

Just Go Find Yourself a Nice Alpha: Gender and Consent in *Supernatural* Fanfiction's
Alpha/Beta/Omega Universe

by
Tessa Barone

A THESIS

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Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English
(Honors Scholar)

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Rebecca Olson

Shows, books, and media are constantly negotiating power with their fans. Who decides what is canon? To whom does the story belong?? The answer has traditionally been in favor of producers. However, in the age of the internet, fans now hold considerably more power than they ever have before, and some shows, like the CW's *Supernatural*, respond by participating in “fanservice.” Many fans of this show strongly support slash and incest pairings, and by allowing such interpretations to be acknowledged in the narrative *Supernatural* makes increasingly transgressive readings available to the audience. The trope known as “Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics” is extremely popular, borderline pornographic, and virtually eradicates women from the narrative—instead depicting a relationship between men that is highly heterosexual in dynamic. This trope deconstructs the gender binary by assigning gender roles based on behavior, rather than biology, and appeals to an animal code of ethics in order to indulge in problematic, sexist, and abusive sexual situations. This thesis uses a fanfiction titled *Real Slick Dean* by Archive of Our Own author trilliath to explore what such a trope offers its readership, and how fans deal with problematic narratives in their stories.

Key Words: fanfiction, Supernatural, Alpha/Beta/Omega, slash, television

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

Tessa Barone, Author

Table of Contents

ABBREVIATIONS.....	1
INTRODUCTION	2
WHY ROMANCE, SLASH, AND ABO APPEAL TO WOMEN	8
GENDER BLURRING IN SCIENCE FICTION, SLASH, AND <i>SUPERNATURAL</i>	12
THE ROMANCE OF ABO	15
“FRIDGING” WOMEN AND FANDOM AS SOCIETY	18
NEGOTIATING AUTHORIAL POWER AND THE THREAT THAT FANS POSE.....	23
<i>SUPERNATURAL</i> , <i>SUPERNATURAL</i> , AND THEIR AUDIENCES	25
RAPE CULTURE IN ABO	29
CASE STUDY: CONSENT IN <i>REAL SLICK DEAN</i> BY TRILLIATH.....	32
CONCLUSION.....	39
WORKS CITED	43

ABBREVIATIONS

AO3	Popular fanfiction website <i>Archive of Our Own</i>
ABO	Setting in fandom where everyone has a secondary gender of alpha, beta, or omega
Dubcon	“Dubious consent,” wherein a character is loosely coerced into a sexual encounter, often by their love interest
Fics	Shorthand for “fanfic” or “fanfiction”
FOD	A trope wherein characters must “Fuck Or Die”
RPF	“Real Person Fanfiction” that depicts real people, usually celebrities
SPN2	Used to refer to the book series also titled <i>Supernatural</i> , based on the life of Sam and Dean, which exists within the show
Wincest	The romantic pairing of brothers Sam and Dean Winchester

John Winchester lets out a long-suffering sigh on the other end of the phone. Dean can hear the eye-roll in his voice when he says, "Fine. Give me a half hour. But let me remind you that I told you that you shouldn't be in school anyway. Focus on yourself and finding a nice alpha."

"I don't want a nice alpha," Dean snips.

John groans, "I'm not gonna get into this over the phone. You're gonna get an alpha whether you want one or not, so better to have a decent alpha than a jackass. I'm hanging up. Go to the nurse. She'll give you – y'know – omega stuff."

A Story for Every Corner by thepinupchemist, AO3

INTRODUCTION

When a book, movie, or television show connects with enough people, it often inspires fans to band together a “fandom.” Members of a fandom will create stories and art that expand on the world of “canon”: material that is considered officially part of the story by source material.

“Fanon” (fanfiction or fanart) is that which is endorsed only by fans. The fact that J.K.

Rowling’s Harry Potter is English is canon, while the idea that Harry Potter is of Indian descent is fanon—a popular concept in fan art, but not verified or legitimized in the books or movies.

Before the widespread use of computers, passionate fans circulated “fanzines”—physical copies of fan-written stories that featured characters from television, movies, and books (Krustritz 371). These fanzines were a shared resource among fans, who wrote and read stories as community endeavors. Today, the internet functions as a repository for fanfiction, making it easier than ever to gather numerical evidence about its contents and trends. Archive of Our Own (AO3), one of the most popular fanfiction websites, uses tags and sorting systems that make it possible to analyze this data. On AO3, all top twenty pairings of 2017 (the last year this datum was collated) are “slash” pairings—depicting two men in a romantic relationship—far outclassing the popularity of heterosexual or femslash (lesbian romance) pairings (“AO3 Ship Stats 2017”). This means that most fan works are focused on men rather than women, despite the fact that fanfiction authors—particularly those interested in slash—are overwhelmingly female

(Graham 136).¹ Furthermore, of these forty characters in the twenty top pairings, all except four are white. Although fanfiction is largely considered an open space, likened to a “sandbox” where women can leave behind social pressures and expectations (Tosenberger 191), it is still mostly populated with white, male-oriented viewpoints.

There may be a number of reasons women are so apparently reluctant to write about women. Internalized misogyny, a desire to remove focus from oneself as the target of discrimination, and lack of women in the source material appear to be three of the biggest reasons. In one of the most popular tropes, known as Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics (AKA “ABO” or the “omegaverse”), we see women entirely eliminated from the narrative, and “femininity” reassigned in new ways to male characters. ABO originates from the *Supernatural* fandom, a show which notoriously lacks regularly-appearing female characters. This dearth of female characters might attract an audience who is simply comfortable without female representation on screen. On the other hand, it might attract fans interested in forcing the narrative to include them, or those interested in feminizing the male characters they have come to know and love. In other words, does the construct of ABO originate from the show, or from the fandom? In what ways do each of these entities hold power over the other?

The dynamics of power between fans and producers has changed significantly over time. With the advent of the internet, fans have come to possess more power as a group backed by large numbers, with the ability to comment on and express ownership of “their shows” on social

¹ There is much analysis to be done on the question of “who writes fandom.” Most data on fanfiction writers and readers is gathered through self-reported sources, often by “aca-fans”—fanfiction writers who themselves study the phenomenon in academia. Jennifer L. Barnes studies aca-fans’ testimonies, survey distributions by media entities, and surveys distributed by fans themselves in a non-academic setting to draw two points of consensus: that fanfiction writing has “become more mainstream with the advent of the internet,” and that fanfiction writers are usually female (Barnes 74).

media. *Supernatural*'s plotline introduces fandom into the narrative, responding to this accumulated power of fandom, and in different ways restricts and legitimizes the power of fandom. This thesis uses *Supernatural* fanfiction as a case study for ABO, and argues that *Supernatural*'s influence on fandom, in a context of audience-show power redistribution, helps create an atmosphere in which ABO thrives.

I chose to examine ABO in this specific fandom for two reasons. First, it is the birthplace of the trope, first tracked to its Real-Person Fanfiction (RPF), featuring a relationship between *Supernatural* actors Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki (Arnaiz 119). Investigating the particular trappings of ABO's birthplace fandom undoubtedly will help clarify some of the reason for its popularity. Second, *Supernatural* has a nearly unprecedented relationship with its fandom. Showmakers interact with fans on social media and at conventions, and have proven receptive to fan feedback—even to the point of changing storylines. They even introduce fandom into the plot: a book series containing the events of the show appears within the story, making it possible for *Supernatural* characters to interact with their own fans. The high level of intertextuality between the show and its fandom makes it possible to see how the canon text interprets, legitimizes, and delegitimizes aspects of fandom. It also allows us to question to what extent fandom takes its cues from canon material—specifically, is it the dearth of women on *Supernatural* that leads to the systematic elimination of women from fanfiction?

First, I will establish the pertinent details of *Supernatural* (2005–). This show follows two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, who hunt monsters, rescue people, and save the world from assorted apocalyptic entities. In its projected 15-year run, villains have included an assortment of demons, the Devil, several mythological entities, and God's sister. Secondary cast members appear and are systematically disposed of. The only stable, authentic, and long-term relationship

on the show is between Sam and Dean, and the fanfiction reflects this. Sam/Dean romances, known as “Wincest”—a portmanteau combining “Winchester” and “incest”—ranks #6 most productive of all 2017 AO3 pairings. The pairing of their actors, Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki (J2), ranks #16. This RPF pairing is often similar in tone and dynamic to Wincest, but is normally set in a non-supernatural world—and, most importantly, removes the incest factor. I would consider Wincest and J2 essentially the same pairing; this means that the combined followings of Sam/Dean and Jared/Jensen hold a daunting number of fan-written works.

The #1 AO3 pairing of 2017 is between Dean and an angel named Castiel, who joins the main cast in the fourth season. Each of these three main characters regularly die and are resurrected. While it is difficult to quantify the exact number of deaths, due to timeline complexity, we can ascertain that Dean dies roughly 111 times (an inflated number due to episode 3.11, wherein the brothers are trapped in a time loop that kills Dean approximately 100 times (“Dead... or are they?”)). Sam dies roughly eight times; Castiel five. Each of these deaths have proven impermanent, giving the audience a greater sense of security as to these characters’ permanence. Therefore, emotional relationships can be built and sustained with greater intimacy than any other characters. This might be one reason *Supernatural* has proven popular in the slash community—the only secure, intimate relationships available to fanfiction writers are those between men.

Altogether, the *Supernatural* show provides 20% of AO3’s most productive pairings. This is clearly an influential show in fandom. In order to fully explore the contexts and complexity behind ABO, we must consider the ways *Supernatural*’s character makeup and relationship with fandom has produced such a trope.

Next, we will establish the world of ABO, which takes inspiration from wolves and applies certain animalistic aspects to characters. All people are assigned one of three secondary genders: alpha, beta, or omega, resulting in a combination of six different possible genders. Alphas are dominant, omegas are submissive, and betas are usually ignored, as they are only normal humans. These stories almost inevitably feature a pairing of a male alpha and male omega, producing a highly heteronormative relationship without women. Omegas can even bear children, thereby entirely making women emotionally, socially, and reproductively negligible within the societies they portray. As these authors are mostly women, this profound lack of female representation signals a troubling internalized disinterest in women's stories. Furthermore, ABO fanfiction delights in dubious consent ("dubcon") and non-consent ("noncon") in sexual situations. By consciously separating characters from general humanity, ABO places characters in societies ruled by an animal code of ethics, enabling audiences to indulge in problematic narratives without necessarily indulging rape culture itself.

In order to understand the appeal of ABO and slash, I will examine the original "woman's novel": romance. This genre is typically characterized by a singular lead woman and a lead male who fall in love and end the book in lasting happiness. Most analysts differentiate romance from pornography, which they consider "male-oriented." Catherine Salmon and Don Symons define male-oriented porn as narratives with "little development of character, plot, or setting in which heroines have brief, impersonal sexual encounters... with no obstacles, no falling in love, no strings attached, and no happily-ever-after endings" (98), while romance novels almost always contain all these things. Most analysts place slash on a spectrum of romance to pornography, usually concluding that fanfiction is more romance than pornography. ABO, however, holds a fairly ambivalent position on this spectrum. It is an explicit genre, but one highly dependent on

emotion. Romance novels are a template for what women are most commonly thought to want, and slash—particularly ABO—inverts the conversation by challenging both the gender binary and conceptions of male/female desire.

This thesis will discuss first the romance/pornography spectrum, considering what insights the study of romance novels offers the study of slash fanfiction. This is the original “woman’s novel,” and studying the genre will help clarify what women want, or are taught to want. ABO, considered a descendent of the romance novel, blurs gender roles, inspired by the mingling of masculine and feminine traits on *Supernatural*, and by slash fiction in general. *Supernatural* has long struggled to consistently and meaningfully portray female characters, and the fraught relationship that ensues with its largely female readership lays the groundwork for the development of the ABO trope.

In modern days, fandom is a powerful entity, and *Supernatural*’s relationship with this force creates a context wherein fans are accustomed to seeing their desires acknowledged, if not exactly legitimized, on screen. Such a relationship between producers and fandom makes it possible to perform increasingly-transgressive queer readings on the source material, leading to the healthy popularity of ABO in this fandom. The eroticization of rape culture, sexual coercion, and outright abuse in ABO indicates the problematic internalization of misogyny in fanfiction’s largely female readership. In order to indulge in these dark coercive fantasies, writers construct a world with a different ethical code. The *Supernatural* fanfiction *Real Slick Dean* by AO3 author trilliath will serve as a case study as it illustrates many of these issues, and portrays a coerced sexual situation presented as a romance, and interpreted as such by its readership.

WHY ROMANCE, SLASH, AND ABO APPEAL TO WOMEN

In their highly influential article “Slash Fiction and Human Mating Psychology,” Catherine Salmon and Don Symons analyze the format of a romance story, attempting to build a working understanding of what they call “female mating psychology,” and consider how slash continues or abandons elements of a traditional romance. They break down the genre into a formula, including: a masculine love interest, typically described as “tall,” “confident,” and “intelligent,” who finds the heroine uniquely appealing and has “never been so deeply in love” (97). They argue that, according to romance novels, the ideal love interest possesses the traits of a “successful warrior,” as female evolution is designed to want: strong, honorable, and alpha. Sex, in a romance novel, “serves the plot rather than the other way around, as in porn.” The importance of sex to the overall story is the central difference between male porn and female erotica. ABO stories straddle this binary, as they are often emotion-centric; just as often, however, they choose sex over plot. Consider the aptly-named tag “Plot What Plot/Porn Without Plot,” which boasts 105,707 stories, in addition to the many other tags that serve the same function, which are often used in conjunction with the “Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics” tag. ABO can be considered as both pornography and erotica, indicating that it cannot be neatly associated with either male-centered pornography or female-centered erotica.

Salmon and Symons attempt to build an understanding of the audience of slash, suggesting that, according to their research, women attracted to slash fiction are those who are already open to masculine activities, such as tomboys. They suggest these groups are drawn to the genre because it “fuses female romance with traditionally male camaraderie, adventure, and risk taking” (99). Perhaps women who identify as less feminine feel greater ease identifying with men in stories. However, the data here is limited, as there is little data on which demographics of

women are interested in slash. Furthermore, their article was published in 2001, some time before the internet really entered the debate. *Archive of Our Own* was first opened in 2009; fanfiction.net in 2006. As the internet has increased access and exposure to slash fiction, it is doubtlessly more mainstream and much more common than it was in 2001. It seems likely that the interests of tomboys of the late twentieth century would not be an aberration in 2019. Furthermore, since the appeal of romance novels has proven so popular, if slash fanfiction holds the same ingredients as homosexual relationships—and at least 78% of Salmon and Symons’ study enjoyed it “at least as much as they enjoyed romance novels” (98)—then we might expect that, as homosexual relationships become more mainstream, slash will become more mainstream, as well. The idea that women who are attracted to slash are those already immersed in masculine interests might already be outdated.

Salmon and Symons also suggest that slash may be attractive to women because it fixes many of the insecurities unavoidable in romance novels (99). The romance genre typically depends upon a virile man’s exclusive interest in a singular, often-inexperienced woman. This is essentially a sexual connection based on attraction; friendship, respect, and trusted intimacy are secondary. The books nearly always end with marriage as a means of assuring the audience that this is a resolved love, but the audience still has to believe that a relationship built on transient attraction will remain exclusive. In slash works, however, the bonding agent between the two male lovers is a solid and tested friendship. These are heterosexual men who develop such a deep, intimate relationship with a close friend that their relationship turns sexual. They usually fall in love long before they ever have sex, and are therefore “united by a bond that is plausibly more durable and secure than sexual or romantic passions” (99). It is perhaps uniquely

pleasurable to imagine a love strong enough to transcend gender, enabling the reader to trust that the love will last.

If slash is a sub-genre of romance, ABO—a sub-genre of slash—complicates our understanding of the appeal of romance. If the transcendence of sexuality for true love is what makes slash relationships feel most secure, then the omegaverse lessens the gravity of that bond. ABO assigns male/male relationships a traditional hegemonic value that they do not possess in the real world. Alpha and omega pairings, regardless of primary gender, are quite traditional—suitable for politicians, royalty, and religious leaders, as seen in various iterations of the trope. Writers remove the stigma of a queer relationship, as well as the profundity of their true love. If slash offers a uniquely secure kind of romance, ABO returns queer relationships to the standing of attraction-based heterosexual relationships, thereby invalidating Salmon and Symons' presumptions on the offerings of slash to its readership.

However, ABO also imbues its characters with new, specific markers of romantic permanence. In addition to secondary, wolf-inspired genders, characters in ABO are given an advanced sense of smell, which functions as a social and sexual guide. They can sniff out pheromone markers, emotional states, and determine the gender and availability of other people. Alphas can smell omegas, and vice versa; their attraction to one another usually deeply involves their sense of smell. It is possible to judge the suitability of a mate through scent; often in ABO, the lovers will scent one another and immediately experience attraction like never before. Their bodies fall in love before their minds do, implying both the rightness of the match and the unavailability of their union. Once mated with another character, characters have the option of performing the “mating bite,” which irreversibly bonds the lovers to one another. As romance novels often end with a marriage, ABO fics will often end with the mating mark. This is a bite

that creates a permanent scar, and alters the lover's scent so as to broadcast to all others that this is a bonded and unavailable individual. It is always given by the alpha, and may be accompanied by a reciprocal bite by the omega. A mating bite cannot be broken—not without sustained psychological damage between the participants. It fuses the essences of the lovers, who become aware of one another in new ways. This might mean simply becoming especially attuned to their presence in the room, or it might take the form of a proto-telepathic link. The mating bite may be accompanied by talks of marriage, but is nearly always understood to be a separate occurrence. Characters can exchange mating marks and become ceremonially bonded without marrying one another. It is performed in the midst of passion, usually after “heat sex,” and might appeal to audiences partially due to it being a ritualistic expression of passion, occurring external to the establishment of marriage.

The mating mark is arguably even more secure than a ceremony of marriage, as it becomes physically very difficult for the individuals to *not* remain in exclusive love forever. Regularly, authors will depict individuals suffering physical discomfort if they happen to engage in thoughts of infidelity or distance from their mate. In this sense, ABO offers romance readers an even more secure relationship than either the immediate attraction of heterosexual romance or the deep friendship of more general slash fiction.

Between the dominant, aggressive alpha, and the submissive, domestic omega, the slash relationship is made unmistakably heterosexual. Of all top 2017 AO3 pairings, every individual is canonically heterosexual. In many cases, fanfiction writers retain these characters' heterosexuality while depicting them in homosexual relationships. They “identify and are furthermore identified by their largely female readers as heterosexual, not homosexual” (Foster 510). These are straight men in love with each other, whose love is so strong that their

connection turns sexual. Salmon and Symons argue that writers are, in fact, “not imagining anal sex at all” (98), but are acting out heterosexual fantasies using the context of male bodies. Anal sex takes precedence as the final copulative act, often unrealistically. For example, in ABO, omegas self-lubricate and do not require preparation for the act. The unrealistic nature of slash erotica supports the idea that it is functioning as a metaphor for heterosexual sex. As women appropriate male bodies to act out romantic fantasies, women are present in the text as writers, readers, and metaphors, even if they do not include female characters in the text itself.

GENDER BLURRING IN SCIENCE FICTION, SLASH, AND *SUPERNATURAL*

Any academic discussion of slash and ABO must acknowledge its roots in science fiction and fantasy, as these settings fostered the discussion of gender ambiguity, alien codes of ethics, and fandom societies in fanfiction. Slash owes much to fandoms like *Star Trek*, which produced what many consider the original flagship of slash: Kirk/Spock, the “slash” in which gave male/male ships their name. *Star Trek* even provided a proto-omegaverse—the “Pon Farr.” Every several years, a Vulcan enters a state of arousal, similar to an omega’s heat (addressed in further detail later). In 2.11 “Amok Time,” Spock undergoes his Pon Farr, and becomes sexually insatiable—even willing to murder Kirk in order to win the hand of his desired mate, a Vulcan woman. Fanfiction writers since have made Pon Farr a common trope in *Star Trek* fanfictions, and Laura Campillo Arnaiz argues that Pon Farr cultivated in fan audiences a readiness to accept and produce ABO, which later originated in the *Supernatural* Real-Person Fanfiction (RPF) fandom. *Star Trek*’s contribution to both slash and ABO must be acknowledged.

In addition, sci-fi and fantasy shows typically take place in the past or future. By removing characters from modern settings, society can follow entirely different rules about gender norms, ethical codes, and when confronted with sentient, inhuman creatures, must define “personhood”

in new ways. This setting opens the door to fandoms questioning humanity, gender roles, and ethics, arguably laying the groundwork for ABO to develop.

Much of slash fiction borrows this long-away historical period or future setting, distancing writers from the homophobic, male-centered context of the modern day. By placing their characters elsewhere, authors “remove the cultural pressure that may be felt by some writers to deal with current real life issues such as homosexual identity politics, homophobia and safe sex” (Woledge 57). It is a “sandbox” where gay characters can be gay without the assorted, expected societal ramifications. Much of slash is born from these fantasy and science-fiction contexts, showing that these situations do connect with slash readers. However, in ABO—what Arnaiz would consider the daughter of *Star Trek* slash—writers apply painful modern burdens to characters who would normally not suffer such consequences. Giving young, white, conventionally attractive men the omega gender makes them vulnerable to discriminations and systemic injustices. Male omegas have to defend themselves against the threat of losing autonomy, whether in a legal, social, or bodily sense. They may have to fight for their right for education, a right to exist in public spaces without harassment, or protect themselves from sexual assault. This might allow fan writers to more deeply identify with the male characters who are emotional on screen but nevertheless masculine, such as Sam or Dean in *Supernatural*.

Elizabeth Woledge argues that there are many important parallels between science fiction/fantasy and slash stories, as both deal with “similar forms of representation” (51). Science fiction and fantasy are said to intrinsically represent homosexuality, as it inherently questions morality, humanity, and gender—producing characters who “embody both male and female qualities” (Woledge 52). Frequently, *Star Trek* novels apply feminine characteristics to its male characters, and Woledge notes that “many slash fans speak of finding the gender blended

characteristics of each hero erotic” (53). It is not just the contrast between masculine and feminine that is eroticized, but the “fact that the combination occurs in the same individual at the same instant” (54). This blurring of gender is endemic to slash and omegaverse, which, by portraying nearly exclusively male characters, chooses to depict an array of both masculine and female characteristics within the same gender. With a single sex, reader gain greater flexibility of perspective.

Woledge points out that there is no standard application of masculine and female characteristics that is consistently applied to either Kirk or Spock. Writers will regularly portray either character as the dominant or submissive partner. Dominant and submissive characteristics are interchangeable between stories “rather than being a stable characteristic” of either character (55). This statement rings true for many of the universes that have created active and outspoken fandoms. Canon *Supernatural* usually codes older brother Dean as the more masculine of the brothers, with a classic car whom he considers his “baby,” love of burgers, and a taste for rock music and casual sex. Sam is the intellectual, emotionally-intelligent brother who uses hair gel, which Dean considers “girlish.” Sam is also the brother to whom darkness comes more easily. When both brothers are revealed to be intended vessels of archangels, Sam is the Devil’s, while Dean is the archangel Michael’s. Women are often coded as the corruptive influence on righteous men—such as Eve in the Garden of Eden—and Sam’s role as the dark brother further codes him as feminine. In fanfiction, however, Dean is nearly always portrayed as an omega, despite being perceived as more classically masculine in the source material. Audiences appear interested in revealing the vulnerable, feminine aspects of Dean, reflecting Woledge’s point that slash likes to blur boundaries between the masculine and feminine: “The use of such blending patterns allows characters to be represented as two halves of a whole... achieving the

representation of unity which is central to the ideology of slash” (52). Depicting Dean with both a masculine personality and a feminine nature achieves this pleasurable unity of gender, as does pairing him with an alpha partner.

Although the show is careful to masculinize the brothers, it nonetheless portrays a family unit of men forced to compensate for the lack of women. Throughout their childhood, Dean took on a largely maternal role in caring for Sam. In flashbacks, it becomes apparent their father was often absent for long periods of time, leaving Dean to cook, clean, and care for his little brother. When their father is present, he is unreliable, gruff, or drunk; in all cases, emotionally unavailable and demanding feats of masculinity (hunting) from his sons. Their father is unable to ever get over the loss of his wife, whose absence leaves the family unit irreparably wounded, while Dean picks up the slack. This dynamic carries over into the brothers’ adult lives; Sam is the most important thing in the world to Dean, and the brothers get all they need from one another. As girlfriends, partners, and love interests die, while the brothers eternally return to one another, it becomes increasingly apparent that Sam and Dean really are more than brothers—they are life partners. Their dynamic understandably makes it easy for an audience member to imagine that their love for one another is so strong that it transgresses normal familial bonds, leading to depictions of slash and Wincest. Furthermore, it makes it easy to imagine a world without women, where men meet all of one another’s needs.

THE ROMANCE OF ABO

ABO builds this world without women, and imbues it with certain markers that remind the reader it is a different world than the one they know. ABO characters are, usually, remarkably animalistic. Alphas, betas, and omegas may be outright werewolves, or descended from werewolves, or only referred to as “Weres”; almost always, they are differentiated from humans,

who appear in ABO with only one level of gender. Each author reinterprets ABO dynamics and builds their own, slightly different world. In the comments of *Supernatural* ABO story *No Words*, by AO3 user Ltleflrt, a commenter by the name of Ravenwolf36 writes, “The beauty of ABO? There is nothing set in stone. It’s all up for interpretation.”

In this setting, alphas and omegas are utterly suited for one another, providing the sense of security Salmon and Symons underline as of paramount importance to romance readers. Their advanced, wolf-like sense of smell means they find pheromones irresistible, making it possible for characters’ bodies to identify their favored mates long before they fall in love. Additionally, omegas will periodically enter into a “heat,” wherein they become extremely fertile sexually insatiable, and undiscerning. It is nearly impossible for an alpha to resist an omega in heat. Alphas, in turn, go into a “rut,” wherein they experience the same all-consuming urge to reproduce, although it may be shorter or less intense than an omega’s heat. Either condition may be triggered by their lover’s heat or rut, indicating the absolute biological symbiosis between these two genders.

In ABO, it is typical for all gender-based issues and discrimination to be transferred to the omega. Omegas might not be allowed to vote or to take custody of themselves; many stories often feature omegas struggling to get an education, as most people expect them to simply “get mated” and bear children. Omegas have to be diligent about their own safety, as they are weaker than alphas or betas, and are vulnerable to assault in public. Alphas feel entitled to omega bodies, especially ones in heat, mirroring the danger of being a woman in public. Many ABO stories in *Supernatural* feature a previously-abused omega Dean who, in time, builds a trusting, respectful, sexual relationship with alpha Castiel. In other words, in this world organized by a secondary gender, women are no longer the focus of gendered oppression.

People largely read slash for the same reasons they read romance—to indulge in a “true love” story—and ABO, in turn, strengthens and sharpens many aspects of romance. At the same time, ABO endangers its omegas by placing them in a world where they are the target of abuse and discrimination, and face the same issues as modern women.

By writing a domestic, highly feminine species of men, writers virtually eradicate all differences between female and male identity, instead ascribing gender differentiation to something more of an orientation. People “present” their secondary genders during puberty, so girls and boys are raised without knowing if they will be alphas, betas, or omegas. Everyone is, presumably, treated the same until they reach puberty, with little-to-no discrimination until the secondary genders solidify. Although women are not the focus of the story, ABO consciously relieves them of gender-based discrimination, and treats them the same as boys while they grow up. If these girls present as alphas, they will be welcomed into the hegemonic majority; if they present as omegas, they will take the social position we are accustomed to women taking. The “sameness” of people until they reach puberty is an interesting component to this trope, as it highlights the unfairness of sexual discrimination by showing its relatively arbitrary nature.

There are a host of unknowable reasons a writer will choose to depict a certain character as an alpha, beta, or omega, but there are certain trends that span whole fandoms, implying that there are at least a few ways to quantify their decision-making process. Fans will assign secondary genders based on the behaviors of characters—if a character is confident, assertive, and already satisfactorily blended with feminine characteristics, they will often be portrayed as an alpha in fanfiction. Sam is rarely portrayed as anything but an alpha; perhaps, as the brother less concerned in performing his masculinity, audiences already perceive his gender as sufficiently blended. Within fanfiction, secondary genders are given the gravitas of irrefutable

biology, but from an outside, critical standpoint, we can surmise that ABO designations are entirely based on behavior. This indicates that many women are interested in worlds where gender is less important than behavior. By eradicating the baggage of binary gender, masculinity and femininity remain at the forefront of ABO, although gender itself takes a backseat.

ABO often portrays a male child whom everyone expects to present as an alpha—strong, assertive, active—but who turns out to be an omega. He might take pheromone-suppressing medicine, commonly referred to as “suppressants,” in order to continue acting as an alpha. He will continue to do this until he meets his love interest—the only alpha strong enough to make him submit and take his position as a domestic, submissive entity. In the case study explored at the end of this thesis, alpha Castiel attempts to rape omega Dean, who punches him. Castiel reels, his “instincts not prepared for an Omega who fights like that” (trilliath, chapter 2). Dean is different—stronger—than other omegas, but his eventual love for Castiel leads him to take his biologically-rightful place as a submissive lover. From the perspective of its audiences, ABO eroticizes the masculinity of the alpha, a romantic lead so masculine that he physically and sexually dominates all other men. It also takes pleasure in the conclusion that bodily desires trump intellectual desires—creating a culture of sexual abuse and violence, which is further explored later in this thesis. Most of all, ABO takes Dean, whose vulnerabilities are only hinted at in the show, and reconciles him with domesticity, submission, and physical weakness.

“FRIDGING” WOMEN AND FANDOM AS SOCIETY

If we are to discuss ABO in further detail, we must first establish the particular trappings of *Supernatural's* fandom, as it has had an enormous impact on ABO and fanfiction in general. This show interacts with its audience in a very modern way, and its relationship with fandom must be understood through its gendered context. The active fanbase is largely comprised of

women, and when *Supernatural* producers speak of adhering to fan desires, they are nearly always speaking about female fans' slash, Wincest, or otherwise queer readings. Despite this, the show has quite a troubled history with depicting female characters, perhaps leading the fanbase to continually create their own representations of femininity within fan material, allowing us to surmise that ABO's existence is, in many ways, directly related to the producer-fan relationship.

It is "conventional wisdom" that most fandom materials are produced by women (Graham 136). Many researchers, including the highly influential Henry Jenkins, have suggested this gender disparity is because fanfiction comes more naturally to women, as the practice requires high emotion and empathy (Jenkins 74). This falls in line with the general assumption that women like feelings and men like sex, which perhaps oversimplifies the impact of socialization and the breadth of female sexuality. If anything, ABO indicates that women clearly enjoy pornographic material, as sex is of paramount importance to the trope and the stories are nearly always explicit. The relationships that prove most attractive are those of great emotional intensity in the source material—as brothers (Sam/Dean), best friends (Kirk/Spock), or mortal enemies (Harry Potter/Draco Malfoy). These relationships are canonically singular in their intensity, but the inevitable sexualization of seemingly platonic relationships indicates that feelings and sex are not the mutually exclusive realms of men and women.

Barnes also suggests that the high number of women writing fanfiction is a direct reaction to the "marginalization of female audiences from the source material itself" (74). She argues that writing fanfiction that inserts female characters, or feminizes male characters, is a subversive action of self-insertion. A marginalized female audience forces reluctant narratives to include them, even to the point of disrupting biological laws and norms for this purpose. ABO's established relationship with *Supernatural* can be traced to its lack of regularly-occurring female

characters, and the resultant emotional intensity of relationships between the remaining male cast members.

Supernatural has, from the onset, had a problematic relationship with women. The entire series hinges on the mysterious death of Sam and Dean's mother, who dies violently engulfed in flames, pinned to the ceiling, while the boys are young. Her death motivates their father to begin hunting monsters, a profession that he teaches to his sons, thus providing the context of the show. Sam, the rebellious son, disdains the hunting life and tries to put down roots as a Stanford student studying pre-law—but before he can graduate, his long-term girlfriend, Jess, dies in the exact same way as his mother. This gives Sam the motivation to return to hunting and avenge her death, ending the very first episode of *Supernatural* and setting up the rest of the show.

There is an unfortunate precedent for killing off female characters in order to facilitate another character's story. This is a trope known as “Women in Refrigerators,” inspired by a *Green Lantern* comic wherein the hero finds his girlfriend murdered and stuffed into the refrigerator—an act which eventually gives him the strength to avenge her. In 1999, comic book writer Gail Simone coined the term and, along with a group of other feminist artists, created a website which compiled a list of female deaths in comics, for the purpose of clarifying how it is “not that healthy to be a female character in comics” (“Women in Refrigerators”). The term has since been adopted into widespread usage, referring to any instance in which a female character is “targeted by an antagonist who has them killed off, abused, raped, incapacitated, de-powered, or brainwashed for the sole purpose of affecting another character, motivating them to take action” (“Stuffed into the Fridge”). Since *Supernatural*'s genesis plot itself involved a Woman in a Refrigerator, we may understand that this show's particular context finds it inherently challenging to provide thoughtful portrayal of female characters.

In season 7, *Supernatural* introduces a young woman named Charlie, who was young, female, geeky and queer. Fans perceived her as a “positive media icon they could identify with as women, fans, and queer people” (Karkanias 18), and a sign that showmakers had begun to respect fandom. Charlie is the reiteration of the “fannish woman” that *Supernatural* had first belittled with the character of Becky Rosen, to whom we will return. In season 10, Charlie was killed off-screen; we learn of her death along with Sam and Dean as they enter a bathroom covered in her blood, and find her mutilated body in the tub. Her death fuels Sam and Dean in defeating season 10’s major villains, fully completing the “fridging” arc.

Charlie is only one of a host of recurring female characters who are killed off in order to dramatize the emotional landscape for Sam and Dean. When faced with criticism, showmakers defend the continual elimination of female characters as “going where the story takes us,” (Karkanias 19) and add that they routinely kill off male characters, as well. They do not acknowledge the 124 resurrections enjoyed by Sam, Dean, and Castiel. Showrunners defend their habitual fridging by appealing to authorial integrity, expressing that they are only staying true to the demands of the story. In this case, the creators are invoking the power of ownership as the hegemonic entities that keep the gates of canon. The creators retain a traditional power dynamic between themselves and the audience, establishing authority as the showrunners.

This is a traditional stance for a show to take. Producers and showrunners have long denigrated the culture of fandom, which they perceive as threatening, unnecessary, or simply annoying. Henry Jenkins details many instances in which producers historically asserted power over fans. He begins his book *Textual Poachers* by detailing when William Shatner, star of *Star Trek*, appeared on *Saturday Night Live* in 1986. Shatner is presented with a portrayal of *Star Trek* fans presented as overweight, sexually immature, and unnaturally obsessed with mundane details

of the show. He tells them to “get a life!” (9). *Star Trek* arguably boasts one of the strongest fanbases the world has ever seen, but in its heyday, actively participated in limiting fan culture. Traditional power dynamics have long favored producers, but as technological infrastructure has advanced, fans have increasingly gained power.

With greater access to any number of people, individuals now can “self-select” rather than enter into “convenience-based groups” (Fogle 298). Where once people had to build societies with those who were simply nearby, we now have the ability to choose increasingly-niche groups to found our identities upon—such as fandom. Fogle describes how as a person watches television, they interpret events “according to certain themes that exist within the society [they] belong to.” When these individuals “come to a common understanding of what they are viewing,” they create a society (305). Due to the internet, individuals are free to join groups according to their interests, regardless of their location. When they join a fandom, they find others who share their same interests, thereby creating and validating their identities. Participating in fandom creates and supports identities, so seeing women killed off—particularly women with whom the fans identify—is troubling to fans, and understandably might motivate the audience to insert their own identities as women, the marginalized, or people discriminated against into the narrative.

It is interesting that fans make the effort to actively subvert texts instead of simply abandoning their media entirely. We must concede that marginalized audiences rarely, if ever, enjoy adequate representation, so perhaps they have no alternative. On the other hand, *Supernatural* has long allowed fans to influence the course of their narratives, perhaps leading fans to believe that if they agitate long and hard enough, that the show will address their concerns. ABO is born of a fandom that has enjoyed some measure of success in advocating for

their own interests, and perhaps functions as a symptom of a community that still indulges in a show that has so long failed to represent them.

NEGOTIATING AUTHORIAL POWER AND THE THREAT THAT FANS POSE

For a television show, *Supernatural* has an unusually reciprocal relationship with its fans; throughout history, many creators have not been so welcoming of fan creations. Infrastructure and the power of production have traditionally been held by producers, therefore locating power firmly on the side of the producers. In modern days, the internet allows fans to gather in greater numbers, and openly interact with producers through social media, gaining power through numbers and visibility. Having a cult-like following is considered an indicator of success (Kane & Loges 323) and it is one shows are now specifically appealing to. Kane and Loges cite one instance where the costume designer of *Game of Thrones* included intricate details on her costuming that “likely went entirely unnoticed by the average viewer” (328), but specifically courted avowed fans. She later Tweeted about it and openly discussed her decisions with fans. Additionally, Kane and Loges express that it is “not uncommon to have actors or writers scouring fan sites to get an inside look at what their viewers think about the program” (323). Shows such as *Community*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Firefly* were literally rescued from cancellation by a strong, loud fanbase, proving that fans are beginning to hold a significant amount of power. It is in creative works’ interests to directly appeal to this fanbase.

At the same time, these fans pose a threat. Ducey indicates that some fans use social media in an attempt to “drive story lines of ‘their shows,’ to make their voices heard by the television network, and to show their own derivative works” (222). Ducey is specifically referring to soap operas, but we can apply the same rules of engagement to *Supernatural*. Fans feel a sense of “moral ownership” over “their shows,” and use the tools of the internet to

maximize their control over the storylines. It is, therefore, also in the interest of producers to limit the power and influence of fans.

Supernatural is one such show where we can see these power dynamics at play. A product of the internet age, it directly interacts with its fan community. Actors and show runners use social media, such as Twitter and Tumblr, to interact with fans, and regularly organize at fan conventions (Karkanias 4). Alena Karkanias investigates both sides of this relationship by including testimony from both fans and individuals featured on the show. Karkanias interviews actors, along with a number of the show's other participants, who report being encouraged to authentically interact with fans. Show runners even conceded to let fan reactions influence the plot line of the show. In the third season, *Supernatural* had two regular female characters, both heavily disliked by the fanbase. To appease the fans, showrunners chose to kill off one, and kept the other who was integral to the plot. Karkanias argues that this is an example of authors threading the needle between listening to fanbase and maintaining authorial integrity (16).

This show avidly courts its fanbase, to the point that they allow fan consensus to affect actual storylines. In some ways, it also holds firm to a traditional retention of power on the side of production, limiting the power of fans on the course of the show. ABO is a trope born in a fandom accustomed to exerting some amounts of power over the source material, and which is used to seeing themselves at least marginally acknowledged in the narrative, if not actually represented by female characters. As sci-fi and fantasy settings have been thought to naturally inspire slash readings, perhaps *Supernatural*'s particular context lends itself to ABO readings. *Supernatural* is relatively open to allowing fans some control over their text, but in a limited fashion. This is further emphasized in one of the major arcs of its 4th season, wherein it folds the fanbase itself into canon.

SUPERNATURAL, SUPERNATURAL, AND THEIR AUDIENCES

Supernatural lessens the taboo of queer readings, even incestual ones, by welcoming these interpretations into the show, albeit in a guarded format. During the fourth season, *Supernatural* breaks faith with the fourth wall entirely, giving it an opportunity to explicitly interact with its fanbase. In 4.18, “The Monster at the End of This Book,” Sam and Dean enter a comic book shop, investigating a routine haunting. In the midst of their usual interrogation, the owner laughs at them and, assuming they are cosplayers, says, “You’re those guys from those books, right?”

Sam and Dean soon discover a book series called *Supernatural* (hereafter referred to as SPN2), which chronicles the lives of two monster hunters named Sam and Dean. It is the story of their lives, complete with inner thoughts, intimate details, and secrets they never even told each other, with each novel named after an episode title. Sam and Dean track down the author, a pajama-clad, hungover writer named Chuck, who at first thinks they are simply very good LARPerS (Live-Action Role Players). They come to discover he is a prophet in the midst of writing what will eventually be known as “the Winchester Gospels.” He receives visions based on their lives, and has mistaken these for literary inspiration.

His books, although not strictly popular, have attracted a cult following. SPN2 inspires fanfiction, erotica, and fan conventions—everything a popular television show typically inspires. This plot is particularly interesting because it enables *Supernatural* to depict its own fans, which it does in humorous and occasionally paternalistic ways: as desperate and lonely women writing erotica; wise and alternative high school girls cleverly pointing out plot holes; gay men who see themselves in Sam and Dean’s relationship. In many ways, *Supernatural* legitimizes fan creations by “canonizing” their depictions and existence. It moves fandom from being an

external, reactive force to an actual plotline on the show, allowing the source material to respond to fan impulses and criticisms. At the same time, it grants fandom this legitimacy in a very restricted way. By only allowing their material to interact with the fans they choose to depict, *Supernatural* maintains authority over how fans interact with the story.

The most prominent fan of SPN2 is named Becky Rosen, an aggressively sexual, obsessive, and desperate woman. Her online alias is “samlicker81,” and she is an avid Wincest writer, who describes herself as “web-mistress of morethanbrothers.net.” Chuck knows of her as a militant fan who has sent him numerous letters (and marzipan), and, in an emergency, contacts her to deliver a message to Sam and Dean in 5.1, “Sympathy for the Devil.” Upon receiving his request Becky says, defensively, “I know that *Supernatural*’s just a book, okay? I know the difference between fantasy and reality.” Chuck says, “It’s all real,” and Becky immediately squeals: “I knew it!” When she meets Dean, the first thing she says is that he is “not what [she] pictured.” Tosenberger describes Becky as the “clichéd fangirl taken to its most ridiculous ends,” who “cannot separate fantasy from reality” (141). She represents the worst possible interpretation of a fan: “individuals so immersed in their fantasies that reality disappoints them” (141).

Becky can be interpreted as a symbol of a fan’s worst anxieties concerning how their source material perceives them. In using Becky as their main fandom avatar, *Supernatural* makes it clear it considers fans awkward, immature, perverted misfits. With every wince and scoff of Sam and Dean as they encounter SPN2 fans, *Supernatural* establishes its power over the story and diminishes the power of fandom. Specifically, it diminishes the power of its female fans. This is a show that revives its male characters upwards of a hundred times, while explaining that the story simply led them to kill off every female character. To engage in suppressing the voice

of its largely female fanbase further marginalizes female audiences, which perhaps leads them to invest in a trope that equalizes gender, explores sexual subtext, and literalizes power struggles into explicit sexual dialogue.

As Sam and Dean investigate SPN2, they enter the internet archives—and presumably Becky’s *morethanbrothers.net*. “What’s a slash fan?” Dean asks. Sam explains. Dean responds by exclaiming “That’s just sick!” and slams his laptop closed, folding his arms, thereby exiting the conversation having pronounced judgement on behalf of the creators. His reaction maintains the power structure in favor of the producers, portraying slash fans as transgressive and “sick.” Nevertheless, lighthearted music plays over the scene, implying that this situation should be found funny; the audience is meant to laugh at the exaggerated nature of Dean’s reaction. Here the show straddles the line between maintenance of traditional, hegemonic systems of power, while implying that it is, in other respects, on audience’s side, as if the show and fandom are colluding together against social mores. This is another instance of *Supernatural* toeing the line between authorial intent and fanservice, opening the door to more tabooed readings.

Supernatural uses SPN2 to interrogate its own role as creator. Upon discovering his characters are flesh and blood, Chuck, the author, concludes he must be a god, and immediately apologizes. “The things I put you through,” he says, choked. “I toyed with your lives, your emotions, for...entertainment.” While this is a humorous note in the show, it also functions as a self-critical lens by which *Supernatural* actually questions its own ethical responsibility in providing its creations with such terrible lives. It also casts aspersions upon the consumers of this entertainment, implicitly questioning the sadism of audiences. Many things that are a source of anxiety and distress for Sam and Dean become a source of pleasure for fans. The brothers have magical tattoos that prevent them from being possessed by demons, and many fans have gotten

the same design as a mark of their passion for the show. Sam and Dean get this tattoo “out of fear of another monstrous possession,” while fans do it as a “signifier of pleasure” (Kies 25). Chuck’s apology addresses the concept that the various tragedies and tortures of their favored characters bring pleasure to the audience. Perhaps the abuse, violence, and discrimination of ABO is not out of the norm, and exists simply because fans enjoy the suffering of their favored characters.

Chuck also apologizes for forcing them to live through “bad writing”; he would have “done another pass” if he’d known it was real. Karkanias perceives this as “Kripke’s way of acknowledging fan complain about particular episodes” (3). It is startling to see canon caring to acknowledge fan complaints, as many producers have long disdained this type of fanservice. Above all else, SPN2’s existence functions as a way of interacting with fans from canon material in order to acknowledge and conspire with them, but ultimately is used to retain ownership of the story.

Supernatural periodically throws a bone to slash fans, and Wincest fans in particular. In episode 2.11, “Playthings,” Sam and Dean visit a hotel, whose concierge assumes they are a couple and immediately offers them a single king-size bed, leading Dean to awkwardly disabuse him of his notions. For an audience member engaged in negotiated reading, this could easily be read as Dean in denial, flustered by the truth of the concierge’s assumption. In episode 5.11, “Point of No Return,” an angel named Zacharias exclaims to another that “You know Sam and Dean Winchester are psychotically, irrationally, *erotically* codependent on each other, right?” These function as instances of queerbaiting: a phenomenon where media creators imply that subtextual queer relationships might, at any point, become outright text—but fail to deliver. As

other characters affirm slash fans' reading of the show, the show is able to toe the line between representing fandom interests and maintaining strict control over their product.

The ABO trope is not directly addressed by the show, but the show's treatment of slash and Wincest fans certainly has ramifications on the popularity of the trope. By opening the door to legitimate queer readings of the show—even readings as transgressive as incest—the show makes it increasingly easy for fans to indulge in queer readings by lessening their tabooed nature.

RAPE CULTURE IN ABO

One such “tabooed” reading of the show produces the ABO trope, which has a few troubling elements. First, as discussed, is the utter dearth of outwardly female characters. ABO has created a world of men where women are not necessary for any reason—emotionally, biologically, or physically. While the omega is clearly coded as an allegory for women, he is nonetheless referred to with male pronouns. Woledge suggests it is this “blurring” of gender distinctions that is erotic, but it is nonetheless troubling in a fandom for a show that kills off all women and resurrects men over a hundred times.

Perhaps the reinterpretation of male gender is an empowering move. In writing and reading slash, women locate themselves in the subjectivities of men, appropriating the gender of masculine characters in order to situate themselves more comfortably in the narrative. Eva Y.I. Chen regards slash texts as a “site of phisic mobility and thus liberation for romance readers” (38). When reading heterosexual romance, it is clear to a female reader that they are meant to identify with the female character. When reading a romance between men, women are allowed more flexibility, as they are offered “two protagonists, not one,” thus increasing their pleasure as they are allowed to take on a “variety of positions in multiple identifications” (Foster 518). Having few, if any, female characters means that female readers can more easily identify with a

greater number of characters—so having few women is, in this sense, ideal. On the other hand, eliminating women from the narrative entirely is a misogynistic notion. Why don't any stories eliminate men instead?

Second, another troubling element in ABO is the eroticization of rape and abuse. Inequality is essential to this trope. Alphas are on the highest rungs of society; omegas the lowest. Laura Campillo Arnaiz expresses that the dark side of omegaverse fanfiction “revels in an explicit classism and caste system” (127). She argues that ABO exists as fulfillment of “very dark and controversial female sexual fantasies” (123). Women have long suffered the kinds of abuse omegas are subjected to in ABO fandom, and depicting these stories allows fans to feel in control of feelings of “helplessness, humiliation, worthlessness, and unlovability” (124). In Arnaiz’s interpretation, while these stories are not necessarily empowering, they do function as an outlet for the dark sexual fantasies women develop as they endure oppressive, abusive, and sexualizing aspects of society.

Perhaps one of the most defining traits about ABO is the “heat” omegas enter a few times a year. During this heat, omegas enter a period of fertility, become sexually undiscerning and insatiable, and desperately need to copulate with an alpha. Accordingly, omegas cannot consent to sexual activity at this time, as their cognitive functions are impaired and they are entirely driven by their bodily impulses. Although their romantic interest will often refrain from sleeping with them during this time if the omega has not consented while “sober” (a heroic feat considering that omegas in heat are incredibly alluring to alphas), the entire practice draws attention to the rape culture inherent in this setting. Every month, omegas become vessels of reproduction, unable to control themselves or even think. Talk of “breeding” abounds in ABO stories, and although an omega may deny wanting children—to keep their autonomy,

independence, or any other reason—they lose all control over their own bodies during heats. The choice is, ultimately, not up to them. Their heats are designed to result in pregnancy, and ABO stories delight in stretching the tension between what the mind wants and what the body wants.

Heats are often treated similarly to a woman's menses, often depicting the omega crying frequently, requiring chocolate, or eating a lot of ice cream. Alphas who are not the love interest often express awkwardness with omega heats, like uncomfortable fathers of teenage girls. A heat cycle is comparable to menses, but different in one key respect—in that it inspires attraction and demonstrations of sexuality in their partners, whereas a woman's cycle is often treated with complex social baggage. ABO thus posits the idea that fertility cycles and female bodily functions can be eroticized. As it removes women from being the default targets of discrimination and harassment, it also creates a world wherein even the bodily functions of feminine partners are considered desirable—allowing them to retain certain kinds of sexual power and value which women are so often divested of.

Any discussion of ABO would be incomplete without mention of its animal-inspired kinks. These serve as a demonstration of the writer's power over the show, its characters, and human physiology itself. During heat, an alpha might “knot” an omega; paralleling wolf physiology, an alpha has a “baculum bone” supporting his penis. In the right circumstances, it will swell during penetrative sex, “making it virtually impossible for [the male] to withdraw quickly.” The pair will remain locked for upwards of half an hour. In wolves, this offers the male a greater chance of impregnating his partner, given that, as long as they remain together, no other male can mate with her, essentially giving his sperm a head start (Marshall Cavendish Corporation 252). In ABO, the alpha and omega are usually already cloistered in privacy, so the trope serves mostly as a kink that amplifies the power discrepancy between the lovers.

In a world with rampant sexual abuse and condoned discrimination, ABO's animalistic markers reminds the reader that this is a different world, with a different, more animalistic code of ethics. In the animal world, the most aggressive alpha will mate fertile females, without the explicit negotiation of consent that humans ethically require. ABO is, in part, pleasurable to readers because it leaves behind human negotiations of sexuality, giving the readers the freedom to indulge in highly problematic sexual encounters—or encounters that would be problematic, if they were not between animals.

CASE STUDY: CONSENT IN *REAL SLICK DEAN* BY TRILLIATH

The story *Real Slick Dean* by AO3 user trilliath illustrates issues in ABO, such as its habitual disregard of women, eroticization of rape, and appeal to biology as a way of excusing dubious consent. In this story, Castiel is an alpha police officer working in the Special Victims division, which specializes in alpha-, beta-, or omega-related crimes (i.e. sexual abuse as it pertains to secondary genders). During the course of his work, he meets many unmated omegas who do not have anywhere safe to go during their heats, and he takes them to an establishment known as the Roadhouse, which will give them sanctuary. The Roadhouse also doubles as a “slickery,” where omegas can sell their “slick”—a bodily fluid produced when the omegas are in heat, which has the side-effect of soothing an alpha's rut. For his ruts, Castiel orders slick from a single donor, who is, unbeknownst to him, Dean, who lives at the Roadhouse and is in contact with many of his colleagues and rescuees. Using Dean's slick regularly has caused Castiel's body to believe they are mates, leaving both of them scrambling to negotiate consent upon their first meeting, while their bodies are already halfway in a sexual relationship.

The plot of *Real Slick Dean* begins during a police altercation where Castiel leads a bust of an alpha drug den, where a number of alphas imprison omegas in cages and indulge in a drug

known as “Rutter.” Rutter forces an alpha’s body to enter a prolonged and highly intense state of rut. While taking down a roomful of these alphas, Castiel is forcibly injected with an overdose of Rutter. Before it takes effect, he rescues a caged omega who happens to be entering her first heat and takes her to the Roadhouse, where he accidentally encounters Dean for the first time. Due to the Rutter, Castiel becomes incredibly aggressive and attempts to rape Dean. Luckily, bystanders intervene.

These bystanders are aware that Castiel has been drugged, and are quick to assure Dean that Castiel’s behavior “isn’t [Castiel’s] fault.” Even Sam, whom the story interprets as Dean’s alpha brother and Castiel’s colleague, is the first to explain that Dean shouldn’t hold Castiel accountable for his attempted rape. It soon becomes clear that Castiel will die if his drug-induced rut is not satiated—turning this story neatly into an FOD situation (“Fuck Or Die”).

It soon becomes apparent that Castiel’s rut psychology—his alpha instincts—will accept only Dean as a partner. He literally cannot accept another omega, even if it means his death. Throughout the story, Dean is arguably coerced into having sex with Castiel by the surrounding characters, and his own sense of obligation. Since Castiel has spent his career saving omegas from situations of sexual abuse, side characters angrily explain to Dean that Castiel is a “guardian angel” who has “saved lives”—implying that Dean is unfair for holding Castiel accountable for his actions, and that he deserves to be rescued by Dean’s sexual favors. Dean is also distressed to learn that Castiel is an exclusive customer of his slick, and worries he has developed an obsession with him. Jo, another omega, responds, “The guy likes your scent best. You should be flattered or whatever.” She later assures Castiel (at this point dying in a “rut tank”) that she, and the other side characters, will convince Dean to have sex with Castiel. She explains that Dean is just “being a prissy brat about it. So I’ll make you a deal; we’ll worry about

[him], you just worry about not dying.” All the characters in this story pressure Dean to help Castiel through his rut, and clearly consider Dean’s resistance to be immature and an overreaction. They know Castiel is a hero, and that he really isn’t a rapist. Although he attempts rape at least once in the story, and arguably performs it throughout once Dean consents to have sex with him, the story and characters are firmly on Castiel’s side. When Dean finally consents to sex with Castiel, he explains, “I don’t want to have to live with a dead guardian angel on my conscience okay?” (chapter 4). Clearly, his decision is not motivated by desire to have sex, but rather by the pressure of the situation.

Later, Castiel asks Dean whether he can touch him, and Dean thanks him for asking. Castiel remarks that it is a habit “[he’s] never broken until now,” with some bitterness in his tone. This obliges Dean to once again comfort him and absolve him of the assault. *Real Slick Dean* asks, most controversially, whether we can hold Castiel accountable for his actions. If he was forcibly injected with hormones, and has spent his whole life respecting and saving omegas, doesn’t he get a pass?

Simplified to its allegory, this is the story: a nice guy, overrun with his body’s hormones, assaults a woman. Should he be held accountable? The FOD trope asks: but what if he really had to or he’d die? Set to this life-or-death tune, consent becomes a prickly subject. At what point can we absolve a good person for terrible actions? Rape is hardly an uncommon form of assault, and defenses of it are often rooted in the idea of being unable to control one’s own body. By putting two men in a situation of sexual coercion, ABO reinterprets the looming threat over women, and asks startling questions that force us to revise the male/female aggressor/victim narrative.

Omegas are frequently depicted within the throes of passion, throwing themselves at alphas. Is this sexual assault? What is substantially different between a “heatstruck” omega and an alpha overdosed on Rutter? Should Castiel be held responsible simply because he is physically stronger and in a position of privilege? If we hold with Arnaiz’s assertion that the darkness of omegaverse channels the trauma of being a woman, then it makes sense that women, a population constantly immersed in negotiations of consent, would create a world where such gray areas are explored. The ABO trope questions who holds the accountability in a situation where all people are inarguably at the mercy of their bodies.

Real Slick Dean argues that Castiel’s uncontrollable rut, and subsequent sexual coercion, makes him, too, a victim of sexual assault. While absolving Castiel of his attempted assault, Dean explains that he was “basically raped into raping me.” He is, after all, forcibly injected with a drug that causes a hormonal shift, creating a situation where he himself cannot meaningfully consent to sex. Is this any different than an omega in heat?

Although the story draws attention to Castiel’s own dubious consent, it does not apply the same coercion to him as it does to Dean. There is no expression of reluctance on his part at any point. He is, in fact, already somewhat in love with Dean. As a regular buyer of his slick, Castiel has become accustomed to using Dean’s scent to ride out his ruts, and has long nurtured a “domestic fantasy” between himself and the then-unknown producer of the slick. This creates an aura of pre-consent to sexual interactions with Dean. Furthermore, the careful pressure applied to Dean throughout the story makes it clear that, while neither of them are able to truly consent to sex with each other, Dean is the one who endures coercion.

Characters in ABO talk about sexual assault casually and often. It is rare for a story to portray an omega that *hasn’t* been sexually assaulted. This mirrors the prevalence of sexual

violence in the real world, wherein one in three American women report experiencing sexual violence during their lifetime (Smith et al. 1). In *Real Slick Dean*, once they have begun a sexual relationship, Dean requests foreplay, asks to move from the couch (where he finds knotting uncomfortable) and then, deciding for himself, runs to the bed. Castiel responds aggressively:

His Omega should know better than to tease him, to run from him. Unless he wants this. Of course he does, Castiel decides. Every Omega wants their Alpha like this, desperate to prove how much they want them. It is his purpose to give Dean what he asked for.
(trilliath, chapter 6)

In the relatively-sober discussion afterwards, Dean alludes to having run from and been overpowered by an alpha in the exact same way Castiel has just chased and overpowered him. Castiel is devastated to hear that he is comparable to a rapist; Dean comforts him, and apologizes. “I chose to push your buttons just now,” he says, taking responsibility for prompting Castiel’s possessive, savage response. “If anything I should probably apologize to you.” When Dean later expresses reluctance to continue having rough sex every two hours indefinitely—as the rut demands—Castiel requests from another character a “stretch of rope” and for them to “get started on the coroner.” The stakes are clear: if Dean does not continue sexually appeasing him, Castiel will die.

It is characteristic of ABO stories to blur romance and rape. The very foundation of the trope disabuses traditional notions of consent. Omega bodies are already transactional in ABO fics, and the FOD trope further advances these issues. It is impossible to meaningfully consent in an FOD situation. Dean has very real reservations about Castiel, whom he discovers is, suspiciously, a frequent customer of his slick—and who attempts to sexually assault him at their first meeting. Mournfully, Castiel admits that he would have succeeded had bystanders not

physically separated them. Throughout the story, Castiel expresses regret about his inability to keep himself from sexually assaulting Dean, and every other character rushes to reassure him. Since Castiel is a labelled “guardian angel”—a defender of omega rights—who intellectually respects the rights of omegas, the story labors to reassure readers that although Castiel is in a rapist context, he is not really a rapist. Castiel’s spells of self-disgust and his subsequent reassurances by other characters—Dean included—function to remind the reader that Castiel is, after all, a good guy. If the other characters can forgive and excuse his actions, then the audience is encouraged to as well. Castiel is forced to act like a “bad alpha” against his will, but it is the context of his society that makes his actions possible and successful. In a world that makes meaningful consent impossible, and normalizes violence against omegas, his attempt to assault one is forgivable.

Like many ABO stories, Castiel’s allure is partly in his enduring love for “his omega.” From the onset, Dean and Castiel have an almost-mystical connection. Castiel has already developed feelings for Dean through the use of his slick, and his body’s instincts are what lead him to true love. From his long use of Dean’s slick, Castiel’s alpha instincts have begun to associate him with periods of fertility and companionship, and clearly consider Dean “his.” Most romantically, he literally would rather die than accept the sexual advances of any other omega. The drug Rutter only amplifies his body’s hormones and responses, and the dramatic way in which it responds to Dean imbues their connection with a sense of fatefulness. In ABO, the body’s desires take precedence over the mind’s. In addition, this alpha isn’t like other alphas—although the alpha is dangerous, strong, and aggressive, his love and respect for the omega causes him to go against his primal urges and treat the omega gently. In this sense, omegaverse functions as an amplification of the appeal of the romance genre.

ABO fics, as Arnaiz points out, are conscious of their interaction with problematic ideals (126). The author of *Real Slick Dean*, trilliath, tags this story as containing “Lots of semi dubiously questionably consenting sex sorta” / “I mean it’s FOD sooooo.” The author demonstrates awareness that this is a problematic trope, and the story revels in the tension there. Commenters also support Castiel’s nonconsensual pursuit of Dean. After Dean initially escapes Castiel’s advances and avoids him thereafter, one commenter remarks “poor cas. dean is an idiot.” Like the side characters, this commenter does not respect Dean’s reluctance to have sex. I would not categorize *Real Slick Dean* as a “dark fic,” such as Arnaiz’s work explores, but rather a genuine romance that is simply immersed in the problematic trappings of omegaverse. “Dark fics” occur when authors leave behind justifications for rape and assault, while *Real Slick Dean* works constantly to balance the dubious consent with care and romance—leaving it immersed in negotiating rape culture but not outright “darkness.”

Like *Supernatural* using SPN2 to apologize for bad writing, authors also self-consciously discuss their interpretations of ABO. ABO fics are not static, and can be reinterpreted according to authors’ interests and aims. In *Real Slick Dean*, female alphas have hermaphroditic physiology, and it is their sexual partners who bear children. In the comments, trilliath argues that it would not make sense for female alphas to bear children, as “if the mutation just made them more fertile as childbearers, that would weaken them as protectors.” The author defends her decision as plausible “since we’re already playing with biology like crazy.” Trilliath clarifies that this way, they hope to “avoid the inherent sexism that gets built into these universes sometimes.” In this comment, the author acknowledges the highly sexist nature of ABO, and its flexibility as a trope within fanfiction. They further blur the distinction between male and female, instead ascribing male physiology to female alphas while assigning the reproductive labor to omegas of

any gender. Fanfiction is naturally given to recursive self-analysis, and we often see authors displaying consciousness of their participation in problematic tropes. Their elaborations on a standard trope illustrate the flexibility of fanfiction conventions.

Real Slick Dean also includes another theme common to the omegaverse—the presence of an institution that commercializes omega bodies. Castiel is a police officer who is attempting to “change the system” from the inside, but struggling. Years earlier, his older omega sister, Anna, was put in the “heat tank” at the police station—where omegas ostensibly can ride out their heats in safety—and was raped by officers on duty. Now, as a police officer himself, instead of bringing omegas to the heat tank, he takes them to the Roadhouse. The Roadhouse is run by individuals, many of whom are omegas themselves, headed by matriarchal alpha Ellen. Like many ABO stories, *Real Slick Dean* deals with institutional abuse of omegas, and builds a world where the couple deals with unfair laws, standards, and builds a safe haven away from the unfair reach of the law, where omegas can recuperate among omegas and fair-minded alphas.

Real Slick Dean is a relatively popular, run-of-the-mill ABO story. Its sexual content is punctuated by inability to consent on many sides, and belies ABO genre’s fundamental interest in probing notions of consent. Set in a highly problematic, classist society, such stories integrate romance and rape. Female writers distance themselves from directly perpetuating notions of violence and abuse in two ways: by making their characters something other than human, thereby appealing to a more animal code of ethics (e.g. biologically determined rather than socially); and by making their characters male, thereby removing women from directly being the targets of violence.

CONCLUSION

In season 4, episode 18, a fan of SPN2 praises Sam and Dean, whom she does not know are real (or that she is speaking to them), for being “so open and in touch with their feelings” (“The Monster at the End of This Book”). The showmakers clearly believe that their fans value the brothers’ emotional investment in each other, and find the emotional demonstrations of heroic men appealing—perhaps considering it their primary interest when consuming the material. Such a perception relies on the romance/porn dichotomy, which many scholars treat as the separate realms of women and men. The idea that women enjoy feelings while men enjoy sex is an enduring assumption no doubt mired in gender roles. The ABO trope challenges this dichotomy. It is an explicit genre, often affiliated with pornographic tags and controversial sexual kinks.

The show *Supernatural* is essentially treated as a case study for ABO, as its intense emotional intimacy between brothers makes queer readings readily available. The show also regularly panders to its fans; and because such a large portion of its fanbase are slash or Wincest supporters, the show consciously makes the decision to court such interpretations. In the age of the internet, fans are able to create and maintain active societies with one another, and *Supernatural’s* negotiations of power with its fans has made it a ready source for transgressive interpretations. The gender dynamics of the show, the profound intimacy between brothers, and encouragement of queer readings have been the breeding grounds for a trope like ABO.

Fans have only recently come to enjoy a more mutual relationship with producers, but female fans in particular still have yet to see consistent, thoughtful, meaningful representation on *Supernatural*. This is perhaps what drives them to engage with canon materials beyond the source material to a greater extent than male fans. Troublingly, ABO eliminates women from the narrative and indulges many misogynistic, abusive aspects of rape culture. At first glance, ABO

seems to be a wondrously cruel world. Why would so many women participate in negating themselves from society?

If slash fiction offers readers a uniquely secure relationship by transcending sexual orientation in pursuit of a true love, then ABO removes this sense of permanence and places slash fiction on the same footing as heterosexual romance. Despite lacking traditional female presence, ABO is highly invested in blurring the gender binary. Women force narratives without female characters to represent them in atypical ways, enabling readers to imagine a society where gender roles are distributed based on behavior, according to characters' behavior in their source material. This setting takes great pleasure in forcing men to perform the emotional labor most commonly relegated to women—negotiating presumptions of sexual receptivity, appeasing aggressive pursuers in the name of safety, and coming to terms with loving people who could easily trap, rape, or kill them. On the other hand, ABO is rife with misogynistic, abusive, and coercive sexual situations. These perhaps function as a means of coping with the unfortunate violence of being a woman. It offers a world where sexual abuse and discrimination can be explored through the ethics of animals, making it possible to indulge in such problematic tropes without necessarily perpetuating violence against women.

The fanfiction *Real Slick Dean* is a story that explores the “caste system” of the ABO trope. Castiel, a “good” alpha, is firmly on the side of omegas, the oppressed class. He is forced to become an aggressor against his will, but the trappings of his society make it extremely easy for him to take advantage of his lover. The story questions the limits of consent in a situation where meaningful consent is impossible, and in so doing, probes the gray areas of consent. Although ABO is often considered a genre with ridiculous, complicated conventions, it brings up

real, important, and deeply complicated questions about the place of women, sexuality, and power in the world.

Literature, television, and movies created by men have long put words in the mouths of women, particularly showing women interacting with women, as a way of legitimizing hegemonic male demands. ABO reverses this dynamic, appropriating the male gender in order to put the sexuality, desires, and presence of women first and foremost within the text. As technology advances and queer readings are increasingly normalized, fans will doubtlessly gain more power, enabling them to create increasingly complicated worlds and further questioning aspects of society through the mouths of favored fictional characters.

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