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# The complex relationship between TV producers and Slash fans as demonstrated by Supernatural

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**UNIVERSITE RENNES 2**

**The Complex Relationship Between TV Producers and  
Slash Fans as Demonstrated by *Supernatural***

**Marguerite THEBAULT**

**Sous la direction de Anaïs LE FEVRE-BERTHELOT**

**Année 2020-2021**





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# Introduction

*Supernatural* (The CW, 2005-2020) was created by Eric Kripke and tells the story of Sam and Dean Winchester, played by Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles, two brothers who were raised by their father to be monster hunters after their mother was killed by a demon. The series rapidly gained the status of “cult” TV show with a relatively small but loyal and active fanbase (Macklem 78). Indeed, the fan responses to *Supernatural* have always been very enthusiastic and numerous. Very early on, several communities of fans constituted themselves around the show, most of them enjoying the reading and writing of slash fiction (or simply slash). Slash can be defined as stories that “posit a same-sex relationship, usually one imposed by the author and based on perceived homoerotic subtext,” as opposed to “het” which is based on heterosexual relationships, and “gen” which does not focus on any pairing (Busse 2014, 5) In the early years of the show’s diffusion, the scarcity of well-rounded recurring secondary characters caused slash writers and fans to mainly focus on creating an incestuous relationship between Sam and Dean (Wincest). However, after the introduction of Castiel (Cas), an angel played by Misha Collins, in 2008, the fandom’s attention progressively shifted to the bond between him and Dean. This pairing, nicknamed Destiel or DeanCas by the fans, massively grew in popularity over the years. So much so that, in 2015, it became the most written about pairing on Archive Of Our Own (AO3), one of the largest and most popular fan fiction websites in the world.

Very early on in the history of TV series analysis, academics concluded that, in order to produce better and more complete research, it is important to look not only at the source material but also at the process of production and reception. In other words, looking at the contents of a TV show is not enough to fully understand it. The methods used to produce it and the way viewers react to it must also be taken into consideration. In 1973, cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall created the encoding/decoding model of communication based on this idea (510). This model shows how the message of a show is encoded during the production process using the rules of language and discourse as well as the dominant beliefs and values of society. John Fiske expanded on this idea in his book *Television Culture* by defining the codes through which meanings are encoded in television. These codes can be social, technical, or ideological and are also present in real life, only in a less stereotyped way (Fiske 5). The encoded message is then decoded by the audience in several possible ways. Hall’s model proposes three kinds of readings: dominant or preferred when the audience member views the

work in the way that was intended by the writers and producers; oppositional, when they reject the preferred reading and instead create their own meaning; and negotiated, when the viewer accepts only some parts of the preferred reading but also have their own opinion on other parts (Hall 515-17).

Fiske and Hall's way of analyzing the reception of TV series is, still to this day, used as the basis of a lot of research work in this domain. However, with the apparition of "complex TV series" — a term coined by Jason Mittell — and internet fandoms in the '90s, other scholars created new models to better understand contemporary audiences. In *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins tries to go further than what Hall proposes and chooses to expand on Michel de Certeau's notion of "poaching." He explains that de Certeau's model is more useful than Hall's for research in fan studies because it "emphasizes the process of making meaning and the fluidity of popular interpretation" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 34). Jenkins insists on the importance of considering that fans do not make sense of a text from a stable position but rather use (or "poach") various textual and intertextual elements to construct an opinion that is always likely to evolve. The poaching model has sometimes been criticized by other scholars and by Jenkins himself but it is still recognized as a central work for analyzing the process of meaning-making within fandoms and fan/producer relationships (Fathallah 2013, 37; Busse 2014, 13).

Unlike Jenkins, in his conceptualization of fan practices, Sandvoss almost fully rejects the encoding/decoding model when it comes to fan texts. His definition of fan texts is very wide as it includes any text that can become an object of fandom which arguably encompasses most modern fiction (Sandvoss 123). He argues that these texts "allow not only for a multiplicity of meanings, but for *any* meaning" and that they function as a "blank screen" that reflects the fans' self-image (126). This theory is interesting to consider in the analysis of *Supernatural* because the show's longevity and inconsistencies allow for viewers to interpret it in wildly different ways, so much so that any fan can easily project their own thoughts and ideas onto it to create a meaning that is unique to them. However, this analysis of reception is deeply flawed and cannot function as an alternative to Hall's encoding/decoding model. As Fathallah points out, if Sandvoss's theory was true there would be no reason for fans to choose one text over another or even to be in several fandoms at once (2013, 39). His analysis also dismisses the importance of the producer's meaning in the fan's interpretation of the text. While it is true that fans interpret the text however they want, what they believe to be the producer's intended meaning will always influence their perception of the text in one way or another (Busse 2017, 29).

Even though Sandvoss's research uncovers some interesting ideas, the work of Hall, Fiske, and Jenkins remains best to analyze the reception of a complex TV show like *Supernatural*. In this thesis, I will use the encoding/decoding model of communication while also taking into account the fluidity of the meaning-making process emphasized by Jenkins with his poaching model.

With the fast development of fan culture in the 1990s, the discipline of fan studies also started to be taken more and more seriously. The rise of complex TV shows pointed out by Mittel forced the study of their content and their reception to evolve in order to adapt to the new ways of producing and watching television. Characters and relationships are now much more developed than they used to be and can more easily be the subject of an in-depth analysis. Mittel even explains that “nearly every successful television writer will point to characters as the focal point of their creative process and how they measure success” which shows how much attention is given to the creation of well-rounded protagonists and how well the audience seems to respond to them (Mittell 118). In response to this, fans are quick to build various opinions on their favorite series and share them with others, especially since the democratization of the Internet in the 1990s which allowed fan communities — or fandoms — to move online.

As Kristina Busse explains, the development of online fan communities affected “not only dissemination and reception, but also production, interaction, and even demographics” (2014, 9). In other words, fandoms that were limited to activities like fan-clubs, the exchange of letters and zines, or conventions accessible only to adults geographically close to one another are now much more widespread and easy to access. Anyone with an internet connection can now participate in fannish culture and fan-created content is fairly easy to come across. Fan communities are bigger and more spread out than they have ever been. Nowadays, social media is at the core of most interactions among fandoms and allows fans to react immediately to the latest installment of their favorite TV show and to share their opinion and theories — also called headcanons — to a wide audience that can also participate in the debate.

In the early days of fan studies, most of the research was focused on trying to understand what fandoms were, how they worked, how they came to be... By staying distanced from the object of their studies, academics produced works that were too descriptive and did not truly grasp the complexity of the fandom phenomenon (Harris and Alexander 5). This is the case for Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* in which she observes the

activities of women in the *Star Trek* fandom, and particularly those who like the pairing Kirk/Spock and create fanworks for it. Her work was one of the first to present such a thorough analysis of women's fan communities and to try to understand them without judgment. However, her detached ethnographic approach has since been criticized for making her unable to fully understand the complexity of fandom (Busse 2014, 14). As a solution to this problem, in *Theorizing Fandom*, Harris chose to push for a methodology of fan studies that would focus on "the authentic voices of fans" and that would go "beyond description of what fans do toward an understanding of why fandom is a fundamental and widespread social role in contemporary western society" (5). This idea is well illustrated in the first chapter of the book which is a study of slash fans composed only of interview samples with no further analysis or conclusions (Green and al.). The authors' goal is not to say that all fan studies research should adopt this format but rather to show the importance of listening to what fans have to say about themselves in order to fully understand fandom.

For many researchers, the push to reduce the distance between fans and academics also means that scholar and fan identities do not have to and should not be separated (Busse, 2014; Cristofari and Guitton; Hills). It is generally recognized that the first scholar to also call himself a fan was Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers*. Since then, the term "aca-fan" (short for academic fan) has been created to designate an academic who also identifies as a fan. In *Fan Cultures*, Hills insists on the importance of this concept to avoid a hierarchization between fannish and academic work (2002, xviii). He then goes on to demonstrate that the worlds of fandom and academia are not opposites, often relying on each other in many ways. Several years later, Busse published *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, a collection of essays written exclusively by aca-fan authors. This work, though not without its flaws, shows how interesting and complex research produced by members of the fan community can be. The validity of academic-fan is still debated but it is now mostly viewed positively in the discipline of fan studies. Cristoffari and Guitton even claim that "a rationalized position of aca-fans could not only be an optimal method to study communities of fans but also an intrinsically ethical way to approach these large communities of consumers" (713). Even though I would not go as far as saying that the aca-fan position is the "optimal" one as I believe that studies written from a more objective point of view on these subjects are also important, I do agree that it is a good way to study fan communities. Cristoffari and Guitton's point about ethics is a particularly good one as I have noticed during my research that many slash fans do not wish to become the object of study of someone who does not truly understand the inner workings of the community. For these reasons, I have no reluctance in

applying the term aca-fan to myself. I started getting into fandoms in 2012 and began watching *Supernatural* soon after. I discovered the universe of slash shipping and fanfiction with Destiel and even though I have never published my own writing, I have participated in fan discussion, online roleplay, and posted photo edits. This experience is undeniably helpful for me to produce an in-depth analysis of DeanCas fanfiction and fan-producer relationships without missing subtle references or implications.

The shifts in the perception of fan studies by academics and outsiders alike allowed the discipline to evolve rapidly over the years. In the introduction of *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington separate these changes into three waves (2-7). The first wave was “primarily concerned with questions of power and representation” and with showing how fans could become an interesting and complex object of study (2). The second wave looked more into the sociological aspect of fan practices and the hierarchies that can be found within fandoms (5). The third wave, that we are currently in, takes its roots in the drastic changes communication technologies underwent in a very short period of time. As stated previously, fan spaces that used to be limited and not so easy to access are now all over the internet. *Convergence Culture*, a defining work for the third wave of fan studies, shows that these changes blurred the line between fans and viewers and that the way they interact with the industry is often quite similar (Jenkins, 2006). This work had quite an impact on fan studies forcing academics to “redefine the concept of what constitutes a fan and how we define fandom” (Busse 2017, 9). It is now understood that making a clear distinction between fans and viewers is impossible and rather useless as the two very often overlap.

Instead of defining fans in opposition to regular viewers, what Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington define as third-wave fan studies have been more focused on understanding and analyzing fan practices to understand who fans are and what they do. For some people, those practices can be separated into two categories: transformational fandom and affirmational fandom. These two terms were coined by *obsession\_inc* in a short essay entitled “Affirmational fandom vs. Transformational fandom.” In affirmational fandom, the intentions of the creator are valued and respected. Fans strive to accumulate knowledge about their favorite work and to demonstrate how much they know, love, and respect it. In transformational fandom, fans use different ways to make the work their own transforming it with no predefined limits or rules (*obsession\_inc*; Peyron 77). These two forms of fandom are usually perceived as masculine or feminine — affirmational fandom gathering more male fans and transformational fandom gathering mostly women — and, even though the vast majority

of academics agree to say that this binary is not so clear-cut, the implications of this gender divide have become an important subject of research in the discipline of fan studies. With his research on Mimetic fandom, Matt Hills is one of the academics who have shown that fans cannot be sorted into neat categories with men on one side and women on the other. He explains that the material aspect of fan culture is enjoyed by men and women alike (2014, 1.3). However, despite showing that fandom is too complex to be sorted into only two categories, Hills's article also shows that the gender divide between male and female fans is always present, even in domains that might seem more neutral like the construction of props and cosplay. In the introduction to the 2012 edition of *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins and Scott note that the manifestations and perception of "masculine" and "feminine" forms of fan culture are heavily influenced by patriarchal models (xix-xx). Busse's research shows how much gender stereotypes affect the treatment of women fans. She talks about the omnipresence of sexism in fan spaces and explains that "gendered discrimination occurs on the level of the fan, the fan activity, and the fannish investment" (2017, 178). Even though she does not use the words "transformational" and "affirmational" fandom, her account of masculine and acceptable fan activities contrasted with feminine ones that are mocked and rejected fit these two categories. This research on the gender stereotypes that rule fan spaces is extremely important to understand the dynamics at play in the representation of fans in *Supernatural*.

The study of transformative works is a subcategory of fan studies that a lot of academics have been interested in. Hills even notes that "sections of fan studies have seemingly assumed that fan works that are not self-evidently transformational are simply of no interest" (2014, 2.2). Since then, more works have been published on the other aspects of fandom but transformative works are still the most popular subject of research. This can be explained by the more marginalized status of these works and those who produce them but also by the fact that they more easily allow fans to criticize and comment on what they are watching or reading (Hills, 2014). Transformative works have a very important place in the *Supernatural* fandom. It is hard to know exactly what proportion of fans produce and consume them but it is clear that their number is exceptionally high compared to most fandoms.

In the wide variety of transformative works, slash fiction has always been at the center of the most heated debates. The study of slash began in the early nineties when authors like Bacon-Smith and Russ started writing about Kirk/Spock stories that were circulated by

women in fanzines (fan magazines). These early authors tended to describe slash as a “blatantly female” activity, with heterosexual women writing exclusively about homosexual men (Russ 95). More recent authors, notably Kristina Busse, have proven that this vision of slash is rather reductive and does not reflect the complexity of this genre. As Fathallah notes: “now, critics tend to view the production, reading and online spaces of slash as more polymorphous, able to accommodate a wider range of gender identifications and sexualities” (2013, 68). With the evolution of the study of slash, academics also found ways to show that fanfiction can and should be taken seriously demonstrating how it could be studied as a literary genre or as a political instrument (Fathallah 2013, 60). Both aspects are interesting and relevant but Fathallah warns against focusing on one while forgetting the other which inevitably results in an incomplete understanding of what fan and slash fiction truly are.

Over the years, various authors have proposed methodologies for the study of slash and, despite their differences, many of them agree on the use of postmodernist theory as a framework. This is the case for Busse who explains that her very influential works on fanfiction are based on the theories of Roland Barthes and Eve Sedgwick (Busse 2014, 152-55). She explains that, for Barthes, continuity is not inherent to a text and is rather an effect of the “habits and repetitions, stereotypes, obligatory final clauses and key-words” understood by the reader (Barthes 168). She goes on to show that texts are not limited to what is written (or shown on screen):

As Barthes argues in “Writing Reading,” “‘only the text’ does not exist,” since the logic of reading “is not deductive but associative: it associates with the material text ... other ideas, other images, other significations” (1986, 31). To read a text, therefore, is to produce, out of the totality of significations and associations available to each reader, a docile or a resistive intertext within which a text makes sense (2014, 153).

The readings that fall into the “resistive” category and are produced by “associative” readings and serve to open texts onto “other outsides and other knowledges about the world” (153). This phenomenon, which Busse calls “supplementation” allows fanfiction to “fill in” gaps in canon that can sometimes only be perceived by readers who refuse the “illusion of continuity” (154). These gaps do not mean that the story is missing something but rather that the intertextual and extratextual knowledge of readers who write fanfiction allows them to see points in the story that they could add to. Busse explains that “writing fan fiction first of all makes gaps in a text that the cultural code attempts to render continuous, and then, rather than filling them in, supplements these gaps with intertexts” (154). This idea is particularly interesting when applied to fanfics closely based on one or several specific episodes as it shows that the elements added, removed, or modified by the fan writers do not reflect flaws in

the story according to the dominant cultural code but rather show what would be possible if all readings were equally accepted (164). Busse thus studies fan fiction by looking at the ways in which it accepts or rejects the dominant code and trying to understand why writers might want to modify canon as they do. While I believe that this method is a good starting point for an in-depth study of fan fiction, I do not think that it is enough to fully understand the complex relationship between slash writers and canon.

In addition to Busse's Barthesian approach, I have decided to use the work of Fathallah and her analysis of slash fiction through the work of Michel Foucault. Both methods are based on the idea that fan fiction can be based on a different, less approved, set of codes than other literary works. Indeed, Fathallah explains that contrary to "texts that present themselves as 'true,'" fan fiction "can make use of more subjugated and less generally available, epistemically approved statements, as it does not claim a direct link with reality" (2013, 83-84). Unlike Busse, Fathallah does not look at fan fiction with the goal of understanding how it subverts the dominant cultural code. Instead, she follows what Bhabha calls "Foucault's repeatable materiality of statements" and explains that, "in a project dealing with fiction that appropriates a canon, identifying statements which accumulate this materiality across various contexts is important" (Bhabha 22; Fathallah 2013, 85). In other words, her study of fan fiction focuses on finding statements that are repeated and altered in different contexts and seeks to understand their meaning and their impact. Here, the word "statement" does not refer to "a particular arrangement of words" but rather to a theme or a specific element that might be found in multiple fanfics (89). In order to conduct the kind of research proposed by Fathallah, it is important to take into account the reception of these statements through the feedback they might have received. As I have decided to work only on fanfics that received the most kudos for each episode or paratext, my goal is to find statements that resonated with a majority of readers. In this case, the comments left under the fics are mostly helpful to understand which parts or statements gained approval from other fans.

I also agree with Fathallah in her refusal to refer to all slash fans as female. Given that the overwhelming majority of slash fandom is composed of women, many academics have employed terminologies that exclude men, Busse going as far as using "she" as the default third-person pronoun in her work (2017, 17). Both Fathallah and I have observed, thanks to our experience in slash communities, that there are men who engage in the reading and writing of slash fiction, enough for them to be seen as more than just a statistical anomaly (77-78). Moreover, referring to slash communities as exclusively female spaces would be to erase the significant amount of queer men and nonbinary people who use slash to construct



and explore their identity (Brennan, 2014). I will thus try to avoid falling into the trap of assuming that all slash fans must be female and use neutral pronouns and terminologies.

Due to its very active fanbase and its unique relationship with its fandom, a lot of research has been done on *Supernatural* in the domain of fan studies. Some authors have been interested in the direct representation of fans within the show. In ““Hey, check it out, there’s actually fans”: (Dis)empowerment and (mis)representation of cult fandom in *Supernatural*”, Laura Felschow explores how the open acknowledgment of the show’s fandom — first in season four and then in season 5 — changed the dynamic that existed between the fans and the producers. The article demonstrates how *Supernatural* fits into the definition of a “cult TV show”: a show that attracts a solid fanbase invested in the storylines and the characters and that encourages its viewers to engage with the program (2.7). Felschow explains that writing the fans into the show had the dual effect of making some feel more accepted but alienating others who did not identify with or felt insulted by the way the fandom was represented. A few academics have explored what this direct acknowledgment in the series meant to slash fans and how it might influence their practices. This is the case for Melodie Cardin who shows in her article entitled “The “Problem” of Male Friendship in *Supernatural* and Its Fan Fiction” that the various discussions about slash in the show “make space for these readings to coexist within the canon” (17). Like most articles written on the subject, Cardin’s work focuses on Wincest, the incestuous pairing between the two brothers. Despite the exceptional size and longevity of the Destiel fandom, it is usually treated as secondary or simply ignored in academic works that explore the slash communities of *Supernatural*. While the two fandoms do share some similarities, the differences between the two relationships and the way their fans are addressed on the show are too important for them to be put together in this way. For this reason, I believe that Destiel and its fandom needs to be explored more in order to better understand the slash fans of *Supernatural* and slash communities in general.

This thesis focuses on *Supernatural* for its qualities as what Kristina Busse calls a “fannish show” (2017, 31). Indeed, ever since it began airing, a very active fan community has grown around the show among which slash shipping has always been extremely popular. The involvement of fans with the series was strengthened by encouraging conversations with the cast and crew on social media or in fan conventions but also by representing them directly within the show. The resulting relationship between slash fans and the series is a complex one that evolved a lot over the years. In order to study this complicated relationship, this thesis

will mainly focus on the pairing involving Dean Winchester and Castiel. I decided to work on this pairing because it has become overwhelmingly popular over the years and has thus influenced the fandom as a whole.

This study of the complex relationship between *Supernatural* producers<sup>1</sup> and slash fans covers a time period that stretches between the airing of the fourth season in 2008 and the end of the series in November 2020. Season four corresponds both to the first introduction of Castiel in the series and the beginning of the inclusion of fans and writers of the show into the story, it is thus a good starting point for my analysis.

The first part of the corpus is composed of two selections of episodes. The first selection includes forty-eight episodes going from season four to season fifteen. For each season, the four episodes for which the most Dean/Castiel fanfics were written on Archive of Our Own were selected. The number of works based on each episode was determined by looking at the episode tags on the Archive, works that include elements of certain episodes without mentioning them in the tags were thus disregarded as it is nearly impossible to compile them all. This allows for an in-depth analysis of the elements of Dean and Cas's relationship that have inspired fan fiction writers over the years. Episodes in which Misha Collins does not appear were not selected as they became popular because of the interesting premise they created rather than what they added to the relationship between the two characters. The second selection is composed of six episodes in which *Supernatural* fans and fan work are explicitly included. These episodes give an interesting insight into the way writers perceive their fans and how they wish to address them. The complete list of episodes accompanied with short summaries can be found in Annex 1.

The corpus then includes an array of paratexts that can also be separated into two categories. The first one regroups a selection of official paratexts (trailers, promotional pictures, and gag reels) that inspired the writing of at least one Destiel fanfic on AO3. Since there are no tags for promotional material or gag reel like there are for episodes, the paratexts selected were found by looking at the notes that authors sometimes add at the beginning of their works and where they can explain what inspired them to write their fanfic. To keep the selection to a reasonable size, only the paratexts which inspired the most popular fanfics were selected. The second category is a selection of various unofficial paratexts in which the lead actors and a producer give their opinion on fan fiction or slash shipping. The selection is composed of Tweets, convention panel videos, a video posted online by Misha Collins, and "The Long Road Home," a documentary-style episode that was aired before the series finale.

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1 In this thesis, this term will be used to refer to anyone involved in the show's creation process but primarily to showrunners, writers, actors, and executive producers.

These elements were chosen to show the variety of reactions that the fandom has provoked over the years.

In order to explore Destiel fan writers' reactions to the episodes and paratexts selected, I picked a total of seventy fanfics that were directly inspired by them. For each episode or paratext, one or two works were selected among those that had received the most kudos (the equivalent of "likes" on AO3). Five works were also selected because they were written in reaction to two events that had a big impact on the fandom. The first one was Jensen Ackles revealing that the original script for season 8 episode 17 originally included a moment when Dean said "I love you" to Castiel but it was later changed to "I need you." The second one was the release of the Latin American version of season 15 episode 18 where Dean's response to Castiel's love confession was changed from "Don't do this" to "Y yo a tí" ("And I you"). I decided to exclude Alternate Universe fics (AU) as their ties to the series are often more complex and would necessitate a more in-depth analysis. I also excluded works in progress because, while they can be a very interesting object of study, it is better to analyze their progression as chapters get published rather than look at them at a single point in time. The selection was narrowed down by removing fanfics that had received under 200 kudos for those related to episodes and under 50 kudos for those related to paratexts.

Finally, I circulated a survey on a *Supernatural* forum and Tumblr to gather the fans' opinions on the way they are represented within the show and on their relationship with the cast and crew. The survey was circulated from November 30th, 2020 to December 1st, 2020, and gathered seven hundred answers. The first part includes several multiple choice questions meant to ascertain the respondents' relationship to the series and to fanfiction. In the second part, respondents were asked about their perception of fan representation in the series in the form of likert scales and open questions. It is important to note that, despite being addressed to all kinds of viewers, this survey was largely shared by Destiel fan accounts on Tumblr which resulted in more than 97% of respondents declaring that they mainly read Dean/Castiel fanfiction. The complete list of questions asked to respondents can be found in Annex 2.

In addition to being mainly focused on Wincest, most of the published research around *Supernatural* focuses on individual aspects of this relationship: the partially deliberate incorporation of queer subtext throughout the series, the personification of writers and fans within the show, the proximity between the actors and their fans, the transformative aspect of fan writers' works... In order to have a better understanding of the unique bond between *Supernatural* and its fans, I believe that it is essential to take a step back and examine how all

of these different elements connect. By doing so, I hope to demonstrate how this show's incredible success at drawing in transformative fans despite the conflictual relations it entertains with them may reflect more general aspects of the relationship between producers and slash fans in television.

Looking through the prism of Dean and Castiel's relationship, this thesis will examine the different aspects of the interconnection between *Supernatural* slash fans and the actors, writers, and producers of the TV show. To begin with, I will dive into the first selection of episodes and paratexts presented in the corpus so as to uncover the different elements that might encourage slash writers to write about Destiel. Then, I will look into the many different ways fanfiction draws from these elements but also resists canon. Finally, I will use the second selection of episodes and paratexts as well as the online survey to analyze how slash is represented in the series or talked about by producers and the reactions it provokes among fans.

# PART I

## Supernatural's Attractiveness to Slash Fans: Finding the Balance Between Encouragement and Frustration

Slash fans are present in most — if not all — fandoms but statistics show that *Supernatural* is particularly attractive to transformative writers (centeroftheselights). Destiel in particular is by far the most popular pairing on AO3 and still has a very active fanbase after twelve years of existence. Because of this, a look at the elements of the series which have resulted in such enthusiasm can give us a good idea of what attracts transformative fans to certain pairings and TV shows. I will begin this part by examining the different elements that attract slash fans to certain pairings and to create transformative works around them. Then, I will demonstrate how *Supernatural* producers have been able to attract such a large fanbase by creating — sometimes accidentally — a perfect balance between engrossment and frustration for slash fans in the series and its paratexts.

### A. What Attracts TV Show Viewers to Slash?

The question of why so many fans are interested in slash shipping is a recurring discussion among fans and academics alike. There is no true and unique answer to this debate as it often varies from one person to another but it is still possible to find elements that commonly attract viewers to slash and fanfiction in general.

#### a. The Importance of Genre

Nowadays, with websites such as AO3 making it easy for anyone with an internet connection to read and publish fanfics, it is possible to find fan works for all kinds of TV shows, even those with a very small fanbase. Transformative fans tend to be present in most if not all fandoms but genre television is by far the most popular category among them (Busse 2014, 51). This can be verified by looking at the statistics for the most popular TV shows on AO3. All of the series in the top ten fall into the genres of Fantasy/Horror (*Supernatural*, *Teen Wolf*, *Game of Thrones*, *Once Upon a Time*, *Merlin*, *Shadowhunters*), Science-Fiction (*Doctor Who*, *Star Trek*, *Stargate*), or Crime show (*Sherlock*) (centeroftheselights). This

shows that fanfic writers tend to prefer series that set up a universe that is different from ours and that consequently leaves much to the viewers' imagination. We can also note that these shows focus primarily on the plot and that the exploration of the characters' relationships is, while still important, often secondary. The fact that these shows are attractive to fanfic writers is most likely connected to the "supplementation" aspect of fanfiction (Busse 2014, 153): they leave plenty of gaps that viewers may be inclined to fill, both in terms of setting and characterization. These TV shows are thus an ideal outlet for the creative expression of fans who are interested in romance as they set up emotional relationships that are rarely explored fully and an expendable universe that writers can use to create a variety of stories that develop on these relationships.

It is not hard to see why genre television is appreciated by transformative fans but the concept of supplementation is not enough to explain why slash fiction, in particular, is so popular. In 2020, the list of the hundred most popular pairings on AO3 contained sixty-eight male/male (m/m) pairings, nineteen female/male (f/m) pairings, and three female/female (f/f) pairings (centeroftheselights). The large majority of slash between two men in the realm of fanfiction is sometimes dismissively explained as being the result of women wanting to write about attractive men having sex with each other. Bacon-Smith considers this possibility in *Enterprising Women* but quickly dismisses it to move on to the more plausible explanation that fans mostly write about men because interesting female characters are often rare (239-242). Even though this book was written in the early nineties, Bacon-Smith's argument is still valid today. Indeed, despite an undeniable improvement in the representation of women in TV series in the past twenty years, there is still progress to be made in order to make sure that female characters are given as much importance and respect as their male counterparts, especially in the genres of Sci-Fi and Fantasy. We can also note that, in TV shows, the most popular pairings almost always involve the main characters which reduces the chances of pairings including women becoming too popular. Looking back at the most popular shows on AO3, we can note that, for the majority of them, all of the main characters are men and that for the others, the most popular pairings are often f/m or f/f.

This explanation alone is not enough to explain the popularity of slash and there are many other theories trying to understand why m/m pairings dominate the world of fanfiction. For instance, authors like Kaveney propose that slash allows the relationship between the characters to be completely egalitarian and free of the gender roles found in heterosexual relationships (145). However, the lack of complex female characters certainly played a big part in the evolution of the *Supernatural* transformative fandom. Indeed, the show has often

been criticized for its lack of women and the treatment of its few female characters despite a slight improvement in later seasons (“Supernatural Is Sexist And Misogynistic. But It Doesn’t Have To Be”). In addition to being rarely present and often pushed aside to fulfill the male characters’ narratives, women in Supernatural are often overly stereotyped, sexualized, and/or killed violently. As a result, the only relationship that was fully developed in the show’s early seasons was between the brothers which mostly explains the popularity of Wincest at the time. When Castiel was introduced at the beginning of the fourth season and grew closer to Dean, fans jumped at the opportunity to get invested in a complex relationship that was not incestuous.

### **b. Fans Like to Play With Homoerotic Elements**

The structure and genre of a TV show undeniably play a part in its attractiveness to transformative and slash fans but this is not to say that viewers gravitate towards particular m/m pairings solely because they are two men in a show they like. In some cases, fans can decide to write about two characters because the situations they find themselves in within the series would be interesting to explore, or even simply because they think they would look good or be funny if they were together, but popular pairings are usually based on more than an interesting premise<sup>2</sup>. In *Genre Intersections Between Slash and the Mainstream*, Elizabeth Woledge explains the importance of homosocial relationships as a basis for slash stories. The concept of homosociality was popularized by Eve Sedgwick who defines this concept as a “social bond between persons of the same sex” which is infused with desire (20). Woledge uses Sedgwick’s work to analyze only one subset of slash fiction that she calls “intimatopia” that is based on the exploration of intimacy between the characters as opposed to stories that focus more on the sexual aspect of their relationship (95). This separation is logical for Woledge’s literary approach to slash but it is not necessary to analyze the elements that make some pairings more attractive to fans. She explains that slash fans depict homosocial bonding as “directly supportive of homosexual activity” which, according to Sedgwick, is not always the case (Sedgwick 20, Woledge 96). Fans actively seek out these homosocial relationships and tend to focus on pairings that come from “a media source that already emphasizes homosocial bonds through the depiction of the loyalty between two men who live and work in a more or less homosocial community” (Woledge 96-97). Woledge illustrates this idea with

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2 In this section, I am talking only about non-canon slash pairings (meaning that the two characters are not together in the source text). Canon queer relationships can also become popular slash pairings but they are obviously treated differently by fans who do not have to expose reasons why these two characters should be together.

the example of Kirk and Spock in *Star Trek* who share a close professional and personal relationship and live isolated from the outside world in the USS Enterprise spaceship. She adds that, for slash fans, “the use of a homosocial backdrop is the ‘logical’ way to explore a homosexual relationship” (97). Indeed, fans looking to demonstrate the romantic potential between two male characters often tend to focus on the depth of the bonds that unite them and use the moments of intimacy between them to support their interpretation.

Joseph Brenan complexifies this idea of slash fans building queer readings on homosocial relationships by showing the importance of homoeroticism in such readings. He explains that, in a continuum between homosocial and homosexual, homoeroticism would be found in the middle with a “near equal number of homosocial and homosexual cues” (2018, 193). He rejects the idea of a clear separation between homosocial and homosexual, with canon on one side and fan interpretations on the other, and instead considers the space between the two concepts as a spectrum that cannot be viewed in such a binary way (196). Slash fans thus come up with homoerotic interpretations of shows that are based on a variety of elements drawn from canon that may fall anywhere on the homosocial-homosexual continuum. This theory is interesting as it accounts for cases where different elements concerning the same relationship fall on both ends of the spectrum thus creating an ambiguity that fans have to negotiate with. Brenan also argues that the difference between “actual” queer subtext — which is voluntarily included in the show by its producers — and elements that were not intended to be perceived as queer by the audience does not really matter when it comes to fan creativity (195-196).

In his article, Brenan explores the concept of “hoyay” (a contraction of “homoeroticism, yay!”) as a phenomenon that encourages slash fans to participate and create in their fandom. This term used to be commonly used in fandom spaces and is defined by Brenan as the enjoyment of coming across and exploring queer subtext but also as the desire to ship<sup>3</sup> two men together not because of the subtext that may or may not be there but rather for the pleasure that comes from participating in the fandom (193-194). His goal is not to say that fan interpretations are not supported by canon but that it does not matter if they are. The homoeroticism that transformative fans perceive in media becomes a fuel for the creation of an impressive quantity of art, writing, and other various fan products. The fact that the characters are not actually together can also be exciting as it leaves more freedom for viewers to imagine how they may finally become a couple and how they would act if they were. Brenan’s enthusiastic praise of “hoyay” reflects the fact that, for some fans, the whole point of

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3 This term, derived from the word “relationship,” refers to see two characters be in a romantic relationship.



slash shipping is to enjoy being part of the fandom. This does not just mean producing art around a pairing but also consuming what other people have created, coming up with and sharing interpretations, headcanons (personal theories), and jokes about the characters, and many other activities encouraged by the close communities created by fans. Though the two broadly overlap, slash fandom differs from general fandom in the fact that it is almost exclusively transformative and thus focused on creativity. It also creates smaller and more tightly-knit communities that have more in common than just their love for a particular show. For some fans, the attractiveness of slash thus comes from the possibility it offers to enjoy the homoeroticism of a story among other like-minded people.

### **c. For Queer Fans, Representation is Important**

The fun and enjoyable aspect of slash may be the primary reason why so many fans are attracted to this practice but it is also important to consider that, for members of the LGBT+ community, shipping is also a way to create and ask for more representation. The importance of representation for minorities of all kinds has been discussed at length in academic circles and it has been shown that the positive portrayal of queer characters in media has a largely beneficial impact on LGBT+ viewers. Studies have shown that positive queer representation has an influence on the self-realization and self-acceptance of viewers and that they serve as a source of “pride, inspiration, and comfort” (Gomillion and Giuliano 330). They can also help LGBT+ youth to overcome the difficulties linked to their identity and to become more confident (Craig and al.). Queer characters in media often become role models for young fans trying to figure out their sexuality or identity, helping them to realize and accept that they do not fit into heteronormative models. As a result, queer representation is something that needs to be not only present in media but also treated carefully and respectfully in order to preserve its positive aspects. Indeed, as Erin Waggoner explains:

Representation on television has the potential to help people with their own identities. Therefore, a lack of representation on television becomes a problem if not handled with care. Since the convergence era of television, one where television meets Web 2.0 technologies (i.e., social media), focuses more on niche audiences (Mittell, 2010), separating or not handling those particular audiences can have the potential to do more harm than good (1878-1879).

For queer fans, slash can thus become a means to seek this positive representation when it is not satisfyingly present in the media they enjoy.

In recent years, the percentage of regular LGBT+ characters in TV series increased significantly going from 4% in 2015-2016 to 10.2% in 2019-2020 (GLAAD). Despite a small

decrease in the 2020-2021 season (mostly due to the COVID-19 pandemic halting production on several shows), these numbers are very encouraging and show that queer representation is now taken more seriously by producers and is likely to keep improving. However, there are still many problems in the depiction of LGBT+ characters on television. The GLAAD television report of 2019 shows that queer characters on broadcast television are often isolated among a cast of cisgender heterosexual characters (9). Even though this issue is less present in cable and streaming shows, TV series with more than one LGBT+ lead character are still pretty rare, especially in the genres that transformative fans are attracted to. Another issue with the representation of queer people on television is that they sometimes do not receive the same treatment as their straight counterparts. In, 2017, Ray Seif conducted research showing that gay and lesbian characters on television are still stereotyped, especially in terms of the gender roles assigned to them, and still contribute to the persistence of heteronormativity (40-42). Slash can be a way for queer fans to escape these problems. When the two characters of the pairing are written as straight in the series, they avoid the stereotypes that often come with canon queer representation. For some LGBT+ fans, it is easier to relate to characters who are not explicitly queer as they are more diversified and often more complex. Moreover, fanfiction allows queer writers to be in control of the narrative and to portray the characters in a way that is more connected to their experiences. Obviously, stereotypes and homophobic portrayals can be found in fanfics, even those written by queer fans, but the amount of stories written gives readers the option to pick and choose the ones that fit their interests best. Slash stories are thus important for LGBT+ writers and readers, the former being able to express themselves and share their own stories and the latter finding representation in characters they identify with.

All of these ideas can be applied to DeanCas fans and partially explain the incredible popularity of this pairing among slash writers for the past decade but the reason for the attractiveness of this pairing is also to be found within the show itself. Indeed, the fans' enthusiasm about Destiel heavily relies on twelve years of more or less explicit elements implying romantic feelings between Dean and Castiel.

## **B. The Reluctant Encouraging of Slash in *Supernatural***

Ever since the fourth season of *Supernatural* and the introduction of Castiel, a great number of fans have been claiming that the feelings between him and Dean are more than just platonic and that the writers and producers intentionally created the homoerotic tension between them. For the quasi-entirety of the show, while Destiel was acknowledged more than once, the romantic implications between them stay buried in subtext that slash fans had to interpret in their writings. However, the antepenultimate episode (15.18) disrupted this dynamic with the revelation that Castiel had been in love with Dean for years which, without satisfying the fans' expectations, changed the way they had to negotiate with canon.

### **a. Finding Subtext Between the Characters**

For a very long time, slash fans' queer reading of Dean and Castiel's relationship was based almost entirely on the homoeroticism they perceived between the two characters. Whether or not this was intended by the producers, there are many instances where the interactions between the characters can be read as subtextual clues encouraging shippers' interpretations. These interpretations heavily rely on the special connection that exists between Dean and Cas which shows that their friendship is not a normal one. This idea is present from the very first episode in which Castiel appears after saving Dean from hell and introduces himself by saying "I'm the one who gripped you tight and raised you from perdition" (4.01). In addition to being Dean's savior, the angel also reveals that his grip is what caused the permanent handprint mark that Dean discovered on his shoulder at the beginning of the episode. This mark is never truly explained but, for many fans, it is a visual representation of the profound connection between the two characters.

As time goes by, Cas quickly becomes "the best friend [Dean] has ever had" (7.02). They often confide in each other and develop a relationship that is different from the brotherly love shared between Dean and Sam but also not quite the same as the friendships they have with other characters. This unique connection is made explicit when Castiel explains to Sam, "Dean and I do share a more profound bond," a phrase that is often used by Destiel fans to refer to the depth of their romantic attachment (6.03). As Cassandra Collier notes in her thesis: "both Castiel and Dean are shown to have a deeper connection to one another than Castiel has to Bobby or Sam," Bobby being the brothers' friend and father figure (97). The fact that the bond between Dean and Cas is special and unique is shown repeatedly throughout the show but one of the best examples of this can be seen in 6.20 ("The Man Who Would Be King")

when Castiel reveals that he rescued Sam from hell just as he did Dean. The words he uses to explain this — “I’m the one who raised you from perdition” — are the exact ones he said to Dean in season four and make the removal of the “gripped you tight” part extremely obvious and let the viewers wonder why such a distinction was made. We can also note that Sam has no handprint which further shows that the connection built between Dean and Cas is unique to the two of them.

In addition to the special bond between the two characters, fans often point out the tension built between them, more with actions than with words. Indeed, Dean and Castiel are frequently shown exchanging very intense and unblinking stares charged with meaning. These stares often last longer than is socially acceptable and seem to demonstrate the character’s ability to communicate without speaking. This is the case in “Lucifer Rising” (4.22) when Cas pushes Dean against a wall and manages to express that he is on his side and intends to rebel against other angels simply by looking into his eyes. In addition to the intense stares, the homoerotic tension between the characters is also due to their tendency to stand very close to each other. In early seasons, this was meant to show Cas’s lack of understanding of human behaviors despite Dean trying to teach him (5.03). However, this combined with the stares, Dean’s reluctance to back down, and the camera angles making them appear closer than they actually are make these moments all the more charged. While discussing the codes commonly used by slash communities to analyze romantic homoeroticism, Collier explains that “eye contact between characters or the necessity of close-ups or a small space between the actors to shoot for television screens is interpreted as a sign of emotional intensity and intimacy” (13). Despite becoming less frequent in later seasons, these stares and invasions of personal space never completely disappeared from the series and contributed to reinforce the perception of Dean and Cas’s relationship as romantic.

The homoerotic tension between the two characters reaches its peak in scenes that could be called “almost confessions”: moments when one of the two characters seems about to say something that will take their relationship to the next level but they are quickly diffused. Two of them can be found in “Goodbye Stranger” (8.17). The first time is at the beginning of the episode when Castiel comes back after a long absence and Dean confesses that he prayed to him “every night.” Once the angel is in another room, Sam asks his brother, “Why were you praying to him?” but they are interrupted before he can answer. At this moment, Dean’s only possible answer would have been to admit that he cares more about Castiel than he lets on but this is left unsaid and quickly forgotten. The second time is when Dean and Castiel inevitably find the artifact Naomi was looking for in a crypt and she orders

the angel to kill his friend like he was trained to do. He complies at first, causing a beaten-up Dean to kneel at his feet and say in a plaintive voice, “We need you. I need you,” which is enough for him to fight off his brainwashing. Castiel then heals his friend with his powers while gently cradling his cheek but the moment is quickly broken when he decides to leave with the artifact to protect it. Once again, Dean and Castiel seem to be on the edge of an important turn in their relationship but the moment is cut short before it gets too explicitly romantic. Another example of almost confession can be found in the twelfth season when Castiel is mortally injured by a magical spear. Convinced that he is about to die, he says his goodbyes and tells the brothers how much they mean to him (12.12). In the middle of his speech, he looks at Dean and says, “I love you.” There is a pregnant pause and the camera lingers on the hunter, showing that he is indeed the one being addressed. The moment is broken when Castiel continues with, “I love all of you,” contradicting what seemed to have been shown before.

This homoerotic tension always on the verge of being resolved but never quite becoming explicit resulted in many accusations of queerbaiting made about *Supernatural* over the years. This fan-conceived term is relatively new and encompasses a large number of practices and its meaning thus often varies from one person to the other. An accurate and complete definition of queerbaiting can be found in Bridges’ work:

[Queerbaiting refers to] any in-canon inference or subtext suggesting queerness, or actual occurrence of queerness that results in the luring of queer viewers to engage, become fans, and given today’s fully interactive fandom cultures, to serve as vectors for deep promotion of a media franchise (119).

The term has negative connotations as it implies that producers are aware of their viewers’ expectations and wants for queer characters and use them in an exploitative manner (McDermott 136). It is hard to determine when the word queerbaiting started being used with this definition but it began spreading in fandom spaces in 2012 and quickly grew to become a common topic of discussion among slash fans. The term was almost immediately associated with *Supernatural*, and more specifically Destiel, with viewers pointing out the many homoerotic moments between Dean and Cas and their influence on the show’s ratings (Gennis). The show is also often cited as a prime example of queerbaiting in many academic works that broach the subject (Collier, McDermott, Ng).

The reason why the series has always been categorized as queerbaiting rather than just playing with homoerotic subtext comes from the carefully maintained ambiguity of Dean and Castiel’s relationship. The subtext and almost confessions suggest that the two of them might end up together at some point but they are always counterbalanced with moments reaffirming

the characters' heterosexuality and emphasizing the strictly platonic nature of their relationship. For instance, "Goodbye Stranger" mentioned previously is often cited by fans as proof of the characters' feelings for each other and is one of the most popular episodes for the writing of fanfiction. However, it also contains multiple scenes that remind the viewers that Dean and Castiel are sexually attracted to women. In between moments showing how deeply the characters care for each other, viewers are reminded of Dean's love for hot porn actresses and of Castiel's kiss with the female demon Meg. These kinds of conflicting messages are an important part of the process of queerbaiting as they allow producers to play to queer audiences in a "safe" way that stays unnoticed by viewers who might be upset by this sort of content (Bridges 119). Queerbaiting is, by definition, meant to encourage fan engagement and is thus fuel for the production of slash stories. Indeed, the multiple possible readings it creates are often a source of debate in fan spaces and can push slash fans to want to express their opinion in the writing of fanfiction. Moreover, it builds frustration among those fans waiting for the resolution of the tension between the characters which is often translated into the production of more slash stories. This is shown by the fact that the *Supernatural* episodes for which the most stories have been written are often those with a lot of potential for romance that does not get exploited, like 8.17 discussed previously but also "I'm No Angel" (9.03) and "Heaven Can't Wait" (9.06) in which Castiel becomes human but is kept apart from Dean who is forced to lie to him to save his brother.

### **b. The Romantic Implications of Certain Storylines**

The accusations of queerbaiting made about *Supernatural* are not only connected to the homoerotic chemistry between the characters. Another, more insidious, manifestation of queer subtext in the series can be found in the storylines and character arcs that sometimes parallel the story of Dean and Castiel with romantic tropes. For viewers not focused on the romantic potential of this pairing, those parallels are very easy to miss but for slash fans, they encourage the idea that their interpretation is logical and not simply a product of wishful thinking. The presence of these storylines in the series suggests, for those who notice them, that the feelings between Dean and Cas are an integral part of the show and can make fanfic writers feel validated in their decision to include Destiel into the show's narrative in their work.

To begin with, Castiel's entire character arc is directly connected to Dean and most of the things he does are related to him one way or another. Even before his romantic feelings were confirmed in 15.18, many fans felt that the way he was written could only be explained

by him being in love with Dean. In seasons four and five, Castiel starts off as an obedient soldier from heaven who slowly begins to doubt his orders and ends up rebelling and falling from Heaven in order to stop the Apocalypse. Even though he decides to fight for humanity as a whole, his decision is entirely motivated by Dean, the only person he is really close to during these seasons. In the last episode of season four, Dean is shown pushing a small angel statue off a shelf and Castiel appears to him immediately after. This, taking place a few minutes before Cas decides to rebel, implies that Dean is directly responsible for making the angel fall. This is made more explicit in season five, in several instances. One of them takes place after Dean tries to give up and stop fighting. He is found in an alley by Castiel who beats him up and says: “I gave everything for you. And this is what you give to me” (5.18). The romantic implications of this are emphasized by the double meaning of the expression “falling for someone.” When seeing that “Castiel fell for Dean” is something that is made explicit in canon, it is easy to make the jump and also give a romantic meaning to the phrase.

In the following season, Cas’s actions keep being shown as mainly motivated by his desire to help or protect Dean. After his questionable decision to work in secret with the king of Hell, Crowley, to acquire more power and defeat his enemies in Heaven, Castiel has an intense confrontation with Dean where he explains: “I’m doing this for you, Dean. I’m doing this because of you” (6.20). His words are supported by the fact that the entire episode focuses on his relationship with the hunter and his regrets about having lied to him. Other characters also notice and point out Castiel’s attachment to Dean, usually antagonists trying to rile him up. For instance, at the end of season 9, the power-hungry angel Metatron mocks Cas for his tendency to do anything to protect Dean and tells him: “You draped yourself in the flag of heaven, but ultimately, it was all about saving one human, right?” (9.23). This scene is interesting because it shows that Castiel can lie, perhaps even to himself, about his motivations and that, even when he claims to fight for a greater cause, his primary goal is still to keep Dean safe.

Though most of the storylines centered on this pairing tend to revolve around Cas’s feelings for Dean, there are still some moments in the show when the narrative implies that the hunter’s attachment to his friend may not be entirely platonic. As a character, Dean embodies the performance of old-fashioned masculinity that keeps him from expressing his emotions in fear of sounding too “womanly” (Ronnenberg 134-137). As a result, we almost exclusively see him being emotionally open in moments of extreme duress when his facade cracks open and reveals what he is hiding underneath. For this reason, the episodes of *Supernatural* that best showcase his feelings for Castiel are the ones in which the angel dies

and Dean is left grieving for him. This may also be due to the writers' reluctance to make the feelings between the two characters too explicit: it is safer to show Dean's profound attachment to Cas when he is not there and there is no risk of things getting too intense. There are several points in the series showing Dean having a hard time dealing with the loss of his friend, notably in season seven and in season eight, but the most significant occurrence takes place at the beginning of season thirteen. Castiel is killed during the last episode of the previous season when the Winchesters' mother also gets taken by Lucifer into a parallel universe and is presumed dead. Season thirteen starts right where this episode left off and focuses heavily on Dean's emotions after these losses. Even though both brothers lost their mother and their best friend, Dean is evidently much more affected by it and his grief seems to be focused almost exclusively on the loss of Cas. In a long analysis of the representation of grief in these episodes, Natalie Fisher explains:

While the cast and creators have been careful to describe the losses of Mary and Castiel as both very important, and the combination of them being more important still, we still see a... leaning, shall we call it, one way or the other, from each brother. Whenever the boys remember what they've lost, particularly when it gets heated, it's always cries of "Mom" first, ripped from Sam's mouth, and "Cas" from Dean's ("Dean Winchester and the study of death in 'Supernatural' season 13").

After having lost Castiel, Dean reaches his lowest point in the series. In 13.05, he explains to Sam that, for the first time in his life, he does not know if he will be able to keep on fighting for the greater good. This changes at the end of the episode when Cas is brought back to life. Dean's attitude in 13.06 is the polar opposite of his depressed state in the previous episodes: he is joyful, excited, and cracking jokes on every occasion. Fisher describes this episode as "a love letter to Dean's unique relationship with Cas" as it shows that getting his friend back was the only thing Dean needed to be happy again.

This short story arc is also significant because of the parallel it makes between Dean and his father. Indeed, Dean's reaction to losing Castiel reflects his father's reaction to losing his mother in the first episode of the show. When John Winchester lost his wife, he was overwhelmed with grief and became a different, angrier man. This caused him to neglect and mistreat his sons to fulfill his quest for revenge. In Dean's case, his anger is taken out on Jack, a half-angel half-human newborn in a teenager's body whom Castiel was planning to adopt after the death of his mother. After the angel's death, the Winchesters take Jack with them and he becomes the victim of Dean's incapacity to process his grief, mirroring the abusive behavior of his father when he was a child. This reinforces the idea that Dean dealing with the death of Castiel is treated as the loss of a love interest, leading Destiel fans to use the name



“Widower Arc” to refer to these episodes. The strong subtextual implications make it very tempting for slash writers to explore this arc in a more explicitly romantic way.

The Widower Arc is not the only time when Dean and Castiel’s relationship is paralleled with a canon couple. There is another small and easy-to-miss parallel with Dean’s parents when we are shown that he gifted Castiel with a Led Zeppelin mixtape which reflects the fact that Dean’s parents got together thanks to their shared love of this band (12.19; 12.01). This may not have been intentional but the fact that these two things were shown in the same season caused many fans to notice and give a romantic meaning to the mixtape. Another, more obvious, parallel can be found in season fifteen in which Dean and Cas are mirrored with Sam and his girlfriend Eileen. The antagonist of the season is God (who calls himself Chuck) who is revealed to have been controlling the character’s lives from the beginning, causing them to doubt how much free will they actually have. When she begins questioning every aspect of her life, Sam tries to reassure Eileen by kissing her and telling her “I know that was real” (15.09). This parallels a very similar exchange between Dean and Castiel in 15.02:

**Dean:** Nothing about our lives is real. Everything that we’ve lost, everything that we are is because of Chuck. So maybe you can stick your head back in the sand, maybe you can pretend that we actually had a choice. I can’t.

**Castiel:** Dean. You asked, “What about all of this is real?” We are.

For fans who notice it, this parallel gives a more romantic meaning to Dean and Cas’s conversation and can be seen as a confirmation that their relationship is meant to be viewed in the same way as Sam and Eileen’s.

### c. Explicitly Romantic Elements

The homoerotic subtext in *Supernatural* is very important for slash fans as a source of inspiration for the writing of fanfics and as something that can be interpreted as a support of Destiel as a romantic pairing. It provides material that fans can easily use or dismiss depending on their preferences. This is less the case for the times when the feelings between Dean and Castiel are presented as explicitly romantic. Before “Despair” (15.18), this was done only in the form of jokes made by the other characters or by Dean himself. Even though Castiel’s confession in 15.18 is completely different from the humorous one-liners implying that the two characters were more than friends, they share the similarity of simultaneously working both for and against the romantic interpretation of their relationship.

The treatment of queer characters and queer relationships in *Supernatural* has often been criticized by fans and non-viewers alike (Lady Geek Girl). Indeed, the show features only a handful of recurring LGBT+ characters in its very large cast and homosexual couples are often only present to be laughed at. For a very long time, being gay in the series was only considered as something funny, and queer characters were always used to make some more or less homophobic jokes. This was also reflected in the portrayal of Dean and Castiel's relationship as the only acknowledgments of the tension between them throughout the show were made in the form of jokes. For instance, the sexual tension created by the very intense stares the two of them regularly exchange is mentioned in 5.18 when Dean jokingly says to Cas "last person who looked at me like that, I got laid" and then winks at him. Jokes about the two of them being a couple or being in love with each other are also often made by other characters, like when Meg talks to Dean about Cas and tells him: "he was your boyfriend first" (7.23). These lines are always clearly intended to make the audience laugh but, for slash fans, they also demonstrate that they are not imagining the homoerotic tension between Dean and Castiel as the characters also notice it. However, the fact that this is only done through jokes also sends the message that the idea of Dean and Cas together is something to be laughed at, dismissing the possibility of them actually ending up together. As McDermott explains:

Humour can be read as an attempt to dispel the presence of queerness and homoeroticism in the sexualization of the male body or even the legitimacy of homoeroticism in the narrative. However, humour is also able to acknowledge these interpretations without actively endorsing or discouraging fans' engagement in these supposedly transgressive desires and activities (138).

For this reason, humor is often stated as a tool used by writers to queerbait their audience. It allows writers to suggest the presence of non-platonic feelings between two characters while still establishing a heteronormative narrative. Fathallah insists on the importance of jokes and mockery in her definition of queerbaiting which she describes as the process of "suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility" (2015, 491). This is perfectly illustrated by the humor around Destiel in *Supernatural* which encourages slash fans in their interpretations but also reminds viewers that Dean and Castiel are not meant to be in a relationship.

Because of these constant reminders, for a very long time, most Destiel fans were convinced that the feelings between Dean and Cas would remain entirely subtextual except for the occasional joke. However, in "Despair," Castiel finally confessed his love to Dean in a very emotional declaration. This moment was set up in the previous season when Cas made a

deal with the Shadow (the cosmic being in control of the Empty, the afterlife for angels and demons) giving up his life to save his adoptive son's (14.08). The conditions of the deal were that, at the moment when Castiel would finally allow himself to be truly happy, the Shadow would come for him. Slash fans were excited by the romantic potential of this storyline but also doubtful that it would end with Destiel becoming canon, thinking that the writers would find another way to make Cas happy. The revelation that the angel's moment of true happiness was to be able to confess his love to Dean came as a shock for many fans and immediately became the number one subject of discussion in fan spaces<sup>4</sup>. The confession confirmed many things that had only been implied subtextually previously, like the fact that Castiel fell from heaven and decided to fight for humanity because of his love for Dean. However, the revolutionary feeling of the confirmation that Cas is in love with Dean was dampened by the fact that the question of whether it was reciprocated or not was left entirely ambiguous. During Castiel's speech, the hunter stays mostly silent, only letting out a few words to express his confusion and answering his friend's "I love you" with "Don't do this, Cas." In the two remaining episodes, the confession is never mentioned and, though Castiel is implied to have been brought back from the dead, he does not come back in person. In the *Supernatural* fandom, the most virulent debates between the people who ship Destiel and those who do not are centered around Dean's sexuality and whether he could have feelings for Castiel or not. Writers managed to avoid answering this controversial question while still giving slash fans some of what they wanted.

"Despair" was heavily criticized for falling into the 'Bury Your Gays' (BYG) trope. This term refers to the idea that "recurring, confirmed queer characters are disproportionately more likely to die on-screen – often violently – than their straight counterparts" and that these deaths often happen just after the character has experienced some kind of romantic fulfillment (Bridges 122). Bridges presents BYG as rooted in the history of American cinema and television where censorship codes meant that any depiction of queerness on screen had to be met with a tragic and often violent end for the character as a form of punishment (124-127). Castiel's death fits this trope in a way that seems almost parodic: confessing his romantic feelings for another man immediately causes him to die and be sent to a place that is described in the show as "worse than hell" (14.08). BYG is often presented as a form of queerbaiting as it allows producers to "bait" queer audiences with the promise of representation without letting the same-sex pairing take too much importance (Bridges 122; Waggoner 1889). In the case of *Supernatural*, where the death and resurrection of characters is a common occurrence,

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4 On November 5th, when the episode came out, Destiel trended at #1 on Twitter over the results of the American election and there was a 5,065% increase in all engagements around the ship's tag on Tumblr.

many viewers expected Castiel to come back and to be reunited with Dean one way or another. Many Destiel fans who had stopped watching the show and some queer people who had never seen it previously came to watch 15.18 and the last two episodes in the hope to see the pairing finally become entirely canon<sup>5</sup>. The fact that Castiel was brought back off-screen in the finale with only a quick mention that he helped rebuild Heaven as proof that he was alive caused outrage among fans and raised the question of whether it was enough to cancel the BYG aspect of his demise. In any case, this controversial ending had a hugely positive impact on the production of fanfics, fan writers using their work to demonstrate their anger and frustration<sup>6</sup>.

The tendency of Supernatural producers to always toe the line between affirming and disapproving the queer reading of Dean and Castiel's relationship, often to the point of queerbaiting, greatly contributed to the impressive amount of fanfics written for this pairing. The romantic elements present textually and subtextually in the series make it especially compelling to a large number of slash fans and the frustration caused by the pairing never fully crossing the line between non-canon and canon pushes those fans to be even more productive. While this plays a big part in motivating slash writers to take an interest in Destiel, many fans do not stop there and also draw inspiration from the show's paratexts to write their stories.

### **C. Paratexts as an Additional Source of Inspiration for Slash Fans**

The word 'paratext' refers to all of the material that surrounds the main body of a work. For invested fans, they are often an integral part of the viewing experience and it is thus not uncommon for them to be used in fanfics. Authors of such fics often assume that all of their readers share their knowledge of the paratexts they refer to. This is something we can see in the notes of "Full Circle" written by Tibbins where they explain: "Just because I had to write something about that moment in the season 14 trailer... you all know the one." Paratexts are thus recognized by slash fans as valid source material for discussing and writing about their favorite pairing. For convenience, I only selected fanfics that were entirely inspired by a

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5 In the survey conducted for this thesis, several people mentioned having only seen the last three episodes of season fifteen after they stopped watching the show.

6 The number of works published in the Castiel/Dean Winchester tag on AO3 increased by more than 200% in the three months following the release of 15.18 compared to the previous year.

specific paratext and that were described as such by their writers. Interestingly, the most popular paratexts that emerged from this selection are only trailers and gag reels. This may partially be due to the fact that Destiel is rarely talked about outside of the show<sup>7</sup>. It also seems that, when comments from producers are included in fanfiction, it is usually in a quick referential way. For instance, Misha Collins' comment about Castiel's wings being rainbow colored at a virtual panel, despite being used by many slash writers, was used as the primary inspiration for very few works (SPN BunkerNA). When it comes to understanding what fans use as a source of inspiration for the writing of fanfiction, it is thus good to turn to paratexts that provide additional material approved by the producers and create hype that motivates slash fans' investment.

### a. What Are Paratexts?

In recent years, the study of viewer to producer and producer to viewer communication has become more and more common with the growth of online fan communities. In an article entitled "Fandom in the Digital Era," Roberta Pearson writes about this phenomenon:

The digital revolution has had a profound impact upon fandom, empowering and disempowering, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of cultural production (84).

As a consequence, what has been called "off-screen studies" by Jonathan Gray has become essential to have a better understanding of TV shows and their impact on our society (*Show Sold Separately*). Indeed, a piece of media is made not only of its contents but also of everything that surrounds them and can modify the way its audience perceives it. These elements, named "paratexts" by literary theorist Gerard Genette, can be seen both distinct from and part of the text as they create "many of the meanings" associated with the original work without officially being a part of it (Jonathan Gray 6). Even though Gray's definition of paratexts is largely inspired by Genette's work, there are differences between their approaches, the most important one being that Gray does not believe that paratexts stand outside the text. His opinion is based on Barthes' work which he uses to distinguish the work and the text, the former referring to the "aesthetic entity" and the latter being "the entity in society and culture" (Brookey and Gray 102). For Gray, the text is thus the combination of the work and the paratexts. This distinction is important because it shows how essential paratexts

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7 This selection was made in November 2020 before Castiel's confession made discussing this pairing a little less taboo.

are in the construction of the text as a cultural unit. The interesting thing about the theory of paratextuality is that it comes to complicate Hall's notions of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings as these elements insert themselves in the middle of this process and give viewers directions that they are free to ignore (107).

Another important element in Gray's definition of paratexts is that they cannot be placed in a hierarchy of value as their reception can differ largely from one person to another (Brookey and Gray 102). It is important to remember that the impact of one paratext on the audience as a whole can never be measured precisely and that, even in closely interconnected communities of fans, it is impossible to know who exactly came in contact with which paratext and how it might have impacted them. This is not to say that studying the impact of paratexts on the viewers is a lost cause but rather that one must always be careful when drawing conclusions not to make generalizations. Another mistake to avoid is to assume that the paratexts related to a work are always uniform in their intent and that they are necessarily thought of as a whole by their producers. As Gray explains, "different people in the production process are trying to do really, really different things with their work or paratexts, and somehow they all get stitched together—sometimes sloppily and incoherently, sometimes neatly—as a text" (Brookey and Gray 103). In a TV show like *Supernatural* in which engagement with the audience has become so important, it is not unusual for different sources to send different and sometimes contradicting messages to the viewers thus producing an ensemble of paratexts that is not always coherent.

Defining precisely what is or is not a paratext is not always easy and so it is useful to create categories into which different paratexts can be sorted to make matters more clear. In *Show Sold Separately*, Gray separated paratexts into two broad categories. Firstly, "entryway paratexts" like trailers or movie posters affect the way we might consider a film or TV series before watching it and thus change our approach to it (35). Then, "in medias res paratexts" fill the gaps between the episodes and allow for the meanings already created to change and evolve (40–42). Some of the examples used by Gray are "previously on" sequences, DVD bonuses, and official merchandise. In addition to this, Eve Ng notes the importance of "producer paratexts" which are not explored much in Gray's work (Ng 3). She explains that "[their] impact has increased with the growth of social media and the move of entertainment conventions such as Comic-Con into mainstream culture" (4). Those can fit into either the entryway or the in medias res category depending on the context within which they are published. Ng does not develop much on this concept but the notion of producer paratext is an interesting one that can even be pushed further to include the actors' commentary thus

creating a broader category of paratexts originating from social media and conventions and being addressed directly to the viewers. I use the name unofficial paratexts for this category, in opposition to official paratexts that are published officially with a clear marketing intent. In my research, I have noticed that this separation seems to matter to fans who will often themselves make a distinction between paratexts that come from an official source and those that do not.

Several articles have been written on the relationship between paratexts and queer readings of a text (Brookey and Westerfelhaus; Thomas). By nature, paratexts are often meant to indicate to the audience how they should interpret a certain text, it is thus not surprising to see them being used to indicate how the relationship between two characters should be interpreted. Some, like Brookey and Westerfelhaus, have written about the ways paratexts can be used to invalidate those interpretations and others like Thomas have looked at the paratexts that promote such readings. However, not much work has been done on texts for which both kinds of paratexts are produced as is the case for *Supernatural* where the paratexts related to the queer reading of Dean and Castiel's relationship often contradict each other depending on the source. Despite the variety of paratexts available for *Supernatural* fans, when it comes to the production of slash fiction, it is mostly official ones that are used as a source of inspiration. This may be because they are more likely to be seen by viewers but them being part of a well-thought-out marketing process also seems to be important.

### **b. The ambivalence of Gag Reels**

In the large world of paratexts, gag reels — compilations of the funniest outtakes from a season — are often overlooked. Indeed, the fact that they exist mainly for comedic purposes causes them to be treated less seriously than other DVD extras like deleted scenes or episode commentaries. However, the answers to the survey conducted for this thesis show that gag reels and outtakes are the most popular kinds of paratexts among fans with more than 80% of respondents stating that they often watch them. Gag reels can become important to slash fans by providing them images of the actors dressed as their characters in entirely new situations. In this way, they are a little similar to deleted scenes with the obvious difference that the scenes shown in the gag reel are the result of the actors messing up or jokingly improvising.

As a result, the *Supernatural* outtakes sometimes show interactions between Dean and Castiel that are in complete contrast with the general tone of the series. A good example of this can be found in the gag reel of season fourteen that includes a brief scene where Jensen Ackles and Misha Collins, dressed as their characters, are happily waltzing together. The

peacefulness of this moment greatly contrasts with the scenes shared by Dean and Cas in the series that are usually either very heavy and dramatic or played for laughs. This allows slash fans to imagine a context in which the two characters would be together and slow dancing for fun. The exploration of domesticity and intimacy, especially in fanfics that do not give much importance to these themes, is omnipresent in fanfiction as can be testified by the popularity of the hurt/comfort trope where the characters grow closer together after going through hurtful events (Busse 2014, 254; Woledge 106). The popularity of this scene among slash writers demonstrates the potential for a gag reel to provide fans with new inspiring material that they could not get from the show itself.

Moreover, gag reels are also a way for producers to address slash pairings and, much like the jokes in the series discussed previously, can either be seen as an approval of shipping or as a way to dismiss it. Contrary to other DVD extras, gag reels do not provide direct commentary of the producers on the episodes but it is important to remember that they are the result of a well-thought-out production just as much as any other official paratext. As such, not only do they provide fans new original content, they can also be interpreted by them as a way to validate queer readings of the series. As Eve Ng explains:

[Gag reels] constitute a hybrid product of the marketing and creative teams; although the reels are put together by the studio, actors are aware that what they are filmed doing on set may end up on those reels, and this content is therefore also a channel through which producers communicate with viewers.

This can be illustrated by looking at the Destiel content in the gag reel of seasons five and eight. In the former, we can see Jensen Ackles jokingly saying with gestures that he has performed oral sex on Misha Collins standing behind him. For slash fans looking for confirmation of the validity of their interpretation, this could be interpreted as evidence that Ackles is aware of the tension between the two characters and that it is something he takes into account while he plays Dean. Secondly, the gag reel from season eight is peppered with outtakes from the scene in the crypt from 8.17 which was shown earlier to be heavy with romantic subtext. The first of these outtakes shows the moment when Castiel cradles Dean's face with his hand. Collins breaks character to pull Ackles towards him and hug him instead. A little later, the two actors are seen in character joking about being in love with each other. In addition to provoking the same effects as the former outtake, these scenes also emphasize the tension of the original scene by turning it into something explicitly romantic.

Comedy having such a big importance in *Supernatural*, it is not hard to perceive the gag reels as an extension of the series itself. A joke in the show is not much different from a joke in the gag reels. This is emphasized by the proximity given to these two elements by the



DVD support which makes the frontier between them more blurry (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 23). The fact that these scenes were willingly added by the studio also contributes to the idea that the gag reels might be perceived as a validation of the queer reading of Dean and Castiel's relationship. However, this is only true for the fans who already see the subtext which might be hidden in the series and are looking to find elements confirming that it is not only a product of their imagination. There is nothing in the reels which could push a person who does not already ship Destiel to suddenly start reading their relationship as homoerotic. As a result, gag reels are a safe way for producers to hint at the possibility of a relationship between Dean and Cas while still dismissing the idea that it could actually happen by portraying it as something funny. Unlike the jokes deliberately written in the series, these outtakes are not criticized for being homophobic as they are simply the product of the actors messing around which can make fans disposed to use them in their writing.

### **c. Building Homoerotic Tension in Trailers**

Gag reels are a rather popular source of inspiration for *Supernatural* slash writers but the paratexts that have inspired the most Destiel fanfics are undeniably promos of all kinds. There are many works written about trailers, sneak peeks (short extracts from an episode), and promotional pictures. In television, trailers and promos released in between episodes are more likely to address returning viewers than people who have never watched the show (Jonathan Gray 72). According to Gray, in addition to building the hype around the next episode, promos allow producers to "reiterate their version of a text" and to show their viewers how the show should be interpreted (72-73). For this reason, fans can see the inclusion of scenes between Dean and Castiel that they read as romantic as a way for producers to approve the queer reading of their relationship. Because of this role that trailers play in reaffirming the preferred reading of the series, fans sometimes include them in their discussions about queerbaiting. As Nordin points out, hinting at queer content in the show and failing to follow up on the expectations that this built among fans can be seen as a case of queerbaiting for some fans (43). This is very rarely the case for *Supernatural* as the trailers are usually more focused on the story than on the relationship between the characters but Nordin's work shows how slash fans also analyze the show's trailers in search for content related to their ship. Destiel fans generally know that an episode's trailer will not imply a romance between Dean and Cas but they can still look for moments that could announce a homoerotically charged scene in the episode.

In addition to being mostly focused on the plot, *Supernatural* trailers promoting the next episode are only 20 seconds long and are thus composed of very short sequences. Fans who write Destiel fics using them usually only have one short sentence or an image with very little context to go from. This is similar to the use of prompts, something that is very popular among fanfiction writers. Prompts are relatively short bits of text that are intended to inspire the creation of a fanfic (or another fanwork). For instance: “Character A and character B go to Ikea together.” They are often shared on social media in the form of lists that writers are free to use as they wish. Just like prompts, trailers are used as a small starting point to create a whole story and give fanfic writers a lot of freedom to imagine the context around it which participates in their popularity among slash fans. Sneak peeks and promotional pictures work in the same way, only with variations in the amount of context they provide.

The promos that have drawn the most interest from Destiel fans can be separated into three categories depending on the reactions they may provoke. Some of them contradict what fans would hope for in Dean and Castiel’s relationship and thus require to be ‘fixed’ in fanfiction. For instance, the trailer for 9.03 shows a newly human Castiel kissing a woman who has not been introduced yet. It is not surprising that fans who had been excited about seeing how Castiel’s humanity would affect his relationship with Dean would turn to fanfiction to give it a meaning that does not contradict the idea of Dean and Cas being in love with each other. Other promos are interesting because the pain and suffering that they show can be used to inspire hurt/comfort fanfics. This is the case for the trailer of season 12.09 that shows Castiel counting the time and crying alone while the Winchesters are imprisoned, and the trailer for season 12.12 that shows him about to die in front of Dean. When presented with these scenes, slash writers may be inclined to imagine a scenario where they later turn into a moment of tenderness and intimacy between the two characters even though they are aware that it is very unlikely to actually happen in the show. The final category of promos is the ones that announce a scene that looks like it will be enjoyed by Destiel fans. For instance, the sneak peek for “Byzantium” (14.08), nicknamed the “sad gay dad promo” by AO3 user xylodemon, shows Dean and Cas worrying about Jack and Cas telling Dean to go to him. This isolated moment makes the characters look like worried parents in a very domestic way and can inspire fans to write more about them being a couple raising their son. The trailers for the second part of season 15 and for 15.18 are also a good example of this. Both of them show images of Dean crying in front of a smiling Castiel and Dean wearing the same jacket, on the ground with a bloody handprint on his shoulder that looks like the one Cas gave him in season four. Many fans connected these scenes to Castiel’s deal with the empty and wrote about how

they may be part of him confessing his love to Dean. In this case, the promos correspond to what the fans want to see in the series and are simply expanded upon in fanfics. We can note that these three categories correspond to the model of oppositional / negotiated / preferred readings proposed by Stuart Hall. This shows that, like the series itself, promos can inspire all three kinds of readings and that they can all serve as motivation for slash fans to write fanfiction.

In addition to inspiring the production of fanfics, trailers and sneak peeks also seem to have an impact on slash fans' engagement with the series. Indeed, several fans have already researched what effect promos might have on *Destiel* fans by analyzing the show's ratings. In a study conducted from episode 3 to episode 22 of the tenth season, Tumblr user *northern-sparrow* demonstrated that the ratings of an episode are affected by whether or not Dean and Castiel interact in its promo ("Supernatural Statistics: Castiel Effect"). The study shows that compared to the previous two episodes, the ratings tend to drop by an average of 100,000 viewers when Castiel does not appear in the promo and by an average of 60,000 viewers when he is in it but does not interact with Dean. When the promo of an episode shows the two of them interact in any way, the numbers of viewers tend to rise by 80,000 viewers on average. It is typical for a show's ratings to progressively decrease during the course of a season which makes the rises shown in this study all the more significant. To go further, I looked at the ratings for the episodes promoted by the trailers discussed in this thesis and noted that they all increase compared to the episode before them. These results may be affected by the fact that episodes featuring Castiel tend to have higher ratings than those where he does not appear and it is impossible to say how much of this is due to people loving his character and how much is due to slash fans being excited about his possible interactions with Dean (*occamshipper*). Still, *northern-sparrow*'s study shows that the presence or lack of *Destiel* content in the trailers has a measurable impact on the fans' engagement with the show. It seems that, for some slash fans, the contents of the trailer will determine whether or not they will watch the episode. Interestingly, though producers are certainly aware of this, interactions between Dean and Castiel are not often shown in the promos. This might be connected to the way producers use trailers to reinforce their vision of the text which was discussed above. The decision not to advertise Dean and Cas together despite the impact it seems to have on the show's ratings reflects the fact that this pairing does not correspond to the "preferred interpretation" offered by the producers in charge of marketing the series (Jonathan Gray 72).

The popularity of official paratexts among slash writers and readers can be explained by the fact that they show the characters — or the actors in costume — in new situations with little context, which is great for writers who want to work their imagination. References to these paratexts are expected to be understood by fanfic readers and can therefore be used without too much explanation. Nevertheless, the official paratexts of *Supernatural* are not meant to encourage the queer reading of Dean and Castiel’s relationship but rather to reaffirm that it should be read as entirely platonic. Slash fans are usually too secure in their opinions to be deterred by this message, because of their own reading of the series but also sometimes thanks to outside elements that make them confident in the belief that Dean and Cas should not be kept from becoming a couple.

#### **D. Hoping for a Romantic Resolution**

Slash fans often disagree on the importance of their ships becoming canon. It is generally accepted that slash is primarily about enjoying the idea of two characters together and producing or consuming fanworks about them but for some fans, it is also important to think that they will become a couple on-screen. The results of a survey conducted on shipping by Fansplaining show that, even though canonicity is not a priority for most fans, it still matters to many of them to some degree (Klink). Caring or not about whether their favorite pairing will become canon changes the approach that slash writers have to the series. Those who do care are more motivated to show the potential of the pairing or to prove that it will be “endgame.” I would argue that, in general, fans care more about their ship becoming canon when it is a realistic possibility. Because of years of queerbaiting, Destiel fans are very divided on the question, some thinking that the producers have made it clear that they did not support this pairing, and others believing that they were always planning to make it canon. These opinions were affected by the changing context around the series in terms of LGBT+ representation and by rumors of people working against the writer’s plan to make Destiel canon that continued even after the show ended.

##### **a. The Improvement of Queer Representation on TV**

Dean Winchester and Castiel having been together on screen for more than twelve years, the possibility of them becoming a couple evolved a lot from their first introduction to their last episode. In 2008, when Castiel was introduced, the percentage of LGBT+ series

regulars on television was 2,6% (GLAAD). None of them was the main character and they often had secondary roles in an ensemble cast. Producers had no interest in portraying more homosexual relationships as there was little demand for it. Edwards notes that viewers “did not consider gay relationships as entertainment” and that networks had a hard time trying to make heterosexual audiences connect with homosexual characters (26). Because of this, Dean and Cas becoming a couple was not a conceivable option. The idea that Dean, one of the main characters, could come out as a bisexual man was unimaginable for the producers and viewers alike, even those who loved Destiel and saw the potential they had as a couple. Early DeanCas fans were not bothered by the fact that this pairing would probably never become canon and simply enjoyed being part of the fandom.

Each year that went by between Dean and Castiel’s first meeting and today saw new advancements in the representation of queer characters on television. In 2009, *Modern Family* and *Glee* premiered on ABC and Fox, two very popular series that participated in changing attitudes about LGBT+ characters by leaving a lot of space for queer storylines (Edwards). Like *Supernatural*, *Glee* was also a precursor in the evolution of fan-producer relationships and had a very vocal and invested fanbase (Stork). The progressive inclusion of a large cast of recurring gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters in this series showed the possibility of producers listening to their queer fans asking for representation.

Thanks to the work of organizations like GLAAD and insistent demands from viewers, queer representation has increased and improved steadily during the last decade. Recurring LGBT+ characters can be found in all kinds of shows, some focused on queer stories and experiences (*The L Word*, *Queer As Folk...*), and others where queer characters are part of a bigger story (*Sense8*, *Shadowhunters...*). Nowadays, the CW is the leading broadcast network in terms of LGBT+ character inclusion with shows like *Batwoman* that featured the first lesbian superhero on television as its sole lead character. This progress in terms of queer representation while *Supernatural* continued airing made the idea of Dean and Castiel becoming a couple less and less improbable. More and more fans thus started to expect that the homoerotic subtext in the show meant that the pairing would be made canon at some point. Those who were aware of the concept of queerbaiting also demanded that producers stop their teasing and act on everything they did to suggest this possibility. As a result, many slash fans used fanfiction not only to play with the concept of Dean and Cas as a couple but also to vocalize their desire to see them together on screen.

The improvement of queer representation on television also impacted the reaction slash fans had to the ending of *Supernatural*. Indeed, many fans expected Castiel to come

back after 15.18 because they knew that producers were aware of the Bury Your Gays trope and expected that they would want to avoid it. The CW has already received virulent criticism over the death of Lexa in the series *The 100* that is often cited as a prime example of Bury Your Gays (Bridges; Waggoner). This character's death provoked outrage among fans who protested through very efficient social media campaigns that succeeded in making the show's ratings drop and in causing some announcers to withdraw for the remainder of the season (Bridges 129; Waggoner 1884). Many people hoped that the importance of these protests would cause producers to be more mindful of the way they represent queer characters in the future. Bridges explains that Lexa's death "set off a wave of publicity that sparked what we can only hope will result in long-term change in how American TV creators will view their ethical responsibility to vulnerable segments of their audiences" (130). Castiel not coming back physically in the last episode provoked a similar outrage among *Supernatural* fans, aggravated by the belief that producers should now know better than to end a queer character's storyline in this way. The fan's indignation was felt in the production of fanfics. In the two months following the finale, 27% of all Destiel fics were tagged with the term "fix-it"<sup>8</sup> which indicates that the work is meant to fix issues with canon that the author disagrees with. Part of this percentage is due to the generally poor quality of the finale and many controversial decisions taken by the producers but Castiel's absence certainly played a significant part. Overall, the frustration of knowing that Destiel could realistically become canon and never seeing it happen seemed to motivate slash fans to be more active and vocal.

### **b. Rumors of Behind the Scenes Conspiracies**

The fans' frustration at regularly seeing Dean and Castiel's relationship on the verge of becoming romantic without ever crossing the line inevitably caused rumors to grow about people working behind the scenes to keep the pairing from ever becoming canon. Several of these rumors circulated in fan spaces over the years, all of them similar in the idea that Dean and Cas were originally supposed to become a couple or do something romantic at some point in the series but that one or several people involved in the creation process kept it from happening at the last minute. To be clear, my goal here is not to comment on whether or not these rumors are well-founded but rather to observe how they came to be and how they impacted slash fans. The rumors gained a lot of momentum because of two significant events that led fans to believe that scripts were modified to keep the feelings between Dean and Cas from becoming too explicit.

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8 Compared to 2% for the same period the year prior.

The first fandom-wide rumor about a script being changed concerned the crypt scene in 8.17 discussed previously. As I demonstrated earlier, this episode was already important for Destiel fans who saw it as proof that Cas was in love with Dean. Misha Collins was the first to mention a change in the script during a panel at Emerald City Comic-Con in March 2013:

There was a line in the last episode I shot, there was a line where Jensen's character, whatever his thing is, says, "I love you" to Castiel...That line didn't make the final cut, so, for all you know, I'm lying.

At the time, there was no way to confirm what episode Collins was talking about but, when season eight came out, fans speculated that the line had not been deleted but rather modified into the "I need you" that Dean says to Castiel to break him out of his brainwashing. This hypothesis was supported by the jokes about Dean being in love with Cas that Collins made in the gag reel of that scene. This rumor did not grow much until Fangasm posted a summary of a meet and greet with Jensen Ackles at Toronto Con in October 2013 in which this sentence was immediately singled out by fans:

In the scene with Cas beating Dean up, there was consideration of Dean saying 'I love you,' but it didn't seem like something Dean would actually come out and say, so he said 'We're family'.

The line "We're family" being the one that precedes "I need you," this was taken as confirmation that the speculations were true and that the original script actually said "We're family. We love you. I love you." The article was later modified with notes from the author clarifying that they were only sharing their personal recollection of the event and that there could be some differences between what they wrote and what Ackles actually said but the first version had already spread around the fandom ("The rumor that Jensen..."). Because of the formulation, many fans believed that Ackles was the one who was unhappy with the declaration of love and was responsible for the change even though the author of the article never indicated who made the decision. This interpretation may have been helped by the fact that Jensen Ackles already had the reputation of being particularly uncomfortable with the idea of Destiel and his character being bisexual (Brenan, 2017). The discussions around the 8.17 script cemented the idea that the actor was not only against DeanCas but was also responsible for it not becoming canon. However, for most slash fans, the important part was not who was responsible but rather what it meant for the line to be included in the original script. This reinforced the belief that Destiel should be canon and that slash fans were right in their claim that the two characters belong together. Despite this happening almost eight years ago, the rumors around the changes of the 8.17 script had such an impact on the fandom that they are still regularly brought up in fan conversations today.

The second important rumor about a script being modified to censor the romance between Dean and Castiel is much more recent and concerns 15.18. As I mentioned earlier, fans were extremely unhappy with Cas's ending and there were already rumors circulating saying that the official version of his absence from the finale being due to Covid restrictions was a cover-up to hide that he had been removed from the script to make sure that the confession would not be addressed again. The idea that writers, producers, or CW executives had intervened at the last minute to keep Dean from reciprocating Castiel's feelings was already present but it impressively gained in popularity after the Latin American version of "Despair" was released on November 25th, 2020. In this version — quickly nicknamed "the Spanish dub" by the fans — the line "Don't do this, Cas" pronounced by Dean right after Castiel's "I love you" was replaced with "Y yo a ti, Cas" ("And I you, Cas"). This very quickly spread among slash fans who immediately began debating how such a big change could have taken place. The most popular theory was that the script of the episode had been changed very late in the creation process and that the Latin American translating team had been working with an earlier version where Dean said "I love you too." People who supported this theory pointed out that the awkward editing of the scene could mean that they had filmed something different from the version that was aired in the end. The network was pointed as responsible for censoring Dean's bisexuality in order not to alienate their more conservative viewers. Fans protested against the erasure of such an important queer narrative in *Supernatural* with the hashtag #TheySilencedYou that trended worldwide on Twitter for several days. The CW was accused of homophobia and of having used slash fans for profit without ever showing them the respect they deserved (Pell).

For a lot of slash fans the Spanish Dub — paired with the controversial finale that had been released only a few days before — was the last drop in a long history of queerbaiting that made them cut ties with the official owners of the series to exclusively enjoy the transformative aspect of the fandom and reclaim the narrative as their own. Seeing a version of the series where Dean Winchester was openly bisexual and in love with Castiel inspired fanfic writers to continue on sharing this interpretation which they consider to be better than the official canon (Baker-Whitelaw).

For many slash fans, seeing that Destiel was never made fully canon even when it could have been, became a motivation to be even more active in transformative fan spaces. It seems that, over the years, producers have noticed this phenomenon and cultivated the fans' frustration which, added to many purely accidental elements, created the perfect conditions



for the emergence of a large and active transformative fandom. This frustration that *Supernatural* slash fans have always felt with the series due to the enormous unfulfilled potential of Dean and Castiel's relationship — which reached its peak during the eventful last month of its broadcast — explains why fanfiction has become so important in the show's fandom. Indeed, on top of their purely entertaining aspect, fanfics allow fans to negotiate with a canon they do not always agree with and to assert their own interpretations. Dissatisfied fans can thus turn to it in order to reclaim the power to give meaning to the source text

## PART II

# The Complex Relationship Between Slash Writers and the Source Text

The elements put forward in the first part demonstrate that *Supernatural* provides abundant material for Destiel fans to work with but seldom meets their expectations in a satisfactory manner. Fans have plenty to draw from to imagine the potential of this pairing but are kept in a state of permanent frustration. As a result, DeanCas fanfic writers tend to have negotiated or oppositional readings of the source text (Hall). Fanfiction exists for many reasons but it has always been a tool used by unsatisfied fans to speak against some of the producers' decisions or simply to give more weight to interpretations that are not sanctioned by the original author. It is often used by fans to challenge the sovereignty of the producers and to re-appropriate the power to interpret the story as they wish. This can be seen in Destiel fanfiction which shows the tendency of slash fans to be in constant negotiation with canon, sometimes going as far as to rewrite, ignore, or criticize it to better serve their interpretations.

### A. Fanfiction as a Means of Wrestling for Control

Even though fanfiction is generally recognized as a way to challenge the authority of the producers, its primary goal is not to argue about the legitimacy of the original text (Busse 2017, 99-100). Even when fans are displeased with canon, they still recognize its authority (though there are many virulent debates about what counts as canon and what does not in fan communities). Fan interpretations are regrouped under the term "fanon" and this distinction shows the existence of a hierarchy between official and fan readings (Nordin 47). Instead of completely dismissing canon, fanfic writers work to create their own version of it which may be in partial or complete opposition to the author's intentions. This is often seen as a power struggle between fans and producers over the control of the meaning-making process. This appropriation of canon by the fans has historically received mixed reactions from producers but despite the general consensus veering toward acceptance of fanworks in recent years, there is still a push for authors to be considered as the sole authoritative voice over their work. Fanfiction is thus often seen as the fans resisting the original creator's authority in an

illustration of Barthes' death of the author but it is more about shifting the power of the author-function to interpretive communities (Busse, 2017).

#### **a. Producers' Reactions to Fanfiction: Moving Between Resistance and Acceptance**

The struggle for interpretive power forced on producers by their transformative fans has been met with varying degrees of resistance and acceptance over the years. Originally, fanfiction writers were mostly seen as trying to steal the story away from its original author and were met with reactions going from disapproval to threats of legal action. Anne Rice, the author of the *Vampire Chronicles*, is often mentioned by fans as a prime example of creators trying to regulate the production of fanfiction in order to keep hegemonic control over their story. In the 1990s, Rice was rather vocal about her disapproval of fanfics of all kinds but she did not take action until 2000 when she decided to ban the writing of fanfiction based on her books ("Anne Rice"). Several fanfic writers reported receiving Cease and Desist orders and in 2001, the website FanFiction.net responded to a request from Rice's lawyers by deleting all of the works based on the *Vampire Chronicles* they hosted. Most creators did not go to such extreme lengths but Rice's reaction to transformative works based on her books reflects the general distaste for fanfiction that existed at the time. Slash fiction was even more disapproved of with some creators supporting and even encouraging the creation of fan works but trying to regulate the existence of anything seen as too transformative. This was the case for J. K. Rowling who had "publicly sanctioned Harry Potter fanfic which is 'not obscene'" (Fathallah 2013, 44). Slash was not directly cited but the tendency of slash writers to freely mix sex and romance meant that, for many people, it would automatically fall into the "obscene" category (Busse 2017, 81). Lucasfilms was also known for trying to regulate fan activity (Jenkins 2006, 150-154). In 2002, the company released a statement saying "fandom is about celebrating the story the way it is" making it clear that slash fiction was absolutely forbidden (Harmon).

During the last two decades, the responses to fanfiction from original authors gradually shifted to acceptance, and even sometimes encouragement. Eric Kripke, the creator of *Supernatural*, was one of the precursors of this change with the incorporation of slash fans and slash fiction in the series in 2009 with the character of Becky. Even though she did not positively represent fans, Fathallah notes that she was still considered by many as an "official sanction of fanfic" from Kripke himself (2013, 15). Since then, more and more creators have publicly shared their support of transformative works. For instance, Bryan Fuller, the creator of the TV series *Hannibal*, is known for regularly encouraging his slash fans and sharing their

works on social media (@BryanFuller). Some popular authors have even published their own fanfics, like Neil Gaiman who received a Hugo Award for a piece of writing telling the story of Sherlock Holmes in the Lovecraftian universe, or Cassandra Clare who used to write Harry Potter slash fiction (@neilhimsel, “Cassandra Claire”). As a result, fanfiction and slash fans are now much more understood and accepted than they used to be. Fan writers do not have to fear legal actions anymore as long as they do not make profits from their works (Fathallah 2013, 46). Some corporations have even noticed the financial potential of fanfiction and have tried — often unsuccessfully — to profit from it (Fathallah 2013, 43). Many producers also recognize that they can benefit from the “added value produced by the labor of viewers” and are thus more likely to encourage the production of fanfics (Andrejevic 49).

However, this better perception of fanworks in recent years does not mean that producers have relinquished their interpretive power to fans. On the contrary, canon is still meant to be seen as the “Word of God” and to be respected by viewers (Busse 2017, 104). By unashamedly going against the producers’ preferred readings, slash fans thus disturb the hierarchy of this relationship.

### **b. Killing the Author?**

Fanfiction is generally recognized as a challenge to the author’s authority. This idea has always been present in fan studies but the concept of fans as resistant readers was popularized by Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers*. His definition of transformative fan practices as “poaching” is often related to Barthes’s “birth of the reader [...] at the cost of the death of the author” (Barthes 148). Indeed, Jenkins theorizes that fans can pick and choose meanings from the original text in order to shape their perception of it (46). This poaching is done in a way that can seem to be “frighteningly out of control” to the dominant perspective (18). The intentions of the author — or, in the case of TV series, the producers — are not necessarily ignored but their power is deconstructed to give way to the viewers’ interpretations. Jenkins explains, “unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise, the fans assert their own right to form interpretations” (18). Alexandra Herzog illustrates how this applies to fanfiction writers in a rigorous and compelling study of Author Notes (A/Ns). A/Ns are messages from the writer of a fanfic to their readers at the beginning and/or the end of a chapter. Herzog’s work demonstrates how A/Ns allow writers to exert their power over the original text and the original author (1.3). She explains:

The fan author moves to take the metatext away from the original producers, claims it as his or her own, appropriates it in the form of the fan fiction story, and simultaneously

turns it over to the readers. The instances of power [...] are thus negotiated by the initial act of opening up the metatexts for interpretation by its fan fiction-producing audience, and find their expression in A/Ns that give voice to the community's fundamental disavowal of the metatexts' creators' authorial rights (3.1).

The transformative aspect of fanfiction empowers its readers, giving them the ability to end the tyranny of the producers and to reclaim authority over the meaning-making process (2.4). Writing fanfics thus allows fans not only to produce their own interpretations but also to actively dismiss the original author's preferred reading. For slash fans, who often have to work against the producers' intentions, this is an opportunity to regain control of the narrative and to enforce their own reading of the relationship they are invested in.

This empowerment of fanfic writers allows them to use their work as a means to protest some of the producers' decisions and to correct what they perceive as mistakes in canon. By rewriting the story and transforming the original work, fans can point out what they dislike in the source. This can be done directly by stating in the fanfic or the A/N that a plot point or a character's actions should not have happened for one reason or another or should have been done differently. This is the case in "Heirloom" by Tibbins which is based on the 300<sup>th</sup> episode in which the Winchesters' father temporarily comes back to life. This fic criticizes the positive portrayal of John Winchester in the episode by extensively describing how he was abusive to his sons, and particularly to Dean. The critique of the source text can also happen in a more indirect way when the fanfic writer decides to simply ignore the elements they disagree with, slightly changing the universe they draw from to exclude the parts they dislike. The process of setting a fanfic in a universe that diverges narrowly from canon is called "canon-divergence" in fan lingo. It is not necessarily used to criticize the producers' decisions but it is a way for fans to show what elements of the canon they disagree with. For instance, canon-divergent *Supernatural* fics in which the events of the finale never happened have become quite popular in the fandom. This illustrates the fan's "power to devalue the metatext in disavowing the trueness/correctness" of the original author's creation (Herzog 3.3). Canon is respected and conserved insofar as it corresponds to what the fanfic writer expects from it. However, the name "canon divergence" itself shows that works that fall under this category are not usually seen as replacements of canon but rather as "what-if?" scenarios that do not really undermine the authority of the source text. As Fathallah writes: "fanfic still negotiates a subordinated relationship to its canons" (2013, 1).

Though fanfiction is a great means of empowerment for TV shows viewers, it thus does not completely kill the original author. Busse notes that "many fans do view authors as the primary, if not the sole, arbiter of meaning" which is shown by the importance given to

authorial comments in fannish debates (2017, 104). What to make, then, of slash fans' tendency to easily dismiss the authors' intended meaning? Busse explains this paradox by citing Michel Foucault's author function:

Foucault's author function is both empowering, in that the author becomes the founder of all that the initial text effects, and disempowering, insofar as the author cannot control or dictate these consequent works. Fans very much regard the source text in such a way—as authoritative and generative, but also open to expansion (2017, 107).

In other words, fanfiction does not fully dismiss the importance of the original author. On the contrary, they are highly regarded as the creator of the source text who has authority over the original intended meaning. In the case of TV shows, this power is shared by producers but the idea remains the same. Fanfiction should not be considered as a way for fans to rip the ability to produce meaning away from the original author but rather as a complex negotiation over the importance of fan interpretations. It is less about the producers being dismissed than the fans being given authority in the meaning-making process, putting them on an equal footing to interpret the source text. Fans can thus be considered to be part of what Busse calls an “interpretive community” where the power to create meaning partially reclaimed from the author is shared between all fanfic authors and their readers.

### **c. The Power of Interpretive Communities**

In *Framing Fan Fiction*, Kristina Busse explains that she borrows the concept of interpretive communities from reader-response theorist Stanley Fish who defines them as “made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions” (171). Fanfiction writers and readers are a real-life illustration of this concept and demonstrate that meaning is not directed by the author and the text alone (Busse 2017, 30). Interpretive communities originate the fan text which can be defined as the “entirety of stories and critical commentary written in a fandom [...] in which a large number of potential meanings, directions, and outcomes co-reside” (Busse 2014, 3). This term is similar but slightly different from fanon which refers to the different interpretations present in these stories. Those “potential meanings” do not exist to stay static and independent from each other, they are in constant evolution, influenced by the sum of fanworks produced in a fandom. Busse explains that “each interpretive fan community shares central readings and values” which affect the way fans interpret the text but they also host “continuous negotiations over what actually constitutes the meaning of a text” (Busse 2017, 100). Interpretive communities empower fans,

who are able to give meanings to the source text that can become just as respected as the original author's intentions, and also places fanfic writers in a position of authority that reproduces authorly schemas and fan/producer power negotiations.

As Verlee Van Steenhuyse explains in her article entitled "The Writing and Reading of Fan Fiction and Transformation Theory", members of interpretive communities tend to "agree on particular readings of the primary text(s)" that are generally expected to be found in fanworks (5). These readings can become so wildly popular within a community that they are held in the same regard as canon elements, known and respected by most members. Just like fans have the power to validate or disregard what happens in the source text, they can give importance to entirely fan-made readings until they are given just as much importance as canon. For instance, though Castiel's wings are only shown as shadows in the series, fans have collectively decided to depict them as black, and sometimes iridescent (see, "An Angel's Wings" by angelofthequeers). Any fan writer or artist who chooses to represent them differently usually does so knowing that they are defying community-held expectations, maybe even more than if they had written a canon-divergent fanfic. Van Steenhuyse also notes a similarity between canon and fanon regarding their use in fanfics held in high regard by fans. She explains that "fans tend to value fics the most when they both adhere to canon and diverge from it" and that it is the same for popular fan readings (5). Many fanfics studied for this thesis demonstrate the fans' appreciation for works that both follow fanon and go against it. For example, "A feeling that I belonged" written by perilously confirms the popular idea that Dean is scared of his feelings for Castiel but defies expectations by making Cas openly and casually talk about his love for the hunter. This shows how official and fan interpretations are often considered similarly thus placing transformative writers at the same level as producers when it comes to interpretive power.

The empowerment of fanfic authors through interpretive communities allows them to gain authority over the story they produce. Their writing is still influenced by the source text and the producers' intended meaning but, when it comes to their own works, fanfic writers are granted a lot of power by the fan community. This interpretive power is different from the one creators of a TV series exert over their work. Indeed, as many academics have pointed out, fanfiction is a collaborative art form where writers and readers are all involved in the creation of the story (Busse; Fathallah; Herzog). However, as Herzog points out, the models of authorship expressed in fanfiction oscillate "between intensely collaborative and firmly prescriptive" which means that, despite working in collaboration with other fans, fanfic writers still assume a position of authority (1.3). For Herzog, the figure of the "Author-God"

is deconstructed in transformative works only to be transferred to fan writers who grant themselves the power to “provide lines of interpretation for their audience that they fiercely refuse to accept from the metatext and its producers” (4.12).

Though the authority of the original author is far from being completely dismissed in transformative fiction, interpretive communities allow fan writers to also become powerful figures with control over the interpretation of their stories thus further reducing the gap between fan and producer. Here, the “birth of the reader” is not done at the cost of the “death of the author,” fans and producers are simply put at the same level regarding their role in the meaning-making process.

## **B. *Supernatural* Fans Negotiating With Canon**

As I demonstrated in the previous part, canon is never completely dismissed by slash fans and it is generally seen as an authoritative voice that should be respected. Even *Supernatural* slash fans who are known to be particularly resistant to the source material tend to value stories that work around canon rather than go against it. In an article about Sam/Dean fanfiction, Tosenberger says that “too strong a focus upon slash as a subversion of canon can mask consideration of the ways in which the canon itself may make queer readings available” (1.3). Fathallah expands on this by explaining that, “fanfic inflects and alters statements from the source text through re-iteration with variation, using hints, lines and references to create alternative explanations and expansions” (2013, 79). This idea seems to be very present among Destiel fans who often prefer stories that use canon elements to demonstrate the love between Dean and Cas to stories that diverge from the series too much. This is possibly connected to the fact that fans of this pairing have always been very intent on proving its validity as was shown in the first chapter. In any case, most of the fanfics studied for this thesis seem to demonstrate a desire from writers not to oppose canon but rather to reclaim canon as the romantic story of Dean and Castiel. To do so, they give more importance to themes and relationships that correspond to this interpretation and push aside the ones that do not. They also make use of the ambiguity and subtext present in the series which allows them to freely interpret some scenes and elements as romantic.



### a. The Importance of Canon Elements in Fan Stories

As Kristina Busse explains in *Framing Fan Fiction*, the source text is a framework that needs to be obeyed to some degree by fan writers who are aware that their readers will most likely be very familiar with it (125). Busse describes this as a limitation for writers but it is also a source of narrative freedom as it allows them to make references that will be fully understood by most of their readers and avoid long descriptions or bothersome explanations. Van Steenhuyse acknowledges this as an integral part of fanfiction as an immersive literary genre (3). Most of the fanfics selected for this thesis make references to previous *Supernatural* episodes that demonstrate the writer's deep knowledge of canon and their assumption that it is the same for their readers. In some cases, these references are a discreet nod to other invested fans which can easily be missed by more casual readers. For instance, "Lift Up Your Hearts" by domesticadventures imagines how Castiel might come back to life after his death in 12.23 and makes a discreet parallel between his resurrection and Dean's in 4.01. To be understood as such, this parallel requires readers to clearly remember the events of an episode that aired almost a decade prior to the publication of the fic but the comments show that it was picked up on and appreciated by many:

- Thette: You echoed Lazarus Rising (4.01) so damn well, it was a punch in the gut.
- Thewoman1: I especially liked idea of Cas trying to climb out of where they buried him, it's a great parallel of Dean clawing his way out of his own grave in Lazarus Rising.

Other works rely more heavily on past episodes and can hardly be understood without having seen or remembering them. This is the case for dothraki\_shieldmaiden's "Weights on my ankles" which takes place after Dean and Cas's fallout in 15.03. In the fic, Castiel decides to go back to the place he went when he was human and left to fend for himself in 9.06. It is clear that the writer expects their readers to share their knowledge of the episode as it is impossible to fully understand the work without understanding the many references made to it.

The canon elements included in fanfiction are sometimes meant to strengthen the connection between the work and the series but they also often allow writers to demonstrate that romantic interpretations of the show are possible and logical. As I mentioned previously, Destiel fans are often intent on proving that their ship is not simply a fan creation and that it is strongly supported by canon. Fanfiction writers giving a romantic turn to elements pulled from the show is a good way to show the potential of Dean and Castiel's relationship and that, even though the producers may not have intended these readings, they are far from

improbable. This is helped by the fact that many fanfics are written in the free-indirect discourse which allows writers to “mention thoughts, emotions, and observations as they occur to the character” (Van Steenhuyse 7). Many fanfics, especially those written for early seasons episodes, address the stares and personal space issues between Dean and Cas and interpret those as a manifestation of their feelings for each other. In “Epilogue”, Jayne L writes about Cas staring at Dean from the point of view of his future self:

And Castiel will be looking back, because he always does. He'll be staring, searching and intense, because he doesn't yet know any other way of looking at Dean, can't yet understand why he'd ever look at Dean without wanting, wholly, to see him. [...] When he looks at Dean, he wants; in comparison, his exile from Heaven, his weakening grace, and the depths of his doubt become, somehow, bearable. And so, he stares. The physical space between them will be entirely respectable. They'll both want, increasingly, to close it.

This extract demonstrates how, by giving readers access to the internal thoughts of characters, fanfic writers can shift the reading of the homoerotic subtext present in the series to something more explicitly romantic. Here, the point of view is interesting because the future Castiel is someone that can be trusted to understand the feelings of his past self and Dean. Readers thus know that his interpretation is the correct one and this idea can then come to affect their understanding of the source text (Busse 2014, 3). Sometimes, fanfiction can be used to challenge the preferred reading of an episode in particular. This is the case for “The Unmade Bed” written by 60r3d0m which is written in poetic form and portrays Dean thinking back on the events of 12.19. The entire fanfic uses direct quotes and references to the episode and mixes them with the internal dialogue of a Dean who is deeply in love with Castiel. For instance, this extract uses lines from the scene when Cas comes to Dean’s room and tries to give back the mixtape he gifted him:

*“We didn’t know what happened to you.”*

I didn’t know.

*“We were worried.”*

I was worried.

You don’t return a fucking mixtape, you idiot.

That means...

I love you.

The lines responding to the quotes pulled from the episode are clearly supposed to be what Dean actually meant when he was speaking, or maybe what he truly wanted to say. The last three lines do not directly respond to a quote but readers with enough knowledge of the series can easily understand that it is similarly associated with the line “it’s a gift, you keep those” that Dean says when Cas tries to return the mixtape. This passage is a good example of

negotiated reading as it proposes a romantic interpretation of the dialogue without opposing anything that was said in the show. As we can see throughout the fic, the writer takes advantage of the ambiguity of the source text and the many things left to interpretation.

It is interesting to note that a lot of references to canon made by fanfic writers also refer to the popular fan interpretations associated with them. This is linked to the interconnection of fanworks that Busse describes when she explains that “a fanfiction writer cannot write without at least implicitly acknowledging the fan text that came before” (2017, 114). Some episodes, due to their homoerotic subtext or potential for romantic interpretations, become more popular in fan discussions and take a more important place in the fan text. Fan writers are thus more likely to reference them in their works and to expect their readers to know the interpretations they are associated with. Anne Kustriz develops on this idea in *Seriality and Transmediality in the Fan Multiverse*:

Because fan works often respond to each other and build upon each other’s experiments and insights, knowledge of a fan work’s position within larger conversations, tropes, and genre forms appreciably enriches a reader’s or viewer’s ability to trace the story’s baseline and interpret multiple layers of serial narrative interactions (239).

To go back to the example of “Weights on my ankles,” readers are not only expected to have knowledge of the episode but also of the fan conversations that have taken place around it. Indeed, 9.06 is known for a moment that fans commonly call the “fanfiction gap”: Dean takes Cas into his car and asks him where he wants to go at nighttime and the next scene shows him driving him to work in the morning with no explanation of what happened in between. Fans writing about this episode are expected to give their interpretation of what could have happened during this time (see, “Adaptation” by cadignan and “There Are Many Things” by imogenbynight). When dothraki\_shieldmaiden writes a flashback of that night from Castiel’s perspective, they are thus responding to the fan text and the expectations that come with it, something that other fans will be able to catch up on to enrich their reading. Some references can even have multiple levels of reading depending on how familiar readers are with fan discussions. This is the case for the parallels between Dean needing and loving Cas that can be found in multiple fanfics in this corpus. First, those parallels reference the homoerotically charged crypt scene from 8.17 and Dean’s supplicant “I need you” to Castiel. This is very clear in thestoryinsideme’s “Traverse” with the line: “Dean needs him. In the past, Castiel did not realize what Dean meant when he said those words to him, but now Castiel has felt human longing and desire and everything is changed.” Additionally, readers who are aware of the rumors concerning the original script for 8.17 can see this interchangeability between the words “need” and “love” as a reference to the “I love you” line that was allegedly erased from

the episode. Getting this reference allows for a new level of reading for these passages that can be seen, for instance, as a protest of the removal of this line and a way to subtly include it back into the narrative. A profound knowledge of both canon and fan text is thus necessary to fully understand the meaning given to elements borrowed from the original text by fanfic writers. As we can see, in the world of fanfiction, canon is often respected and used to enrich the readers' experience. Canon elements and fan interpretations become intertwined and are thus sometimes seen as equally important.

#### **b. Bringing Romance to the Forefront: Centering and Decentering Important Themes**

In order to write love stories based on a TV show that is decidedly not about romance, slash writers have to give more importance to themes that do not necessarily get developed in the series. In general, the themes from the show are not suppressed or replaced but rather pushed aside or emphasized depending on how well they serve the story fanfic writers want to tell. In *Supernatural*, since Castiel is not one of the two main characters, many aspects of his relationship with the brothers — or with Dean — are broached in a few episodes but never become central in the narrative. Fans thus have to shift the usual focus of the series in their works and give more importance to themes that are secondary in canon. This is an example of what Jenkins describes as the act of “poaching” and shows how fans are able to play with what is made available to them in canon to write their own stories.

In Destiel fanfiction, one of the most common themes is the parallel between Castiel wanting to stay with Dean but feeling like he is unwanted has to leave and Dean wanting Castiel to stay but being unable to tell him so. This idea is present in one way or another in no less than fourteen fanfics selected for this thesis. This theme is definitely present in the series and is an important part of Dean and Cas's relationship but it is only developed in a handful of episodes (notably in 6.20, 9.06, 15.03, and 15.09) and the problem never gets completely resolved as the characters never directly talk about it. In a lot of Destiel fanfiction, Dean and Cas getting together and having a stable relationship is directly connected to their ability to express their emotions on the subject and to finally realize that they both want the same thing. This is the case in “Stay” by aeli\_kindara where the characters' first kiss directly stems from Dean asking Cas to stay and him answering positively. This is yet another example of slash fans writing about what they feel is missing in the show and showing how the potential for romance is definitely present. A comment by user rustling\_pages on “Stay” shows the importance of expanding on canon themes for fans: “This is perfection. It's a natural

progression of what we've had in the show, while making the most out of canon. [...]” This comment also shows that using themes present in the original text allows writers to make their works feel more connected to the series and thus more satisfying for readers looking for a story that feels like it could be canon. Several other themes are similarly given more importance than in the series and given a romantic spin like the question of whether or not Dean only wants Cas around him because he is useful or Cas being the one who saved Dean from hell. This allows fans to have their own perspective of canon which allows for a romantic reading of Dean and Castiel's relationship without diverging too much from the show.

As a consequence of slash writers pushing smaller parts of canon forward in their stories, some themes that are central to the show become almost dismissed in Destiel fanfics. Indeed, when those themes do not particularly serve the writer's goal to tell a love story between Dean and Cas, they are pushed aside and become secondary to make space for more romantic storylines. For Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, fanfiction writers “remove undesired elements to create stories which because of the excision follow an alternative narrative path” (43). While this can be true, it is more common for writers not to completely get rid of these elements but rather to give them less importance than they would normally have in canon.

One particularly good example of this is the secondary place taken by the relationship between the Winchester brothers in DeanCas fanfiction. In the series, Sam and Dean's relationship is at the heart of everything and its evolution is always central to the story. However, while Destiel fans are also fans of the show and evidently care about the brother's relationship, it is often pushed aside to make room for Dean and Castiel's in fanfics. Sam is not even mentioned in the tags of almost half of the fics selected for this thesis which makes it clear that, in these stories, the focus will be shifted away from the Winchester brothers. When Sam is present, he almost always becomes a supporting character and his discussions with Dean are usually related to Castiel in one way or another. “One Word” by angelofthequeers perfectly reflects how the brothers' bond becomes secondary while still being acknowledged as important. In this fic, the Winchesters and Castiel are fighting against angels to keep hold of a precious artifact while Dean and Cas struggle with their feelings for each other. Sam often takes the role of mediator between his brother and his friend, his close relationship with Dean allowing him to better understand and advise him on his problems with the angel. The writer makes it clear that Sam is the most important person in Dean's life but also explains that “Cas is special in a way that Sam isn't” and that both relationships matter equally but differently to Dean. As we can see, the canon importance of Sam and Dean's bond does not

completely disappear, it simply becomes less central in the stories which can then focus on themes that matter more to Destiel fans.

The centering and decentering of some of the show's themes in fanfiction can be seen in the way many fanfic writers include the "profound bond" between Dean and Castiel in their works. This expression taken from the series has become extremely important to a lot of Destiel fans who use it to describe the connection and closeness between the two characters. In the series, the quote is used to indicate that Dean and Cas's relationship is different from the one Sam and Cas have which is something that is often found in Destiel fanfics. This is particularly clear in "I missed you" by *skystiel* which is based on promotional pictures for 9.21 that show Castiel hugging both brothers. The pictures show no difference between the hug Cas gives to Dean and the one he gives to Sam but in the fanfic, they are described very differently. On one hand, the description of the hug between Dean and Cas is more than four hundred words long and contains poetic sentences like, "Castiel clung to Dean as if he may disappear at any moment, as if he were a sinking ship in need of an anchor." On the other hand, the hug between Cas and Sam is only described with a few words: "he watched Castiel wrap his arms around Sam in a brief hug." Passages like this are a discreet reminder of the "more profound bond" shared by Dean and Cas, reminding readers of its importance in their relationship. Sam and Castiel's relationship is thus pushed aside to emphasize the depth of Dean and Castiel's feelings.

Even though the "more profound bond" expression was only used once in the series, it has become central to the interpretation of Dean and Castiel's relationship for many fans. Fanfiction frequently references it by showing how deeply the two of them are connected to each other. This is linked to the tendency of slash fans to apply romance codes to the primary text they enjoy (Woledge 98). The idea that the characters share a love more powerful than anything is certainly one of this trope and is often associated by fans with the idea of the "profound bond" (Van Steenhuyse 6). References to this idea can be done implicitly by showing that Dean and Cas know and/or trust each other better than anyone else (see, "If the Sky Turned into Stone" by *aeli\_kindara*, "Something To Be Chosen" by *imogenbynight*, or "Say You Love Me" by *allthebeautifulthings9828*). It can also be more explicit when writers reference it directly or emphasize the importance of the handprint that Cas left on Dean's shoulder when he raised him from hell which has always been considered by fans as a physical manifestation of this bond (see, "Everything is Blue" by *MalMuses*, "Mistakes Are Better When They're French" by *Maraudersgirl47*, or "Closed mouth litany" by *eidolon*). In some stories, the "profound bond" even becomes central to the plot like in "None of this

Meant-To-Be Crap” by whichstiel where Dean and Castiel’s connection is an actual link between their soul which allows Dean to rescue Cas from the Empty. All of these examples show how the concept of the “profound bond” goes from a simple mention in the series to a central theme in Destiel fanfiction but it is not the only way writers accentuate its importance.

Indeed, fans also demonstrate the depth and uniqueness of the feelings between Dean and Cas by comparing them to the ones they had for their previous love interests in the show. Rather than denying that these relationships ever happened, many authors show how they pale in comparison to the powerful love between the hunter and the angel. For instance, in “There Are Many Things,” imogenbynight has Castiel reflecting on his first time having sex with a woman named April who was later revealed to be a reaper trying to kill him (9.03). When asked about the encounter, Cas answers: “I think I just wanted the... closeness, I suppose. But she didn’t... it wasn’t right.” On the other hand, him kissing Dean at the end of the fic is described as such: “already it feels natural. Right. Like something they've been doing for years.” The writer makes it clear that, despite Castiel’s previous experiences in canon, the only person who is “right” for him is Dean.

This dismissal of all of the characters’ previous relationships with women can be perceived as fanfiction reproducing “normative discourses that elide women” but it can also be an opportunity for slash writers to give more depth to female characters whose only role is to be a love interest in the series (Fathallah 2013, 33). This is the case of “If I Am Anywhere To Be Found” written by fairychangeling. This story is told from the perspective of Daphne, a character from 7.17 who rescued an amnesic Castiel, brought him into her home, and eventually married him. In the episode, she has very little screen time and is only used as a plot device to explain where Cas had been during most of the season. The fanfic develops on her story, her personality, and her motivations to turn her into a fully fleshed-out character. However, the writer still makes sure that there is absolutely no ambiguity about the fact that Castiel has no feelings for her and only loves Dean. Many of the comments left on this fic both praise the author for turning Daphne into a more complex character and express their happiness at seeing that, in the end, she was not an obstacle to Dean and Cas’s love.

To support the idea of the “profound bond,” slash writers show in their stories that all of the previous sexual or romantic relationships Dean and Castiel had in canon could never compare to what exists between them. The women are sometimes even pushed out of their love interest role to become active supporters of the pairing’s relationship as we can see in fairychangeling’s story. This is a prime example of the way fanfiction writers play with canon

elements to support their interpretations, bringing the most romantic ones to the forefront and painting those they do not care about or disagree with as unimportant.

### **c. Fanfiction Writers Playing With Ambiguity: the Interpretation of Dean and Castiel's Sexuality**

As we have seen, slash writers draw from many canon elements to write their stories but they also make use of what is not said or shown in the series in order to produce a queer reading of the show that does not contradict the original text. Things left ambiguous in canon allow transformative fans to interpret the source text in a variety of ways without going against it. This kind of freedom allows writers to write stories that do not diverge from canon while still including their queer reading of the series. This can be illustrated by the way many authors deal with the characters' sexualities in Destiel fanfiction. Indeed, the ambiguity cultivated around the subject in the series leaves a lot of freedom of interpretation to fans.

When it comes to the sexuality of *Supernatural* characters, Dean Winchester is the center of most discussions. Much has been written on the subject by fans and academics alike. Some viewers argue that he must be heterosexual because he has only had relationships with women while others explain that there is nothing in the show that comes to contradict the reading of Dean as a closeted bisexual man. People who defend that he is bi point out his overperformance of masculinity, the many jokes made about his sexuality, or some charged moments he had with other men but most importantly, they argue that this interpretation has never been denied outside of a few quick jokes in canon (Brennan 2017; Ronnenberg; Sue). The ambiguity around Dean's sexuality has caused virulent arguments among fans for years, something that has been cultivated by the producers who have always made sure to neither confirm nor deny anything in canon. This became particularly flagrant in the last few episodes of the series in which they were careful to keep Dean as neutral as possible regarding Castiel's love confession. As a result, it is easy for slash writers to write him as bisexual while still following the original text. The fact that the hunter is never seen romantically or sexually interacting with men in the show is often explained with internalized homophobia and showing that Dean repressed this part of himself. This is the case in "One Word" where angelofthequeers writes:

He's known about bisexuality for years; known that it's possible to like more than one gender. But accepting that part of him would mean accepting that he's into dick as well as pussy – and between his dad's mindset of 'gay is okay so long as it ain't my boys' and his terrifying feelings for Castiel, it's been easier to just shove that part of him aside and pretend it doesn't exist.



This passage gives a plausible explanation as to why Dean never explicitly flirts with men in the series, using his education from a strict ex-Marine father and his strong aversion to acknowledging his feelings as an excuse. Other writers, like *awed\_frog* in “Personal Space” and perilously in “sweeter coming from my hand,” even portray Dean as having slept with men before implying that it is something that could have happened in the show even though it was never shown on screen.

Discussions around Castiel’s sexuality are much rarer in *Destiel* fanfiction. Indeed, in *Supernatural*, angels have no gender which implies that they do not care much about their partner’s gender. Most fanfic writers do not feel the need to explain Cas’s attraction to a man, the canon implications that all angels are bisexual by nature being common enough knowledge among readers. This is the case in *mnwood*’s “One, Two, Three, Repeat” where the future version of Castiel from 5.04 is shown to have sex with men and women indiscriminately. In the fic, Dean’s repressed bisexuality is discussed at length but Castiel being indifferent to gender is taken for granted. However, in the series, Cas’s sexuality is not treated as straightforwardly. Indeed, he is only shown kissing and having sex with women but Dean is the only person he is confirmed to love romantically. This, in addition to the fact that he gradually becomes more human than angel as the show progresses, gives fans a lot of freedom regarding the interpretation of his sexuality. Some could decide that he is heterosexual because canon only shows him being sexually attracted to women while others see him as gay because the only person he has ever canonically had feelings for is Dean. In “There Are Many Things,” Cas realizes that he did not like having sex with April because he is not interested in women and has a scene when he comes out to Dean. However, this fic being the only one in the corpus where Castiel’s sexuality is discussed shows that, despite not completely going against canon, this interpretation is not the most popular among fans (though it has become more accepted lately) and thus necessitates to be explained by the writer.

Though the question of the characters’ canon or perceived sexuality is a recurring one in discussions around slash shipping, the fics analyzed in this thesis show that the subject is rarely broached in fanfiction and that, when it is, it seldom takes a central place in the story. It seems that, in slash fiction, the characters’ sexuality is not really important unless it is part of the obstacles they have to overcome to get together which increase the tension and make the story more interesting to readers. This can be linked to the fact that “fan fiction purposefully encourages and thrives on intimacy” (Busse 2017, 154). Indeed, intimacy is often put above all else in slash fiction and, while is not disconnected from sex, it is clearly a more important

part of the characters' relationship (Woledge 95). As a result, sexual attraction and sex scenes usually have the primary goal of emphasizing the intimate connection between the protagonists (Woledge 101). What matters is not whether a character is heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, or anything else, what matters is their intimate relationship with the other half of the pairing. "Mercy, mercy, please" by ThePinkFizz illustrates how some writers decide to push sexuality to the background. At the beginning of a sex scene, Castiel tells Dean that he thought he only liked women. Dean simply tells him to stop talking and the scene carries on. The deliberate lack of answer given to why Dean would suddenly have sex with a man when he has only had relationships with women in canon shows how this question is secondary in the story. The important thing is that Dean and Cas are together and in love.

Many of the works analyzed in this thesis show the fans' preference for stories that do not dismiss the original text but rather work around it to create a narrative in which their interpretations are validated. However, fanfiction is also used by writers to express resistant readings of the source text and to criticize it.

### **C. Slash Writers Using Fanfiction to Make Their Voices Heard**

It is clear that fanfic writers often choose to write stories that fill in the perceived gaps in canon thus allowing them to respect the original text while still sharing their own interpretations. However, as I explained before, fanfiction is also a means for fans to free themselves from the producers' authority (Busse 2017, 125). Indeed, many writers use their works to criticize the series and give their opinion on elements they do not agree with or think could be improved. Fans who decide to express themselves through fanfiction have almost unlimited freedom in terms of form and content which allows them to share their opinions with very little constraints (Busse 2017, 144-145). Since fanfics are meant to be read only by other fans and not to be shared with the producers, their goal is not to try to influence changes in the source text but rather to criticize, and sometimes even replace, the original author showing how the fanfic writer's opinions could fit into the series. There are multiple ways for slash writers to make their voices heard. In some cases, the story's changes and additions to the source text highlight what fans perceive as flaws in canon. Other times, writers more or less directly insert themselves into the story to directly give their opinion.

### a. The Various Uses of Canon-Divergence

As I mentioned previously, canon-divergent fanfics often reveal the parts of canon fans disagree with. To understand this, it is important to know that a fic is only considered to be canon-divergent if it was intended by the writer to be different from canon. This means that a post-episode or post-season work imagining how the series might continue — which is the case for many fics analyzed in this thesis — and making predictions that are contradicted by episodes aired after its publication cannot be read as canon-divergence. The modifications made to the original text can be rather small and have little impact on the rest of the story. For instance, in “One, Two, Three, Repeat,” the future/alternate versions of Dean and Cas from 5.04 do not die at the end contrary to what happens in the episode. This change would not affect what happens in the rest of the series but it allows readers to imagine a happier ending for these two characters. Small changes like these are usually not tagged by the writer but they are still included in the definition of canon-divergence. We can also point out all of the stories written in the time frame between 14.08 and 15.18 which ignore Castiel’s deal with the Empty in order to be able to show Dean and Cas getting together without it resulting in the angel’s death. This does not necessarily mean that the writer disagrees with the producers’ decisions but rather that they might not want to deal with all of their implications in their story.

Fan writers can also decide to apply bigger modifications to the source text which affect how the story continues from this point. This is the case in “Mistakes Are Better When They’re French” by Maraudersgirl47 which is based on “The French Mistake” (6.15), a very meta episode where Sam and Dean are sent to a universe very close to the real world where *Supernatural* is a TV show and they are the actors playing in it. They meet various members of the production team and other cast members like Misha Collins. The story written by Maraudersgirl47 follows canon events but diverges in that it explores what would have happened if Jensen Ackles and Misha Collins had been married and living together in that episode. The fic includes many direct quotes and references to the source text, the writer playfully highlighting the differences between their work and canon. This is a good example of the position of fanfiction as both in and against the text (Busse 2017, 106). In the end, Collins decides to give the scripts of the last few episodes to Dean which allows him to “fix” the end of season 6 once he goes back to his own universe. The hunter learns of Castiel’s betrayal in 6.20 before it happens which allows them to talk about their feelings and ultimately get together and come up with a better solution to resolve the problems they are facing. “Mistakes Are Better When They’re French” demonstrates how canon-divergent

fanfiction can be used by fans to play with the source text and use it to write their version of the story but also to point out what they wish had happened differently in the show.

There are many examples of slash writers using canon-divergence order to demonstrate how one part of the series could have been better in their opinion. For instance, In “angelus ex-machina,” lunarriviera changes the conversation that takes place between Dean and Cas at the end of 10.03 after Dean was cured from being a demon. This divergence is connected to the plot of the fanfic but it also allows the two characters to talk more about their feelings than they did in the episode. This reflects the common desire among Destiel fans to see Dean and Cas communicate more and thus avoid unnecessary drama. Sometimes, canon-divergence in fanfics can be used by writers to truly criticize the series and make note of the problems they have with canon. Such is the case in “Traverse” by thestoryinsideme which diverges from the series after Castiel becomes an angel again in 9.09. Though the story uses some canon elements that take place after that episode, it is mostly different from what actually happens in the series. The first difference is found at the very beginning of the fic when it is revealed that, contrary to the other angels in this season, Cas can fly because he was human when a spell made all of the angels fall from heaven. By explaining this, the writer calls attention to the incoherence of Castiel having his wings broken in the series even though he did not fall like the others. The fic also provides explanations about the spell that was used to cast the angels out which were never provided in the show. Indeed, many fans have pointed out that the first two ingredients were connected to humans, angels, and love but the series never made an explicit link between those and the third ingredient that was Castiel’s grace (the source of an angel’s power). The plot of “Traverse” revolves mostly around the fact that Cas’s grace was needed specifically because the third ingredient required for the spell was the grace of an angel loved by a human. Thestoryinsideme thus criticizes the lack of follow-up on this plot point in the series and fixes this problem by giving their own explanation. A comment left by user Tennyo on this story praising the writer’s version over what happened in the show shows how these changes are well-received and encouraged by readers: “so... I like your version better. Could you apply to go work for the CW plz?” This shows how fanfiction writers are able to resist the official canon and take back control of the narrative through canon-divergence.

Another, more specific, manifestation of canon-divergence is found in fanfics where everything is the same as in the series but the two halves of the pairing are already in some kind of romantic or sexual relationship. These works are usually tagged with “Established Relationship” when the writer wants their readers to know that they should expect the

characters to already be together. These kinds of fics are a way for slash writers to show how having the characters in a relationship could work in canon and how it could enrich the original story. There are several examples of works where Dean and Cas are already in some kind of relationship before the story starts in the fanfics used in this thesis. One of them is “Safe” by Bookkbaby which takes place right after 9.03 but excludes the part where Dean tells Cas he has to leave. We quickly learn that the two of them were in a relationship before Cas became human which the writer uses to change the context around the episode, and more specifically Castiel’s implied sex scene with April. In the fic, Cas reveals that April sexually assaulted him and that they did not actually have sex. Dean comforts the angel and ultimately asks him to stay. The established relationship thus becomes a starting point that the writer uses to correct the many flaws they perceived in this episode which has always been rather unpopular among Destiel fans. User chelsorzo7 makes this evident in a comment where they tell the writer: “you’re so on point with how wrong that episode was on so many levels.” Bookkbaby’s story reflects how the obstacles that come to complicate Dean and Castiel’s relationship in the series can be removed in fanfiction, the decision to portray the two of them as an established couple reinforcing the resistant position taken by the writer to the original text.

#### **b. Adding missing elements to the show**

With canon-divergence, fan writers highlight the parts of the series they disagree with or wish had gone differently and supplement them with their own version. Similarly, slash fans can also emphasize the elements they believe to be lacking in the show by adding them to their stories. This is another example of fanfiction “filling in the gaps” in the source text (Busse 2014, 154). In this case, it is not done by taking advantage of the room for interpretation left by the producers but rather by pointing out what should be added to the series to make it more enjoyable.

This can be seen through the popularity of the hurt/comfort trope in Destiel fanfiction (and in slash fiction in general). Indeed, *Supernatural* is a show where the characters are constantly put through extremely harsh, painful, and traumatizing situations but are rarely allowed to find relief in each other afterward. Scenes when Dean or Cas comfort the other after one of these moments of pain and violence, are basically nonexistent in the series, to the great frustration of Destiel fans. In the A/N of “the nature and scope of knowledge,” which is tagged as hurt/comfort, saltyfeathers writes: “that scene at the end of 10.22 was fucking brutal so of course my natural reaction is to FIX EVERYTHING IMMEDIATELY MAKE

EVERYTHING BETTER ALWAYS.” This shows how fanfic writers can use the hurt/comfort trope as a way to “fix” canon by adding moments of tenderness between the characters. Moreover, according to Elizabeth Woledge, the hurt/comfort trope allows slash writers to increase the closeness and intimacy between two male characters:

Hurt/comfort provides a plausible way for any author to depict increasing closeness between two men, because when the hero is hurt, he is at his most vulnerable. The element of hurt permits him to share intimacies that would otherwise be kept private (106).

To go further, I would like to argue that only including the “hurt” in the series creates frustration for slash fans who are well-versed in fanfiction codes and thus acutely aware of the potential for intimacy it creates. As a result, it is natural for them to wish or expect to see this potential be exploited in canon. Another good example of this trope can be found in outpastthemoat’s “handle with care.” This fic was written after the finale of season 8 where Castiel is betrayed by Metatron and is turned human. The writer imagines what could happen after that and has the former angel immediately coming back to Dean who takes care of him and helps him overcome his depressive feelings. As this fanfic was published before season 9 aired, it is less of a way to “fix” canon and more of a way for outpastthemoat to express how they expect the producers to follow up on this storyline. A comment by user Castiel\_For\_King, posted after the release of season 9, shows the negative reaction that the failure of the show to meet those expectations provoked:

They so did not do anything right on the show when I came to this. Like yeah, Cas had his throat cut open, his very essence ripped from him and then abruptly CHANGED SPECIES...but the writers were just like "nah he fine" [...] Ugh...as you can see I get a little pissed when I think about how badly the writers failed where it concerns Cas...but this...this fic was perfect and beautiful.

Here, we can see how the fic is presented as what should have happened over the work of the producers. The story written by outpastthemoat, with its use of the hurt/comfort trope, allowed for a development of the characters’ feelings that many fans believe should have been included in canon.

Another element practically absent from the series and often found in fanfics is domesticity. This is a theme that has always been popular in slash fiction resulting in the publication of a great number of what used to be called “domesticfics” (Busse 2014, 245). This might seem strange as slash fans tend to be attracted to genres where domesticity is not the focus but Busse explains that the intertwining of fantasy and domesticity is a “fannish tradition” (249). With the term “domesticity,” I refer to anything related to the idea of a “normal” home or family life, something that is extremely rare in *Supernatural*. Even though

the later seasons of the show have left an important place to the theme of found family, domestic scenes that come to illustrate this idea are rather scarce. As a result, fanfic writers often add these scenes to their works, thus shining a light on their absence in canon. Because too much domesticity would clash with the dark and action-oriented atmosphere of the series, it rarely becomes a central theme in fanfics not set in an Alternate Universe. Instead, it is added parsimoniously by writers to show the familiarity between the characters. For instance, we can find scenes of grocery shopping in youaresunlight's "This Is The Start" and of movie nights in AnabelleBlack20's "I Like Me Better When I'm With You." These brief moments demonstrate how domesticity could fit into the show without distorting it. Fan writers adding domestic scenes to their fanfics is thus a way to show how producers could improve their work.

These previous examples show implicit criticism of what fans believe to be lacking in canon. However, there are also many Destiel fanfics written to directly criticize elements missing from the show. Indeed, many fan writers have published works in reaction to the rumors about the 8.17 script and the Spanish Dub which are explicitly meant to express their displeasure with the idea that lines where Dean said "I love you" to Castiel could have been removed from the show. This can be illustrated with "One Word" written by angelofthequeers and "the rest of the story" written by bottled yarn which are both rather long stories that start with the premise of "what if the line had not been removed from 8.17 the script?" for the former and "what if the Latin American version had been the official one?" for the latter as both writers explain in the summary or A/N. In these two works, the change is presented to the reader in the middle of an accurate description of what actually happened in the episode. This is particularly evident in "One Word" in which the crypt scene is very thoroughly described from beginning to end in Dean's point of view. The only change made to it is the inclusion of the moment when Dean says "I love you":

Castiel pauses. For a brief moment, Dean thinks he can see something flicker in Castiel's emotionless blue eyes and so, taking a deep breath, he forces out the three words he's wanted to tell Castiel for years.

"I love you."<sup>9</sup>

The message of these fics is that, if those things had happened, Dean and Castiel could have ended up together and happy. Many of the commenters on both fics express how they wish this version could have been the canon one showing the fans' enthusiasm for stories that reject the official version of these episodes.

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9 The scene in its entirety, with the modification from canon highlighted, can be found in Annex 3.

There are other ways for fan writers to show the superiority of the original script and the Spanish Dub over what was shown on screen. For instance, “closed mouth litany” by eidlonn begins with a scene after Castiel’s death with Dean crying on the floor and praying to the angel, expressing his regrets at not having been able to tell him he loves him back. The second part of the fic, entirely written in italics, is a retelling of the Latin American version from Dean’s point of view. The meaning of this ending is left to the reader’s interpretation but, contrasted with the first part of the story, it is clearly presented as a better, ideal version of the confession scene. Another way to address these rumors can be found in “heart eyes, motherfucker” where a good\_soldier references the 8.17 script in a story that takes place in season twelve, not by changing the way the episode went in the story but by having Dean explaining that he was going to say “I love you” and changed his mind in the last moment. The writer expresses how they believe including the line in the episode could have led to Destiel becoming canon by saying: “seems like they could’ve been going somewhere with this half a decade ago.” This fic being a critique of the producers’ decisions is made clear by the A/N in which a good\_soldier refers to what was said about the script as “queerbaiting.” All of these examples reflect the fans’ disappointment with canon and show how, instead of accepting it passively, they use fanfiction to create their own version of the series which they consider to be better than the original.

### **c. Using the Characters as Author-Inserts**

In addition to changes made to the original text, fan writers can use fanfiction to express their opinion by inserting themselves into the story through the characters. It is very common to see slash writers sharing their point of view by way of having their characters talking or thinking in the same way they do. As Busse explains in *Framing Fan Fiction*: “most stories contain traces of the author’s desire and identifications” (48). In other words, fanfics demonstrate what writers want to see the characters do and the ways in which they identify with them. Sometimes, these two things are mixed and writers push their identification with their protagonists until it becomes a way to talk through them to encourage what they would to come true in canon. Busse writes about writers inserting themselves into their work in her analysis of voyeuristic fiction:

This form of voyeurism story clearly invites the reader to double her position as outside viewer watching the actions on screen. In fact, if, as Bacon-Smith suggests, fan viewers tend to refuse to gaze across the screen but instead immerse themselves into the on-screen scenes, the in-text observer is an invitation to identify within the text while also remaining carefully removed (86).



The idea of identifying within the text while staying removed is interesting but it is generally specific to this kind of fanfics. Indeed, in most cases, writers insert themselves into the story to interact with the protagonists or with their readers to share their opinion on the source text and sometimes influence the narrative in a way that is restricted to them with the real TV show.

The most common manifestation of writer-insert in the fanfics studied for this thesis is the inclusion of at least one character who recognizes and points out the chemistry between Dean and Cas. For writers, this is a way to demonstrate that the love between the two characters is so evident that anyone can notice it. Not all of these characters directly voice the writer's thoughts but they highlight the idea shared by most Destiel fans that their love is obvious and impossible to ignore. This is made obvious by the variety of characters used to make these remarks. They can come from antagonists like in "stars round his wrists" by perilously where Lucifer is possessing Castiel and is able to feel what he feels. Quickly, he notices: "Castiel has it bad. Actually, that's a pathetic understatement." The writer's opinion is felt more clearly as the story progresses and Lucifer begins to realize that this love is powerful, probably more than him. The character who notices Dean and Cas's feelings can also be someone close to them. This is the case in "Reunions" by casdoms where Dean's mother, having just been brought back from the dead, hears her son talking about Castiel and immediately picks up on the fact that he is in love with him. We can also see this in "One Word" when Benny, one of Dean's best friends, tells him: "Anyone with eyes can tell how much you love that angel." Here, the closeness of what the character says and what the writer thinks is particularly evident. In some cases, remarks about Dean and Cas being obviously in love are made by complete strangers as we can see in "this is the start" by youaresunlight. In this story, the protagonists encounter two elder women who immediately assume that they are a couple when they see the way they interact with each other. All of these examples illustrate how, through a variety of secondary characters, slash writers express their belief that Dean and Cas have a lot of chemistry in the series and that it is natural to interpret them as in love with each other.

In most cases, the character used by writers to share their opinions on Dean and Castiel's relationship is Sam. This can be explained by the fact that he is usually the voice of reason in the series so fan writers using him to voice their analysis of the series makes it sound more reasonable. Moreover, as I explained before, Sam is often pushed aside in DeanCas fanfiction and so, like the viewers, he becomes a spectator of Dean and Castiel's story which makes it easy for fan writers to insert themselves into the text through him. This

can be seen in “Sam Finally Gets It” by pherryt and “You’re My Win” by mattzarella\_sticks, two stories about Dean and Cas reuniting after the angel comes back from the dead in 13.05 told from Sam’s point of view. In both stories, Sam observes his brother and his friend and notices many small details which indicate that the two of them have feelings for each other. He is thus put in the position of a Destiel fan, carefully analyzing the two characters’ actions to find evidence of their love. We can see this in this extract from “Sam Finally Gets It”:

How the hell had he missed it? If he thought about it, all the signs had always been there. So many signs over the years, getting stronger and more obvious all the time [...] And the way Dean had been acting these past few weeks, the things he’d said...how much he hated Jack for being the cause of Cas’s death... *it all made so much more sense now.*

In this passage, the writer demonstrates that the way Dean and Cas behave in the show necessarily means that they are in love. This is something that is done in many fanfics but, coming from Sam, who knows Dean more than anyone else, the argument is made more credible and is given more weight than if it had been the writer directly expressing it. In “You’re My Win,” Sam’s investment in Dean and Castiel’s relationship is rewarded when he finally witnesses the two of them confessing their feelings for each other. The fic ends with these words: “the sight of them together, happy [...] it makes him feel... happy. Like this is his win, too.” Given his position as a Destiel fan throughout the fic, Sam’s joy can be read as the expression of the writer’s desire to see this scenario come true. The message here is that Dean and Cas getting together would be “a win” for the writer, and anyone else who is invested in their relationship.

Moreover, fan writers can also decide to insert themselves more directly into the story by writing in characters just as invested in their favorite pairing as they are. This is particularly easy to do in *Supernatural* fanfiction because characters who are also *Supernatural* fans already exist in canon. Indeed, in the show, the adventures of Sam and Dean are published as a book series written by God disguised as a prophet. This allows producers to include their fans in the series on several occasions, notably in the two hundredth episode where viewers encounter a group of high school girls producing a *Supernatural* musical. Marie, the girl in charge of this production, appears in imogenbynight’s “Weak Point” and gives Dean some advice regarding his relationship with Castiel in an email conversation. In this fic, the writer takes back control of the character meant to represent them and uses her to write themselves into the story. The overlap between imogenbynight and their version of Marie is particularly explicit in this extract from an email she addresses to Dean:

Communication has been the number one problem this whole time. You just need to talk to each other. I’ll bet Sam has some insight he could give you, too. For what it’s worth, if

I know anything at all about your brother, he is going to support you no matter what. And also, sorry if I'm overstepping, but your dad was wrong. Don't let his misguided opinion hold you back.

The idea that Dean and Cas need to better communicate is at the center of the fanfic and we can thus easily understand that what Marie says is also what the writer thinks. Generally, self-insertion receives mixed reactions from fanfic readers, but, by occasionally using their characters' voices to speak their opinions, writers can give themselves the power to affect the narrative from the inside without falling into the "Mary Sue" cliché (Fathallah 2013, 67).

Finally, slash writers can express their opinion directly through the internal dialogue of their protagonists. Indeed, it is common to find fanfic writers to project some of themselves onto the characters they are writing about (Busse 2017, 45-46). Contrary to the previous examples, this is not done to push the idea that the characters have chemistry and should become a couple but rather to criticize the producers' decisions. This is the case in "Full Circle" where Tibbins has Castiel thinking about the man who used to be Lucifer's vessel and who was freed from him in season 13. He concludes that it "made no sense" for him to have been able to escape alive and well when it had previously been shown in the series that being possessed by an archangel was something that left the vessel in a catatonic state afterward. This does not correspond to what Cas thought in the series and is thus a way for the writer to insert their critique of the show's inconsistencies into their story. Another example of fanfic writers criticizing the series through their characters can be found in "The Strength To Say" by komodobits in which Dean thinks back about Cas saying "I love you" when he was about to die in 12.12. The fic starts with a description of the many ways Dean had imagined Cas could have said those words to him. This is reminiscent of the way transformative fans create different scenarios in their works, exploring the many possibilities of a love confession between the characters. This passage is followed by Dean thinking: "when Cas whispers, "I love you," it doesn't sound like anything Dean imagined. It sounds awful. It sounds like goodbye." This sentence illustrates the disappointment of the writer at having been given such an underwhelming declaration in the series, something that they go on to fix by having the two characters talk about it and realize that they are in love with each other. Instead of just sharing the version they wish had happened, komodobits takes the time to show exactly why they were disappointed by canon and why they believe it needs fixing.

Thus, in fanfiction, authorial projection into the characters is a way for writers to affirm their resistant position to some parts of canon and to share their opinion on the series in

a more direct way. This process allows them to give more weight to their arguments and to increase the impression of control they have over the narrative.

Similarly to all slash writers, Destiel fans have a very complex relationship with canon. Despite the importance for a lot of writers to stay as true to the series as possible, fanfiction still often shed a light on the many criticisms fans have to make about it. Even though the authority of the producers is far from being completely undermined by transformative writers, interpretive power is partially taken away from them to go into the hands of the fan community. The remarkable size of the transformative side of the *Supernatural* fandom has caused producers to notice and acknowledge it pretty early on. The tendency of fans to fight for control over the meaning-making process has thus been received in many different ways over the years as the portrayal of fans in the series and the producers' declaration in conventions and on social media have shown

## PART III

### The Progressive Evolution of the Dynamics Between Slash Fans and Producers

As Lisa Macklem explains, in her thesis about fan/producer relationships in *Supernatural*: “there is no question that *Supernatural* fans share a unique relationship with the production of the show” (93). Indeed, producers have reacted to the active and vocal fanbase that the series rapidly attracted by regularly engaging with it and creating a feeling of intimacy within the fandom. The nickname “SPN Family” used to talk about the fans and the people involved with the show reflects how an emphasis is put on proximity between the producers and their audience. Even though the producers’ reactions to the way slash fans resist their interpretations and appropriate meaning-making power have always been mixed, Xanthoudakis points out that “unlike *Lost* (ABC, 2004–2010), which courted fans through podcasts, hidden Easter eggs, and the creation of an official message board, there were no sanctioned power structures in place to curate and control the ways in which *Supernatural* fans engaged with their source material” (2.1). Though she is right to point out that this has been helpful for fans to feel like they could share ownership of the show with the producers, she fails to account for the way transformative fans’ activities have been policed through their inclusion in the series. Indeed, in season 4 episode 18, the viewers are introduced to the “*Supernatural*” novels: a series of books that were written by Chuck Shurley — a prophet who was later revealed to be God — and describe the events of the first five seasons as works of fiction. This has allowed writers to insert themselves into the series and later include *Supernatural* fans into the narrative. Thus, in order to fully understand the way transformative fans are perceived by the show’s producers, it is important to look both at the series and its paratexts.

Despite the unique methods used by *Supernatural* producers to address their transformative fans, the way their relationship has changed over the years reflects the evolution of the dynamic between slash fans and television producers. Looking at fan representation in the series and declarations made by producers, I will demonstrate that this relationship has slowly shifted toward acceptance on the producers’ part but ultimately, they have repeatedly failed to truly understand who slash fans are and what they want. My analysis will be supported by the answers to the survey I circulated among fans.

## A. The initial rejection of slash fiction

In the early years of the series, as it attracted more and more transformative fans, producers tended to react rather negatively to this category of viewers that they often perceived as over-enthusiastic and annoying. The character of Becky Rosen introduced in 5.01 reflects this rejection of transformative fans in favor of fan behaviors seen as more masculine. Outside of the series, Jensen Ackles' declarations about slash quickly turned a large number of fans against him and, even though his opinion seems to have changed in recent years, what he said still has an impact on the fandom to this day. Despite being generally more careful about not alienating their audience, writers and producers occasionally showed dismissal toward slash fans outside the show.

### a. Belittling transformative fans within the series

Becky is introduced to the audience primarily as a dedicated slash fan. In her first scene, she is shown in a room covered in "Supernatural" posters passionately writing Wincest fanfiction. We quickly learn that she is a "Samgirl"<sup>10</sup> and she is the owner of a website named MoreThanBrothers.net where her username is SamLicker81. When she is contacted by Chuck asking for her help to get a message to Sam and Dean, she enthusiastically professes that she is his "number-one fan" but grows disappointed when she believes that she is being made fun of:

**Becky:** Look, Mr. Edlund... Yes, I'm a fan, but I really don't appreciate being mocked. I know that Supernatural's just a book, okay? I know the difference between fantasy and reality.

**Chuck:** Becky, it's all real.

**Becky:** I knew it!

This exchange cements Becky as a representation of an overenthusiastic fangirl, so obsessed with her passion that she is unable to see it rationally. Later, when she meets Sam and Dean, Becky immediately loses all sense of boundaries and touches Sam repeatedly, even after he asks her to stop. This reflects the producer's disapproval of fans "watching the show for sexual titillation, or even experiencing some pleasure in sexually gazing upon the actors" which was seen to be "in direct contrast to the authentic narrative" for some producers

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<sup>10</sup> Supernatural fans who have a clear preference for one of the brothers usually self-identify as samgirls or deangirls

(McDermott 137). After this quick introduction, Becky reappears in 5.09, an episode in which she successfully tricks the Winchesters into attending the first convention for the “Supernatural” novels. There, she continues her aggressive flirting with Sam but she is also shown to be an ardent defender of Chuck’s work, forcefully shutting down those who try to criticize it. Thus, the producers recognize that her being a transformative fan does not mean that she does not respect and love the original work. In these two episodes, Becky is undeniably used to criticize undesirable fan behaviors but this critique mostly remains playful, lighthearted, and interlaced with moments when writers make fun of themselves through the character of Chuck who is portrayed as a socially awkward loser. As a result, fan response to Becky in season 5 was mixed, with some feeling insulted and mocked by this portrayal and others thinking that she was a fun and enjoyable character (Macklem 107). These diverging reactions can be seen in the responses to the question of the survey asking what respondents thought about Becky:

- She is funny. She is an overexaggerated representation of spn fans. I do not know why so many people are offended by her character.
- She makes me feel a lot of things: hurt, annoyed, insecure, embarrassed, ashamed, but mostly hurt. It feels like the writers were very explicitly attacking the fandom and mocking fans who got excited about the show. There’s this one quote that goes, something along the lines of “The worst thing a creator could do is make the fans feel embarrassed for ever liking it in the first place.”
- She’s fine. Definitely supposed to be a “fan” which, with how they depicted her sometimes, is a bit rude, but also fair since a significant percentage of the spn fandom is/was real annoying towards the actors and writers.

Despite the variety of opinions about Becky that can be found in the survey, the majority of fans tend to disapprove of the way she represented fans in the beginning. She is often said to be a stereotypical, inaccurate, and insulting fan portrayal. As Melissa Gray explains, even though some slash fans felt validated by her existence and appreciated her unashamed commitment to her obsession, most thought she was embarrassing (17).

Nevertheless, the goal of these two episodes is not to completely dismiss slash fans. Indeed, when Chuck comes to Becky for help at the beginning of 5.01, The author is “constructed as needing the fan” (Fathallah 2013, 266). The message here seems to be that, even though fans like Becky can sometimes be difficult to understand for producers, they still need and love each other. This idea of mutual love is materialized at the end of 5.09 when Chuck and Becky end up as a “harmonious couple” (Macklem 108). However, this relationship is read differently by Scott who sees it as a fan willingly offering her labor in

organizing the “Supernatural” fan convention and being compensated with a romance with the show’s writing staff (299). As Tosenberger explains:

Becky’s “reward” of sex with Chuck starts to look like a masturbatory fantasy about the fandom as a horde of horny, available women who just *love* the work of the male creator and the mostly male writing team (2010, 1.7).

The message of love and harmony that the producers seemed to be aiming for thus gets lost as Becky is never valorized for her fannishness but she instead receives the writer’s sexual attention. As Toesenberger puts it, the message sent to female fans with these two episodes seems to be: “you are creepy, but you might be willing to fuck us real writers, so you aren’t *totally* unacceptable” (2010, 1.6). Despite that, it seems that the predominantly negative reception of Becky by the transformative fans she was meant to represent was more the result of the inability of producers to truly understand their fans than an attempt to reject them.

When Becky reappeared for the time of an episode in season seven, she became a much harsher and mean-spirited representation of fans. In “Season Seven, Time for a Wedding” (7.08), Becky uses a love potion on Sam to force him to marry her so that she can come with him to her high school reunion. Later, she finds out that the “friend” who gave her the potion was actually a demon who easily tricked her in an attempt to get her to sell her soul. This episode portrays Becky “as a not-too-bright, lonely loser” whose obsession with “Supernatural” borders on pathological (Macklem, 108). As this answer shows, 7.08 made Becky unlikable even to fans who appreciated her in season five:

- I liked her first appearance, but the season 7 ep she was in where she drugged Sam (and it’s implied she raped him, since they had sex while he was under a mind control drug) it really soured me on the character. I like her later appearances, but I can’t get past the season 7 ep.

This episode is cited by many fans as particularly bad in terms of fan representation and greatly participated in convincing some that producers had no respect for them. As Scott explains, “Becky’s disruptions and manipulations are treated as a nuisance by the characters (and perhaps the show’s writers, by proxy)” (298). Indeed, this depiction of slash fans as crazy and obsessive is viewed by many as a message from the producers telling them that they did not like this category of viewers:

- Crazy fan girls are funny, this is how we see our audience. Let’s make fun of them while profiting from them - what the writers thought when they made this character.
- I think she is an unkind caricature of how the writers perceive their mostly female fan base. More often than not, Becky is the butt of the joke.



For Fathallah, this rejection of slash fans in *Supernatural* is an example of what Johnson calls “fantagonism” which is the process of de-legitimizing certain fan behaviors by portraying them negatively in the series (Fathallah 2013, 265; Johnson 313). Becky’s excessive commitment to her fannish obsession can thus be seen as a way for producers to police the activities of their fans and to reject attitudes they do not wish to see.

Here, the behaviors rejected are typically associated with female fans and are usually seen as excessive, or even pathological. Indeed, 7.08 cemented Becky as a representation of the “crazy fangirl” stereotype. Though it has been argued that her depiction in season five “buys into many of the female mad-fan stereotypes” this becomes much more literal in 7.08 where she is directly called a “crazy groupie” by Dean (Fathallah 2010, 1.1). As Busse puts it, this harsh criticism of “crazy” female fans in 7.08 “suggests the intended viewer’s subject position as clearly not that of a fangirl” (2017, 188). This pathologization of female fans has the effect of presenting fan activities that are traditionally considered as feminine, like writing slash fiction, as negative and unacceptable. For the producers, the goal is to reaffirm their authority and Becky can be seen as “a reminder to *Supernatural* fandom, delivered with a smile, of who exactly is in charge,” showing slash fans they cannot and should not feel empowered (Felschow 6.6). This rejection of transformative fans is also done by valorizing more masculine parts of fandom like the behaviors associated with affirmational fans.

#### **b. The valorization of masculine fan behaviors**

In 5.09, Becky is not the only representative of “Supernatural” fans. Indeed, the Winchesters are also introduced to Demian and Barnes, a couple of Sam and Dean cosplayers who get dragged into the brother’s real ghost hunt while trying to participate in a game organized by the convention. They are also a playful and sometimes mocking representation of *Supernatural* fans but, contrary to Becky, the two men are allowed to participate in the episode’s adventure and thus earn Sam and Dean’s respect. They are rewarded for the fact that they do not want to criticize the series and that they “submissively help Sam and Dean on with their exorcism rather than undermining them or diverting/rewriting them” (Scott 299). With this faithful respect of the producers’ authority, Demian and Barnes become the representation of the affirmational side of the fandom, contrasting with Becky’s transformative activities. The negative portrayal of Becky, contrasted with the more positive representation of Demian and Barnes, encourages the development of the primarily masculine side of the fandom and rejects “Supernatural’s large female fanbase” and their transformative

activities (Busse 2017, 188). Scott explains that this is partially due to the greater financial reward of attracting a large affirmational fanbase:

In some sense, we can view “The Real Ghostbusters” (5.09) as an industrial fantasy, projecting a more affirmational (and lucrative) male fanbase for the show. Though the fanboy characters in the episode are unquestionably fans, they are importantly presented as the type of fans the media industry sanctions and values (299).

It is, however, doubtful that the rejection of the primarily female side of the *Supernatural* fandom was only for pecuniary reasons. Indeed, *Supernatural* has often been criticized for its misogyny, especially in its early seasons when female characters mainly existed to be killed violently and their importance in the story was constantly undermined (Melissa Gray, 8). It is thus not surprising to see that female fans were also treated poorly via the character of Becky. Many fans picked up on the difference of treatment between male and female fan representations in the series:

- I think the writers always thought they were writing for a male audience, then when they realized the audience was predominantly female instead of playing to them they tried to punish women [...] they seemingly were trying to alienate the majority of the fan base just to make the people they wanted to be fans happy.

As we can see, the rejection from the producers of their dedicated transformative fanbase to endorse their male audience has been clearly understood by many fans. Slash fans thus had to continue engaging with the fandom with the knowledge that their activities were not fully endorsed by the producers and that they were not as valued as the rest of the show’s audience.

Another, more discreet, encouragement of affirmational fan behaviors was done through the character of Charlie Bradbury. She was introduced in season seven and quickly became a fan-favorite character. Charlie is a talented hacker who sometimes uses her skills to help the Winchesters in their quest against evil. She is a gamer and a fangirl, frequently making various pop culture references. Her approach to the things she loves is entirely affirmational: she wears graphic t-shirts of her favorite media, goes to conventions to buy collectibles, participates in LARP events<sup>11</sup>... This becomes even more evident in 8.20 when she tells Sam and Dean that she has read the “Supernatural” books and uses the knowledge she gained from them to create an app that helps hunters identify the monster they are dealing with. As we can see, her interest in “Supernatural” lies more in the plot than in the relationship between the characters. As one of the survey respondents explains:

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<sup>11</sup> Short for Live Action Role-Playing game: Role-playing where participants physically portray their characters.

- Charlie is a “cool” fangirl—all the cred of geekdom, none of the pesky meddling with canon. She’s a representation of curatorial<sup>12</sup> or affirmational fandom.

Even though Charlie is also a female fan, her behavior toward the things she loves is nothing like Becky’s. She is portrayed as less obsessive and more balanced. She is rewarded for this attitude as she is allowed to participate in the Winchesters’ adventures and has some of her own heroic moments. Moreover, contrary to Becky who is always treated as a nuisance, Charlie is loved by the Winchesters — and especially Dean who sees her as a little sister — which is very important to fans. In the survey, many respondents wrote their appreciation for her friendship with the brothers and the fact that they accepted her as one of their own. This acceptance of Charlie and her affirmational fannish behavior can be seen as a strategy by the producers to steer their female fanbase toward these more acceptable attitudes. Indeed, as Navar-Gill explains, encouraging the kinds of behaviors that they want to see is more efficient for producers than more punitive methods to influence fans (416).

Due to the writers’ and producers’ tendency to stay silent on the subject of slash and transformative fans outside of the series, the rejection of these fannish activities was rarely found in paratexts. However, it was sometimes seen in negative reactions from actors at conventions when asked to talk about it.

### **c. Discouraging slash at convention panels**

In the early years of *Supernatural*, even though producers tended to avoid questions about slash, some still expressed their opinion on the matter occasionally. As the portrayal of transformative fans in the series at the time showed, most had a rather negative opinion about slash and these answers were often used to “neutralize and domesticate” what was seen as “potential threats [...] to a social or cultural status quo” (Cavalcante 86). In other words, producers expressing their disapproval or dislike of slash in paratexts served as a way to “neutralize” the threat that two of the main characters being seen as a homosexual couple would be for the firmly heterosexual narrative of *Supernatural*. In most cases, these answers were rather diplomatic as the goal was not to alienate the show’s transformative fanbase but rather to make them understand that their reading of the series did not correspond to the intended meaning.

For instance, in 2011, during a panel at the seventh edition of Asylum Convention, Misha Collins was asked by a fan whether he preferred Destiel or Wincest. His response was

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12 “Curatorial fandom” refers to the collection and organization of information around a piece of media, it is most often included into the definition of affirmational fandom.

to go on a tangent about what slash is and how it has become a little more accepted in fandom. While he seemed supportive, expressing his happiness at seeing that such a question could be asked at a convention with no backlash from other fans, he also made it clear, by jokingly saying that slash shippers had “perverse tendencies,” that he viewed slash as something weird and inappropriate. In the end, he summed up his opinion by saying, “it’s fucked up, but it’s nice” showing that he was not against slash in itself but that it was something that he believed should stay between fans. This idea was shared by several respondents who expressed their belief that fan activities and producers should be separated:

- I’ve heard through the grapevine a few people’s thoughts on fanfiction. It always makes me feel like I need to brace for impact. If they want to engage in fanfiction topics, bless them. But otherwise fans trying to get the actors & writers engaged in the topics, ships, and dramas makes me uncomfortable. They’re real people and they have every right not to engage with fan creations that might make them uncomfortable.

This used to be the dominant opinion in most fandoms but it has become less widely spread among fans in recent years as many have started to point out that this taboo did not exist when talking about heterosexual couples and resisted the idea that slash should be kept among fans simply because it involves same-sex characters. In any case, Collins’s gentle disapproval of slash was rather well-received by fans as demonstrated by the many positive comments under the Youtube video showing this moment. This is partly because of his humorous take on it, but also because he showed that he was informed about the subject, using the term “slash fic” unprompted and sharing some of his — albeit very partial— knowledge about the history of the practice. As a result, Collins seems to be laughing with fans, not at them. Much like Becky in season five, this fun and playful answer disempowers slash fans with no mean-spiritedness, which is more likely to be well-received by the audience than a rude dismissal.

On the other hand, Jensen Ackles’s responses to fans asking him about Destiel or Dean’s possible bisexuality were much less diplomatic. For instance, during a panel at New Jersey Convention in 2012, Ackles quickly shut down a fan asking about potential subtext related to Dean’s sexuality by telling her, “don’t ruin it for everybody” and then quickly moving on to the next question. This rude and dismissive answer caused virulent debates in the Supernatural fandom, between outraged slash fans and people defending Ackles’s point of view (Romano). For those who believed that actors should always be encouraging fan practices, this answer was seen as “at odds with what many might describe as certain obligations [he] has to the fan community, pursuant to his subcultural celebrity status” (Brennan 2017, 251). Another example of Ackles shutting down questions about slash can be

found in a panel at JaxCon in 2017, where he quickly dismissed a fan's question about the subtext between Dean and Castiel by plainly saying, "Destiel is not real." As Collier explains, "Ackles' knee-jerk response to shut down any discussion or even mention of non-normative sexuality makes clear that if fans are viewed as too transgressive they will be excluded from producers' conversations with fans" (55). The actor's negative reactions to slash fans' interpretation of the series and his character hurt many fans who were invested in shipping Destiel, sometimes even to the point of driving them out of the fandom:

- [...] when Jensen actively expressed his opinions on Dean being straight, it always hurt a little.
- [...] It hurts that Jensen has reacted negatively to bi!Dean in the past since I'm bi and that interpretation isn't even far-fetched.
- Jensen saying Destiel doesn't exist made me feel depressed honestly.
- Jensen's Destiel denial of 2017 (or so?) hit hard, and drove me out of the fandom for a while.

Indeed, when asked to rate how much the opinion of actors about their favorite pairing matters to them on a scale of one to ten, most fans indicated that it was at least a little important to them: the average of the answers to this question is of 6.2 with a median of 7. However, a great number of fans also indicated that, while comments discouraging their interpretation of the series upset them, they easily dismiss the negative opinions they might hear about slash:

- I've heard everything across the spectrum from "gross" to "writers liking Destiel fanart on twitter", and honestly I choose to mentally discard the negative opinions of fanfic and ship pairings to protect my mental health. Any positive opinions tend to act as reinforcement of my reading of the text...

As Fathallah points out, "the only way to stop these fans producing fanfic would be force, and that would be extremely difficult" (2016, 473). Because of this, Ackles's rude dismissal of transformative fans has often been more efficient in upsetting them and turning them against him than at discouraging queer readings of the series.

This is not to say that the rejection of slash at convention panels has had no impact on the fandom. On the contrary, hearing these opinions expressed by someone as influential and well-liked as Jensen Ackles reinforced the negative stereotypes around transformative fans already present in the fandom. This, in addition to the stereotypical image of these fans projected by Becky, caused many people to form a negative opinion about slash and those who enjoy it. This can even be seen among transformative fans who often separate themselves from the "crazy fangirls" who must be the ones being criticized and rejected:

- There is such a range of fanfiction, and while it can be respectful sometimes it's a lot. I think I've seen some panels where J2M<sup>13</sup> make jokes about fanfiction and Misha mentioned reading a couple a few years back. I haven't had any issues with their opinions on fanfiction specifically. It's definitely a delicate subject, since there is a lot of fans who will ruin it for others by making the actors uncomfortable...
- [Becky] is fine. Definitely supposed to be a "fan" which, with how they depicted her sometimes, is a bit rude, but also fair since a significant percentage of the spn fandom is/was real annoying towards the actors and writers.

As we can see, upon seeing the way transformative fans were treated by producers, many respondents, who themselves enjoy reading slash fiction, did not think, "producers believe that slash fans are bad" but rather, "some slash fans are bad but I am not one of them." This is a common effect of the propagation of negative stereotypes about transformative fans which causes the community to identify "against the kind of fans they do not want to be" (Busse 2017, 46).

#### **d. Producers walking the line between acceptance and rejection**

As I mentioned before, writers and producers have mostly stayed silent on the subject of slash outside of the series but there have been some occasions where one of them decided to share their opinion. One notable example is a series of Tweets posted by executive producer Chad Kennedy which perfectly illustrates the attempts of *Supernatural* producers to carefully avoid upsetting and driving away slash fans while still dismissing queer readings of the show. Topic et al. explain that "media producers endeavor to strike the right balance between encouraging fan enthusiasm/participation and protecting the artistic integrity of their original text" (2). Therefore, when it comes to popular slash pairings, producers who decide against being silent have to walk a very fine line between encouraging fans who take an interest in the series because of their favorite pairing and reassuring others who would reject explicit queer content. This process can be illustrated by a series of tweets published by Chad Kennedy on October 13th, 2013 in which he answered fans' questions about the show and the relationship between Dean and Castiel. These tweets were posted in response to the fan's negative response to 9.03. Indeed, after the subtext-heavy eighth season, viewers were very excited about the romantic potential of seeing a newly human Castiel be reunited with Dean. Cas being forced to leave on his own at the end of the episode was understood by many fans as proof that their relationship would stay platonic. Kennedy tried to address these concerns by

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13 Abbreviation for Jensen Ackles, Jared Padalecki, and Misha Collins.

stating that a romantic relationship would not be impossible between the two characters, even though it had not been planned yet. One tweet in particular sums up what was said about this subject. It said: “I’ll put it this way: don’t know if we’ll ever go there, but don’t know for sure that we never will...”. Moreover, on several occasions, Kennedy asked disgruntled fans to keep watching the series to see how Dean and Castiel’s relationship would evolve in future seasons. However, this attempt at keeping slash fans interested in watching the show was dulled by Kennedy’s constant reminders that it was not the producers’ intention to write Dean and Cas’s relationship as romantic. In one of his Tweets, he explained: “I support the idea of bi lead chars (characters). But on this specific show, it is not our intention for these chars.”

This is a good demonstration of how producers and writers have occasionally tried to give hope to some viewers that their ship might one day become canon in order to keep them watching without worrying those who did not want this to happen. This practice of using paratexts to encourage some fans in their queer reading of the series while staying very careful about showing that their interpretation was not the correct one greatly participated in the accusations of queerbaiting made about *Supernatural*. Because of this, Kennedy’s Tweets were received very negatively by slash fans who saw his answers as evidence that he did not truly care about what they wanted and was only interested in keeping them watching. As a result, producers — and sometimes also writers — are disliked by many slash fans who believe that they care more about making money than giving them what they want:

- While we treasure the story, sometimes it feels like the main writers/producers value whether their content will generate wide viewership. So when some fans critique or offer opinions [...] it doesn’t really seem to be anything more than an annoyance to the writers or producers...
- [...] Producers care about their shareholders and dollar bills, appealing to whichever ‘side’ of the fandom will get them more money moving forward. They don’t care about the story or relating to the fans.
- I think they pretended to be for the fans to keep their ratings up. They’ve always thought of super involved fans as annoying.

Moreover, declarations from producers and writers are also more likely to be received negatively by slash fans than what the actors say because of the more official nature they are thought to have. Indeed, as Brookey and Westerfelhaus explain in their analysis of *Fight Club*’s DVD extras, despite the importance given to actors’ comments, producers and writers’ seen as “having privileged insights regarding a film’s meaning and purpose” and what they say is thus used “to articulate a “proper” (i.e., sanctioned) interpretation” (23). As Pearson notes, fans who wish to have freedom regarding their interpretation of the primary text are

often likely to dislike or reject these “authorial assertions” (85). These declarations can be seen by fans as a way to police their activities and are thus more likely to be ignored by slash fans. This was reflected in the survey as the question asking fans to rate how much the opinion of writers on their favorite pairing matters to them on a scale of one to ten received an average of 4.9 (compared to 6.2 for actors) with more than fifteen percent of respondents picking the lowest option.

As we can see, the initial response from *Supernatural* producers to the large transformative fanbase the series attracted was rather negative. Even though they were recognized as an important part of the show’s viewership, the early representations of fans in the series and the comments made by producers on the subject show that slash fans were often not treated seriously. This reflects the many stereotypes that were associated with female fans and the tendency of authors and producers to resist viewers fighting for interpretive power (Fathallah 2013, 15; Scott 292-294). Transformational fan activities were thus placated and silenced by producers as fans were “were guided back into the affirmational space” (Collier 53). Thankfully, as years went by, *Supernatural* producers have begun to treat their transformative fans more respectfully and to be more accepting of transformative fanworks in general.

## **B. Moving toward acceptance?**

When asked whether they believed the way *Supernatural* producers viewed their fans had changed over the years, sixty-eight percent of respondents answered that it has become a little or much better<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, in recent years, with the growing popularity of fan studies and the work of groups like the Organization of Transformative Works, fanfiction has begun to be recognized as a true art form. As time went by, more and more members of the *Supernatural* cast and crew have expressed their support of slash fans and transformative works. This positive change can also be seen in the later representations of fans in the series, with the 200th episode “Fan Fiction” (10.05) and the return of Becky in season fifteen. However, despite the improvement of the way slash fans are treated, it seems that their interpretations are still not taken seriously and invalidated by producers.

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<sup>14</sup> 18.5% responded that there was no change, and 15% said it has gotten worse.



### a. Misha Collins's lighthearted support of transformative fans

Though many *Supernatural* producers have shown their support of slash fans in recent years, Misha Collins has always been the most outspoken defender of the show's transformative fandom, and especially of Destiel fans. For instance, in 2018, during an SPN Denver Convention panel, Collins revealed that, despite the denial of other producers that there was any intention of creating sexual tension between Dean and Castiel, *Supernatural* scripts sometimes contained sentences like, "Dean and Cas eyefuck." This term was created by fans to talk about the homoerotic tension created by the lingering stares often exchanged by the two characters. This was not the first time the actor had spoken up against the idea that the queer subtext in the series was completely invented by fans. In 2012, at a ChiCon meet and greet, he allegedly said about Dean and Castiel's relationship:

You know, we know what it is, what's going on. We don't talk about it. The actors don't, Jensen and I don't. But we're all perfectly aware of how the relationship is, the writers are completely aware of how it's being written. It may be unspoken but that doesn't mean it's not there or not true ("Meet'n'Greet: Dean Loves Cas").

Collier explains that these declarations "give fans hope and validate their own readings of the relationship" and while most fans reacted very positively to them, some have argued that Collins was giving viewers false hopes that Destiel would one day become canon and was thus queerbaiting his fans (Brennan 2017, 256; Collier 51). While it is impossible to know for sure what Misha Collins's intentions are in his support of Destiel, his consistency on the subject after he outgrew his initial prejudices and his real-life support of LGBTQ issues seem to indicate that his declarations were genuine. In any case, for a majority of fans, Collins's support was seen as validating and was thus greatly appreciated. This answer to the survey denotes the importance for fans to hear such positive opinions about slash:

- Was glad to hear that Misha was in favour. When it means so much — because we have, or had when I was younger & got into SPN, such little lgbt+ representation — it feels validating for anyone connected to the show to support it.

In addition to validating slash fans' reading of Dean and Castiel's relationship, Collins's declarations were also a way for him to resist the "crazy fangirl" stereotype that was rampant in the *Supernatural* fandom. Indeed, by confirming that the queer reading of Dean and Cas's relationship was intended by producers, Collins refutes the idea that slash fans see things that are not there and that their complaints about queerbaiting should not be treated seriously. Another example of this can be found in the form of a Tweet that Collins posted after the drama that was caused by Chad Kennedy's Tweets. While other *Supernatural* staff

were trying to calm angered fans down and to “silence fan efforts that could really be considered transformational,” Collins simply tweeted: “You’re not crazy” (Collier 53; @mishacollins). This short Tweet shows that the actor understood and addressed the root of most fans’ anger: they felt that Kennedy saying that the homoerotic subtext between Dean and Castiel was not intended by the producers was a way to tell them they were delusional in their interpretations and imagining things that were not there. Louisa Ellen Stein explains that, with this attitude, Collins has embraced fannish discourse and built a sense of commonality with his fans:

Misha Collins thus entered and was welcomed into a transmedia playing field where audiences expect to be authors and where female desire and queer desire are not only embraced but aggressively demonstrated, often through fan authorship. Rather than fight these elements, Collins has engaged with and embraced them, integrating them further into his developing star text (410).

Even though Collins is not the only member of the *Supernatural* cast and crew to have shown support of transformative fans, his tendency to do so in resistance to more official narratives has given him the image of a marginal and transgressive “representative of fans-as-transgressive-author” defending fans against the “official creative frame of *Supernatural* and *The Powers That Be*<sup>15</sup>” (Stein 414-415). Because of this, some fans have associated the positive evolution of the *Supernatural* fan/producer relationship with Collins’s support of transformative fans as this answer demonstrates:

- Misha Collins has been supportive of fanfiction and shipping for a majority of his time on the show, and he really feels like a representative of the modern fandom.

Here, the expression “modern fandom” refers to the fact that slash is not less taboo and treated more respectfully by producers.

For some fans, Collins has become more than a representative and is even considered as a fan himself. This is largely due to the fact that he admitted having read Dean/Castiel fanfiction on several occasions. For instance, at a DallasCon panel in 2019, the actor explained that he went to read some explicit fanfics soon after his character was introduced to the show but then decided to avoid it as much as possible when he realized that writers could be uncomfortable with him reading their work. This, in addition to Collins’s support of slash fans’ interpretation of Dean and Castiel’s relationship, has led a number of Destiel fans to consider the actor as one of their own:

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15 This term is used by fans to refer to the people who have authority in fan spaces. It can be abbreviated in TPTB.

- Misha and Bobo<sup>16</sup> shipping destiel has always been so validating, not because of the ship itself but what it means to me and how I see my own identity reflected in the characters.
- Misha of course, has always been the number 1 destiel fan and has been very supportive of fan fiction. I was very happy when I found out he thought about the same things I did.

As we can see, the idea that Collins may himself be a Destiel shipper is extremely validating for these fans, making them feel like their reading of the show is legitimized. In an analysis of the close relationship between *Sleepy Hollow* star Orlando Jones and transformative fans — whom she compares to Misha Collins in this regard — Suzanne Scott explains that the reception of his “intersectional performance of fan identity has been overwhelmingly celebratory” but that his status as one of “The Powers That Be” complicates his self-proclaimed fan identity (331-333). Indeed, the identity of fan and producer are sometimes seen as incompatible but the combination of the two can also be valued and respected by fans. Misha Collins’s status as both “expert and fan” allows him to gain more legitimacy and respectability than other producers within the fandom (Brenan 2017, 248; McLeod and Holland 1).

Despite the privileged status held by Collins within the Destiel fandom, he is still sometimes criticized for making light of slash shipping. Indeed, humor and satire are an important part of the actor’s interactions with fans and, as a result, many of his declarations about slash have been made in the form of jokes. For instance, in 2013, the actor posted a short video entitled “People always ask whether I’m into “shipping.” Well, here’s my definitive answer. (This video is not for kids.)” in which he filmed himself shipping a sausage of the brand ‘Diestel’ to Jensen Ackles. This video is a playful jab at fans a little too intent on knowing the actor’s opinion and though some viewers were a little offended by the last shot where Collins raises his middle finger staring straight at the camera, the comments under the video show that it was very well-received. However, though Collins’s jokes are not meant to belittle fans, his flippant attitude regarding slash shipping is sometimes criticized by fans who wish to be treated more seriously. These jokes can also be seen more negatively because of the way transformative fans used to be mocked in the series which can make any kind of attempt to laugh about the subject feel like a continuation of this slightly hostile climate. Many respondents to the survey expressed their distaste for the jokes about slash made by Collins and other producers:

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16 Robert Berens, one of the *Supernatural* writers who notably wrote 15.18

- Misha has made jokes about the pairing and the fandom... at the expense of shippers and it was probably not ill intentioned but it definitely made it obvious that he was confused about the impact and important destiel held for a lot of fans.
- [Producers] make jokes about some of the ships within the show itself [...] It makes me angry that they're making an LGBTQIA+ relationship out to be a joke because that community deserves to be supported and uplifted and not queerbaited and degraded.

These comments show that the regular jokes made by producers about slash shipping can be interpreted as them deeming homosexual pairings unimportant or thinking that they are laughable. Indeed, it is true that producers more rarely joke about heterosexual pairings on social media or at conventions but it is hard to know if this is due to homophobia or simply to the fact that such pairings hold a much less important place in the fandom (or, more likely, to a mix of both of these things).

Ultimately, Collins's attitude toward slash reflects the evolution of the perception of transformative fandom in the industry: transformative fans are more respected and are rarely treated as a nuisance like they used to be but some producers sometimes still have trouble taking them seriously.

#### **b. Season 10, Episode 5: a love letter to the fans?**

After the increasingly mean-spirited representation of fans through Becky in seasons five and seven, the two hundredth *Supernatural* episode, "Fan Fiction," was a turning point in the way producers perceived and represented slash. This episode was described by showrunner Jeremy Carver as a "love letter to the fans" and, indeed, it was particularly well-received by viewers and is still one of the show's highest-rated episodes on IMDb to this day (Lee). Fathallah speculates that this more positive portrayal of the fandom might have been influenced by the fans' reaction to Becky, pushing the writers to change their approach to fan representation (2017, 162).

The plot of the episode revolves around a high school musical production of the "Supernatural" novels. Viewers are introduced to Marie, the student who created and is directing the play, who is immediately presented as a huge fan of the books, very intent on making her vision come true. Like Becky, she is a slash fan, slightly obsessive, and sometimes annoying but she is also shown to be creative, passionate, and very capable. Contrary to her counterpart, Marie's status as a fan is not pathologized and her dedication even plays an important role in helping the Winchesters defeating the monster of the week. When asked

about their opinion of Marie, an important number of fans noted that she was an improvement compared to Becky and did not fall into the “crazy fangirl” stereotype:

- I felt this episode was an example of really good fan service. We got to see ourselves - people who make art about shows we are passionate about - represented not as crazy but as legitimate artists...
- She was really passionate with supernatural and had her opinions but unlike Becky she was not crazy or dictatorial about that.

Many respondents also liked to see that she was a transformative fan who defines herself as such. Indeed, when Dean asks her about a futuristic prop he sees backstage, telling her that “there’s no space in Supernatural,” she answers, “well, not canonically, no. But this is transformative fiction.” She also reveals that her play explores the “subtext” between both Dean/Sam and Dean/Castiel. Fans appreciated her lack of embarrassment talking about these subjects, showing that it was nothing to be ashamed of. Many respondents also pointed out that the representation of her relationship with the original text as a slash fan was very accurate. Indeed, even though Marie decided to create her own ending because she did not like the one she read in the novels (the last one she has access to tells the events of the season five finale) she still shows a lot of love for the source material. As I demonstrated in the second part, fanfic writers do not fully reject canon and tend to respect it in many ways. This is also the case for Marie, whose first scene where she berates the actress playing Dean for not wearing his signature necklace shows that her writing a show with aliens, robots, and Dean turning into a woman does not mean that she does not care about canon.

As its title suggests, “Fan Fiction” is not simply a “love letter” to fans in general, but more specifically a love letter to the transformative fandom, recognizing its importance for the series as a whole. This is shown by the fact that Calliope, the monster Sam and Dean have to defeat, draws her power from stories and authors realizing their vision. Talking about Marie’s play, she explains, “I’ve consumed many authors. Many stories. But tonight, soon as that curtain opened, I knew something special was brewing with this one.” Thus, the writers show the power of transformative fiction and recognize it as a real form of art. In the end, Marie is told by Dean to “keep writing” even though he disagrees with her interpretation. With this, producers directly address slash fans, telling them that they are important and validating their fannish activities. This becomes even more explicit in the last scene where Chuck, the writers’ proxy in the series, comes back for the first time since season five to tell Marie that he liked her play. Though this was appreciated by many fans, Fathallah notes that this ending reaffirms the fan as “needing the approval of the Author God” (2017, 168).

Despite the largely positive response from viewers to 10.05 and the clear improvement it made in the representation of *Supernatural* fans, this episode is not without its flaws. Indeed, even though Marie is not pathologized like Becky, the portrait she paints of fans is still criticized:

- I feel like [Marie] is portrayed negatively because of her drive and focus. I'm typically fond of such characters, but Marie grated on me.
- Eh. Not my favorite. I'm not sure what it is but she feels like Becky 2.0 and they used her to make fun of us again...
- I felt like Marie was passionate and interesting, but the show used her as another device to mock the audience anyway. I wanted to like her, but I just couldn't.

As we can see, many fans felt like “Fan Fiction” was more mocking than loving and that, despite Marie’s qualities, she was still used to make fun of them. Indeed, the whole episode has a very light tone — which is arguably not uncharacteristic for *Supernatural* — and every time slash is mentioned, it is as the set up of a joke. For instance, when Dean sees the actresses playing him and Castiel hugging and kissing, the following conversation with Marie ensues:

**Marie:** Siobhan and Kristen are a couple in real life. Although, we do explore the nature of Destiel in act two.

**Dean:** Sorry, what?

**Marie:** Oh, it's just subtext! But, then again, you know, you can't spell subtext without... s-e-x.

Jensen Ackles then breaks the fourth wall to give an exasperated look to the camera. This moment demonstrates how, even though the producers’ opinion of slash fans has improved, slash shipping is still viewed as something funny and embarrassing. This follows Fathallah’s argument that “it cannot be said that Marie represents a good, rational model of fandom that serves to emphasize the opposing bad fandom of Becky, but rather that they exist on a continuum” (2017, 167). Indeed, 10.05 does not fully break the stereotypical image of the weird but funny fangirl propagated by Becky but rather shows how it has evolved from a rejection of the transformational fandom to a slightly patronizing encouragement of fan practices.

“Fan Fiction” was also criticized for reinforcing the hierarchy between producers and fans and for invalidating queer readings of the series. As I mentioned earlier, with Chuck’s appearance, the episode recognizes that fan writers have power but this power is depicted as entirely dependent on the producers’ approval, rejecting the idea that transformative fans could take part in the meaning-making process without this kind of legitimization (Fathallah

2017, 174). This, however, is not the main problem that slash fans have with this episode. Though some felt validated by the producers' acknowledgment of fanfiction, others felt like the message of 10.05 was that, even though they are allowed and encouraged to produce transformative works, their interpretation of the series is not supported by canon. Several respondents noted that the episode felt like a dismissal of their vision of the show:

- I liked [Marie] and what she represented but honestly I didn't love that the show used her and the play to give the "you have your story we have ours" message. In the big picture I understand it and it's a nice sentiment but I felt [it] invalidated certain aspects of the story by trying to claim they were just fan created and not intentional narratives being put forward by the show.
- [...] I never liked this episode, it was insulting and patronizing. It was so obvious so much of the dialog was them trying to gaslight the fans into believing that Destiel was just stuff the fans made up, fine for our little schoolgirl fantasies, but not something that was REAL.

This is due to the fact that, in this episode, Dean represents the producers slowly growing to accept transformative fans which creates an imbalance between their opinions and the fans', represented by Marie. Indeed, when the two characters disagree about the story, putting the fans' interpretation against the producers', Marie is automatically perceived as the wrong one. She is allowed to have her own vision of the story but Dean's version is obviously the real one because he lived through it. As a result, Dean telling Marie he disagrees with her interpretation which "explores the nature of Destiel," even if he respects it, is a way for the producers to tell slash fans that the reading of Dean and Castiel's relationship as romantic is a pure invention on their part and is not supported by canon in any way. This denial of the presence of homoerotic subtext in the series reinforces the stereotype that slash fans are delusional and looking for things that are not there and thus diminishes the improvement made by 10.05 in the representation of transformative fans.

### **c. The redemption of Becky**

The final step in the evolution of fan representation in *Supernatural* was the unexpected return of Becky in season fifteen. In "Atomic Monsters" (15.04), Chuck, who lost his inspiration and is unable to come up with a good ending for the Winchesters, goes back to his "number one fan" to gain his self-confidence back. The version of Becky introduced in this episode is completely different and much more stable than the one that appeared in earlier seasons. She is still a big "Supernatural" fan but is now happily married with two children and seems to be able to healthily balance her passion and her family life. We learn that she is still

a passionate fanfiction writer, builds maquettes of scenes from the novels, and owns a very successful online shop for “Supernatural” merchandise. Much like in 10.05, the emphasis is put on fan talent and creativity rather than on the idea that fans spend their time aimlessly obsessing over their favorite characters. Fan responses to this new version of Becky were overwhelmingly positive with almost all of the respondents asked to give their opinion on this character explaining that they greatly appreciated this positive evolution. This answer sums up the majority of opinions expressed on the subject:

- Early Becky I don’t relate to at all, but season 15 Becky feels so relatable. Supernatural is part of her healthy, balanced life, a part she loves but doesn’t control her. She’s passionate about the characters but not possessive, and she fundamentally believes in the power of all writing and narratives (including fan ones). The “show” means as much to her as it does to us, and she fundamentally cares about the nature of the narrative. She’s also taken her passion and turned it into something constructive (her business) which is so admirable. I love that she was given this space, because it feels so loving to the fans.

This overwhelmingly positive response from slash fans can be partially explained by the fact that, for the first time in *Supernatural*, fan activities in this episode are treated seriously and never used for jokes.

Indeed, in 15.04, the differences and similarities between fanfiction and published writing are a central theme. Initially, Chuck is dismissive of Becky’s status as a fanfic writer but she progressively makes him understand that “writing’s writing” and that she is just as much of an author as he is. Thanks to her insightful advice, he is able to find inspiration again and lets her criticize his ending’s first draft, taking her comments into account to make it better. Here, the fan is put in a position of power over the writer who defers to her expertise. Many fans appreciated this episode’s depiction of the relationship between fans and authors:

- [...] I really liked how [Becky] was portrayed in season 15: a person who still loved Supernatural but she had her own life, and she was critical of Chuck’s writing but in an insightful and constructive way.
- [...] The contrast between [Becky’s] description of what fans love and appreciate about the show vs. Chuck’s POV as the “author” was especially accurate and validating.

It seems that the message of “Atomic Monsters” is that transformative writers are now fully accepted and valued by *Supernatural* producers. This episode breaks the previously established hierarchy between fans and producers by having Becky regularly remind Chuck that she is doing well on her own and does not need him. Contrary to 10.05 and the previous apparitions of Becky, this episode recognizes that transformative fans do not need the producers’ approval for their works and interpretations.



However, the empowerment of transformative fans built throughout the episode is contradicted by an ending that reasserts the superiority of the producers over fan writers. Indeed, when Becky reads Chuck's second attempt at writing an ending for the series and tells him that it is much too dark and hopeless, he does not listen and instead reveals his identity as God before making her and her family disappear. In their last exchange, Chuck reaffirms his authority as the original author of "Supernatural":

**Becky:** Please, you can't do this.

**Chuck:** Oh, Becky. I can do anything. I'm a writer.

This abrupt ending does not completely nullify the positive portrayal this episode makes of transformative fans but it certainly complicates its initial message of respect and acceptance. Becky's death feels like a punishment for having dared to consider herself superior to the Author God and tried to break free of him. In the survey, many fans expressed their disappointment at seeing the episode end like this:

- [...] I was happy that they attempted to rectify [the show's disdain for its audience] with [Becky's] season 15 return as a successful, confident woman with a full life that still included fandom. Less happy that they killed her immediately after.
- [...] I did not like [Becky] at all when she first appeared on the show, but I loved her explanation of why Chuck's ending sucked. It was tragic, however, when, after her evolution, she was zapped into oblivion.

Becky's death is made even worse by the fact that the show never addresses whether she was brought back in the end or not, which was perceived by some as proof of the producers' disdain for their fans. A few respondents also pointed out that the message sent by Becky being allowed to give her opinion on Chuck's drafts was complicated by the fact that producers planned an ending that most fans would not like (Seddon and Jeffery):

- [...] I really liked how they changed [Becky] in Atomic Monsters, although I think we're all at a loss as to what her speech about Chuck's ending was supposed to mean in light of the finale

"Atomic Monsters" painted an unprecedented respectful portrait of transformative fans by giving Becky a more complex and less stereotypical personality but this episode also serves as a reminder that fans have no authority over the series and producers are the ones with all the power.

Over the years, *Supernatural* producers have progressively stopped trying to silence their transformative fans and have begun to explicitly encourage slash both from within the series and in paratexts. This reflects the evolution of the perception of slash fans in the television and film industry who are now recognized as a valuable part of their viewership (Andrejevic). However, the idea that slash is something silly and laughable has not completely disappeared and is still used to dismiss fans' interpretations. Even when producers try to address their transformative fans respectfully and encouragingly, it seems that they always feel obligated to reassert their authority as the sole originators of canon and its official interpretations. Ultimately, despite the efforts made to improve their relationship with fans, *Supernatural* producers have always been unable to truly understand the large transformative fandom that has formed around the show.

### **C. The Problem With Fan Representation in *Supernatural***

From Becky's first appearance to the end of the series, most of the critiques regarding the way producers represent and address their transformative fans have been based on the idea that they have never made enough of an effort to truly understand their fanbase:

- [...] To be honest, I don't think they preoccupy themselves with the fans all that much, or really understand the complexity of the fandom
- [...] Their portrayal of the fandom often gives me the impression that they half-heartedly put the effort into understanding how fandom works, but ultimately have a difficult time wrapping their heads around what people mean when they say things...
- They think they know what we want, but they don't.

Fans have expressed this critique in all of the open questions of the survey, showing that it is a central problem in the relationship between *Supernatural* slash fans and producers. Those who are perceived as more understanding, like Misha Collins, are seen as an exception. Producers have always struggled to represent fans in a way that felt accurate, repeatedly misunderstanding their audience and failing to create relatable fan personas. Moreover, fan representations in the series and paratexts have shown that they have never fully understood what slash is and why fans create transformative works.

### a. Fan Representation Versus Reality

Originally, one of the biggest problems with the producer's image of their fans was that they failed to see or to accept, that the show attracted mostly female fans who enjoyed slash and other kinds of transformative works. As I explained previously, Damian and Barnes, the couple Sam and Dean of cosplayers in 5.09, allowed producers to encourage affirmational fannish activities over transformative ones (represented by Becky) but this was not the only way in which female fans were discarded in this episode. Indeed, in the shots that show the entire crowd of convention attendees, we can see that there are only a handful of women scattered in the middle of the "overwhelmingly male" audience (Scott 298). Anyone who has ever seen a real *Supernatural* convention would know that this representation could not be further from reality as the dedicated fans who usually attend these events are, by a large majority, women. This dissonance could be explained by the fact that *Supernatural* was originally created to attract male viewers (Ronnenberg 132). The overwhelmingly female fandom that appeared around the series was entirely unexpected, and perhaps unwanted. A lot of fans are aware of this issue and have mentioned it as one of the reasons for the erasure and poor treatment of female fans in the series:

- They realized that they were creating something for a primarily queer/female-aligning audience when they initially thought they had been creating for a masculine, "cars, rock, and womanizing" type of audience, and they have been punishing us for it ever since.
- [...] initially they were probably expecting a lot more dude bro fans, not women and queers, and weren't always respectful towards those groups to say the least.

The crowd of men at the "Supernatural" convention in 5.09 can thus be understood as a representation of the people who are supposed to enjoy the story told by the series and the novels. This might even be a way for producers to imply that, if *Supernatural* had been written instead of filmed and had not provided viewers with images of attractive men, women would not have been interested in it. This perpetuates the stereotype that young female fans are more interested in "sexual titillation" than in the story which completely ignores the profound love and respect for the show and its narrative that I have repeatedly shown slash fans to have in the course of this thesis (McDermott 137). Even though producers have later shown their acceptance of the women of the fandom, few fans seem to have forgotten this initial rejection and later efforts to improve fan representation have sometimes been perceived as a reluctant attempt not to draw away female fans. As one of the respondents puts it, "they have realized young female fans are Not Going Away, and now they have to cope."

In “Fan Fiction,” producers did a much better job at showing that the majority of the *Supernatural* fandom is composed of women but many fans still had trouble relating to Marie who was meant to represent them in this episode. Survey respondents who could not connect to her gave many reasons for this, some linked to her personality and others to her vision of “Supernatural,” but the one that was cited the most is the fact that she was too young to be relatable:

- Me age 15 probably would’ve identified with her much more. but by the time they brought her on and by the time i watched it, she was more like a fond memory of being that passionate about media and theatre.
- This kid was a little annoying, but she was exactly that: a kid. I’m almost 30, I’m not going to resonate with the child writing a musical for a school play.
- She was fun. I get her as a writer and fanficcer, but as a highschool girl, she's a bit too young for me to fully identify with at this point.

Indeed, answers to the survey show that, among the respondents who watched the episode in the year it aired, a large majority would have been at least twenty years old. For them, Marie represented not who they were but who they used to be. As a result, it felt like the positive evolution of fan representation in 10.05 arrived too late as many fans had already grown and matured past the passionate and slightly obsessive behavior shown by the young fangirl. This would have been less of a problem if *Supernatural* had also portrayed transformative fans as more mature but, even though Becky was older than Marie, she is often considered to be more immature due to her over-enthusiasm and lack of personal boundaries. Scott explains that, because of their rarity, fangirl portrayals “carry a burden of representation” which is why Marie’s youth compared to the age of actual viewers sends the message that transformative fans are immature (294). However, this issue was resolved with Becky’s evolution in season fifteen which allowed her to become a representation of older fans to balance with Marie’s young age.

Another problem pointed out by survey respondents is the lack of representation for LGBT+ slash fans. Indeed, fandoms tend to be composed of an important number of LGBT+ people who explore their identity through fan activities, notably the reading and writing of fanfiction (Koehm 24; McInroy and Craig 185). A survey conducted in 2019 by Fansplaining and answered by more than 16,000 self-identified shippers (primarily but not exclusively m/m slash fans) showed that less than twenty percent of them identify as heterosexual (Klink and Minkel). It could be argued that, given there are only two transformative fans in *Supernatural*, it is not necessarily surprising that queer slash fans are not represented. However, in the series, queerness and transformative fandom are so explicitly separated that it seems almost

deliberate on the producers' part. To begin with, in 5.09, Damien and Barnes being revealed as a couple might be a way for producers to acknowledge that they are aware of the important number of LGBT+ fans in the show's fandom and to represent them as an important part of the fanbase. However, as I explained earlier, they represent the affirmational side of the fandom, in contrast with Becky whose interest in slash is strongly connected to her sexual attraction to Sam. In the episode, her heterosexuality is constantly reasserted through her sexual advances toward Sam and the beginning of her relationship with Chuck. The separation between transformational fan and queerness can also be seen in 10.05. As I mentioned before, the two girls playing Dean and Castiel are revealed to be in a relationship, which could have been a good opportunity to add representation for LGBT+ slash fans to the show. However, the young actress playing Dean is explicitly stated not to be a fan of the "Supernatural" novels, explaining that she is only participating "for the college credit." Finally, this problem is also personified by Charlie, who is a lesbian and is extremely relatable to the slash fans who answered the survey, with an average of 8.1 on a scale of one to ten. As I previously demonstrated, she is clearly meant to be a representative of the affirmational fandom and, even though she has read the "Supernatural" novels, she does not seem to be a fan and is only interested in them for the convenient information they provide. All of these examples demonstrate that producers have failed to show understanding about the importance of queer identities in transformational fandom, preferring to depict slash fans as straight women and to only portray LGBT+ fans as people who do not read and write fanfiction.

#### **b. The Failure to Understand Slash Fiction**

As many fans have pointed out, the biggest problem with the producers' relationship with slash and its fans is that they fail to fully understand what slash fiction really is and why fans are interested in it. Indeed, slash is still perceived primarily as a way for fans to explore their sexual fantasies involving the characters they love and is associated with "deviant sexuality" (Fathallah 2017, 161). As I mentioned previously, many authors and producers initially rejected slash as "obscene" and unfit for children, demonstrating how the practice was viewed as entirely pornographic (Waters). In an article entitled "Talking back: 'Fanfiction, fandom and the collapse of the fourth wall,'" Pich clearly explains how this vision is false and harmful:

I'm not going to be foolish enough to argue that sex is absent from fanfiction, but fanfiction is so, so much more than smut. Asserting that fanfiction is synecdoche for porn not only misrepresents the wealth of literature produced by fans, but also stigmatises participation in fandom (63).

The fact that slash fiction is not only pornographic can easily be verified as AO3 provides writers with a system of content ratings that are “analogous to movie or TV ratings, from G to NC--17, approximately” (Riley 45). These ratings indicate for which audiences the story is appropriate: General Audiences (G), Teen and Up Audiences (T), Mature (M), and Explicit: only suitable for adults (E). Works rated G or T are expected not to contain any explicit sex scenes. More than a half of the Destiel works hosted on the archive fit into one of these two categories which shows that slash fans are far from only being interested in sex<sup>17</sup>. The selection of popular fanfics analyzed in this thesis also demonstrates this variety. Moreover, as I demonstrated in the second part, even though sex is often present in fan works, it is rarely the primary focus of these stories. Instead, it is used to reinforce the intimate connection between the characters which is almost always given a central place in slash fiction.

The misconception that slash fiction is primarily pornographic is still very much present as is demonstrated by the portrayals of Becky and Marie. Indeed, in Becky's first introduction, she is seen reading aloud the words of the Wincest fanfic she is writing: “and then Sam touched— no —caressed Dean's clavicle. ‘This is wrong,’ said Dean. ‘Then I don't want to be right,’ replied Sam, in a husky voice” (5.01). In addition to showing that Becky is a rather bad writer, this short passage implies that her story will most likely continue to include sex between the brothers. This idea is reinforced by her blush and giggles when she tells Sam and Dean that she has written about them. Many fans felt that this representation of slash fans attested to the producers' inability to understand them:

- [...] The writers did a bad job at representing us as a fandom, getting a basically heterosexual, white, cis woman who shipped incest and wrote bad smutty fics. it was kind of offensive.
- [Becky] started off as a way to make fun of the fans, who I speculate the writers thought of as a small group. She's every over obsessed, sex crazed fan girl.

Interestingly, in 15.04, when Becky has grown and is not portrayed as a sex-obsessed fangirl anymore; she is also separated from her identity as a slash writer. Of course, she still writes fanfiction but her description of her work as stories where the characters “just sit around and do laundry and talk” raises the question of whether she is still writing slash or if her growth also included her moving on to writing gen stories only. The association between slash and

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17 The ratings for Destiel works on AO3 are as follows: T = 28%, G = 24%, E = 21.5%, M = 15%, and not rated = 11,5%.

pornography continued in 10.05 with Marie telling Dean that “you can’t spell subtext without ‘s-e-x’.” This moment was seen by fans as another proof that producers believe them to be interested in slash solely because of its sexual aspect:

- I mean. They framed [Marie] as a nuts fan who was not-so-subtly focused on the sex. So. Not super favorable.
- Marie is the sex-obsessed fan creator people love to portray us as [...].
- [Marie] is more like Becky, but not as terrible. However it is hurtful that fangirls are, again, portrayed as sex-crazed fetishizing girls.

The representation of slash fans in the series has thus led many fans to believe that producers are unaware of the non-sexual aspects of slash fiction.

Moreover, many respondents have also noted that declarations made by various producers outside the show have led them to feel like they did not understand that slash was much more than pornography. When asked to talk about opinions on fanfiction they had heard from producers and their reaction to them, a significant number of respondents pointed out this problem:

- [...] Not such a fan of the way I feel the show runners treat fanfic as a creepy/obsessed/sex thing. Having helped create a universe with lots of lore and character, which is not always fully explored, it seems fairly obvious that fans would expand on that in their spare time.
- [...] I feel like they're very much Casuals trying to react positively to something they don't really know about. way too much focus on sex when they talk about it tbh (to be honest).
- They mostly are either joking about how fanfic is porn or dismiss it as our own interpretation of the story.

Respondents upset about this misconception of slash mention actors, writers, and showrunners as holding this belief which shows that the idea seems to be spread among many producers of the series. This builds a climate in which fans feel misunderstood by the people they hold in high regard which creates a rift between slash fans and producers.

Another issue with the *Supernatural* producers’ understanding of slash fiction is that it fails to account for the many important differences between various slash communities. In “Revenge of the Fanboy,” Suzanne Scott explains that fandoms are still erroneously represented as one cohesive ensemble:

There is little that is “hegemonic,” or even cohesive, about contemporary fandom or the work currently being done within fan studies. Still, concerns linger about fans and fandom being hegemonically conceived or represented, either by the popular press, the industry, academics, or fans themselves, and must be addressed alongside the gendered power imbalances they perpetuate (281-282).

*Supernatural* producers have shown that they are aware of the differences between affirmational and transformative fannish practices but their portrayals of slash fans show that they still tend to imagine those people as one cohesive group. This can be illustrated by Marie’s portrayal as a fan who enjoys both Wincest and Destiel and includes both pairings in her work. Indeed, in reality, there is very little overlap between Sam/Dean and Dean/Castiel fans as is demonstrated by the fact that only thirteen out of seven hundred survey respondents indicated reading fanfics for both pairings. This separation between the two slash communities is partially connected to the fact that many fans are bothered by the idea of portraying the Winchesters in an incestuous relationship. As we can see in this survey answer, some viewers particularly disliked the implication that the two pairings were put on the same level in this regard:

- The fact that [Marie] purposely put incestual subtext in her play is disgusting. Also shows that the writers put destiel on the same level of validity as incest. Im not much of an active destiel shipper tbh, but that's just ridiculous. Gross

Perhaps more importantly, Wincest and Destiel fans tend to have fundamentally different readings on the series. The formers mostly focus on the bond between the brothers and usually see the series as the tale of the two of them against the rest of the world while the later tend to read the show as the Winchesters’ journey to discovering that “family don’t end with blood” and finding strength in the bonds they form with others (3.16). As a result, Marie’s seemingly equal enjoyment of both pairings can be seen as unrealistic. This is not to say that people who like both Destiel and Wincest do not exist but it is extremely rare to see the two pairings included in the same fan work. Many respondents were put off by Marie’s relationship to the two pairings which made it harder for them to relate to her:

- [...] She seemed to be a multi-shipper who had no issues with Wincest, though, which is hard pass from me.
- [...] a little too vaguely wincesty yet also ships destiel? not very realistic in my opinion
- again, why do they think we're all wincest shippers ew

This last comment also shows that having the only two slash fan representations in the series be Wincest shippers made some viewers feel like producers thought that all of their transformative fans enjoyed this pairing.



The problem with the portrayal of Marie as both a Destiel and Wincest fan is that, in their attempt to represent all transformative fans through one character, *Supernatural* producers failed to recognize the fundamental differences between these two pairings. Indeed, the majority of Wincest fans are very much aware of the transgressive nature of the pairing and, whether they choose to explore it or ignore it, their goal in creating fan works is usually not to prove its validity or to push for it to become canon. Wincest is thus mostly about enjoying the unlimited possibilities of transformative fandom. On the other hand, many Destiel fans were invested in the idea of seeing Dean and Castiel enter a relationship in the series. As I demonstrated earlier, a lot of DeanCas fanfiction includes elements meant to show how the characters' relationship can and should be read as romantic in canon. The association of Wincest and Destiel, done through the character of Marie, thus showcases the producers' inability to understand slash communities as more than a unique cohesive group but also minimizes the desire of DeanCas fans to see the subtext present in the show be concretized in making their relationship canon.

The sentiment that producers do not fully understand the importance of seeing Destiel become canon for fans was also propagated by a comment made by Misha Collins in "The Long Road Home." In this special documentary episode aired just before the series finale, the actor told the viewers: "Even when the story is written, you can write your own ending." This declaration received mixed reactions from slash fans. While they appreciated the validation of fanfiction and the encouragement to keep writing these stories, they also took offense at the implication that fanfiction can become a substitute for a good or satisfying ending. As this survey answer attests, the fact that slash fans use fanfics to fix the parts of the series they think could be improved does not mean that they do not care about what happens in canon:

- Misha talks about fan fiction and how we can write fix it fics to expand the universe and get the endings that we specifically wanted to see, but I don't think he understands that we're sick of having to write our own endings in the shadows.

Not only does the idea that transformative fans can create their own ending minimize the interest they have in seeing their interpretations be validated in the source text, but it also ignores the close relationship slash writers have with canon. As we have seen, the original text is always very important to transformative fans, and the implication that they should simply ignore it if they dislike the ending demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of what fanfiction really is. Moreover, because the *Supernatural* ending failed to deliver the representation that many queer fans were hoping for, this declaration was also taken by some as a way to say that slash fiction could replace canon queer representation:

- [...] I took a little of offense in [Collins's comment], because why are queer stories always shoved aside and hide under the rug, why do we need to pick the crumbs and fix everything ourselves.

As McLeod and Holland explain in “The Ghost of J.K. Rowling: Harry Potter and the Ur-Fan,” while some fans might enjoy the freedom of having things left up to the viewers’ interpretation, representation of different minorities is better when it is made clear and explicit in the source text (2). In a long and comprehensive answer, one survey respondent explained the many problems posed by Collins’ declaration:

- In some cases, specifically recently, I have seen people involved in supernatural pushing the narrative of “write your own endings” as a way to endorse fan fiction to placate fans who were upset about the way things went on the show. I think that is utter nonsense, and it a cop out for them to give terrible and fake representation and leave it up for interpretation so they don’t anger fans who disagree. I think when they endorse fan culture in this way it is malicious and it is honestly lazy. Writing your own ending can be really great, but when the entire fandom has to turn to fix it fics to make the show bearable that isn’t something to praise, it means they did something wrong. Also the sentiment that they leave things - such as Deans sexuality - up in the air so that we as fans can interpret it our own way and write our own endings in fanfiction is disgusting and harmful to queer fans, who are desperate to be represented and instead are told time and time again we do not belong in the canon, but they will encourage us in fan fiction so long as we keep making them money.

We can note that, though Misha Collins was the one to pronounce the quoted sentence, this viewer sees this narrative as something that is also pushed by other producers. Even the simple fact that this moment was included in a special episode shows that this idea was not just Collins’s opinion but was part of a more official message to the fans. This answer also highlights the sentiment shared by many viewers that producers encourage the writing of fanfiction to profit from the fans’ labor but that they are not at all interested in trying to understand what slash fans truly want. Ultimately, telling fans that, no matter what happens in canon, they can always write fanfiction to correct it pushes the idea that there is no use in fulfilling transformative fans’ expectations as they can create their own satisfying ending.

## Conclusion

Even though the size and activity of *Supernatural*'s slash fandom and the manner in which its producers interact with their fans have made the show's fan-producer relationship special and unique, the series does reflect the evolution of the relationship between slash fans and media producers in many ways. With a mix of luck and deliberate actions, the series' producers have found what is still to this day one of the best formulas to attract slash fans and keep them interested in the show. Indeed, the series' genre, mixing Fantasy, Sci-Fi, and Horror elements, is particularly attractive to transformative fans and the pushing aside of women to focus on the male characters' relationships encouraged these fans to turn their focus on m/m slash. There is plenty of homoerotic subtext between Dean and Castiel in the show used by the fans to explore the possibility of seeing them as harboring romantic feelings for each other. However, producers also discourage the queer reading of this relationship in the series and its official paratexts. The mixed signals thus sent to slash fans create frustration that encourages them to be more vocal and active to make their voices heard. This constant back and forth between validating and dismissing slash fans' interpretations, keeping fans hopeful that the pairing would one day become canon but never satisfying their expectations, resulted in many accusations of queerbaiting toward the series but, even though the practice is generally viewed as harmful and dishonest, it is nevertheless efficient in inspiring the creation of transformative works. The popularity of Destiel fanfiction is thus largely explained by the need for fans to work through their frustrations and to assert their own interpretation of the series.

The analysis of popular fanfics directly inspired by episodes and paratexts showed that slash writers have a complex relationship with canon and the producers' authority. Fanfiction is undeniably a means for fans to take some control over the meaning-making process and to partially seize interpretive power from the producers but their authority is far from being completely undermined. Indeed, for a lot of writers, it is important to stay close to the source text so as to demonstrate the validity of their queer reading of the series. These writers negotiate with canon by recentering elements that correspond to their interpretation and giving less importance to those that do not. They also make use of the ambiguity of the show to create stories that do not directly oppose the original text. However, fanfiction is also used by transformative fans to criticize the source text and show how it could be improved. Writers are at liberty to express their opinions through the characters but also write stories that diverge

from canon to fix the parts they disliked and highlight what they think is missing from the series. Instead of “killing the author,” fanfic writers thus demonstrate that they also have some interpretive power of their own and that they are just as legitimate as producers in the meaning-making process.

The ways in which slash fans fight producers for the power to interpret the source text as they wish has not always been well-received. Until recently, transformative fan activities were considered with wariness and disdain by the people who were not a part of it but slash and its fans have slowly grown to be more accepted over the years. This is very well reflected in the different ways *Supernatural* producers have addressed their transformative fans in the fifteen years of the series’ diffusion. In addition to declarations made at conventions or on social media, the addition of fan portrayals in the fourth season and onwards allows for a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the producers’ relationship to the show’s slash fans. Despite an initial rejection of transformative fans and slash interpretations to the benefit of more traditionally masculine fan behaviors, the perception and representation of slash by *Supernatural* producers greatly improved in recent years. Various producers have expressed their support of the practice and later fan portrayals have demonstrated the growing acceptance of transformative fans. However, the perception of slash as ridiculous and funny has perdured and the fans’ interpretations have never stopped being dismissed as less important than the producers’ authority. Ultimately, the analysis of producers’ opinion of slash fans through the series and its paratexts has shown their inability, or unwillingness, to understand who these fans are and what they want.

Many aspects of this thesis would benefit from being analyzed in more detail and compared to other pairings or TV shows. For instance, it would be interesting to expand the research on the relationship fanfic writers have with the source text as this particular aspect of the study of fanfiction remains largely unexplored. Further research would also be needed on the effect of the evolution of the way producers address slash on the fans and fanfic writers. Finally, the end of *Supernatural* and the several controversies that ensued seem to have provoked a shift in the relationship many slash fans entertained with the series and its producers, causing them to distance themselves from official sources to take back control of the narrative. It would be good to take a closer look at this more resistant approach to the show to have a more complete understanding of the complex relationship between slash fans and TV producers.

## Appendix 1: Episode summaries

→ Most popular episodes in terms of fan fiction written.

- **Season 4, Episode 1, “Lazarus Rising” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2008**

Four months after having made a deal with a demon that got him killed and brought to hell, Dean Winchester wakes up in his coffin and digs up to the surface. He believes that his brother, Sam Winchester, somehow brought him back but he finds out that he had nothing to do with it. They consult a psychic who tells them that Dean was brought back by a being named Castiel. Dean and his friend Bobby Singer summon him in a barn. Castiel appears and reveals that he is an angel and that he dragged Dean out of hell because he was instructed by God to do so.

- **Season 4, Episode 16, “On the Head of a Pin” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2009**

The angels have captured a demon and want Dean to use the skills that he learned in hell to torture him and get information. He refuses so they take him refusing to let him go until he cooperates. He finally agrees to do it but the demon escapes and tries to kill him but Sam saves him in time. Dean is taken to a hospital. Castiel discovers that his superior is the one who frees the demon and starts to lose faith in heaven’s authority. He visits Dean in the hospital where they have a long heart-to-heart conversation.

- **Season 4, Episode 20, “The Rapture” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2009**

After appearing in Dean’s dream, Castiel asks for a meeting with him. The brothers don’t find the angel but his host, Jimmy Novak who doesn’t remember what Cas wanted to tell them. Jimmy tries to rejoin his old life with his wife and daughter but demons are after his family. Castiel comes back in the form of Jimmy’s daughter and Sam kills the demons. Cas possesses Jimmy again but still doesn’t tell Dean what he wanted to tell him in the first place.

Instead, he tells Dean that his obedience is to Heaven and not humanity, “and certainly not to him.”

- **Season 4, Episode 22, “Lucifer Rising” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2009**

Sam and the demon Ruby capture Lilith’s minion to question her about Lilith’s intention. After listening to Ruby’s advice, Sam once again gives in to drinking this demon’s blood to fulfill his addiction. Meanwhile, Dean is forcibly brought into a room without exits by the angel Zachariah. He explains that the angel’s goal is to start the Apocalypse to cleanse the Earth. Dean is furious at Castiel who then rebels against Heaven and helps Dean escape. Cas brings him to Sam's location but they are too late as Sam breaks the final seal to Lucifer’s cage by killing Lilith. Dean kills Ruby after she reveals working for Lucifer all along. The cage is now open, Lucifer rises.

- **Season 5, Episode 3, “Free to Be You and Me” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2009**

Sam receives a visit from Jessica (his dead girlfriend). He wants and tries to go back to normal life by settling down and working at a restaurant. Meanwhile Dean and Castiel team up to track down Raphael, the archangel, as he probably knows where God is. They find him but he claims that God is dead. In the meantime, a group of hunters kidnaps Sam’s restaurant coworker which forces Sam to tell them the truth about his involvement in the Apocalypse. Later, Jessica comes back but reveals she is Lucifer who explains to Sam he is the only true vessel he needs to end the world.

- **Season 5, Episode 4, “The End” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2009**

Zachariah sends Dean five years into the future in an attempt to convince him to become Michael’s vessel. Dean discovers a world where Sam is possessed by Lucifer and the Croatoan virus is turning people into zombies. Dean discovers a group of survivors led by his future self who is obsessed with the idea of defeating Lucifer and a Castiel who has become human and turned to drugs and sex to cope. When Dean is brought back in the present, he still

refuses Zachariah's offer. Dean then recontacts Sam and accepts to come back to him, knowing they are stronger together.

- **Season 5, Episode 18, "Point of No Return" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2010**

Sam and Castiel lock Dean up to keep him from accepting Michael's offer. The archangel then finds another potential vessel: their deceased half-brother Adam who is resurrected by Heaven. Dean tries to escape by banishing Castiel but he gets recaptured easily. However, Sam lets Dean out and they both try to find Zachariah before he tortures Adam to make Dean say yes. Dean demands that Michael kills Zachariah before he can accept to be his vessel. While Michael finally descends, the three brothers try to flee but Adam is trapped inside a room that disappears.

- **Season 5, Episode 22, "Swan Song" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2010**

Dean lets Sam agree to Lucifer's offer. Sam wants Dean to trap him in the cage and go live a normal life once he's gone. The plan fails when Lucifer succeeds in taking total control of Sam's body. Dean finds out where the battle between Michael and Lucifer will take place and goes to confront them. Castiel interrupts Lucifer and Michael's reunion and banishes the archangel resulting in Lucifer killing him and Bobby. While Lucifer beats Dean almost to death, Sam retakes control over his body. Sam opens the cage, grabs Michael who reappeared, and jumps in. Castiel is resurrected by God, brings back Bobby to life, and heals Dean. He then returns to Heaven to try bringing order. Dean tries to move on and returns to his ex-girlfriend Lisa.

- **Season 6, Episode 10, "Caged Heat" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2010**

Sam is back from the cage but his soul is missing. Castiel believes that it was left behind when he was resurrected. The Winchesters' grandfather, Samuel, tells them about the king of Hell Crowley torturing creatures for information on Purgatory. The brothers and Cas go to stop him and get information on Sam's soul but they discover that Samuel betrayed

them and they are trapped in Crowley's compound. They escape and Castiel comes back after being banished to kill Crowley.

- **Season 6, Episode 15, "The French Mistake" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2011**

The angel Balthazar sends Sam and Dean to an alternate reality where they are actors called Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles who play Sam and Dean in the television show *Supernatural* that follow their lives. They meet Misha Collins, who plays Castiel, and some of the show's directors and producers. They try to go with it to attempt to return to their reality. Meanwhile, an angel is sent by Raphael from their dimension and slaughters everyone in this reality. The brothers manage to kill the angel and trick Raphael into bringing them back to their own dimension.

- **Season 6, Episode 20, "The Man Who Would Be King" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2011**

This episode is told mostly from Castiel's perspective. He reveals that he was the one that pulled Sam from Hell and talks about his doubts. We discover that Cas had been working with Crowley and lying to the Winchesters ever since the beginning of the season. When they realize this, Sam and Dean summon Castiel and trap him. Dean tries to convince him to stop this alliance but he refuses and goes back to working with the king of Hell.

- **Season 6, Episode 22, "The Man Who Knew Too Much" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2011**

Sam lost his memory and is on the run from the police. Castiel shows up and breaks the wall in Sam's mind which protects him from his memories of hell. Meanwhile, Crowley betrays Cas by trying to kill Dean and Bobby when they find their hideout. Castiel tries and fails to kill Crowley for this treachery and the demon manages to open a door to Purgatory. Castiel absorbs every soul coming out of it and proclaims himself the new God.



- **Season 7, Episode 1, “Meet the New Boss” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2011**

Castiel, more powerful than ever, has some difficulty keeping all the souls inside him under control. The brothers summon Death to ask him for his help and learn that the entities inside Cas are Leviathans, God’s first creations. Castiel finally loses control of the creatures and goes to ask the brothers for help to send them back to Purgatory. Sadly, they are too late and the Leviathans kill Cas from the inside and take over his body.

- **Season 7, Episode 2, “Hello, Cruel World” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2011**

The Leviathans can’t stay in Castiel’s unstable body and decide to infect the water so that they can possess civilians. All that Dean has left of his best friend is his trench coat which he decides to keep. Dean then breaks his leg in a fight with a Leviathan. When Sam begins to have serious seizures and hallucinations, he decides to take him to the hospital.

- **Season 7, Episode 17, “The Born-Again Identity” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2012**

Sam is on the verge of losing his mind and is institutionalized. Looking for someone to help him, Dean meets with a healer who is in fact an amnesiac Castiel. He is married to a woman named Daphne and does not remember that he is an angel. Dean convinces him to come to fix Sam but they are attacked by demons. Cas kills them with his powers and gains back his memory. He tries to heal Sam but fails to do so. He then decides to transfer Sam’s hallucinations onto himself. Castiel is left in the care of a friendly demon named Meg at the hospital and Sam is released.

- **Season 7, Episode 23, “Survival of the Fittest” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2012**

Dean and Sam find a way to kill Dick Roman, the leader of the Leviathans. They need Castiel’s help to find him but he does not want to fight anymore. Dean convinces to join them anyway after forgiving him for his betrayal. Dean and Cas confront Roman together and kill

him but the aftershock sends them to Purgatory. Castiel's sanity is restored but he flies away and leaves Dean alone.

- **Season 8, Episode 7, "A Little Slice of Kevin" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2012**

After investigating a series of future prophets abductions, Sam and Dean find a weakened Castiel with no memory of how he escaped Purgatory. Dean remembers how he escaped and deals with the guilt of not taking Cas with him. Castiel later reveals he didn't want to leave the Purgatory with Dean as he wanted some penitence for what he did. In the middle of this conversation, Cas is taken to Heaven by an angel named Naomi who tells him that angels are the ones who saved him. When Castiel is sent back to Earth, no time has passed and he has no memory of being taken.

- **Season 8 Episode 8, "Hunteri Heroici" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2012**

The Winchesters and Castiel investigate a series of murders that have been inspired by cartoons. Dean and Cas have a heart-to-heart conversation about the angel's psychological state. They discover that the deaths are caused by a mentally unstable psychic named Fred. After having found a way to make him stop Castiel decides to return to Heaven to face the consequences for the angels he killed when he was God. When Naomi forbids him to do it, he decides to stay and watch over Fred.

- **Season 8, Episode 17, "Goodbye Stranger" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2013**

Castiel has been brainwashed and sent to retrieve a tablet on which the Word of God was written. Dean and Sam are also looking for it and find out that Cas is lying to them. They are taken to a crypt by Meg. Castiel finds Dean there. He easily overpowers him and starts to beat him off as he was trained to do while being brainwashed. Dean pleads him to stop explaining that he needs him and Cas finally breaks free, heals Dean, and runs off with the tablet to protect it.

- **Season 8, Episode 23, “Sacrifice” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2013**

Sam is trying to complete trials to close the gates of Hell. To complete the last one, he has to purify a demon with his blood and decides to do it on Crowley. Castiel asks Dean to help him and the angel Metatron to complete a spell to close Heaven’s gates. When Dean finds out that completing the trials will kill Sam, he asks Cas to bring him to his brother and talks him out of it but he is already on death’s door. Metatron then betrays Castiel and extracts his grace from him, making him human. He uses it as the final ingredient for a spell that makes all of the angels fall to Earth.

- **Season 9, Episode 3, “I’m No Angel” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2013**

After having fallen to Earth, Cas is on his own, homeless and desperate. He encounters April Kelly who welcomes him to her home and gives him food leading to them having sex. He discovers later on that she is a rogue reaper hired by the angel Bartholomew to find him. She tortures him to get information on Metatron and kills him when Sam and Dean arrive to save him. Castiel is resurrected by Ezekiel, an angel possessing Sam without his knowledge. Cas is happy to be in the bunker with the Winchesters but Ezekiel forces Dean to kick him out because he fears he will draw angels to them.

- **Season 9, Episode 6, “Heaven Can’t Wait” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2013**

After a call from Castiel, Dean comes to investigate mysterious deaths in the town he lives in. We discover that the ex-angel has found work at a gas station but is still homeless. Cas, upon investigating the crime scene thinks it’s the work of an angel who kills people who are in pain. Later on, Castiel is attacked by that angel while babysitting. Dean helps him kill the angel and then leaves Cas to his normal life.

- **Season 9, Episode 9, “Holy Terror” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2013**

A war starts between the angels stranded on Earth. Sam, Dean, and Castiel investigate the place where one of their battles took place but Ezekiel does not want Cas to be there. Later, Castiel is captured by one of the angel factions and is tortured for information. He

learns that Ezekiel died during the fall and escapes by absorbing another angel's grace to warn Dean about it. Dean learns that Ezekiel's real name is Gadreel and tries to use a spell to push him out of Sam but it fails. The angel escapes and kills Kevin, a prophet and friend of the Winchesters.

- **Season 9, Episode 23, "Do You Believe in Miracles?" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2014**

Dean has taken on the Mark of Cain which makes him more powerful but also much more aggressive. He is locked in the bunker's dungeon by Sam and Cas who worry about its effect on him. Dean manages to escape but he is mortally wounded by Metatron. Castiel tricks Metatron and makes the angels turn on him. Because of this, the angels now consider Cas as their leader even though he does not want to be. Dean's body is brought back to the bunker but he is resurrected as a demon by the Mark of Cain.

- **Season 10, Episode 3, "Soul Survivor" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2014**

Castiel grows weaker because of the grace he stole. He and his friend Hannah are attacked by a vengeful angel and he is left near death. Crowley intervenes, kills the angel, and steals her grace which he gives to a reluctant Cas to give him his strength back. Cas goes back to the bunker and manages to capture him and with Sam, they are able to successfully complete a ritual to purify him. Dean becomes human again but keeps the Mark of Cain.

- **Season 10, Episode 5, "Fan Fiction" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2014**

Sam and Dean investigate the disappearance of a teacher and discover that the students of the school are rehearsing a musical based on the "Supernatural" books written about their lives by a prophet. The brothers get to talk to "Supernatural" fans and exchange with them about the perception they have of their own lives.

- **Season 10, Episode 14, “The Executioner’s Song” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2015**

Cain is killing all of his descendants because he believes that his bloodline is tainted. The Winchesters and Crowley trap him and Dean goes to him. Cain reveals there is no cure for the Mark and that he should lean into its power. They fight and Dean kills him.

- **Season 10, Episode 22, “The Prisoner” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2015**

Sam and Dean are devastated by the death of their friend Charlie. While trying to avenge Charlie’s death, Dean is captured by her killers, but he rapidly slaughters them all. When he returns to the bunker, Cas begs Dean not to go down this path but he starts savagely beating him up, coming close to killing him with an angel blade. Before leaving, he warns Castiel that he will kill him and Sam if they meet again.

- **Season 11, Episode 4, “Baby” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2015**

The whole episode happens in and around the Impala. Sam has dreams that he thinks are a gesture of help from God but Dean is skeptical. They investigate a case in a small town. The monster’s wife captures Dean and tells him that her husband is scared of The Darkness that was released when he got rid of the Mark of Cain. They decapitate the monster, making all of his victims turn human again. The brothers drive off in the Impala, swearing they will stop The Darkness.

- **Season 11, Episode 10, “The Devil in the Details” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2016**

Lucifer has promised the witch Rowena to reward her if she helps him get Sam. When Lucifer, still stuck in his cage without a vessel, sees Sam, he tells him the only way to win against The Darkness is to let him out. Sam refuses the offer so Lucifer brings Dean and Cas into the cage with them and beats them all. Not knowing how to beat Amara, Castiel agrees to be Lucifer’s vessel.

- **Season 11, Episode 18, “Hell’s Angels” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2016**

Lucifer convinces the angels to work with him to stop Amara. Sam wants to use him to defeat The Darkness but Dean wants Castiel freed first. The brothers bait Lucifer with a powerful weapon and try to convince Cas to kick him out but he refuses as he awaits for the battle with Amara. Lucifer breaks free and tries to attack Amara with the weapon but she captures him and torture both him and Cas to lure God.

- **Season 11, Episode 23, “Alpha and Omega” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2016**

Sam and Dean find Castiel freed from Lucifer and God/Chuck fatally injured. Now that Chuck is hurt, the sun is dying and so is the planet. With the help of a reaper, the Winchesters are able to turn Dean into a weapon strong enough to defeat The Darkness but he has to sacrifice himself for it to work. Fortunately, Amara regrets her actions and reconciles with Chuck. The two of them leave Earth. Dean, after Amara promised to give him what he wants the most in the world, finds his resurrected mother.

- **Season 12, Episode 9, “First Blood” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2017**

The Winchesters are taken to a government black site where they are locked in separate cells. They succeed in escaping after faking their deaths. At the same time, Mary and Castiel try to find them unsuccessfully. The brothers contact Cas and they reunite. Driving away, they are stopped by the reaper Billie who helped them escape in exchange for a Winchester’s life. Mary wants to sacrifice for her sons but Castiel kills Billie instead telling the Winchesters they are far too important.

- **Season 12, Episode 12, “Stuck in the Middle (With You)” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2017**

Sam, Dean, and Castiel are brought in by the Winchesters’ mother and one of her friends to hunt a demon. They realize that he is more powerful than an ordinary one when he easily fights them off and stabs Castiel with an enchanted lance. They shelter themselves in a barn where the king of Hell Crowley finds them and tells them that they are facing Ramiel, a

prince of Hell. Cas is rapidly dying and he begs the Winchesters to leave and save themselves. They refuse and manage to kill Ramiel with the lance. Crowley breaks it in half which also breaks the enchantment hurting Castiel.

- **Season 12, Episode 19, *The Future Supernatural*, The CW, 2017**

Kelly Kline, pregnant with Lucifer's son, tries to kill herself but is resurrected by her child which convinces her that he is not evil. After being gone for weeks, Castiel comes back to the bunker and explains he had been working with the angels. Sam is convinced he can remove the baby's power but Cas comes up with a plan to kill it by killing Kelly. He can't do it so he kidnaps her and decides to take her to the portal to Heaven. The child chooses Castiel as its protector. After a battle with an angel during which the baby gives Cas some power, he is also convinced that the child must be born with its power intact. He transports Kelly somewhere safe and claims that the child has shown him the future.

- **Season 12, Episode 23, "All Along the Watchtower" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2017**

Castiel discovers that the unborn baby has opened a rift to an alternate post-apocalyptic reality. While Kelly starts giving birth, Cas leads the brothers to the breach where they are welcomed by Bobby. He provides them with a gun capable of killing angels and Lucifer. Crowley, Sam, and Dean then try to seal Lucifer in the rift. Crowley dies performing the spell and Lucifer, who escaped the trap, kills Castiel. Mary finds a way to send Lucifer back in but stays trapped with him. While Dean mourns Cas's death, Sam discovers that Kelly died in childbirth and finds her son, Jack, newborn but looking like a teenager.

- **Season 13, Episode 1, "Lost and Found" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2017**

Dean shoots Jack, who knocks out the brothers with his powers. He then leaves to search for his father. The Winchesters follow him. Dean wants to kill him but Sam stops him. Jack reveals that his mother told him he had to grow fast to be protected from the dangers of the world and that she told him Castiel is his dad. The Winchesters take him back to the

bunker. They give Castiel and Kelly a funeral and say their goodbyes to Crowley and Mary who they both assume to be dead.

- **Season 13, Episode 5, “Advanced Thanatology” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2017**

Dean and Sam investigate a case in an abandoned asylum. When they struggle to find bodies to burn, Dean kills himself to find out where they are. A reaper finds Dean and brings him to meet the new Death: Billie. She helps the ghosts move on and sends Dean back, and lets him read about one of his possible deaths. The brothers find a resurrected Castiel who escaped The Empty (the place angels go where they die) thanks to Jack’s powers.

- **Season 13, Episode 6, “Tombstone” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2017**

After finally meeting Castiel, Jack finds a case in Kansas. Dean loves all Western scene material so he and Cas go undercover as Texas Rangers to investigate. During a fight with the monster, Jack accidentally kills a security guard whom Cas can’t heal. Jack believes he is a monster despite the others telling him it was a mistake. He is convinced he will end up hurting more people and teleports away.

- **Season 13, Episode 23, “Let the Good Times Roll” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2018**

The Winchesters hunt with Jack and Castiel while the refugees from Apocalypse World settle in. Meanwhile, Michael from the alternate universe attacks Sam, Dean, and Castiel. Jack intervenes and severely injures Michael. Lucifer steals Jack’s grace to have his power and teleports to a church with Jack and Sam. Lucifer becomes unstoppable, so Dean agrees to be Michael’s vessel if he can stay in control. Dean kills Lucifer but before the group can celebrate, Michael breaks the deal and takes full control of Dean, and departs, leaving everyone in shock.



- **Season 14, Episode 8, “Byzantium” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2018**

Jack is dying so Sam contacts a woman who knows about angel magic, in an attempt to save him. In Heaven, Jack is chased by a dark force and reunites with his mother. Castiel travels to Heaven where he learns The Shadow – who rules over The Empty – has come seeking Jack’s soul. Cas locates Jack and is faced with the entity. He makes a deal with it to trade himself for Jack but The Empty tells him he will not be taken until he experiences a moment of true happiness. Jack is resurrected and Cas forbids him to tell the Winchesters about the deal.

- **Season 14, Episode 10, “Nihilism” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2019**

Sam and Castiel try a spell to cast Michael out of Dean and find out that he has been living in a looped existence in a bar where he is happy. Michael reveals that if he is forced out, Dean will die. They decide to trap Michael in Dean’s mind. Billie warns Dean that Michael is destined to break free and destroy the world but shows Dean the one fate where he fails to do so.

- **Season 14, Episode 13, “Lebanon” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2019**

Dean tries to use a pearl that grants the holder’s greatest wish to get rid of Michael but instead summons John Winchester from 2003. While the Winchesters are thrilled to have the family reunited, the summoning alters the timeline, creating a world where Sam runs a law firm and is internet famous, Dean is a wanted serial killer, and Castiel is still a loyal soldier to Heaven. The Winchesters thus decide to destroy the pearl. After an emotional goodbye, John returns to his original timeline, thinking that the experience was only a dream.

- **Season 14, Episode 20, “Moriah” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2019**

After accidentally killing Mary Winchester fleeing the bunker, a soulless Jack uses his powers to force everyone to only tell the truth. As the Winchesters try to track Jack down, God reappears and reverses Jack’s spell. He provides them with a gun that can kill him but that will also kill the shooter. Jack encourages Dean to kill him but Dean cannot resign

himself to do it. God reveals He had been manipulating them all along and is mad at Dean's failure to kill Jack. God kills Jack himself and Sam attempts to kill him but fails. Enraged by the Winchester's audacity, God decides to end the world and turn it into darkness, unleashing the soul of Hell upon the world, leaving Sam, Dean, and Castiel surrounded.

- **Season 15, Episode 2, "Raising Hell" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2019**

The Winchesters and their allies struggle to contain the ghosts. Rowena joins the Winchesters and works on a spell that will permanently trap them. The ghost of Kevin Tran, who had been cast into Hell instead of Heaven because of Chuck, also appears to help them. Meanwhile, we discover that Chuck has been severely weakened when Sam shot him and that they have developed a mental link because of the injury.

- **Season 15, Episode 3, "The Rupture" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2019**

Rowena finds a way to send the souls back to Hell but has to sacrifice herself with the help of Sam for the spell to work. Dean, in mourning and unable to deal with the revelation that Chuck has orchestrated his whole life, puts the blame on Castiel for everything going wrong, Mary's death included. Cas reveals his powers are failing and decides that since Dean cannot forgive him, he needs to move on and leave the bunker.

- **Season 15, Episode 13, "Destiny's Child" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2020**

Billie tells the Winchesters God is almost done destroying universes and will soon destroy theirs. They try to find a way to make a resurrected Jack strong enough to defeat him. Dean and Sam hide their intentions from God by having some of their alternate versions pose as them. In their quest to find a powerful artifact, Jack is brought to the Garden of Eden where his soul is restored.

- **Season 15, Episode 18, "Despair" *Supernatural*, The CW, 2020**

Billie attempts to leave with Jack to follow her plan to kill Chuck but is injured by Dean and disappears. When people from the Apocalypse World start vanishing, Dean and Castiel track down Billie who tells them that Chuck is the one responsible. She then chases

and corners Castiel and Dean for revenge. Castiel realizes only the Shadow can stop her. He reveals his deal to Dean, confesses his love for him, and is taken with Billie as a sacrifice to the Empty. Dean is heartbroken over Castiel's death and ignores all calls from Sam about everyone in the world being gone.

➔ Episodes that directly talk about fans and fan works

- **Season 4, Episode 18, “The Monster at the End of This Book”**  
*Supernatural, The CW, 2009*

Sam and Dean discover a book about their lives entitled “Supernatural”. They discover that the book series has an active fanbase and that many fans write slash fiction about the two of them. They track down the author, Chuck alias Carver Edlund, who tells them he has visions which he turns into cheesy novels. He reveals he had had visions of their encounter and the demon Lilith coming for Sam. Castiel tells Dean that Chuck is under the protection of an archangel so they decide to use this against Lilith but fail to kill her.

- **Season 5, Episode 1, “Sympathy for the Devil”** *Supernatural, The CW, 2009*

The Apocalypse has started. Sam and Dean gather information from Chuck and learn that Castiel has been killed for helping them but Chuck can't tell anything more as he is being watched by angels. To discreetly send a message to the brothers, the prophet contacts one of his most faithful fans, Becky. We learn that she is a Wincest fan and that she is obsessed with Sam. Thanks to her help, the Winchesters find the supposed location of Michael's sword but discover that it was a trap set by Zachariah who manipulated Chuck. Castiel appears to save them and explains that the brothers and himself have been protected all along by God himself.

- **Season 5, Episode 9, “The Real Ghostbusters” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2009**

After receiving a text message from Becky posing as Chuck, Sam and Dean find themselves at the first “Supernatural” fan convention. Becky makes awkward advances to Sam while Chuck desperately tries to get her attention. The Winchesters have to deal with several Sam and Dean wannabees role-playing in a fictitious ghost hunt. However, the brothers find out the ghost is real. By working with a couple of cosplayers, Sam and Dean manage to destroy the ghost and save everyone. Chuck manages to seduce Becky by heroically protecting the fans inside the convention hall.

- **Season 7, Episode 8, “Season Seven: Time for a Wedding” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2011**

Dean receives a text message from Sam asking him to meet him at a church and finds out Sam is going to be marrying Becky. He quickly discovers that his brother is under the influence of a love potion that Becky obtained from a demon posing as a friendly witch. Her goal was to bring Sam with her at her High School reunion to get rid of her loser image. The Winchesters manage to kill the demon before it is too late. In the aftermath, Sam and Becky get an annulment and Sam tells her to find a more suitable love interest.

- **Season 15, Episode 4, “Atomic Monsters” *Supernatural*, The CW, 2019**

While Sam and Dean are on a hunt, Chuck visits BeckyFebd tells her he has lost his sense of purpose. She is now happily married and has two children. She is still a “Supernatural” fan who writes fanfiction and sells maquettes online but she has gone to therapy and now has a healthy relationship with her passion. She convinces Chuck to start writing again but is horrified by the ending he has in mind for the Winchesters. Chuck makes Becky and her new family vanish and begins preparing his plan to bring the Winchesters to a dark end.

## Appendix 2: Survey Questions

# Supernatural Survey

I am a postgraduate student at the University Rennes 2 in France working on a thesis about the TV show Supernatural and its fans.

Your answers to this survey will remain entirely anonymous and the data collected will only be used for this research.

**\*Required**

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How old are you?

Your answer

---

---

When did you start watching Supernatural? \*

Choose



Which seasons of Supernatural have you seen? \*

## Section 2

Have you ever written and published Supernatural fan fiction? \*

- Yes, 1-4 works
- Yes, 5-10 works
- Yes, more than 10 works
- No

How often do you read Supernatural fan fiction? \*

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Very often

For which pairings do you most often write/read fan fiction?

- No pairing (gen)
- Dean Winchester / Castiel
- Dean Winchester / Sam Winchester
- Sam Winchester / Gabriel
- Jessica Moore / Sam Winchester
- Sam Winchester / Castiel
- Sam Winchester / Lucifer
- Castiel / Meg
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

## Section 3

What do you think of the overall representation of fans in the show? \*

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Very bad                                 Very good

Do you think that the way writers and producers see the fans has changed over the years? \*

- Yes, it has become much better
- Yes, It has become a little better
- Yes, it has become much worse
- Yes, it has become a little worse
- No
- I don't know

(Optional) Explain your answer

Your answer

---

# Becky Rosen

How much do you relate to Becky? \*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at all           A lot

What is your opinion on Becky?

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

# Charlie Bradbury

How much do you relate to Charlie? \*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at all           A lot

What is your opinion on Charlie?

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_



# Marie (Fan Fiction)

---

How much do you relate to Marie? \*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at all           A lot

---

What is your opinion on Marie?

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

## Section 4

What kind of promotional material around the show do you often watch? \*

- Trailers, promos, sneak peeks
- Outtakes and bloopers
- Interviews of actors and writers
- Convention panels
- I don't watch promotional material
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

How much does the opinion of the writers on your favorite pairings matter to you? \*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	A lot

How much does the opinion of the actors on your favorite pairings matter to you? \*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	A lot

Have you ever heard about the actors, writers, or producers of the show's opinion on fan fiction? \*

- Yes
- No
- I don't remember

---

If so, what were those opinions and how did you react to them?

Your answer

---

## Appendix 3: Extract From “One Word” by angelofthequeers

- The passage that diverges from the canon scene is indicated by italics

[...]

“What have you done to me, Naomi?” Castiel cries, doubling over. Dean, his bloody face throbbing from the beat-down Castiel has been dishing, freezes.

“Who’s Naomi?” he demands. Is this Naomi bitch why Castiel is trying to break his face? “Cas!” He struggles to his knees and puts a hand on Castiel’s shoulder but in response, Castiel backhands him into a wall. When Dean tries to punch Castiel, to maybe knock some sense into him, Castiel grabs his fist in an iron-tight grip and twists sharply. Dean lets out a pained cry as his arm shatters, sending lightning bolts of agony shooting up his arm and making him nearly black out. How is he supposed to reason with Castiel? Is this how he’s finally going to die? At the hands of his best friend?

As Castiel continues to beat and punch him, turning his face into a bloody display of minced meat, Dean tries to curl in on himself and wait it out, praying for Castiel to just end it and run him through with his blade. But Castiel keeps hitting him and it’s all Dean can do not to cry at the pain, both physical and emotional. Physical pain is something that he’s used to and he’s not going to show weakness when Castiel is already dominating over him.

“You want it?” he spits at Castiel, who simply looks at him blankly. The glazed, empty look in the angel’s eyes cuts Dean to his very core. “Take it!” He shifts the tablet that’s next to him. “But you’re gonna have to kill me first! Come on, you coward. Do it! Do it!”

Is he yelling at Castiel or Naomi? He doesn't know. But Castiel doesn't answer, instead choosing to raise his fist and punch Dean extra painfully. So Dean does the only thing he can do.

He pleads.

"Cas...this isn't you...this isn't you, Cas..." He weakly reaches out for the angel, fumbling to grip his trench coat sleeve. "Cas, I know you're in there..."

Castiel simply raises his angel blade, ready to stab Dean.

"I know you can hear me, Cas..." His voice breaks. "It's me. We're family. We need you. I need you."

*Castiel pauses. For a brief moment, Dean thinks he can see something flicker in Castiel's emotionless blue eyes and so, taking a deep breath, he forces out the three words he's wanted to tell Castiel for years.*

*"I love you."*

The clang of Castiel's angel blade falling to the ground rings loudly in Dean's ears and he finally allows himself to groan in pain as Castiel reaches down and picks up the tablet, which begins to glow. Dean weakly tries to shield his eyes from the burst of brilliant white light that's being emitted from the tablet but his broken arm flares painfully, distracting him until the light starts to fade. Castiel is still standing over Dean, staring at him with wide blue eyes.

"Cas?" Dean says. In response, Castiel reaches out for Dean, who tries to scramble back, terrified that Castiel is going to start beating him up again. "No. Cas. Cas!"

Castiel gently cradles Dean's face with one hand. Dean closes his eyes, ready for the smiting that's sure to follow. Instead, a jolt of hot, clean energy surges through him and he gasps when he feels his arm and face immediately begin to heal. [...]

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**Résumé:**

Ce mémoire explore la relation entre les producteurs de Supernatural et les fans du couple le plus populaire de la série, formé par les personnages Dean Winchester et Castiel. La série a toujours rassemblé une communauté de fans très active dans laquelle l'exploration de dynamiques romantiques entre couples de même sexe (appelée "slash shipping" ou "slash") est extrêmement populaire. La participation de ces fans a souvent été encouragée par les producteurs de diverses façons et, par conséquent, une relation complexe sujette à de nombreux changements au fil des années s'est formée entre les fans de slash et la série. Au travers de l'analyse d'un large corpus composé d'épisodes, de fanfics et de paratextes, j'ai pour but de dépeindre de manière compréhensive les différents aspects de la connexion entre ce groupe de fans et les acteurs, scénaristes et producteurs de la série. Cette analyse explore les nombreuses raisons pour lesquelles les fans de slash ont toujours été particulièrement attirés par cette série ainsi que la tendance des producteurs à osciller entre encourager ou dissuader les activités de ces fans. En examinant des fanfics et des témoignages de fans, mon travail analyse aussi la manière dont cette ambiguïté affecte les créations des fans de slash et leur relation avec les producteurs de la série.

**Abstract:**

This analysis explores the relationship between Supernatural producers and fans of the most popular pairing of the show, which involves the characters Dean Winchester and Castiel. The series has always enjoyed a very active fan community among which slash shipping – the belief that two same sex characters would be interesting or believable in a romantic relationship – is extremely popular. The fans' involvement has often been encouraged by the producers through various means resulting in a complex relationship between slash fans and the series which evolved a lot over the years. With an analysis of a large corpus of episodes, fanfics, and paratexts, I attempt to paint a comprehensive picture of the different aspects of the interconnection between Supernatural slash fans and the actors, writers, and producers of the TV show. This thesis explores the many reasons why the series has always been so attractive to slash fans as well as the constant back and forth between encouraging and discouraging these fan's activities and interpretations on the producers' part. By looking at fanfiction and fan testimonies, my work also analyses how this ambiguity affects slash fans' creative works and their relationship to the show's producers.

**Mots clés:** Supernatural (2005-2020), Étude des Médias, Étude des Fans, Fandom, Fan Fiction, Slash Fiction, Relation Entre Fans et Producteurs, Paratextes, Queerbaiting

**Keywords:** Supernatural (2005-2020), Media Studies, Fan Studies, Fandom, Fan Fiction, Slash Fiction, Fan-Producer Relationship, Paratexts, Queerbaiting