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# Queerer than Canon: Fix-it Fanfiction and Queer Readings

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## Abstract

This essay examines queer fanfiction, or fiction based on previous narratives, through the lens of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of "reparative readings" to argue that fanfiction is the instantiation of "loving criticism," and of grassroots queer praxis. I explain fanfiction and its common constructs, and then explore how queer reading functions to challenge and subvert heteronormative narratives for better representation and for validation. Fanfiction provides space for healing and pleasure, and delegitimizes heteronormative ideals, giving space for queer readers to grow and learn about themselves. This essay highlights fanfiction about Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes from the Marvel Cinematic Universe as a case study of fanfiction as a Kosofskian reparative reading. In this example, fanfiction works to give voice to the sublimated themes that lie beneath more overtly heteronormative messages, and brings queer identity to the forefront of these stories. With the Marvel Cinematic Universe's connections to hegemonic and capitalist forces, these messages can be buried beneath commercial values: fanfiction repairs this damage, I argue. Fanfiction not only gives space for different sexual identities, but also provides representation for different physical abilities, racial identities, and gender identities. In consuming fanfiction, readers may undo the harmful ideals not only within the narrative, but within their own psyches, which empowers them for future queer activism, or praxis.

# Introduction

The whole point of fanfiction is that you get to play inside somebody else's universe. Rewrite the rules. Or bend them. The story doesn't have to end [...] You can stay in this world, this world you love, as long as you want, as long as you can keep thinking of new stories. (Rowell 123-124)

In this discussion, I will focus on the subgenre of literature and media consumption known as fanfiction (fanfic); I will specifically focus on spaces that fanfiction creates for readers to revel in their preferred narratives while having the creative liberty to critique potentially problematic aspects of a narrative. Drawing from queer theory, philosophy, and literary studies disciplines, I will create an interdisciplinary reading of selected fanfics. In doing so, I will show that these works provide readers safe spaces for healing and an accessible bridge into queer praxis for those who may not have been exposed to an in-depth study of theory. I will draw from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's examination of queer readings and what they can do for readers: specifically, Sedgwick's concept of "reparative reading" ("Paranoid Reading 128). Sedgwick argues that reparative readings enable readers to gain some positive effect from a text without first expecting disappointment and pain from the contents. While Sedgwick examined the classic literary canon including Shakespeare and Dickens in her queer readings, fanfiction is a genre that has not been fully accepted or examined by academia. In my analysis of fanfiction as a form of queer praxis, I mean to demonstrate that fanfiction is a legitimate genre deserving of academic examination, for it exists as a site of personal and intellectual engagement with narratives and societies surrounding the self. To examine the effects of reparative readings, we will consider one specific case study: Steve Rogers and James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes<sup>1</sup> from the Marvel Cinematic Universe. I've chosen this example both because of the sheer number of readers and writers that engage with this relationship and because of my own engagement with this subject. Steve and Bucky's relationship is a common subject of a popular fanfiction subgenre called "fix-it fics" in which readers are able to nuance relationships that the original narrative does not adequately examine. The question, then, concerns what fanfiction can contribute to queer theory and praxis. This essay will argue that fix-it fics function as reparative readings, giving readers a greater possibility of affective engagement with a narrative by recognizing and revealing queer subthemes that heteronormative<sup>2</sup> regulations conceal from the reader in the dominant narrative. These fix-it fics then become a form of grassroots queer praxis on the individual level: a more accessible form of political resistance rooted in the reader rather than in an external agenda.

As a new generation of readers and viewers desiring to critically engage with a text

rises, fanfictions function as a response to or reclamation of an original text through which fanfic authors purposefully add onto or change parts of an existing narrative for their (and other readers') satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> The original narrative, referred to as "canon," is the original published work a fanfic is based upon.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, canon refers to explicit details or events in a narrative as they are written or directed by the original creator (DopeyPixie). "Headcanon" refers to a reader's interpretation of the canon, including ideas regarding character development, backstories, and relationships. Often, audiences create headcanons to expound on subtext and implicit themes in a narrative or to specifically contradict an aspect of canon that they find inappropriate or unenjoyable ("Headcanon"). Often, headcanons pertain to nuanced aspects of characters that the canon withheld or glossed over. "Slash fanfiction" is a genre that frequently uses headcanons, and these fanfics specifically cast canon characters together in homosexual or homoromantic relationships ("Slash"). The goal of slash fanfics, stated or not, is to parse out and explicitly show implicit connections between two or more characters. Slash writers receive criticism for writing characters that deviate from the explicit canon; however, this critique relies on a stability in the canon narrative that may not exist, as human experience (lived or written) and its subjectivity is arguably unstable (Young 129). Slash is often a response to the original creator's engagement in queerbaiting, defined as the exploitation of queer audiences' financial support and emotional investment through hints of unfulfilled queer representation (Romano). Creators who queerbait often try to use subtext as a defense in the face of critics or unsatisfied audiences, as if implying that queer representation is enough to satisfy their audience's needs. Fix-it fics address issues like queerbaiting by purposefully adapting and rewriting canon to fulfil the new writer's desires for the canon characters and narratives. These fanfics create a platform for readers to challenge problematic themes in dominant media and represent authentic queer identities. Fix-it fics function as a form of accessible queer readings that encourage readers to recognize and deconstruct heteronormativity in dominant media.

## **Sedgwick and Reparative Readings**

Queer readings, those which "queer"<sup>5</sup> a text, challenge themes of heteronormativity and other dominant ideals by revealing locations within the text (and making space for such places) that blur the lines between heterosexual and queer presentations of identity. Like fanfics, queer readings seek to explore implicit narratives rather than explicit ones. Queer readings "make the invisible possibilities and desires visible" as an explicit narrative that may not resemble the original ("Queer and Now" 3). Whatever implied queer representation original authors claim in their texts, queer readings work to force aside existing structures to make space for explicit queer representation, leaving no question as to what is happening

and for whom. In this process of creating space for queer representation, queer readings also create space for more nuanced treatments of “human subjectivity” and “human relationality” (Young 127), revealing subjectivity and intimacy that is not exclusive to heteronormative conceptions of people or relationships. Along with reworking a narrative to include queer representation, queer readings confront the creators of such works for exclusively adhering to dominant heteronormative constructs that support a stable and bound depiction of identity. Queer readings also confront the creators of such work and expose their heteronormative foundations, forcing these creators to face the “substantive inaccuracy and moral inadequacy” of their normative structures (Young 127). The exclusion of queer experiences by wealthy media corporations or powerful creators is purposeful in supporting a hegemonic, heteronormative ideal that endorses a particular image of who or what a person may be. The goal of queering is not simply to do away with these constructs but to “[render these] culturally central, apparently monolithic constructions newly accessible to analysis and interrogation” (“Queer and Now,” 9). From Sedgwick’s perspective, we can see that queer readings expose heteronormative constructs for supporting a supposedly ideal representation while creating a discourse on the accuracy of these constructs in human experience. This discourse contributes greatly to an understanding of accessible queer praxis as readers of these narratives are able to explore nuances of queer experience while “knowing that they are unstable all the while” (Young 127), all without the help of an entire academic course in queer theory. In calling these readings unstable, we mean that queering proposes a complex and subjective interpretation of queer experience and not a new hegemonic narrative. Since stability inherently purports an identity as more lasting and permanent than others, we can see that queer readings fundamentally challenge notions of stable identity.

Sedgwick proposes two kinds of queer readings that differ in the location, intentions, and affect of the reader: paranoid readings and reparative readings. In reference to what Melanie Klein calls the “paranoid-schizoid position,” which seeks to split objects into valid and invalid categories, Sedgwick initially uses the term “paranoid reading” to refer to the position of “terrible alertness” that skeptically examines a narrative through its parts (“Paranoid Reading” 128). Readers who take a paranoid approach to a narrative position themselves at a “critical distance” as a way of maintaining control of the narrative (Love 236). By distancing themselves from the text, readers can disentangle specifically “valid” aspects of a narrative from their original contexts and reinscribe them into their own arguments. From this external position, additionally, readers may obtain a full view of the entire narrative to eliminate any chance of surprise. The distant and skeptical position of this type of reading, however, does not obviously lend itself to a deep affective engagement that we (and later Sedgwick) now prioritize with the text, as this level of skepticism and critical distance can initially close a reader off from accepting what a narrative can provide. Sedgwick argues that the paranoid

position “demands least from its object,” or seeks less to engage with the text in a reciprocal relationship but instead to take from the narrative (“Paranoid Reading” 132). Later, Sedgwick criticizes this paranoid position for being too stringent, as this position still lends only “a way among other ways, of seeking, finding, and organizing knowledge” (“Paranoid Reading,” 130). The paranoid position, however, stabilizes these separate epistemologies without addressing that these are also an interpretation.

Reparative readings, on the other hand, place the reader intentionally within the narrative to understand each narrative in full. From Klein’s same discussion of the paranoid position, Sedgwick draws on her conception of a “depressive position” that reforms and combines the split parts of a paranoid position to understand the object as “something like a whole [...] not necessarily like any preexisting whole” (“Paranoid Reading” 128). The intention of the reparative position is not to excise aspects of a narrative and reconfigure them to fit another story but to reattach every detached aspect into something cohesive (this may even be more cohesive than whatever the original author intended). From a reparative position, there cannot be any critical distance or a refusal to be surprised because, according to Sedgwick, this position inherently supports spontaneous “experimentation and pleasure” from the narrative: both of which require a relinquishing of control and an allowance for surprises (Love 236). With a reparative approach, the reader acknowledges that the constructs creating the narrative inherently provide limitations for representation and affect while simultaneously engaging with the text to create future resources of developmentally important models of interpersonal engagement. (“Paranoid Reading” 149). Within queer theory and readings on queerness, the reparative position understands that these narratives were created with a heteronormative guide and empowers aspects of the story that feature or can become better models for queer readers. In sum, readers employing a reparative reading can affectively engage with the text while understanding that the text’s origins are inherently flawed—it is in this recognition of flaw that understanding and healing can happen.

## **Queer Praxis: A Case Study in “Stucky”**

Fix-it fics function as reparative readings by challenging typical mainstream narratives for their exclusion of queer identities and their alienation of queer audiences from potential pleasure. Within canon, characters and plots are intentionally positioned to suit the author’s interests and serve the overall story line; however, this stabilizes characters and events as fixed entities. Much of canon tends to reinforce and support primarily heteronormative identities, especially canon narratives that come from multi-million-dollar production companies whose goals focus around profits.<sup>6</sup> Often, these productions will exclude positive

queer representations under the excuse of being “family-friendly”—although this in itself problematically reinforces heteronormative constructs that condemn queer identities as perverse.<sup>7</sup> In the face of blatant queer-exclusion, it can be hard for queer audiences to find comfort and pleasure in a narrative without internalizing the missing representation of queer identity. Hope, then, is one of the strongest motives of fanfiction writing—specifically fix-it fic writing—because hope helps readers “organize the fragments and part-objects [they] encounter or create” (Sedgwick, “Introduction” 112). Canon, like some paranoid readings, can cobble together characters and events to play into familiar constructs, but fix-it fics recreate the narrative to better align with already present subtext. In fix-it fics, no world or character is a fixed entity, and there is more possibility for what can happen or what characters can do (Reißmann et al. 19). By changing aspects of these narratives to support queer identities, I argue that fix-it fic writers critique canon narratives while also deeply experiencing and reveling in the narrative’s world, characters, and intricacies.

Those who write fix-it fics imbue harmful or problematic texts with loving corrections that help repair connections between the reader and the original narrative. These writers see fix-it fics and fanfiction in general as a “way to save a beloved text”<sup>8</sup> from what we infer to be heteronormative constraints that limit the content and influence of a text (Reißmann et al. 19). In the case of pop-culture narratives (i.e. the Harry Potter universe, Marvel’s *Avengers*, etc.), readers may hold onto narratives for being a dominant influence in their development or for providing a sense of wonder that they are not willing to let go of. When the problematic constructs of these narratives are revealed, I argue that fanfics become a way for readers to safely and intentionally engage with the characters and events without perpetuating harmful constraints: “[w]e needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love” (“Queer and Now” 3). When original narratives exclude queer representations, the queer reader has more difficulty positioning themselves within specific aspects of the narrative as it fundamentally lacks empathetic and relatable queer models. Fix-it fics, then, “insert [these] mirrors into the popular texts from which they have been erased,” which allows for a stronger engagement with positive themes within the text (“Fanfiction” 48). In this way, fix-it fics allow readers to heal from the invalidation provided by negative portrayals that draw from heteronormative limitations—sometimes by creating totally new portrayals.

To examine the impact of fix-it fics on readers, we will examine a specific case that shows how fics serve as bridges for readers to cathartic representations. Within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the relationship between Steve Rogers (a main hero) and his best friend James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes was continuously ambiguated and filled with implied non-heteronormative connections until, suddenly, the creators of this narrative made Steve Rogers pine over his (female) first love, and ultimately leave his best friend to be with her.



Readers of this narrative were deeply hurt by this sudden change in character, considering the continuous subtext surrounding this relationship, and believed this change occurred because of the creators' and production company's institutional heteronormativity. Fix-it fics become a reparative practice of "negotiating the 'painful gaps' left" in the narrative between "the reader's 'felt desires'" and "read text" (Willis 155 in Duggan 49). I mean to argue that fix-it fics within this universe help readers visualize and internalize a positively queer ending that does not encourage forsaking queer relationships in favor of heteronormative ideals. Although writers of fanfiction make subtext explicit and pull aspects of the narrative into the forefront, I argue that fanfiction does not function from a paranoid position to individualize these subtexts but to reincorporate them with the original narrative. Fix-it fics are a reparative reading of canon that gives readers the ability to engage with their own identities within a text and incorporate positive queer portrayals into their own identity while understanding the original narrative's faults.

By combining this social commentary and loving engagement, fix-it fics and fanfiction combine Sedgwick's notion of reparative readings and what Sharon Doetsch-Kidder calls "loving criticism" to right the written and emotional wrongs in canon narratives. For Doetsch-Kidder, loving criticism is a form of social engagement which seeks to honor the roots of a narrative, rather than forsaking it altogether, together with taking positive action for change (Doetsch-Kidder 446). One of the primary tenets of writing a fix-it fic is making the story "believable" by honoring the canon subtext when morphing events. In this way, fix-it fics inherently try to respect the canon narrative and appreciate the creations of the original writer rather than flippantly ignoring them. One of the most important aspects of loving criticism and fix-it fic writing is a reader's recognition of their own power and ability to dismantle oppressive constructs (Doetsch-Kidder 446). In the very act of writing fix-it fics, the writer understands their own role in absorbing and interpreting the material in front of them in order to see that this is not all the narrative has to be: "[e]mpowerment is the work of discovering one's erotic power, a power that enables creativity and movement" (Doetsch-Kidder 457). Rather than being skeptical of the narrative and blaming it for exclusivity, fix-it fics take responsibility for creating these representations so readers can move forward in the narrative. By accepting this ability to change, fix-it fic writers resist the "violent forms of subjectivity that binary structures demand" which characterize the canon (Hawthorne 156). Slash fics, gender-bending, race-bending, and what I would call ability-bending<sup>9</sup> all circumnavigate the heteronormative binaries spotlighted within typically able-bodied, straight white characters. In the case of Steve Rogers, fic writers often write this character as hard of hearing or deaf because this character started his arc as a partially deaf man with a very frail body (before being conveniently transformed into a stereotypically sexy able-bodied hero). Many fix-it fics also focus on Bucky's prosthetic arm, and specifically the navigation of intimacy with a

prosthetic arm between previously able-bodied individuals. In fix-it fics, writers can identify places in the canon controlled by heteronormative expectations and explicitly contradict them as a form of reparative, positive change by including what the canon does not.

In many fix-it fics regarding the events of *Avengers: Endgame* and Steve and Bucky's ending,<sup>10</sup> writers consistently include certain details that work to create a healing ending for queer audiences that explicitly represent queer identities. One of the main issues people take with the canon ending of Steve and Bucky's relationship is the sense that their actions are wholly out of character, considering the events of the previous movies and the progression of their relationship within these. In the canon scene, Steve travels back in time to return a tool the Avengers needed for a major battle while leaving Bucky and two of their friends to wait. However, he does not return when he is supposed to and the group finds a much older Steve waiting for them, who then only speaks to one of the friends and does not interact with Bucky at all. One writer, Storynerd on Archives of Our Own, in their fix-it fic titled "darling I keep falling for you," rewrites the scene in this way:

"But...you're here." That's the bit he's stuck on. "You had a life to get to. All the things you missed. But you're here."

Steve sighs, and takes Bucky's hand from his face to squeeze tight between his own. "I wasn't kidding about trying to get a real life. But the past...it's all done. I can't keep looking backwards. I told everyone to move on for five years. What kind of a hypocrite would it make me if I hadn't done the same thing? And Peggy...she had a life without me too. A husband, kids. I couldn't take that from her just because I wanted it too. Besides—" he cuts himself off.

"Besides what?" Bucky asks, looking at where their fingers tangle together. On impulse, he brings his left hand up to join his grip.

"I couldn't leave you," Steve says, quieter now. "I lost you too many times already, Buck. Gave up everything to find you again, too. More than once. You really think I'd do all that and then just walk away?"

Maybe this is what vertigo feels like, Bucky thinks distantly, like the world is spinning a touch too fast. "Steve..." he says, and thank god, thank god Steve knows him so well, because he reads exactly what Bucky means when he can't even put it into words, leans forwards, and kisses him (Storynerd).

This fic changes the events by having Steve not only return at the age that he left but also spend the majority of this scene conversing with Bucky. While recognizing the opportunity Steve had for an alternative ending, Storynerd's Steve explains how that course of action would be unfair not only to Bucky but also to Peggy, his first love. In rewriting the scene

in this way, Storynerd engages in reparative and loving criticism as they work to give the characters an ending that respects the integrity of the work up until that point. Steve calls on the fact that he “gave up everything to find [Bucky] again,” something he has done more than once, and alludes to the events of the past two movies centering around Steve’s character.<sup>11</sup> Rather than disregard the events leading up to this moment, I argue that this writer explicitly brings up these events to give respectful weight to the connections built up in these moments. For readers of Steve and Bucky’s relationship, the constant search and longing for each other of these two characters feels romantically charged; so much so that an ending as emotionally detached and amicable as the canon’s jars the audience. Readers of Steve and Bucky’s relationship read into this subtext, and it is here that they find validation for their own identities. Writers like Storynerd make this subtext explicit by doing away with the canon’s coldness, in turn further validating readers’ identities. In this way, this rewritten ending almost seems more believable than the canon when taking into account the entire arcs of the characters.

In this lengthy interaction, fix-it fic writers give back to Steve and Bucky in these final moments, working to heal readers from the harmful canon by bringing up not only canon past events but imagined shared history that deepens their connection. In keeping the details of the history of Steve and Bucky’s relationship vague, the canon creators have more liberty to claim plausible deniability when it comes to the men’s relationship, and this dismissal tends to be especially harmful to readers who find value in the love between these men. Fix-it fics often add details about their shared past, like writer TheLadyConstellation in their fic titled “Our Dance” on Archive of Our Own:

“Wait,” Steve said. “I made an extra stop when I was returning the stones.” Bucky gave a look of confusion because he was, well, confused. Steve reached into his pocket and pulled something out that Bucky hadn’t seen for a very long time.

“1942, just after I got the serum. I went to our apartment. You left them behind just in case I needed something to sell. I never did, but they were left behind.” Steve held the tiny silver rings in front of them.

“I remember when I proposed to you,” Bucky said, laughing. “Of course we couldn’t actually get married, but we had a quiet ceremony in our living room. We even wrote vows.” He laughed again (TheLadyConstellation).

In this fic, Steve and Bucky’s fleshed-out history allows more room for stepping outside the confines of the canon narrative and into a space where queer audiences can find productive and realistic representations. Canon creators often throw in details about characters being queer without giving any explicit examples of these characters living happy, queer lives. This

fix-it fic makes explicit these potential happy lives to show that queer people can have happy moments, and they can have moments (like proposals and exchanging of rings) traditionally ascribed to heterosexual couples in mainstream media. Steve and Bucky exchanging rings before the events of the first “Captain America” movie is important in this fic because it helps connect the characters’ ending to their beginning, allowing their character development to come full circle as well: as Steve and Bucky canonically say, they are with each other “to the end of the line.”

Steve and Bucky (known in fanfic as “Stucky”) fix-it fics show not only that queer characters can have happy endings but also that they can have happy endings that explicitly heal past harms. A writer named Kasia (better known as @captainjanegay on Tumblr) writes a different Stucky fic with added details about Steve and Bucky’s past that portrays negative experiences of queer existence:

Steve only chuckles wetly and squeezes Bucky’s hand tighter in his. “You punk. I can still take you back to London. I can take you wherever you want. But we can do this now, Buck. We can do this like we always wanted,” Steve whispers, resting his forehead against Bucky’s. “Do you still want it? Do you still want me?”

“Til the end of the line,” Bucky says simply as he wraps his free hand around the back of Steve’s neck, keeping him close. “There’s nothing that could change that.”

Steve’s smile is blinding as he tries to press a kiss to Bucky’s lips. “I’m yours and yours alone,” he says and kisses Bucky again. “And you’re mine” (Captainjaygay).

This example specifically names a habitual exchange between the two characters. It is important to note that this line originates in the canon: “I’m with you til the end of the line.” Steve and Bucky often repeat this to remind one another of their support and affection. Considering that Steve and Bucky originally grew up in pre-World War II Brooklyn, the two would have experienced homophobia had they been publicly together (which the movies do not touch at all). Harmful experiences like homophobia and queer invalidation present an immediate danger to queer people as such experiences can drive them to internalize these messages and incorporate them into their own self-conception. I mean to argue here that alluding to and including these experiences can potentially hurt the reader, who did not experience any such possibility for harm in canon, so this must be done carefully. When done in such a way that the pain of being queer in an unaccepting environment is resolved—as Kasia does here with the two men understanding that they can be together publicly now—readers can resolve their own pain too. In the same way that readers potentially adopt the harmful messages heteronormative narratives push forward, fix-it fics like this one give readers the ability to adopt a more empowering and hopeful message. Being queer is not

simply a happy ending, because queer people are still people with good and bad experiences; it is possible and necessary to live both the positive and negative parts of life.

I have pulled only three examples for our discussion, but the subgenre is not limited to just these works or these themes; the beauty of Stucky fix-it fics are the possibilities they open up for the audience of Steve and Bucky's relationship. Through fix-it fics of this narrative, it becomes possible for these queer men to be together in various ways; it is in the possibility for these variations that we can see it is possible to live queer lives that are detailed and more complex than some singular image of a queer life. While clearly these works do not explicitly name Sedgwick or other reparative theorists, these fics contribute a great deal to our theoretical discussion on reparative readings and queer praxis. In my argument, I mean to say that at the heart of reparative readings is the effort to dive deeper into a hurtful text knowing that the canon can be hurtful and finding value anyway—for fix-it fic writers, this value comes in reimagining these ending scenes in ways that stay true to the existing character arcs. Audiences of Steve and Bucky do not have to sit in the disappointment of being invalidated by Steve's choice to leave Bucky behind in the original canon because they can have an alternative that is equally as valid as the canon. It is in this collective decision to love that our important understanding of praxis arises. There is empowerment in an audience collectively choosing to reject harmful aspects of a canon narrative and rework the existing characters to fulfill their healing needs.

## High Stakes

To reiterate and clarify, fix-it fics are reparative readings that function as a queer reading and queer praxis by subverting heteronormative constraints on public literature and media to give pleasure and nourishment back to the reader. In the previous example, Steve and Bucky's canon ending left readers bereft and unsatisfied, and many people felt cheated and manipulated by the creators' usage of queerbaiting and the later forced straightening of sending Steve back to a woman in his past. Additionally, many fans felt that the canon ending of these characters' storylines rob the characters of their progress and growth over the course of events in movies or television series leading up to this moment. To provide a couple of brief examples: Tumblr user @antifatonystark-moved commented on the ending in a viral Tumblr post published in August 2019:

You really think agent Peggy "I know my worth" Carter would stand for Steve coming back to the 50s or whenever bc he thinks he deserves her? You really think she wouldn't give him their promised dance and then gently but firmly tell him to go home? Really?

You think a well characterized version of Steve Rogers would rob Peggy of her happy ending with a man she loves in favor of what he wants? That he'd abandon all his friends, his family, the whole world, in the 21st century, turn his back on his "home," which has been brought up as a theme for him in two movies. That he'd put his own wants in front of his sense of duty? Y'all think that? Really? (@antifatonystark-moved)

Peggy Carter, the initial romantic interest for Steve, had her own character arc in a spinoff television series titled *Agent Carter* centered around her own independent achievements and professional career. Fans felt that this ending took away from Peggy's accomplishments and reduced her to merely a tool in Steve's happy ending. Similarly, fans felt that the ending disregarded the characters themselves by invalidating their affective experience:

ya ever think about how bucky probably ran from steve because he didn't know who "bucky" was, and even as he gained his memories back and began to realize the true importance of the man he saved from the Potomac, he was damaged and broken and dangerous, and no matter what he'd never be the person that steve wanted him to be, never again. but then steve was back in his life, fighting for him even tho bucky didn't think he was worth any of it, and he gave him an option to heal in wakanda, to feel whole again, and he took it because then maybe he'd be good enough, finally be the person steve remembered instead of his shadow, but the world kept putting guns in his hands because he'd always be a weapon, and he died and when he woke up the person he loved most in the world had decided til the end of the line wasn't forever, it was now (@caraldanvars)

In this popular post published in 2020, this Tumblr user directly speaks to the invalidation of these characters' emotions that leaves both the character and audience feeling bereft. As readers of this relationship begin to identify with Steve and Bucky, they begin to place themselves within the emotional experiences of the character; when the canon disregards these emotions, it feels unnatural and shocking to readers.

The body of work involving fix-it fics devoted to the Stucky relationship alone allows readers to cathartically live out a healthy queer relationship in full. Fix-it fics offer a resolution to implicit subtext by creating a narrative that continues developing these aspects of each character. The models and archetypes readers absorb are important for the development of their identities since readers construct their identities via apparently "valid" or "invalid" representations of gender, sexuality, and bodies (Butler 329). In fix-it fics, these problematic representations are righted so the models that readers absorb are not as inherently constraining and harmful as the heteronormativity within canon. Fix-it fics allow readers to find joy in

different representations through fix-it fics allowing nuanced and queer characters to exist with happy endings. Specifically, fix-it fics deconstruct the limitations around intimacy and physical contact by normalizing physical affection through slash relationships. Steve and Bucky, for example, are often written as very physically affectionate in fix-it fics—sexually and platonically. This reiterates that their connection necessitates more than subliminal hints, and normalizes all types of physical contact between masculine-presenting individuals, as opposed to toxic conceptions of masculinity and male bodies (“Revising” 39). Through redefining the allowances (and deconstructing the notion of allowances), I argue that fix-it fics give readers the ability to ambiguate their own identity and address the heteronormative binaries that try to reify strict demarcations between gender, sexuality, and the body to say that they, too, are allowed pleasure.

## Conclusions

Fix-it fics are important to consider as an example of reparative readings for their contribution to what Sedgwick calls “weak theory” through the creation of an inherently more accepting, accessible, and ground-level queer praxis. In contrast to “strong theory” which seeks to “organize vast amounts of territory and tell big truths,” “weak theory” seeks to “decenter what [it] encounters” through inherently non-normative alternatives and methodologies (Love 237; Saint-Amour 438). Fanfiction and fix-it fics are not normalized forms of critique, as those who engage with fanfiction often face their own type of stigma for engaging with an uncommon genre relegated mostly to online spaces and associated with certain stereotypical types of people (“nerds” or “superfans”), and yet they still take part in deconstructing internalized heteronormative ideals. Additionally, since representation is important for nourishing development of personal identities, fix-it fics and fanfiction give people better models and options for their own development. Fix-it fics do this not by lobbying large production companies to change their heteronormative habits (though this is an important step in liberation) but by forcing a “negotiation—rather than a compulsory and passive acceptance—of relationships” (Young 130). This “negotiation” does not need to take place in a physical location but instead can occur in the intangible relationship between reader and narrative. The agenda of fix-it fics, like “weak theory,” focuses on “acts of noticing, being affected, taking joy, and making whole” (Love 238). Fix-it fics take fractured narratives and refit their gaps with nourishing and positive queer adaptations that allow people to challenge heteronormativity within media as well as in themselves. Looking at fix-it fics generally, these works become weak theories of praxis by disobeying heteronormative societies’ desire to withhold information from queer people to either “conform or (and this is not a figure of speech) die” (“Queer and Now” 3). All of these works inherently disregard the goals of

heteronormative structures that seek to limit identity through the creation and dissemination of queer stories of love and sex.

Fix-it fics are an underexplored but important aspect of queer praxis as they give readers the ability to engage with challenging discourses around heteronormativity in mainstream narratives. Using Sedgwick's conception of reparative readings, we can see that fix-it fics and fanfiction function to heal a reader and beloved narrative after the betraying inclusion of heteronormative ideals. In reflecting Sedgwick's reparative reading and Doetsch-Kidder's conception of loving criticism, fix-it fics become an unconventional method for challenging engrained heteronormativity that permeates mainstream media. The accessibility and widespread prevalence of fanfiction make these works an important opportunity for growth within many young readers, and these works can disrupt the internalization of heteronormative identities during important formative stages. Canon, while a source of widely loved and protected universes, can be insufficient for queer representation and fanfiction fills the gaps in representation with authentic and relatable queer identities. Considering that fix-it fics do not focus exclusively on gender, sexuality, race, or ability, these works function to deconstruct heteronormative ideals through intersectional means. A wider exploration of fanfiction yields insights into how people—individually and communally—reject problematic ideals to favor more nourishing possibilities that provide every reader with some sense of cathartic hope.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As of 2019, Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes' relationship was listed fourth in "Most Popular Pairing" on Archive of Our Own (one of the most popular compendiums of fanfiction), and currently has 47,170+ works devoted to this relationship (some works may not be included in this count for not using the most common tag).

<sup>2</sup> In using this term, I am discussing the monolithic ideal of a person in our current society, and this does not solely have to do with sexual orientation. As society works to limit the voices of any person who divulges from the idealized norm of a white, able-bodied, heterosexual cisgender man, "heteronormative" ideals have to do with gender, race, and ability. Heteronormative regulations, then, are those that prioritize the voice of those who match this monolithic image and silence anyone who cannot.

<sup>3</sup> As we move forward with defining the important terms regarding fanfiction, I will be using information from non-academic or more publicly available sources such as Fanfiction.net, and I will do this purposefully because these terms are created, popularized, and understood by



and for people who engage with fanfiction. Many of these writers and readers are not high academics entrenched in an intellectual field, and their sources of learning about fanfiction are what is readily available via a Google search.

<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, the term “canon” has referred to “a rule, law, or decree of the Church” or some sort of ecclesiastical law. Within this meaning, the word held a more final and authoritative connotation, such that “canon” equated law and canon word was meant to be followed closely. For literary studies, the term was then used to mean authoritative or significant texts that were seen as “being of the highest quality and most enduring value,” so canon narratives were held with the highest regards in literary studies. Within fanfic discourse, the definition of “canon” aligns more with the literary definition, as original narratives are often held with respect and seen as final or complete on their own. Fanfic discourse uses “canon” in a broader sense than traditional literary studies does, referring simply to the concrete details laid out by the original narrative a fic is derived from.

<sup>5</sup> In this discussion, I use the verb “to queer” in line with thinkers like Thelathia “Nikki” Young who conceptualized queering as “troubling [...] of the lenses through which we read experiences, contexts, and intersections” (127). As we queer these texts, we will deconstruct the way we view and consume them while deconstructing the powers that created them.

<sup>6</sup> The last movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe’s *Avengers* series had a budget of \$365 million and grossed \$2.8 billion. Disney currently owns and controls this franchise (see, for example, D’Alessandro; Wilkerson.)

<sup>7</sup> Case studies for capitalist gatekeeping of queer representations include but are not limited to: Disney (Marvel Cinematic Universe & Star Wars), the CW’s *Supernatural*, and Harry Potter.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth recognizing that not all those who take on this savior role come with the best of intentions, and some efforts to save texts can potentially do further harm to the narrative and its readers. To imbue these narratives with love in ways that “save” them, writers must be careful not to write from the same theoretical and social foundations that created the canon (i.e. writing with the same heteronormative ideals), and they must make the effort not to write from a point of selfish interest (i.e. writing uncharacteristic or unnecessary narratives that service some personal ideal or belief about the characters regardless of their development).

<sup>9</sup> Gender-bending and race-bending are terms for changing a character’s gender or racial identity. Often, race-bending focuses on canonically white characters with commonly accepted headcanons of being a character of color. Ability-bending is not a term used by fanfic readers and writers, but a term created for the sake of this paper to comprise the multitude of tags and names for writing disabilities into a character’s development or arc.

<sup>10</sup> *Avengers: Endgame* is the last installment of *The Avengers* series within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. It is also the movie that holds the ending to Steve’s story, as the Marvel Cinematic

Universe does not plan to feature more content centered around him or his story with Bucky. Bucky will be featured in his own TV show, but this show will focus more on this life after Steve's exit from the Avengers. For this reason, we will look at the events of this movie specifically and how these fanfics work to navigate this specific ending. (See, for example, Dockterman.)

<sup>11</sup> In the previous movies centering around Steve, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, (the Winter Soldier referring to Bucky's persona given to him by Steve's enemy) and *Captain America: Civil War*). In *Winter Soldier*, Steve's whole mission revolves around saving Bucky, while his mission in *Civil War* centers around protecting Bucky from being unlawfully imprisoned (which he does to such an extreme that he gives up the mantle of Captain America to be with Bucky).

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