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Fanfiction: A Look into the Disruptions of Gender Identity through Tropes

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

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by

Stephanie L. Preslar

May 2021

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Dr. Michael Cody, Chair

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Dr. Chelsea Wessels

Keywords: fanfiction, tropes, disruptions, gender, gender identity, sexuality, heteronormativity,  
slash, queering

## ABSTRACT

Fanfiction: A Look into the Disruptions of Gender Identity through Tropes

by

Stephanie L. Preslar

Fanfiction provides the unique opportunity to explore disruptions of heteronormativity through tropes. By exploring different fanfictions in the Soulmate AU, ABO Dynamics, and Mpreg tropes, the disruptions indicate a desire to explore gender, identity, and sexuality through queered characters. Male slash fanfiction provides the chance to examine the disruption of the heteronormative through the queering of male characters and placing them into situations that may embrace the feminine or a female-gendered experience. The situating of heterosexual male characters into queered roles allows an examination of how this disrupts canonical ideas of gender, identity, and sexuality. By reviewing the male slash relationships in these tropes, the narratives may explain why the disruption of heteronormativity seems so appealing to fanfiction authors and readers. Heteronormativity restricts exploration of new dynamics and experiences that fanfiction authors and readers may crave to investigate. Disrupting that heteronormativity presents new opportunities for experiences in areas that may receive underrepresentation.

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## DEDICATION

To those who put up with the late-night phone calls and text messages from me asking if something made sense while I was writing this thesis. Thank you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	2
DEDICATION.....	4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	5
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....	7
CHAPTER 2. SOULMATE AU.....	15
CHAPTER 3. ABO DYNAMICS.....	30
CHAPTER 4. MPREG.....	44
WORKS CITED.....	58
VITA.....	60

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

I was browsing through the Soulmate section of archiveofourown.org (AO3) when this title caught my eye: “Warning Labels (are meant to be ignored)” by fanfiction author gammadolphin. Although the title seemed to suggest something a little dangerous, I clicked on it, expecting a typical romance story featuring characters from *Star Trek*. I read through the first few paragraphs about the ups and downs of Leonard McCoy and Jim Kirk and their love lives and the search for their soulmates. Things were not going well for either of them when they found themselves as strangers on a shuttle to Starfleet Academy. At this point the third-person narrative is centered in McCoy, who is uncomfortable flying. ““I think these things are pretty safe,”” his fellow shuttle passenger says:

Leonard freezes, just for a heartbeat, because *no*. Hell no. He’s just gotten *out* of a soul-crushing clusterfuck of a relationship because of those damn words. He never wants to hear them again in his *life*, much less on this dank shuttle from a pretty stranger who’s clearly as much of a mess as he is. (gammadolphin)

I paused in my reading and thought, *Wait, who’s this “pretty stranger”?* *Jim Kirk?* As I continued, I realized that McCoy’s “pretty stranger” does, in fact, refer to Kirk. *What is going on here?* I thought.

If a reader is not looking closely, “Warning Labels (are meant to be ignored)” appears no different from the run-of-the-mill fanfiction about falling in love listed with the tags:

- Alternate Universe - Soulmates
- Alternate Universe - Canon
- Soulmate- Identifying Marks
- Angst



- Emotional Hurt/Comfort
- Misunderstandings
- Mutual Pining
- Hurt/Comfort
- Friends to Lovers
- Academy Era
- Fluff
- Angst
- Angst with a Happy Ending
- can be read as a oneshot

The tags imply a straightforward romance with some emotional upheavals situated strategically throughout the narrative. The one thing I initially overlooked was the romantic pairing: James T. Kirk/Leonard McCoy. It can be easy to overlook the pairings when browsing for the next fanfiction to read, and I clicked without looking. When I opened “Warning Labels (are meant to be ignored),” I expected to simply enjoy a narrative containing favorite characters and a romance. While that did happen, I began to wonder about the gender of the protagonists: Captain James T. Kirk, a famously, straight male character who has no lack of female admirers in both the original series and the reboot films, and Doctor Leonard McCoy, another canonically, straight male character. Why have them fall in love? Why play with the sexuality of these characters? Would it not be easy enough to find a female character somewhere in the film to fit into the romantic role instead of placing the two men together? Probably, but “Why not?” seems to be *the* question when it comes to fanfiction. Why not see how these characters react in this situation? Why not see what happens when these characters are now in love? Why not?

Experimenting with the sexuality of characters is a practice that appears across fandom spaces. Straight characters are recreated to be queer, queer characters are reimagined in straight roles, and transgender characters are created in texts that never approach the subject. The sky appears to be the limit when it comes to molding characters—in the context of fanfiction—to fit new narratives, to explore strange new stories, to boldly go where no fan has gone before. The different ideas that emerge from the creative minds of fanfiction authors can be surprising. So why do fanfiction authors create such disruptions of heteronormativity? What do they hope to discover or explore by playing with queering the sexuality of iconic characters? To look more closely at that, we need to answer the question of what male/male means.

In the world of fandom, the language has evolved to create a specific vernacular that fans learn and build on as fandom spaces expand. The vernacular used can be confusing to many new learners of fandomspeak, but it is important to understand the different terms to grasp and navigate the platform of fanfiction. Some of the more basic terminology includes *fanfiction*, *canon*, *canon-compliant*, *non-canon compliant*, *trope*, and *slash*. Fanfiction can be described as fan creators taking pre-existing worlds and characters, belonging to the original creator(s), and then creating new narratives with them for no monetary purpose. The term *canon* refers to the original text and content within the original text. Something can be considered canon if it belongs to the original text. Fanfiction is created from canonical material. Thus, a canon-compliant fanfiction follows along with the plot, characters, or events of the original text or source; conversely, non-canon compliant fanfiction does not follow the original.

The use of the word *trope* might seem to contradict how the term tends to be used in non-fandom spaces. In fandom terminology, a trope is often viewed as a genre. For example, a fanfiction set primarily around a coffeeshop setting belongs to the trope of Coffeeshop Alternate

Universe (AU). The trope of the Coffeeshop AU can be viewed as a genre to those new to the fanfiction scene. Tropes vary extensively, and there does not appear to be a set requirement for narrative structure within the writing. Writers simply base their fanfiction within a general trope and then allow themselves to manipulate the narrative however they desire. As long as the story includes the base aspect of the trope throughout the narrative, then the fanfiction fits within that trope.

*Slash* can be confusing at first, but “the term ‘slash’ comes from the / symbol, which is traditionally used as part of a story header to mark the main [romantic] pairing in the narrative” (Mazar 1147). For example, if a reader finds themselves interested in the *Star Trek* fandom, but they only want to see fanfictions dealing primarily with Captain James T. Kirk and Dr. Leonard McCoy in a romantic narrative (the category of M/M), then the reader could look for all fanfictions with the characters listed as Kirk/McCoy. The slash symbol between the characters’ names lets the reader know that the fanfiction revolves around a romantic relationship between those characters.

The use of slash fanfiction, especially male slash fanfiction, is an extremely popular theme that many fanfiction authors pursue in their works. This raises the question of why it is so popular. In many cases, it can be argued that slash fanfiction is being used to explore sexuality, gender roles in a relationship, and/or eroticism. The fanfictions used in this thesis are all male slash relationships and happen in created universes within the tropes that do not include anti-same-sex narratives, and the presence of same-sex relationships is not analyzed as abnormal.

Slash fanfiction provides the unique opportunity to examine the disruption of the heteronormative through the queering of male characters and placing them into situations that may embrace the feminine or a female-gendered experience. The situating of heterosexual male

characters into queered roles allows an examination of how this disrupts canonical ideas of gender, identity, and sexuality. As Judith Jack Halberstam argues, “Gender conformity is pressed onto all girls, . . . and this is where it becomes hard to uphold the notion that male femininity presents a greater threat to social and familial stability than female masculinity” (2531).

Halberstam’s idea of gender conformity may explain why fanfiction authors play with the sexuality of characters as they create fanfiction. If gender conformity is being taught as a rigid structure that must be followed, then the queering of male characters becomes more of an exploration into differing ideas about gender than it may appear to when first seeing male slash fanfiction.

Disrupting heteronormativity may allow fanfiction authors and readers to explore different dynamics of gender and sexuality than would typically be allowed in real life. In a fictional setting, fanfiction authors and readers have greater agency to investigate differing ideas, opinions, or desires that may have an element of stigma or even impossibility. A desire to explore a sense of normalcy about gender fluidity or sexuality may be indicated through the queering of the characters. By creating different scenarios that allow characters to experience behavioral and/or biological differences between males and females, or a gendered exchange, fanfiction authors create narratives that allow for an investigation of gender and sexuality. With no restrictions on how characters must act or appear in fanfiction, authors have the ability to transform characters into representations of those desires or curiosities.

Gendered exchange and sexuality are prominent in male slash fanfiction. Sexual content and exploration of sexual content run through fanfiction as through an arterial system. For every fanfiction that avoids sexual content, there are even more fanfictions that include sex in the narrative. Why? Why is there such a focus on sexual content in fanfiction, especially sexual

content between queered characters? Gayle Rubin suggests that “[c]ontemporary conflicts over sexual values and erotic conduct have much in common with the religious disputes of earlier centuries. . . . Disputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity” (2195). By including sexual content, authors of fanfiction may be attempting to displace negative feelings surrounding sexual activity or exploring the dynamics of sex through a barrier of a fictionalized character. The reliance on sexual content between queered characters may also show that fanfiction authors desire to examine the standards surrounding the heteronormative and shift those standards into a modicum of gendered and sexual fluidity.

To look at the disruption of heteronormativity, I have chosen to examine three tropes that fanfiction utilizes frequently for this purpose: Soulmate Alternate Universes (AU), ABO Dynamics, and MPREG. These particular tropes investigate the complexities surrounding the identity disruptions through the queering of the male characters. Although multiple tropes allow for an analysis, each of these three tropes situates the characters into new dynamics that examine the disruptions of heteronormativity through gendered exchanges and emotions of the new experiences. By reviewing the male slash relationships in these tropes, the narratives may explain why the disruption of heteronormativity seems so appealing to fanfiction authors and readers.

In Chapter One, the Soulmate AU trope will be examined. This trope consists of the idea that every person has a soulmate, a person who is the completion of one’s soul. The Soulmate AU trope, in general, removes the focus of sexuality from the characters and creates a reliance on the emotions of those characters. Fate or destiny plays a role in Soulmate AU fanfictions that generates a new dynamic for identity. If one has a destined partner, then does a person own their

own identity? The erasure of the sexuality focus plays into the disruption of heteronormativity by removing not only homosexuality as a concept but also heteronormativity. With the queering of characters, the trope creates a narrative that can focus on emotions and identity instead of sexuality. I will be examining the emotions of the characters to see how the removal of sexuality forms a space of inclusivity.

In Chapter Two, I will examine the ABO Dynamics trope for the representations of sexual exploration. Fanfiction authors use the trope to examine and investigate perceptions surrounding gender identity and unique sexual desires. ABO Dynamics introduces new genders that can be applied to the traditionally recognized genders of male and female. By queering the characters, fanfiction authors examine a new gender dynamic that allows for an exploration of gender oppression. I will be approaching different fanfictions to look into how the narratives showcase oppression in gender but also how sexual desires may indicate a longing for equality.

In Chapter Three, the trope of Mpreg (male pregnancy) will be examined to see how gender exchange plays a role in interpreting identity and gender. The Mpreg trope allows the biological female experience of pregnancy into male characters' range of experience. Involving male characters in a first-person condition of pregnancy disrupts the heteronormative experience and cultural expectations of that experience. I will be questioning the gendered experience of male characters becoming pregnant and making decisions about their bodies to discover how identity plays a role in the trope.

Fanfiction, particularly male slash fanfiction in the Soulmate AU, ABO Dynamics, and Mpreg tropes, provides an opportunity to examine the disruption of heteronormativity. By queering the male characters, fanfiction authors open an avenue for exploration of gender, identity, and sexuality through embracing the femininity or female gendered experience not

easily examined in other texts and contexts. As fanfiction authors create and explore these tropes, they manipulate readers' expectations through the disruptions and create new experiences for understanding and inspecting perceptions surrounding gender, identity, and sexuality.

Heteronormativity restricts the exploration of new dynamics and experiences that fanfiction authors and readers may crave to investigate. Disrupting that heteronormativity presents new opportunities for experiences in areas that may be underrepresented.

## CHAPTER 2. SOULMATE AU

The Soulmate Alternate Universe (Soulmate AU) trope in fanfiction is exactly like the name of the trope suggests – a story dealing with the concept of a person that the universe, or a deity, has designated to be the completion of another person’s soul. Soulmate AUs deal heavily with the emotional state of the characters and the intent of those emotions. The trope builds a world that is open to strong emotional connections, and Soulmate AUs celebrate those emotions. There is rarely any negativity placed on the action of searching for a soulmate since it is considered a normality of that universe. However, it should be noted that some fanfiction authors take it upon themselves to subvert the fandom-accepted normality of allowing a positive narrative within the trope and explore the negative emotions of characters choosing to defy tradition.

Generally, the Soulmate AU trope does not emphasize the importance of the gender of the characters. This deemphasizing of gender allows for an exploration of character beyond sexuality. The Soulmate AU trope places more significance on emotions than on whether a relationship contains the correct gender combination. By eliminating the concern of gender combinations in a relationship, a disruption of heteronormativity occurs. This disruption of gender and sexuality subverts heteronormativity by removing the concept of homosexuality and heterosexuality. It tends to be more important to look at the individual characters and how they respond to fated relationships. Some fanfiction authors may choose to use more traditional views of gender divisions within relationships and create narratives that use that view as a catalyst between the characters. However, the fanfictions used in this chapter do not use social stigma based on the gender of the characters.



Fanfictions within the Soulmate AU trope have unique takes on why soulmates may exist or how soulmates are made known to each other. Soulmates can discover one another in a variety of ways:

- Written indication of the first words soulmates will say to each other, appearing either at birth (as a birthmark) or manifesting at the birth of the soulmate (something like a tattoo)
- Physical eye colors changing when soulmates meet
- A red string, that only an individual and their soulmate can see, attached to a body part that will lead a person to their soulmate
- Being unable to see in anything other than greyscale until meeting a soulmate which brings color to their vision
- Stopping aging after a certain point until soulmates meet
- Having the same dreams
- Timers counting down until soulmates meet
- Receiving a soulmate's injuries

These methods of discovery are just a few of the unique ways fanfiction authors have created and other authors employed. While the possible ways that fanfiction authors imagine for soulmates to find each other appear to be endless, some ways are more popular than others, such as having first words written on the skin vs receiving a soulmate's injuries, but there does not appear to be a set rule for the way soulmates meet within fanfictions. The decision lies with each author, their preferences, and their imaginations.

If the decision on how soulmates meet lie with the author then the decision to recognize love between characters who are not soulmates also becomes relevant. Some fanfiction authors choose to subvert the popular narrative of happily finding a soulmate and explore what may

happen to characters who fall for those whom the universe has not dictated to be the other half of their soul. The emotional struggles to have those relationships viewed as acceptable and valid become a central part of the narrative.

As one would expect within a narrative about soulmates finding one another, recognition of emotions becomes the forefront of the story. The heavy focus on emotion allows for immersion into the characters and their thought processes. Each achievement or failure in finding a soulmate becomes a shared emotion with the reader, which integrates the reader into the characters and plot. This transference of connecting with a character's emotions can be found in most fictional literature. Fanfiction, while transformative, does not present as unique in that manner; it plays heavily with emotions, perhaps slightly more than a traditional piece of literature might, but it still uses the same techniques that fictional literature employs. However, fanfiction does allow for a deeper exploration of emotion, especially in Soulmate AUs, than traditional literature presents by working with characters that the reader finds familiar from the canon material. In general, a reader of fanfiction has a familiarity with the characters of a particular fandom and enjoys searching out and consuming materials with a heavy focus on those characters. With prior knowledge of the characters, the author and the reader have the opportunity to bypass basic character building and immediately delve into new character development unique to fanfiction.

How does the focus on emotions subvert heteronormativity? Breanne Fahs states that “the long history of connecting women to their bodies, while men get linked to their minds, has informed feminist politics for many decades” (112). If women have been linked with their bodies and men to their intellect, then the linking of emotions and male protagonists subverts that expectation. The emotional, in association with women, may be seen as unstable and irrational,

while the intellectual, in association with men, may be perceived as being rational and in control in the traditional recognition of feminine and masculine roles. In slash fanfictions, men are being connected with the emotional and, while not a complete removal, simultaneously being pulled away from the intellectual. The combining of men and emotions situates them in the traditionally recognized role of women and of the male other. This disruption of heteronormativity situates male slash fanfiction and the Soulmate AU trope in a position that provides a unique look into how fanfiction authors and readers may see sexuality as a concept to be erased.

The roles and designations of male and female, heterosexual and homosexual enforce strict barriers on progression and analysis. The removal of said barriers allows for fanfiction authors to transcend concepts of gender and sexuality to see relationships in different ways. Judith Jack Halberstam argues that “[m]asculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege” (2527). While the Soulmate AU trope does not remove the masculinity of the male protagonists, it does open up a heavier emotional inner dialogue and verbal conversation, which is traditionally more feminine. Through exploring male/male relationships within the Soulmate AU, readers can situate themselves in a viewpoint to witness a romance that society does not dictate as necessary to gender. Sexuality takes a backseat to the romance and the emotions. It no longer becomes important whether the characters are male or female, heterosexual or homosexual. The focus returns to the emotion and bypasses socio-cultural concerns of sexual identity. By viewing the romance narrative without the enforced barriers of gender or sexuality, readers remove themselves from societally instigated stereotypes and stigmas and allow themselves to view romance as an action between equals on equal footing. Since Soulmate AUs focus on the normality of love and finding that love, the narrative helps to eliminate societal stigmas on pursuing romance.

Soulmate AUs celebrate love and the treacherous road to finding or maintaining that relationship. “Warning Labels (are meant to be ignored)” by gammadolphin, a *Star Trek* fanfiction that deals with the versions of the characters from the 2009 reboot film, focuses heavily on the struggles of finding a soulmate by presenting the idea of soulmates attempting relationships with people that the characters either know are not their soulmate or with people that are false soulmates found through a soulmate’s first words that present as a tattoo which appears when a person’s soulmate is born: “The words appear on Leonard McCoy’s arm when he is six years old. . . .[H]e knows what the appearance of his mark means. His soulmate was just born” (gammadolphin). The fanfiction immediately informs the reader how the characters, within the narrative, find their soulmates. The narrative also informs the reader that “Not everyone gets a soulmark. Not everyone gets to know when they’ve met the perfect person for them” (gammadolphin). As the fanfiction begins, the readers suddenly get a sense that the narrative may deviate from an expected plot of soulmates finding each other and immediately coming together in a romantic relationship. The author drops hints that the journey to the happy ending that readers may be expecting may not be uneventful or pleasant.

At this point, gammadolphin begins to remove the character, Leonard McCoy, a designated canonically male character, from his cage of intellect and transplant him into the sphere of the body. Leonard becomes a creature of emotion: “The words become a part of him, written on his heart as well as his skin” (gammadolphin). He acknowledges his soulmate marks are affecting him both physically and emotionally. He longs for the connection that the meeting with his soulmate should provide. Leonard’s strong desire to connect with his soulmate ultimately leads him down a path to a relationship with the wrong person, which ends disastrously:

He'd been happier than he knew what to do with, happy enough to overlook the fact that Jocelyn's neat lawyer's handwriting did not match the messy scrawl on his arm, the fact that the apology written on her hip was in bold block letters that were nothing like his own, the fact that she's two months younger than him, not six years. They'd convinced themselves that they fit together, had left no room for doubt. Which was why it felt like the end of the world when it all fell apart. (gammadolphin)

By allowing himself to fall in love and pursue a relationship with a person who is not his soulmate, in a universe that revolves around soulmates, Leonard sets himself up for failure. Despite the two of them having spoken the words tattooed on each other's bodies, Leonard and Jocelyn do not fit as each other's soulmates. Forcing a relationship in a Soulmate AU leads to disastrous conclusions, which suggests that following emotion blindly may not be the best course of action. This does not mean that emotions should be perceived as less than intellect, or in other words, that the feminine should not be perceived as less than masculine; instead, emotions should be analyzed carefully rather than followed blindly. The understanding of emotions requires analysis. By allowing himself to fall victim to desire, and not analyzing the emotions, Leonard fails to properly perceive his emotional state and sets himself upon a path that the universe may not have intended.

Leonard's true soulmate, Jim, or James T. Kirk, also succumbs to the plight of blindly following emotions when it comes to soulmates. With the words *I may throw up on you* tattooed over his heart, Jim desires to believe in the happiness that finding a soulmate will bring to his life: "Jim thinks he's grateful for it though. His words help him manage his expectations for his life from an early age" (gammadolphin). Although Jim experiences neglect and abandonment early in life, he maintains the eagerness for finding his soulmate someday. Jim, like Leonard,

finds himself transplanted into the sphere of the body which focuses on his emotions. His desire for finding his soulmate provides emotional stability in his turbulent life.

Jim's failings with recognizing his soulmate do not follow the same path as Leonard's. While Leonard could have been able to tell that Jocelyn was not his soulmate based on the logistics of age, Jim has always had his soulmark. Jim's birth occurs when Leonard is six years old, so Jim would have been born with his soulmark. His meeting with his false soulmate, although he embraces her, sets them up for a failed relationship:

He can't do much besides stare at her for a beat, because this close he can see the words, *hey, are you okay?* scrawled along her collarbone and *holy shit* things this good do not happen to him and how could his alcoholic lover of a soulmate turn out to be a gorgeous girl with a questionable stomach? (gammadolphin)

His disbelief that he deserves a soulmate, despite being born with a soulmark, shows that Jim, while a heavily emotional person, cannot reconcile his emotions. An inability to reconcile emotions may represent a lack of willingness to connect with those emotions. Jim's experience, while initially positive, comes after trials in his life, which may have hindered his ability to analyze his emotions. He does not believe that he can have good experiences in life, but he tries to embrace his new partner. While his disbelief in his capability to have good things in life does not negate the fact that good things may happen to him, it may be a subconscious hint that the current situation does not correspond with the destined relationship the universe has designated for him.

The subconscious warnings that Jim may be receiving at the meeting with his false soulmate reinforce the emotional significance that the Soulmate AU trope relies on. He

instinctually senses the incompatibility of his choice to pursue the relationship he thinks the universe wants for him:

It turns out that things that good do not, in fact, happen to him.

He spends one amazing year with Ruth, and he lets himself believe that his life may not have to suck after all. He lets himself fall head over heels in love with her, because he thinks that she's the first person in his life who will never leave him.

But leave him she does, and she takes every ounce of his newfound optimism with her. He stops believing in the whole soulmate thing after that. He stops believing in a lot of things after that, really, himself included. (gammadolphin)

The emotional reliance that Jim places on the relationship with Ruth destroys his belief in love, life, and his confidence to be happy. His trust in the soulmate premise shatters in a way that leaves him feeling damaged and unwilling to try and find his true soulmate. That destruction envelops him, which leads to more emotional disturbances as he struggles with coming to terms that his true soulmate has appeared after his loss of self-confidence and willingness to pursue another relationship beyond brief, physically gratifying trysts.

Both Leonard and Jim struggle with the analysis of their emotions, which may indicate that they struggle with understanding the emotions. The masculine, in general, tends to disregard the feminine as less than; therefore, the intellect disregards the emotional as less than. While gammadolphin's version of Leonard and Jim never indicates any type of misogyny or sexism, the lack of the characters' abilities to recognize and understand the emotions they are experiencing may be an indicator of the struggle between the masculine and the feminine. Both

characters have been planted into the feminine sphere but still struggle with the recognition of the emotional. Their loss of the traditional masculine cage of the intellect becomes a contention point within their characters as they remain within the sphere of the body. The ability to embrace the emotional and understand it becomes a goal of the narrative and reiterates the disruption of heteronormativity. The heterosexual relationships within Leonard McCoy's and James T. Kirk's pasts failed, not because they were heterosexual, but because they were wrong by decree of the universe. This removal of focus on sexuality situates the story in a conversation of compatibility rather than concepts of right or wrong. The emphasis remains on the emotions not the sexuality of the characters.

The characters recognize the emotional states they are in to the extent that they know they are not willing to put themselves in the line of fire again with another relationship.

Leonard's thoughts are of horror:

Leonard freezes, just for a heartbeat, because no. Hell no. He's just gotten out of a soul-crushing clusterfuck of a relationship because of those damn words. He never wants to hear them again in his life, much less on this dank shuttle from a pretty stranger [Jim] who's clearly as much of a mess as he is.

True love and destiny are for other people. Leonard learned that the hard way. And he point-blank refuses to get sucked down the same devastating rabbit hole, especially when the metaphorical ink isn't yet dry on the metaphorical papers of his really goddamn literal divorce. (gammadolphin)

His reaction to realizing there is a possibility of Jim being his true soulmate during their first meeting implies that Leonard's capability to process emotions becomes severely damaged when



his marriage falls apart. Leonard's dismissal of the new revelation of possibility shows that his willingness to express the emotions that make him vulnerable and to analyze those emotions is buried due to the trauma of his failure to process his emotions years before.

Jim's reaction shows a slightly different understanding of emotion:

The moment he heard the first words out of the scruffy, though undeniably handsome stranger's mouth, he could've sworn he'd felt the words on his chest burn like an electric shock directly to the heart. He'd been prepared to panic and shut down, because those words could never mean anything but heartache for him. (gammadolphin)

Jim recognizes that Leonard may be his true soulmate, but he refuses to allow himself into a vulnerable state of emotion again. At this moment, the reader sees that Jim, while having shut down his self-confidence after Ruth, still possesses the ability to analyze his emotions. He identifies the emotions surrounding their meeting and acknowledges his vulnerability by refusing to acknowledge his willingness to be vulnerable again.

By the time both men finally allow themselves to acknowledge the trials of emotion that they have put themselves through, the lack of emotional acknowledgment and analysis have taken their toll. Both Leonard and Jim are reaching their limits of refusing to allow themselves to experience their emotions. This level of denial reinforces the idea of Soulmate AUs dealing almost exclusively with the emotional ramifications of the bodily sphere. The refusal to acknowledge and truly understand their emotions shows the reader that the emotion within the narrative must be recognized by both the reader and characters before a true comprehension can take effect. If the Soulmate AU celebrates emotions and the understanding and acknowledgment of those emotions, then the narrative must include a climax where the struggles culminate. This moment occurs when both men finally acknowledge their compatibility: "This is proof that

Leonard and Jim are capable of destroying each other so thoroughly that there will be nothing left of either of them” (gammadolphin). Leonard and Jim have reached the pinnacle of the narrative. They allow themselves to analyze the emotional turmoil they have each undergone and recognize the culmination of those struggles.

“Warning Labels (are meant to be ignored)” allows readers to see two characters forced into the emotional sphere of the body. As canonically male characters, both Leonard McCoy and James T. Kirk are assigned to the masculine space of the intellect, but through the Soulmate AU, they are removed from that space and positioned into a new sphere where emotions become the pinnacle of their existence. This removal, which puts a heavy emphasis on emotions, structures the Soulmate AU into a discussion about the disruption of sexuality through the removal of the masculine. The fanfiction celebrates the genre of romance that is traditionally viewed as feminine and inferior in literature. Through the removal of the female character within the romance between Leonard and Jim, the author emphasizes more importance on the exploration of love than following traditional gender associations. By eliminating the gendered associations with romance and emotions, the trope falls into a critical evaluation of perceptions surrounding the gender of protagonists and their sexualities.

A Soulmate AU narrative typically includes a pinnacle moment when the characters understand and recognize the emotions that have plagued them and the reader throughout the fanfiction. Without this moment, the narrative of the fanfiction cannot function as a true completion of the emotional and cannot call itself a part of the Soulmate AU trope. However, there is not a single particular way the emotions must be explored or resolved. Fanfiction authors often employ different strategies to explore the emotions of a fanfiction. “Rehabilitation for the Lonely and Broken-Hearted” by communicate, a *Voltron: Legendary Defender* fanfiction,

reverses the narrative seen in gammadolphin's "Warning Labels (are meant to be ignored)."

Whereas Leonard and Jim begin their stories by finding false soulmates or ignoring the warning signs of incompatibility, Keith and Lance in *communicate's* fanfiction begin by both characters having lost their true soulmates to death. This opens the exploration of emotional consciousness to a new degree since the narrative's purpose no longer includes the universe's struggle to bring two soulmates together. The new narrative promotes an understanding of the emotional grief and confusion that occurs as pure circumstance pulls two characters together for a romantic relationship on which society places a stigma. The stigma that society forces on the characters belongs solely to the fact that these men are not soulmates and not because they are both men.

With a strong dependence on emotions, the subversion of Breanne Fahs' argument that women are typically connected to the body while men are connected to the mind applies to "Rehabilitation of the Lonely and Broken-Hearted" (112). The author has chosen to remove the characters of Keith and Lance from the intellect of the masculine and transplant them into the body, or emotional sphere, of the feminine. As with most Soulmate AUs, *communicate's* fanfiction relies heavily on the emotions that the characters experience and struggle to come to terms with as they progress through the narrative. The disruption of heteronormativity occurs here as well. Keith and Lance, canonically heterosexual male characters are being allowed to explore a romantic relationship with each other without a stigma attached to their sexuality based on heteronormativity.

"Rehabilitation for the Lonely and Broken-Hearted" follows the same pattern of explaining the universe's reasoning on why, or how, soulmates were created and how they may find each other. For this fanfiction, this explanation becomes integral to the narrative and understanding of the story. As the narrative explains, soulmates were created by the gods, and

people discover their soulmates through differing eye colors (communicate). When soulmates meet their eyes become “a matching pair” (communicate). While heterochromia use within Soulmate AUs tends to be a fairly common and popular tactic, communicate takes that tactic to a deeper level. The author explains what happens to those who lose their soulmate:

If one was unlucky enough — so cursed and hated by the gods — their soulmate would die before they could meet, and a single iris would turn grey to show what they had lost. To the whole world it signified that the gods had given them the promise of a soulmate, only to tear it away. A shroud of grief would cover their field of vision as they continued on with only the hope of what lay beyond death. . . .

But those with grey eyes and aching hearts never lost the stigma. Hated by the gods.  
Shamed by the people.

They are the lonely and broken-hearted souls that roam our world with death in their eyes and grief in their hearts. (communicate)

The narrative sets up the background reasoning of the emotional fallouts on which the fanfiction centers its storyline. This becomes an important part of the narrative as the characters find themselves victim to the stigma of *grey eyes*.

“Rehabilitation for the Lonely and Broken-Hearted” revolves around the unique location of a therapy group, which highlights the story’s intended use of emotions. Therapy groups tend to focus on the emotional state of participants and attempt to help transition the participants to a foundation of emotional healing. Keith, who lost his soulmate before they had even met, participates in a group therapy session for those with similar experiences: “It’s clear by their eyes

that they all have lost their soulmates — are alone in this world with fated pairs and destiny” (communicate). The strategic situation of placing the protagonists within a therapy group reinforces the reliance on the emotion that the fanfiction intends to employ. The author reminds the reader of the reliance on emotions throughout the narrative by providing vivid descriptions that force the reader to acknowledge the pain or pleasure a character feels: “. . . it feels like the floor is ripped out from underneath him, forcing him to freefall, stomach rolling in his rib cage and nausea threatening to void his lunch” (communicate). With the focus on emotions at the forefront for the characters, the reader begins to analyze the emotions written on the page as if they are experiencing the same emotions for themselves. Through the reader’s analysis, a connection with the character occurs through an emotional response, which situates the reader in the realm of the body. The readers can engage with the characters without considering gender.

Soulmate AUs embody a heavy reliance on the emotional state of the characters, and by extension, the reader. As authors of male slash fanfiction pursue Soulmate AUs, they remove their male characters from the idea of the intellectual (masculine) and transplant them into the sphere of emotion (feminine). The removal and new placement of the male characters allow for an exploration into understanding and embracing emotions that are generally perceived as inferior by traditional literature. This disruption of the heteronormative through the queering of the characters allows the Soulmate AU trope to consider the emotional aspects of the romance genre. The familiarity of the characters removes the learning phase that original content requires and plunges the reader into an intimate space. A reader only needs to acquaint themselves with the new world dynamics that the fanfiction author creates.

Authors also begin to play with the boundaries of how relationships may be perceived. Instead of the stigma that may be focused on a person for solely focusing on romance in their

life, Soulmate AUs not only celebrate the search for true love but elevate that search above pursuing false or short-term romances. It becomes more important to find and value true love than to waste time with insignificant dalliances. The views on traditional gender roles and relationships are not placed in high importance. While some fanfictions may keep the traditional views on sexuality, many fanfictions embrace a level of acceptance for deviation from traditional gender roles and sexuality in their narrative. With a variety of ways to discover a soulmate, Soulmate AUs normalize the search and desire for a partner that can complete a person's soul. The normalization, within fanfiction, of focusing on an emotional attachment to another person brings the narrative into the emotional sphere and celebrates that positioning. Gender and sexuality of the soulmate tend to be disregarded in the narratives and may only be mentioned as a brief explanation to the reader for clarification on the deviation from traditional gender roles and relationships. The Soulmate AU trope celebrates the removal of boundaries and emotional expression, and it draws readers into conversations about what it means to see the expression of emotion as something to celebrate rather than dismiss.

## CHAPTER 3. ABO DYNAMICS

Perhaps one of the most confusing and hard to understand tropes of fanfiction may be the Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics (ABO) trope. To understand what the ABO trope consists of, one must first understand what the dynamics of the trope mean. ABO stands for Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, which are new gender designations given to the characters. The designations appear to come from canine hierarchical structures: “Think of it as pack dynamics as written by individuals who have never spent time with actual wolves” (norabombay). These dynamics are central to the plot and drive many of the actions by the characters. Characters that identify as male or female in an ABO fanfiction will also be given the additional gender of an Alpha, Beta, or Omega. It is possible to have an Alpha male and an Alpha female, as well as an Omega male, an Omega female, a Beta male, and a Beta female in the same fanfiction. The designation of Alpha, Beta, or Omega outweighs the designation of male or female as fanfictions emphasize the newly designated genders more.

The new gender designations have specific qualities about them that readers recognize as being typically universal in the ABO trope. Although each author changes and tweaks the designations to fit into their version of an ABO centric world, there are almost always some elements of each gender designation that remains the same: Alphas are viewed as strong and aggressive, Betas are seen as calm and analytic, and Omegas tend to be regarded as vulnerable and submissive. While some fanfiction authors choose to subvert these ideas, the majority of the fandom works within these general characteristics of the new gender designations.

One fanfiction author, norabombay, has taken it upon themselves to provide an overview of the characteristics of each new gender. The author has applied the traditional genders of male

and female to the new genders of Alpha, Beta, and Omega in an apparent effort to help the reader contextualize and understand the new genders:

Alphas are larger, aggressive, and have giant penises. An alpha in the vicinity of an omega in heat cannot control himself. He must have the omega, bond with them and own them. Alphas frequently are in the military and politics. Think of any situation where someone would normally be described as an alpha male. (norabombay)

Characters that are designated as Alphas within a fanfiction tend to be the characters that the fanfiction author views as having either the most dominant personality or the character the author prefers to see in a dominant sexual role. In some cases, the designation simply appears to be applied to the character who is tallest in a male slash relationship. For example, it appears to be common for authors in the *Sherlock* BBC fandom to designate Sherlock as an Alpha instead of John Watson, whose designation often portrays him as an Omega, because the actor who plays Sherlock is several inches taller than the actor playing Watson. However, several authors choose to reverse those designations and simply work the height difference into the narrative as something that could cause strife in the hunt for a mate. Each author chooses to which character to apply the designation, but it appears to be common within a fandom that a trend emerges in which the majority of people create and consume content that has a favored character in a specific role. In general, an Alpha can be seen as a character who has physical strength, freedom and status in society, and an excuse to act on their aggressions or compulsions without having to take responsibility for those actions.

Omeegas are, generally, the exact opposite of an Alpha:

Omeegas are smaller, not as aggressive, and can be impregnated. An omega will go



into heat, during which time they have little, if any, control of their actions. Omegas have a biological imperative to be bred . . .

Omegas are the ones who go into heat. Frequency and desperation level depends on the author. . . .

. . . In all cases, omegas can be impregnated. (norabombay)

The role of an Omega can be varied within fanfiction; however, it appears to be a generally accepted idea that Omegas are an oppressed group within their societies. This oppression, which tends to be based on stereotypes and gender, can be infuriating and eye-opening for readers. In many cases, the oppression that Omegas experience can be paralleled with the realistic oppression throughout history of people other than the heteronormative male. If women have been oppressed by society controlling their sexuality, for example, then Omegas are a representation of that oppression. Fanfiction authors appear to use the Omega designation as an outlet to explore equality in reproduction, gender, and sexuality. The restrictions that have long been imposed on women in society are sometimes exaggerated to the point of overwhelming abuse and sexism in an ABO fanfiction. Omegas become an embodiment of the stereotype of women in real life.

The gender of Beta appears to be applied to characters that an author does not want to deal with within the restrictions of an Alpha or Omega: “Betas are basically normal everyday humans as you know them. Betas may be aware of omegas in heat, and may want to mate with them. The success of this activity depends on the author” (norabombay). It should be noted that norabombay’s fanfiction guide to the ABO trope is not extensive, and the dynamics of the

genders can be changed to fit different storylines dependent on the author of each fanfiction. However, in general, these assumptions appear to be a fairly accurate depiction of Betas, who appear to be mostly secondary characters within the narrative of an ABO fanfiction.

At this point, it becomes important to discuss additional terminology provided by norabombay:

- mating/heat cycles . . .
- knotting
- semen. lots of semen. epic amounts of semen.
- soul bonding (norabombay)

*Mating/heat cycles* are extremely common and appear to be a key factor in ABO fanfictions. This element of the story appears to be fairly straightforward if a reader considers how reproductive cycles for animals, specifically canine species, work. In short, an Omega will enter a *heat cycle* in which they are compelled to take an Alpha mate in order to complete the *mating*. The *mating* consists of an Omega taking an Alpha's penis, in the same manner recognized as vaginal or anal sexual intercourse, but with a new element added: a knot. *Knotting* occurs just before or right after climax is reached between the coupling pair and locks the pair together for an amount of time determined by the author. This new physical feature comes from the genitalia of canine species. At the base of the penis, an inflatable addition to the organ, the knot, swells to the point at which the male is unable to remove the penis from either the vaginal or anal canal. During the time frame in which the pair are stuck together, the Alpha releases the unrealistically large amounts of semen into the receptive partner. The end goal of the *knotting* and "epic amounts of semen" is pregnancy. The idea of *soul bonding* comes from the Soulmate AU trope, but the difference between a Soulmate AU and *soul bonding* comes from how the events occur. As the prior chapter explained, in a Soulmate AU, the characters are destined for each other by an outside force and usually have a way to find each other. In an ABO *soul bond*, the soul

connection can occur between any mating pair, even if one partner does not wish it to happen. Once a *soul bond* occurs, it is almost impossible to break, and the process of breaking the bond tends to be dangerous to one or both participants. Some fanfiction authors allow for an Alpha to be able to freely pursue new relationships, while an Omega can only have one Alpha and becomes trapped in the relationship. This could be a parallel to oppression that women have faced—and are facing—when it comes to equality in relationships and sexuality, such as having the freedom to leave unstable relationships or retain multiple partners. It should be noted, as norabombay stated, that not all of these elements are present in every ABO fanfiction. In fact, some fanfictions only include three of the characteristics which are usually: *mating/heat cycles*, *knotting*, and *epic amounts of semen* (norabombay).

If a reader recognizes nothing else in an ABO fanfiction, kinky sexual activity will be the one thing they take away from the experience. Sexual exploration is one of the most common factors of an ABO fanfiction. Different authors try out different things, and some ideas take off like wildfire throughout fandom spaces. The deep dive into gender identity and sexual expression amongst queered characters are key indicators of the disruption of heteronormativity in the ABO trope. The exploration of sex and eroticism in a safe space may be a desire that becomes evident as fanfiction authors explore these aspects of creation: “The writers and readers of these fantasies can do what most of us can’t do in reality (certainly not heterosexual reality), that is they can act sexually at their own pace and under conditions they themselves have chosen” (Hellekson and Busse 90). The sexual activities described in ABO fanfictions are often bizarre, but they provide an outlet for emotions dealing with sex that potentially cannot be explored or even talked about in mainstream literature. ABO fanfictions also explore the oppression of groups of people by detailing the oppression of the Omega populations within the fanfictions. The implications of

approaching sexual freedom and oppression in fanfiction situate the ABO trope within a conversation that examines gender identity.

Sexual freedom and expression are a major component of oppression over people to keep certain ideas and actions surrounding sexuality restricted. As different cultures enforce limitations on portions of their populations, they harm the vitality and progression of their communities. Limiting sexual freedoms and expressions harms the entire population by removing the voice of those being oppressed. The lack of equality when it comes to sexuality trickles through society and finds a way to be expressed despite the struggle to prevent it. Through the queering of the characters, ABO fanfictions place sexual exploration onto characters that have the ability to represent experiences of oppression through sexuality. Gender becomes fluid through this process, and the male characters represent the oppression of gender identity. Gayle Rubin believes that “[d]isputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity” (2195). If fanfiction authors feel limited in how they can express sexual desires in real life and in traditional literature, then creating new and unique tropes allows for an uninhibited opportunity to explore and investigate new dynamics.

GoldenTruth813’s fanfiction “Sweet Heat” situates the characters of Netflix’s version of *Voltron: Legendary Defender* into the ABO trope. The author has given the designations of Alpha, Beta, and Omega to the characters that they prefer to see in those gendered roles. Almost immediately into the narrative, the author presents the inequality between the new gender designations: “Shiro’s dealt with more than his fair share of doctors, the vast majority of them alphas and betas—who have no idea what it’s really like to be an omega, and as such seem inclined to reduce his every medical issue to hormones or hysterics” (GoldenTruth813). Shiro, a

canonically homosexual male character and an Omega within this fanfiction, reveals his troubles with doctors based on his gender. The fact that his medical issues are reduced “to hormones or hysterics” parallels the problem that many women face when discussing medical problems (GoldenTruth813). Many times, when complaining of a medical issue, women are considered as being overly dramatic. This can cause a lack of communication in the future with medical professionals and even the misdiagnosis of conditions. The action of disregarding someone’s concerns based on gendered stereotypes highlights an inequality within a population. GoldenTruth813’s recognition of that inequality at the beginning of their fanfiction might be to inform readers that the fanfiction contains the oppression of Omegas and, therefore, the representation of the oppression of women.

Paralleling the oppression of the Omega population in fanfiction with the experiences of women in the real world helps the ABO trope to situate itself into a conversation about gender identity. The male omega characters represent trials that are gendered. By approaching topics that women face in life, fanfiction authors distance themselves and their readers from the uncertain emotions that come with the discussion of oppression. Transferring the actions and fallouts of oppressive topics onto characters situates a barrier between the reader and the topic, but it still allows for readers to make the connection between fiction and reality. Some ABO fanfictions attempt to keep the narrative from straying too far into an uncomfortable conversation of oppression and try to stabilize the narrative with rational thought on the topic:

[Shiro] recognizes that not every omega wants or needs an alpha and that not every alpha wants an omega. Shiro’s even seen alpha to alpha or omega to omega matches where both people were happy, even if it’s unconventional. He knows that there’s no one-size-fits-all mold for people or relationships. But he also knows that most people fall into

relationships that fit into these norms. Some people say its [*sic*] biology, others say its [*sic*] pheromones. (GoldenTruth813)

“Sweet Heat” attempts to combat the initial acceptance of an Omega absolutely needing an Alpha within its narrative. In doing so, the fanfiction enters a conversation of individuality and recognition that the stereotypes that exist in that story are being challenged. The fanfiction also enters a brief conversation on sexuality and perceived norms for the story. By entering that argument, however briefly, the author allows a conversation on a unique queer theory to emerge within a narrative that does not distinguish homosexual relationships in an ABO trope as male/male relationships or female/female relationships. Instead, it distinguishes homosexual relationships to be viewed as Alpha/Alpha, Beta/Beta, and Omega/Omega relationships. With this brought to the attention of the reader, the narrative shows another case of inequality and stigma forced on the characters. The recognition that Shiro gives to understanding that different relationships occur outside of societal norms, within the story, situates the narrative into a balance with equality amongst the characters and the readers. Barriers are being recognized and eliminated on the part of the character and the reader, which shows the erasure of the barrier as the erasure of inequality amongst the sexes and the disruption of heteronormativity.

The author continues in that vein by highlighting stereotypes even further by implying that Omegas are often the victims of perverse thoughts simply due to their gender: “Most guys he’s tried to date . . . assumed just because he’s an omega that he’s gagging for it all the time” (GoldenTruth813). By implying that Omegas are always up for sexual encounters, the narrative indicates that specific genders are being stereotyped. This suggests a parallel with the idea of women being pressured into sexual encounters: “When it comes to dating Shiro is used to holding part of himself back, aware of people’s perceptions of omegas and how most people

perceive any affection from an omega as permission for more” (GoldenTruth813). A lack of respect for consent affects the Omegas within “Sweet Heat,” which suggests a conversation on the lack of respect women receive when it comes to sexual encounters. GoldenTruth813, however, does try to rectify that stereotype by having an explicit dialogue in the narrative discussing consent issues. Keith says to Shiro, “I was trying to give you autonomy. This is your choice. You don’t have to share your heat with anyone ever if you don’t want, and just because we’re dating doesn’t mean you owe me your heat. I didn’t want you to feel pressured or trapped” (GoldenTruth813). This indicates the author’s awareness of consent issues that affect people entering into sexual circumstances. The conversation of consent allows the reader to connect with a positive experience dealing with a sexual encounter, which tends to be overlooked in popular media representations of sex.

“Sweet Heat” attempts to portray positive, consensual sexual experiences and truthful conversations about how bodies function that many ABO fanfictions appear to limit or simply remove. GoldenTruth813 continues that conversation of bodily functions and the stress that comes from dealing with those bodily functions as Shiro deals with his heat cycle: “The idea of my body controlling me, wanting someone else—needing someone else. I think some part of me knew it wasn’t great to just stay on the suppressants forever, but the doctors never said anything so I thought it was fine. I didn’t...I never wanted to have a heat” (GoldenTruth813).

Conversations about bodily functions are normal within an ABO fanfiction universe and provide an opportunity to investigate gender identity. Women’s bodies are often objectified by men. However, the mere mention of menstrual cycles or breastfeeding immediately deposits a woman’s body into a realm of being dirty or something asexual and no longer as an object of the male gaze. Through the queered characters, these attributes are positioned onto male bodies. This

disruption of gender forces the reader to consider the identity of the characters and how they represent oppression. Shiro's frank conversation about his heat compares his experience to discussions women might have about their reproductive cycles.

The act of sex in an ABO fanfiction involves extra elements that are unrealistic and bizarre. However, the bizarreness of the interactions allows for a celebration of sexual desire to occur by exploring the unique and explicit content. Rubin approaches a conversation on pornography discussing anti-feminist rhetoric which implies that sexual expression is detrimental to women because it falls into the realm of the masculine: "A good deal of feminist literature attributes the oppression of women to graphic representations of sex . . ." (2213). However, the expressions of sex and sexual desire are feminist because they imply a sense of self-awareness and equality in recognition of having sexual desire. Rubin also says that ". . . battles have been waged over just how much shame, distress, and punishment should be incurred by sexual activity. . . . Sexual liberation has been and continues to be a feminist goal. . . . But it has also produced an exciting, innovative, articulate defense of sexual pleasure and erotic justice" (2213-14). Any conversation dealing with sexuality and sexual expression should be celebrated as a recognition of moving past the limitations and oppression that come with any person desiring sex or having access to sexual materials. Through the queered characters in male slash fanfiction, the masculine realm of pornography becomes accessible to fanfiction authors and readers that may have found limited content that appealed to them. The ability and confidence to express sexual desire can be seen as the removal of an oppressive barrier that real society and the fictional ABO society force on groups of people based on a patriarchal belief system.

Sex within the ABO trope can often be seen as controversial and disturbing due to the lack of consent during the act. Many fanfictions deal with the idea that an Omega, during a heat



cycle, loses the ability to control their actions without the help of hormone suppressants. These hormone suppressants are extremely reminiscent of modern-day birth control medication in the sense that the medicine controls a biological function dealing with hormones and reproduction. Real birth control is not always be taken to prevent pregnancy, but in an ABO fanfiction, heat suppressants are taken to prevent a heat cycle from occurring. In “Submit, Fight, Fail, Fall (or why you can't fight the blood that's in you)” by akainagi, another *Star Trek* fanfiction, the narrative highlights the use of heat suppressants as a means for retaining control over the body:

[Jim] had taken the suppressants far too late this time. It would be the better part of an hour before they began to deaden the feelings of lust and razor-sharp need. . . . But he'd be fucked if he gave his body what it really wanted. Fucked in every sense of the word, actually. He'd be on his knees and the worst part was that he'd *want* it.

God, this was why he hated being omega. This fucking enslavement to hormones and pheromones. (akainagi)

The action of taking heat suppressants gives agency to the character taking them. Control over another person's body translates to an oppressive state for the person being controlled. This occurs to a large number of people across the world in multiple cultures. In “Submit, Fight, Fail, Fall,” the access to heat suppressants for Omegas allows them to have control over their bodies. Gender is disrupted through the representation of a birth control-like substance, normally intended for females, being used on male characters.

The action of controlling aspects of a woman's reproduction introduces the idea of considering other bodily functions that can occur during sex or reproduction. One of the most intriguing elements of an ABO fanfiction tends to be the idea of male lubrication: “Shiro feels a

gush of slick as he imagines Keith pressing him back into the mattress and filling him” (GoldenTruth813). Naturally producing lubrication during arousal or stimulation tends to be a trait that many biological females possess. The ability for Omegas, male and female, to naturally participate in this physical or stimulated response could be considered a celebration of female arousal which has been shamed throughout history for occurring only when the desire for sexual activity is present. The idea that natural lubrication only happens when the woman desires penetration harms women worldwide. Women are blamed for inviting their own sexual assaults because stimulation of their genitals produced natural lubrication. Permitting both male and female Omegas to produce natural lubrication allows fanfiction authors to place both males and females on the same level of biological experience in regards to both reproduction and pleasure. This emphasizes the equality between males and females and removes the barriers that real society has forced on them through the disruption of gender. It also explains how anal penetration occurs easily during a heat cycle without requiring additional materials. In other words, while the production of the natural lubricant suggests a celebration of female arousal and an expression of equality, it might also simply be a plot device. However, the fact that the description of *slick* appears in the majority of ABO fanfictions may indicate that fanfiction authors and readers desire to see a positive representation of a bodily function that women have been shamed for and the emergence of equality between male and female bodies. This combination of male and female biological responses represents the unique gender identity aspects of the ABO trope. Gender appears to be fluid in the ABO trope through the physical changes that the Omega characters embody.

Another unique factor during penetrative sexual encounters between an Alpha and Omega is the occurrence of knotting. As explained earlier, this action occurs just before or just

after climax has been reached during vaginal or anal sexual intercourse. The action of knotting can be completed either during a heat cycle or outside of a heat cycle during normal sexual intercourse. The fanfiction author makes the decision based on their preferences or desire to see certain actions play out in the narrative. Scenes dealing with knotting are usually extremely explicit, but some narratives keep descriptions to a tamer level, such as the case with “Your Sex I Can Smell” by authors HedonistInk and Heikijin. This particular fanfiction comes from the Netflix series *Voltron: Legendary Defender* and focuses on Lance and Keith in the roles of Omega and Alpha, respectively:

Lance felt the change below almost as soon as it happened, but his orgasm ripped through him and made him forget about it whilst the pleasure coursed through him. But once the high was gone he was very much aware. He felt way too full way too suddenly and it almost hurt a bit too much. At the same time he knew what it meant and that knowledge was... oddly hot. (HedonistInk and Heikijin)

By using this language, the authors are placing into the narrative a hesitation, but also a budding interest, in expressing sexual desire. The authors are hinting at that desire by stating that “he knew what it meant and that knowledge was... oddly hot” (HedonistInk and Heikijin). The hesitation that Lance experiences in admitting he finds the action of knotting arousing may be an indicator of the oppression that individuals, particularly women, feel when acknowledging they have a sexual desire. If an Omega represents a facet of the reality women deal with, then having an Omega character show hesitation in expressing or admitting desire could be parallel to experiences in real life. Female sexuality has been controlled or degraded in many cultures, and the feelings and ramifications surrounding that control can still be found in cultures today.

Showing a fictional character recognizing a hesitation and acknowledgment could be a way to connect with and combat those prejudices.

The ABO Dynamics trope, while seemingly bizarre, contains a unique narrative perspective on gender identity and gender oppression. Through fanfictions in this trope, fanfiction authors and readers experience a space created for exploring how gender operates more fluidly than many people consider. This disruption of gender identity shows that the ABO trope approaches gender in unique and inventive ways. It also shows that the trope participates in a conversation with the sexual oppression of people by initiating new gender dynamics to portray the oppression. By applying the new gender dynamics onto male characters and queering them, the trope initiates the disruption of heteronormativity through the queering of characters and the gender fluidity of the trope.

## CHAPTER 4. MPREG

As seen in the ABO Dynamics trope, fanfiction authors can get extremely creative with narratives to tell the stories they wish to read. The Mpreg trope may exist as a technique to allow two male characters to procreate naturally without the inclusion of the traditional XY chromosomal pair found in biological procreation between a male and female. While the trope does not appear to focus heavily on the medical science behind male/male procreation, it does focus on the experiences of being pregnant and giving birth. The Mpreg trope employs the use of male characters having the ability to become pregnant and give birth to children in a manner similar to biological females. The reasoning behind why males can bear children is usually never explained fully or becomes relegated to the normality of the Mpreg trope, but the subversion of traditional gender roles becomes complex. The male characters may experience oppression and a form of sexism, or they may exist equally amongst all of the other genders. Mpreg appears frequently as a sub-trope of the ABO Dynamics trope. This may simply be an authorial choice of preference, or it may be that the ABO Dynamics trope portrays excessive amounts of sex. Before the ABO Dynamics trope arrived on the fanfiction scene, Mpreg seems to have been a trope that stood on its own. For the purpose of this chapter, both standalone Mpreg fanfictions and ABO Dynamics Mpreg fanfictions will be used.

Mpreg fanfictions allow authors to explore an aspect of reality that only persons with uteruses have the capability of physically experiencing. The possibility of pregnancy for a male-identifying character allows a transfer of emotions and experience to be passed on to those characters. It also allows illumination of the physical struggles that a pregnant individual may experience in such a way that readers engage with the text in a more understanding and sympathetic manner. The exchange of gendered experience in Mpreg fanfictions, mostly

overlaying female experiences onto male characters, allows for a unique perspective to occur by transplanting the experiences of biology and social dynamics onto a gender that usually has no firsthand interaction with such knowledge. Through the transplantation of those experiences, Mpreg fanfiction situates itself to be argued as a trope that disrupts gender identity and heteronormativity through an exchange of body.

Although fanfiction cultures promote unusual storylines, Mpreg does not appear to be one that the majority of fanfiction authors employ in their narratives. However, there are always exceptions to this trend, such as with “Justice” by orphan\_account. This particular account can be found across the majority of fandoms on AO3 because the account does not belong to a singular person but rather fandom as a whole. The orphan\_account contains works by fanfiction authors that have chosen to remove a fanwork from being associated with their username and have transferred their fanwork into an account created to host those works so that the fanwork may continue to be available to fans. “Justice” does not contain the ABO Dynamics trope, but it does contain the Mpreg trope. The fanfiction belongs to the *Supernatural* fandom and deals primarily with the characters of Dean Winchester and Castiel in a completely human setting.

Pregnancy comes with risks and decisions that require a great deal of thought. Almost everyone seems to have an opinion on how to handle pregnancy, but the one decision that seems to inspire heated debates and strong opinions is abortion. Aborting a pregnancy, for whatever reason, typically requires planning and working with medical professionals for safety. Of course, home or back-alley abortions happen, but in general, when people think about current abortion practices, they imagine a medical office or surgical procedure room. The location of an abortion procedure may indicate many things such as access, race, and socio-cultural stigma. However, the ability to access abortion services speaks to the problematics of control over a woman’s

body. Lack of access indicates that society still holds control over a woman's body and removes her ability to make decisions for herself. Freer access to abortion services may indicate a woman's control of her body belongs to her. According to bell hooks, abortion access "directly challenged the notion that a woman's reason for existence was to bear children" (27). The changing notion of a woman's purpose in life entails a desire for equality and for female voices to be heard. The struggles for reproductive rights and to be heard as a human, not as baby-making machines, are ongoing feminist issues. However, by subjecting male characters to these struggles, the fanfiction disrupts gender identity. As the debate over abortion continues to resonate through the media, the church, and the home, fanfiction provides a safe space to explore different outcomes. What does it mean to have an abortion? What if a woman changes her mind about abortion after starting the process? These questions often occur to women and being able to see similar circumstances play out in fanfiction helps creators and readers explore what their beliefs may be.

If fanfiction helps to situate the conversation surrounding abortion into a safe space, then the Mpreg trope moves the conversation into a unique corner. Mpreg removes the biological woman from the pregnancy and transplants the experience of the pregnancy onto a male character. The action of the transplantation creates a disrupted gendered experience that biological males never interact with on a physical level. In a sense, gender roles are reversed in the Mpreg trope. While female characters still exist and may have pregnancies, the male characters become the forefront of the story. Their pregnancies, emotions, and experiences are mirrors of what women endure during reproduction. The decisions that women must make are now in the hands of a male character, not as a controlling, patriarchal mechanism, but rather, as a new space of understanding. Those decisions and the consequences are transferred entirely onto

the male characters, which situates the Mpreg trope as a gendered exchange of body and experience through disruption of heteronormativity.

In “Justice,” the character, Dean, becomes pregnant after a one-night stand with Castiel. The narrative attempts to depict the discovery of the pregnancy in a mostly realistic fashion:

Dean was [*sic*] been feeling groggy everyday [*sic*] for the past six weeks. His feet and ankles were swelling and had been having [*sic*] to pee more these days. Even his eating habits had changed. The once carnivorous, 24/7 whiskey, beer and pie eating Dean Winchester now wanted to drink water and eat fruit and KALE? Just the smell of a burger was enough to put him off. It was weird but he brushed it off. People’s bodies change over time and he could be retaining water in his feet and ankles. (orphan\_account)

The fanfiction author includes common signs of pregnancy such as frequent urination, exhaustion, a changing olfactory sense, and cravings to provide a hint to the reader about the upcoming plotline. With the inclusion of common pregnancy symptoms, the narrative transfers the experiences of pregnant women to Dean, a canonically male character. He now must deal with a changing body in a way that biological males are incapable of doing. This disruption of gendered experience allows fanfiction to provide a unique platform for conversations surrounding identity, agency, and/or power.

With a revealed pregnancy, Dean enters the typically female headspace of deciding what to do. He must make a decision that will affect not only him but a potential new life. He must also risk the judgment of others around him as he chooses what to do with his own body:

“I’m sorry brotha, but that’s a fetus inside of you and it looks to be about eight weeks along.” Benny sighed. He hate [*sic*] being the bearer of bad news to a friend.



Dean knew what he had to do next.

“I want an abortion.” He said coldly.

Benny, who was usually professional with his friends turned patients, gave a venomous look at Dean. (orphan\_account)

Dean chooses by himself to have an abortion; he makes a decision about his body and immediately receives a judgment from his doctor and friend. This implies that Dean has control over his body. He can choose to terminate his pregnancy, but the strong opinions of his doctor and friend, Benny, show that there may still be a desire on part of the population to gain that control back. The stigma of an abortion sticks to the mother, or the father in the case of an Mpreg fanfiction. Dean will be judged for making a decision about his body and life:

Benny threw a towel at Dean and left the room to get the info he printed off of his laptop.

Dean knew Benny was going to have his opinion since he was raised in a religious household in the south. Benny didn't care about what Dean did about in his spare time, but he was pro-life when it came to his friends [*sic*] pregnancies. Dean just learned about his and he was throwing it away like that.

Benny came back into the room and handed Dean the paper with a scowl on his face.

“Listen Benny, I know you mean well but this my life and my body. Thanks for your help.” (orphan\_account)

The lack of professionalism shows that Benny situates his personal beliefs about the rights of the mother/father to choose into the narrative. He represents the pro-life segment of the population; however, his opinion, which he makes well-known, does not prevent him from providing Dean with the information about abortion services that Dean wants.

The reader's decision on the topic of abortion may form faster than they anticipate as Dean heads to an abortion clinic for a first visit. The harsh judgment of protestors that follows the decision to visit the medical facility plays out in the fanfiction:

As it started to creep closer to one o'clock, Dean started walking to the clinic with help from the GPS on his iPhone. When he got there he saw a barrier between the clinic and the protestors. They were holding signs with graphic pictures of aborted fetuses and bible verses that were condemning those who entered to hell. Dean had never known much about the abuse and harassment that women get when they go to these clinics. Then he saw a female clinic escort come up to him and helped walk him through the shouts and cursing from the pro-life protestors. His blood was boiling and he wanted to shout back but the escort saw that he was about to turn and yell but grabbed his arm.

“Don't talk back to them you hear me? It only fuels the fire more. Now lets [*sic*] get you inside.” (orphan\_account)

Dean witnesses a deep division in female reproductive health by experiencing protestors who are adamantly against a woman's right, or in Dean's case, a man's right, to choose. The protestors outside of facilities that offer abortion services may represent the deep divide in opinions about gender rights. Males generally have more rights than females in many cultures and showing that reversal on Dean may indicate that the author wants to highlight that inequality through the

gendered exchange. As a male, Dean should be seen as having agency for his body, but through the disruption of gender in the Mpreg trope, his agency is being questioned by outside parties. This gender discrimination affects the identity of the characters and the women who suffer in real life from the disparities of bodily agency.

As Dean continues to his appointment, he reiterates a conversation that feminist and pro-choice believers have frequently: “I can’t believe men and women get that kind of shit from people like that for being in control of their own bodies. It should only be their personal business and only with doctors involved” (orphan\_account). At this point, the narrative implies a pro-choice rhetoric through Dean’s experience. He firmly believes that the decision to abort his pregnancy should be private and belong only to him and a doctor. Control over his body belongs to him and no one else, especially not to strangers who have no intimate knowledge of his life. This argument reinforces experiences that women deal with daily in the struggle to maintain their bodily autonomy. By inserting Dean into this situation, the narrative situates him within the gendered and societal experience of a biological female. He inherits the struggles of women in similar situations and feels the frustration of not being able to make a decision about his body and receive respect or privacy about that decision. His experience is female, which reiterates the disruption of gender that the trope contains.

The right of an individual to choose an abortion or to decide against one needs to be addressed. Many women change their minds about going through with an abortion. Choice belongs solely to the individual, and the ability to change minds promotes autonomy. Dean experiences this when he makes a radical shift from going through with the abortion to deciding to keep the pregnancy: “He couldn’t believe he almost went through with this. He almost did

away with his baby” (orphan\_account). Dean’s change of mind reiterates that he has autonomy about his body and has the ability to choose what may be right for him.

Dean’s experience with choice in “Justice” shows that he undergoes the gendered experience of many women in real life. Mpreg fanfictions reverse gender roles, and therefore, gender experiences. While birth scenes in Mpreg can vary widely in their depictions of how a birth actually occurs, “Justice” portrays the birth in a hospital scene with Dean pushing the baby out through a birth canal; however, the fanfiction does not specify if the birth canal is a new orifice in the genital region or if it belongs exclusively to the anal canal. While graphic, the birth scene appears to be a standard parallel to the real experience of giving birth vaginally:

“Doc, I need to push really bad.” Dean was pleading as sweat was beading up on his face. He looked like he was suffering.

“Let me check how far the baby is.” She checked him again, “Baby’s head is close to the exit. Let’s do this.”

Dean had a thankful moment for a second and then he had to push. Castiel grabbed his hand as Dean tucked his chin in and arched forward, pushing as hard as he could, his face going red. (orphan\_account)

The physical birth of Dean’s child highlights the exchange of bodies between males and females that Mpreg fanfictions are built on. As a biological male, in reality, Dean cannot carry a child, but through a gendered exchange within the fanfiction Mpreg universe, his body takes on biological female capabilities. This includes the ability to breastfeed:

His daughter found his nipple and clamped onto it and sucked greedily, filling her tummy with her fathers [*sic*] milk. Dean was in awe at his daughter and the experience he was having with her at this point. He knew that he would have to burp her soon after her fill and more memories would be made with every second of her existence. Dean changed feeding breasts and held her close to him. (orphan\_account)

By experiencing the physical gendered exchange, Dean's situation in the fanfiction can be considered biologically and emotionally feminine. He experiences the physical and social restrictions that being female forces on women when it comes to decisions about their bodies. Dean's experience with disrupted gender informs the reader that gender identity may not be as stable as heteronormativity implies.

The Mpreg trope can also be a component, or sub-trope, of the ABO Dynamics trope, previously discussed. The placement of Mpreg in the ABO trope does not drastically alter the storylines except for the mating drive between an Alpha and Omega having a reproductive outcome. The Mpreg fanfictions within the ABO trope appear to focus more on the reproductive drive between the Alpha and Omega characters and positions the trope in the female experience of reproduction through male characters. With the male Omegas capable of pregnancy, the Mpreg trope allows for a gendered exchange to occur. Fanfiction author, CrypticGabriel explores the harsh realities of an unexpected pregnancy and pregnancy loss in their fanfiction, which belongs to the *Voltron: Legendary Defender* fandom and the ABO Dynamics trope: "Keith tried to be good at it, he really did. The doctor said that sometimes pregnancies just fail for no reason. He was devastated, but... this was a good thing." CrypticGabriel opens their fanfiction with the immediate information that one of the main characters has unexpectedly fallen pregnant and miscarried. A strong emotional response to this news affects both the character and the reader.

The miscarrying of a pregnancy positions the experience into the gendered exchange of the body from female to male.

Emotions within CrypticGabriel's "A Little Bit of Time" run heated and strongly when Keith decides to keep his pregnancy and miscarriage a secret from Shiro: "'There's no baby, Shiro.' He tried blinking back tears when seeing that spark in the Alpha's eyes quickly fade. 'I lost it. It all happened so fast that... I thought it'd be alright... if you never knew about it'" (CrypticGabriel). The fact that Keith remains silent for a long period of time about his miscarriage shows that he may be exercising his right to bodily agency. The pregnancy and miscarriage belong to Keith's body, not Shiro's. Not telling Shiro about the incident can be seen as deceitful, but it may also be seen as Keith taking control by making his decision to keep everything quiet. While this is not a choice about abortion, miscarriage still carries a heavy burden and potential feelings of shame. Keith, as the individual experiencing pregnancy and, subsequently, a miscarriage, must still make decisions that affect himself and those around him. His choice to hide what occurs to him reproductively and to deal with the after-effects situate Keith's experience within the disrupted gendered exchange.

The belief that a woman only has value if she can provide her partner children may be a thought that pervades many women and many readers of fanfiction. "A Little Bit of Time" approaches this thought through Keith's second miscarriage and Shiro's reaction:

He couldn't stop crying, for several hours. Shiro tried his best to comfort him, but Keith could hear the wobbly emotion in his voice as well. His Alpha crooned to him regardless, rubbing his back as he kept telling him "It wasn't your fault, it's gonna be okay."

"I'm a horrible Omega," he sobbed. "I'll never carry a child."

“Hey... don’t say that, sweetheart,” Shiro assured him. “In the future, we could always try again.”

His cries grew louder at such an outrageous claim. He could never do this again! He knew it’d just end terribly. He couldn’t take another failed pregnancy. He didn’t want to go through it anymore. He was never meant to carry children, and that was clear as day. “Hey, no, baby...” Shiro held him tighter. “We don’t have to. Okay? I don’t need a baby to be happy. I just need you.”

Keith stared at him in disbelief, his crying slowing down to choked hiccups. “Every Alpha wants babies,” he whined. “You deserve an Omega that will give them to you.”

(CrypticGabriel)

Keith’s insistence that he fails as an Omega because he cannot provide his Alpha with a biological child transplants Keith within a gendered experience by paralleling his fear with a fear that women may experience in the same situation. Shiro’s response to Keith’s distress can be seen as placating or compromising. He loves Keith, but the narrative implies that, as an Alpha, he desires a child which Keith has failed to provide. Shiro may reassure Keith that he does not “need a baby to be happy,” but the guilt placed on Keith through their ABO gender dynamics reinforces that he lacks an ability seen as integral to his Omega gender: the ability to reproduce (CrypticGabriel). The reliance on a successful pregnancy within the narrative positions the gendered experience of Keith and female biology at the forefront of the reader's mind and allows connections to form as readers see similarities between real life and the fictional world.

“A Little Bit of Time” approaches birth in the same manner as “Justice” by orphan\_account with a natural birth in a hospital setting and by leaving the actual birth process, beyond pushing the babies out through an undetermined birth canal, vague. However, “A Little Bit of Time” does bring up breastfeeding in a slightly different manner than “Justice”:

He guided his daughter to his breast, watching her still seem disinterested and whining after smacking her lips together to find that there was still no milk. His confidence was starting to dwindle, and he knew that if this didn't work now, it never would. What was the point of growing such a large chest when the babies didn't want anything to do with it?

“P-please...” His voice was starting to wobble as he grew frustrated. First milk was supposed to be this special bonding time, and it was killing him knowing that he probably wouldn't experience it. (CrypticGabriel)

By showing the struggle with trying to breastfeed, CrypticGabriel reinforces the gendered experience of motherhood onto Keith, a canonically male character. His struggle to engage breastfeeding with one of his infant children mirrors a common experience that many new mothers may encounter. The reference to the physical body change, “growing such a large chest,” shows the physical changes that Keith undergoes occurs in the same manner as a woman going through the reproductive process of pregnancy (CrypticGabriel). The masculine word choice of *chest* over the feminine connection to the word *breast* implies gender, which might be a subtle reminder to the reader that Dean is a male. His body reacts to the hormones pregnancy produces in preparation for having offspring reliant on his body for nourishment just as a



biological female's body reacts, which shows the gender changes that apply within an Mpreg fanfiction.

An aspect of MPREG fanfictions that does not appear to be incorporated frequently, negative body image, finds a home in "A Little Bit of Time." Although negative body image does not equate solely to gender exchange, it does situate the narrative into a position of relatability to many readers. After pregnancy, many women experience a period of time when they may feel unattractive to or unworthy of their partners. CrypticGabriel's inclusion of body image into their narrative helps to cement the fanfiction into a realm of plausibility despite the fantastic nature of Mpreg fanfiction:

It was incredibly discouraging. He just wanted to bounce right back. Actively avoiding the flab and stretch marks while washing himself off, he made sure he felt refreshed before finishing up with his shower. He could be in there for hours, if he could [*sic*]. He wouldn't look at himself in the mirror afterward, though.

His pre-baby body was one version of himself that he knew Shiro found attractive. And the pregnant belly was a peculiar turn-on, but Keith quickly got used to it and grew to love the way he always felt worshipped despite his appearance. But this... this in-between look was not the least bit appealing. Shiro would grow to love it, the way he loved his baby belly. Wouldn't he? At least, that was what he'd hoped. (CrypticGabriel)

Keith's experience with negative body image helps to relate his character to the post-partum stage of reproduction. His discomfort with his body and the worry about his partner's attraction to him relates his mindset to the potential mindset of a woman in a similar stage of life.

The Mpreg trope can claim a disruption of heteronormativity through the gendered exchange of body and experience. As more fanfiction authors create Mpreg fanfictions they participate in the circulation of the discovery and evaluation of gender identity within fandom, and as more readers interact with the content, they formulate new opinions and experiences. Through the gendered exchange of the Mpreg trope, authors and readers have an opportunity to explore identity perceptions. The application of female experiences onto male characters enables the gendered exchange to occur through the transplantation of biology and social dynamics. The disruption of heteronormativity infiltrates itself into fanfictions in unlikely and unusual locations.

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