Representing disability in queer fanfiction: Analyzing the role of whiteness and intimacy in depicting desirable disabled masculinity

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Abstract

Fanfiction is a media which blends canon texts with audience reimaginings, wherein fans take up existing narratives and make them their own. This paper analyzes story tags on the fanfiction site Archive of Our Own (AO3) and a case study of “Malex,” a notable relationship between two canonically disabled characters, to examine the salience of their disabilities in fanfiction which presents them as desirable romantic and/or sexual prospects. I discuss the desexualization of disabled people as well as the tendency for fanfiction to (re)produce norms of whiteness and maleness, and examine how Malex-focused stories are similar to and different from stories about characters who are not canonically in a relationship. Overall, I argue that fanfiction has the ability to queer and crip existing social narratives, depicting disability as a real and desirable part of diverse relationships. However, as it stands, whiteness, maleness, and the intimacy of perceived vulnerability remain the cornerstones of desirable disabilities.

1. Introduction

Fanfiction is a media which blends canon texts with audience reimaginings, wherein fans take up existing narratives and make them their own. Although sometimes maligned as childish, lewd, or otherwise low art, fanfiction continues to thrive as a popular and transgressive space of transmedia storytelling. In fact, Archive of Our Own (AO3), a massive, international website where people post and read fanfiction, was recognized in 2019 with a Hugo Award for Best Related Work (Romano, 2019). Henry Jenkins, a professor from the University of Southern California and a foundational voice in the formation of fan studies, describes fandom as a cyclical space where we share information back and forth with one another in a collaborative form of meaning-making. Fanfiction is thus also a space with the potential to disrupt norms, tell different kinds of stories, and create social change (de Montrouge, 2019; Debelius, 2022; Newman-Stille, 2019). As a disabled individual who is involved in many fandoms myself, I set forth to understand the ways in which disability is represented in fanfiction stories (fics) and examine the ways in which those depictions can act as a site for re-writing social narratives of disability, especially those regarding the romantic and sexual desirability of people with disabilities (PWD).

In their book, Disability Media Studies (2019), media studies scholars Elizabeth Ellcessor, Mack Hagood, and Bill Kirkpatrick, call for increased engagement with topics of disability and accessibility in the study of media industries and content alike. This paper answers that call
by addressing what the representation of disability in fanfiction can reveal about the conditions under which fans understand disability to be salient and desirable. The questions guiding this project are as follows: What similarities and differences arise when examining the most popular depictions of canonically disabled characters presented in a sexual or romantic light? What does representation in fanfiction reveal about when disability is depicted as desirable?

Towards this end, concepts from disability studies and media studies are blended together in an analysis of fics on AO3 and the tags used to describe them. First, I analyze story tags to understand what the most popular depictions look like, using quantitative measures under the tag “canon disabled character” to determine popularity. This analysis provides insight into the first question about similarities and differences in popular depictions of disabled characters. Then, I analyze the relationship between the characters Michael Guerin and Alex Manes (couple-named “Malex”) from the television series Roswell, New Mexico (RNM) in-depth to explore the representation of disabled characters as desirable partners. While Malex fics continue to (re)produce some of the hegemonic norms of disability representation, they are also notable because Malex, unlike many of the other couples “shipped” together (presented as in relationships with one another) in popular fics, is based on characters who are in an actual relationship in the source material. The ability for authors to build off of Malex’s existing scenes and storylines provides fruitful opportunity for discussion of how the audience is (re)interpreting the role of disability in these characters and their relationship. However, while I acknowledge the source material to provide context for my analysis, the focus of this paper is on the representation in the fics, not the canon works. This case study allows me to go more in-depth in exploring why this representation is similar or different from the other main ships using the tag “canon disabled character,” how disability is presented in fanfiction of a canon relationship, and what that means for the representation of disability as desirable in the Malex fandom. This paper sheds light on how media representations can provide a space for disabled people to be reimagined as romantic and sexual beings as well as subjects of desire and address where progress remains to be made.

2. Tagging practices in fanfiction spaces

Fanfiction is often categorized through a system of folksonomy rather than official codified classifications (Bullard, 2014). Rather than traditional hashtags which sort content by specific terms, AO3 uses a more flexible and thematic tagging system, wherein volunteer “tag wranglers” who are familiar with specific fandoms work to consolidate disparate tags into coherent groupings (Price, 2019). For example, the tag “disability” may include stories which are tagged with terms such as autism, blind, or physical disability even when they do not explicitly include the tag disability itself – the tag wranglers have identified these distinct tags and grouped them for easier searching. Additionally, this allows authors to use the tags as a space for commentary, what Ingrid Brett and Sarah Malsen (2021) refer to as whispering to their readers. The implications of these whispers then reveal preferred readings of the texts and describe to the audience what aspects of the stories their authors find salient and deserving of explicit attention. Thus, tags work to hail (or warn off) potential readers and express meaning-making in collaborative audience spaces (Stein, 2018).

This paper analyzes the tag “Canon Disabled Character” specifically because unlike broader tags like “disability” this tag speaks to characters who are disabled in the original text, a better
demonstration of how PWD are represented in media. Additionally, the use of this tag shows that disability is explicitly meaningful and salient to both authors and tag-wranglers. This paper determines the general popularity of relationships and tropes through a quantitative examination and applies discourse analysis to provide in-depth analysis of the case study on fics which feature the relationship between Michael and Alex (Malex). The data was collected and reflects the fics posted on AO3 in June 2023.

Due to my personal interest in many fandoms, I came into this project with a deep familiarity with each of the characters and relationships discussed below, providing me with insight into the implications of the tags used to categorize each story as well as ensuring that I have knowledge of the canon media being (re)presented by these fics. Thus, my analysis focused on identifying emergent themes rather than beginning with an a priori list of sub-tags to explore. This work was supported by an understanding of the implicit meaning behind certain otherwise potentially obscure tags, providing a guide for which stories would provide fruitful discussion when analyzed in-depth.

3. Disability & sexuality

In his work on compulsory able-bodiedness, formative disability studies scholar and professor at the George Washington University, Robert McRuer (2006), describes how disability is not a category based on similarities between the vast array of people with disabilities. Rather, it is an umbrella term used to describe anybody who falls outside of society’s bodily and behavioral norms. Thus, to be deemed disabled, similar to being identified as “queer,” is to be marked as intrinsically outside of the norm and thus outside the bounds of acceptable sexuality.

Two factors thus converge to distance disability from potential desirability. Firstly, esteemed disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers’ ‘ideology of ability’ describes the assumption that it is inherently better not to be disabled than to be disabled (2010). This ideology provides a foundation of stigma against disabled people and disabled bodies. Additionally, in her 2009 book, Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality, disability and gender scholar Margrit Shildrick points out that in a society which privileges independence, vulnerability and interdependence are denigrated. The associations between disability and a lack of autonomy or control thus function to reinforce the idea that PWD are not valid partners. Not only does associating disability with sexuality challenge the bounds between the valued able-body and the devalued dis-abled form, it marks both parties as outside of the acceptable norms of sexual and romantic attraction.

This results in cultural beliefs that disabled people either cannot or do not want to engage in romantic or sexual relationships. For example, lack of education and representation leads to cultural assumptions of PWD as asexual (Esmail et al., 2010) and concerns about the boundaries of acceptable bodies create fear of queer and disabled individuals (Hirschmann, 2013; Ebrahim; 2019). Representation of disabled characters as a whole is not enough to change these attitudes. We need disabled characters to be depicted as desirable, in relationships, and in ways that audiences understand and internalize.

Notable disability studies scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder describe how disability is commonly included in stories as a “narrative prosthesis,” used as a metaphor representing Otherness rather than included as a true attempt to depict the experience of disabled
individuals (2017). By continuously presenting disability as a literary device rather than a material reality, the experiences of disabled people are rendered invisible even by stories which on the surface provide representation. Part of this issue comes down to who is writing these stories. “Own voices” works, those written by people of a marginalized community about their own communities and experiences, are one way of avoiding this pitfall. Having first-hand knowledge to build upon makes reliance on narrative prosthesis less necessary. However, where stories written by members of marginalized communities can provide nuance, realism, and authenticity, “outsider writers” can over-power those stories by (re)producing stereotypes with which audiences are more familiar (Booth & Narayan, 2021). In her award-winning book on the representation of race in popular adapted media, The Dark Fantastic (2019), Ebony Elizabeth Thomas attributes this to an “imagination gap” on the part of both authors and audiences wherein the same stories are repeated over and over, reproducing hegemonic messages about marginalized groups.

Interestingly, Mel Stanfill (2018), who studies whiteness in fandom at the University of Central Florida, describes that one of the reasons that fanfiction is so white is that white authors may be afraid of being critiqued for writing non-white characters “wrong,” and so avoid writing them altogether. Meanwhile, this does not seem to be the case for characters with disabilities, potentially because authors do not imagine disabled individuals in their audiences and perhaps because they are simply reproducing the representation that they have witnessed in the source material and thus assume that readers will accept this representation uncritically. Fic authors often pull their ideas about what disabilities look like from how they are represented in the source media (Debelius, 2021), and thus it is possible that the authors assume that reproducing these depictions is a “safe” way to include disabled characters in their stories. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with non-disabled authors wanting to and being comfortable with representing disabled characters, this means that it is vital to analyze how disability is depicted in the source material and how this is interpreted and (re)presented by said authors.

One way of circumventing the pitfalls of hegemonic storytelling is to queer or crip the story. Based on reclamations of derogatory terms, Alison Kafer, a feminist disability scholar from the University of Texas, Austin, explains that to embrace the crip and the queer is to reject assimilationist thinking and create space for imagination beyond traditional boundaries of what kinds of bodies and relationships are desirable (2013). “Much as slash fiction allowed for a break in the hegemonic sexual identity of the hero, crip fic would require a reworking of the basics of bodily normalcy for the hero” (Newman-Stille, 2019: 91). In either case, the subversive power of this storytelling requires pre-existing knowledge of the material being transformed (Kenny, 2019). It is through this system that audience members negotiate meanings with one another, using characters and plots from these existing stories to reimagine hegemonic narratives; it only works when you have context for the preferred readings.

Although people with disabilities of many types face stigma, both disabled and non-disabled individuals acknowledge a hierarchy wherein some disabilities are viewed more negatively than others. Generally, this hierarchy continues to uphold cultural ideas of normalcy in form and function, with the people who are viewed as closer to the norm and more independent viewed more positively than others. However, the cause of one’s disability is also important to their status in said hierarchy. Disabilities acquired through heroic action and those which allow for the retention of a normalized “whole” body are privileged above others (Deal, 2003). Furthermore, physical and psychological disabilities are seen as preferable to intellectual
disabilities, and those which were acquired through forces outside one’s control are viewed more positively than congenital disabilities or those which are deemed to be one’s own “fault” (Hayward, 2005). Thus, when considering the few circumstances under which disabled people are presented as desirable, it is little surprise that the examples tend to feature people with physical or psychological disabilities which were explicitly acquired through heroic action.

In particular, this bias is illustrated through the archetype of the veteran-hero, a figure which arose in the aftermath of the World Wars, when society had to adjust its image of disabled people to compensate for the influx of newly injured men returning from war. Here, a conscious effort was made to construct an image of disabled men as retaining independence and masculinity, traits previously denied to disabled men (Serlin, 2002). Similarly, as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) became more understood as part of the national consciousness in the wake of the wars of the 21st century, the image of the veteran-hero has not disappeared, but simply adjusted to include soldiers with mental scars as well as physical ones (Samuels, 2017). Yet in each case, the figures used to uphold this ideal of heroism in media are white men. We see this trope continue to be reproduced to this day.

4. Fanfiction and representation

Many scholars have pointed out how much of fanfiction recreates stories which focus on characters who are disproportionately white and queer. Stanfill attributes this to an engagement with “default-white media” (2018: 305), where the stories being adapted already focus on predominantly white characters. Thus, the whiteness of fanfiction is due in part to the pre-existing whiteness of the source material. Others point out how whiteness and maleness are centered specifically, with many fics focusing on relationships between white men, platonic or otherwise (de Montrouge, 2019; Fazekas, 2014).

Beyond the focus on white characters generally, queerness – specifically relationships involving two men, a dynamic called “slash” – flourishes in fanfiction spaces, popular in ways that other forms of diverse relationships such as interracial ones are not (Thomas, 2019). For example, in the tag canon disabled character, the focus on male partners is extreme, with more than double the fics about male/male relationships (4,651) than female/male (1,739) and even significantly fewer female/female stories (687). There is, in fact, a long-standing question about why this is the case even when the authors of fics are diverse and lean heavily female. Yet fan studies scholar Francesca Coppa (2018) argues that these traits are notable not because they deviate from the trends of other literature or fan-made-media, but because fanfiction itself must be recognized as a distinct genre of media with its own norms altogether. For example, she describes how slash fics should not be interpreted as attempting to represent the experiences of gay men in real life, but instead be understood as a sort of queer performance on the part of the author, wherein a female author can play with her own ideas of gender and sexuality through her characters. In some ways this is a similar practice to the use of narrative prosthesis, where authors work through their personal interests in cultural and interpersonal dynamics using the metaphor of disability without any true goal of representing the lived reality of disabled people. Subjectification, “the erasing of differences between the self and the fictional character to the point where a fan can feel a profound identification with someone who is really quite objectively different” (Coppa, 2018: 191) amplifies this performance and exacerbates the distinction between attempts at true representation and the goal of simply playing within the space of social difference.
Another habit which emerges in the writing of fics is that of rehashing various tropes. In the genre of fanfiction, one common trope is that of hurt/comfort (H/C). H/C is a trope wherein one character is hurt, be it physically, emotionally, or psychologically, and another helps to comfort them, building intimacy between the two and sometimes acting as a direct precursor to a romantic or sexual encounter. When the injury is physical, it is often followed by “sexualized nurturance” as the hurt character receives extended touch from a loving source (Coppa, 2018: 191). Although not inherently about disability, this trope works to romanticize vulnerability and can be used to fetishize injury.

Romanticizing perceived vulnerability to fetishize a power difference can be deeply harmful. For example, Hollywood’s presentation of disabled women as passive and vulnerable repeatedly paints them as ideal victims of sexualized violation, and can romanticize this dynamic (Andree, 2021), having dangerous implications for how audiences view disabled women’s sexuality in real life. Although that trope is different from H/C in that it is explicitly violent, it highlights the broader issue with how fetishizing disabled sexuality presents disabled people as objects of sexual desire rather than subjects in their own right.

H/C too has been critiqued for depicting the acquisition of disability as a form of victimization (Newman-Stille, 2019). Yet H/C stories are not always problematic. For instance, when including disability in H/C stories, the plot can either recreate the thorny “overcoming story” where the characters’ disabilities are transcended or fixed (Garland-Thomson, 2005), or it can avoid this pattern by allowing the narrative arc to instead depict the comfort aspect as the characters working to integrate the disability into their identities and relationships (Debelius, 2021).

Beyond the bounds of H/C specifically, it is common for fics across fandoms to construct desirable bodies as those of white men who are feminized, queered, and/or oppressed (Fathallah, 2017). In his book, *Taking it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (1998), David Savran describes the phenomenon of “white male victimhood,” explaining how the 1970s brought on an era wherein the response to the attempts to diversify stories by featuring non-white and non-male characters, a backlash created a desire for stories about white men with their own struggles. This was manifested in the formation of a new trope focusing on white men undergoing an explicit trauma, giving them something to overcome outside of social inequalities. This story-type continues to feature heavily in contemporary media, and in fandom this mingles with the genre norms of slash and queering straight characters to queer the male body and the role of masculinity more broadly. Altogether, these tropes work together to reify whiteness and maleness as the norm while playing with the meanings of injury and trauma in ways which are potentially revolutionary but also deeply fraught.

5. Depictions of desirable disability in AO3 fics

As of June 3rd, 2023, a total of 8,062 fics appeared under the tag *canon disabled character*. Of these, Erik Lehnsherr/Charles Xavier were found to be by far the most popular pairing. 1,354 of the fics in this tag focused on that pair. The following most popular pairings are those of James “Bucky” Barnes/Steve Rogers (228) and Michael Guerin/Alex Manes (142). Although this distinction from first to third place is significant, it is notable that Michael and Alex are characters from RNM, which is a singular property from the CW channel, while the top two
Couples are featured in a massive number of canonical materials across decades from comics to film and television. Under this main tag there are also distinctions made between those rated for General Audiences (1,765), Teen + Up (3,022), Mature (1,305), and Explicit (1,340) which feature little variation and consistently rank Malex in the top five most popular slots. Many of the fics in the tag canon disabled character also fall into common tropes such as fluff, where the tone is positive or sweet (1,340), hurt/comfort (1,202), or angst (1,073). These categories again feature Malex heavily and match up with many of the themes identified in Malex fics.

For context, Charles and Erik are characters from the X-men universe, also known as Professor X and Magneto who have been featured together since 1963. This franchise focuses on the emergence of a new species of super-powered humans known as mutants and treats the mutants as an allegory for marginalized groups such as the LGBT+ community, including storylines of coming out to one’s parent and finding pride in one’s identity as a mutant. Charles and Erik in particular have a long-standing friendship which is made fraught by their disagreement on how to handle the stigma against and oppression of mutants, but reaches across decades and numerous canons. The film X-Men: First Class establishes that in the popular 20th Century Fox series (2000-2020) it is canon that Charles becomes paralyzed due to a stray bullet Erik flicks the bullet away from himself using his ability to control metal. Thus, their relationship is complicated not only by their political disagreements but also because Erik is directly responsible for Charles’ later paralysis.

Steve and Bucky are also a pair which appear across numerous source materials, dating back as far as 1941. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU, 2008-present), they are childhood best friends. After Bucky is drafted to World War II, Steve signs up for the Super Soldier Program, gains super-powers, and takes on the title Captain America. When Bucky is captured, Steve rescues him and they fight together in an elite unit, until Bucky falls from a great height during one of their missions and is presumed dead. Despite surviving this fall, Bucky loses his left arm and is recaptured by the villainous group, HYDRA, who brainwash him and give him the title of Winter Soldier. They keep him cryogenically frozen except for when they thaw him to use as an assassin. After Steve crashes a plane into frozen water, he too is preserved until he is found and revived in 2011. Eventually, Steve and Bucky reconcile in modern day, where Steve helps Bucky work through his PTSD and brainwashing and rediscover his true, heroic self. Thus, a prominent theme in fics about their relationship focus on Steve helping Bucky heal.

Meanwhile, Michael and Alex from RNM dated in high school, both coming from abusive backgrounds and finding comfort in their connection. Michael is an alien who crash landed in Roswell as a child and Alex comes from a military family who is later discovered to be involved in hunting down and experimenting on other aliens from that ship. During their senior year of high school, Alex’s homophobic father finds them together and smashes Michael’s left hand with a hammer, leaving it badly damaged, causing pain and motor difficulties moving forward. After high school, the two separate and Alex joins the military. When they reunite ten years later, they rekindle their relationship and eventually marry in the final season of the show. Malex fics often deal with themes of being destined to be together across the cosmos and overcoming the challenges of being a forbidden romance due to Alex’s father and family history keeping them apart. Notably, their disabilities are not included in the list of challenges which must be overcome.

Each of these pairs have relationships which span many years, including time before the characters acquire their disabilities. While this is notable in that it can be seen as one of the
primary justifications for casting non-disabled actors, in the case of fanfiction, this provides interesting opportunities to read and write about the characters before they become disabled. However, while some fics using the tag canon disabled character include scenes from before the characters became disabled, they clearly view disability as an important aspect of the characters and their stories, and unlike some other fics, do not depict some alternate universe where the disabilities never occur.

Michael/Alex, Charles/Erik, and Steve/Bucky share further similarities including how they fulfill the expectations for representation based on hegemonic social pressures and the norms of fanfiction as well as the tropes used in fics about them. This is to say that not only are each of these characters partnered in male/male slash fics, they are played by white, non-disabled actors, and feature in some similar stories. One trend in fanfiction is to depict slash pairings as foils of one another (Coppa, 2018). For example, where Charles is an optimist, hero, and has cerebral powers, Erik is a pessimist, villain, and has powers which manipulate the physical world. Similarly, Steve is blond, heroic, and enhanced by scientific experiments, while Bucky is dark-haired, sometimes a villainous character, and tortured by scientific experiments. Finally, where Michael is a pessimistic alien, Alex is an optimist but part of a military family which has been involved in imprisoning and experimenting on aliens for decades. This contrast between the optimist and pessimist is so common that it has been identified as a distinct trope, the “grumpy/sunshine” dynamic. Of course, one of the other aspects at play here is disability, in which case Erik and Steve fulfill the non-disabled role while Charles and Bucky are their disabled counterparts. Depending on when in the series fics take place, some Malex fics can also follow this pattern – primarily with Michael depicted as non-disabled and Alex as disabled – but other fics minimize this distance as a salient part of their dynamic or present both Michael and Alex as disabled.

However, there are also other notable differences between Malex and other popular ships in this tag. For example, despite the fact that the actor does not claim Native American heritage (grá💖💜💙 sonas, 2020), in the words of fic author, vincerets, “alex manes is a disabled man of colour and we should remember that” (2019). In a space where whiteness is so much the norm, the fact that Malex is a relationship that is not only inter-species but perhaps more importantly understood to be interracial (presuming that one reads the alien Michael as a white man) is highly notable.

Additionally, whereas the Charles/Erik and Bucky/Steve pairings consist of canonically straight characters engaging in a non-canon romantic partnership, Malex consists of two canonically queer characters who are, for the majority of the time, in a canon relationship with another in the source material. Because Malex is an existing ship in the canon, fans have an explicit template from which to build their stories and address how disability functions within their relationship. For example, in the pilot episode we see Michael and Alex reunite after a decade apart. It is revealed that Alex has recently had a below the knee amputation of his right leg and even when Michael sees him adjusting his prosthesis later in the episode, he makes no comment about it, instead expressing his nostalgia for their previous relationship and kissing Alex. In the following episodes this is reinforced as Michael says “I never look away” (1x02) and sensually massages Alex’s leg with his own injured hand while they are in bed together (1x03). This sets an immediate expectation that the couple are comfortable with each other physically, neither at all uncomfortable with the other’s body or new scars. Instead, their disabilities are largely handled with care and good humor, such as when Michael laughs at hearing Alex’s prosthesis was taken from him because he tried to “bludgeon” his brother.
with it (2x12). These incidents exemplify the attitude of the source material which is then reproduced in many of the fics. Whereas other non-canon ships rely entirely upon audience imaginations without those touchstones of what Echobleu calls “compassionate pragmatism” (2019).

6. Case study: Malex

Several notable themes emerge when exploring the tags of Malex-focused fics. The first of these is some variation of PTSD. This is notable for two reasons. Firstly, it represents the somewhat larger trend of these stories to expand beyond the canon including the canon disabilities of the characters “and other disabilities” (Echobleu, 2019) such as autism, Deafness, claustrophobia, epilepsy, pneumonia, and eating disorders to name a few. Nearly all of the additional disabilities are invisible and thus able to be added to the story without disrupting the readers’ imagined visuals of the characters based on the television series. Yet of these added disabilities PTSD is by far the most common, reflecting the broader cultural trend of including PTSD as a trope in heroic narratives (Samuels, 2017) and enabling the trauma of the characters’ injuries to continue beyond when they have physically healed. Furthermore, for Malex fics in particular, the PTSD tends to be related not to the war in which Alex fought and lost his leg, but both characters’ relationship to Alex’s abusive father, Jesse Manes. The trauma in these stories is tied directly to their relationship, as the experiences and confessions of their sexuality are intricately linked with past abuses and homophobia (Caprioglio, 2021). Although Alex literally walks around with a reminder of his injury from the war, his emotional trauma is rooted in his relationship with his father to the point where he explicitly says “my father was my war” (1x01) – leading to the formation of the tag Jesse Manes is a War Crime. Notably, this focus on the mental scars associated with the veteran-hero archetype upholds a cultural privileging of psychological disabilities over physical ones as an appropriate site for desirable disability, but it is also important to note that the ways that these stories play out do not take away Alex’s physical disability nor does it depict the acquisition of these disabilities as making him a victim.

Michael and Alex’s relationship to Jesse Manes also overlaps with the tag established relationship and references to the lost decade where the characters were broken up between the high school flashbacks and contemporary storyline of season 1. The tag established relationship functions in two primary ways. The first is that it can refer to the characters having an established relationship from their high school years. This meaning is associated with the stories about how they are already familiar with one another regarding each’s personality, trauma, and bodies. This pre-existing comfort with one another provides opportunities to show how they navigate the scars acquired in the lost decade as new parts of each other, providing a site for open communication and a non-judgmental attitude about the differences in one’s body from high school to ten years later. They can acknowledge the differences such as Michael’s crushed hand and Alex’s amputation, but the way that these conversations occur shows a positive intimacy rather than a pitying or anxious dynamic. This seems to build directly from how the relationship is handled in the show, as discussed above.

Because disability itself is seen as deviant, people expressing desire for PWD are often deemed inherently deviant themselves (Ebrahim, 2019). For example, devotees, people who are identified by their fetish for disabled bodies are often pathologized for this attraction and critiqued as problematic. However, a line should be drawn between being attracted to
someone who is disabled versus being attracted to them specifically (or exclusively) because of their disability. Thus, it is interesting to consider how the fact that Charles/Erik, Steve/Bucky, and Michael/Alex’s relationships each predate their acquired disabilities may contribute to fans’ comfort with their desire being understood as “genuine” versus the result of fetishizing their disabled partners.

The second function of the tag established relationship is to address an established relationship in the present, post-season 1 reunion and indicates that Malex will be portrayed as an existing couple (rather than getting together during the fic). In each case, the couple is already familiar with one another and their access needs, providing space for access intimacy to feature in the fics. Disability justice advocate, Mia Mingus, describes access intimacy as the comfort that one feels when their access needs seem implicitly understood by someone, enabling an ease in the relationship and communication between individuals rather than a clunky or demeaning discussion of one’s needs (2011). Therefore, presenting Malex in an established relationship avoids some of the sensationalization that can occur when depicting characters acclimating to disability for the first time.

Another notable tag which emerges in Malex fics is one which states that either Michael or Alex deserves nice things. This tag may be associated with fluff, kisses & cuddles, domestic storylines, or H/C. Notably, despite playing into the comfort side of the H/C trope, none of the fics under this tag presented being healed or “fixed” as one of these nice things. Instead, the fics focus on finding emotional comfort and imparting feelings of being loved. One surprisingly common way for this to come about was through many stories with a domestic slant, especially those in which Michael takes on domestic tasks such as cooking for Alex. These stories to provide both parties with “nice things” as they depict Michael as having a safe home and family, something his character has always longed for, and Alex as being cared for by a loving partner who is aware of but not overly preoccupied with his disability.

Other domestically-centered stories had a surprising common focus on showers. These fics showed the shower as a site where the domestic, practical, and sexual aspects of Malex’s relationship intersected. Whereas other tags were explicitly sexual including kinks, sex work, and specific sex acts, the shower-story is not necessarily its own tag but is a distinct sub-genre of story. In most of these stories there is conversation of wanting to be intimate in the shower but finding the practicalities of this desire complicated by Alex’s inability to stand in the shower. Thus, conversations move towards how one might work around this complication including the use of a shower chair or having Michael support Alex with his body or with telekinetic powers. Alternatively, a plan is made to engage in sexual activity first and shower later. These stories exemplify a negotiation of the realities of being disabled while simultaneously representing Alex and his disabled body as explicitly sexually desirable and featuring discussion of assistive technologies beyond simply the crutch and prostheses used in the television show. Although perhaps a seemingly random event to see become such a common thread in Malex fics, the shower stories are emblematic of how fans are processing disabled sexuality in ways which contrast with the traditional Hollywood images of sex as “spontaneous and unpremeditated” (Andree, 2021, p.258), where disabled sexuality can be seen as exceptional and a spectacle. Instead, fans are considering how, like all sex, sex with PWD can be mundane and specifically depending on one’s disability, require intentional planning (Siebers, 2012). Thus, this tag exemplifies fans’ attempts to address the embodied experience of PWD rather than erasing the characters’ disabilities implicitly or explicitly while imagining Malex’s sexual relationship.
7. Discussion

Of the top three relationships tagged with canon disabled character, Malex stands out as a case where their disabilities are not simply narrative prosthesis. Rather than a superficial plot device, these fics tend to present each characters’ disabilities as yet another facet of their full selves. Furthermore, as the only pairing who are canonically queer and in a relationship, they provide a useful case study to explore how fans (re)present disabled characters who are explicitly in a romantic and sexual relationship as desirable partners. For example, both the source material and resulting fanfiction present Michael and Alex’s disabilities as embodied, part of their sensual and lived experiences. Notably, their scars and bodily differences are not avoided in sexual scenes. Additionally, even after Michael’s brother, Max, uses his alien powers to heal Michael’s hand, neither the show nor the fics present the healing as a miracle which he needed to be happy. In some ways Michael seems ambivalent about the healing, although it is shown that he appreciates being able to play the guitar again.

“The bodies of male slash protagonists are not just bodies, they are often bodies with particular narrative histories” (Coppa, 2018, p.198), and Michael and Alex’s bodies are each imprinted with traumatic stories of acquired disability, both linked to the abuses of Alex’s father. Yet, the RNM fandom has negotiated these bodies in ways that do not erase their disabilities, seek to fix the characters, or reject the characters’ rights to full and happy lives. In many ways Malex fics are a strong example of positive disability representation, where the stories build upon a text which seems intentional in its depictions and reify the positive messages of Michael and Alex as characters who are not desirable in spite or because of their disabilities but regardless of them. Instead, whether domestic and fluffy, angst-ridden, or more focused on smut than plot, these stories continue to accept disabilities as part of the characters rather than fetishizing or minimizing them. Still, the popularity of Malex does little to challenge the existing norms of whiteness, maleness, and associations of vulnerability with intimacy.

For example, one should consider why vincerets felt the need to remind fellow fans that Alex is a man of color. Despite the fact that Michael is an alien and Alex is half Native American, they still read as a relationship between two white men. Both actors are white, and where Alex’s personal ties to a nearby reservation make his family roots important to the plot, his mother is never featured in the show and it is his relationship with his (white) father that is truly important to his character. Similarly, where his queerness and disability are salient parts of his identity and how other people see him, his race is not. In a genre which assumes whiteness as the norm, fics about Alex do little to challenge the idea that desirable disability is exclusive to white or white-passing people.

Similarly, Malex fics do little to challenge the association between desirable disability, masculinity, heroics, or intimate vulnerability. Not only is this a slash pairing, again a norm of fanfiction in general, but both Michael and Alex acquired their disabilities through heroic action – Michael in an attempt to protect Alex from his father and Alex during his time in the military. In fact, each of the disabled characters in the most popular ships, Charles/Erik, Steve/Bucky, and Michael/Alex acquire their disabilities in heroic manners. This is notable because these relationships reify the privileging of acquired disabilities over congenital ones and also features non-disabled actors for the fandom to lift up. Additionally, it reinforces the
normative image of the disability community as one of men with acquired disabilities. Even in popular ships which depict heterosexual relationships such as that between Kaz Brekker/Inej Ghafa (95 fics) and Peggy Carter/Daniel Sousa (69), it is the male characters who each have acquired disabilities. Furthermore, although not depicting Michael or Alex as victims in need of fixing, the stories which focus on Michael as Alex’s caregiver or use their emotional trauma as a site for bonding, continue to reify the H/C dynamic which can lean towards using disabilities as a site for romanticized vulnerability. Showing vulnerability is not inherently bad. It can enable the normalization of interdependence. However, as mentioned above, when fetishized it can become a problem.

When McRuer (2017) discusses desire in relation to disability, he notes that PWD have a desire for dignity, especially in contrast to the pity so often faced. Dignity here requires one to be seen as having full personhood, including the potential to desire and maintain romantic and sexual relationships. Hence, depicting disability in ways which spark the imagination of audiences to view disabled people as desirable partners is a radical act. However, one cannot ignore the intersectional implications of this representation. Where fandom (de Montrouge, 2019; Fazekas, 2014; Stein, 2018; Thomas, 2019), fan studies (Stanfill, 2018), and disability studies (Bell, 2017; Schalk, 2018) have all been critiqued as assuming whiteness as the norm, it is vital to consider how the representation of disability in canon media and related fan works intersect with other concerns such as the representation of race.

In The Dark Fantastic, Thomas (2019) draws explicit attention to the pattern of fandoms aggressively preferring and promoting ships between white male characters rather than supporting even canon heterosexual relationships when those relationships are interracial (2019). In the RNM fandom, this plays out again with fans rejecting the relationship between Michael/Maria in favor of Michael/Alex. Maria is a Black woman based on Michael’s fan-favorite love interest in the original television series, Roswell (1999-2002), but when she and Michael entered a canon relationship in seasons 1 and 2 of RNM, many people in the fandom expressed disinterest and even anger, choosing to support the relationship between two men over the straight couple with a darker-skinned woman. Part of this can be attributed to what Kenny (2019) describes as a war over the moral high ground, in which fans will argue that the couples that they prefer are better or more important to include than another couple, using arguments about representation as one of these factors. Thus, fans might argue that they support Malex not only because they like the pair together but because they are doing the right thing in uplifting a queer and disabled character. However, the way that the Michael/Alex supporters so aggressively fought the Michael/Maria relationship (to the point where a tag emerged assuring that a fic would have No Maria bashing) shows that this pattern is not neutral and cannot be left out of this discussion. One notable couple that did appear in the tag canon disabled character which does depict an interracial relationship with a dark-skinned woman is that of Kaz/Inej from the Shadow and Bone fandom. However, it is notable that despite their canon relationship and their status as beloved by the fans of the books and television adaptation in which they feature, Kaz’s PTSD makes him touch-avoidant and thus their relationship is largely interpreted as asexual, reifying the cultural narrative of disabled people as nonsexual. With women and people of color underrepresented in the examples discussed above, further study should be done to explore how intersections with disability are represented in fan works featuring these groups specifically.
8. Conclusion

In conclusion, Malex fics show how positive representation in source material can lead to positive (re)presentations in fan works. Additionally, because fanfiction and other fan works can speak back to the original content creators, making an impact on representation (Maris, 2016), it is important to continue to examine how fans are portraying disability in their fics. As a communal and interactive form of media, fanfiction has the ability to queer and crip existing social narratives, depicting disability as a real and desirable part of diverse relationships. Hopefully as more properties begin to include disabled characters and more fans are exposed to positive depictions of disabled characters as desirable within the fandoms themselves, real progress can be made in broadening the bounds of disabled desirability. However, as it stands, I argue that whiteness, maleness, and the intimacy of perceived vulnerability remain the cornerstones of desirable disabilities.

Keywords
Disability, media studies, fandom, sexuality, fan fiction, tag analysis

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