPF ABO is accessible without an AO3 account: Hockey RPF’s ABO fandom is an intimate fandom, closed off from outsiders who don’t have access or the awareness to search for the material. As a relatively small fandom, Hockey RPF’s ABO doesn’t show up in top results for ABO *or* RPF, so we are able to develop our own ABO norms, somewhat separate from (but always aware of) the larger ABO fandoms.

## **5.5 The Creepy Creatures of Hockey RPF**

Hockey RPF ABO is a big line for people to cross, and you don’t become an “us” of Hockey RPF ABO accidentally. It’s undoubtedly creepy to take Sidney Crosby’s body and give it the lubricated anus and biological urge to be fucked that makes an Omega, especially when it’s not uncommon for people to taunt Crosby for being a woman and/or having a vagina. When I write Omega!Sidney, though, I’m not photoshopping make-up on him or drawing him in a tutu – and I’m not doing it to mock him. I may be giving him what the rest of the world calls “lady-parts” but Omega!Sid is not a woman (and we know this, because there are different tags for fic in which Sidney is a woman) – and he’s not always a normal

man, either. In a lot of Hockey RPF ABO, Sidney, may or may not be an Alpha or an Omega – and is frequently something else entirely – and while he is a man who is expected to desire other men who have the correct secondary sex, he often has desires outside of those his biology necessitates. Sidney in Hockey RPF ABO is frequently queer within the dynamics of ABO – as an Alpha who loves other Alphas, for example – or is unable/unwilling to perform normative Alpha or Omega gender even when his relationships do fall into normative Alpha/Omega pairings. Hockey RPF ABO writers play with the norming codes of ABO and heteronormativity to rebuild an ABO world in which impossible queerness becomes joyfully real, even if only in private.

Fic like “Wine,” a Sid/Geno ABO courting AU, are delightful moments of queerness that I’ve only found in Hockey RPF ABO. “Wine” tells the story of the courtship between Alpha!Geno and Alpha!Sid – a courtship that is complicated and fraught because normative courtship rituals between men in this ‘verse assume that one man must be the Alpha and the other the Omega, just as real-world straightening imagines that one gay man takes the social and sexual role of “the woman” in any homosexual relationship. Geno struggles to court Sidney: he feels that he isn’t allowed to do it as an Alpha because he believes that Sidney wouldn’t want to be courted as an Omega, but he also doesn’t want to take on the Omega role himself. He forces himself into the Omega role, to his and Sidney’s displeasure, until Sidney gets him to see that Alphas can be together *as Alphas* without mimicking the Alpha/Omega dynamics that require the Alpha to be financially, socially, and sexually dominant over the Omega. In “Wine,” Alpha/Alpha relationships are so rare as to be

impossible, just as the pairing is rare in ABO generally. However, “Wine” is a popular and well-loved Hockey RPF ABO fic. It is the 31<sup>st</sup> (out of 319) most popular Hockey RPF ABO fic with 619 kudos (and the most popular Alpha/Alpha Hockey RPF ABO fic). I’m not the only one who read this fic and felt a strong connection to the story: it “feels like a reclamation” to one commenter (Comment, July 12 2015), and that seems to have been the goal. Although “Wine” digs right into the feelings of confusion, shame, and desire that exist around the realization that you are queer in a homophobic culture, the writer’s goal was “to yell ‘Fuck you, it is not!’” to the “‘anatomy is destiny’-ness of the a/b/o trope played straight (pun totally intended)” (Comment, July 12 2015). The story “Wine” tells is simultaneously a “Fuck you” to normative ABO *and* to the effects of internalized homophobia that limit our ability to imagine our queer selves as happy and in love.

In “Wine” and two other of the most popular Hockey RPF ABO fic, Sidney and Geno fall in love, have tender-filthy – gooey – sex, and navigate the tension between what their bodies are (and want) and what the cultures they live in expect of them. I chose these three fic, “Smell,” “Notes,” and “Wine” partly for their popularity, partly for the fact that they’re fairly representative of the moves other Hockey RPF ABO makes, but mainly I chose these because they are my favourite ABO fic. Among not just Hockey RPF ABO, but also all the ABO I’ve read in other fandoms, these fic hit me right in the feels. In “Smell”, not only is Sidney’s ‘heat’ delayed (broadly comparable to puberty) but his scent, a central element of the AU’s culture, is highly distasteful: not only is he isolated from his peers, but everyone can tell he doesn’t fit in, because he smells bad. As he and Geno fall in love and have sex

with each other, he experiences his first heat, but he still smells *wrong* to others. The story ends happily, with Sid and Geno pleased to be in their strange relationship. In “Notes”, Sidney is similarly afflicted by a biological strangeness that isolates him socially, but this one is incurable: he is neither Alpha nor Omega, but the rare Beta. Meanwhile, Geno has imagined that Sidney is hiding his Omega designation and is disappointed to learn that Sid is not, in fact, like him. Despite this, and Sidney’s (seemingly) inexplicable inability to follow the scent-based communication that shapes their social world, they fall in love. Sidney’s inability to communicate through scent, though, complicates their sex life, and Geno teaches Sidney that they can enjoy sex together, even if it’s different. “Wine”, my personal favourite, focuses on a courting ritual. In this AU, Alphas and Omegas perform specific actions when courting, but Geno, who is an Alpha, wants to court Sidney, also an Alpha. Geno can’t imagine how it would look to court another Alpha as an Alpha, so he, shamefully, takes on the role of the Omega. Sidney refuses to be courted this way and shows Geno how the refusing to perform either Omega or Alpha can free them to enjoy not only a queer romance, but queer sex. Although all three fic have something to say about queerness (which I will, of course, discuss), the thing I love is that they turn the NHL’s most boring off-ice personality into a queer, horny monster whose staid exterior is really just armor against a world that would hurt him for his queer monstrosity.

The rules for each ABO universe differ across the three fic, but all three use their different roles to tell a story of a monstrous Sidney who does not quite fit his world and who finds a way to mis-fit with Geno. In “Smell”, where sex and love are codified through

biological secondary sexes and soulmate bonds (a common ABO trope), Sidney's heat is much delayed, isolating him socially from the rest of the world. While queerness still exists in both "Wine" and "Notes", it is more culturally than biologically constructed, as social rituals rather than biological magic are what sets Sidney apart. As with most ABO fic, those social and biological rules create inequality that affects the characters, but those rules (and oppressions) are applied differently across the three fic. In "Smell" and "Wine," the pressure of normativity is felt most in romantic and sexual pairs, as Alphas are expected to join sexually and romantically with Omegas, whereas the normativity of "Notes" is a result of an Alpha-based patriarchy which oppresses and discriminates against Omegas as a weaker sex. Biology affects the social worlds in all three fic, as the tension between biology and culture is a central feature of ABO fic, but the authors use different tools to express it: where "Wine" is concerned more with the social world of ABO, in which special rituals codify the interactions between Alphas and Omegas, "Smell" and "Notes" rely on secondary communication through pheromones and scenting to make the social isolation of queer people a biological reality. Finally, all three have a happy ending (much like most ABO and most fic that isn't darkfic) but unlike the common ABO trope where biology and soulmates fix the main character's primary tension, the happy ending in these three fic requires a refusal of the social and biological rules. Sidney is cured of his physical ailment in "Smell," but that physical cure is not a fix for his social displacement. In "Notes," he comes to accept that his biological features are not illnesses to be cured. In the third fic, "Wine," we see Sidney through Geno's eyes: after Sidney, comfortably, bravely queer, teaches Geno that happy endings for queer

people are possible, through queerness. These fic break and rely on a mix of different ABO tropes, as expected for such a pastiche genre, but all end up at the same place: queerness exists even in (especially in) worlds with rigid biological and social rules, and the way out of the pain of queerness is not, in fact, to get out of queerness, but to claim it. In ABO fic starring Sid and Geno, that claiming of queerness happens through sex that is gooey: filthy, with the depiction of excessive bodily fluids, in the midst of tender declarations of care and love.

Bodily fluids are a common feature of most ABO fic, and part of the pleasure of the genre is the excess of these fluids. Omegas don't just have self-lubricating anuses, they have anuses that drip, soak, and flood. Alphas don't just ejaculate into their mates, they "knot," blocking the semen inside the reproductive tract and locking the pair together in the post-sex come-down. The smell of the slick leaking from an aroused Omega can send an Alpha into a horny trance, and the smell of Alpha semen on an Omega's skin can soothe them and release them from the pleasure-pain of their overwhelming urge to have sex (called 'heat'). This is true in Hockey RPF ABO as it is in other ABO. In "Smell," scent and bodily fluids are used to show that Sid and Geno are soulmates, or at least biologically wired to want each other: Sidney's scent is mostly unpleasant to the people around him, and he finds no pleasure in the smell of the Alphas he has sex with, but he and Geno find each other irresistible. When Sid has sex with Jack, he's mostly just annoyed to smell like him, finding "nothing sexy about the whole process" as he wipes ejaculate off his face (par. 63). In contrast, when he starts spending time with Geno, his teammates comment that Sidney "reeks" of him (par. 203) and

he “soak[s] through” his boxers when Geno’s presence kickstarts his delayed heat (par. 282). When they finally have sex, Sid encourages Geno to “knot” him, even as he is oversensitive, “fucking himself as much as he can on the knot” (par. 528). We know, in “Smell” that Sid and Geno are destined for a happy ending because they both instinctively enjoy their gooey, sticky sex.

“Notes” and “Wine” challenge this assumption that love is a natural extension of their biological processes, though they do retain the characters’ desire for that gooey sex, the mix of tenderness and filthiness that feels uniquely queer. In “Notes,” Sid can’t react to Geno’s scent, so he’s incapable of participating in the mutual exchange of excessive bodily fluids, but they still have sex they both enjoy, with Sid and Geno both ejaculating. However, we still see Geno responding to Sid’s scent, however faint it is: “It apparently didn’t matter that his scent was fainter than what Evgeni was used to; the promise of it went straight to his dick and to his ass, already beginning to slick” (par. 564). In other words, though their sex does not have the level of excessive stickiness stereotypical of ABO sex scenes, excess gooeyness is still present, both physically in the form of Geno’s slick and figuratively. When Geno reiterates that he is proud to have Sid as a romantic and sexual partner, Sid calls him a “sap” (par. 584). “Wine” further complicates the connection between bodily fluids and sex, since neither Geno nor Sid have the body parts required to create the combination of Omega slick and Alpha ejaculate, which is why Geno purchases “O-My! Artificial Slick” at the start of the fic (par. 8). Much of Geno’s shame and fear comes from the fact that he literally cannot provide Sid with the Omega experience (par. 16). When Geno describes the bottle of



lubricant, the shame drips from his words: the lubricant is “thick and viscous” and it “slosh[es] against the sides” of the bottle (par. 8). This un-sexy description of the thing that is meant to make him feel like an Omega for Sid-as-Alpha is a reminder to the reader that we’re dealing with something beyond the edges of good taste: Geno is purchasing thick, gloopy lubricant so that Sid can fuck him in the ass more naturally. This discomfort exists throughout the bulk of the narrative until the moment Sid accepts Geno as a fellow Alpha. However, because gooey sex is still a necessary and expected part of ABO, Sid discourages Geno from getting rid of the lubricant, suggesting that they can still use it to fuck each other (par. 63). Though that sex does not occur in the text of the fic, the promise remains: Sid and Geno will find a way to have gooey, sticky, lubricated sex with each other, and this sex will affirm their love for each other as equals.

The promise of gooey sex exists in all three fic, partly because it’s a mainstay of ABO, but also because it’s a necessary payoff to the tension and struggles the main characters face. Being in some way mis-aligned to the social worlds they inhabit, the main characters don’t – or can’t – believe that they will get to enjoy love and sex at such a visceral level. All three fic make it clear that biological inequality restricts the lives of NHLers, which mirrors the paranoia and surveillance of queerness in our real NHL. Because he is not an Alpha (or an Alpha in the ‘right’ way) in ABO fic, Sid must not only come to terms with his own difference, but do so with the knowledge that the NHL and its public fandom will comment on his queerness. Since the fic are romances, the solution to this surveillance and pressure to conform is to find comfort and equality in the relationship he shares with Geno.

However, that relationship cannot solve the entirety of the social ills they face. For example, in “Smell”, Sid’s career in the NHL is in question from the beginning, as his family is concerned that his “future alpha” would not want him to play (par. 8) and he is the target of “death threats and omega slurs” when he continues to play (par. 20). Even when he is drafted in the NHL, hockey media becomes obsessed with Sid’s delayed heat and speculates about the eventual Alpha who will get “his hole wet and ready for a good feelings-attached dicking” (par. 96). By the end, Sid decides that the “solution to the criticism” he faces (par. 570) is to “have [Geno] hold me down and fuck the anger out of me” (569). He will never avoid the criticism, nor does he expect that the NHL will suddenly accept him as a strange omega – instead, he and Geno can find comfort, together and privately, from the pain of being queer in public hockey fandom.

Similarly, in “Notes,” the NHL and its media distrust non-Alphas. Because Sid is a Beta, he is able to pass as an Alpha by using medication (“scent blockers”) that stops people from being able to smell his gender (par. 4). Although the practice is strange, it is not entirely queer: scent blockers allow him to be seen as the “eccentric hockey saviour” rather than the “total fucking freak” he believes he is (par. 359) Geno, who is not able to hide his Omega status, constantly aware that he cannot be seen to be too close to an Alpha (or someone who seems like an Alpha), or else people will assume he will “retire pregnant” before his time (par. 87) and see him as a “waste of [a] draft pick” (par. 94). Like “Smell,” the resolution of their love story is not the cure for their social problems. In “Notes,” it’s not even the cure to their biological problems. Sex with Geno does not cure Sidney of his Beta sex, a fact that

disappoints him: he “thought maybe it would work for [him], too. With you [Geno]” (par. 555), but he still can’t scent Geno the way an Omega or Alpha could. Similarly, dating Sidney is not the solution to Geno’s social problems, since the rest of the world will still assume that Sidney is an Alpha (par. 383). Again, as with “Smell,” the solution is for them is to learn how to enjoy the sex they have with each other, in private, away from the social expectations of the world they live in, as Geno says in his stilted English: “You not broke. You not need fix. You fuck me now?” (par. 560). In other words, in their intimate moments, they can craft a space in which the pain of feeling broken is soothed, much like those of us fans who write Hockey RPF do in our own intimate fandoms.

Even “Wine,” which doesn’t concern itself with social acceptance in the way that “Notes” and “Smell” do, still makes it clear that queerness in ABO Hockey is closely watched, and thus that safety and joy can be found in intimate, protected spaces. Geno, the narrator, opens the fic intensely aware that his every move is scrutinized: he notes that “Jen [the Penguins’ communications manager, Jennifer Bullano Ridgley] would approve” of his choice to have a private freak-out over his sexuality (par. 1). Geno spends most of the fic worrying about “what other people will say, how it will affect the team, his family,” because he recognizes that his desires are so strange as to be taboo. It is only when Sidney makes it clear that he shares this queer desire that he can relax (par. 76). However, their conversation and acceptance of each other takes place inside Sidney’s home, and they do not discuss coming out: the fears that Geno expresses at the start of the fic are as relevant at the end. He can “put them out of his mind” for now (par. 76), but they are not gone. In all three fic, the

biological and social restrictions on their lives are not completely solvable by a fairy tale kiss: the happy ending arrives when Sid and Geno work together to make a space that works for them, separate from hockey culture, even if that solution does not *fix* the world they live in.

Hockey culture, and the culture of these worlds more broadly, have hard, immutable rules shaped by assumptions about and realities of ABO biology that result in Sidney's misfit. In "Smell" and "Notes," Sidney fails to adhere to his world's social rules because there is something literally wrong with him, biologically. In other words, ABO in Hockey RPF *is* about biological essentialism: an Omega is an Omega because of their particular biology, and an Omega who cannot live up to the social role does so because there is something wrong with his particular biology. However, all three fic argue that it is the *social consequence* of those biological rules that makes any particular biological characteristic a problem. In other words, these fic use the ABO obsession with biology to carve out queerness. For example, in "Smell," the biological sex of the Omega literally affects who they can be attracted to: Sidney is unable to find most Alphas attractive, because something in their pheromones (called "scent" in most ABO fic) is physically incompatible with Sidney's body. Sidney is in constant tension with his body, often referring to "his biology" as something that "really wants to fuck him over" (par. 17) and getting in the way of his goals (par. 16). However, Sid's hatred of his biology is a narrative irony that we, as readers, are meant to understand is an incorrect assumption. Throughout the fic, we watch as Sidney, who wants his body and his Omega sex to "be easy" (par. 191) and "make things easier" (par. 396), ignores the

people who tell him that he doesn't need to have a "regular Alpha-Omega relationship" (par. 392, par. 425). The miscommunication that sustains the plot of the entire fic rests on Sidney assuming that Geno, as an Alpha, would only want him as a traditional, submissive Omega, when Geno is highly aware that Sid would not want that (par. 490). That is, although the wider society in which Sid lives is biologically essentialist, Sidney's immediate social circle does not believe in it: they encourage him to act in ways that are not aligned with what he should want, biologically. They encourage him *not* to conform to the gender expectations that his culture bases on his biological sex.

In "Notes," Sidney's strange biology is also the cause of the main romantic conflict, though, again, it is the social effect of his biological status that creates tension between him and Geno. That is, biological realities deeply shape the social world that Sidney and Geno navigate, and both create obstacles to their relationship. Although scent is an element of the culture in "Smell," it is a significant communication method in "Notes" that Sidney cannot access as a Beta, someone with "no scenting or musk" to help him send or receive social signals like Alphas and Omegas (par. 357). Biologically, Sidney is excluded from entire conversations and social hierarchies because he cannot comprehend the "fundamental social signals" communicated through scent (par. 32). As a result, Geno and Sidney miscommunicate in both scent and words, delaying their eventual union. In the world of "Notes," Sidney's inability to participate in the social world of scents marks him as *weird*, verging on queer.

I could explain that this is an argument about how queerness is constructed within cultural systems of normativity: Sidney does not act, talk, or feel *right* to the people around him, and thus he becomes queer, even within his immediate social circles of friends and loved ones. And, yes: Sidney is queer, he is socially strange, he is felt as *weird* by the people around him, but it is, in this fic and other ABO fic, because of a literal fact of his biology. He is a Beta in a world of Alphas and Omegas, which results in both small and large social consequences. However, Sid's inability to participate in and understand social situations does not have to be a biological reality, especially since the real Crosby's star image includes this eccentricity, and this characterisation exists in non-ABO versions of Sid in Hockey RPF. ABO as a genre *requires* a biological reason for queerness, so to choose the genre to tell the story of a Sid who cannot fit into his social world is to choose to find a reason for that misfit that exists in some kind of biological reality. In other words, although it would be possible to argue that what is *really* happening in "Notes" and "Smell" is an argument for the power of queers to find love even under oppressive systems, it is also true that both fic express a desire for a real reason for queerness, some reality of biology that makes some people different. Neither fic expresses queerness as a reality on its own, but instead it is a *consequence* of a biological quirk, defect, or abnormality.

I think this is why "Wine" is my favourite of the three fic: both Sid and Geno are Alphas, with no "genetic throwback" or delayed heat to cause Sid or Geno to act in ways that are different, weird, or queer. Instead, we watch as two people accept their queer desires, even if there is no biological imperative for those desires – even if those desires *contradict*

the biological imperatives of their bodies. Geno opens the narrative, psyching himself up to buy “O-My! Artificial Slick,” a “thick and viscous” lubricant meant to replicate the internal lubrication of an Omega’s genitals (par. 8) because his own body doesn’t produce it naturally. He believes that he must perform the biological and social role of an Omega in order to be in a relationship with Sid, and the disconnect between that belief and his own body creates shame: he fears humiliation (par. 9), and struggles to come to terms with the fact that he is trying in vain to fool someone who “knows what he is” (par. 5) with a body that will “get so many things wrong” (par. 16). The fic reaches its climax when Geno “offer[s] to turn himself inside out” for Sid (par. 69), despite his obvious distaste at the idea of “play[ing] Omega” (par. 62). Sid refuses Geno’s offer, not because he doesn’t desire Geno, but because he doesn’t want the straightened version of their coupling that Geno proposes. Instead, he wants “the real you. Not pretend-Omega you” (par. 55). In this fic, Sid has already come to terms with who he is and what he desires, which allows him to imagine, desire, and claim a reality where they court each other as they are: two Alphas. Because of this, he’s able to acknowledge his own queer desire to have sex with Geno, not as an Omega, but as an Alpha. When Geno half-jokingly complains that he’ll have to return the slick he worked so hard to purchase, Sid says, bluntly, “You could fuck me...I’d like that” (par. 63) an admission that shocks Geno because it “was beyond the realm of the imaginable” (par. 67) that Sidney would take on the role of a “willing bottom” (Pronger, “End Zone” 117). The fic resolves with Sid and Geno choosing which parts of the social rituals they will bring into the relationship, negotiating how they’ll make dinner together, and agreeing to drink the wine

Geno brought as an Omega courting gift. Rather than refusing the entirety of the social rules that delineate Alpha/Omega relationships, Sid and Geno pick and choose the parts they want, to build a new set of rules for their own Alpha/Alpha relationship. In other words, they disidentify with the normative courting rituals to construct their own queer ritual, a reality built not by their bodies or the social rules that extend from their biology, but by themselves.

In the end, queer people in this Hockey RPF ABO get to be happy when they refuse the call of normativity in big or small ways. The reward for their refusal, however, looks a lot like the normative expectation of love and sex: sex and a monogamous, fated romantic pairing. This feels, to me as a reader and as someone analysing these fic, both good and bad: the fic express a desire for a queer love that does, in the end, still look like what we expect love to look like. However, this fantasy of queer love only happens in pockets, small spaces that the characters carve out for themselves. Sid and Geno in “Smell” are out as a couple, but still face criticism for the fact that Sid will not perform the Omega role more perfectly (par. 570). In “Notes,” it doesn’t seem as though Sid will let the wider world know of his Beta status, and he will continue to wear the scent-blockers that make him so unpalatable to the rest of his scent-based culture: only in bed with Geno can he be himself in “all the complex, organic subtleties” (par. 595). In “Wine” they have a romantic moment at the end walking “into the fresh air” together, but as much as they’re walking off into the sunset, it’s to Sid’s back porch, which is hidden from the outside world (par. 83). As joyful as the moments of queer euphoria are for Sid and Geno, and us as readers, they aren’t moments that will rewrite the worlds they live in. They are small, private moments that change *them* and maybe



even some of us readers, but their worlds will continue on expecting traditional Alpha/Omega relationships, biology, and sex. In other words, Sid and Geno build a queer story for themselves as they fall in love, rewriting the rules of their world for the two of them – but only the two of them. This is not a moment of political subversion. What they’re doing, instead, is disidentifying with their ABO cultures, just as their authors are disidentifying with hockey culture in all of its straight-cis-ness, to build a space, however small, in which they can just *be*.

The magic of ABO is that the social worlds that exist in each fic can shift to tell the story of love within a rigid sociosexual hierarchy however queerly the author desires. In Hockey RPF, that story is usually of the pains and joys of finding a path towards gooey love. A comment on “Notes” expresses this clearly: “love that’s stronger than biological determinism hits me where I live” (April 2015). It hits me where I live, too, and explains why someone who is as attached to queer politics as I am would love a genre that feels like it has rigid gender/sex/sexuality relationships. Neither author uses the tags “trope inversion” or “trope subversion,” which signals that the stories they tell fit into *their* understanding of the genre of ABO. When a commenter on “Notes” writes “this is SUCH a good inversion of the trope (without actually being an inversion, I guess?),” the author replies that “the worldbuilding can shift dramatically depending on the balance of alphas/omegas in your universe” (November 2017). That is, depending on which identities are felt as normal and which are felt as queer, the apparently normative social dynamics of ABO can shift in response. Other commenters expressed how much they love the author’s take on the genre,

point out that they “love the exploration of the beta as the anomaly” or the “really neat twist” of Sidney’s rare gender (July 2014), which tells us that this interpretation of ABO isn’t normal – it *is* a twist on the genre. The author explains that they enjoyed “playing with a/b/o assumptions” (April 2015) and that they really like writing fic where “people who are a little weird fit[] weirdly together” (August 2017). What makes this fic interesting to its readers, then, is the exploration of queerness within ABO: we use ABO to tell stories of queerness finding space to bloom in a world that feels rigid and unchanging because people have told us, over and over, that the world is rigid – not because it actually is. Much like how public hockey fandom feels impossibly straight, hard, and masculine, ABO feels impossibly deterministic on the surface until you imagine a story of queerness within it – and suddenly things that were rigid reveal themselves to be held up by assumptions about normality that aren’t as necessary as we once thought.

Queerness, like creepiness, like monstrosity, is dependent on the context – on the other bodies in the space who determine which way is north and show you whether your body and desires are, in fact, botched, defective, or abnormal (Ahmed). Whether I say queer, creep, or monster, I mean the same thing: a creature whose body and/or actions are a threat to the norm and must be contained in order to maintain the order of normality, of public fandom, of whiteness, of heterosexuality, of cis-ness, masculinity, and so on and so on. So, when we make Crosby a monster, or through making Crosby queer become monstrous ourselves, we become a threat to the normal order of hockey masculinity. My monstrosity may cost me more than it costs Crosby, but we are nonetheless monsters together. That

Crosby can be made – and recognized – as Sidney, the queer monster, makes Crosby-the-real-athlete feel even queerer. If I explain that my choice to read, write, and share stories of this monstrous Sidney is a politically subversive act, an intentional poke at the scaffolds of hockey masculinity, I become a monster through my desire to take hockey apart. If I have no desire to engage in the public of hockey, to prove that my work is *good*, but choose instead to lean into the desires that public fandom has deemed monstrous, to have fun in my corner with my friends, I become monstrous in my lack of shame.

Public hockey fandom uses Crosby's monstrosity to turn voyeuristic desire into scientific/athletic observation, thereby maintaining hockey's heteronormativity. As a tool, as a social technology, monstrosity has been used to "read the difference between an other and a self, a pervert and a normal person, a foreigner and a native" (Halberstam, *Skin Shows* 8). Even before intimate fans of Hockey RPF, ABO or otherwise, get their hands on Crosby, he has already been made into a monster because he doesn't quite fit as the NHL's Face of Hockey. Public fandom has already borrowed rhetorical figures from the codes of monstrosity, like his large lips, thighs, glutes, and his particular superstitions to make Crosby a monstrous amalgam of queer, feminine sexuality, with a dose of racist obsession with (apparently) enlarged body parts. The technology of monstrosity doesn't turn Crosby queer in public fandom, but it does turn the queerness of Crosby into a scientific marvel rather than an erotic one. We create a Creature to hold all those queer moments when he's just a bit too queer, a bit too sexy, a bit too womanly or girlish. It's not just that Sidney Crosby is a monster, but that his body inspires monstrous feelings in us: he's the bogeyman under the

bed for those who prefer their NHLers to look and act ‘like a man’ and he’s an object of (monstrous) desire for so many others. It’s not that the Creature Crosby is queer, black, and/or a woman – he is emphatically none of those things – but monstrosity “transform[s] the fragments of otherness into one body ...[which] bears the marks of the constrictions of femininity, race, and sexuality” (92). Whatever form that monster takes, it is almost always straight white colonizing men who know how to defeat them: Dracula, King Kong, Gill-Man, etc. are defeated by white heteropatriarchy, and their defeat as monsters stabilizes the norms against which all bodies are measured. By turning Sidney Crosby’s curvy, feminine body into a Creature, he becomes something we know how to look at: with scientific curiosity, with horror, and without the discomfort of erotic desire. The technology of monstrosity need not only be a tool of the oppressor, however, but can be wielded by the monsters themselves to rewrite/reclaim the narratives of monstrosity (cf. McKittrick; Halberstam; Paquesi).

Not everyone uses monstrosity in the same way, of course, and in intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF, we love our monsters. Rather than defeating or exiling the Creature Crosby (the fate of most monsters), Hockey RPF slash uses his already monstrous body to affirm the desire for monstrously feminine, queer, disabled, squishy bodies. In public fandom, Sidney Crosby becomes the Creature, a monster who serves a cultural purpose, since “monstrosity (and the fear it gives rise to) is historically conditioned rather than a psychological universal” (6). The public fandom of hockey that yearns for the good old days, when hockey men were men and women and dirty SJWs didn’t try to take away their toys, needs the Creature (and those who love him) to be monstrous in opposition to their ‘us’, to stabilize their position as

the heroes. That is, Crosby is only a terrifying monster to those for whom he was turned *into* a monster. What they fear about the Creature Crosby reveals more about them than about him. Similarly, the qualities that we love about the monstrous Sidney in Hockey RPF's intimate fandoms – especially ABO are as real/unreal as the qualities that public fandom fears, and say more about our own desires than about Crosby himself. In fact, I love the Creature Crosby more than I love Sidney Crosby, because the Creature Crosby is unabashedly queer. In Hockey RPF, we love the Creature, just as we love Hyde, the Amphibian man and King Kong more than we love the men who defeat our monsters.

In our intimate Hockey RPF ABO fandoms, we exaggerate the monstrosities of Creature Sidney and make him desirable, because the things that Crosby's body makes us feel are not anathema to our fandom. We don't need to reject the body that fascinates and horrifies us. Rather than reshaping Crosby to fit the worlds of public hockey fandom, we reshape the worlds of intimate fandom to fit him: we make use of a creepy, kinky, monstrously taboo world of sex and pheromones that crosses so many moral and ethical boundaries. We create, through disidentification with both Creature and Sidney Crosby, these monstrously queer, kinky, joyful, beloved outsiders who take on the name Sidney. Hockey RPF ABO disidentifies with the imagined Creature Crosby, who doesn't play the game hard enough or use his body in manly enough ways, and recodes the Creature as broken, queer, wrong, *and* deserving of love and devotion from other hockey men. If his body is queer and disabled, great. If it's weird and inhuman, perfect. If the way his body makes us feel is a bit

turned on and fascinated and maybe even a little bit horrified, too, well – that’s just the way things are.

Those of us who imagine queerness in an apparently rigidly straight world, those of us who refuse to be made normal are made monstrous, but monsters are frightfully powerful when we stop being ashamed of monstrosity. When we choose to take on the name of the monster, we become terrifying and dangerous. The Creature in *Frankenstein* becomes the greatest threat when he accepts that he will always be a monster, and those of us in Hockey RPF ABO know *very well* how creepy we are. We are creepy for reasons that are completely understandable, but we’re also creepy because the things we love are the wrong things, or we love the right things in the wrong ways, but loving incorrectly is the life of monsters, creeps, and queers. What Hockey RPF ABO can help us understand is that public hockey fandom is already monstrously creepy: it’s just difficult to tell unless you come at it sideways. We intimate fans of hockey RPF ABO come at hockey on an angle and reshape it into something less horrifying to us. With Sidney Crosby, we take the shape of his fandom: he’s a beloved and hated queerish figure who is supposed to represent all that is right about hockey masculinity while also serving as a bogeyman, warning others of the cost of failing to be appropriately manly. We see how he is called womanly, robotic, obsessive, and strange, and we feel the unspoken obsession with his body through familiar objectifications, under names like Creature, Sid the Kid, Cindy Crysby, or Captain Canada. We take that shape apart and reconstruct a gender-crossing, sexuality-blurring, human-animal monster cyborg version of Sidney Crosby that we call Sid, Sidney, Sidnyushka, Omega!Sid, Alpha!Sid, Beta!Sid, or

any of the infinite other representations of this creature, because we want a monster who is familiar to us, who is like us and would like us. That feels creepy, but so does public hockey fandom's obsession with his butt, his hockey-robot persona, and his role as a Creature of Hockey. By writing Hockey RPF ABO we make the creepiness sensible – we say *yes*, his butt is amazing and weird. Yes, he's particular about his rituals in a way that makes him cruel and polite. Yes, he's a soft expression of hockey's hard masculinity. No butts (except the one), just ands: like cyborgs, monsters, queers, we creeps of hockey's public and intimate fandoms are happy to take on the paradoxes of loving the Face of the NHL who's also a real person. If that makes us monsters, we can at least be sure that our fellow fans will love us, because loving monsters is what we do.

The power and pleasure of loving monsters is that we accept our own monstrosity in doing so. We accept that we stand outside of certain social scripts and we use our position as monsters to take them apart and reconstruct them, keeping in the things that work and leaving out the things that don't. It would be wholly cyborgian and disidentificatory if it weren't so bound up in white privilege, however. It's difficult for Black people, especially, to reclaim monstrosity, as Sharpe explains, because the monstrous intimacies to which black people have been subjected make any reclamation of monstrosity a reinscription and erasure of the violence of those intimacies (Sharpe 3). P.K. Subban is, to many hockey fans, a monster that is not made safe through scientific voyeurism. In fact, when they are asked to watch him, public fans complain that we see *too much* of him. In the summer of 2019, Subban posted almost-daily videos of his high-intensity workouts on Instagram, and sports commentator

Andrew Walker sarcastically tweeted “Hey has anyone seen any P.K. Subban summer workout videos? I haven’t noticed. I sure hope he’s training hard for the new season like all the other players” (@AndrewWalker650). Walker’s comment “like all the other players,” implies that Subban is showing off, whereas other hockey players work out without displaying their bodies (which is not true – many players, like Tyler Seguin, for example, post workout videos on Instagram). Not only does Subban’s Blackness make him a threat, the fact that he is showing *us* his body, rather than waiting to be displayed through hockey, implies a monstrous vanity that public fans like Walker cannot stand.

Where white queer fans feel comfortable reveling in the dirty, sexy queerness of the Creature Crosby, we are not willing or able to do so for the black NHLers whose bodies are contested by the public fandom of hockey. For us, the pleasure of monsters is the fantasy of breaking up with cruel optimism by choosing to have a monstrous relation – a powerful position accessible only to those who have the option to *choose* monstrosity. If monstrosity – and its consequences – is always thrust upon you, it becomes harder and less possible to take pleasure in it. Perhaps this is why Sidney Crosby is so fun to turn into a monster: he is already powerful, white, rich, athletic, beautiful, and beloved. Through Sidney, we can joyfully, queerly accept our failures and reconstruct our desires through monstrosities, “allow[ing] us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour” (Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure* 3). Writing Sidney as a misfit who nonetheless has power allows us to experience the process of creating intimate relationships while monstrous. It is a fantasy where acceptance of your own monstrosity doesn’t isolate you, a fantasy where people are



willing to take on your monstrosity for themselves in loving you. These stories show us how to get out of cruel optimism without breaking our attachment to the object – and therefore, ironically, allow us to maintain our own attachments of cruel optimism by soothing the pain without reducing the cruelty – so they are fantasies, utopias of queerness where the impossible – living outside the scripts of straight normalcy – is possible, if only for white men.

As much as I've taken pleasure in finding these patterns of (re)claimed queerness, in examining the privileges that are deconstructed and those that are maintained in monstrosity and in creepiness, I've also taken pleasure in the pornography, the romance, and the thrill of reading something so *gay*. I can explore the connections between monstrosity and queerness *and* recognize that there are as many comments on fic complimenting the authors on their skill at writing hot sex as there are on their skill at weaving queerness through their stories. This is the balancing act of the discussion of edge cases: there are many things that are surprising, notable, interesting, special, or *weird* about Hockey RPF ABO, but there's also the very normal fact that people create it for people to like it and many people do like it. We do the same thing in Hockey RPF ABO as we do in Hockey RPF more generally, in slash more generally, and even in romance narratives more generally: we tell hopeful stories that make us feel good. The only difference is in *what* feels good and who gets to feel good. In telling the story of those differences, I hope I haven't hidden those mundane feelings away, because it's the feeling good that really matters, in the end.

## Chapter 6 Conclusion: Shifting Fandoms

The autoethnographic method for studying fandoms that I've practiced in this dissertation worked. It's not all that different from the second generation-onward of fan studies methods, because fan scholars have tended to write about fandoms they're in, or, at least, fandoms they've joined as a result of their research. What's different is that I've taken a rhetorical approach to my analysis, rather than a literary, categorical approach. This method is easily replicable in different fandoms – as well as different communities of practice – because it's a way to connect the practices of people in a community-in-the-margins of the dominant culture that marginalizes, through the scholar's own experience of both. I describe my experience, which includes my feelings, desires, and anxieties in relation to the dominant culture – in this case, my feelings about hockey as a white queer Canadian – and show how my participation in a smaller group – Hockey RPF – helps assuage some of the pain that comes from my attachment to dominant culture – hockey in the form of the NHL. I bring in the creations and expressions of my fellow fans, through quotation and analysis, to create connections between my feelings and theirs, but avoid diagnosing or determining the reasons for their actions unless they state them explicitly. All I can do is speak to my own desires, just as another individual could only speak to theirs, but by connecting my feelings to theirs, I show that there is a community who shares some attachment(s), and who react in similar ways.

The idea of intimate fandoms, or intimate publics of online fandoms, and public fandoms is also useful – I hope it's one that other people take up, formally. We already talk

about fractured fandoms, about different kinds of fan activities, and about contact zones between fandoms, so we're almost there already: I just hope that we, as fan scholars or people who write about fan interactions, can formally move away from describing fandoms as singular groups. The advantage of writing my dissertation about hockey fandoms is that it's a lot easier to understand that a Penguins fan is in a different fandom than a Predators fan – team loyalty is something that's existed in mainstream fandom since there were teams. It's a little harder to understand that ship loyalty is just as fervent unless you've had a ship, but it's as absurd to say that all hockey RPF fans feel the same way about hockey as it is to say that Penguins and Canadiens fans do. Of course, there are similarities, especially if you compare the fandoms to complete outsiders: Penguins and Predators fans have more in common with each other than, say, fans of the Broadway musical *Rent*, but to other hockey fans, their similarities and differences are much more granular. The Predators are an expansion team in the south and they don't have any hockey royalty, really, to give them cred, whereas the Penguins have Captain Canada and several Stanley Cups, but if you talk to a Toronto Maple Leafs or Montreal Canadiens fan, they're both overconfident upstarts. That is: depending on where you stand, the fandom is more or less alike, and those differences matter in different ways. Having public fandom as a foil helps explain those general similarities, but we still need to understand the boundaries of the intimate fandoms, otherwise we bury the important distinctions in the service of generalizing.

In the intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF, the team is not the best way to distinguish the boundaries. I am a Penguins fan *and* a Predators fan – and a Vegas fan, a Capitals fan, a

Leafs fan, a Stars fan, and an Avalanche fan. I'm friends with Flyers fans, Kings fans, Sharks fans, Habs fans, Wild fans, Jets fans, Oilers fans, and Lightning fans – between us we cover just about half the league. Team loyalty matters a little bit, but not as much as our affective attachments to hockey. I'm *not* friends with people who love fighting and who continue to cheer for Patrick Kane once they learn he's been accused of rape. I don't consider myself part of the same fandom as people who think that the Chicago Blackhawks aren't racist for refusing to change their logo. I'm not a fan *with* people who support the NHL because it's a haven of whiteness and white supremacist fandom. You might say, because I'm a Penguins fan, that I'm in the same fandom as the men who performatively burned their NFL jerseys (because players kneeled during the national anthem), then announced themselves Penguins fans when the team visited Donald Trump in the white House. Technically we're both fans of the Pittsburgh Penguins, but the reasons we're fans are completely different. I'm a reluctant fan, *despite* their inability to understand the politics of their visit to the white House – that is a thing I survived, not a thing I celebrated. In the same way, you might say that I am in the same fandom as someone who writes Toews/Kane hockey RPF, because we both write slash about NHL athletes. But I don't read or write Toews/Kane fic, and I don't understand why you would, knowing what we do about Kane. My feelings about hockey RPF are different from theirs, and you couldn't describe a fandom that holds both of us without missing something important about at least one of us.

Intimate fandoms – and writing about intimate fandoms from the perspective of someone who participates in them – helps. You can describe the specific things about the

particular, unique fandom you participate in *and* describe the ways that fandom is and is not connected to the larger, more public fandoms that serve as general buckets. I'm a Sid/Geno fan in the Hockey RPF fandom that's nominally a part of a Pittsburgh Penguins fandom, which is in an NHL fandom, which is in a Hockey fandom. I'm something like a hockey fan in a completely different intimate fandom, but I'm also a Sid/Geno fan in the Hockey RPF fandom that's nominally a part of RPF slash fandom that's like slash fandom more generally, which is a kind of media fandom. And I'm also a Sid/Geno fan in the RPF Omegaverse fandom that's nominally a part of Omegaverse, which is sort of a part of slash, and so on. I'm also a queer person in a family whose home-life was wrapped up in my sister's hockey for a decade, and whose intimate fandom of hockey helped repair some of the fractures from the ways I didn't fit into my family's hockey fandom.

### **6.1.1 My sister's perspective**

Hockey. Let me think back to my hockey career. 5 nights a week. 6 am practices. Weeknights in Kanata. Weekends in Toronto. Weekends in the middle of nowhere with an arena. Dad? Always. Mom? Most of the time. Elise? No. Where is she? Is it bad if I say I don't know? I mean hockey dominated my life but if I think about hockey I don't even remember my sister in any of it. Not to say she didn't come to any of my games (I'm 99.9% sure she did) but she just wasn't part of the hockey life... which was literally our entire lives back then.

Thinking about this now makes me feel pretty bad because she wasn't involved in any of it - and it took up so much time in our lives. We were always going somewhere for my hockey. And at the time I was so wrapped up in my hockey that I didn't even realize that she hated it. She HATED it. Can I stress that enough? She HATED everything to do with hockey. Sitting down at the dinner table, we ask each other how our day went. A few words pass around and the conversation quickly moves towards hockey or hockey politics. Elise

promptly rolls her eyes, lets out a sigh, and walks away to go play piano or read a book. And even if the Senators were in the playoffs she couldn't have cared less. Zero interest in hockey whether it was me or professional. And honestly, I didn't seem to care. That sounds extremely heartless - and I don't mean it in the way that it sounds - but I was so wrapped up in hockey that I accepted that she wasn't really a part of it.

Now. 2016. Let me first say that I'm a die-hard Flyers fan. You won't go a few steps in my house without seeing something with a Flyers logo on it. I get a text from my sister about how much she loves Sidney Crosby. I mean Crosby. Am I in some weird dream? Is this actually happening? My sister... MY sister is a Penguins fan. First thought in my mind is - my sister actually likes something to do with hockey? Second thought - there are 30 teams in the NHL, and she had to pick the one team that I absolutely hate... BUT I do know she didn't do it to start some sister rivalry, because for her it's different - it's about the fandom and "shipping" players and having fun with the relationships that teammates have in the NHL. By the way, this is something I had no idea even existed before.

I've actually had a lot of fun trying to find stories and funny pictures that will get my sister excited about a fandom. And I've been so desperately trying to get her to find one amongst the Flyers so she can have even the teeniest amount of love for my boys. One of the best things is being able to teach her about all the different rules and words that exist in the hockey world (i.e. conditional draft pick) and helping her understand the sport that has been my entire life.

Above all though, I have to say her new love for hockey has brought us so much closer together. I know it sounds silly, we're sisters, and we've always loved each other. But over the years we'd only really talk when there was something to discuss. But now we talk almost every day! AND our conversations are mostly dominated by hockey. Now let's flashback to the dinner table where she's begging to have one dinner without the mention of hockey - to now where she's the one sending me Tyler Seguin rubber ducky pictures and Malkin gifs out of nowhere. What can I say, I'm extremely grateful that she found her love for hockey, in whatever way, shape, or form that it is. Though I may still feel bad about the past where she wasn't involved in any of it, I'm happy and excited that it is a mutual love now and that hockey has brought our relationship closer.

## Praise Giroux.

It is possible to have different, distinct fandoms that are attracted to the same media object and made up of demographically similar people, because it's possible for women, say, to be facing the same object at a different angle. It's possible for people to speak to each other through similar forms – fic, art, meta, and so on – but the reason why, their rhetorical aims, can differ. That is why my sister and I (mostly) don't share a fandom, because even though we share similar demographics (we are both white, middle-class women (ish) of similar ages), our relations to hockey are different. She played competitively for years, still plays in house leagues, attends NHL games regularly, and while she cares when I talk to her about queerness and racial politics in the NHL, it's not her thing. When she says “hockey politics” in her narrative of our hockey lives, she means the internal feuds between my family and the *other goalie's parents* (to be said in a slightly scandalized whisper) who wanted equal play time for the girls despite my sister being (as far as we and our allies on the team were concerned) the superior netminder. When I say “hockey politics,” I mean that one of the few black players, JT Brown, was a healthy scratch for weeks after he raised his fist during the national anthem and his (white) wife still receives racist messages calling her a “breeder” on Instagram (@LexiLafleur). This difference shapes even our memories of our hockey fandoms: I don't remember hating hockey as much as my sister remembers me hating it – I do, in fact, remember caring about the Senators in the playoffs. I remember having a hockey fandom, but it wasn't expressed through card collecting, through gaining and sharing knowledge about player stats, or through learning the more complex rules of the game. I

liked Alexei Yashin because he was a cute Russian (this is still a weakness of mine, apparently). I remember being interested in Mike Fisher because he bought a house down the road from us. I remember being proud that Daniel Alfredsson played almost his entire career in Ottawa. I even remember attending her weekend tournaments in Barrie and Brampton and other B-towns in Ontario, although I did spend most of my time trying to find a comfortable seat to read in. My sister doesn't remember this about me, because none of this felt like hockey fandom to her.

But the thing is, our fandoms are not completely incompatible: we've learned how to express our desires for hockey in a way that the other can understand, and we learn which ways of speaking work – sending each other Instagram pictures of hockey players doing cute things off the ice – and which don't – mocking each other during rivalry games – and we make our own little intimate fandom of two. That is why I say we *mostly* don't share a fandom, and not that we don't share a fandom at all. We do share a fandom, it's just very, very tiny. Our fandom is a blend of her relation to hockey and mine; we make concessions for each other, leaving some things out and paying attention to things we wouldn't otherwise. We've come up with ways of speaking to each other that let us share our fandoms, and in doing so we've created a space for our relationship to grow. My sister is always in the top few conversations in my messenger app, now, and, yes, more often than not that's because I've messaged her a link to Angela Price's Instagram because there's a cute pic of Carey Price and his daughter, or because she's sending me a screenshot of the news that Ray Emery – an ex-Ottawa, ex-Philadelphia goalie – died and sharing her sadness about it with me.



Other times, I'm chatting with her about how much we hope Erik Karlsson gets traded away from Ottawa (we're hoping for Vegas, but would be happy with Tampa), or how cool it is that two players that we've both loved individually are now on the same team (Pierre Edouard Bellemare, an ex-Flyer, and Marc-Andre Fleury, an ex-Penguin, both played for Vegas, briefly). But sometimes it's also to share the little things about our lives that aren't big enough news to be an *event*, and so would not have been shared a few years ago, like the purchase of a new hat, or a new haircut, or what our cats are doing, or we're eating for dinner, or whatever other little moments we share with our far-away loved ones in order to maintain that thread of connection.

When I say we've learned the language to speak with each other about it, what I mean is that we've come up with the rules for our intimate fandom – we've learned this by making mistakes: sharing things the other didn't find as interesting as we do, saying something that hurt or annoyed the other person, or accidentally taking the fun out of a moment. When my sister shared the news about Ray Emery, I shared quotations from an Athletic article about his life – I chose the quotations that showed him to be a fun-loving, goofy guy, like the story about how he ate a cockroach the Senators found in their locker-room, because Alfredsson bet him \$500 he wouldn't do it. I didn't share the quotation about how he beat his ex-fiancée, and I didn't talk to her about how his Blackness had a lot to do with the NHL labelling him as a problem player (because *lots* of NHLers are abusers – it's just that the white ones get away with it). I didn't share that with her not because I think she wouldn't care, but because I know how my sister reacts to news of deaths, and I know that she wants to be able to grieve

and mourn a man who played goalie on the two NHL teams she's loved. And when I couldn't help but throw in a quick line about how he wasn't an angel, she let me have my say and we agreed that he was a troubled guy who probably needed more help from the league than he got. In a different fandom, I'd put that differently. I'd say that he was an abuser who, because he was Black, did not get the benefit of the doubt from the NHL that they give to white abusers. It's sad that he died, of course, but I don't mourn him the way my sister does. But the compromise I make in our fandom is that I save my killjoy moments for less fraught events. I don't know exactly what compromises she makes – she doesn't tell me the things she doesn't tell me – but I know she likes rivalries and chirping, and she doesn't do that with me often (maybe because the Flyers aren't very good these days). Sometimes, when the Flyers beat the Penguins, she'll tease me, or make fun of the goalie who let in all the goals, or the goal scorer who failed to register a shot on net, but that's maybe once a year, because we've been lucky that the Flyers and the Penguins haven't met in the playoffs recently. She keeps an eye out for things she knows will interest me, and she saves her hockey analytics talk for when I start that kind of conversation. I'm sure she does other things I don't notice, but that's the point: I don't notice – and I hope she doesn't notice – because we've made a hockey fandom that fits. If we noticed how many compromises the other was making, we'd feel bad and awkward and like we were a burden rather than a fellow fan.

You might, reasonably, argue that what I'm describing is just a relationship with another person in which we often talk about hockey. And to that I say: yes, exactly! Many of my fandom friends from the days before Hockey RPF are people I spoke with frequently,

mostly about *Supernatural*. That's what intimate fandom is: it's people you have a relationship with because of or focused on something you're all fans of. You talk about it, you share information, hopes, dreams, fantasies, and desires, and you look forward to being able to connect to a person or community you otherwise wouldn't connect to. So my sister and I never sat down and made official rules for our little club – we've learned them over time, because we wanted to share this fandom together. We are a (small) group of people who want to be connected to each other through the object of fandom. In fic fandoms, we see this desire for connection through things like mutual following on social media sites like Tumblr and Twitter (which don't require mutual following, unlike Facebook), fic exchanges where people gift each other artworks and stories, and/or anonymous messages where people submit headcanons and prompts to their friends and favourite writers who then react with appropriately excessive expressions of feeling. In the intimate fandom of me and my sister, our connection is visible in our Facebook message thread full of links, pictures, gifs, complaints about the NHL, and *gentle* teasing about our teams. Even people who look like they're a part of hockey's public fandom have their own intimate fandoms, the people they connect to through their mutual love of their team or the game or a player, because the public fandom of hockey doesn't *really* exist – not in the way that intimate fandoms do. The public fandom of hockey is just the shape we expect hockey fandom to take; some people fit in that space better than others, so their intimate fandoms don't look out of place.

People whose fandoms fit into hockey's public fandoms aren't *sensible*, in the sense that we don't feel them, because they don't feel any different than what we expect. It's like

walking up a staircase that you've used dozens of times: your body knows when to step and how high and when to stop, so you don't really sense the way the staircase lifts you from one floor to the other. However, people whose fandoms fit into public fandom are also *so* sensible, in that they make sense to us: when we encounter them, they feel right. Intimate fandoms of Hockey RPF, on the other hand, are sensible, in that they feel shocking/different/notable, so we really *feel* them when we encounter them. However, they are *nonsense* because when people come into contact with them, they don't make sense: they feel wrong. When I encountered Hockey RPF for the first time, after growing up in Canada's hockey fandom, I had a feeling of vertigo, like what happens when you take an extra step at the end of the staircase, or when a step is taller or shorter than you expected. I expected Hockey RPF to be violent, to be obsessed with narratives of internalized homophobia, to be full of darkfic and angst, because that was the shape of hockey I had learned through public fandom. So, when I encountered the soft, domestic, fluffy, gentle, loving, and queer stories of Hockey RPF, I was disoriented (or, rather, I was shocked to find myself oriented in a space that was shaped for me). When you move and the world doesn't react the way you thought it would, you trip or fall or feel off-kilter – but that doesn't mean that the world is wrong, just that your expectation of the world was not in line with how the world actually is.

Understanding these fandoms through intimate publics lets us see them less as strange places where weird things happen, and instead as fandoms where people have reshaped the space to suit their needs. We're still fans, we still react to marketing and PR spins, we still engage with the reality of the fannish object, but we do so in a way that is sensible to us. We

need to be able to speak about fandoms without relying on the language of weirdness not because it's bad to be weird (see the entirety of Chapter 5), but because women's fandom especially has either been weird and therefore socially and sexually bad or weird and therefore politically and academically good – leaving no room for those fandoms to be *just* fandoms, where the purpose is the connection between the people, not the sexual deviancy or literary endeavours of individual fans. There certainly are fandoms where people celebrate how strange or queer (or weird) their fandom is, but there are also fandoms where people don't think what they're doing is all that strange, even if it looks that way from the outside. Our job as scholars of these fandoms should not be to diagnose the weirdness-or-not of a fandom, or to translate strangeness into academic rationality, but to understand what people get out of the fandom, what they put into it, and the things they express through it. Some people express their literary interpretation of the primary text – like the *Sherlock* fans who argue for John/Sherlock through their fic and meta – and others express their love of a sport that has been otherwise hostile to them – like the Hockey RPF fans who imagine a hockey world that hurts less.

When we understand those odd little fandoms less as weird places where strange people do queer things and more as spaces that are tailored to queer desires, we can see how they work in similar ways to public fandoms. The specifics are different – the things we care about, the way we speak, who we address, and what spaces we occupy – but they are all, in the end, about the connections between people who share feelings, orientations, and attachments to the fannish object. Sometimes fandom helps you translate your feelings into

something legible, understandable, sensible. To state the obvious: when you share a language with other people, you can more easily communicate what you feel, and each fandom is a language on its own, with its own rules about how to say what, when, and to whom. Perhaps your fandom helps you translate your feelings about what it means to be a man, as you learn and share your understanding through praise and criticism of one or another athlete. It might give a straight man a path to express his love for a friend in a culture that doesn't otherwise let straight men show their love for other men. It doesn't have to be hockey fandom, because there are intimate fandoms all over the place.

As I conclude this dissertation, I also close the door on my own hockey fandom. Not all my intimate fandoms of hockey are gone, but I've stopped needing them, because I've stopped wanting hockey (or I've stopped wanting hockey to give me the things I want). I've moved on from hockey fandom, but as a result have been able to experience, in real-time as I move through and into new fandoms, the very things I described in this dissertation. I watched myself end one attachment of cruel optimism and develop a new one that necessitated a new intimate fandom and new genres of fanworks. It's one thing to believe in the theories I developed and proved in hindsight, as I looked back on my own fandom and explored the traces of the bits I wasn't around for, but it's quite another to experience it bit by bit, to feel something in fandom and *know* what it is: to feel and recognize the end of my attachment to hockey, to understand that I'm developing a relation of cruel optimism to my new fandom, to know that I'm looking for an intimate fandom of people that let me be

“somebody”, to recognize the desire to write for and with them (and to feel them writing for and with me).

## **6.2 First: the end of my attachment to hockey**

I felt my relation of cruel optimism to hockey *snap*. At some point at the beginning of the pandemic, the scales tipped: the NHL and Hockey Canada started causing me more pain than it was worth, more pain than my intimate fandoms could soothe. One day, I cared about Sidney Crosby, and the next – well I still think his butt is hilarious, but I don’t particularly care one way or the other how he feels about it. There’s part of me that’s sad to lose that attachment, that fandom, because it means that I’ve lost those relationships. I’m no longer an “us” of hockey fandom in any real way. My sister and I don’t talk hockey every day anymore. We do still talk more than we did before Hockey RPF, and we do sometimes still talk hockey politics...but she’s the one sending *me* links to articles I haven’t read yet. She’s the one asking me what I think about Ivan Provorov’s Pride Night protest. I’m grateful that I still know how to talk hockey with her, that we still have that language in common, but it’s something I do for us as siblings, rather than for us as fans. I’ve also lost any desire to change the public fandom, partly because I just got...worn down. I kept myself soft and protected in my intimate fandoms, but hockey’s backwards, regressive, unyielding conservatism won, in the end. I no longer have faith that things will change for the better, no longer a thread of hope that someday, somehow, things might just be different in the right way.

### 6.3 Second: finding a new public and a new/old way to be nobody

Luckily for me, that also seems to have happened to a sizeable number of Hockey RPF fans that I followed, because my Hockey Twitter became my K-Pop Twitter almost overnight. The language of my Hockey RPF fandom started to include references to BTS, to K-Pop-specific industry politics, to literal Korean words. I decided I'd better learn the names of the BTS members if I wanted to be able to talk to my friends. I decided I should probably understand what it meant to have a bias if I wanted to understand my friend's tweets. From there, I came to understand the shape of K-Pop's international public fandom (on Twitter, at least). Following the threads of my friends' fandoms, following the threads of queerness, and seeking those K-Pop groups with public fandoms that had the not-quite-right-shape, I eventually ended up in my current intimate fandoms.

I had to learn, first, the shape of international K-Pop fandom on Twitter: the language, the relationships, the desires. I had to learn *ults* and *biases* and *stans* and *delulus* and *hags*. These words delineate whether your desire for your idols is the right kind of desire (I stan my biases and ult respectfully) or the wrong kind (I'm delusional to think these two idols might be in love; I am too old, a creepy hag). The relationships are capitalistic (I spend the right amount of time and money to ensure the success of my ult group) or they are creepily parasocial (I believe them when they say they love me). The desires are normal (I want (to be) him) or not (I want him to want him). Not that different from hockey. The boys are prettier, the girls exist, they dance and sing instead of skate and score goals, but the things



I need to do and be to fit into the public fandom are not that different. Like them in the right way. Be the right kind of fan. Don't be too queer. Don't want them to be queer.

#### **6.4 Third: intimate fandoms**

So, as an older queer fan, I'm still not the right "somebody" for K-Pop. I'm a good two decades older than public fandom would like me to be, and my sincere belief that some K-Pop idols *are queer people* makes me as much a pariah in public K-Pop fandom as it does in public hockey fandom. As a result, I have joined group chats with older queer fans who also feel a need to come together in a space away from public fandom, where we do not need to be constantly on guard to defend ourselves. We name our group chats "old yeop stans" and "gay council," claiming the thing that marks us as "nobodies" in public fandom. Unlike the intimate fandoms I describe on Tumblr, these intimate fandoms primarily exist in group chats (rather than through idiosyncratic tagging), largely as a result of Twitter's algorithmic obsession with publicity and findability. It is much harder to control who sees your Tweets than who sees your Tumblr posts, so we use circles and group chats to control the boundaries of our intimate fandom.

We turn to each other when the public fandom of K-Pop, or even of our specific groups, becomes painful as, yet again, people get mad at the idea that a K-Pop idol might be doing something genuinely queer. We trace out the boundaries between "us" and "them" in conversations about *discourse* on Twitter as some people claim, yet again, that RPF is immoral (even as the machinery of K-Pop fandom more broadly relies on a *heterosexual* RPF idol x reader fantasy). We push back or shift in response when someone names something as

a “them” (“shipping is okay but writing fic about it isn’t”) that’s actually an “us” (“but I do that, so should I leave this gc?”): in one of my group chats, we don’t talk about fic – there are people in it that don’t do it or like it. So, we just ... have another group chat where we do. There, I have readers I write fic for, and other writers and artists who take up my desires in their fanworks. There are also group chats I’m aware of and not a part of, because they want things that I don’t (like look-a-like porn gifsets). Other group chats rise and fall in the space of a week, as the need arises and dissipates. But the movement in and through these intimate fandoms is a way for us to feel the things we do without always having to defend ourselves from the fan who thinks we take it too far (or not far enough) or wishes we were talking about their group instead or hates that our tweets showed up on their timeline.

Now, as Twitter’s infrastructure becomes increasingly unstable and unpleasant, people are moving away – back to Tumblr, into Discord or Mastodon (I guess) or other group-chat apps like WeChat and KakaoTalk – but a lot of us are staying on Twitter – or should I call it X? – because that’s where our connections are. That’s where the public fandom is, and that’s where we can feel the edges of what works and doesn’t work for us, and that’s where we find ourselves, the other people who have been made nobody, but are still reaching out for somebody *like me*. When we find those fans who want in the same way, and who are *unwanted* in the same way, we can re-shape our own fandoms through the connections between us and the ways we say, “I feel you.”

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