

What is an omega?

Rewriting sex and gender in omegaverse fanfiction

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**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Master of Philosophy in Gender Studies**

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17.11.2017

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2017

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<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

Trykk: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo

Abstract

This thesis examines the reinterpretation of sex and gender in omegaverse fanfiction. In omegaverse fanfiction, characters from popular culture are written into a parallel gender structure, as alphas, betas, or omegas. Using concepts from fan studies and feminist theory, this thesis analyzes three omegaverse fanfiction stories, asking how they intervene in discourses about sex and gender. It shows how omegaverse fanfiction treats discourses about sex and gender in the same way as it treats the original media texts, mining them for meaning in order to imaginatively transform them. As a result, omegaverse fanfiction can be read as critical commentary of sex and gender.

This thesis argues that the speculative mode that is characteristic of the omegaverse genre makes it possible to explore the premises that underlie understandings of sex and gender without being bound by the strictures of reality. Through this speculative mode, omegaverse fanfiction creates a space where the discourses associated with sex and gender can be treated as a set of building blocks, with which individual authors can examine the inner logic of fictional gender systems on societies, relationships, and situations, examine their consequences, and imagine their downfall. Furthermore, by rewriting these discourses through a narrative, and onto familiar characters, the alpha/beta/omega system works as a node through which to imagine how specific reconfigurations of discourses about sex and gender would play out as lived, situated, meaningful experience.

In the stories analyzed in this project, the figure of the omega is made to signify female-coded otherness, a personification of the multiple discourses by which women have been (and still are) constructed as other. By writing a male character as an omega, experiences of being treated as other in female-coded ways are imagined to be experienced by a character who represents the male norm. As a result of this double gendering, experiences of female-coded otherness are imported into the universal. Finally, it suggests that omegaverse fanfiction can be read as a kind of 'low theory', theory that exists at the margin of formal knowledge formations, creating alternative ways of talking and thinking about sex and gender.

Acknowledgements

For their part in helping me complete this thesis, I am deeply grateful to the following people:

My supervisors, Sara Orning and Erika Kvistad for sharing my enthusiasm for this project, and for all their encouragement, perceptive suggestions, and gentle criticism throughout the process of writing this thesis.

The Center for Gender Studies at the University of Oslo, for providing the space for me to embrace the stranger strands of my academic interests.

My friends at the Snirkler discord, for making me feel connected and human through it all.

Ivan Dervisevic, for all his love, support, and patience.

My cats, for sitting on my arms when I needed to take a break.

And last, but not least, the authors of the stories I have been working with throughout this thesis, whose writing has inspired and delighted me, and who generously allowed me to add my thoughts to their work.

Marianne Gunderson

Oslo, November 2017

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1 Introduction

After years of being valued more for what lay between his legs or in his head than who he was, it was hard to believe. Yet here they were, John close enough that every breath mingled, blue irises dark with desire and understanding as if, for once, he was reading Sherlock's mind with ease.

'You were a brilliant, mad, nutter of a man.' He nudged Sherlock's chin, encouraging him to meet his gaze again as if he could drive home the truth with eye contact alone. He licked his lips, his voice cracking as he forced out the words that Sherlock knew John would not find easy. 'And you still are. Alpha, Beta, Omega... This –' He cleared his throat, huffing out a sigh and squaring his shoulders. 'This isn't about any of that. It's about who you are. Not what you are.' (...)

'You realise that the same is true of me?' Sherlock murmured, licking his lips as John's thumbs rubbed in circles, skirting inwards across the plane of his waist before retreating once more. 'This isn't about needing what your biology can offer.'

He watched the shadows changing in John's eyes, seeing the gleam of joy ebb beneath the ever-encroaching clouds of reality. That expressive face fell into a faint frown, and John let out a deep sigh, his lips parting to outline all the obstacles Sherlock was so desperate to overlook.

'Don't,' he implored, brushing two fingers across John's mouth before he could speak. 'We can't dismiss the impact our respective genders have on our situation, particularly mine, but please – don't say it.' (BeautifulFiction 2014)

This is an excerpt from *The Gilded Cage*, a fanfiction story written about the characters from the television show *Sherlock*. The passage follows after Sherlock has confessed his feelings for John, and John has divulged that he has been in love with Sherlock since they first met, long before he knew that Sherlock was an omega. Sherlock realizes that John, despite being an alpha, sees and loves Sherlock for who he is, "a brilliant, mad, nutter of a man," instead of only wanting him for his reproductive functions, his ability to become pregnant. Even though neither John nor Sherlock wants to acknowledge it, the impact of their respective genders is impossible to ignore; as alpha and omega, John and Sherlock are positioned at opposite sides of a hierarchy that is encoded into everything from the laws that govern their lives to the biological processes of their bodies.

The Gilded Cage is one of many fanfiction stories written in a genre known as "the omegaverse", in which familiar characters are written into an imaginary gender structure, as

either alphas, betas, or omegas. This thesis is about what these stories do when they take familiar pop-cultural characters, and write them into an imaginary, ternary gender system. Through this project I ask what it means to appropriate the meanings connected to sex and gender in order to creatively recombine and transform them through fictional narratives. What is the result of writing already gendered characters into an imaginary gender system? What does it mean to say that Sherlock is an omega, and what kind of difference does it make? What kind of stories about sex and gender can be told through omegaverse fanfiction?

1.1 Background: fanfiction and the omegaverse

The most inclusive definition of fanfiction¹ would be to say that it is any fiction based on other, already published fiction. According to this definition, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and any work of fiction inspired by the works of William Shakespeare, could be said to be fanfiction. While looking at the canon of western literature and cultural production through this lens can offer an interesting perspective, it is ultimately an unhelpful definition when the goal is to study the specific texts that are produced in contemporary fanfiction communities.

Several factors seem relevant in order to reach a more precise and informative definition: Fanfiction is produced by fans; it is made by people who see themselves as fans of the media product which inspired their work. Fanfiction is inspired by other fictional works, such as novels, television series, movies, plays, or games. Fanfiction is non-commercial; it is not published and shared for profit, and fanfiction authors do not receive monetary compensation for their work. Fanfiction is a communal practice; it is written for, and sometimes with, a community of fans of the same media product. Finally, fanfiction is an online practice; it is shared on the internet and its production is centered around online platforms, networks, and pages dedicated to the practice.

All of these specifications capture some of the fundamental characteristics of fanfiction today, but all of them also have significant flaws and exceptions. Before the internet, fanfiction communities were centered around zines, conventions, and physical mail,

¹ A note on spelling: "Fanfiction" in one word is the most common spelling of the term within fan communities, while most style guides, as well as in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, only accept "fan fiction." Since dictionaries and style guides refer to journalistic and academic sources when determining the correct spelling, fanfiction written in one word is seen as an error, even though it is the preferred spelling within the community engaged in the practice, and the most common spelling of the term overall. In this thesis, in order to contribute to the legitimization of the popular spelling of the term, I will be writing "fanfiction" in one word. See Klink (2017) for more on this.

and fanfiction written and distributed on paper is still fanfiction. The same can be said for fanfiction that is written purely for personal pleasure, never intended to be shared or published, online or elsewhere. Lately, some fanfiction authors have started to provide ways for their readers to compensate them for their work, and some writers have been able to get their fanfiction professionally published by changing character names and removing other references to the works they were inspired by, bringing fanfiction into the commercial space.² Some fanfiction stories, also known as Real People Fiction (or RPF) is written about real people and events, such as celebrities, sports teams, and politicians, with boyband fanfiction being a particularly prolific example. And finally, sometimes people write fanfiction about things that they feel antagonistic about, such as political candidates that they oppose, or media products they are frustrated with.

These exceptions and borderline cases illustrate the difficulty of delineating a precise definition of fanfiction texts, and different definitions of fanfiction will be suitable for different uses and contexts. For the purpose of this thesis, the fanfiction that I will be referring to and analyzing, are fictional texts that are based on other works of fiction, in this case mainly movies and television shows, which have been published for free by their authors on online platforms specifically dedicated to fanfiction.

Fanfiction frequently revolves around romantic storylines between characters who may or may not have been romantically involved in the original media. Many stories include erotic content, and more or less explicit descriptions of sexual activity are common. Often the romances are written between two characters of the same sex, regardless of their sexual orientation in the canon material. These stories are called “slash,” from the fanfiction labelling/tagging practice in which the names of the characters would be listed separated with a / (eg. Kirk/Spock) to indicate romantic involvement. Most slash fanfiction is about relationships between two men, and the word “femslash” is often used for fanfiction about romantic/sexual relationships between women. Romance, relationships, and sexual encounters between men have been major themes in modern fanfiction communities since they first started forming around television fandom in the 1970s, and remain so today. In 2013, 45% of the fanfiction on aO3.org was m/m slash, 20% was about m/f couples, and ca 4% centered on f/f relationships (destinationtoast 2013), while on Tumblr, more than half of the most popular

² The most prominent case of that in recent time being *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James (2011), which was originally written as *Twilight* fanfiction.

relationships (or “ships”) in fandom in the period from 2013 to 2017 were between two men (fanfiction and other fanworks included).

A proposed explanation for the popularity of slash fanfiction among women is that slash is a way for women to write a romantic relationship between two partners of equal power, without having to reckon with the kind of structural power differentials and gender norms which are associated with heterosexuality (Hellekson and Busse 2014, Russ 2014). In these relationships both partners will be free to express both masculine and feminine sides, and a (presumed female) reader will be free to identify with either and/or both of them. According to Patricia F. Lamb and Diana L. Veith, in slash “[t]he lovers may have many problems to confront, but one problem never arises: one partner’s inferior sexual rank in a sexist society” (2014, 114). Because the overwhelming majority of the writers and readers of fanfiction are women³, many of whom are queer, and who write and/or read stories about same/sex relationships, fanfiction communities, and especially slash fandom, have been described as a “queer female space” (Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007), and Catherine Tosenberger has argued that fanfiction has created a space where young women are free to be “strange and unusual” (Tosenberger 2008, 190).

As texts that are explicitly based on other texts, fanfiction is inherently intertextual. The intertextuality of fanfiction is not limited to references to the main source media; fics often contain references to other popular media texts, as well as referencing other fics. Most fanfiction builds on, reproduces, or subverts established conventions and discourses from the already established, multi-limbed body of fanfictional works. Some of these textual conventions have been institutionalised into named fanfiction “tropes” that are well known in fanfiction communities. These tropes are often explicitly referenced by the author, and included in the “tags” that accompany the story, positioning the story within fanfictional traditions. As more stories are written through and within these intertextual practices, these tropes are continually being reproduced and reinterpreted across fandoms.

Fanfiction tropes can refer to the tone of the work, such as “fluff,” which are feel-good and pleasant stories, or “darkfics” which are violent and/or emotionally disturbing. They can

³ Because of the dispersed and internet-based nature of fanfiction communities, the exact demographics are difficult to ascertain, but two recent surveys conducted of fanfiction communities both reported between 80-85% female respondents (centrumlumina 2013b, 2013c, Upham, 2017b). Notably, in both surveys less than 5% of the respondents identified as men, while more than 10% of the respondents reported gender identities other than male or female (nonbinary/agender/genderqueer/genderfluid/ and others). In addition, less than 40% of the respondents in both surveys identified as heterosexual, and terms denoting attraction toward two or more gender categories (bisexual/pansexual/etc) was the most common response. According to the same surveys, the fanfiction community consists of people from all ages from early teens to people in their sixties, with people in their twenties as the largest age category (Upham 2017a, centrumlumina 2013a).

also refer to the relationship dynamic between the main characters in the story, such as “hurt/comfort” in which one character is hurt and the other one cares for them, “fake relationship” where two characters pretend to be romantically involved, or “curtainfic” which focuses on domestic life. Other fanfiction tropes alter the characteristics of the characters, for instance stories in which human characters are written as fantastic creatures, such as werewolves or vampires, or stories that change the gender, sex or sexual and/or romantic orientation of some or all of the characters. Tropes that make significant alterations to the world or the storyline characters of a particular piece of media are embedded in, are often referred to as alternate universes, or AUs. Often, these tropes are frameworks, settings or contexts which can be imported into any (fan)fictional context, from Harry Potter to Les Miserables to One Direction. Fanfiction tropes, and alternate universes in particular, are often based on a hypothetical ‘what if’-type question through which the canonical material is transformed and reinterpreted (Pugh, 2005), such as: what if the members of the boy band One Direction went to Hogwarts? Or what if the storyline of *Pride and Prejudice* happened in a modern setting? What if the characters from *Lord of the Rings* all worked in or frequented the same coffee shop?

The stories I will be analyzing in this thesis all belong to an alternate universe known as alpha/beta/omega dynamics, or “the omegaverse.” The omegaverse or alpha/beta/omega dynamics (often shortened to a/b/o) is an alternate universe consisting of a cluster of tropes involving humans with animalistic traits, inspired by the popular imagination of wolf biology and behavior, the rewriting of sex, gender, and the human reproductive system, and dynamics of dominance and submission. The defining feature of the omegaverse is the introduction of the alpha, beta, and omega categories which have been connected to a number of tropes which were already circulating in fanfiction communities, such as male pregnancy, knotting - a canine-inspired anatomical feature where a protrusion forms at the base of the penis during sexual intercourse, locking the partners together, heat cycles - another canine-inspired trope, in which a character experience urgent sexual desire at while they are ovulating, and unequal power dynamics, in which one character is written as dominant and the other one is written as submissive. In an archetypal version of the omegaverse trope, omegas, both male and female, have heat cycles, ovulate, and have the ability to become pregnant. Alphas, both male and female, can form a knot during sexual intercourse, and often respond to the proximity of an omega in heat by going into rut, an intense sexual arousal which in many ways mirror that of the omega’s heat. The beta label is usually reserved for characters without any alpha or

omega traits, whose biological makeup is mostly unaltered from non-omegaverse humans, but in some stories they are written as either sterile/infertile or intersex. The popular imagination of wolf pack hierarchy remains a central theme, and while the degree of emphasis on animality varies, most a/b/o stories involve a hierarchical social structure in which alphas are thought to be dominant and omegas are imagined to be submissive. Another common trope in a/b/o stories is the “soul bond,” in which two (usually romantically involved) characters can create a special connection between them which enables them to sense each other’s emotional states, or otherwise experience a unique emotional bond. In a/b/o stories this connection is often created by a bite to the neck, causing them to imprint on each other on a biological level (Busse, 2013). The majority of omegaverse stories focus on a romantic and/or sexual relationship between an alpha and an omega character. As a whole, omegaverse stories are predominantly slash, and the genre tends to be more sexually explicit than fanfiction in general.⁴

From its origin in the Supernatural fanfiction community in 2011, the omegaverse was quickly adapted by other fandoms (netweight 2013). The specifics of the trope are often adapted to the setting and genre of each individual fandom, and every writer will make their own interpretation of the trope. As a result, the omegaverse has become a loose and highly customizable framework which lends itself to a variety of different interpretations, depending on the interests and inclinations of the author. This means that while all of the above-mentioned elements are common in a/b/o, there is enormous variety in how they are interpreted. Each story contains its own unique version of the omegaverse, embracing some elements of the trope, while ignoring or discarding others. Some stories focus heavily on the erotic potential of a/b/o, in which heat cycles provide the urgency of excruciating and uncontrollable physical desire, knotting creates intensity and intimacy, and the alpha/beta/omega hierarchy and associated personality traits become a vehicle through which to explore a dom/sub dynamic. Some stories center around domestic narratives, exploring the romantic and intimate potential of soul bonds, coupledness and (frequently male) pregnancy. Other stories build on the concept of alpha/beta/omega hierarchy to outline societies in which a person’s status as alpha, beta, or omega determines their status and position, using the a/b/o trope to explore experiences of oppression and injustice. A number of stories posit that a person’s alpha or omega characteristics only become apparent when a person reaches puberty,

⁴ In 2013, 90% of all a/b/o stories on aO3.org involved relationships between two male characters, and 78% of all omegaverse stories were rated by their authors as containing “mature” or “explicit” themes (destinationtoast 2013b)

and use this premise to explore experiences of adolescence. Most often, any particular a/b/o story will contain a combination of several of these themes.

1.2 Why research the omegaverse?

There are many compelling reasons to study omegaverse fanfiction. One of the more obvious reasons is the scale of the phenomenon. With the onset of the internet, fanfiction has become one of the fastest-growing genres of writing in the world (Mirmohamadi 2014, 5). Its immense popularity is reflected by the ever-increasing number of stories uploaded each day to online platforms such as An Archive of Our Own (aO3.org), Fanfiction.net, and Wattpad.⁵ All together the three sites currently contain close to a million individual stories written about the Harry Potter franchise (books and movies), and more than 4800 stories about the Norwegian television show *Skam*.⁶ Within fanfiction communities, a/b/o stories quickly gained popularity across platforms, fandoms, and languages, and have become one of the most popular alternate universes in fanfiction. In November 2017 the “alpha/beta/omega dynamics” tag on aO3.org contained 28 821 works in 20 different languages.⁷ Searching for “omegaverse” on Wattpad brings up 56 900 stories.⁸ The ever growing number of omegaverse stories indicate that people all over the world clearly find the genre compelling. Yet despite its popularity, apart from Kristina Busse’s 2013 article about the origin of the omegaverse, and one chapter in Milena Popova’s (2017) doctoral thesis on sexual consent in fanfiction, there are currently very little academic research on the genre.

⁵ In 2015, Wattpad reportedly got a staggering 63 000 fanfiction uploads per day, amounting to 30 million uploads in total (Miller 2015), a number likely to have increased considerably with the growth of Wattpad’s userbase since then. The same year, Fanfiction.net contained 6.6 million fanfiction stories (destinationtoast, 2015), and in April 2017 aO3.org reached 3 million stories hosted on their site (Archiveofourown.org, 2017). The numbers are not directly comparable across platforms: the numbers reported by Fanfiction.net and aO3.org refer to completed stories, while Wattpad’s statistics refer to individual uploads, many of which may be additions (such as chapters) to the same story. There is also bound to be some overlap from stories uploaded to several platforms.

⁶ As of June 18th, 2017, the category “Harry Potter” had 767 000 stories on Fanfiction.net, 146 000 stories on aO3.org, and 85 000 stories on Wattpad.com. The same day, the label “Skam” had 2213 stories on aO3.org, 3800 stories on Wattpad, and 53 stories on Fanfiction.net. (Checked by me.)

⁷ Including Chinese (479), Russian (345), Spanish (203), Polish (73), Italian (52), French (51), German (19), Korean (13). Take into account that aO3.org is a primarily English-based site and that these languages most likely have other fanfiction publishing platforms specific to their language. I have also come across “how to write omegaverse”-guides in several languages, including Korean, Japanese, and Spanish.

⁸ However, the search function and labeling system on Wattpad is less transparent and accessible, so the accuracy of this number is difficult to ascertain.

The lack of research on a/b/o fanfic is probably at least partially a result of the relative recent appearance of this phenomenon - omegaverse fanfiction as a genre first appeared in 2010-2011 - but it should also be seen in connection with the devaluation of the cultural production of fans in general, and women fans in particular. Fans are often portrayed as, in the words of Henry Jenkins, “a group insistent on making meaning from materials others have characterized as trivial and worthless” (1992, 3). Despite bleeding into the mainstream in recent years, there remains something “improper” about claiming a fan identity (Duffett 2013, 60). Fan identities and activities have often been stereotyped as excessive, overly emotional, immature, feminized, and sexually inappropriate. Within the internal hierarchy of fan communities, expressions of fandom associated with femininity have been devalued, as illustrated by the pejorative meanings given to terms associated with female fans, such as “squeeing” and “fangirling.”⁹ This can be seen in context with the common pattern of perceiving of women’s media consumption and production as trivial, frivolous, excessive, or sexually suspect, whether that media is romance novels, soap operas, or slash fanfiction (Ang 2015, Jack 2012, Modelski 2008, Radway 1991, Russ 1983). Despite becoming more acceptable in recent years, fan activities dominated by women and associated with sexuality, such as the writing of slash fanfiction, is still often seen as shameful, even by the people who participate in producing or consuming it (Jenkins 1992, Zubernis and Larsen 2012). To take the cultural production of (often young) women seriously, and treat these texts as worthy of analysis in their own right, rather than as objects of ethnographic curiosity, is a feminist cause in its own right, and one of my motivations for choosing this topic for my thesis.

From a gender studies point of view, omegaverse fanfiction is a particularly interesting research object because, as I will argue in this thesis, omegaverse stories appear at their core to be *about* gender and sex. From the description above it should be apparent that in the omegaverse, traits which have traditionally been associated with maleness, such as aggressiveness, dominance, and being the active, penetrative partner during intercourse, are ascribed to the alpha, and that features which have traditionally been associated with femaleness, such as submissiveness, caring for others, and the ability to become pregnant, are ascribed to the omega. In addition, these categories are hierarchically ordered, usually with the alpha on top and the omega at the bottom of the hierarchy. Furthermore, many stories expand this system by assigning social norms and roles to the a/b/o categories that have traditionally been applied to men and woman. By connecting both reproductive capabilities,

⁹ These terms have since been appropriated and are now commonly used self-referentially by female fans.

sexual differentiation, hierarchical status, and the social norms and roles to the a/b/o categories, the alpha/beta/omega system functions as a parallel sex/gender structure, which combines popular ideas about canine/wolf biology and behaviour with traits and meanings associated with the male/female gender and sex dichotomies, into a ternary hierarchical system. This raises questions about how a/b/o maps onto the m/f gender system: To what degree does omeganess represent femaleness, and alphaness represent maleness? And what role does the third category, the figure of the beta, play in this?

A common characteristic of this system is the hyperbolization of (a/b/o) sex and gender. Through the omegaverse trope, aspects of sexed and gendered existence which are usually relegated to the background in other forms of fiction, are foregrounded and intensified, leading almost to a kind of “hyper-gendering” of the characters. Through storylines that explore issues of gendered oppression and inequality, or romantic relationships between people who are differently positioned in the a/b/o gender hierarchy, or the bodily experiences connected to becoming sexed and gendered as one enters puberty, or pregnancy and childbirth, or hormone-driven experiences of overwhelming sexual arousal, omegaverse fanfiction actively draws on, engages with, and rewrites discourses about sex and gender. This raises a series of interesting questions, such as: how is sex and gender being rewritten in the omegaverse? What kind of understandings of gender and sexuality are being produced within the alpha/beta/omega system?

Another level of complexity is added by the fact that the invented a/b/o layer of sexed- and genderedness is written onto and through the already sexed and gendered characters from the original media upon which the stories are based. It is important to recognize that the canonical male or female¹⁰ gender and sex of the characters is not erased by the introduction of the a/b/o denominations. Alpha, beta or omega characters are usually differentiated by their male/female sex/gender: they are described as omega men, alpha girls, beta women, etc. While the a/b/o categories are usually the ones to which gendered bodily experiences and societal expectations are primarily tied, the underlying male/female gender connects to the canon characters and to the readers’ history with them. When people take characters from a television show such as BBC’s Sherlock and turn them into alphas and omegas, Sherlock the

¹⁰ I acknowledge that the male/female dichotomy is not exhaustive: both when it comes to sex and gender, there are multiple positions and identities that embody both and/or neither of these categories. However, the hegemonic discourse about gender and sex in our society is still organised in relation to the binary dichotomy of male and female, men and women, which is why I will be discussing the a/b/o system in relation to discourses about male/female sex/gender.

omega is still male - and he looks like the man Benedict Cumberbatch portrays on the show, carrying with him the associations that the reader has to his character. The result is a structure of two overlapping gender/sex systems: alpha/beta/omega and male/female layered on top of each other like a palimpsest, through which the characters get interpreted. This interesting situation provokes another set of interesting questions, this time about the effect of this doubling of a character's sex/gender: what are the ramifications of writing a/b/o-gendered differentiation into and through same-sex relationships between men? How do the two sex/gender systems affect each other? What is the result of the tension between the canonical gender/sex of a character, and their assigned a/b/o gender/sex?

It should be clear that omegaverse fanfiction is engaging with questions about gender, sex, and sexuality in unique and potentially surprising ways. Throughout this thesis, I will show how these stories are intervening in discourses about sex and gender in ways which directly addresses central issues in feminist theory, such as the relationship between the body and the meanings that are applied to it, the conflict between essentialist and social constructivist understandings of gender, the lived experience of oppression, and the nature and experience of gendered otherness.

1.3 Research questions and thematic delimitation

The questions that have guided the analysis throughout this thesis are: how are gender and sex (re)interpreted through omegaverse fanfiction? How do the a/b/o and m/f gender/sex systems interact with each other, and what effects does this palimpsestic overlap of two sex/gender systems have? What kind of work do these stories do, how do they intervene in discourses about sex and gender? And finally, what understandings of sexed and gendered existence are made possible by these stories?

As the title of this thesis suggests, the focal figure of this analysis is the male omega. This is partly a reflection of the material I have been working with, as through my exploratory readings of omegaverse fanfiction the male omega stood out as the most common protagonist and focal point of the stories. What is more, analyzing the role of the male omega seems to be a particularly productive vantage point from which to understand the gender work that is being produced in the omegaverse. Since the majority of a/b/o fanfiction focuses on an alpha/omega relationship, the beta figure is often not very prominent. Similarly, since the majority of omegaverse fanfiction is focuses on romantic relationships between two men, female alphas are relatively uncommon as main characters. In the case of the alpha man, the

two systems, m/f and a/b/o categories would both seem to pull in the same direction, making it difficult to see how the two systems interact. In the case of the omega man, the a/b/o and m/f categories would seem to be pulling in opposite directions, allowing the differences, synchronicities and paradoxes between the two different systems to appear more clearly. Embodying a double, seemingly contradictory position, the omega man is a felicitous starting point from which to investigate how the two systems, a/b/o and m/g gender/sex, interact.

Because of the sheer number of stories, and the immense variation between them, it would be beyond the scope of this project to answer these questions about the omegaverse in general. How the particular alpha/beta/omega roles are interpreted, and how they interact with the character's canonical gender, can only be explored through the specific expressions the a/b/o dynamics are given in individual stories. Rather than trying to answer definitively what the omegaverse *is*, I wish to explore what it *can be*. This means that my focus has been on *what is made possible* through the a/b/o fanfiction stories that I have worked with in this project. What can be said about sex and gender by writing about it through omegaverse fanfiction which cannot otherwise be easily expressed? While all of the above questions will be touched upon throughout this thesis, it is this last question which is the core focus of this project.

My aim in this thesis is not to read a/b/o fanfiction through a specific theory on sex and gender, but rather to investigate how alpha/beta/omega fanfiction engages with, and intervenes in, various discourses about sex and gender. In other words, rather than starting out with a fixed and stable definition of the categories gender and sex and male and female through which I will then be analyzing the stories, I will be examining the way different perspectives on the sex/gender and male/female dichotomies are brought into a/b/o fanfiction. By putting alpha/beta/omega fanfiction into conversation with a variety of perspectives from feminist and queer theory as well as fan studies, I wish to investigate what kind of gender work these stories are doing. The commonly accepted definition of sex and gender is that sex refers to biologically determined differences between the sexes, such as chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive systems, while gender refers to the social and cultural distinctions between the sexes. By separating that which pertains to the body and biology [sex], from that which pertains to culture [gender], gender could be seen as socially constructed, implicated in power structures, and subject to criticism and change. This social constructivist understanding of gender was framed in opposition to essentialist conceptions of gender, the idea that gender categories can be traced back to immutable and universal essential traits that are often

understood to be rooted in nature or biology. However, sex/gender dichotomy has proven to be anything but stable, and the question of its meaningfulness and usefulness is an ongoing site of contention within feminist theory (Hird 2004). One such criticism is that by splitting sex off from that which is affected by culture, language, and power, the body and biology is framed as is fixed, immutable, naturally given. As a result, it is allowed to remain an essentialist category that can be invoked as the ‘real,’ original source of gender differences (Blackman 2008, 74).

In response to this problem, Judith Butler (1999) has argued that sex is just as socially constructed as gender. According to Butler, it is impossible to access facts about the biological body which are not already expressions of our ideas about gender, because gender is a continually reproduced discursive structure through which the body appears, it is how the body becomes intelligible to us. As a result, gender becomes the source of biological sex, not the other way around. In this perspective, there is no way to get outside, before, or beyond the existing power relations embedded in our culture.

However, this perspective has been criticized for dismissing the materiality and embodied realities of lived experience. In her essay *What is a Woman?*, Toril Moi (2001) argues against the usefulness of the sex/gender distinction, while also opposing Judith Butler’s perspective, on the basis that neither are relevant for providing an account of the embodied lived experience of being a woman. Drawing on the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, she calls instead for an understanding of the body as a situation which is both materially and socially determined. According to Moi, the body is ambiguous, it has no absolute meaning, but neither is it without consequence. As a situation, the body is the foundation of one’s experience in and of the world, structuring the choices they have at their availability. However, it is not deterministic, as it leaves room for each person to make something out of what the world makes out of them (Moi 2001, 82).

This tension between sex and gender, matter and meaning, and body and power, is carried into the omegaverse. In a/b/o stories, biology is often a strong influence on all kinds of (a/b/o-)gendered behavior. Alpha and omega feelings and behavior, such as jealousy, compliance, or aggression, are often explained by biological instincts. Yet a/b/o fanfiction also commonly have a strong emphasis on the social and societal aspects of the a/b/o sex/gender system, with detailed exposition of how the hierarchical differences between alphas, betas, and omegas are reproduced through state regulation and cultural practices. Because of the prominence that issues of body and biology and hierarchy and power have in

the omegaverse genre, and their relevance for the understanding of a/b/o as a gender system, I have chosen to use them as the organizing structure of this thesis. Throughout this thesis I will discuss various ideas about the body, biology, and lived experience, and socially constructed gender and discursive power, are brought into the omegaverse stories I am analyzing. The two first analytical chapters are dedicated to separate sides of this equation, the first chapter focusing on the body and biology, and the second chapter focusing on dynamics of social power and oppression, before I gather the various strands of my arguments in a final discussion. Yet as evidenced by the ongoing discussions within feminist theory about this issue, it is difficult to draw a clear line between what pertains to the realm of the body, and what pertains to culture. This turns out to be no less true about the omegaverse, which means that issues of culture and power structures will be pulled into the chapter about the body, and vice versa.

1.4 Presenting the fics

The stories which are part of the main analysis in this thesis are *The Gilded Cage* by BeautifulFiction (2015), *Born from the Earth* by venusm (2016), and *A Stiller Doom* by Tessa on Ice (2017). These fics will be referenced throughout the thesis, but what follows is a brief overview of the three stories upon which I base my analysis:

Based on the BBC TV-show *Sherlock*, *The Gilded Cage* (hereafter referred to as TGC) starts with John Watson's accidental discovery that Sherlock is actually an omega, not an alpha as he had been assuming. Alternating between Sherlock's and John's point of view, the story then follows their gradual development from friends to lovers, a process that is complicated by the fact that John's status as an alpha, and Sherlock's status as an omega, starts them out in an asymmetrical position: in the society described in TGC, omegas are treated as the legal property of their families or their alpha partners. It also does not help the situation that Sherlock is still bound to his abusive former partner, from whom he moved to London to escape. The story is also a 'casefic', i.e. a story which revolves around the investigation of a crime: someone have been poisoning and killing alphas, and the resolution to the investigation turns out to have potentially groundbreaking consequences for Sherlock's future, as well as for omegas in general. It is 326 887 words long, which would make it 7-800 pages long in book form, depending on the font and formatting. With more comments, 'kudos', and bookmarks than any other Sherlock A/B/O fic in the archive, it is arguably the most popular omegaverse story within the Sherlock fandom. This story was selected for its

thorough exploration of the difficulties involved in establishing an equal, respectful, consenting relationship under conditions of gendered oppression, as well as for its descriptions of omega embodiedness.

Born from the Earth (also referred to as BftE) is based on the Marvel Cinematic Universe superhero movies *The Avengers*, *Iron Man*, and *Captain America*. Even though it is more than 270 000 words long, and has been left unfinished with no new updates since June 2016, it is also one of the highest ranked omegaverse stories within its fandom on aO3.org. The first part of the story, which I have chosen to focus on for the purpose of my analysis, follows the omega Tony Stark as he grows up to become the superhero known as Iron Man. Tony's passion is engineering and robotics, and he wants to get involved in his father's weapon manufacturing business, but as an omega, Tony is not expected to develop his talents in the STEM fields. He is instead encouraged to marry, to provide himself with material security and his parents with business opportunities, and Tony has to fight to win his rightful place as the heir to his father's company. In the Iron Man movies, it is strongly implied that Tony Stark has PTSD from his deployment in Afghanistan, in *Born from the Earth*, his trauma stems from being victim to several harrowing experiences of sexual assault and rape. The story goes on to develop a romance between Tony, Steve Rogers (Captain America), and an original character invented by the author, but this storyline will not be discussed in this thesis. This story was selected because of its descriptions of Tony becoming socialized as an omega, and for its exploration of sexual vulnerability and assault.

A Stiller Doom (hereafter referred to as ASD), is based on a Japanese animated TV-series called *Yuri!!! on Ice*. The story centers on the young Russian ice-skater Yuri Plisetsky (the namesake of the main character in the show, the Japanese ice-skater Yuri Katsuki). Surpassing his peers in junior championships, Yuri has just begun entering competitions as a senior, and has his eyes set on the olympics. This plan gets derailed when Yuri unexpectedly goes into heat, revealing that he is an omega, and not a beta as he had previously assumed. As an omega, Yuri has to confront prejudice, shame, discrimination, and ultimately the Russian state, in order to continue to skate. In the TV-series Yuri Plisetsky is portrayed as ambitious, arrogant, and rebellious, a teenage punk with a short temper, and in ASD these traits are channeled into Yuri's resistance against the treatment of omegas in Russian society.¹¹ Throughout the story, Yuri also develops a romance with the Kazakhstani skater Otabek

¹¹ As the story is set in Russia, involves politics, popular protests, and opposition to the Russian state, and was written in 2016/2017, it is difficult not to read it in the light of contemporary international politics. However, this topic is outside the scope of this thesis, and will not be explored in detail.

Altin, whose “omegist” mother turns out to be an important influence on Yuri’s political awakening. This story was selected for its exploration of the teenage experience of becoming gendered, and for its depiction of the journey through resignation, anger, and hope, as Yuri gets involved in activism against the oppression of omegas.

Throughout this thesis, I will often cite full paragraphs and longer sections of these stories in connection with my analysis of them. This is a conscious choice, made partly for the sake of transparency, to allow a reader to make their own judgement about the reasonableness of my interpretations, and partly to give readers who are unfamiliar with fanfiction a chance to get a feel for the genre.

1.5 Thesis structure

In the introduction I present the topic of this thesis, present my research questions, thematic focus, and the stories I have worked with. This chapter also presents my methodological approach, my approach to the texts, and discusses the ethical ramifications of this project.

The analytical part of this thesis is split into three chapters: “(Re)writing the omega body”, “Power and oppression in the omegaverse”, and “Speculative genders and omega otherness”. The two first chapters, “(Re)writing the omega body”, “Power and oppression in the omegaverse”, discusses the topics of bodies and power in the three stories outlined above, focusing on the figure of the omega, and are both split into three thematic sections each.

The first section in the chapter on omega embodiment focuses on the adolescent experience of becoming gendered, drawing on the writings of Elizabeth Grosz on uncontrollable bodies and leakage, and on the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, as well as Eline Oinas and Janet Lee on in a discussion of the parallels and divergences between Yuri’s first heat and the adolescent experience of one's first menstruation. The second section contains an analysis of the use of the mind/body duality in the descriptions of Sherlock’s struggle to retain control of his body and John’s confrontation with his own biological imperatives in TGC, ending with a discussion about alpha/beta/omega gender essentialism. For this section I draw on Elizabeth Grosz’ writing on uncontrollable bodies, as well as other feminist theorists who have written on the mind/body, nature/culture dualities, and Grosz and Judith Butler in the discussion about essentialism. For the third section in this chapter, I draw on the writings of Michel Foucault, especially the first volume of *A History of Sexuality* to analyze the encounter between omega bodies and institutionalized medical knowledge based on the description of two successive gynecological exams described in ASD.

The chapter on power and oppression in the omegaverse follows the same three-part structure. The first section is dedicated to a reading of the three stories as speculative gendered dystopias, discussed alongside feminist theory about patriarchy, as well as writing on feminist science fiction and gender dystopias. The next section is dedicated to an analysis of the affective experiences of gendered socialization in the omegaverse, using Marilyn Frye's essay *On Oppression*, as well as Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Sara Ahmed's writings on affect. The third section is dedicated to a discussion of power dynamics within romantic relationships and sexual consent in the stories, and draws Bob Pease's writings about men's interests, alongside theory on romance novels by (among others) Janice Radway and Pamela Regis, and writings on sexual consent by Carol Pateman, Erika Kvistad and Milena Popova.

The third chapter of analysis departs from the pattern established by the two preceding chapters. Rather than drawing in and analyzing new points from the fanfiction stories, this chapter focuses how the readings and arguments from the two previous chapters fit together, and what can be said about them as a whole. Here I analyze how the various threads from the two previous chapters relate to the main questions posed in this thesis, pulling them into a discussion of how the use of the alpha/beta/omega gender structure in these stories intervenes in discourses about sex and gender. Using fan studies theory about fanfiction and feminist theory such as Judith Butler's concept of 'the heterosexual matrix', Toril Moi's essay *What is a woman?* and de Beauvoir's description of the woman as the other, I present my argument that the use of the omegaverse structure creates a productive distance to the male/female gender system, enabling the imaginative examination of the inner logic of the discourses by which sex/gender is constituted, and the creative exploration of gendered experiences. I also discuss the role of the male omega, arguing that the omega does not represent 'woman', but rather is a personification of the discourses by which women have been constituted as other, and in extension of this, that by writing the omega through a male character, the male character's status as a representative for the male norm functions to bring experiences of female-coded otherness into the universal. Finally I argue that omegaverse fanfiction can be read as a form of 'low theory' that is engaging in active critique of the meanings and discourses associated with sex, gender, and sexuality.

In the concluding chapter, I suggest that omegaverse fanfiction can be read as 'low theory' and outline some directions for further research.

1.6 Selection and analysis

Given the large number of a/b/o stories available, finding and selecting the set of stories to work with in this thesis was an obvious challenge in this project. Since omegaverse stories are adapted and interpreted through the source material they are based on - making an a/b/o story from the Hannibal fandom different from one about Sherlock, which again would be different from one about Teen Wolf - and a/b/o dynamics as an alternate universe is popular across multiple fandoms, it did not make sense to limit the thesis to fanfiction from one particular source media. However, I could only include stories based on media with which I was reasonably familiar, or which I could familiarize myself with without expending too much time and effort. Furthermore, I chose to limit the search for stories to aO3.org, which is one of the most popular platforms for the publication of fanfiction online. AO3.org was chosen partly because of its popularity, but also because its functional search engine and its well-organized tagging system make it easier to navigate. Fics on aO3.org are usually accompanied with a set of tags which specify the media the story draws upon, the main characters in the fic, whether any of them are in a romantic relationship, sexual explicitness, violent content, and a number of user-defined thematic tags, including whether the fic is set in an alternate universe such as the omegaverse. These features enabled me to limit my search for a/b/o stories within specific fandoms or in combination with other tags, such as “power dynamics,” “male pregnancy,” the presence or absence of sexual consent, or specific gender constellations in the main relationships, which considerably aided the research process. Sorting the search results by the amount of “kudos” or number of comments was helpful as a way to find the more popular stories which I hypothesized would be more likely to contain interesting elaborations of the themes I was interested in. (This turned out to be true in some, but far from all of the cases.) In addition to searching, I used a range of strategies to find and select stories that would be interesting and relevant to this project. I tried to avoid unfinished stories, to avoid the problems inherent in analyzing something which is incomplete. Stories which were locked (ones you need an account on aO3.org to read) were excluded to avoid access issues. I also excluded Real People Fandom stories (RPF, stories about real people such as boy band members or athletes) partly for the same reason and partly because that would introduce a new set of ethical issues into the project. I also found quite a lot of good story leads on various fanfiction recommendation lists, as well as personal recommendations by people I came into contact with.

Initially I read widely within omegaverse stories to get oriented and form a general impression, looking for common themes and tendencies within and across fandoms. I found that a great number of a/b/o stories raised questions about the relationship between biological sex and social and psychological gender, the possibility of an equal and respectful relationship between two partners who are differently privileged/disadvantaged by society based on their gender, alienation and fear connected to the adolescent experience of becoming a sexed/gendered body, the nature of sexed/gendered bodily experience, the biopolitical regulation of bodies which can get pregnant, and the possibility of overcoming gendered oppression both on an individual and societal level, as well as engaging with themes of sexual identity, heteronormativity and homophobia within the alpha/beta/omega structure, themes of animality and wolf-inspired behaviour, and pregnancy and birth. The stories I selected all engaged with one or several of the above themes in ways which appeared to me to pose interesting challenges to central themes in feminist theory. However, because of the limited scope of this thesis, it was not possible to cover all of these topics with the stories I selected, and I ended up focusing on the themes that seemed the most central to the research questions posed in this thesis. While I was able to include a great many of the themes I wanted to examine, I did not manage to find reasonable ways to cover all of them within the scope of this thesis, and as a result the topics of pregnancy, animality, and sexual identity in the omegaverse will not be explored in detail in this thesis.

These stories I ended up using were not selected for their representability of the a/b/o genre as a whole, but for their engagement with these topics in particularly interesting or complex ways. Still, stories which raised and actively engaged with these themes were not by any means difficult to find, and ultimately this project could have been completed several times over with a different selection of stories each time. Even though this project does not aim to be representative of the genre, it is still worth remarking upon the fact that all three of these stories were among the more popular a/b/o stories in their respective fandoms.

In order to facilitate the analysis of these stories with respect to the relevant topics, I would, in addition to reading them closely several times and taking notes, highlight key paragraphs and sections which were later imported into an excel file. In excel I would label them according to thematic content and other keywords. This process was of great help both in getting an overview of the most pertinent parts of the stories, and for conducting the analysis.

1.7 My approach to the texts

Every instance of reading is a meeting between the reader and the text, and it is impossible to rise above or move beyond the subjective interpretation to access any kind of objective, singularly privileged textual meaning. My interpretation of these stories is inevitably informed by my situated position, shaped by my previous experiences, interests, and acquired knowledge. While this necessarily limits my reading of the texts, it is also what makes it possible. My interest in and understanding of these texts is not only a result of my position in relation to my material, it is this situatedness that has made this project possible. My perspective on these texts comes from my background in gender studies, but also from my personal experiences with fandom. While I have not always been an active part of fan communities as a creator of fan works, fandom, in various forms, has been a part of my life on and off since my early teens. Even in periods when I was less fannishly engaged with any specific object, I had a background awareness of various fandoms from a wide circle of friends and acquaintances who were more actively involved. At the time of embarking on this project, I was at most an occasional fanfiction reader, and I sometimes found the sheer mass of available fanfiction to be disorienting. Throughout the project I have found a renewed appreciation for and pleasure in the genre, also in the realm of my personal fannishness. However, my interest in these stories, and the pleasure I have taken in this research, has come primarily from appreciation of their engagement with questions of sex and gender, and has not for the most part been based on attachment to the original media or particular characters. Yet this does not necessarily set me apart from many other readers of omegaverse fanfiction: throughout this project I have frequently come across comments where readers mention enjoying a/b/o fanfiction for its inventive and interesting takes on gendered worldbuilding.¹² As exemplified by the common use of the term aca-fan in fan studies scholarship, the fan/researcher subject positions are not mutually exclusive, and their overlap can be productive (Cristofari and Guitton, 2016). In my case, my proximity to fandom informed my choice of thesis topic, provided me with the knowledge of how to navigate and orient myself in fan spaces online, and without a history with fandom I do not think this project would have been possible. Having said that, it was my background in gender studies and interest in feminist theory that made the research potential of these stories evident to me, and which provided the theoretical foundation upon which I have based my analysis.

¹² See for instance the Three Patch Podcast Episode 28: Omegaverse Roundtable. (By Fans 4 Fans, 2017)

In this thesis I do not wish to make a claim to be making the authoritative reading of the texts I am studying on the basis on my position as a researcher. I am, however, aiming to make *a* reading of these texts, as informed by feminist theory. This means that I will, quite naturally, be paying more attention to how these stories engage with issues of sex and gender, than to how they reinterpret the canonical texts or other narratives, or to literary or stylistic issues, unless relevant to the central issues in this thesis. The same goes for the background of the writers behind the stories. As should be apparent from the research questions in previous sections, this project is not about the intentions and desires of fanfiction writers, nor about the reception of these stories in fanfiction communities. This means that even though the demographic characteristic of fanfiction communities as female-dominated spaces was relevant for the choice of the topic for this thesis, the authors' genders, ages, nationalities or geographical locations are not central my analysis of the texts. I am not studying these texts in order to decipher the circumstances or personal experiences of their creators, nor am I relying on the function of the author to reveal the true meaning of the texts. The main reason to limit my analysis to the content of the text itself follows from the research questions. This is not a project about "why" - why these stories are being written, or why they are being read, and although some possible answers to these questions might indirectly present themselves in the process, the main question around which this project revolves is: What do these stories do as texts? This project is about the meanings produced in these texts, and in how they intervene in discourses around sex and gender. The object of investigation is the production of meanings made by the meeting between the text, the canonical material, and discourses about sex and gender. In this I am informed by the seminal essay *The Death of the Author*, in which Roland Barthes argues against the appeal to authorial intent and other author-centric modes of interpretation, saying that "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes 2006, 279). Rather than seeking to make an authoritative "final signification" and closing down the meaning-making of the text, I am seeking to open them up to the production of new meanings in the meeting with feminist theory.

For this purpose, it would be counterproductive to read these texts descriptively, as truth claims about the world or the author's experience, or normatively, as moral prescriptions, as both of these approaches tend to lead to closed, singular readings. This would also be at odds with the general orientation of fanfiction as a genre. As mentioned earlier, fanfiction in general, and especially fanfiction about alternate universes, is often

written as a response to actual or hypothetical what if questions, which give rise to thought experiments that take the shape of a narrative. This means that fanfiction is an inherently speculative and exploratory genre, taking “what is” in media texts, existing tropes, or existing discourses about romance, the body, gender and society, and creatively rewriting it according to the “what if” that the author has in mind. This exploratory, speculative “what-if” mode is not unique to fanfiction. In her essay “The image of women in science fiction” Joanna Russ defines science fiction as what if-literature, literature which does not aspire to describe reality as it is, but as it might be (Russ 2017). Ingvil Hellstrand has argued that science fiction is about “potential bodies and societies that may never exist, but which nevertheless present us with expectations or imaginings about what could lie ahead” (Hellstrand 2015, 28). This speculative mode means that science fiction is particularly suitable to explore topics of social change, otherness, and gender and sexuality. (Russ 2017, Haraway 2004, Hollinger 1999, Annas 1978). This has made science fiction a fertile genre in which to imagine and explore worlds in which sex, gender and sexuality are radically (or not so radically) different, as well as a fruitful field for feminist research and theorizing. As a genre that presents alternative worlds, science fiction can be seen as a close relative of the alternate universes found in fanfiction¹³, and of a/b/o in particular. The very premise of the omegaverse with its reimaginings of human biology and the addition of a second set of sexed/gendered categories invites experimentation with new ways of structuring and imagining sexed and gendered differences. The affinity between these two genres points to the possibility of taking a similar approach to reading of a/b/o fanfiction as to feminist science fiction. This would imply reading these stories as speculative explorations of the *what if*, rather than reading them as descriptions of *what is*, or of *what should be* (both of which tend toward fixing and closing down the meaning of the text). Looking at these texts as science fiction-like thought experiments brings to the foreground the ideas that are made possible by these alternative worlds.

In analyzing these stories for their productive potential, for their potential to act in the world, I am primarily interested in their ability to contribute - positively, constructively, critically, and unexpectedly - to discourses about sex and gender. In this project I am interested in aligning myself with the critical practices described by Sedgwick (2003) as characteristic of the “reparative reading.” This means that rather than approaching the texts

¹³ Fanfiction communities have had close ties to science fiction fandom since the 1970s, and have often been centered around science fictional or fantastic media.

with suspicion, seeking to “unveil hidden violence” by exposing how these texts (too) are complicit in oppressive and harmful meanings and practices, this project was undertaken with the wish to approach my material with enthusiasm and the hope and expectation that I may be surprised, that I do not know in advance what I will find. From the reparative mode comes also an additive ambition, the desire to be able to contribute to, rather than to subtract from, the theory and fanfiction which has sustained this project.

When I ask what these stories do, it is based on the premise that utterances of all kinds, including fiction, are not only carriers of information, they are also actions in their own right (Austin 1962). Or, in the words of Judith Butler, from *Excitable Speech*:

We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do. Language is a name for our doing: both "what" we do (...) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences. (1997, 8)

To the degree that we are linguistic beings, words have the capacity to hurt, but also to heal, in addition to affecting how and who we are in the world (Butler 1997, 1-2). Language is what sustains the social existence of the body: by being addressed by others, bodies become recognizable. (Butler 1997). When fanfiction stories create differently gendered and sexed human bodies, the meanings that are created in them, and the possibilities they formulate, have effects in the world, however elusive and difficult they may be to track. Tracking these effects into the lives of the readers and writers of these stories is unfortunately outside of the scope of this project, but what I will do, is see how these utterances can be seen to intervene in discourses about sex and gender, which meanings they activate, reproduce, and how they modify, twist or warp them. In short: what potential do they have to act on our understandings of sex and gender.

In the spirit of reparative reading's emphasis on allowing oneself to be surprised by the texts, I did not enter into this project with the intent to study these stories in the light of a pre-determined theoretical framework. Rather than reading the texts through the lens of a fixed theoretical perspective, I believed in the importance of leading with the text, and allowing the theory to arise from the material. By paying attention to the subjects and themes that came to the forefront while reading the text with the research questions in mind, and allowing those themes to point me in the direction of theory which would be the most relevant for their interpretation, I was able to address a number of disparate topics that would

otherwise have been difficult to unite under a single theoretical framework. This means that the theoretical references throughout this thesis are fairly diverse when it comes to disciplinary background, time-period, and theoretical school. Drawing on fan studies, literary theory about romance novels and science fiction, and of course, various strands of feminist theory, this thesis is a thoroughly interdisciplinary project.

To summarize: My reading of these texts is informed by my knowledge of and involvement with fandom, as well as my background in gender studies. I will not be appealing to the privileged position of myself as a researcher nor authorial intent to formulate the singular truth or final meanings of these texts, but will offer a reading informed by feminist theory. The texts will not be read as descriptive of actual conditions, but as speculative and experimental interventions in these discourses, combining them with, and (re)writing them through fanfictional traditions and popular media texts. I will be following the theoretical tradition of analyzing science fictional texts for their utopian, critical, or creative rewriting of sex and gender, asking what thoughts these speculative stories make possible. The main interest in this project lies in what these texts do with and to discourses about sex and gender. This means that I will be reading them for their productive potential, rather than seeking to expose all the ways in which these texts, too, are complicit with oppressive practices and discourses. I do not deny that such a reading is possible. Yet this, too, is an intervention. This project too, acts in the world. And ultimately, I would rather add to and build on than rip apart and tear down the material - both fanfictional and theoretical - to which this project is indebted.

1.8 Ethical considerations

One of the issues I ran up against was whether it would be necessary to notify the authors of the stories I will cite, and whether I should seek their permission to quote from and analyse their story. While some academics feel free to cite texts published on the internet as public as long as the texts are accessible without the use of a password, others take a more careful approach, considering the particular context in which a text has been published, and asking whether the people cited had “a reasonable expectation that the information they have shared would not be used for research” (Den nasjonale forskningsetiske komité for samfunnsvitenskap og humaniora 2014). It can be difficult to discern whether something published online should be considered private or public, and what the creator’s expectation of privacy is in each particular instance.

It is worth taking into account that the reading and writing of fanfiction is a community-oriented activity, and when people publish fan fiction they expect to share it with other people who share their passion for the source material in addition to specific fandom-related cultural references. Different fan spaces and platforms may have slightly different norms in relation to expected behavior, but one norm which is common on aO3.org is to give mainly positive feedback, and that criticism of a story is generally not welcome in the comments. This makes it possible to argue that a fic writer has not “signed up for” getting their story criticized or analyzed when sharing it on this platform. It is also worth taking into account that while fanfiction stories are usually published pseudonymously, it may be possible to trace them back to their real identities. As fanfiction is a community with a wide age range, there is also no way to tell whether or not a story may have been written by a minor. Finally, fan studies researchers are dependent on the trust of the community to be able to continue to do research. If researchers use fanfiction in ways which are seen to break community norms, the basis of that trust might be undermined and fandom communities could become less accessible and welcoming to future research projects. All of these factors put together weigh heavily in the favor of seeking permission to cite fanfiction.

In her doctoral thesis “Imagining Virtual Community,” Cali DeDominics (2015) argues that fans are highly aware of issues of privacy, and these themes are often discussed in fan communities. Based on the fanfiction communities’ discussions of the etiquette of citation, DeDominics developed a set of guidelines for the citation of fan texts. According to her system, texts that contain no personal or sensitive information, which are accessible without the use of a password/login, including fanfiction, are strictly speaking fair use for citation, but she decided to inform the authors after all, and respected their wishes if they asked not to be cited. However, if she received no reply or was unable to reach the author of a text (after two attempts), she considered it ethically sound to use the text. She also offered the authors the possibility of reading what she had written and provide their own reflections/comments to her text.

In this process I have taken a similar approach. I have notified the authors of the stories I have chosen to analyze, informed them about the topic and objective of this project, and asked if they have any objections to their work being cited in my thesis. I also offered them the opportunity to read a draft version of the thesis before publication.

Another methodological tool I used was keeping a tumblr blog for the project. I first intended to use the tumblr page like a semi-public research journal/field diary from the

omegaverse, a place in which I could explore ideas in a more informal setting. Because of time constraints and other complications, the tumblr ended up being used more to conduct preliminary research and to reblog/collect tumblr posts that discuss a/b/o-related themes and other fanfiction-related issues which were useful as background information. In addition, it was essential as a platform on which to interact with other people in fandom who were interested in a/b/o dynamics, for discussing the omegaverse and receiving recommendations for interesting stories. It turned out to be one of the main channels through which to contact the authors of stories I wanted to cite in the thesis (most of whom had no other contact information than a tumblr link). And at the end of the project, the tumblr turned out to be a good place to write my own fic recommendations as a way for me to give back to the community.

2 (Re)writing the omega body

The most distinguishing feature of a/b/o fanfiction are its modifications to the reproductive anatomy of the characters. Omega men have fully functional ovaries and a uterus which is accessed through the anus (Figure 1), which for pleasure or convenience has been given the ability to self-lubricate. Correspondingly, alpha women have a penis or penis-like protrusion which may or may not be retractable. As a result, some men (omegas) have been given the ability to become pregnant, and certain women (alphas) have been given the ability to impregnate omegas and beta women. In addition, the trope includes a series of anatomical and biological alterations inspired by wolves and canines. One such feature is alphas' (both male and female, or sometimes only the males) ability to form a knot - a swelling or protrusion that forms on the base of the penis - which appears during intercourse with an omega, locking the partners together. Biologically this trait exists to promote conception, but in the context of fanfiction narratives, it also has the function of locking two characters together in an intimate moment for an extended period of time. Omegas usually experience heat cycles (also referred to as estrus), periods of increased fertility and urgent sexual desire that coincides with ovulation. Proximity to an omega in heat can sometimes cause alphas go into rut, an aggressive need for sexual intercourse usually triggered by the scent of an omega in heat. The prominent role of the sense of smell is another animalistic trait which is almost universally present in a/b/o fanfiction. A character's scent can reveal whether they are alpha, beta or omega (though this can sometimes be disguised with biomedical tools), and whether they are in heat or rut, and occasionally also conveys information about a character's emotional state. A last relevant feature is that of the bond bite trope, which mixes animalistic mating behaviour with the fanfiction soulmate trope, where if an alpha bites the neck of an omega, it binds the two of them together on a biological level.

When it comes to re-coding the body in a/b/o, however, biological features are only a basis from which to imagine elaborate scenarios and dramatic narratives. In this chapter I will discuss how the stories analyzed in this thesis draw on, rewrite, and appropriate discourses about the sexed and gendered body. The chapter is split into three parts, each dedicated to a different perspective on the omega body.

In the first part of this chapter, I will draw on Elizabeth Grosz' descriptions of how women's bodies are associated with leakage and lack of control, to discuss how meanings connected to menstruation, hormonal cycles, and leaky bodies, are brought into the omegaverse through the concept of the heat cycle. I will go on to show how the description of

Yuri's first heat in ASD mobilizes ideas of bodily leakage, loss of control, shame, and sexual awakening to create an intensified account of the embodied experience of entering puberty. Based on the descriptions of the experience of female puberty by Simone de Beauvoir, Eline Oinas, and others, I will argue that the story describes the first heat as a crisis, a bodily betrayal that initiates the transition into becoming a gendered body, a body which is constituted as other, and is subject to restrictive gender norms.

In the second part of this chapter I use examples from TGC and theory by Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler to discuss how omega bodies are inscribed with the primacy of biology, and identified with an essentialized, immutable nature which is linked to their status as omegas, and how this is used in TGC to create a biologically based structure of dependence. I will show how the idea of the mind/body duality is written into Sherlock as an omega, forcing his mind to become secondary to the biological imperatives of his body. I will also go on to discuss how these concepts relate to alphas and betas.

In the third part of this chapter, I will draw on the ideas of Michel Foucault from *The History of Sexuality* to discuss how the institution of medical knowledge is brought to bear on omega bodies. Focusing on two descriptions of gynecological exams from ASD, I show how medical knowledge is described as an instrument of power used to regulate and discipline omega bodies.

2.1 Becoming omega: adolescent trials

The heat cycles are one of the defining tropes of the a/b/o genre, recurring phases during which omegas are especially fertile and experience overwhelming sexual desire. This is not a new invention; the heat cycle trope predates a/b/o by at least two decades. Writing about *pon farr*, the Star Trek version of the heat phenomenon, Constance Penley (1991) has suggested that female fans enjoy reading and writing stories containing the heat cycle trope because they take pleasure in the idea of men also being subject to a hormonal cycle. However, the omega heat cycle is not a straightforward copy of the familiar menstrual cycle onto male bodies. At one point, TGC makes a direct comparison between the omega and the beta female cycle, when Sherlock is suffering from the onset of heat:

Cramp clenched a fist in his stomach, and he curled on his side, groaning at the consequences of his sexual deprivation. Male Omegas didn't technically menstruate. The rich lining of the womb was broken down and reabsorbed, the toxins filtered through normal excretory systems. However, there was still a spectrum of aches at various stages of the cycle. These were precursors -- warnings that ovulation had occurred and that the window of conception was starting to close. Sherlock resented it, the grudging demands of his transport thanks to a yearning he couldn't satisfy himself. (BeautifulFiction 2015)

The comparison accentuates their analogousness, even while highlighting their differences. While the abdominal pain that Sherlock experiences are easy to read as a parallel to female menstrual cramps, it is worth noting that the most distinctive symptom of the female cycle, the monthly bleeding, has been explicitly written out of the (male) omega reproductive cycle. None of the stories I read for this project mentioned bleeding at any point in the omega heat cycle, a conspicuous omission if the intent was to write stories in which men experience the trials of female biology. Julia Kristeva (1982) argues that menstrual blood along with other kinds of corporeal waste, signifies the abject: that which is both of the body and separate from it. As such, it must be expelled in order to insure the coherence and integrity of the subject. Among the types of bodily waste, menstruation is in a special position, as it is also a signifier of sexual difference. Building on Kristeva's analysis, Elizabeth Grosz argues in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* that menstruation is paradigmatic of the construction of the female body as "a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting a formlessness that engulfs all form, (...) a disorder that threatens all order" (1994, p.203). One could speculate that the menstrual flow is omitted from the omega cycle because the concept of the bleeding body was deemed too uncomfortable, disgusting, and abject, for stories that to a large degree are written to provide pleasure. By giving the omega the ability to reabsorb the uterine lining, they could remain self-contained, delivered from leakage. However, this idea is undermined by the copious presence of another bodily fluid connected to the heat cycle. Heat is usually marked by the excessive production of anal lubrication, as in *ASD* by Tessa on Ice, when the young Russian skater Yuri Plisetsky is experiencing the onset of his first heat:

There is absolutely no way Yuri can leave this bed. Every single part of him hurts, and he's drenched with – what is it, sweat? He reaches under the tangled sheets and presses two fingers

into his thigh –

"Nnnnnnnn."

His entire leg jerks at the touch, little sparks of electricity racing up and down his thigh. His skin is hot to the touch, and the sweat –

The sweat –

Blood pounds along his femoral artery, through to his cock. And for a moment, he cannot even imagine –

Until he can.

Oh, God.

Realization hits him like a truck. His entire body starts to shake. He slides his fingers down around the inside of his thighs, ignoring the surging electricity. Slick. Wet. Hot. Heat. He's in heat. *Jesus Christ, he's gone into heat.* (Tessa on Ice 2017)

The production of anal lubrication during heat is involuntary, uncontrollable and copious. The boundlessness and viscosity connected to female menstruation has here been reinscribed onto a fluid which simultaneously communicates the omega's out-of-control desire during the heat phase. Still a tell-tale sign of sexual difference, the secretion is also a signal of physical desire, giving it the ability to mobilize both disgust and humiliation, and lust and pleasure. By transferring some the meanings usually connected with menstruation onto the production of lubrication during heat, the menstrual fluid is given a libidinal meaning, in both senses of the word, being both a disclosure of sexual drive, and an expression of instinctive impulses which are out of the control of the conscious mind.

The experience of sexual desire during heat is often described in terms connoting distress, helpless urgency, and overwhelming need, with symptoms resembling physical illness. When Yuri has his first heat, he first mistakes it for a flu. He initially experiences "an inscrutable middle between attraction and seasickness" (Tessa on Ice 2017) into body aches and nausea, he feels miserable, like "hot, wet garbage left to ferment in the sun" (ibid.). Later, when he realizes what his body is going through, he becomes aware of his overwhelming sexual arousal: his skin is hyper-sensitive as if "alive with electricity" (ibid.), he has an erection, and nothing feels as urgent or important as "getting fucked" (ibid.). Bewildered and reacting with fear, shame and anger, he goes on the internet to learn more about what is happening to his body. Since he is too weak and his legs shake too much for him to be able to stand up, he realizes that he has no choice but to ride it out on his own - but he does manage to get his omega ballet coach to come by with food and water. Resigning himself to the

inevitable, he “eats when he feels lucid enough, fucks himself on his fingers when he’s not, showers when his legs can support his own weight. The longer the heat drags on, the hollower he feels, the more exhausted. By the time it ends, he feels like a shadow” (ibid.). Compare this account with Simone de Beauvoir’s description of young girls’ early experiences with sexual desire:

through reading, conversations, theater, and words she has overheard, the girl gives meaning to the disturbances of her flesh; she becomes appeal and desire. In her fevers, shivers, dampness, and uncertain states, her body takes on a new and unsettling dimension. (...) when her eroticism is transformed and invades her whole flesh, the mystery becomes agonizing: she undergoes the disturbance as a shameful illness; it is not active: it is a state, and even in imagination she cannot get rid of it by any autonomous decision. (de Beauvoir 2011, 345)

From the references to illness, shivering, and dampness, to the all-enveloping eroticism, the shame, the feeling of powerlessness and the attempt to make sense of one’s bodily experiences - the similarities are striking. It is also significant to note de Beauvoir’s emphasis on the “not active” nature of this process, it is a state which is imposed on the body, a process which she has no power over. This echoes the language of helplessness and dependence with which the omega in heat is described, see for example the earlier quote from TGC, where Sherlock’s heat is described as “a yearning he couldn’t satisfy himself” (BeautifulFiction 2015).

In ASD, as in many a/b/o fics, a person’s alpha or omega traits manifest for the first time during puberty. Up until his heat, Yuri had thought that he was a beta, and would never manifest either alpha or omega traits. When Yuri goes into his first heat, it is not only an uncomfortable and traumatic physical experience, it is also an identity crisis: this is the moment realizes that he is an omega, and not a beta as he had previously assumed. After he missed the skating Grand Prix Final championship because of his heat, Yuri announces that he is ending his skating career, without explaining why. Victor Nikiforov, an older alpha skater and skating coach, comes by Yuri’s house to find out what is going on:

“What are you angry about, Yuratchka?” he asks after a drawn-out silence, filled only with the sound of sipping. Yuri’s vision swims, and he feels hot, wet, furious, stupid fucking tears break their banks and roll down his face. “I’d understand fear, but anger? What cause is there to be—?”

“Because I’m a fucking omega, okay?” Yuri bellows.

Victor stills. Yuri screams and hurls a pillow from the couch into the wall.

“I didn’t catch the fucking flu, Victor, I went into heat! Is that what you wanted to hear?”

Slowly, Victor lowers his mug to his lap. His expression is very carefully controlled, and Yuri wants to punch him.

“I spent two fucking days locked up in that hotel room, miserable and hating myself and drenched in my own slick! And yes, I went to a doctor, and yes, he ordered me to stay off the ice because how the hell am I supposed to compete when I become a braindead fuck puppet for two days out every thirty? And yes, my career is over and I hate it! I hate this! I hate my stupid fucking body for betraying me!” (Tessa on Ice 2017)

According to Simone de Beauvoir, a girl’s first menstruation is experienced as a crisis, the event which reveals to them what it means to be a woman: being forced into “an inferior and damaged category” (2011, 340). With his heat, Yuri is plunged into a new social category, and is made to confront not just the bodily, but also the political consequences of his newly discovered status. The onset of heat irrevocably forces him into the othered and marginalized category of omega. Suddenly all the meanings, norms and regulatory structures that apply to omegas, apply to Yuri’s life. Yuri realizes that he now belongs to a group which is treated as second-class citizens, and grapples with the implications of this for his skating career. As a professional ice skater, his career is now in jeopardy, as omegas are seen as incapable of strenuous activity because of their heats, much less capable of competing and winning against alphas in the Olympics. Reacting with anger, shame, and depression, Yuri’s immediate impulse is to blame his body for betraying him, while (initially) internalizing the norms which now apply to him.

Grosz describes adolescent embodiment as “awkward, alienating, an undesired biological imposition” (1994, 75) and the onset of menstruation as signaling “the beginning of an out-of-control status that she was lead to believe ends with childhood” (1994, 205). Elina Oinas, in her research on women’s experiences of menstruation, found that many women mentioned reacting with panic, disgust, and grief as their bodies started to bleed, experiencing

what Oinas terms “a crash in selfhood” in which “suddenly both the body and the self have become a mess” (2001, 70-71). And Lee (1994) finds that women report that the first menstruation was when women started to see their bodies as problematic, as sexualized and shameful. In the account of Yuri’s first heat in ASD, these tumultuous trials of female adolescence are transcribed onto the young omega, in intensified and condensed form. Rather than being a process which lasts for years, the experience is written as a sudden and traumatic shock, in which the sexed body presents itself to the subject for the first time. The first heat establishes a direct narrative link between leakage and loss of control, beginning to experience embodied sexual desire, and becoming aware of one’s own status as a sexed and gendered body. The story mines the discourses which are connected to female adolescence, and amplifies them, creating an account of the experience of becoming gendered as other, written onto a male character.

2.2 Biological imperatives: the mind/body duality

Grosz argues that women’s bodies and sexuality have been structured to position them in a passive and dependent relation to men (1994, 202). These structures are explicitly written into the basic structure of the omegaverse. The basic tropes of the a/b/o genre, such as heat cycles, hierarchy, and bond bites, are often used to create a situation where the basic facts of the omegas’ biology put them in a position of required passivity, vulnerability and dependence vis-a-vis alphas. Of the stories I am analysing in this thesis, TGC provides the most extreme example of this: from they reach reproductive maturity in their teens, unbonded omegas in this story experience especially torturous heats, called *pyresus*, as often as every other week. The only way to get relief from this bi-weekly ordeal is to establish a bond with an alpha. This is achieved when an alpha bites into the scent gland on an omega’s neck, and a biochemical link is established between them which stabilizes the omega reproductive cycle and makes the heats less frequent and intense. In addition, a bond changes the omega’s scent so that other alphas will not be able to identify them as an omega, nor will their heat trigger a frenzied rut in anyone but their bonded mate. This creates the paradoxical situation which is at the core of the plot all the way throughout the story: the easiest way for an omega in TGC to gain independence and relief from the trials of their reproductive system, is to give up their autonomy by bonding with an alpha. In TGC, Sherlock, the rational, self-contained and brilliant man, is trapped in a hormonal, cyclical, uncontrollable body, a body that by its biological makeup undermines his struggle for autonomy, requiring him to be dependent on

the support of a partner. As is stated in the story, “[t]he way Omegas were treated was unfair even on a biological level, their dependence on one person written into the way their bodies worked” (BeautifulFiction 2015). Here the structure of dependence with which women’s bodies are inscribed is quite literally written into the omega biology and explicitly foregrounded, and placed at the core of the narrative, it is the axis around which the story revolves.

This construction of biologically dictated dependence is interwoven with other concepts historically tied to the female or feminine. Throughout Western history, the mind, rationality and culture have been associated with maleness, while the body, emotions, and nature have been associated with femaleness (Bordo 1993, Lloyd 1993, Ortner 1974, Spelman 1982). The body, emotions, and nature are deemed to be passive, reactive, and immanent, they are materials to be acted upon, while conscious agency is ascribed to the first set of the above terms (Lloyd 1993). In TGC, these discourses are mobilized and mapped onto the alpha/beta/omega system, drawing upon the ways in which these terms circulate in the canonical media by which the fic is inspired. In the BBC tv-series that TGC is based on, Sherlock’s identity is firmly tied to his rationality and intellectual faculties, to the point that he refers to his body as “transport,” priding himself on his ability to ignore this bodily needs. The canonical Sherlock is distinguished by the mastery of his mind over the body, rationality over emotions, and by association, an implicit rejection of the feminine. This characterization is carried into TGC, but here Sherlock’s rejection of his body is caused by his disgust for the unpredictable and volatile fluctuations of his omega hormones, which in this version of the omegaverse are especially brutal. Here Sherlock’s dissociation from his body is given a reason: the brutal effects of his omega biology. By taking a trait which in the canon frames Sherlock as uncomplicatedly masculine and anchoring it in his rejection of the volatility of his omega body, Sherlock’s implicit rejection of the feminine in the canon is made explicit in the fic, and turned inward toward himself. Linking what is a stereotypically masculine character trait in the canonical story to the suffering Sherlock had been forced to live through as an omega adds a layer of depth and complexity to his character.

At the beginning of TGC, Sherlock has been living an independent and autonomous life in London after escaping the abusive alpha he was bonded with in his late teens. When his ex-partner is murdered, the bond which has been keeping his body under his control breaks, and Sherlock experiences the full blow of this trade-off. In TGC, the dissolution of the bond triggers a biochemically induced depression in omegas, sometimes known to end in suicide.

As his bond is erased, Sherlock is forced to experience his body's grief for a partner whom he abhorred. At this moment, the physical sensations of his body go from something Sherlock would rather ignore, to a refuge from his emotional turmoil:

An hour ago, he had ignored his transport and the vile messages it delivered to his mind. Now he revelled in it, choosing to dissect the rasp of cloth against his skin, the rhapsody of discomfort in his joints and the prickling, tidal chills. Better that than facing what lay within the caverns of his thoughts. The warnings of his body were biochemical and quantifiable – something he could see with his own eyes, given the right equipment. The gory mess of his emotions was not so straightforward.

Sherlock knew one was linked to the other. Hormones drove his mental state, which in turn accelerated the vicious cycle. He knew his desperate distinction between body and mind was a useless effort at reclaiming some control, but he clung to it all the same, immersing himself in the minutiae of the physical until that, too, faded from his awareness. (BeautifulFiction 2015)

In the excerpt above, as the bond that has been keeping his biology in check dissolves and Sherlock's body reasserts its presence, Sherlock finds comfort in the factual and observable reactions of his body, rather than facing the emotional turmoil his hormones are subjecting him to. By using the language of science he is positioning himself as an observer, someone situated outside of the tumultuous processes going on in his mind. This moment turns the mind/body split on its head: His mind, held hostage by a biochemical reaction, is now the site of uncontrollable hormones and volatile emotions, while the physical sensations of his body are quantifiable and logical, and serve to anchor Sherlock to sanity and control. This flip exposes the artificiality of the split, which is emphasized by the text explicitly calling attention to this point. By breaking down the barrier between the mind/body, and revealing their interconnectedness, the text highlights the embodied status of Sherlock's consciousness. Yet even as the fragile boundary between body and mind is breached, he clings on to the sense of control the distinction has granted him. But he cannot keep the hormones at bay: as the biochemical bond dissolves, Sherlock succumbs to depression. He becomes unable to care for himself, and loses his ability to seek refuge in his mind palace, or find pleasure and satisfaction in the use of his mental faculties. He slowly recovers under John's care, but when the fog of depression lifts, his body has reverted to its unbounded state, once again threatening to undermine his fragile and hard-won autonomy. Sherlock's life of

logic and detective work is once more invaded by his hormonal body, robbing him of his autonomy:

It was easy to think of a bond as something simple, but the truth was that Sherlock's body was rewriting itself, switching him into a different way of life. His olfactory sense, already powerful, would strengthen further, the better to detect threats or a potential partner. The balance of his brain chemistry would shift, prioritising physical sensations over logical reasoning, and his reproductive health and efficiency would be given precedence over every other physiological need. Even the intimate arena of Sherlock's biology endeavoured to rob him of free will. (BeautifulFiction 2015)

Sherlock's body is making itself known, asserting its presence and desire, undermining his cold and distanced rationality. Every other part of Sherlock, his mind, his personality, his ambition and drive, is under threat to become secondary to his reproductive functions. Referring to the heat cycle, John observes that "Sherlock's nature put sex on display – not just a possibility, but something definitive, intimately and unavoidably linked to the needs of his gender" (BeautifulFiction, 2015). Sherlock's omega body is inscribed with sex in both meanings of the word: sexual needs are written into his omega body, and he is seen as inherently tied to the sex side of the sex/gender split, as defined by and enslaved to his biology. Here TGC draws on the idea of the female sex as enslaved to its supposed (reproductive) nature (de Beauvoir 2011, 44-49), taken to almost parodic extremes. This also echoes the way women have been constructed as closer to nature than men, more identified with their bodily functions (Ortner, 1974).

According to Grosz, femininity and womanhood is associated with "the metaphors of uncontrollability, the ambivalence between desperate, fatal attraction and strong revulsion" (1994, 203). Female sexual desire is framed as concurrently non-existent and insatiable, both entirely passive and out of control, attractive and repulsive. Grosz traces this back to the inscription of women's bodies with seepage and fluidity, "a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order" (ibid., 203). From the idea of the fluid, seeping nature of women's bodies, flows the idea of their infectiousness, their capacity to contaminate others with fatal attraction, spreading disorder and chaos. Women's bodies are conceptualized not only as being out of control, they are also imbued with the power of causing others to lose control as well. This too, is encoded into a/b/o: heat announces itself through an unmistakable

scent, a pheromonal signal which triggers the instinctual reaction of intense and near irresistible sexual arousal, a condition called “rut,” in any alpha who gets exposed to it. In TGC, John Watson allows himself to be exposed to an artificial version of the omega heat hormone under controlled circumstances at the hospital:

A wave crashed over his head, swamping every sense as his knees tried to buckle. The air turned smoky in his mouth as his vision tunnelled, and his pupils dilated so fast that his eyes seemed to buzz. He was painfully aware of his body becoming hot and swollen with awareness. His hair prickled across his scalp and down his arms, shivering erect as electricity bolted down his spine and ignited in the pit of his stomach.

'Jesus Christ,' he whispered, his voice little more than a husk as his body responded. His senses narrowed down to the synthetic signature in the air, and he could feel his gaze moving, searching the empty room instinctively as his ears strained to pick up any sign that he wasn't alone. Every inch of skin was hypersensitive to the chafe of his clothes, and he grimly tugged his jacket closed around him, thrusting his hands in his pockets to hide the uncomfortable constriction of his jeans between his legs.

Never, in his entire life, had he experienced something to which his body was so viscerally attuned, like an empty vessel that had been waiting for this moment to find its fill. His hairline itched with a fine sheen of sweat, and his leg muscles thrummed as if he'd suffered a massive adrenaline rush. He longed to pace and prowl, but he managed to hold firm to Mike's instructions, staying on the mark on the floor. The amount of concentration required was huge, and he closed his eyes, scowling hard as he tried to force his body back under his control. It took him a while to notice the hum of the ventilation fans and the hiss of the neutraliser. Already, the telikostrone was fading from the air, and John shivered as a new jolt of desperation shot through him. He wanted to chase down the elusive phantoms of hormone, to pin it down and hold it close. It was a glimpse of the Alpha mating drive, terrifying in its ferocity. He'd only been exposed for a few seconds. What would it be like if he was actually sharing this space with an Omega? Would he have the mental capacity to hold on to rational thought, or would all that vanish beneath the strength of a biological imperative?

(BeautifulFiction 2015)

In this passage, John gets a taste of what it feels like to have his body assert its agency at the expense of his conscious control. The leaking, lustful omega body is literally contagious, containing hormones that are capable of infecting alphas in its vicinity with

overwhelming desire, threatening to force John, too, to lose control over his body and succumb to his animalistic nature. Yet it is clear that the idea of the contagious female body is not straightforwardly mapped onto the omega; the contagion does not unilaterally pass from omega to alpha, it can go both ways. Alpha bodies can also infect omega bodies with desire: in ASD, Yuri's first heat is triggered by his attraction to the alpha skater Otabek Altin, after they had spent a whole day together. And in TGC, a confrontation between Sherlock and his alpha ex-partner intensifies and hastens the onset of his next heat. Instead, the potential to infect someone with animalistic desire is written into both alpha and omega bodies.

This illustrates an interesting point. Rather than being limited to the reproductive a/b/o sex, both ends of the a/b/o spectrum are inscribed with associations to nature, with animalistic, hormonal, uncontrollable bodies. In this system betas may be seen as representative of the norm to which the alphas and omegas are the exception, the ones less affected by volatile bodies, hormonal contagion, and animalistic instincts, less inscribed with "nature." This is emphasized by the description of betas as "normal humans," humans that are untouched by the particular alterations that the a/b/o trope carries with it. In comparison to the beta category, alphas and omegas stand out as hyper-sexed, people who are more intensely affected by hormonal, uncontrollable, contagious bodies. In this context, the beta category functions as a backdrop against which to highlight the exaggerated sexedness and genderedness of both the alphas and omegas. From this it seems to follow that the associations of nature, instinct, animalism and the primacy of the body have been linked to genderedness and sexedness as a quality, rather than being tied unilaterally to one end of the alpha/beta/omega spectrum.

However, the encoding of this hyper-sexedness is not symmetrical, alphas and omegas are not equally susceptible to being overwhelmed by their animalistic, instinctual nature. While Sherlock is at the mercy of his hormones with every heat cycle, John is only in danger of losing control if he is exposed to an omega in heat. Sherlock's body exerts its nature on its own accord, but John's animal nature is only brought forth by exposure an omega. Even though alphas are also subject to instincts and hormones, capable of being affected by biological imperatives, this mostly comes to light in response to being exposed to the scent of an omega. Whereas omega bodies can be similarly affected by alpha pheromones, their bodies can also assert their instinctual, uncontrollable, desiring nature on their own, according to their own inner rhythms, without outside prompting. So while both alphas and omegas are written as more contagious and out of control than the more mundane betas, the metaphoric

of fluidity and infectiousness are more intimately tied to the omega body. Furthermore, in TGC, omegas are written as dependent on alphas to manage their unruly bodies, while alphas manage perfectly fine without an omega. In fact, alphas that never get exposed to an unbonded omega, like John before this point, may never come to experience the force of their alpha instincts. In TGC, alpha-specific anatomy such as “the knot,” the protrusion at the base of the penis, only appears during intercourse with an omega, and in the absence of an omega, very little distinguishes alphas from betas. While the omegas are inevitably and intensely made subject to their biological imperatives, and made to choose between being enslaved by their biology and being bound to an alpha, alphas never need to face a similar dilemma. Even though both alphas and omegas in TGC are inscribed with animalistic, instinctual, out-of-control bodies, these meanings mainly flow from the omega to the alpha. Moreover, as I will discuss in further detail later, the omegas’ enslavement to their bodies is underpinned by societal structures, while alphas have access to tools that help them control their unruly bodies.

Within the narrative, the introduction of these irresistible biological imperatives has the effect of giving characters an alibi for behaving, thinking, or feeling things that are in accordance with m/f gender stereotypes, because ‘they just can’t help it.’ The inscription of these traits into the characters’ bodies on a biological level, results in their removal from the sphere of ethics and politics, as a character who is enslaved by their biological impulses cannot be held responsible for their actions. Through the omegaverse, well-loved characters can be inscribed with misogynist scripts, while their personality remains uncontaminated by them. In the case of the above excerpt, the inscription of the alpha mating drive into John Watson’s biology creates a situation where his body may be infected by forces outside of his control; threatening to compel him to follow the misogynist script of becoming so aroused he is unable to restrain himself from committing sexual assault. Meanwhile, as this drive is perceived to be coming from the independent agency of his body, independently of his conscious mind, John’s character and personality are allowed to remain untainted by these impulses, and in fact he is horrified by them. Here, too, the story engages in a mind/body split: by writing animalistic, out of control urges onto John’s body in the language of biology, the story takes what would otherwise be framed as an internal conflict between opposing desires and wants and externalizes it, turning it into a conflict between the rational mind and the irrational body.

By grounding the alpha and omega categories in biological imperatives and natural instincts, the story attributes essential, biologically based identities to the two categories. This brings the story into conversation with the discourses about sex, gender, and essentialism within and around feminist theory. The debate about essentialism centers on the question of whether there are any traits, experiences, or bodily configurations which all women can be said to have in common, characteristics that can be said to be both essential and universal to being a woman (Grosz 1995). The question of essentialism is central to feminism: on the one hand, to argue for the cause of women, it is necessary to establish in what way women differ from men, and what experiences, and interests which unite women as a group. On the other hand, generalizations about women, often based on appeals to biology or nature have been used as justification for discriminatory, misogynist practices (Grosz 1995). The attribution of a fixed essence to women as a group, based on biological or natural assumptions has been criticized for being reductivist, exclusionary, and for precluding the possibility of change, but has also been defended as a strategic way to mobilize and unite people for feminist causes, or as base from which to argue for a feminism based on an idea of women's subjectivity as uniquely different from that of men (Grosz 1995, Fuss 1989). The distinction between the categories of sex and gender was originally intended to dispute the essentialist idea that biology is destiny (Butler 1999, 9). By distinguishing between the characteristics attributed to biologically given sex and culturally constructed gender, gendered practices could be acknowledged as learned behavior, a product of socialization, and therefore subject to change. Judith Butler (1999) has criticized this understanding for ignoring the social construction of 'sex' as a category, relegating it to the sphere of pre-discursive truth. According to Butler, 'sex' is itself always already interpreted through gender, and gender is "the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established" (1999, 11). Sex, then, is a product of gender, not the other way around.

Reading TGC through this framework, it would seem that alpha and omega bodies have been inscribed with an essentialist notion of sex which is unusually expansive, determining the relations between alphas and omegas, as well as patterns of behavior, impulses and instincts, in addition to anatomical differentiation. The encoding of alpha and omega characteristics and behavior in biological imperatives causes these traits become innate and involuntary, a result of hormones and instincts rather than conscious choice or learned behavior. Within the confines of the omegaverse, the gender/sex distinction here appears to have been collapsed back into sex, reintroducing biology-as-destiny. In TGC, the figure of the

omega is inscribed with amplified and transformed versions of familiar discourses about female-gendered bodies, which within the fictional frames of the story are being presented as pre-discursive biological facts about omega bodies. However, as will be discussed going forward, this is not entirely the case. As I will show, the omegas are not simply helpless victims of the biochemical whims of their bodies, the biological imperatives are not wholly absolute, and even biological destiny is avoidable. Moreover, nor are omega bodies exclusively dictated by biology. They are also described as subject to social norms, and, as I will show in the coming section, discursively constructed and subject to the regulation of institutionalized knowledge.

2.3 Medical knowledge and the regulation of omega bodies

Omegaverse fanfiction does not only treat the body as a site of biological imperatives and embodied gendered experiences - it also with surprising frequency raises the topic of the body as a site of regulation and control, especially in the field of reproductive politics. Biomedical technologies and interventions, such as heat suppressants, scent blockers, contraceptives, and abortion are recurring elements, and the stories often address the role access to these technologies plays in making omega lives more, or less, livable. Drawing on the writings of Michel Foucault, and using examples from ASD, this section discusses how the institution of medical knowledge is described as an instrument of power used to regulate and discipline omega bodies.

Michel Foucault (1990) has written extensively about how medicine as a discursive field has worked to make bodies subjects to monitoring and regulation by the state. In *The History of Sexuality* (1990), Foucault shows how sexuality in 18th and 19th century became an object of scientific inquiry, encouraging a culture of confession and producing an ever more detailed and sprawling discourse about the sexual life of the body. Sexuality became an object of power, not through suppression and silence, but by being increasingly talked about and catalogued, in terms of deviance, disorder and health. According to Foucault, sex and sexuality became an access point for the state to discipline and regulate human life, through institutions like pedagogy, economics, psychiatry, and medicine (1990). Developments which Foucault calls new “technologies of sex” such as government programs for population control and measurement, psychiatry, and medical interventions, provided the state with opportunities to monitor and govern marriages, births, and life expectancies, turning states into “managers

of life and survival” (ibid., 137). This opened the door to “infinitesimal surveillances, permanent controls, extremely meticulous orderings of space, indeterminate medical or psychological examinations, to an entire micro-power concerned with the body” (ibid., 145-146). These new techniques of power also contributed to the construction and preservation of social hierarchies, underpinning relations of power and domination. Power, according to Foucault, is not something which is held by one subject and can be used on another, rather it is a product (and producer) of discourse. Through discourse, power produces the subject positions through which it is possible to think, speak, and resist. Medical science is one of these discourses which give rise to a great variety of regulatory practices by producing knowledge about bodies and sexualities. In the resulting “order of sexuality,” men, adults, parents, and doctors are put in a position of power and authority over the bodies of women, adolescents, children, and patients (Foucault 1990, 99).

In many of the a/b/o stories I studied for this project, the regulation of omega bodies is explicitly addressed, either through their difficulty in obtaining medications or through struggles with the medical knowledge that is produced about omega bodies. In TGC, where omegas are valued solely for their reproductive abilities and considered a status symbol for wealthy alphas, there are no pharmaceutical contraceptives that work on the omega reproductive system. Rather than being disciplined by their integration into medical discourse, omega bodies in TGC are being regulated by their exclusion from it. While alphas in TGC have access to medication that prevents them from losing control of their bodies, even if they get a whiff of an omega in heat, omegas have access to no such thing. This means that alphas are not forced to succumb to their nature, because the culture produces tools with which to manage their bodies. For omegas in TGC, the case is different. Considered a niche field within medicine, the details of omega physiology is not common knowledge even for doctors, which leads John to take to the books to understand what Sherlock is going through. The only medical knowledge that is being produced specifically about omegas, caters to the interests of the alphas, and focuses on ensuring the omegas’ reproductive abilities. Infertility in an omega is framed as a disorder that renders an omega valueless, and must be remedied by any means possible, including life-threatening surgery. Omega bodies are reduced to bodies that can (and should) become pregnant, and the debilitating heat cycles, or an omega’s own wishes about whether to procreate, are not constructed as problems worthy of medical attention. The result is that omegas are denied the tools to overcome the limits of their biology, culture is keeping omegas trapped in their nature. The production of medical knowledge about omega bodies is

shown to exclude the needs and experiences of the people inhabiting those bodies, while privileging the alphas' desire to gain access to those bodies and exploit their reproductive functions. The marginalization of medical knowledge about omega bodies, the skewing of that knowledge toward the interests of alphas, and the disregard of omegas' own needs in the production of knowledge about them, are all shown to contribute to the domination of omega bodies, confining them to a life dedicated to the bearing and rearing of children. However, omegas in TGC have developed their own underground knowledge, passed from parent to child, about plants and herbal remedies that can be used to prevent unwanted pregnancies. Their resistance takes the form of a separate, omega-centered sphere of knowledge, outside of the medical tradition, as what Foucault terms "subjugated knowledges" (Marcellus 2003). The story obviously draws on the history of medical discourse about women's bodies, the regulation and suppression of women's access to contraception, and knowledges of traditional means of contraception which used to be passed between women (Marcellus 2003, Knowles 2012). As they are written onto the figure of the omega, these histories are recombined with other structures and meanings that have been used to deny women the chance to break out of the roles to which they were seen to be biologically destined.

By drawing upon these histories, the fics are calling attention to the practice of basing the subjugation of women on appeals to medical authority and knowledge. One of the most interesting examples of this is from an episode following Yuri's first heat in ASD, wherein Yuri has an appointment with a gynecologist. The scene is an extremely illustrative example of the regulation and disciplining of reproductive bodies via the authority of the medical institution of gynecology, which is why I have chosen to cite it in its entirety.

The examination room is cold and sterile and unfriendly. The walls are made of cinderblock, the cabinets of formica. There is a rack of pamphlets with titles like "Gonorrhea: Omegas & Beta Females" and "Why Can't I Get Pregnant During Estrus?" All of them have distressed looking white people on the covers.

Yuri is tempted to take a photo for Snapchat. There's a shitty memelord in him somewhere dying to draw digital dicks all over it.

"Mr. Plisetsky?"

He jumps slightly and the exam table paper he's sitting on crinkles loudly. Dr. Zielinski, presumably, walks in, and Yuri is on edge at once because—

"You're an alpha?"

“I’m a doctor,” he says, like that’s supposed to make him feel better. Yuri’s not sure if the answer is meant to imply professionalism or impartiality, but either way Yuri doesn’t buy it for a second. But he’s already in the stupid paper gown, and what’s he supposed to do, demand another doctor?

“Ugh,” Yuri says. What the hell is an alpha male doing in gynecology, anyway?

“Prothestrus?” Dr. Zielinski asks, distracted, flipping through Yuri’s patient chart on an iPad.

“Two days ago.”

“Any lingering pain?”

“At first, but not anymore.”

“Feet up in the stirrups, please.”

Is that what those things are? Yuri had been trying to figure it out. As Dr. Zielinski grabs a heat-sealed baggie full of medical equipment, Yuri works out just how his feet are supposed to fit into the stirrups. By the time he’s managed it, Dr. Zielinski is sitting on the little bench at the foot of the exam table, between Yuri’s spread thighs.

Yuri already hates this.

“I’m going to give you the usual rigmarole of tests,” he says, pulling on a pair of nitrile gloves. “Blood, pap, palpation. But if you’re not in any pain or experiencing discharge, you’re likely fine.”

“Great,” Yuri answers flatly. “I wanted to ask about heat suppressants.”

“Suppressants are illegal for omegas under twenty,” he says at once.

“What? Why?”

“They alter your body chemistry quite significantly,” he says. “Studies have shown that they can interfere with natural development.”

“That’s bullshit,” Yuri says at the ceiling. “What the hell am I supposed to do for the next four years? I don’t have—Jesus fuck Christ.”

“Speculum.”

“Warn a guy, goddammit.”

“Vaginal aperture looks fine,” Dr. Zielinski says, and then the speculum, presumably, fords right into it. Yuri fights back a shout of pain and his hands grip hard at the edges of the exam table. “Cervix looks fine. The heat was empty?”

Yuri grits his teeth. “Yes.” Well, narrowly so.

“You ought to think about going to a home, if you don’t have an alpha.”

“I don’t – no, I don’t want to go to a home.” The mere thought of it makes him physically nauseous.

“Empty heats can be dangerous, you should know that.”

“I’m kind of new to the omega thing,” Yuri says through his teeth. “Up until very recently I was a top-level competitive figure skater.”

“Well, that will have to stop immediately,” Dr. Zielinski says, and Yuri feels like the words punch him in the stomach. “Professional sports is no place for an omega. How did you manage to not know right up until your first heat?”

“I…” Yuri swallows down his frustrations. “My mother never got much prenatal care, so she never had an ultrasound…”

“One quick physical exam could have found the vaginal aperture,” Dr. Zielinski says, and it sounds like he’s scolding Yuri, and Yuri grips the exam table all the tighter. “The kind they usually do at birth.”

“I don’t know the details, but I’m sure I was a home birth. My mother was beta, my grandfather’s beta,” Yuri answers. “I just assumed—”

“I’m going to scrape your cervix.”

“Aren’t you supposed to take me out to dinner first?”

Dr. Zielinski doesn’t laugh. Instead, he scrapes Yuri’s cervix. It feels very weird, but at least it doesn’t hurt like the speculum did.

Yuri hears the pop of a rubber stopper as Dr. Zielinski presumably slides a swab into a test tube. Yuri isn’t looking; he’s staring at the ceiling and trying not to think about the speculum up his ass. And apparently exposing his newly discovered cervix.

“You can’t be forced into a home anymore, at least not since they passed that law,” Dr. Zielinski says, inflecting the words that law in the same way as that bullshit. “But I can strongly recommend that you go, to avoid any unwanted complications—”

“I’m not going to an omega home!” Yuri says, perhaps a bit too shrilly.

Dr. Zielinski sighs heavily, like Yuri’s being difficult, and it makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. “At your own peril, then,” he says, and removes the speculum, which is a huge relief. “You’ll have to sign a waiver stating that you’ve been made aware of the risks of an empty heat. And absolutely no more figure skating.”

Yuri swallows, pulls his feet out of the stirrups, and curls up around himself on the exam table.

“Can I at least get neutralizers?” he asks weakly.

“Those are sold over-the-counter,” Dr. Zielinski says. “Give me your arm, I need to take a blood sample.” (Tessa on Ice 2017)

Already when Yuri enters the doctor's office, the scene is set: cold, sterile, and unfriendly, adjectives that emphasize the impersonal and instrumental nature of the encounter.

The pamphlets on the rack with “distressed looking white people” on the cover, in addition to being a snide hint at white normativity, highlight the construction of omegas (and beta females) as reproductive bodies. This lumping together of omegas and beta females highlights how women (beta females) and omegas are constructed as similar because of their reproductive characteristics (able to be impregnated, the receptive/penetrated part during sexual intercourse). By framing the inability to conceive as a problem, they reproduce the implicit assumption that pregnancy is desirable. Yuri’s desire to subvert their message by covering them with “digital dicks” points to their power as part of a regulatory and disciplinary discourse, reinforcing the connection between omegas and procreation.

When Yuri asks about the gynecologist being an alpha, the doctor replies “I’m a doctor.” Yuri interprets this statement as intended to convey “professionalism or impartiality,” indicating that the gynecologist title supposedly cancels out his alpha identity, absolving him from being affected by the usual alpha/omega gender dynamics. This also functions to highlight the construction of medical authority: the doctor feels no further need to convince Yuri of his competence or trustworthiness. As a representative of the medical profession, his actions are authorized by the discourse of scientific knowledge and authority. The medical discourse through its associations with science and objectivity conceals the identity of the doctor and allows him to speak as if his status as an alpha has no effect on his words or actions. As a representative of the medical profession, the doctor is empowered to behave as if he is entitled to Yuri’s body, inserting the speculum with no warning and leaving it in longer than necessary while he deposits his sample.

This is, significantly, also the first time Yuri’s newly discovered genitals are named, although they have been invoked when Yuri was masturbating during his heat. Yuri’s vaginal aperture and cervix appear both to Yuri and to the readers of the story as his body is penetrated by medical knowledge. During the examination, Yuri is also being informed about the constraints which now apply to him, as a consequence of his emergent omeganess. He is told that he will have to quit figure skating, his chosen career and biggest passion in life. Part of the regulation of omega bodies, is the denial of access to medication which may help them manage their cycles. Concerns about Yuri’s “natural development” are used to justify denying him access to heat suppressants. Coming from the doctor, in combination with medical information, this message is given the air of objectivity and scientific truth. He is, however, told he can access scent neutralizers - medications that prevent other people from detecting

his omega scent, effectually enabling him to 'pass' as a beta - without a prescription at pharmacies.

The enforcement of suppressive gender norms are combined with the initiation of his body into the medical discourse. This connection is further underscored by the doctor's emphasis on the perils associated with "empty heats" - heats without sexual intercourse with an alpha - which is used to try to persuade him to move to an omega home, which are institutions housing young omegas, often until they marry. Later in the story, we learn that the omega homes often function as brothels, granting alphas access to omegas in heat. The omega homes thus fulfill a double function, both serving the interests of the alphas and isolating the people whose bodies are deemed too unruly. The omega home could be read an example of what Foucault (2003) terms a "heterotopia," spaces which are 'other' to society, which constitute its outside, its boundaries. Heterotopias are, among other things, spaces that house people whose behavior deviates from the norms of society, such as prisons or brothels, or that house people who are in a crisis in relation to the society in which they live, such as, according to Foucault, adolescents or menstruating women (Foucault 2003). With reference to the connections between heats, menstruation, and adolescence described earlier, as well as the description of heats as out-of-control states of extreme sensation and urgent needs, the omega homes can be read as heterotopias in both meanings of the word. Yuri's adamant refusal to move to an omega home is received with a heavy sigh. His emotional outburst is received as an unreasonable reaction from someone who does not know his own good, rather than a reasonable response to the situation he is in: undergoing his first gynecological exam during which the doctor pays no attention to his personal boundaries or comfort, while being told he needs to comply with restrictive gender norms he up until recently had no reason to think about in relation to himself. Yuri is being treated as an object, while being informed about the objectifying norms that now apply to him. Where Yuri's first heat was an abrupt initiation into omega embodiment, this scene functions to thrust Yuri into the social reality of his new gender, and the societal restrictions and norms which go along with it.

While Yuri adopts a defiant attitude to these directives, he resigns himself to the fact that his newfound status as an omega means that his ice skating career is over, and he reacts to the news by sinking into a deep depression. However, he later learns from Otabek Altin, the alpha skater that Yuri has a crush on, that heat suppressants are legal for people of his age in Kazakhstan. Yuri arranges to visit Otabek in Almaty, and when he arrives he learns that Otabek's mother Lashyn is not only an omega, but also an elected politician and a medical

doctor. This is where we get the second gynecological exam in this story. To prescribe heat suppressants, a routine check is needed, and it is easier to conduct a new examination than to transfer Yuri's medical records from Russia. This leads to the second full description of a gynecological examination in this fic, this time at the hands of Lashyn. The scene basically functions as an inversion of the first examination. It is here worth remarking on the convergence between the two genders in both of these scenes: the first doctor was an alpha man, Lashyn is an omega woman. Even though the gender norms which are described in the fic are all connected to the alpha/beta/omega level, the convergence of the two works to reinforce their respective positions, and emphasizes the analogous positions of men and alphas, and women and omegas. In the case of the doctor, his maleness works in conjunction with his alpha status to reinforce his alignment with authority, rationality, and the norm. In the case of Lashyn, the situation is reversed, and her status as a woman reinforces her status as a figure which is positioned as other to the alpha/male norm.

Lashyn tells him to contract and release his pelvic muscles to make it easier to insert the speculum, giving Yuri more control and agency over the process. She explains the purposes of the samples she takes, and talks him through what she is doing. The concern and care Lashyn shows for Yuri's comfort, is a striking contrast to the alpha male doctor in the first scene. When Yuri comments that the first exam was more painful, Lashyn astutely deduces that the doctor conducting it was an alpha. Through the contrast with the second examination, the first doctor's status as an alpha man is revealed to have affected how he performed the procedure, making him blind or indifferent to the discomfort he was inflicting on Yuri.

Throughout the examination, Yuri learns that heat suppressants are not damaging to his body, and when he questions why they would be made illegal if they were indeed harmless, he is told he was being deceived:

“It's best to inure yourself now to how often and how elaborately the world is going to lie to you about your own biology, dear,” Lashyn says.

“But I mean, they're straight-up illegal in Russia for people under twenty,” Yuri says. “They wouldn't make something illegal just because they hate omegas.”

“Injustice is rarely borne out of spite,” Lashyn says. (Tessa on Ice 2017)

Lashyn goes on to tell Yuri not to think of hate as the source of prejudice, but to trace it back to its historical context. She describes how the omega houses function as a continuation of the now abolished omega slave trade:

“So instead of being stolen from families at birth, they’re willingly given up. And instead of being sold into a life of rape and forced breeding, the wealthy and noble donate money, and are merely introduced to a few recipients of their generosity. And what else is an omega going to do when they propose marriage, when they’ve known no life outside their home?”

Yuri’s gut churns in what he recognizes is growing nausea. He knew, of course, that omegas often stayed in homes until marriage, but he’d never thought about it in context before.

“And then there arrives the miracle that is modern medicine, and suddenly there’s a cheap, effective way to cull an omega’s heat altogether. Suddenly, omegas have the option to control their own sexuality, and the entire function of an omega home is called into question. But they’re built into the economy, into society itself. Powerful, wealthy people have vested interest in their continuation. So naturally—”

“A law gets passed,” Yuri mutters, “making heat suppressants illegal.”

“Throw in a few skewed results from flawed scientific studies, and you even have a plausible reason to do it.” (Tessa on Ice 2017)

Lashyn’s speech offers Yuri an alternative discourse about his body. Yuri is shown how medical and scientific discourse is an instrument of power, which is used by the ruling classes in society to further their interests, preserving the social order which is keeping omegas subjugated and oppressed. In this depiction of omega subjugation the story draws on multiple histories of oppression. The reference to being stolen from their families and sold into forced breeding, echoes the historical enslavement of African Americans. But in its depiction of the liberating potential of the heat suppressants - its ability to give omegas control over their sexuality and reproduction - the story draws on the role of the birth control pill in what has been termed the contraceptive revolution for women. Either way, it becomes clear that Yuri’s body is contested territory.

Through these two gynecological exams, Yuri is first subjected to the hegemonic medical discourse about omegas, in which he is constituted as a passive object, reduced to his reproductive functions, disregarding his agency, choice and bodily integrity. In the second scene, Yuri is still constituted in relation to the hegemonic discourse about omegas, but this

time in opposition to it. Here, the official field of medical knowledge is revealed as constructed by and serving the interests of those in power, and deliberately designed to restrict the freedom and sexual agency of omegas. It is a significant point that this scene also takes place in a doctor's office, during a medical exam, and as such it is still structured by the relations of power between doctor and patient. It too is being presented by a person with authority. The significant difference is in the subject positions that the two discourses make available for Yuri. The first medical exam was conducted in a way which disregarded Yuri's agency and physical integrity, and framed Yuri's body as a source of trouble which must be controlled, preferably by confining him to an omega home. It had no room for Yuri's own interests, desires and ambitions. In the second examination Yuri's agency and control is reinstated, and he is offered a story in which the trouble is not within him, but in the way the world is organized. This too, leaves Yuri in distress:

Yuri leans forward, forehead-first, against the wall. Just when he'd thought he was done feeling angry about presenting as omega, too. God, why is the world so shitty? Has it always been this shitty? How had Yuri managed not to notice? (Tessa on Ice 2017)

But it is, ultimately, a distress which allows him to be an active participant in the world, rather than being resigned to "the stiller doom" of giving up on his career and living a life within the confines of the norms which apply to bodies like his. Taken together, these two scenes function as a striking illustration and critique of the way the medical institution produces and regulates gendered bodies, unlike anything I have seen in fiction elsewhere.

While these sections have presented distinct arguments, each describes an expression of the same transformative process. What all three of the above sections have in common is how the bodies of familiar characters are inscribed with modified and exaggerated versions of already established discourses which constitute the sexed and gendered body. Both in the account of Yuri's crisis of puberty, Sherlock's crisis of being reduced to his body, and the disciplining of omega bodies by the institution of medicine, these discourses are creatively reworked, recombined, and written into the omega category, creating bodies that become exaggerated or intensified manifestations of the discourses that constitute female bodies as other.

3 Power and oppression in the omegaverse

The hierarchical relationship between the alpha, beta, and the omega is one of the defining elements of the omegaverse trope. Many stories take the elements of the a/b/o trope and imaginatively expand their consequences and scope, weaving it together with the expanded world of the source material. The elements of the alpha/beta/omega fanfiction trope serve as a skeleton, which is then fleshed out into a world designed to explore the interrelated topics of gender, hierarchy and power. By inventing social structures and institutions based on a/b/o dynamics, they are engaging in acts of imaginative worldbuilding, effectively crafting gendered dystopias in which to tell their stories. In this chapter, I will be discussing how the a/b/o trope engages with narratives of oppression, vulnerability and dependence, both on a societal, individual, and relational level. I will show how fanfiction authors have taken the concept of inequality and hierarchy between the a/b/o categories as an invitation to explore gendered power differences and oppression, both on a societal level, as lived experience, and within intimate relationships. The main aim of this chapter is to investigate how a/b/o dynamics are being used to explore the topics of gendered oppression and unequal power relations, both on a societal level and in terms of the effects such oppression and inequality has on individual psychology and intimate relationships.

Like the previous chapter, this chapter is also split into three main parts, each with its own thematic focus. The first chapter discusses how all three of the stories analyzed in this thesis expands the omegaverse framework through what I will call gendered worldbuilding. Drawing on feminist theory by Shulamith Firestone, Susan Brownmiller, and others, I discuss how the societies outlined in these stories can be seen as analogues to patriarchy. I further bring these stories into the tradition of feminist science fiction, arguing that these kinds of omegaverse stories can be seen as speculative gendered dystopias.

The next section is dedicated to an analysis of the affective experiences of gendered socialization in the omegaverse. Using Marilyn Frye's essay *On Oppression*, as well as Butler's *Gender Trouble*, I analyze how BftE portray the lived experience of gendered oppression, through the experience of being socialized into restrictive gender norms. Bringing in Sara Ahmed's writing on affect, I discuss how BftE and ASD stories depict oppression through the affective reactions of their characters. I go on to show how ASD describes Yuri's affective journey from depressed resignation to anger and hope as he embraces the role as an omegist activist.

The third section in this chapter focuses on how the unequal power dynamics of the omegaverse play out in the intimate relationships in the stories. Using Bob Pease's writings about men's interests, I describe how John learns about Sherlock's situations and through empathy is shown to align himself with Sherlock's interests rather than those that should follow from his position as an alpha. I further go on to analyze the stories in the light of theory on romance novels by (among others) Janice Radway and Pamela Regis, and writings on sexual consent by Carol Pateman, Erika Kvistad and Milena Popova, showing how they construct a fantasy of overcoming inequality both within a balanced romantic partnership and by changing the societal structures that maintain gendered oppression.

3.1 Building unjust worlds: gendered dystopias of the omegaverse

Many omegaverse stories take the basic elements of a/b/o dynamics and extrapolate the structure of the surrounding society, outlining the social norms, customs, and systems of government of their own interpretation of the omegaverse. The result is stories set in societies based on fictional gender constellations, created by crafting expansive answers to 'what-if'-type questions to the premises of the a/b/o trope. This type of re-imagining of gender and society is not unique to fan fiction. While being solidly positioned within the culture, genres, and tropes of fan fiction, these stories fall into pace with the tradition of feminist science-fiction, such as the work of Margaret Atwood, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, and James Tiptree Jr (Donawerth 2009, Hollinger 2003), as well as the stories of more recent authors such as Jo Walton, Ann Leckie and Lois McMaster Bujold. While the traditionally published canon of feminist science fiction and fan fiction have separate traditions, there is no denying that there has been fertile cross-pollination between the two: several science fiction authors have a history with reading and/or writing fan fiction (O'Brien 2016), and there is a long-standing overlap between fan fiction communities and science fiction communities (Coppa 2006a).¹⁴

These stories are engaging in what Hanna-Riikka Roine (2016) calls speculative worldbuilding, by which "abstract and remote ideas are brought to the domain of the concrete and possible" (Roine 2016, 63), actively transforming the world in which the original material is set. Inventing imaginative answers to questions arising from the a/b/o trope, they elaborate

¹⁴ One fanfiction author (manic_intent) unpromptedly mentioned Ursula Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* as one of their inspirations for writing a/b/o fanfiction when I contacted them about their omegaverse fanfiction.

on the relationship between the alpha/beta/omega hierarchy and biological traits, exploring connections between power, biology, and culture. In a/b/o stories, worldbuilding is often based on drawing connections between the biological characteristics particular to the a/b/o system, and the status and position of alphas and omegas in society. TGC, BftE, and ASD all link the status of omegas in society to their biological features.

In TGC, which is set in modern London, the omega fertility rate, especially during heat and partnered with an alpha, is known to be extremely high (BeautifulFiction 2015). Alpha/beta or beta/beta couples, on the other hand, often have difficulty conceiving (BeautifulFiction 2015). In addition, in this version of a/b/o dynamics, omegas are a genetically determined minority which can only be born to other omegas. This makes omegas into a reproductive resource, especially for alphas of the wealthy elite. As a result, omegas are almost exclusively found in the ruling class of rich, alpha-headed families. There, they are treated as precious status objects with no legal agency. They have no right to vote, cannot sign a contract in their own name, cannot own property, and cannot be held accountable to the law - a point which takes on a central role in the plot of the story. As previously mentioned, the omega heat cycles as they are described in TGC are particularly harsh, disabling the omega for days, and repeating in quick succession if not satisfied by an intercourse with an alpha. Because of this, omegas are usually married off to alphas of the elite at a young age. While societal norms dictate that omegas should be protected and treated with kindness and care, they are entirely at the mercy of their partners or families, whom they are seen as the legal property of. There are no legal drugs or medications available for omegas to regulate their heat cycles or fertility, but knowledge about the contraceptive properties of certain plants is passed from parent to child. With limited access to formal education and barred from being able to legally participate in the workforce, omegas have few options to make a life for themselves outside of the care of an alpha family, and runaway omegas sometimes see no other recourse than selling their own reproductive organs on the black market to raise funds to survive.

In BftE, human DNA has been altered by a disease, making it difficult to conceive a healthy human child unless an omega is involved. Omegas, who are said to be between 3 and 12 percent of the population, possess the ability to repair DNA during the conception process, guaranteeing the genetic health of the child (venusm 2016). Arranged marriages of omegas to alphas or couples who desire children are common, including the practice of temporary marriages, in which omegas are married for a predetermined period (often the duration of a

heat) either to aid with conception or for sexual enjoyment. Omega heat suppressants and contraceptives are available, but so are drugs designed to induce heat and reduce sexual inhibitions, which are often used on omegas without their knowledge or against their will. Once permanently married, an omega's property will be legally transferred to their partner, who will also become their legal guardian. They are allowed access to higher education and can work outside the home if they gain the signature of their parent, guardian, or spouse, but are generally only expected to pick subjects and careers which are deemed suitable for omegas, such as childcare and early childhood education, nursing, and design, art, and entertainment.

In ASD, omegas are also said to be especially fertile, but unlike TGC and BftE, the story does not contain details about reduced fertility rates for the rest of the population, or say anything about relative scarcity of omegas relative to the rest of the population. Nevertheless, here too the reproductive capacity of omegas is treated as a resource. Omegas used to be bought and sold for breeding, a custom which has since been outlawed. Yet the practice has survived through the establishment of "omega homes," institutional houses for unpartnered omegas which in practice function as brothels for wealthy alphas. Previously mandatory, the decision to stay in an omega home is now voluntary. However, life outside of omega homes is made difficult by the fact that omegas under twenty are refused access to heat suppressants, as well as by the prevalence of prejudice and discrimination against omegas.

The freedom and autonomy of omegas is also limited by the ever-present threat of sexual assault. In both TGC, BftE, and ASD, the mere whiff of an omega in heat is capable of triggering a strong reaction of overwhelming lust in any nearby alpha, seemingly giving them a "biological alibi" for sexual assault. Since being in heat also induces similar experiences of intense (occasionally almost debilitating) physical arousal in omegas, it becomes very difficult for either of them to give meaningful consent in this state, their biology seemingly overriding the possibility for considered choice. Even outside of heat, omegas are described as sexually vulnerable, especially in BftE, where omegas react to being touched on certain zones (for instance neck, hips, or belly) with a manifestation of physical desire which makes it difficult for them to think clearly and retain control of their actions, leaving them vulnerable not only to sexual assault, but also to manipulation. As a result, the sexual vulnerability of omegas is used as an excuse to restrict their freedom of movement, based on the argument that they are not safe out in public on their own. In BftE omegas often travel with chaperones,

and in TGC they are rarely seen out in public at all, and in ASD omegas are encouraged or expected to live in omega homes.

The idea that one's capacity to bear children, or one gender's sexual vulnerability affects their position in society is hardly new; it echoes a chorus of time-worn justifications for misogyny. But these connections have also been drawn from within the field of feminist theory, as explanations for the historical oppression of women. When it comes to sexual vulnerability, the journalist and feminist activist Susan Brownmiller argued in her book *Against Our Will* that the anatomical configurations which made men capable of rape, and women vulnerable to it, was not just a factor behind the oppression of women, but "the single causative factor in the original subjugation of woman by man" (1993, 26). Furthermore, she describes the human male as "a natural predator" and women as "his natural prey" (ibid., 26). This language of prey and predator is echoed in both TGC and BftE, as well as many other a/b/o fics, especially when an alpha gets exposed to an omega in heat.

Building on Marx and Engels, Shulamith Firestone argues in *The Dialectic of Sex* that the root cause of the oppression of women, what she calls the "sex class system," originated in the biological features of the human species. An activist and second-wave radical feminist theorist, Firestone argues that the oppression of women is not "simply" cultural or economic, but is a part of the very organization of nature (Firestone 1970, 2). The differentiation of reproductive functions in the human species was the origin of the first division of labor, in which women became responsible for the bearing and rearing of children, which was later institutionalized, leading to the oppression and exploitation of women's labor, both on a reproductive and a productive level. She argues that "women throughout history before the advent of birth control were at the continual mercy of their biology" (Firestone 1970, 8-9) and that because of childbirth, menstruation, nursing and care of infants, in addition to the interdependency between children and mothers, they ended up dependent on men. However, even though it is rooted in biology, this system of oppression is not immutable: new developments in reproductive technology, such as fertility control, have the potential to remove the biological basis for the sex class system. But the existence of these technologies do not on their own guarantee the overthrow of the sex class system, as reproductive technology might as well be used to reinforce the system of exploitation.

The premises with which these three fanfiction stories construct their oppressive societies are very similar to the ones that form the basis of Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, and Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*, in that features of omega biology cause them

considerable disadvantages with regards to their participation in society, making them dependent on alphas to varying degrees. The heat cycle in particular is used to create biological restrictions on omegas' autonomy, either by nearly debilitating them unless they bond with an alpha (TGC), making them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and manipulation (BftE), or making them physically unwell for two to three days once per month (ASD). All three of these stories introduce biomedical technologies as possible solutions to the omegas' situation, but legal and societal obstacles inhibit their liberatory potential: either contraceptive technologies or other biomedical means that would enable omegas to control their cycles are illegal (TGC), or they are prevented from freely accessing them (ASD), or biomedical technologies are weaponized against them (BftE). The heat cycle is also used to introduce the dynamic of prey and predator by overruling the rational decision-making mind of alphas, and omegas in heat.

In all three of these stories, the reproductive capabilities of omegas as a class is directly linked with the hierarchical aspect of the a/b/o system, and used as the foundation to construct imaginary worlds that are systematically oppressive to omegas. They all, albeit to varying degrees, sketch out societies in which an omega's worth is determined by their reproductive functions, their ability to conceive and give birth to (healthy) children. Because of their increased fertility, and in the case of TGC and BftE their relative scarcity, omegas in these stories are seen as a desirable reproductive resource to be exploited by what is often a rich and powerful alpha elite. Omegas bodies are commodified and omegas reproductive freedoms are restricted. The results are imaginary worlds in which the position of omegas in society is defined by their biology, reduced to their sex.

Because of how explicitly and systematically many a/b/o stories establish societies in which gendered oppression is the most prominent organizing factor, the concept of patriarchy, defined as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby 1990, 20), presented itself to me as a relevant parallel to the societies described in these stories. Patriarchy as a theoretical tool has been criticized on many fronts, for being an ahistorical, monolithic and simplistic model of gender dynamics, for ignoring differences among and between men as well as women, and being blind to other axes of oppressions such as class, race and ethnicity (Hunnicut 2009). There have been various attempts to address these criticisms within the framework of patriarchy, but the term has steadily been losing academic ground to other theoretical concepts such as gender inequality, power dynamics, and intersectionality in current feminist theory (Hunnicut 2009, Patil 2013,

Tinsman 1998). Both TGC and BftE occasionally mention other aspects of oppression such as class and sexual orientation, but ASD is the one that goes the furthest toward addressing intersectional axes of oppression, weaving issues of LGBT rights and race into its narrative through secondary characters. One of them is Yuri's trainer when he is practicing for the Olympics, a black female omega ice skater¹⁵ who remarks to Yuri that "my old coach told me once that I'd have taken gold in the Olympics if I'd been an alpha. I always thought privately that I could have managed if it I'd just been white" (Tessa on Ice 2017), and the closing section of the final chapter includes a quote by Martin Luther King, Jr. The story also features a relationship between two men who are both alphas, whose story of battling homophobia, state discrimination and violent threats plays out in the background of the main plot.

Another element which complicates the patriarchy parallel is that rather than being approximately fifty percent of the population, omegas are a minority, and in the case of TGC and BftE, a fairly small one. This gives the omega position some elements in common with ethnic, racial, or lgbt minorities, in that their oppression is easier to overlook by people who are seemingly untouched by it. Especially in TGC, this connection seems relevant, as the position of the omega as property to be bought and sold, with no legal rights to personhood, brings to mind historical conditions of slavery of racialized minorities in the west. Yet while the parallels between the treatment of omegas and the treatment of women are made explicit in these texts, unlike ASD, these two stories do not in any obvious way acknowledge any similarities to the oppression of people of color. This may indicate that any such parallels are unintentional, but it also makes the parallels more problematic. By writing conditions of slavery which are reminiscent of the injustices which have been perpetrated upon people of color, without acknowledging the connection, the story may exploit a history of suffering while at the same time contributing to its invisibility. However, the similarities to slavery are not extensive or overly conspicuous, and may just as easily be the result of a deliberate exaggeration of the historical conditions of subjugation of women. The defining feature of all three stories is their emphasis on a/b/o gender as the main axis of oppression, stressing gender as a source of inequality and oppression in a way which echoes the structures described by the concept of patriarchy, except with alphas as the patriarchs and omegas as the oppressed. In the context of a/b/o dynamics, the ability of patriarchy to capture gendered oppression on a systematic and society-wide level makes it a useful allegory.

¹⁵ An original character invented by the fic author, based on the French skater Surya Bonaly.

According to Tom Moylan, the power of dystopias lies in their ability “to register the impact of an unseen and unexamined social system on the everyday lives of everyday people” (2000, xiii). This is achieved in narrative form by zooming in on one of the subjects of the dystopia, as they gradually recognize their situation and become able to draw connections between their individual experiences and the operation of the entire system (Moylan 2000). In these stories, the themes are written out through already familiar male characters, who are put in a structural position comparative to that of women under patriarchy. They are written as “other” in ways which are analogue to the ways which women are othered - yet they manage to transcend their gender, both through their exceptional abilities, but also through romantic relationships in which they are seen and valued not for their biological capabilities, but for ‘who they really are.’

The creation of oppressive imaginary societies based on exaggerated versions of already existing discourses about gender and reproduction echo works of feminist science fiction, perhaps most notably Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1998). The dystopian novel is set in the theocratic dictatorship of Gilead, a future USA where the state has taken control over reproduction, and women have been stripped of their rights to employment, property, and equal citizenship. Fertile women are forced into the role of handmaidens, whose duty it is to function as breeders for the elite. Through its “overliteralization and overdramatization of patriarchy” (Latimer 2009, 221) *The Handmaid’s Tale* describes a world in which “a woman’s only ‘choice’ is pregnancy or death” (Latimer 2009, 213). In this novel, the imperative of producing healthy children completely overshadows the personhood of the women carrying them. Heather Latimer (2009) reads *The Handmaid’s Tale* as an engagement with both feminist and non-feminist ideas about reproductive politics which were circulating in the 1980s, stretching their premises to extremes in a way that amounts to a critique of the terms of the debate itself. Much in the same way, these omegaverse fanfiction stories are taking discourses that have been used to justify or explain the limitation of women’s civil rights and their exclusion from the public sphere, and applying them to the figure of the omega. By grounding oppression of one gender in biology, either on the basis of reproductive capability or sexual vulnerability, the stories activate meanings from and intervene in discourses about biological determinism, gender essentialism, and the origins of gendered oppression.

3.2 Affective experiences of gendered oppression

I am not making the claim that the authors of these stories were directly inspired by the works of Atwood, Firestone, or Brownmiller when writing these stories.¹⁶ Neither am I arguing that these stories are written as straightforward descriptions or reflections of our society. Rather, my argument is that these fanfiction stories poach ideas from already circulating discourses about the connection between biology, reproduction, and gendered oppression, weave them into the system of a/b/o dynamics, and write stories “as if” these ideas were factually true. What if one group was biologically disadvantaged because of their reproductive functions? And what if a society institutionalized those disadvantages?

One may argue that these questions could be answered by opening a newspaper or going out the door, but this would be missing the point. By answering these questions in the form of a speculative narrative, these stories explore the premises of gendered oppression, investigating how they intersect and interact in the imaginary life of their main characters. In this section I will show how, by centering the experience of the main characters, these stories explore the personal, subjective, and emotional costs of systemic gendered oppression. It also creates opportunities to question and add nuance to some of the premises which support the oppression of omegas in these societies. All three of these stories spend considerable time elaborating on the emotional impact being seen and treated as an omega has on their main character, but for this section I focus primarily on a pair of episodes from *BftE* and *ASD*. Following Tony Stark from childhood to adulthood, the first part of the story is mainly focused on formative experiences where Tony learns what it means to be born an omega, and how he is expected to live and behave as one. A telling paragraph is when Tony Stark arrives at the all-omega boarding school as a young child. At one point he is looking through the books in the bookcase in his dormitory bedroom, together with a teacher, and discovers a book called “Our Omega Bodies.” He remarks to the teacher “I bet the alphas here don't have an Our Alpha Bodies book.” (venusm 2016), revealing that Tony has already learned that his omega body is seen as the exception, as a problem which needs to be managed, while alpha bodies are seen as the norm.

The teacher goes on to explain that this is an all-omega boarding school, and “that mixed-sex type classrooms are poor learning environments for omegas” (venusm 2016).

¹⁶ Even though this is not entirely inconceivable. *ASD*, for example, cites bell hooks and references Simone de Beauvoir.

"Oh my god," Tony hisses, "this is another one of those you poor little omegas can't possibly handle the hard hard math. Don't worry your widdle head about--"

Na Anderson just talks over him, voice still calm. "Numerous studies indicate that in a mixed type environment, teacher attention and classroom resources are unfairly applied. Omegas are called on sixty percent less often than their beta or alpha counterparts. Their homework is often graded too leniently, too harshly, or not at all. When working on group projects, omegas often do more than their share of the work and yet receive less credit for it. Despite showing leadership or academic skills, teachers frequently pass over talented omega students in favor of alpha students during after school programs."

Tony is just staring at her. The math book feels heavy and clumsy in his hands. He's thinking about the Math-a-Thon at his old school. His team had six kids, and he'd done most of the problem sets. When they'd gotten their scores back, the alpha, Sarah, had gotten fifty extra credit points for leading their team. The other kids had gotten twenty to thirty extra credit points, and the teacher had put lots of interesting commentary on the math problems on their answer sheets. Tony had been given twenty five points for participation. The teacher had put a smiley face on his answer sheet, and she'd made some comments about how helpful it had been to the team that he'd taken their notes and re-written their proofs so they were easier to read in his neat printing. She'd hoped that he'd enjoyed participating, and she'd suggested that he might want to join the upcoming debate camp. The debate coach was looking for a charming omega who could bring out the competitive streak in his debaters. "At Miss Price's Academy," Na Anderson says, "we only take omega students. You're not here to help alphas or betas, Tony. You're here to learn for yourself." (venusm 2016)

This excerpt contains an illustration of a/b/o-gendered world building, in which information about this particular version of the omegaverse is presented to the reader as an integrated part of the narrative, often early in the story. In this case it takes the form of a list of facts and statistics presented to Tony by his new teacher, describing of how omegas are systematically underestimated and overlooked in favor of alphas.¹⁷ The paragraph simultaneously reveals how Tony has already been shaped by being treated as an omega. Even though Tony is not yet nine years old, he is already aware of the expectations and prejudices he is met with because he is an omega: Omegas are not able to do hard math. Omegas are not expected to have the skills to make valuable contribution of their own, but should be lauded for trying. Omegas are good for making things pretty and neat, and for making alphas perform better. The paragraph

¹⁷ Conspicuously, there is no mention of betas, although they are supposedly the majority of the population. This is not an uncommon tendency in a/b/o stories.

also works to establish that the teacher Na Anderson, and the school, do not subscribe to these ideas about the limitations of omegas' abilities. It is apparent that neither does Tony, although he has clearly learned to expect them. The flashback to the Math-a-Thon in his old school, demonstrates how omegas are treated as if their only possible function and ability is to conform to their assigned gender role of nurturer and caretaker, no matter what their actual ability or inclination may be. It shows how Tony's status as an omega has caused his efforts and abilities to go unrecognized and unsupported, and how he has been encouraged to behave in ways which conform with what is expected of omegas. That Tony's former teacher assumes that Tony must have re-written the other pupils' work, rather than considering the possibility that he might have done it himself, reveals how the a/b/o designations are organizing categories through which the teacher interprets behavior, even among little children. Furthermore, the former teacher's exclamations, condescendingly praising Tony for his effort without acknowledging his contribution, function as performative utterances citing already established a/b/o gender norms, stabilizing and bringing about the categories of which they speak (Butler 1999). By showing how Tony is told what he should be, and not seen or acknowledged for his actions and abilities that defy omega gender expectations, this short paragraph demonstrates that omegas are socialized into their role, rather than embracing it as something innate or natural. In so doing, this paragraph contradicts the sweeping biological statements made about the "nature" of alphas and omegas, revealing that the ascription of alpha and omega traits to biology can be unreliable. Tony himself functions as living proof that omegas do not always conform to their expected roles and abilities, undermining the essentialist understanding of the a/b/o gender categories. This destabilizes the neat biological categories of alpha and omega, as it is shown that they do not necessarily reflect a natural, non-discursive truth. This is supported by the statistics quoted by Na Anderson, which suggest that gendered prejudice causes omegas to get systematically overlooked in classroom settings.

Following Tony's experience growing up creates the opportunity to explore the emotional effects of being socialized as an omega. Even though these paragraphs do not contain any direct descriptions of Tony's inner experience, the emotional impact can be read from Tony's reactions: the contempt expressed in Tony's initial outburst, using baby talk to parody the message he is used to receiving about omegas, and his stunned reaction at finding someone who validates his experience. Given that the reader is familiar with the source material, where Tony Stark is canonically established to be a mathematical and engineering

genius, the reader needs no further emotional clues to feel Tony's indignance at having his work ascribed to other people, while being praised for his "neat handwriting." This experience of indignance and frustration at not being seen and acknowledged is a recurring theme throughout the telling of this version of Tony Stark's origin story. Another illustrative example is an episode when Tony Stark as a teenager is attending a party held by his parents, intended to present him to a range of eligible alpha candidates for a marriage. Here his mother is talking about the robots Tony has been building at school:

Tony should be glad she's been paying attention to whatever reports the school sends home, but it's difficult to hear his award-winning robot AIs called "these funny little moving arms--all gears and engines and whatnot, Howard can tell you all about them. It's so charming how Tony wants to be like his father, isn't it?"

Tony opens his mouth to explain about their learning capabilities, but his mom just presses her hand on his back. He smiles instead, feeling plastic. One of the tricks he learned at school to deflect unwanted personal attention was to steer the conversation onto the other person. Ask about their life, their work, their family.

It works well for a while. Tony's pretty proud of his own cleverness until one lady says, "He's such a good listener. I've always said omegas make the best spouses--they're always more interested in others' needs than their own."

That puts an end to that party trick. Jesus. (venusm 2016)

Yet again, Tony's achievements in robotics are belittled, described not as impressive, but "charming." At this point however, Tony has learned not to protest, and has acquired the skill of playing along. Rather than trying to prove his brilliance, he lives up to their expectations of "the charming omega" by using the interpersonal skills he has learned at school. This excerpt demonstrates that charm is not a trait that is inherent to omegas, but rather a learned behavior, which is even taught in class. Furthermore, charm is revealed as a social strategy which Tony is using defensively to avoid the discomfort of not conforming to the stereotype of the charming omega. The reward he gets for playing along is to yet again be mischaracterized, to be taken as confirmation of the image of "the charming omega."

In *On Oppression*, Marilyn Frye posits that one of the most characteristic experiences of oppression is the "the double bind" - situations in which one's choices are limited and each of them involve some sort of "penalty, censure or deprivation" (2008, 42). She goes on to

describe the dilemma between playing along with sexism by smiling and being charming and thus participating in one's own erasure, or standing up for oneself and being seen as "bitter, angry or dangerous." This is perfectly illustrated by what Tony is going through in this paragraph. His experiments in robotics are being belittled as charming and cute and not the serious accomplishments which they are. He can choose whether to stand up for himself or play along, and, not wanting to provoke his mother, he chooses the latter and makes an effort to live up to the role he is expected to play. The reward, however, is that his behavior is taken to affirm the stereotype about omegas in which he is trapped. But if he had chosen to stand up for himself, it is clear that he would face social sanction. No matter what Tony does, he can not be seen as the brilliant young engineer-to-be that he is, nor can he gain any acknowledgement for the social skills he has learned, as they are seen as innate behavior for omegas. By framing his achievements as something quaint and cute, they are translated into language that makes sense within the norms that govern what an omega supposedly can and cannot do. The only actions Tony can be seen and acknowledged for, are the ones which fit within the outline of the stereotypical omega figure; anything that exceeds or goes beyond that outline is unintelligible. The incident demonstrates how appeals to a universal, essential omeganess operate to trap Tony within a narrowly confined role. Tony has been taught by necessity and schooling to perform the role of the charming omega, and his success is then taken as a confirmation of the innateness of of this role. Like the previous example, this paragraph can be read as a comment on how biological justifications for gender roles conceal their social constructedness, hiding the way they function to regulate individual behavior. It shows how the appeal to a fixed or innate essence as a discursive move can work to disguise the operation of power.

Again, Tony's discomfort is clear: he finds it difficult to listen to the way people talk about his robotics projects, his smile feels like plastic when he heeds his mom's subtle signal to not talk back, and his exasperation when he is praised for being a good listener comes through loud and clear in the last line. Both of these two excerpts not only illustrate how gender categories are naturalized, they also highlight the emotional costs of this process. These costs involve Tony having to hide his real emotions, desires, and preferences, in order not to disturb the illusion of harmony.

In her article "Creating Disturbance: Feminism, happiness and affective differences" (2010) Sara Ahmed asks how certain bodies become identified as the source of disturbance and bad feelings. She argues that happiness is not a feeling that is located in an individual, but

rather involves “a shared orientation toward what is good” (Ahmed 2010, 37), where that which is defined as good is seen as the cause of happiness. When the influence over what is defined as good is not equally distributed, this results in a “happiness duty” (Ahmed 2010, 39) in which some people are obligated to orient themselves toward other people’s definition of good in order to preserve their happiness. When people find that objects that are perceived as good do not make them happy, the result is alienation.

By reading the above excerpt in the light of Ahmed’s framework, we can trace the circulation of emotions to the performance and enforcement of gender roles. Tony is made to cede what he sees as good (talking about engineering), in favor of the good as defined by his parents: ‘the charming omega.’ The successful performance of omega gender roles is constituted as a “happy object” (Ahmed 2010, 34) toward which Tony is obligated to orient himself, regardless of whether it is something he himself defines as good or is made happy by. Not only does Tony have to perform this role to keep his parents happy, the success of his performance is contingent on him seeming happy while doing it. When Tony tries to have a conversation about an engineering project with his father later that night, and becomes visibly upset at being rebuffed, his mother’s response is, “Now darling, don't sulk. It's not attractive.” (venusm 2016). Since his distress threatens the mirage of the charming omega, it must remain hidden. Because the charming, attractive omega is seen as an object of happiness, failure to happily perform the role is seen as a disturbance. In order to preserve other people’s happiness, Tony is made to “pass as happy” (Ahmed 2010, 39). By not finding happiness in the role of the charming omega he is “out of line with the affective community” (Ahmed 2010, 34), leaving him alienated and ‘feeling plastic.’

The norms and meanings to which the omega is supposed to conform - charming, friendly, caring, attractive - together contribute to the construction of the omega as a female-coded figure. Weaving together depictions of the reproduction and policing of gender norms with explorations of the emotional experience of being subjected to these norms, the story reworks the emotional experiences associated with being socialized as female. Rewriting these experiences through the fictional categories of alpha and omega, exempts the story from having to justify its descriptions as truth claims about the conditions of gendered oppression - it does not pretend to be a representation of ‘women’s situation’ in any specific time or place. This makes space to explore subjective experiences of gendered oppression, giving rise to a different kind of truth claim, a claim to the affective truth of the experience of oppression

under the fictional conditions outlined in the story: this is what it would be like for Tony Stark to be raised as an omega in this imagined society.

Of course, the clear references to m/f gender encourage the reader to relate the depictions in the stories to the way gendered oppression is structured in the real world. These parallels are especially explicit in ASD, because of its intertextual references to feminist theory and works of literature. The title of the story is taken from a line from *Jane Eyre*, which Lashyn gives Yuri as a gift. Of course, in this universe, Jane Eyre was an omega. The first chapter opens with a quote from the book: “The worth of women: wherein is clearly revealed their nobility and their superiority to men” by Moderata Fonte, in which the words men and women have been replaced with alphas and omegas. It does the same with a quote by bell hooks, and references Simone de Beauvoir as an “omegist” writer. These references immediately situate the story in relation to the political and theoretical tradition of feminism. ASD follows Yuri’s journey from discovering that he is an omega with the onset of his first heat, to becoming politically involved as an omegist activist whose public statements spark large-scale omegist protests in Russia. For Yuri, in addition to being a journey in space and time, this is an affective process and emotions play a big role in Yuri’s omegist awakening. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* Sara Ahmed examines the role of pain, anger, wonder, and hope in the feminist project, arguing that “feminism involves an emotional response to the world, where the form of that response involves a reorientation of one’s bodily relation to social norms” (2014, 171). This statement encapsulates the process Yuri undergoes throughout the course of the story. When Yuri first discovers that he is an omega with the onset of his first heat, it is an incredibly painful experience for him. Not only is it a physically distressing and mentally confusing experience of losing control of his own body, he also finds himself belonging to a category which is seen as the other. From one day to another he becomes subject to social norms and gendered restrictions that he never expected would apply to his life, and is told this will mean the end of his ice skating career, just when he is on the brink of qualifying for the Olympics.

Drawing on the writings of bell hooks, Ahmed argues that feminism originates as a response to pain. However, this pain can only be used as a basis for feminism if it is read in connection with a larger structure of oppression. In order for pain to motivate political action, the subject has to learn to read “the relation between affect and structure” (Ahmed 2014, 174). As he sinks into a deep depression, Yuri has no confusion about the connection between distress and pain and his status as an omega. That structural relation is obvious to both him

and the reader from the start. However, after the doctor's visit where he is denied heat suppressants and told to conform to the gender norms through which his body is now being read, Yuri sees no alternative to resignation. According to Ahmed, for pain to lead to political action, it first needs to be translated into anger, the pain needs to be interpreted as wrong, as an outrage (Ahmed 2014, 174). Fortunately for Yuri, this step comes easy for him. Already in the animated series that the story is based on, the canonical version of Yuri Plisetsky is shown as an angry rebel, short-fused and prone to temper tantrums. In ASD, these traits are channeled into Yuri's reaction to his new social existence as an omega. But Yuri's anger is not a political argument, it does not show him a way forward. This only happens after Lashyn explains the underlying structures behind the oppression of omegas, revealing how the oppression of omegas serves the interests of dominant groups and is actively maintained by social institutions such as medical knowledge production and omega homes, as well as political decisions. Thanks to his conversations with Lashyn, Yuri's anger is translated into the language of omegism. If I can be permitted to take the same liberty with Ahmed's writing as ASD does with bell hooks and Charlotte Brontë, replacing the word feminism with omegism, Yuri's "[omegist] anger involves a reading of the world, a reading of how, for example, gender hierarchy is implicated in other forms of power relations, including race, class and sexuality, or how gender norms regulate bodies in spaces" (Ahmed 2014, 176). Through the two gynecological examinations he undergoes, first by the alpha doctor and then by Lashyn, Yuri receives a crash course in how gender norms regulate bodies in space. As shown in the previous chapter, he is made to see how medical knowledge about his omega body is constructed to deny him access to heat suppressants, in order to pressure omegas to stay in the omega homes. His awareness of the intersections of gender norms with other types of oppression comes later, but both race and sexuality are brought into context with the oppression of omegas at various points in the story, through his interactions with side characters.

Yuri's embrace of omegist activism does not come easy. In his first conversations with Lashyn, Yuri is resistant. He is hesitant to return to skating as an omega, afraid of the stigma it carries with it, calling attention to the death threats and "endless bullshit" (Tessa on Ice 2017) a formerly prominent omega skater had received. He is frustrated by the fact that no matter what he does, he will never be able to escape being seen first and foremost as an omega: "If I started competing again as an omega, that would be the extent of my identity forever. I wouldn't be Yuri Plisetsky, I'd be Yuri Plisetsky, omega" (Tessa on Ice 2017). It

feels deeply unfair to him that he should have to shoulder the burden of representation. When Lashyn encourages him to embrace it, he responds:

“Why should I have to worry about embracing it? How many alphas worry about their secondary sex every day?”

Lashyn frowns. “Not many,” she admits.

“I don’t want to be an omegist icon, but I don’t want to kowtow to alphacentrism either. I just – I want to skate.” (Tessa on Ice 2017)

So after Yuri receives the heat suppressants, he uses scent blockers to pass as a beta when he returns to his skating career. The turning point comes when Yuri visits an omega home in St. Petersburg, witnesses the bleak conditions the omegas there are living under, and is made aware of the harrowing practices of exploitation that go on there. This is the moment when Yuri’s anger is sharpened into action, and he gives an interview to a magazine explaining his decision to donate his prize money to the “Omegist Political Action Fund” (Tessa on Ice 2017). He starts using his considerable fanbase to talk about omegist causes, by starting a blog and airing his frustrations on twitter. He later comes out as an omega and takes an even more active political stance against the Russian government, which results in Yuri’s exile from Russia, the attempted assassination of Lashyn by Russian agents, and massive omegist protests in Russia and abroad.

But in order for this to happen, his anger first had to be supplemented by another emotion: hope. According to Sara Ahmed (2014), hope is the emotion that directs feminist action toward the future, based on the assumption that change is possible, that oppression is not inevitable. For Yuri, this too is sparked through his relations with Lashyn. As an omega who is not only a doctor, but also an elected representative in the Kazakhstani parliament, her mere existence is a beacon of hope, showing Yuri that it is possible to live an ambitious and fulfilling life as an omega. She also demonstrates how political actions can lead to systemic change, both by introducing Yuri to omegist writings and through her work for omegist causes, and explicitly argues that there are reasons to be hopeful, that activist work can pay off. She gives Yuri the ability to believe that it could be different, and that individual actions can affect the course of history. The final paragraphs of the story are a retrospective blog post written by Yuri, looking back at the process of his omegist awakening:

My life was upended when I presented as omega, and I was only able to start piecing it back together when I came to terms with myself. In the same way, my world became more broken when I presented, and the process of un-breaking it was only undertaken when I – when thousands of people all over the world, when politicians, when activists, in a legacy going back hundreds of years – all became aware and demanded change.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once famously said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” He neglects to mention that the universe does not bend on its own. The world bends when we make it bend, when people are angry enough, or desperate enough, or passionate enough to grab it and start bending it themselves.

(Tessa on Ice 2017)

With these closing lines, the message of hope - the promise of the possibility of change and the power to make a difference - is passed on to the reader.

By writing Yuri as an omega, ASD examines the subjective experience of going through the process of becoming gendered, being made aware of the operation of power within this process, learning how that power is institutionalized, and coming to find ways to formulate resistance. The fictional narrative form enables the exploration of the role of mediated emotions in the process of becoming able to act to oppose and change gendered systems of oppression. In so doing, it also creates a blueprint by which the reader can mobilize the same emotions toward action directed against related situations and structures in their own lives. The extent to which this happens would, of course, be a question for a different project, at this point I will settle for pointing out the textual potential for encouraging this process.

3.3 Unequal relationships: romance and consent

The exploration of the emotional impact of oppression is not limited to the isolated inner experience of the main character in each of the stories. By centering the narrative on a relationship between an alpha and an omega, the a/b/o system is also used to explore the topic of asymmetrical power relations in the context of romantic relationships. The inequality of the respective positions of alphas and omegas in these settings creates the opportunity to imaginatively investigate the effects of oppression on intimacy, trust, and consent. The question of how to build a harmonious romantic relationship between two people who are positioned on opposite sides of a gendered hierarchy, is one which a/b/o has in common with

mainstream romance novels. In *Women Read the Romance* Janice Radway argued that romance novels allow their readers to imagine a world in which their emotional needs could be met by a hero who would still prove to be “spectacularly masculine” (1983, 64), promising (heterosexual) women that emotional fulfillment is possible, even under patriarchy. In an extension of this point, Catherine Roach has argued that romance novels provide women readers with reparation fantasies which help them “deal with their essentially paradoxical relationship toward men within a culture still marked by patriarchy and its component threat of violence toward women” (2010, web). According to Roach, the cultural narrative of romance stories function as “a fantasy antidote to patriarchy” (ibid.) by giving women the tools to do the deep work of reconciling their ambiguous positions of “simultaneously desiring and fearing men” (ibid.). I will argue that by creating extreme versions of patriarchy as settings for their imagined romances, these omegaverse stories do a similar type of work.

While both ASD and BftE engage with the paradoxes and struggles of how to establish an equal relationship between unequal partners, in TGC this theme is at the core of the plot all throughout the 800+ pages long fic.¹⁸ Of the stories I have been analyzing for this project, TGC is also the story which starts out with the most oppressive situation for omegas. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the way the omega biology is written in TGC puts them in a position of dependence on alphas. Unless they have an alpha to mate with, omegas in TGC suffer from debilitating heat cycles. Bonding with an alpha grants the omega the relief of less frequent, less intense, and more regular heats. Since there are no biomedical remedies to the omega cycles, alphas hold the only key to cure the omegas’ agony, unless the omega is desperate enough to risk their life by undergoing illegal surgery to remove their reproductive organs. As shown earlier in this chapter, this dependence is intensified by creating a storyworld characterized by harsh institutional oppression on a societal level, wherein omegas are a small minority that are treated as the property of the alpha elite.

In the canonical story from the BBC TV show, the power balance between Sherlock and John is skewed in Sherlock’s favor, with John often portrayed as the loyal sidekick to Sherlock’s genius. During their investigations, Sherlock leads and John follows. This dynamic is carried into TGC, but is offset by writing John as an alpha and Sherlock as an omega. Through this textual move, John is given a structural advantage over Sherlock, on both a societal and biological level, while Sherlock is put in a position of relative powerlessness.

¹⁸ The fic is 326 887 words long, which translates to 820 single-spaced pages with a Times New Roman font according to <http://www.wordstopages.com/>.

Their communication is also complicated by Sherlock's experiences of partner abuse, and John's lack of experience with the realities of omegas' lives. There is a continual struggle for both of them to meet on equal footing despite the unequal positions imposed on them by their a/b/o statuses. The challenge throughout the story for both John and Sherlock is to communicate and trust each other across the structural difference in power and privilege. In TGC, the fate of their relationship rests on their ability to bridge this gap. This also introduces the potential of conflict between them, as their respective positions on opposite sides of a system of oppression would seemingly give them opposing interests. As an alpha, John's interests would presumably be aligned with the structures that are the cause of so much of Sherlock's suffering.

In the article "(Re)Constructing Men's Interests," Bob Pease asks how men can be convinced to align themselves with women's interests and become "reliable allies in fighting patriarchy" (2002, 166). His starting point is the assumption that since men benefit materially from the oppression of women, it would be in their interest to sustain this oppression, rather than challenging it. Pease questions this premise, by arguing that men's interests are not objectively given by their social position, but rather formulated by individual men in the context of available discourses and their social situations (Pease, 2002). Pease goes on to suggest that men's interests can be reconceptualized through processes that encourage them to listen to and empathize with women's pain. In order for these processes to be successful in transforming men's interests, it is not sufficient to make them understand the experiences that women go through, they also need to be emotionally engaged with them (Pease 2012).

The question of how to transform men's self-conceived interests in order to oppose the oppression of women, can be mapped onto the relationship between alphas and omegas in TGC. However, as mentioned earlier, the a/b/o system departs from the m/f gender system in that alphas and omegas are both minority populations, with omegas being the numerically smaller minority. Omegas are sold to wealthy alphas of the elite, and since omegas can only be born to other omegas, they are nearly exclusively found in the upper class. As a non-elite alpha, this has direct consequences for the framing of John's interests. The fact that omegas are such a small and isolated part of the population, gives John a claim to ignorance and non-complicity which would not be available to men in a similarly oppressive system. Until discovering the truth about Sherlock, he was dating betas and had reconciled himself with the idea that alpha/omega dynamics would play no role in his romantic life. As an alpha who is not part of the elite, he had not been in the position to have much contact with omegas, and

thus has no personal experience with how omegas are treated. Despite knowing that omegas have no independent legal agency or human rights, he had failed to consider the extent the consequences this would have on the lived reality of their existence. The relative rareness of omegas in TGC gives John an excuse for not knowing reality of the oppression omegas live under, and for not understanding how this must have affected Sherlock as a person. This means that through his status as an alpha, John's interests are formally aligned with the oppressors, but because he is not a member of the elite, he is not invested in the system, and did not personally expect to benefit from it. Even though John has absorbed some of the common cultural assumptions about omegas, he is not actively complicit in their oppression. John's struggle to understand Sherlock originates from lack of experience and knowledge, not from a personal investment and involvement in the oppressive system. By writing John as a non-elite alpha, he is placed in the position of the oppressor while retaining a degree of blamelessness. As the story alternates between John and Sherlock's point of view, this creates the opportunity to explore a "first encounter" with gendered oppression from the perspective of a person who is structurally in the position of the oppressor. When John is hit with the realization that Sherlock, the man he lives and works with, is an omega, he is awakened to the reality of omegas' situation:

John tried to imagine [Sherlock] in that situation, tied to someone with no expectations beyond staying quiet and bearing children. In theory, his Alpha would be wealthy enough to purchase anything he wanted, but the components Sherlock believed made life worth living – the chase, the game, an exhilarating puzzle – they were the kind of thing money couldn't buy. An existence like that, hidden away by an Alpha, even one who adored him, may as well be the death penalty for Sherlock. He would stagnate, the engine of his mind tearing itself apart without cases to keep it engaged, and that thrilling spirit of intelligence would wither and die, superfluous to what his Alpha would consider to be Sherlock's purpose. (BeautifulFiction 2015)

As the above paragraph shows, John begins to take in the reality of omega oppression by imagining how soul-crushing life as an omega would be to a person like Sherlock. The omega can no longer be imagined as an abstract figure who would be content bearing and caring for children, with no other aspirations or agency. When given the face of someone he loves and respects, the inhumanity of the situation becomes painfully obvious. John is gradually introduced to the social and material reality of the gendered oppression Sherlock

has been living under, and comes to understand how it has affected him. Throughout the story John's growing realization of how Sherlock, and by extension all omegas, have been treated, together with the strength of his feelings of love, admiration, and respect for Sherlock, combine to make John a steadfast ally and advocate for Sherlock. The reconstruction of John's interests is a result of being hit with the knowledge of what omegas' lives are actually like, in combination with the strength of his feelings for Sherlock. The story thus dramatises an idealised version of the process outlined by Pease, in which romantic love is strong enough to cause the person structurally positioned as the oppressor to turn away from the privileges they are granted from the oppressive system in order to defend their partner's interests and autonomy.

In addition to echoing Pease's account of how to reconstruct men's interests under patriarchy, this narrative also draws on established conventions of romance novels. While the romance genre has repeatedly been criticized for reproducing traditional, misogynist ideas about gender, and for its focus on marriage as the end-all goal (Regis 2016), others have argued that the genre engages with these discourses in a more transformative way. Patthey-Chavez, Clare, and Youmans has argued that although romance novels are grounded in hegemonic ideas about gender roles, these roles are then transformed by the main characters, turning their relationship into "a journey for healing and growth" (Patthey-Chavez, Clare, and Youmans 1996, 100). According to Pamela Regis (2016), the romantic couple is usually opposed by a society flawed by corruption, tradition, or inequality, which is symbolically overcome through their romantic union. Catherine Roach further argues that romance novels draw on a cultural narrative of "the healing power of love" (2010, web) to construct "a fantasy conquest of patriarchy" (2010, web). Through their love, the heroine wins a man who both embodies hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), while also being emotionally available and devotedly loyal to her. So even though the superficial characteristics of the genre seem to replicate a very traditional gender structure, the subtext and the emotional content of the text creates a more complex picture.

By introducing the alpha/omega dynamic between John and Sherlock, TGC creates a very similar narrative structure. As alpha and omega, John and Sherlock are encoded with exaggerated versions of the discourses that constitute male and female gender roles. As an omega, Sherlock is supposed to be submissive, dependent, passive, and is primarily valued for the reproductive and sexual characteristics of his body. As an alpha, John is expected to be dominant, possessive, and aggressive. Both of them rebel against these roles, Sherlock by

running away from his abusive alpha partner and becoming a successful detective, John by respecting Sherlock's autonomy and defending Sherlock's right to freedom and self-determination. By writing Sherlock as an omega, the story is also in line with the common trend in romance novels of writing heroines who are willful, strong and independent, "bucking patriarchal convention" (Roach 2010, web) and refusing to be submissive and subservient. The story draws on the traits of the canonical Sherlock - his exceptional intelligence, his unconventional methods and disdain for authority - and channels them into opposition to a symbolically represented patriarchy.

John, on the other hand, who from the outset is portrayed as respectful, understanding and caring, seems to have more in common with what romance novel readers call a "beta" hero.¹⁹ In romance novel terms, male heroes who start out as a representative of hegemonic masculinity, displaying traits of dominance, aggression, or emotional unavailability and then gradually learn how to become more expressive and sensitive to the needs of the heroine, are known as "alpha heroes," while romantic interests who are more sensitive, gentle and understanding are known as "beta heroes" (Lynch, Sternglantz, and Barot 2012).

Yet the classic "alpha hero" traits - aggression, dominance, possessiveness - are also included in John's characterization, via his alpha biology. As much as John rejects and disdains the oppressive norms of the society, he is still subject to the hormonal instincts of his body. In the previous chapter, we saw John get his first experience with the intense predatory desire of the alpha mating drive when he was exposed to a synthetic version of the omega heat hormone. After Sherlock's previous partner dies and he reverts to his unbonded state, Sherlock's scent regains its ability to trigger John's dormant alpha instincts, to John's horror and embarrassment. This comes to a point when John wakes up one morning from an achingly wet dream and senses a whiff of heat hormones in the air. He goes looking for Sherlock, but finds nothing but his empty bedroom. Seeing movement out of the corner of his eye, he turns and is confronted with his own reflection in a mirror:

Horror crept through him, bringing with it insidious whispers of repulsion. The expression of his reflection was not one of a concerned friend or a caring lover. It was that of a hunter: merciless and indifferent to reason. All he'd cared about was finding Sherlock, not to check on

¹⁹ This is an example of how the alpha/beta/omega terms have been circulating and taken up by several communities, resulting in different, if often related meanings. Romance novel readers' use of the alpha and beta terminology are drawn from the same source as a/b/o fanfiction, but the meanings associated with them are not the same as in omegaverse fanfiction, although their descriptions of the "alpha" role nearly overlap.

his safety, but to snatch him close and fuck into him. Claim him. His jaw ached with the desire to bite, and his cock throbbed, petulant. (BeautifulFiction 2015)

John is faced with the distressing realization that he was acting on impulses that were in line with the stereotype of the predatory and possessive alpha. He is confronted by the fact that he can be driven to behave in ways which he finds abhorrent, and may pose a threat to Sherlock's safety. Throughout the story John grapples with this fear of behaving like Sherlock's previous, abusive alpha partner, and continually questions whether he can trust himself not to hurt Sherlock. Sherlock struggles with the same doubts. The danger posed by John's alpha instincts and the distrust it brings with it are among the main obstacles standing in the way of their happy ending. By means of the alpha biology, the "alpha romance hero" traits are still a part of John's character, but they have been externalised and written onto his body, described as separate from his conscious self. To be able to be a worthy partner to Sherlock, John needs to prove to both Sherlock and himself that he is able to control the alpha (in both meanings of the word) aspects of his character. As discussed in the previous chapter, I showed how the omegaverse seemingly collapses the gender/sex distinction back into sex, positing biology as destiny. Now John has to prove that this is untrue. The essentialist depictions of the alpha and omega categories and the biological imperatives that they bring with them function as obstacles to be overcome, not static and objective descriptions of omegaverse reality.

The inscription of these traits onto John's body as primal biological imperatives does not preclude the existence of socially constructed gender norms that support them. While John is not of the elite, he is not entirely untouched by the norms that uphold the oppression of omegas. When he first discovers that Sherlock is an omega, John struggles with "the collision of the awareness that Sherlock was strong and powerfully independent, and the social programming that made him sure, deep in his brain, that Omegas were helpless, naïve, innocent – an Alpha's responsibility to protect" (BeautifulFiction 2015). This indicates that John has, on some level, bought into the discourse that frames alphas as custodians of omegas' interests, and deprives omegas of their right to autonomy and self-determination. But when confronted with the reality that the fiercely brilliant, strong, and independent Sherlock is an omega, John's preconceived notions do not hold up. It is interesting to note that the story here emphasises that these ideas come from John's "social programming," and not from any primal alpha instincts. Like BftE, TGC story thus undermines the simplistic image of biological essentialism, asserting the role of culture in defining the content of the alpha and

omega categories. Furthermore, Sherlock's existence clearly disproves John's preconceptions of what and how an omega can be. As John discovers that his ideas about omegas are inaccurate, this opens up the possibility that alphas may also be capable of breaking with the stereotypical behaviour - possessive, protective, domineering - that is expected of them.

Pamela Regis (2016) argues that romance novels revolve around the heroine's struggle to overcome a series of barriers between her and the romantic hero. These barriers can be small or large, societal or psychological, but what they all have in common is that they are impeding her freedom and constraining her life. By overcoming these obstacles, she "moves from a state of bondage or constraint to a state of freedom" (Regis 2016, 51). According to Regis, when the heroine finally marries or gets engaged to the hero, it is as a manifestation of her freedom, rather than a concession to traditional or patriarchal ideals about marriage. This interpretation places the heroine's ability to freely choose her desire, her partner, and her life, at the center of the romantic narrative.

Reading TGC through this framework, it becomes clear how the story revolves around Sherlock and John's ability to freely choose each other, without being forced by circumstance or duress. In order to do so, they have to overcome the many obstacles posed by their status as alpha and omega: how can they choose each other when one of them is living under conditions of oppression and constraint, and the other one belongs to the privileged class which is benefiting from the system of oppression? How can they remove dependency and inequality from the equation in order to be able to base their relationship on mutual love and affection?

After Sherlock's gender is revealed, John struggles to adjust to the new information and its implications for their relationship. Affectionate touch which up to then had been a casual part of their dynamic suddenly takes on new meaning, and John finds that he needs to restrain himself:

Before, it hadn't been an issue. He'd thought the vivid moments of connection they experienced went both ways. Now, John wasn't so sure. Sherlock might not have told him much, but he got the impression that he had spent years in a world where his wants and desires had been irrelevant, and people ignored his opinion. John didn't want to be the same. He didn't want to touch Sherlock like he had every right when, in fact, the opposite was true. Despite Sherlock's assurances to the contrary, John wasn't convinced he would tell him to back off. So he exercised restraint, missing every idle bit of contact so intensely that it became a physical ache. (BeautifulFiction 2015)

Knowing that Sherlock is an omega, John is aware that is aware that his actions will be read in a different context than when he assumed they were both alphas. As an alpha, John's touch will unavoidably be put in context with the treatment Sherlock suffered at the hands of his previous partner. Whether he wants to or not, his behaviour toward Sherlock is now part of a history of alphas treating omegas as objects without any regard for their agency or desire. Both on the personal and the general level, an entire history of oppression is brought into their most minute interactions. Not willing to risk reproducing this dynamic, John forces himself to refrain from reaching out. But the question which haunts them both, is whether he would be able to do the same if Sherlock was in heat? Would he be able to control himself enough to respect Sherlock's right to choose, or would his alpha instincts take over?

When Sherlock first goes into heat, Sherlock's brother Mycroft supplies John with a contraband experimental drug which can revert an omega in heat back to their "neutral" state for a few days, to give to Sherlock. For himself, John takes "inhibitors," a drug made to make alphas immune to the overwhelming effects of the omega heat hormone. This creates a window of a few days during which they can make lucid decisions about their relationship without being overruled by the hormonal instincts of their bodies. To the degree that their alpha and omega instincts are inscriptions of stereotypical gender roles onto the sphere of the biological, the drugs temporarily subdue the influence of gendered power relations, allowing them them to make decisions as "just" Sherlock and John.

In the course of this time, they get the chance to talk about the fears and doubts that arise from the asymmetry of their situation. John is worried about whether he can trust Sherlock's consent, sexual and otherwise, when Sherlock is in a position of vulnerability and dependence. How can he know that Sherlock really wants to be with him, and is not entering a relationship out of need? Conversely, Sherlock is worried about losing his hard-won autonomy, but also about the trustworthiness of John's consent: does John really want a romantic relationship with Sherlock, or does he just want to save or help him? How can the two of them establish a situation in which they can meet as equals, within a system which grants one of them power over the other? In so doing, it raises questions about choice under conditions of power and inequality: under what conditions can a choice be said to be meaningful and free? How does power and inequality affect one's ability to consent? Under what conditions can consent be freely given?

During these discussions, John offers to bond with Sherlock to stabilize Sherlock's biology, and then leave. Within the context of TGC, the bond would be analogous to a

marriage contract, written onto their bodies. Its stabilizing effect on the omega biology is the key to making Sherlock's life liveable, but is also one of the main institutions by which omegas are oppressed. Through John's offer, the bond is transformed from an oppressive institution in which the omega is conceived as property, into a guarantee for Sherlock's agency. John's offer involves ceding the claims this institution would grant him, as well as sacrificing his life with Sherlock, in order to give Sherlock the benefits and protection a bond would offer, allowing Sherlock to continue the work that he lives for. He is offering to limit his own freedom - a permanent bond would make him unable to marry anyone else in the future - in order to secure Sherlock's autonomy. Putting his interests second to those of Sherlock through his offer, John symbolically relinquishes (some of) the privileges that comes with his alpha status. By freely ceding the claims connected to the bond, John changes the structural constraints surrounding Sherlock's decision: Sherlock's options are no longer only an oppressive bond or his oppressive biology. Assuming he trusts John's word, his choice is now between his oppressive biology and a bond that will give him full freedom, with or without John by his side. This frees Sherlock to choose John from a position which is not defined by his biological needs. According to Wendy Brown, consent is "a response to power" (1995, 163), and as such it always implicates unequal power relations, in which the consenting part agrees to something "the terms of which [they] do not determine" (ibid.). John's offer changes the terms of the agreement, effectively diminishing the effect of the unequal power relation between them.

The focus on power dynamics and consent is carried into the erotic content of the story. After confessing their feelings for each other, when they have sex for the first time, the conscious decision is explicitly emphasized.

'You're sure about this?'

Sherlock took a deep breath, wetting his lips as he rested his hands on John's hips, forcing himself to consider what they were about to do.

(...)

He was not lost in the oblivion of pyresus, struggling to recall his logical train of thought.

Desire fogged his mind, but he remained rational. This was not just answering a need, it was about making a choice, and Sherlock knew his answer.

'Yes. Are you?' It was the one thing that could stop him. If John's doubts outweighed his longing, then Sherlock would retreat, but he needn't have concerned himself.

John cupped his cheek, his eyes black in the room's half-light. 'I've never been so sure of anything in my life.'

'Then please,' Sherlock whispered, not ashamed to beg – not for John. 'For god's sake touch me.' (BeautifulFiction 2015)

This focus on explicitly stated sexual consent is a deliberate departure from the hegemonic discourse of sexual consent between men and women, in which men initiate sexual advances, and women respond by either refusing or accepting them (Brown 1995). In "Women and Consent" Carol Pateman (1980) argues that even when a woman makes an effort to refuse a man's advances, she can be interpreted as consenting. Since women are shamed for expressing sexual desire and being sexually active, a woman's passivity or even resistance can be read not as lack of interest or desire, but as hesitance to express it. This structures a situation in which a man can feel justified in ignoring a woman's protests and resistance, and proceed as if her protests are simply expressions of modesty, allowing a man to "interpret a woman's "consent" when (...) there are no obvious expressions of it at all" (Pateman 1980, 155). Reading 'between the lines' of her protests, he is given the authority to decipher her 'true desire' from the reactions of her body, even if her words or actions contradicts it. When John and Sherlock finally have sex, John takes the opposite approach: rather than assuming consent, he is constantly watching out for its withdrawal, "observing [Sherlock's] every reaction, mindful of any moment where Sherlock's unequivocal "yes" became a "no"" (BeautifulFiction 2015). John, well aware that Sherlock is used to having his pleasure and desires ignored, makes a point out of asking Sherlock to express his wants, emphasising that Sherlock's pleasure is as important as his own. The entire scene emphasizes reciprocity and equality, as they take turns being on top, alternating between the giver and receiver of sexual pleasure. Even relatively non-imposing acts are described in ways which emphasize consent, such as when Sherlock gives John a hug in the shower the next morning, "giving [John] time to pull away from the embrace if he wanted before enveloping him completely" (BeautifulFiction 2015). Phrases that foreground the sharing of power between them, such as "John could see how fluid the roles could be – a shifting landscape of cooperation, rather than rigid constraints to tie them in place" (ibid.) are scattered throughout the descriptions of sex acts and the pleasure they derive from them. The story repeatedly underlines that the fact that this is a lucid, conscious decision by both of them deepens the emotional significance of the act.

But the drugs only buy them a few days of lucidity before Sherlock's heat is scheduled to return with a vengeance. By the time the effect of the heat-suppressing drugs runs out, Sherlock has accepted John's offer of a bond, and they have agreed to spend the heat together. As the heat sets in, the roles they end up playing are not exactly what John had expected:

It was like being hit by a tsunami, and John tried to ride the wave as Sherlock herded him back against the wall. His body pressed against John's, demanding, and he tipped John's chin up, every angle of his frame dominant and hungry.

This was not the submissive, pleading creature John had once imagined. This was Sherlock taking what he wanted: John, in every aspect. (BeautifulFiction 2015)

Rather than being described as a helpless victim of his own desires, Sherlock in heat is dominant and in control. He is the one pursuing John, not the other way around. With respect to sexual norms, this is one point where the alpha and omega categories do not straightforwardly map onto those of men and women. Rather than following the stereotypical female sexual script of waiting for the other part to initiate, Sherlock knows what he wants and does not hesitate to act on it. This is not unique for TGC: during heat omegas are often described as the ones who initiate sexual activity (Popova 2017, 104), and often express their urgent sexual desire with abandon. The overwhelming physical desire caused by the heat may be read as a biological "alibi" allowing a female-coded character to express physical desire without having to be seen as responsible for their actions, and thus exempted from the shamefulness associated with female sexual agency.

Agency, however, implies choice, which is undermined by the physical urgency of the heat. The desire prompted by the heat is often framed as almost overpowering, near impossible to resist. Within the societies constructed in a/b/o stories, omegas in heat are often seen as automatically consenting - like women, their bodies are given the ability to speak for them. Furthermore, alphas are often described as unable to control themselves when tempted by a (seemingly) willing omega, in line with common constructions of male sexuality (Popova, 2017). The heat cycles' supposed ability to override rational decisionmaking in both alphas and omegas, could be assumed to make the issue of consent a moot point in a/b/o stories: if both parties are so overwhelmed by desire that they cannot control themselves, neither of them can be held responsible for their actions. This disempowering conception of heat dynamics functions as a backdrop of John and Sherlock's relationship, the hegemonic

alpha/omega dynamic that they both are afraid to reproduce. John is terrified of mindlessly following the scripts that are expected of him, and Sherlock is afraid of being treated as if his agency does not matter.

Although these fears saturate every aspect of their relationship, they converge on the issue of sex during heat. The scene is a step by step refutation of their fears. Rather than being passive or submissive, Sherlock is portrayed as active and in control. Instead of being portrayed as a victim to his volatile body, Sherlock is described as “becoming not less but more beneath the growing waves of his biology” (BeautifulFiction 2015). He is described as simultaneously powerful and vulnerable, but his vulnerability is a choice, a display of trust willingly given. Before they touch each other, Sherlock is the one who first seeks consent, telling John to leave now, if he has changed his mind. And John, who most of all feared losing control and hurting Sherlock, never ceases to have Sherlock’s well-being and freedom of choice in mind: Even after Sherlock unambiguously tells John to penetrate him, exclaiming ““Now! God now, John. Please!”,” John summons the presence of mind to confirm the consent:

‘Yes?’

He felt Sherlock go still, and for one awful second John thought this was it: Sherlock coming to his senses and withdrawing his consent. He would obey, he fucking would, even if it killed him, but the thought made a gasp bubble in his throat, too close to a sob for comfort.

‘Yes.’

Before he could respond, Sherlock shifted back, sinking onto him as John gave a shout.

(BeautifulFiction 2015)

Even though Sherlock is described as the initiator, both with his words and actions, throughout the act their roles are fluid and interchangeable, switching between leading and following, between being dominant and submissive. When John bites down on Sherlock’s neck as his knot locks them together, the act which would otherwise be a tool for domination only reinforces the existing emotional bonds they have for each other. In TGC, sex during heat is presented as the ultimate test of their ability to overcome both their socially expected roles and the biological imperatives written into their bodies. Through the scene they prove both to themselves and each other that these fears are unfounded even while they are both almost out of their minds with lust. Simultaneously, the story demonstrates to the reader that

mutual respect and equality within a romantic relationship is achievable, even across barriers of gender, power, and oppression, even when the odds are overwhelmingly stacked against it.

In *ASD*, Yuri visits an omega home and learns that they allow alphas to pay for access to omegas in heat. Outraged, he accuses the receptionist of enabling rape. The receptionist dismisses the accusation, saying “Don’t you have to not be gagging for a knot for it to be rape?” (Tessa on Ice 2017). By articulating the ‘omegas in heat consent by default’ narrative through a person affiliated with the omega homes, an institution which is integral to the oppression of omegas, it is framed as an integrated part of the obstacle which the hero, Yuri, must overcome. Its claim to truth and normativity is undermined by the interactions between Yuri and his love interest, Otabek Altinn. During Yuri’s first heat, he mistakenly sends a text message asking for help to Otabek. When Otabek shows up at Yuri’s room and realizes that Yuri is in heat, he turns in the doorway and runs away. Later, when the heat has passed, Otabek calls Yuri to apologize for his behaviour, and Yuri is baffled.

“No, sorry, hang on,” Yuri says. “Are you seriously apologizing to me for the way you behaved?”

There’s a moment of perplexed silence on the other end of the line. “I... yes, of course. You needed help, and I just ran off and told that scary ballet coach of yours instead. It was irresponsible and completely unkind.”

Yuri double checks his phone screen to make sure this isn’t actually a wrong number somehow.

And no, it’s definitely him. “Beka, what the hell are you talking about? Under the circumstances, you showed what I’m sure must have been inhuman restraint—”

“I shouldn’t need restraint,” Otabek says, sounding angry, though mostly with himself, “I’m an alpha, I’m not a pack animal. You needed my help, and instead of going out and just getting you provisions, I just – God, Yuri, I’m so sorry.” (Tessa on Ice 2017)

Otabek’s actions undermine the narrative of the alphas as unable to control themselves, and reveal an implicit respect for Yuri’s bodily integrity. Recognizing that Yuri was in a state where his ability to consent was compromised, he removed himself from the situation. Furthermore, rather than being content with overcoming his alpha instincts and leaving Yuri alone, he feels bad for not doing more to help. His apology carries normative implications: it reinstates his personal responsibility for his actions. This strong concern for consent

resurfaces at a later point in the story, when Yuri calls Otabek on the phone while he is in heat, and they have phone sex. Once again, Otabek apologizes, saying he didn't mean to take advantage of Yuri when he was in heat and unable to consent. At this point they are in a long distance relationship, and Yuri finds Otabek's concerns unnecessary, explaining that he appreciated Otabek's help getting him through the heat. This scene emphasizes Yuri's capacity to determine his own ability to consent, even in the throes of heat.

Consent is emphasized in BftE as well, albeit initially from the opposite angle. In his teens Tony experiences several sexual assaults that leave him traumatized. In one especially harsh episode he is pressured to enter into a "temporary marriage" with a senator for the duration of his heat. The senator drugs and manipulates Tony into enjoying the encounter, leaving Tony burdened with shame, feeling like he took part in his own violation. Back at his boarding school, he is told by a counselor that it was not his fault, but Tony remains unconvinced. Tony's struggle with symptoms of post-traumatic stress from this and the other violations he undergoes becomes a central theme throughout the rest of the story.

So rather than using the heat trope to avoid engaging with questions of sexual consent, both TGC, ASD and BftE uses the trope to make the issue a central part of the narrative. In an article discussing depictions of sexual consent in the movie *Fifty Shades of Grey* together with a short story by Greta Christina, Erika Kvistad (2017) argues that texts that eroticize unequal relations of power operate on three different levels of "narrative reality" (Kvistad 2017, 126): realism, normativity, and fantasy. Depictions of erotic acts that are written in ways that make the interaction seem plausible and faithful to reality are operating on the realistic level. Erotic fiction that puts emphasis the moral (or immoral) behaviours of the participants, inviting the reader to judge their acts according to moral norms, would be functioning on the normative level. The third level, fantasy, is text designed to arouse the reader and give sexual pleasure. The same text can contain elements from more than one of these levels, leaving it up to the reader to use contextual clues to negotiate between them to produce meaning. Thus a depiction of a non-consensual sexual encounter can be evaluated by its faithfulness to reality (or lack thereof), judged for the moral values of the actions committed, or, the reader may suspend concerns for morals and realism, mining the relations of domination for their pleasurable potential.

It is clear that both TGC, ASD, and BftE operate on all three of these levels. With all the modifications of human biology that goes with the omegaverse, the level which is perhaps least supported by the text is the realistic one, but taking the worldbuilding into account it is

clear that all three of the stories strive to create an internally coherent sense of realism. The play-by-play description of sexual acts with a focus on the pleasure of the protagonists strongly supports reading them as fantasy. The prominence of the themes of consent, responsibility, and mutual respect in TGC and ASD, and the emphasis on trauma from sexual assault in BftE, encourages a normative reading. In the case of TGC and ASD however, the emphasis on consent can also be seen to play into the fantasy reading, included to give the reader a chance to be aroused by the mutual giving of enthusiastic consent, like in the following description of John and Sherlock's heat-enhanced sex:

John meant to ask if he was all right, to check that he was ready for more, but he couldn't. His brain was offline, refined to a lower set of parameters. He thought rut would make him stupid: a mindless animal reduced to satisfying a need. He'd never realised it would be like this, his circuitry realigning to read the primitive language of Sherlock's body and fragrance, gaining understanding through biological cues: the shudder of Sherlock's hips, the roll of his spine, and the tilt of his head – all blatant signs of encouragement.

(BeautifulFiction 2015)

Here John and Sherlock are described as perfectly in tune with each other. The pleasure of getting lost in primal desire is combined with the pleasure of picking up on wordless signs of encouragement. The depiction of seamless communication, and the unstated but constantly affirmed consent, contributes to the erotic potential of the text. It constructs a fantasy of the unlikely triumph of equality and mutual respect over oppressive gender norms and structurally skewed power relations. We are back at the classic romance novel theme of overcoming the patriarchy through the power of love.

Where these omegaverse fanfiction stories differ from the standard romance novel pattern, is in how explicitly they address these themes. There can be no doubt when reading a story like TGC, ASD and BftE, that they are essentially *about* gender politics, and that these themes are not only addressed through the world-building, characterization, and narrative, but also explicitly explored within the sexual content of the stories. In the context of a/b/o fanfiction, this is not an unique move. Milena Popova argues that fanfiction authors use the elements of the a/b/o genre to deliberately examine how “power structures and inequalities around gender, and how they map onto intimate relationships” (2017, 89). Through these stories the critique of patriarchal structures is foregrounded and made explicit and obvious,

rather than being relegated to subtext. A second difference is on the matter of scale: In the romance genre, the conquest of patriarchy is usually limited to the unit of the couple, while the larger societal structures remain intact. The societal obstacles are overcome not by instigating lasting change in society, but by turning the couple into an enclave wherein the heroine is shielded from its oppression, living happily ever after (Roach 2010). The result is a somewhat paradoxical three-part message: “you can’t fight patriarchy” (the system will remain) “you must fight patriarchy” (the heroine must take a stand and stand up for herself, often through confronting the hero, or a former partner), and “patriarchy will end” (through a romantic union in which the heroine is cherished, loved, and respected) (ibid., web). In TGC, this structure plays out in the romance between Sherlock and John, but it is also extended onto the societal scale. When the death of Sherlock’s abusive ex-partner, Alexander Cunningham, causes the property rights to Sherlock to be transferred back to Alexander’s family, Sherlock’s fight for freedom turns into a political struggle against the oppression of omegas. For them, Sherlock is a valuable asset, to be sold or given to one of the family members, and also a point of honour - to lose an omega which should have been in one’s control is seen as deeply shameful. Sherlock’s alpha brother Mycroft attempts to find a way to subvert the Cunninghams’ claim, but is rebuffed when the Cunninghams obtain a legal provision forbidding anyone representing Sherlock to contact them. However, the legal document fails to put any such limits on Sherlock’s actions, as omegas are not considered to have legal agency. Taking advantage of this loophole, Sherlock manages to negotiate his own freedom directly with the Cunninghams by offering to solve the murder of Alexander, which turns out to be connected to an ongoing case Sherlock has been investigating throughout the story. The culprit is discovered to be an omega woman, who together with a beta accomplice was poisoning alphas in an attempt to invent a drug that would affect alphas’ behavior, rendering them docile and easy to control. This revelation brings the question of omega rights to the public, in a roundabout way: since omegas are not legally recognized as people, they can not be brought to trial and be found guilty of murder. In order for justice to be served, omegas must be granted legal personhood. So in the process of freeing himself from the constraints of society, Sherlock succeeds in bringing the topic of omega emancipation onto the public agenda. Toward the end of the story, it seems likely that omegas will be legally emancipated.

In this sense, the story is combining romance tropes with conventions found in dystopian fiction, in which oppressive structures are often depicted through hyperbole and analogies, and in which the main character, either alone or as part of a movement, is

sometimes able to take actions that trigger the process of change on a society-wide level (Moylan 2000). This narrative is even more prominent in *ASD*, in which the romantic union between Yuri and Otabek meet very few significant obstacles apart from a few misunderstandings, and the main conflict throughout the story is between Yuri and the oppressive society. Here, too, the process of system-wide change is set in motion by Yuri publicly coming out as an omega and exposing the injustices omegas experience, sparking a popular uprising for omega (and lgbt) rights in Russia. Both of the stories end just as the process of social change has begun, but as the possibility of system-wide change is presented, the permanency of the oppressive system is dispelled. Writing the story within the omegaverse means that the conquered system, patriarchy, is represented symbolically (however transparent and obvious the analogy may be). At the same time, by redirecting the happy ending from overcoming oppression as a couple, to the eventual downfall of the system itself, the conquest of patriarchy is made an explicit part of the narrative, both within the intimate sphere of romantic relationships, and on the grand scale of society at large. By creating gendered dystopias where the odds are overwhelmingly stacked in the favour of oppression and abuse both on the societal and intimate levels, both *TGC* and *ASD* enable the reader to take pleasure in the undoing of inequality through a loving partnership.

4 Speculative genders and omega otherness

So far, it may seem that my answer to “what does the omegaverse do with discourses about sex and gender?” is “a lot of different things.” This is, in my mind, not an inherently bad answer: since one of the characteristics of omegaverse fanfiction lies in its constant reinvention and the endless possibilities for variation, I would not consider this project a success if it didn’t manage to capture at least some of the range of the genre. Nonetheless, in this chapter I will try to gather the disparate threads from the two previous chapters into a discussions of what they have in common. This means that the structure of this chapter will differ from that of the two last ones, most notably by the fact that apart from a few points, it will not be bringing in more material from the stories I have been analyzing. Instead I will be discussing what can be said from the readings that I have made so far in this thesis. Building on ideas and concepts from fan studies, and Judith Butler’s concept of ‘the heterosexual matrix’, Toril Moi’s essay *What is a woman?* and de Beauvoir’s description of the woman as the other, I discuss how the readings I have produced in the preceding chapters answers the questions I asked at the outset of this thesis: how are gender and sex (re)interpreted through omegaverse fanfiction? How do these stories intervene in discourses about sex and gender? What are the effects of the two overlapping sex/gender systems? And finally, what is an omega?

4.1 Textual poaching

In “Textual Poachers” Henry Jenkins argues that fanfiction authors poach meaning from pop cultural texts and repurpose it for their own use, transforming and often subverting the meanings communicated by the original media in the process. By treating media texts as “raw material for their own cultural production” (Jenkins 1992, 24) the writers “become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings” (ibid., 24). In extension of this, L  ppanen (2008) has pointed out that fanfiction writers often actively draw on the images of gender and sexuality presented in the media they are basing their story on, in order to “modify, question, parody, critique and radically subvert the ways gender and sexuality are represented in the cult texts” (L  ppanen 2008, 176). In the case of the omegaverse, this rewriting of discourses about gender and sexuality is an intrinsic and fundamental feature of the trope: the distinguishing elements of a/b/o - encoding the alpha/beta/omega categories with unequal power dynamics and the retooling of the reproductive body - invites active

engagement with discourses of gender and sexuality. The omegaverse trope thus functions as a framework through which discourses about gender and sexuality are brought into the text, reorganized, and rewritten. A/b/o fanfiction stories thus do not limit their re-interpretative practice to meanings poached from media texts, they actively bring discourses about the sexed and gendered body into the story. Through the a/b/o trope, the sexed and gendered human body is treated as text that is mined for meaning and used as raw material to be repurposed, much in the same way that they repurpose the meanings found in pop cultural texts.

According to Henry Jenkins, fanfiction is a result of fascination and frustration. If the original work did not fascinate the writers, they would find no reason to engage with it. If it did not frustrate them, it would not arouse the desire to transform it according to their own interests and preferences. The stories that result from this process can be read as expressions of a desire to change something about the source text, to explore possibilities that the canonical texts fail to realize. By reconfiguring and reinterpreting the original texts, fanfiction supplies the source texts with new meanings and possibilities. As a result, fanfiction can be read as a form of critical commentary of the source texts upon which it is based (Jenkins 2006). It follows that fanfiction which treats the discourses surrounding sex and gender the same way as it treats the media texts is subject to the same logic. By taking the discourses surrounding sex and gender as its source material and creatively transforming them, omegaverse can be read as critical commentary of the discourses which constitute sex and gender. This brings us back to the questions I asked at the outset of this project: What do these stories do to gender and sex? How are gender and sex being rewritten in a/b/o? If omegaverse fanfiction treats the gendered body as text to be mined for meaning, what are the meanings it extracts and how do they transform it? How do a/b/o stories intervene in these discourses?

4.2 Misogynist premises

A conspicuous feature of omegaverse fanfiction is the degree to which the alpha/omega dynamic resembles misogynistic stereotypes of men and women. Although a/b/o is a ternary rather than binary system, and uses the labels of alpha, beta, and omega rather than male and female, it is easy to read the alpha/omega categories as exaggerated versions of the male/female gender/sex system. As has been shown in previous chapters, meanings, norms, and biological characteristics normally associated with women are usually written into the the omega category, and meanings associated with men and maleness are written into the alpha

figure. The direct association of reproductive function with social roles and behavior, linking the ability to become pregnant with inferior status, domesticity, and submissiveness, and the ability to impregnate with superior status, aggression, and dominance, is highly reminiscent of coarse caricatures of misogynist discourses. In addition, like in the stories analyzed for this thesis, these traits are also often said to be biologically hardwired, coded into hormones, instinct, and genes, presenting a view of (a/b/o) gender as something that has an inescapable essence which is dictated by nature, and that gendered characteristics and behavior can be straightforwardly traced back to biological dictums. The attribution of fixed characteristics to categories based on biological or “natural” traits, echoes the gender essentialist descriptions of women which have been frequent targets for feminist criticism (Grosz 1995).

Furthermore, these biological imperatives not only manifest in gendered behavior, they also often dictate the direction of the character’s attraction. Often omegas are described as responding instinctively to the presence of a certain alpha, without conscious intent or will. This is amplified by the common use in a/b/o of the soulmate and soulbond tropes, where two characters are written as destined for each other on a biological level, resulting in near-irresistible mutual attraction and a special connection. When the mechanisms underlying the soulmate/soulbond phenomenon are described as part of the alpha or omega biology (betas are often described as “immune” to soul bonds), this results in the biological and essentialist encoding of alpha/omega heterosexuality.

This must be seen in connection with the fact that most omegaverse stories focus on relationships between two men. The same way as fanfiction rewrites the original media texts, fanfiction also continually rewrites and transforms its own tropes. The heterosexual encoding of a/b/o fanfiction must therefore be seen as a reaction to and a transformation of the slash genre from which it sprung. As discussed in the first chapter, one of the theories about the appeal of slash fanfiction to female writers and readers is that it allows them to imagine relationships that are free from gendered inequality and sexist norms and assumptions. This idealised image of slash fiction has since been modified by fan studies scholars who have pointed out that fanfiction stories, including slash, also often reproduce traditional gender roles and heteronormative narratives and structures. As demonstrated by Hunting’s (2012) study of fanfiction based on the reality television show *Queer as Folk*, when the text upon which fanfiction is based is canonically queer, the resistant and transformative activities of fandom communities can result in undermining the canonical text’s subversive qualities by importing heteronormative structures into an otherwise queer context. In a parallel argument,

a/b/o can be read as a resistant transformation of the queer narratives that dominate slash fanfiction: in addition to doing a transformative reading of the canonical material, a/b/o also transformatively rewrites the slash fanfiction trope, re-introducing gender and sex differences into narratives about same-sex relationships.

Judith Butler's concept of "the heterosexual matrix" is a productive lens through which to understand this process of alpha/omega gendering of same-sex relationships. Butler uses the term heterosexual matrix to convey the "grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (Butler 1999, 194 fn 6). Drawing on Monique Wittig's notion of the heterosexual contract and Adrienne Rich's notion of compulsory heterosexuality she argues that in order for bodies to be seen as intelligible and coherent "there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (...) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (Butler 1999, 194 fn 6). The alpha/beta/omega dynamics can be seen as a way to re-encode the heterosexual matrix onto a same-sex relationship. By writing the characters of a male/male couple as alpha and omega, what would otherwise appear to be a queer relationship is inscribed with sexual and reproductive differences, as well as highly defined, mutually exclusive, and hierarchical gender roles. By means of the heat cycles, biological imperatives, and the bond trope, compulsory heterosexuality is literally encoded into their biology. A/b/o dynamics function as a parallel gender structure through which a male/male relationship can be made to conform to the heterosexual matrix. This "heterosexualization" of omegaverse relationships is supported by a limited fan-run survey that found that alpha/omega relationships were largely seen as heterosexual, regardless of the character's male/female genders (abostudies 2016). If seen against the backdrop of slash fanfiction writing in general, it is easy to argue that a/b/o fanfiction is a heteronormative rewriting of queer relationships.

It might seem likely that the inclusion of the third category, the beta, would undermine the degree to which the heterosexual matrix could be said to apply to alpha/beta/omega dynamics. After all, its equivalent does not exist in the male/female gender system, and a ternary system could reasonably be assumed to produce a very different structure from that of a binary system. However, despite being described as the majority of the population in a/b/o storyworlds, betas are often relegated to the periphery. Most a/b/o stories revolve around the relationship between two main alpha and omega characters, while betas are written as secondary, supporting characters (Popova 2017). For this reason, the previous chapters of this

thesis have focused on the alpha and omega categories, mirroring their prominence in the fics analysed.

However, this sidelining of the beta is a significant point in itself. Their peripheral presence serves as a reference point to which the alpha and beta categories can be compared. Betas are often described as “just like normal people.” These characters, whose biology is mostly unmodified from that of non-omegaverse people, function as a contrast to the more extreme characteristics of the alphas and omegas. For example, in TGC, the beta Molly’s reaction to the revelation of Sherlock’s status as an omega is put in direct comparison to John’s experience: “She could view it all with a distant rationality that John envied. She could see Sherlock as nothing but himself, whereas John, despite his best efforts, still got distracted by the veil of preconceived notions Sherlock's gender brought with it” (BeautifulFiction 2015). Molly’s ability to remain unaffected is used as a contrast to the gendered dynamics which John finds himself enmeshed in. In ASD, the beta also functions as a contrast, as Yuri is assumed to be a beta before his first heat reveals his omega status. Here the beta category enables the sudden and intense transition from a neutral/seemingly less gendered state into omega genderedness, underpinning the story’s focus on the traumatic process of becoming a gendered body and becoming subject to constricting gender norms. In BftE, betas are “generally considered (by society) to be level-headed and less affected by hormones” (venusm 2016), highlighting the emotional and embodied nature of the other two categories. Unlike alphas, betas are unaffected by omega heat hormones, their bodies are not inscribed with the same kind of volatile uncontrollability as omegas and alphas, and in TGC and BftE, they are often described as less fertile/having difficulty conceiving. These traits all come together in a general tendency to portray betas as somehow less affected by their social and biological sex/gender than alphas and omegas. By being framed as neutral and normal, the beta category functions as a backdrop against which the hyper-gendered and hyper-sexed qualities of the alpha and omega characters to stand out in stark relief. This means that in stories centering around alpha/omega relationships, the beta category actually works to bring out the heterosexual gendering of the alpha/omega categories, supporting rather than undermining the reproduction of the heterosexual matrix in a/b/o fanfiction. Furthermore, this inclusion of a category whose function is to highlight the gendered and sexed aspects of the alpha and omega categories, further supports the argument that a/b/o is a genre that is fundamentally *about* sex and gender.

4.3 Speculative gendering

Even though it is clear that the a/b/o stories analyzed in this thesis draw on essentialist, stereotypical, and heteronormative representations of sex and gender, it does not automatically follow that they can be said to straightforwardly reproduce or resist them. As previously mentioned, alternate universes in fanfiction can be seen as speculative explorations of “what-if”-type questions.²⁰ In the case of the stories analyzed in this thesis, some of the questions they can be said to explore are: what if the basic structure of human reproductive functions positioned one sex as fundamentally dependent and vulnerable to exploitation? What if this group was valued only for their reproductive abilities, and was restricted in their participation in society because of this? What if people of one gender were treated as the property of another, because of their reproductive abilities? What if their (in)ability to consent to sexual relations was seen as irrelevant? And what if Sherlock Holmes, Tony Stark, or Yuri Plisetsky belonged to that group?

Arguably many of these questions could be answered with a direct reference to the current or historical situation of women, with or without some exaggeration. Why, then, bother writing them through an invented structure such as the omegaverse? If, as is the case in the stories discussed in the previous chapters, the omegaverse trope largely (re)produces representations of male/female gender relations, what is the effect writing them through a/b/o dynamics? An obvious answer is that it introduces some extra elements such as the heat cycle, knotting, and soul bond, which can have a special appeal to the writer. But in the case of stories such as ASD, TGC, and BftE, which spend considerable amount of time on descriptions of systemic gendered oppression, this answer seems unsatisfactory.

A more interesting answer to this question can be found in the characteristics of the speculative mode that genres like alternate universe fanfiction and science fiction have in common, and how it affects the texts’ relationships to reality. As I have touched upon earlier in this thesis, this mode allows the stories to have a more flexible relationship with reality than other kinds of texts. As opposed to non-fiction and more realist styles of fiction, fiction that is rooted in the ‘what if’ mode is not assumed to be directly representing a reality that exists external to the text. As such, these kinds of stories are freed from the need to prove the premises upon which the stories are made, and spared from the imperative of having to justify

²⁰ This does not mean that the authors must necessarily have a what if question in mind at the outset of writing the fic. The following questions are not intended to reference the fic writers’ actual intentions, but to highlight the premises the stories are exploring.

themselves as truth claims.²¹ By placing the stories in a/b/o alternate universes, these stories are exempted from any assumption that they represent how gender and sexuality works in existing societies, structures, and places. As a result, the stories can describe sexism and oppressive gender structures without having to be held accountable for the accuracy of their accounts as descriptions of women's situation in any given place or time. Releasing the stories from the need to anchor their premises in references to 'what is', the 'what if' mode frees them to explore the consequences of these premises from a speculative, imaginative point of view. Within the omegaverse system, gendered oppression becomes hypothetical and malleable, making it possible to take it apart and put it back together again. The speculative mode of omegaverse fanfiction creates a space in which the discourses associated with sex and gender can be treated as a set of building blocks, with which individual authors can construct models of societies, relationships and situations, examine them, and imagine their downfall. By writing about structures of gendered oppression *as if contrafactual*, the stories not only makes it possible to examine the premises they are based on, it also creates a space to imagine their unraveling and envisioning the possibility for change.

4.4 Gendered embodiment

The stories I have analyzed for this project embrace the potential of this speculative opportunity in different ways, but one thing they all have in common is their exploration the relationship between gendered embodiment and lived experience. This may seem to contradict the earlier statement that omegaverse fanfiction treats the gendered body as text which is mined for meaning and combined with pop-cultural and fanfictional meanings into new textual configurations. The textual, discursive approach to gender and the body that was inspired by the poststructuralist writings of Foucault and Derrida (among others), has been criticized for making the embodied, material, and biological aspects of gendered bodies disappear behind a veil of self-referential discourse (Blackman 2008, 73; Csordas 1999). In her extensive essay *What is a Woman?* Toril Moi (2008) claims that the post-structuralist focus on the discursive production of gender is fundamentally ill-suited to produce a good account of subjectivity and lived experience because it ignores the materially given

²¹ The question of the status of truth in literature is of course a larger theoretical discussion which I do not have the space to explore in this thesis. For an extensive exploration of this topic, see for instance "Truth, fiction, and literature" by Lamarque and Olsen (1996).

“biological facts” of the body.²² Moi argues that the experience of being a woman in the world is determined by the interconnected relationship between the specificities of her material body, the meanings given to that body through culture and language, and the structures of the society that surrounds her. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir, she argues that the body should instead be considered as a situation. For Moi, “[t]o consider the body as a situation (...) is to consider both the fact of having a specific kind of body and the meaning that concrete body has for the situated individual” (Moi 2001, 81). Moi emphasizes that this the individual subject has a degree of freedom to determine their situation: even though a person’s situation will be influenced by their body and the way that body is met by society, “[e]ach woman will make something out of what the world will make out of her” (2001, 82).

What omegaverse fanfiction does is to construct imaginary bodies and societies based on premises drawn from the discourses that surround sex and gender, and imagine what situations would arise if those premises were embodied and experienced by a familiar pop-cultural figure.

By poaching and reconfiguring discourses about sex and gender, they create thought experiments that explore how specific bodily configurations, as lived by known pop-cultural characters, would result in specific embodied situations and experiences. The experiment is set up through the combination of the specificities of the reconfigured omega body, a familiar pop-cultural character, and an imagined societal context. The thought experiment then plays out as a narrative, as the story explores how Sherlock Holmes, or Tony Stark, or Yuri Plisetsky would experience the situations created by the combination of the materiality of their bodies and the ways those bodies are met in their societies. The stories further imagine how the character would respond to their embodied situation, how they would resist or comply with the norms that apply to them, and what kind of existence they would be able to make for themselves out of the social and embodied circumstances that were given to them. By treating the gendered body as mutable, transformable text, omegaverse fics such as TGC, ASD, and BftE explore the interactions of materiality and meaning on gendered bodies, not through theoretical, conceptual analysis, but as narratives. This allows them to focus on the subjective, affective, and relational aspects of embodied gendered existence. As such, the

²² The main target of her critique being (a somewhat ungenerous reading of) Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity as presented in *Gender Trouble* (1999). This is one point where I feel that her critique of Butler’s approach misses the mark, as Butler’s argument on this matter can be boiled down to the point that we have no access to pre-discursive “biological facts;” biology is produced through discourse and therefore appears to us as already gendered. Since this thesis is not aiming to resolve the relationship between matter and meaning, I will avoid going into details on the contradictions between these two approaches.

a/b/o system functions as a node through which to imagine how specific reconfigurations of discourses about sex and gender would play out as lived, situated, meaningful experience.

In the article *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess*, Linda Williams (1991) argues that genres that show the body in the throes of sensation, such as pornography, melodrama, and horror, are deemed excessive and gross. By drawing on the force of sex, emotion, or violence, these genres are made to appeal to the body provoking in the viewer the same emotional sensations; pleasure, pain, or terror, as is shown on the screen. Popova (2017) places omegaverse fanfiction among these genres, based on the frequency of sexually explicit content in A/B/O stories compared to other fanfiction. Popova also calls attention to how readers' responses in comments often combine descriptions of bodily reactions, such as being turned on or squirming in discomfort, with reflection on how the stories relate to discourses on sexuality. In the extension of this point, my assertion is that these omegaverse stories rewrite discourses about sex and gender in targeted ways to maximize their ability to mobilize intensity of sensation and emotion in both their characters and the readers.

In ASD, the first heat is used to create a dramatic account of the shock of puberty, drawing on ideas about the first menstruation, loss of control, and adolescent desire, combined with an account of the traumatic experience of becoming gendered. In BftE, the omegaverse is used to give an account of the frustrations involved in being made to play along with restrictive gender roles, and to describe the shame and helplessness of sexual assault. And in TGC, the building blocks of the omegaverse are combined to construct a situation of biologically based dependence of the omega on an alpha, inscribing the omega with an extreme version of the idea of woman as enslaved to her nature, which is then used to explore the misery of living with a body that undermines one's autonomy. It also harnesses the a/b/o trope to increase the stakes of intimacy and trust in the context of sexual encounters, and to intensify descriptions of desire and sexual pleasure. The a/b/o trope is tailored to each story, drawing on established discourses on the gendered and sexed body, in order to maximize the potential for desire and distress, raising the emotional stakes of the story. In so doing, these stories are calling attention to both devastating and exalting experiences that can come from existing as a gendered body in the world.

4.5 Omega otherness

By actively modifying and transforming the human body, inventing bodily constellations that do not exist outside of the text, these stories are not bound to represent existing bodies and

genders, nor can they be assumed to directly originate in the lived experiences of their authors. Instead, they are representations of the experiences that could plausibly be produced by the bodies, societies and characters imagined in the stories. The use of a fictional gender structure creates the opportunity to examine the inner logic of discourses about sex and gender by imagining hypothetical bodies and societies based on the premises that underpin these discourses, whether that is hierarchically ordered, biologically rooted gender categories, or socially constructed and enforced gender norms. This means that even though the omega is constructed from traits and concepts associated with femaleness, such as hormonal cycles and the capacity to become pregnant, the imagined experience of the omega is not directly equitable to that of a woman.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that the masculine sees itself (and is seen) as the universal, the absolute, while woman is seen (and sees herself) as the other, the particular, the exception to the male norm (de Beauvoir 2011, 6). Within the a/b/o system, omega characters are positioned as the other in relation to the alpha (or occasionally alpha/beta) norm. Furthermore, through the omegaverse trope, meanings by which women have been conceptualized as other and lesser - such as the primacy of the body over the mind, the volatility and infectiousness of the leaking female body, and the fear of uncontrollable female desire - are written into omega bodies. In addition, the stories construct societies in which omegas are disciplined by social norms and institutions in ways that echo the historical subjugation of women. Presented as both a naturalized, biologically rooted category and a socially constructed identity, omega genderedness is essentially over-determined, resulting in a fictionalized representation of female-coded otherness. Rather than representing women or femaleness, the omega figure is an embodiment of multiple discourses by which women have been (and still are) constructed as other. The omega does not signify woman, he or she signifies the otherness with which the category 'woman' has been imbued. By stitching together the omega from discourses that have been used to constitute women as lesser and other in relation to the male norm, the figure of the omega can then be mobilized to undermine and resist these discourses.

In both TGC, ASD, and BftE various meanings that go into the discursive construction of woman as other are made to converge in the figure of the omega, whereupon the narrative is dedicated to discrediting them. The stories attack these discourses from multiple angles, sometimes contesting the veracity of the essentialist premises that go into the omega figure, revealing that what seemed like a biological, naturally given identity is in fact a result of

oppressive, socially constructed structures that can be resisted and changed. At other points they refute their validity through the character's ability to defy even the dictums that are encoded into their bodies, making them rise above biological imperatives and thus proving that biology is not destiny. Within these stories the question of whether sex or gender is foundational is left unresolved - both of them go into the construction of gendered otherness in the shape of the omega. Biology and culture both contribute to the oppression of omegas, but neither of the two are deterministic, as proven by the ability of the main characters to overcome them. By giving the omega characters the means to overcome their uncontrollable bodies, find ways to flourish in a society which is structured to deny them the chance to develop their capabilities, and to have them find love and respect with an alpha despite all the things that separate them, the narrative becomes one of transcendence and hope. As a caricature of the constructions of female otherness, the omega is constituted as a strawman argument erected only to be demolished, supporting the inherently optimistic claim that even if the premises that construct women as other were written in flesh, they could be proven wrong and defeated.

4.6 The male omega

So far, this discussion has focused on the constellations of meaning produced through the a/b/o categories, without paying too much attention to the fact that the characters that embody them carry their male/female genders into the stories. From the perspective of the inner logic of the stories, this makes sense. Within the omegaverse, meanings, behaviors, roles, and structures that we generally associate with gender and sex are all connected to the a/b/o system. Even though the characters' canonical male/female gender is still referred to alongside their a/b/o designation, the a/b/o categories are largely the ones that determine both reproductive abilities, gender roles, and which norms apply to them. It is also the system by which some characters are othered, while other characters are constituted as the norm. In TGC, ASD and BftE, omegas are oppressed because they are omega, regardless of their male/female gender.

Nevertheless, this discussion would be incomplete without discussing the significance of this double gendering. What are the consequences of writing the omega as a man? At first glance, the fact that the characters retain their male/female gender may seem irrelevant, simply included as a relic from the source material. However, this would ignore one of the most characteristic traits of fanfiction as a genre: the reliance on characterization from its

source material. Fanfiction assumes reader familiarity with the source texts, and uses that familiarity in the production of new stories. According to Francesca Coppa (2006b), fanfiction readers come to the text with pre-established extratextual knowledge, especially (in the case of fanfiction based on visual media) of the characters' bodies, voices and relationships. She argues that "the actor's body, as much as the words on the page, is the medium of (...) fannish storytelling, and that fanfiction as a genre has much in common with theatrical drama, in that it "directs bodies in space" (2006, 225). The writers making the already established characters act out a script of their own, rely on the reader's familiarity with the source material to bring the physicality of the characters into the story (Coppa 2006b). In the case of movie and television fandom, this includes the canonical characters' physical features, their looks as determined by the actors who play them, and their gender as presented in the canonical media. This means that when a fanfiction story is based on the BBC TV series *Sherlock*, the reader will imagine the characters as they are portrayed by Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman in the show. In omegaverse stories such as TGC, ASD and BftE, the main characters are gendered as male not just through the textual references to their maleness, but also through the images and associations drawn from the reader's familiarity with the source media. Through these fics, characters envisioned as male are put into embodied situations structured by discourses which have been, and are still, used to construct women as other. Yuri is made to go through the adolescent crisis of becoming a gendered body, experiencing feelings of betrayal and grief as his body presents the traits that will condemn him to the subjugated status of an omega, as well as the process of his gradual omegist awakening as he comes to learn how society is structured in order to maintain alpha interests. Sherlock is put in a situation where his agency and freedom are constantly threatened, both by his volatile, uncontrollable omega body, and laws that frame omegas as property, not people. Together with John he is made to struggle to find a way to form an equal, respectful, and trusting relationship despite the unequal power dynamics that follow from their respective statuses as omega and alpha. Tony is made to experience the frustrations of being socialised into a restrictive omega gender role that does not allow him to express his passion for engineering. He is also made to live through shame and trauma from being the victim of several sexual assaults.

To follow Coppa's theater reference, by writing these male characters as omegas, they are made to act out scripts structured by female-coded otherness. The result is that character is simultaneously gendered through the familiar, extratextual, male/female gender system, and

through the imagined alpha/beta/omega gender system, producing a two-layered, double genderdness. This puts the male omega in an interesting position: according to his m/f gender he represents the norm, while as his a/b/o gender he represents the other. By writing a familiar male character as an omega, experiences which are coded as particular, exceptional, and less than fully human because of their association with female otherness, are imagined to be experienced by a character who, through his status as a man, represents the norm, the absolute, the human. The double position inhabited by the male omega puts experiences of female-coded otherness into a context in which they can be recognized and legitimized as if they had been experienced by someone who were seen as the norm, while also retaining their specificity. Through the figure of the male omega, the suffering, indignity, and injustice that comes from being othered are validated by being played out by a character who has the ability to be read (by the reader of the text, if not by the world of the fan text itself) as the norm. Simultaneously embodying both the norm and the other, the male omega smuggles experiences of female-coded otherness into the sphere of the universal.

5 Concluding remarks

At this point it is worth re-emphasizing that the stories I have analyzed in this thesis are not meant to be representative of the whole body of work that is omegaverse fanfiction, and that the conclusions made in the previous section will vary in their validity if applied to other omegaverse stories. While many stories will contain some of the structures and narratives that have been discussed in this thesis, they will not all coincide in any given story. Moreover, there are other elements to the omegaverse which I have not been able to discuss here, either because they were not covered by the stories I selected, or because they fell beyond the scope of this thesis. My aim as I set out was to bring out what kind of accounts of sex and gender are made possible through omegaverse fanfiction, and discuss in what ways omegaverse fanfiction can be said to intervene in discourses about sex and gender, and within the limits defined by the scope of this project, the answers that I have been able to outline here have at least succeeded in satisfying my own curiosity, and hopefully also that of the reader of this thesis. Still, I would like to stretch the project a little bit further, and use this last section to explore what omegaverse stories brings to feminist theory about sex and gender, as well as indicate some promising directions for future research.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam (2011) uses the term ‘low theory’ to denote the theoretical knowledge production that is being formulated from sites that are denied the legitimacy of formal, disciplined knowledges produced in sites such as the university. According to Halberstam, low theory is “a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the high in high theory” (2011, 16). Drawing on the “silly archives” (2011, 19) of animated film, Halberstam locates low theory in works of popular culture. McDermott and Roen (2016) have argued that the articulations of gender and sexuality that are crafted and shared by and for queer youth in online forums are examples of low theory, producing counter-hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality, in order to find meanings that make their existence intelligible and livable. As I have shown, the a/b/o stories I have analyzed in this thesis are engage with many of the same questions and issues as feminist theories that have come out of the university, but these stories are not seeking to produce authoritative accounts of the reality of gendered existence. Like Halberstam’s low theory, omegaverse fanfiction “seeks not to explain, but to involve” (2011, 15), inviting the reader to take pleasure in the imaginative exploration of sex and gender. It is my contention that omegaverse fanfiction is another example of low theory, an undisciplined

field of theorizing that is not seeking to produce and transfer knowledge, but rather to model a way of thinking about gender and sexuality as a field of pleasure, exploration, and transformation. Since it is a relatively new and under-researched field, there are many opportunities for further research on the omegaverse. My last assertion raises one topic that I think could be promising: that of the role of pleasure in omegaverse fanfiction. It would be interesting to go beyond the boundaries of textual analysis, and ask about the pleasure that is experienced by the readers of these stories, and the motivations and interests of their authors. A second promising topic for further research would be to explore how themes of animality play out in omegaverse fanfiction, possibly in combination with theory on the posthuman. The rewriting of the human with animal traits and anatomy is an element of a/b/o fanfiction which I found to be incredibly fascinating, but which fell outside the scope of this project, and I hope to get a chance to explore this topic further in the future..

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