Chivers, Seto, Lalumière, Laan, and Grimbos (2010, p. 48) to conclude that 'a woman's genital responding might reveal little about her sexual interests'.[1] Chivers et al. (2010) also speculate that, for women, based on observations of higher levels of female consumption of nonvisual forms of erotic literature (see Malamuth, 1996 for a review), concordance between physiological and self-reported arousal would be greater when assessed using nonvisual modalities of erotic stimuli. However, it should be noted that, much the same as men, women have more genital arousal while watching sexually explicit videos than they do reading erotic stories or engaging in erotic fantasy (Van Dam, Honnebier, van Zelinge, & Barendregt, 1976), and that romantic content does not enhance genital arousal (Heiman, 1977). It would seem that women respond to the same explicit content that men do, and, not only that, they respond to a greater variety of content too.

So, while the work of Chivers and her colleagues may well suggest a dissociation between mind and body in women's arousal—and I'm certainly not suggesting that a woman's vaginal lubrication is a good predictor of what she's actually feeling—it may also suggest that women have a more fluid sexual response than men. In her work on sexual fluidity, Lisa Diamond (2008) identifies two different types of sexual desire: *proceptivity*, that is lust or libido, and *arousability*, the capacity to become aroused once certain cues are encountered. She observes that as female proceptivity is a lot less constant than men's, and only peaks for a few days at a time in-line with ovulation, a woman's sexual desire is therefore primarily driven by arousability. Diamond (2008, pp. 210–212) adds that proceptivity is essentially heterosexual in so much as it is geared around reproductive sexual activity. However arousability is not intrinsically oriented and therefore does not need to be 'gender targeted', leading Diamond to conclude 'if the majority of women's day-to-day desires are governed by arousability, and if arousability is a 'gender-neutral' system, then … women … are [more] likely to have … "cross-orientation" desires [than men]'. Diamond here is discussing women's greater propensity towards same-sex attractions, and a fluid sense of sexual orientation. However, there is no reason that her theory could not also explain why women might find m/m sex arousing. Taken with the work of Chivers and her colleagues, and viewed in the light of the recent 'discovery' by the

media that women might like watching men have sex with each other, it may well be that women enjoying watching m/m pornography is not particularly surprising.

Women and Slash

One dimension of female interest in m/m eroticism which has been more thoroughly explored is the area of slash fiction (and, to a lesser extent, slash videos [slash vids]). Slash[2] is a genre of fan fiction that focuses on interpersonal attraction and sexual relationships between fictional characters of the same sex, believed to have originated in the 1970s when female fans started to compose stories based around *Star Trek* where Kirk and Spock had a romantic—and often sexual—relationship. Much of the academic research on slash fiction has come from the areas of media studies and cultural studies, with 'the former tending to emphasize the pornographic aspects of slash, the latter its romantic aspects' (Salmon & Symons, 2001, p. 74). Hayes and Ball (2009, p. 222) observe that 'by far the most popular stories have sex scenes between the two main male characters, which are graphically depicted in detail with the explicit aim of titillating the reader' (see also Bruner, 2013). The more sexually explicit genres within slash have (not without controversy) been characterised as 'porn' by some scholars (Russ, 1985). Paasonen (2010, p. 139) agrees that these sorts of texts can certainly be classified as pornographic, describing the tendency to understand pornography purely in terms of the visual as problematic, particularly considering 'the history of pornography has largely been one concerning the written word'. To this extent explicit online slash texts can be viewed as a form of pornography for women. However, it should be noted that slash fiction is about far more than sex. Lothian, Busse and Reid (2007, p. 103, emphasis added) maintain that online slash fandoms 'can induct us into new and unusual narratives of identity and sexuality, calling into question familiar identifications and assumptions' and that as such 'slash fandom's discursive sphere has been termed *queer female space* by some who inhabit and study it'. Catherine Driscoll (2006, p. 91) also notes that, as one of the few forms of pornography mainly produced and consumed by women, slash fiction is important for what it says about the gendering of porn.

The concept of 'slashing' male characters in films, TV shows, and books is increasingly spilling over into the mainstream. In May 2016 the hashtag #GiveCaptainAmericaABoyfriend trended on Twitter, with thousands of social media users taking to the site to campaign for Marvel to include a same-sex love story for Captain America in his next film outing. Tweets not only pointed to the existing romantic tension between the character and his 'BFF', James Buchanan 'Bucky' Barnes, but also highlighted how positive it would be for younger members of the LGBTQ+ community to have a non-heterosexual superhero to look up to on the big screen. However, despite the growing awareness and popularity of slash fic (Jamison, 2013), research in media and cultural studies tends to view slashing as a somewhat isolated phenomenon. Indeed, in her influential chapter on women's involvement in slash, Bacon-Smith (1992, p. 248) talks about how 'only a very small number' of female slash writers and readers have any interest in gay literature or pornography more generally; and the possibility of slashers having a broader interest in m/m SEM is not often discussed in more recent analyses of slash. In terms of why women are drawn to slash, CarrieLynn Reinhard (2009) notes that explanations for this behaviour have typically consisted of theorists discussing *their* ideas of why women slash, and there has been less work grounding these ideas in conversations with slashers, using their interpretative stance to develop theories.

Women and Boys' Love Manga

Boys' Love [BL], and its more explicit subgenre *yaoi*,[3] are usually defined as same-sex male romances or erotica written 'by women for women' (Meyer, 2010). Much like slash, BL developed from (primarily) women taking manga intended for male consumption and rewriting them to accommodate their own desires and interests. However, while there are many similarities between BL and slash, BL is produced in comic book or graphic novel format. Slash often includes illustrations, but the artwork is not an essential part of the narrative. In this respect, Pagliassotti (2010, p. 74) argues that 'sexually explicit BL manga may more closely resemble Western pornography than it does Western romance or erotica'. There is the same emphasis on the aesthetic of maximum visibility that

we see in video pornography. Nagaike (2003) has therefore suggested that it can be productive to analyse BL as pornography that reflects women's sexual desires. Insofar as readers consume such texts as a medium through which they satisfy at least some of their sexual appetites, we can define these texts as pornographic.

BL has proved incredibly popular with women, both in Japan, where the genre originates, and worldwide. Part of this may well be down to the fact that, unlike slash, which is beset by issues with copyright regarding who owns the characters and their universes, BL has enjoyed commercial success, with Japanese publishing companies publishing work by amateur *yaoi* artists. Commercially produced *yaoi* in Japan is now a big business, and 'has generated enough jobs for hundreds of women to be economically independent by providing products to female customers' (Mizoguchi, 2003, p. 66). It may also be because the concept of women appreciating m/m sex and gay culture is regarded as less unusual in Japan than in the West. As journalist Richard McGregor states, 'in Japan almost anything homosexual can attract an all-female audience' (1996, p. 229). Lesbian activist Sarah Schulman reported being astonished to discover in Tokyo in 1992 that a lesbian and gay film festival was being held in a popular shopping mall and that 'the audience was 80 per cent straight women' (1994, p. 245).

Much like with slash, there is a preponderance of interesting theoretical work on women and BL. A lot of this analysis tends to treat the genre as problematic, and attempts to explain the sexist features of Japanese society that drive Japanese women to fantasise about homosexual, not heterosexual, romance (McLelland, 2000). Within this outlook, m/m content is only consumed because it offers a form of escapism from women's confined roles within heterosexual erotica, presenting women with the sort of equal relationship they could never hope to achieve with a man themselves (Buruma, 1984; Suzuki, 1998). Moreover, some critics believe the men and boys featured in BL are simply the women's displaced selves, citing the androgynous appearance of male characters in many comics (Matsui, 1993). Meyer (2010, p. 237) agrees that BL is about equality, but not just women wanting equal relationships with men, rather the equality here is 'more literal and physical. It is about the availability of both sexual roles for women and men, not just euphemisti-

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9

'The Times, They Are a Changin'

We're beginning to claim our own sexuality. We're beginning to stand up and refute the madonna/whore dichotomy. We can be women, wives, mothers, sisters, teachers, scientists, etc., and yet we can still like sex or porn.
(American, 35–44, married, heterosexual)

The internet has revolutionised SEM, particularly for women. Attwood (2010a, p. 2) observes that the internet has 'domesticated porn', bringing it in to the home and allowing women to interact with it on their own terms, thus freeing women's porn use from much of the stigma that has historically dogged it. One of my participants explains, 'obviously we always *wanted* to look at porn, but probably were too embarrassed to buy magazines, and most of them didn't appeal to us anyway. Now there's the internet, there is niche porn which can appeal to more types of people, including women who were historically left out. Also, we can view it without anyone knowing, which makes it much easier, safer, and less "shameful"' (American, 25–34, in a relationship, heterosexual). This does not mean that there is not still the potential for shame—one woman laments that while porn is now 'easier to get privately, so that's great' she 'hate[s] it when Amazon pops up and recommends porn for me! My

L. Neville, *Girls Who Like Boys Who Like Boys*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69134-3_9

daughter has a field day with that' (American, 45–54, divorced, heterosexual)—it has certainly made it exponentially easier for women to consume SEM without fear of social condemnation. The internet has also taken a lot of the work out of accessing SEM—both emotionally and, to a lesser extent, physically. As one participant jokes, 'I'm betting [my daughter] will grow up viewing porn differently than I did. In my day, we had to go to an actual dirty video store! Uphill! Both ways! In the snow!' (American, 35–44, single, heterosexual).

Not only can the internet provide women with unprecedented opportunities for accessing SEM, it can also provide them with space to engage with their sexuality and sexual identity in new and dynamic ways. These two aspects are often linked. Accessing SEM can potentially provide a catalyst for changes in how women view sexuality, and the growing visibility of women's perspectives on sexually explicit representation can change how we think about women's desire. As Milne (2005, p. xiii) observes, women's involvement in SEM is often seen as 'helping shape and change society's views on sexuality'. One participant observes,

> I think the internet has particularly opened things up for women. I think men are culturally expected to consume pornography from a relatively young age. "Finding the *Playboys* under his bed" is a cliché, and we don't have an equivalent cultural-norm cliché yet for girls. It isn't generally considered to be a rite of passage, in the same way it is with men, for a girl to get her first piece of porn. And there's still lot of bullshit cultural baggage in the way the media discusses women's porn usage. Ugh, if I never again hear the condescending term "mommy porn" in relation to the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon… (American, 35–44, single, heterosexual).

McNair (2002, 2013) builds on these ideas, maintaining that sexual liberation in general, and acceptance of feminism and gay rights in particular, has generated a societal demand for more sexual culture, and for forms of sexual culture that deviate in various ways from those associated with established or traditional patriarchy. He believes that the expansion of what he refers to as 'the pornosphere'—'the space in which explicit sexual discourse is circulated' (McNair, 2013, pp. 14–15)—has led to a greater democratisation of desire, and the entry of traditionally excluded or marginalised groups into sexual citizenship. The internet, then, is 'the single most important influence on the structure of the pornosphere since the invention of pornography' (McNair, 2013, p. 28). Not only can it provide a storehouse for a depth and breadth of sexually explicit material, but it can also play a number of roles with regards to SEM: introducer, connector, provider, instructor. In 1990 Linda Williams suggested that 'pornography produced by, and featuring, sexual minorities, could provide a political response to the misogynistic and aggressive pornography of the mainstream market, offering a platform for the discussion of non-oppressive sexual practices and identities' (Williams, 1990, p. 64). Thanks to the advent of the world wide web 'traditional' heterosexist male-orientated pornography has now been joined in an ever more segmented marketplace by a diversity of pornographies, catering to all sorts of tastes and desires. As Katrien Jacobs (2011, p. 186) notes, 'digital media networks have allowed women and queer groups to develop and distribute their own types of sexually explicit media and to create niche industries', providing a medium for non-traditional SEM consumer groups to define their sexual selves. As Williams envisioned, the internet has not only provided access to diverse types of SEM, it has also offered a medium for discussion and dispersion of pornographic material, meaning that 'alternative' SEM is both more visible and more public. As one of the women in my study points out, SEM 'is becoming more open and mainstream. There is the potential for it to be a driving force in changing public opinions about sexuality' (Australian, 18–24, single, bisexual). In virtual space, consumption of SEM has become routine, almost mundane, part of a multitasking mode as users move between 'socialising, buying commodities, and searching information … chatting, peeping, cruising, masturbating, and maintaining friendships' (Jacobs, 2004, p. 73). Attwood (2010a) observes that porn then becomes part of a wider repertoire of interests and interactions that are simultaneously more public and more private than before. It is this public element that I wish to focus on in this final chapter.

The internet has also radically altered the dynamics and size of slash fandom. At the time Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992) were writing about slash, fandom was a place where introduction by a mentor was common, with tight-knit conferences and zines shared among friends or sent out to membership lists in the post being the norm. Now one need not come to a fandom via love of the original media text, then find fan fic, and then slash (the route suggested by Bacon-Smith), but instead can

stumble over slash quite by accident when searching on Google for material related to a particular movie or TV show. One of my participants explains that she was 'looking for additional material about *A Knight's Tale*, at the tender age of thirteen I believe, and stumbled across [slash]' (American, 18–24, single, bisexual). As Collier (2015, p. 115) points out, 'gone are the days when potential slash fans had to be vetted and tested before being told about or offered slash'. One of my participants discusses slash in the 'time before internet': 'fandom was hard to find and slash fandom even more so—fic was insanely expensive photocopied zines, and, later, through *Professionals Circuit* archive, *if* you managed to find someone who had the goods and was able [and] willing to copy them. Bear in mind when I first found out about slash … most houses didn't even have a PC, let alone a printer or a scanner' (Australian, 45–54, single bisexual). For a small minority of my participants, the explosion of slash fandom in the digital age is seen as a bad thing, with one explaining,

> for me, and many like me who've been in fandom a very long time, it has changed to the point where the sense of community has changed. That sense of sisterhood that once existed between all fan fiction writers and readers has been lost, or at the very least stretched to breaking point. A different kind of bond exists with online writers than that which existed for those of us who wrote before the internet. In the old days, to exchange ideas we needed to either write a letter or go to the trouble of travelling to a fan convention. Now it's very impersonal, cold (American, 45–54, single, bisexual).

However, the vast majority find the availability of explicit slash and slash fandom communities on the internet a source for positive change, noting that it has 'allowed women to own their sexuality in a generally female-positive, woman-powered, safe and encouraging environment' (American, 25–34, single, lesbian). They comment that, historically, fandom was the prerogative of those who were wealthy and/or well-connected enough to be able to have access to expensive zines and to afford to travel to fan conventions, which was not easy for a number of women. While the internet is not a magic panacea for issues of access and inclusion (e.g. see Fazekas, 2014 for more on slash's race problem), it has vastly increased the availability of slash, and opportunity for discussion within the slash community. One woman in my study talks about how

> if you look at the recent past—say, the Victorian era through the Second World war—I think it was very hard for many reasons for women to congregate together, either physically or through print media, to create things such as slash. I'm sure they did throughout time. If you look at the Greek female poet Sappho from, god, 2600 years ago, it's clear that some women, always, throughout time, have succeeded in broadcasting to others—even to other women—their interior, sexual, erotic lives and fantasies. But on this scale? An almost-global—I say "almost" as many still don't have access or a shared language—scale? No. This is a new frontier, and an exciting one (American, 25–34, married, heterosexual).

The internet has proved pivotal in how consumers and producers of m/m SEM engage with one another, the formation and maintenance of m/m fan communities, and the demonstration of fan activities. It has also radically altered the production–consumption dichotomy, from disrupting it entirely, to allowing traditional producers to further control consumption by co-opting fan activity (Deuze, 2007; Reinhard & Dervin, 2012). The women I spoke with are aware of the potential for this, with one complaining 'we've been writing porny slash since 1974. It ain't new. What's new is that the mainstream is realising that we've been writing our own porn on our own terms with *Fifty Shades of Grey*. And now they want to monetise it' (American, 18–24, single, queer).

Indeed, Germaine Greer (2000) argues that the 'cool, post-liberal consensus' on porn misses the point. Greer maintains that porn has nothing to do with freedom of expression: it is primarily a business, a ruthless impersonal industry. However, a lot of the types of SEM discussed by the women I spoke to do not fit within the 'classic' porn industry model. One would be hard pushed to describe slash fandom, community writing forums such as Literotica, pornographic micro-blogs on Tumblr, user generated or amateur porn, or even much gay porn which—while commercial—has perhaps always had a wider social and cultural purpose (Mercer, 2017), as ruthless or impersonal. The sharing market we see in slash and BL (and, increasingly, in some of the DIY porn that women in this study express a preference for) is not only resistant to commercial and capitalist industries, it also demonstrates 'subcultural resistance to heterosexist regimes that attempt to enforce their notions of normativity and limit or cut off access to queer

media' (Wood, 2013, p. 51). As discussed in Chap. 3, amateur pornography—films, texts, and images—has come to connote a 'better kind of porn' (Paasonen, 2010) that is ethical in its principles of production, and somehow more real, raw, and innovative than products of the mainstream porn industry (Dery, 2007). DIY porn sites such as *Sharing is Sexy*, an open source 'sex positive collective' of polyamorous, queer, and transgender people who make porn 'for love rather than money' have been praised for their innovation in bringing experimental porn 'up to date with the latest ideas about everything from intellectual property and social networking to collaborative online creation' (Penley, in Attwood, 2010b, p. 93). Many of the women I spoke to welcome the availability of these 'new' types of pornographies. While they recognise that the 'mainstream' porn industry does not cater for them particularly well—'when having a look at the covers of the porn DVDs in the local video store I still don't feel addressed' (German, 45–54, single, bisexual)—the opportunity the internet has given women to both produce and consume the type of SEM they want is widely praised. 'I think women have taken charge of their own [SEM],' one participant comments, 'we are producers, not passive consumers. It's awesome' (American, 35–44, married, heterosexual). Another adds, 'the internet has allowed women to gather and produced porn [and] erotica by themselves and for themselves. This porn [or] erotica can also be distributed entirely without outside intervention or monetary exchange. That's pretty much unprecedented' (French, 18–24, single, bisexual).

Attwood (2010b) argues that the 'gift economy' and amateur origins of much new porn production also provide a different context for understanding porn labour, part of a broader shift from cultural production and consumption to usage and active engagement in participatory cultures such as that which has always existed in slash fiction (see Jenkins, 2006). Obviously not all DIY porn is an example of ethical, liberal and guilt-free sexual representation, but the loss of elite control over sexual discourse is arguably a positive, progressive trend (McNair, 2013). Amateur porn makers often talk about how they want to 'give back to the community' (McKee, Albury, & Lumby, 2008, p. 131). They see themselves as part of 'a community of fans and connoisseurs', where they are not just producers but also ideal spectators (McKee et al., 2008, p. 131).

It is these more home-grown and community- based types of erotic content that seem to appeal to the women in my study, as discussed in Chap. 3. Often the sense of community and creative sharing they have found in their slash consumption (for the 84 per cent of the sample involved in slash) has informed their use of porn more generally. Mowlabocus (2010) has observed that the current set-up of many porn websites often engenders a sense of community, where individuals are able to express themselves in non-hierarchical and non-institutional spaces. XTube, for example, encourages users to engage with consumers and producers via their profiles and comments. The ability to comment on a video posted to the site—and 'track-back' and identify the author of that comment—suggests to Mowlabocus (2010, p. 72) that 'the video is not experienced on its own, but is embedded within the community that consumes it. These responses are sometimes, but not always, complementary and inclusive'.

The internet has smudged the boundaries between producer, performer, distributor and consumer for many types of SEM. Using the internet for distribution has 'changed the relationships between producers and consumers' (Kibby & Costello, 2001, p. 359) and complicated 'established ways of viewing cultural production and consumption as a linear process where ordinary people "receive" media and other products from media professionals' (Attwood, 2007, p. 442). This can help to alleviate the stigma of both porn production and consumption, as one of my participants notes:

> I think the stigma that porn is for men and women must be disgusted [or] threatened by it is weakening under the cheap means of production and distribution of the internet—it's now so easy to make and find the kind of porn you like, whatever kind that is, that the previous choke points of producers and wholesale buyers who kept the porn industry focused on a particular heterosexual male viewpoint are losing their grip. Plus, as the producer/consumer distinction erodes, the stigma on appearing in porn is weakening too, though not as quickly when it's a question of getting paid. From sexting selfies to your boyfriend, to high end 'boudoir photography' shoots, to pole dancing and strip teasing fitness classes, the sex life of 'good girls' is getting pornified. I know a lot of people hate that but on balance I

> think it's a good thing… I just wish we could go a bit further in the direction of men being allowed and encouraged to want to be sexual objects—consensually, and not exclusively—to women, not just to other men. (American, 35–44, in a relationship, bisexual)

Patterson (2004, p. 211) believes that the participatory nature of today's online porn consumption offers 'a sense of interactivity, which brings with it a sense of shared space and a collapse or disavowal of distance'. There is now a sense of 'being there' when consuming porn, rather than simply watching, as there 'is a sense of participation with the performer's life' (Patterson, 2004, p. 119). Likewise, many sites that focus on written SEM, such as Literotica, also provide a creative community detached from the institutions of publishing and literary critique. The community is inhabited by dedicated and enthusiastic contributors, who don't write for money, but instead for 'the love of it' (Leadbeater & Miller, 2004, p. 20). It is these sorts of virtual public sex sites which have the potential to bring about social and political change—something I will return to later in this chapter.

Dirty Little Secret: 'Coming Out' of the m/m Closet

While the stigma of women's SEM production and consumption may have lessened in the digital age, I do not mean to imply that it has disappeared entirely. Talking about how she never discusses her use of m/m SEM, one woman spoke about how she harbours a great deal of 'internalised shame—I come from an era where pornography was dirty, dirty, dirty and no respectable woman would *ever* admit she used and enjoyed it' (Australian, 45–54, single, bisexual). Others feel it is pragmatic not to discuss their SEM consumption, particularly given the 'taboo' nature of women engaging with m/m content: 'my porn use rests squarely in the "known to self/ unknown to others" square of my Johari's window. I do not think it would be appropriate within my social circles and it would definitely adversely affect [people's] perception of me if they knew I watched gay porn on a regular basis' (Singaporean, 25–34, single, heterosexual). However, over two-thirds (68 per cent) of the women in my sample say that they *do* discuss their SEM use and preferences more generally with people. Often this is a conscious choice, informed by the fact that they actively want to remove some of the stigma around women engaging with SEM. One woman states, 'I'm very open about watching and enjoying porn, because I think it is important for women to speak up and acknowledge they enjoy sexual fantasies without shame' (American, 25–34, single, lesbian). Discussing porn is also seen as a way of helping other women to explore their sexuality and the potential of SEM to excite them. 'I have become much more vocal about [my porn use] recently', explains one woman. 'I'm tired of this idea that women can't enjoy porn. And when women tell me they find porn distasteful, it *always* turns out that they're talking about het porn, in which case I encourage them to check out gay porn' (American, 35–44, married, heterosexual). For some, the assertion of their enjoyment of m/m SEM is something they enjoy *because* it can be provocative: 'bigots just looooove being uncomfortable, and since they think about gay sex more than anyone else, who am I to deny them their pleasure?' (Greek, 18–24, single, demisexual lesbian). However, there is still wariness about having these discussions in front of certain people. As one woman explains, 'I love dishing on what I find appealing versus what others find appealing. Unfortunately, I've found straight guys can really tend to get the wrong impression about women who speak candidly about their porn use [and] preferences. They can often take it as "hey, she likes sex, she must want to fuck me", and then get all douchey about it' (American, 25–44, single, heterosexual).

However, while the majority of consumers are happy to discuss their SEM preferences, producers tend to be slightly more circumspect. While 83 per cent of participants who produce m/m SEM discuss their production with friends, only 33 per cent feel comfortable doing so with family. As one participant notes, 'there are some things a daddy should not know about his baby girl. It would distress certain of my family members if they knew anything about my activities' (Zimbabwean, 25–34, single, asexual/omnisexual). It has long been noted that many m/m SEM writers feel safer behind anonymous screen names (Morrissey, 2008). As Cumberland (2003, p. 263) points out, pseudonyms 'allow writers to avoid the real world "crap" that many of the women who write … erotica would face if

their work was published under their legal names, or in the print media'. Cumberland (2003, p. 264) credits the internet for allowing writers to produce m/m SEM in a safe environment, noting 'in the past, the desire or need for privacy would have either limited the author's access to the audience or would have placed the author at risk of discovery'. In cyberspace, however, the audience for m/m SEM is potentially very large, since people can access it and read it in the privacy of their homes. While this means that writing non-heteronormative erotica has 'lost its undercurrent of seediness and danger' (Cumberland, 2003, p. 273), it is clear that a certain stigma still remains—hence the continuing need for anonymity among a minority of my sample.

However, the fact that comparatively few women in my sample (17 per cent) felt the need to keep their production of m/m SEM secret from *everyone* suggests that the stigma associated with women's porn use, even their m/m porn use, is lessening. In Boyd's (2001) study (n = 210), 90 per cent of slash writers maintained at least a small level of secrecy about their writing, showing a 'certain cautiousness and understanding of their environment' (Boyd, 2001, p. 99). Two major factors influencing nondisclosure were employment and their community's view on homosexuality, and these continue to be significant factors within my data. One woman in my study notes, 'I am very, very careful who knows about what I write. Writing male/male erotica can get you fired, lose your kids in a divorce hearing, etc. Most people are pretty apt to dump you in the same box as a paedophile' (American, 45–54, single, heterosexual). Another adds, 'I can't afford the consequences of someone in real life discovering what I write and then being able to use that as a tool of leverage to control me or negatively affect my ability to hold down a job, pay my mortgage, etc.' (American, 45–54, single, bisexual). However, more recent surveys suggest a similar lessening of the need for anonymity as found in my data. In Hinton's (2006) study (n = 365), only 17 per cent of her sample kept their slash writing secret from everyone.

Of course, for the 86 per cent of my sample who are involved in slash fandom, as well as other forms of SEM consumption, reasons for anonymity can be more complex. Seeking to explain the desire of some slash fans to remain anonymous, Lee (2003, p. 73), a slasher herself, uses *Star Trek* fandom to describe the slash fan as 'a double taboo', stating 'it's one

thing for your co-workers, domestic partners, or children to know you're a "Trekkie", it's another to know you're a producer of pornography with gay overtones'. Bury (2005, p. 94) notes that 'slash evokes the discourse of the closet and one's relative position in it in terms of "in" and "out"'. However, not all of those in her study experienced the closet negatively, some enjoyed the secrecy and elicit thrill it entailed. Jenkins (2006, p. 1) has also reflected on how many fans have been reluctant to 'open the closet doors' to fandom. Brennan (2014, p. 373) believes that there is a 'shared commitment in the fan community to maintain the underground status of slash', and that many fans relish and actively maintain the secretive and taboo nature of slash.

Anonymity can, however, lead to problems. Brennan (2014, p. 368) argues that, in the context of slash, online communities have 'as much potential for prejudice and narrow-mindedness as real-world communities, perhaps an even greater potential given cultures of anonymity'. He believes that netiquette governing how people should behave in online fandoms is routinely ignored, and that 'cultures of nastiness and encouraged ridicule within online fan communities have free rein' (Brennan, 2014, p. 369). To a certain extent, Davies (2005, p. 201) agrees, noting that the 'intense world of slashers' can feel 'intimidating' to men, and that gay and bi male readers remain very quiet, seldom acknowledging that they read slash. A small minority of writers in my study also spoke negatively about the political aspects of the genre, discussing times when they had been called homophobic or insensitive because of their writing, with one lamenting the 'hatred and venom toward straight women' in the community (American, 35–44, heterosexual, married). However, this is a small group of respondents, and most add that they have seen a marked improvement—both in terms of the portrayal of m/m sex in fics, and in terms of community behaviour—over the course of their involvement with slash. It should be noted that this research did not specifically address negative experiences participants might have experienced in fandom spaces (arguments, flame wars etc.) and so should not be taken as an indication that slash fandom is free from unpleasant and upsetting interactions (see, e.g., Brennan, 2014). However, the vast majority of respondents spoke extremely positively of the impact their involvement has had on their social and political awareness around issues relating to gender

and sexuality, and of their dedication to bringing about real-world change with regards to both homophobia and dismissal of women's sexual agency. Jenkins (1992, p. 221) agrees, noting that slash has 'established channels of communication between lesbian, bisexual, and straight women', providing them with 'common terms within which a dialogue about the politics of sexuality may be conducted'.

Fifty Shades of Change: Women and Porn in a Post *Grey* World

McNair (2013, p. 92) sees the demand for more and better porn for women that is prevalent in my study as 'an *achievement* of feminism rather than its betrayal, in that it is both a consequence and a reflection of enhanced women's rights'. The overwhelming majority of women I spoke to welcome this shift, with many pointing to the phenomenal success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* as bringing about a sea change in how women and SEM are viewed.

> This fucking book, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, right? Which gets on everyone's tits, we know, we all know our reasons, as writers, it's shit, but one wholly wonderful thing about it is that women are coming out of the woodwork *everywhere* and talking about the fact that they love porn. I was at the swimming pool, in the changing room at the swimming pool and behind the door I heard: 'Oooo, have you read *that* book?' I've heard people on the plane saying, 'Oh, I've got that, and I bought one for my mother in law'—I'm sorry, can you imagine giving your mother-in-law one of our stories? But perhaps we will be able to soon, and that's just wonderful. (British-Italian, 45–54, married, heterosexual)

Many hope that the success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* will open the door for more diverse types of SEM aimed at women, and a more frank discussion of women's wants and desires. As one participant notes:

> *Fifty Shades of Grey* is the go-to example of how even mainstream women really crave explicit erotica. And they don't care about quality. They're like the 14-year-old who has just discovered restrictedsection.org and will consume *any* written porn they can find because it is brand-new and exciting. I'm hoping the climate will continue to evolve to where quality explicit erotica has a place in mainstream culture. Women want it and are becoming comfortable asking for it and talking about it, and that is fantastic. (American, 18–24, in a relationship, heterosexual)

The significance of this move from private to public, from subculture to mainstream, from the closet to the high street, should not be underestimated. DeVoss (2002, p. 75) argues that the 'historically significant but superficial divide between public and private spaces and identities has shaped women's lives, subjectivities, and sexualities'. As Nancy Duncan (1996, p. 128) observes, 'the public/private dichotomy (both the political and spatial dimensions) is frequently employed to construct, control, discipline, confine, exclude, and suppress gender'. As the internet starts to erode these divides, we can see a shift in the perception of women and SEM.

Additionally, cyberspace provides women with both space and place to create and reflect on the kinds of changes they would like to see. Brown (1994, pp. 32, 37) has previously noted that as women are a disenfranchised group, their talk is empowering because it 'contains information contrary to ideas validated in dominant or hegemonic culture', and that women-focused forms of fandom can therefore provide a 'space for women to construct their world in their own terms'. Their talk appears to 'produce, circulate, and validate feminine meanings and pleasures' (Brown, 1994, p. 32). Welker (2006, p. 866) describes how online slash communities not only give women access to SEM they enjoy, but can serve to provide such a 'narrative safe haven' where women 'can experiment with identity, find affirmation, and develop the strength necessary to find others like themselves and a sense of belonging'. Writing in *The New Statesman* Elizabeth Minkel (2014) describes slash fandom as a 'deeply supportive space for women and girls', one which 'can honestly make a life-changing difference for a person hovering on the margins'. Slash community spaces are not just about m/m sex, they are about women having a space free of heteronormative conditionings in which to chat and share meaning, and reflect on life, politics, the world (Bury,

2005). In addition, because these spaces are queered (as discussed in Chap. 7), they are (for some) 'safer spaces of connection and reflection' (Rambukkana, 2007, p. 77). One woman explains how what she loves about online slash fandom is that 'women are engaging with each other with curiosity and without judgement, and I think that's diametrically opposed to who we're taught to be to each other, i.e., we're supposed to be competitive and critical and judgemental, and I think that's bullshit, frankly' (British, 25–34, in a relationship, pansexual).

To this extent, online forums that provide space for women to engage with and discuss m/m SEM, such as online slash fandom, can be viewed as inherently transgressive, as they provide a space for going against current restrictive social norms (Neville, 2018). If women writing about sex is still seen as transgressive, then women writing about sex using the male body and inviting other women to enjoy these stories is doubly transgressive (Jung, 2004; Neville, 2015; Stanley, 2010). As a practice, it challenges the heteronormative metanarrative that informs much social discourse about sexuality and gender, 'thumb[ing] its nose at the insidious heterosexism underpinning most forms of literary expression' and 'celebrating sexualities that fly in the face of traditional heterosexist discourses' (Hayes & Ball, 2009, p. 223). Some academics have therefore viewed online slash communities as providing a space for exploring gender performance and sexuality in a way that constitutes Foucault's vision of 'creative practice' as a form of political dissent (Hayes & Ball, 2009; see also Bury, 2005; Shave, 2004). Others have regarded slash communities as a type of heterotopia, which Foucault (1986, p. 24) describes as 'real places … which are something like counter-sites, a kind of collectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites which can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'. Rambukkana (2007, p. 73, emphasis added) highlights the importance of heterotopias being actual spaces (unlike utopias which are simply romantic ideals)—it is the realness of heterotopias that means 'they have a substantive place in politics as spaces where *actual* things can happen'. To this extent online slash communities can be viewed as a type of digital counterpublic—a space in the public sphere where alternative identities can be reflected and where subordinated social groups can find support and collective resistance (Fraser, 1992; Warner, 1999). Indeed,

Lackner, Lucas, and Reid (2006, p. 192) describe slash forums as 'counterpublics … complex and multiple constructions of queer female spaces in an easily accessible public venue'. Martin (2012, p. 365) emphasises that BL online spaces are not 'feminist utopia[s]' nor 'zone[s] of unilateral sexual-political progressiveness', but argues that it is nevertheless noteworthy that they exist—participatory spaces, that, in Mizoguchi's (2011, p. 164) words, can act as 'unprecedented, effective political arena[s] for women' with the potential for feminist and/or queer activism. Relatedly, D. Wilson (2012) rejects the idea that slash fandom is space simply of the mind: fantasy, postmodern, implied. For them, 'online fantasy space overlaps, engages, changes, and is changed by embodied space every day' (Wilson, 2012, p. 4.4).

Somewhere over the Rainbow: Que(e)rying the Future of Porn

As well as providing space for the expression of female desire, online m/m SEM forums can provide space for the expression of *queer* desire. In Martin's (2012) study of BL, some women linked use of m/m with their generation's liberal attitudes towards sexual diversity, either citing m/m as a catalyst for the liberalisation of their thinking, or vice versa, citing generational change as the reason they were relatively receptive to m/m material in the first place. Martin (2012, p. 372) notes that themes such as gay rights, gay normalisation, and the triviality of gender as a deciding factor in romantic love 'carry strong echoes of gay-friendly rhetoric since the 1990s in the broader culture', adding 'this is a generation who has come of age with these rhetorics (if not generally their effective implementation) looming large in the public arena'. While this might be the case, it would still be accurate to describe our culture as heteronormative. As Johnson (2005, p. 56) observes, 'we call what we see in the world "marriage", "the family", "reproduction", "relationships", but we rarely prefix any of these things with the word "heterosexual". Far more visible, in relation to sexuality, is homosexuality'. Berlant and Warner's (1998, p. 548) assertion that the heterosexual couple is 'the referent or the privileged

example of sexual culture' still holds true. Slash fandom (and other interactive homosexual porn sites) may be one of the few spaces inhabited by heterosexual people where this is *not* the case. Acadafan Jung (2004, p. 14) recounts a personal anecdote of a moment when, fully immersed in the fictional universe she was writing where same-sex relations were completely normalised, she spotted a heterosexual couple kissing at a bus stop, and thought 'how strange they look! A man and a woman', adding that 'a couple consisting of two men or two women would [at] that moment have felt more natural'. She explains that she is recounting this story not to argue for the primacy of homosexuality over heterosexuality, but in an attempt to describe how up to that point, and without her even being aware of it, compulsory heterosexuality must have been constantly at the back of her mind, that feeling of being 'a copy, an imitation, a derivate example, a shadow of the real' (Butler, 1991, p. 20). 'Only by its absence did I realise its otherwise constant presence', Jung (2004, p. 14) concludes. She states that one of her hopes as a writer is that 'some of that feeling of having truly been in a land "somewhere over the rainbow" for a while will also communicate itself to the reader, regardless of gender or sexuality' (Jung, 2004, p. 14). One of my participants similarly discusses how she rarely reads m/f erotica because 'heterosexuals having sex has to be about the characters. Sometimes I forget heterosexuals actually have sex in the real world. I'll think about it and become confused: "...oh, but not *really*... Really?"' (American, 25–34, in a relationship, lesbian).

Many of the women in my sample maintain that by speaking about their preference for m/m SEM—both semi-privately on m/m porn sites or slash fandom forums, and publicly with friends and acquaintances—they can effect some kind of real-world change. Elizabeth Wilson (1997) is sceptical of these sorts of arguments, and maintains that this sort of experimentation with sexual practices and roles does not mean social change. Transgression is limited in its effects. It may be personally liberating, and may indeed make an important ideological statement, but whether we can do anything more seems uncertain: transgression 'is a word of weakness ... we can shake our fist at society or piss on it, but that is all' (Wilson, 1997, p. 169). However, other writers have refuted this. In saying this, Wilson is suggesting that sexual activities are merely

personal/private and do not amount to politics; that they cannot be productive in terms of social change. Beasley (2011, p. 27) disagrees, stating that the personal/private cannot be set apart from the political, and likewise that sexuality cannot be distanced from 'the terrain of social change'. Indeed, there is a long-standing assumption that what has been deemed private, including sex, does have political implications (Corber & Valocchi, 2003), something I touched on in Chap. 3 when I looked at Penley and DeVoss's arguments for the political impacts of slash.

Zizek, for example, argues that desire is constituted through fantasy, it is through fantasy that 'we learn how to desire' (Zizek, 1990, p. 118). If fantasies have no effect whatsoever on practices and identities, then the whole project of producing feminist sexual imagery to displace sexist sexual imagery, as pioneered by filmmakers such as Erika Lust and Louise Lush would be in vain—simply an interesting and amusing novelty rather than an intensely political intervention. However, a gay man quoted in Giddens' (1992, p. 123) *The Transformation of Intimacy* argues that 'sexual fantasies, when consciously employed, can create a counter-order, a kind of subversion, and a little space into which we can escape, especially when they scramble all those neat and oppressive distinctions between active and passive, masculine and feminine, dominant and submissive'. Among my sample of women there is great enthusiasm for the idea of online m/m SEM fandom spaces, particularly online slash fandom spaces, as heterotopias, counterpublics, spaces that are radical and have the potential to be genuinely transformative (Neville, 2018).

In his discussion of slash and heterotopias, Rambukkana (2007) draws on Warner's (1999) observation that restrictive zoning laws in real space which limit the number, size, and proximity of sex-related businesses in areas that also contain residences can threaten gay areas of a city. In this sense, non-conventional sexuality is constrained to the margins, to liminal spaces where no one lives, places which are 'out of site and out of mind' (Rambukkana, 2007, p. 78). If explicit m/m sites serve merely as idealised fantasy spaces for women interested in getting off on gay sex they would not have any impact on mainstream space, place, or culture. However, the change in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours expressed by the women I talked to shows how participation in such a counterpublic can interrogate and overturn hegemonic codes governing the public

expression of gender and sexuality, meaning that explicit m/m fandom 'can work to elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations … including forms of intimate association, vocabularies of affect, styles of embodiment' (Warner, 2002, p. 57).

For many respondents, participation in such online fandom spaces encourages them to talk more openly about queer sex—to demystify it, to challenge prejudiced 'jokes', to correct misinformation when they find it in the public sphere. Berlant and Warner (1998, p. 562) argue that the potential to change our social system lies in freeing sex and intimacy from their 'obnoxiously cramped' position within private space; by having 'public sex'. By 'public' sex, Berlant and Warner do not mean sex that is happening out in the open, but rather sexual relationships that do not pretend they have no connection to any social context, that can instead be a foundation for new communities that may then become dissenting political bodies—'public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity' (Warner, 2002, p. 203). Many of the women in this study maintain that their involvement with m/m fan spaces *is* political, and we can read this through the lens of 'public sex'—m/m fandom can serve to decouple sexuality and intimacy from the private, and resituate them in the public. Sexuality is thus rendered a more public activity, not just because of its setting, but also in its cultivation of important dimensions of performance and collective witnessing. As Abrams (2012, p. 32) describes, sexual cultures such as explicit m/m fandom can foster forms of intimacy and trust that create a context for stranger sociality—'for casual contact or intense, shared observation that forge new forms of collective bonds between people with no prior acquaintance'. Explicit slash sites can help freer circulation of sex-radical discourse and change the dynamic relation between sexual subcultures and the mainstream public sphere, as well as asking that queer sexuality and relationships be publicly celebrated (Levin Russo, 2002; Neville, 2018).

Maddison (2010) describes how responses to the proliferation of pornographies online have worked to intensify views of porn as frighteningly pervasive and oppressive, or wonderfully liberatingly abundant, with both views working to mythologise porn. The aim of this book is not to say that women engaging with m/m SEM is a universal force for good,

but rather that engaging with m/m SEM has had a positive impact on many of these women's lives and, arguably, an effect on their politics. As one participant argues, 'I think it's all contributing to the social acceptance of the idea that women can have sexual identities and desires of their own, independently of a man, and it doesn't make them weird [or] sluts, just human' (Scottish, 25–34, single, grey-a [demisexual]). This does not mean that women's choice of SEM is *consciously* political or that this is a primary reason for their engagement with it—as laid out in this work, women's motivations for engaging with m/m SEM are complex, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory. Fathallah (2010, p. 3.7) notes that attempting to theorise why people like certain kinds of media is essentially problematic, inasmuch as media effects need to be interpreted through 'social/personal histories, parts of which must necessarily escape us'. She continues, 'we can theorise its potential and effects; we can describe our experience of it to each other, look for more or less frequently recurring patterns in its pleasures and problems, and try to understand what that tells us about ourselves and our communities in the context in which we live. But the attempt to say … why people like it will only lead us back to the exhausted, self-consuming mystery of an individual human nature detached from politics' (Fathallah, 2010, p. 3.7). So it is with women and m/m SEM—not to mention that some women *don't* like m/m SEM at all. However, the 'right' answer as to why women like this kind of SEM is arguably less important than the fact that women are finally having their voices heard. Not only that, but online fan spaces from within slash fic and BL afford women the opportunity to share the process of collectively thinking through these reasons in an inclusive and woman-dominated cultural space.

As Angela Carter (2000, p. 527) so eloquently wrote, 'pornographers are the enemies of women only because our contemporary ideology of pornography does not encompass the possibility of change, as if we were the slaves of history and not its makers, as if sexual relations were not necessarily an expression of social relations, as if sex itself were an external fact, one as immutable as the weather, creating human practice but never a part of it'. The women in this study show this need not be the case. Women *can* be the makers of history, and they *can* be the makers of porn. Through engaging with non-conventional SEM women also have the

potential to change social practice. While m/m porn does not eradicate all of the problems posed by m/f porn, it does seem to offer women a space where they can positively engage with sexuality free from much of the concern and guilt which plagues their m/f SEM consumption. For, as Tom Waugh (1985) has noted, m/m porn subverts the patriarchal order by challenging masculinist values, providing a protected space for non-conformist, non-reproductive, and non-familial sexuality, and encouraging many sex-positive values. Is it any wonder so many women like it?

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