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"We Can (All) Be Heroes" The American Monomyth and the Problem with a Queer Captain America

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Thesis of Carlos Rodriguez Rosa

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Nova Southeastern University
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“WE CAN (ALL) BE HEROES”
THE AMERICAN MONOMYTH AND THE PROBLEM WITH A QUEER CAPTAIN
AMERICA

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Carlos Rodriguez Rosa

Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

Department of Communication, Media, and the Arts

Nova Southeastern University

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ABSTRACT

The quintessential superhero is an American Monomyth; a figure who is selfless, cunning, and headstrong, seeking nothing for themselves in favor of the collective. What this figure is not, however, is queer. This project examines how queer audiences utilize slash fanfiction to queer the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Captain America in order to "write back" to the canon that excludes them. This thesis does not simply look at what fans do within slash fanfiction; rather, it explicitly examines how the practice challenges the original text the piece is responding to. The project applies a queer rhetorical analysis, utilizing José Esteban Muñoz's concept of queer time, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's structure of binaries, Paul Booth's furthering of Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal concept of the carnivalesque, and Lawrence Grossberg's model of maps of mattering to observe how three pieces of slash fanfiction subvert the structure of The American Monomyth. As a structure of cultural ideals, the American Monomyth privileges heterosexuality as a pillar of culture and deems anything outside of its hegemonic definition as lesser. In observing how the slash fanfiction stories use queerness to rhetorically confront Captain America's position as an American Monomyth, I propose a more inclusive framework: The Queer American Monomyth.

Keywords: American Monomyth, queering, queer time, slash fanfiction, binaries

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INTRODUCTION

As with many slash fanfictions, the first chapter of Mellaithwen's "let the memories be good (for those who stay)" begins merely moments after the canonical ending of the *Captain America: Civil War* film. Steve Rogers had just dropped his shield, effectively walking away from the Captain America role. After days of fighting 117 countries, as well as his fellow Avengers over the morality of the Sokovia Accords, all he can do is walk away. He is tired, the super-soldier brawling against the cold Siberian air, bearing the weight of Bucky over his shoulder.

In the cold of both the air and their minds, the two ruminate on their pasts and how they had gotten into their situation. Bucky sifts through his sins as the Winter Soldier as "swiss cheese memories have started to return" (Mellaithwen). Meanwhile, Steve wrestles with whether he was still a good man, as Dr. Erskein had called him many years before. Even then, he "doesn't think about the shield, or leaving it behind and what all of that means" (Mellaithwen). Instead, once the two reach some sort of safety, all he is concerned with is *Bucky*. Mellaithwen concludes the chapter with a moment of tenderness between the two men,

"their lips are chapped from the cold and they're both left with a coppery aftertaste as they pull away, but this chaste kiss has been a long time coming and neither of them have the energy to think that it's anything less than perfect. Bucky's breathing slowly starts to even out as exhaustion looms over them both, while Steve leans into the embrace greedily and thinks, they can have this now. Finally" (Mellaithwen).

Finally.

Superheroes are about possibility. They are about taking all that makes a person unique and calling it powerful. They are about imagining a world that does not yet exist but could if

seemingly regular people used their gifts to fight for what is right. From characters such as Marvel's Iceman (a.k.a. Bobby Drake) and DC's Blue Beetle (a.k.a. Jaime Reyes), many superhero narratives follow the themes of emerging identity and becoming their best self. In this way, superheroes are also about wish fulfillment, to be a "bigger, brighter, bolder" image of oneself, just like the stories that tell us we can do just that (Brooker 11). But superheroes are also symbols of power and cultural standards, becoming what Lawrence and Jewett call American Monomyths that cement a social identity that not only tells us who we are, but who we *should be*.

Since their creation in the late 30's and early 40s, superheroes have become figures that represent the struggles of our times by demonstrating the outcast fighting for justness—exemplifying that everyone has power (Brooker; Coogan). Their purpose has always been to motivate people to overcome hardships in the pursuit of the American dream by functioning as icons representing what it means to deal with societal struggles. An example of such characteristics is observable in the origins of Captain America, who at his inception was a propaganda tool as the symbol of American identity during WWII, the cold war, and so on (Beyvers and Zitzelberger; Macdonald and Macdonald). The very name "Captain America" not only emphasizes the character's role as a leader, but his significance in the construction of the American identity. He is the ultimate success story: a young man from Brooklyn who gives everything to serve his country.

At the core of that story is Steve Rogers, the everyman who rose to the occasion and proved that anything is possible in America if one is willing to work hard and make sacrifices. Intriguingly, his origin is also a story of emerging identity and becoming. He goes through what Macdonald and Macdonald call a "metamorphosis" from a scrappy skinny kid on the streets of

Brooklyn to a symbol of virtue, loyalty, and truth that represents the American identity—an American Monomyth (250). He quite literally became something new, a monolith that encouraged audiences to *be* like him in their embodied lives during WWII. However, inevitably, as the war ended and America changed in an ever-complex world, so did Captain America.

According to Jeffrey Lang and Patrick Trimble, an important characteristic of the American Monomyth is that its need changes as culture changes. Captain America's purpose and affects changed as America's needs and expectations of heroes changed. This resulted in different iterations of the icon, tackling social issues such as racial discrimination, gender roles, and the cultural fallout of the Watergate scandal. Further, the emergence of new media brought the opportunity for remediations of the character beyond the comic book genre, venturing into television, video games, toys and, particularly, film. Nevertheless, even as Captain America and the American Monomyth move into the 21st century, bringing its themes of emerging identity and becoming with them, the ideals they uphold are far from universal (Lang and Trimble; Macdonald and Macdonald).

Most recently, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) brought the figure of Captain America into mainstream media as a pivotal player in the ever-growing cinematic universe. Throughout his journey in the franchise as the leader of the Avengers, he tackles issues such as the ethics of government oversight and the questioning of the ideals he believes and represents. In particular, the MCU humanizes him, making him a complicated and relevant character to a much larger mainstream audience. Still, even while tackling modern societal concerns, the character's core ideals have not changed. Though American culture has changed and evolved, the conception of the American Monomyth has not. This fact bleeds through the MCU remediation of the character, which struggles to accomplish the task of representing the

everyman because the narrative is driven by heteronormative ideals which excludes minority identities—particularly queer identities.

In 2017, the *Huffington Post* published Mary Standfield's, "No, Really, Give Captain America a Boyfriend" as a response to the #GiveCaptainAmericaABoyfriend twitter campaign. The movement was sparked by queer fans of the MCU's *Captain America* trilogy who perceived an underlying queer subtext within the films. In specific, they perceive Captain America's (e.g., Steve Rogers') relationship with Bucky Barnes to be romantic, and call for Marvel, who they argue has queerbaited its audience, to fulfill their wishes for the two's imagined love affair to be canon¹. Stanfield notes that many queer fans see the narrative within the MCU movies to be a missed opportunity for queer representation in media that fails to include them in any positive or lasting way.

Queer individuals in media are often reduced to stereotypes of passivity and villainy (Dhaenens et. al; Lecker). They are never the hero, never the one with power, and queer people feel that lack. Stories about superheroes matter because they "inspire us, educate us, heal us, and unite us" (Stanfield). Fans love the stories they engage with, and the stories love them back. At its best, that is the nature of fandom. But sometimes the stories do not love them back, and fans are left struggling to not only figure out what the stories mean, "but to make it mean something that connects to their own lives, experience, needs, and desires" (Grossberg 52). Without authentic representations of queerness in media, queer people cannot relate to texts because they

¹ For example, in the 2019 segment, "Avengers: Endgame Cast Sings 'We Didn't Start The Fire'" on The Tonight Show, Chris Evans, who portrays Steve Rogers in the MCU, teases fans in the lyrics, "Bucky, Peggy, I love you", framing them both as love interests ("The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon," 00:00: 25 – 00:00:30)

do not fully align with their embodied lives. Therefore, in the face of such a void, queer fans make their own stories—they write slash fanfiction.²

Slash fanfiction (or slashfic), as derivative work, transforms narratives into something the writer(s) want, like, and perhaps even feel seen in. From coming out, to first dates, to first sexual experiences, slash fanfiction provides a space to just *be* (Beyvers and Zitzelberger; Thomas). This subgenre of Fanfiction has often been a source of comfort for queer fans, functioning as a safe place to explore and come to terms with their embodied lives by writing back to the systems that oppress them. In a world that is unsafe for queer individuals, queer people feel like they are missing—their identities are missing. Writing slash fanfiction, conversely, is a way to work through that struggle, to write themselves into the canon in order to challenge the text by bringing queerness to the forefront (Davies). By writing slashfic about superheroes, then, queer writers carve themselves into a genre in ways that challenge the very structure that casts them aside.

The American Monomyth exists within a binary of Heterosexual/Queer, its nexus of power privileging the heteronormative hegemony of American culture, thus othering those with identities that reside on the other side of the binary. Therefore, superhero narratives are by and large hegemonic texts that perpetuate heteronormative ideals that fans must grapple with in their stories. In the dynamic of this binary, there is little correlation between queerness and heroism. Joanna Di Mattia explains that “heroism, let alone *super-heroism*, is not an identity associated with [queer people], and in the current political climate, the divergence between homosexuality

² The broad term “Fanfiction” refers to fan-written works that takes elements from a storyworld canon (characters, plot lines, setting, etc.) and remediates them to new, and often bizarre, directions as per the writer’s intention. “Slash Fanfiction” is a subgenre of Fanfiction that focuses on (canon or imagined) same-sex relationships, often romantic and sexual in nature.

and heroism is writ large in a number of arenas” (Mattia 197). In this way, the American Monomyth cannot be queer—it goes against its very definition.

As queer fans struggle with locating themselves in texts, they yearn for a space where their identities are not a hindrance for being *good*. The work to see queerness as more than negative by writing slash fanfiction and queering texts is meant to transcend the “politics of shame” that create disgust towards queer bodies and queer narratives—even without saying so (Mattia 201). Slash fanfiction, as a practice, challenges traditional hegemonic understandings of heroism, working to truly find what queerness is without the stereotypes that have historically defined it (EvilDime’s “[Podfic] Brooklyn” making Captain America a gay icon, for example).

This project explores how queer fans have utilized slash fanfiction to play with Captain America’s (read: Steve Rogers’) perceived queerness. The three works chosen were acquired from the fanfiction site *Archive of Our Own* and selected from 106,598 unique works under the tag “Steve Rogers/Bucky Barnes.” After surveying hundreds of stories, I ultimately chose three pieces that best provided space for this project to explore Captain America’s cultural significance as an American Monomyth and how queerness subverts his position as a bastion of masculinity and heroism.

The three pieces chosen for analysis explore what occurs with the character of Captain America when he is a queer man, albeit to different degrees of success and different circumstances. Part of the “4 Minute Window” series, “your favorite ghost,” and “Scenes From A Marriage: Captain America At Home,” follow Steve Roger’s conflict with his sexual orientation and his position as Captain America through different stages of his life. From acknowledgement of his sexuality to his eventual marriage with Bucky Barnes, Steve’s queerness is a point of contention and conflict in the stories/series. This story treats Steve Rogers

and Captain America as two different entities, thus focusing on how Steve's queerness and relationship with Bucky complicates his life and challenge his standing as Captain America. "[Podfic] Brooklyn," however, turns such a complication on its head by exploring what could occur if queerness wasn't a deterrent to his life and standing, but a benefit as a queer icon. Accordingly, his queerness aids him in fulfilling his mission as a symbol of inspiration without coming at the cost of his masculinity. In this way, the project questions how slash fanfiction writers use queerness to deconstruct the character they are writing about and observes what occurs to the figure in its reassembling. However, this project doesn't concern itself with interrogating what queerness is, but rather what the exploration to find its meaning does to the objects it touches. We are forced to question not only what becomes of the character, but what a queer Captain America tells us who we should—or could—be. To view Captain America as queer shatters our ideas of what the quintessential superhero is and who is supposed to win and why. It forces us to move past hegemonic ways of thinking about heroism and into a more inclusive framework: The Queer American Monomyth.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The quintessential superhero is an American Monomyth; a figure who is selfless, cunning, headstrong, and willing to put themselves on the line to save the day (Coogan; Jewett and Lawrence, *Myth of the Superhero*). What this figure is not, however, is queer. Researchers such as Francesca T. Royster and Daniel Stein have observed queer superhero fans as they bridge the gap between (a lack of) homogeneous representations and the heterogeneous representations that proliferate the genre. Such subversive reinterpretations are oftentimes achieved through cosplay, MMORPGs, and fanfiction that function to create an overarching community. However, I am particularly interested in how queer fans utilize the subgenre slash fanfiction to write their identities—and themselves—into the narrative (Corin and Schott; Grossberg).

Slash fanfiction (sometimes referred to as slashfic) involves stories created by fans based on a particular text and within a particular storyworld, which involve same-sex male pairings. Such stories play with the canon of those texts, imagining their own version of the narrative where queerness is at the forefront. It is a deeply personal practice that allows writers to insert their own motivations, frustrations, desires and, yes, identities. It is a space for queering. Superheroes have often been the focus of the dialogic, transformative work because they are the best of us—a reflection of who we are and should be as Americans. Captain America is a prime example of the queering of the superhero, seen in sites such as *Archive of Our Own*, where there are over 500,000³ slashfics depicting Steve Rogers as queer.

³ This number was compiled by utilizing *Archive of Our Own*'s advanced search engine, though the total is *not* exhaustive of the potential slashfics depicting Steve Rogers as queer. There are countless ways of spelling, formatting, and categorizing tags in the archive, as well as the potential male characters he has been paired with (e.g. Tony Stark, Heimdall, Baron Zemo, Phill Coulson, Thanos, etc.).

Slash fanfictions have always existed within fandom-led projects, letting fans take ownership of characters and stories that may sometimes exclude them. The very first slash fanfictions were released by the *Star Trek* fandom in its fanzine *Spockanalia* in 1967. The fanzines, which featured slashfics of Kirk/Spock, were released in physical form, and distributed between and within the fandom (Coppa; Jenkins). Perhaps because of that regard toward the practice, scholars like Francesca Coppa started *Archive Of Our Own*, a fan-built nonprofit that translates fanzines into an online modality (Coppa). The nonprofit functions as a safe place for fans to share their work within a community of writers, sharing the notion that what they do is an act of love toward the stories that inspire them, even if they do not include them. In this way, *Archive Of Our Own* functions as a place of exploration—a response to a lack of representation in mainstream media.

However, slashfic (and fanfiction in general) is rarely something that is taken seriously by mainstream media. It is often considered a derivative, improper, and even an illegal practice that is just merely an imitation of texts with little inherent value (Jenkins; Thomas). Such perspectives lead to slash fanfiction to be somewhat of a taboo in mainstream culture. But others, such as Sarah Beyvers and Florian Zitzelberger believe slash fanfiction to be dialogic and an opportunity for identity creation and exploration. Studies such as theirs have noted that slash fanfiction has the capacity to explicate and navigate the coming out process, as well as harnessing control of one's sexuality, functioning as tools for navigating such topics.

Consequently, sites and fanfiction practices have been a focus within fandom studies and has garnered attention from many scholars (Corin and Schott; Davies; Dhaenens et. al.; Jenkins). The study of fanfiction has been housed mainly within media and cultural studies, as well as anthropology, narratology, and sociology. The crux of such work focuses primarily on the

authors of the works and their motivations. In other words, they focus on the writers, not the writing itself. This is because fanfiction studies is, rightfully so, concerned with the fandom community and the effects of the practice for its members. However, in doing so, the study of fanfiction is limited to the social aspect of the writing, not the rhetorical implications of the work itself to the original text.

While studies at least try to examine fanfiction alongside literary conventions and traditions, current research steers clear of evaluating fanfiction based on aspects of the writing, the plot, or the characterization involved in the work (Davies; Dhaenens et. al.; Jenkins; Thomas). Genre conventions of fanfiction works deal with characterization and relationships, be they platonic, romantic, or sexual. But these genres are looked at mainly from the social implications for the fandom, not the effects of the writing itself (Thomas). In other words, fan affect trumps literary and rhetorical aspects. Fans interact and interpret the storyworlds they interact with, thus focusing on the text itself but “without understanding how it is being responded to and used by fans” much is left unexplained and unexplored (Thomas 5). In this project, I assert that queer fans utilize the subgenre of slash fanfiction to respond to the original text by queering the storyworld and its characters. If we are to take slash fanfiction seriously, with its potential for rhetorical avenues of study, it is not only important to look at what fans are doing with slash fanfiction, but to see what that usage does to the structures it touches—such as *The American Monomyth*.

The following sections work to paint a picture of what queerness is/isn't in order to identify just what exactly fans are doing when using slash fanfiction to queer the American Monomyth and the potential implications of doing so. It was important to me to start off broad in identifying what queerness—or lack thereof—fans are looking for, as well as illustrating how

heteronormativity is reliant on binaries. With this, I move toward a discussion of queering the superhero, both how it's done and its implication. Finally, I define the American Monomyth, how the structure exists within mainstream American culture, and how Captain America is a perfect example of the concept. All of this is done to cast a light on the relationship between the American Monomyth and Queerness, and what might happen when the heteronormative system of Monomyth is disrupted or, perhaps, redefined through slash fanfiction.

Binaries as Othering

Queerness is a perplexing idea. As a concept, it evokes different meanings depending on the space and place it is presented. To some, queerness is to embody an identity that exists beyond what culture has deemed hegemonic. Queerness, in its connotative sense, is a thing to *be* despite societal expectations—and oftentimes it means to be not straight. In this way, the concept is straightforward in its hegemonic understanding, but reality is seldom so simple. To merely say that queerness is to *not* be something feels insufficient, like one idea cannot exist without the other. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick rationalizes this association in the binary of heterosexual/queer, elucidating that the two are fundamentally linked and dependent of each other to have meaning (72). Perhaps because of this relationship, José Esteban Muñoz claims that “what we really know as queerness, does not yet exist” (22). In other words, queerness is a mystery because we do not know what it means without straightness. It is an ideality, clouded in the shadow of heterosexuality that regards anything and anyone who does not fit into its standards as an Other.

The struggle for those who are othered, then, is to find themselves in a world that erases them.⁴ Such a position hinders queer audiences in their ability to locate themselves as real,

⁴ Perhaps best seen in the ways queer fans have demanded for characters in film, television, literature, music, etc. to be queerer (Adventure Time, Supergirl, Merlin, Teen Wolf, etc.).

breathing, valid people in texts, media, and the world—especially in texts where representation is absent. Queerness, then, is a thing to be found. Something that we do not fully have but could. Further, it is that absence of representation that drives queer people in fandom to look between the lines. The act of writing slash fanfiction, then, is a response to a lack of authenticity—a way to insert queerness into texts where queerness cannot be found. To get what we do not yet have through the resistance of current canon constructions. This is done through the practice of queering, directly questioning the elements of a story that establish the heterosexual/queer binary and shifting what Jonathan Alexander and Jaqueline Rhodes call a “nexus of power” within that dynamic.

Queering as Action

In this method, queer becomes a verb. To queer something means to interrogate it, pull it apart, and look for places where gender and sexuality can be questioned. It’s a work of queer rhetoric that works to disrupt the hegemonic ideas of what is ‘normal’ in a text by creating counter-discourses, rerouting the currents of power to give voice and agency to marginalized audiences (Alexander and Rhodes; Lecker). By assembling traditionally marginalized identities onto existing characters, fans get to create a space where their identities matter in a more authentic way. This work is vital for marginalized groups to feel their lives are validated and worth living. Michael J. Lecker speaks to this need in explicating that “in order to survive in such a world where society is pressuring [queer people] to conform to heterosexuality, [queer people] must do queer readings in order to fight off negative stereotypes and interpret positive messages about their queer identities in the media” (680). In other words, queering is a way for queer readers to search for themselves and identify with figures that are more than caricatures. It is an act of yearning for more than what they are given—a yearning to feel seen and heard.

The work of queering is also utopian, a desire for a “place in time” where the queering does not have to be looked for within the binary, but be queerness for queerness’ sake. To put words to the yearning for a “a place in time,” Muñoz turns to ideas temporality in the naming of “straight time” and “queer time” (Muñoz 22). To Muñoz, straight time is the perpetuation of the hegemonic binary dynamic that “tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life” (22). In other words, straight time tells us that nothing can ever change, that the nexus of power will always tip toward heteronormativity. Queering characters in media subverts this positionality in straight time, transforming them into something that might look more authentic to the queer viewer. The shattering of that hegemony, in turn, is queer time, which is “essentially about the rejection of the here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (Muñoz 1). In effect, queering is the process through which we work toward queer time and the breaking of heteronormative constructions of queerness in media.

A strong example of the practice of queering is noticeable in the queering of the superhero, particularly that of the Marvel Cinematic Universe’s (MCU) Captain America, and the ways queering is done through the practice of slash fan fiction within sites such as *Archive of Our Own*. Queer fans appear to be resonating with Steve Rogers’ Captain America—as evidenced by his pairing with Bucky Barnes (*[podfic]Brooklyn; your favorite ghost*). Conversely, the queering of this specific superhero is worth exploring considering the figure’s place as the epitome of hegemonic masculinity and American patriotism. In queering Captain America, we are forced to question what we currently recognize as traditional masculinity, sexuality, and even heroism. More importantly, queering him forces us to interrogate his position as an American Monomyth and how he is reflective of and reflected by American culture.

Captain America as American Monomyth

For all intents and purposes, the American Monomyth is a blueprint for heroism and cultural identity. The structure is an outline for social identity which centralizes cultural ideals that are intrinsically connected to the American identity. In other words, it tells us what American heroism should be, ultimately using superheroes to do so. In their 1977 book *The American Monomyth*, Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence define the concept as:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil: normal institutions fail to content with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisaical condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity (Jewett and Lawrence, *American Monomyth* XX).

They further describe how the hero's journey, as an archetype, can be found in many stories throughout history that held figures like Hercules as an ideal that has been hugely influential in heroic texts and culture. They term the American Monomyth in its general sense, as they were denoting it for the first time. However, such a broad stroke of the term doesn't fit quite well in my research, as they don't specifically delineate what makes *superheroes* American Monomyths in their 1977 project. Luckily, in their 2002 book, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, the authors do delve into the specificities further in their elaboration:

The monomythic superhero is distinguished by *disguised origins*, *pure motivations*, a redemptive task, and extraordinary power. He *originates outside the community* he is called to save, and in those exceptional instances when he resides therein, the superhero plays the role of *idealistic loner*. His *identity is secret*, either by virtue of his unknown origins or his alter ego; his motivation is a selfless zeal for justice. By elaborate

conventions of restraint, his desire for revenge is purified. Patient in the face of provocations, he *seeks nothing for himself* and *withstands all temptations*. He *renounces sexual fulfillment* for the duration of the mission, and the purity of his motivations ensure his moral *infallibility* in judging persons and situations. (Jewett and Lawrence, *Myth of the Superhero* 47, emphasis added).

In this elaboration, Jewett and Lawrence pinpoint specific traits that elevate the superhero into an American Monomyth. They describe superheroes as selfless people with pure, idealistic motivations. They are loners who, by virtue of their position in society, renounce any romantic or sexual attachments. When seeing the MCU's Captain America as an American Monomyth, we can see many of these elements play out throughout the *Captain America* Trilogy. He is selfless and brave when fighting Nazis, loyal and righteous SHIELD was compromised, and he is forthright and idealistic when he leads the Avengers. Such qualities make him a hero—make him a good man.

We first meet Steve Rogers in a world at war, the Nazi regime of World War II functioning as the evil that threatens the character's environment. The film depicts Steve's rise as a hero to end the war. Throughout the first third of the movie, we witness Steve Rogers in his fruitless pursuit in joining the army and contributing to the cause in a tangible way. However, his selflessness, bravery, and persistence stand out, making him a candidate for the super soldier program; moreover, it's not his strength that sets him apart, but his *morals*. Queering him, in turn, challenges the perceived ways he upholds and represent his morals throughout his story as queering the American Monomyth complicates the nexus of power in traditional American values.

Fanfiction as Challenge

The American monomyth, as a structure, is intrinsically connected to the American experience. He represents the working class American and those who are brave, honorable, and resilient, a detail that makes Captain America not only an American Monomyth, but also an American Icon. He is the epitome of American manhood, and to be a man in America and, according to Michael Kimmel, is to be “a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power” (125). Such a position is what makes him an attractive character for queering. He’s the kind of male figure scholars like Antonio Thompson declare as “all things good and just and great about America” (118). Therefore, the American Monomyth’s nexus of power leans toward the heteronormative side of the heterosexual/queer binary. Describing it in Muñoz’s terms, it operates in straight time, telling us how to be Americans, who gets to have cultural capital, and who is deemed unimportant (Lang and Trimble). Captain America, as a symbol of national identity, tells us what means to be an ideal American—to be the kind of ‘normal’ Alexander and Rhodes speak of (Beyvers & Zitzelberger).

Naturally, queer people recognize their place within this nexus of power and, knowingly or unknowingly, the power dynamic between them and that of the Monomythic Captain America (Alexander and Rhodes; Beyvers and Zitzelberger; Grossberg; Jenkins; Mattia). Consequently, said recognition is also a motivator to challenge that dynamic, using slashfic to “gain a certain amount of control over their affective life” and shift who gets to have power and gain agency (Grossberg 65). They do so by inserting their own experiences onto the narrative with concepts such as coming out, losing their virginity, and navigating homophobic world, as seen in the fan works chosen for this thesis, like “[Podfic] Brooklyn” and “your favorite ghost” (Beyvers and Zitzelberger; Coppa; Davies; Grossberg). Slash Fanfiction, in this way, gives queer writers space

to write their identities—and themselves—*into* the narrative, using Captain America as the vehicle to carve space for themselves.

Further, I find importance in exploring what happens within that carved space. There is value in not simply seeing how queer people challenge that oppressive system through this practice, but what the practice does to the system. Jewett and Lawrence's definition of the American Monomyth is rooted in traditional American, protestant values, that pertain specifically to sex and sexuality. They must be pure, practice restraint, and renounce sexual fulfillment in order to retain their power and standing. And such power, according to the standard of the American Monomyth, must come at the cost of the hero's sexuality. So when queer slashfic writers use Captain America to navigate themes such as sexual orientation and sex, they do more than challenge the structure of American Monomyth—they turn back and directly subvert it.

Queering as Subversion

In Jewett and Lawrence's American Monomyth, "reality of sexual conflict and pain, the acknowledgement of sexual desires and identity, and the ceaseless need for maturation are dismissed" in favor of abstinence (62). They have no time for that kind of connection, requiring them to exist outside of their community as lonely, sexless beings. Subsequently, that renunciation, which is a consequence of his selfless acts as a hero, is a prominent theme in the MCU's Captain America. From his very first appearance in *Captain America: The First Avenger* film, Steve Rogers is so focused on fighting his battles that he dismisses or sets aside romantic attachments until the very end of his mission, serving as a motivator in the background.

For example, in *The First Avenger*, Steve feels a connection to Peggy Carter, but their relationship is never consummated, and he constantly missed the window to achieve such a

connection with her. This missed opportunity stays with him throughout the rest of his story in the MCU and is treated as a motivator for his actions. This theme is then repeated as his narrative continued in the two subsequent films, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Captain America Civil War*, as seen with his connections to Sharon Carter and, according to fans, Bucky Barnes. Further, it is in that window in canon that fans see room for queerness when reading the text.

As the canon doesn't portray him as a romantic or sexual being, queer fans utilize this omission to queer Steve Rogers' relationship with Bucky Barnes, determining their connection (Steve and Bucky) as the motivation for Steve's actions in place of Peggy Carter (Stanfield). This queering then becomes the baseline, or canon, from which queer slashfic writers create their own canon, as seen in the slash fanfiction stories selected for this thesis ([Podfic] Brooklyn; Scenes From a Marriage: Captain American at Home). In result, said stories explicitly determine and focus on romantic longing, sexuality, and sexual desire at the forefront of his motivations. It is a canon that works for the community, granting queer fans agency to see queerness as heroic.

However, when put in context with the original text, these slash fanfictions work—and the canon they establish—to complicate the original text's interpretation and the very foundations of its creation. By making his queered motivation the centerpiece of the character, the canon strays from the monomythic traits that shaped the original text and made him an American Monomyth. More specifically, that canon subverts his requirement to remain single, sexless, and selfless. Therefore, when looking back at the original text with the queered canon in these slash fanfiction stories, giving into his romantic and sexual desires makes him selfish and, by definition, no longer an American Monomyth.

In the study of slash fanfiction, current research in Fanfiction Studies tend to stop at the conclusion that the liminal space of slash fanfiction allows fan writers to explore their identities. They are given space to be themselves within the storyworlds they love, gaining agency and confidence in their place within the nexus of power from which the storyworld originates. Though, while these concepts and realization are true and good, that is where the conversation usually stops (Dhaenens et. al.; Gwenllian Jones; Thomas). We focus on the fan affect portion of what happens when writing slash fanfiction and forego looking back at the rhetorical implication of the practice to the objects they subvert. As such, I believe that by taking an objective, rhetorical turn back to the original text, there is potential for another layer of study to the practice of slash fanfiction writing. We must not simply observe how slash fanfiction writers write their identities and embodied lives *into* the canon, but how, in turn, they are writing back to the text (Booth, *Digital Fandom*; Thomas). Much can be learned from how the queered elements are deconstructed and reassembled in the queer writer's image. Such an inward look could yield new understanding of how slash fanfiction *works*, moving beyond simply identifying what the genre *gives* to the writer, but what their writing *does* to the text, its writer, and the foundations that give them meaning.

METHODOLOGY

My research consists of a queer rhetorical analysis, emphasizing the rhetorical nature of slash fanfiction. I do so by identifying what elements of canon the work is queering, followed by unveiling how said queering rhetorically navigates the nexus of power to create its own canon and, finally, returning to the original text to observe how the queering changed its structure. My method of a queer rhetorical analysis is informed by approaches to fan culture such as Lawrence Grossberg's *Maps of Mattering* and elements from Paul Booth's furthering of Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal concept of the carnivalesque. Both frameworks examine the self-reflexive nature of fandom and how affective spaces grant fans agency through collective intelligence. However, the theoretical lenses I use explicitly are José Esteban Muñoz's *Queer Time* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notions of Binaries, with a focus on investigating both how queering through slash fanfiction changes its composition, and how that change alters the text's meaning within its nexus of power.

I elected to use Lawrence Grossberg's ideas of maps of mattering as my primary framework for this analysis because it provides language concerning fan affect that I believe describes the ways in which the American Monomyth's power dynamics can be found. It is based on fan affect, encompassing the way the texts fans consume make them feel seen, heard, and understood—what makes them feel alive. Like this, fan affect can be objective, because no two fans will have the exact same interpretation of a text. On the other hand, Grossberg asserts that affect can be socially constructed, giving those with more cultural capital authority in deciding which interpretation is the most important, thus dictating how we, as viewers, are supposed to see a text. Grossberg describes such a dynamic with the model of a map, describing fans' persistent effort to organize fan interpretations into a hierarchy, dictating what elements of

a text matter, how they matter, and who they serve. In effect, these complicated, organized yet always at odds maps of mattering resemble the American Monomyth.

In my view, it is in the yearning for such a feeling that motivates queer fans to carve their identities into the narrative they love in order to construct their identities and embodied lives within a narrative. They do so by using the metaphorical image of a map in an attempt to create a stable identity and find a place where queer people “temporally, find [themselves] ‘at home’” within the storyworlds they care so deeply about (Grossberg 60). It is here, then, where we can see the yearning for queer time, queer fans challenging the nexus of power of American Monomythic maps in various ways, such as writing slash fanfiction.

With this in mind, I also make use of elements from Paul Booth’s perspective on Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque, complimenting Maps of Mattering as it speaks more to the effect of the social aspect of the practice. Booth views slash fanfiction writing as a subversive practice that disrupts cultural expectations and destabilizes the power held by longstanding hierarchies (or binaries). In particular, Booth defines intertextuality, which examines texts not as individual works, “but rather as links in a chain of interrelated and interconnected meanings”—like a map (Booth, *Digital Fandom* 59). Slash fanfiction writing, in this regard, can be seen as a community endeavor—perhaps even giving shape to a queered canon with collective intelligence.

Further, Booth’s view focuses on the intertextual nature of the fanfiction platform where the slash fanfiction works live, which in the case for this thesis, is *Archive of Our Own*. Within such a space, the comments section becomes a means for writer-reader connection, and the writing functioning as an object and subject for the community to discuss. Booth also delineates six qualities of the carnivalesque that platforms offer: self-reflexivity, organization, direct

address, meta-knowledge, lucidity, and recursive expansion (Booth, *Digital Fandom* 65-75). Albeit all six of these qualities can be found within and around the comments section of each piece, my analysis focuses on three of the qualities: self-reflexivity, lucidity, and meta-knowledge. Specifically, self-reflexivity entails the relationship between (and referencing of) individual elements within the same text; lucidity spotlights the playfulness of the practice that takes place through said texts; and meta-knowledge refers to one's familiarity with the original text's canon (Booth, *Digital Fandom*). These three qualities, in my eyes, work well to evaluate what kind of agency the comments section provides to queer fans, writers, and readers alike.⁵ All of this in an effort to give space to illuminate what challenging the American Monomyth with slash fanfiction writing potentially gives both the author and the community that consumes their work.

Moreover, I make use of Lawrence Grossberg's theory as a lens for how I will apply José Esteban Muñoz's concept on Queer Time and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ideas of Binaries to queer the three fanfiction works chosen to determine what elements exactly they are queering, and the potential consequences of such works for the structures (or maps) that give them meaning. Additionally, I utilize Paul Booth's advancement of the Carnavalesque so as to ascertain what slash fanfiction writing might offer to the queer writer by inspecting the comments section of the works for community reaction and reception. Thus, in this project, I don't simply analyze what fans are doing when queering the American Monomyth, but also how the subversive act of writing slash fanfiction provides affective sensibility to queer writers to feel included and seen in the media they consume. And taking it further, I also observe the effect of

⁵ The comments I chose for this study were only altered for length and sentence structure; word choice was not altered as to maintain the authenticity, emotion, and original intent of the posts.

the act on the original text's interpretation—and thus, the construction of the American Monomyth.

I chose Captain America as the Monomythic character of study because of his history as a representative of the American dream.⁶ Superheroes like Captain America are situated within a “web of specific relations of time and space,” meaning that they define an age (Beyvers and Zitzelberger 7). The character was created with the intention of being a propaganda piece and a success story, growing from a poor, scrawny kid that just wanted to serve his country to a fearless leader dressed in red, white, and blue. His history is one of inspiration as, “the metamorphosis of Steve Rogers into Captain America represented human triumph over nature; anything is possible in America, given enough desire, ambition, and just plain hard work” (Macdonald and Macdonald 250). Therefore, as a symbol of American nationalism, the construction of the character is categorically a heterosexual one and queering him makes his assemblage become a string of contradictions.

If an American Icon is queered, we are challenged to interrogate, reassess, and redefine the elements that build the symbol itself. Henceforth, choosing him as the subject for this thesis proved to be beneficial, as his status as both a national symbol allowed me to clearly identify the American Monomythic traits chosen for this study: Selflessness and Sexual Renunciation. Using Sedgwick's concept of binaries, I denoted a binary of Monomythic Captain America/Queer Steve Rogers which operated similarly to the heterosexual/queer binary in order to identify how the monomythic traits of selflessness and sexual renunciation in three slash fanfiction stories

⁶ In addition, I chose Captain America because of his connection to the hegemonic masculinity of American culture (Lang and Trimble; Macdonald and Macdonald). Also, slash fanfiction is a genre that confronts the foundations and limitations of masculinity by subverting gender roles (Booth, “Slash and porn”; Jenkins). Further, while a queer rhetorical analysis can be performed on female American Monomythic characters, such a study would have to involve concern such as the male gaze and the fetishism of female slash pairings in fandom, elements that were outside of the scope of my research (Gwenllian Jones).

shifts the binary's nexus of power. The three works chosen were acquired from the fanfiction site *Archive Of Our Own* for both its easy tagging system and co-creator Francesca Coppa's intention of making the platform accessible and equitable (15). They were required to be set in the MCU and to align with the MCU canon, but ultimately this kind of exploration demanded canon divergence.⁷ Thus, the pieces for this study include elements and themes from the MCU films canon but live outside of that canon in order to make Steve Rogers' sexual orientation a motivator for the plot.

Because I am examining Steve Rogers' queerness in relation to his pairing with his best friend, Bucky Barnes, I filtered through the "Steve Rogers/Bucky Barnes" tag in the site's search system. As a grand total, there are over 114,504 pieces within the tag with dozens more added every day.⁸ As I could not sift through all of them, I utilized more specific search options in the site's advanced search feature, eliminating any elements that were too far off canon.⁹ After surveying hundreds of stories, I ultimately chose three pieces that I felt elucidated what I aimed to do with this study, which was to examine what occurs to the American Monomyth when its hegemonic functions are shifted through queering the narrative with the binary of Monomythic Captain America/Queer Steve Rogers.

Both "your favorite ghost" and "Scenes From a Marriage: Captain America At Home" are a part of the "4 Minute Window" series, which spans over 17 stories featuring works from

⁷ I elected to use the MCU, filmic iteration of Captain America over the comics version for three reasons: 1) The character and his specific story are both prominent in mainstream media and easier to consume in its entirety. 2) An overwhelming grand majority of the pieces I found on *Archive of Our Own* were set in the MCU, meaning that queer fans are homing onto the mainstream version of the character. 3) One of the bases, or examples, of fans wanting Steve Roger's Captain America to be queer is Stansfield's 2017 article "No, Really Give Captain America A Boyfriend," which discusses queer fan's dissatisfaction regarding the MCU's lack of queer representation—and why Steve Rogers was a missed opportunity.

⁸ I opted for this specific tag because it houses the most slashfic pieces compared to other tags (i.e. Steve Rogers & Bucky Barnes, Captain America/Bucky Barnes, James "Bucky" Barnes/Steve Rogers).

⁹ Among them were genres such as, Dom/Sub dynamics, High School/College AUs, Zombies, etc.

seven different writers. The first story of the series, “your favorite ghost” was published in 2014; and “Scenes From A Marriage: Captain America At Home” Chapter seven, December 14” is part of the 16th story of the series, published in 2019. I chose these stories specifically because they are part of a series, as well as represent two different stages in Steve Rogers’ life and his struggle with his identity as both Captain America/Steve Rogers. Throughout the narratives, Steve is confronted by his sense of duty as Captain America and his desire to be happy with Bucky, exploring conflicts with his position, his loyalty, and his capacity to be a sexual being. Further, the stories interestingly treat Captain America more as a symbol and title rather than intrinsically connected to Steve, allowing Steve to pass on the mantle and retire to be with Bucky—which serves as an example of the Monomythic Captain America/Queer Steve Rogers dynamic’s shifting power toward the Queer Steve Rogers.

The third piece chosen, “[Podfic] Brooklyn,” was published in 2018 and is a slash fanfiction delivered through an audio modality.¹⁰ I chose this narrative because it completely subverted the conflict depicted in the other three pieces, making Steve Rogers and Captain America synonymous, as well as making his sexual orientation a quality that enhances his capacity to be fulfill the duties of an American Monomyth, becoming a source of inspiration rather than weakness within the story. Thus, making queerness a strength potentially reveals slash fanfiction as an agent of change that perhaps makes space for queer people to exist—to make queerness matter.

In the following sections, I will summarize and perform a queer rhetorical analysis of the three slash fanfiction pieces chosen for this study. I move through each piece individually and approach each analysis with the binary of Monomythic Captain America/Queer Steve Rogers in

¹⁰ As my project focused on a queer rhetorical analysis of the content of three pieces, a study based the on modality/delivery of the pieces chosen was out of the scope of my research.

mind, interrogating to what degree each piece subverts the monomythic traits of selflessness and sexual renunciation. In addition, I utilize the carnivalesque qualities of self-reflexivity, lucidity, and meta-knowledge in a discussion of the effects of said writing on the writer and the community that consumes it within the comments section. Lastly, I move toward a discussion of the findings of this analysis' specific implications for the structure of the American Monomyth as we hegemonically know it.

ANALYSYS

A scene from a slash fanfiction,

The shield falls to the ground with a resounding clang. It sounds so much heavier than it is—just like it feels so much heavier than it is, as if it’s imbued with the very weight of a nation’s expectations, and standards too impossible to achieve. The noise of the vibranium as it slams into the concrete is swift—finite, and contained, and the dead silence that follows is akin to a quiet void. Like the closing of a door, it does not echo—it simply *is*. It sounds wrong, but Captain America is too exhausted to care (Mellaithwen).

Fanfiction, as a genre, is all about character exploration. It’s about asking, ‘what if?’ What if the character made different choices? What if they were a werewolf? What if they encountered zombies? What if the hero was the villain instead? *What if they were queer?* In the liminal space of slash fanfiction, fans get to take the characters they love and unearth sides of them that the canon cannot realize (Brooker; Thomas). For example, Mellaithwen’s slash fanfiction, “let the memory be good (for those who stay),” serves as a direct response to the ending of *Captain America: Civil War*, diving deeper into Steve’s thought process at the end of the film when he lets go of the shield and the emotional turmoil that followed. It’s a deeply introspective story that gives the reader a perspective that the canon could not offer—as well as ending romantically by connecting Steve and Bucky. It is an act of love and “an essential part of the process by which the characters are expanded and made epic, loved by their fans into greatness” (Coppa 5). What makes Captain America great to fans isn’t necessarily what he stands for, but what we read as his motivations.

While the Marvel Cinematic Universe’s *Captain America* trilogy follows Steve Rogers as he deals with world-threatening events and political turmoil, the franchise’s focus is on his

relationship with Bucky Barnes. In the MCU canon, the relationship between Steve and Bucky is described as a brotherly love though through the eyes of queer fans, their relationship is deeper.¹¹ In many slash fanfiction narratives, Steve's queerness, as well as his romantic affection and sexual desire for Bucky are what motivates him to *become* a hero, viewing his actions throughout the *Captain America* franchise to be *about* Bucky, *for* Bucky, and *because of* Bucky. Consequently, it is in this queering of Steve Rogers's motivations where his position as an American Monomyth comes into question.

As the crux of my queer rhetorical analysis, I designate a difference between the American Monomythic Captain America that represents the hegemonic, selfless hero he is supposed to be, and the Queer Steve Rogers he that is rejected. And as is the nature of binaries, he cannot be both. To make Steve Rogers' actions be *about* and *for* Bucky throughout the narrative would mean that his motivations are not pure, becoming selfish as opposed to having the "selfless zeal for justice" that the American Monomyth calls for (Jewett and Lawrence, *Myth of the Superhero*, 47). In that same way, to declare Steve and Bucky's relationship to be romantic and sexual in nature directly challenges the idea of a hero that "seeks nothing for himself," "withstands all temptations," and "renounces sexual fulfillment" (Jewett and Lawrence, *Myth of the Superhero*, 47). In this conversation, he becomes a bundle of contradictions, so it is in this incongruence where the construction of the American Monomyth itself can be challenged.

The "4 Minute Window" Series

The "4 Minute Window" series is a fan group project consisting of 17 multi-chapter works with its first project published in January 2015, and its most recent published in April 2021. The series is written by seven fan writers who all contribute to the ever-growing narrative

¹¹ Additionally, I believe there is a conversation that could be had centered on the concept of queerbaiting here.

on *Archive of Our Own*. The series directly centers on Steve Roger's journey with struggling to be Captain America because of his concerns for Bucky as he wrestles with the brainwashing from being The Winer Soldier. Such worries shake his temperament and focus, affecting his ability to perform his duties as Captain America—even creating distrust among his fellow Avengers. When the two do reunite, he is forced to recognize his feelings for Bucky and acknowledge his queerness. Consequently, throughout the series' progression, Steve Rogers deals with his identity as a selfish hero, as a queer man, as a partner, and as a sexual being. Be it by circumstance, a homophobic culture, or simply a personal feeling, his ability to embody and fully perform the duties of and *be* an American Monomyth is threatened—exemplifying a clear dominance of the Monomythic Captain America over the Queer Steve Rogers.

“your favorite ghost”

The first work in the series, “your favorite ghost”, was written by augustbird and published in 2014. Set shortly after the events of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, the story centers around Steve's incessant determination to find Bucky and bring him home. Interestingly, the narrative shifts between the past and the present, highlighting the ways in which the two are piecing their memories together in order to understand who they were before and who they are to each other at the present moment. Their relationship operated as a cycle, the two meeting by happenstance, spending time getting to know each other again, identifying a fervent longing for each other that neither understood, and Bucky leaving when emotions became too intense. Each time his friend came back into his life, he became increasingly distracted and at odds with his fellow avengers as he prioritized his emerging feelings for Bucky over his mission. Yet, every time Bucky departed from his life, Steve stepped back into his role as Captain America

seamlessly. Therefore, the power dynamic set by the narrative posits Captain America and Steve Rogers are deemed separate entities.

Like this, “your favorite ghost” depicts Steve’s slow descent from the title of Captain America to simply being Steve Rogers—his fall from grace—and no longer American Monomyth. This shift can most explicitly be seen in the climax of the story, the night in which their cycle was broken as Steve openly, desperately, selfishly pleaded for Bucky *to stay for him*. What followed was a soft, defiant moment that culminated in Bucky initiating a kiss, one that Steve reciprocated earnestly as the two finally leaned into their unspoken romantic yearning and sexual desire for each other.

Steve and Bucky proceed to spend the night together, consummating their relationship amidst a string of declarations of love they never fathomed to admit. It is here where disclosed that Steve had never had sex until that night, a fact that quickly changes as Steve reflects:

If [he] could rewrite their story, he would write it this way: a too small apartment in Brooklyn, no war. Afternoon sunlight coming in through the windows. Bucky, stretched out on the bed, the sheets bunched up around his bare chest. An arm held out, a smile on his face and low voice just for Steve. "Come to bed." If Steve could rewrite their story, they would already be dead, curled around each other in the same grave (augustbird).

From then on, Steve recognizes, acknowledges, and decides to pursue his feelings for Bucky, a choice that required him to choose between his two identities, as he could not be both. The story ends with Steve and Bucky reuniting one final time after Steve decided to walk away from the moniker, a narrative choice with implications to the larger storyworld canon we will never see, all left to the interpretation.

By taking place shortly after *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, this story is wedged into a time in the MCU canon where Captain America is needed perhaps more than ever. He is a symbol of hope in unprecedented crisis, such as the fall of SHIELD, and is often part of the resolve for such emergencies.¹² Further, as the leader of The Avengers, he is required to be a voice of reason and of sound mind and focused on the team's holistic goals in their mission to eliminate Hydra. Such responsibility is not a something he takes lightly, foregoing the pursuit of a personal life and his search for Bucky. Such selfless sacrifices are requirements of The American Monomyth, the burdens the hero must face in order to keep the world safe.

Consequently, when weighing this story in relation to the binary of Monomythic Captain America/Queer Steve Rogers, augustbird's "*your favorite ghost*" becomes a story about selfishness. The author chose issues intersecting identities as a main conflict, as seen through the ways Steve struggled more and more every time he reunited with Bucky. In so forth, the *text* itself treated this conflict as a negative, calling him selfish for pursuing the things that he might want out of his life. While Steve ended up making a selfish choice, it is only the narrative that deems it wrong.

To a reader, this story could be about defiance. It's an example of how a fan writer and their meta-knowledge of the original text can posit how a story would change if the character made different choices, especially ones the original text's canon does not. It is stories such as augustbird's that tap into queer fans' affective sensibility, giving queer readers new ways through which to challenge the original text. In addition, because the story is housed in the platform *Archive of Our Own*, fans are given the opportunity to also respond and create dialogue about the work in its comments section.

¹² i.e. The battle of New York, the fall of SHIELD, the Battle of Sokovia, etc.

Seven years after its publication, “your favorite ghost” has amassed approximately 635 comments, ranging from its publication date in 2014 to as recently as June 2021. In the 24 pages of comments, readers share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences while reading the slashfic. For example, many commentors discussed queer narrative tropes found in mainstream and other slash fanfiction pieces on the platform, specifically expressing their relief when the story had a happy ending. But what truly intrigued me about this particular comment section was the way the carnivalesque qualities of self-reflexivity and meta-knowledge manifested. The main conversation that I observed this taking place within the comments section involved the characterization of Steve and Bucky, mainly how believable they were when compared to their MCU iteration. Similarly, I was intrigued by the praise given to augustbird for the care in the portrayal given to themes such as identity and trauma recovery compared to other slash fanfiction works.

An example of such a comment comes from user M_Leigh on April 28, 2014:

... I've been pretty frustrated with a lot of post-CATWS fic thus far - a lot of it just hasn't felt like it properly deals with or appreciates the severity of what's been done to Bucky, and/or just how fucked up Steve is/would be about it, so when you add that to the standard pile of well written/plotted/etc. it's been... an uphill climb, shall we say. This is easily one of the best long post-movie fics I've read (...) (M_Leigh).

M_Leigh responds to the slashfic with a lucidic tone, expressing their opinion on how other writers on the platform approach their own writing. In other words, the commenter uses their meta-knowledge of the text to then self-reflexively evaluate what writers are doing with the space slash fanfiction gives them. This particular subversion of the canon text can be seen

throughout the rest of the “4 Minute Window” series, where readers hone in on the relationship between the characters and the consequences of their choices.

Whenever faced with choosing between being Captain America or Steve Rogers, he ultimately steps down from the role because he’d rather lose the role than lose Bucky. He gives himself the chance to act on his feelings instead of living in the closet— though a decision that, according to the traits of the American Monomyth, is still seen as a selfish act. But commenters like princesscharmingx express that, while “the decisions that Steve made might not make sense to most people” they are still in character and stories like augustbird’s “your favorite ghost” make a reader “believe they were the right decisions” and a fundamental part of his character. Here is where queer writers reinterpret Steve’s motivations, maintaining the view of his selfishness to be pure and a form of love. Here is where slash fanfiction makes room for a world where “steve is selfish enough to say yes [to his desires and] destroys what he is because he can’t help it” and instead finds strength in his love for Bucky (radialarch). All of this, in turn, posits his selfishness into a good thing regardless of the cost.

“Scenes From A Marriage: Captain America At Home”

By the 16th installment of the series five years later, “Scenes From A Marriage: Captain America At Home”, specifically chapter seven: “December 14” published by alby_mangroves and Speranza in 2019, Steve did exactly what readers like radialarch wanted out of the story.¹³ Throughout the narrative, Steve became someone “selfish enough to say yes” to personal wants and desires, seeing as he has officially retired (radialarch). Here, the separation of the identities of Captain America and Steve Rogers is more prominent. The mantle of Captain America, now

¹³ “Scenes From A Marriage: Captain America At Home” is a multichapter narrative written by five authors: alby_mangroves, lim, Lunate8, RevolutionaryJo, and Speranza. Yet, in this analysis I am focusing on chapter 7: “December 14,” which was specifically written by alby_mangroves and Speranza, because the events of the chapter explicitly and directly subvert sexual renunciation in a way other chapters/works I read did not.

considered an objective title, has passed down to Sam Wilson. So, when weighing this story and chapter within the Monomythic Captain America/Queer Steve Rogers dynamic, the piece blatantly and immediately favors the Queer Steve Rogers.



Figure 1 - _artgroves_. “Steve & Bucky: Bucky’s golden globes version.” *Archive of Our Own*, 24 December 2019

In chapter seven of this slashfic, written by alby_mangroves and Speranza we meet Steve and Bucky further along in their relationship, the two having been married for years and they live in their old apartment in Brooklyn. Albeit they are still struggling with self-identity and guilt, they live happily as open queer men. Interestingly, the narrative finally treats these facts as good, focusing on Steve and Bucky’s love as the source of strength, as “Steve had saved [Bucky] by being queer and totally unembarrassed about”

(alby_mangroves and Speranza). In this way, the

chapter can be read as a celebration of that love, with themes of indulgence and reward driving the narrative.

Fittingly, alby_mangroves and Speranza employ these themes by centering on an intimate, character driven moment where Steve and Bucky have sex. Further, along with the explicit written text, alby_mangroves and Speranza also include an art piece (see fig 1) giving a direct visual of the erotic romantic scene, highlighting the intensity and tenderness of their relationship. This is apparent in the chapter itself when Bucky:

took him to bed and then took him apart, laying across him. He took his time, devoting himself to it in a way he'd been embarrassed to do back in the '30s. Back then, he'd felt compelled to pretend that it was half a joke, this—not motivated by his deepest desires and profoundest feelings; lust, love (alby_mangroves and Speranza).

That same moment grants Steve the opportunity to indulge in intimacy, with Bucky vowing to “love Steve as hard as he could, which was only a fraction of what Steve deserved” because “Steve had been sincere enough about their love affair for the both of them” (alby_mangroves and Speranza). Like so, the authors frame this erotic moment as a reward for his sincerity that gives Steve permission to indulge in what he has earned—even at the cost of being Captain America. In this way, “Scenes From A Marriage: Captain America At Home” is a slashfic that directly and lovingly celebrates the Queer Steve Rogers, honing in on his sincerity, love, and bravery as a form of strength that saved Bucky in a way the Monomythic Captain America could not. Though what I consider most important in this story is, not simply in the *fact* that Steve’s queerness is celebrated, but in the way alby_mangroves and Speranza do so by making Steve Rogers a sexual being.

Erotic scenes are common within slash fanfiction works, written for both pleasure and as vehicles to create authentic representations of queer relationships (Gwenllian Jones).¹⁴ It centers itself in the grotesque nature of the carnivalesque, creating a space for fans play with the narrative using sex to make queerness both visible and validated. Thus, sex is an implicit, and sometimes expected phenomenon within slash fanfiction that has the capacity to queer fans’

¹⁴ Scholars like Henry Jenkins implore that, while scenes like these are taboo and indulgent, “slash is not so much about sex as it is a genre about the limitations of traditional masculinity and about reconfiguring male identity”. (291). Thus, pieces such as “Scenes From A Marriage: Captain America At Home” are the result of the subversion of gender roles within slashfic, which gives queer fans the agency to queer canon narratives even further (Booth, “Slash and porn”; Jenkins; Gwenllian Jones).

affective desires shamed by heteronormative culture (Booth, “Slash and porn”; Davies; Jones; Sedgwick). Moreover, all this can be explicitly seen within “Scenes From A Marriage: Captain America At Home” chapter seven’s comment section.

Within the slashfic’s 68 comments, there are various reactions to both the erotic text and the image.¹⁵ By and large queer readers approach said texts for a variety of affective reasons. For example, some might focus on the graphic and say “[this is] filthy in the best possible way” (Fullmetalcarer), and others might elucidate how the chapter was “so beautiful and truly intimate” (Honkytonkgirl) and focus on the romantic focus of the piece. Yet, once more all comments come with a lucidic tone of praise. Uniquely, users in this comments sections seem to engage in self-reflexivity in a more lucidic way, focusing on how they interpreted the scene and image, praising it, and then furthering their own opinion about both the interaction and the way Steve and Bucky’s relationship is depicted.

One such comment comes from user Zacharypay1_Alisa on December 15, 2019:

Filthy with emotion - I love it!! The ART IS GORGEOUS, omg! You can’t tell where one starts and the other ends, they’re as physically close as two people can be... loved Bucky being so overwhelming in love, that he gets to take Steve apart like this now, when back before he didn’t really show his sincerity as much as Steve did... doesn’t matter now, they know how much the other loves him, after all they’ve been through... I’m looking forward to more! Thanks so much for writing! I really appreciate it!

(Zacharypay1_Alisa).

¹⁵ In regard to the image, it is important to note that alby_mangroves and Speranza use the likeness of Chris Evans and Sebastian Stan in the fanart, which is a result of the piece being a subversion of the filmic iteration of the characters. Though this use of carnivalesque—meta-knowledge specifically—in queering the MCU canon is beyond the scope of my research, it is definitely a fruitful avenue for future projects.

Zacharypay1_Alisa's response to the slashfic is a perfect example of the self-reflexivity and affective interaction that occurs within these comments sections. First they comment on the piece as a whole by noting how they loved how it was "filthy with emotion," a descriptor many commentors used in regard to the piece. This is followed by praise of the art itself along with giving their own interpretation, and engaging in a sort of lucidic, affective play as they refer back to their meta-knowledge of the MCU canon for context with "after everything they've been through..."(Zacharypay1_Alisa). Consequentially comparing this iteration of the characters to that of the original text

Still, what I found most significant in this comment was how, after giving their piece, Zacharypay1_Alisa expressed both gratitude to alby_mangroves and Speranza for having written the piece and their interest for more of their writing. This is an instance of community, implying that they will return to read more of the author's content as they are interested in the storyworld they have created and the canon they have delineated—that this is a story that matters to them.¹⁶ It is in this way that queer fans utilize the space provided by fanfiction to find each other and create community as they do the hard work of subverting the original text, becoming a cycle of subversion, play, and affective sensibility in the practice of slash fanfiction.

All in all, the "4 Minute Window" series explored Steve and Bucky's relationship in introspective and character-driven ways. The authors made Steve Rogers into a person who made personal, although admittedly selfish, decisions that leaned into his authentic self as a queer man. This depiction was both supported and praised by readers whom, from 'your favorite ghost' to chapter seven of "Captain America At Home: Scenes From A Marriage", viewed Steve's ascent into queerness as a good thing despite its consequences. Thus, value can be found in Steve's

¹⁶ There is more to be said about the level of comfort between users as they write and consume erotic slashfic, perhaps even by virtue of anonymity, but that is also for a future project.

journey of self-discovery that, throughout a narrative as long as the “4 Minute Window” series, can take the reader along with him.

Moreover, a queer rhetorical analysis using the binary of Monomythic Captain America/Queer Steve Rogers reveals that, while slashfics such as these are defiant in the face of heteronormative hegemony, they still do so within the constraints of the heterosexual/queer binary. Although the series challenges both Steve Rogers’s monomythic selflessness and sexual renunciation, they did not do so to Captain America. Steve’s queerness was a means of defiance, something to be celebrated in allowing him to be selfish and indulge in being a sexual being through letting him have his reward for his deeds of Captain America. But it was that very indulgence and reward that triggered Steve’s fall from monomythic status. However, at every turn, Steve Rogers had to make a choice to either be Captain America or be queer—and as per the narrative, he could not be both. Henceforth, here is where we can see the somewhat totalizing nature of the heterosexual/queer binary’s nexus of power—and thus, the American Monomyth.

Superheroes are supposed to be about possibility, about anyone being able to stand tall holding everything they are firmly and confidently. But too many times, the othering caused by binaries perpetuate a system that make superheroes inaccessible to queer fans, casting them to the side. And on that sideline is the yearning for queer time, for a world that does not yet exist, for there to be no time at all. For there to be no binaries that tell us who to be or make us choose. Yet, even our proposed methods of subversion sometimes fall short because we are still viewing the world—viewing Captain America/Steve Rogers—as an either/or. Slash fanfiction queers him with the intent to subvert and make him look a little bit more like us—so we, too, be righteous, brave, and good. The “4 Minute Window” series is a celebration of Steve Rogers as a queer man,

whose queerness is good, and he gets to have what Monomyth requires him forego. But doing so means having to stop being a hero—thus perpetuating the system it’s trying to subvert.

But for as many works like this series, there are others that approach the construction of Monomythic Captain America/Queer Steve Rogers differently. There are other stories that construct their maps of mattering differently, taking different approaches to the original text. While the “4 Minute Window” series explored Steve’s struggle with hiding his queerness in an either/or, stories like [Podfic]Brooklyn imagine what might happen when he’s not put in that situation at all. It’s hard to overcome a system when the system is all we know, but fans keep trying, knowing there is room to imagine a world where Steve Rogers/Captain America can—and should—have it all.

[Podfic]Brooklyn

Published in 2018, “[Podfic]Brooklyn” is a slash fanfiction delivered through the format of a podcast—which *Archive Of Our Own* calls ‘podfic’.¹⁷ Narrated by EvilDime, the story begins mere moments following the events of the 2012 film, *The Avengers*, where the team is hosting a press conference after the Battle of New York. This is the first time the public learns about the heroes—particularly the resurgence of Steve Rogers after his disappearance in 1945. In result, Steve is asked many questions concerning the circumstances of his survival, as well as his opinions on how American culture has changed.

A direct question turned his way made the public, as well as the other Avengers, pause: “Captain America, what’s your stance on gay marriage?” There is a pause, a breath taken, and Steve proceeds to not only share that he supports same-sex unions, but also comes out to the

¹⁷ The delivery of the piece was outside the scope of my research, though I do see an interesting avenue to take in a future project: a study of the multimodality of the piece according to Booth’s view of the carnivalesque quality of organization (*Digital Fandom*).

world. In his disclosure he doesn't label himself, he simply shares his sexual orientation by declaring that he had been in love with Bucky his entire life—a fact the public honed into as the two apparent star-crossed lovers became the subject of feature films, fandom, and queer history. In this same manner, Captain America became a queer icon. Rather than face rampant homophobia, America embraced him. In result, Steve Rogers became a figure of great importance to the queer community because of his visibility as a hero—as an American Monomyth. In result, he served as representation of the queer community and an inspiration for all Americans, queer or otherwise.

What is most interesting about this story is how, while his public queerness made him a cultural phenomenon, this is simply the setting of the narrative. The conflict and, in turn, the plot catches up to the events of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. Here, Steve is not only required to navigate the complications of Bucky coming back into his life but is also tasked with finally sharing his feelings. In result, he does everything he can to shelter Bucky from the outside world, because he wasn't ready to explain himself or how their relationship influenced queer culture. In this way, Steve's conflict isn't whether or not he can be queer, or whether or not he has to make such a choice. Instead, his task is to find the strength to share his feelings.

One of the most important parts in the story is when, instead of turning inward in his conflict, he turns toward the queer community that has embraced him. He finds comfort and strength in solidarity with queer people as fundamentally understands what and who he is to them. This is especially seen at the Brooklyn parade where Steve Rogers, or Captain America, or both, serves as grand marshal and speaks to the crowd:

I didn't know what true bravery was before [being part of the queer community]. I thought it meant running toward bullets or leaping off airplanes, standing up to bullies

around the world. But all of you here have the courage to be who you are (...) All of you have the courage to be yourselves, even when it means losing people you don't want to live without. You have the courage to reach out and love, to speak when silence is the only assurance that you won't be alone. I am grateful for your successes. I am honored by your solidarity and by the trials that you faced so I can stand here today (EvilDime).

Here, his coming out isn't selfish or indulgent. Queerness is not a source of contention, shame, or a crisis of identity—it's just a fact. Even further, it becomes a source of power for not only the community, but also *himself*. In the end, naturally, Bucky does in fact reciprocate his feelings, leading to a very happy ending. Even then, what makes “[Podfic]Brooklyn” unique and powerful isn't the love story, but the implication that Captain America and Steve Rogers are one and the same. Steve did not have to change or give up anything to keep the role. Instead, his queerness increased his ability to represent a community authentically.

Moreover, “[Podfic]Brooklyn” is the kind of utopian world that Muñoz would call queer time because he isn't an either/or. He can be both the Monomythic Captain America and the Queer Steve Rogers, the power of both even complimenting the other. Consequently, while this story is pleasant and utopian, it is particularly, forcefully subversive of what The American Monomyth *is* and *can be*. Being both/and should be impossible, but the story seems to not only reject that notion but push it forward into a more inclusive and kinder American Monomyth with queerness at the forefront—making it become something new. Something that I posit as The Queer American Monomyth.

DISCUSSION

A scene from a slash fanfiction:

“Steve had saved him from himself by resolutely ignoring his bullshit and never once calling him on it: never calling him frightened, or weak, or a coward, although he was all three. Steve had saved him by jumping down into this trench right along with him, just as he'd followed him into war and rescued him even though it meant going all the way into the teeth of the fucking Nazis. Steve had saved him by being queer and totally unembarrassed about it, in that totally pigheaded way Steve had about things sometimes. Steve had been sincere enough about their love affair for the both of them.”

(alby_mangroves and Speranza)

In my view, the most critical thing about the American Monomyth is that, by design, it's meant to change as the world around it changes. As our culture's worldviews and needs shift, so must the structure that denotes what it means to have power within that changed world. Similarly, Captain America, as American Monomythic figure, is also supposed to metamorphosize and change as America changes—to represent American patriotism as our national consciousness (Beyvers and Zitzelberger; Macdonald and Macdonald). Yet, even as America has inevitably changed in the 44 years since Jewett and Lawrence coined the definition—and definitely since Captain America's creation in the 1940s—the structure of the American Monomyth has remained the same. Thus, it is this incongruence in change which creates a hazardous structure that both shapes and assigns power to the binaries that perpetuate oppressive systems for individuals with minority identities

With its foundation of traditional 20th century values, the American Monomyth's nexus of power leans toward the heteronormative side of the heterosexual/queer binary. Therefore, the

American Monomyth is a function of straight time, telling us who to be in American culture in order to gain cultural capital (Lang and Trimble). Like so, this structure, with its rigid, traditional nexus of power has little to no room for change or diversity, thus setting clear divisions of who has power and who does not. Conversely, through the queer rhetorical analysis of the three slash fanfiction iterations of Captain America conducted in this project, we are able to see that the structure of the American Monomyth is *not* monolithic.

The queer rhetorical analysis of this project involved observing how three slash fanfiction pieces navigated the power dynamic of a Monomythic Captain America/Queer Steve Rogers binary. Observing how the queer slashfic writers integrated queerness into the plot highlighted how slash fanfiction sites like *Archive of Our Own* provide queer fans, writers, and readers alike, a space to find validation of their identities through writing back to the original text. In writing back, queer fans get to explore how queerness might affect the original text's storyworld by deconstructing character motivations with their affective needs in mind—which, in the case for this project, was for Steve and Bucky to be together.

Ultimately, this rhetorical analysis revealed how queering the character's motivations drastically reorients the Monomythic Captain America/Queer Steve Rogers binary away from an either/or and into a both/and. In such a space, Steve Rogers' Captain America is given permission to be motivated by his love for Bucky, and to let that love become a source of strength as he goes on to fulfill his duty as Captain America more authentically. In equaling that nexus of power—in it not tipping any way or the other—he doesn't have to choose between his identities, because there's no choice to make.

Queering Steve Rogers' Captain America, in short, destabilizes his position as an American Monomyth as Jewett and Lawrence would define it. Instead, queering him reorients

his purpose and reassembles him into what I would call a Queer American Monomyth. Further, using Jewett and Lawrence's definition in *Myth of the American Superheroes* as a reference, I would articulate and specify the Queer American Monomyth in this way: the queer monomythic superhero is distinguished by *honest motivations*, a *liberating* task, and extraordinary power. He *originates from within the community* he is called to save, and in those exceptional instances of conflict, he plays the role of an *authentic, truthful leader*. His identity is *recognized and celebrated as a source of power*; his motivation is a *fervent passion* for justice. By elaborate conventions of fortitude, his desire for revenge is purified. Patient in the face of temptations, he *assumes love as a source of strength*. He *accepts emotional intimacy*, and the purity of his *queerness* ensures his *moral steadiness* in judging persons and situations.

Like this, the Queer American Monomyth reveals a freer, more inclusive hero based on honesty and the celebration of identities. It is a structure that values truth and deems authenticity as a foundation of strength. This quality provides a space that embraces difference and recognizes all identities as sources of virtue and heroism. It equalizes the nexus of power and becomes a means for queer audiences to find validation in their identities because they are no more or less worthy of power than anyone else. It gives queer audiences what they have been yearning for all along as they carved spaces for themselves in the narratives and structures that excluded them. The Queer American Monomyth grants the space for anyone to be anything—even superheroes.

Ultimately, superheroes are about mattering. Spanning from the pages of comic books to adaptations on the big and silver screens, the superhero narrative has always been connected to the American identity—they are the best of us. In slash fanfiction, especially in what I observed with the three slashfic pieces, queering Steve Rogers' Captain America can be easy—one just

has to imagine a world where it's possible. In this way, fanfiction is a wish. It's an act of making a better world, even if it's pretend. It is an act of love toward the characters that make queer people feel powerful and taking ownership of the narrative, so it connects to our lives. Because the thing about superheroes is that they always win, or we want them to. If Captain America, a hero who embodies the best of our culture, is queer, then maybe queerness can be heroic.

Finally.

CONCLUSION

When Mary Stansfield wrote, “No, Really, Give Captain America a Boyfriend” in 2017, she joined the chorus of queer voices calling for queer inclusion in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. She noted that the time was coming for a queer superhero, signaling Steve Roger’s Captain America as an exemplary figure through which to do so. In rationalizing the #GiveCaptainAmericaABoyfriend twitter campaign, she asserted that “a queer Cap is a message to the queer community that we can be a part of that America too. In fact, we can lead the way,” that we can all be heroes. Presently, in the wake of *Avengers: Endgame*, which culminated a three-phase overarching narrative a decade in the making, the MCU is in a stage of reinvention. New titles like *WandaVision*, *What If?*, and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* are exploring new possibilities for narrative threads, providing new avenues of self-identification for fans.¹⁸ Therefore, it is in this stage of change that queerness must come to the forefront.

Such changes are occurring in entries like the Marvel Disney+ show, *The Falcon and The Winer Soldier*, where the mantle of Captain America is passed down to Sam Wilson. In a 2021 interview with *Variety*, Anthony Mackey, who portrays Sam Wilson in the MCU, was asked about his thoughts on the way fans queer Captain America. In particular, he was asked about his character’s relationship with Bucky, which fans have already begun to queer. When acknowledging the fan queering of the characters, he expressed his view that “there’s so many things that people latch on to with their own devices to make themselves relevant and rational,” and regarded such queering as allegedly spoiling queerness—though he did not further explain

¹⁸ The most recent entry into the MCU, *Eternals*, introduces a queer character, Phastos, into the MCU canon. Hence, the character provides an excellent avenue for observing how the Queer American Monomyth subverts the heterosexual/queer binary in a future study.

what he means by that (Vary). It is in misrepresentations of queerness such as Mackey's where the heterosexual/queer binary manifests.

Moreover, this study illustrates how queer fans turn to slash fanfiction in order to find agency, validation, and solidarity. This showed me how the practice of slash fanfiction has the power to subvert structures like the American Monomyth, each piece working to dismantle some kind of canon to respond to the affective needs of the author—to validate them. As I made note of how slashfic writers “wrote back” to the text, I realized the ways in which the practice became a community endeavor. In the hundreds of comments left on the three slashfic pieces, the self-reflexive nature of the interactions put the slashfic, original text, and meta-knowledge of the commenters all in conversation—each new interaction creating its own queer canon. In result, I assert this practice of writing back is an avenue for both giving slash fanfiction legitimacy in the mainstream and also to function as an agent of change. Further, I believe that there is possibility for an objective turn in the study of fanfiction, using tools of Rhetoric and Composition to not only find what writing back gives fans, but what it does to the original text, as seen here with *The American Monomyth*.

In future research, I want to delve deeper into my proposed definition of the Queer American Monomyth and how its rhetorical destabilizing of power plays out in various hegemonic structures. As the practice of queering established by my queer rhetorical analysis entails interrogating the parts of text where gender and sexuality can be questioned, I see the possibility of such a framework questioning other forms of oppression. Hence, I believe that my proposed Queer Monomythic qualities of authenticity, the recognition and celebration of identities, and finding strength through love and community can be extended to subverting the othering of other minority identities. In this way, the possibility of a Queer American Monomyth

reveals that the power of hegemonic culture created by structures like the American Monomyth are not monolithic. They can change—and they should.

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