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Symposium

Slash fandom, sociability, and sexual politics in Putin's Russia

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Russian slash practices are much more than a protest subculture—a reductionist term that implies an unchanging isolation from other public realms. The political significance of slash practices on the Russian-language Internet, Runet, is more effectively understood by examining how slash and slashers travel from fannish to other public spaces to shape everyday political conversations about sexual politics in Russia.

[0.2] *Keywords*—LGBT politics; Public spaces; Social media

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Slash embodies a vocabulary of choice and difference. In Russian online forums, slash becomes a discursive device in both fannish and nonfannish public conversations about LGBT rights. A more thorough understanding of the political significance of Russian slash requires us to disrupt the subculture/dominant culture binary and consider how slash

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and slashers travel across many kinds of public spaces, shaping conversations about Russian culture and threats to it on the one hand, and pronouncements about individual choice and freedom on the other. How does slash become embedded in discourses about sexuality, individual liberty, state repression, and social stability, and how do we make sense of these moments of interaction across diverse Internet platforms?

[1.2] As a queer, transgressive reading of heteronormative mainstream texts, slash has tremendous subversive potential. Edi Bjorklund writes that slash "is not just a new kind of women's literature. It is a means whereby we may defy a wide variety of social conventions and taboos. [...]" Slash fandom is, to sum up, a tactic of subversion for women" (cited in Rambukkana 2007). Rambukkana himself states that slash media spaces function as "zones where other practices, discourses, and consciousnesses can form or circulate with partial autonomy from the constraints upon those practices, discourses and consciousnesses in other societal spheres." In new scholarship emerging on Russian slash fandoms, slash fandoms are similarly seen as an autonomous, resistant subculture in a hostile homophobic and nationalist climate (Samutina 2014; Palash 2013). Here I do not examine slash culture as a zone of resistance and subversion (although it can undoubtedly be such a space). Rather, I suggest that it is more productive to consider how slash and slashers cut across fannish and nonfannish spaces, shaping political rhetoric and everyday conversations about sexual choice and cultural norms in contemporary Russia.

[1.3] It is not impossible to be gay or talk about being gay in Russia; urban spaces, particularly in Moscow and St. Petersburg, allow some room for the LGBT community to socialize and interact. However, public proclamations of gayness have little space outside this community, and the state actively discourages the public visibility of homosexuality (Stella 2013). Russia has recently adopted legislation making the propagating of homosexuality among minors a criminal offense and has banned the gay pride parade for the coming hundred years. (It is still held clandestinely and has, on every occasion, been disrupted by

the police.) Recent research strongly emphasizes slashers' own perceptions of working in a repressive environment and their growing anxiety that their activities will, in time, be completely silenced (Palash 2013). Slashers' posts across Russian social media platforms reflect this concern, and indeed, many forums have shown dwindling activity. In this context, the persistent production of slash fics, vidding, and art on the hitherto unfettered but now increasingly policed Russian-language Internet (Runet) is intrinsically political, its very presence a challenge to the heteronormative nationalism of Putin's Russia (note 1).

[1.4] Over the years I have read slash meta—self-reflexive diaries and discussions, threads, and posts across Runet, particularly on LiveJournal (<http://www.livejournal.com/>) and Ficbook (<http://ficbook.net>). I have been a member of forums such as Slashfiction.ru (<http://slashfiction.ru/>) and slash fandoms on VKontakte (<http://vk.com/>), Russia's main social networking platform, such as Slashfiction.ru's own group and another called Slash—Senseless and Merciless. Here, I extend the concept of meta from being simply fan discourse about being slashers to include online discussions by nonfans about slash. Because I was interested in how slash becomes embedded in discourses on freedom and sexuality, I did a Yandex (<http://www.yandex.ru/>) search combining keywords and phrases such as "slash" and "law on homosexual propaganda." This yielded hundreds of pages of online discussions that talked about slash and its fate in an increasingly repressive legal climate in Russia. By considering both slashers' reflective commentaries and the use of fan slash in nonfan discourses about gay rights, it is possible to chart the journey of slash as a discursive device from the realm of fandoms to other public spaces on the Internet (note 2).

2. Communication, sociability, and politics beyond subcultures

[2.1] Russian fan slash has typically been interpreted as a way for fans to assert individual choice and the self above the socially normative (Samutina 2014), or as a vital form of

protest and resistance or an infrapolitical practice (Scott 1990) in a highly homophobic and nationalist political and social environment (Palash 2013). However, not all creators assemble or produce slash with an explicit political agenda underpinning their work. Defining slash as a subcultural practice limits our understanding of its significance as a phenomenon that has a powerful discursive role beyond fan conversations.

[2.2] Recent work on youth subcultures argues for such a revised view of youth practices in postsocialist spaces. Hilary Pilkington and Elena Omel'chenko (2013) make a case for a study of social context when examining youth cultural practices, rather than framing these as subcultural formations with fixed boundaries. They persuasively rearticulate theories of new youth cultural practices to posit that communication rather than style is central to "forming affective bonds" in youth cultures in postsocialist societies, allowing individual trajectories across the cultural scene (210–11). The Internet particularly enables the traversing of spaces that might otherwise be discrete, and it allows for the potential impact of young people's cultural practices on wider society.

[2.3] This shift of perspective from the structural to the cultural follows on Pilkington and Omel'chenko's (2013) recommendation that we study youth cultural practices as strategies that are embedded in whole lives, rather than social formations separated from these whole lives. Subcultures have often been studied for their distinctiveness and in isolation of their social contexts, but framing slash fandoms as strategies allows us to acknowledge the fluidity and flow of conversation among these and other public spaces. As a strategy, slash or being a slasher occasions moments of interaction and sociability across the Internet that hold within them the potential to engender debates on human rights and on what constitutes Russianness.

3. Slash as political act: Both disengagement and activism

[3.1] At the outset, it is important to clarify that not all slashers claim to be doing political work, either implicitly or explicitly. Russian slashers articulate their motivations in many ways, only some of which are political. Some slashers suggest that they are drawn to slash owing to curiosity about how men might interact if they had a relationship that privileged emotional contact; they deny any political message. The administrator of a slash forum for the Russian TV cop drama *Glukhar* (2008–11) explained to me that the serial piqued his interest only when he noticed "how often the main male protagonists embrace, call each other 'my dear,' kiss each other's cheeks, gaze at each other—I realised that it was a goldmine of material for slash. The relationship between the male characters makes them interesting and credible" (personal communication translated from the Russian, 2011). For this fan, slash is taking what is implicit in the text; it is not an invention or a radical new reading. He then emphasized that for him, slash was not about asserting a political position, and it was not meant to be a form of resistance.

[3.2] Ellie Cler, who has many slash videos to her credit, says this: "There was a brief period of time when I was all about gay rights and how slash is sooo progressive etc. Well, that was exactly because my political views were changing at the time because of slash. Once they've settled, slash is once again my favorite hobby, and politics are set apart from that, even if I'm still all about social justice :)" (personal communication, 2011). It is common to frame slash as a catalyst in the formation of political views. Slashers intrinsically work against the cultural grain, but not all espouse political goals. Yet this ready denial of a connection between fandom and politics, or the desire to articulate these as separate preoccupations, is also noteworthy. In societies where politics pervades every aspect of everyday life, a disavowal of politics can itself be construed as a political act.

[3.3] Many slashers, however, do make explicit political associations between their interest in slash and the political cause of sexual minorities. The administrators at Slashfiction.ru, one of the largest repositories of Russian slash fiction and art, are vocal about the rights of the LGBT

community and move seamlessly between discussing their fics and deliberating over the rights of sexual minorities. In the Slashfiction.ru forum, Russian slashers, in response to an internal survey about what it means to be a slasher, noted that creating slash media provides ample opportunity to assert identity and to create expressions of political culture:

[3.4] To me being a slasher means thinking in a certain way; paying attention to small things (people's views, the randomly-used phrase in films, for instance); being part of a large community, where there is an improbable number of smart, talented, intellectual and interesting people; a guaranteed audience for my creativity; a broader understanding, than civil society offers, of issues of gender, orientation, the concept of "queer," than civil society offers; being inspired; having enough imagination to bring a spicy diversity to my intimate affairs; being part of gay culture; I can go on forever—slash is an irrevocable part of my life. (Citrina, Slashfiction.ru, November 13, 2010, translated from the Russian)

[3.5] These slashers claim that they are able to bring to political debate that which civil society is generally unable or unwilling to table. Being a slasher also means finding a community where one's leisure interests and views coincide with those of several others; it means being part of a culture of socially and politically like-minded people. In the discussion threads on television shows in the Slashfiction.ru forum, for instance, slashers also share news on homosexuals' rights in other parts of the world, the rights of gay couples to adopt, and the issue of homophobia.

[3.6] Within slash communities, whether Web forums or social network groups, slashers have also been known to engage in activism, usually motivated by legislative moves that are construed as antagonistic to slashers' work. The administrators of the Slashfiction.ru group on VKontakte have frequently urged fans to support the rights of sexual minorities in an intolerant environment. When news of the impending law against "homosexual propaganda among

minors" broke in 2012 (the law has since been adopted), slash communities on Runet began to circulate petitions about its implications. Slasher Marina Riabova posted the following petition in the VKontakte group: "Hello! We're gathering signatures for a petition against the passing of the law. In a nutshell, they could put a lid on slasher activity if they pass this law! This is very serious. Let's sign this!" (VKontakte, "Saito Slash," August 6, 2013, translated from the Russian). Slashers used social networking sites to garner support and agitate against the legislation being adopted.

4. Slash at large: Conversations with detractors

[4.1] Slashers' sense of the significance of what they create is, however, particularly heightened and reinforced in dialogue with antislashers. By acknowledging this, we make it essential to consider how slashers engage with nonfans and other detractors, both within and outside fan forums. Within fan forums, slashers consciously respond to hate posts and criticism of slash, making a claim for political space in a hostile society. Conceding that not all antislashers are homophobic, one slasher claims that many rants of antislashers hold no water, given how little space slashers have for self-expression. In the following ironic post, a slasher addresses detractors who prefer heteronormative fan fiction, arguing that they have no need to feel under threat when they dominate fan spaces. The fan paints a picture of what being hemmed in truly feels like:

[4.2] Until you get to a point when you are accused of killing fandom, until you start getting insulting and offensive emails because you dared to describe heterosexual relationships of your favourite pairings, until you have lost half your life hiding and inventing secret handshakes in order to find like-minded people among fans, enough with this rhetoric about the poor, marginalised heterosexual orientation in fandom. Dammit, you are in the majority. You will survive.

(<http://ficbook.net/readfic/403661>; translated from

the Russian)

[4.3] Slash is clearly framed here as a vital form of expression for those who see themselves as a minority with an ever-shrinking public space for their voices. It is the engagement of those who have spent half their lives in hiding, forming communities in creative ways; it is a coming out, as it were, in a context that places obstacles in the way of such disclosure.

[4.4] Slashers make a case for their work solely within fandoms, but they also have their work cut out for them, as slash has increasingly become a bone of contention in public spaces outside fan forums. In forums peopled by nonfans, slash, with its implicit challenge to the mainstream narrative of sexuality, is held up as an example of moral depravity. In a LiveJournal entry on the new legislation against homosexual propaganda, this is what the writer has to say about how to deal with the threat of slash propaganda:

[4.5] Sadly, there is propaganda. When one sixth grader sends the other sixth grader slash fiction on her mobile, through bluetooth, for instance. It is not propaganda as such, but information from which we need to protect our children.

[4.6] One exemplary (punitive—SR) act against slashers, and the phenomenon will not be as attractive anymore. Social disapproval alone does not work. (Vashima_midori, LiveJournal, August 8, 2013, translated from the Russian)

[4.7] These views are expressed during an exchange of posts on what qualifies as propaganda of homosexuality in light of the new law. Many sites hosting threads on the new law against homosexual propaganda have concerned adults discussing matters pertaining to children's safety. Fan slash becomes emblematic of a permissive culture: it stands for all things harmful to the healthy development of children. For example, one person notes in a blog post that third graders are reading about homosexuality in widely circulated slash. Angry responses suggest alerting the school principal; others

ask that gays go live in Europe so children in Russia can be raised "normally" (BDV1984, Yaplakal.com [<http://www.yaplakal.com/>], March 19, 2014). Some discussion sites see slash featuring in debates between those who view it as propaganda and those who equally do not see the appeal of slash but find the legislation dubious. A visitor to a LiveJournal blog on the new law offers the example of slash writing, explaining what it is to those unfamiliar with it. A discussion follows in which the posters debate whether slash written by many under the age of 18 can be considered propaganda directed at those under 18 if they are the ones writing it themselves: "Is it a violation if they are propagating it themselves?" (Naritsyna, LiveJournal, March 29, 2013).

[4.8] As slash travels to nonfannish spaces, slash fans act as publics on other sites where discussions about being gay bring a mix of voices to the forefront. One such is the well-regarded Internet project Deti-404 (Children-404; <http://deti-404.com/>) for young LGBT teenagers, who use the forum (which plays on the familiar "404—Page Not Found" server error message) to share experiences of how they live with their sexual preferences, of coming out of the closet, and of how family and friends have responded to their disclosures. (There is an ongoing legal case against the journalist who set up the project for "propagating homosexuality.") On the group's Facebook and VKontakte walls, many who post these personal stories talk about writing slash, framing it in confessional narratives that articulate their personal journeys and trials:

[4.9] My mother thinks homosexuality is an ailment. She threatened to send me to a shrink, when I was into slash (I still am, but I do it surreptitiously)...and I try not to think about love... don't want to love anyone here because I don't want the homophobes around me to hurt my loved one. (D., 16 years old, Altai region; VKontakte, Deti-404, LGBT podrostki [teenagers], translated from the Russian)

[4.10] Many posts describe the writing of slash as a

clandestine activity that they cannot share with family and friends. For one nonlasher in this well-known forum, slash appears to have made being gay something of a fashion (MP, VKontakte, Deti-404, LGBT подростки [teenagers]). Posts in this forum describe the fascination with writing slash and the ways in which it has normalized the imagining of alternative sexualities for young people with no other platform for such expression. It is quite common for participants in this forum to strategically place the writing and reading of slash as a transformative moment, one that makes them come to terms with their sexual orientation.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] The creation of slash and the imagining of alternative sexualities is intrinsically a political act on Runet. Yet framing slash communities as resistant subcultures in Russia conceals more than it reveals. In an essay about *Indian Idol 3* (2007) and its audiences, Aswin Punathambekar (2012) writes about how the performance of a young man from the city of Shillong brought together plural groups that engaged with the show and came out in support of their candidate. Their show-centered conversations bridged many ethnic and social divides because they took place among diverse social groups that otherwise had little opportunity to mingle.

Punathambekar suggests that the test of the show's contribution to civic and political participation is to understand how these newly formed affinities endure and seep into everyday life and into various spaces and moments of sociability. Only then can we truly understand the impact that such participatory practices have on political life and society. We need to reconsider the political potential of public conversations that are triggered by the media event but then extend beyond it to "generate...alternative imaginations of public life that, in turn, are tied to the experience of everyday life" (2012, ¶3.2).

[5.2] In Russia, slash emerges in direct response to a media event or production but goes on to become a factor in shaping new conversations about being gay in Russia—conversations beyond the original context of fan media

production. Framed this way, a study of slash can shift emphasis to the significance of moments of sociability outside the fan community, in everyday life, where slashers often speak to the converted but at other times engage with nonslashers and even those wary of gay rights and the liberal values they embody. When slashers engage with one another and with those with different and sometimes contrarian views on the subject, they inhabit "spaces and moments of sociability" that may not always turn into political participation in the ways that we expect but that may "generate new and sustainable ideas for social and political change" (Punathambekar 2012, ¶3.3). By looking beyond the immediate context of the slash fan community to examine the ways in which slash becomes embedded in other debates about individual freedom, legislative control, and social stability, we encounter moments of sociability that have tremendous political significance in a society where public proclamations about homosexuality appear to be increasingly fettered, both socially and legally.

6. Notes

1. I reflect on digital slash in this essay, but the world of slash extends beyond the Internet; slashers also hold annual conventions such as the Moscow Slashcon, last held in 2013.
 2. Sources cited here are public. The only exceptions are the posts on the VKontakte page of Slashfiction.ru, the personal comments of the *Glukhar* slasher, and the personal comments of Ellie Cler; permission to use these were granted to me via e-mail.
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