

Romancing the Beast: Intersections of Power, Gender, and
Sexuality in Omegaverse Fan Fiction

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Abstract

In this thesis, I argue that the Omegaverse genre of fan fiction often critiques existing systems of cis-hetero-patriarchy which shapes much of the Western society readers and writers in the Omegaverse community confront on a daily basis. This thesis explores the many fascinating and curious elements of Omegaverse fan fiction - discerning the ways in which it can offer critique for concepts encompassed by Western constructs of gender, sexuality, and hierarchies of social power. I argue that tropes borrowed from previous genre fiction, such as romance novels and monster media, provide the Omegaverse with conventions that it often uses to suspend traditional gender binaries, explore boundaries of sexual consent, and find pleasure in fantasies that explore dynamics of power that are more cyclical and reciprocal than many power structures in reality.

The original contribution of this work is informed by the tropes and dynamics of the Omegaverse and how they can be read to interact with live and emerging issues through hyperbolic, sex-forward world-building. The genre has previously been theorized as a tool to uncritically reinforce structures of cis-hetero-patriarchy into the otherwise queerly positioned realm of fan fiction. However, I argue that the genre has grown to critique these institutions through explorations of queer potentialities. Using the animalistic fantasy elements of the genre, the Omegaverse can be read to prompt dialogues between status and power. This thesis makes the subtleties of these dialogues explicit and argues that they support an interpretation of the genre as queerly positioned.

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Introduction

The pain in your lower abdomen has started to intensify and is now affecting your hearing and vision with its intensity. The pain has been there for days, but it has been an ignorable discomfort until today. Today it is much worse.

The extra pheromone glands on your neck, wrists, and inner thighs have started to swell and ache. You have tilted your head back in subconscious submission to anyone who spoke firmly with you today. As an Omega, you understand what these signs mean. You have understood since it first happened as a teenager. You're going into heat. Ugh, mating imperatives. So irritating. Now that the pain has arrived, you have to act quickly.

Soon you will start sweating profusely and not long after you will start eyeing all Alphas in the immediate vicinity as potential heat partners. After all, that is the easiest and fastest way to make this agony in your lower abdomen cease. Find a heat partner. Let them fuck you. Let them knot you. And enjoy the pheromones your body releases following the experience of the knot. It will be the first time in days you haven't been in discomfort and it's the only way to make the heat pass without taking a significant amount of time off from work while you writhe in agony for days on end in a partnerless heat.

You know there are risks involved. You have to be careful with the Alpha you pick. Some of them are Alpha supremacists and might try to bond-bite you while you're incapacitated by heat symptoms - thinking it is their right as Alphas. Bond-bites are permanent. You don't want a heat mate who will take advantage.

But all of the Alphas around you smell so good. So alluring. You want them to bite you. Perhaps a bond-bite wouldn't be so bad.

You recognize that this is just the heat symptoms kicking in, but a bond-bite sounds incredible right about now. You're starting to sweat. Time to make a decision and get out of this public space or a nearby Alpha might decide for you. Do you pick a stranger? Take the chance? Or go home and call a previous heat mate? Ask for a favor? Maybe call another Omega friend who can help you through it with toys instead of a real knot? Your lower abdomen gives a tight twist at this. You don't like that option, but you're quickly losing the ability to think clearly. Everything is becoming a bit hazy.

Suddenly, a truly mouth-watering smell meets you and you practically collapse at the hunger it awakens in you. That's it. That's the Alpha you want to be your heat partner. Damn the consequences. If you don't have that person, you feel you might actually die. Pulling yourself from the haziness, you search out this smell, all the while ignoring the people around you giving you odd looks and holding their noses. You dodge Alpha arms trying to wrap around you out of interest. You deliberately ignore the other Omegas looking on with pity as you dash towards the amazing scent in a pre-heat fervor.

When you finally reach the person responsible for the smell, you grab at them. You don't mean to, but you need them to understand. This needs to happen now. They turn and, lo and behold, it's your childhood crush.

I have had the above text on my phone for some time now. I call it an "immersive" script into the genre of Omegaverse fan fiction (also called "Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics" or "A/B/O"). I've found it an extremely useful shorthand for explaining the nuances of my thesis topic. I do not always ask that interested parties read this little self-written immersive excerpt; how I introduce my topic depends heavily on the environment. When friends ask the topic of my Ph.D. thesis, I typically answer:

“wolf-boys fucking”. This is often met with rolled eyes and perhaps a muttered, “of course you are”, but occasionally a friend wants to know more, and the explanation shifts to one more appropriate for academic conferences (at least, non-Fan-Studies-specific conferences). The academic description is often borrowed verbatim from pioneering Omegaverse scholar, Kristina Busse, who describes this genre of fan fiction as:

societies where biological imperatives divide people based on wolf pack hierarchies into sexual dominants (alphas), sexual submissives (omegas), and everyone else (betas). (317, 2013)

This description is often enough for listening parties to decide whether they are actually interested in the topic or horrified that I would dedicate years of my life to studying this genre. However, some intrepid souls hear this description and, like me, are immediately fascinated by the implications of these dynamics and wish to know all that they can. To these few, my description of the Omegaverse becomes infinitely more complex, and I happily hand over my phone for them to read and ask questions about the immersive A/B/O text.

Written from the point of view of an Omega character, the above text illustrates some of the common tropes of the fan fiction genre called the Omegaverse. The Omegaverse is a speculative sub-genre of fan fiction characterized by its system of hierarchical, discrete statuses that correspond with social and sexual position (as indicated by Busse above) as well as altered biological anatomy resulting in mating impulses (i.e., heats and ruts like the mating impulses of many canines and lupines). This thesis is interested in examining social constructions of power and how those power hierarchies are maintained (or critiqued) within Omegaverse fan fiction. As the

genre is built around notions of gender/sex, social power exchanges are often determined by a character's gender as well as their sexual positionality. This is reinforced through issues of sexual consent, sexual power dynamics, and how social expectations translate into sexual acts. My main research question for this thesis concerns the ways in which the Omegaverse can be seen to criticize real social structures through their hyperbolic exploration in this speculative genre. In order to do so, I will be using this introductory space to expand on the more curious elements of the genre that inform this thesis, since the above immersive script misses much of the nuance of the genre. For instance, while it does explain the fundamentals of the Omegaverse sub-genre, it does nothing to explain what fan fiction is.

Fan fiction, sometimes called “transformative work”, is the self-published stories produced and circulated by fans, without profit, based on existing media copyrights (Jenkins 1992, Bacon-Smith 1991, Pugh 2004, Busse and Hellekson 2006, Jamison 2013).¹ Fans, derived from the word “fanatic” (Jenkins 1992), are a self-identified group composed of people interested in particular media content, whether books, films, television, etc. Fans typically ascribe to particular “fandoms” (the fan culture attributed to specific media content, e.g., the *Star Trek* fandom is composed of fans of properties pertaining to the various iterations of the *Star Trek* franchise), and some direct this fanaticism towards producing and/or consuming fan fiction. While there are many types of fans (Stanfil 2013, Chin and Morimoto 2013, Gerard 2021), this thesis is primarily

¹ There is some debate amongst fan scholars as to whether “fan fiction” or “fanfiction” is the correct phrasing for the genre (Jamison 2013, Gunderson 2017, Busse 2017). I have elected to use fan fiction partly due to personal preference, but also because my later references to “fics” (as the diminutive of fan fiction) read as odd if I had chosen fanfiction (where “fanfics” would be a more accurate shorthand). Additionally, following conversations with fellow fan fiction scholars at Fan Studies Network conferences (2019, 2020, 2021), I have found that while many scholars have preferences, neither phrasing is deemed “more correct” than the other.

concerned with fans involved in English-language fan fiction and will not discuss any other forms of fan participation unless otherwise stated.²

Fanfiction asserts the rights of storytellers to take possession [...] to expand and build upon the original, and, when they deem it necessary, to tweak it and optimize it for their own purposes. (Grossman xii, 2013)

Because of the fan fiction author tendency to “tweak” or “optimize” the original source material, there are many sub-genres within fan fiction that have either been produced within the community of readers and writers (e.g., The Omegaverse, Coffee Shop Alternate Universes, etc.) or borrowed from other published genre fiction (i.e., paranormal romance, murder mysteries, etc.). As such, fan fiction (and the study of its subgenres) also effects many disciplines of academic inquiry beyond that of strictly literary or Fan Studies. For instance, audience participation with media as described through fan fiction can have interesting effects for sociological studies and the psychology of consuming media. The popular tropes and trends of the Omegaverse that can be seen, through this thesis, to shift away from replication without interrogation (in earlier iterations) to subtle, but noticeable questioning of patriarchal power structures and issues of bodily autonomy suggest that the wider fan fiction community is using this online medium to examine the the various cultures that propagate these structures and dynamics in reality. As I will argue, the Omegaverse can be seen to shape and potentially adjust how those in the fan fiction community interact with ideas of power, consent, and gender in reality. The Omegaverse is somewhat unique within fan fiction,

² There are multiple authors and researchers studying fans and their engagement with other fan practices (such as amusement parks, conventions, costume play, and producing artwork). While the scope of this thesis is limited to fans of fan fiction, more reading about live issues for fans (and anti-fans) can be found in Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007, 2017), Stanfil (2013), Scott (2019), Williams (2020), Williams and Bennett (2021), Booth and Williams (2021) and Gerrard (2021).

both because of its conception within fan fiction as its own sub-genre and because of the conventions from genre fiction it borrows and tweaks. A/B/O fan fiction can be read to co-opt wolf-pack hierarchies based more on werewolf lore than actual wolf behavior, and also mass-market, twentieth-century paranormal romance novel tropes; such as showing commitment through claiming bites as opposed to a more traditional, but temporary, identifier like a wedding ring. This cross-genre pollination within the Omegaverse is an apt metaphor for how the popular themes of the genre, like power dynamics, sexual consent, and gender expression can be equally applicable to disciplines outside of fictional writing and can have an effect on how those in fan fiction communities interact with these themes in their daily lives.

Largely published on fan fiction hosting sites like *Archive of our Own* (called Ao3), *FanFiction.net* (FF.net), or *Wattpad*, the Omegaverse fashions a world where characters are divided along a status hierarchy of Alphas, Betas, and Omegas. Omegaverse fics ('fic' is the established shorthand for fan fiction) build narratives around societal hierarchies that describe Alphas as the privileged elite and Omegas as marginalized citizens. Loosely adapted from the (now debunked) concept of wolf-pack hierarchies, the Alpha, Beta, and Omega statuses each have prescribed roles within their social settings.³ Betas have a unique role within the genre as they are typically excluded from primary roles in the majority of fics and appear as minor characters. While the Betas feature heavily in later chapters of this thesis, they are remarkable within the genre because of their 'lack' of extra animalistic tendencies possessed by Alpha and Omega characters. For instance, an Omega is categorized by their regular

³ I will expand on the theories of wolf pack behavior and the nomenclature of Alpha/Beta/Omega wolf hierarchies initially popularized by animal behaviorist L. David Mech in the 1970s (1981, 1999) in Chapter 2.

heat cycles, like the one described in the above immersive excerpt, and Alphas by their rut cycles (each a term for mating imperatives borrowed from canine and lupine nomenclature). But Betas do not have mating imperatives and are often ancillary characters within the more sexually explicit Omegaverse fics. Each class has its own markers of identity: some biological - like the heats and extra pheromone glands described in the above scene - and others socially dictated - like the various responses of the onlookers to the Omega character going into heat.

While I used the excerpt as a way to highlight the urgency and eroticism attached to notions of heat and rut within the genre, there are also themes of commitment, romance, and even predestined soul mates expressed within the Omegaverse (as I hinted at with the final childhood crush aspect in the excerpt). Furthermore, the genre uses the circumstances surrounding mating imperatives (and the statuses they are attached to) to explore how biology frames and informs particular social hierarchies. For instance, characters with an Alpha status often have certain privileges associated with their position at the apex of the social hierarchy. As the excerpt suggested, some Alpha characters believe their dominance is so ingrained that any and all of their behaviors are excusable, up to and including permanently bonding with Omegas without their consent - negating the Omega character's bodily autonomy and sense of free will. These types of social (and sexual) interactions may seem foreign given that they are often described through tropes of heats, ruts, bond-biting, and knotting (an engorged area at the base of a canine/lupine penis that swells after ejaculation to keep couples locked together to inspire pregnancy). But, as I will argue throughout this thesis, these animalistic traits offer readers and writers within the Omegaverse community a speculative space to

contemplate issues of social hierarchies and gendered discrimination, in reality, using the A/B/O dynamics.

Additionally, as the mating imperatives might indicate, the genre is very sex-forward. Over 70% of the Omegaverse fics published on Ao3, at the time of writing (February 2022), feature an Explicit or Mature rating due to scenes of a sexual nature.⁴ Considering the genre consists of over 115,000 fics on Ao3 at the time of writing, this is a significant number of sexually explicit fics, particularly when the average total number of all fics rated Explicit or Mature on Ao3 is much lower - around 30% (around 2.5 million fics). The Omegaverse is known within fan fiction communities for being sexually explicit (Busse 2013, Arnaiz 2018, Popova 2017, 2018, 2021) as well as its majority of “mlm” (men-loving-men, man-loving-man) relationships. Over three-quarters of the fics labeled as Omegaverse on Ao3, regardless of content rating, feature a relationship between two men. Often these relationships are between male Alpha characters and male Omega characters - leading many researchers in the field to identify the Omegaverse as a space where the A/B/O dynamics are used as a “secondary gender” system imposed on male bodies (Busse 2013, Popova 2017, 2018, 2021, Gunderson 2017, Arnaiz 2018, Weisser 2019). As such (and as I discuss below) many Omegaverse scholars have noted that the genre provides a speculative space to explore notions of gender and sex within a fictional setting (Busse 2013, Popova 2017, 2018, 2021, Director 2017, Gunderson 2017, Arnaiz 2018, Weisser 2019).

The tropes established within the Omegaverse seem to invite and promote an inquisitive community of writers and readers concerned with questioning gender-based

⁴ I will explain the fan fiction rating system and how ratings are distributed in the Note on Methodology section of this thesis.

norms as well as exploring how these norms map onto their own lived experiences with gender and sexuality. As Busse notes, the genre “engage[s] issues of enforced sex” prompted by heats and ruts as a way of “think[ing] through biology-based societal constraints” in reality (319, 2013). Thus, the genre is categorized by both its speculative nature and its preoccupation with existing forms of gender/sex.⁵ It uses gender and sex in ways that are often familiar (like primary gender corresponding with a feminine, masculine, nonbinary, genderfluid, etc. identity), and also entirely new (attaching gendered and sexual norms onto new secondary statuses of Alpha/Beta/Omega). Omegaverse scholar, Marianne Gunderson, based their thesis on this very curiosity, writing:

A common characteristic of this system is the hyperbolization of (a/b/o) sex and gender. Through the omegaverse trope, aspects of sexed and gendered existence which are usually relegated to the background in other forms of fiction, are foregrounded and intensified, leading almost to a kind of “hyper-gendering” of the characters. [...] omegaverse fan fiction actively draws on, engages with, and rewrites discourses about sex and gender. (19, 2017)

⁵ My use of the term “gender/sex” is complicated in reference to the Omegaverse. Traditionally, these terms are used in conjunction with one another as related, though separate concepts with sex as anatomical and gender as social indicators of expected behaviors (Herdt 1993, Weideman 2005, Kimmel 2007). More recent queer scholarship has sought to uncouple these terms to leave room to explore separately (Plummer 2007, Nicholas 2014, Lothian 2018), or kept them related, but only as equally socially constructed concepts (Butler 1990, 1996, Dray 2020). The Omegaverse is almost regressive in its use of gender/sex in that these terms are nearly indistinguishable within the genre because of the secondary characteristics of Alpha, Beta, and Omega. While the chapters to follow examine the ways in which this regressive conflation of concepts is becoming a less accurate descriptor of the genre, it is sometimes difficult to determine where and how the Omegaverse can be seen to treat gender and sex as different concepts as opposed to interchangeable words relating to biological sex and social expectations of that sex. For the most part, I use punctuation to distinguish between gender/sex (as interchangeable terms in the Omegaverse) and gender and sex (as separate, though related theoretical concepts). More on “gender/sex” in the following paragraphs.

The Omegaverse often conflates gender and sex into the term 'gender/sex' which is used by many psychologists to refer to how "gender and sex are closely intertwined such that sex cannot be studied without consideration of gender, and studies of gender can often benefit from considering sex as well" (Hyde et al. 184, 2019). While readers and writers of the genre often use the term "secondary genders" to describe Alpha/Beta/Omega statuses, these statuses also correspond with biological impulses as well as anatomical biology, as Busse noted above with her description of the statuses based on biological difference (317, 2013). As such, the use of "secondary genders" to describe the Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics is not only incorrect but underwhelming for my own exploration of the genre as a place of speculative introspection on gender/sex. I prefer to use the term "secondaries" referring to A/B/O dynamics as a secondary component of gender/sex.

It is precisely this notion of gender/sex and how it engages with questions regarding the conflation of these terms in reality that originally drew me to Omegaverse fan fiction. I have been an active member of the fan fiction community for decades (long before the advent of Ao3 in 2007), but even years into my thesis, I still find the Omegaverse peculiar as a fan fiction genre. What is particularly interesting about this Alternate Universe (AU) to me is the familiarity I find in its strangeness. Do I experience heats? No. But as a person with a uterus, I do experience debilitating lower abdominal pain fairly regularly. Monthly, in fact. I may not have had people drawn to me by my scent (that I'm aware of), but I have had people treat me as an object to be possessed due to my gender identity. There are echoes of my lived experience within the dynamics of the Omegaverse. They are wildly exaggerated and made comfortingly distant (to me) by this exaggeration, but I find that is what makes the genre interesting rather than

horrific. While I have no desire to experience heats or knotting or any form of pregnancy, the experience of pre-heat likened to menstruation never ceases to amuse me. In fact, I have taken to calling my own monthly lower abdominal/uterine pain as “going into pre-heat”. I might not want to feel intense sexual arousal simultaneously with menstruation, but I do find it an interesting way to speculate on how menstrual cycles (as well as pregnancy and menopause) bring about sometimes unwanted bodily changes in reality. The Omegaverse provides a new perspective on bodily issues and the social hierarchies that bodies seem to produce - particularly in hegemonic, patriarchal, Western cultures.

In this thesis, I argue that the various tropes and iterations of the Omegaverse offer fascinating contributions to existing critical conversations regarding dynamics of social power, ethics of consent, sexuality, and gendered experience. While each chapter examines a different facet of these themes, it is my evaluation that the Omegaverse (despite its previous scholarly descriptions as a tool of cis-hetero-patriarchy) presents an opportunity to queerly reimagine the often deeply gendered roles present in Western, patriarchal societies. The genre explores queer potentialities through explicit sex; reshaping how gender/sex is composed within hierarchical societies (particularly with the male Omega characters and the Beta status as a whole). In doing so, the genre offers a space to speculate on the expectations of gender-binarism and “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1980) in many Western cultures that are often linked to gender/sex and social hierarchies.⁶ This thesis is interested in

⁶ Compulsory heterosexuality refers to the feminist theory that Western cis-hetero-patriarchal societies often frame heterosexuality as the natural expectation for sexual identity and any deviation from heterosexuality as ‘other’ or ‘unnatural’. According to feminist theorist Adrienne Rich, compulsory heterosexuality can be described as the “constraints and sanctions which, historically, have enforced or insured the coupling of women with men and obstructed or penalized [women’s] coupling or allying in independent groups with other women” (636, 1990). For example, it is this expectation of heterosexuality

examining social constructions of power and how those power hierarchies are maintained through indicators of status, both in the Omegaverse and reality. My main research question for this thesis concerns the ways in which the Omegaverse can be seen to criticize social structures in reality through their exaggeration in the conventions of this speculative genre.

Before looking ahead to my specific arguments in the chapters that follow, I will first explain why the Omegaverse is a useful area of study for academia and briefly probe some of the issues I will discuss in more depth in later chapters. Additionally, I will use this introductory space to define the somewhat nebulous terms used above, like “queer”, “cis-hetero-patriarchal”, “gender/sex”, and “power”. I argue that the Omegaverse genre interjects itself into many critical discussions surrounding these topics and across multiple disciplines, from literature to the social sciences, and thus having working definitions of these topics from which to complicate and compound in later sections is useful. Because of the multi-disciplinary applicability of my conclusions on Omegaverse trends, I will not be using one singular lens through which to discuss the genre; relying instead on each chapter to build the criticism I will be engaging with. Despite this rather “promiscuous methodology” (Nicholas 2014), the aims of this thesis are simple. The Omegaverse is often categorized by the taboos that it plays with (typically sexual taboos), earning it the nickname of “dogfuck rapeworld” (Popova 2017, 2018, 2021), and I argue that this reputation is far too simplistic and narrow for a genre so clearly interested in questioning gender and sexual norms through critiquing hierarchies of social power.

in many Western cultures, such as the US and UK, that often causes so many bisexuals to find their identity later in life because they had assumed themselves heterosexual (Harrad 2018).

“Wolf-boys fucking”: defining terms and genre norms of the Omegaverse

First and foremost, I would like to outline my own positionality and history within the Omegaverse genre as it exists on the fan fiction hosting platform, Ao3. I started reading Omegaverse fics in 2015, some 5 years after the genre came into existence with the *Supernatural* RPF (Real Person Fiction) fandom in 2010 (norabombay 2012, netweight 2013, Busse 2013, Popova 2017, 2018). Unfortunately, I didn't keep track of the A/B/O fics I read prior to the start of my thesis in late 2018, but in attempting to catalog the fics I had read or was familiar with for this thesis in late 2020 I found I had read (or remembered reading) over 600 of the 700 most popular A/B/O fics organized by “kudos” at that time.⁷ I am certain the number of A/B/O fics I have read is, in actuality, much higher than the 654 I initially counted, but this number provides some insight into my immersion in the genre. Though I have never published any fan fiction on Ao3, much less A/B/O-specific fics, I am extremely familiar with the tropes, genre conventions, and nuances of the Omegaverse. As such, the next few paragraphs will impart some of my knowledge of the more dramatic, animalistic mechanisms within the genre that make it unique and recognizable within the millions of fics available online.

There are many aspects of the genre that are unusual, especially when compared to the lived experience of humans who do not have “wolfish traits” (Busse 317, 2013) or canine-adjacent anatomy. Heats (and ruts) are arguably the convention of the genre most associated with the Omegaverse. But there are other mechanics that could be considered strange that serve interesting narrative features within the genre.

⁷ I will discuss Ao3, kudos, and metrics for discerning fic popularity in more detail in the Note on Methodology section of this thesis.

For instance, heats bring about certain biological changes within Omega characters like increased pheromone production, swelling of glands, and slick production. “Slick” refers to self-lubricating orifices (typically anuses, though not always) that become a helpful narrative tool for stories where explicit sex driven by mating imperatives does not always allow for the preparation typically represented as required for penetrative sex (i.e., synthetic lubrication, stretching, etc.). Since the majority of A/B/O fics are sex-forward romances between male Alphas and male Omegas, self-lubricating anuses provide a fictional shorthand for authors, eliminating some of the arguably cumbersome elements of penetrative anal sex in reality.

The bond-bites, or partnered bites, on the neck that indicate relationship status as I mentioned in the immersive excerpt, produce a “biochemical link” (Gunderson 42, 2017) that bonds couples together as “soul mates”. While the concept of soul mates is complicated and, as I will argue in Chapter 3, stems from multiple genres including werewolf lore and paranormal romances, it is employed as a staple of the Omegaverse and often acts as an indicator of romantic and/or sexual commitment to a partner. Similarly, the notion of ‘scenting’ in the Omegaverse is not unique to the genre and is largely situated around its relationship to the other animalistic conventions within the A/B/O dynamics. Alpha and Omega characters have extra pheromone glands that are highly sensitive and characters can use these glands located on wrists, necks, and inner thighs to secrete pheromones, sometimes without their knowledge and/or unintentionally. Beta characters are often without extra olfactory glands, but can sometimes pick up on the scents of Alphas or Omegas producing more scent pheromones due to lust or agitation. Scenting is often a precursor for bond-bites and/or heats, as a character’s scent can act as a “transmission of affect” (Brennan 2014)—

relaying information about their emotional and physical states such as anxiety or sexual arousal during periods where their mental states are compromised by heat/rut symptoms. While ruts will play a smaller, but not insignificant role in this thesis, it is important to note that they serve similar purposes as heats, since they are mating instincts. However, unlike heats, they do not carry the same potential for harm or permanent consequences. For instance, knotting occurs to satisfy Omega heats within many A/B/O fics, but also has the potential of hurting an Alpha's partner. Attempting to remove a knot before it has subsided could result in vaginal/anal/orifice tearing while leaving the penis relatively unaffected.

Similarly, the purpose of the knot in reality (i.e., pregnancy), translates into the Omegaverse in interesting ways. Pregnancy is a possibility for almost all Omega characters (and sometimes Betas) within the Omegaverse regardless of primary gender identity or sex. Similarly, Alpha characters often have bodies capable of producing knots regardless of primary gender/sex. As the illustration below by fan artist, LS|四肢 depicts, there are many possible bodily arrangements within Alpha and Omega bodies and not all of them have a direct translation to human anatomy. Though the illustration is but one example of the potential bodily arrangements within the genre, it offers an interesting collaboration of human and non-human anatomical structures:

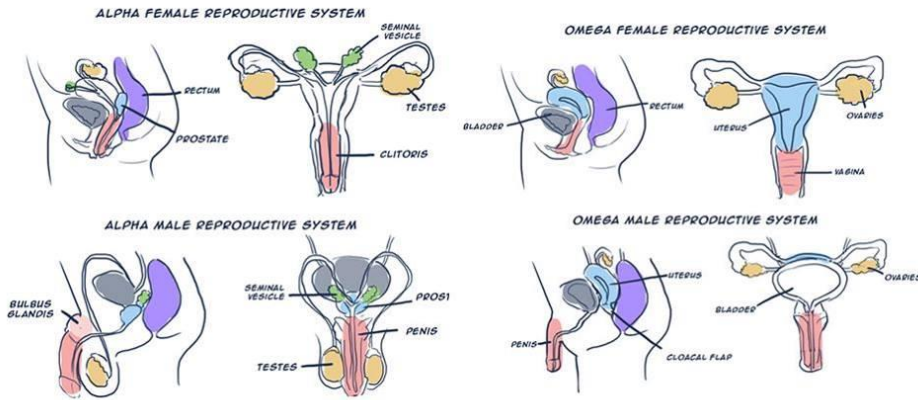


Figure 0.1: "Alpha/Omega Anatomy" by LS|四肢 (@LS_FLimbs 2020)

This results in anatomical configurations that can be seen to speculate on and play with existing anatomical structures as well as potentially mimicking some transitioning/transgender bodies in reality.⁸ However, it is the speculative play featured in this illustration that indicates the fictitious parameters of the genre are far more nebulous than bodies in reality. For instance, male Omegas do not necessarily require a uterus to become pregnant, as the specifics of pregnancy are often glossed over (Kerry 2009, Aström 2011, Ingram-Waters 2015) in fan fiction stories containing "mpreg" or male pregnancy. While I will discuss this concept at more length in the following chapter, mpreg does not feature heavily in this thesis.

It is this rather fluid relationship with forms of gender and sex in reality that seem to resonate with many readers and writers within the Omegaverse community. For instance, Omegaverse *TikTok* commenter Kendalexis uploaded "in defense of a/b/o" in

⁸ In Chapter 1, I will discuss some of the existing scholarship on potential readings of the Omegaverse as a space for transgender identity, particularly with the works of Weisser (2019) and Director (2017), though there remains a relatively low amount of A/B/O works labeled as discussing transgender identity or centering trans-identified characters (about 1% of all A/B/O labeled works on Ao3) at time of writing.

2021 and had the following to say about the varied and non-uniform anatomy presented by A/B/O dynamics:

Given that werewolf fiction, as a genre, is a capsule for queer sexuality, right?

Given that it is a way for queer people to talk about our desires that come out at night, that we cannot control, that are deemed monstrous by society, so on and so forth...then it stands to reason that A/B/O fics are a capsule for queer gender expression and queer gender identity. Men who self-lubricate. Women with penises. People who are explicitly neither Alpha nor Omega. Use your noggin, babe! It doesn't get more trans than A/B/O. Okay? And I think it's high time we stop disparaging A/B/O fics as cringey and dismissing them out of hand. It's time to lean into the gender euphoria that can be found there. (@kendalexis March 31, 2021)

@kendalexis makes a few very interesting points regarding intersections with monster media, transitioning bodies, and the reputation of the Omegaverse within wider fan fiction communities that I will explore thoroughly in later chapters, but it is their point regarding queer gender identity that seems to resonate with readers and writers of the Omegaverse. With comments from users such as, "I just discovered the reason why I love A/B/O so much [...] I'm non-binary BTW" (@soresu_writes, 2021), over 72,000 likes, 2,280 comments, and over 3 thousand shares at the time of writing, this could very well be an indication of the popularity of the Omegaverse as a speculative space to explore complex notions of gender/sex and sexuality.

Before moving into my own arguments regarding the presentation of sex and sexuality within the Omegaverse, I would like to clarify what I mean when referring to gender or sex in the genre. As briefly mentioned in footnote 5, my use of punctuation to

differentiate between gender/sex versus gender and sex is used to indicate different theories regarding these concepts and how they are used within the Omegaverse. Gender has been recognized by past queer theorists as a sociopolitical concept separate from biological sex. This theory was popularized by late twentieth-century theorists West and Zimmerman (1987), who promoted the idea of “doing gender” as opposed to *being* a gender - separating biology from social roles. Early queer theorist Judith Butler (1990, 1996) built on this concept of gender as socially ‘performative’ rather than a biological-based compulsion. According to Butler (1990), the construction and continued use of a binary gender structure (i.e., men and women) can be read as a ‘heterosexual matrix’ wherein heterosexuality - as the dominant and most widely acceptable form of sexuality - is used to construct gender roles which best maintain heterosexuality within the species (Weeks 2011).⁹ The heterosexual matrix is more complicated than a social assumption of heterosexuality within a culture, though it is related to notions of “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1980) noted in previous sections. It positions heterosexuality as natural within hierarchical societies through the: promotion, assertion, and performative re-inscription of discursive tropes, by the erasure of alternative lives through their unacknowledgement, and the forceful policing and regulation of alternative sexualities. (Weeks 80, 2011)

This policing of sexuality extends into policing of gendered social performance to conform to heterosexual norms (Halberstam 2005, Kimmel 2007). Via this social regulation of heterosexuality, and by extension the limited genders of men and women,

⁹ This particular definition side-steps some of the complicated conversations surrounding nonbinary gender identity, gender fluidity, and agender identities. I will discuss these identities and provide more in-depth definitions for each in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis.

the cisgender binary is constructed as naturalized as well as biologically reinforced through medical procedures and psychological practices.¹⁰

The Omegaverse can be read to continue these practices of constructing a heterosexual matrix, thereby reinforcing binary systems of gender correlated with sex as well as prioritizing one type of sexual attraction (primarily Alphas with Omegas). In doing so, the genre can be read to map stereotyped gendered experiences of masculine and feminine onto Alphas and Omegas, respectively. For example, the term 'male Omegas' refers to the overlapping gender/sexes of men/male (since the term "male" in this regard refers both to masculine gender identity and the biological sex of male) and Omega. Omega characters have minoritized gendered roles within A/B/O social hierarchies that are usually represented as prioritizing the wants of Alphas. Omega biology provides the mating imperative of heats, slick production, and potential pregnancy - all biological traits exclusively associated with the Omega dynamic. Thus, the Omega status presents a conflation of gender roles and biological sex between the Omegaverse and real-life. Additionally, because the male Omega characters combine gender/sex roles traditionally associated with femininity and/or female anatomy (i.e., minoritized social status, potential of pregnancy, etc.), they are often theorized by Omegaverse scholars as sites of queer potential for rewriting gender/sex roles onto typically male bodies (Busse 2013, Gunderson 2017, Arnaiz 2018).

I will explore the works of previous Omegaverse scholarship and how it intertwines with my own arguments surrounding the queer potential of the genre in

¹⁰ Historically, many Western countries have reinforced a cisgender binary through medical procedures as well as classifying gender-based dysphoria and dysmorphia as psychological disorders (Terman and Miles 1936, Pleck 1981). Erasure of intersex peoples through genital modification surgeries in infancy (Reis 2009) and the inclusion of transsexualism as a diagnosable disorder in the DSM until 2013 has limited much of the gender diverse and sex diverse data available for scholars. For more reading on Intersex history in the US, see Reis 2009.

Chapter 1, but in order to understand my meaning for “queer potential” within *A/B/O* fiction, a working definition of ‘queer’ is needed. Queer and heteronormativity are terms that can be best understood in dialogue with one another. As Fan Studies author, April Callis, writes, “Within a heteronormative system, heterosexuality is privileged, while nonheterosexuality is marginalized” (3.6, 2016) referring to heteronormativity as both a system implemented on a social level and informed by the maintenance of heterosexuality as ‘naturalized’ within that society. Expanding on this description, Fan Studies queer theorist, Kyra Hunting, suggests,

It is heteronormativity that leads most people to assume that a person they just met is heterosexual unless otherwise informed. However, heteronormativity goes beyond just the issue of sexual practices; it also refers to the set of values, privileges, and life stages associated with heterosexuality, such as monogamy, marriage, and child rearing with biological parents. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) argue that “heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance and other protected spaces of culture (554–55).” (3.3, 2012)

Borrowing definitions from Berlant and Warner, Hunting describes heteronormativity as a sort of invasive species of ideology that infiltrates all aspects of social experience. While the extent to which many Western cultures have been ‘invaded’ by the concept of heteronormativity (and thus enforced this ideology on colonized and imperialized cultures) is debated and contested in reality, it has had an impact on the formation of the Omegaverse. The ability of the male Omega to become pregnant is arguably linked

to the heteronormative insistence that couples be able to procreate biologically with associated gender roles of 'father' and 'mother' regardless of primary gender identity. It is because of this emphasis on procreation in this speculative fan fiction genre that I use the term heteronormative to describe relationships and societies within the Omegaverse rather than "homonormative". Homonormativity, or the reinforcement of traditionally heteronormative roles such as monogamy, marriage, and child-rearing in LGBTQ+ relationships (Callis 2016, Hunting 2012), has played a significant role in some Fan Studies of m/m fan fiction (Willis 2016, Callus 2016, Hunting 2012), but because the Omegaverse conflates gender/sex and promotes biological families in many iterations, heteronormativity is a more accurate representation of the relationship dynamics within the Omegaverse than homonormativity. A/B/O fic has been and continues to be, theorized more by the recognizable gender/sex roles it represents than the gender identities of those characters in relationships (Gunderson 2017, Popova 2017, 2018, Arnaiz 2018).

However, this erasure of the primary gender/sex from male Omegas can be read as eliminating some of the queer elements of the Omegaverse, namely the queer relationships between men that the genre is seemingly fixated on - if the 85% of all A/B/O fics being m/m is any indication. As I suggested above, queerness is often understood as in dialogue with heteronormativity, though this is not necessarily an oppositional relationship. While in early theoretical definitions of queer theory this opposition may be accurate (Doty 1993, Sullivan 2003, Freeman 2010), the queer practices of Omegaverse fan fiction are very much in constant debate with heteronormativity. More accurately, it is cis-hetero-patriarchy that I argue the Omegaverse is in direct conflict with. Rather than speculating on existing queer theory,

the genre seems to direct criticism towards the gender/sex, sexuality, and power dynamics implied by the concept of cis-hetero-patriarchy. As I have suggested, the Omegaverse does not respond to every single aspect or one particular school of queer theory, but rather does some unpredictable things that present opportunities to speculate on queer practices. Queerness, as I argue is present in the Omegaverse, is more theory-adjacent than theory-reliant. Regardless of this tumultuous relationship with queer theory, the term “queer” has many definitions that inform this thesis; queer sexuality being the most relevant.

If heteronormativity is based on heterosexuality, then queerness (as it is used within the Omegaverse) is broadly based on non-heterosexuality. Queer theorist, Lucy Nicholas, describes the field as “disruptive”, writing,

The disruptive term ‘queer theory’ is attributed to Theresa de Lauretis [...] in 1990, who was drawing on the multiple meanings of ‘queer’ to articulate the anti-normalising potential of challenging the naturalness and dominance of heterosexuality. (5, 2014).

While this definition of queerness as disrupting the compulsive heterosexuality of many Western patriarchal cultures will inform the first few chapters of this thesis, it is also limiting in scope. The term ‘queer’ does describe non-heterosexual identities, but as the above definition provides, there are multiple definitions of queerness beyond sexuality. In their primer on the academic field of queer theory, Annamarie Jagose poses interesting questions as to how the past derogatory use of ‘queer’ has developed the word to include a more wide-ranging spectrum of experience beyond sexuality.

Once the term ‘queer’ was, at best, slang for homosexual, at worst, a term of homophobic abuse. In recent years ‘queer’ has come to be used differently,

sometimes as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times to describe a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies. (Jagose 1, 1996)

Jagose's foundational work, though dated, can be read to expand the term queer to encompass lived experiences (particularly of non-heterosexual peoples) and presents yet another question as to what is meant by the word queer. Is it a sexual identity? A lifestyle? Anything that is not considered 'normative' within a culture? The simple answer to these questions is yes, but this thesis is concerned with the potential of the Omegaverse to express queerness. As such, the Omegaverse can be read as influenced by the earlier works of theorists like Jagose (1996) and Nicholas (2014), though not necessarily responding to these definitions so much as exploring queer practices in popular media impacted by these iterations of earlier queer theory. Each chapter of this thesis will expand on the above definitions of queer starting with queer as a sexual identity towards an understanding of queer as a presentation of non-normative social power dynamics and lifestyles expressed within the Omegaverse. However, the question of normativity remains. Who decides what is normative within a culture? How is normativity or queerness determined within a society? Both of these questions are related to structures of power and who has the social power to promote and enforce cultural norms; which, for the Omegaverse, is often Alphas.

Social power structures in reality (at least in Western, patriarchal cultures) have an interesting parallel within the Omegaverse. Both are constructed as hierarchical, since some statuses with more power (i.e., Alphas in the Omegaverse and typically cisgender, white, heterosexual, wealthy men in reality) and all other statuses can be read to fight for positions of increased social power below the highest status.

Furthermore, I argue that power and gender are correlated in the Omegaverse, much the same as reality. The fan fiction genre reflects this correlation by often disenfranchising characters with more feminine-coded roles (e.g., Omegas and Betas) and forming social dynamics that both prioritize and protect masculine-coded Alpha characters' wants and actions.

In discussing the relationship between power and gender I will be borrowing a definition from Knudson-Martin and Mahoney's 2005 article, "Moving Beyond Gender" which defines power as "the ability to influence a relationship toward one's own goals, interests, and well-being" (237). While 'influence' is a vague word that could encompass financial codependency between partners or emotional manipulation - both factors contributing to unequal power distribution in a relationship - 'influence' also points to larger, systemic dynamics of power like gender.

Every society has a gender structure, in the same way that every society has an economic structure. The gender structure has implications at the level of individual analysis, in shaping interactional expectations that are at the heart of doing gender, and at the institutional level in the organization and policing of social groups. (Risman 83, 2009)

Similarly, the Omegaverse has gendered influences at all levels of interaction. Even the term itself, "A/B/O dynamics" is presented as a hierarchy of gendered power with Alphas first and so on. Many A/B/O fics construct a gender power hierarchy that protects Alphas, sometimes at the expense of Omegas - similar to many real-world cultures that often construct institutions that uphold and promote patriarchal structures that favor cisgender, heterosexual, white men. But the dynamics of power this hierarchy produces, like systems in reality, require constant reinforcement by those who benefit

most from the hierarchy. In the Omegaverse, I argue this is constructed through the world-building of each individual fic, but departs from reality in how accountability is often required of Alpha characters and their actions. In real-life, accountability is often stymied by power structures that protect particular groups. For instance, a popular legal case in California featuring rape notably only held the convicted rapist, Brock Turner, in prison for only three months in an attempt to get the upper class, white man out of jail before his swim team started practicing again; thus indicating that the athletics prospects of the rapist were more important than justice for the survivor. In the Omegaverse, as a speculative fictional universe, accountability can be realized through fantasy.

And that is the main crux of this thesis. The Omegaverse presents a fantasy of real life, as so many fictional worlds do, but the specific parts of lived experience it seems to highlight and explore are focused on gender, power, and sexuality. It is precisely these intersections within the genre that make the body of work contained in this thesis resonate with many disciplines and communities outside of literature and fan studies. The conclusions drawn on the Omegaverse's contributions to discussions of gender, sex, and consent are important for psychological, sociological, and culturally focused-disciplines even beyond the scope of A/B/O fiction. Those in the Omegaverse community seem to use the genre to interrogate their own sociopolitical landscapes and how those are translated into media portrayals. The Omegaverse may use wolfish traits and exaggerated structures of gender/sex, but so many of the works (especially those explored in this thesis) are invested in describing and exploring intricacies of human experience, specifically queer lived experience in many Western cultures. These particular intersections of personal identity and social interaction are integral parts of

human experience and to find them so exaggerated and closely examined within a sexually explicit sub-genre of fan fiction is endlessly captivating to me. In the following, final section of this introduction, I will outline the work ahead in this thesis and add some final relevant contextualization. Despite my best efforts, this thesis project is not an exhaustive examination of the Omegaverse, but rather a snapshot of some of the most curious questions it poses at the time of writing. As such, each chapter will explore a distinct, though correlated, aspect of the genre.

Areas of Interest and Aims of the Work Ahead

“Omegaverse is a great trope for exploring social issues” “it’s not always about sex” “non-traditional a/b/o dynamics are really fun to explore” that’s AMAZING and I am so happy for you. I have a breeding kink tho. (@bobby_speeds, December 2021)

The above tweet from fan fiction writer Bobby succinctly demonstrates the many types of people drawn to Omegaverse stories. Some enjoy the social power aspects, some enjoy the dynamics of unequal power exchanges, and some enjoy A/B/O specifically for knotting penises and mpreg to satisfy “breeding kinks”. The Omegaverse casts a wide net of interest from fan fiction readers and writers. The tweet also currently (Feb 2022) has over 43,000 likes on *Twitter* which indicates the number of people who are fans of (or at least interested in) this genre. Growing in tandem with fan fiction sites like Ao3, the Omegaverse has remained at 1% of all fan fiction produced since the sub-genre’s inception in 2010. For instance, the total number of A/B/O fics has grown from just

under 50,000 works in 2018 (at the start of this thesis) to well over 115,000 in January of 2022.

COVID-19 changed how many communities engaged with one another, but for fan fiction (that was already a largely online and socially distanced activity) the pandemic led to a boom in productivity and output, with numbers on Ao3 increasing by nearly three million works between March 2020 and January 2022. While the pandemic is by no means over at the time of writing, the boost in fan fiction engagement seems to have mellowed, holding at just under 8.8 million fics on Ao3 (January 2022). This boom in fan fiction production and engagement was equally present in the Omegaverse, but the increased activity has also drawn an interesting anti-Omegaverse sentiment in some spaces.

As I noted in earlier sections, the Omegaverse has something of a reputation in fan fiction spaces as a “cringey” (@kendalexis 2021) genre that is sex-forward at best and “rapey” (Popova 2021) at worst. While later chapters will explore the “rapey” connotations with the genre, the “cringey” explicit sex is something this thesis will explore in every chapter, though with a different perspective in each. As Omegaverse and Fan Studies scholar, Milena Popova, theorized, one of the best methodologies for examining a genre with such prolific amounts of stories and a contentious fandom surrounding it (though their studies were not limited to explicit sex) is to “follow-the-trope” (2020) and let the dynamics of the genre determine how research is conducted. As such, this thesis follows-the-genre from sexually explicit scenes to the dynamics that enable these scenes to the fan reactions, both complimentary and critical.

The first chapter serves as a literature review that combs through the history of Fan Studies (the academic field under which fan fiction studies typically fall), to tease

out some of the main tenets of “slash” fan fiction research and demographic changes within fan fiction communities that could account for these changes. Stemming from a history of producing queer romances called “slash” fiction, this chapter explores how fan fiction has been characterized in the past to understand the origins of genres like the Omegaverse. Similarly, this literature review peruses the pre-existing scholarship on Omegaverse fan fiction to establish the gaps that will be filled by the chapters that follow.

Chapter 2 builds a discussion around the complications of informed sexual consent surrounding some of the more heteronormative elements of the Omegaverse, including many of the conventions it borrows from mass-market heterosexual romance novels. Using fics from the *Teen Wolf* fandom, this chapter explores how informed consent is conceptualized in some of the more popular A/B/O works. In a departure from how consent is conceptualized in genres like the mass-market heterosexual romance novels, the use of consent (or nonconsent as the case may be) reflects a concerted effort by the Omegaverse community of readers and writers to add nuance to a debate about consent in fan fiction that has been flattened over time with nicknames for the genre such as “dogfuck rapeworld”. As consent is an active issue within fan fiction spaces and has been for my entire tenure as a fan fiction reader, this chapter discusses how the online space has shifted to incorporate a more wide-ranging discussion regarding consent that I argue the Omegaverse uses to its advantage. This chapter also compares traditionally heterosexual forms of consent with how consent is often conceptualized in queer sexualities using the fictional Omegaverse as a potential example of how queer relationships in reality can differ in constructing concepts of bodily autonomy and sexual consent between partners.

As Omegaverse scholar Gunderson (2017) has previously noted, the Omegaverse is a sprawling genre and no single theory could encompass all works under the A/B/O umbrella. However, there are themes within the genre that are more popular and commonly associated with it. They write,

Some stories focus heavily on the erotic potential of a/b/o, in which heat cycles provide the urgency of excruciating and uncontrollable physical desire, knotting creates intensity and intimacy, and the alpha/beta/omega hierarchy and associated personality traits become a vehicle through which to explore a dom/sub dynamic. (16, 2017)

In a departure from Gunderson's argument, Chapter 3 argues that positions of dominance and submission are employed in the Omegaverse through the animalistic conventions of the genre rather than traits associated with A/B/O status as previous Omegaverse scholars have suggested (Gunderson 2017, Busse 2013, Popova 2018, 2021, Fazekas 2020). The current gap in Omegaverse scholarship regarding the animal traits of the genre (e.g., knotting, scenting, nesting, biting, etc.) presents an opportunity to examine what purpose these traits serve within the popular A/B/O narratives. As such, Chapter 3 uses the bond-biting convention of the A/B/O dynamics to explore the sexual dominance and submission that authors Busse (2013), Gunderson (2017), and Fazekas (2020) have previously attributed to the genre through the statuses themselves. Using characterizations popularized by paranormal genre fiction like vampires and werewolves, Chapter 3 examines the bonding bites of the Omegaverse and how they often use pleasure/pain responses to evoke roles of sexual dominance and submission. It has been previously theorized that bond-bites are often used as tools to reinforce social hierarchies as natural and force Omega characters to be complicit in

their submission to Alphas (Gunderson 2017, Popova 2018). I argue that despite the traditionally conservative concepts of monogamy and partnership linked to the often permanent nature of bond-bites (Busse 2013, Gunderson 2017), the biting process - and the temporary bliss that follows - relates far more closely with the lived experiences of BDSM practitioners and other queerly positioned sexual experiences. Using examples from the *Voltron: Legendary Defender* fandom, Chapter 3 builds on the use of queerness in this thesis to include not only queer sexual identities and conceptualizations of consent as described through many popular Omegaverse stories, but also queer sexual practices and lifestyles that have been adopted into the queer community in reality. As such, this chapter expands on preliminary definitions of queerness in this thesis and discusses the many points of connection between Omegaverse tropes and some of the lived experiences of queer peoples in reality.

Chapter 4 revisits the work of Omegaverse scholar Popova (2017, 2018, 2021) and the use of sexual scripting theory within the genre. The Omegaverse can often be read to uphold the traditionally heterosexual scripts of aggressive masculine partner and passive feminine partner, hence my use of the word heteronormativity as opposed to homonormativity thus far. However, there has been recent growth in “alternative”, “nontraditional”, and “atypical” A/B/O dynamic pairings that deviate from the popular Alpha/Omega couple - resulting in sexual scripts that do not easily map onto heterosexuality. Using a few of the exceedingly popular Kpop (Korean pop) RPF (real person fiction) fandoms, this chapter explores the newly popularized Alpha/Alpha and Omega/Omega pairings to determine whether the dynamics of traditional heterosexual scripts are analogous with one particular pairing or status as opposed to an assumption that all Omegaverse couples adhere to heterosexual norms. This recent shift in popular

sexual scripting in the Omegaverse suggests a growing number of A/B/O readers and writers may be dissatisfied with the heteronormativity in the genre and are seeking to implement more queerly-identified narratives within the genre. In doing so, I argue that this chapter further expands the queer potentials of the Omegaverse to include sociological theories of queerness (including sexual scripting) and queer communities (particularly how consent is constructed on different levels of social scripting).

The final chapter of this thesis is one of the more experimental explorations of the genre as it contrasts gender and power as depicted in more heteronormative communities versus queer communities using the fictitious statuses of the Omegaverse as avatars for these concepts. Chapter 5 examines the often overlooked Beta characters within the Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics and their positionality within this hierarchy of statuses. As Beta characters are often presented as socially versatile, and their placement within the A/B/O power structure differs from fic to fic, this chapter investigates the relatively rare Beta-centric fics to determine some of the possible readings of these characters as protagonists within the Omegaverse. As Betas often exist outside the typical gender binary presented by the Alphas and Omegas, the Beta characters' relationship with their gender and sexuality generally offers a more speculative range of roles for these characters. Using a selection of fics from various fandoms, this chapter uses the potential discursive identities of the Betas to suggest a potential shift in how the Omegaverse community conceptualizes gender and sexuality - leaning away from traditions of allosexuality and gender binarism that have previously categorized the more popular works within the genre.¹¹ While I do not suggest that all

¹¹ Allosexuality refers to the naturalization of sexual attraction within many cultures (Chen 2020). For instance, a sexual spectrum representing heterosexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality, etc. would be an allosexual spectrum of sexual orientations. Alternatively, the asexual (the absence of sexual attraction)

Beta characters identify as nonbinary or exist on the asexual spectrum, my evaluation of the Beta status is as one that presents more opportunities for readers and writers to speculate on the placement of these queer identities and lived experiences within the context of the Omegaverse.

Many previous Omegaverse scholars (Busse 2013, Gunderson 2017, Director 2017, Popova 2017, 2018, 2021, Arnaiz 2018, Westberg-Gabriel 2018, Weisser 2019, Fazekas 2020), and fan fiction scholars more broadly (Pugh 2004, Busse and Hellekson 2006, Jamison 2013, Busse 2017, Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2017, Spacey 2018, etc.) have noted that fan fiction is too varied and diverse to fit neatly into one theory or discipline and similarly, this thesis could not possibly be reflective of all A/B/O fic. Instead, it is representative of some of the unexplored areas of Omegaverse fan fiction and recent trends within the more popular works that I have noticed from my own time in fan fiction spaces. While I do build on some of the previous scholarship, this thesis is but a sliver of the available Omegaverse fic, and there will likely be variation between my interpretation and others within the Omegaverse community. As such, my conclusion will discuss some of the limitations on the current scope of this thesis and potential points of entry for future scholarship.

Each of the above chapters contributes to exploring themes of power, sexuality, and gender expression. As such, they contribute to my aims of broadening the current scholarship on Omegaverse fan fiction to include both the queer potential that is becoming increasingly apparent in the genre as well as critiquing the cis-hetero-patriarchy of many Western cultures. As a rapidly growing genre existing in increasingly

spectrum represents sexualities that vary by libido rather than attraction (e.g., sex-repulsed, sex-forward, sexually ambivalent, etc.) (Chen 2020). This concept will be explored in more depth in Chapter 5.

digitalized Western cultures, the Omegaverse can be read as a microcosm for the many social issues (e.g., sexual assault, consent, misogyny, compulsive heterosexuality, etc. depending on the chapter) faced by many people living in Western, heteropatriarchal societies and presents opportunities to examine those issues through the controllable parameters of fantasy fiction. The A/B/O statuses question the interconnectedness of gender, sex, and sexuality and how all of these concepts are informed by social power hierarchies that arguably produce systems that excuse acts of assault or misogyny against certain groups with marginalized social power. In doing so, I argue that readers and writers of the Omegaverse are able to investigate which groups benefit from these systems in reality, question their own positionality in these hierarchies, and potentially find ways to circumnavigate oppressive systems through Omegaverse fantasies.

To provide more context on who comprises the communities of Omegaverse readers and writers and how they have previously been theorized by my fellow researchers in the field, I will move to the first chapter of this thesis that provides a brief literature review of Omegaverse scholarship. But first, a note regarding my methodology for data collection and the archival research for this project.

A Note on Methodology

I have included this brief, but essential note to explain why I have elected to use fics and data for this thesis collected solely from the fan fiction hosting site, Ao3, as opposed to the many other hosting sites such as *Wattpad*, *AdultFanFiction.net*, *Asianfanfics.com*, or FF.net (*FanFiction.net*). Each chapter of this thesis has its own methodology for the close readings therein, following-the-trope through different patterns and trends that “present one possible, specific, and situated view of how some parts of the fan fiction community engage with issues” (Popova 4.6, 2020); particularly issues of gender, sexuality, and power dynamics in the Omegaverse. Thus, I will use this space to justify my use of Ao3 as the best data collection archive for this genre and my particular areas of interest. I admit part of the decision stems from personal preference, but it is also influenced by Ao3’s user-friendly design and how it affords specific data that informs my arguments - data not currently offered by other fan fiction hosting sites. The history of the Ao3 site and its formation in online communities is fascinating and could be a thesis in its own right, but I will be limiting my comments to a very brief history of the site and relevant selections from its offered data.

Ao3 is an unusual fan fiction archive in that it was produced and is continually run by fans through an annual election of executive positions...by fans. Since it is a nonprofit organization, it does not suffer from some of the shortcomings of previous fan fiction hosting sites.¹² Other sites, like FF.net and *Wattpad*, are owned by corporations and thus are responsible for the content hosted on their sites - leading to more intense

¹² *Wattpad* is currently being “mined” by media production companies (ViacomCBS) for concept ideas - meaning users’ work will be taken from the site to be produced in a media format without the creators’ involvement or consent (Keck 2021). Part of the agreement with posting to sites like *Wattpad* is that the site owns any content it hosts (Keck 2021).

content restrictions and occasional content “purges”.¹³ FF.net, the most popular fan fiction hosting site until Ao3 outpaced it in 2015 (ffinnagain 2017), does not allow “pornographic” content and will remove content that has been reported as sexually explicit by users of the site. While the site offers a “Mature” rating option for authors to label their fics, it is with the knowledge that Mature does not include sexually explicit material and fics including this material may be removed by site administrators at any point. In the site’s terms of service (last updated in February 2019), FF.net outlines:

FanFiction.Net reserves the right to decide whether Content or a User Submission is appropriate and complies with these Terms of Service for violations other than copyright infringement or privacy law, such as, but not limited to, hate crimes, pornography, obscene or defamatory material, or excessive length. FanFiction.Net may remove such User Submissions and/or terminate a User's access for uploading such material in violation of these Terms of Service at any time, without prior notice and at its sole discretion.

(FanFiction.net)

Despite the site’s hard limit on explicit material, some fics do contain “pornography” and other “obscene” material without being taken down by site administrators. Reporting fics that violate the terms of service is left to site users and no investigation is necessary for removing a user-cited fic. In an attempt to depart from these content restrictions, Ao3 was founded without content restrictions beyond word limits and tagging limits (that I will

¹³ Previously popular fan fiction hosting sites like *Livejournal* and *Tumblr*, both experienced content purges where explicit content was removed (without user consent) to make the sites more ‘marketable’ as a wide-ranging platform to advertisers. While there is much fan-produced documentation on these events, there have also been a few scholarly projects archiving the “purges” of many fan fiction hosting sites, such as Floegal (2021) and Pilipets & Paasonen (2020).

explain in later sections).¹⁴ Thus, authors on Ao3 do not face the same challenges of posting work that might be removed without warning or deemed too explicit for the hosting site.

Since the Omegaverse is a sexually explicit genre, Ao3 is one of the only sites that hosts A/B/O fics without concerns of those fics being removed (for example, halfway through a Ph.D. project). Additionally, Ao3 offers systems of engagement between readers and writers through comments and/or kudos.¹⁵ While comments can be offered multiple times on a single story or a single chapter, kudos can only be offered once from readers to writers. As such, a fic with multiple chapters may have thousands of comments from readers but only a few hundred kudos, indicating that the fic has a very dedicated readership that offers comments on each chapter, but the fic itself is either not widely read or not widely enjoyed (since more popular works typically number kudos in the thousands - though popularity is relative). Kudos are also arguably easier to offer as they can be awarded with a single button-click, whereas comments require typing as well as a button-click. When I refer to popularity throughout this thesis, I am referring to this system of kudos and using the kudos awarded to a fic as a metric for popular trends within the wider genre and “therefore considered influential by the community” (Popova 4.4., 2020). While there are some shortcomings to this use of kudos (i.e., some more popular authors may receive more kudos than new or unknown

¹⁴ The limited reporting methods for Ao3 has led to some live issues within Fan Studies research. Since Ao3 has very few (if any) consequences for writers who upload works that are explicitly abusive towards other users, defamatory or encourage/promote hate crimes, there have been reports of Ao3 members using the platform to advance racist, sexist, and ableist ideologies (Pande 2019, 2020, Stitch 2021). While this debate has truly fascinating repercussions for discussions of censorship and tolerance, it is unfortunately outside the scope of discussion for this particular thesis.

¹⁵ The “FAQ” page on the Ao3 site offers more in-depth discussions and tutorials for all of the concepts I briefly explain in this section, including comments and kudos. For information about the site, how it collects data, and how it is run, see: https://archiveofourown.org/faq?language_id=en

authors due to a pre-existing audience rather than merit), at the time of writing, this system remains arguably more indicative of fan fiction reader and writership trends than other, more randomized selection methods.

This method of tracking popularity is not unique to Ao3, as FF.net has a similar system of comments versus “favorites” (as opposed to comments versus kudos), but Ao3 is also more easily navigable for readers, writers, and researchers than other platforms. For instance, using the search function on the Ao3 site allows researchers (and readers) to arrange search results by popularity (i.e., kudos), but also through other data points self-selected by authors. Authors on Ao3 can choose how their work is advertised and/or displayed to readers (to an extent) by the optional use of “tags”. Tags are a series of notations based on the “curated folksonomy” of fandom that authors use to make certain their fics appear within certain search parameters.¹⁶ For instance, the most popular fic under the Omegaverse tag at the time of writing (January 2022) is “Quiet Rapture” by lalazee (2017),¹⁷ and has the following tags and metadata attached to it:

¹⁶ Curated Folksonomy is the language surrounding fan fiction (e.g., the Omegaverse is a curated folksonomy as those in fandom will know what the Omegaverse is without much prompting, but those not familiar with fandom circles will not understand this word or what it represents).

¹⁷ In the final weeks of editing this thesis (February 2022), another fic took the number one most popular spot on A/B/O fan fiction hosted by Ao3, a heterosexually paired Harry Potter fic called “All You Want” by senlinyu (2019) featuring a Draco/Hermione relationship. This is highly unusual, not only because there are only 3 heterosexual main pairing fics in the top 100 most kudos’d A/B/O fics on Ao3 (the other two come from the *Star Wars* fandom), but because heterosexual fics do not often garner intense popularity in the Omegaverse. This could be related to recent changes in the distribution of “slash” fiction within the Omegaverse that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 1. Unfortunately, “All You Want” (senlinyu 2019), alongside other heterosexually paired A/B/O fics will not be discussed in this thesis, as the genre remains over 80% m/m at the time of writing. Explicitly heterosexual A/B/O would be an interesting point of entry for future Omegaverse studies, especially given the recent popularity of “All You Want” (senlinyu 2019), but it will not be discussed in any capacity in this thesis.

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Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Categories:	M/M, F/M
Fandom:	僕のヒーローアカデミア Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia
Relationship:	Bakugou Katsuki/Midoriya Izuku
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Alpha Bakugou Katsuki, Omega Midoriya Izuku, Slow Burn, Mating Cycles/In Heat, Mating Bond, Love at First Sight, Quirkless Midoriya Izuku, Pining Bakugou Katsuki, BAMF Midoriya Izuku, Wooing, Canon-Typical Violence, Blood and Injury, Murder Mystery, Angst with a Happy Ending, Minor Character Death, Implied/Referenced Sexual Harassment, Dark Past, No mpreg, Implied/Referenced Sexual Assault, Past Relationship(s), Unhealthy Relationships, Recovery, Underage Drug Use, Panic Attacks, PTSD, Near Death Experiences, Past Rape/Non-con, Switching, Therapy
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of the "I Want That Quiet Rapture Again" series • Next Work →
Stats:	Published: 2017-11-22 Updated: 2021-09-03 Words: 275524 Chapters: 46/50 Comments: 6929 Kudos: 26455 Bookmarks: 5069 Hits: 579219

Quiet Rapture
lalazee

Figure 0.2: “Quiet Rapture” by lalazee (2017) opening title, data, and tags.

The tags offered by the author under the “additional tags” heading indicate a story that includes “Love at First Sight”, “Blood and Injury”, as well as “Recovery” (lalazee 2017). Since the addition of tags is contingent on authorial discretion, their inclusion can be read to suggest authorial intention. For instance, lalazee could be read to have a vested interest in a standard of ethical care for her readership as she includes tags that forewarn readers of potentially triggering material like “Implied/Referenced Sexual Assault”. Alternatively, sites like FF.net offer genres that fics can be nested under (e.g., “adventure” or “romance”) instead of tags. Unfortunately, as these genres do not offer fan-fiction-specific language (i.e., the Omegaverse does not fit neatly under any of the listed genre headings on FF.net), authors must include keywords in the synopsis or title in order to be found within the FF.net search function. This limits the number of fics caught within the FF.net search engine, making the tagging system of Ao3 a superior method to collect accurate data and track shifts within the Omegaverse genre. While

additional tags are optional for writers on Ao3, there are other useful data points presented by Ao3 that make it well-suited to a thesis on the Omegaverse genre.

As the image of lalazee's work illustrates, authors can also choose ratings (e.g., Explicit, Mature, Teen And Up Audiences, Not Rated, or General Audiences), archive warnings (e.g., No Archive Warnings Apply, Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings, Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Rape/Non-Con, Underage, or Major Character Death), relationship categories (e.g., M/M, F/M, F/F, Multi, Gen, or Other), and other, additional tags that can be used for both advertisement and potential warnings for readers (e.g., "Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics", "Murder Mystery", "Dubious Consent", etc.).¹⁸ While ratings and archive warnings are required for all Ao3 works, there are options for writers to use the "not rated" and "creator chose not to include archive warnings" to circumvent these required tags. For instance, some of the more popular writers on Ao3, like rageprufrock whose works amass over 100,000 kudos in total, often choose not to use the tagging system; preferring an approach to writing that is more consistent with traditional publication methods that do not include tags, trigger warnings, metadata on relationship pairings, or ratings. One of rageprufrock's more recent publications includes the following metadata:

¹⁸ Tags like "dubious consent" have an interesting placement within the Omegaverse, specifically, and will be explored in more detail in Chapter 2.

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Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	僕のヒーローアカデミア Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2019-06-19 Words: 7795 Chapters: 1/1 Comments: 343 Kudos: 4588 Bookmarks: 1817 Hits: 32584

#bakudeku
rageprufrock

Figure 0.3: Title and tags for “#bakudeku” by rageprufrock (2019).

While there is a rating on this fic, there is no other data beyond the fandom it involves. In fact, rageprufrock is rather playing with the lack of data they provided in this fic to subvert reader expectations, as the title portmanteau suggests a relationship between characters Bakugou and Midoriya (called “Deku”) from the *My Hero Academia* Japanese anime franchise when the main pairing of the fic is actually between characters Todoroki and Midoriya. As such, the writer can use their lack of tagging specific relationship pairings to build and circumvent fan fiction reader expectations.

But the Hugo Award-winning archival ‘tagging’ system of Ao3 (“AO3 Wins” 2019) also presents certain drawbacks. The difference between writers like rageprufrock, who choose to primarily exclude tags, and writers like virtual1979, whose “sexy times with wangxian” (2019) fic included so many tags that it caused the elected Ao3 officials to rewrite standards on how many tags could be included with one fic (Romano 2021), succinctly illustrates one of the primary issues with using tags as primary data collection on Ao3: there is no universal tagging standard. There are volunteers for Ao3, called “tag wranglers”, who work to include stories not tagged for potentially triggering material (i.e., fics that could include archive warnings, but authors elect not to) within search results (or remove from search results as the case may be), but freeform tagging is a common

practice on Ao3 and tag wranglers do not interfere with existing tags published with fics. Sometimes this lack of uniform tagging standards manifests as fics containing superfluous tags that don't relate to the story (e.g., using a "happy ending" tag when the fic does not include a happy ending to intentionally frustrate readers), other times this means fics do not have warnings for potentially triggering sequences because the author objects to the use of tags as trigger warnings - though tag wranglers might include the fic under those triggers within specified search parameters. While consistent with their objective of being an archive for fan fiction of all kinds, the inconsistency of the Ao3 tagging practices is sometimes frustrating from a researcher's perspective.

I have briefly touched on this function before, but the archival search engine on Ao3 (alongside the tag wrangling that includes works within specific fields, even if they are not explicitly labeled as such) is especially helpful for working with fan-fiction-produced sub-genres like the Omegaverse. Broadly speaking, sites like Wattpad and FF.net do not have discerning search functions that parse data within the fics themselves. This is why it is difficult to find A/B/O fics on sites other than Ao3 unless the words Omegaverse or A/B/O are used in the synopsis or title as the search functions are rather limited in scale. The enhanced search functions of Ao3 provide a more accurate impression of genre trends than other sites. For this thesis, the search function on Ao3 works so that fics like Mikacrispy's "Expectations" (2019) (that I will discuss in detail in Chapter 5) does not explicitly have an "Alpha/Beta" tag, but it is included within the search parameters for the tag "Alpha/Beta" because the search engine, and tag wranglers, of Ao3 have accurately identified it as such. While this sometimes leads to works included in search results because of ancillary mentions of particular characters or settings (e.g., a *Supernatural* fic appearing in a search for *Star Trek* fics because a

character from the *Supernatural* fic mentions once that they have watched *Star Trek*, etc.), extraneous data is often more helpful in collection processes than no data at all.

There are many other reasons that I, personally, prefer Ao3 over other fan fiction hosting sites, but for the purposes of my research, there is only one remaining, relevant reason to choose Ao3: the Omegaverse genre was born on Ao3 (norabombay 2012, netweight 2013). While it has since made its way to other fan fiction hosting sites as well as into the professional publishing world (Foxhall 2017, Alter 2020, Ellis 2020, United States District Court for the Western District of Oklahoma 2019),¹⁹ the Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics came into existence on Ao3 and it would be misrepresentative of my research and interest in the genre to use another site through which to gather data and fic examples. As such, for the remainder of this thesis, all statistics, metadata, and fics will be from Ao3 and any data not specifically noted as coming from Ao3 can be assumed as originating from this source as I used no other fan fiction hosting sites in the evidence provided in the chapters that follow.

Ethics of Public Access Fan Fiction

There is a long-standing debate in the field of Fan Studies (and wider journalism and digital culture studies) of the ethical concerns regarding the use of fan fiction in academia without formal ethics approval. This debate is centered on the question of

¹⁹ There has been a relatively recent court case regarding the Omegaverse in the professional publishing sphere (United States District Court for the Western District of Oklahoma 2019). While this court case is interesting and the paratext surrounding the case has fascinating implications for fan fiction tropes or genres in the publishing world, the case and surrounding documentation do not focus on the Omegaverse genre so much as its place in US intellectual copyright law and will therefore be largely absent from this thesis. The case and surrounding paratext have arguably contributed to an increasing awareness of the genre in the mainstream media, but not necessarily in ways that inform the popular trends discussed in the arguments of this thesis. There have been a selection of video essays regarding the case (Ellis 2020) as well as a *New York Times* article (Alter 2020) that can be accessed for free for more information on the case, though it remains outside the current scope of this project.

context and whether it is permissible to use open access publications, like fan fiction, within an academic setting without explicitly seeking author permissions to do so. One side of the argument suggests that open-access publications are exactly that, open access. Regardless of the potential intent with which these publications were made available for public consumption (for instance, much of fan fiction is published for private reader consumption as opposed to the expectation that it will be subjected to academic rigor), the existence of these works on public sites releases them to any manner of public use. On the other hand, there are many in fan studies who agree with organizations like the AOIR (Association of Internet Research) that suggest all research conducted on public internet platforms requires particular permissions before being subjected to academic study and analysis. While the specifics of this debate often shift depending on the material at hand, these are broadly the two poles of the ethical debate regarding the use of fan fiction in academia.

Broadly speaking, in Fan Studies, these poles are occupied by many prominent authors in the field (that I will discuss in more detail in the chapter to follow). Authors like Henry Jenkins (1991) and Constance Penley (1997) have no explicit stance, though their silence on the issue is often interpreted as supporting fan fiction as open access. Similarly, authors like Scott (2019) and Stanfil (2013) seem in support of open-access being applicable regardless of context. Alternatively, Fan Studies authors such as Coppa (2014) and Jamison (2013) are very much supportive of including fan authors in the academic publication process and not only seek permissions to use their works, but include them in the final editing process. There is a long-standing tradition within Omegaverse studies, specifically, to seek author permission before performing close-readings of that author's work. Kristina Busse has been a proponent of obtaining fan

fiction author consent in many contexts (2018) and Popova has repeatedly explained (2017, 2018, 2021) that one of the many contributing factors for their use of less popular works in A/B/O was due to their ability to obtain consent for the works they wished to discuss in their analysis. Gunderson also cites author permissions as one of the reasons for their small sample size in their work (2017). While Elliot (2017), Arnaiz (2018), Weisser (2019) and Fazekas (2020) do not explicitly provide details on author consent to having their works discussed, there is also no reason to suggest that they did not seek author permissions prior to their publications.

My own positionality and body of work falls somewhere between these two poles of ethical debate. On the one hand, I did not seek ethics approval for my project, because fan fiction is open-access and publicly accessible. On the other, I did reach out to many of the authors whose works are used in this thesis to unofficially obtain consent to use their work in an academic setting. However, because this thesis project is concerned with the broader A/B/O genre rather than the few specific works I have used to support these conclusions, I have not critiqued any of the included fan fiction. As such, when seeking permissions I focused primarily on asking to include excerpts for close-readings as opposed to any subjective analysis of the works as 'good' or 'bad' fiction. Since the ethical debates on the use of fan fiction in academic settings is ongoing, I argue that all included works are used appropriately within this particular context and will further explain their inclusion in the chapters to come.

Chapter 1

1. Literature Review

As I am interested in the potentiality of the Omegaverse to express interesting perspectives on how consent, gender, and sexuality inform social power structures and how these structures can be used as a critique of Western cis-hetero-patriarchy within the genre, this chapter engages with existing literature on these subjects in relevant disciplines like Fan Studies. Fan Studies is a wide-ranging field with work originating in fandom conventions and physical fan spaces (Bacon-Smith 1991, Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007, 2017, Williams 2020) and theories of fandom participatory practices (Jenkins 1992, Chin and Morimoto 2013, Jenkins, Ito & Boyd 2016, Popova 2021). Fan Studies, particularly theorists who engage with fan fiction and create dialogues between writers, readers, and the fics themselves, will inform my approach to critically assess the dynamics of the Omegaverse as a genre of fiction and fic selection methodology in each of the following chapters. The literature review presented in this chapter, and the research that follows, is focused primarily on notions of slash fan fiction, heteronormativity in fan fiction spaces, and the more recent scholarship on queer navigation and experimentation in fan fiction. As such, this chapter will provide a brief literature review of slash fan fiction theories (and debates) and discuss existing Omegaverse scholarship as well as its' position within these dialogues. Since Omegaverse scholarship remains a relatively limited field at the time of writing, I will highlight spaces within the existing Omegaverse scholarship that my research addresses.

I have split this chapter into three distinct sections working through previous slash scholarship, current Omegaverse scholarship, and fields outside of Fan Studies to

contextualize the genre within the wider literary critique. The first section discusses the various ways slash fiction has been theorized in Fan Studies - focusing on themes of gendered roles and heteronormativity that were pervasive in early iterations of slash fan fiction studies. These early slash theories inform much of the research in this thesis and have contributed to my use of heteronormativity as opposed to homonormativity. As I will argue in later chapters, Omegaverse fics and their individual world-building often oscillate between uncritical reproduction of heteronormativity in otherwise queerly identified relationships (i.e., mlm) and using the A/B/O framework to interrogate these relationship norms. The second section in this chapter discusses how previous heterosexual scripting in slash fic has had an impact on Omegaverse scholarship and details the rather limited amount of A/B/O-centered research currently available while identifying the gaps in the research that this thesis seeks to fill. The final section shifts from Fan Studies and A/B/O scholarship to explore more mainstream discussions relevant to gaps presented in the previous sections. For instance, Popova (2021) prompts questions of animal characteristics as a metaphor for human experience in the Omegaverse and so the final section of this literature review discusses some scholarship from Animal Studies to help contextualize the framing of animality in later chapters.

1.1.0 Slash: then/now

“Slash” is fandom shorthand referring to queerly-identified romantic and/or sexual relationships. The term stems from the forward-slash punctuation between character names indicating romantic/sexual relationships as opposed to the ampersand which is

used to indicate platonic friendships. For example, writing popular mythologized characters such as King Arthur and Merlin as “Arthur & Merlin” indicates a platonic relationship between the two, but “Arthur/Merlin” is indicative of a sexual/romantic relationship. Typically slash refers to gay couples, or pairings between two men (e.g., m/m), with “femslash” as the term for a relationship between two women (“w/w”).²⁰ There is evidence to suggest that slash has received more attention from academia in past years (in comparison with other forms of fan fiction or fan participatory practices), due to the sheer volume of slash fic available (around 48.8% of all tagged, searchable fic housed on Ao3 at the time of writing is identified as slash) in comparison to femslash (8.9%), het (shortened from heterosexual) (24.7%), multiple pairings and/or polyamory (4.9%), other (3.3%), or “general” fics (19% Ao3) that either feature pairings that do not include scenes of a sexual (or violent) nature within the fic or no pairings at all (either romantic, sexual, or platonic).²¹ Slash scholarship is especially relevant for discussions of the Omegaverse, as over 80% of all A/B/O fics are tagged as slash or m/m at the time of writing.²²

As Fan Studies scholars Busse and Hellekson so eloquently state, “the history of fan fiction studies, for the most part, is a history of attempting to understand the

²⁰ I predominantly use the terms w/w and m/m, as opposed to gay or lesbian, for two reasons. The first is that they are the popular nomenclature within fandom at the time of writing and I would like this thesis to be representative of the community it explores. Second, as this thesis will discuss later, gender identities and biological sex are comingled, though separate, categories and w/w or m/m are more inclusive terms for the collection of genders and sexes involved in sexualities expressed by Omegaverse characters as well as many in the fan fiction community.

²¹ As some fics use more than one category when tagging, these percentages present a broad overview of category popularity rather than exact numbers. Some fics do not use category tagging at all on Ao3 and are thus exempt from the available, searchable statistics.

²² When this thesis research began in October of 2018, the statistic for slash saturation within the genre was 95% and in December of 2019 the percentage had lowered to 89%. The current rate of around 85% slash suggests that as the genre gets older, the more diverse the romantic pairings become. While I will not be exploring this relative drop in slash A/B/O fics in this thesis any further, it would be an interesting point of entry for future scholarship.

underlying motivations of why (mostly) women write fan fiction and, in particular, slash” (17, 2006). Whether it is because the “normal female interest in men bonking” (Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins 1998) poses curious sociological questions or because slash has historically been so prevalent and prolific in early iterations of fan fiction (Penley 1997, Jenkins 1992), “slash fiction has received disproportionate treatment in both academic and mainstream journalistic representations” (Busse and Hellekson 17, 2006).²³ In fact, the “Big Three” premier scholars of Fan Studies have all mentioned, if not closely examined, slash fan fiction. The “Big Three”, an affectionate term used in Fan Studies circles, refers to the early 1990s publications by Penley (1997), Bacon-Smith (1991), and Jenkins (1992).²⁴ Though there is scholarship that predates the Big Three (Lamb and Vieth 1986, Russ 1985) that similarly discusses slash fan fiction and its audience, it is Penley (1997), Bacon-Smith (1991), and Jenkins (1992) that remain cemented in the field as foregrounding the subject.

While Bacon-Smith shifted focus away from explicit slash fiction towards the “matriarchal erotica and male-male friendship story” (145, 1991), Jenkins (1992) and Penley (1997) both extensively examined slash fiction produced and disseminated by

²³ When I refer to early fan fiction, I am referencing fan fiction from the 1960s to the advent (and access) of the internet in the 1990s, where it has a traceable lineage through fan conventions, fan-produced magazines, and mailed as physical copies to fans by fans (Jenkins 1992, Bacon-Smith 1991, Penley 1997, Busse and Hellekson 2006, Jamison 2013). Fan fiction as a practice has arguably existed for centuries since fiction produced on existing media properties could describe a significant number of Shakespeare’s works and even Virgil’s *Aeneid* as fan fiction of Homer’s *Odyssey* (Jamison 2013, Popova 2021). There are a selection of wonderful readings on the history of fan fiction and how it has previously been imagined versus contemporary understandings. For more information, see: Popova (2021), Jamison (2013), Coppa (2017), and Busse and Hellekson (2006). For the purposes of this study, when I reference “early fan fiction practices” and the study of these practices, I refer to the work catalogued by authors Jenkins (1992), Penley (1997), and Bacon-Smith (1991) that does not extend prior to the 1960s.

²⁴ Fan Studies scholar Lori Morimoto opened her keynote speech at the Fan Studies Network conference in 2019 discussing the “Big Three” and was met with laughter and applause from the audience. While not often written in Fan Studies scholarship as the “Big Three”, these works do have a certain notoriety within the community and in order to accurately represent the norms of the Fan Studies community, I will continue to refer to them as such.

the *Star Trek: The Original Series* fandom. With a focus on why slash was so popular in focus groups populated by predominantly white, cisgender, heterosexual women, Jenkins (1992) and Penley (1997) both suggest that the reasoning behind the draw of slash fiction is three-dimensional. The first dimension is the oftentimes poor writing for female characters on beloved television shows and other popular media. As Jenkins writes, fan fiction writers “began to suggest, however timidly, that Kirk and Spock cared more deeply for each other than for any of the many female secondary characters who brush past them in the original episodes” (187, 1991). The one-dimensionality of many of the women characters in some famous television franchises who “brush past” the main male characters seemingly did not provide fic writers with compelling heterosexual relationships that could be fostered through fan fiction. The second reasoning for the appeal of slash explains that, “writing a story about two men avoids the built-in inequality of the romance formula, in which dominance and submission are invariably the respective roles for men and women” (Penley 125, 1997). While this thesis will flesh out these themes of inequality as well as dominance and submission in Chapters 2 and 3, this theory remained one of the most popular explanations in Fan Studies for many years following the early 90s publications (Kustritz 2003, Pugh 2005, Salmon and Symons 2004, Stasi 2006, Woledge 2006, Driscoll 2006, Lindgren-Leavenworth 2009). The third explanation according to earlier criticism in the field simply states that writing about two men together is sexually stimulating for some heterosexual women.

This third motivation, being partially derived by the participants studied by the Big Three, implies that the demographics surrounding fandom become increasingly relevant to the research being conducted. Though the participants for early 90s surveys of fan fiction culture suggested the audience was largely heterosexual, white, cisgender

women, more recent surveys suggest the demographic for fan fiction communities has shifted towards a more LGBTQ+ community. Demographic data collected by Ao3 and disseminated by *Tumblr* bloggers *centrumlumina* (2013) and *destination: toast!* (2017) paint a picture of fan fiction communities as predominantly non-heterosexual (27% responded as heterosexual while other categories such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer created a combined majority of non-heterosexuality), though women are seemingly the predominant gender identity within fan fiction communities at 80% saturation. More recent data provided by fandom podcast *Fansplaining* in 2019, provides another shift in demographics with about 43% of respondents identifying as Bi/Pansexual (with only 20% of respondents identifying as heterosexual) and 72% of respondents identifying as women, with increased representation from gender identity categories such as nonbinary/genderqueer (21%). As later sections in this chapter will note, the only seemingly static category of fandom demographics is race - which has stayed at 76% of the community identifying as white between 2013 (*centrumlumina*) and 2019 (*Fansplaining*).²⁵ There have been many other third-party demographics surveys for fan fiction and fandoms (Three Patch Podcast 2016, *destination:toast!* 2017), but many of these surveys support similar conclusions of predominantly non-heterosexual fan fic communities. It is difficult to accurately catalog whether this shift in sexualities and gender identities has more to do with the increasingly inclusive norms in many Western cultures since the early 2010s when the Ao3 survey was conducted or if the anonymity of online fan fiction has become more appealing for queer audiences since it

²⁵ The end of this chapter further explains why this demographic is relevant to conversations surrounding the Omegaverse, but further reading on this subject can be found in Pande (2018), Pande (2020), and Fazekas (2020).

does not typically exist in printed mediums distributed through postal services - a very visible and traceable practice.

The differences in the fan fiction community demographics over the years are fascinating, not only because they have changed prevailing theories as to the popularity and prevalence of slash fic, but also because they may affect the framing of relationship dynamics (and therefore power dynamics) within many slash fics. For example, earlier theorists like Penley (1997), Pugh (2005), and Salmon and Symons (2004) suggested that the couples featured in slash fics were less representative of the lived experiences of gay men and more a continuation of the heterosexual romance novel roles of hero and heroine. Romance novel relationship dynamics that the predominantly heterosexual, white women in the fan fiction community at that time would have potentially been more familiar with than the lives of gay men.²⁶

Penley added some nuance to this argument by suggesting that this fantasy of two men in love tended to blur the traditional masculine heroes and feminine heroines leaning both characters towards more androgynous descriptions (i.e., Kirk is emotional, but strong and Spock is logical, but sensitive - both romantic leads exhibiting traditionally masculine and feminine traits) (125-126, 1997). These “approaches to slash centering on gender often invok[ing] comparisons with romance, pornography, or both” (Popova 179, 2018) help contextualize the often “female-coded” Omega (Gunderson 2017), masculine Alphas, and the sometimes nontraditional gender coding of Betas. The androgynous approach to slash pairings prompts questions as to why the Omegaverse, a genre that came into existence in 2010, seemingly fashions its

²⁶ There is significant overlap between the audiences of mass-market romance novels in the 90s and early fan fiction communities (Salmon and Symons 2001, 2004, Kustritz 2003). This overlap in readership means many of the popular romance tropes that have manifested in fan fiction have predecessors in the heterosexual romance genre. This idea will be explored further in Chapter 2.

characterizations and relationship dynamics around heteronormative theories of slash fiction from the late 90s through the early 2000s.²⁷

This writing of “gay couples heteronormatively” (Weisser 2019) remains at the heart of slash fiction studies, from Hunting’s work on “how seemingly subversive fan fiction that depicts same-sex couplings can reinforce heteronormativity” in 2012 to Callis’ article titled “Homophobia, heteronormativity, and slash fan fiction” in 2016 to the Fan Studies Network 2021 North American Conference containing a disclaimer about the heteronormative (and potentially problematic) features of slash at nearly every fan fiction panel I attended (FSNNA 2021). There are some notable exceptions to this throughline of heteronormativity in slash fic research, such as the more recent work produced on fandom as a space for exploration and experimentation with queer identities like Lothian, Busse, and Reid’s “‘Yearning Void and Infinite potential’: Online Slash Fandom as Queer Female Space” (2017), Willis’ “Writing the Fables of Sexual Difference: Slash Fiction as technology of Gender” (2016), and Busse and Lothian’s “A History of Slash Sexualities: Debating queer sex, gay politics and media fan cultures” (2017).²⁸ These texts opened a dialogue in slash fandom studies to consider the positionality of the readers and writers when exploring fan fiction as opposed to the sometimes heteronormative tropes (i.e., coding mlm characters as either masculine or feminine in a seeming reproduction of heterosexual romance novels) they employ when describing queerly identified relationships.

²⁷ This thesis thoroughly explores the “nontraditional” coding of Betas (both in gender and sexual identity) in Chapter 5.

²⁸ Other notable research on intersections of slash fiction and queer theory can be found in Dhaenens, Bauwel, and Biltreyst 2008, Tompkins 2015, and McLelland et al. 2015.

As I noted above, the shift in community demographics between the earlier academic studies of slash - sometimes referred to as the “Fandom is Beautiful” period as it was more focused on the existence of the community than what norms the community might be reproducing (Williams and Bennett 2, 2021) - and more contemporary fandom communities seem to have dramatically changed how slash fandom is conceptualized. For instance, it has only been in recent years with the works of post-colonial academics like Pande (2018, 2020), that Fan Studies has examined the overwhelming and seemingly pervasive whiteness of the field.²⁹

The vast majority of Fan scholars, myself included, come from a perspective of white privilege that is only now being addressed with any regularity. This has contributed to the reproduction of insular perspectives and unquestioned positionality within Fan Studies since the publications of the Big Three in the early 90s. In the following section, I will discuss the research of Omegaverse scholars, like Fazekas (2020) included in Pande’s *Fandom, now in color*, who are working to understand how fandom’s inclination to center whiteness has led to an overwhelming tendency, within fan fiction centered on Western media, to focus more on the slash pairings of white male characters. I will note that this tendency to fixate on white male characters has had an impact on the popularity of many of the Western fandoms discussed in this thesis. As I have approached the Omegaverse from a stance of popular-fics-as-exemplary-of-the-wider-genre-trends, the popularity of relationships featuring white men has had an

²⁹ Pande’s edited collection (2020) features a host of fandom authors exploring the tendency of fandom to center whiteness. While the edited collection is one of the few publications to center all chapters on race and fandom, there are a few scholars prior to Pande’s *Fandom, now in color* in the field who have addressed the issues of representations of race in fandom (Chin 2007, Corker and Pande 2018, Chatman 2017, Scott 2017, and Pande 2018). However, it is worth noting that the *absence* of racial consideration in the works prior to Pande, except in a few chapters included in edited collections like those listed above, speaks eloquently to the problems of non-white racial inclusion in contemporary Fan Studies discourse.

impact on the fic (and fandom) selection process of this thesis and does indicate a wider trend of centering whiteness within the Omegaverse, specifically.³⁰ Though Fazekas (2020) remains one of the only Omegaverse scholars to integrate questions of racial identity into the A/B/O dynamics and gender politics, I will briefly address how the centering of whiteness has affected many of the characterizations of non-white characters in the Omegaverse.³¹ As this thesis remains relatively focused on intersections of gender, sexuality, and power in the Omegaverse, discussions of race will only be briefly discussed in this project. Therefore, I will shift focus from wider slash studies to the sub-field of Omegaverse scholarship and how it integrates many of the gendered approaches to slash dynamics into studies of the genre.

1.2.0 The Spectrum of Omegaverse Scholarship

There are currently less than a dozen scholarly works focused on the Omegaverse genre. I will discuss all of the available literature (excluding those produced in undergraduate courses made available over the internet), to contextualize my later arguments and point to the places where my research fits into and expands on existing scholarship.³² Despite my focus on the scholarly Omegaverse work, it would be

³⁰ The metadata on the most popular fandoms in the Omegaverse as shifted in recent years from largely Western, white fandoms in 2018 (e.g., *Supernatural*, *Teen Wolf*, Marvel Cinematic Universe) to East Asian fandoms in 2021 (e.g., Kpop, Japanese anime/manga, and Chinese dramas, etc.). Chapter 4 will discuss this shift in more detail.

³¹ As Chapter 4 features the Kpop RPF fandom, discussions of racial identity and the overlap between race and gender in fandom will be highlighted briefly in that chapter.

³² There are currently three undergraduate papers discussing the Omegaverse (Silva 2017, Barone 2019, van de Vegt 2020). Similarly, there are two scholars working on Omegaverse or Omegaverse-adjacent studies in independent research (Nicoli, forthcoming) and undergraduate studies (Gonzales, forthcoming) that will be largely excluded from this thesis due to their incompleteness, lack of peer review, or incompatibility with my own research.

remiss not to point to the many A/B/O primers available on fan fiction hosting sites like Ao3. Some of the earliest work on Omegaverse fan fiction was produced and circulated on Ao3 (norabombay 2012, netweight 2013). For example, the seminal primer on the Omegaverse, cited by nearly all of the authors listed in the section below, is the “Alphas, Betas, Omegas: A Primer” posted by norabombay on Ao3 in April of 2012.

Norabombay’s primer outlines the basics of the secondary genders, provides links to the first A/B/O fic from the *Supernatural* fandom that produced the entire genre, and provides a brief history of the Omegaverse going as far forward as 2015. I include this information to showcase the often vast gaps between Fan Studies and the movement within genres on fan fiction sites. Like many fast-paced, online areas of research, conventional academic research cannot possibly keep up. Where norabombay was providing public primers for free on the archive in 2012, Fan Studies did not have a primer on the Omegaverse until Busse’s contribution of “Pon Farr, MPreg, Bonds, and the Rise of the Omegaverse” in Anne Jamison’s crucial anthology, *fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World* (2013).

Nevertheless, Busse’s (2013) Omegaverse primer focuses on some of the more unique tropes associated with the genre, primarily the “wolfish traits” and some of the concepts of predestined lovers made popular in fan fiction by science fiction shows like *Star Trek*. Much like norabombay, Busse’s work is considered the fore-grounding text on Omegaverse scholarship and all of the academic research in this section quotes or uses Busse’s work as context for the field. Busse’s work, since it is contained in an anthology, is unfortunately only seven pages long. Despite its brevity, the primer offers broad strokes concerning the issues presented by the genre and some of the possibilities explaining its popularity within fandom. Whether to its merit or detriment,

the quick pace of Busse's writing means many tropes and concepts mentioned within the primer are brief and lead to more than a few sentences that are compelling in their vagueness. For example, Busse writes,

While fandom has always had its share of animal transformations and bestiality kinks, A/B/O stories also seem to draw from other tropes, including mating and heat cycles, breeding, and male pregnancy (mpreg), as well as imprinting and soul bonds. (318, 2013)

The above sentence offers a range of terms that were, and continue to be, useful descriptors of the tropes that determine and distinguish the Omegaverse from other "animal transformations and bestiality kinks" in fandom. But there are many questions prompted by this language - what are the bestiality kinks? Do the animal transformations and bestiality kinks inform the imprinting and soul bonds? Or are they separate tropes?

There is very little context for what these terms mean to the Omegaverse genre and its community, though Busse does suggest some of these tropes stem from the *Star Trek: The Original Series* fandom. Since Busse's primer is focused on establishing "where the trope came from and how it has evolved" and "cross-[pollinated]" from an AU to a genre in its own right (2013), this brief description of the various, unusual tropes of the Omegaverse suits the tone of Busse's work. Busse's early primer is intrinsic to Omegaverse scholarship - not because of its specificity or particular discussion of the genre itself, but because of the themes it identifies as potential points of exploration for future scholars.

The Omegaverse scholars to follow Busse focused heavily on themes of gender/sex and how these intersected with power hierarchies in the genre - particularly

Gunderson (2017), Popova (2017, 2018, 2021), Westberg-Gabriel (2018), and Arnaiz (2018). As my work draws heavily from these scholars, their research will be discussed in more detail than Busse (2013) or other contributors such as Director (2017), Weisser (2019), or Fazekas (2020). The most interesting connection shared between Gunderson (2017), Popova (2017, 2018, 2021), and Arnaiz (2018) is not only the genre they focus on, but how they frame the characterization of Alphas and Omegas as masculine and feminine, respectively. Like many slash fic scholars, these Omegaverse scholars were quick to notice that the dynamics between male Alphas and male Omegas mirrored many heterosexual roles in reality.

Gunderson's 2017 MPhil thesis, compellingly titled, "What is an Omega?", uses feminist theory to explore the many points of connection between the lived experience of many women (from puberty to mid-life) and the typical characterization of male Omegas. Gunderson refers to the Omega characters as "female-coded" in their socially-expected and available roles (25, 2017). For example, Omegas are expected to be nurturing, caring, and child-rearing, all concepts traditionally aligned with the feminine social role in many Western (though arguably global) cultures. The stigma many Omega characters faced when attempting to shift away from or break these "female-coded" roles, particularly by an Alpha-dominated society, mapped easily onto the experience of many women under patriarchal social conditions and thus supported a reading of Gunderson's work on the Omegaverse as heterosexually coded (2017). While a thorough exploration of the many ways male Omega characters are seemingly feminized within the genre (their bodily changes during secondary puberty include the potential for pregnancy, Alphas often blame Omegas for being sexually assaulted, and their sexual roles are often limited to being the consent gatekeeper and penetrated

partner), the connection between Alpha characters and patriarchy is implied, though never fully expressed by Gunderson (2017).

In all Omegaverse scholarship, there is remarkably little said about male Alpha characters beyond their associations with stereotypically Western, hegemonic masculinity. As Gunderson writes, both Alphas and Omegas are “hyper-gendered” characterizations, but it is only the Omegas that are explicitly discussed as exaggerated portrayals of femininity (Gunderson 2017). Gunderson’s thesis of the Omega as “female-coded” provides the framework through which to discuss the Alpha as hyper-masculine; a framework I incorporate into discussions of social and sexual roles for Alphas in Chapters 2 and 3.

The next two publications come from the same anthology, *The Darker Side of Slash Fan Fiction* (Spacey 2018). Arnaiz (2018) and Westberg-Gabriel (2018) offer nearly opposing viewpoints on the Omegaverse genre. Arnaiz uses a methodology based in feminist theory to offer a rather bleak overview of ‘darker’ Omegaverse fiction as a way to exaggerate existing binary cisgender roles and eroticize sexual violence against women through the mistreatment of male Omegas by male Alphas (2018). Arnaiz also controversially describes Omegas as “undoubtedly stand[ing] for females” as they are typically “as excessively mistreated as many women in real life situations” (123, 2018). There are very different implications attached to Gunderson’s “female-coded” description for male Omegas versus Arnaiz declaring Omegas as stand-ins for women in A/B/O slash fiction. One describes a gender role and the coding used to illustrate it (Gunderson 2017), the other implies heterosexuality is compulsory in all relationships - even those between two men - and must include a woman or a stand-in for one (Arnaiz 2018). This is perhaps the most controversial phrasing used to describe

male Omegas in existing Omegaverse scholarship as it does seem to feminize the male identity of male Omegas to reach similar goals as Gunderson; describing Omega behavior and social roles as feminine-coded. However, because of this language, Arnaiz has gained something of a notorious reputation amongst Omegaverse scholars as a researcher simplifying complex issues and is sometimes completely absent from lists of existing Omegaverse scholarship.

Contrary to this view, Westberg-Gabriel (2018) focused on the potentiality of the heat and rut tropes of the genre as a tool to destigmatize the experience of asexual identity within wider fandom. Since heats/ruts force a libidinal, if not sexually attractive, response in Alpha and Omega characters, Westberg-Gabriel looked at works where asexual characters have to navigate these mating imperatives. Contrary to other Omegaverse scholarship, Westberg-Gabriel conceptualizes heats and ruts as “level[ing] the playing field for the characters by setting them on equal footing when it comes to having one’s desire held in a tight grip by instinct and/or orientation” (43, 2018). This particular conceptualization of heats and ruts does require both partners to be experiencing these states simultaneously; that is, an Alpha in rut and an Omega in heat, which is not always the case in A/B/O fic. Thus, this notion of heats/ruts as equalizing agents does have some world-building complications that can change from fic to fic, limiting the universality of this theory in Omegaverse studies. However, theorizing mating imperatives as equally disruptive between Alphas and Omegas does pose interesting questions as to whether Alphas lose bodily autonomy, similarly to Omegas, regardless of their own experiences with mating imperatives. Are Alphas placed in a position of lessened power by mating imperatives, as many Omegaverse scholars determine Omegas are? While I will discuss the implications of this theory for Alphas in

Chapters 2 and 3, Westberg-Gabriel's work (2018) on asexuality will also feature in the conclusions of Chapter 5 on Beta characterizations.

The Omegaverse scholarship by Popova (2017, 2018, 2021) recognizes and addresses some of these questions of heats and ruts as impacting gender roles for relationships between male Alphas and Omegas. Popova's work is easily the most thematically relevant to this thesis as their work also discusses issues of gender, sexuality, and sexual consent within the genre and how these concepts intersect with notions of power. In fact, it was Popova's earlier work (2017, 2018) that inspired large sections of this thesis - expanding on their conclusions about the Omegaverse as a place for those in the fan fiction community to speculate on the nature of sexual consent within unequal power dynamics like those often outlined in the A/B/O hierarchy. Popova's two published works on the Omegaverse (2018, 2021), titled "dogfuck rapeworld" in each iteration, are variations on a chapter from their Ph.D. thesis from 2017. Their first publication following the completion of the thesis (2018) narrowed the original chapter down to themes of intersection with sexual scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon 1986) and the sexual roles performed by characters in the *Supernatural* RPF Omegaverse fandom. The second iteration (2021), published in the final editing stages of this thesis, supports my findings in Chapters 2 and 4 regarding hierarchical power structures within the genre. For example, the structure of the 2021 iteration of Popova's work uses the heteronormative framing of previous slash scholarship as a way to engage with the heterosexual scripts employed by many Omegaverse works - much the same as this literature review uses slash scholarship in the first section as a springboard into Omegaverse scholarship in the current section. Additionally, Popova's expanded thesis in their latest work describes the Omegaverse as "the perfect tool to

explore the effect of scripts and dominant ways of thinking on our actions and our ability to meaningfully negotiate consent” (42, 2021). As my Chapter 2 expands on the capability of those under the influence of mating imperatives to offer consent and the ethics of that consent within the genre, my work can be read as in direct dialogue with Popova’s; though my work is more focused on how consent is conceived as “dubious” in the genre than how it fits into existing theories of sexual scripting.

Where Popova departs from previous scholarship is in their insistence that the Omegaverse is “an alternate universe where gender and sexual scripts work radically different to ours” (42, 2021). As I noted in the introduction (and will continue to do so throughout this thesis), I remain unconvinced of the accuracy of this claim as there are many parallels between Omegaverse dynamics and reality. As such, I have interpreted Popova’s “radically different” as an indication of animal difference between Omegaverse characters and humans. Since there are currently no studies delving into the animality present in the genre, Popova’s conclusion that the genre is “radically different” as a byproduct of animality as opposed to gender and sexual scripting, suggests interesting connections between animality and traditional heterosexual framing. This tentative linkage between animal traits and enforcement of gender roles can be used as a “critical tool” to “problematize issues of power and consent” (189, 2018).³³

Popova’s various iterations of “dogfuck rapeworld” (2017, 2018, 2021) pose interesting questions about the genre that are side-stepped in their own work. For instance, Popova uses examples from Omegaverse fics that feature male Alpha/male Omega relationships. As the most popular pairing in the genre, Alpha/Omega would

³³ Chapter 3 of this thesis expands on themes of animality and the traditions of gender roles and sexual scripts as they appear in the Omegaverse, though it focuses on the specific trope of biting and how this A/B/O convention is used to problematize traditional framing of the genre as heterosexual.

seem the natural starting place for research into relationship scripting.³⁴ However, as Popova questions in the latest iteration of their work, “what if two alphas fell in love with each other?” (43, 2021). While Popova does not explore this question further, Chapter 4 of this thesis builds on the theme of nontraditional A/B/O pairings to deduce what changing relationship dynamics mean for the sexual scripting within the genre. Using Alpha/Alpha and Omega/Omega couples to explore Omegaverse social and sexual scripts through a new lens is one of the ways this thesis can be seen to fill gaps in current scholarship while remaining in dialogue with it.

While Popova (2017, 2018, 2021), Arnaiz (2018), Gunderson (2017), Busse (2013), and even Westberg-Gabriel (2018) are used throughout the following chapters as useful inroads to contextualize my research questions, there are a few scholars who have contributed interesting work to the field though I do not draw on their perspectives regularly in the following chapters. In the Omegaverse scholarship less connected to this thesis are works like Director (2017), Weisser (2019), and Fazekas (2020). Director (2017) and Weisser (2019) both tackle issues of mpreg represented in the Omegaverse and how the genre reiterates and sometimes riffs on this fan fiction trope. Mpreg, shortened from male pregnancy, has been previously theorized by fan scholars Aström (2010) and Ingram-Waters (2015) where the trope has been described as “a very female experience, pregnancy is mapped onto the male body, bringing with it specific discourse that challenges our preconceptions of masculinity and femininity” (Aström 6.1, 2010). While Ingram-Waters uses more inclusive language to describe pregnancy as a

³⁴ At the time of writing (January 2022), the Omegaverse currently hosts more around 85% slash fiction and of those m/m fics about 20% are tagged as Alpha/Omega. The number of total male Alpha/male Omega pairings is likely much higher than 20%, as this pairing is often considered the norm and authors do not always use the “Alpha/Omega” pairing tag if they have already used the “Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics” tag as the pairing is implied by the genre itself.

process for people with uteruses (2015), both Aström and Ingram-Waters concluded that mpreg is often a tool of heteronormativity reinforcing the biological family unit on otherwise queer-coded couples.³⁵ Weisser (2019) uses Aström and Ingram-Waters' theory as a framework through which to discuss the potential of Omegaverse fic to be representative of trans men's lived experience with pregnancy. Weisser comes to similar conclusions as Aström and Ingram-Waters, arguing that the Omegaverse, as a largely heterosexually-coded genre, does not often allow for a subversive reading of the texts as representative of trans experience nor can it be read as an allegory of such experience (2019).

Director (2017) does not so much depart from this conclusion as approach it from another angle and find similar results. Using 90s queer theory, Director (2017) discusses the potentiality of mpreg, more than the act itself, as a way to stigmatize the Omega experience. For example, in the broad overview of the genre, Omegas are characterized by Director as "capable of becoming pregnant", "regardless of their gender" and Alphas "[as] capable of impregnating others", "regardless of whether they identify as man or woman or their sex assigned at birth" (154, 2017). This focus on reproduction as a facet of A/B/O characterization and its direct impact on the social power hierarchy within Omegaverse world-building complicates the relationship between gender and sex in the genre and whether or not a distinction between these two concepts exists. While never explicitly stating the A/B/O dynamics as a gender/sex configuration, Director's work does question whether the mpreg of A/B/O is a tool for

³⁵ While the mpreg trope features heavily in Omegaverse scholarship by Director (2018) and Weisser (2019), it is largely absent from this thesis with the exception of Chapter 5 where it features briefly. Both Director (2018) and Weisser (2019) have discussed this trope at length and its involvement in the genre, but there is further reading regarding mpreg in the wider Fan Studies by Kerry (2009), Stein (2006), and Ashman (2018).

reinforcing heteronormativity in queer relationships (142, 2017) through the implementation of a biological family unit. Director (2017) uses the Omegaverse as a microcosm of fan fiction to test previous theories of heteronormativity in mpreg fiction (Aström 2010, Ingram-Waters 2015). As my second and third chapters arguably do similar work of expanding on previous theories with authors like Popova (2018, 2021), Gunderson (2017), and Arnaiz (2018), this approach of using tropes as a model for wider genre theories is particularly interesting and has impacted the methods of this thesis.

The final Omegaverse scholar available at the time of writing is Fazekas (2020), whom I have briefly discussed in regards to the centering of whiteness in Fan Studies. Fazekas (2020) critiques the “many fans, particularly queer ones, [who] experience reading Omegaverse fan fiction as a space of queer possibility” (100), when the “stories overwhelmingly focus on pairings between two white men, effectively foreclosing their progressive potential and recentering whiteness” (95).³⁶ Fazekas uses variations of critical race theory to position the power hierarchy of the Omegaverse, not as a sexual or gendered hierarchy (as suggested by previous scholarship by Busse (2013), Popova (2017, 2018, 2021), Arnaiz (2018), Gunderson (2017), Westberg-Gabriel (2018), and, to an extent, Director (2017)), but rather as a function of racial hierarchies imitating North American models of racial divides; with the Alphas as masters and Omegas as slaves. Fazekas (2020) provides much-needed perspective into the pervasive whiteness of the genre and points to the popularity of predominantly white fandoms as the most popular

³⁶ “Recentering” refers to the specific fandoms that Fazekas (2020) uses as examples where white characters are made the focus of many fics and Black protagonists are side-lined or absent from fics in order to prioritize white men.

within the genre to evidence this stance.³⁷ To Fazekas, these fandom preferences are indicative of the genre's tendency to focus on white characters in unequal power dynamics to sidestep the potentially problematic nature of placing people of color in the often degrading roles of Omega characters.

Fazekas (2020) does point to the crossover between points of sexual power exchange and racial power exchange within the genre, quoting Kustritz, "BDSM slash fan fiction [produces] a new language for thinking about exotic power exchange" (4.2, 2008). For Fazekas, this connection with BDSM is circumvented by linking the language of BDSM fan fic with slavery AUs as "[appealing] to the same kind of masochistic sexual pleasure" (104, 2020). This connection prompts closer inspection of the A/B/O roles and their relationship with BDSM culture and how it might be explored in this environment safely, sanely, and consensually. Chapter 3 of this thesis expands on this question of power dynamics as potentially sexually pleasurable and fills some of the gaps prompted by the connections to BDSM made by Fazekas (2020). Given the rapid pace of change in online fan fiction, many of the statistics on popular fandoms in the genre that Fazekas' used to conclude the regularity with which authors' "recenter" whiteness has shifted towards East Asian fandoms. As such, Chapter 4 of this thesis uses some of Fazekas' findings to explore the relationship between the recent popularity in the last few years of East Asian fandoms (e.g., Kpop RPF, Japanese anime, etc.) and how they are used in the Omegaverse. While the focus of Chapter 4 is trained on nontraditional sexual scripting within the genre, the transcultural fandoms used as examples of this

³⁷ At the time of Fazekas' writing this may have very well been true, though the current most popular fandoms sway more towards media produced in East Asia. Of the ten most popular fandoms as of January 2022, 3 are Japanese animes and the most popular is Kpop group BTS. Though fandoms like *Supernatural*, *Teen Wolf*, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe remain high on the list of most popular fandoms, there has been some incremental change since Fazekas' publication.

scripting suggest that Fazekas' arguments, while specific to North American racial politics, could be altered for many conversations regarding race in the Omegaverse.

Omegaverse scholarship can be summarized by the themes that emerge through the years of published research on the topic. In earlier scholarship, these were themes of conventionality where "male characters in heat are forced to play out traditional female roles, victims of biology" (Busse 319, 2013) and focused on the heteronormativity of the genre. In the last few years, Omegaverse research has incorporated new perspectives into previous themes (i.e., the potential trans narratives of male omegas and intersections of race in A/B/O power hierarchies), resulting in scholarship focused on the potential of the Omegaverse to express different identities, albeit heteronormatively. As the genre grows older and develops more of a foothold in the fan fiction realm, the impetus to challenge and/or subvert genre expectations is occurring with more regularity in both the Omegaverse fics themselves and academic scholarship.³⁸ The existing scholarship on the Omegaverse, while exceptionally helpful in mapping the current paths that academics have walked through the genre, does open a few fields of inquiry not yet addressed within Fan studies. Busse (2013) mentioned some of the many tropes borrowed by the Omegaverse from sci-fi television, but stops short of introducing the tropes like erotic rape fantasies borrowed from popular romance novels of the same time frame. Popova (2017, 2018, 2021) thoroughly examines the issues of consent outlined by the heteronormative sexual scripts often followed by the A/B/O dynamics but, doesn't explore nonheteronormative sexual scripts that exist in the genre. Gunderson (2017) used Omegas as a focal point for gendered roles and power

³⁸ Challenges to the genre conventions and expectations of heterosexual scripting seem to hit a critical point in 2018. According to the tags used by A/B/O authors on Ao3, the number of nontraditional pairings and Beta-centric fics increased noticeably in 2018. These challenges to the established norms of the genre will be discussed in further detail in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis.

hierarchies, leaving a gap for exploration of the Alpha roles and positionality within the genre. Fazekas (2020) questioned the overwhelming whiteness of the Omegaverse as it navigates complicated issues of power exchange, providing a point of entry for future scholars to examine these power struggles through the lens of sexual dominance and submission. This thesis addresses these gaps in research to show how continued growth within the genre fits into and can, as I will argue, be read to criticize previous Omegaverse scholarship by challenging the cis-hetero-patriarchy that is seemingly inherent of the genre. However, there remain gaps within the wider literary community that require context before I position my arguments in the following chapters. Thus, the following section will briefly provide context for these areas of study.

1.3.0 The Space Between: Animality, BDSM, Non-heterosexual Scripting, and the Beta

Each of the following chapters explores a facet of the gaps left by previous Omegaverse scholars: from romance tropes, to animal magnetism, to BDSM, to non-heteronormative sexual scripting. For example, while there is currently no scholarship exploring the points of intersection between Omegaverse dynamics and tropes used in the popular “bodice-ripper” romance novels of the 1980s (Radway 1991, Modeleski 1982), there is plenty of work within the wider Fan Studies exploring the many connections between fan fiction and romance novels:³⁹ enough so that fan fiction as a

³⁹ Though some of these authors will be explored within Chapter 2, a comprehensive (though not exhaustive) list of Fan Studies romance researchers consists of: Lamb and Vieth (1986), Penley (1997), Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins (1998), Cicioni (1998), Pugh (2006), Salmon and Symons (2004), Kustritz (2003), Driscoll (2006), Busse and Hellekson (2006), Jamison (2013), Busse and Hellekson (2014), Coppa (2017), Spacey (2018), and Popova (2021).

medium is often theorized as the progeny of the popular, mass-produced romance novel. Fan Studies theorist, Kustritz, titled her 2003 article, “Slashing the Romance Narrative” to make plain the connectivity between the two genres. Authors Salmon & Symons (2001, 2004), Pugh (2006), and Driscoll (2006) all use the tropes that have carried over from the romance novel (i.e., hurt/comfort, arranged marriage, forbidden romance, etc.) as evidence of some of the more heterosexually-coded aspects of slash fiction. Popova (2021) even uses the arranged marriage trope as a case study for the ways in which fan fiction modifies pre-existing, often problematic romance fiction conventions. However, there remains no such comparison between the erotic rape fantasy trope, popularized by “bodice rippers” in the 70s and 80s, and how mating imperatives in the Omegaverse oftentimes mirror the implementation of this trope without explicitly using the same language. As Chapter 2 will explore further, there are examinations of the erotic rape fantasy in romantic fiction (Radway 1991, Krentz 1992, Hazen 1983, Salmon and Symons 2001, 2004, Modeleski 1982, Roach 2016, Wendell and Tan 2009, Regis 2003, Vivanco 2012, and Pearce 2007) and the problematic consent negotiations in the Omegaverse (Popova 2017, 2018, 2021, Arnaiz 2018, and Fazekas 2020), but there is currently no overlap between these studies.

Similarly, all of the current Omegaverse scholars point to the animalistic tendencies of the genre - like heats, ruts, knots, and biting - as metaphors for many human experiences, though shown through a “radically different” (Popova 2021) lens. However, aside from a discussion of the mechanics themselves, there is very little examination of why the genre has adopted these “wolfish traits” (Busse 2013) and how the lupine traits inform some of the community engagement with this genre. The title “dogfuck rapeworld” is evocative not only for the profanity, but because of the partial

truth it provides (Popova 2017, 2018, 2021). There have been many studies about the uses of animality in literature and other media, though, for the Omegaverse, it is monster media studies that provide the most interesting context for Omegaverse wolfishness. The Omegaverse may share some traits from actual wolves (Marvin 2012, Bourgault du Coudray 2003), but it is the exaggerated immediacy of heats/ruts, eternal commitment implied by bonding bites, and sexual gratification of being knotted that stem more from werewolves and vampires than any creatures in reality (Schell 2007, Young 2011, Bernhardt-House 2008, Kendal and Kendal 2015, Bailie 2011, Burr 2003, Keft-Kennedy 2008, Schoop 1997, and Lindgren-Leavenworth & Isaksson 2013). Chapter 3 will delve into the wolfish dynamics of A/B/O, particularly the convention of bond-bites, to uncover some of the messy connections between animality, humanity, and the hybridity expressed in the Omegaverse. Chapter 3 will also tease out some of the more sexualized power dynamics in A/B/O fics using the broader academic work in BDSM scholarship (Howe and Cook 2019, Lennard 2012, Pitagora 2013, 2017, and Airaksinen 2018) that was noted as a potential area of study by Fazekas (2020).

Chapter 4 will use non-heterosexual scripting provided from psychology and sociology (Hoppe 2011, Kiguwa 2015) to expand on Popova's theory (2017, 2018, 2021) of Omegaverse sexual scripting following the heteronormative roles theorized by Simon and Gagnon (1986). But before moving into these chapters and the work they explore outside of Fan Studies, I would like to address what is arguably the largest blank space in Omegaverse scholarship: the Beta dynamic. Though an intrinsic part of the A/B/O genre, the Beta characters are typically absent from Omegaverse scholarship, due in part to the dearth of information provided by the Alphas and Omegas. Since three of the next four chapters focus exclusively on Alpha and Omega

characters, I am not exempt from foregoing Betas to focus on the fascinating animal characteristics present in Alphas and Omegas. However, as Chapter 5 will express, the lack of Beta scholarship presents something of a conundrum for this thesis as there is only enough said about Beta characters to explain that they often lack animal characteristics and any other inhuman conventions recognizable within the genre. Betas are currently defined by what they lack. As such, Chapter 5 looks at Betas as a potential representation for a group similarly (though perhaps unfairly) defined by lack: asexuals.

There is presently one Omegaverse scholar, Westberg-Gabriel (2018), who has addressed asexuality in the genre. However, their work looks exclusively at how asexuality can be navigated within the Alpha and Omega dynamics - not Betas. As such, while Westberg-Gabriel's work (2018) is important in understanding representations of asexual peoples in the genre more broadly and how mating imperatives might complicate asexual identities in some ways, their work is largely absent from chapter 5 as heats and ruts do not affect Betas the same way they do the other dynamics. As with many Omegaverse scholars in the chapters to come, their work is inspirational though not directly relevant.

As this final section has noted, there are many gaps in Omegaverse scholarship that this thesis will explore. Because of the relative newness of this genre, and even Fan Studies more generally (since the Big Three are often considered the birth of the discipline in academia), there are many unexplored areas that current scholarship has only hinted at - from the specifics of "wolfish traits" (Busse 317, 2013) to the relatively forgotten Beta. The chapters that follow will attempt to answer questions prompted by atypical A/B/O dynamics, areas of problematic consent negotiations driven by mating imperatives, and why this intensely speculative genre has garnered the reputation of

“dogfuck rapeworld”. In fact, it is with this reputation of problematic, “rapey” (Popova 2021) content within the Omegaverse that I shall begin. The next chapter answers questions such as: where does this stigma stem from and why does it persist within the A/B/O dynamics?

Chapter 2

2. Predatory Romance: erotic rape fantasies and consent in the Omegaverse

Since this chapter builds on pre-existing notions of consent within fan fiction communities and how these notions of consent interact with the speculative dynamics of the Omegaverse, I will start by providing some context regarding the types of consent commonly described in fan fiction. There are three main categories of sexual consent, situated along a spectrum, circulated within fan fiction communities. On one end is enthusiastic, unquestioned, clear sexual consent. This type of consent does not typically require a content tag and if authors choose to include one, it is often used to highlight that consent is discussed in some fashion and mutually respected by sexual partners (i.e., “enthusiastic consent”, “consentacles”, etc.).⁴⁰ Sometimes sexual consent is described through verbal indicators, such as asking for permission to touch a partner sexually while both partners are sober and fully able to consent. Other times clear consent manifests as nonverbal explorations of sexual acts by mutually enthusiastic parties with an established relationship and pre-granted permission for specific sexual encounters. On the opposite end of the sexual consent spectrum is the “Rape/Noncon” (shortened from “nonconsensual” sex) category. This is the only one of the three main variations of sexual consent that is offered as an archive warning as opposed to a tag that can be optionally added by the author. As I noted in the methodology section of this thesis, archive warnings are required of each fic and include options to forewarn readers for violence, underage relationships, and Rape/Noncon. While not all fics that

⁴⁰ At the time of writing, there are currently over 1,400 fics listed under the “consentacles” (shortened from consensual tentacles) tag on Ao3 and almost 8,000 fics under the “enthusiastic consent” tag.

include Rape/Noncon within the narrative also include an archive warning, it is considered courteous within fan fiction circles to disclose these potential triggers to readers (Popova 2021, Spacey 2018, Busse 2017, Jamison 2013). However, the types of material under the Rape/Noncon tag vary widely. While the author's definition of Rape/Noncon is the deciding factor in whether a fic will receive the archive warning, Rape/Noncon is a somewhat nebulous term.

Ideas of consent exist on a spectrum and have changed over time both in reality and in fan fiction; consent is not a static concept. Noncon can relate to a wide variety of activities (e.g. some people might tag for a nonconsensual kiss, some might consider this not a significant enough act to merit tagging, and also some people might not have tagged a fic containing a nonconsensual kiss in 2010 but they would do now, etc.) and rape has no universal legal standard. The current legal (though by no means static), Western understanding of rape is often interpreted as sexual acts (typically penetrative acts) performed without mutually granted permission and/or disregarding the bodily autonomy of a partner with penetrative elements (Brod 2010, Weinberg 2015, Hermann et al. 2018, Popova 2019, Darden et al. 2019). As Popova notes in their *Sexual Consent* primer, “bodily autonomy is the idea that you get to decide what you do with your body, what happens to it, who else has access to it, and how that access is obtained and exercised” (13, 2019). As the disregard of bodily autonomy is one of the more commonly used metrics for Rape/Noncon in fan fiction, it serves as a useful starting point through which to discuss the various iterations of consent in the fan fiction medium, though I will build on this definition in later sections of this chapter.

It is the third category of consent, which lies between enthusiastic consent and noncon, that concerns my argument for this chapter and the Omegaverse more broadly;

“dubious consent”. Dubious consent, or dubcon, is one of the more interesting conceptualizations of consent within fan fiction as it seems to acknowledge that bodily autonomy is sometimes complicated while also recognizing the potential ill-intent of practicing sex without enthusiastic consent. Dubious consent navigates the murky space between fictional depictions of sexual fantasies and lived experience. Even the word choice of dubious, as opposed to ‘questioned’ or ‘unclear’, belies a certain lack of trust or doubt. Much like Rape/Noncon, there is no universal definition for dubious consent, though Popova’s *Dubcon* (2021) offers a variety of definitions that could be said to comprise the general essence of the word in fan fiction such as “sometimes, for whatever reasons, consent is not clear-cut, not a matter of ‘yes’ or ‘no’” (6). What makes dubcon so alluring for studies of the Omegaverse is how the category has become emblematic of how speculative fiction orients notions of lived experience in fictional realms. For instance, how does the Omegaverse, with its mating imperatives of heats and ruts, navigate the concept of consent and contribute to its debates in reality?

The conceptualization of consent in the Omegaverse is fascinating because of its pliability. The genre navigates and constantly renegotiates what it means to consent to sex while under the influence of biologically determined mating imperatives. Alternatively, the genre struggles with the concept of sexual bodily autonomy because the A/B/O dynamics exist in a community of readers and writers that have drawn hard lines - not unreasonable, but immutable lines - in the sand as to what is considered clear, consensual sex and what is ostensibly not (i.e., dubcon, noncon). These two equally important aspects are constructed in tandem between the dynamics of the genre itself and the community that comprises it. What makes the Omegaverse particularly interesting in conversations about consent is not that a majority of the A/B/O

tics are explicitly sexual (over 70% of the works on Ao3 are rated Mature or Explicit at time of writing), but rather the reputation the genre has within the community (and in wider fan fiction circles) as space where consent goes to die.

Attention-grabbing though it may be, using “dogfuck rapeworld” as the title of their Omegaverse scholarship was purposefully done by Popova (2017, 2018, 2021). The genre is highly controversial in fan fiction communities (Popova 38, 2021) because of the questions of consent it raises rather than the somewhat more obvious “roots in bestiality kink” (Popova 38, 2021) it serves through animalistic tendencies like heats and ruts.⁴¹ The preconception of Omegaverse fiction as “rapey” (Popova 2021) has been addressed by many A/B/O scholars, from Busse’s concession that even though fandom as a whole includes “the seeming loss of taboos and a general acceptance of all kinks, there are still some kinks that tend to be considered a bit kinkier than others” (317, 2013) to Arnaiz’ assertion that “darker slash fiction”, particularly dark Omegaverse fic, is “impossible *not* to come across” in contemporary studies of the genre (136, 2018, emphasis original). In acknowledgment of the accuracy of the phrasing of “dogfuck rapeworld” to describe the genre, Popova writes, “eroticized representation of sexual violence is at the core of the Omegaverse controversy in fanfiction communities” (38, 2021). Indeed, the quote from *TikTok* creator @kendalexis that opened this thesis implies that “disparaging A/B/O as cringey and dismissing [it] out of hand” (March 2021) stems from the stigma surrounding the genre within wider fandom as “cringey” due to problematic framing of sexual consent that causes discomfort for some fan fiction readers.

⁴¹ Busse (2013) noted that the fan fiction community has “always had its share of [...] bestiality kinks” (318) suggesting that bestiality kinks - like attraction to animal traits such as biting, scenting, sex with partially or fully transformed were-creatures - are more accepted within the fan fiction community at large.

But my question, and the question that informs the research in this chapter, is: where did this assumption that the Omegaverse is a dark, “rapeworld” of a genre come from? Statistically, the evidence for this assertion that the genre is characterized by sexual violence and rape is unsupported. The total number of fics utilizing the archive warning of Rape/Noncon has remained at 10% of all tagged A/B/O fics since the beginning of this thesis research in late 2018. While this is significantly higher than some other genres of fan fiction, it indicates that the number of fics featuring sexual violence and rape within the Omegaverse remains at one-tenth of all A/B/O fics tagged on the archive at the time of writing.⁴² The archive warning for “Graphic Depictions of Violence” arguably has a larger foothold in the genre with about 12% of all Omegaverse fics including this particular archive warning at the time of writing. Similarly, the top 100 most popular A/B/O fics, sorted by the number of kudos, suggests the prevalence of “Rape/Noncon” is lessened in more widely read and popular works with only 7% containing a “Rape/Noncon” warning. None of these warnings apply to the main pairing, rather a main character is raped by someone who is not the romantic lead or rape occurs to an ancillary character, but is discussed in some detail (Nov 2021). So where does the assumption that the Omegaverse is “cringey” (@kendalexis 2021) or “rapey” (Popova 2021) come from? And more importantly, how do these assumptions fit into existing debates around consent and accountability?

Through this chapter, I argue that perceptions of the Omegaverse’s problematic relationship to, and representation of, sexual consent stems more from the genres preceding it and the social contracts of fan fiction engagement more broadly than the

⁴² Other genres of fan fiction housed on Ao3 typically fall between 2-5% of all works utilizing the “Rape/Noncon” archive warning. For example, the Vampire AU (Alternate Universe) averages 3% of it’s works using “Rape/Noncon” warning at the time of writing (January 2022) and that number has remained the same since at least November 2019.

A/B/O dynamics themselves. This is not to say that the dynamics of the genre do not have a complicated relationship with consent. It is well-documented as a fan fiction space with issues of power inequity (Fazekas 2020, Popova 2021, Arnaiz 2018, Busse 2013) that are often connected to sexual consent and the variables therein (Gunderson 2017, Popova 2017, 2018, 2021). But the assertion that the genre is characterized by rape because it offers complicated and nuanced approaches to consent does not do justice to the genre. I argue that the tense navigation and renegotiation of consent in the Omegaverse is more representative of the community of readers and writers working through anxieties regarding sexual consent than it is a genre framed around notions of Rape/Noncon. In recent years, particularly following the height of the #metoo movement in 2017, consent has been re-examined in public opinion resulting in (sometimes) more nuanced explorations of explicit Rape/Noncon in popular media (e.g., Coel's *I May Destroy You* (2020), Grant's *Unbelievable* (2019), and Roach's *Bombshell* (2019)) and how this conflicts with fictional concepts like dubious consent. These depictions in popular media tend to highlight the vast difference between sexual consent in lived experience and the legal definitions of sexual assault - much the same as I argue the Omegaverse does, though through the lens of sexual fantasy. Through this chapter, I will evidence the ways in which the Omegaverse reflects the nuance provided by more recent reflections on sexual consent (and noncon) by using the potentially problematic framing of mating imperatives. As such, I will approach this argument as a three-pronged issue stemming from distinct, though connected sources.

The first connected issue is inherited from the erotic rape fantasy trope passed from popular romance fiction, like the historical variety of "bodice rippers" (Wendell & Tan 2011, Pearce 2007, Krentz 1992, Modeleski 1982, Hazen 1982), where discussions

of erotic rape fantasies became so popular in media interpretations and academic studies of the genre suggesting the trope was more prolific and problematic in romance fiction than it was in reality (Radway 1991, Roach 2016, Arvanitaki 2019, Howe 2019). Second, the community standards of consent in fan fiction spaces are typically more involved and all-encompassing than that of the legal praxis of consent in many people's lived experience.⁴³ Fan fiction requires consent at all stages of engagement, from providing tags so that readers are informed of the work they are consenting to read to the extra consent page added to works with archive warnings and/or rated as Mature or Explicit (Ao3).⁴⁴ Thus, the Omegaverse community's tendency to play with these expectations, with tags like "mildly dubious consent" or "consent issues" that are subjective, could be interpreted by some in the wider fan fiction community, as traversing immutable lines of consent. Finally, the characterization of male Alphas in the genre can often prompt associations (and related connotations of bastardry) with the "Alpha Male". A concept popularized by fictional genres like popular romance as well as contentious groups in reality, like incels (shortened from involuntary celibates), the "Alpha Male", not to be confused with the male Alphas of the Omegaverse, can be read as a sexual predator. Since much of the language describing male Alphas in the Omegaverse mirrors that of the "Alpha Male" with their "aggressive seductions" (Krentz 109, 1992), there is sometimes commonality between the two characterizations. However, as the relative lack of "Rape/Noncon" in the top 100 most popular fics - and

⁴³ My perspective is that of the US and UK legal systems. As such, phrases like "many people's lived experience" is not representative of all peoples and can arguably only be said to apply to the white peoples living in these countries. While fan fiction as a practice is overwhelmingly white (approximately 76%), I will note that laws for sexual consent are different in many areas of the same country and despite my generalizing, lived experience with legal expressions of informed consent are not universal.

⁴⁴ Just after starting this thesis project, Ao3 added extra content warning pages to works containing an E or M rating for all users (both members of the site and guests) without explicit permissions in their data to allow explicit content.

the close readings in this chapter - will illustrate, the behavior of the most popular male Alphas in Omegaverse fics is not often reflective of the “Alpha Male” characterization. Many of the popular male Alpha characterizations offer careful deviations from expectations of “Alpha Male” dominance and associated forms of “hegemonic masculinity”.⁴⁵ In fact, many writers take careful consideration when discussing how consent functions in the Omegaverse both from a realistic, legal standpoint and as Popova theorizes, the “wantedness of the sex” (2021) when consent is compromised or unobtainable due to the mechanisms of heats/ruts in the genre. Like the genre itself, the positionality of consent from fic to fic seems to draw from both reality and fantasy; where legal definitions are sometimes suspended in order to provide more control for the authors over the potentially problematic fantasy elements.

To argue these points, this chapter is split into three sections. The first section will look at the pre-existing scholarship in the area of erotic rape fantasies as they have been theorized in the romance fiction community, the ethical standards of consent in fan fiction, as well as the possible intersections with the popular conception of the “Alpha Male” and how it interacts with the accountability of sexual assault both in the genre and in reality. In this section, I use Popova’s distinction between the legal praxis of informed consent and the wantedness of sex (2021), as that is how fan fiction communities can be read to construct the differences between explicitly wanted sex, dubious consent, and nonconsent. Section two will perform a close reading of three popular *Teen Wolf* fics, with various tags and archive warnings for sexual consent, as examples of how

⁴⁵ Hegemonic masculinity is a theory developed by R.W. Connell in the early 1980s that provides a framework through which to understand the pervasive, popular attitudes surrounding Western masculinity that order it as dominant over women and all other gender identities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

these themes are constructed in one of the more popular and prolific fandoms.⁴⁶ As the *Teen Wolf* fandom, alongside the *Supernatural* fandom, was one of the progenitors of the genre and contributed to its current popularity on Ao3 (norabombay 2012, netweight 2013, Busse 2013), how consent is constructed in these fics is important in contextualizing the genre as a whole and how it has developed on Ao3. The final section will offer conclusions as to why the Omegaverse continues to have a reputation as a “dogfuck rapeworld” despite the overwhelming evidence demonstrating the genre’s nuanced approach to sexual consent that uses both an ethical standard of care for readers and fantasizes about the potential pleasures that can be derived from noncon (though with commentary on accountability not often found in mainstream Western media presentations of sexual consent). From shifting goalposts in standards of fan fiction consent to changing attitudes towards sexual consent in wider popular culture, I argue that the dubcon elements of the Omegaverse provide an interesting lens through which to explore consent negotiation.

Before moving into section one, I would like to clarify some word choices in the sections to come. I will be using the terms sexual violence, sexual aggression, and sexual harassment with some regularity throughout this chapter, but each of these terms - while interlinked with rape and sexual assault in reality - are linguistically separate from the act of rape in this chapter. I separate these concepts in an effort to

⁴⁶ Though *Teen Wolf* was the second most popular and prolific fandom in the Omegaverse when I started this thesis in 2018, it has since fallen to the 7th most popular fandom in the genre (January 2022). This does not necessarily change its formative placement in the genre and its trope development, since it was extremely popular in the early 2010s; concurrent with the birth and subsequent growth of A/B/O on Ao3. *Teen Wolf* is currently a “Post-Object Fandom” (Williams 2015), meaning the television show is completed at time of writing, and it is unlikely that this fandom will ever rise to its previous level of popularity within the Omegaverse. As such, the term “popularity” in this chapter is complicated by previous popularity versus current popularity. The fandom is still popular, though nowhere near its previous status as second only to *Supernatural*.

abide by the coded rules of this speculative genre of fan fiction that situates consent along a spectrum, with particular acts similarly situated along this spectrum and subject to author interpretation with every iteration. Rape, in as far as the following sections are concerned, references the legal standards of the word that imply penetrative acts of/with sexual organs (Philadelphoff-Puren 2005, Popova 2019, Bivona et al. 2012). While sexual assault is a far more encompassing term for all of the problematic sexual activities I will be discussing, to offer an accurate impression of how sexual consent is framed in the Omegaverse and by fan fiction tagging practices, I will be separating the language of sexually aggressive acts (noncon) from the penetrative act of rape. I recognize this may be counter-intuitive as the archive warning for Rape/Noncon conflates the terms, but the Omegaverse has its own interpretations of this conflation - as I will describe in the close readings.

2.1.0 “Aggressive Seductions” and other borrowed tropes

Fan fiction shares many of its tropes and conventions with other literary genres, but none more so than with popular romance fiction (Driscoll 2006, Kustritz 2003, Salmon & Symons 2001, Penley 1991, Russ 1985);⁴⁷ particularly, the mass-produced works of romance genre fiction made popular within the last fifty years by publishing houses such as Harlequin and Mills & Boon (Kustritz 2003, Salmon & Symons 2004, Roach 2016).⁴⁸ The Omegaverse often uses similar formulaic plot structures from

⁴⁷ Connections between the Omegaverse and genres like monster media and erotica will be made more explicit in Chapter 3.

⁴⁸ I have elected to narrow my selection of what will be considered “popular romance fiction” in this chapter to the above listing. Romance novels from the mid-1970s forward have a very specific, formulaic structure (Hayes 2016) that is recognizable in much of fan fiction (see footnote 49). While not specific to romance fiction mass-produced by Mills & Boon and Harlequin, the novels produced by these companies

popular romance fiction that revolve around themes of true love, destined lovers, and Happily-Ever-After (HEA) endings.⁴⁹ In fact, every fic featured in this thesis has a HEA or Happy-for-Now ending regardless of the sometimes horrific assaults happening in the body of the fics. Alongside inheriting a penchant for happy endings and formulaic narratives, the Omegaverse inherited some of the criticism associated with popular romance fiction, whether warranted or not - i.e., how consent is handled between soul mates/destined lovers and whether or not scenes which read as nonconsensual are given a different context by conventions of “true love” in the genre (Lowell 89, 1992, Deffenbacher 923, 2014, Wendell & Tan 136-147, 2011).

Historically, mass-market romance fiction has elected to use soul mates and destined lovers as a way to circumvent the potentially problematic nature of noncon in romance (Menard and Cabrera 2011, Wendell & Tan 2011, Modeleski 1982, Krentz 1992, Hazen 1983). According to romance fiction scholar and novelist, Krentz (1992), there is no such thing as rape between destined lovers, only “aggressive seductions” (109).⁵⁰ She elaborates, “Most of the time this [aggressive] seduction is portrayed as

are often termed “pornography for women” given their sometimes sexually explicit scenes and overwhelmingly female community of readers and writers (Russ 82, 1985, Krentz 2-8, 1992). Romance, as a literary genre, has existed for centuries (Modeleski 1982, Cohn 1988, Pearce 2007, Saunders 2004, Regis 2003), but the audience and public perception is shared between mass-market romance fiction of the late twentieth century and fan fiction. While there is also some crossover between the Omegaverse and more sexually explicit genres, like erotica, the criticism for romance novels is more helpful for conceptualizing the Omegaverse than erotica. Thus, erotica, arguably a sub-genre of romance, will be largely absent from this chapter unless noted otherwise. For more on the crossover between popular, mass-market romance fiction and fan fiction, see: Russ 1985, Lamb & Veith 1986, Salmon & Symons 2001, Kustritz 2003, Driscoll 2006, and Woledge 2006.

⁴⁹ In *Romancing the Beat: Story Structure for Romance Novels*, novelist and romance novel editor Hayes (2016) describes a typical romance novel as consisting of four parts: set up, falling in love, retreating from love, and fighting for love (15). Additionally, Hayes notes a romance novel cannot call itself such without including an HEA (Happily Ever After) or HFN (Happy For Now) conclusion (6-15, 2016).

⁵⁰ “Aggressive seduction” is a term used by the popular romance community to accomplish the same idea as noncon sex in fan fiction (Krentz 109, 1992). Both are nonconsensual, though only one is overtly aligned with rape and sexual assault (fan fiction) while the early romance fiction community was more resistant to the idea of naming nonconsensual, fictional sex as rape (Bivona & Critelli 33-44, 2009, Bivona et al. 1107-1116, 2012).

intense and unrelentingly sensual; occasionally it is so forceful that it has been mislabeled rape by critics" (109, 1992). By this logic, any sex occurring between hero and heroine is consensual regardless of how "forceful" it reads. Alternatively, romance scholar and author Hazen (1983) suggests that rape can occur between the main characters, but is only acceptable within the context of true love or soul mates as that implies the heroine was "so desirable that he [the hero] will defy all rules of honor and decency in order to have her" (8). While many authors have disagreed with this description of romance fiction as not including rape or only including 'acceptable' rape (Radway 1991, Modeleski 1982, Wendell & Tan 2011, Roach 2016, Arvanitaki 2019), the responses like those provided by Krentz (1992) and Hazen (1983) became emblematic of the romance fiction genre and prompted the public perception of romance fiction as unable to identify or meaningfully critique rape or nonconsensual sex (Modeleski 1982, Wendell & Tan 2011, Roach 2016, Rodale 2017).

Since the majority of the genre's market is middle to low-income women (Radway 1991, Rodale 2017, Allan 2016), much of the critique for the genre stems from both classism and sexism. Despite many literary critics suggesting that "no one who is anyone likes romance novels" (Wendell & Tan 3, 2011), the genre remains the highest-grossing of all literary genres (Arvanitaki 2019). Infantilizing language is used to dismiss the genre as asinine for using formulaic plot structures and character tropes - despite almost all genre fiction using these same conventions (Modeleski 1992, Cohn 1988, Radway 1991, Krentz 1992, Wendell & Tan 2011). However, it is the consent negotiation (or lack thereof) that has drawn the most ire from critics of the popular heterosexual romance novel, specifically those of the historical romance variety (Bivona & Critelli 2009, Bivona et al. 2012, Arvanitaki 2019, Vivanco 2012). Novels such as

Kathleen E. Woodiwiss's *The Flame and The Flower* (1972) and Beatrice Small's *Skye O'Malley* (1980), which are considered pivotal works in the formation of popular bodice rippers (Tidwell 2016, Clair 1992, Radway 1991) both feature explicit rape scenes. Sometimes retroactive consent is offered, though typically the scenes that read as rape are later contextualized within the conventions of true love and/or soulmates (Hazen 1983, Barlow & Krentz 1992).

Many critics of the romance novel were quick to draw on these depictions as proof of mishandling of sensitive content and exploiting rape as a romantic gesture rather than the horror of its reality, and used it as evidence with which to condemn the genre (Hazen 1992, Vivanco 2012, Arvanitaki 2019). This public condemnation was seemingly given credence by second-wave feminist authors, such as Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan, who argued that romances were a tool of the patriarchy to keep women complicit in subjugated roles and the erotic rape fantasy was proof of this claim (Hazen 1983, Arvanitaki 2019, Vivanco 2012). Eroticizing sexual violence, regardless of its purpose or audience, was presented by many second-wave feminist critics as actively harmful towards the progression of the gender equality movement (Vivanco 2012, Krentz 1992, Radway 1991).

This argument between the second-wave feminist theorists and advocates of popular romance fiction can be reduced down to questions of morality in women's (and in more contemporary romance - queer people's) sexual fantasies. One side finds objectionable material as evidence through which to condemn the genre and all within the community who seemingly enable it. The other finds these types of fantasies sexually arousing, if not empowering, as they grant them the ability to contemplate sexual violence without the real-world consequences (Kinsdale 1992, Arnaiz 2018,

Bivona et al. 2012, Salmon and Symons 2001). Unsurprisingly, as fan fiction uses many of the same conventions as popular romance fiction (Russ 1985, Kustritz 2003, Popova 2021), the attitudes of many in the fan fiction community are caught somewhere between the two poles of this argument - either “disparaging A/B/O as cringey and dismissing [it] out of hand” (@kendalexis, March 2021) or embracing the genre fully as “a safe space to explore how to deal with the inequalities and power structures we face in our day-to-day lives” (Popova 58, 2021) as a community comprised of women and other gender and sexual minorities (*Fansplaining* 2019, centrumlumina 2013).

There are notable differences between the responses to critique of the romance novel community and fan fiction communities when faced with allegations of eroticizing sexual violence, but perhaps most notable is the acknowledgment of sexual violence at all. Where the romance fiction community fought against allegations of rape within the bodice ripper sub-genre, claiming rape does not exist in historical romance, only “aggressive seductions” (Krentz 109, 1992), fan fiction communities often acknowledge that fan fiction is used as a space to speculate on the reality of rape or as a space to explore “pleasurable, escapist, satisfying fantasies” (Arnaiz 125, 2018) eroticizing sexual violence. This acknowledgment of problematic material has led fan fiction hosting sites, like Ao3, to implement tags as a way to forewarn readers of potential sexual violence in fics; a notable departure from professionally published romance fiction.

Tagging is not infallible and many authors choose not to include archive warnings for potentially problematic material (almost 87% of all Ao3 works include tags but no archive warnings as of November 2021), use incorrect tags to entice readers only to “subvert” tag expectations with surprises within the narratives, or not include any tags at

all (mirroring romance fiction and letting the reader “go in blind”, so to speak).⁵¹ As one disgruntled reader so eloquently wrote,

can't believe [I] just read a fic that was tagged with “happy ending” and when I reached the ending (which was not happy[]) the author went ‘yeah sorry [I] don't believe in happy endings’ bitch what?? (@mdzsed November 2021)

This reader's disbelief and irritation at an author's choice to deliberately mislead readers using tags is indicative of the fan fiction community standards to provide accurate and informative tags so that readers can make an informed decision when choosing a fic to read and/or interact with. This reader is not alone in their dismay at the inappropriate use of tags if the tweet receiving over 500 retweets, 250 quote tweets, and over 5 thousand likes within the first five days of its publication (@mdzsed November 2021) is any indicator of shared fandom emotion. The use of archival tags and warning systems for fan fiction, like those provided by Ao3, when used accurately, act as informed consent for readers. Readers are consenting to read the fic based on the tags and information provided. When no information is provided about a fic, the reader consents to read the fic with that lack of forewarning. Even the choice not to provide tags informs the reader's consent when selecting a fic.

This use of tagging is made particularly difficult in the Omegaverse as the genre conventions involved make the “Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics” tag something of a

⁵¹ The 87% of fan fiction on Ao3 not containing archive warnings is not indicative of 87% of all fic on the site disregarding tagging practices and choosing not to include warnings where they are needed. In fact a vast majority of these works do not include archive warnings because they are not needed (ie. fics do not explore sex, violence, underage themes, etc.). This figure is presented to explain that within these fics that host “creator chose not to include archive warnings” or “no warnings apply”, some do contain tags that indicate potentially problematic material, even if they do not have an archive warning. For example, while the Omegaverse only hosts 7 “Rape/Noncon” archive warnings in the top 100 most popular fics, there are 9 fics that feature the “dubious consent” tag and over 23 fics with variations of dubcon from “Mildly Dubious Consent” to “consensual non-consent” (January 2022).

warning in and of itself. For example, an author might use the tag “heat sex” to indicate that some of the sex in an A/B/O fic occurs while one or more characters are experiencing heat and therefore may have diminished critical thinking capabilities. Therefore the “heat sex” tag becomes something of a dubious consent warning for readers familiar with the genre. However, the “Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics” tag itself does carry with it the convention of heats and ruts as tropes of the genre and therefore does not require the “heat sex” tag to potentially warn readers: it is implied. Similarly, many Omegaverse writers (like those in the following section of close readings) use “mildly dubious consent” in the same way as “heat sex” - it forewarns that heats and ruts sometimes compromise a character’s ability to offer informed consent, but the “mildly” modifier on “dubious consent” tag suggests the writers do not necessarily find heat sex objectionable or even dubiously consensual, but include the tag to be sensitive to readers’ perspectives.

The real crux of this argument hinges on how sexual consent is framed in the Omegaverse. Traditionally, consent, as enshrined in many legal systems in the 21st century (though not all legal systems), is a matter of *human* social convention based upon respecting the autonomy of fellow humans (Brod 2010, Weinberg 2015, Popova 2019). As such, animal mating imperatives, like heats/ruts, could potentially circumvent consent altogether as there is no precedent of consent during mating season in the nonhuman animal kingdom.⁵² The Omegaverse genre uses animal behaviors,

⁵² The discipline of Animal Studies typically makes a distinction between human animals and nonhuman animals as separate species of the same kingdom (Amoit and Bastian 2012, Ortiz-Robles 2016, Herman 2016, Donovan 2016, Ohrem and Bartosch 2017). Sometimes this distinction is described as humans versus creatures (Herman 2016, Youngs 2013). As Chapter 3 looks at mythological creatures, I will not be using this particular parlance. However, I will occasionally differentiate between human animals and nonhuman animals when discussing the Omegaverse since the A/B/O dynamics themselves refer to the human animal, but the heats/ruts refer to biology of nonhuman animals. Regardless of the parlance used,

specifically wolfish traits (Busse 2013, Gunderson 2017, Popova 2021), to side-step or circumnavigate the popular Western conceptualization of informed consent. Heats and ruts are physically and psychologically compromised states, when placed in the context of human bodies, and thus consent offered during this time is compromised, at best. But as noted above, these mammalian traits do not exist in the typical human experience and so positioning them as such comes with complications of how to construct consent under these conditions.

For the most part, A/B/O seems to be understood by readers and writers as a genre where all heat sex is considered dubcon. Busse comments on this potentiality when she writes, A/B/O “stories engage in dub-con scenarios where one or both partners are out of their minds with heat lust and lose all reasoning and inhibitions” (321, 2013) suggesting that without higher brain function, informed consent cannot be valid during heats/ruts. According to fan scholar and dark fan fiction enthusiast Spacey, “there are dub-con stories where partners who once consented enthusiastically and who trust each other implicitly must now negotiate new situations where they are uncertain of whether they wish to continue” (216, 2018). While revoking consent during heat is not common in A/B/O stories, Ashton’s assertion that the inability to change pre-granted consent would describe heat sex as dubiously consensual. This seeming inability of the genre to incorporate tags that accurately describe the subtleties of consent during heats/ruts could very well be a contributing factor as to why it is so often condemned as consensually problematic (@kendalexis 2021, Popova 2021). However, as the following

it can be assumed that when I discuss “animal tendencies” in the context of the Omegaverse, I am *not* referencing human animals.

section of close readings will explore, the non-universal tagging of the genre may be more helpful than problematic when tracing the potentially dubious consent in A/B/O fic.

Tagging issues aside, there is yet another factor associated with the Omegaverse on a more wide-ranging social level that I argue affects the initial perceptions of the genre as problematic: its use of male Alphas. The popular conception of the “Alpha male” (as distinct from the male Alpha of the Omegaverse) has shaped how the Omegaverse is perceived as a genre with “hyper-gendered” (Gunderson 2017) characterizations and a space with problems of domineering men not respecting the bodily autonomy of their sexual partners. For the purposes of this chapter, I will be limiting my focus on notions of the “Alpha Male” to those constructed and disseminated within two groups: the incels and the romance novel community. I’ve selected these two groups because they share many similarities between their constructions of the “Alpha Male” figure and what he represents. For incels, the Alpha male (referred to as “Chad”) represents the epitome of masculine physicality, access to financial stability (if not excess), and sexual prowess (Menzie 2020, Ging 2019, Armato 2015, Schell 2007). For the romance novel community, Alpha Males are the popular hero archetype that represent the fantasy of physical dominance, and sexual prowess that “feminist critics despise” (Krentz 107-108, 1992). As romance novel researchers Lynch et al. write, “the single word that crystallizes both his appeal and his malignity is power. The alpha hero is in possession of power, and he yields it without apology” (2012). Both of these characterizations represent the fantasy of physically imposing, highly sexual men who take what they want without consequence.

But they are just that: a fantasy. For incels, the Alpha Male is a projection of unfulfilled masculine expectation - what they assume other men have that they (as

involuntarily celibate men) lack (Menzie 2020, Ging 2019). For the romance community, the Alpha Male is the fantasy of overwhelming sexual pleasure and (sometimes) forced submission to that pleasure (Lynch 2012, Roach 2016, Wendell & Tan 2011, Hazen 1983, Krentz 1992, Modeleski 1982, Allan 2016, Arvanitaki 2019). However, both of these conceptualizations are based on the notion of the Alpha Male as domineering and entirely unrestricted by social constraints. He can do whatever he wants (typically with a sexual connotation, though many incels are quite thorough in their shared imaginings of the range of Alpha Male dominance) and face no repercussions from wider society because of how he looks, acts, and the amount of social power he yields based on these imagined facts.⁵³ Interestingly, both characterizations suggest that the Alpha Male has an innate superiority - meaning that his actions, while often thoughtless (and sometimes, notably, animalistic), are treated as natural within his environment (Allan 2016, Lynch et al. 2012, Schell 2007, Ging 2019). The Alpha Male, in both conceptualizations, is an apex predator acting on biological instinct to mate and dominate and is not only appreciated, but respected, for fulfilling this role.⁵⁴

It is this concept of unrestrained, predatory power that poses an interesting juxtaposition between Alpha Males in incel and romance novel community models and the male Alphas of the Omegaverse fan fiction genre. One of the most popular features of the male Alpha in the Omegaverse is his restraint - prompted by his respect for his

⁵³ There are some interesting intersections with this fantasy and the reality of white, heterosexual, cisgender male privilege. I will discuss these connections more in the close readings and the conclusion of this chapter.

⁵⁴ There some links between the Alpha Male role and white supremacy that have been explored by incel theorists such as Ging (2020) and Menzie (2020). Similarly, Fazekas (2020) made connections between the male Alphas of the Omegaverse and white supremacy, especially in fics from predominantly white-centered fandoms. While the white supremacist connections with the concept of the "Alpha" are related to notions of dominance and control over minoritized people, I will be focusing more on themes of gender and power than race and power in this chapter.

partner and their bodily autonomy. While this is not always the case, many of the more popular male Alpha characterizations are based on impulse control and respect for one's partner. As later close readings will illustrate, male Alphas in the more popular A/B/O fics demonstrate that they are distinct from other Alphas because of these features. For example, in the most popular A/B/O fic at the time of writing (January 2022), "Quiet Rapture" by lalazee (2017), the author spends much of the exposition explaining how the main Omega character is unusual because of his many "Alpha Male" behaviors. Lines like, "did this nerd just stop a powerful Alpha in his tracks without so much as an Omega whimper of anxiety?" (lalazee 2017) suggest that the author is aware of the audience's tendency to link male Alphas with Alpha Males and is going to change this script of "powerful alpha" and anxious Omegas by making the Omega the dominant partner. This awareness of Alpha stereotypes of power and the assumption of Omega submission to that power indicates to readers that those stereotypes have no bearing in this iteration of the Omegaverse.

This brings up an interesting point regarding male Alpha characterization in the Omegaverse versus that of the popular Alpha Male. While both tend to operate within world-building that imagines them as free of consequence when acting on instinct that sometimes drives them to dominate others, the male Alphas of the Omegaverse are likely to recognize this privilege and attempt to control their more animalistic impulses in order to check that privilege. To reiterate, of the top 100 most kudos'd A/B/O fics on Ao3 only 7% contain a "Rape/Noncon" warning, and 0% of those fics feature a rape perpetrated by the main Alpha character. This suggests that male Alphas as a whole are not the unrestrained, sexually domineering characters that the word "Alpha" would imply, but rather a group of characters navigating a genre wherein they are expected to

act without restraint based on their placement in the social hierarchy. Since I argue that one of the main differences between the Omegaverse and the genres it borrows from is how it speculates on structures of power, who the genre conventions hold accountable for actions is integral to this claim.

Before moving into the *Teen Wolf* fics in the next section, I would like to note that while the most popular iterations of the male Alpha do not typically act as the fantasy of an Alpha Male would, that is not to say that ALL male Alphas act the same. While the more popular iterations of the male Alpha share commonalities in their characterizations (as the close readings will illustrate), the Omegaverse Alpha is not a monolith. As Arnaiz (2018) and Popova (2017, 2018, 2021) have demonstrated, some fics lean into the lack of consequences for male Alphas who do as they please - treating Omegas as sexual conquests at best and “sexual slaves” (Busse 2013, Fazekas 2020) at worst. Arnaiz examined fics from the *Hannibal* fandom and found that more often than not, the Alpha character (Hannibal Lecter) treats Omegas, including Omega partners he found unique and worthy of conquest (typically Will Graham), as subhuman and unworthy of respect, much less acknowledging of their humanity (2018). Popova discussed several works from the *Supernatural* fandom with varied consent tags and found that the Alpha characters in the “Rape/Noncon” fics were more cold and calculating than other Alpha characters in dubcon or enthusiastically consensual fics (2017, 2018, 2021). This coldness and perception of superiority found in many fics with male Alphas acting as Alpha Males provides an interesting point about acting on instinctive behavior in the Omegaverse. Acting instinctively, or animalistically, seems to be less indicative of Alpha Male behavior. Instead, it is forethought and premeditation that suggest male Alphas are acting as Alpha Males. As such, both Arnaiz (2018) and Popova (2017, 2018, 2021)

offer readings of the Alpha-Male-male-Alpha as a habitual predator, who knowingly stalks Omega prey as opposed to Alpha characters acting on instinct, drawn by animal magnetism. While this has interesting ramifications for the typical excuses offered for “Alpha Male” behavior in reality, as I will discuss in the conclusion to this chapter, it also implies that the mating imperatives discussed in the following close readings place male Alphas into a context where forethought and premeditated sexual coercion would not be possible. Because heats/ruts are not always planned events and require immediate attention, the circumstances of the fics in the following sections provide a perspective on male Alpha behavior that differs from those described by Popova (2017, 2018, 2021) and Arnaiz (2021).

2.2.0 Consent in Practice: the case studies

As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, the *Teen Wolf* fandom played an important role in constructing the tropes of the Omegaverse and making them recognizable as conventions of the genre. However, this is not the only reason why I have elected to include *Teen Wolf* fics as illustrative of consent norms within the wider genre. As their work titled, “Consent is Sexy: Gender, Sexual Identity and Sex Positivism in MTV’s Young Adult Television Series *Teen Wolf* (2011-)” would suggest, researchers Kendal and Kendal describe the show (running from 2011 to 2017) as “seiz[ing] opportunities to condemn the failure to seek consent, thereby challenging the more forceful expressions of passion common in young adult romance series” (33, 2015). This careful consideration of consent in the source material does influence how the fan fiction in the fandom is constructed. My use of this particular fandom - a fandom

least likely to implement noncon or other forms of dubious consent - could be construed as misrepresenting the wider Omegaverse problems with sexual consent. However, the *Teen Wolf* fandom's navigation of consent makes it particularly well suited to illustrate how consent functions in the more popular and widely used iterations of the Omegaverse. For example, *Teen Wolf* is one of the least likely (of the top ten most popular) fandoms to include a "Rape/Noncon" warning with only 7% of the total works including one at the time of writing- less than the 10% average noted in the introduction of this chapter. This 7% is consistent with the "Rape/Noncon" archive warnings of the 100 most popular A/B/O fics that featured only 7 "Rape/Noncon" warnings in total. As such, *Teen Wolf* provides a fandom representative of the more *popular* trends of A/B/O at the time of writing as opposed to a sample representative of all A/B/O fics. Alternatively, fandoms like the Marvel Cinematic Universe feature around 12% saturation of "Rape/Noncon" archive warnings and would therefore be higher than the averages for both the most popular works and the genre in total.

Additionally, *Teen Wolf* (2011-2017) included a number of wolfish tendencies that coincide with the Omegaverse - including werewolf characters sorted into classes of alpha/beta/omega (though with less sexual implications than the A/B/O dynamics of the Omegaverse). While many of the *Teen Wolf* fics tend to lean into the A/B/O dynamics of the genre rather than the werewolf dynamics of the show, both illustrate a particular fondness for impulsive behavior being excusable given particular characterizations of Alpha, Beta, or Omega status. For the show, full moons brought about unusual and sometimes dangerous behavior. For the Omegaverse, heats and ruts are similarly impulsive and occasionally dangerous.

All three of the fics in this section use the same general framework of the television show which featured the intrigues of a teenaged, recently-turned werewolf and the supernatural elements which seem to manifest subsequent to his transformation (*Teen Wolf* 2011-2017). Surprisingly, the most popular relationship (hereafter referred to as ‘ship’) does not include the main character of the show, but rather his human best friend, Stiles, and the head of the werewolf pack, a young man named Derek. All three of the works I’ve selected for this study are from this most popular pairing between Derek and Stiles, though all of the works have changed the characters’ ages so that they are both adults (in the television show Stiles is a teenager) and most of them have moved the werewolf behavior from the show to the background of the fic, bringing the Omegaverse dynamics to the fore.⁵⁵

Before moving on to the analysis of these works, I would like to note that only one includes a “Rape/Noncon” archive warning. Despite the lack of archive warnings in the other works, all three use variations of dubious consent in the tags included with each fic and navigate consent in subtle, interesting ways. The first fic I will discuss, “I don’t know why, but I guess it has something to do with you” by LunaCanisLupus_22

⁵⁵ While a relatively small sample size, I have selected three fics to focus on in this chapter in order to offer a selection of potential descriptions of sexual consent in A/B/O fic. Additionally, the plot points and uses of consent in these particular fics represent a majority of the available popular Omegaverse stories. For instance, the A/B/O Sterek ship currently has over 1800 fics labeled as such and over 1300 of these fics are rated E for explicitly sexual material (July 2022). Of these fics, over 250 fics include tags for dubious consent and many of these 250 follow a romance novel-esque plot pattern. As such, each of the selected fics in this chapter can be seen to be a popular representation of 200 over fics housed under the *Teen Wolf* fandom – an extremely popular and formative fandom in the Omegaverse. Though each of my case studies throughout this thesis can be said to be smaller sample sizes from which to draw conclusions, each of them are representatives of a much larger proportion of fics. Though not all of these fics will be exactly the same as the population I argue they represent (thank goodness for that), each fic does represent a much larger population sample than the 3 fics used for close readings in this chapter. Similar conclusions could be drawn from any number of the fics under the selected tags, I have simply elected to dive more deeply into a few very popular fics rather than excerpts from dozens of less popular fics. Though this methodology may change from chapter to chapter, each chapter that follows will outline the sample size and what populations it could be seen to represent within the larger Omegaverse genre.

(2017) does not include any archive warnings, but does include a tag stating “mildly dubious consent”. “we can take our time” by KouriArashi (2017) uses a “Past Rape/Noncon” tag alongside a “no dubcon” tag suggesting the fic explores what both consent and noncon look like in an Omegaverse setting using past and present to illustrate the difference. The final fic in this section, “Survival of the Species” by Lissadiane (2017), features a “Rape/Noncon” archive warning, but has the added tag of “Attempted Rape/Noncon” to offer a more accurate description of the noncon featured in the fic.

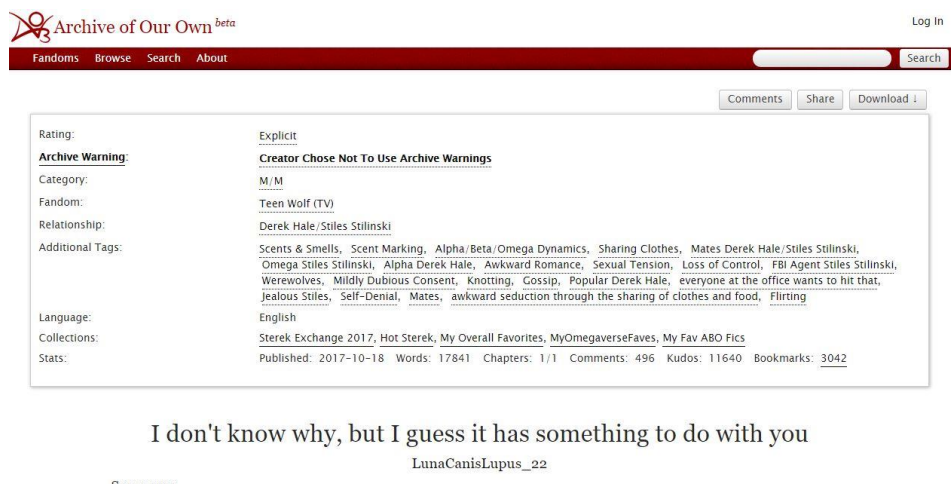
All three of the fics follow a typical romance narrative structure (Hayes 2016), all of the fics are rated as Explicit due to sexual situations, and all of the fics feature the same dynamic of Alpha Derek and Omega Stiles. All included fics also have between 8-17k kudos and all are within the top 20 most kudos’d works in this particular fandom. In fact, LunaCanisLupus_22’s fic is in the top 10 most popular works of *all* A/B/O fandoms, coming in at number 9 at the time of writing (January 2022).⁵⁶ Since LunaCanisLupus_22 has remained so popular through years of shifting fandom popularity (and a global pandemic that also dramatically changed fandom engagement), I will begin the close readings section with “I don’t know why, but I guess it has something to do with you” (2017).⁵⁷ As the most popular of the three, this particular fic offers insight into facets of the Omegaverse that are considerably more popular within

⁵⁶ When the first outline of this chapter was completed in early 2019, all three of these *Teen Wolf* fics were in the top 25 most kudos’d works of all A/B/O fandoms. LunaCanisLupus_22 (2017) is now the only one of the three remaining in the top 25 most popular on Ao3, ranked by kudos.

⁵⁷ As the introduction previously stated, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a boom in productivity and output of fan fiction - jumping nearly three million works between March 2020 and November 2021 (on Ao3). While the pandemic is by no means over at the time of writing, the boost in fan fiction engagement seems to have mellowed, holding at just under 9 million fics (January 2022).

the community and provides a framework through which to discuss the dynamics of sexual consent within the genre as a whole.

2.2.1 Flipping the script: the popularity of the dominant Omega



The screenshot shows the AO3 interface with the following metadata for the story:

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Teen Wolf (TV)
Relationship:	Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski
Additional Tags:	Scents & Smells, Scent Marking, Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Sharing Clothes, Mates Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski, Omega Stiles Stilinski, Alpha Derek Hale, Awkward Romance, Sexual Tension, Loss of Control, FBI Agent Stiles Stilinski, Werewolves, Mildly Dubious Consent, Knotting, Gossip, Popular Derek Hale, everyone at the office wants to hit that, Jealous Stiles, Self-Denial, Mates, awkward seduction through the sharing of clothes and food, Flirting
Language:	English
Collections:	Sterek Exchange 2017, Hot Sterek, My Overall Favorites, MyOmegaverseFaves, My Fav ABO Fics
Stats:	Published: 2017-10-18 Words: 17841 Chapters: 1/1 Comments: 496 Kudos: 11640 Bookmarks: 3042

I don't know why, but I guess it has something to do with you

LunaCanisLupus_22

Summary:

Figure 2.1: Title and tags from “I don’t know why, but I guess it has something to do with you” by LunaCanisLupus_22 (2017).

For context, here is a brief overview of the plot summary of the fic.

LunaCanisLupus_22 uses the animal magnetism developed within the Omegaverse genre as a way to lure the future lovers together in “I don’t know why, but I guess it has something to do with you” (2017); Stiles and Derek are strangers drawn to each other by their scents. After their initial unconventional meeting - wherein Stiles is wearing Derek’s clothes (and thereby his scent) that he collected at a thrift shop - their jobs in the private sector prompt an environment where they must work together in a corporate setting while their mating instincts cause their interactions to become increasingly inappropriate for their professional relationship. After an incident involving instinctual

scenting without explicit permission, Derek follows Stiles home and they have enthusiastically consensual sex. An epilogue concludes with Derek and Stiles enjoying Stiles' next heat together with the implication that they live happily ever after.

The plotline of this fic is a fairly standard reproduction of the popular romance novel framework with a memorable first meeting, challenges to the relationship, finding love, and a HEA (Hayes 2016). Additionally, some of the language I will explore in later scenes suggests that male Omegas in this particular iteration of the Omegaverse are female-coded and that some Alphas are fearsome in their failure to respect Omega character's boundaries. However, it is the framing of consent in this story that makes it a remarkable inclusion, both for this thesis and as one of the most popular Omegaverse fics currently housed on Ao3. There are early examples in this fic that frame the Alpha character as masculine-coded, and the Omega as feminine, leading to heterosexual coding in their relationship reminiscent of heterosexual romance fiction. For example, at their first meeting in fic, Stiles and Derek's positionality is indicative of an unequal social power structure where Alphas are not responsible for acting on instincts or, tellingly, without restraint. Derek very nearly assaults Stiles at their first physical meeting, seemingly overwhelmed by Stiles wearing his discarded clothes and smelling like Derek.

While Derek is undoubtedly the perpetrator of the sexually aggressive behavior in this scene, he immediately blames Stiles for acting provocatively. Derek's comment, "I wasn't expecting to come across a random, unbonded omega practically rolling in my scent. It - got the better of me" (LunaCanisLupus_22 2017) is reminiscent of many perpetrators of sexual violence blaming the victims of their assault for being too irresistible (Philadelphoff-Puren 2005, Luke 1998, Bivona et al. 2012, Popova 2019).

The “unbonded omega” in the above quote could easily be exchanged for the terminology of the “single woman” and (scenting aside) be recognizable as victim-blaming for sexual assault in reality. This particular positionality uses recognizable shorthand for blaming victims of assault, because of their clothing choices rather than the choices made by the assaulters, to explain to readers that Derek sees his aggressive behavior as Stiles’ problem, not his own, to restrain. With the justification that scent allows for many transgressions without accountability, there is a reading of this fic that supports Derek as both male Alpha and Alpha Male and suggests that if Alphas can act this way in fics with tags for “mildly dubious consent” (LunaCanisLupus_22 2017), then perhaps the genre itself has a problem with contextualizing sexual consent.

However, this fic is not popular amongst readers because it conforms to heterosexual gender roles and reuses the Alpha Males from popular romance fiction in a new genre. One of the many reasons it remains so popular is due to the interest it takes in exploring how these pre-existing roles indicate power structures and what happens when they are disrupted. The incident that leads to Derek and Stiles’ first sex scene includes nonconsensual scenting, but it is the Omega, not the Alpha who acts according to instinct and without restraint. As the text indicates following this nonconscenting (as the introduction to the thesis noted, scenting is often a precursor to sexual activity and considered a sexual act in most contexts), this behavior is unusual for an Omega as Alphas are typically described as the perpetrators of sexual misconduct and assault (as later readings will attest). Stiles’ internal monologue reveals,

He straight up just jumped an alpha because he got the slightest hint of his scent and went hare-brained. What kind of omega does that? It’s shitty alphas who try

that shit because they think they can get away with it when omegas are in heat.

(LunaCanisLupus_22 2017)

Stiles' thoughts on this issue can be read as providing exposition for the prevailing attitudes regarding acceptable Alpha and Omega behavior in this fic. Not only does noncon behavior typically get associated with "shitty Alphas" - suggesting that 'good' Alphas would not indulge in this behavior - but Omegas are exclusively cast as characters who do not act on impulse or without first garnering their partner's consent. This sets the dynamic between Stiles and Derek in this fic as unusual as Stiles has just proven himself to be a sexually aggressive Omega towards a seemingly passive Alpha. The phrasing of Stiles' noncon scenting, that he likens to Alphas sexually assaulting Omegas during their heat, as him going "hare-brained" is also curious as it implies that he was not in control of his actions, more so acting on instinct without conscious thought. If this is the case, it could potentially be true that "shitty alphas" who attempt or succeed at raping Omegas during their heats are also "hare-brained" and acting on instinct.

As sexual harassment is typically framed in Western societies as an issue faced by young women (not exclusively, but the majority of recorded cases) with men as perpetrators (Bivona et. al. 2012, Bivona & Critelli 2009, Critelli and Bivona 2008, Simon and Gagnon 1986, Hazen 1986, Salmon and Symons 2001, Vivanco 2012, and Busse 2017), this particular introduction to the prevailing attitudes and social standards for each of the A/B/O dynamics is peculiar. Even more peculiar is how the following scene describes Derek and Stiles' reactions to the noncon scenting - presenting Derek as placating Stiles and assuring him that he did not act without Derek's subconscious, nonverbal consent. Interestingly, this scene (which I have included in its entirety) seems

to play with the expectations that Stiles, as a female-coded Omega character, will take on the emotional labor for the situation to diffuse tension, but instead, it is Derek who assumes blame for the Omega's actions and eases Stiles through the conversation.

"Because I am so sorry. Again. You should report me to Human Resources. Fuck, I can't believe I did that. Fuck. That was- well, pretty fucked up, man. Sorry."

Derek swallows and doesn't answer right away but he's standing there so stiffly that Stiles can't help but feel like actual scum of the earth.

He might not have pulled his dick out of his pants in the break room like that temp guy did last month before he was fired and escorted off the premises, but Stiles is clearly tenting in his pants and Derek has obviously witnessed the event. This is not the time for unwelcome boners.

"It's fine," Derek says eventually, pointedly avoiding staring at Stiles' crotch as if that will drive his erection out of existence. "You're wearing my clothes. Your instincts became... confused."

Whatever's going on in his pants now is certainly not confused. And Stiles' instincts seemed like they knew exactly what they were doing a moment ago.

What the hell is up with that?

"I practically jumped you," Stiles hisses, astonished that Derek's so calm.

He shrugs. "You barely even scented me," he promises, like it's no big deal.

What the hell is happening? How is Derek not angrier about this? Stiles feels like every rational part of his brain just took a spectacular swan dive out the window.

"Barely even scented you?" he repeats. "I nearly-"

-*bit you*, Stiles realises he's about to say and his mouth snaps shut at the thought. (LunaCanisLupus_22 2017)

There is some tension within the text of this scene as the tone could be interpreted several ways. It can be read as Stiles' serious regret for his actions — as I have interpreted — or a reading that implies Stiles' response is insincere and sarcastic. In the latter supposition, Stiles' character becomes manipulative, callous, and unlikable as a romantic protagonist. I have chosen to interpret his responses as sincere, despite the possible sarcastic reading of this scene, as it is more in line with a romantic reading of this relationship - which is confirmed by the HEA at the close of the fic. Additionally, romance fiction typically casts heroes as likable or, at the very least, redeemable (Lynch et al. 2012, Putney 1992, Krentz 1992, Wendell & Tan 2011, Roach 2016) - both of which would be unattainable for Stiles' character if he is interpreted as masterminding this exchange to undermine Derek's concern.

There are three points in the above scene I would like to highlight regarding how dialogue is used to imply gendered roles and the navigation of consent given how those roles are represented in the Omegaverse. First, the inclusion of an example of a 'worse' act of sexual harassment that Stiles recalls in response to his own behavior and how he uses this to downplay his role as a sexual aggressor. Second, Derek's justification of Stiles' actions as being instinctual, and therefore forgivable, functions to exonerate his previous behavior towards Stiles as well as erasing his own feelings of vulnerability. And lastly, the acknowledgment that Stiles' intent behind the scenting was potentially more sinister and permanent, as biting is identified as a permanent, indissoluble marker between mates in this particular fic (LunaCanisLupus_22 2017). All three of these elements work to minimize the harm done by Stiles and to resituate Derek as the

partner with more power in the relationship, but in doing so, questions the rigidity of power dynamics within the genre. It poses the question of whether it matters which character is using the excuse of "I couldn't help myself" in response to sexual misconduct (if not sexual assault) despite the gendered roles traditionally implied by Alpha and Omega characterizations. The answer it offers through these three examples seems to be no, it doesn't matter, as instinctual behavior seems to be excusable in either dynamic and the recourse for acting on instinct does not seem to be related to Alpha or Omega status.

The first example seems to serve the purpose of explaining Stiles' self-awareness about the dire nature of what he has just done while simultaneously contextualizing it within 'worse' examples. Through comparing his instinctual response to Derek's scent to the "temp who pulled his dick out of his pants in the break room" (LunaCanisLupus_22 2017), an act which does not immediately read as instinctual given the context of his expulsion from the company can be read to cast Stiles in a more forgiving light. Not only Stiles, but it casts instinctual behavior in general as more acceptable than the temp's actions. Similarly, the readers of this fic read the noncon scenting from Stiles' perspective and understood how he went "hare-brained". Including this scene where he tries to reckon with that loss of control and what it means for him as an Omega character - acting how he has assumed only Alphas would - asks the question of whether Stiles' previous account of "shitty alphas" was accurate.

The next example, Derek's immediate forgiveness and shouldering of the "blame" for the situation, offers a potential answer to this question - though it is increasingly complicated. There is no real indication that Derek realizes he has shifted the blame for Stiles' harassment onto himself other than the length of time it takes for

him to answer initially. His response, “It’s fine,” Derek says eventually’ (LunaCanisLupus_22 2017), is a potential signal to the reader that Derek is shaken by the event. This response, particularly as he is on the receiving end of instinctive sexual behavior, does potentially read as the first time Derek has ever been treated this way and was entirely unprepared for how it would affect him. As a point of comparison, when Derek advanced on a retreating Stiles in their first meeting in the fic because of Stiles’ scent, Stiles’ reaction of a loud retreat - so others could hear him and see he was in some sort of trouble - can be read as a trained response from a society that expects Omegas to always be on the alert for potential harm from others. Not dissimilar to “sexual harassment/assault training” being offered solely to women and offering rape whistles and suggestions of yelling ‘fire’ instead of ‘rape’ in an attempt to call attention to their attacker from onlookers as a preventative measure. Contrastingly, Derek’s response of stunned silence followed closely by victim-blaming speaks to social conditioning where Derek has never been prepared for this potentiality and must therefore fall back on what he has been taught to do. This minimizing of harm done, while it does advance the romantic plot between the two, is complicated for the dynamics between Alphas and Omegas in this fic, as it seems to double-down on instinctual behavior being the fault of the victim and entirely excusable within this iteration of the Omegaverse. Using instinct as an excuse for sexual assault is not only an issue faced by Omegas, but also Alphas. Since this story is so popular amongst A/B/O readers, this presents a complicated framework for consent within the genre.

There is an alternate reading of this scene, particularly of Derek’s behavior as dismissive, due in part to his own aroused response to Stiles’ behavior. A later line in the dialogue suggests that perhaps Derek wanted Stiles to find him attractive enough to

act without thinking, but was merely surprised by the effectiveness of this ploy. For example, he later notes, “‘I gave you my clothes,’ Derek says with an unexpected amount of gravity.’ (LunaCanisLupus_22 2017) as though giving Stiles his clothes should be interpreted as his tacit permission for Stiles to scent him and perhaps more. This particular reading, reminiscent of the erotic rape fantasies popular in historical romance fiction where consent is offered after the “aggressive seduction” (Krentz 1992), does provide some interesting interpretations of how partners can offer consent through instinctual behavior in the Omegaverse. For instance, Derek providing Stiles with his scent via clothing becomes consent for Stiles to scent him directly. However, the subtlety of this exchange further complicates how consent is framed in this fic - if Derek did consent to this, why was Stiles not aware of that until after? Why was Stiles concerned over the potential outcomes of his instinctual behavior if he had already obtained consent nonverbally by accepting Derek’s clothes? LunaCanisLupus_22 seems to offer an answer to this by way of consequences being real, even if the crime is imagined.

The final example is what makes it clear to readers that instinctual behavior, while seemingly excusable, is not without consequence in this fic. At the end of the excerpt, Stiles reveals (to readers, not Derek) that he barely stopped himself from biting Derek (LunaCanisLupus_22 2017). In the context of the fic, biting leaves a permanent mark indicating a partnership that cannot be dissolved as a marriage could be (LunaCanisLupus_22 2017). The consequences of biting Derek would be lasting and potentially traumatic for both parties. While this urge to bite is used for romantic purposes later in the fic (i.e., soul mates, mate-biting), the inclusion of that impulse in this scene is ominous. It implies that had Stiles not reined in his instincts, the results of

his transgressions would have had permanent physical, emotional, and psychological impacts on both parties.

However, the fact that Stiles was able to restrain himself from biting Derek is potentially transgressive in this context. Not only does it suggest that instinctual behavior can be stymied by personal restraint, but it also implies that consequences are considered even under biologically compromised positions. Or at least, Omega characters can consider consequences for their instinctual actions enough to stop said actions. As some of the readers of the fic mention in their comments, this particular facet of the Omegaverse caught their attention and is a contributing factor to why they found it so compelling.

I love your handling of ABO - how you both touch on the tropes of the genre (with the little hints at Alpha dominance, like Stiles not wanting to be one of the Alphas who claim they just can't control themselves around an Omega in heat), and put your own twist on them, as with Stiles being so overwhelmed by Derek's scent, but still very much able to control himself, no matter how close he sometimes comes to biting prematurely. (thedaughterofkings, Dec 2020)

The acknowledgment of traditional A/B/O tropes leaning towards male Alphas as Alpha Males and noting how this fic seemingly departs from those norms by the Omega being in control of instinctual behavior is particularly interesting. This reader's interpretation of Stiles' being "very much able to control himself" during the scenting is also an odd departure from traditional conceptualizations of the Omegaverse, as well as a very telling response to Stiles' ability to stop himself before biting Derek. Stiles' restraint when acting on animal impulse seems to be a marker of distinction between himself and the "shitty alphas" he described in earlier scenes. In this way, both Derek and Stiles are

unusual in their A/B/O characterizations as they are able to restrain their instinctual behavior. Derek refrains from instinctually assaulting Stiles at their first meeting and Stiles can keep himself from bond-biting Derek. Alternatively, some readers identify the subtleties of consent in the fic as the main draw, with comments such as “the ‘we’re-courting-but-we’re-also-in-denial’ phase was epic [...] I love the subtle ABO AND HOW YOU DIDNT MAKE IT A GENDER WARS THING” (LadyLace, Nov 2017). This particular comment suggests that the gender-coding, without explicit statement of gender roles described as masculine or feminine, masks some of the tropes borrowed from heterosexual romance fiction like the “aggressive seductions” (Krentz 1992), or as this reader words it, “we’re-courting-but-we’re-also-in-denial”. This coding allows readers to enjoy the tropes without “mak[ing] it a gender wars thing” as is sometimes the case where strict gender roles restrict mutual respect between partners (i.e., Arnaiz’ *Hannibal* examples could be evidenced as A/B/O ‘gender wars’).

“I don’t know why, but I guess it has something to do with you” (LunaCanisLupus_22 2017) presents an interesting set of consent-based values that can be used as a framework for the following two close readings. First, Alphas seem to be granted more leeway in acting on instinctual behavior, but it is clear that Omegas experience similarly problematic instincts that they do occasionally act on with similar impunity. Second, even in fics without archive warnings for “Rape/Noncon”, the “mildly dubious consent” tag for this particular fic does quite a bit of heavy lifting - contributing to the genre’s reputation as a “dogfuck rapeworld”. Based on this one (extremely popular) fic, the sources for the problematic framing for consent in this genre seem to stem from the animal tendencies to act instinctively, the adherence of male Alphas to

Alpha Male stereotypes, and the subtlety with which consent can be offered in nonverbal and unusual ways (like offering clothing).

As the next fic, “we can take our time” (KouriArashi 2017), will illustrate, this framework does seem to have a throughline in many popular Omegaverse fics, but how characters react to these staples of the genre changes with each iteration. For instance, there were many ways to excuse initially noncon behavior in LunaCanisLupus_22’s fic - from scent-making characters go “hare-brained” to consent being offered after the fact. In “we can take our time”(2017), not only are those particular explanations considered invalid but there are consequences for noncon behavior, whether instinctual or forethought, that change how characters react to their own status and associated instincts. These changes fundamentally alter how consent is handled in this iteration of the genre, leading to vastly different conclusions within the readership about the role of consent in the Omegaverse.

2.2.2 The Alphas in Charge: instinct versus wantedness

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Teen Wolf (TV)
Relationship:	Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski
Characters:	Derek Hale, Stiles Stilinski, Erica Reyes
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Law Enforcement, Alternate Universe - Human, Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Alpha Derek Hale, Omega Stiles Stilinski, Police Officer Derek Hale, Police Officer Stiles Stilinski, Mating Cycles/In Heat, Past Rape/Non-con, Slow Build, Angst, Angst with a Happy Ending, Hurt/Comfort, no dubcon, Consensual Infidelity
Language:	English
Collections:	DarkBloodWolf13's Collection, MyOmegaverseFaves, Read from 24 Oct
Stats:	Published: 2017-02-27 Completed: 2017-03-10 Words: 17476 Chapters: 4/4 Comments: 397 Kudos: 9360 Bookmarks: 1599 Hits: 91341

we can take our time
KouriArashi

Figure 2.2: “we can take our time” by KouriArashi (2017) title and tags as shown on Ao3

The plot of “we can take our time” (2017) is centered around notions of sexual trauma and recovery while negotiating biologically determined heats throughout. Stiles and Derek become new partners in a police precinct when Derek discovers that Stiles spends his heats, which occur every few months, without a heat partner. The world-building of this fic indicates that for an Omega to spend heats alone is near inconceivable as they can be dangerous if not fulfilled properly and will likely lead to the Omega’s eventual demise. After learning that Stiles spends his heats alone due to past sexual trauma perpetrated by an Alpha, Derek offers to spend heats with Stiles consensually and platonically, caring for him primarily through scenting and cuddling. Over time they start dating and experimenting sexually outside of Stiles’ heats. When Stiles’ unfulfilled heats continue to cause physical stress to himself and emotional stress for Derek, the couple decides to spend a heat together sexually. The entire story culminates in a successful heat fulfilled via knotting with Stiles’ renewed belief that Alphas can respect bodily autonomy.

In this fic, the framing is such that consent can be offered in one of two ways: either it is pre-granted in an arrangement made before heat begins, or a compromised verbal consent offered in the heat of the moment, so to speak. However, since consent is one of the focal points of this fic, there are also in-text discussions of how neither of these methods is necessarily valid for Stiles, who views all consent offered between Omegas and Alphas as inherently flawed due to power imbalances between the statuses. Arnaiz (2018) often discusses the improbability of consent during heats as a boon where “neither party has control of themselves and will let their animalistic behavior and primal urges take over” (123). But KouriArashi (2017) seems conflicted by this particular problematic facet of heats and ruts in regards to definitions of informed

consent that dictate neither party be under influence of stimulants (either chemical or organic) or otherwise compromised. KouriArashi (2017) uses a dialogue between Derek and Stiles to prompt questions regarding the validity of consent during heat/rut conditions that can be read to invoke Popova's theory of wantedness of sex versus legal definitions of sexual consent (2021) and how only one of those things might be obtainable for Omega characters during heat.

Derek thinks about that very carefully for a minute, not wanting to push, but wanting to make sure Stiles gets the right information. "I think most people think that if they arrange it ahead of time, consent is, you know, pre-granted."

"Yeah, well, that isn't how consent works." Stiles swallows convulsively.

"Especially knowing what it does to have to go through it alone. You know, an omega goes through a heat alone and after that, they'd agree to just about anything to avoid it happening again. How is that consent?"

"I don't know," Derek says quietly. "I guess most people just don't think of it very much. Since it's a, a biological imperative, like eating or sleeping. It's just something we do." (KouriArashi 2017)

This excerpt succinctly explains the controversy surrounding consent within the Omegaverse and how it has earned its reputation. Omegas cannot offer informed, uncompromised consent during heat, but as there are factors that compromise decisions before heat, pre-granting consent is not necessarily valid either. However, as Derek points out, it is a biological imperative with dire consequences if not met and thus suggests there must be a way for couples to have heat sex while respecting each other's autonomy. As I noted above, KouriArashi is delving into the notion of the "wantedness" of sex, if legal definitions of consent cannot be met. Given the parameters

of informed consent in this particular iteration of the Omegaverse (i.e., consent can only be offered in a compromised form), the author has crafted a scenario where either all heat sex is rape, (and given the “no dubcon” tag on this fic, that is not the case) or there must be another way of examining the wantedness of sex outside of the definition of informed consent. Popova offers a definition of how these complicated notions of consent versus wantedness reflect issues related to sex in reality:

sometimes, we may very much want to fuck someone silly, but other factors, such as power imbalance between them and us, may impact whether we can genuinely and meaningfully give consent. Other times, we may feel little or no desire, and yet we may consent to sex for other reasons. (7, 2021)

While this distinction would be impossible to infer in real-life circumstances, from a legal standpoint, as the intent is difficult to discern in many situations in reality (hence informed consent has a legal definition and precedent in many countries), in fictitious sexual fantasies like those presented in the Omegaverse, the wantedness of the sex can be determined by context clues. For instance, “we can take our time” (2017) navigates Stiles’ aversion to heat sex in many ways that lead him to believe that pre-granted sex based on the wantedness of the sexual partner may have more merit than he initially granted. Stiles comes to realize that wanting sex with a partner outside of heat changes an Omega’s willingness to pre-grant consent and feel that consent is both valid and respected by an Alpha during and after heat.

“Yeah.” Stiles gives a little smile. “I mean, I can’t imagine any scenario in which I wouldn’t be willing to have sex with you, so, the whole pre-granting consent thing makes more sense to me now.” (KouriArashi 2017)

Lines like these draw attention to the differences in how consent is positioned in the Omegaverse versus reality and why that distinction may cause certain sections of the fan fiction community to find it consensually problematic. In Omegaverse fics, like “we can take our time” (2017), consent is something that must constantly be renegotiated based on relationship dynamics and interpersonal connections. While excerpts like the one above suggest that Omega characters can decide for themselves whether their heat sex is consensual, it might be frustrating for many readers to have no singular, unified system of consent versus nonconsent like legal systems in reality oftentimes provide.

This frustration might be compounded by the animality of the genre and how it engages with tropes like erotic rape fantasies. Even in “we can take our time”, a fic that is arguably extremely conscious of how it portrays sex and consent, KouriArashi plays with expectations, both of Stiles and the audience, by describing heat sex as especially violent. It is described as playful and perhaps not intended as an eroticization of sexual violence, but violent nonetheless. In fact, Stiles pleading during their heat sex, presumably for sexual pleasure if the context is any indication, adds yet another layer of frustration for readers looking to apply clear definitions of informed consent within the genre. Evidencing his previous claim, Stiles’ begging during heat sex demonstrates that Omegas will agree to just about anything during a heat and they might even beg for it.

He’s hot to the touch, and he feels so ready. Derek goes in for another kiss, and Stiles bites at his lips frantically.

“Please,” Stiles pants. “*Please.*”

His scent changes, and it’s so subtle but so affecting, and his pupils are blown wide and his fingers are twisting in Derek’s hair, and Derek slides into him slow

and easy, like breathing. Stiles' back arches and he throws his head back and he gives a quiet little whimper. "Easy, Stiles, I've got you," Derek murmurs into his throat. "I'll get you there, I've got you." (KouriArashi 2017, emphasis original)

Heat sex scenes like the excerpt above are complicated. On the one hand, there is obvious want and verbal permission. On the other, the audience is aware that Stiles, fully immersed in heat symptoms, is not fully in charge of his faculties. But the author's use of "no dubcon" in reference to the heat sex between Stiles and Derek suggests this heat sex, regardless of pleading or aggressiveness, is representative of consensual sex under the A/B/O genre conventions. This particular iteration of the Omegaverse lends credence to my argument that the Omegaverse does not struggle to provide consent, so much as the way it provides consent is in a form unfamiliar to many who engage in other forms or genres of fan fiction. Using realistic, informed consent in the speculative genre of the Omegaverse could lead readers to conclusions that the A/B/O dynamics construct a "dogfuck rapeworld". But this simplification also disregards the careful consideration of authors like KouriArashi (2017) who use the genre to think through issues of consent under these unusual conventions.

The clear distinction between noncon and consent in "we can take our time" (2017) is made stark when Stiles describes his past rape to Derek. The clear absence of wantedness in this scene can be read as the author drawing a firm line between heat sex that is consented to and heat sex that is not. While not graphic in detail, this scene further explains how the power structures between Alphas and Omegas are reinforced through physical and emotional manipulation.

After another long moment of silence, Stiles continues, "But that wasn't even the worst part. The worst part was that he said I wouldn't mind once I went into heat.

That none of this would matter. I could hate him all I wanted, but once I was in heat, I would *beg* him to fuck me, that I would *love* being fucked by him.”

(KouriArashi 2017, emphasis original)

Unlike the erotic rape fantasies of some romance fiction, the tags relating to this scene indicate it is not written to be titillating or for readers to derive pleasure from. It explicitly states the harsh reality of Stiles’ positionality as an Omega experiencing heat and the lasting psychological horrors done to him by his rapist. Despite Stiles’ rape informing his views on consent and KouriArashi using the bulk of the plot as a way to give Stiles new tools through which to examine how consent works for him and how he can make sex pleasurable for himself again, the contrast between this description and the description of Derek and Stiles’ heat sex offers succinct expressions of the author’s views regarding consent in A/B/O: it comes down to wantedness.

In the endnotes of this fic (authors are allowed forewords and endnotes on fics, though they are not required to use either) KouriArashi offers a rather telling bit of information regarding the reputation of the Omegaverse and their own choice to write an A/B/O fic about consent and trauma recovery.

Notes:

Ohhhhhhkay so first I thought I would never write a/b/o and then I thought I would never write a/b/o that involved heat cycles and yet here I am, writing this fic. All I can say is that my brain is a very strange place.

Warnings for a view of a/b/o that involves a lot of serious discussions of whether or not consent can be granted in this sort of setting. I'm not trying to kinkshame anyone here, just exploring the concept. Plus there is a detailed description of a past rape and a suicide attempt (not in the first chapter, but later in the fic). So yeah, definitely some trigger material in here, take care of yourselves!

Figure 2.3 Author notes from “we can take our time” (KouriArashi 2017)

The above note indicates that the entire concept of heats and ruts lead to questions of “whether or not consent can be granted in this sort of setting” and admits the author “never thought” they would write an A/B/O fic including heats because of this conceptual

flaw. However, it is clear from their work that they do find consent navigable in the Omegaverse genre, though it functions as an extension of want rather than legal praxis. “we can take our time” (2017) provides a subtle exploration of the concept of consent in A/B/O and the author freely admits that preconceptions regarding the genre were hindrances in the fic’s production. But the final product plays with these hindrances, particularly those of associating aggressive, potentially compromised sex with eroticizing sexual violence, as too inflexible for a genre intent on providing nuance between informed consent and wantedness of sex.

The final close reading is peculiar in this set, not just because it is the only fic to contain an archive warning for “Rape/Noncon”, but because of how it uses this warning to forewarn an “attempted rape/noncon”. While the attempted rape in the fic does not meet the legal (or fandom) definitions of rape (as there is no penetrative element aside from biting), the author chose to include this archive warning in the event the attempted assault was potentially triggering for readers. This raises two potential issues for both readers and the wider reputation of the Omegaverse. First, a reader who uses the “Rape/Noncon” warning as a metric through which to find works depicting rape because they find these scenes erotic (akin to the erotic rape fantasies of romance fiction) will be disappointed by this fic using “Rape/Noncon” warning as it is not entirely accurate to the content. Second, the use of the “Rape/Noncon” warning, that would ordinarily provide proof of the genre as a place of overwhelmingly problematic (if not entirely absent) consent, is here used as an extra precaution in line with many fan fiction practices of offering as much information as possible for readers to make informed decisions about what type of content they consume. As arguably the most fandom-friendly use of content warnings in these close readings, how “Survival of the Species” (2017) handles

issues of bodily autonomy and consent in the fic is integral to understanding the genre as a whole.

2.2.3 'Attempted Rape/Noncon' in popular A/B/O

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Rape/Non-Con
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Teen Wolf (TV)
Relationship:	Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski
Characters:	Derek Hale, Stiles Stilinski, Scott McCall, Peter Hale, Jackson Whittemore, Derek Hale's Pack, Chris Argent
Additional Tags:	Non-Traditional Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Alpha Derek, Omega Stiles Stilinski, Attempted Rape/Non-Con, Beta Scott McCall, I Can't Believe I Wrote This, there's actual sex in it, It's a Big Deal, Stiles has to have sex to live, mpreg is mentioned, omegas aren't common, Hurt/Comfort, Full Shift Werewolves
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2017-09-06 Words: 19370 Chapters: 1/1 Comments: 119 Kudos: 5742 Bookmarks: 1247 Hits: 67789

Survival of the Species

Lissadiane

Figure 2.4: "Survival of the Species" by Lissadiane (2017) title and tags as shown on Ao3.

Lissadiane's "Survival of the Species" (2017) begins with Stiles' presentation as an Omega by way of a violent heat which progressively robs him of mental coherence and bodily autonomy. Derek initially remains reluctant to engage sexually with Stiles (the description of which sexual acts will satisfy a heat is vague, leading to later mishaps). Derek makes the argument that Stiles would not choose him as a partner were he capable of making decisions not driven by heat, but it becomes clear that Stiles will die from this particular heat if not mated to an Alpha. Derek acquiesces to non-penetrative sex, which abates Stiles' symptoms, though it becomes apparent through repeated attempts that penetration and knotting will be the only acceptable option to relieve Stiles of his heat and save his life. When a rival Alpha attempts to rape Stiles

after smelling him in heat, Derek disposes of the Alpha (in nonspecified ways) and relents that the only way to protect Stiles from further assault is to knot him. The fic ends with Derek and Stiles discussing their future now that Stiles' heat has ended with the agreement that they are a couple. This fic, unlike "we can take our time" (KouriArashi 2017), uses werewolf features from the *Teen Wolf* show to enhance the "wolfish traits" (Busse 317, 2013) of the A/B/O dynamics and add a particular brand of animal urgency and aggression to each sexual encounter.

While the exaggerated animality in this fic will be explored in later passages in reference to how it may lend credence to claims of the Omegaverse as consensually problematic, I will begin with the use of tagging in this fic as it has had a curious effect on the readership. One reader writes that they were initially hesitant to read "Survival of the Species",

because it had a rape/non-con tag, however, I was VERY leery about whether I really wanted to read it after all. I decided to open the fic up and see if you'd posted any trigger warnings, and I was REALLY happy that you did. Knowing what I can expect is helpful and makes me feel better about wanting to read it.

^_^ (sexypancake, Sept 2017)

As I noted in the preface to this fic, the use of the "Rape/Noncon" archive warning, while useful for many readers wishing to explore some of the "darker" (Arnaiz 2018) aspects of A/B/O, is considerably less useful as a warning where "Attempted Rape/Noncon" is a better descriptor of the content. This use of archive warnings as vague indicators of content with tags as specific indicators of content presents an interesting conundrum for many Omegaverse fics. Does the reputation of problematic consent stem from compromising heats as "we can take our time" (KouriArashi 2017) suggests? Or does

the fan fiction tagging system play a larger role in issues of consent than previously suggested? The author responded to sexypancake explaining the necessity of their choice to include a “Rape/Noncon” warning on the fic,

Hi! Thanks for the feedback, I wanted to make sure I did everything I could to help people out who would be leery about the non-con stuff, so I'm glad it's helpful. When you do have a chance to read it, if there is anything at all you think I should add or clarify in the warnings, please let me know! I tried to be as thorough as possible, but just in case. (Lissadiane, September 2017)

In an effort to “help people out who would be leery about the non-con stuff”, Lissadiane brings up an interesting point about the standardization of archive warnings in fan fiction. Specifically, there is no standard for the inclusion of archive warnings. For example, KouriArashi used the “Past Rape/Noncon” tag to alert readers to discussions in the fic of Stiles’ previous rape, but there was no archive warning for “Rape/Noncon” featured in “we can take our time” (KouriArashi 2017). Though the authors have used noncon in similar ways - that is to say, not extremely descriptive, nor does it occur between the main romantic pairing, but it does affect the relationship between the main pairing as it is traumatic - only one author uses the archive warning. This presents an issue for standards of consent within fan fiction that readers may have picked up on if the Omegaverse reputation is any indication.

The reader tendency to presume the use of “A/B/O Dynamics” or “Omegaverse” tags are indicative of dubious consent suggests that the fan fiction community understands that sometimes sexual consent is complicated and a fic does not necessarily need a “dubcon” tag, “consensual noncon” tag, or a “Rape/Noncon” archive warning to include themes of problematic consent. However, A/B/O seems to be one of

the only fan fiction genres that receives this universal understanding of problematic consent regardless of tags. As I have explored in “we can take our time” (KouriArashi 2017), this could be due to how typical methods of obtaining informed consent are not often valid during heats/ruts, but where informed consent is sometimes absent, the wantedness of the sex is never in question (based on overwhelmingly positive reader responses). Thus the nuance of sexual consent broken into questions of legal praxis versus wantedness seem to be understood by the readership. This again prompts the question of whether the lack of standardized archive warning usage has any bearing on the problematic A/B/O stereotypes or if the root of this reputation is more wide-ranging and culturally based.

As I have noted before, some of the stigma surrounding this genre may be a remnant of previous genre critique more than it is a reflection of prevailing attitudes towards the Omegaverse. For example, the scene Lissadiane (2017) has used a “Rape/Noncon” warning for oscillates between Stiles’ wanting and not wanting sex. He says no and actively tries to disrupt his attacker but still finds pleasure in the actions of his attacker. Even with the “Rape/Noncon” archive warning and “Attempted Rape/Noncon” tag, the dynamics in these scenes are complicated because sexual fantasies are complicated. This is very much reminiscent of the erotic rape fantasies in the “aggressive seductions” (Krentz 1992) of some romance fiction, though the difference lies in how the scenes are described (and the acknowledgment that this is assault, not an “aggressive seduction”). I’ve included a section of the text below, not for shock value, but to help contextualize what I mean when I describe the similarities between the “forced pleasure” (Hazen 1983) of heterosexual romance fiction and the conventions of the Omegaverse.

Stiles struggles, thrashing and feverishly mumbling, “No, no, no,” if only to remind himself he doesn’t want this, no matter how his body burns to give into it.

The wolf tears at his jeans, ripping fabric and skin, and Stiles’ protests become a wordless, desperate cry.

He twists and turns and the wolf growls, “Lie still.” And then there is a strange sensation at the spot where his neck and his shoulder meet, a wet sort of pressure and Stiles feels his muscles all lock up against the intrusion moments before the alpha wolf’s fangs pierce his skin.

He goes still, his body freezing, his lungs incapable of drawing breath. He can feel blood running from where the wolf’s teeth are tearing into his flesh, dragging Stiles up onto his hands and knees as sharp claws keep tearing at his jeans.

(Lissadiane 2017)

There are no reader comments on this fic that suggest that Lissadiane’s tags are incomplete or that the writer is eroticizing rape through A/B/O dynamics as some suggest is common in the genre (Arnaiz 2018, Popova 2021). There seems to be an implicit understanding that this scene is complicated, not just because of how heats sometimes compromise traditional methods of informed consent, but because sometimes pleasure and wantedness are complicating factors of sexual consent. This is also not a new or unique aspect specific to the Omegaverse. Romance novel researchers Wendell & Tan describe the erotic rape fantasies of historical romance fiction using nearly the same themes as expressed in the excerpt from Stiles:

The heroine often explicitly says no, and in the vast majority of instances, they’re not feeling ambivalent about allowing the hero to seduce them [...] If they do feel

pleasure, they loathe themselves for responding sexually to the hero. (Wendell & Tan 137, 2011)

The main differences between this description of “aggressive seductions” in romance fiction and the “Attempted Rape/Noncon” in “Survival of the Species” (Lissadiane 2017) is that it is not the hero doing the ‘seducing’ in this scene and unlike published romance fiction, there are tags provided by the author that state in no uncertain terms that this scene is meant to be interpreted as nonconsensual despite Stiles’ pleasurable reactions. Despite these very clear and important distinctions between the two genres, there remains hesitancy amongst readers as to whether the entire Omegaverse is problematic, not just those fics that carefully navigate “dubcon”, “Attempted Rape/Noncon”, or explicitly “Rape/Noncon” material.

What is perhaps most surprising about this scene is not the complicated erotics it provides and how there are many ways to respond to unwanted sexual stimulus - though these do have interesting implications about the A/B/O community and how they relate to consent - but rather that there is a reading of this scene that does meet the legal definitions of rape that is not highlighted in any reader responses nor does the author indicate this specific event as problematic in their notes. The physically penetrative aspects of this excerpt, namely, the biting, provide a reading where this scene is more than “Attempted Rape/Noncon” and is instead a completed rape through biting. The excerpt has multiple instances that could fall under the more vague label of sexual assault, from the way Stiles is physically overpowered by the wolf to the ripping of his jeans from his body. But the most peculiar, in terms of the correlation between tagging practices and problematic consent, is the penetration of the werewolf’s teeth into Stiles’ neck where a bond mark would typically be.

Biting is typically deployed as an erotic gesture in the Omegaverse. I will go into more depth on this topic in the following chapter, but it is typically written as a sort of doubling penetration during sex that bonds mates irreparably (Westberg-Gabriel 2018, Arnaiz 2018). It is also not a trait specific to the Omegaverse; much of werewolf and vampire literature eroticize the “bite” in whatever context it might exist in those stories (Keyser 2010, Elliot 2016, Marvin 2012, Kendal & Kendal 2015, Lynch et al. 2012). As I noted, I will discuss the similarities between supernatural entities and the Omegaverse in Chapter 3, but it is worth noting that the bite being viewed as an erotic penetration of flesh is not new or unique to the Omegaverse. Despite these examples, the bite being utilized as a penetrative tool with sexual connotations means that it can also be used against unsuspecting victims as a tool of sexual assault. Alphas biting nonconsenting Omegas, or vice versa, as evidenced by the noncon scenting that almost led to a bite in “I don’t know why, but I guess it has something to do with you” (LunaCanisLupus_22 2017), is as much a sexual violation as it is a physical one. Much like Stiles likened his scenting of Derek to that of a sexual harasser who “whipped his dick out” in LunaCanisLupus_22’s fic (2017), Lissadiane (2017) uses traumatic language to suggest that Stiles’ going limp and freezing after his attacker bites him is similar to the physical sensations of rape. In both of these fics, all noncon actions, whether scenting or biting, have a sexual connotation. This tentative linkage between animality and problematic consent could be an explanation as to why this genre, specifically, has been dubbed a “rapeworld”. However, as I noted in the introduction to this chapter, other genres that implement biting or other animalistic characteristics (like werewolf or vampire AUs) are

significantly less likely to include a “Rape/Noncon” archive warning and do not appear to face the same “rapey” stereotypes as A/B/O.⁵⁸

This brings me to the final sex scene in this fic featuring heat sex between Derek and Stiles. How Lissadiane navigates this scene is fascinating because of how carefully the fic constructs the differences in framing between Stiles’ previous attacker (forceful, unrelenting) and Derek (cautious, disbelieving of Stiles’ offered consent).

“I trust you,” Stiles tells him, and Derek flinches.

“It’s the heat – the instinct. You can’t know—”

“I don’t feel any of that right now,” Stiles says [...]

Stiles swallows, his mouth suddenly dry, and says huskily, “All I know is that being with you is an amazing outcome of a pretty spectacularly shitty situation, and if you want me, and I’ve wanted you for so long, and you being with me will save my life, then there are so many better things we could be doing with our mouths rather than talking ourselves in circles.”

Derek’s eyes search Stiles’ face, his brow furrowing, like he’s looking for proof that Stiles really wants him, and Stiles doesn’t know how to give it. (Lissadiane 2017)

It is this final line from the excerpt that belies the true issue of how legality and wantedness tend to war with one another instead of coalescing in A/B/O fiction. We, as readers of this passage, are aware that Stiles would very much like to have Derek fulfill his heat sex needs as he 1) does not want to die, 2) has had a romantic crush on Derek for some time, and 3) is not currently under the direct influence of overwhelming heat symptoms as he “do[esn’t] feel any of that now” (Lissadiane 2017). Under any other

⁵⁸ See footnote 42

circumstances any one of these factors would be enough for Derek, and the wider fan fiction community, to believe that Stiles is sincere and uncompromised in his wish to engage in sex with Derek. But because the dynamics of heat have been so present in this fic up until this point, there is still doubt as to whether Stiles *can* consent to sex. Whereas “we can take our time” (KouriArashi 2017) eventually came to terms with wantedness being an arguably more crucial part of heat sex consent than the legal standards of consent as uncompromised being met, “Survival of the Species” (Lissadiane 2017) comes to this same conclusion, though with significant torment for both the Omega and Alpha.

Derek’s arguably extreme adherence to legal standards of consent, while problematic for Stiles who is (literally) dying for him to understand that Stiles can offer consent during a heat, can be read to have a two-fold purpose that will lead to dialogues in the conclusion of this chapter. First, Derek’s staunch stance on consent can be read as setting him apart from traditional notions of the “Alpha Male” as he fights animal impulses to fulfill Stiles’ heat even when Stiles’ health becomes compromised because of it. He is so focused on his moral standards, that align with informed consent being uncompromised, that his inaction and restraint ends up causing more pain for his partner than acting on impulse might have. Second, Derek refusing to accept Stiles’ consent as valid causes Stiles to doubt his own ability to do so. In a sense, Derek’s inability to believe Stiles causes doubts in the readership in their ability to discern consent in A/B/O dialogue. In distancing the male Alpha from depictions of “Alpha Male” who take what they want (like Stiles’ attacker), Lissadiane’s depiction of Derek is cast as causing others pain by his indecisiveness and confusion at the consensual standards of the world that he inhabits. This particular distance between male Alphas and the

Alpha Male brings with it questions as to whether the audience can trust either iteration to be a fulfilling partner for an Omega. One Alpha does not ask permission, the other does not believe permission can be meaningfully granted because the power difference is too great between the Alpha and Omega dynamics. Though very different in practice, both iterations of the Alpha could end up causing physical and psychological pain for their partners.

Along these lines of comparison, it is easier to see why sometimes these male Alphas are confused for Alpha Males by the wider fan fiction community. They seem to cause undue stress for Omegas regardless of whether they act on instinct or not. The main difference between the two is a restraint against animalistic impulses, yes, but it also lies in accountability. The Omegaverse Alpha protagonists, in each of the three stories examined in this section, hold themselves accountable for their actions and so they think about them (sometimes to excess) to make sure they're making the best, or least worst, decision for all involved. This is a far cry from the "accountability" Alpha Males, in incel logic and romance fiction, face - which is to say none at all. But it also speaks to a more wide-ranging issue of accountability in Western cultures at large - not just fan fiction culture. As the final section will discuss, the genre's speculative nature means it could respond to complicated social issues like accountability for sexual misconduct, or uncritically reproduce some of the structures that allow sexual misconduct to continue without consequence, but with more biologically inclined dynamics.

2.3.0 Conclusion

The personal accountability demonstrated by many of the Alphas in the more popular iterations of the Omegaverse seems a peculiar fantasy for a genre with a reputation of dubious sexual consent. Is it a fantasy that an aggressor will feel shame and self-loathing about their actions even if they internalize power dynamics that support their impulsive actions over the bodily autonomy of non-Alphas? There is an interesting intersection between these particular fantasies and the wider society that arguably produces them. Contemporary Western societies (though this is felt by nearly all societies based on patriarchal power hierarchies) have many prominent public figures, usually men, performing guilt and remorse about their actions or denying those actions ever took place. Since the emergence and prominence of the #metoo movement, many people are becoming increasingly aware of the prolific nature of sex-related crimes and the relative ease through which prominent men escape consequences for not only these, but nonsexual crimes as well. Alternatively, the fantasy presented by the popular Omegaverse male Alpha illustrates a process of shame and horror at potentially acting on impulsive behavior contrary to their partner's wants and/or consent. It's a compelling fantasy to represent sexual aggressors as realizing they were in the wrong and being capable of meaningful change, and perhaps be forgiven, but even more compelling seems to be the fantasy of the potential aggressor who restrains themselves from wrongdoing and holds themselves accountable for the actions of others of their same status.

There are definitely intersections between the Omegaverse and some of the problematic genres and concepts that have informed its conventions - from romance fiction to the mythical Alpha Male. But as the close readings of the more popular iterations of the Alpha and Omega dynamics conclude, there seems to be an active

reimagining of these roles by Omegaverse authors. There is a concerted effort in works like “I don’t know why, but I guess it has something to do with you” (LunaCanisLupus_22 2017) to subvert expected scripts with the Omega as the aggressor to examine how this distorts predetermined power structures of Alpha dominance. “we can take our time” (KouriArashi 2017) explores the nuance and subtlety of sexual consent within the genre - given the Omegaverse reputation of circumventing consent through heats/ruts - and finds that far from reproducing erotic rape fantasies, heat sex could be a way to explore new forms of consent negotiation. “Survival of the Species” (Lissadiane 2017) arguably went so far in the opposite direction of Alpha Male stereotypes that they crafted a hero hindered by his own accountability for his partner’s well-being. All of these fics, as a reflection of the wider *Teen Wolf* A/B/O fandom, suggest there are more careful conversations to be had about how the Omegaverse handles questionable consent and even what consent looks like within the genre than a nickname like “dogfuck rapeworld” would suggest.

The fan fiction community’s imperative to label sexual consent based on legal standards of informed consent (i.e., uncompromised) may hinder some of the more nuanced dialogues present with the miasma of heat/rut dynamics. Since the genre removes a lot of traditional consensual safeguards by using heats and ruts - the tags often indicate that consent is dubious, if it is present at all - when it is more accurate to describe the consent as differently constructed. As Popova argues,

It is ultimately stories like these, where consent is a vast gray area between ‘yes’ and ‘no’, mired in power relations and inequalities, that give us the most nuances and productive engagements with questions of consent (6, 2021).

Far from rejecting accusations of “Rape/Noncon” as “aggressive seductions” (Krentz 1992), many Omegaverse fics seem to use the genre conventions to address these concerns before they are made. Using the praxis for informed consent between authors and readers on fan fiction sites like Ao3, Omegaverse communities use tagging as a way to both inform readers of the legal definitions of consent reached in each iteration of the genre - with tags like “Mildly Dubious Consent” doing quite a bit of heavy lifting - while still playing with the notions of ‘does uncompromised consent exist in this genre from existing legal definitions?’ In offering an altered, but no less enthusiastic, sexual consent the more popular Omegaverse fics (and those that helped shaped the conventions of consent in the genre) offer a variety of ways to experience wanted sex within this quirky genre. As such, the biases towards the genre are informed more by the genres and concepts associated with the concept of problematic consent than with the A/B/O dynamics themselves - at least as far as popular characterizations are concerned.

But what about fics that lean into themes of animality and loss of restraint or accountability? While some of these works have already been explored by researchers like Popova (2017, 2018, 2021) and Arnaiz (2018), I will use the next chapter to delve into the less examined properties of this genre - namely, the animal instincts and tendencies like nesting, scenting, and biting. Though biting is the main focus of the chapter to follow, there will be echoes of consent negotiation and power hierarchy throughout this thesis that indicate the near-constant dialogue in the genre regarding this subject. I doubt the Omegaverse will ever shed its more problematic nickname of “dogfuck rapeworld”, but I have used this chapter to add much-needed nuance to the “rapeworld”, so the next chapter will take a closer look at “dogfuck”.

Chapter 3

3. Bonding, Bites, and BDSM: Paranormal Lineage and Commitment in A/B/O Tropes

He cries when Shiro kisses his scent gland, expecting the sharp sting of teeth, whimpering as he receives the soft, insistent wetness of his tongue instead. Keith pants, his vision fuzzy at the edges, and pushes himself back onto Shiro's cock at the same moment as his alpha bites him.

The pain is unimportant, but the high which comes with it is dizzying. Keith swears he can feel Shiro's pulse flooding through him, their heartbeats lining up as the alpha sucks deeply and kisses over the fresh bite. (SashaDistan 2020)

From the above description of Omegaverse bond-biting, from the relatively popular fic "Latent Heat" by SashaDistan (2020),⁵⁹ it might seem contrary to note that bond-biting is largely theorized by my fellow A/B/O scholars as a trope used to reinforce heteropatriarchal relationship norms. Gunderson describes bond-bites as "achieved when an alpha bites into the scent gland on the omega's neck, and a biochemical link is established between them" (42, 2017), but this link is more an indicator of ownership than partnership. By Gunderson's account, omegas "give up their autonomy by bonding with an Alpha" (41, 2017), and this "biologically dictated dependence is interwoven with other concepts historically tied to the female or feminine" (43, 2017), suggesting the

⁵⁹ I have used a "relatively popular" fic as opposed to an extremely popular one to illustrate that even A/B/O fics of middling popularity use bond-bites and they are used in a way consistent with both previous interpretations of the bite as potentially heteropatriarchal in nature as well as supportive of my argument for their use as instruments of queer reimagination of commitment and marriage. Despite the relative popularity of this fic within the larger Omegaverse genre (this fic has a little over 2,100 kudos at the time of writing, whereas the most popular A/B/O fic at time of writing has over 26,000 kudos), it is popular within the fandom (*Voltron: Legendary Defender*) and ship (Shiro/Keith), as it is ranked within the top 25 most popular works under these filters (Ao3, Dec 2021).

Alpha biting the Omega is a mark of patriarchal domination over traditionally feminine roles. While this theory regarding bond-biting is just one example from Gunderson's perusal of the extremely popular *Sherlock* Omegaverse fic "Gilded Cage" by BeautifulFiction (2015), other Omegaverse scholars have posited similar attachments between biting and patriarchal domination - particularly where nonconsensual bites are concerned. For instance, Popova's exploration of *Supernatural* A/B/O fics considered world-building where Omegas were "legally owned" by Alphas after they were bitten and the "legal and social framework around [the omega] completely negate[d] any agency he might try to exercise" (55, 2021). Both of these descriptions point towards a conclusion of bond-biting in the Omegaverse that is less a marker of commitment than it is a way of staking a claim of possession for Alphas over Omegas. However, as the above excerpt from "Latent Heat" (2020) would indicate, these previous theories on the subtext of the bond-bite might be a bit too narrow in definition.

In this chapter, I argue that more recent iterations of the Omegaverse bond-bite are less heteropatriarchal and more queerly positioned than previous scholarship would indicate. This chapter uses the traditionally temporary roles of domination and submission as practiced in the BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination and submission, sadism and masochism) and kink communities to reframe A/B/O biting through a queer lens.⁶⁰ I argue that bond-biting in many of the more experimental fandoms, such as the post-object fandom of *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, suggest the trope is less a submission to patriarchal dominance and reinforcement of

⁶⁰ Definitions for BDSM practices will be described in more detail in later sections of this chapter, but some scholars have taken to using these words (BDSM/kink) interchangeably to describe the same community (Connolly 2006, Lennard 2012, Pitagora 2013, 2017, Ambler et al. 2016, Sprott and Hadcock 2017, Airaksinen 2018, Howe and Cook 2019, Dunkley and Brotto 2020). As such, when I refer to the BDSM communities in reality, I am also referring to the kink communities who practice BDSM.

heteronormative relationship roles (that often minoritize women) than it is a temporary sexual submission to shared sensuality, physicality, and mutual respect expressed through animal characteristics. As such, this chapter will expand on definitions of queerness from the introduction of this thesis to include sub-cultures of queer practice and how they are incorporated through supernatural, animalistic elements within the genre.

Omegaverse bond-biting does sometimes reinforce traditionally Western, socially conservative themes like markers of commitment between partners (akin to wedding rings) and the notion that once bitten one can never be unbitten (akin to the concept of virginity). Despite these uses of the bond-biting trope in A/B/O, the history of bond-biting can be read to stem from more queerly-positioned genre characters such as vampires and werewolves (Lau 2018, McMahon-Coleman and Weaver 2012, Bailie 2011, Keft-Kennedy 2008, Azzarello 2008, Bernhardt-House 2008, Schopp 1997, Lawrence 1996). Through a thorough examination of the power dynamics illustrated in a selection of A/B/O bond-bites, I argue that the simultaneous popularity of BDSM practices in fan fiction, alongside the creation and popularity of the Omegaverse, has affected how bond-bites are framed and suggest that power being constructed in a hierarchy through biting roles does not necessarily indicate that power exchange is unequal or indicative of a specific gendered role.

As such, this chapter will be split into three coalescing areas of study followed by a series of close readings (from the same *Voltron: Legendary Defender* fandom as SashaDistan's "Latent Heat" 2020) to help contextualize these arguments. First, I will discuss what a bond-bite is and its history within fan fiction since bonding and biting have often been separate tropes within the fan fiction medium. Following that

discussion, I will explore some of the genres that may have influenced the conceptualization of A/B/O bond-bites, like popular vampire and werewolf media, and how the migration of these characterizations into fan fiction sub-genres like Vampire AU (alternate universe) and Werewolf AU may have affected the Omegaverse construction of bond-bites leading to a more queerly-constructed commitment through biting. Finally, I will discuss the role of BDSM in bond-bites, both the fictional depictions of BDSM (like the emergence of BDSM mainstream erotica following the success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in 2012 alongside BDSM AUs in fan fiction) as well as BDSM in practice and how its conceptualization for many in the real-life BDSM community can be useful in exploring the more visceral reactions to bond-biting in Omegaverse fan fiction.

I am particularly interested in how concepts of “safe, sane and consensual” (Pitagora 2017, Howe and Cook 2019) BDSM practice, in reality, intersect with the categories of consent within the Omegaverse where biting and bonding are concerned. The suspension of consent in narratives that combine elements of romance narratives, supernatural elements, and animality within the Omegaverse suggests power hierarchies are established more easily in noncon stories than in other forms of consent (e.g., dubcon) that offer more even, equal power exchanges between partners. Much like Chapter 2, how consent and power are framed within the genre can be used as a metric for Omegaverse community interests/anxieties surrounding the topic. All of these genre conceptualizations of biting and bonding have contributed to the Omegaverse trope and through their shared dynamics, a pattern emerges of explicitly queer-coded bond-bites. The examples in the close readings section illustrate that while the genre does sometimes use animal tendencies, like biting, to uncritically reproduce traditionally heteropatriarchal roles of Alpha-centric domination and possession, there are a

significant number of fics that challenge this conceptualization and use bond-bites as a way to reexamine traditional forms of commitment and relationship power dynamics.

3.1.0 Bond-bites: a brief history

As the excerpt from SashaDistan's "Latent Heat" (2020) illustrates, there are a few key facets that comprise a bond-bite in the Omegaverse. First, biting is almost exclusively sexualized in this genre. As Chapter 2 noted, when biting happens outside of explicit (and wanted) sex it is often written for horror rather than romance. Since the genre is often modeled on romance novel narratives, the horror aspects, like those described in Chapter 2 with the Alpha attacking Stiles and attempting to bond-bite him in "Survival of the Species" (Lissadiane 2017), are often included in fics with a noncon warning of some sort and characterized by being unwanted and unwelcome. There is also a very high likelihood of biting occurring during penetrative sex and/or knotting. This sort of dual penetration, both of penises into various sexual organs (depending on the biological elements of the fic) and teeth into necks is not new or unique to the Omegaverse. Vampires are arguably the more famous biters and present some of the early concept work for biting creating "biochemical links" (Gunderson 2017) between partners.⁶¹ Additionally, many fics use language to describe bond-biting in a way that can be read as evocative of vampiric biting and feeding, as lines from the excerpt that

⁶¹ Vampires have a long and varied history from Baltic folklore that birthed popular vampires in Western canon like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to the reanimated corpses of the Chinese Jiangshi to the flesh eating Algonquian Wendigos. Many cultures have myths that would be considered vampiric and each have a particular relationship to biting, but for the purposes of this chapter, I will be limiting my purview to the popular Western vampiric canon that includes blood-drinking, temporary or long-lasting psychic connections between biter and bitee and, of course, the act of biting (i.e., works like Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976)) as they have arguably had the most influence on the fan fiction sub-genre of Vampire AUs that almost always share these same tropes.

opened this chapter suggest: “Keith swears he can feel Shiro’s pulse flooding through him, their heartbeats lining up as the alpha sucks deeply and kisses over the fresh bite” (SashaDistan 2020). While the blood-drinking that is often attributed to vampiric diets (Schopp 1997, Sceats 2001, Azzarello 2008, Amy-Chinn 2005, Keft-Kennedy 2008, Lindgren-Leavenworth & Isaksson 2013, Durocher 2016,) is typically absent from the A/B/O dynamics, I argue that the emotional attachment that can be felt through the shared pulse and the Alpha “suck[ing]” at the Omegas neck can be read as vampiric in nature.

The vampiric characteristics popular in many of the Vampire AUs of fan fiction provide an example of what Busse refers to as “how tropes cross-pollinate, change, and mutate in and across fandoms” (318, 2013). For instance, themes that were subtextual or inferred from representations of vampiric characters like Dracula, or other popular vampires in the Western canon such as Anne Rice’s Louis and Lestat from *Interview with The Vampire* (1976), have been previously theorized by popular monster media critics as subtextually homoerotic. As monster media researcher Schopp, summarizes:

[when] a vampire feeds on someone of the same sex, it can be perceived as a homoerotic moment since the vampire’s feeding has historically been viewed as a sexual act. (Schopp 235, 2021)

Vampire-centric fan fiction, on the other hand, makes these homoerotic tensions explicit, as well as foregrounding “feeding” as a sexual act; commingling sex and biting. Progenitors of popular vampiric characterizations, such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), can be seen to use biting as a metaphor for penetrative sex (as well as telepathic bonds that I will discuss in the following section) as a way to circumvent potential censorship of sexual elements of the novel when it was published (Durocher

2016, Burr 2003, Schopp 1997, Signorotti 1996, Icoz 1994, Auerbach 1995, Gordon 1988). Since fan fiction can be read as less concerned with substituting biting for penetrative sex, due in no small part to the medium through which fan fiction is published and the ethos of the site hosting the content as I noted in my note on methodology, many Vampire AUs can be read to include both biting and sex. Vampiric characters in fan fiction engage in explicit homoeroticism, as 77% of the fics labeled in the Vampire AU are tagged as m/m or f/f and nearly 53% of them are rated Mature or Explicit at the time of writing (Dec 2021), but they also engage in both sex and biting simultaneously. While some of the explicitness of fan fiction Vampire AUs can be attributed to the medium itself (30% of all fan fic hosted by Ao3 is rated M or E as of December 2021), there have also been recent vampiric media depictions with more explicit sexual content that could have led to the increased amount of simultaneous biting and penetrative sexual intercourse.⁶² It is this sexually explicit dual penetration (of both teeth and penises, though not typically teeth into penises) from Vampire AUs that has become a tenet of A/B/O bond-biting.

Some A/B/O fics insist on biting happening during sex to dull or distract from some of the more painful aspects of bond-biting. For example, one of the more popular A/B/O fics at the time of writing (Dec 2021) and the most Popular A/B/O fic from late 2017 to early 2019, “You Can’t Plan For Everything” by RivDeV (2016), features an Alpha reluctant to bite his Omega partner because he is aware of the possible pain (and biochemical link) it will cause. He insists they wait to attempt bond-biting until his partner’s heat symptoms are at their most intense. As such, when the Omega is bitten

⁶² Recent examples of sexually explicit vampiric biting that may have had some impact on both Vampire AUs and A/B/O biting include Ball’s *True Blood* (2008-2014), Ellis’ *Castlevania* (2017-2021), Logan’s *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) and Park’s *Thirst* (2009).

during penetrative heat sex, the description of “it’s a little painful, but his endorphins are dulling everything except pleasure” (RivDeV 2016) is understood as the intended result of biting during sex. Combining biting and sex also serves the purpose of intensifying the bonding element of a bond-bite with physical and psychological bonding occurring simultaneously.

Like heats/ruts, biting is often described as an animalistic impulse one has to control. Control is necessary, not just because biting is often painful (as well as pleasurable), but because of its often lasting effects of psychological links between partners and the typically irreversible nature of bond-bites. As Gunderson (2017) and Popova (2021) suggested in the previous section, the longevity of bond-bites is sometimes used to ensure Omega servitude to an Alpha - marking them as the Alpha’s possession. Additionally, bond-bites and the permanent marks they leave are often treated with extreme caution within the more popular fics. For example, in the most popular A/B/O fic at the time of writing (Dec 2021), “Quiet Rapture” by lalazee (2017) opens the fic with the main Alpha character becoming so overwhelmed by the scent of an Omega that he attempts to bite them, and promptly has his nose broken by said Omega. It is described as,

...the Omega’s hand rocketed up. The palm strike cracked Katsuki square on the nose, pain streaking through his eye sockets. Stumbling back a half step, Katsuk[i] dropped his hand from his nose to bare his teeth, but something inside him snapped his mouth shut, as if he couldn’t dare act with aggression towards his [omega]. (lalazee 2017)

The Alpha’s transgression of biting norms by attempting to bond-bite a stranger is immediately resolved through violence from the Omega and becomes the entire

impetus for the plot of the fic, i.e., the Alpha learning to control his more aggressive instincts to bond and bite to earn his Omega partner's trust (Ialazee 2017). In this particular case, and with many of the more popular A/B/O fics, the bond-bite represents a very serious commitment to a partner, and transgressing this established norm has consequences for characters, both Omega and Alpha.

The bonds established through biting are often permanent, non-platonic, nonfamilial bonds between romantic and/or sexual partners secured through biting which has the effect of an emotional/psychological connection. Gunderson's description of bond-bites as a "biochemical link" (2017) is not incorrect as bond-bites do effectively create such a link between couples, but this description lacks some of the more romantic elements established by many of the more popular bond-bites in A/B/O fiction. For example, bond-bites are often described as bringing together "soul mates" and crafting a soul bond between partners that transcends biology and is instead a bringing together of spirits in addition to bodies. In "Latent Heat" by SashaDistan (2020), the rather sexually explicit bond-bite happens concurrently with penetrative sex (as the excerpt at the opening of this chapter illustrates), but it is a culmination of many chapters of build-up and a romantic conclusion that reads as inevitable. Even in the afterglow of the bite and sex, the Omega character remarks,

He belongs to Shiro. Shiro belongs to him. [...]

He is *safe* and *secure* and *protected*.

He is *loved*. (SashaDistan 2020, emphasis original)

This suggests that the bond-bite leads to a preoccupation with emotional entanglement rather than a momentary physical sensation. As the close readings in later sections will suggest, this particular emotional investment and the notion of soul mates can often

lead to questions of predestination between partners. While this is absolutely a trend in some fan fiction tropes (as I will discuss in the next section) and does appear in some A/B/O fics (around 3.7% of A/B/O fics also include a “soul mates” tag at the time of writing), the notion of predestination in the Omegaverse is complicated and revolves more around the use of scenting than biting. As such, I will not be discussing it further in this chapter, but I have a more expansive article on the subject of scenting available in the forthcoming 2022 *Transformative Works and Cultures* journal, issue 38. For the purposes of this chapter, the more popular iterations of the bond-bite are often irreversible, but not necessarily predestined.

Finally, before moving into the history of biting in fan fiction and the genres that have influenced it (i.e., soul mates, vampires, werewolves, and BDSM AUs), I will address the relatively low number of fics tagged as including “Biting” (7% of all tagged A/B/O fics), “Mating Bites” (3.8%), and “Claiming Bites” (1%) when I have explicitly stated that this trope is integral to the genre as a whole. This relatively low usage of the biting tags in A/B/O is most likely due to the mate-biting convention being so intertwined with the genre that many authors may feel that tagging the fic as “Omegaverse” implies mate biting will/might occur. For instance, in a sample of the 25 most kudos’d Omegaverse fics on Ao3 (as of Dec 2021), only 2 fics include a tag related to biting (or an adjacent tag like “Mating Bonds”), but in reading the fics I found that 15 of them explicitly include the mate biting dynamic, with 3 more discussing mate-biting as an ancillary function of the genre even if the bite does not occur between the main pairing in the fic. Though a small sample size, it illustrates the prolific use of biting within the genre and a general understanding within the Omegaverse writer and readership that the fic may contain biting even if there are no tags to explicitly indicate as much. Much

like the dubious consent often affiliated with heat sex that was described in Chapter 2, biting is affiliated with the Omegaverse regardless of the tags used.

3.1.1 Soulbonds and Alternate Universes: a review of fan fiction practices

As Jenkins' noted in his seminal fandom primer, fan fiction is an act of "textual poaching", where authors choose pairings and tropes from various sources that best suit their desires, sometimes entirely devoid of the context from which they were poached, though not always (1992). In a continuation of this tradition of poaching in fan fiction, there is significant evidence to suggest that the Omegaverse bond-bites were not necessarily pulled out of their original contexts in various genres but rather chosen because of their context within these genres. As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, biting and bonding, in fan fiction at least, have not always been co-mingled. The notion of bonding has traditionally been a facet of a "soul bond" that can be accomplished in various rituals or happenstances in fic.⁶³ While bonding in fan fiction has reached a new level of popularity in the last decade or so spearheaded by the popularity of "imprinting" (a predestined soul bond indicated to partners telepathically, following the wild success of Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005) that repurposed the idea for a younger, more online audience), the history of bonding in fan fiction predates the internet. Like many popular fan fiction tropes, it requires a return to the fandom which arguably started the contemporary fan fiction community as the "first modern

⁶³ As the name indicates, soul bonding occurs between partners as a melding of consciousness. While typically romantic and non-platonic, these bonds can be used to share thoughts, emotions, and psychological states between partners regardless of relationship status. The word "soul" sometimes has religious connotations, but these soul bonds are not often used within a religious context in fan fiction.

media fandom”: *Star Trek: The Original Series* (Busse 318, 2013). Bonding finds its fan fiction roots in *Star Trek* fic stemming from canon material such as “Pon Farr” and the continuously popular “Soul Mates AU”. The *Star Trek* convention of ‘Pon Farr’ became popularized in fan fiction as it is a type of alien heat that causes heightened responses to physical stimuli resulting in either violent sexual intercourse or physical confrontation/fighting (Busse 2013). Pon Farr arguably takes many forms in fan fiction, from the “sex pollen” trope (wherein aphrodisiacs cause heat-like mating imperatives) to the “aliens-made-them-do-it” trope (wherein sex is a cultural norm of some alien cultures and being spurred into intercourse by aliens is equally normalized within the other-planetary society). Busse suggests this is where the roots of the Omegaverse concept of heat can be found as it is the “progenitor of stories where a character’s biology forces [them] to have sex - sometimes with their partner, other times with anyone willing and able” (318, 2013). However, it is the Soul Bond/SoulMate AU, also from *Star Trek* fan fiction (Busse 320, 2013, Jamison 85-86, 2013), that shares many facets of bonding with the A/B/O bond-bite.

The SoulMate AU finds its roots in the Vulcan mind-melds of the *Star Trek* fandom that connect minds and/or consciousness through physical meld-points on the face and fingertips (Busse 2013, Roddenberry 1966-1969). Unlike the Vulcan mind-melds, contemporary SoulMates AUs often have implications of predestination absent from their origins in *Star Trek*. In their “Embodied Soulmarks and Social Expectations: The Materialization of Romantic Love in Soulmate AU Fanfiction” Kinga Kowalska defines the Soul Mates AU as “imaginary worlds where the existence of a predestined romantic match is manifested through physiology” (211, 2018). Recently, or at least within the last decade, characters with “predestined romantic match[es]” in fan fic have

particular traits identifying them as soul mates. Depending on the fandom, this can manifest as indicators on the body where a “soul mark” identifies one as a match when they find their identical mark on another. Of the roughly 57,600 fics tagged with a “SoulMates AU” or “Alternate Universe - Soulmates” at the time of writing (Dec 2021), over 21,000 also include “Soulmate-Identifying Marks” (Ao3). Sometimes, the marks that appear on one’s skin, such as bruising, tattoos, and handwriting, are reflected on the skin of one’s soul mate and can be used to find one another.⁶⁴ Other popular soul-bonding conventions include a timer in one’s skin counting down to when one meets their soul mate *or* experiencing the world in black and white until touching one’s soul mate makes the world burst into vivid color *or* telepathic links between soul mates allowing internal conversations (Kowalska 2018).⁶⁵ The range of Soul Mate AUs is vast and encompasses well over fifty thousand works at the time of writing (December 2021). Perhaps because the “mind and soul bonds are simply the most extreme form of a trope that habitually collapses the physical and emotional” (Busse 321, 2013), they have garnered more scholarly attention within fan studies (Kowalska 2018, Busse 2013) than the various forms of biting in fan fiction.

While bonding tropes in fan fiction, varied though they are, arguably stem from *Star Trek* and similarly otherworldly connections (Kowalska 2018, Busse 2013), the use

⁶⁴ Popular examples of these “Soulmate-Identifying Marks” can be found in “hello goodbye (‘twas nice to know you)” by tamerofdarkstars (2015) with over 33k kudos that uses a “soulmate AU where the thoughts of your soul mate inscribe themselves on your skin in a shifting magic tattoo” or “The Electric Fizzing Prick Pistols, or Whatever” by whitmans_kiss (2014) with over 24k kudos that features dynamics where “Everyone is born with Words on their arm that connect them to their Soulmate”. Interestingly, the majority of works tagged with “Soulmate Identifying Marks” are rated T (Teen and up Audiences) or G (General Audiences), with less than 5,000 fics rated M or E.

⁶⁵ While each of these examples are tagged with “Soulmate-Identifying Marks”, some have specific AUs or tags, such as “Soulmate-Identifying Timers” (1,281 fics), “Soulmate Telepathy” (402 fics), or “Soulmate Tattoos” (509 fics). Each of these types of Soulmate AUs are popular in their own regard (each of the most popular fics in these categories has over 5k kudos - with “timers” at over 14k kudos at its most popular), but are nested together under the “Soulmates AU” tag.

of biting in fan fiction is much more difficult to pin down to a single source. For instance, I mentioned Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005) as partially responsible for the popularity of bonding tropes in online fan fiction, and *Twilight* does feature biting as not just a potential mark of possession, but also as transformative in nature. Where Omegaverse bites transform individuals into partners, the bites in *Twilight* transformed humans into vampires (Meyer 2005). However, despite this connective tissue, I am reluctant to suggest that *Twilight* had an overwhelming influence on the formation of Omegaverse traits; not only because *Twilight* remains a relatively unpopular fandom in the Omegaverse (there are only 88 fics total as of Dec 2021), but because the bites in *Twilight* do not necessarily share some of the more intimate connotations of those bond-bites in A/B/O fics. The bites in *Twilight* are arguably non-sexual in that they do not bring the bitee any sensual pleasure (in fact, they often bring unimaginable pain akin to torture (Deffenbacher 2014)) and there is no indication that the bites offer a connection between biter and bitee - only transformation. As such, I suggest the bond-bites of the Omegaverse stem more from the genre conventions featured in the Vampire and Werewolf AUs of fan fiction than any one specific fandom.

While werewolf biting, as it is expressed in fan fiction, does play an interesting role in the development of A/B/O bond-biting and introduces concepts like bond-mates and bite marks as an indication of commitment, I will first discuss vampiric biting and Vampire AUs due, in part, to their aforementioned dually penetrative biting and sex. While the bite is important, how the bite is accomplished is equally important to my argument, as Vampire AUs tend to have a preoccupation with the notion of 'compulsion'. Compulsion, in Vampire AUs, functions as a sort of trance wherein a vampire may lure partners/victims/prey to them in order to bite them and drink their

blood. Depending on the fic, compulsion can act as a numbing agent that makes potential bitees more susceptible to vampiric suggestion or it can be a highly erotic trance-like state where the compelled person feels only pleasure. Much like Omegaverse bond-bites, compulsion is so intrinsic to the Vampire AU that it is not often tagged in fics where it is used and the ways in which it is used (e.g., consensually, dubiously, nonconsensually, etc.) are also not typically listed. At present, only 22 of the over 20,000 Vampire AU fics use the “Compulsion” tag, but in reading the top 25 most popular Vampire AU fics, it is clear from almost 20 of the works using some variation of compulsion that it plays a major role in the conventions of Vampire AUs - though it is sometimes called “voice”, “thrall” or “mind-control”. This integration of compulsion into norms for vampiric biting in Vampire AUs as a way to connect biter and bitee and potentially cause heightened euphoria can be seen in many of the reactive properties to biting within the Omegaverse.

These notions of thrall and euphoria being linked to altered cognitive states established by the bite parallel some descriptions of “subspace” found in many BDSM practices. While I will explore subspace as a concept related to the altered states produced by A/B/O bond-biting in the following section, it is important to note that while the eroticism of vampiric biting was among the first in fan fiction to explore the pleasure/pain response biting can produce - it is also not a concept unique to vampire AUs or other vampire media. While there have been bonds between vampires and victims in works that pre-date fan fiction (Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) features emotional and psychic connections between Dracula and his victims that oftentimes spans continents), it is the combination of both explicit sexuality and compulsion prior to biting that will be relevant for a discussion of biting in the Omegaverse.

One of the main differences between the compelled bites of the Vampire AU and the Omegaverse is the power dynamic between vampire and their partner/victim/prey. Not only is there often a species divide between vampires and humans, but there's also a dynamic of predator and prey that is not often present in popular Omegaverse fics. Even in Vampire AUs where biting happens between two vampires, there are often familial dynamics of vampire sire and their progeny or a hierarchy established by age; with older vampires being more powerful than younger.⁶⁶ As such, in order to explore the power dynamics often established by Omegaverse bond-bites and how they contribute to the potentially disruptive aspects of these bond-bites, I will discuss the use of biting in Werewolf AUs and their rather peculiar relationship with one another.

Werewolf AUs have had a profound effect on the formation of the Omegaverse and its many fictional wolfish tendencies.⁶⁷ Werewolves have been connected to the Omegaverse by many scholars and have been invoked by many names, including “bestiality kinks” (Busse 2013), “humans with animalistic traits, inspired by the popular imagination of wolf biology” (Gunderson 15, 2017), or the more colorful explanation from Ao3 A/B/O historian norabombay:

To get something out of the way: Werewolves. Lots of omegaverse AUs feature werewolves. Think of it as pack dynamics as written by individuals who have never spent time with actual wolves. Not every fic featuring werewolves is an

⁶⁶ This can be traced to popular iterations of vampire media making these power distinctions and class hierarchies (Durocher 2016, Fink 2010, Azzarello 2008, Keft-Kennedy 2008, Auerbach 1995).

⁶⁷ Werewolfism, as used in this chapter, refers to the fictional transformation between human and wolf. Lycanthropy, or the mental condition wherein a patient believes they can physically become a wolf or identify as a wolf incorrectly assigned to a human body (Buxton 41-42, 2013), will not be discussed in this thesis. Though some scholars cited in this section use lycanthropy interchangeably with werewolfism, there is no discussion of the mental condition in this thesis.

omegaverse fic. Lots of omegaverse fics have nothing to do with werewolves.

(2012)

To reiterate from the introduction to this thesis, the Omegaverse arguably draws more inspiration from werewolf media than from actual wolves. Strict pack hierarchies included in werewolf lore dictate social roles (typically affiliated with gender) that determine one's position and power within the werewolf pack (McMahon-Coleman and Weaver 2012, Young 2011, Berhardt-House 2008, Gutenberg 2007, Bourgault du Coudray 2003). The consensus for many of the portrayals of werewolf packs from the last few decades can be best summarized by paranormal scholars Kaja Franck and Sam George:

Werewolf packs [...] tend to adhere to strict hierarchies in which the male Alpha is the leader and his mate is second in command, and the fights for dominance between male and female werewolves are a recurring theme. Thus, the depiction of gender politics [...] often observes both heteronormative and patriarchal models, explaining behaviours as 'natural' to the werewolf and reinforcing the idea that gender difference is biologically determined. (153, 2019)

As previously noted by Gunderson (2017) and Popova (2021), there is a link between heteropatriarchal werewolf social hierarchies and how the Omegaverse uses the bite to reinforce these hierarchies as Alpha-centric. However, these pack dynamics describe heterosexual werewolf relationships, and as paranormal literary scholar Bernhardt-House notes, "The figure of the werewolf might be seen as a natural signifier for queerness in its myriad forms" (159, 2008) as evidenced by homoerotic werewolf fan fiction. This queer potential of werewolves (and vampires) is explored both through the homoerotic pairings of werewolf-centric fan fiction and the framing of said fan fiction as

“actively disrupt[ing] normativity, transgress[ing] the boundaries of propriety, and interfere[ing] with the status quo” (Berhardt-House 159, 2008). One of the ways that werewolf AUs accomplish these disruptions to traditionally heteropatriarchal werewolf pack structures is in popularizing the concept of mates as equals as well as using bite marks to indicate relationship status, not power status. For example, of the nearly 40,000 fics identified as werewolf-centric, over 2,500 specifically identify “Werewolf Mates” and almost 2,000 also identify bite marks or marking as an identifier of mated pairs (Dec 2021). This, in and of itself, is not particularly useful, but with the context of these mated pairs within tags like “teamwork”, “soulmates”, and “shared power” take on a distinctly different tone than the “heteronormative and patriarchal models” (Franck and George 2017) of other popular werewolf media.

This is not to suggest that *all* Werewolf AUs offer fluid or shared power between mates, but rather that the popularity of this dynamic within the Werewolf AU may have influenced how many A/B/O fics use bond-bites to indicate mated pairs as having similar status due to their bond. However, werewolf bites (like vampire bites) often have transformative properties as well as being indicators of mated pairs. As the Omegaverse bites are not actively transformational, but rather serve as points of connection and pleasure between partners, I have one more fan fiction AU to examine to fully contextualize my argument of the queer positioning of A/B/O bond-bites: the BDSM AU.

3.1.2 BDSM: Intersections of Pain and Pleasure

This particular section is unusual in this chapter because BDSM exists in reality instead of solely through fiction or mythology like werewolves or vampires. As such, this section will oscillate between the fictional depiction of BDSM and BDSM practice in reality, as they are both applicable to Omegaverse bond-bites in slightly differing ways. BDSM AUs provide context through which some Omegaverse writers may be familiar with BDSM practices, though in fan fiction those sexual roles and practices are often wildly exaggerated (sometimes hyperbolic to the point of farce). However, as I mentioned, the fan fiction community is a predominantly queer-identified group, and many queer peoples, in reality, practice BDSM in some form. While not all queer peoples enjoy BDSM and not all BDSM practitioners are queer-identified, BDSM practices are often considered a queer subculture (Ambler et al. 2016, Sprott and Hadcock 2017, Dunkley and Brotto 2020). Since I argue that the Omegaverse's use of the bond-bite (and its similarity with some BDSM practices) plays a considerable role in the queer potential of the genre to critique cis-hetero-patriarchy, the positionality of both the fan fiction community and BDSM communities contributes to how these ideas are executed within the genre. I will expand on this notion in later sections, but first I will clarify what I mean by BDSM. BDSM, in reality, is broadly related to:

an erotic attitude towards activities that involve intense sensations (pain), sensual experiences that increase arousal because of their connections to erotic targets (fetish), or involve power differences and expression[s] of power/powerlessness (dominance). (Sprott and Hadcock 2, 2017)

BDSM, sometimes used interchangeably with 'kink', is a concept much like queer sexuality, as it encompasses a wide range of experiences, identities, and practices and is thus intentionally ambiguous in order to encapsulate this range.

Though this similarity of concept is just one of the many reasons for the connectivity, there is significant overlap between LGBTQ+ communities and BDSM/kink practitioners. As research psychologists, Sprott and Hadcock argue,

Even though the number of studies measuring the prevalence of kink/BDSM is relatively small, these studies have noted a heightened correspondence between LGBTQ identities, non-heterosexual orientations, and kink/BDSM sexualities. (2, 2017)

Again, queer-identified people are by no means the only community to participate in BDSM, but they do represent a majority of practitioners at the time of writing (Ambler et al. 2016, Sprott and Hadcock 2017, Dunkley and Brotto 2020). Alongside a shared history of medical pathologizing and social stigma (Pitagora 2013, 2017, Sprott and Hadcock 2017, Ambler et al. 2016, Howe and Cook 2019, Airaksinen 2018, Dunkley and Brotto 2020), both LGBTQ+ communities and BDSM practitioners have specific parlance related to popular, recognizable roles with their communities (e.g., “daddies”, “mommies”, “vers”, etc. all have specific roles in each community though they often overlap).

As I noted in the introduction of this chapter, for BDSM practice, these roles often refer to themes of domination and submission. One of the most well-known BDSM researchers, Dulcinea Pitagora, summarizes these roles and their significance within the kink community into three general categories related to power differentials,

There are differing means of expressing or identifying with power roles among BDSM practitioners [...] For example, the individual who prefers to present the appearance of wielding ultimate control or to administer physical sensation might identify as a sadist, dominant, top, or master/mistress. The individual who prefers

to play the subjugated role might identify as a masochist, submissive, bottom, or slave. The individual who is generally more fluid in power role preference might identify as versatile or switch. (28, 2013)

How these roles are played determines the “scene”, or a specific type of BDSM play, introduced. This use of theatrical language is not without purpose within the BDSM community, as many practitioners limit their BDSM play to a singular scene with designated beginning and end as opposed to a longer, sometimes permanent commitment to using BDSM in all aspects of life or a relationship (though these longer commitments are not unusual or unheard of within BDSM communities) (Lennard 2012, Pitagora 2013, Airaksinen 2018). As such, it is popular within the BDSM community to limit play to specific times and settings as opposed to composing one’s lifestyle around BDSM/kink. Similarly, the acknowledgment that one is presenting a role that does not necessarily indicate power differentials in real-life is important to many in the BDSM community. During a scene, partners play with the concept of power and a “mutual, bidirectional exchange of power takes place” (Pitagora 29, 2013) wherein roles like dominant that “appear to hold a position of greater power [and] be seen as having greater control” (Pitagora 29, 2013) are not necessarily the partner in charge of the scene - since the submissive partner always has the option to end a scene or change its dynamics through the use of ‘safe words’ (Moser & Kleinplatz 2007, Pitagora 2013).⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Safe words are predetermined words or nonverbal indicators of changed consent or comfortability within a particular scene (Lennard 2012, Pitagora 2013, Howe and Cook 2019). One of the more rudimentary safe word systems follows the colors on a stop light, with green as good, yellow (or amber) to pause and consult, and red to end the scene immediately. Dominants are expected to ask about comfort and consent throughout a BDSM scene in order to provide the best experience for their submissives. In return, submissives are expected to offer accurate interpretations of their comfort and consent. While this flow of comfort and consent between partners is not always the case in BDSM/kink scenes, it is considered the norm by many BDSM practitioners.

The longevity of BDSM scenes and power dynamics therein are two of the main points of divergence between BDSM in practice and popular BDSM AUs in fan fiction.

BDSM AUs are a relatively new sub-genre within fan fiction with only 3,300 fics in total and not reaching 1,000 fics until 2017. Despite the popularity and subsequent fame of BDSM-based fiction like “Master of the Universe” by Snowqueens Icedragon (2011) (later published under the title *Fifty Shades of Grey* by EL James (2012)), the actual AU including BDSM practices (as opposed to including elements of BDSM play into other types of fan fiction) was not particularly popular until after 2017.⁶⁹ While not a prolific sub-genre of fan fiction like the Omegaverse with over 115k fics, BDSM AUs are remarkably popular with the most popular fic, “Power and Paradox” by The_Kinky_Pet (2020), featuring more than 10,000 kudos.⁷⁰ Alternatively called “Dom/Sub AU” or “D/S AU”, BDSM AUs are typically fashioned around world-building where one’s preferred sexual power status is a matter of public knowledge, either through physical marker or innate sense (much like the aforementioned Soulmate AUs), and society is separated by sexual statuses of Dominants, Submissives, and Switches. Much like the Omegaverse hierarchy of Alpha/Beta/Omega, dominants in the d/s dynamic are afforded more social power alongside sexual domination. As this excerpt from one of the more popular BDSM AUs written from the submissive perspective explains,

Officially, they are equal; officially, they are accorded all the rights and privileges of a citizen, and all the attendant expectations; yet the State has always given

⁶⁹ While the BDSM AU only hosts 3,300 fics, the BDSM tag on Ao3 has upwards of 320,000 fics (Ao3, Dec 2021). BDSM play is an immensely popular fan fiction trope, even if the sub-genre that makes these characteristics part of every-day life is less so.

⁷⁰ Sciencefictionness, brightlyburning, and Astolat are all prolific and popular fan fic authors who have authored at least one story under the BDSM AU tag. While none have reached the same popularity as The_Kinky_Pet’s “Power and Paradox” (2020), each of the author’s BDSM AUs have thousands of kudos each.

with one hand and taken with the other, professed one truth and carried out another.

The State mandates equality, but [he] has always known the truth of what it is to be submissive. (brightlyburning 2016)

Much like the Omegaverse, authors use this social power differential to explore unequal dynamics and the potentially sexually satisfying aspects therein. For some BDSM AUs, there are also biological urges, akin to heats/ruts, that urge characters to fulfill needs to dominate or submit with the goal of achieving “subspace” or the less frequently used “topspace”. Subspace is one of the many concepts borrowed from actual BDSM practice, and the definition is the same for real-life and BDSM AUs. It is a “relatively rare but commonly sought after experience among BDSM participants” (Pitagora 46, 2017) that can be described as “a combination of psychological submissive space and a change in blood flow and body chemistry that produces a feeling similar to flying or floating” (Pitagora 46, 2017). While not always the goal of BDSM scenes, subspace offers an opportunity for those in the submissive/masochistic/bottom role to experience a “unique, subjectively pleasant, altered state of consciousness” (Ambler et al. 3, 2016). Alternatively, topspace refers to the sensation of pride and mastery sometimes experienced by the dominant/sadist/top role when they have achieved “optimal performance on controlled, purposeful activities” (Ambler et al. 3, 2016) like directing the submissive’s pleasure and/or pain.

Pain is also another theme shared between the BDSM community in reality and the fictional depiction of BDSM in fan fiction AUs. While pain is often inflicted with the intent to provide pleasure, whether from the painful actions themselves (i.e., restraints, flogging, hot/cold temperatures, orgasm delay or denial, etc.) or the reception of these

actions leading to an eventual subspace that provides pleasure (Ambler et al. 2016, Pitagora 2017, Airaksinen 2018, Howe and Cook 2019, Dunkley and Brotto 2020), it is often framed as both pleasure and pain in BDSM AUs. That is to say that BDSM AUs do not often focus on the sensations of pain or the methodology that inflicts that pain so much as the pleasure it inevitably brings. However, both BDSM practice and BDSM AUs use temporary states of pain to elicit an altered state for the submissive partner. Some of the leading BDSM researchers have suggested that the “many elements of masochism, such as pain without permanent harm or damage, bondage, diminished personal power, and degradation [help] facilitate [an] escape from the self” (Ambler et al. 2, 2016) can lead to experiences of subspace or a lessened sense of anxiety for submissive partners (Pitagora 2017).

It is this lessened anxiety and experience of subspace through temporary pain that maps most easily onto the experience of bonding bites between A/B/O partners. As the close readings in the following section will illustrate, the sensation of floating, euphoria, and/or satisfaction associated with subspace is often accomplished through the bond-bite that induces similar pleasure/pain responses in recipients. However, much like the differences between BDSM and BDSM AUs are often based in biological necessities, the differences between A/B/O and BDSM AUs are complicated by issues of consent present in the Omegaverse. The often dubious consent featured in the Omegaverse, as explored in Chapter 2, presents an issue when discussing the bond-bite as a potentially kink-adjacent tool of permanent commitment between partners as consent is what separates BDSM pain/pleasure play from rape and/or torture. Through their explorations of consent in BDSM cultures, researchers Dunkley and Brotto found, “the practice of mutually defined and agreed-upon behaviors [are] said to be primary

qualities that delineate BDSM from coercive sex” (658, 2020). Much of the historical pathologizing of BDSM stems from the systemic failure to recognize the mutual consent between BDSM partners and instead uses the limited perspective of pain as uniformly bad and painful sexual practices as sexual abuse regardless of context (Pitagora 2013, Probyn 1999, Kubiesa 2019, Dunkley & Brotto 2020).⁷¹ As such, the consensual practices of the Omegaverse being based on wantedness rather than “mutually defined and agreed-upon behaviors” does complicate the interpretation of the bond-bite as using similar practices of BDSM AUs.

Since the Omegaverse oftentimes suspends the traditional, legal understandings of consent using animal mating imperatives, the use of additional animal traits to further define consent and power within the genre varied depending on world-building. The following close readings have been separated by the dialogues of consent surrounding their bond-bites to illustrate this point; starting with the enthusiastically consensual bite, and moving towards the non-consensual bite. Despite the various relationships with consent in the readings, understanding BDSM and BDSM AUs is useful in describing the distinct allure of the bond-bite in A/B/O and how it might be considered a tool of queer reinvention rather than strictly hetero-patriarchal domination. The relationship dynamics secured during bond-bites are more often based on power exchange than domineering Alphas asserting their control over Omegas. Where Alphas do assert control over Omegas, it is often as a temporary role to increase sexual pleasure through bond-bites for both parties. As such, the power dynamics within each example from the close readings vary from equal partners that each provide pleasure and/or pain from a

⁷¹ There is also evidence to suggest that the high population of LGBTQ+ individuals in BDSM communities contributed to the pathologizing of BDSM, as until recent years LGBTQ+ identity was similarly pathologized in many Western cultures (Dunkley and Brotto 2020, Howe and Cook 2019, Pitagora 2013, 2017).

particular perspective (much like the cyclical power exchange between doms and subs in BDSM practice) to strict power hierarchies where consent is often dismissed by the more powerful partner.

3.2.0 Intergalactic Bonds: Mate Biting in the *Voltron: Legendary Defender* Fandom

I have elected to use works from the *Voltron: Legendary Defender* (often referred to as VLD) fandom for a few reasons that I will discuss in this section, not least of all because of the notoriety this fandom garnered for being contentious and toxic - doxxing fans and fan scholars alike.⁷² The source material, an animated television show produced by *Netflix* (2016-2018) reimagined from the original Japanese animated program from 1984,⁷³ prompted an impassioned response by its followers that led to what fandom has termed “shipping wars”. This doxxing, or releasing personal information including legal name, pictures, residential addresses, and workplaces to the internet, has continued within this particular fandom despite the ending of the show in 2018, and thus *Voltron: Legendary Defender* has been termed a “toxic fandom”.

⁷² There is a surplus of non-academic fan scholarship on this subject on fan sites such as *tumblr*, *reddit*, and *Youtube*, though no academic scholarship on the subject currently exists. This is due, in part, to cases like Fan Studies scholar, Renee Ann Drouin, who was doxxed in 2019 by *VLD* fans after attempting to scrape data from the fandom for a Ph.D. thesis on ethical data collection in fandom, as she noted on a panel on contemporary fandom at a recent Fan Studies conference and in a recent book chapter for an edited collection (FSNNA 2021, Drouin 65, 2021). Thankfully, Drouin has since changed universities and thesis topics, but further reading on this subject of *VLD* fandom doxxing can be found on fan sites such as “Why is the *Voltron* Fandom so Toxic?” hosted by Quora (2019) or *reddit* thread “What Happened to the *Voltron* Fandom?!” added by Fandom Files (2017).

⁷³ The animated program produced and distributed by *Netflix* was based on Japanese content, but many of the showrunners, writers, and voice actors for *VLD* are white (including the voice actor for the Japanese character Shiro). While this decision leads to many questions of cultural appropriation and “white-washing” in mainstream Western media productions, the potential appropriative aspects of the show remain outside the current scope of this thesis.

However, the fans who have remained in the *VLD* fandom since the show's conclusion in 2018 have produced some of the most interesting iterations of Omegaverse bond-biting currently available in the genre. Perhaps because of their survival of the "shipping wars", or despite it, these fans seem more interested in exploring the more unusual aspects of bond-biting and play with preconceived notions of what a bond-bite consists of. In doing so, these authors have crafted stories that interrogate not only the purpose of the bond-bite but the potentiality of using it to critique the traditional Alpha-centric hierarchy of A/B/O dynamics. Additionally, as someone who enjoyed *VLD* fics before starting this thesis, I know from my own involvement that *VLD* A/B/O fics have always been interested in incorporating new concepts into traditional Omegaverse tropes - whether through exploring the potential to express bond-bites as BDSM practice, as this chapter evidences, or in reimagining heats and ruts as products of alien involvement rather than expected biological markers in societies.

As my argument seeks to broaden current descriptions of bond-bites as tools to reinscribe heteropatriarchal traditions of male-centric dominance, these fics, with their revisionist world-building, are the ideal contenders for a perspective of the A/B/O bite as a revisionist tool through which to reframe current understandings of power and partnership.⁷⁴ The fics I have chosen, "Balancing Act" by an_aphorism (2020), "Alpha to Alpha" by magisterpavus (2020), and "Shiro the Hero and the Hungry Chain" by Saasan

⁷⁴ Unlike Chapter 2, this chapter utilizes a less popular fandom (relatively speaking – it is still within the top 20 most popular fandoms in the Omegaverse) in order to showcase how ingrained concepts like bond-biting are to the genre. Bond-biting, and the BDSM elements I argue it represents, can be found in any number of A/B/O fics and using less popular fics helps to illustrate that point. That being said, the three fics selected for this chapter can be seen to represent a proportion of Omegaverse fics in the 100s. The A/B/O "Sheith or Shiro/Keith" fics number at almost 1000 and over 50% of those fics are rated E for sexual content. Again, the actual number of these fics that include a bond-bite is difficult to estimate given the intrinsic nature of animality in the genre, but from my experience in this fandom, I would suggest 200 of these fics to include an explicit bond-bite if not an implicit one. Much like Chapter 2, I elected to use the more popular examples from this fandom instead of a quantitative approach, but that does not mean that my conclusions will not be applicable to a larger proportion of the fics in these categories.

(2018), all offer differing perspectives on A/B/O bond-biting. Whether through the status of the partner who initiates the bite, the consent with which the bite is performed, or the pre-existing power dynamics of the couple involved, all of these *VLD* fics provide different approaches and interpretations of the A/B/O bond-bite. While each of the fics features the same characters from the animated television program, Keith Kogane and Shirogane “Shiro” Takashi, only one of the fics remains in “canon-verse”, meaning some of the events and settings from the source material remain relevant to the events and settings of the fic.

The source material for *VLD* featured space travel, alien species, large-scale battles between humans and aliens, and interplanetary exploration. The program could broadly be described as an animated mish-mash of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* as it had the exploration and adventure motif of the former and the grand good-versus-evil battles of the latter. The program was initially marketed to children and the pairing I am going to use, between Keith and Shiro, is canonically that of mentor and mentee. While their relationship is complicated in the source material, in the fics, their mentor/mentee relationship often translates into a “forbidden romance” where their professional relationship prohibits them from professing their desire for romance, or their relationship is one of “mutual pining” where both characters pine for the other, but assume their advances will be rejected and therefore never communicate these emotions. Both of these dynamics will play small roles in the fics below, but the source material is often suspended or circumvented in the examples I’ve selected.

For the fics, an_aphorism (2020) explores Shiro and Keith’s relationship through their jobs as airplane pilots (without space travel or aliens), Saasan (2018) crafts a ‘modern AU’ where characters rarely travel outside of the bedroom - much less to

space. Only magisterpavus (2020) uses space exploration as the setting of their fic. This is only relevant in as much as the source material reveals that Keith has an alien parent and therefore partially alien biology. While this is largely ignored in the fics, it does have repercussions for the length and aggressiveness of Keith's heats (when he is an Omega) and ruts (when he is an Alpha) regardless of his described parentage. Despite the context, Keith's biology is always regarded as unique in the fics.

Each of the fics uses the A/B/O dynamics to foreground biological reactions/impulses and thus, Keith's unusual biology is often an effect of his status within the A/B/O hierarchy rather than alienness. The reliance on A/B/O dynamics to explain unusual mating imperatives or extended durations of heat/rut also has an interesting effect on the use of consent, both for sex and biting, within these fics. Since consent is a contentious issue with the Omegaverse, as Chapter 2 disclosed, and within the BDSM community practices that I will be using as points of comparison, I have split the following readings along the lines of consent - starting with an enthusiastically consensual bond-bite and moving through dubious consent into noncon. Much like my contemporaries, Gunderson (2017) and Popova (2021), I do think consent has an impact on how power is distributed through bond-bites, but as the following close readings will evidence, consent is only a portion of the complex power dynamics between bonded partners.

3.2.1 Case Studies: The Consensual Bite

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Voltron: Legendary Defender
Relationships:	Keith/Shiro (Voltron), Minor or Background Relationship(s), Allura/Lance (Voltron), Adam/Shiro (Voltron)
Characters:	Shiro (Voltron), Keith (Voltron), Adam (Voltron), Allura (Voltron), Lance (Voltron), Hunk (Voltron), Pidge Katie Holt
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, reverse omegaverse, Mutual Pining, Omega Keith (Voltron), Alpha Shiro (Voltron), Courting Rituals, Cuddling & Snuggling, Service Top Shiro (Voltron), Sparring, Masturbation, emotional and physical edging, Love Confessions, Kissing, Grinding, Oral Sex, Sex, Knotting, Mate Bite, Soft filth
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-05-10 Words: 13229 Chapters: 1/1 Comments: 65 Kudos: 1843 Bookmarks: 435 Hits: 9493

Balancing Act an_aphorism

Figure 3.1: Title and tags for “Balancing Act” by an_aphorism (2020).

“Balancing Act” by an_aphorism (2020) features an Alpha Shiro/Omega Keith pairing, where the author notes that the framing of the fic is a “reverse omegaverse in which omegas control society,[and] there are alpha prejudices/rules that Shiro struggles with”. This ‘reversal’ means that the power hierarchy of the relationship is inverted from traditional Alpha-centric hierarchical A/B/O models. The Omega holds more social power as the dominant partner and is outwardly assumed to be more financially, emotionally, and sexually capable than Alphas. Despite this alteration to the typical A/B/O world-building that traditionally favors male Alphas, the bond-bite and the concurrent sex scene of this fic remain unchanged and remarkably un-reversed in comparison with typical A/B/O dynamics - meaning the Alpha initiates sex and is sexually domineering.

The plot of “Balancing Act” (2020) revolves around the developing relationship between Shiro and Keith, from friendship to lovers, following the end of Shiro’s previous relationship with another Omega. Despite evidence that Shiro’s ex-partner was abusive and continually belittled Shiro’s achievements and job choice, saying “piloting is brain work, omega work” (an_aphorism 2020), suggesting that Shiro’s hard-won job as a pilot

was wasted on him as an Alpha, Shiro is implied to have a sullied reputation due to his loss of a potential Omega mate. Lines like, "It's a great shame for an alpha to lose a mate-match, even one not consummated by a mate bite" (an_aphorism 2020) provide interesting world-building context as they can be read to suggest that Shiro has 'earned' his reputation by being discarded by an Omega. Regardless of the 'inverted' power dynamics of this fic, "Balancing Act" (2020) can still be read to adhere to specific gendered roles correlated with each status, and deviation from these roles has sometimes disastrous consequences for the less socially powerful party. While not explicitly stated, there is a reading of this quote that blames Shiro for the failure of his past relationship because he failed to perform his role adequately by pursuing and obtaining "brain work, omega work".

In a manner of speaking, Shiro provided many of the benefits of a traditional marriage such as companionship, shared finances, and cohabitation, but without the legal contract of marriage (e.g., a bond bite) to protect him when his partner left. Additionally, the assumption that it is Shiro's fault that the relationship ended because of his choice in 'unsuitable' careers mirrors many of the potentially problematic assumptions surrounding traditionally conservative views of marriage. For example, conservative, heterosexual marital roles often assume relationship maintenance as the wife's responsibility and any failure to reconcile as the wife's failure in this role. While a fairly conservative view of marriage and relationships, there are echoes of this mindset in the world-building of "Balancing Act" (2020), if Shiro's reputation as a failed potential mate at the beginning of the fic is any indication.

However, it is exactly this conservative framing of relationship roles that makes the biting and desire to be bitten so thematically poignant in this work. The tone of the

fic takes a very sensual departure from its more traditional framework when it describes desire - both for sex and (notably) biting. There is a very explicit yearning that comes across in lines such as:

Here there is a desperate wanting just under his skin, and it's so much more than just the physical mating. He wants Keith in every way it is possible to have a person. He wants a mate-match and a mate bite and a forever mate.

(an_aphorism 2020)

Reminiscent of the “equal partners” tag associated with Werewolf AUs, Shiro’s desire for a forever mate can be read to stem from both his desire for a partner (in general) and his desire to be with Keith (sexually and romantically). The desire for a “mate-match” indicates Shiro’s wish to fulfill the social role of obtaining a partner, specifically an Omega partner. But the “desperate wanting under his skin” is indicative of a far more sensuous reaction to the prospect of mating than a socially ascribed role expected of Shiro.

In BDSM practice, many of the pleasure/pain responses used in an effort to achieve subspace are prompted by this very desire to ease the “desperate wanting under [one’s] skin”. For example, in the 2016 report examining the correlation between BDSM and altered, stress-relieving states, an interview with a professional dominant revealed that for some submissives who are too antsy or anxious, “a heavy whipping is the only thing that brings them out of their heads and into their bodies - out of their thoughts and into the here and now” (Ambler et al. 4). While biting and heavy whipping are very different experiences and, in the case of the Omegaverse, the desperation described is fictional, there are notable similarities between Shiro’s getting caught in his own desire to be mated and submissives who can only be pulled out of their own heads

by painful, consensual BDSM play. If “achieving subspace during consensual BDSM interactions might result in a reduction of physical and emotional stress in the submissive partner” (Pitagora 44, 2017), then the above excerpt suggests Shiro is in need of achieving subspace or some similar sensation to relieve his desire and anxieties revolving around this desire. In this way, when Shiro achieves a bond-bite in later scenes, his response mirroring that of a submissive in subspace is not only recognizable but expected.

Awareness skips him over then. Shiro floats in the bliss, spent and happy in a primal way that nothing has ever been. He pulls his teeth back from flesh and begin[s] to lick at the wound. There is nothing else but the heat clutching his knot, the taste of his mate. There’s a throb around his knot that sends a little jolt through him. He licks again at the bite and his mate tightens again. (an_aphorism 2020)

This notion of floating is one I have described as consistent with the experience of subspace by many submissive partners participating in BDSM scenes in reality. Where this experience of bliss stemming from pain and connectivity seems to deviate, if slightly, from BDSM play is the permanence of the bond-bite marks (where BDSM impact or pain play would otherwise be temporary) and that Shiro seems to be achieving subspace as the active, dominant partner (i.e., the biter instead of the bitee). The active, dominant partners of BDSM, in reality, are more likely (though still very rarely) to experience topspace than subspace. However, what Shiro is described as experiencing is notably different from the expected topspace. Topspace is often associated with a sense of hypervigilance and ‘flow’ where one’s dominant actions or dictation has led to their submissive partner’s pleasure and the dominant feels pleasure

as a result of this; their pleasure is reciprocal rather than unilateral (Ambler et al. 2016, Pitagora 2017).

The above description of subspace through shared emotional connection and therefore shared feelings of pain and pleasure rebounding through the Omegaverse bond-bite is what initially led me to the framework of BDSM fan fiction as opposed to BDSM in practice. In BDSM AUs, the fictional reality is shaped around the flow of power between dominants and submissives as submissives enter subspace and their partners find pleasure in helping their submissives achieve this altered state of bliss or euphoria. As such, the A/B/O bond-bite described in “Balancing Act” (2020) offers a direct parallel in how it frames the fluid power dynamics between Alphas and Omegas during a bond-bite. The Alpha, Shiro, can be read to feel pleasure and euphoria by *providing* a bite for his mate and also *receives* pleasure through the security and commitment through the bond itself. Despite being the dominant, aggressive sexual partner, Shiro’s description of his bond suggests more of a switch or even submissive attitude towards his own pleasure and the pleasure exchange between himself and his partner.

This positions the bond-bite of this fic more towards fictional illustrations of BDSM practice than those recorded in reality, but it does provide an interesting point of entry to explore the power dynamics implied by the bond-bite. Do they adhere to patriarchal structures where the bite is used to cement the dominant partner as the more powerful role and requires submission from their partner in all aspects of the relationship, not just sexual, as suggested by previous scholarship from Gunderson (2017) and Popova (2021)? The closing lines of “Balancing Act” would suggest that playing with roles of dominance and submission is limited to sexual play, whereas fluid

power exchange prompted by these roles will serve as the basis of their newly permanent relationship.

“Exactly. Hm. How about from now on you give up this Proper Alpha shit and I’ll give up the Proper Omega shit and we just meet in the middle?”

Shiro can’t help but beam. His mate is perfect. “Equal partners,” Shiro says.

(an_aphorism 2020)

Despite the roles of dominant and submissive used during sex and bond-biting, it is explicitly noted in this exchange that the power dynamics of the new relationship between Shiro and Keith is not based on a hierarchy. The disregard for “proper” social norms or expected roles suggests a resistance to the often patriarchal structures of the A/B/O dynamics that have been garnered through bond-bites. While this passage comes at the close of the fic, it implies that Shiro and Keith’s relationship, made permanent through bond-bite, will not encounter some of the same biter/bitee issues of genres like the Vampire AU as there is no sire/progeny relationship; instead following more closely with power structures from queer Werewolf AUs where mated pairs create their own new dynamic separate from the ‘pack’ or in this case, the social pressure to conform to particular roles. This notion of disintegrating power hierarchies through specific dominant and submissive roles that offer fluid power exchanges has interesting complications for iterations of the bond-bite, as it suggests consensual bonding eliminates the social hierarchy of A/B/O. Since this is but one example of the potentially transgressive nature of bond-bites, the next example will explore a dubiously consensual bond-bite to investigate whether issues of consent affect the more fluid power exchange suggested by “Balancing Act” (2020). Does altered consent offer

altered power dynamics, leaning more towards traditionally heteropatriarchal structures?

3.2.2 Case Studies: The Dubiously Consensual Bite

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Voltron: Legendary Defender
Relationship:	Keith/Shiro (Voltron)
Characters:	Keith (Voltron), Shiro (Voltron), Allura (Voltron), Pidge Katie Holt, Hunk (Voltron), Lance (Voltron), Zethrid (Voltron), Veronica (Voltron), Acxa (Voltron)
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Alpha/Alpha, Alpha Shiro (Voltron), Alpha Keith (Voltron), Mutual Pining, Miscommunication, Hurt/Comfort, Alternate Universe – Canon Divergence, Protective Shiro (Voltron), Protective Keith (Voltron), Sex Pollen, Mating Cycles/In Heat, First Time, Knotting, Facials, Rimming, Virgin Keith (Voltron), Bottom Shiro (Voltron), Praise Kink, Overstimulation, Nipple Play, Mating Bites, Marking, Soulmates
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-06-05 Words: 11975 Chapters: 1/1 Comments: 53 Kudos: 976 Bookmarks: 135 Hits: 6728

Alpha to Alpha

magisterpavus

Summary:

Figure 3.2: Title and tags for “Alpha to Alpha” by Magisterpavus (2020).

“Alpha to Alpha” by magisterpavus is an unusual A/B/O fic as it features one of the more recently popular relationship dynamics of the Omegaverse; an Alpha/Alpha pairing where neither of the main characters is an Omega.⁷⁵ As the opening lines of the fic express, this is an unusual configuration even within the world-building set by the author of the fic, “Alphas aren’t supposed to want their mate to be another alpha. It’s a rule so old it hardly bears repeating” (magisterpavus 2020). Because of their shared Alpha status, Shiro and Keith mutually pine for one another while assuming the other will not accept their romantic overtures due to the stigma attached to same-status couples in this fic. Since “Alpha to Alpha” (2020) is mostly set within the canon-universe

⁷⁵ This recently popular dynamic (since 2018) will be explored thoroughly in Chapter 4 as it provides an interesting perspective on gender norms and associated power hierarchies within the genre.

of the source material, Shiro and Keith (as space explorers and *legendary defenders*) accept a mission to an unfamiliar planet that leaves the pair stranded in an alien environment that triggers heat/rut-like symptoms for them both. This use of alien flora to trigger mating imperatives means that despite the explicit wantedness of the biting and bonding that occurs, the dubious consent of both the bond-bite and multiple rounds of sex happening concurrently leaves the couple uncertain of how to navigate their new, permanent mental/emotional link. While the fic ends with love confessions and the traditional HEA of many of the most popular A/B/O fics, the addition of other soul-bonding tropes like sex-pollen and aliens-made-them-do-it complicate the power structures implied by bond-bites.

The fic is fairly explicit in defining the impossibility of Shiro and Keith's relationship under normal circumstances. As such, the use of sex-pollen tropes acts as a plot device to circumvent societal pressures to conform to the expected Alpha/Omega pairing. This has the unusual side-effect of indicating to readers that this particular same-status pairing could not occur naturally within this iteration of the Omegaverse and requires alien assistance to succeed. As the following excerpt suggests, this "unnaturalness" has problematic implications for the impending bond-bite in this fic, namely that it implies a moral condemnation of the couple who will end up permanently bonded by the conclusion of this story.

[...] a rule so old it hardly bears repeating, with a thousand supposed justifications: it's unnatural, they can't procreate, it's something they'll outgrow, it's dangerous, their instincts will make them hurt each other, the mating bond won't work properly, it's just simply not possible for alphas to fall in love.

(magisterpavus 2020)

Given the above excerpt, the text seems to support a reading that reinforces a conservative, patriarchal view of bond-bites wherein they are only successfully used to bond Alphas and Omegas within a specifically procreative relationship. There are also indications in this reading that same-status relationships are likened to same-sex or same-gender relationships in many conservative, patriarchal Western cultures such as the more evangelical communities of the United States. While I will go into more detail in Chapter 4 regarding this connection between same-status relationships in the Omegaverse and queer relationships, in reality, it is notable that “Alpha to Alpha” (2020) seems to recognize this similarity and circumvents its more problematic implications by using sex-pollen to spur action instead of conversation.

The framing of the bond-bite in this fic works to dispel some of these unusual and unsettling implications of same-statused couples by using the roles of dominant and submissive sexual partners to instill a familiar power dynamic for potentially concerned readers. However, unlike “Balancing Act” (2020), “Alpha to Alpha” (2020) does not immediately suggest that the power exchange between these roles is cyclical or fluid. As the following excerpt will evidence, the initial power dynamics favor the dominant sexual partner as the more powerful party; in charge of both initiating sexual play and bond-biting.

Keith doesn't bite down, doesn't mark him there, but he wants, oh how he wants. His eyes flutter shut at the hard beat of Shiro's pulse beneath his tongue, and his entire body strains closer at the thought of biting down, his canines grazing Shiro's skin in the most tantalizing, awful way. Shiro doesn't even try to move away, just lets his head fall back into the pool, panting harshly under Keith.
(magisterpavus 2020)

This almost-bite can be read to accomplish three goals related to bond-biting and its associated power structure within this fic. First, it distinguishes Keith as the dominant partner in charge of providing pleasure for his partner both through sex and potentially bond-biting. Second, the desire to bite, or at least teasing biting, alerts the reader to the wantedness of the bond-bite between these Alphas when under the influence of alien substances. This wantedness is also explored by the third point, which is Shiro's submission to Keith as both a dominant sexual partner and potential bond-mate. When Shiro "just lets his head fall back" instead of fighting against the potential bond-bite, this can be interpreted as delegitimizing the previous assertion that Alpha/Alpha couples would not be able to bond in this iteration of the Omegaverse because their instinctual behavior would not allow it. It can also be interpreted as the sex-pollen enabling the Alphas to act as sexual partners as opposed to their expected Alpha aggression when placed in a same-status sexual encounter.

Unlike "Balancing Act" (2020) that featured a bite offered and received with full consent and wantedness (inasmuch as the Omegaverse can provide these concepts given the arguments of Chapter 2), the dubiousness of the consent offered during the first bite in "Alpha to Alpha" (2020) does seem to affect the power dynamic of the couple. Keith bites Shiro while they are both still under the influence of the sex-pollen and the language used to describe the bite is similar to "Balancing Act" (2020) in that it implies the result of bond-biting as akin to subspace, but a marked departure from the previous fic in that neither partner is aware of the potential permanence of their bond-biting actions.

The world is blurry and strange when Keith finally releases Shiro, and he blinks at the wound he's left on Shiro's neck, the bloodied bite of a fresh mating mark.

In that moment, Keith can find nothing wrong with it except that it's too messy, and he rumbles in concern, licking the marks clean and preening at Shiro's answering rumble. (magisterpavus 2020)

While the sense of blurriness and strangeness could be read as subspace-adjacent, I would argue that Keith's physical experience following the bite is more consistent with the topspace concept of BDSM practice. The floaty and euphoric elements of subspace are absent from this description, focusing instead on Keith and how he has made his more submissive partner feel through administering pain followed by pleasure. Keith's acknowledgment of the bite and "preening" at his bite-mark suggests "optimal performance on controlled, purposeful activities" (Ambler et al. 3, 2016) that mirrors the description of BDSM topspace. Additionally, Shiro's rumble is indicative of him being in subspace as he is nonverbal, but still enthusiastic about the sexual play. The scene, being from Keith's perspective and his own feeling of accomplishment at having bitten Shiro, seems to be compounded by animal instinct to pleasure his partner over the potential logistical issue that he has just irrevocably bonded with Shiro. Magisterpavus (2020) seems to be aware of the permanence of the bond-bite and what it signifies to the readership of this fic that is familiar with Omegaverse tropes. The author's addition of "Keith can find nothing wrong with it" suggests that were Keith not under the influence of alien fauna, he might take issue with the bond-bite. As neither partner is particularly bothered, or aware, of the permanence of their new bond, the anxiety of the situation is entirely dependent on reader knowledge of Omegaverse tropes.

The permanence of the bond is addressed almost directly following Shiro and Keith's rescue that provides medical attention to disperse the effects of the alien fauna. As Shiro, the submissive partner, did not reciprocate the bond-bite, it is revealed that

their bond is only partially complete and will not work sufficiently to bond them as mates unless Keith agrees to let Shiro bond-bite him. As such, it is the framing of both power equality and consent in the final bond-bite of this fic that queerly positions the trope. For instance, the more open communication of what a completed bond-bite might mean for their relationship dynamics brings with it an understanding that Shiro and Keith will be partners if they are bonded. Despite Shiro being in the position of biter, it is a mutual decision made by the couple. This mutuality, while not specifically queer, does indicate a clear departure from previous suggestions that the bond-bite secures positions of permanent dominance and submission as affiliated with patriarchal, heterosexual bonds of commitment. As the excerpt below would suggest, there does seem to be a correlation between consent offered during a bond-bite and the power distribution within an Omegaverse relationship.

“I should have done this a long time ago,” Shiro tells him, and leans down to nuzzle at the juncture of Keith’s neck and shoulder. Keith’s grip on Shiro’s shoulders turns bruising, and he whimpers when Shiro exhales over the skin, mouths wetly over Keith’s throat. Shiro pauses, his right hand stroking down Keith’s side, soothing, holding him. “Yes?”

Keith makes a breathy noise he doesn’t mean to and squeezes his eyes shut when Shiro’s teeth graze his throat. “Yes,” he gasps, and when Shiro’s teeth sink home and Keith arches up into him, overwhelmed by the sudden, unmistakable feeling of being whole, “Yes.” (magisterpavus 2020)

Interestingly, the reversal of roles, with Keith as the bitee as opposed to the biter, seems to have reversed the sexual roles as well, leaving Shiro (temporarily) as the more dominant partner and Keith as more suggestible and submissive. Unlike Shiro,

and perhaps because of his cognizance of the situation, Keith does have more aggressive reactions to the bite as evidenced by his bruising grip on Shiro and the “noise he doesn't mean to” make. But his relative passiveness in accepting the bite can be read as a reversal of the sexual roles portrayed with the previous bite - potentially suggesting that biter and bitee have predetermined roles of dominant or submissive based on their role within the bite itself, but also that these roles are impermanent and pliable. While this was not the case for “Balancing Act” (2020), “Alpha to Alpha” (2020) seems to offer a bond-bite with very specific sexual roles. The power dynamic of this scene, perhaps because of the verbal consent offered, does read as remarkably different from the previous bite with equal power exchange between both parties indicated by their verbal agreement to accept the bond-bite. Keith is submissive to Shiro's actions, but Shiro's reiteration of consent before biting belies a more equal exchange of power, inconsistent with previous implications of the bond-bite as a tool of heteronormativity.

“Alpha to Alpha” (2020) uses both a dubcon bite as well as a consensual one to highlight that consent is at least a partial determinant of the power dynamics between partners. When consensual, the bond-bite can offer a more fluid power exchange between partners that allows both parties to experience a variation of subspace wherein they are brought “out of their heads and into their bodies” (Ambler et al. 4, 2016) through shared pleasure and pain. However, when the conditions through which consent must be determined are through the wantedness of the bite (and other nonverbal indicators), the power dynamics between partners seem to become much less cyclical, though impermanent. While the dubiously consensual bond-bite is more aligned with the lived experience of many BDSM practitioners (with its separation of

topspace from subspace and reliance on separate roles to achieve these means) it also speaks to the potentially hierarchical power structure enforced by the bond-bite itself, previously theorized by Popova (2021) and Gunderson (2017). Where “Balancing Act” (2020) can be read to use the roles of BDSM AUs to illustrate the differences in how pleasure from pain can be achieved for both parties regardless of their socially ascribed A/B/O status, “Alpha to Alpha” (2020) can be read to use the sexual roles of dominance and submission to articulate a power structure between partners of the same social status and uses a bond-bite to illustrate the *potential* permanence of these roles. Through the mutually consensual decision to bond together, the Alphas can be read to form a less possessive, more flexible power dynamic within their relationship.

As verbal consent, as opposed to wantedness or nonverbal indicators, can be read to influence the sexual power dynamics between bond-mates, the final example in this section explores the noncon bite and how it affects relationship dynamics. As with the previous selections, the final fic is something of an oddity within the wider A/B/O genre as it is the Omega, instead of the Alpha, who bites without permission. Since Popova (2021) and Gunderson (2017) both theorized the bond-bite as a tool of patriarchal domination using fics where the Omegas were bitten by Alphas, this final inclusion may seem irrelevant to my evaluation of bond-biting as a potentially queer reinvention of themes of power and commitment. However, as the following example will attest, some of the more unusual dynamic configurations in A/B/O have been responsible for the more interesting deviations from the “traditions” of the genre.

3.2.3 Case Studies: The Nonconsensual Bite

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Voltron: Legendary Defender
Relationship:	Keith/Shiro (Voltron)
Characters:	Keith (Voltron), Shiro (Voltron), Lance (Voltron), Hunk (Voltron), Allura (Voltron), Pidge (Voltron), Background & Cameo Characters, Krolia (Voltron)
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Omega Verse, Gender Issues, Loss of Virginity, Gratuitous Smut, Mating Cycles/In Heat, Knotting, basically the kind of sex you expect in omegaverse stories, Keith has good friends, Shiro is a saint, Alpha Shiro (Voltron), Omega Keith (Voltron), terrible science, Porn with Feelings, Porn With Plot
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of the Shiro the Hero loves you, baby series • Next Work →
Stats:	Published: 2018-04-16 Completed: 2018-05-01 Words: 35674 Chapters: 13/13 Comments: 601 Kudos: 1976 Bookmarks: 351 Hits: 34109

Shiro the Hero and the Hungry Chain

Saasan

Figure 3.3: Title and tags from “Shiro the Hero and the Hungry Chain” by Saasan (2018).

Saasan’s “Shiro the Hero and the Hungry Chain” (2018) is seemingly one of the more traditional examples of A/B/O world-building as does not suggest a non-Alpha-centric power hierarchy like an_aphorism’s “Balancing Act” (2020) that placed Omegas as the pinnacle of social power nor does it feature a non Alpha/Omega pairing like magisterpavus’s “Alpha to Alpha” (2020). Saasan’s fic (2018) describes a pairing between Alpha Shiro and Omega Keith wherein Keith is considered a marginalized citizen within his community because of his Omega status. Keith is compromised by exaggerated heat symptoms that cause him to seek out Shiro’s help in abating those symptoms through sex. After a series of sexual experimentations finally culminating in the completion of Keith’s heat, the couple decides to pair their new physical relationship with a romantic one and the fic concludes with their shared delight at their nascent romance. Given this description of the plot of Saasan’s fic, it would appear on the surface to be ill-suited to the category of “noncon bite” under which I have placed it. The sexual encounters in the fic have consent negotiated well-before heat symptoms set in and when navigating new boundaries during a heat, much like those fics of Chapter 2

illustrated, the author takes every opportunity to explore the nuances of consent negotiation given animalistic mating impulses and is very explicit in the wantedness of the sexual acts the pair engage in. However, it is the biting in this fic that provides truly curious insight into the dynamics of power associated with popular iterations of the bond-bite.

As the Omega initiates the bite in this fic is already under the influence of heat symptoms by the time of biting, there are certain cues in the narrative that suggest Keith is not cognizant of biting Shiro until after the bite has happened. This gap in his memory induced by instinctual need/heat symptoms leaves room for interpretation as to whether Keith is acting as a dominant partner (or rather a partner in control of the biting) or whether the seemingly uncontrollable urges place him in the submissive role as he is overwhelmed by his impulses. Here, the lack of consent during the bite is indicative of the power structure though in ways distinct from the previous two fics. The lack of consent, Shiro's reaction to the bite, and Keith's reaction to biting without conscious thought or seeking Shiro's permission all indicate that despite Keith's active role, he is not in a position of power.

Keith inhaled deeply and then licked at the gland. Heaven. He'd never been very affected by scents before but Shiro was an addiction worth having, worth keeping.

Blood.

Keith could smell blood.

And taste blood? Confused, he pulled back.

"Keith," Shiro said in a sharp and commanding voice. He'd stopped moving.

Blood. Fuck fuck fuck fuck *there was blood on Shiro's neck* he had fucking bitten Shiro. He had just fucking bitten Shiro without asking. His eyes shot up to look [at] Shiro's and saw a firmness there that did nothing to orient him.

He fled in a blaze of fear. (Saasan 2018)

Unlike the previous fics, this biting scene has a profound shift in tone from the relative subspace aspects of heat and biting bliss to the abject horror of Keith realizing he has assaulted Shiro and potentially bonded them irreparably. It also presents an interesting reading of power dynamics using Shiro and Keith's reactions to the bite to suggest that Shiro has more control in the situation, if not an advantage over Keith because he is uncompromised by heat. The "sharp and commanding tone" Shiro uses to call Keith's attention to him and the "firmness" in his eyes both indicate that Shiro is the more dominant partner, but has the odd implication that as the dominant partner he allowed Keith to bite him while Keith was unaware of the situation. This particular reading would liken Shiro to the cold, calculating Alpha characters described by Popova (2018, 2021) and Arnaiz (2018) providing a link between bond-bites and the heteropatriarchal power dynamics they have previously been theorized to inscribe. Additionally, if Shiro is the dominant partner, this creates a complicated arrangement of noncon elements surrounding the bite that indicate that Shiro was using Keith's heat symptoms to manipulate Keith into bonding them accidentally. While this particular reading will become more relevant in later scenes, for this particular excerpt I argue that Keith's noncon biting is an indication of this fic's interpretation of power exchange that continues during altered states like heat and/or subspace; particularly that if a submissive partner acts out while in an altered space, the responsibility for those actions falls on the dominant partner in control of the scene.

This particular iteration of power differentials is typical in many BDSM AUs, as biological submission requires a vigilant dominant partner to keep their submissives from harm, and some BDSM scenes, in reality, contend that there are “no bad subs, only bad dom/dommes” (Lennard 2012, Howe and Cook 2019). However, because of the permanence of bond-bites and their implications of commitment, the question of ‘fault’ in this scene is complicated. While Keith was not conscious of his behavior, he will still have to live with the consequences of his actions. The author adds a rather elegant if unorthodox, condition to bites in this fic that addresses the notion of ‘fault’ by noting that bond-bites cannot be formed nonconsensually. I use the word unorthodox because the lack of nonconsensual bonds does seem to undermine much of Keith’s concern about the noncon biting and could lead to an interpretation of Keith’s response to his actions as hysterical and/or an overreaction.

“Keith? I don’t know if you heard me earlier, but it’s okay. It’s not physically possible to form a bond if only one partner bites the other.”

Keith knew that. That wasn’t the problem. He had *marked* Shiro. Everyone would look at him and assume he had a mate and it was a lie, a horribly embarrassing, damaging lie. How would he explain that to people? Fresh off a heat with a bite but no mate? And long term—how many potential partners would he miss simply because they rightfully assumed he was taken? What about for his real mate, some day, having to add a second mark? He had done the worst possible thing he could have done to this kind, gentle, incredible man. (Saasan 2018, emphasis original)

While potentially an overreaction, Keith’s response regarding marking poses interesting questions for the positions of power afforded to mates and mate-marks in this fic. A bite-

mark providing a physical indicator of relationship status suggests Shiro would be 'damaged' as a single Alpha with a bond-mark - similarly to Shiro's reputation as a failed bond-mate in "Balancing Act" (2020). This has two main effects for the bond-bites in this iteration of the Omegaverse. First, a bite mark does not always indicate a bond, meaning that there is a possibility of 'divorce' or 'accidental' biting that does not result in a bond, since bonds require both intention and consent to form. Second, there are no real consequences for acting on bond-biting instinct in this universe unless that instinct instructs both parties to intentionally bond with one another, which the text indicates is not likely. In a way, this cosmetic biting works similarly to collaring in BDSM (both fiction and reality) where it is an indication of commitment and roles within a relationship, but the removal of a collar - as with the bite without a bond - does not suggest permanence. But what does this indicate about power and commitment in this scene? That Keith's lack of knowledge regarding the nature of bond-bites placed him at a disadvantage? Or that Shiro's knowledge offers him both advantage and control over the situation? In their final discussion of the bite mark before resuming heat-resolution, Shiro reveals that he had prepared for the potentiality of Keith biting him and accepted it as a possibility of being his heat partner. This particular exchange invites further questions about the power dynamics of this scene and prompts the potentially confusing conclusion that Keith, despite nonconsensually biting his heat partner, was entirely powerless in this scene even before his heat symptoms set in.

"Keith? Nothing is messed up. Nothing. Look at me. Look at my neck."

Keith saw dried blood and immediately looked away.

"It's not over my gland, Keith," Shiro said softly. "I moved. You bit my shoulder."

Keith looked closer. The bite mark was indeed barely lower than the gland. He slumped, boneless with relief and Shiro had to take his weight.

"I thought something like this might happen," he said softly, settling Keith on his lap. "Don't worry; I was prepared." (Saasan 2018)

While Shiro's preparation for the potentiality of his partner acting unconsciously does support a reading of him as the dominant partner, it also presents evidence for the previous interpretation of his character as manipulative. As Shiro's possible manipulation pre-dates his heat arrangement with Keith, this reading of Shiro's character suggests that his dominant role extends beyond sexual scenes and is not necessarily temporary.

These interpretations of Shiro's character present two possible outcomes (and complications) for my argument of consent affecting the permanence (and associated heteronormative coding) of power dynamics within A/B/O relationships. If Shiro is interpreted as acting manipulative in order to secure a permanent role of superiority over Keith, then this fic can be read as supporting the conclusions of previous Omegaverse scholarship (Gunderson 2017, Popova 2017, 2018, 2021) that bond-bites act as tools to secure hierarchical power dynamics akin to Western heteronormative systems of commitment in reality. This is can be read as true regardless of the status of the character acting nonconsensually, as the power dynamics can be read to favor Alphas regardless. However, if Shiro is interpreted as being sincere in his regard for Keith's well-being during his heat and was instead preparing for potential problems as a dominant would for a scene (Pitagora 2013, Lennard 2012, Howe and Cook 2019), then the issue presented by this scene is not the permanence of roles but rather the suspension of consent during the scene. As I have already argued in Chapter 2, the

Omegaverse has a curious relationship with legal standards of consent because of the instinctual behavior foregrounded in the animalistic traits of the genre. Bond-biting compounds these animalistic traits with supernatural elements of shared psychological and emotional feelings between partners; making consent (and its circumventions) an issue of physical autonomy as well as mental, and psychological autonomy. Unlike Chapter 2, the “wantedness” of bond-biting cannot be used as a metric for consent in this context as the results are arguably more dire should these barriers be transgressed. Keith wanted to bond-bite Shiro to the point that it occurred without his knowledge or (arguably) Shiro’s consent. His wantedness of the bond-bite is what caused the bite to be nonconsensual. Regardless of the interpretation of Shiro’s intentions for this scene, the effect is that bond-bite scenes that can be read to rely on BDSM practices seem to reinforce heteronormative power dynamics when consent (both legal praxis and wantedness) is suspended. Only through the use of “safe, sane, and consensual” (Pitagora 2017, Howe and Cook 2019) BDSM practices, like those arguably expressed in “Balancing Act” (an_aphorism 2020) and “Alpha to Alpha” (magisterpavus 2020), can bond-bites provide a speculative tool for the exploration of queer subcultures in the Omegaverse.

“Shiro the Hero and the Hungry Chain” (2018) presents connections between power hierarchies and consent as well as describing a complete undermining of that connection. On the one hand, it poses interesting questions about who has power and/or control over a situation caused by animalistic, impulsive behavior. On the other hand, “Shiro the Hero and the Hungry Chain” (2018) uses these questions to indicate that control never actually changes hands regardless of consent being violated - the Alpha is always in control and has the upper hand. As I have said, stories like “Shiro the

Hero and the Hungry Chain” (2018) support Popova’s (2021) and Gunderson’s (2017) theories of the bite being used to reinforce heteropatriarchal traditions, but with the added caveat that these conditions are only met when consent is absent (or seemingly so). As such, noncon biting can be read to reinforce heteropatriarchal roles of disenfranchised, submissive partners tethered to domineering, powerful partners whereas increased consent negotiation can lead to differing power dynamics and increasingly fluid power exchanges between “equal partners” (an_aphorism 2020).

3.3.0 Conclusion

Through the close readings, I have highlighted the patterns of power associated with bond-biting and how these patterns are constructed around consent. With the shift towards dubcon and noncon comes the potentiality of permanent power hierarchies that prioritize Alphas and compound Omega’s feelings of powerlessness through both their positionality during the bite (i.e., not conscious of it happening). With increased consent negotiation comes more relationship equality with temporary roles of dominance and submission during the bite itself that increase sexual pleasure for the bond-mates and lead to more queerly constructed forms of commitment long term that prioritize mutual pleasure. In each iteration of the bond-bite used in the above section, there is an element of “subspace” or “topspace” indicating that the bite itself has qualities associated with BDSM play, particularly notions of pain/pleasure and using pain as a grounding agent to complement or enhance pleasure responses. But, much like BDSM practice in reality, the construction of those temporary power dynamics is dependent on how consent is constructed and executed within the narrative. Any bond-biting with less than enthusiastic, verbal consent can be read as reinforcing heteronormative roles and

unlike sexual consent during heats, consent for bond-bites does not seem to be determinable by wantedness. While previous scholarship is still very much relevant to understanding the bond-biting dynamics and how they can sometimes reproduce heteronormativity in m/m relationships, the BDSM elements of the A/B/O bond-bites can be read to expand on these previous conclusions and add some much-needed context to the nature of biting in the Omegaverse.

The Omegaverse has grown, both in size and scope, and the uses of the bond-bite trope reflect these shifts within the A/B/O community towards an exploration of queer subcultures within genres previously theorized as strictly heteronormative. As a sex-forward genre, the fantasies presented through A/B/O stories offer a wide variety of experiences, from the sex-positivism of BDSM narratives to finding pleasure in the patriarchal power hierarchies often attributed to heteronormativity. Whether temporary or permanent, the positions of dominance and submission play a significant role in A/B/O world-building and contribute to its reputation within the wider fan fiction community. Through these various connections with BDSM play and the ways in which consent determines partner dynamics, the bond-bite has outgrown some of the heteropatriarchal structures that it was synonymous with at its inception. Alongside other fan fiction genres and AUs, many Omegaverse authors seem to be using the more popular and animalistic tendencies of the genre to interrogate what themes emerge from these tropes and how they can be manipulated to suit more queer-aligned perspectives. As fandom scholars, Busse and Lothian (2017) write in their history of slash sexualities,

Some of the more intense explorations of non-normative sexual practices in fan fiction take place within stories that construct alternate universes where

traditional sexual binaries are replaced with or supplemented by power dynamics that are or appear to be biologically determined. (125)

The “supplemented power dynamics” aligned with biological imperatives (like the heats/ruts/biting of the Omegaverse or need to achieve subspace in BDSM AUs or the desire to feed on blood in vampire AUs) all challenge assumptions of traditionally heterosexual power differentials and use these “biologically determined” tropes to question the hierarchies they typically uphold.

Gunderson (2017), Popova (2021), and (to a certain extent) I have looked at how the Omegaverse stories are sometimes constructed as heteropatriarchal in that the world-building is often Alpha-centric and promotes their domination of Omegas sexually and socially. I have used the words heteronormative and hetero-patriarchal in this chapter as a metric of power hierarchy as gender and sex are often composed around power differentials (Butler 1990, 1996, Weeks 2011, Kimmel 2007, Nicholas 2014). However, these terms do reflect a gendered and sexual hierarchy with specific roles beyond the oftentimes temporary sexual roles of domination and submission as suggested by BDSM practice. As such, the next chapter will examine how sexual and social scripts are determined within the Omegaverse, using Popova’s framework of Alpha/Omega sexual scripting theory (2017, 2018, 2021) to assess how these roles and dynamics change with the newly popular shift away from the traditional Alpha/Omega pairing.

Chapter 4

4. Rage Against the World-Building: Sexual Scripting in A/B/O dynamics

While Chapter 3 discussed how dominant and submissive roles (typically aligned with gender roles in a heteropatriarchal society) are sometimes reinforced by the animalistic biting built into the dynamics of the genre, Chapter 4 investigates these roles further as components of gendered sexual scripting and a structured hierarchy of power in the Omegaverse. As Popova (2018, 2021) has previously theorized, the relationship between the Omegaverse and sexual scripting can be read as largely 'heterosexual' in that it follows a pattern of Alpha males as the more active sexual initiators and the "Omega male script [that] exhibits significant similarities to the Western female sexual script" as "passive gatekeepers" (184, 2018).⁷⁶ Popova, Like Gunderson (2017) and Arnaiz (2018) before them, focused their efforts on discerning the nature of sexual scripting in the Omegaverse on couples involving one Alpha and one Omega and found them to closely resemble traditionally 'heterosexual' scripts and describe them as heteronormative. In this chapter, I question why heterosexual scripts are so important in a genre where queer relationships are seemingly the focus.

While Popova's work (2017, 2018, 2021) is highly valuable in understanding Alpha/Omega pairings and the general patterns of sexual scripting therein, some fics include Alpha/Alpha pairings and Omega/Omega pairings. As previous Omegaverse

⁷⁶ I use the term 'heterosexual' loosely throughout this chapter as it refers more to scripting positionality than sexual orientation in the Omegaverse. While heterosexual is an accurate modifier for the sexual scripting theory that set forth the roles of passive and active scripting in the 1970s (explained in the following section), it is inaccurate to describe most m/m Omegaverse relationships. Therefore, 'heterosexual', while accurate for the description of traditional sexual roles performed, is inaccurate as a modifier for A/B/O relationships. While A/B/O relationships are often theorized as heteronormative (Arnaiz 2018, Gunderson 2017), heterosexuality will only be used in reference to traditional scripting theory as opposed to a description of the Omegaverse relationships.

scholarship has not examined these pairings, this chapter seeks to build on and complicate the existing arguments surrounding sexual scripting in the Omegaverse by examining how these 'heterosexual' scripts are adapted (or queerly rescripted) in pairings outside the popular Alpha/Omega dynamics.⁷⁷ This exploration will thereby determine whether the replication of 'heterosexual' scripting is continued outside of Alpha/Omega pairings and if not, what factors determine its exclusion. I argue it is the Omega/Omega fics - comprised of characters in statuses of lessened social and sexual power - that provide the clearest declaration of how sexual scripting is often determined within the genre. As the only pairing that does not feature an Alpha (in this chapter), I theorize that the presence of an Alpha in a relationship tends to push the trajectory of the narrative towards traditional, 'heterosexual' scripting and related hetero-patriarchal power hierarchies.

Alpha/Alpha pairings currently comprise about 1,318 of the 118k fics under the A/B/O Dynamics tag, and Omega/Omega pairings are at about 741.⁷⁸ While these numbers are not exact (and many A/B/O fics are either untagged or tagged for A/B/O, but not the specific pairing dynamics), this approximation offers a basic understanding of the popularity of these relatively new pairings in the genre. According to Ao3, the majority of Alpha/Alpha and Omega/Omega pairings have been published in the last five years. Of the 741 total Omega/Omega fics on Ao3 at the time of writing (January 2022), 592 of these have been published since January of 2018. Likewise, of the 1,318 Alpha/Alpha fics, 1,113 of them were produced in that same time frame. Since A/B/O as

⁷⁷ At time of writing (January 2022), 20% of all tagged fics in the Omegaverse on Ao3 feature an Alpha/Omega pairing. This number is likely much higher as Alpha/Omega pairings are often the default for Omegaverse pairings and are thus not tagged as "Alpha/Omega" by authors to indicate pairing dynamics.

⁷⁸ Data accurate as of January 2022 (on Ao3).

a genre has existed since 2010, the majority of Alpha/Alpha and Omega/Omega works being published in the last five years indicates these fics have been growing in popularity recently. While a relatively small percentage of the whole of A/B/O fic, the growing popularity of these pairings suggests a recent trend towards alternative, nonheteronormative sexual scripting in the genre.

I propose this current movement towards alternative scripting most likely stems from a few timely factors. First, the Omegaverse has grown in popularity over time and thus the tropes of the genre have become more popular. As the tropes become more established and expected within the genre, the more writers can intervene and diverge from typical conventions to challenge the dynamics of the genre (or uncritically reproduce them, as the case may be). As the Omegaverse is a speculative genre, having established conventions often means these tropes will be subverted when the genre itself becomes more fixed. Second, as some queer lives have begun to enter mainstream visibility, fan fiction can be seen to reflect this growing visibility with increased roles and tagging for nonbinary and gender non-conforming characters.⁷⁹ As sexual scripting is often linked with gender identity, I argue that this increased representation of gender non-conforming identities (and versatile masculinities as I will discuss in later sections) in fan fiction may have had an impact on how sexual scripting is presented in the Omegaverse dynamics. Similarly, increasing visibility for non-heterosexual identities and subtle indications of increasing acceptance of these identities (i.e., ratification of “gay marriage” in more countries, increasing availability of health care for non-cisgender peoples, etc.) has influenced views of traditional sexual

⁷⁹ Of the 33,707 fics on Ao3 with the tag “nonbinary character” (January 2022), over 29,707 of these works have been published since 2017. As with the Omegaverse, this relatively new surge in nonbinary gendered content suggests an increased visibility and interest in nonconforming genders and their sometimes alternative sexual scripting.

and gender roles within the Omegaverse writer and readership that is reflective in the increasing number of Alpha/Alpha and Omega/Omega fics. While fan fiction may have always been interested in m/m relationships, as the long history of slash fics can attest, the sexual scripting of these relationships has not always been representative of the lived sexual experiences of queer peoples.

In this chapter, I will examine how sexual scripting has been previously applied to the Omegaverse followed by a discussion of common A/B/O sexual scripts using examples from the popular Alpha/Omega fic “Nu ABO: A Memoir by Park Jimin” by decompositionbooks (2016) from the BTS fandom. Finally, I will discuss the shifts in scripting illustrated by Alpha/Alpha and Omega/Omega pairings using the fics “Sunset Lover” by jamjoon (2017) and “SAME LOGIC” by bambambams (2017) from the BTS and Monsta X fandoms. Since these works are among the highest kudos’d fics in the explosively popular Kpop (Korean pop) RPF (Real Person Fiction) fandoms, they offer a relevant snapshot of the current deviations from traditional sexual scripting that are taking place in the genre with increasing frequency. Like Alpha/Omega pairings, much of the sexual scripting in Alpha/Alpha and Omega/Omega pairings is dependent on structures of social power and how mobility (or the ability to take or cede power) within these power hierarchies determines the possible sexual roles for characters to perform. This adherence to traditional, often patriarchal, power hierarchies creates narratives that must also submit to a certain heteronormative sexual script. As I will examine further in the close readings, diverging from these correlated power and sexual scripts can often produce queerly cast narratives with alternative sexual scripting. While this could be an effect of the predominantly queer-identified fan fiction creators and consumers (centrumlumina 2013, destination: toast! 2017, *Fansplaining* 2019) integrating more of

their lived (or speculative) experiences into the Omegaverse sexual scripting, I argue it is also an exploration of the potential of the genre to express complex social structures and pressures than a departure from 'heterosexual' scripting - as only one of the alternative pairings (the Omega/Omega pairing) appears to have the potential to adapt nontraditional scripting onto nontraditional pairings.

4.1.0 Sexual Scripting and the Curious Case of the A/B/O Dynamics

Sexual scripting is a useful metric for exploring Omegaverse statuses as this theory is often an extension of social, gendered roles in real life, and the A/B/O statuses can be read to mimic the gender roles of many Western societies. I use sexual scripting instead of social scripting because the sex-forward nature of the genre allows for a deeper discussion of character roles through sexual acts rather than social world-building; though these concepts remain related in reality and the Omegaverse. Sexual scripting is a theory in the social sciences that works to explain how sexual interactions and experiences are socially constructed and performed at levels beyond that of reproductive "biological and natural" (Plummer 2007) urges. Simon and Gagnon first discussed the social aspects of sex in their 1973 work, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* and suggested that despite prior research to the contrary, sex is a socially produced performance with various recognizable roles. Where previous studies suggested the "prime goal" of sex was reproduction, the social constructionist theory of sexual scripting "aimed to show the myriad ways in which human sexualities are always organized through economic, religious, political, familial, and social conditions" (Plummer 2007). For example, if a person has more economic power than

their partner, sexual encounters can often be more reflective of their own personal preferences, rather than their partners, as they have the financial power to exercise financial control or withhold funds dependent on their partner's sexual performance. As these "social conditions" are often based within hierarchical structures that determine one's power within society, so too does sexual scripting determine (or at least reiterate existing) structures of power. In short, early sexual scripting theory evaluated the sexual roles of heterosexual relationships as dynamics of power and found the social power of men is often translated to expectations of sexual power - leaving women to assume the less powerful, oftentimes submissive, role.

Pioneering sociologist, Jeffrey Weeks, described the social constructionist approach to sexual encounters as, "theatrical" where the "metaphor of scripts suggests an acting out of erotic life rather than an expression of a deeper, essential urge" (192, 2011). In this way, sexual scripting looks to roles as a way of signposting sexual activity where "people are 'actors' who are using 'scripts' to understand and shape their sexual interactions" (Beres 77, 2014). Furthermore, the "erotic life" one acts out in sexual interactions is typically informed by the society that shaped their knowledge and experience of sex. Some theorists in the field (Sanchez et al. 2012, Weiderman 2005, Masters et al. 2013) argue sexual scripting is less indicative of the role one wants than it is an acceptance of the role which will help them to fit into existing social structures. For instance, many women accept roles of lessened social and sexual power (i.e., submissive, passive, etc.) relationally to men in order to cater to men's expectations and maintain the status quo (Weiderman 2005, Sanchez et al. 2012, Kimmel 2007, Humphreys 2007, Weeks 2011, Hermann et al. 2018, Darden et al. 2019). This acceptance of sexual roles to appease social roles and expectations will be discussed

in later examples from Omegaverse fics, but it is yet another reason why the use of sexual scripting is well suited to sex-forward genres like the Omegaverse where sexual acts are written in exceptional detail and are often influenced by social power dynamics. Since the theory of sexual scripting cannot be untangled from social expectations, there are different levels of scripting that produce varied individual experiences of sex that will inform the roles discussed in this chapter.

Simon and Gagnon outline how roles are performed at three distinct levels of sexual scripting (1986). First and foremost are “cultural scenarios” that refer to how gender roles, and the attached sexual expectations of those roles, are reproduced on a cultural level in particular societies. This often refers to the scripts one follows to ‘fit in’, as they are the most commonly accepted roles discussed within a society. Second, “interpersonal scripts” which refers to how partners are taught to relate to one another in specific sexual and/or romantic scenarios - separate from cultural scripts only inasmuch as they are taught through interactions with one another and consist of more personal negotiation of what one’s role could be.⁸⁰ And lastly, “intrapsychic scripts” refer to the individual internalization of these scripts and how they manifest as personal fantasies or desires. For example, the erotic rape fantasies expressed in Chapter 2 are a representation of “intrapsychic scripts” as they are sexual fantasies that do not necessarily have a relationship with real-life wants or desires (e.g., fantasizing about rape for sexual pleasure does not represent an actual desire to be raped in reality) (Bivona et al. 2012, Bivona & Critelli 2009, Critelli and Bivona 2008). With these levels in mind, Simon and Gagnon concluded that there were two dominant sexual roles: the

⁸⁰ This is the level at which scripts typically tend to shift from cultural expectations more towards personal preference. Roles that do not conform to traditionally ascribed ‘cultural scenarios’ are often distinguished at this level of scripting interaction (Weiderman 2005, Hoppe 2011, Plante 2007).

active, penetrating (masculine) role and the passive, penetrated (feminine) role (1986). This conclusion drew a curious crowd of researchers to the field of sexual scripting signaling a shift from Simon and Gagnon's earlier studies of heterosexual scripting within a specific group towards a discussion of sexual scripting outside the domain of heterosexual, consenting adults.⁸¹ While these more recent works from the early 2000s currently comprise a large percentage of sexual scripting theory, it is the continued work on heterosexual scripting theory, as well as recent forays into the "top/bottom" scripting of homosexual men, that is most relevant to a discussion of Omegaverse dynamics.

As Chapter 3 argued, there are largely two scripts within A/B/O dynamics; the dominant script which is aggressive and active, and the submissive script which is a more passive gatekeeper role. Both social scripts correspond to the Alpha's overwhelming physical and social power and the Omega character's outwardly subservient role and typically weaker bodily frames. Often, these social roles correspond with sexual roles that mirror the 'heterosexual' scripts of passive, female-coded penetratee (Omega) and the active, hypermasculine penetrator (Alpha) (Popova 2017, 2018, 2021). As such, the sexual scripting of A/B/O fic is generally focused on gendered power differentials of sexual scripting (Popova 2017, 2018, 2021), and many Omegaverse scholars have, in some form or another, discussed the sexual scripts of A/B/O fic using traditionally 'heterosexual' scripts (Busse 2013, Arnaiz 2018).

Popova's thesis of heteronormative scripting patterns (2017, 2018, 2021) serves as a starting point for discussions of 'heterosexual' scripting in A/B/O since the role

⁸¹ Many sexual scripting theorists note that it was their dissatisfaction with the limitations of either the original publication of sexual scripting or overlooked genres of sexual scripting which drew them to the field (Kimmel 2007, Plummer 2007, Plante 2007). Simon and Gagnon's original study collected data from heterosexual, college-age (predominantly white) people with no discussion of how scripts change with age/financial position/religion/ethnicity/race/etc. (Plummer 2007).

characters assume is heavily dependent on their gender identity - with men as initiators of sex and typically the more aggressive or dominant partner (Popova 2018, Simon and Gagnon 1986, Weiderman 2005, Kiefer and Sanchez 2007, Menard and Cabrera 2011, Sanchez et al. 2012) and women as gatekeepers of sex with a more submissive, passive role (Popova 2018, Simon and Gagnon 1986, Kurth et al. 2000, Weiderman 2005, Menard and Cabrera 2011, Sanchez et al. 2012, Beres 2014). In the Omegaverse, these roles often correspond with the statuses of male Alpha as the dominant partner and male Omega as the passive role and coded as female (Gunderson 2017).

This adherence to a patriarchal power hierarchy that benefits masculine coding, even within a relationship between men, invites interesting commentary on the correlation between male Omegas and the feminization of lessened social and sexual power. Popova's 2018 work on the impact of social power structures within A/B/O fic delves deeply into the intersections of power and sexual scripting to ascribe the female-coding of the passive role onto the male Omega. Popova's conclusion draws on both the sexual roles provided by the Omega as gatekeepers of sexual interactions and the social dynamics of lessened bodily autonomy reinforced by both the biological tropes of A/B/O alongside the political conventions of popular Omegaverse storytelling at the time their work was written (2018).

There are some variations within these discussions of the role of male Omega in A/B/O fic by other Omegaverse scholars. For example, Gunderson (2017) writes this of the male Omega: "the omega does not represent 'woman', but rather is a personification of the discourses by which women have been constituted as other" (26). Gunderson suggests that the placement of Omegas in the female-coded sexual script offers the

opportunity to explore the 'othered' gender role without deferring to the 'feminized' language surrounding male Omegas. As I noted in Chapter 1, Arnaiz (2018) is a more contentious Omegaverse scholar because their phrasing was less concerned with separating gender roles from gender identities, writing "omegas undoubtedly stand for females in A/B/O slash fiction" (123). While this does not directly speak to the sexual scripting Omegas adhere to, Arnaiz' position declares in no uncertain terms that Omegas are stand-ins for female readers/writers in the community and would therefore follow the feminized, submissive script. In the later section on Omega/Omega pairings, I will discuss why this perspective could be considered reductive, both for male Omegas and for the fanfiction community as a whole.⁸² Despite this divisive language, Arnaiz' argument does suggest points of intersection between the Omegaverse community of readers and writers as predominantly nonbinary/genderqueer and female-identifying (centrumlumina 2013, destination: toast! 2017, *Fansplaining* 2019) and the potential of this community to describe characters with similar social and/or sexual scripting as themselves.

While earlier 'heterosexual' scripts are important in defining the theory and contextualizing previous studies of the Omegaverse, it is the more recent studies of homosexual scripting that could be read as more relevant to the Omegaverse and its m/m pairings. This is not to imply that the studies of gay men's sexual scripting are a monolith or completely removed from the active/passive scripting traditionally ascribed

⁸² Arnaiz's argument hinges on the notion that the female-identifying population of Ao3 users are heterosexual and therefore "largely mistreated" (123, 2018) by men. However, most data collected from fan fiction communities suggests that queer women (either lesbian, bisexual, or otherwise queer-identified) comprise the majority of sexual identities in the fan fic community (centrumlumina 2014, *Fansplaining* 2019, destination:toast! 2017, Three Patch Podcast 2016). As such, the claim that Omegas are stand-ins for the women in the fan fiction community (i.e., heterosexual women) is inaccurate given the current data.

to heterosexual scripting (i.e., homonormativity). In fact, some studies prior to 2010 found that gay men in the US mostly adhered to a 'heterosexual' script, going so far as to describe their sexual preferences in terms of conforming to genders. In 2004, Whittier and Melendez published their "Intersubjectivity in the Intrapsychic Sexual Scripting of Gay Men" in which one participant referred to himself as the woman in his relationships because "women were passive, they were the ones that gave pleasure" (136) in reference to his sexual preference for 'bottoming', or being the penetrated sexual partner, for other men. Others in the study described themselves as "the man" (138, 2004) in sexual encounters because of their preference for being the sexual penetrator, also referred to as the 'top'.

More recent studies of top/bottom/versatile sexual dynamics of gay men in various Anglophone cultures have found the scripts to be more varied than equating masculinity with penetration and feminizing the penetrated sexual role. Trevor Hoppe (2011) established the sexual scripting for the "positional identity as 'bottoms'" (193) as more circuitous than previous studies suggested. He suggests bottoms do not necessarily fulfill the female-coded role of pleasure giver, but rather derive pleasure from the act of receiving penetrative stimulation from a partner - making the role both active and passive. Furthermore, Hoppe found that the participants were reluctant to identify their sexual scripts in terms of gender because they felt their preferred roles were too complex to be labeled 'feminine' or 'masculine' (207-208, 2011). Hoppe found the power structures of bottom identities to be exceptionally varied as some found sexual release in submission as a vessel for their partner's pleasure while others derived power from their "dominance as a bottom" (209, 2011), sometimes calling themselves "power bottoms".

Research psychologist Peace Kiguwa's work, "*I provide the pleasure, I control it*": sexual pleasure and 'bottom' identity constructs amongst gay youth in a Stepping Stones workshop" (2015) provides a similar insight into the sexual roles gay men perceive for themselves. In their study of gay men in South Africa, Kiguwa found that the sexual identifier of "bottom" was less connected to passive, submissive sexual roles; partially because the 'feminization' associated with the role was not one that they ascribed to the role for themselves and was instead incorrectly assigned to them by the wider, heterosexually-identified society because of their physical positioning in sexual encounters. Instead, self-identified bottoms aligned more readily with a discourse of "topping from the bottom" wherein respondents felt that they controlled the power and pleasure dynamic of an encounter through their role as a bottom (2015). Despite societal conceptions of bottoms as the "women" in gay relationships (similarly to the female-coding of the male Omega), participants in Kiguwa's study objected to this role and identifier.

These heterosexual gendered norms are not only deployed in "reading" sexual practices of gay men but also function in stigmatizing ways that construct many "bottoms" as lesser than and lacking sexual agency. (118, 2015)

Like Hoppe, Kiguwa distanced bottom narratives from the female-coded passive role which "lack[ed] sexual agency" (118, 2015). This distance is required partly because these roles determine submission to a sexual partner as the main tenet of the script - which was not the consensus of the participants in their study - but also because the language itself is problematic and leads to increasing hostility and demonization towards gay men who identify as bottoms. Since women traditionally fill roles of less social and sexual power relative to men within patriarchal social structures (Hoppe

2011, Kiguwa 2015, Sanchez et al. 2012, Weiderman 2005, Masters et al. 2013), the equation of gay male bottoms to the 'feminine' scripts also lessens their bodily autonomy and social power despite their gender identity as men. This desire to escape the stigma inextricably attached to feminized sexual roles will be mirrored in later discussions of male Omegas. The continued desire to create distance from equating sexual submission with the penetrative sexual script will be equally complicated in the later Omegaverse close readings, particularly the Alpha/Omega and Omega/Omega pairings.

Hoppe (2011) and Kiguwa (2015) both identify the "power bottom" sexual script (for gay men who prefer bottoming) as a role that "implies a certain reciprocity, a sense that he is not only giving, but also receiving" (Hoppe 207). This script, as a conglomeration of active and passive roles for both partners, will become relevant for the discussion of Omega/Omega pairings in later sections. While some of the fics I've chosen to discuss in the following sections continue to adapt 'heterosexual' scripting, others attempt (with arguably varying success) to deviate from the traditional active/passive roles for scripting more like the 'reciprocity' found in Hoppe (2011) and Kiguwa's (2015) studies. In the fics I examine, the "cultural scenarios" (Simon and Gagnon 1986), or the world-building within the fics that defines expected social and sexual roles, build the norms of each iteration of the Omegaverse while the couples' "intrapyschic scripts", or how they interpret those norms for their own personal use, dictate whether they will adhere to societal scripting standards. As the close readings will demonstrate, how the fic navigates sexual scripts depends on this tension between social and personal interpretations of sexual scripting. However, as I argued in the introduction to this chapter, the production of non-heteronormative scripts is very much

informed by the popular media presentations of social and sexual scripting available to readers and writers in fan fiction communities. As such, the fandoms used to describe these scripts are important to the types of representation therein. I used the increasing media visibility for gender non-conforming identities as an example for this potential shift away from heteronormative scripting, but as the next section will illustrate, the various, versatile representations of masculinity in contemporary popular culture (particularly those presented in Kpop groups) have had an overwhelming impact on the genre's critique of the prolific use of heteronormative sexual scripts.

4.2.0 “Manufactured versatile masculinities” and Kpop RPF

To illustrate how sexual scripting is exemplified in A/B/O fics, I have pulled a short selection from the most popular fandoms in the Omegaverse tag at the time of writing: the Kpop (Korean Pop) RPF (Real Person Fiction) fandoms (January 2022)⁸³. The following sections will track changes in sexual scripting from Alpha/Omega to Alpha/Alpha (A/A) and Omega/Omega (O/O) pairings through the BTS and Monsta X Kpop RPF fandoms.

⁸³ RPF has a complicated history within Fan Studies, though it has become less mired in controversy in recent years with the work produced by theorists Jamison (2013), Coppa (2014) and Popova (2021). While earlier iterations of Fan Studies theory questioned the ethics of RPF since it is fiction based on real people as opposed to fictional characters and therefore would need consent from the celebrities in order to be published publically (Jenkins 1991, Pugh 2004), more recent work from the authors listed above have argued (rather successfully as the issue is perceived as less controversial now than in previous years (Popova 2021)) that the celebrity curation of a public persona creates a sense of distance between themselves and their fans. As such, any fan fiction created about this person is more accurately described as fan fiction of the celebrity's persona than of the celebrity themselves. As such, RPF fiction is more often theorized as purely fictional even if the names and personas used do exist in reality (Jamison 323, 2013; Popova 94-95, 2021). As any celebrity personas or persons used in Omegaverse fic are inherently fictional because the many more fantastical and animalistic features of Omegaverse are only achievable for humans through the fictional genre, debates concerning the ethics of RPF will not be intervening in this thesis, more information regarding this material can be found in Jamison (2013), Coppa (2014), and Popova (2021).

Kpop groups are headlining the recent popularity of A/A and O/O pairings on Ao3 (Jan 2022). Culturally, this is most likely the direct effect of *Hallyu*, or the Korean Wave, which describes the timeframe from the early 1990s forward wherein Kpop idols became increasingly popular in the USA, Canada, and the UK (Lee, Lee, and Park 2020, Song and Velding 2020, Oh 2015, Anderson 2014, and Kuo et al 2020).⁸⁴ Due to the increasing popularity in recent years, the distribution of fic for East Asian fandoms has exploded with the BTS Kpop fandom leading the charge - knocking *Supernatural* from its spot as most popular A/B/O fandom in late 2019, a title it held since the beginnings of A/B/O fic in the early 2010s. Of the top 20 most popular works (arranged by kudos) containing an A/A pairing, 16 of the 20 are from East Asian fandoms (including Kpop, Japanese anime, and Chinese dramas) (Ao3 2022).⁸⁵ Similarly, East Asian fandoms hold a narrow majority of O/O pairings with 14 of the top 20 works coming from Kpop, Japanese anime, or Chinese dramas (Ao3 2022). With 80% of the A/A pairings and 70% of the O/O pairings, East Asian fandoms constitute a majority of the newly popular “non-traditional” Omegaverse pairings. Considering the breadth of fandoms included in the Omegaverse tag, having a considerable majority belong to just a few East Asian fandoms speaks both to their recent popularity in fan fiction and larger fan fiction trends including more East Asian fandoms.⁸⁶ Additionally, the BTS Kpop RPF

⁸⁴ Idol is the preferred term used to describe a single member of a Kpop group (Song and Velding 2020, Kwon 2019, Anderson 2014).

⁸⁵ Subject to variance as some authors don't tag their works with pairings related to A/B/O (i.e., tagged 'Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics', but with no specifics as to what dynamic each character is, etc.)

⁸⁶ While Hallyu had a direct effect on the globalization of Kpop, other East Asian fandoms like Japanese anime and Chinese television dramas have become increasingly popular due to wide-spread availability through streaming services for Western audiences making the content more readily available for English (and Spanish) speakers. Streaming services like *Crunchyroll*, *BiliBili*, *Funimation*, and *Ratuken VIKI* have all expanded their translation services and *BiliBili* now offers English translations for printed media coming from some East Asian countries (as of summer 2021). Additionally, US-based streaming services like *Netflix* and *Hulu* have expanded their catalog of East Asian content as translations and subtitles become more readily available. This increased availability has drawn more Western fans towards East Asian

fandom has become so popular in recent years that to exclude the fandom from this thesis would misrepresent the A/B/O genre and its popular trends. Simply put, BTS (among other Kpop RPFs) is too big a fandom to ignore when discussing the A/B/O genre.

Many fics in the BTS Kpop RPF fandom feature Alpha/Alpha and Omega/Omega relationships in fics where the 7 group members are polyamorous - and so while most pairings will still be A/O, there may occasionally be an A/A or O/O coupling - I have selected works from the fandom which focus on specific, singular pairings to better illustrate the sexual scripting without navigating polyamory.⁸⁷ I will explain why I chose the following fics, specifically, in a later section, but first I must address some of the live issues associated with Kpop RPF fandom.

I am going to briefly examine the role of East Asian masculinity in the Kpop RPF fandoms to provide some much-needed context for the current space the following fics occupy. While the scope of this chapter is limited to the uses of sexual scripting in the Omegaverse, using fandoms originating in East Asian cultures does raise questions of the ethics of representation and cultural appropriation that require context. Furthermore, my argument touches on these questions of masculine presentation and much of the work on East Asian masculinities could be said to be relevant. I will be limiting my discussion to these themes of the manufactured versatility of masculinity presented by

fandoms resulting in an increasing supply and demand which could also explain the recent boom of East Asian fandom on predominantly English-language fanfiction sites like Ao3.

⁸⁷ Some of the more popular fics featuring polyamorous A/B/O ships from the BTS RPF fandom include: "A Pack's Price" by EmpatheticShipper (2020), "crystal snow" by shadowsinsounds (2019), "spring day" by Bangtanbananas (2017), "It Might Just Come Back to Bite You" by Arobeebee (2020), etc. All of these fics have more kudos than "Sunset Lover" (jamjoon 2017) though their multiple pairings make them more difficult to categorize as either A/O or A/A or O/O for the purposes of this chapter. However, from the perspective of popularity, it could be argued that monogamous works actually display 'deviant' sexual scripting in comparison with the normalized polyamorous scripting. I will not be exploring polyamorous ships in this thesis, but it would be an interesting point of entry for future study.

Kpop idols, Western 'orientalized' stereotypes of effeminate East Asian masculinity, and the international fans of Kpop RPF as these all feature in current discussions of Kpop RPF fandom (Oh 2015, Kwon 2019, Kuo et al. 2020) and can be seen in the following fic examples from the BTS and Monsta X Kpop RPF fandoms.

The masculinity presented by male Kpop idols is fascinating for several reasons. It is often described by leading scholars in the field as "manufactured versatile masculinity" (Jung 163, 2011), referring to its promotion by a team of individuals who curate the particular image for a Kpop idol and its blending of "softer", more "effeminate appearances or behaviors" (Kuo et al. 2020) with traditional forms of hegemonic, "beast-like" (Kwon 2019, Oh 2015) masculinity. One of the foremost scholars in the field, Chuyun Oh, describes Kpop idols presentation of masculinity as "liminal masculinity" since "androgynous K-pop male dancing bodies cross gender lines by performing both unconventional and conventional heterosexuality/homosexuality and femininity/masculinity" (70-71, 2015). Practically, this can be seen in the dancing bodies and "pelvic thrusting moves" (69, 2015) that Oh describes in her study as "virile gesture[s]" that "seem[...] to be a recovery of [...] masculinity" (65, 2015), but also in the use of makeup, body glitter, and "lavish costumes" by male Kpop idols that Oh describes as "metrosexual" (2015). Many scholars describe this production of liminality between masculinity and femininity using the language of "soft and pretty faces" (Kuo et al. 4, 2020), "pastel-colored outfits" (Lee, Lee, and Park 5912, 2020), and "gestures such as blowing kisses which emphasize their youthful innocence" (Song and Velding 5, 2020) to describe the various expressions of "softer" masculinity in Kpop. This versatility prompted by the agencies that produce Kpop groups, as well as band managers,

means that “K-pop male bands are often not committed to one version of masculine expression” (Song and Veld 5, 2020).

This expression of “liminal” or “softer” masculinity by Kpop idols has led to some conflict in the area of study, as some scholars contend, “this feminized Kpop masculinity could be perceived as reinforcing the stereotypes of emasculated and asexual Asian men perpetuated by [W]estern media” (Kuo et al. 4, 2020). Similarly, others have argued that using soft masculinity as a separate and discrete masculinity specifically for East Asian men is based in racist Western stereotypes centered around the myth of Western superiority promoted by the US (to name one example) and results in an inescapable emasculation and “racial castration” (Han 11, 2006) for East Asian men (Han 2006, Anderson 2014, Kuo et al 2020, Kim 2021). This particular argument circumvents the potential positives of the fluid portrayals of masculinity providing idols the mobility between “softer” expressions of masculinity and more traditionally hegemonic “beast-like” masculinity. Kpop provides this freedom of masculine expression in a way few other industries do. However, as Kpop has an international fandom, how their masculinity is portrayed does sometimes feed into racist Western stereotypes of East Asian masculinity as “exotic” (Han 2006, Kim 2021). Furthermore, the international reception of Kpop has had an interesting effect on the international perception of Korean culture (Song and Velding 2020, Lee, Lee, and Park 2020) in addition to the cultural impact Kpop has had on Korean culture (Kim 2021, Kwon 2019).⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Further reading on Kpop as a transnational fandom and some of the live issues therein can be found in: Kim 2021, Kwon 2019, Larsen 2020, Oh 2015, Kuo et al 2020, Lee, Lee, and Park 2020, Song and Velding 2020, and Chin and Morimoto 2013.

For example, Oh's theory regarding Kpop masculinity straddling the line between hetero and homosexuality (2015) brings about a point of contention in the fields of East Asian media studies as well as Fan Studies. The manufacturing of queer ships in international Kpop fandom, sometimes by fans and sometimes prompted by production companies in a common practice called 'skinship' (Kuo et al. 2020), is widely contested in studies of Kpop because of the debate surrounding its origins. The issue is centered on whether skinship is reflective of the Korean culture that produces Kpop, where same-sex marriage is not legal and being a part of the queer community is still very much taboo (Kwon 2019), or more reflective of the international cultures which comprise a large portion of International Kpop fandom (e.g., US, Canada, UK, etc.) and whose occupation of Korea following the Korean War (e.g. the US) had an impact on local cultures (Kim 2021). One perspective suggests that though "K-pop is a product of a hybridized cultural movement that blends multiple cultures, the cultures that inform that hybridity remain recognizable" (Anderson 120, 2014). This implies Kpop is less a product of Korea, than a transnational product informed by outside influence on Korea - both through popular media and through the occupation of Korea by US armies during the post-war reconstruction (Kim 2021). This de-centering of Kpop from Korean culture is a tense issue in current fandom discourse with many scholars agreeing that international acclaim has removed recognizable Korean-ness from Kpop (Jung 2015, Lie 2012) while others argue that Korean culture is intrinsic to Kpop (Kim and Ryoo 2007, Lee, Lee, and Park 2020, Kuo et al. 2020). When I say "current fandom discourse" it is reflective of the discussions in the field of transcultural fandom studies that address how Western fans' engagement with these fandoms has risen to prominence in the last few years. This engagement has contributed, though is not solely

responsible for, the consumption of media, like Kpop, as a global commodity. As Kpop researcher Kyung Hyun Kim writes, “K-pop is perhaps the only globally recognized music movement from the past several decades to focus less on the actual music and more on the online fandom that has largely ushered it to global fame” (35, 2021).

There are also scholars specific to Fan Studies who are engaged in these debates about Kpop culture (Oh 2015, Anderson 2014, Larsen 2020, Kwon 2019), including debates centered on how much of the research being done on East Asian fandoms comes from a perspective of whiteness (Lothian 2007, Fazekas 2020). While I briefly allude to elements of these arguments in my analysis of Kpop fanfic in this chapter, I will only be intervening in these arguments insofar as they relate to A/B/O sexual scripting. My interest in the discourse regarding “versatile” (Jung 2011) East Asian masculinities manufactured by Kpop talent agencies and the Western audience's perception of these cultures is focused exclusively on how they are adapted within the Omegaverse power structures.⁸⁹ For instance, Kpop idols with masculinity promoted by their agencies to have a “softer”, more “flower boy” (Anderson 2014, Kwon 2019) appeal often get cast as Omegas in the following fics, with Alphas as the more “beast-like” (Anderson 2014, Kwon 2019) Kpop idols. This correlation can be read as indicating that the “manufactured versatile masculinities” (Jung 2011) have some bearing on how the Kpop idols are received by the wider transnational fandom and how that translates to authorial decisions regarding which A/B/O dynamic an idol will have in the Omegaverse.

⁸⁹ I focus on the nebulous “Western” cultures involvement in Kpop fandom - as opposed to the Japanese reception of Kpop (Larsen 2020) or responses from Latin America or South America where Kpop is equally, if not more, popular than in countries like the US, Canada, or the UK - largely because the works published on Ao3 are typically written in English and (based on the most recent data collection) stem from populations in the the “Western” global North including the US, Canada, and the UK (Centrumlumina 2014, ThreePatchPodcast 2016, *Fansplaining* 2019).

Since these masculinities are manufactured as a product for global consumption in specifically “versatile” ways (Jung 2011) it is worth keeping their origins in mind while consuming fics from Kpop RPF spaces. However, since I am focused primarily on the parameters of sexual scripting and power negotiations - while related to discussions of racial stereotyping and structural power inequality therein - wider arguments about Western perceptions of East Asian masculinities lie largely outside the scope of this chapter. Thus, the following section of case studies will look at Kpop RPF fics that present interesting commentary or deviations from heteronormative sexual scripting - in order to assess how nontraditional pairings create nontraditional scripts. Since my argument hinges on the placement (or absence) of Alphas within pairings, how masculinity is presented in relation to A/B/O status will affect my evaluations of each pairing type in the examples ahead.

4.3.0 The Kpop RPF Case Studies

To collect key fic examples for this discussion, my selection process for the three fics for this chapter was limited to works that seemed to be doing something interesting with sexual scripting. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, in attempting to catalog the A/B/O fics I've read, I sifted through 700 of the most popular fics organized by kudos on Ao3 and found I had read 654 of them. While I am sure the number of A/B/O fics I have read since my Ao3 login was created in 2014 is, in actuality, much higher than 654, it is a starting point through which to explain that I have more than a baseline knowledge of the trends of popular A/B/O works. Even so, the selection process for this chapter was largely impacted by both the data outlined in section 4.3.1. and my own

knowledge of the changing trends in the genre; “following-the-trope” (Popova 2020), as it were. BTS has become the overwhelming favorite for A/B/O writers and so I decided to narrow my field of possible works from “all” fandoms to BTS and related Kpop RPF fandoms. Because of the reasons outlined in the previous section, Kpop masculinities provide an interesting context through which to describe the traditional sexual scripts of the genre as they can often have very clear distinctions between masculine Alpha characters and “softer” Omega characters. The more wide-ranging presentations of masculinity also provide space to speculate on how these dynamics might shift if the relationships are “nontraditional” or A/A or O/O. I’ve read over 100 of the most popular works from the Kpop RPF A/B/O fics and found that all the fics below demonstrate a certain preponderance for nontraditional scripting, while still adhering to the more popular trends of the most highly kudos’ed fics. That is to say, they each set the terms of the acceptable sexual scripts through “cultural scenarios” wherein the world-building of the fic sets fairly standard ‘heterosexual’ scripting expectations like those discussed by Popova (2018) and then attempt to deviate from them, in some form or another, through the character’s interpretation of these scripts, also called “intrapsychic scripts” (Simon and Gagnon 1986). While there are many fics in Kpop RPF that use world-building and character traits to interrogate traditional sexual scripts at the social and personal level using Alpha/Alpha and Omega/Omega pairings, the fics I have elected to use are explicit in their use of scripting as a framing device for character interaction - i.e. “interpersonal scripts” (Simon and Gagnon 1986). Thus, these fics, and arguably the Kpop RPF fandoms they stem from that often tap into notions of feminized masculinity, become excellent examples for how “nontraditional A/B/O dynamics” beget nontraditional sexual scripts.

The explicit nature of the sexual scripting in the following fics is particularly fascinating because the authors seem to be very attentive to the ways that social expectations influence sexual behaviors and roles. While this often translates to a direct connection between social power and sexual positionality (i.e., top or bottom), the nontraditional scripting in some of the fics ahead suggests that these connections between social and sexual are becoming less stringently heteronormative within the Omegaverse. The authors seem to be equally conscious of the deviations from cultural scenarios - drawing attention to characters' awareness of their own adherence or disruption of social norms with their sexual adventures. As many of the fics are also romances following a romance novel structure (Hayes 2004) and a HEA ending, their nontraditional scripting is typically short-lived and reverts to conventional passive and active sexual scripts by the end of each story.⁹⁰

All of the included fics also pre-date the 2018 boom in nontraditional scripting popularity: two from 2017 and one from 2016. This was done purposefully as each of the selected fics has had an arguable impact on the relatively recent popularity of nontraditional scripting in A/B/O and contributed the foothold Alpha/Alpha and Omega/Omega are gaining within the genre.⁹¹ Each fic is careful in how it constructs and revises sexual scripts, but the inclusion of a Happily-Ever-After ending can be read, to some extent, as requiring an eventual adherence to traditional 'heterosexual' scripting. The notable exception to this reversion to active and passive roles with a Happily-Ever-After ending will be thoroughly explored in "SAME LOGIC" by

⁹⁰ See Chapter 2 for more information regarding romance novel structure and HEA.

⁹¹ Decompositionbooks is a very well known writer within the BTS A/B/O space and has had fics gifted to them in the past that have gained their own popularity: "acrobats, artists, and animals" by flitter (2017) and "Jingle Bells and Ugly Sweaters" by jikookie (2017). Similarly, bambambams has seen tremendous success in the Kpop A/B/O sphere and has had almost a dozen works gifted to them as thanks for their influence in various fandoms.

bambambams (2017), the Omega/Omega pairing. As this is the only fic in this chapter that does not feature an Alpha in the pairing, I argue that the presence of an Alpha in a relationship tends to push the trajectory of the narrative towards traditional scripting and related power hierarchies. As the Alpha would typically be the character with more social, economic, and political power - fulfilling the active sexual role - the absence of an Alpha in an Omega/Omega pairing creates an interesting, circuitous power dynamic with sexual roles in a constant, though harmonious flux. To use Hoppe's theory (2015), these relationships demonstrate a "reciprocity" (207) of power exchange not often found in pairings that feature an Alpha.

And so, in the following sections I will discuss the Alpha/Omega pairing of BTS fic, "Nu ABO: A Memoir by Park Jimin" by decompositionbooks (2016) to examine how fics often play with the construction of 'heterosexual' scripting in these types of pairings, as Popova (2017, 2018, 2021) has previously suggested, and how that scripting is often revised to provide for the traditional romance ending. Following that, I will explore the Alpha/Alpha fic "Sunset Lover" by jamjooon (2017) from the Monsta X fandom which attempts to revise the typical active and passive scripts to allow for two dominant statuses in a pairing but eventually responds to these competing active roles by implementing a familiar power hierarchy based on biological imperatives. Finally, I will examine "SAME LOGIC" by bambambams (2017) which outlines some of the sexual scripts available for an Omega/Omega pairing absent the power hierarchy generally enforced by domineering Alpha behavior and perpetuated at the social (and personal) levels of scripting.

While all of these fics play with the notion of traditionalism and adherence to cultural scenarios outlined in the world-building of each fic, some are more successful

than others at interrupting the ‘heterosexual’ scripting that seems to demand one active and one passive party. Additionally, only “SAME LOGIC” (2017) provides both a HEA ending and nontraditional sexual scripting simultaneously suggesting these themes might only coexist absent an Alpha. Before I move to Omega/Omega or Alpha/Alpha pairings, I will first discuss how sexual scripting is performed at the Alpha/Omega level and how these roles inform the scripting “norms” of the genre.

4.3.1 The Alpha/Omega case study

Explicit
No Archive Warnings Apply
M/M
방탄소년단 | Bangtan Boys | BTS
Jeon Jungkook/Park Jimin, Jeon Jungkook & Park Jimin
Park Jimin (BTS), Jeon Jungkook, Jung Hoseok | J-Hope, Kim Seokjin | Jin, Kim Taehyung | V, Kim Namjoon | Rap Mon:
| Suga, Im Jaebum | JB
Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, AlphaJungkook, omegaljimin, sort-of-not-really-omegaljimin, pretty much everybody
and lots of Pining, A little bit of angst, Mating Cycles/In Heat, Self-Lubrication, Sexual Content, Idol-Verse, Knotting
English
Published: 2016-09-12 Completed: 2017-02-04 Words: 34478 Chapters: 6/6 Comments: 720 Kudos: 16582
3956 Hits: 289072

Nu ABO: A Memoir by Park Jimin

decompositionbooks

Figure 4.1: Title and tags for “Nu ABO: A Memoir by Park Jimin” by decompositionbooks (2016).

The fic “Nu ABO: A Memoir by Park Jimin” is a 2016 piece by decompositionbooks that positions the Kpop group BTS in an Omegaverse setting where the presentation of A/B/O dynamics influences the whole group and their reception by Korean and international fans.⁹² This story explicitly focuses on the wider

⁹² BTS fans refer to themselves as Army, or Armys and many of the Armys interested in fan fiction are very aware of this fic. Though considered an older fic (for this fandom), it remains one of the most popular BTS A/B/O fics in circulation. This fic is an oddity for BTS A/B/O fics as it does not reach 100,000 words and focuses on one developing relationship within the BTS Kpop group as opposed to several. Despite

social context of Omegaverse norms and how they might operate in a 'real-world' setting in which the characters are still Kpop idols. This enables the author to use Omegaverse tropes to explore and reflect on how masculinities, and gender more broadly, are constructed in the Kpop industry. As the title implies, the plot follows BTS group member Park Jimin as he presents as an Omega, a rarity for this particular iteration of the Omegaverse as the author notes only "6%" of the population occupies the status of male Omega (decompositionbooks 2016). Through his presentation, he finds his role in the Kpop group, and within society, has changed from the relative security of power that comes with being an Alpha or Beta, to a loss of bodily autonomy and social mobility that is afforded to Omegas - since they are viewed as a lesser status.

Almost simultaneously, Jimin's BTS groupmate, Jeon Jungkook, presents as an Alpha and has a seemingly smooth transition into his new status. Despite Jimin's crush on Jungkook, his jealousy over the ease with which he judges Jungkook to assume his status as an Alpha leads to some misunderstandings between the groupmates. Additionally, their new biological status causes intense sexual chemistry to alter their daily routines when close to one another. Their changing relationship causes some new tensions within the BTS group, who are all Alphas or Betas, and the rising conflict comes to a head when Jimin asks a Kpop idol from another group to aid him through a heat so that he doesn't further change the dynamic of his own idol group with his bodily requirement of heat sex and knotting. Jungkook interrupts Jimin's quickly scrapped attempt to find a heat partner outside of BTS and the two spend Jimin's heat together.

these oddities, this fic has remained within the top 5 most popular A/B/O fics in the BTS RPF fandom for over five years.

Inevitably, this does fundamentally alter the group dynamic, though based on the happy-for-now style of the ending of the fic, this change is not considered bad by the other group members.

The setting for this fic is interesting because it contemplates the possibility of Omegaverse dynamics interrupting the already tense public personae manufactured by Kpop groups and how an Omega status would further complicate these manufactured versatile masculinities. While the Alphas and Betas of the group enjoy a certain degree of social mobility granted by their masculine personas, as an Omega, Jimin is relegated to performing the role of “flower boy” or a more traditionally feminine form of masculinity (Jung 2011, Oh 2015, Kwon 2019). This means he wears soft, oversized sweaters that make him feel like “a girl who borrowed her boyfriend’s sweater” (decompositionbooks 2016), pastel makeup, and increased “aeygo”, or a child-like cuteness, when interacting with fans. Interestingly, the author takes this particular description of Jimin and his performance of masculinity from many of his real-life appearances where his persona is similarly that of a “flower boy”. As such, the author seems to be deliberately interjecting on how Jimin’s more feminine presentation, in reality, would affect his biological presentation in the Omegaverse. This construction of Kpop masculinities as a one-to-one comparison with Omegaverse status is an interesting use of the genre conventions, especially as this author has chosen to portray the more feminine constructions of masculinity as an Omegaverse status that traditionally has less social power and assumes passive sexual roles.

As such, Jimin feeling restrained by his new status as an Omega as opposed to being afforded new opportunities to experience a range of masculine personas like his Alpha and Omega BTS group mates, can be read as condemnation for being restricted

to one presentation both in the Omegaverse and with real-world implications for Kpop masculinities. This narrowing of possible masculine presentations in social situations is only applied to the male Omegas in this fic, suggesting a bias against this status and a socially constructed imperative to control how they are perceived: both at the public level (since Jimin's image is curated for public consumption) and at the personal level (since his groupmates feel compelled to reinforce social expectations of Omega behavior on Jimin in private).

The social bias against Omegas in this fic's "cultural scenarios" dictate the limited sexual and social scripts available to (or acceptable for) Omegas and are clearly laid out in the fans' projection for Jimin's presentation. The public speculation regarding A/B/O dynamics speaks to the social acceptability of some dynamics over others - going so far as to research Jimin's family lineage to confirm suspicions over his genetic predisposition.

He's seen the speculations all over the fancave—Armys threw their money in the cash pool betting on the outcome, some even going as far as to dig up the genetic tree and draw outrageously inaccurate Punnett squares that clearly confirm that Jimin was *indeed* homozygous recessive for the Alpha trait. They really only got the "homo" part right. (decompositionbooks 2016, emphasis original)

Since this fic is set in a modern Korean environment where Jimin remains a Kpop idol, the speculation on his secondary gender is seen as normal and encouraged by the production company. But the implication that the Alpha status would be the preferred one for Jimin speaks to a larger bias within the fictionalized Korean culture against Omegas (and perhaps Betas). Jimin's note about the "inaccuracy" of the genetic tracing

relays to the reader that either the Armys are deliberately misrepresenting Jimin's genealogy to produce their favored result, or that they have received inaccurate information from the production company (or other sources) that they assume is true; because it produces their preferred result. Either way, this promotion of Alpha preference among fans speaks to a diminutive or lesser role for Omegas established within the world-building of "Nu ABO" (decompositionbooks 2016).

This reinforcement of Alpha as the dominant status in society continues throughout the fic, but it is the descriptions of Jungkook's transformation from an unstatused, younger member of the group to an Alpha that illuminates this point clearly for both Jimin *and* the readers of the fic.⁹³ Descriptions of Jungkook's rapid bodily, hormonal, and personality changes are often positioned as a sort of second puberty - with added traits typical of male-coded pubescence.

It's different now. It's not just Jungkook's height that changes, or his muscles that grow; he gets bolder, a little more aggressive. He also gets too attractive for his own damn good. Jimin realizes that he can't see Jungkook as a maknae anymore, but as a man. (decompositionbooks 2016)

While Jimin's obvious crush on Jungkook does lead to questions as to whether the description of Jungkook's changing persona is accurate or the effect of Jimin's own biased thoughts, the description of Alphas as "hyper-gendered" (Gunderson 2017) or the masculine ideal for this particular iteration of the Omegaverse is not unreasonable. Prior to his own presentation, Jimin remarks on the social perception of Alphas (and Betas) as being a better option for men than an Omega status, saying,

⁹³ Younger members of a Kpop group are referred to as "maknae" or a "maknae line" if there are a considerable number of young members (Anderson 2014, Kim 2021). While young is relative, typically maknae are young adults aged anywhere between 11-25.

When Jimin turns twenty, the cash pool empties out and Armys and Jimin both resign themselves to the fact that Jimin is, unfortunately, a beta. If Jimin were to be honest, he's okay with it because he'd rather not be one of the lust-driven, hypermasculine Alphas he reads about in the "trashy omega harlequin novels" (as Yoongi calls them). (decompositionbooks 2016)

Despite being the preferred status, this description of Alphas as "lust-driven" complicates the overarching theme of Alphas as dominant and in control of the power they hold. Describing Alphas as little more than men dictated by animal mating instincts dampens the aura of powerful strength that the rest of the fic (and the Alpha/Alpha fic to follow in this chapter) presents. Additionally, the rather explicit female-coding of Omegas with the "trashy omega harlequin novels" comment also suggests a note of derogation for Omegas. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the connotation between women's fantasies and the infantilization of romance novels as derivative or "trashy" has a long history. Thus, using a brand like "harlequin" suggests both the writer's cultural standpoint (as they are aware of harlequin and its tumultuous legacy) and the implication that Omegas enjoy harlequin romances could contribute to their female coding negatively. This negative connotation with traditionally female-coded interests implies that female-coding is a direct factor in Omega's lessened social power.

Jimin seems to have particular contempt for each of the statuses available to him. Alphas are too masculine, Betas too plebeian, and Omegas too obsessed with harlequin romances. However, it is this last group that receives the brunt of Jimin's ire when he presents as an Omega and further illustrates the extent to which the society Jimin was raised in has influenced his contempt for his Omega status. This becomes explicitly apparent in the lack of medical information available for Omegas, leaving Jimin

mystified about his new status and prone to gossip to draw his own conclusions regarding his changing body.

He's heard about heats—the way they can drive omegas insane, how they can turn them into nymphomaniacs, into incubi hungry and desperate for sex. Maybe those were just rumors spread by the old Alpha and [B]eta population as a way to scare their children away from “seductive” omegas, to promote Alpha-Alpha, Alpha-beta, beta-beta monogamy or whatever. (decompositionbooks 2016)

All the conclusions Jimin draws from the rumors regarding his own status indicate a social power structure where Alphas and Betas are the preferred statuses with Omegas as lesser in every regard. Strangely, Jimin seems to think that the cultural stereotype of Omegas being desperate for sex or sex-obsessed would lessen their appeal as viable mates for Alphas or Betas. While a status filled with supposed nymphomaniacs would not necessarily discourage their appeal as sexual partners, it does lead to further questions about the sexual scripting surrounding Omegas brought about by these cultural scenarios.

Where decompositionbooks (2016) tackles these questions of sexual roles available for each status comes with the interactions between newly presented Omega Jimin and, somewhat newly statused Alpha, Jungkook. The rest of the group, Alphas included, seem to react to Jimin's new status as an Omega with relative ease (though entirely clueless as to the nuances of Omega status and with many stereotypes of Omega's diminutive social and physical power to work through). The only difference being the Alphas in the group seem to take protective roles over Jimin, leading to Jimin describing his situation as, “maybe being an omega also means you're a teenage girl with two dads who chaperon[e] every interaction, who knows” (decompositionbooks

2016). Despite referring to himself as a teenage girl with what can be interpreted as a derogatory tone, Jimin does not appear to hold any ill-will towards the social role imposed on him by his group mates. However, it is the interactions with Jungkook that indicate that the expected *sexual* scripting of active and passive roles for Alphas and Omegas, respectively, may cause unexpected tension within BTS in this fic.

Jungkook had looked at him like he was a piece of meat; had wanted to devour him. A sick part of Jimin liked it, wanted Jungkook to claim him and eat him up (god, what the hell was wrong with him?). But then Jimin remembers the way Jungkook had looked when Jimin shoved him and brought him back to reality, remembers the panic and the distress on his face like Jungkook couldn't believe what he had done. (decompositionbooks 2016)

This excerpt from Jimin's musings following a scene where Jungkook backs Jimin into the kitchen cabinets and scents him without consent has two implications regarding the expected sexual roles of Alphas and Omegas in "Nu ABO". First, Jimin as the object being viewed, or "piece of meat" to be devoured, finds a new sort of pleasure in this role as the passive sexual party. Second, interrupting this script by pushing Jungkook away reads as less passive acceptance and a more active deterrent to sexual overtures. As with the Omega scenting an Alpha in "I don't know why, but I guess it has something to do with you" (2017) from Chapter 2, the active Omega in sexual situations is often cast as unusual since Omegas are assumed to be entirely sexually passive. Jimin's sexual gatekeeping - a role often paradoxically ascribed to the passive, female-coded sexual roles (Simon and Gagnon 1986, Weideman 2005, Menard and Cabrera 2011, Sanchez et al. 2012, Beres 2014) presents an interesting dichotomy of Omega sexual roles. Gatekeeping is commonly viewed as passive, but the physicality of pushing Jungkook

away to end the sexual encounter is, indeed, an active role. While I will examine Jungkook's distress at his own domineering sexual role as an Alpha in later sections, it is Jimin's oscillation between passive and active roles in this scene that complicates what is often considered the common sexual script for Omegas.

It is this oscillation, as opposed to strict adherence to one passive or active role, which leads Jimin to reject his Omega status, and the social and sexual scripting it implies, to embark on a mission to become more Alpha-like in demeanor.

In a nutshell, Alphas were masculine. And, as luck would have it, society claims that being a gay omega male makes Jimin as far removed from masculinity as possible. So of course, the only way for anybody (Jungkook, his mind offers) to take him seriously is if he became a manly, take-no-shit-from-anybody Alpha.

(decompositionbooks 2016)

As this quote directs, the socially constructed equation of masculinity with Alpha status provides a complicated relationship for Jimin and his relationship to his own body. According to Jimin's perception of socially conceived and accepted masculine standards, his own Omega masculinity is practically invisible and certainly not seen as a viable substitute for Alpha masculinity leading to his attempts to become more like an Alpha. The purpose of this attempt to change his status seems to be two-fold. First, this suggestion that statuses and the social (and sexual) roles associated with them are entirely discreet means Jimin must forsake one status to obtain the social roles he desires from the other. For example, to have the power to assume the active sexual role he employed with Jungkook, Jimin must purge himself of the passive roles implied by his status as an Omega. Second, Jimin assumes that the more hypermasculine the posturing, the more social power an Alpha can assume - hence his desire to become a

“take-no-shit-from-anybody Alpha”. Jimin is not confined to the role of passive sexual partner as an Omega (though he did find some pleasure in the position as a sexual object), though he remains insistent that his social roles, and thus social power, will inevitably improve by imitating stereotypes of Alpha behaviors. This could indicate the strict cultural scenarios of the society in “Nu ABO” have a larger impact on the sexual scripting in this fic than the interpersonal scripting internalized and utilized by the characters. This is most clearly illustrated by Jimin’s multiple failed attempts to become more Alpha-like to reclaim what he views as lost masculinity.

The author’s decision to conflate gay sexual identity with Omega identity as “far removed from masculinity” is also a strange addition, especially as Jimin seems to have no desire to purge his sexual identity - only A/B/O status. While interjections like this seem to critique the Kpop industry and the concept of skinship in a culture where LGBTQ+ relationships are not (strictly speaking) legal (Kwon 2019, Kim 2021), the author’s decision to address Jimin’s sexuality reads as odd. Jungkook is similarly homosexual but does not seem to have the same correlations between sexual identity and masculinity. As Jimin’s sexuality is never discussed in conjunction with masculinity after this scene, it is difficult to discern the specific critique the author is offering with the conflation of homosexuality and masculinity. I would suggest it is meant as a commentary on the stereotype of the ‘effeminate gay man’, but again, Jimin remains focused on physicality as a projection of masculinity in “Nu ABO” (decompositionbooks 2016) rather than sexual identity and he does not correlate the two again in this fic.

Some of the attempts to become more physically dominant through muscle mass and a “beast-like” (Kwon 2019, Oh 2015) public persona are thwarted by Jimin’s production team to maintain his flower-boy Kpop image. While this journey to find a

status more aligned with the script Jimin wants to fulfill was sparked by sexual stimulus, sex doesn't feature heavily in Jimin's story arc until his heats become more prominent in the fic. It is Jungkook who struggles more with the sexual implications of his new status of Alpha and how he fulfills these roles with seemingly unconscious compliance. When discussing his new primal reactions with fellow BTS groupmate and Alpha, Namjoon, Jungkook relays all the ways in which his body seemingly dictates the active role for him - leaving him emotionally distressed in the aftermath, not unlike his sexual overture towards Jimin.

"I hate being an Alpha," he mutters.

"Hm?"

"I hate it," Jungkook says again, voice muffled by the pillow. "Alphas are supposed to be strong, right? The movies make them all heroes and stuff, but I just—" He breathes. "—I just feel so weak. I don't know what's wrong with me."

The hand keeps going, rubbing small circles in his back. "What do you mean?"

"There's just- so much anger and I just feel like a bad person all the time. I'm so damn tired of it." He doesn't get any verbal response from Namjoon but the hand doesn't stop moving so Jungkook takes it as encouragement to continue.

"Hyung, I was ready to fight you," he confesses, fiddling with the pillowcase. "I saw your hand on Jimin's waist and I— I got so angry. All I was able to think about was moving your hand and—dammit, I sound insane".

(decompositionbooks 2016)

Jungkook's struggle to keep his instincts under control lest he try to dominate his Alpha group mates and lay a sexual claim on Jimin manifests here as feelings of worthlessness and personal weakness. However, it brings the biological essentialism of

Chapter 2 and the animal magnetism of Chapter 3 into sharp relief. Does Jungkook have the ability to control which sexual scripts he follows as a “lust-driven” Alpha? Could he oscillate between roles like Jimin attempts to or does his status confine him to the active, domineering role? Unlike Jimin who is most often contained by the *social* expectations of his status, Jungkook can be read to be confined by the *sexual* scripting of his status. Additionally, their ability to deviate, or attempt to change, these scripts seem to be hindered by different structures. For example, Jimin’s Omega status comes with social policing of the roles assumed to accompany his status while Jungkook, as an Alpha, has less social pressure to adhere to sexual roles, receiving pressure instead from his own body and instincts to comply.

“Nu ABO” (decompositionbooks 2016) can be read as an exploration of a character’s personal autonomy and control when navigating a role within a socially and biologically predetermined structure. While attempts to circumvent these roles often fail (as Jimin never successfully sheds his “adorable” Omega-ness and Jungkook cannot endure a passive sexual role), unconscious submission to these roles also brings emotional turmoil (Jungkook despises himself and his status for the urge it prompts to sexually claim Jimin and fight any Alpha standing between him and his sexual mate). The conflict the characters face when presented with these roles (or imperatives, as the Alphas seem to be more biologically inclined to follow scripts thus far) suggests that one of the few ways to find solace in their roles in society, and sexual scripts, is to surrender to them.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ This particular trait of Alpha’s struggling with dominant roles, but finding pleasure in accepting this role is a common trait in many PwP fics (PwP is shortened from Porn without Plot, or Plot, what Plot?). Though traditionally associated with one-shots (or fics that are only one chapter long), many A/B/O fics use this template for male Alpha behavior. Popular fics from Kpop RPF that use this feature include: “thirty thousand feet and falling” by linzeigh (2018) with over 12k kudos at time of writing, “Gold and Silver” by madeliefie (2017) with 11k kudos, and “Alpha Who?” by wontonz (2018) with 10k kudos.

As the main plot of the fic revolves around both Jimin and Jungkook's attempts to deviate from their new status and accompanying scripts, the final romantic culmination ending in acceptance of and finding pleasure in strict adherence to Omega passive, submissive scripting and Alpha active, dominant scripting can be read as shoehorning these characters into 'heterosexual' scripting. Shoehorned, in that the entirety of the storyline attempts to broaden the social roles for Omegas and fight against the biological impulse that forces Alphas into active sexual roles. But for the sake of the HEA (or happy for now) ending of this romance genre fic, interrupting the prescriptive roles only goes as far as the conflict in the romance plot can manage before it starts interrupting the 'getting together' portion of the fic. This romance novel sexual scripting conformation comes with Jimin's heat and prompts a return to typical social and sexual Alpha/Omega scripting.

"My omega pheromones are making you crazy!" he says, hysterical. Jimin forces himself to breathe but his lungs still feel like they're collapsing in on themselves. "You don't—you don't know what you're doing. I didn't wanna force you into this." "What?! If anything, *I'm* the one forcing *you* into this! Jiminie-hyung, you're—" Jungkook's voice gets smaller, sounding more broken. "You're heat-drunk and I'm just—I can't even control myself around you". (decompositionbooks 2016, emphasis original)

I mentioned in the previous paragraphs that control is a theme that features heavily in this fic, whether it be control over one's instincts, their bodily autonomy, or how society views them. The above excerpt illustrates how the final chapters and scenes of the fic can be seen to diverge from this notion of control towards a more biologically essentialist notion of sexual scripting. As explored in Chapter 2, heats bring about many

questions of consent, but the above scene points to issues beyond heat-based questions of consent and focuses instead on who has the power in this situation and who will be culpable for the consequences; in short, who will take the active role and who will take the passive. Shifting the 'blame' over who initiated the sexual encounter from 'my body forced your body to react this way' to 'your body reacted this way without your permission' can be read as moving the active role from one body in particular towards the less discrete concept of bodies in general. Neither Jimin nor Jungkook are responsible for the way their bodies respond to one another and thus neither of them feels as though they have accepted or rejected an active or passive role. They are merely responding to bodily stimuli and if that happens to produce roles like the passive, submissive Omega and active, dominant Alpha outlined by scholars like Popova (2018) or Gunderson (2017), then so be it - despite their articulation of struggle.

This approach to sexual scripting as biologically dictated as opposed to socially embedded contributes to a reading of the ending of this fic as shoehorned into a Happily Ever After ending. Delegating control to instincts and bodily responses, especially when so much of the plot has been in the service of the opposite, is odd, but not uncommon in many Omegaverse stories compliant with the romance novel structure. Either the troubles both characters faced regarding their status-based scripts must be resolved or they are ignored as a possible point of further contention. In the case of "Nu ABO" (2016), decompositionbooks takes the latter position and the closing lines of the fic indicate that the choice to follow the typical Alpha/Omega scripts will persist throughout their relationship without causing any further doubt or dismay. The author writes:

Jimin has made it a habit to catch himself doing non- [Omega] things, throwing an arm over Jungkook's shoulder, ordering him around on camera. And Jungkook's okay with it, doesn't let his Alpha pride get in the way.

In private, Jungkook's the one ordering him around, pinning him on the bed and talking to him in a way that's way too comfortable (and explicit) for anything on broadcast. And Jimin lets him do it because he doesn't mind bending to him, too eager to please. (decompositionbooks 2016)

The effect of this decision to follow prescribed roles of their statuses based on biological instinct makes the driving plot of this fic seem odd in retrospect. Is the sexual scripting of "Nu ABO" (2016) so biologically ingrained that fighting against instinct will only end in self-loathing and failed attempts to change? That adhering to society's role for a person based on biological aspects will bring romantic fulfillment? Perhaps the intent is more uplifting and suggests that fighting the way biology is inscribed onto societal structures can be freeing for both Alphas and Omegas since it separates roles into that of public and private: social and sexual. There is some distinction in the above excerpt between the more public scripts performed by pairings and the private sphere - where compliance with 'heterosexual' scripting is not stigmatized and giving in to biological imperatives does not inexplicably tie a character to a 'lesser' role. However, this reliance on traditional 'heterosexual' scripting is not just a facet of Alpha/Omega sexual roles. Using traditional 'heterosexual' scripting as a workaround for HEA endings or even as a way to fulfill heat or rut needs is a tenet of the Omegaverse for both Alpha/Omega pairings and - as the next example will examine - Alpha/Alpha pairings as well. Since my argument is that the Omega/Omega pairings are the only examples to provide non-heteronormative scripting at the time of writing, the absence of Omegas in the following

pairing contributes more to my suggestion that it is the presence of Alphas in the main pairing that conform sexual scripts to heteronormativity. As such, the following example does not deviate from the sexual scripts expressed in “Nu ABO” (decompositionbooks 2016) so much as it provides further evidence of the scripts’ permeation of many Alpha-centric fics.

4.3.2 The Alpha/Alpha case study

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Monsta X (Band)
Relationships:	Chae Hyungwon/Shin Hoseok Wonho, Lee Minhyuk/Son Hyunwoo Shownu, Lee Jooheon/Lim Changkyun I.M
Characters:	Chae Hyungwon, Shin Hoseok Wonho, Lee Minhyuk (Monsta X), Son Hyunwoo Shownu, Lee Jooheon, Lim Changkyun I.M, Yoo Kihyun
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Alternate Universe - College/University, Sexual Content, Getting Together, Alpha/Alpha
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2017-04-03 Completed: 2017-04-11 Words: 19136 Chapters: 4/4 Comments: 146 Kudos: 3586 Bookmarks: 716 Hits: 39127

Sunset Lover

jamjoon

Figure 4.2: Title and tags for “Sunset Lover” by jamjoon (2017).

The plot of “Sunset Lover” by jamjoon (2017) follows the blossoming Alpha/Alpha relationship between Chae Hyungwon (called Hyungwon) and Shin Hoseok (referred to as Hoseok or by his nickname “Wonho” interchangeably throughout the fic) from the Kpop group Monsta X. In addition to being an Omegaverse fic, the setting for this fic takes place during imagined undergraduate college years for the Kpop idols - making it a ‘College AU’.⁹⁵ While there are brief mentions of the romantic entanglements of

⁹⁵ This fic, like many in the College AU tag, uses conventions for the American college system including fraternities, keg parties, etc. These conventions could be contested as appropriative (Pande 2018, Pande 2020, Fazekas 2020), but I will not be intervening in these arguments for this fic since the question of ethical representation does not intersect with the social or sexual scripting for this particular story.

Hyungwon's flatmates (also Monsta X idols), the story is focused on the mutual pining between Hyungwon and Wonho as they both believe the other is exclusively interested in Omegas as would typically be true for Alphas in A/B/O fics. When one of Hyungwon's Omega flatmates has an unexpected heat and forces Hyungwon to leave the apartment (due to the mutual discomfort between the two flatmates rather than uncontrollable attraction that heat typically prompts in Alphas), Hyungwon stays with Wonho wherein the two confess their mutual attraction and have lots of sex about it. The final sections of the fic explore how the two Alphas navigate Hyungwon's rut and the after-effects of that shared rut.

Similar to "Nu ABO" (decompositionbooks 2016), the social and sexual scripting of this fic is set up early in the world-building, though "Sunset Lover" (jamjoon 2017) accomplishes this through a series of interludes into Hyungwon's past. It is clear through previous interactions with his parents and classmates, that there are stereotypes for social scripting aligned with A/B/O status in "Sunset Lover" (jamjoon 2017). The perspective of this fic is entirely from Hyungwon's point of view and he often excludes himself from being shaped by the stereotypes perpetuated by his society.

He presents as an alpha at age fourteen, his parents give him a pat on the head, and life moves on. Having two beta parents never really left any room for stereotyping. His best friend is an omega, and he could probably snap Hyungwon in two. (jamjoon 2017)

This excerpt quickly sets up a few of the cultural scripts expected of each of the A/B/O dynamics and just as quickly positions Hyungwon as an outsider, or exception, to these norms. Alphas are meant to be strong, but Hyungwon has Omega friends stronger than him and in noticing this exception to stereotypes is presented as an atypical Alpha. Most

parents push their Alpha children into stereotyped social roles, but Hyungwon's Beta parents place no such expectations on their son and thus further exempt him from traditional roles impressed upon Alphas. This happens multiple times throughout the opening of the story, where the reader is led to believe that Hyungwon is an exception to typical Alpha traits of strength, aggression, and domineering behavior.

Unlike "Nu ABO" (decompositionbooks 2016), Hyungwon's decision to abstain from the social role expected of him as an Alpha is not seen as a negative, but rather a positive personality trait. This positive spin on exceptionalism is inescapable at the beginning of this fic, with scenes like the one below doubling down on just how little Hyungwon has in common with other, traditional Alphas.

In highschool he'd hear other dickwad alpha's talking in the locker rooms, bullshit like, *"Fuck, did you catch the scent on that one?"*

"Oh yeah, god. Smells so fucking good- "

Hyungwon would only blink. Raise an eyebrow and pause, trying to remember if he smelled anything particularly nice. (jamjoon 2017, emphasis original)

Setting up the traditional Alpha archetype within a boys' locker room is a useful way for the author to address stereotypes of misogyny against Omegas within young Alpha spaces and continue to illustrate Hyungwon's exceptionalism since he does not partake in the 'locker room talk'. I use the term misogyny to describe the Alpha's derogatory comments about Omega scent as it can be read to resemble disparaging 'locker room talk' that is often openly objectifying and misogynistic.⁹⁶ However, since many of the Omegas featured in this story are men, perhaps bigotry is a better term for the

⁹⁶ I used similar language in Chapter 2 when comparing erotic rape fantasies in heterosexual romance novels to the erotic rape fantasies featured in Omegaverse fic.

disrespectful and objectifying comments made by those who are considered typical Alphas. Nevertheless, I include the term misogyny because it informs later sexual scripting for the Alpha/Alpha pairing as 'heterosexual' and speaks to the brand of harassment being gender-based and derogatory.

Nevertheless, Hyungwon's exceptionalism is made abundantly clear to the reader before the primary love interest even enters the narrative. *But* the opening exposition is the only place in this fic where the reader is told or offered any proof of Hyungwon's exceptionalism. Almost as soon as Hoseok is introduced as an equally atypical Alpha - in that he is respectful and not immediately sexually aggressive - Hyungwon's personality traits take on an interesting shift revealing Alpha-typical competitiveness and aggression. These themes of competition and aggression are inextricably linked with notions of patriarchal power structures which encourage competition to establish and reinforce these hierarchies of power. As I briefly explored in the opening section of this chapter, this return to traditional patriarchal power dynamics also signals a return to 'heterosexual' scripting, despite the exposition of this fic indicating alternative sexual roles for an Alpha/Alpha pairing.

In a scene following Hoseok's introduction, Hyungwon comes to the aid of one of his Omega friends who is receiving unwanted attention from other hypermasculine and sexually aggressive Alphas. Where the beginning of the story leads readers to assume Hyungwon will reason with the Alphas or employ other diplomatic methods illustrating his atypical Alpha behaviors and alternative scripting, he instead starts a fistfight. Despite Hyungwon's immediate Alpha-typical response of resorting to violence, Hyungwon is revealed to be a very poor fighter when set against other Alphas. Hoseok comes to help Hyungwon win the fight against the Alpha harassers - which can be read

from a couple of differing perspectives. From one point of view, Hoseok's physical capabilities present an opportunity for Hyungwon to lust over his musculature - performing the necessary function of furthering the attraction in the romance plot. However, it also sets up a sexual dynamic of competition between Hyungwon and Hoseok, as implied with the line, "Hoseok's eyes are narrowed, and lord, he's sooo much better at this whole dominance thing than Hyungwon" (jamjoon 2017).

Despite Hyungwon admitting to Hoseok's aptitude for Alpha-typical dominance, this theme of competing for the dominant, active role persists throughout "Sunset Lover" (2017). While this is eventually resolved into the traditionally 'heterosexual' scripts with Hyungwon's rut causing an eventual shift into active and passive roles, the consequence of the characters' competition for sexual dominance plays an interesting part in their interpersonal scripting. For example, Hyungwon, who until this point has been painted as the exception to typical Alpha scripting of aggression and predation, takes an incredibly active role in his sexual pursuit of Hoseok. As they are both Alphas, there is a cultural scenario built into the A/B/O dynamics of this fic suggesting that it would be within their typical scripting, as Alphas, to assume the dominant role and this wrestling for control is merely an effect of that social scripting. However, the fact that this seemingly circuitous relationship with control is often described in terms of violence or aggression AND is later "solved" with a return to active/passive scripting for the HEA ending presents a problem for this momentary "two-way fight, both parties giving and taking equally" (jamjoon 2017).

This notion of power equality between the Alphas is complicated in "Sunset Lover" (2017) because it is so entwined with their sexual scripting. Both Alphas hold positions of relative social power, in comparison with Omegas who need intermittent

rescue from rogue Alpha harassers, and they both seem to hold each other in high regard. One does not assume dominance over the other (thus far) - instead competing with one another for sexual power. Hyungwon comments on this wrestling for control as a sign of mutual respect between partners as opposed to biological compliance as would be culturally expected of an Alpha/Omega pairing:

Hyungwon nips his bottom lip; Hoseok growls at the gesture, and squeezes his ass harder.

This is what Hyungwon adores.

It's not forced submission through genetics and hormones. It's not finicky consent and horrible excuses. It's kissing because they want to. Wrestling for control because they want to. (jamjoon 2017)

While this excerpt does reveal some of Hyungwon's bias towards Alpha/Omega couples as dubiously consensual and therefore lesser than his own relationship with an Alpha, it also foreshadows his own "forced submission". Where the Alpha/Alpha "forced submission" differs from Alpha/Omega pairings (according to Hyungwon) is in the implication that Omegas cannot offer informed consent, whereas the Alphas wrestle for control in a more circuitous manner wherein consent is granted through dominance.⁹⁷ For example, one Alpha may have "won" the more active role in a sexual situation - determining how the sexual acts will occur - but that does not determine how the roles will be distributed in the next sexual situation. Ironically, "Sunset Lover" (2017) completely undermines this possibility for Alpha/Alpha switching of sexual roles depending on the situation by introducing an Alpha rut. Hyungwon's rut can be read to

⁹⁷ I examined this theme of consent during heats thoroughly in Chapter 2 and while there is some merit to this notion of non-consent during a heat, it is infinitely more complicated than "dubcon equates lesser respect" in an Alpha/Omega relationship.

reinforce the biological essentialism inherent in the Alpha/Omega pairings that, in Hyungwon's own words, leads to "finicky consent and horrible excuses" for sexual roles of domination and submission.

The rut introduces a new component to Hyungwon and Hoseok's relationship which is the nearly uncontrollable desire to sexually mate. Much the same as Omega heat, "Sunset Lover" (2017) describes the Alpha rut as inescapable and puts the character in the position of submissive and receptive to all sexual advances - provided they offer the necessary stimulus.⁹⁸ Hyungwon comments on how the rut makes him feel less like an Alpha due to his reactions to Hoseok's sexual ministrations; however, the phrasing and framing of this comment has an oddly aggressive tone.

Instincts would yell no. Instincts would kick and scream, horrified to have another alpha so close to his most vital area.

But blood rushes through him instead. (jamjoon 2017)

In positioning Hoseok kissing Hyungwon's neck as dangerous and potentially a cause for instinctual alarm, instead of sexual foreplay as it is presumably meant, the author could be interpreted as reminding the audience that it should be much more difficult for Alphas to mate than what Hyungwon is describing. However, in casting Hyungwon and Hoseok as exceptional Alphas able to mate with one another despite possible social and instinctual scripting indicating otherwise, they soon fall into typically active (for Hoseok) and passive (for Hyungwon) roles to satisfy Hyungwon's rut. Much like the Omega heat, Hyungwon's Alpha rut places him in a vulnerable position of overwhelming sexual desire that compromises his sense of bodily autonomy and makes his own

⁹⁸ Stimulus, in this case, refers to stimulating the penile knot. In Omegas, stimulus often refers to the area of the body typically holding the knot - whether vaginal, anal, or other.

consent to sexual acts “finicky”, as he would say. And so, these Alphas can be read to adhere to traditional hierarchical Alpha/Omega scripting despite their shared status as Alphas.

For instance, as Hyungwon advances through his rut, he becomes more and more submissive to Hoseok as an Alpha willing to satisfy his sexual urges. When Hyungwon is too slow to react or attempts to deviate from this new role as a passive receiver of pleasure, Hoseok intervenes with increased Alpha-like behaviors used to reinforce this dominant/submissive sexual power dynamic.

“On your back,” Hoseok exhales. Hyungwon doesn’t listen, blood past his ears, so Hoseok uses his Alpha voice to grit, “*On your back.*” (jamjoon 2017, emphasis original)

This use of Alpha voice, or hormonal persuasion through verbal cues,⁹⁹ to place Hyungwon into “forced submission” while he is biologically compromised by rut closely mirrors the use of bond-biting to impose roles of dominance and submission in Alpha/Omega fics. The use of animalistic tendencies to reinforce, or introduce, roles of dominance and submission into the sexual scripting of an Omegaverse fic seems to be a standard procedure - at least in the scripting of Alpha/Omega and Alpha/Alpha pairings.

In “Nu ABO” (2016), heat was arguably used as a plot device to erase uncertainty about conforming to expected sexual and social roles - alongside smoothing the questions of status identity for a traditional happily-ever-after ending. “Sunset Lover” (2017) uses rut to conclude the “wrestling for control” between the partners so that one

⁹⁹ “Alpha voice” is related to the vampiric compulsion discussed in Chapter 3. It is not a common trope in A/B/O fics, though it does occasionally come up in fics and is understood within the Omegaverse reader and writership as a form of compulsion or thrall. It is not often presented as forcing others to act against their own will, merely to entice them to act according to the issued command.

could dominate the other - again, imposing an active and passive role for each Alpha. From one perspective, the 'performative' alternative sexual scripting in both fics is used to signpost non-traditionalism in theory, while still using the typical male and 'female-coded' sexual scripts in practice. This adherence to traditional 'heterosexual' scripts is not unusual for romance-novel style plots, and as I examined in Chapter 3, the compliance with roles of dominance and submission does not always stem from heteronormative social scripting so much as consent. However, the non-traditional A/B/O dynamics in the two types of pairings discussed thus far seem to follow a pattern of performed nontraditional social scripting, but *not* nontraditional sexual scripting. Where this dynamic seems to change comes about when Alphas are removed from the main pairing.

In the Omega/Omega fic I will explore in the following section, the fic plays with sexual scripting at all three levels of engagement - cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripting. What distinguishes the Omega/Omega pairing from Alpha/Omega and Alpha/Alpha is how the characters negotiate which sexual scripts will work for them with each sexual encounter and how these conversations intersect with the power dynamics of the relationship. This will show how the removal of hyper-masculine statuses allows for a more fluid power exchange that directly challenges many of the seemingly inescapable hetero-patriarchal structures of the Omegaverse that are informed by many Western cultures in reality.

4.3.3 The Omega/Omega case study

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	방탄소년단 Bangtan Boys BTS
Relationship:	Jeon Jungkook/Park Jimin
Characters:	Jeon Jungkook, Park Jimin (BTS), Min Yoongi Suga, Others including the Jeon family
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Angst, Family Drama, Fluff, Omega/Omega, Rimming, Wet & Messy, Grinding, Scissoring, (Like...two guys? It's hard to explain but you'll like it I promise), ass to ass, Sex Toys, Hand Jobs, Imfao What Have I Done, Dirty Talk, Anal Fingering, Anal Sex, Nipple Play, Come Eating, Finger Sucking, Snowballing, Switching, Mating Cycles/In Heat, Multiple Orgasms, Fisting, Mating, Mating Bites, Claiming, Claiming Bites, Bonding, Mutual Masturbation, Sorry about the tags lol
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2017-09-29 Completed: 2017-11-03 Words: 29307 Chapters: 6/6 Comments: 167 Kudos: 1778 Bookmarks: 550 Hits: 36980

SAME LOGIC
bambambams (phanjessmagoria)

Figure 4.3: Title and tags for “SAME LOGIC” by bambambams (2017).

The BTS fic “SAME LOGIC” by bambambams (2017) features the same pairing as “Nu ABO” (2016) with Park Jimin and Jeon Jungkook as the main couple. The narrative of this fic muses on the power structure of A/B/O dynamics and how ‘flimsy’ the scripting for each status is when there is no Alpha to ‘enforce’ these roles - indicating once more that the traditional patriarchal power structure is linked with Alpha behavior. A sexual introspection regarding social expectations, this story follows Jungkook, spelled Jeongguk by the author (bambambams 2017), through his navigation of a relationship with a fellow Omega, Jimin: a pairing that he has been taught is highly unorthodox and will not be accepted by society (or his parents) and will cause irreparable damage to his psychological state. Through the development of their sexual and romantic relationship, Jungkook is forced from his family home due to the prejudices of his parents and finds refuge with Jimin. In the final scenes, Jimin and Jungkook complete a bond bite - an act which is not traditionally performed between Omegas and has no documentation of success within the world-building of this story - and finding happiness in their challenge of stereotypical A/B/O sexual and social scripting.

The typical scripting for Alphas and Omegas in this fic is abundantly clear within the opening paragraphs but continues to be a source of contention throughout the fic. By typical scripting, the fic refers to the roles of dominant and submissive scripting outlined in both “Nu ABO” (2016) and “Sunset Lover” (2017). While the previous fics attempted to play with the social roles at the beginning of the narrative to challenge preconceived associations between status and script, at least until biological urges intervened, “SAME LOGIC” (2017) takes a different approach. Instead of having characters “act out” against the norms and declare their own roles, even if temporarily, the author points to the absurdity of the roles themselves needing constant reinforcement - especially if they are biologically determined (as the last two fics have described them). For example, the first glimpse into Jungkook’s familial environment introduces the roles for every status, but also notes that the strict familial adherence to these roles has led to Jungkook questioning their practicality.

Presenting was actually a *Thing* in his family. A capital-T, carrying serious weight, *Thing*.

They adhered strictly to the societal norms for their Status, went along with every single stipulation that dictated how an alpha, a beta, an omega should act. Jeongguk was the only one who had ever been different, and they never, ever let him forget it.

Presenting as an omega wasn’t shameful—to his family, it was just part of life, a role that someone had to fill. Jeongguk was never made to feel bad about being what he was—until he realized that he didn’t want to be subservient to someone else, to an alpha or a beta. He didn’t want to be part of a system that told him he

was lesser just because he Presented a certain way. (bambambams 2017, emphasis original)

Aside from the apparent lack of “shame” associated with the status in his family, there is a strict social structure erected by this description with a heavy bias against Omegas. While the description of roles would indicate no one status is better than the other, this excerpt makes that assumption decidedly untrue and proclaims Omegas as subservient to the other statuses. This excerpt also implies that while the roles assigned to each status may have stemmed from cultural expectations, these roles are severely policed within Jungkook’s immediate family unit. Jungkook’s family and their insistent adherence to traditional status roles may be outdated (or at least an outlier in their society) are frequently referenced throughout the fic. The author uses social scripting for Jungkook’s parents that closely resembles that of a traditionally conservative family unit that polices heterosexual gender norms for both men and women.¹⁰⁰ It is Jungkook’s obvious disdain for the discrete social (and sexual) roles promoted by his family that make this exposition pivotal in paving the expectations for the remainder of the fic. There are rules that Jungkook has previously abided by, but now that he is reaching a point of sexual exploration, he is finding the roles ascribed to his status and familial expectation regarding these roles to be incongruent with his sense of self-worth.

The fact that Jungkook starts to question the status-driven roles and his family’s adherence to them when he begins having sexual experiences is an interesting departure from the previous fics discussed in this chapter. “SAME LOGIC” (2017) does not indicate that Jungkook cares much about the social scripting for his Omega status

¹⁰⁰ I am referencing specifically conservative, religious families in the US which often promote homophobic, racist, and sexist ideology (e.g., Westboro Baptist Church congregation, Evangelicals, etc.); however, these traditionally conservative family units are not exclusive to the US.

until it starts to affect the choices available to him as a sexual partner and which sexual role he will be expected to assume in a relationship with an Alpha or Beta. Sexual scripting is a preoccupation for Jungkook and drives the plot of this fic. Even when musing on the social position held by Omegas (and who reiterates these beliefs in his own family), Jungkook is focused almost entirely on what his role would be as a sexual partner.

Even his parents subscribed to the belief that omegas truly were the lowest Status, not deserving of the same privileges as betas, who weren't deserving of the same privileges as alphas. But why the fuck should Jeongguk settle for a mate who only saw him as a method to get through a rut, to fill up with spunk during a heat? (bambambams 2017)

As an Omega, Jungkook does not have the same social power as Alphas or Betas, but it is the position as a passive sexual object, or "spunk" receptacle, that Jungkook objects to. Since some of this sexual scripting is based on biological essentialism stemming from heats/ruts, it is even more odd that the introduction to Jimin and the start of their Omega/Omega relationship is based so heavily on animal instinct (i.e., scent, mating bites). Jungkook recalls their meeting with traditional Alpha/Omega sexual scripting at the forefront of his mind, placing himself as Omega and Jimin as Alpha despite Jimin's Omega status:

Jimin was an omega too, but he was unlike anyone else Jeongguk had ever crossed paths with. He was beautiful, which wasn't unusual, but Jeongguk found himself drawn to Jimin's scent the way he'd never been drawn to an alpha or a beta. It was intoxicating: floral yet heady, sweet but musky, and every time

Jeongguk caught it, he wanted to drop to his knees and present himself to be mated. (bambambams 2017)

The biological component of scent affecting Jungkook's sexual reaction to Jimin complicates the divergence from traditional scripting Jungkook seems to wish for in the paragraphs prior to Jimin's introduction. Later scenes reveal Jungkook's current conformation to Alpha/Omega sexual scripting as an aftereffect of his upbringing rather than an intrapsychic script revealing his own desires. However, this scene can initially be read as Jungkook assuming a passive, traditionally Omega sexual role (e.g. dropping to his knees and presenting) when presented with a possible sexual partner, regardless of that partner's status.

While seemingly based on a cultural scenario, wherein Jungkook is not aware that there are other, alternative scripts to the Alpha/Omega pairings he was raised to accept as natural, the reality of Jungkook and Jimin's first sexual encounter reveals interpersonal scripting that diverges from this norm. The expectation set in the exposition of "SAME LOGIC" (2017) indicates a script for these characters which closely resembles the earlier work on homosexual men's scripting presented by Whittier and Melendez (2004) that relates the penetrated party as female-coded (Omegas) and equates sexual control with masculinity (Alphas). However, the actuality of Jimin and Jungkook's sexual coupling seems to favor the circuitous scripting outlined by Hoppe (2011) and Kiguwa (2015) that describes both roles with "a sense that he is not only giving but also receiving" (Hoppe 2011, 207) regardless of penetration. When reflecting on their night together, Jungkook says,

He'd barely gotten any rest—Jimin was insatiable and so, Jeongguk had found, was he. Typically, sex between an omega and an alpha or beta was over when

they popped their knot. It satisfied both parties, soothed heats and ruts, and was regarded as *The End*. Or so Jeongguk had been told.

But with two omegas—they hadn't needed to stop. Neither of them had a knot to plug the other one up with, lock their come inside and then drift off into a satisfied slumber. They could have kept going as long as they wanted to. (bambambams 2017)

Jungkook explicitly tells the audience that the cultural scenarios he was raised with had no bearing on the interpersonal scripting between two Omegas. This manifests as multiple orgasms (where Jungkook had expected one or none) and constant shifts in sexual positioning for Jimin and Jungkook since neither one seems to favor a specific active or passive script. This shift between sexual roles also speaks to the Omega status and its relationship with power dynamics. Unlike the Alphas of "Sunset Lover" (2017), there is no wrestling for control between these Omegas and there is no singular 'winner' who assumes the dominant role. Both characters "hadn't needed to stop" which could be interpreted to mean the circuitous power dynamic between the two Omegas never caused a need to fight for position in their sexual relationship. Absent an Alpha, there is no competition for power.

There are aspects in the way the writer has presented this nontraditional scripting that could align with common cultural scripts surrounding queer women - particularly the absence of sexual competition (Power, McNair, and Carr 2009). As I have explained throughout this thesis, Omegas are often described within fics and theorized in A/B/O scholarship as female-coded (Busse 2013, Gunderson 2017). Male Omegas follow feminine roles within heteronormative scripts as passive partners (Popova 2017, 2018, 2021) and sometimes can be viewed as stand-ins (Arnaiz 123, 2018) for the largely

female-identifying fan fiction community (Centrumlumina 2014, destination:toast! 2017). While I have used this female-coding to inform my use of the term heteronormativity as opposed to homonormativity in the chapters thus far, the female-coding of Omega/Omega relationships requires a more in-depth analysis of this connectivity between male Omegas and feminine roles.

The Omega/Omega sexual scripting, as presented in "SAME LOGIC" (2017), could be interpreted as wlw or wlw-adjacent, but I have deliberately circumvented this phrasing. I suggest that this delegation of scripts is a bit reductive as would imply that all relationships absent an Alpha do not include masculine-coded characters. While I have argued that heteronormative scripts are an accurate description of many of the Alpha/Omega pairings, describing Omega/Omega scripts as wlw-adjacent because of their female-codedness overlooks some of the more interesting conversations with gender occurring within the male Omega characters. As such, I will continue to describe Omega/Omega scripting as non-heterosexual and/or nontraditional instead of wlw or wlw-adjacent to highlight the queer elements of the male Omega, though I concede that the Omega/Omega pairing does share some similarities with wlw scripting: including non-competition for dominance, versatility between scripts, and multiple, consecutive orgasms (Power, McNair, and Carr 2009). I will discuss these possibilities further in the conclusion of this chapter, but the author's awareness of the wlw-coding for Omega/Omega pairings could be a reflection of the largely queer, female-identifying population in the fan fiction community (centrumlumina 2013, destination:toast! 2017, *Fansplaining* 2019).

Returning to the earlier quote from "SAME LOGIC" (2017), Jungkook's comparison between the circuitous sexual energy of two Omegas and the unfulfilling

possibility of Alpha/Omega couplings brings a few interesting possibilities to the fore. First, since Jungkook was initially incorrect in assuming Omega/Omega relationships would mirror Alpha/Omega scripting - perhaps he is also wrong in assuming the active/passive scripts for Alpha/Omega relationships (though the previous fics may indicate otherwise). Second, Jungkook's pleasure at finding a role contrary to those he was raised to believe were inescapable leads to questions as to why he was led to believe these roles were infallible; especially when they quickly fell apart in practice.

As I commented in the plot summation (and my reasoning behind choosing this fic to dissect), bambambams (2017) is quick to address questions of sexual scripting through this narrative - particularly as they correspond with existing power dynamics as the following scene illustrates. When Jungkook arrives home following his sexual explorations with Jimin, the cultural expectations that formed his original presumptions of sexual (and social) scripting are reintroduced, with prejudice, by his parents. The following excerpt from their exchange reveals a few curiosities between the larger social norms and how one is seen to have achieved a 'good life' (Berlant and Rand 2019) in Jungkook's family culture.

"Jeongguk, omegas and omegas just don't mix, sweetheart." His mother.

"No son of mine is going to settle for his same Status." Good old dad.

"Alphas and betas are our ideal mates, you know that, and—"

"I didn't raise you this way, to think that you're suited to be some other omega's plaything—"

"—the best thing to do, really, is to find a beta, then, if you think you...like omegas."

"—and another thing, Jeongguk, don't think we don't see this for what it really is:"

"Betas are a little smaller, a little gentler. It might be a good compromise for you."

"A cry for attention. Are you jealous that your brother is an alpha? So you're trying to act like one by courting omegas?" (bambambams 2017)

There are quite a few themes in these lines indicating what could be read as a toxic home environment that has affected Jungkook's sense of self-worth, but I would like to focus on the status of Omegas in society revealed by his parents' differing, though complementary, views. First is Jungkook's Father's comment regarding same-status attraction as Jungkook becoming an "omega's plaything". This could be read as his Father saying Jungkook will always have the least amount of sexual power, even in a relationship with his own status - which could be an indication of his own feelings towards his son - but also speaks to the Alpha assumption that Alpha/Omega power dynamics persist through all possible A/B/O pairings. Since Jungkook's dad is an Alpha, his assumption that there will always be a dominant partner making demands of their plaything (Omegas) and his view of Omegas as lesser playthings to be "settled" for, also inform the opinions offered by Jungkook's mother - an Omega.

Jungkook's mother seems to take a less hostile approach, though no less demeaning to the status she and her son share. The line "Alphas and betas are our ideal mates" is of particular importance in understanding her relationship to the entrenched power dynamics she has lived in, but also speaks to her expectations of Jungkook's continued acceptance of these unequal power dynamics that have cast her as a "lesser" "plaything" by both her husband and wider society. Not only does she seem to accept that Omegas are the least powerful status in society because they deserve it based on their biology, but also that "mixing" with other Omegas makes them even less powerful and worthy of disdain.

Both Jungkook's parents could be read as describing the 'good life' they envision for their son - one where he conforms to the will of an Alpha or Beta and fulfills the submissive sexual role they understand as fitting into that 'good life'. This concept of the 'good life' and whether it is attainable, causes some interesting possibilities for the romantic trajectory of Jungkook in "SAME LOGIC" (2017). In his perceived deviation from the accepted route to the 'good life', his parents threaten to disown him as his father says, "no son of mine is going to settle for his same status" implying that Jungkook's continued disturbance to his parent's plan for him will eventually lead to his expulsion from their own 'good life' (and this is precisely what happens later in the plot). However, this question of how one achieves the 'good life' or what does the 'good life' look like in the Omegaverse is complicated in fics like "SAME LOGIC" (2017) as Jungkook's perception of a 'good life' varies wildly from that of his parents. While there are consequences for Jungkook's deviation from his parent's perceived path of conformity and submitting to social roles that lead towards the 'good life', arguably Jungkook's own 'good life' would exclude the constant policing into an unwanted role and thus is not a deviation from his own route towards a 'good life'.

There is much more that could be unpacked from this excerpt, including Jungkook's Father's accusation that Jungkook is only attracted to Omegas to compete with his Alpha brother who he envies, which opens a host of suggested psychosexual issues. However, "SAME LOGIC" (2017) often casts Jungkook's parents as fundamentally traditionalist - often mirroring the lived experience of queer children from conservative households in countries like the US - to the detriment of their Omega son. Many interactions with Jungkook's Alpha brother, and Jungkook's coworkers, indicate that Omega/Omega pairings, while uncommon, are not unheard of and undeserving of

the scorn Jungkook's parents indicate they would receive from society. The last interaction between Jungkook and his parents further illustrates their strict adherence to 'tradition' as fundamentally outdated - and while it has shaped Jungkook's expectations of sexual encounters - it has no real bearing on the society established by the fic. For example, Jungkook's mother says this of his continued relationship with Jimin: "Just think about what we're saying, Jeongguk. This is—abnormal. This isn't the way things are done, this isn't the way things have ever been done" (bambambams 2017). The inability to accept change, instead deciding her son is "abnormal" for wanting more than to be a "plaything", indicates that even if the scripting for relationships has changed in the years since her own pairing with an Alpha, Jungkook's mother would not be able to acknowledge these differences as valid. This parallel with queer relationships and conservative family norms is one that the author makes numerous times throughout the interactions between Jungkook and his parents - presenting this story as a queer introspection on the traditionally 'heterosexual' scripts of the Omegaverse. I will discuss the extent of this exploration of queer sexual scripting in works like "SAME LOGIC" (2017) versus "Sunset Lover" (2017) in the conclusion.

Since the expectations of sexual scripting in "SAME LOGIC" (2017) perpetuated by Jungkook's parents may not be indicative of the wider culture in this fic, I will shift forward towards the biological impulses of this fic that mark the biggest departure from the sexual scripting in the previous Alpha/Omega and Alpha/Alpha pairings. How heats are handled by these Omegas presents a curious deviation from both "Nu ABO" (2016) and "Sunset Lover" (2017), due in part to their shared knowledge of heat needs (and how those needs do not always parallel what Alphas expect heat needs to be). This

manifests in small acts of caution, like understanding hesitancy to let others into their space during pre-heat:

“‘Who is it?’ came Jimin’s voice; Jeongguk could understand the precaution. He wouldn’t want to open the door to someone who he might not want to see during his heat.” (bambambams 2017)

Other times the shared understanding relates to larger themes like how their bodies might react to one another creating phantom heats or synced heat cycles when in close vicinity to one another - similarly to how menstrual cycles will sometimes sync without hormonal or other medical intervention. There is also the understanding that there will be unknown or personal reactions that they do not share and can discuss before meeting those needs. For example, when discussing their shared heat symptoms, Jungkook and Jimin find they have different expectations of how to fulfill a heat via a knot.

"I think it was three," Jeongguk answered. Jimin's natural heat had pushed Jeongguk into an irregular one twice more after the first time nearly a full day prior. "Are you almost finished?"

"It's fading," Jimin said, reaching down to rest a hand on his soft stomach, just above the base of his cock. "But I need something bigger."

"A knot," Jeongguk said, knowing that was what Jimin meant—or, at least, he thought that was what Jimin meant, until he snickered. "What?"

"A knot, or...something like it". (bambambams 2017)

This acknowledgment of difference and how it is handled through open communication, while an interesting circumvention of biologically imposed scripting, reads as odd for an Omegaverse fic. As the previous chapters have discussed, at length, the extremity of

heats often leaves Omegas in very vulnerable positions that necessitate a partner capable of producing a knot to ease their heat-born distress. The above scene disrupts this common heat narrative by making knots (that are typically the sole form of heat satisfaction) optional and/or using artificial knots to satisfy these needs where they arise. In eliminating the Alpha from the main pairing, "SAME LOGIC" (2017) is able to explore alternatives to the Alpha knot for satisfying heat needs and does so through what can be read as a lucid conversation about sexual needs and how to sate them during a heat.

The power dynamic of this exchange is also contrary to the traditional narrative of active/passive roles in sexual encounters. While Jimin is arguably the receiver of sexual ministrations to ease his heat - that would normally position him in the passive Omega role - his proposition of "something like [a knot]" implies that he oversees his own pleasure and is taking, not only a participatory role but, an active role in achieving his heat needs. He recognized what he wants from heat sex with Jungkook, verbalizes that request, and works to accomplish his goal through sexual heat aids mimicking the sensation of a knot. Contrary to previous fics that determine the need to be knotted through a heat as a passive, accepting role that can sometimes be devoid of conscious thought or informed consent, the heat sex presented in this fic between two Omegas positions both parties in a power dynamic that is "constantly in flux and relational" (Hoppe 207, 2011).

This constant renegotiation of sexual power and/or control is reiterated through later sex scenes in "SAME LOGIC" and is mirrored in their mutual bond bites in the final chapter. Even the final sentence presents a juxtaposition of equal standing between the two characters: "both of them leaning against the pile of pillows, side-by-side"

(bambambams 2017). Where this fic diverges from the typical active/dominant and passive/submissive roles of most Omegaverse fics seems to stem from two main sources. The first is the lack of Alpha competitiveness and/or Alpha predisposition for sexual control. The second is the couple's willingness to renegotiate sexual scripts regardless of biological imperatives. In the following section, I will further explore how power interjects in both of these claims and why Omega/Omega pairings seem to be the only pairing dynamic that can thoroughly explore alternative sexual scripting (or perhaps a queer divergence from traditional heteronormative scripting) while maintaining the happily-ever-after ending.

4.4.0 Conclusion

Through the close readings I have argued that the role of the Alpha determines sexual positionality and where Alphas are absent, the sexual scripting becomes more fluid and reciprocal. Despite this emphasis on the Alpha and/or the absence of an Alpha, it is the concept of 'heterosexual' scripting and how the genre reinforces or critiques these roles that inform the positions of power occupied by the Alphas. As the fics have evidenced, traditional 'heterosexual' scripts are largely determined by the role the Alpha takes and the Omega accepts - indicating a heteropatriarchal power hierarchy. But it is the queer navigation of the traditionally hetero-patriarchal scripting brought about by the questions of representation in "SAME LOGIC" by bambambams (2017) that informs the core of my argument. Particularly, that deviation from traditional roles provides space to speculate on the nature of those traditional roles and their

perseverance in Western popular culture; a theme that I argue the nontraditional Omegaverse pairings facilitate.

In the examples from “SAME LOGIC” (bambambams 2017), I raised questions about the different ways in which queerness might manifest in these fics and the Omegaverse community more broadly. As a reminder from Chapter 1, there is a high percentage of queer peoples (particularly women) writing and reading fanfic (centrumlumina 2014, destination:toast! 2017, Three Patch Podcast 2016, *Fansplaining* 2019), which complicates how scripting is used in A/B/O fic. In the close readings, I prompted the question as to whether the Omega/Omega relationships are more representational of wlw relationships or present an entirely different, nontraditional queer relationship dynamic that melds popular conceptualizations of both wlw and m/m scripting. “SAME LOGIC” (2017) presents evidence to suggest both arguments have merit in Omega/Omega couplings. Jimin and Jungkook’s relationship followed both the circuitous scripting for gay men who identified as bottoms (Hoppe 2011, Kiguwa 2015) and the common scripting associated with queer women including an absence of patriarchal domination and/or fluid power dynamics (Power, McNair and Carr 2009).

There are other Omega/Omega fics from the Kpop RPF fandom that use tags like “This Is A Thinly Veiled Metaphor For Queerness” (pornographicpenguin 2019) or bambambams’ own “Scissoring, (like...two guys? It’s hard to explain but you’ll like it I promise)” (2017) to explicitly describe their male omega pairings as a metaphor for the experience of queer women. These nontraditional pairings also deviate from expected scripts by renegotiating sexual roles and reframing biological needs without a dependency on the Alpha status and its associated masculinity. While not entirely outside the bounds of hetero-patriarchal structures, Omega/Omega pairings like the one

described in "SAME LOGIC" (2017) demonstrate sexual scripting that is not heterosexual. As such, the Omega/Omega pairings corroborate my argument that there are scripts that do not require hetero-patriarchal intervention to exist (or thrive) and that in suspending these traditional scripts, they can be read to critique the systems they circumvent.

As such, labeling Omega/Omega relationships as wlw because the audience is largely composed of queer women could be read as both reductive and/or presumptive. The assumption being that the entire audience agrees that Omegas as passive, self-lubricating, characters who can become pregnant *must* be women - indicates deeper issues of regressive notions of womanhood. "SAME LOGIC" (2017) does use common stereotypes of wlw scripting and the author is very much aware of the norms of queer navigation of conservative households (at least as they exist in common narratives in the US). However, as Omega/Omega pairings are still m/m - I argue that fics like "SAME LOGIC" use their depiction of male Omega pairings to illustrate a queer deviation from 'heterosexual' scripting by crafting sexual roles that follow scripts from other, more recognizable queer relationships, like m/m and wlw. The relationship between two men using the sexual scripting typically applied to queer women makes for an interesting exploration of the queer possibilities available through speculative genres like the Omegaverse.

There remains a question as to whether deviations from heteronormative scripts can exist in the Omegaverse if the main pairing includes an Alpha character. As "Nu ABO" (2016) and "Sunset Lover" (2017) both illustrated, relationships including Alphas tend towards familiar patterns of 'heterosexual' scripting with distinct active and passive roles which are reinforced on social, personal, and biological levels. I suggested that the

romance novel genre convention of a HEA ending played a hand in how these otherwise flexible or playful explorations of traditional sexual scripting followed a particular pattern of adherence to dominant and submissive scripts regardless of pairing dynamics. As “SAME LOGIC” (2017) also follows a typical romance novel narrative, including a HEA ending, without changing the nontraditional sexual scripting explored in the fic, the conventional HEA leading to ‘heterosexual’ scripting adherence does not seem to be universal.

This leads to the argument I outlined at the beginning of “SAME LOGIC” (2017) - that the structures that uphold traditional ‘heterosexual’ scripts are largely enforced by Alphas and therefore typically only exist in Alpha-centric pairings. How sexual scripts are disrupted in the Omegaverse is often largely determined by the rigid or fluid power dynamics of the couple which seems to be decided by the presence of an Alpha. “Sunset Lover” (jamjoon 2017) is especially helpful in showcasing how Alphas can be a projection of particular forms of hegemonic masculinity such as competition, domination, aggression, etc. However, even “Nu ABO” (decompositionbooks 2016) expressed the Alpha imperative to dominate as biologically inclined and not just culturally acceptable, but socially encouraged. This structure of Alpha dominance and Omega subservience closely resembles existing patriarchal power structures and, in the case of the Omegaverse, seems to be dependent on Alpha reinforcement of these structures.

Patriarchal power dynamics require power to be given and/or taken as opposed to a more fluid or circuitous relationship with power as proposed by Hoppe (2011) and Kiguwa (2015). Alphas, as the status culturally expected to take power, appear to have issues ceding power. Thus, when in relationships with one another they are left to wrestle for the dominant active role and rely on biology to dictate who takes on the

passive script - like the use of rut to allocate the submissive role to Hyungwon in “Sunset Lover” (jamjoon 2017). On the other hand, Omegas seem particularly adept at shifting roles of dominance and submission and are thus more versatile than Alphas. Based on the roles outlined in the world-building for both “Nu ABO” (2016) and “SAME LOGIC” (2017), I suggest Omegas are better prepared for the negotiation of roles, as opposed to fighting for one in particular, because they have been socially groomed to cede power rather than expecting it to be given. Coming from this position of relative powerlessness often makes Omegas more receptive to changing roles and aware of the power those roles entail. As Alphas seem to be more aggressive than receptive, they are less open to deviation from prescriptive roles and/or to negotiate this outside of physical competition.

These power dynamics appear to be intrinsically linked with the character’s perceptions of masculinity. Jimin’s relationship to his Omega status made him feel removed from his masculinity in “Nu ABO” (decompositionbooks 2016), Hyungwon accepted the passive role because he felt Hoseok was “better” at dominance than he was in “Sunset Lover” (jamjoon 2017), and the versatile masculinity demonstrated by both Jimin and Jungkook in “SAME LOGIC” (2017) suggests a more fluid relationship with the concept. The manufactured versatile masculinity of Kpop idols provides an interesting space in the source material for authors to explore speculative gender roles and the power relationships associated with those roles through fic. Whether through uncritical adherence to normative masculine roles and the feeling of restriction within the patriarchal structure therein or the exploration of a more versatile approach to masculine intimacies - Kpop RPF Omegaverse fics have the unique ability to explore a range of masculine identities while remaining “true to canon”, so to speak.

It is precisely this range of gender expressions and the interpretations of sexual scripting that make the Omegaverse such a fascinating genre of speculative fiction. The critique of hetero-patriarchy in speculative genres like the Omegaverse where authors often uncritically reproduce heteronormativity, other times parody it ironically, and sometimes directly expose the often-fragile structures it operates under. This layering is part of what makes the Omegaverse so interesting to examine through a lens of cis-hetero-patriarchy as the pairings can deviate so wildly from the expectations of heteronormative scripts.

Nevertheless, the exploration of the genre thus far in this thesis has focused primarily on the wolfishly adapted Alphas and Omegas, with their extra olfactory senses, biological impulses, and playful relationship with traditional 'heterosexual' roles, both sexual and social. The following chapter will discuss the oft-ignored Betas of the Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics and how their lack of animalistic modification positions them as prime candidates for an exploration of gender and sex much farther removed from heteronormative structures than either the Alpha or Omega status. Where previous chapters examined the Omegaverse as an instrument to critique heteronormativity and patriarchal hierarchies, I argue that the Beta characters can read to critique both of these systems as well as a cisgender binary.

Chapter 5

5. The Beta Question

In this chapter, I will argue that the Omegaverse Beta status offers the most varied and speculative characterization of all the A/B/O dynamics - not because of their recognizable animalistic traits, like the Omega heats or Alpha knots, but rather because there are no unifying descriptors of Betas beyond what they lack: animal traits. They are often framed as the largest group, or the highest percentage, of 'secondary genders' within the world-building of many fics, yet they are minoritized within these same structures because of their lack of secondary gender/sex characteristics.¹⁰¹ They are rarely the main/protagonist character in any given Omegaverse fic (Beta-centric fics, or fics that feature a Beta main character, comprise around 1.4% of all A/B/O fic tagged on Ao3 at time of writing) and in the rare cases where they are protagonists, they are often not the POV character. They are traditionally only described within the context of the Alpha and Omega characters within their social and/or romantic spheres as opposed to their own personal development. Despite typically being relegated to support roles for the more animalistic and sexually dynamic Alphas and Omegas, Betas are integral to the structure of the A/B/O genre.

Beta characters represent unexplored possibilities within the genre. As their position with the A/B/O dynamics is less defined by their animal instincts and social or sexual power, these Beta characters can be interpreted to have a varying range of

¹⁰¹ In the introduction, I detailed my own discomfort with the term "secondary genders" to describe the gender/sex comprised within the A/B/O dynamics. Though "secondary genders" remains the most popular terminology in the genre to describe the A/B/O dynamics, I will only use it sparingly as a descriptor in this chapter. Since the Betas do not share the same gender/sex conflation as their Alpha and Omega peers, I will sometimes refer to secondary genders, the concept, as "secondaries" as a way to separate the gender/sex of Alphas and Omegas from the various gender identities presented by Beta characters.

sexual and gender identities; particularly identities that lie outside the traditional binaries or spectrums of Western cultures, such as gender non-conforming identities (e.g., nonbinary, genderfluid, agender, etc.) and/or asexual identities (e.g., demisexual, gray-ace, ace, etc.).¹⁰² As Beta characters are often ancillary to Alphas and Omegas, their roles and the possibilities therein are largely undefined within the genre. Where Alphas and Omegas are sometimes incapacitated by heat or rut, Betas can and often do fulfill roles necessary to the continued functioning of A/B/O society while the mating imperatives detain those with biologically-inclined secondaries. These roles can be that of parent or caregiver, or it can be temporarily filling a job or occupation for absent Alphas and Omegas. Betas are often given the position of care-taker for Alphas and Omegas in heat/rut - making sure they continue to eat and bathe as days pass in sex-filled hazes. While not a particularly glamorous and often thankless job, the Omegaverse genre world-building is often structured around the unseen work of the Betas in the background. While the Alphas and Omegas sort out the pheromones, biting, and mating imperatives of their secondaries, the Betas do the mundane work of meal prep and paying rent that is necessary for the continued survival of all in their A/B/O societies.

For instance, in Chapter 4, the Monsta X fic, "Sunset Lover" by jamjoon (2017), cites Hyungwon's Beta parents as the reason why he presents as an atypical Alpha. This characterization implies that Beta parentage produces children who do not adhere to the traditionally gendered stereotyping of the A/B/O statuses. While Hyungwon proved to not be as unbiased as the opening description would suggest, this particular modeling of Beta parents as less likely to inscribe status-based prejudice onto their

¹⁰² I will discuss and define all of these terms in more detail in later sections of this chapter.

children is fairly typical of Beta parents in the genre.¹⁰³ I did not focus on the role of Hyungwon's parents in Chapter 4, as they contributed very little to the plot beyond producing Hyungwon, but lines like "having two beta parents never really left any room for stereotyping" (jamjoon 2017) suggests Beta characters do not subscribe to the expected social scripting often cast upon Alphas and/or Omegas. Similarly, the *Voltron: Legendary Defender* fic from Chapter 3, "Balancing Act" by an_aphorism (2020) describes Betas as largely absent characters or they fill necessary, but ancillary roles. For instance, the main Alpha and Omega pair described in the fic are space pilots, but the Beta characters are often the engineers who make the space crafts and keep the pilots from crashing back to earth (an_aphorism 2020) - a necessary support role. Unlike many of the Alphas and Omegas, Betas' sexual scripts are absent from the narratives they inhabit. Either because their roles are ancillary to the fic and their sex lives are not the primary focus of the narrative or because the Beta characters themselves are not interested in sex (or identify as asexual as I will explore in later sections), sex does not often feature in Beta characterization. This has the effect of many Beta-centric fics being rated T (Teen and Up Audiences) or occasionally M (Mature), as opposed to the Explicit rating most popular in the A/B/O genre.¹⁰⁴ All of the *Teen Wolf* fics from Chapter 2 characterize Betas as sexually incompatible with Alphas and Omegas or as sexually disinterested in the other secondaries and the biological

¹⁰³ Many of the most popular A/B/O fics include Beta parents described as relatively unbiased and passing this trait onto their children, including, but not limited to: "You Can't Plan for Everything" by RivDeV (2016) that I described in Chapter 3 as one of the most popular A/B/O fics on Ao3 even though it remains unfinished, "Gold and Silver" by madeliefie (2017), "Reparations" by Merrywetherweather (2019), and "Fever" by MilkTeaMiku (2016) that all host over 10,000 kudos each.

¹⁰⁴ The current breakdown of Omegaverse genre ratings is 48% Explicit, 22% Mature, 14% Teen and Up Audiences, and the remaining fics allotted between General (6%), and Not Rated (8%)(January 2022). While Beta-centric fics have similar percentages, the more popular Alpha/Beta, Beta/Beta, and Beta/Omega pairings are in the M and T rating brackets as opposed to E. This suggests that despite the allocation of ratings, Beta-centric E fics are not as popular as their Alpha or Omega-centric cohort.

imperatives that often accompany them. While Betas are occasionally featured as parental figures in fics like “I don’t know why, but I guess it has something to do with you” (LunaCanisLupus_22 2015), they only appear in the story to intervene in their child’s life or choices or to act as a peacekeeper between their offspring and other Alphas or Omegas.

In a genre very focused on sex and how the undeniable biological impulse to mate shapes societies around it, I argue that the Beta exclusion from many sexual situations and having no clear sexual script paves the way for Beta characterizations to explore facets of the Omegaverse often excluded from Alpha or Omega-centric narratives. The positionality of the Beta dynamic within the Alpha/Beta/Omega power hierarchy can be read as an open question from fic to fic. Sometimes they play significant parts in progressing the plot but are not the protagonists.¹⁰⁵ Other times they are characterized as being rather insignificant to the story aside from their relationship to the Alphas and Omegas in leading roles. In all of the fics previously discussed in this thesis, Betas were not protagonists, but I argue that their placement in relation to the power hierarchies of the Omegaverse is fascinating as they do not seem to be bound to any particular social position in A/B/O societies.

Despite their arguably malleable placement amid the A/B/O social (and sexual) hierarchy, Beta characters have never been the main focus of scholarly or fannish attention. There are only a few notable references to Betas in academic publications at the time of writing. The first comes from Busse’s primer for the Omegaverse in the 2013

¹⁰⁵ Many fandoms with larger casts of characters feature plot-important Betas in their A/B/O fics. For example, the *My Hero Academia* fandom, based on the Japanese manga and anime about a high school class of superpowered teenagers, is notorious for including huge character casts in each fic. Of the 20 most popular *My Hero Academia* A/B/O fics at the time of writing (Jan 2022), 18 feature a central Beta character that is also not one of the main protagonists. Popular examples include: “Quiet Rapture” by lalazee (2017), “A Mate’s Worth” by GreyLily (2018), and “Lost Omega” by GreyDayMoon (2019).

book *fic*, where she describes Betas as “everyone else” (317, 2013) when compared to the altered physiognomy and animality of Alphas and Omegas. The second comes from Gunderson’s introduction to Omegaverse ‘secondary genders’:

The beta label is usually reserved for characters without any alpha or omega traits, whose biological makeup is mostly unaltered from non-omegaverse humans, but in some stories they [are] written as either sterile/infertile or intersex. (15-16, 2017)

I will unpack some of the additions Gunderson offers for Beta bodies as “sterile/infertile or intersex” in later close readings as this definition only applies to specific iterations of the Beta, but the connection between sterility/infertility and Beta characters in Gunderson’s description is not unwarranted. Despite the infertile/sterile Beta occupying only a small portion of fics, Betas are so rarely noteworthy characters in A/B/O fics that when they are mentioned to be sterile as a defining characteristic of their status, it often remains with readers as a convention of the Beta dynamic.¹⁰⁶ As this chapter will evidence, it is more often the “unaltered” human form of Betas, absent animal tendencies such as heat or rut, that are the most common in the genre and remain steadfast in descriptions of Betas from both Busse (2013) and Gunderson (2017).

The final notable mention of Beta characters in the Omegaverse comes from Popova’s 2018 article that defines Betas more broadly as, “normal everyday humans as you know them”(181) implying a sense of ‘reality’ intervening on the animalistic antics

¹⁰⁶ There are currently only a few works that include tags to indicate sterility or infertility as a specifically Beta characterization. However, in comparison with other A/B/O dynamics and sterility/infertility, the number citing Betas, specifically, is significantly higher. For instance there are 21 fics under the “Infertile Beta” tag and 10 under “Sterile Beta”, in comparison to only one fic with the more broad tag “Sterile” (January 2022) under the Beta-centric subheading. While these are not all the fics that represent Betas as sterile/infertile, as not all include tags to indicate as much, they are a decent representation of why so many in the community suggest, as Gunderson (2017) does, that Betas *are* often sterile/infertile when in reality the Betas are rarely characterized as such.

of the Omegaverse through Betas.¹⁰⁷ The theme for Beta characters based on these assessments can be read as “average” and without animalistic alterations of the ‘secondary genders’ experienced by their Alpha and Omega peers. Betas appear to be less interesting for writers to engage with when the wild secondaries of the Alphas and Omegas are competitors, contributing to Beta characters’ ancillary roles within the genre. In all, Betas are the often side-lined “B” in the A/B/O dynamics, though they remain integral to the world-building of many Omegaverse fics. One of the issues I find with the above definitions of the Beta in A/B/O fanfic is they can all be read to define the Beta by what they are not - namely, Alphas and Omegas. In doing so, the Beta becomes something of a role where key potentials in sexuality and gender are deliberately foreshortened to prioritize Alphas and their apparent dominance over Omegas. The roles they fulfill in society are often determined by the absence of an Alpha or Omega.

My evaluation of the Beta role is that it offers a speculative space for readers and writers within the Omegaverse fan fiction community to explore various aspects of power, gender expression, and sexuality because of the definition they ‘lack’ within the genre. However, it is also nearly impossible to extrapolate any concrete characterizations of Betas as they appear in so many forms. Unlike Omegas, there are no heats to define the Beta dynamic nor do Betas have the Alpha knot to define their status in biologically determined designations. For example, if the secondaries of Alphas and Omegas are based on a hyperbolic interpretation of the traditional Western gender binary, as evidenced in the previous chapters, then Betas *could* assume any

¹⁰⁷ Popova has directly quoted this “normal everyday humans” from the Omegaverse primer on Ao3 written by norabombay (2012). norabombay (2012) has been previously quoted by Busse (2013) and Arnaiz (2018) and their work remains particularly well-known within A/B/O studies.

gender variations on a spectrum between the hyper-masculine presentation of the Alphas and the hyper-femininity expressed by the Omegas. Alternatively, the Beta as “normal everyday humans” (norabombay 2012) could compose and present gender in a way entirely diverse from the expected gender binary. In short, the Betas are not defined by a lack of binary gender presentation, but rather a very broad and diverse expression of nonconforming gender identity.

Where the previous chapters discussed the Alphas and Omegas in relation to the gender and/or sexual norms they upheld or critiqued through various world-building renditions, this chapter will exclusively examine Betas and my argument that they can be read to exist largely outside these predominant structures with a sense of gender autonomy not typically available to the gender/sex of an Omega or Alpha. While the main goal of this chapter remains Beta-centric in determining whether nonbinary gender (and sometimes accompanying asexual) identity is fitting for Beta characterizations, it is worth discussing some of the representations of the Beta that typically relegate them to the sidelines of many Omegaverse fics and academic study.

Betas typically have none of the extra animalistic mating imperatives or olfactory senses of their Alpha and Omega cohort and the Beta-centric fics have barely surpassed the 1,500 mark at the time of writing with no signs of increased attention or popularity in recent years.¹⁰⁸ On the surface, the Beta could be seen as irrelevant to a discussion of Omegaverse dynamics, despite their prominent status as the “B” in A/B/O

¹⁰⁸ Beta/Beta pairings remain the least popular ships in the Omegaverse with barely 160 fics in total (January 2022). With consistent increases of around 25 fics per year since 2017, there was a slight uptick in 2020. However, prior to 2017, there were less than 50 fics in total with the earliest fic posted in 2013. Statistics for Alpha/Beta and Beta/Omega fics are more difficult to quantify as they typically feature in polyamorous pairings and feature very little of the Betas in the fics. Presently, the number of Alpha/Beta fics rests around 1,100 fics and Beta/Omega around 560. However, as the more popular fics in these tags feature multiple pairings, it is difficult to determine if Alpha/Beta or Beta/Omega is more popular than Beta/Beta, or simply provides data for a growing trend of polyamory in the Omegaverse.

dynamics, as some of these Beta-centric fics do not feature the Beta as a POV character or slowly push the Beta to a secondary pairing as the story moves forward. However, the small, but fascinating, sub-section of Beta-centric fics provide an interesting purview into the possibilities presented by the inclusion of Betas in the Omegaverse; not as average or mundane characters, but as potential avatars for a broader range of gender and sexual identities than those previously expressed in this thesis. As I will argue and evidence throughout this chapter, the 'othered' position of Beta characters within the genre offers the opportunity to explore nonconforming gender and/or asexual identities within the Omegaverse as their experiences often mirror those of these groups in reality.

To briefly recap, Chapter 4 noted that there has been increased visibility for nonbinary and gender diverse peoples in recent years, both within fandom and in wider, Western cultures.

The concept of non-binary's recent popularity as a gender label has not yet been satisfactorily addressed in scholarship, although its usage in relation to gender began to increase in 2010 and experienced spikes in usage through 2017 and 2018. (Hord 10, 2020)

This increasing awareness of nonbinary identities coincides with the birth of the Omegaverse in 2010 and the genres' increased popularity over the years (Popova 2018), reaching over a hundred thousand tagged fics on Ao3 in 2021. In the wider fan fiction community, outside the Omegaverse, there has also been increased use of both nonbinary and transgender characters and tags on Ao3, with a sharp upwards trend in these categories in 2017 and again in 2020 (toastystats 2021). While these parallel indicators of growth for nonbinary gender identities in reality, in wider fan fiction trends,

and the Omegaverse do not necessarily prove a causal relationship, the Betas fulfilling a prime role within the A/B/O dynamics outside of the traditional Alpha and Omega binary does make the correlation relevant to the potential nonbinary identities that I argue Betas can be read to represent.

In this chapter, I argue that the characterization of Beta identity and their various purposes within the Omegaverse offer more varied representations of gender and sexuality to the otherwise deeply binary gender structure and allosexuality of the Omegaverse. The Omegaverse genre, generally, presents an allosexual society with structures of power predicated by predominantly heteronormative scripts. The Beta status can be read to disrupt these scripts by introducing the potential for nonbinary gender identity and/or asexual representation through various, increasingly queer readings of the characters. While this sometimes manifests in situations related to the lived experiences of queer peoples, e.g., biphobia, narratives of “found families”, and conflating asexuality with aromantic identities, the variation between each iteration of the Beta character is staggering. This chapter focuses heavily on queerly positioned interpretations of the Beta as potentially nonbinary and/or asexual, but the Beta characters can be read to serve many roles for the genre, from their metaphorical use as ‘reality’ intervening in the genre as gender-avatars for an increasingly gender-diverse fandom community to their more practical, narrative roles as plot anchors to the otherwise chaotic (and often biologically essentialist) world-building of the Omegaverse. As such, this chapter will be structured broadly in two parts: defining terms to contextualize the characterization of Betas in my argument and the close readings to evidence it.

To begin, I will build definitions for nonbinary gender expression and asexuality that will be used to explore the Beta status, from queer theorists such as Hyde et al. (2019), Hord (2020), and Chen (2020). This framework will aid in conceptualizing Betas as a possible avatar for nonbinary gender identity and/or asexuality within the Omegaverse, but it will also clarify some of the distinctions between queer theory and the queer practices of fan fiction communities; as there is arguably a clear gap between the two. Using a small, but fascinating selection of Beta-centric fics, I will use my theory of Beta status as a potential expression of nonbinary gender and/or asexuality to explore how power dynamics intervene in attempts to suspend concepts of cis-hetero-patriarchy (or the critique of these systems as the case may be).

Through the close readings, certain themes of gender expression and sexuality will emerge depending almost exclusively on the secondary gender of the Beta's partner. Alpha/Beta relationships, for example, tend to focus more on aggressive sexual encounters than the various social roles expected of Betas - providing an interpretation of Betas in these relationships as stand-ins for Omegas without any defining characteristics beyond *not* being Omegas. Alternatively, Beta/Omega pairings have a through-line of gender-based anxiety, akin to the stigma faced by bisexual/pansexual/omnisexual partners, where the Betas are often concerned their partners will find their Beta identity lacking in some regard and be abandoned for a more traditionally acceptable Alpha. Beta/Beta couples, while statistically the rarest pairing in Beta-centric fics (representing 0.1% of all A/B/O fics), offer critiques on the nature of gender in a genre typically focused so heavily on gender/sex and mating imperatives as well as introducing the possibility of asexual representation that is not

often expressed in the A/B/O dynamics.¹⁰⁹ Despite this variance of gender expression, Betas remain one of the most gender-diverse roles in the Omegaverse, due in no small part to their lack of mating imperatives. Betas are free to choose both their partners and their place within an otherwise strictly adhered to gender hierarchy - overturning popular notions of the overlooked, average Beta characters. In the conclusion to this chapter, I will parse through the various gendered roles and the possibilities of asexual representation within the Beta status in the ever-evolving Omegaverse genre.

5.1.0 Nonbinary individuals and Asexuality in Fan Fiction and Reality

The following section will discuss nonbinary gender identity and typified experiences of power dynamics within a gendered hierarchy where one's identity is not always represented. This section will also clarify my use of asexual identities as potentially mapped onto the Beta status, whether explicitly stated or inferred from the text. However, it is worth noting that there is no specific one-to-one comparison between any of the A/B/O dynamics and those of gender identities and sexualities in reality. Male Omegas are not stand-ins for women (Arnaiz 123, 2018), much the same as male Alphas are not more 'male' than male Omegas because of the hyper-masculine tendencies associated with their secondaries. In this same fashion, there are many facets of nonbinary gender identity (and the many identities encompassed by that term that I will discuss below) that are either not represented in the discussion below and/or

¹⁰⁹ At the time of writing, there is only one study of asexuality in the Omegaverse (Westberg-Gabriel 2018) and it does not address Betas, but rather how Alphas and Omegas navigate mating imperatives while not experiencing sexual attraction. See Chapter 1 for more information on Westberg-Gabriel's contribution to Omegaverse scholarship.

not applicable to the Beta experience of gender. As such, while the definitions used below are exceptionally useful in creating a framework through which to discuss the Beta roles in the Omegaverse, the information that follows is not an exhaustive study of the growing field of nonbinary gender studies - merely a starting point by which to discuss the complicated relationship between the Beta status and the gender binary. Similarly, many in the fan fiction community identify as nonbinary (toastystats 2021) and the discussion below, while not excluding their experiences, is limited to discussions of nonbinary and genderqueer representations of Beta characters. There will be some discussion of nonbinary peoples in the A/B/O writer and readership in the conclusion of this chapter, but the following sections will focus almost exclusively on the Beta characterizations of nonbinary identities as opposed to the gender and sexual identities of the community in reality.

Studies of nonbinary gender identities have only recently boomed in academic studies (Nicholas 2014, Dray et al. 2020, Hord 2020, Hyde et al 2019, Lindqvist, Gustafsson Senden, and Renstrom 2020). While this does mean there are new and relevant definitions of nonbinary gender every year, it does also mean that with every new publication and increased volume of data, even research from two years ago can be read as limited or even irrelevant. For example, the working definition of nonbinary as “individuals who self-identify in ways outside the two-categories of female and male” (Hyde et al. 172, 2019) was found too limiting by researchers the following year who expressed nonbinary gender as “a person [who] may identify or express, via culture-specific ‘masculine’ and/or ‘feminine’ behaviors as a man, woman, both, or anywhere in between” (Dray et al. 1182, 2020). As more research is published on nonbinary identities, the more specifically nebulous the terminology becomes.

Non-binary is difficult to pin down precisely because it does not rest on established correspondences between sex, gender, and expression, nor does it rest on established narratives of their rejection. (Hord 11, 2020, emphasis original)

This shift away from “established narratives” includes gender identities that are not masculine or feminine, but also those who identify as agender, genderfluid, gender-neutral, or trigender (Dray et al. 1182, 2020). Identities like genderfluid, are especially useful in discussing Beta identities because the identity itself encompasses the (possibly) constant shift between masculinity, femininity, agender, nonbinary, and/or any combination thereof (Dray et al. 2020, Lindqvist, Gustafsson Senden, and Renstrom 2020). Thus, the genderfluid relationship with gender expression is in constant flux and can change based on circumstances, people, and many other psychosocial factors. Since genderfluidity often falls under the category of nonbinary as a catchall (Hyde et al. 2019), I will often use the term nonbinary as an umbrella term to broadly describe the Beta status as gender expression outside of the Western gender binary; a binary that “typically assumes that one’s category membership is biologically determined, apparent at birth, stable over time, salient, and meaningful to the self” (Hyde et al. 171, 2019).¹¹⁰

As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, the Beta character’s relationship with their secondary gender identity is similarly fluid and often changes depending on the A/B/O status of their current romantic partner and how their secondaries complement or war with one another. For Beta/Omega pairings, Betas often suffer from

¹¹⁰ This data is largely based on Western imperial and colonial histories. There are many cultures internationally which have long recognized gender and sex have iterations outside this binary (Tompkins 2015, Hyde et al. 2019), but due to the aforementioned imperialism and colonialism, the data on these cultures is limited and still being exhumed and researched. For more information on these cultures and historically nonbinary genders, see: Tompkins 2015, Devor 1997, and Herdt 1993.

gender anxiety where they fear their Beta identity will not be satisfactory for their Omega partner who could potentially leave them for an Alpha - much the same way that some queer partners of bisexuals fear their partner will leave them for a more heteronormative relationship.¹¹¹ This often results in Betas trying to compensate for not being Alphas by mimicking some Alpha behaviors and/or sexual characteristics. In the fic “keeping our vows” (namakemono 2019), which will be discussed in later close readings, the main Beta character constantly fears his Omega partner will find him lacking (in various regards) and thus throws himself into obtaining a leadership position at work - mimicking the Alphas he sees in leadership positions. Unfortunately, the time the Beta character spends chasing his goal of Alpha mimicry succeeds only in limiting his time with his partner and child - straining their relationship and eventually leading to the break-up that the Beta character feared. This mimicry of binary gender characteristics could be read in a variety of ways; however, describing a Beta in a relationship with an Omega as ‘nonbinary, masculine presenting’ is an interesting option to examine one of the roles available for Beta characters. Despite the A/B/O dynamics describing three possible arrangements of gender/sex (Alpha, Beta, and Omega), the Beta status seems to remain trapped within a binary, where any disruption to the norms can be read as discursive and potentially gender non-conforming. This places the Beta in an increasingly liminal space between the Alphas as avatars for traditional forms of

¹¹¹ I will be using the term bisexual (and later biphobia) in this chapter, as it is the more popular term in academia and popular culture (Wandrey, Mosack, and Moore 2015). However, as bisexuality is often synonymous with pansexuality and/or omnisexuality (Obradors-Campos 2011, Harrad 2018), terminology such as panphobia or omniphobia would be equally applicable in this space. The term bisexual has a long and complicated history and the use of the prefix “bi”, meaning *two* as opposed to “pan” or “omni” meaning *all* in greek and latin respectively, has lead to complicated conversations regarding the concept of a gender binary. For this particular usage of the word bisexual, I am including attraction to all gender identities as expressed by many bisexual advocates and researchers such as Harrad (2018), Obradors-Campos (2011) and Garelick et al. (2017).

masculinity and Omegas as “female-coded” (Gunderson 2017). As Betas sometimes present as neither masculine nor feminine, and are not biologically determined by a conflated gender/sex, they present an opportunity for a more diverse, if not nonbinary, expressions of gender and power within the Omegaverse.

In related scripting, the Beta status presents an interesting opportunity to explore asexuality within the A/B/O dynamics. The Omegaverse typically operates under the assumption of allosexuality, sometimes referred to as “sexusociety” (Flore 29, 2014), that refers to the assumption that people will be sexually attracted to others and that sexuality, as a naturalized state, will develop in recognizable stages regardless of sexual orientation (Cerankowski and Milks 2014). In short, “people are assumed to be sexual unless otherwise stated” (Flore 29, 2014). The naturalization of sexual attraction (Chen 2020, Decker 2014, Cerankowski and Milks 2014) is exaggerated through the tropes of heats and ruts within the Omegaverse. However, since the Beta status does not have heats/ruts, their relationship with sex and sexuality is much more relaxed than that of Alphas or Omegas.

While not all Betas are asexual, either explicitly tagged as such (like some of the Beta/Beta fics will be in the close readings section) or implied, I argue that experiences of sex and sexuality for many Betas maps onto experiences of asexual individuals in reality. Principally, both the Beta status and asexuality have been defined by what they lack. Betas as lacking heats/ruts and therefore the specific sexual encounters prompted by these mating imperatives and asexuality as the lack of sexual attraction to others, though more recent definitions use phrasing such as, “resistance to a specific definition of what it means to be a sexual entity” (Flore 29, 2014). Asexuality, much like allosexuality, is largely considered to exist on a spectrum of both attraction and libido

(Chen 2020). Some Asexuals have high libidos and have quite a bit of sex though they never feel attraction for their partners. Others may be repulsed by the idea of sex and abstain. Regardless of attraction or libido, many asexuals face stigma from wider allosexual culture and are often categorized by 'lack' (Chen 2020, Khan 2014). The spectrum of asexuality, like many concepts related to gender and sexuality, is not a static construct and is instead constantly evolving. As such, the definition I use in relation to the Beta status as a lack of sexual attraction is not necessarily all-encompassing for all asexuals in reality. However, it is a useful starting point through which to compare the status of Beta and the concept of asexuality. While asexuality as an identity has become increasingly visible in mainstream media representations (Chen 2020, Cerankowski 2014, Sinwell 2014) and included in the broader field of queer studies with more regularity (Chu 2014, Milks 2014), for the purposes of the Omegaverse, I would like to draw attention to the historical conception of asexuality as a 'lack' of sexuality and its marginalization within the broader queer community (Kahn 2014). Defining a community based on lack or absence of expected sexual or social development accounts for the pathologizing of asexuality as a psychosexual disorder (Kahn 2014). While not often pathologized, Betas in the close readings will often be marginalized within A/B/O world-building because of their perceived 'lack' of secondaries and accompanying mating imperatives that can be read to produce feelings of sexual attraction.

Much like the history of medical and psychological correction endured by asexuals by a largely allosexual society (Kahn 2014), the Beta is often constructed as lesser than their Alpha and Omega counterparts. The marginalized experience of many asexual peoples, and arguably Betas, stems from "the decision to define asexuality

using the same linguistic and theoretical logic as other sexual orientations” (Chen 18, 2020) using the prefix “a-” denoting a lack. As asexuality does not necessarily denote a lack of sexual libido or sexual pleasure since many asexual peoples enjoy sex and kink (Chen 2020, Winter-Gray & Hayfield 2021), the language used to describe asexuality presents a limitation in binary thinking rather than an accurate description of the experience.

The Asexuality Visibility Education Network (AVEN) was founded online in 2001 but grew in prominence and visibility around the same time as both nonbinary gender identity and the Omegaverse. While this could also be coincidental timing, the framing of the Beta as often nonbinary with a complicated relationship to sex due, in a large part, to the heightened libido attached to their partners' gender/sex identity seems too serendipitous to be chance. While both asexual and nonbinary identities have existed in some form for much longer than the Omegaverse has been on the internet, the increased media recognition and attention for these groups in recent years may have led to fan fiction authors' increased interest in exploring these identities and how they might be seen to critique existing power hierarchies. In this way, queer sexual politics, in reality, can be seen to rescript how power is established in the Omegaverse, using the Beta characterization to interrogate how sexuality and gender are sometimes comingled within the genre. As previously stated, the Beta status, and the Omegaverse community more broadly, is not a direct incorporation of all queer theories, but rather an expression of how these theories can be seen to affect the practices of peoples in queerly identified communities (like fan fiction). For instance, queer theorists like Butler (1990, 1996) have long suggested that gender and sex are both social constructions with socially ascribed meanings. While the Omegaverse has elements of this social constructionist thought, as

Chapter 4 explored, the genre is still very much concerned with biology as a Real Thing (capitalized for emphasis) that affects daily interactions. Or at least, the Omegaverse recognizes biology as a metric of difference for Alphas and Omegas. Betas are truly unique within the genre as they challenge pre-existing genre conventions of gender/sex and in doing so critique the very notions of cisgender binary that the genre can be seen to imitate from reality.

As Betas exist outside the Alpha and Omega binary established in the Omegaverse, these characters do seem the best option with which to explore gender and sexual identities that circumvent traditional binaries and hierarchical social structures (i.e., nonbinary and asexual identities). There will be a more in-depth discussion of asexuality in the Beta dynamic in the Beta/Beta close reading section, but I will use the first section of close readings to identify how Betas can be seen to fit in to disrupt the gender/sex binary constructed by the popular Alpha and Omega dynamics. In doing so, this first section can be used to contextualize where the Beta dynamics depart from the previously discussed and expected A/B/O norms.

5.2.0 A Beta for Every Circumstance: Examples from Beta-centric Fics

This chapter, unlike those before it, does not look at one specific fandom or oeuvre of fandoms, like Kpop RPF or Vampire AUs. Instead, this chapter draws on multiple fandoms and a wider range of fics to examine the various roles of Betas within the Omegaverse. To borrow a phrase from queer theorist Lucy Nicholas, my “promiscuous methodology” (11, 2014) spans not only multiple fandoms, but multiple content ratings (moving from the typically explicitly rated fics that represent the majority

of the Omegaverse), and multiple pairings. This was done deliberately with three-pronged reasoning. The first prong relates directly to fic popularity. There is no consistent fandom that is more popular than others when examining the top 100 most popular Beta-centric fics on Ao3.¹¹² As fic popularity is one of the more useful metrics indicating reader preference and the more popular trends within Beta-centric fics, to ignore popularity in lieu of selecting one fandom to examine would not provide an accurate impression of Beta-centric fics nor the various gender identities and sexualities available to Beta characters.

The second prong concerns relationship dynamics and A/B/O pairings. I mentioned above that some of the fics I will be exploring in this chapter are not all E-rated, unlike so many other Omegaverse fics.¹¹³ This decision was made for the simple reason that many of the more popular Beta-centric fics are not rated E, and the majority of the most popular Beta-centric fics featuring a Beta/Beta pairing are non-explicit and non-sexual. As the later readings will evidence, the role the Beta plays is often framed by the secondaries of their partner. This means the position of the Beta in each relationship has a particular theme that spans most fics in this category. Beta/Beta pairings often represent Betas as having a lessened libido or as sex-repulsed, Beta/Omega pairings range from moderately sex-driven to explicitly sex-driven, and pairings with Alphas are typically sexually aggressive with plot lines determined almost

¹¹² I elected to narrow my selection results to the 100 most 'kudos'ed fics with specific examples taken from these 100. As such, all of the selected fic examples are among the most popular 10% of tagged Beta-centric fics (January 2022).

¹¹³ As explained in Chapter 2, many A/B/O fics lend themselves to sexually explicit content due to the dynamics of the genre including mating imperatives and animalistic pheromones. As E-ratings are the most popular in the genre (48% as of January 2022), those rated as Mature (M) or Teen and up Audiences (T) are often considered outliers within the genre. As twitter user, @imnotpoppunk_, jokes, "'Don't fetishize a/b/o' well what the fuck else am I supposed to do with it" (June 5, 2021). This joking comment speaks eloquently to the genre dynamics being well-suited to exploring topics related to explicit sex.

entirely by sexual conquest. As I outlined in the previous section, these descriptions of the Betas with varying sexual appetites and levels of attraction provide an interesting dialogue with asexuality, in reality; both high libido asexuals and sex-repulsed asexuals. However, it is their relationship to their own status and the status of their partners that can be read to inform their relationship with sex.

The third and final prong in my decision to use a selection of Beta-centric fics from various fandoms is due to the various positions Betas fulfill within the Omegaverse. Sometimes they are the driving force of the storyline, sometimes, even in Beta-centric fics, they play ancillary roles offering opinions on the action taking place around them, but not intervening. As the latter occurs in around 15% of fics tagged with Beta-pairings at the time of writing, I've elected to only use one fic as representative of this category of Beta (as ancillary characters in a fic where they comprise one partner in the main pairing).¹¹⁴ Similarly, there are less than five fics featuring a Beta/Omega pairing where the Omega is the narrator or POV character (February 2022). Thus, I have elected to exclude those fics from this chapter as they are not statistically relevant to the roles of Betas in Beta-centric fics.

Since this chapter offers a selection of popular representations of Beta gender expressions, the selected fics have limited shared parameters. Most feature Beta characters in the main pairing, though some do not have the Beta as a POV character. Many fics focus on the sexual relationships between Betas and their partners and consider what sexual scripting will be followed in those circumstances, while other fics will explicitly represent all Beta characters as asexual and/or sex-repulsed. Like the

¹¹⁴ As the later Alpha/Beta close readings will indicate, the fic from the *Batman* fandom is the only inclusion in this subsection of Betas in ancillary roles in fics where they are listed as main characters.

Betas themselves, the selection process for this chapter is varied and does not follow a single methodology beyond the parameters outlined above. However, as each fic is discussed, the necessity of its inclusion in this chapter will become apparent.

What this assortment of fandoms and pairings means for the following section of close readings is that many of the fics will be affected by different canon content that plays a significant role in how the fic is shaped around said canon material. However, each of the fics I have selected draws more on conventions of the Omegaverse genre than they do from their source material. For example, the fic I have chosen from the *Batman* fandom, "Ties that Bind" by Evilpixie (2014), uses recognizable characters and their vigilante alter-egos, but the situations the characters navigate throughout the fic are related to heats, ruts, and other Omegaverse conventions rather than fighting crime or detective work in the fictional city of Gotham. The fics from other superhero intellectual properties, like the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), use characters with supernatural abilities, but those abilities have no bearing on the A/B/O narratives since the plot is focused on Omegaverse-specific dynamics rather than the characterizations presented in the canon material. While I will note instances where canon material has influenced a characterization, for the most part, my interest in the source material is limited to how characters' A/B/O status relates to their canon personalities to find patterns between Beta characterizations. As such, the source material is largely circumnavigated in this discussion of Beta identity and positionality within the wider Omegaverse.

Similarly, many of the fics I will discuss are from East Asian fandoms such as Japanese anime and manga or Chinese live-action dramas (referred to as C-dramas). As with *Batman* and the MCU, the fics themselves are loosely based on canon content,

but as the authors are more focused on the unusual use of Beta-centric pairings in their fics, the canon content plays a significant, though very small role in how the plot progresses or how the characters are portrayed.

5.2.1 The Alpha/Beta fics: **Sex, Sex, Sex**

As I outlined in the introduction to this chapter, the following close readings will be conducted in three parts separated by the pairing dynamics, not unlike Chapter 4. I will begin with an exploration of the Alpha/Beta pairing as it maps most easily onto social and sexual scripts from previous chapters - with the Alpha as sexually dominant and instigating sexual encounters between themselves and the Beta characters. I've elected to use two fics as examples of this pairing. While that sample size may seem small, these two fics can be read to provide context for the roles Betas play in Alpha/Beta pairings, but also offer insight into how Betas are typically cast in A/B/O stories where Betas are not protagonists or POV characters. "Ties that Bind" by Evilpixie (2014), a *Batman* fic that is part of an extremely popular A/B/O universe constructed by Evilpixie.¹¹⁵ As this is the third fic in the six-part series revolving around an Alpha/Omega relationship between Batman and Superman, the Beta-centric relationship is a secondary storyline that can be read to accurately depict how Betas are typically cast as ancillary within A/B/O stories.

¹¹⁵ Evilpixie crafted a 6-part A/B/O series spanning two years (2013-2015) that includes its own index of terms, an overview of A/B/O dynamics as they exist within the series, and a collected 450,000 words. Each work has a significant following within the DCU fandom, as evidenced by the thousands of kudos and comments for each fic, but also in how the fic is referenced by so many other A/B/O writers (SticksandBones, Forth_East, Black_and_Blue_Hood, Irishgrlnextdoor, etc.).

The second Alpha/Beta fic depicts another example of how Betas are often described in narratives where they *are* the main pairing - which is to say not the POV character and often described in terms that contribute to an 'otherness' of Betas that will inform later discussions of marginalization within Beta/Omega and Beta/Beta couples. This fic, "Expectations" by Mikacrispy (2019), comes from the popular Japanese anime, *My Hero Academia*, and is told from the Alpha's perspective as he pursues a Beta known for avoiding the possibility of taking an Alpha as a lover. Both "Expectations" (2019) and "Ties that Bind" (2014) describe their Beta characters as necessary to the functionality of the world they exist in, though both do so with the added layer of comparison between Betas and Omegas; wherein Betas are often cast as superior to Omegas as they do not experience 'messy' heats or ruts, but similar in that they are less socially powerful than Alphas. This establishment of power hierarchies within the Omegaverse secondaries, with Alphas as the most powerful and Omegas as the least, places these particular fics within the well-established A/B/O narrative of the thesis constructed thus far. Additionally, like previous chapters, all works discussed in this section with an Alpha/Beta pairing are explicitly rated for sexual content.

While nonbinary identity can still be read into these iterations of the Beta status, the Alpha/Beta pairing is where this identification could be read as less immediately apparent, and asexual identities are nonexistent in these readings. Like the pairings that included an Alpha in the previous chapter, the inclusion of an Alpha in Beta-centric pairings does seem to reproduce hetero-patriarchal roles, with the Alpha as hypermasculine and sexually dominant. However, while the Beta is sexually submissive to the Alpha, these characters do not typically fulfill the same female-coded role as the Omega often does. In fact, the two fics in this section can be read to explain the sexual

roles of Betas in a relationship with an Alpha from two opposite perspectives - from passive acceptance of a submissive sexual script to competition for sexual authority more aligned with Alpha/Alpha pairings.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	DCU, Superman - All Media Types, Batman - All Media Types
Relationships:	Clark Kent/Bruce Wayne, Dick Grayson/Jason Todd, Dick Grayson/Roy Harper
Characters:	Clark Kent, Bruce Wayne, Jason Todd, Dick Grayson, Alfred Pennyworth, Tim Drake, Lois Lane, Perry White, Martha Kent, Jonathan Kent, Roy Harper, Jor-El
Additional Tags:	Explicit Sexual Content, Explicit Language, Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Alpha/Omega, Mating Cycles/In Heat, Dominant Omega, Dominant Bottom, Sex Addiction, Pack Dynamics, Family Drama, Developing Relationship, Established Relationship, Jealousy, Love Triangles, Friendship/Love, Drama, Oral Sex, Anal Sex, Mutual Masturbation, Knotting, Alpha/Beta, Rimming
Language:	English
Series:	← Previous Work → Part 3 of the DC Omegaverse series → Next Work →
Collections:	Batman, Favorite Bruce/Clark, Alphabet Soup
Stats:	Published: 2014-02-03 Completed: 2014-04-03 Words: 56588 Chapters: 19/19 Comments: 693 Kudos: 1959 Bookmarks: 146 Hits: 51581

Ties that Bind

Evilpixie

Figure 5.1: Title and tags from “Ties that Bind” by Evilpixie (2014)

I will begin with the presentation of the Beta as both gender identity and job title. In Evilpixie’s (2014) *Batman* fic, the Beta, Dick Grayson, often refers to his own identity and experiences as though reading a spreadsheet of necessary functions - oddly removed from the parts of his personality that find their way into the text. In the source material, both the Beta, Dick Grayson, and the Alpha he later has a romantic and sexual relationship with, Jason Todd, both held the mantle of “Robin”, a sidekick to the titular Batman. Despite the similarities between Dick and Jason in respect to their upbringing and job training as Robins, the decision to only cast Dick Grayson as a Beta offers an interesting perspective into the traits ascribed to Beta characters in fics like “Ties that Bind” (2014). I mentioned in the synopsis of the fic that it does not feature a Beta as part of the primary pairing but rather a secondary pairing that evolves in the third installment of a six-part series. This framing of the Beta-centric relationship as secondary to the primary Alpha/Omega pairing can be read as consciously done by the author, because

the introduction to the Alpha/Beta pairing does not feature in the story, beyond passing glances, until chapter 12 (of 19 total chapters). Though the characters have been present throughout the series, it is not until chapter 12 of the third installment that the readers are presented with the Beta perspective and the expectations therein. Grayson has an extended internal monologue prior to his sexual engagement with Jason - but Grayson's description of his role within the larger A/B/O dynamics is oddly removed from his personal experience. His account of being a Beta can be read as a vacant job listing posted by an unenthusiastic employee.

There were certain rules to being Dick Grayson; certain formulas that had to be followed and systems that needed to be adhered to. The first and foremost rule was stability. He was a beta, one of the only two in a pack of six, and it was up to him and Alfred to subtly rein in the more turbulent members and keep them from each [other's] throats. He needed to be staunch, safe, and unbiased in his treatment of all pack mates. A foundation for everything to stand on. He needed to leave the stupidity, the emotional messes, and the drama for the more unstable, hormonally impaired, sexual castes.

It was the most important rule, and it was the one he was breaking. (Evilpixie 2014)

Aside from the final sentence of this excerpt that seems to illustrate Grayson's own autonomous rejection of this Beta job list, with words like "breaking" implying Grayson's actions are illicit, this excerpt suggests that the Beta roles are limited to that of Alpha and Omega wranglers. The excerpt also seems to imply that Grayson, as one of the pack Betas is not allowed to be dissatisfied with his role and must follow the "formulas" and "systems" without fault. This declaration can be read as undercut by Grayson's

description of 'unbiased treatment' by leaving the "stupidity, the emotional messes, and the drama for the more unstable, hormonally impaired, sexual castes" (Evilpixie 2014) - suggesting he is not at all unbiased in his views of the sexual proclivities of Alphas and Omegas.

This particular reading of Grayson's relationship with his Beta status also furthers the rift between his relationships with the other members of his pack, who (in the source material) share the title of Robin. The author's decision to cast all the Robins as different A/B/O dynamics places them in a very distinct power hierarchy. Despite being the eldest and arguably most skilled Robin, both in canon and in this fic, Dick Grayson's Beta status maps onto his character in interesting ways as it places him lower in his family/work hierarchy than an Alpha status would. While the Dick Grayson in the Batman comics was often characterized by bravado and charm, the Beta Dick Grayson in this fic can be read as anxiety-ridden and irritated by his placement in the A/B/O hierarchy and within his own pack. This excerpt could be read to characterize Dick as one of the sole providers of emotional labor for his pack; a role he seems to resent.

This notion of performing his Beta duties to his pack as part of a job wherein he sees himself as a cog in a machine becomes increasingly visible when sex is introduced into his relationship with Jason. Dick's conception of himself and his body seem to oscillate between his delight at finding he can sexually compete with Omegas that Jason may have a sexual history with and his disappointment at finding his Beta body has limitations that an Omega body would not. Some of the more explicit lines, like, "Jason was gliding in an[d] out of him as if he were an omega" (Evilpixie 2014) seem to reveal that Grayson either wishes himself to be an Omega or assumes that Jason wants him to be and fulfills that role without question. Alternatively, lines like "wrap his fist

around his half formed knot; holding it outside Dick’s body” (Evilpixie 2014) speaks to the inability of Grayson’s Beta body to perform the Omega sexual role - including holding a knot *inside* their bodies. Grayson seems to have a complicated relationship with his Beta status, both describing it as an important job that is intrinsic to the well-being of his pack while also distancing himself from the expected role in lieu of acting in the sexual role typically performed by Omegas. Dick’s thought processes surrounding sex suggest that his social status as a Beta has no corresponding sexual script and so he performs what he assumes is the Omega sexual script - since his partner is an Alpha. There is very little indication that Dick thinks about being a Beta as a gendered experience and when thinking of it as a sexual experience, Dick can be read as finding the Beta identity as lacking - choosing a more familiar Omega script instead. While this is not unusual for Beta characters to have specific anxieties about their bodies and/or lack of secondary characteristics, the relationship between Dick and Jason does not offer much insight into the Beta self-perspective beyond it being an unpaid job providing emotional labor for the Alphas and Omegas around them.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	僕のヒーローアカデミア Boku no Hero Academia My Hero Academia
Relationship:	Bakugou Katsuki/Midoriya Izuku
Additional Tags:	Wank and Tell , fuck around and find out
Language:	English
Series:	← Previous Work → Part 9 of the Twitter Threads series • Next Work →
Collections:	HighQualityBNHAFics , bkdk fics that ARE A MUST!!! , Fuck Around and Find out by Mika
Stats:	Published: 2019-07-11 Words: 2860 Chapters: 1/1 Comments: 41 Kudos: 1149 Bookmarks: 144 Hits: 10971

Expectations

Mikacrispy

Figure 5.2: Title and tags from “Expectations” by Mikacrispy (2019)

The second fic, unfortunately, does little to explore the Beta perspective more than *exilpixie* (2014). Mikacripsy's "Expectations" (2019) is told entirely from the Alpha perspective as he pursues a newly single Beta who has been his crush for many years. Since the Alpha, Katsuki Bakugou, is the only perspective the reader receives - there are only a few themes that can be gleaned from this particular fic. Despite this obvious detriment of limited Beta perspective, the fic is extremely popular and provides some of the typical conventions of Beta experience in Alpha/Beta fics (including being absent from the POV). The first theme to emerge is that the Alpha has taken it upon himself to be the best sexual experience the Beta, Izuku Midoriya (sometimes called Deku), has ever had. The text makes clear that Izuku has been sexually active with multiple partners and therefore the Alpha feels the Beta will need to be impressed by Katsuki's sexual performance to consider him as a potential mate. Unlike many of the Alpha/Omega fics, this desire to impress the Beta in order to be selected for mating gives a great deal of power to the Beta - suggesting that, unlike Omegas who may be compromised by mating imperatives, the Beta characters in this A/B/O fic have full autonomy over their bodies and choosing their sexual partners. Excerpts like the one below suggest that Katsuki has spent a significant amount of time planning his sexual pursuit of Izuku furthering the notion that Betas in this particular iteration of the Omegaverse may have even more power than Alphas, if only in the sphere of sexual pursuit.

He bought some expensive lube and has been using some training dildos (Deku is a beta, but Katsuki has felt his dick during their make [out] sessions and it's quite a generous size). He will ride that nerd for all he is worth and prove to Izuku

he won't be missing out on anything for picking Katsuki as a mate. (Mikacrispy 2019)

Many of Katsuki's assumptions about Izuku's sexual preferences in this scene suggest that because Izuku has only been in relationships with fellow Betas or Omegas, it must be due to his partiality for being the penetrating partner. This assumption seems to be based on the social expectations of sexual scripting - like those expressed in the previous chapter - that dictate Alphas are the penetrators and Betas (and Omegas) the penetrated. As such, Katsuki has been training to be the penetrated partner in order to disrupt Izuku's assumed preconceptions about Alphas and be the Beta's chosen partner. Since Katsuki's assumptions prove to be wrong when he and Izuku do have sex, I argue that the theme of Beta experience that can be gleaned from this fic is the propensity of Betas to yield sexual power to Alphas when placed in sexually aggressive situations; reiterating traditionally heteropatriarchal power dynamics like those discussed in the Alpha/Omega and Alpha/Alpha pairings of Chapter 4.

Again, as the reader is never privy to the Beta character's thoughts, the reactions of the Beta have to be interpreted from the Alpha's perspective to understand why they may have occurred. For instance, the excerpt below is fairly blatant in describing how the Beta seems to acquiesce to the Alpha's sexual needs and quickly shifts his expectations when the Alpha becomes aggressive. When describing their expectations of sexual positioning, the Beta is quick to assure the Alpha that he expected to take the passive role, and when the Alpha responds violently, continues to pacify the Alpha by becoming more passive and acquiescing to his moods.

“Wha-why? Kacchan, you don’t need to-... I mean, I know you are an alpha. I know how these things go, I’m ready.” Izuku says with a sweet understanding smile but Katsuki is having none of it.

“WHAT? YOU THINK I CAN’T TAKE IT? You think those shitty bitches you dated could handle you but I can’t?” Katsuki yells furious[ly] and Izuku looks at him with a confused and sad expression. “You know what? I’m gonna fucking show you, shitty Deku!”

Then Katsuki pounces over Izuku knocking the beta back into the bed.

(Mikacrispy 2019)

The Alpha screaming at the Beta that he can be accommodating of his needs and then tackling him into the bedding, while hilarious, does reinforce the typical Omegaverse sexual scripting of Alpha dominance and their partner’s submission. Despite the initial power Izuku may have had in the situation, with the autonomy to accept or refuse Katsuki’s advances, this scene makes clear that the Beta’s expectations of having to defer sexual dominance to the Alpha were well-founded. The rest of the fic has the occasional mention of Izuku’s limited sexual power, for example, he makes it known that he would prefer to be the penetrated party and Katsuki acquiesces, but these examples are few. The characterization of Katsuki Bakugou as aggressive and Izuku Midoriya as both passive and permissive of Katsuki’s aggression directed at him could be read as an accurate interpretation of their relationship in the source material. Much like the *Batman* fic before it, this representation of certain characters as Betas versus Alphas or Omegas does not necessarily add to the tropes of the Omegaverse so much as it contributes to the canon compliance or out-of-character (also known as “canon-contentious”) portrayal within the fic. Both the Betas in these fics can be read as

characterized by their reactions to Alpha aggression and the expectation of emotional labor they will provide for their partners and/or pack.

From these two fics, there is a pattern of the Beta character's minoritized position of power. When their Beta status seems to have job requirements of emotional labor, as the *Batman* fic illustrated, the Beta characters in sexual relationships with Alphas can be seen to use their partner's reactions to inform their own. In these fics, and many of the other Alpha/Beta fics, there seems to be a pattern of Alpha dominance and Beta submission not unlike the Alpha/Omega fics of the previous chapter.¹¹⁶ Despite Betas assuming the traditional Omega sexual role, they maintain a unique social role that can be read as slightly elevated on the social hierarchy in comparison to Omegas. Thus, there is evidence to suggest that though Beta characters may fulfill a gender role that does not necessarily align with the statuses of Alpha or Omega or at least perceives themselves as outside the binary roles assigned to Alphas and Omegas, their sexual scripting remains staunchly binary when paired with Alphas.

These fics offer a very muddled picture of what it means to be a Beta character in a relationship with an Alpha and how that informs gender expression in the Omegaverse. From the above readings, which are among the most popular Alpha/Beta fics, the Betas can be read to have their social roles, and to an extent, their personalities, foreshortened to accommodate their Alpha partners. As I wrote at the beginning of this section, the Alpha/Beta pairing is more like Alpha/Omega pairings from previous chapters than it is unique from them. The next section exploring Beta/Omega

¹¹⁶ While the exact number of Alpha/Beta fics that include dynamics of aggressive Alphas and passive Betas tasked with the emotional labor for their partners and/or pack is difficult to estimate within the current tagged fics, some popular examples include: "For Convenience' Sake" by Danmujiji (2020), "Broken, but Still Good" by deviance (2020), and "Any Alpha Would" by decaf_kitty (2019). While I have not read the over 1,500 tagged fics under the "Alpha/Beta" tag (February 2022), a rough estimation based on the tags provided would suggest around 60% of the fics feature this particular dynamic.

relationships provides a bit more diversity in Beta experience, but with a new through-line of secondary-gender-based anxiety stemming from their choice of Omega partners. This anxiety can be seen to highlight some of the unique aspects of Beta status that I argue could be mapped onto nonbinary gender identity.

5.2.2 The Beta/Omega fics: Secondary Gender-based Anxiety

The Beta/Omega pairing *could* be read as the most uniform presentation of Betas within Beta-centric fics, but only in as much as they share a particular theme, not in how that theme is executed. Almost every one of the top 100 most kudos'd fics on Ao3 with a Beta/Omega pairing features a Beta experiencing momentary or extended gender-based anxiety about fulfilling the biological needs of their Omega partner. While the Alpha/Beta fics had some expectation of their Alpha partners wishing for the Betas to take on more Omega-like tendencies, whether this assumption was true or not, the Beta/Omega fics are more direct in their framing of Beta-specific anxieties. For the first fic I discuss, "Context Clues" by Anonymous (2019) from the MCU fandom, Peter Parker (Spider-Man) goes into heat while alone in a house with famous Beta, Tony Stark (Iron Man). As Stark is a Beta, he spends most of Parker's heat building inventions which will help Tony mimic the biological components of an Alpha to ease Parker's heat with the assumption that when his heat is over, Parker will find an Alpha to fulfill his heat needs in the future without gadgetry. This assumption proves false, but the doubt that Stark feels in his ability to satisfy an Omega in heat plays a large role in the sexual and romantic chemistry of the fic.

Rating:	Explicit
<u>Archive Warning:</u>	<u>Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</u>
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	<u>The Avengers (Marvel Movies)</u> , <u>Spider-Man (Tom Holland Movies)</u> , <u>Iron Man (Movies)</u>
Relationship:	<u>Peter Parker/Tony Stark</u>
Additional Tags:	<u>Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics</u> , <u>Beta/Omega</u> , <u>Dubious Consent</u> , <u>Mating Cycles/In Heat</u> , <u>Anal Fisting</u> , <u>Sex Toys</u> , <u>Scenting</u>
Language:	English
Collections:	<u>Mind The Age Gap Flash Fic Prompt Meme</u> , <u>is this thing (an)on?</u>
Stats:	Published: 2019-11-18 Completed: 2020-02-23 Words: 7831 Chapters: 3/3 Comments: 73 Kudos: 1214 Bookmarks: <u>164</u> Hits: 20671

Context Clues

Anonymous

Figure 5.3: Title and tags from “context Clues” by Anonymous (2019)

The characterization of Tony Stark as a Beta is interesting, especially in comparison with later works in this chapter that cast him as an Omega, though the reasoning behind this choice could be read as emphasizing Stark’s intellect over his leadership skills. As Tony Stark is arguably the leader of the Avengers in the current iteration of the MCU, this is a fascinating choice on the author’s behalf and implies that Betas may be better able to focus their intelligence than Alphas or Omegas as they are not as often distracted by mating imperatives. However, as the entire fic revolves around Tony being distracted by Peter’s heat, perhaps this cursory reading is incorrect. As the reasons *why* Tony is cast as a Beta do not seem to be relevant to the fic, like the previous section, I will not speculate any further as to the author’s reasoning for this choice to cast the canon characters into particular A/B/O dynamics.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	방탄소년단 Bangtan Boys BTS
Relationship:	Jeon Jungkook/Park Jimin
Characters:	Jeon Jungkook, Park Jimin (BTS), Kim Taehyung V, Min Yoongi Suga, Kim Namjoon RM
Additional Tags:	Divorce, Non-Linear Narrative, Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Mpreg, Beta/Omega, Beta Jeon Jungkook, Omega Park Jimin (BTS), Established Kim Taehyung V/Min Yoongi Suga, Side Minjoon, Angst with a Happy Ending, Lack of Communication, Learning To Communicate, Second Chances, Unresolved Emotional Tension, Getting Back Together, Unreliable Narrator
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2019-04-18 Completed: 2019-04-22 Words: 29836 Chapters: 2/2 Comments: 103 Kudos: 1619 Bookmarks: 514 Hits: 27391

keeping our vows
namakemono

Figure 5.4: Title and tags from “keeping our vows” by namakemono (2019)

The second fic, “keeping our vows” by namakemono (2019) from the BTS RPF fandom, deals more with the longevity of Beta gender anxiety and how social expectations train Alphas and Omegas to reinforce these anxieties through their interactions with Betas. Documenting the marriage, parenthood, divorce, and reconciliation of Beta, Jungkook, and Omega, Jimin, the non-chronological storytelling illustrates how the Beta role is stigmatized with untrue assumptions such as sterility, inability to sexually satisfy Omega partners, and a submissiveness to Alphas that is naturalized by society and causes extreme stress on the relationship between Jungkook and Jimin. The first Mature-rated fic in this thesis, as opposed to Explicit, this fic explores the nuances of sexual intimacy almost exclusively through verbal discussion between characters or as an inner monologue described by the Beta narrator, Jungkook. Much like “Context Clues” (2019), “keeping our vows” (2019) discusses heats and sex as a site of Beta-specific performance anxiety. Unlike the other fics described in this chapter, this is the first fic to discuss what Gunderson described as Betas being “written as either sterile/infertile or intersex” (15-16, 2017). While Jungkook

and Jimin are able to reproduce, it is established that this is perceived as an anomaly within the fic as Betas typically only ever reproduce with other Betas.

One of the key departures from the anxieties presented in the Alpha/Beta fics is the self-awareness initially presented by Betas in Beta/Omega fics. While this may, and often does, change before the conclusion of the fic, the Betas presented in Beta/Omega fics are typically more aware of their strengths and shortcomings than the limited version previously discussed. For example, in the Peter Parker/Tony Stark fic, when Parker's heat hits him unexpectedly, Stark quickly assesses the situation and the options available to him as a Beta character.

If Tony were an alpha they'd be in real trouble right about now. Then again, if Tony were an alpha, he'd have the biological means to help Peter through this.

Tony shakes his head. No, that wouldn't be a solution either. The kid must be out of his mind right now, there's no way it would be better if both of them were incapacitated by hormones. (Anonymous 2020)

Tony's quick dismissal of the notion that being an Alpha in this situation might be easier illustrates an understanding that each of the A/B/O dynamics has its strengths, but also weaknesses. Tony's recognition that his key strength at this moment may very well be that he is not an Alpha and has a more objective view of the situation as a Beta could be read as self-awareness. However, there is also a reading of this response as Tony's personal determination (or perhaps his own sense of self-importance) that Betas have an important role to play within the Omegaverse. Unlike Dick Grayson in "Ties That Bind" (2014), Tony does not seem to think of his Beta status as a job, but rather an identity with particular facets that are better suited to his current situation than that of an Alpha. Tony acknowledges that he 'lacks' the biological aspects necessary to ease

Peter's heat (e.g., a knot), but that this is not necessarily a detriment in the situation and provides some idea of the practicality required of Beta characters dealing with the altered biology of the Omegaverse secondaries.

While this acknowledgment of difference could be specific to Tony Stark as an unusual characterization of Betas, Tony also shares in the gender-based anxieties present in other Beta/Omega fics, lending some credence to his perception of Beta experience as somewhat universal. For instance, when Tony remarks on his limited knowledge of heats, he again suggests that the situation might be better if he were an Alpha (or even another Omega) rather than his own status - belying a sense of envy for the other secondaries and their biological imperatives.

Most articles about heat sex only mentioned beta involvement in passing, as decent practice for a young omega, but ultimately inconsequential. Marginally better than nothing, in a situation where no acceptable alpha was on-hand. Even another omega was generally preferable – something about sympathetic pheromones and their (possible, unproven-as-yet) effect on omega hormone levels.

The point being, Tony doesn't have any biological imperative excuse for why he so desperately wants to go back upstairs to wait things out. He can't even believably claim it would be for Peter's sake; Peter will be too out of it to care either way, at least until his heat really started. (Anonymous 2020)

Trying to parse through the rationalizations in this scene is difficult as it is unclear whether Tony is trying to permit himself to act as an aid during Peter's heat despite not having the biological inclination that would make his actions socially permissible, or whether he's trying to argue that despite being traditionally ill-suited for the job of heat

aid, he will persevere because of his attachment to Peter. Either way, this passage reads as odd given Tony's previous rationalization that being an Alpha would be detrimental to helping Peter through his heat, and Tony is much better suited to the task as a Beta. Here, Tony seems to require a mating imperative as an 'excuse' to help Peter - suggesting he doesn't feel he has the right to try to help Peter through his heat unless he receives some sort of biological inclination to do so.

This excerpt is unusual in that it prompts Tony's Beta-based anxiety about being unable to fulfill a heat, but it is not anxiety based on his ability to perform, but rather his motivations to do so not being based in biology. This particular scene recalls circumstances like those in Chapter 2, where consent is complicated by mating imperatives. Perhaps that is intentional in this Beta-centric fic, as well. The author describes Tony's anxieties around his gender as a complication as to whether or not Peter could consent to his aid during a heat. Peter is compromised by biological imperatives, but Tony is not - meaning that Tony is making the conscious decision to engage with heat sex with Peter without Peter's informed consent. The logic being that if Tony was equally compromised by heat or rut, he would not have the same dilemma.

While this interpretation seems likely given the biological imperatives intrinsic to the genre that Tony is navigating in this scene, it also mirrors some of the typical markers of biphobia in reality. Biphobia, or bisexual stigma as it is sometimes referred (Wandrey, Mosack, and Moore 2015), often manifests as a gender-based anxiety wherein queer partners of bisexual peoples feel their gender identity will not be sufficient for their partners' sexual attraction to multiple genders (Wandrey, Mosack, and Moore 2015, Obradors-Campos 2011, Garelick et al. 2017, Mulick & Wright Jr. 2002). This translates into readings like the above excerpt from "Context Clues" (2019) when

Tony feels his Beta identity will not be sufficient in soothing Peter's Omega needs - which he assumes would be better served by an Alpha or another Omega. Where biphobic reactions resulting in gender-based anxiety often stem from a misunderstanding of bisexuality as non-monogamous, when monogamy is an entirely separate component of sexuality (Harrad 2018, Obradors-Campos 2011, Mulick & Wright Jr. 2002), the Omegaverse Beta reaction can be read to stem from similar questions of sufficiency to fulfill their lover's assumed needs. The lived experience by bisexual peoples and their partners seems to parallel the Beta/Omega experience resulting in similar gender-based panic. In both the Omegaverse and reality, these issues are typically addressed through communication and understanding between partners of the other's sexual needs (Harrad 2018, Wandrey, Mosack, and Moore 2015, Obradors-Campos 2011, Garelick et al. 2017, Mulick & Wright Jr. 2002). Similarly, in "Context Clues" (2019), Peter and Tony have a conversation, following Peter's confession that he would rather spend heats alone than without Tony, wherein they become romantic partners. This reassurance from Peter that he will not need an Alpha to get through heats - as he much prefers Tony's company - helps to soothe Tony's anxiety about his performance ability as a Beta. This tenuous link between sexuality and gender, both in reality and in this iteration of the Beta status, contributes to a reading of the Beta as nonbinary, as Stark's perception of himself as different and distinct from Alphas and Omegas is the source of his anxiety; even though it manifests as a sexuality-specific anxiousness. While this reading of the Beta as similar to an anxious partner of a bisexual person, in reality, does have some parallels in "Context Clues" (2019), the more obvious example of this gendered paranoia can be read in fics like "keeping our vows" where this anxiety is found in romantic relationships but also

garnered in the medical community and larger social stigma surrounding Beta/Omega couples.

Namakemono's "keeping our vows" (2019) traces the multiple-decade relationship of Beta, Jungkook, and Omega, Jimin, as they navigate a socially stigmatized romantic and sexual relationship with one another. One of the main differences between the stigma presented in "Context Clues" (2019) and the stigma in "keeping our vows" (2019) is the public reception of the Beta/Omega relationship. Where Tony and Peter were fairly isolated from other people throughout the fic, whether because of the intimacy of Peter's heats or the superhero identities needing to remain away from public view, Jungkook and Jimin are constantly moving through various social settings - each with a unique bias regarding their relationship. Jimin's parents are extremely prejudiced against Betas, as they wish for their son to be in a relationship with an Alpha as is socially expected of him as an Omega. Their friend groups, while supportive of their relationship in general, act as points of comparison between the effort that Jungkook and Jimin go through daily versus the ease with which their Alpha/Omega coupled friends experience romantic relationship staples such as public displays of affection.

Where "Context Clues" (2019) explored how Beta sexuality could be mapped onto the lived experience of bisexuality, "keeping our vows" continues this exploration, but with the added caveat: what if being the 'wrong' or 'unsatisfactory' gender for your bisexual partner affected your chances of producing children? The first fic to introduce Gunderson's (2017) description of "sterile/infertile" Betas, the main narrative arc of the fic revolves around fertility and how the difficulties of becoming pregnant can strain relationships, temporarily leading Jungkook and Jimin to divorce. Though they do end

up having children, eventually, the story focuses heavily on how frustrating the process of pregnancy is for their nontraditional pairing and how social perceptions of their difficulties further strain their relationship. For example, after the first few failures to produce a pregnancy during one of Jimin's heats, Jungkook begins to doubt his capability to fulfill his partner's needs.

By April, Jungkook was beginning to become disheartened, wondering if he truly had doomed Jimin to a life without pups, all because he'd decided to fall in love with a beta instead of an alpha. (namakemono 2019)

This introduction of doubt regarding his gender comes as a surprise for the reader, as the non-chronological storytelling has thus far explained that Jungkook and Jimin are divorced, with shared custody of their daughter, but the reasons for their divorce are unclear. There are vague intimations that Jungkook's Beta status played some small part in their separation, but it is unclear how. The above excerpt is one of the first indications that their marriage may have been in trouble due to gender-based anxieties and the realities of possible infertility between Betas and Omegas.

Before this perspective of procreation-based stressors, many of the tensions on Jungkook and Jimin's relationship have been from outside sources - whether it's Jimin's arguably bigoted parents, their school friends supporting their relationship though not understanding its nuances, and/or strangers assuming Jimin is mated with an Alpha because of his visible bond-bite and healthy child. This social assumption that his Omega partner must be with an Alpha instead of a Beta because of his relative happiness and marital success leads Jungkook to envy Alphas and strive towards fulfilling what he perceives as the Alpha status through a leadership position at work. Jungkook often postulates that his earlier failures to tempt Jimin as a mate have more to

do with “the nonsense that came with alphas and omegas and their complicated courting and relationships” (namakemono 2019) than his own status. With the above introduction of possible infertility comes what appears to be the first interpersonal stressor in Jimin and Jungkook’s relationship as opposed to the external stigma previously noted. In fact, this biology-based expectation of failure can be interpreted as something akin to the much more common Omegaverse heats and ruts. However, instead of the fear of unwanted pregnancy resulting from overactive sexual pheromones or shifts in social or sexual scripting due to biological imperatives, the problem for this particular Beta/Omega relationship can be read as the exact opposite - though equally based in mating potentials.

As the story ends with Jungkook and Jimin reconciling and having another child together, this assumption that Betas and Omegas cannot reproduce with one another is obviously false. The author tackles this issue of suspected infertility on two fronts - the first is medical and based on biological sex, the second in gender and socially accepted scripts. In both of these perspectives, the Beta status can be read as other and outside of the Alpha and Omega binary that has been normalized in society. When Jungkook and Jimin decide to get medically assessed for fertility, the following passage reveals a gap in medical knowledge of Beta/Omega pairings and how social constructs of gender often inform how medical personnel address these gaps in knowledge.

Jungkook was fairly certain that it was just the desperation talking, but he agreed to his husband’s request, taking him to a fertility clinic to get the both of them checked out. The results came back that they were both perfectly capable of having children, but probably not with each other.

“Omegas are designed to have children with alphas. Betas are designed to have children with other betas. If the two of you wish to have children, I would recommend looking into surrogacy,” the doctor said. (namakemono 2019)

This passage is, perhaps intentionally, misleading. The Doctor is assumed to be the authority on the subject of A/B/O fertility as that is their job description and specialty. However, as Jungkook and Jimin’s successful pregnancy following this appointment proves, there may be social constructions of gender/sex influencing this Doctor’s understanding of how A/B/O bodies are “designed”. The insinuation that Jungkook and Jimin, despite being perfectly healthy and fertile, would be incompatible with one another due to their secondaries can read as the social sphere interfering with interpersonal relationships as well as the medical community tasked with offering counsel in those relationships. As I have already noted, Jungkook and Jimin have a child together prior to their brief divorce and they have another child together following their reunion, implying that the medical conclusion that they are incompatible may not be medically sound in this particular iteration of the Omegaverse. This fic contends with the medical designation of ‘otherness’ towards Betas that imposes the unnecessary exclusion of Betas from relationships with the otherwise Alpha/Omega binary. If this imagined infertility is a product of medical training, then there is evidence to suggest that the medical community in this fic is informed by biased social constructions of gender/sex - labeling the Beta characters as outside the traditional binary and ill-suited to integration or comingling sexually - instead of the lived experience of Beta/Omega couples. While vague, this positioning of the medical community in direct opposition with the physical health of nonbinary peoples or those in relationships with them offers yet

another interesting point of entry for reading the Beta characters as a nonbinary gender expression.

This inability to obtain unbiased medical treatment is relevant to the lived experiences of many gender-queer and non-heterosexual peoples in reality (Dray et al. 2020, Goddard 2000, Herdt 1993, Nicholas 2014). As such, Beta-centric works like those described in “Context Clues” (2019) and “keeping our vows” (2019) could be read as speculative fiction using the genre conventions of the Omegaverse and its traditionally binary systems of gender and limited sexualities to describe the anxieties and sometimes heartbreaking realities of queer life. Despite the brief intersections of these works with concepts like bisexual stigma and medicalized, gender-specific perceptions of infertility, there is very little discussion of the Beta gender itself and how it interacts within the A/B/O dynamics beyond its sexual capacity. The placement of Betas within the power hierarchy can be read to change from the relative power over Omegas in the Alpha/Beta fics to the tenuous implication that they may exist in a power structure entirely outside the A/B/O dynamics as the Beta/Omega fics can be read to suggest. And yet, it is the Beta/Beta relationships that offer the widest range of Beta roles within the A/B/O hierarchy and present the Beta as alternatively nonbinary and/or asexual as a prime tenet of the secondary gender.

5.2.3 The Beta/Beta fics: Diversifying Gender Roles and Introducing Asexuality

The Beta/Beta fics can be read to offer the most range for possible gender roles for Betas as their partner’s status can no longer be read to require specific binary

reinforcement. There are no Alpha partners to submit to sexually and no Omega partners to cause anxiety or inferiority complexes. Just two Betas trying to sort out how they fit into world-building that is often constructed without their needs or wants in mind. Interestingly, this section also provides the most convincing argument for the reading of Betas as a largely asexual designation. However, as asexuality theorist, Angela Chen, notes, “the world is not a binary of aces and allos. It is a spectrum” (15, 2020) and the reading of the Beta characterization as asexual is much the same. Some Beta characters will be explicitly labeled asexual and sex-repulsed in the fic tags and described as such within the body of the fic. Others will “find people beautiful, have a libido, masturbate, and seek out porn” (Chen 20, 2020) as many asexuals closer to the allosexual spectrum in reality do, though still have a complicated relationship with sexual attraction. The gender expression and sexual experiences of the Betas in this chapter thus far have been varied and the potential reading of Betas as asexual in Beta/Beta fics is no different. For that reason, I have selected an additional fic for this section, bringing the total to three instead of the two fics each for the Alpha/Beta and Beta/Omega sections. The first, “Stuck in the Middle With You” by flawedamythyst (2020) comes from the Marvel Cinematic Universe featuring a relationship between Clint Barton and Bucky Barnes, both Betas. As the first “Teen and Up” rated fic in this thesis, this work explores the mutual chagrin the Betas feel when working in close quarters with Alphas and Omegas and their often disruptive mating cycles. The relationship between Clint and Bucky can be read to form over their shared ‘lack’ of secondaries and how that ‘lack’ brings them both joy and peace with their roles in their personal and professional ecosystems.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Marvel
Relationship:	James "Bucky" Barnes/Clint Barton
Additional Tags:	Minor Steve Rogers/Tony Stark, Minor Natasha Romanov/Sam Wilson, Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Beta/Beta, Clint Barton as Captain America, relationship dramas
Language:	English
Collections:	Winterhawk Bingo
Stats:	Published: 2020-03-09 Words: 8166 Chapters: 1/1 Comments: 113 Kudos: 785 Bookmarks: 88 Hits: 3643

Stuck In The Middle With You

flawedamythyst

Figure 5.5: Title and tags for “Stuck In The Middle With You” by flawedamythyst (2020)

The second Beta/Beta fic, “Picking Up Roses” by jemariel (2019) comes from the premier Omegaverse fandom, *Supernatural*, and features a pairing between Dean and Castiel. Interestingly, this pairing features Betas masquerading as an Alpha (Castiel) and Omega (Dean) to receive the benefits of these dynamics built into their society. For example, Castiel wears artificial Alpha scent colognes that are expensive, irritating to the skin, and only marginally effective to convince his coworkers he is an Alpha and therefore compatible with the leadership position he occupies. This particular masking of identity provides an interesting opportunity to explore how gender binaries construct often inescapable constructs that force nonbinary individuals to conform to the traditional gender binary or face discrimination. Through their romantic relationship, both Betas find comfort in each other and their shared identity enough to live openly as Betas together.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Supernatural
Relationship:	Castiel/Dean Winchester
Characters:	Dean Winchester, Castiel
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Non-Traditional Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Beta/Beta, DeanCas FlipFest 2019, Yoga, Yoga Instructor Dean Winchester, business exec Castiel, Frottage, Ferris Wheels, Masturbation, Scent Kink, Massage, Self-Worth Issues, Homophobia, Recreational Drug Use, Marijuana, Mentions of Conversion Therapy (in the past), LGBTQ Themes, Closeted Character, A/b/o as allegory, Coming Out, Beta Dean Winchester, Beta Castiel (Supernatural), Secrets, fake Omega Dean, fake Alpha Castiel
Language:	English
Collections:	CasDean FlipFest 2019, The Destiel Fan Survey Favs Collection
Stats:	Published: 2019-09-17 Completed: 2019-09-17 Words: 26491 Chapters: 4/4 Comments: 150 Kudos: 645 Bookmarks: 118 Hits: 6177

Picking Up Roses

jemariel

Figure 5.6: Title and tags for “Picking Up Roses” by jemariel (2019)

The final close reading, “Under Extreme Duress” by sssrha (2020), is one of the most peculiar instances of world-building in a Beta/Beta pairings as it ascribes the concept of gender/sex, typically found in Alphas and Omegas, onto the Beta characters; meaning the Beta status has associated biological components. In this fic, Beta characters are understood as explicitly asexual since asexuality is a biological trait aligned with their status. This fic from the C-drama, *The Untamed* (2019), features the pairing of Wei Wuixian (sometimes referred to as Wei Ying) and Lan Wangji (sometimes referred to as Lan Zhan) who, along with an inherited job of pack-Beta, are described with an explicitly asexual designation as part of their gender/sex. Alongside their asexuality, characters with a Beta status are tasked with keeping the Alphas and Omegas from mating constantly (not unlike the emotional labor expected of Betas in Alpha/Beta relationships) and securing advantageous marriages within their pack. Though their job within their community requires them to be the personification of a chastity belt, these characterizations offer an opportunity to explore asexuality as a naturalized dynamic alongside an examination of nonbinary gender expression within an otherwise heavily gendered genre.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	F/F, F/M, M/M
Fandoms:	魔道祖师 - 墨香铜臭 Módào Zūshī - Mòxiāng Tóngxiù, 魔道祖师 Módào Zūshī (Cartoon), 陈情令 The Untamed (TV)
Relationships:	Lán Zhàn Lán Wǎngjī/Wèi Yíng Wèi Wúxiàn, Jiāng Fēngmián/Yú Zīyuǎn, Jiāng Yǎnlǐ/Niè Míngjué, Lán Huàn Lán Xīchén/Niè Huáisāng, Jiāng Chéng Jiāng Wǎnyín/Jīn Zīxuǎn, Jiāng Chéng Jiāng Wǎnyín & Wèi Yíng Wèi Wúxiàn, Lán Huàn Lán Xīchén & Lán Zhàn Lán Wǎngjī
Characters:	Wèi Yíng Wèi Wúxiàn, Lán Zhàn Lán Wǎngjī, Jiāng Chéng Jiāng Wǎnyín, Mèng Yáo Jīn Guāngyáo, Jīn Líng Jīn Rúlán, Jīn Zīxuǎn, Lán Huàn Lán Xīchén, Lán Yuàn Lán Sìzhuī, Lán Jīngyí, Niè Zōnghuī, Niè Huáisāng, Wēn Qíng, Mò Xuányú, Yīnzhū (Módào Zūshī), Luó "Mián Mián" Qīngyáng
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Non-Traditional Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, (kinda), Beta/Beta, Beta Wèi Yíng Wèi Wúxiàn, Beta Lán Zhàn Lán Wǎngjī, Asexual Wèi Yíng Wèi Wúxiàn, Asexual Lán Zhàn Lán Wǎngjī, nearly everyone else is constantly horny, Crack, Accidental Baby Acquisition, (eventually) - Freeform, WangXian gets together almost immediately, No Miscommunication, Implied Sexual Content, and a whole lot of it, "everyday" is cuddles, and letters when they can't cuddle, Alternate Universe - No Sunshot Campaign (Módào Zūshī), Sect Leader Wēn Qíng, Wangxian would like everyone to know, that premarital sex is forbidden, but they know no one's gonna listen to them, No Beta, except wxw and lwj but u know
Language:	English
Collections:	mǎz's fics that i would still be in love with after 13 years
Stats:	Published: 2020-07-26 Updated: 2020-08-29 Words: 33609 Chapters: 6/8 Comments: 249 Kudos: 1111 Bookmarks: 347 Hits: 15525

Under Extreme Duress

sssrha

Figure 5.7: Title and tags for “Under Extreme Duress” by sssrha (2020)

Asexuality is not necessarily a through-line in Beta/Beta fics, but it does intervene at odd intervals. For example, while the first fic, “Stuck In The Middle With You” (2020) does not explicitly state one way or another what the sexual identity is of the Betas at the fore of the story, there are multiple points throughout that suggest Betas do not necessarily experience sexual attraction. Even in moments of hilarity or quiet humor, the narrative approaches sex with what can be read as trepidation.

He and Clint exchanged looks of mutual weariness.

“Fucking alphas and omegas,” said Clint.

Bucky nodded in agreement. “Always so much fucking drama.”

Clint stared down at his coffee, feeling his shoulders slump. Was it too much to ask to have a living area that wasn't regularly flooded with sex fluids?

(flawedamythyst 2020)

The above excerpt, while probably meant to be a humorous condemnation of Omega slick in communal areas, provides insight into how these particular Betas view the

conventions of heat and rut as well as their shared irritation for being expected to deal with the after-effects of Alpha/Omega mating imperatives. While this does not explicitly state asexuality, it does present a repulsion to sex that has a complicated relationship with asexuality, in reality. To reiterate, asexuality does not always beget sexual repulsion and there are a selection of asexual identities that do not include sex repulsion (Chen 2020). However, this particular scene can be read to incorporate a repulsion to sex as a way to distance the sexual identities of the Betas from the arguably allosexual Alphas and Omegas. I use allosexual to describe the Alphas and Omegas, not to mark Betas as other for having differing levels of sexual attraction or to recreate the allo/asexual dialectic, but to further demonstrate that the Alpha and Omega sexual drives are more normalized than the Beta experience as evidenced by the sexual fluids in shared areas. Additionally, the Alphas and Omegas outnumber the Betas five to one. While these statistics are only representative of those characters in the story, the minority of characters portrayed as Betas does contribute to a sense of otherness or outsider perspective when discussing the Beta characters.

This outsider perspective, which I suggest can be read to stem from sexual difference, can be read in several passages from this particular fic. However, it is by no means the only Beta-centric fic to mark Betas as outsiders based on their 'lack' of mating imperatives. The next fic in this section will have similar positioning for Betas where they are not seen to exist on the same power structure or sexual spectrum as the Alphas and Omegas, but rather as an identity entirely separate and mysterious to the majority Alpha and Omega population. Many other Beta-centric works follow in this vein, but this placement of Betas as outside, or perhaps contrary to, the norms of Omegaverse world-building becomes more obvious with the discussion of children and

child-bearing.¹¹⁷ For instance, in a conversation leading up to an Omega character's heat in "Stuck In The Middle With You" (2020), there is a discussion regarding contraception that markedly positions the Betas as outsiders and/or minorities.

"He wants a family," said Sam.

Bucky snorted. "He should just get a couple of dogs."

"Yes," said Clint, grinning at him. "Exactly. Dogs are so much better, man." He held out a fist and Bucky rolled his eyes, but obligingly bumped it with his own.

"Typical betas," said Tony, sounding amused. (flawedamythyst 2020)

This excerpt sets quite a few standards for Betas which have been previously unexplored in this thesis. First, Betas can be interpreted to have a desire to be child-free and prefer caring for animals instead of children. Second, there is an expectation among Alphas and Omegas that Betas wish to live child-free lives and that this behavior is "typical" of the entire Beta status. While these two standards are related, how they intersect is unusual, given the information surrounding mating imperatives in the previous chapters. The Omegaverse genre, generally, presents an allosexual society with structures of power predicated by predominantly heteronormative scripts. This presentation of Betas as representative of a childless, non-sexualized status - within a genre often recognizable for its mating imperatives - introduces an increasingly queer reading of the Beta gender. The above excerpt implies that a found family, perhaps one of humans and pets, is just as fulfilling (perhaps more so) than that of a biological family. In the case of this fic, Alphas and Omegas can be interpreted to represent a traditional form of a cis-hetero-patriarchal family with biological parents and children

¹¹⁷ It is typically Beta/Beta fics that follow this pattern of separating Beta identities from the Alpha and/or Omega spectrum of experience. Some examples include: "Beta Business Bureau" by Mother of Pearl (Jinjuui_eomeoni) (2021), "A Proposal Is A Promise Your Heart Makes" by TheSilverQueen (2021), and "Pulling your Puzzles Apart" by WaxyWolf (2018).

sharing a gene pool. Alternatively, the Betas present a less heteronormative family structure often affiliated with queer, found family narratives, in reality,¹¹⁸ and fan fiction. While this positioning of Betas as “typically” rejecting the heterosexual scripts does not necessarily contribute to a reading of Betas as asexual or nonbinary, but rather as a possible characterization of some queer experiences within a heteropatriarchal structure.

One main difference between the Omegaverse world-building in “Stuck In The Middle With You” (2020) and the reality of many child-free queer lives comes with the Alpha and Omega acceptance, if not understanding, of the Beta desire to live outside of the cis-hetero lifestyle presented in this fic. When Tony cites this dog-friendly, child-adverse behavior as typical of Betas and amusing to him, a few interpretations can be inferred. Either Tony is particularly fond of these Betas and their relationship to each other and the perspective on child-rearing stereotyped to statuses is amusing to him. Or Betas in general are amusing to Tony as he does not understand their desire to be child-free as it is in direct conflict with his worldview and mating imperatives as an Omega. Regardless of the interpretation, Tony’s amusement suggests that child-free Betas are a known lifestyle within this iteration of the Omegaverse and accepted, if perhaps patronizingly, by Alphas and Omegas. While not always the case, this level of societal acceptance of child-free relationships, based on the desire to remain childless as opposed to biological inhibitors, is rarely seen in reality.

¹¹⁸ While not an exclusively queer narrative, the notion of finding ones’ family instead of being born to one does resonate with many queer peoples both in and outside of fandom communities (Harrad 2018, Chen 2020). However, the “Found Family” or “Families of Choice” tag on Ao3 currently houses almost 75,000 fics and is a common trope within fan fiction (February 2022). While not exclusively an expression of queer communities on fan fiction sites like Ao3, it does offer some support to the notion that fan fiction is a haven for many queer identified individuals.

This is not to suggest that Betas do not face discrimination based on their seemingly alternative life goals and desires. Unsurprisingly, Betas are often depicted as facing discrimination for their sexual preferences. In some fics, like “keeping our vows” (2019) from the previous section, the Beta can be read to face discrimination for having preferences outside of the traditional Beta/Beta pairing wherein their attraction to Alphas or Omegas can be interpreted as unusual for their status. Similarly, in “Stuck In The Middle With You” (2020), the Beta characters are depicted as odd for not being attracted to the Alphas or Omegas in their lives. In a scene describing the scents and fluids typical of Omegas in heat, the Beta characters' obvious discomfort with heats and ruts is described by the group as unusual. However, as the story is told from the Beta perspective, it offers insight into how Beta characters recognize and deal with the assumptions about their sexual interests (or lack thereof).

The more Clint heard about heat sex, the less he wanted anything to do with it. “It sounds exhausting,” he said.” [...]

“That’s because you’ve only ever had beta sex,” said Steve, and both Clint and Bucky glared at him.

“I’ve been with both omegas and alphas,” Bucky said.

“Me too,” said Clint. “And Bucky’s right. It’s great, but it’s not really three days of bubblegum stink great.”

Tony shook his head. “I’ve had sex with betas,” he said. “And you’re right, it’s great, but it’s not mind-blowing. It’s like...rainy Sunday afternoon sex, you know? But heat sex, or even any sex with an alpha, is more like New Year’s Eve. Fireworks and drama and questionable life choices, followed by a mess you’re never going to regret making.” (flawedamythyst 2020)

The initial response to the Beta characters' distaste for heat sex being the assumption that they haven't had heat sex, or the *right* heat sex presents an interesting selection of possible readings of this scene. On the one hand, it illustrates the limited purview of the Alphas and Omegas in the room that the only sex that they can understand as being *good* sex is with a partner they can potentially mate/create offspring with. On the other, this assumption that Beta characters can't understand what they haven't had proves an interesting parallel for asexual experience in reality as it presents a similar illogical paradigm of proving a negative. For instance, one of the many patronizing responses asexual peoples in reality face when discussing their asexuality with allosexuals is the comment, "perhaps you haven't found the right person to have sex with" which assumes allosexuality is the norm and asexuals simply haven't found the right person to be "normal" with (Decker 2014, Sinwell 2019, Chen 2020, Winter-Gray and Hayfield 2021). This infantilizing response to asexuality, while demonstrating a fundamental lack of understanding of asexual/ace experience is difficult to counter, as it would require proof of absence. Unless an asexual person sleeps with everyone on the planet, there is no conceivable way to disprove this inaccurate assumption of their incomplete data regarding their asexual identity. Similarly, the Betas in this scene are quick to mention (with accompanying glares) that they have tried heat and/or rut sex and found it didn't suit them. Far from being satisfied with this response, the group responds with a patronizing description of how sexuality typically manifests for Alphas and Omegas versus the "Sunday afternoon sex" they assume all Betas experience with themselves and other statuses. While neither Bucky nor Clint ever explicitly state they are asexual nor do they posit that Betas, in general, are asexual, this positioning of Beta characters as having a potential 'lack' of sexual appetite, or perhaps possessing the 'wrong' kind of

sexual appetite can be read to represent a unique aspect of many ace peoples experiences in reality.

The closing lines of the fic indicate Clint and Bucky will have a sexual relationship as Clint asks, “And have boring beta Sunday afternoon sex?” (flawedamythyst 2020), playing on Tony’s previous characterization of Beta sex. As this is a T-rated fic, the exploration of what sexual relationships between Betas does look like is not discussed in any further detail. However, as “Stuck In The Middle With You” (2020) is a popular Beta-centric fic, as well as a popular archetype for Beta/Beta relationships, many of the themes of gender expression outside of the Alpha and Omega binary will intercede in the remaining close readings. Before moving to the explicitly asexual Beta characterization in “Under Extreme Duress”(2020), I will first explore an interpretation of sexual relationships between Betas in the explicitly rated fic, “Picking Up Roses” by jemariel (2019) from the *Supernatural* fandom.

This fic is an unusual inclusion, not only because it is an explicitly rated Beta/Beta fic which represents less than 0.1% of all Omegaverse fic on Ao3 (February 2022), but also in how it conceptualizes being a sexually-active Beta within the A/B/O world-building that does not have sex with an Alpha or Omega. In this particular concept, Betas are a rare status, so rare in fact, that to be a Beta is socially perceived as a shameful thing without any social benefits or power. As such, many Betas disguise their status using expensive scent blockers or falsifying Alpha or Omega scent enhancers and molding their bodies to better suit the status they are trying to “pass” as.¹¹⁹ As I briefly explained, one of the side-plots of this fic involves Castiel, one of the

¹¹⁹ “Pass” is a complicated word to use in this context as it has many implications within the Omegaverse community and in reality. In reality, the word often coincides with visual perception of non-cisgendered and/or non-heterosexual people. For example, the ability of a queer person to pass as cisgender/heterosexual as measure of self-preservation within a heteronormative society is often

main Betas, disguising himself as an Alpha at his place of work so that he might enjoy the benefits of being an Alpha including leadership positions and other privileges such as eligibility for promotions and lucrative client accounts. Alternatively, the other Beta, Dean, disguises himself as an Omega - funneling Omega scents through his entire yoga studio so that clients will mistake it as his own scent - as his chosen profession of a yoga instructor is generally perceived as an Omega job that would not be entrusted to a scent-less Beta. Similar to Castiel using the gym incessantly to maintain muscle mass, Dean uses his job as a way to maintain a slimmer physique more acceptable for his portrayal of an Omega.

The focus on scent and muscle mass as indicators of A/B/O status is interesting in this fic, not only because it implies that aside from mating imperatives, the only indicator of one's A/B/O dynamic is the easily replicable (though expensive) scent they produce and how they exercise. Scent as one of the few markers of difference between the A/B/O dynamics in this fic could be read as a commentary of the easily mimicked markers of gender difference that exist in reality.¹²⁰ For this fic, the use of scent as a method of "passing" as one of the primary binary genders in the world-building presents an interesting opportunity to express the nonbinary identity of the Beta characters using similar language as asexuality. The Beta 'lack' of scent indicates their gender as different from those of the Alphas and Omegas which are characterized as producing

accomplished through visual queues. Wandrey, Mosack, and Moore write the following about bisexual women before "coming out": "many women discussed how they choose to pass as straight until in a serious relationship with a woman. [...] disclosure becomes relevant only in the context of being involved in non-heteronormative relationships" (216, 2015).

¹²⁰ For example, despite the camp involved, many drag queens are said to reproduce stereotypically feminine gender characteristics through cosmetics, costume, and affect. This mimicry of feminine gender roles speaks both to the reduction of feminine gender expression to cosmetic value, but also the arguably flimsy nature of gender as it can be easily mimicked or expressed through relatively simple visual modifications.

recognizable scents. Castiel, the POV character of this fic, notes that because of these distinctions of presence or absence regarding gender expression, he does not have to try very hard to 'pass' within the largely binary society he lives in.

Castiel rarely has to lie about his secondary. He implies and he encourages people's assumptions. Betas are rare enough that he doesn't really have to do much for people to file him firmly in the 'alpha' category.

But some days, the charade weighs heavy on his shoulders. He wears his custom-formulated—and very expensive—synthetic alpha scent. He walks his walk, he presents as he has been taught. But none of that changes the bone-deep fact that he *is beta*, much to his everlasting chagrin. (jemariel 2019, emphasis original)

In discussing the work of Butler, Hyde et al. write, "some scholars wondered whether gender was nothing more than a series of stylized acts - nothing more than performance that becomes felt as natural inclination" (180, 2019). In the above quote, there is evidence to suggest that Betas are represented as performing gender, though without the "natural inclination" being present. In fact, Castiel's inner monologue could easily be interpreted as weary - with phrasing like "weigh[ing] heavy on his shoulders", "bone-deep", and "everlasting chagrin" suggesting that the effort of passing as an Alpha is a harrowing experience very contrary to his own instincts as a Beta. For Castiel, one of the arguably more accurate readings of his relationship to his gender is that his performance of Alpha characteristics feels like the incorrect performance, and performing the Beta role is better suited to his gender identity. His passing as an Alpha

causes him gender-based anxiety because his gender identity aligns with his Beta status as outside the expected Alpha-Omega binary.¹²¹

Castiel's gender performance as an Alpha leading to a "bone-deep" weariness can be read as a representation of similar gender-based anxiety felt by nonbinary peoples in reality. A common complaint of the traditional gender binary is that it "fundamentally misrepresents human biological and psychological states and processes" (Hyde et al. 183, 2019), leading to psychological trauma and weariness for those nonbinary individuals who are pressured to conform to binary gender roles to maintain the status quo and associated social privileges in reality. As with Castiel maintaining his Alpha charade in order to receive benefits at his place of employment, many nonbinary individuals, in reality, face workplace discrimination and are denied opportunities due to their gender expression (Dray et al. 2019, Berdahl 2007). As such, this fic presents the Beta status as one similarly marginalized in both workplaces, and the larger society, corresponding with the lived experiences of many nonbinary peoples. Similarly, this fic, without explicitly labeling Betas as asexual, does mimic some experiences of asexual peoples in reality.

The description of Beta sexuality in this fic is characterized by 'lack' of mating imperatives, but also as malformed or insufficiently developed. As with many of the

¹²¹ There is also a reading of this excerpt as a commentary on transgender identities and the potential to read the construction of gender/sex in the genre more broadly as a potential space to explore trans identities. Weisser (2019) conducted a reading of the Omega male as a potentially trans-man-coded figure as their potential to reproduce with a uterus (or uterine-adjacent biological construction) often mimics that of the lived experience of some trans-men. While Weisser (2019) concluded that the Omega male is often too fetishized to be considered an accurate avatar for trans experience, there is definitely potential within this genre for trans identities to be explored and would be an interesting point of entry for future studies. There are a growing number of A/B/O fics featuring transgender characters like, "When All the Pieces Fit" by NARKOTIKA (2015), "The Long Way Back" by fio (2017), "Way more than a handful" by Morpheel (2019), and "stuck in the seams" by spudcity (2020). These fics are all popular Omegaverse stories with over 3k kudos each and tackle complicated issues of gender/sex in the genre alongside trans identities. While I will not be exploring this concept further, as it could easily be an entire thesis on its own, it is an interesting point of entry for future scholarship.

examples thus far, there are several intersections of identity between gender and sexuality for the Beta status. This becomes explicitly apparent when Castiel contemplates both his social role as a Beta and his place within the Alpha-Omega binary while masturbating. This juxtaposition of contemplating his sexuality and how it interacts with his role as a Beta while engaged in self-pleasure presents a direct contradiction between the lived experience of Betas and their perception within the wider society of this fic.

There are several misconceptions about betas. They are poorly understood, poorly represented, and poorly treated. All that most people know is that they don't have ruts or heats, don't have a scent of their own—at least not scents detectable from a distance—don't have any of the secondary sex characteristics that mark someone as an alpha or an omega. Evolutionary biologists have termed the existence of betas as a kind of pedomorphism, where the traits of childhood persist into adulthood. Which is an unfortunate use of a Greek root because people already shy away from sex and relationships with betas. It's "icky."

Complete nonsense. [...]

He is not some sexless, unfinished thing. And as he flops on his back post-orgasm, the unsung truth rages up inside of him, and he doesn't have the willpower to fight it down. (jemariel 2019)

This excerpt presents themes of social expectation versus personal experience, similarly to the Beta/Omega fics and the MCU Beta/Beta fic previously discussed. Like the prior fic examples, Beta characters in "Picking Up Roses" (2019) are classified within their society as 'lacking' and are thus disregarded as incomplete statuses. The

added explanation of the Beta's absence of mating imperatives or scent as a juvenile trait persisting into adulthood can be read to infantilize Betas and further marginalize them within their communities. As Castiel points out, the use of language like “pedomorphism” acts as both infantilizing and criminalizing as it could be misinterpreted as a pedophilic trait associated with Beta status. However, the stereotype of Beta status in this fic being described in terms of “pedomorphism” and ‘lack’ of Alpha or Omega traits are all ascribed onto the status by non-Betas. In a clever transition from thought to action, the author uses Castiel’s thinking about Alphas and Omegas “shying away” from sexual relationships with Betas to introduce Castiel’s thoughts about his status alongside his own sexual satisfaction. Explaining that he is emphatically NOT “some sexless, unfinished thing” following his sexual finish provides an interesting point of entry to discuss how Beta sexuality in this fic is presented as outside the normative mating imperatives of the allosexual Alpha/Omega gender binary. This positionality suggests that Betas are more queerly positioned in their society than their Alpha and Omega counterparts.

Again, I make the distinction of the Alpha/Omega binary as allosexual, not to exclude Betas entirely from the realm of sexual gratification or pleasure, as this fic does feature Betas with relatively high libidos. Rather, I would like to explore the possibility of Betas, in this fic at least, as asexual, though not sex-repulsed - meaning they do not experience any directional sexual attraction, but do experience sexual pleasure and have sex drives. The Beta characters in this fic have sexual appetites that they explore with one another; however, the explanation of their sexual attraction is complicated. Due in large part to their inability to explore their sexuality as Betas openly, both Dean and Castiel have had to maintain the illusion of binary gender expression (Castiel as an

Alpha and Dean as an Omega) with their previous sexual partners. Both characters explain that they were not sexually attracted to nor sexually fulfilled by their experience with their partners because of this facade. In contrast, their sexual experiences with one another are described as newly fulfilling and/or a singular experience of pleasure.

“Can’t do that, usually,” he says.

“What?” Cas is having trouble thinking straight.

“Throw people around. I’m supposed to be all passive ‘n’ shit.”

Cas shivers. “Would you rather, um.” He swallows on a sandpapery throat. “Not be?”

Dean shrugs, but his rakish grin speaks volumes. “Maybe.” (jemariel 2019).

Though they are never explicitly described as asexual, their experience with sex and sexual pleasure in this scene does intersect with the lived experience of some asexual, non-sex-repulsed people. The above scene introduces a playful sexual environment where the Beta characters can be seen to rethink some of their preconceptions about their sexual scripts and what they might enjoy about sex. Despite having had sex in the past, the exclusion of gender performativity in this relationship that was present in previous sexual encounters can be read as a sort of coalescing nonbinary and/or demisexual experience. Chen (2020) describes demisexuality (a designation under the grey ace category) as sexuality comingled with romantic and psychological fulfillment wherein an otherwise asexual person finds they are sexually attracted to someone they have an emotional attachment with. This potential reading of the Beta sexual experience as demisexual provides space to explore sexual identities outside of the traditional allosexual spectrum. Like the above instance of Dean discovering he may be more interested in performing a sexually dominant role, Dean and Castiel’s

renegotiation of their gendered, sexual scripts to better represent their identity enables them to be honest with one another and find fulfillment in their Beta status. In this reading of the fic, the shared nonbinary gender experience of Castiel and Dean as Betas enables their demisexual attraction to one another and the freedom to explore that attraction with one another.

While this reading of Castiel and Dean as grey ace is only one potential reading of the Beta experience represented in this fic, the interconnectedness of gender identity and sexuality can be read as a theme of “Picking Up Roses” (2019) regardless of the sexual identities of the protagonists. Much like Clint and Bucky’s sexual encounters in “Stuck In The Middle With You” (2020) were influenced by their status as a Beta, so too are Castiel and Dean impacted by the social expectations of their status versus their lived experiences and have to reconcile the two to enjoy their sexuality and gender identity. Unlike many Alpha or Omega partnered fics, Beta/Beta pairings can be seen to offer the possibility of sexualities outside the assumed allosexual spectrum of the more sex-forward majority of A/B/O works. In fact, many Beta/Beta fics feature explicitly asexual, sex-repulsed couples exploring romantic relationships within the mating imperatives driven world-building of the Omegaverse.¹²²

The final fic I explore in this chapter, “Under Extreme Duress” by sssrha (2020) is one of the more explicitly asexual and nonbinary characterizations of the Beta status. As the author’s endnote from the fic states: “Not every asexual is sex-repulsed, but Wei Wuxian is! (And so is Lan Wangji!)”. The author has tagged this work with the “asexuality” tag as well as the “sex-repulsed” tag to indicate to readers (before they

¹²² There are currently only two fics tagged with both the “Beta/Beta” tag and the “Asexual Character” tag. However, of the 166 total Beta/Beta fics, some results use tags such as ‘ace’, ‘asexuality if you squint’, etc. that are not included under the “asexual character” grouping (February 2022). As such, these numbers are not conclusive, merely an indication of their present limited popularity.

reach the endnote) that the main characters and main romantic pairing Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian are Betas typified by their asexuality and sex-repulsion. Nonbinary identity in this fic, while never explicitly stated, can be read through the specific roles associated with each of the secondary genders. For instance, the opening exposition sets up each character alongside their A/B/O dynamic and the typical social expectations that define that dynamic within sssrha's world-building.

Wei Wuxian has never heard of a fight over becoming the Pack Beta. He learns very quickly that this is because no one wants to be the Pack Beta.[...]

Wei Wuxian suddenly finds himself responsible for ensuring the stability of all the marriages in the Pack.

"It could be worse," Jiang Cheng tells him. "Mother is responsible for defense and Father is responsible for keeping us supplied. You just have to keep an eye on everyone. Even us kids can do that."

Wrong. Wei Wuxian is nine and he should not be forced to walk in on multiple couples having sex as much as he does. He screams at them to do it at home, to do it out of sight, to keep quiet, to at the very least keep most of their clothes on—but no one listens. (sssrha 2020)

This excerpt sets up the responsibilities of the Beta designation as a job description as well as an underappreciated status, as in this case, the powers in charge of defense and supplies place the responsibility of the sex lives of adults in the hands of a nine-year-old. The description of Alphas charged with roles concerning defense and Omegas in charge of trade can be read as stereotypically heteronormative - corroborating my suggestion that the Alpha-Omega dynamics presents something akin to a cisgender binary. However, these are social roles reserved for the adults of Alpha and Omega

statuses in this fic. The placement of asexual Beta characters in the role of sex police, specifically children in charge of policing the sexual activity of adults, reads as nearly impossible to accomplish - as the above excerpt evidences. The Alphas and Omegas that Wei Wuxian finds publicly fornicating do not seem willing, or perhaps able (due to mating imperatives), to take the advice of a 9-year-old to move their coupling to a more private arena. Thus, Wei Wuxian, as one of the few Betas within his homeland, is faced with the insurmountable task of keeping adults from engaging in sex acts that, as a Beta, he does not understand nor want for himself.

This positioning of Betas as sex-repulsed within an environment where they are constantly confronted with the often exaggerated, sexual encounters of their entire pack *could* be read as a comical placement of Betas within the A/B/O power dynamics. As Betas are represented in this fic as having power over successful mating leading to successful marriages and producing children, their asexuality can be interpreted as a response to their situation, where they are confronted with sex on such a frequent basis that it becomes mundane and irritating to them. Alternatively, this positioning of Betas as sexual police, despite their asexual and sex-repulsed identity, could also be read as horrific. Because they are so averse to sex for themselves, being forced into a role where they must confront sex daily *because* of their lack of mating imperatives could be interpreted as unnecessarily cruel. Unfortunately, it is this second reading of unnecessary cruelty that is arguably more accurate in "Under Extreme Duress" (2020). When ruminating on his relationship to sex as a Beta, Wei Wuxian says, "Being a beta means he's not genetically predisposed to mate. He can technically have sex if he wants to, but the very thought of it nearly has him punching the nearest wall" (sssrha

2020). This distress at the idea of having sex is evident in Wei Ying's response and lends further credence to a horrific reading of the Beta job title in this fic.

However, unlike the possible asexuality expressed in "Picking Up Roses" (2019), asexuality in the case of Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji is not theorized in this particular iteration of the Omegaverse as an absent sexuality or incomplete in any way. The language used to describe Wei Ying's asexuality is not as a 'lack' of otherwise naturalized sexual attraction, but rather a normal part of his Beta development that benefits his entire pack. This acceptance of Beta asexuality as natural, as opposed to a 'lack' or absence of normalized mating imperatives, proves an interesting setting through which to establish typical Beta gender expression as well.

The easy acceptance of Beta asexuality offers a point of comparison between the allosexual Alphas and Omegas and their sexual management team of Betas that oftentimes intersects with gender identity. For instance, when Lan Wangji's brother asks Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian to secure an unusual union between himself and his partner after they are caught having sex, he reasons, "I ask you to accept that we both want sex just as we've accepted you both don't want sex" (sssrha 2020). As Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian both understand their asexuality, it can be read that Lan Wangji's brother also understands that though their sexualities are different, they can be understood as natural and normal for their different secondaries. As asexuality suits and serves the Betas of this fic, so too does allosexuality suit and serve the Alphas and Omegas. This understanding and normalization of asexuality in wider social circles is somewhat unique to this Omegaverse fic, but it serves the function of broadening the socially acceptable roles. The Beta characters are constructed as a third gender instead of nonbinary as the Alpha-Omega binary does not seem to exist in sssrha's fic. It is,

instead, a ternary gender/sex system. This acknowledgment of difference without imposing binary structures on characters who do not identify as such is almost revolutionary in Beta-centric fics, given the examples explored thus far.

However, there are still elements of marginalization within the world-building of this fic that would be recognizable to many asexual peoples in reality; particularly the conflation of asexuality with aromanticism (a separate, though connected spectrum of identity). For instance, when the Betas in ssshra's fic (2020) find themselves baffled about the romantic aspects of their relationship, they realize they had previously understood sex and romance to be irrevocably intertwined. Their shared expectation that their asexuality and sex repulsion excluded them from romantic relationships speaks to a larger issue of framing romance and sex as inherently comingled in their respective communities. This is one of the few instances in the fic where the normalization of Beta experiences of asexuality within the larger community could be read as a deficit for the Betas lived experience. The community expectation that their pack Betas will be both asexual and aromantic, because of their own Alpha/Omega understanding of sexuality and romance as interconnected, can lead to situations where Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji misunderstand their own feelings and how those feelings interact with their Beta status.¹²³ In this particular case, using sexual desire as a precursor to understanding A/B/O status comes at the romantic detriment of the Beta characters.

¹²³ In the source material (in its various iterations - since *The Untamed* Chinese television series is based on a series of books, *Mo Dao Zu Shi* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, and has many adaptations) the pairing of Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian is usually typified by intense sexual desire and longing. Ssshra's decision to write these characters as asexual and sex-repulsed is a fascinating deviation from the canon material that could stem from current debates surrounding the intersections of LGBTQ content and censorship in mainland China. While this debate is outside the scope of this current thesis, more information regarding the subject can be found in: Zhang (2016), Bao (2020), Guo (2021), Song (2021) and Floegal (2021).

Wei Wuxian stares intently at the ground. "...Lan Zhan, do you really think we can become mates without sex?"

Even Lan Wangji suddenly looks skeptical. "Is that possible?" (sssrha 2020)

The text makes clear that mating, specifically bond bites, do not require sex to be valid, but the notion that the Betas in charge of matrimony and sexual relationships within a pack are not aware of this possibility is rather telling of the society they live in and the inability of that society to conceptualize romance without sex. This disconnect between the secondaries seems to shift the ternary system to a binary one, as there does not seem to be any recourse for the two Betas except to explore their relationship on their own terms. There seems to be no precedent for their situation and they are treated as odd because of their sexless, romantic relationship.

While the text offers opportunities to explore a society where gender exists outside of the popular Alpha-Omega binary, the fic's use of conflated gender/sex and sexual attraction/romance imposes a structure of outdated understandings of all of these concepts. While progressive in some expressions of gender and sexuality, other areas remain well within the stereotyped norms of the Omegaverse with strict gender roles determined by status and assuming romance and sexual attraction are inextricably commingled concepts. However, as I have suggested throughout this chapter, as one of the closest avatars for nonbinary gender expression and asexuality within the Omegaverse, perhaps this adherence to outdated modes of binary thinking is yet another tool to liken the Beta experience to the lived experience of those in the Omegaverse reader and writership. In the following, final section of this chapter, I will parse through the realities of nonbinary and ace experience within the fan fiction

community to evaluate the usefulness of the Beta character to explore these identities through the speculative A/B/O genre.

5.3.0 Conclusion

In earlier sections, I pointed to the shared timeline of the birth of the Omegaverse and the increasing mainstream visibility for both nonbinary people and asexual people in Western cultures as a possible indicator of causality for the description of the Beta characters as any combination of the above identities. As I noted in Chapter 1, there is statistical evidence regarding fandom demographics that supports my connectivity between these timelines. For instance, the Ao3 census data from 2013 reported around 10% of the fan fiction community as nonbinary in some form or another (centrumlumina 2013).¹²⁴ More recently, fandom podcast *Fansplaining* released demographic data that suggests this category of nonbinary identity has jumped to 21% (2019). Within six years, the nonbinary identified peoples in fandom doubled, and within this same time-frame asexual and/or ace-spectrum (i.e., grey ace, etc.) identified peoples rose from 11% (centrumlumina 2013) to nearly 30% (*Fansplaining* 2019). Both of these figures support my suggestion that increased awareness and representation of nonbinary

¹²⁴ The Ao3 census offered categories of “Androgynous”, “Agender”, “Genderqueer”, and “Other” (combining nonbinary, questioning, transsexual, and other gender identities participants felt were not adequately expressed by the options) (centrumlumina 2013). I have combined the categories of “Androgynous” (2%), “Agender” (2%) and “Genderqueer” (6%) to come to the 10% figure above since many studies of gender identity, at the time of writing, have identified these categories under the same nonbinary umbrella term (Hord 2020, Dray et al. 2020). As the category of “Other” includes transsexuals, I did not include this statistic as these individuals often do identify as men or women and are thus exempt from the designation of nonbinary. Not all transsexuals include themselves within the gender binary and prefer nonbinary or other identifiers for themselves. However, for the purposes of this statistic, I have chosen a vague “around” 10% to indicate these results are subject to change and could include more or less than the average taken.

and/or asexual peoples in popular media, in reality, has led to an increased number of these same peoples in fandom and, by extension, Omegaverse fan fiction communities.

This statistical data also supports my claims of the Beta as representative of nonbinary and/or asexual identities in the Omegaverse. For instance, I suggested that the Beta characters could be read as reality intervening in the Omegaverse dynamics. While my “reality intervening” comment was initially placed within the context of the Betas being less animalistic and more relatable for readers and writers, who do not experience heats/ruts/bond-biting/etc., I would also point to the intersections between nonbinary/ace representation in fandom and the rise of Beta-centric fics as indicative of a real-world social change reflected in A/B/O dynamics.

Where the Alpha/Alpha and Omega/Omega pairings expanded previous definitions of queerness to include non-normative behavior, the Beta characters can be read as further expanding queer potentiality in the Omegaverse to include a more expansive category of queer family structures and partnership. As evidenced by the close readings, Beta characters very rarely fall within the parameters of heteronormative scripting nor do they perform the binary gender roles. The closest these Beta characters conform to the traditional scripts of heteronormativity is when they are paired with Alphas and attempt to mimic Omega roles to pacify Alpha dominance. As the close readings evidenced, the placement of the Beta within the Omegaverse power hierarchy shifts depending on the world-building of the fic and the status of their chosen partners. Additionally, even this phrasing of ‘chosen partner’ shifts the power dynamics in favor of the Betas.

As Beta characters have the opportunity to choose romantic and/or sexual partners based on factors outside of biological mating imperatives, they have the bodily

autonomy not often available for Alphas and Omegas. Westberg-Gabriel conceptualizes heats and ruts as “level[ing] the playing field for the characters by setting them on equal footing when it comes to having one’s desire held in a tight grip by instinct and/or orientation” (43, 2018), but since Betas often have no such libidinal impulse, they circumvent these genre tropes. While this sometimes complicates their relationships with their partners (e.g., the MCU fic where Tony agonizes over the power he has over the heat-addled Peter), overall, this opportunity to choose their partners without the potentially compromised consent of heats/ruts offers Beta characters arguably more power over their bodies. This does not necessarily change their positionality within the power hierarchy of the Omegaverse, but it does provide insight into the types of power available exclusively to Betas in the Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics.

As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, the Beta is integral to the structure of power described in much of the Omegaverse precisely because of their ability to shift in and out of the norms provided by the world-building. If the Omegaverse hierarchy provides a descending amount of social power starting with Alphas, moving to Betas, and ending with Omegas, then the Beta characters seem to maximize their mobility within the power hierarchy of this genre. For instance, the concept of “passing” described in some of the Beta-centric fics suggests that Beta characters can choose to interact with the Alpha/Omega binary: whether to achieve a higher status within the power hierarchy or as a way to “fit in” with a predominantly Alpha and Omega stabled community. Castiel in “Picking Up Roses” (jemariel 2019) performed Alpha-ness for both of these privileges, while Jungkook from “keeping our vows” (namakemono 2020) mimicked Alpha-ness for only the former. However, Beta characters can also work outside this realm of masculine or feminine presentation as they do not need to “pass”

amongst fellow Betas. All of the Beta/Beta fics described this concept in some form or another; whether it was born from shared job titles as emotional support and policing of sexual intercourse in public areas like “Stuck In The Middle With You” (flawedamythyst 2020) and “Under Extreme Duress” (sssrha 2020) or the community found in shared marginalization like “Picking Up Roses” (jemariel 2019) described.

I have argued that the Beta characters do not signify a binary but are still enmeshed within their respective societies' perspectives on gender, sexuality, and other notions of social power. While they are sometimes described as outsiders or ‘othered’ within the largely binary societies they inhabit (Evilpixie 2014, jemariel 2019, namakemono 2019), there are opportunities presented with the Beta characterization to navigate these societies from a more queerly positioned perspective. As the fics by sssrha (2020), flawedamythyst (2020), and Anonymous (2020) presented, the Beta status is integral to the A/B/O dynamics and has a very important function *because* of its nonconformist attributes. Despite being a smaller sub-section of the Omegaverse genre, the Beta characters from the Beta-centric fics ‘lack’ of animality afford them the unique positionality of seeing how the gender/sex of the Omegaverse is socially enforced as a mirror for the lived experience for many nonbinary and/or asexual peoples in reality.

The Beta characters offer speculative approaches to understanding the way that gendered realities are becoming less certain in the real world; particularly with live issues like the COVID-19 pandemic relegating many peoples away from societal structures that uphold a gendered binary or imply compulsory heterosexuality.¹²⁵ With

¹²⁵ There is evidence to suggest that among the many stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most noticeable changes within households has been the lessening of strict gender roles. *Forbes*’ “Could the Pandemic Change Gender Roles once and for all?” by Jennifer Barret (2020) and “COVID-19 and its Effect on Gender Roles” by Mia Mercer (2021) from Texas A & M University both suggest that despite initial data implying that women (both single and partnered) in Western cultures (i.e., the US and UK) were disproportionately affected by the pandemic, there is also evidence to suggest that this added stress

more visibility for nonbinary individuals and more celebrities publicly identifying as nonbinary (e.g. Demi Lovato and Janelle Monae have both disclosed nonbinary identities since the beginning of global pandemic restrictions in March 2020), the potential unraveling of the real world binary structure can be seen to yield these kinds of dynamics in A/B/O fics that are reflective of these changes in reality. As this thesis has explored, through every chapter, the previous 'heterosexual' scripting and heteropatriarchal structures of the Omegaverse genre become less and less stringent with every iteration and every year that passes since the genre's inception in 2010. While A/B/O scholarship was not incorrect in labeling the genre with these identifiers, newer Omegaverse pairings and social power hierarchies suggest the community of readers and writers are leaning further into the speculative aspects of the A/B/O dynamics to critique the earlier cis-hetero-patriarchy that was synonymous with the genre.

In the following, closing section of this thesis, I will gather the potential queer representations expressed throughout this thesis and briefly discuss how they interact with the power structures within the genre. As the above sections have noted, the speculative dynamics of the Omegaverse provide space for near limitless explorations of queer identity (in concepts of gender, sexuality, and subcultures) and this thesis has explored only a fraction of the potential available within the genre. Thus, the final section will acknowledge some of the potential future discussions of this genre as well as the current limitations of both the field and this study. The Omegaverse penchant to explore exchanges of power, occurring on many levels of interaction (social,

has caused many peoples to loosen or abandon traditional gender norms in order to more evenly distribute workload (particularly in households with working mothers).

interpersonal, sexual, etc.), makes it well-suited to interrogating hierarchies of power - both in the A/B/O dynamics and reality. As such, its impact within the fan fiction community, while already impressive, continues as the genre speculates on relevant issues.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

As I have argued throughout this thesis, the Omegaverse often critiques existing systems of cis-hetero-patriarchy that shape much of the Western society that many readers and writers in the Omegaverse community confront on a daily basis. The genre offers a space to fantasize about subverting these structures and/or how one might be able to derive pleasure from their existence. It also finds ways to circumvent the expected roles of a society crafted around hierarchies of power or to critique these systems through hyperbolic exaggeration. In doing so, the Omegaverse can be seen to shift away from previous “rapey” connotations that arguably informed the heteronormative perspectives highlighted by earlier scholars of the genre. The genre can be read to continue dialogues between status and power using increasingly queer perspectives as the A/B/O dynamics grow older and more established within fan fiction. But the Omegaverse is not so insular a subject that the conclusions of this thesis are limited to Omegaverse scholars or even Fan Studies specifically. The genre can be used as an indicator of how these discussions on concepts of power, gender, and sex have changed outside of fan fiction in recent years. As this thesis has explored, there are specific points in Omegaverse history that seem to correspond with shifts in many Western socio-political climates. When #metoo become a cultural touchstone for centuries of unrest regarding bodily autonomy – the Omegaverse genre trends can be seen to respond with careful consideration of bodily autonomy under the constraints of mating imperatives. When non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming characters become more visible in the media consumed by fan fiction readers and writers, there comes a shift in how the Omegaverse genre uses sexual and social scripting – moving

away from previously heterosexually-coded roles. In many ways, the Omegaverse can be viewed as a microcosm for shifting views on many live, social issues in reality – though the lens may be unfamiliar to many outside of fan fiction circles.

Since the genre suspends many traditional consensual safeguards by using heats and ruts - the tags often indicate that consent is dubious (if present at all), when it is more accurate to describe the consent as differently constructed. The genre also plays with concepts of animality and how animalistic instincts can complicate or alter expected heteronormative roles. While much of the world-building of the genre is crafted around traditionally patriarchal power dynamics that require power to be given and/or taken, more recent genre pairings can be seen to offer a more fluid or circuitous relationship with power. Omegas are typically better prepared for the negotiation of power exchange within a relationship, as opposed to fighting for the dominant position as Alphas can be seen to do. The Beta status also offers opportunities for creators to suspend traditional power hierarchies to explore more queerly positioned exchanges of power that affects both gendered identities and sexualities. I have argued that the previous scholarship and community reputation of the Omegaverse as a largely heteronormative space is far too limiting for a genre so keen on utilizing the unusual dynamics it adopts to explore queer potentialities through fan fiction. As time goes on and this speculative genre further develops, I expect this trend of inquiry into expressions of queer life to continue to grow more popular within the Omegaverse – much the same way that I expect these discussions to become more wide-spread outside of Omegaverse fan fiction and fan fiction communities. Therefore, in the next section, I will briefly discuss some of the areas of potential interest for future scholarship and acknowledge some of the limitations of this project.

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Limitations and Future Discussions

Throughout the previous chapters, I have used the footnotes to highlight potential areas for future study outside the current scope of this thesis. This includes issues of transgender perspectives in the Omegaverse dynamics, the “wolfish traits” (Busse 317, 2013) beyond bond-biting, decreasing amounts of slash fic in the Omegaverse, and how transcultural fandoms intersect with the A/B/O power hierarchy. As some of these topics have been included in related Omegaverse scholarship (Weisser 2019, Fazekas 2020) or are topics of independent or matriculating scholars (Nicoli (forthcoming), Gonzales (forthcoming)), they are regrettably absent from the examination of this thesis but are fascinating inroads into the Omegaverse dynamics. As I have noted in both the Introduction and Chapter 1, this thesis is not an exhaustive study on the Omegaverse genre, but rather a snapshot of the relevant perspective and critiques that the genre offers at this moment in time. There were many areas of interest, both to academics and fans of the genre, that were circumnavigated in order to provide sufficient data on the interwoven topics of this thesis. However, these areas of future interest in no way undermine the many ways in which the Omegaverse can be read to offer a space for creators to speculate on and potentially critique existing power hierarchies.

Impact

As previously stated, using the Omegaverse as a lens for many tense and complicated social issues, the conclusions of this thesis have can be read to have

consequences for many fields outside of Fan Studies or even literary studies. The Omegaverse can be read to critique the Western power hierarchy (traditionally associated with notions of cis-hetero-patriarchy) from a variety of queerly positioned perspectives which provides interesting data for queer theorists looking for a sex-forward perspective on fans and media consumption. A/B/O also offers interesting avatars for gender identities and sexualities while typically remaining sex-forward and sex-positive (e.g., relying on sexual scripts to determine character traits and establish forms of consent, using BDSM practices as a form of commitment, etc.) making the genre something of a fictional social network that provides insight into both sexual fantasy as well as changing perceptions of sexual taboos – a subject, no doubt, of interest to sociological and psychological fields of inquiry. The A/B/O dynamics prompt the interrogation of ideas about sexual consent and how lived experiences and fantasies can sometimes war with one another. The genre also discusses live issues (i.e., sexual consent, social and sexual scripting, power hierarchies, and gender binaries) from the perspectives of the often marginalized communities that encompass and create the genre. These issues offer insight into how these communities conceptualize these topics and what Omegaverse readers and writers are critical of in existing systems (at least in many Western cultures); specifically, how cis-hetero privilege is sometimes used to marginalize groups perceived as ‘other’ or outside these privileged groups. As such, this thesis, and my arguments therein, present a microcosm of the growing fan fiction sub-genre and how it can be used as a metric for community involvement involving concepts of power, gender, and sexuality within Western cultures. While conversations concerning these topics have seen increased media awareness in many Anglophone countries in recent years, as this thesis has illustrated, the

Omegaverse has much to offer to these conversations beyond the cursory image of “wolf boys fucking”.

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