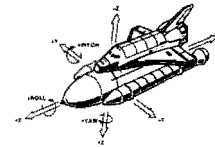


NASA / TREK

Popular Science and
Sex in America



constance penley

V
VERSO

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dred women who inhabit a subculture that exists within and alongside the larger, and far more legitimate, fandom. These women are responsible for the most radical rewriting of NASA/TREK yet.

" / "

Near the end of *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, Captain Kirk, thought to be dead but rescued finally by Spock and some exceptionally helpful Klingons, stands facing his first officer on the bridge of the Klingon ship. Glad to be alive, he moves toward Spock and reaches for him with both hands. Spock interrupts the embrace saying, "Please, Captain, not in front of the Klingons." Kirk directs a brief glance toward the known universe's most macho aliens, then turns back to Spock to exchange a complicitous look before lowering his hands. Most members of the audience probably took this teasing one-liner as just another instance of what actor and director William Shatner has called the "tongue-in-cheek" campiness of the original TV series.⁶⁷

But for a small minority of the audience, a group of female fans who have for years dedicated themselves to writing and publishing underground pornographic stories about Kirk and Spock as spacefaring lovers, this scene came as a delightful surprise. Moreover, it seemed to be an astonishing recognition of their fantasies by a *Star Trek* industry that has up until now met those desires with curt dismissals, cute evasions, or disdainful silence.⁶⁸ It is not yet clear what it will mean for these fans to have had their desires recognized and their fantasies ratified, not only by Shatner but, indirectly, by the Great Bird of the Galaxy, *Star Trek*

creator Gene Roddenberry. It may be that these fans will feel some erosion of the pleasure that comes from its secret, marginalized solidarity. In the past, they have gained particular delight in seeing how their guerrilla erotics shocked and enraged (and, surely, sometimes amused) the producers of *Star Trek*, as well as other fans involved in more official *Star Trek* fandom, and "mundanes" (as they call nonfans) who may have stumbled across some of the steamier stories in fanzines like *Naked Times*, *Off Duty*, *Fever*, and *Final Frontier*. What is more likely, however, is that this fleeting public recognition of their hitherto illicit desires will only spur them on. The group solidarity of these fans rests not only on the taboo nature of their work but also on their pride in having created a unique, hybridized genre that ingeniously blends romance, pornography, and utopian science fiction. They are also fiercely proud of having created a comfortable yet stimulating social space in which women can manipulate the products of mass-produced culture to stage a popular debate around issues of technology, fantasy, and everyday life. This, of course, is my version of it, based on a decade of familiarity with their work. The fans (who refer to me as "one of the academic fans") would say they are just having fun.

Women have been writing *Star Trek* pornography for at least twenty years, mostly in the United States, but also in Britain, Canada, and Australia. The idea did not begin with one person who then spread it to others, but seems to have arisen spontaneously in various places beginning in the early to mid-seventies. Through seeing the episodes countless times in syndication and on their own taped copies, these fans recognized that there was

an erotic homosexual subtext there, or at least one that could easily be *made* to be there. Most of the writers and readers started off in “regular” *Star Trek* fandom, and many are still involved in it, even while they pursue their myriad activities in what is called “K/S” or “slash” fandom. To those purchasing amateur fanzines (or “zines”) by mail, the slash between K(irk) and S(pock) serves as a code indicating that the stories, poems, and artwork published there concern a same-sex relationship between the two men. Such a designation stands in contrast to “ST” (with no slash), for example, which identifies action-adventure stories fans write based on the *Star Trek* fictional universe, or “adult ST,” which refers to stories containing sexual scenes, but heterosexual ones only, say between Captain Kirk and Lt. Uhura or between Spock and Nurse Chapel.

Other media male couples have been “slashed” in the zines, such as Starsky and Hutch (S/H), Simon and Simon (S/S), *Miami Vice*’s Crockett and Castillo (M/V) or, more recently, *Wwe Guy*’s Vinnie and McPike (W/G). The slash premise, however, seems to work exceptionally well with science fiction couples because of all the possibilities opened up by locating the two men in a futuristic universe full of scientific and technological wizardry. K/S was the first slash writing, and it dominated the field for many years; its first real rival was a newer science fiction fandom based on *Blake’s 7*, a British television show broadcast from 1978 to 1981. As we shall see, the popularity and success of SF slash are due to the range and complexity of discourses that are possible in a genre that could be described as romantic pornography radically shaped and reworked by the themes and tropes of science fiction.

The conventions of the science fiction genre seem to offer several important advantages to the writing of “pornography by women, for women, with love” (as Joanna Russ once described slash writing).⁶⁹ It has been argued that science fiction, seemingly the most sexless of genres, is in fact engrossed with questions of sexual difference and sexual relations, which it repeatedly addresses alongside questions of other kinds of differences and relations: humans and aliens, humans and machines, time travelers and those they visit, and so on.⁷⁰ In *Feminism and Science Fiction*, Sarah Lefanu has argued that science fiction offers women writers a freedom not available in mainstream writing. This is because its generic form—with its overlooked roots in the female gothic novel and nineteenth-century feminist utopian literature—permits a fusing of political concerns with the “playful creativity of the imagination.”⁷¹ And this is so, she says, even though science fiction has historically been a male preserve.

Lefanu limits herself, however, to rounding up the usual suspects, those women science fiction writers with self-conscious feminist politics who have written stories and novels that have, nonetheless, been able to make it into the SF mainstream. Those writers include such well-known figures as Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Suzy McKee Charnas, and James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon), as well as feminist writers in the literary mainstream, like Marge Piercy and Margaret Atwood, who have on occasion made use of SF themes and tropes. Lefanu’s focus on professional women writers with self-conscious feminist politics is one shared by the major critics of female SF, Frances Bartkowski, Anne Cranny-Francis, and Marleen S. Barr. Barr’s

project, for example, is to distance female SF as far as possible from its roots in popular genre fiction by relabeling it “feminist fabulation” and arguing for its place at the center of experimental postmodern fiction.

The women writers I want to discuss, however, are amateur writers who embrace the popular culture of television. They are generally unwilling to identify themselves as feminists, even though their writing and their fan activity might seem to offer an indirect (and sometimes not so indirect) commentary on issues usually seen as feminist, such as women’s lack of social and economic equality, their having to manage a double-duty work and domestic life, and their being held to much greater standards of physical beauty than men.

Historian and cultural anthropologist Michel de Certeau once used the term “Brownian motion” to describe the tactical maneuvers of the relatively powerless when attempting to resist, negotiate, or transform the system and products of the relatively powerful.⁷² He defined *tactics* as guerrilla actions involving hit-and-run acts of apparent randomness. Tactics are not designed primarily to help users take over the system but to allow them to seize every opportunity to convert to their own ends forces that systematically exclude or marginalize them. These tactics are also *a way of thinking* and “show the extent to which intelligence is inseparable from the everyday struggles and pleasures that it articulates.”⁷³ The only “product” of such tactics is one that results from “making do,” the *bricolage* process of combining already existing heterogeneous elements. It is not a synthesis that takes the form of an intellectual discourse about an object; the

form of its making is its intelligence. The K/S fans, however, seem to go de Certeau’s “ordinary man” one better. They are not just reading, viewing, or consuming in tactical ways that offer fleeting moments of resistance or pleasure while watching TV, scanning the tabloids, or selecting from the supermarket shelves (to take some of his examples). They are producing not just intermittent, cobbled-together acts but real products—zines, novels, artworks, and videos. These products mimic and mock those of the industry they are “borrowing” from while offering pleasures found lacking in the originals.

Slash fandom more than illustrates de Certeau’s claim that consumption is itself a form of production. A mini-industry, but one that necessarily makes no money (the only thing saving it from copyright suits), it has its own apparatuses of advertising and publishing; juried prizes (K/Star, Surak, and Federation Class of Excellence Awards); stars (the top editors, writers, and artists, but also fans who have become celebrities); house organ, *On the Double*; annual meetings, featuring charity fund-raisers (for example, art auctions to support pediatric AIDS research or earthquake relief); music videos (with scenes from *Star Trek* reedited for their “slash” meanings); brilliant built-in market research techniques (the consumers are the producers and vice versa, since many of the slash readers are also its writers); and, increasingly, the elements of a critical apparatus, with its own theorists and historians.⁷⁴ The fandom has achieved a form of vertical integration—control over every aspect of production, distribution, and consumption—that the trust-busted film industry could only dream about until Reagan-Bush deregula-

tion began to make it possible again.

Although this fan publishing apparatus could not exist without the prior existence of the *Star Trek* industry, its relation to that industry cannot be described as parasitic. Parasites generally injure or sap their hosts, but slash fandom in no way seeks to harm or destroy the world of *Star Trek*, even the often unsatisfying version presented in the second television series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–94), whose cold, high-tech surfaces, straightlaced characters, and lack of humor have made it relatively impervious to slashing. Rather, the fans only want to *use* the system imposed by the other, a practice that, as de Certeau describes it, “redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference.” This is where, he says, one discovers the “opacity” of popular culture:

a dark rock that resists all assimilation....the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have....We see the tactical and joyful dexterity of the mastery of a technique.⁷⁵

In many ways, however, slash fans do more than “make do”; they make. Not only have they remade the *Star Trek* fictional universe to their own desiring ends, they have accomplished this by enthusiastically mimicking the technologies of mass-market cultural production and by constantly debating their own relation,

as women, to those technologies. They have, therefore, carefully considered the ways they make decisions about how to use the technological resources available to them and the ways they rewrite bodies and technologies in their utopian romances.

APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY

The term “appropriate technology” (borrowed from green criticism) refers to both everyday uses of technology that are appropriate to the job at hand and the way users decide how and what to appropriate. To avoid becoming dependent on sources that extract too high a price, or to ensure that the technology will be available to everyone, one appropriates only what is needed. The slashers (their name for themselves) are constantly involved in negotiating appropriate levels of technology for use within the fandom. The emphasis is on keeping the technology accessible and democratic, although this turns out to be easier said than done. The general perception among fans is that media zine editors give more attention to the appearance of their publications than do SF literature zine editors, and that overall they look a lot slicker—laser-printed and xeroxed rather than mimeoed, for example. And it is true that the media zines, and especially the slash zines, look very good. They are beautifully produced, with glossy, illustrated covers; spiral, velo, or even perfect bindings; color xerography on the cover or inside; laser-printed type; and intricate page borders.

However, given the high level of everyday technological skills the fans must have developed in their jobs as nurses, teachers, office workers, librarians, copy shop managers, and so on,

what is striking is that the zines, as good as they look, are not as slick as they could be. In part, this may arise from an impulse to keep them looking *slightly* tacky to give them that illegitimate pornographic cast. One of the binding forces of slash fan culture is the shared delight in the visual shock value of the zines. Although zine publishers claim that they cannot afford heavy-duty plain envelopes for mailing, I have often suspected that an important element of this fandom's pleasure lies in the illicit thrill of receiving in the mail—to the stares and smiles of one's mail carrier, friends, family, or colleagues—a half-torn envelope revealing a particularly juicy drawing of Kirk and Spock, their naked bodies arranged in some near-impossible position. (This has happened to me.) But it is more likely that the publishing technology is only semi-developed because deliberate decisions have been made to keep the technology “appropriate,” unthreatening, accessible, and hence democratic.

Workshops on the “how-to” of zine publishing are offered at each convention, and the zine editors who run the workshops are generous with their advice, sharing what they have learned from experience. Several helpful pamphlets, also full of advice, with step-by-step instructions on how to edit and publish a zine, are available from fan editors. One zine editor/publisher who works at a copy center put out a brochure advertising its services in this way:

I am sure you are aware of the increasingly high cost of copying and binding and the difficulty in finding a printer who is quality-minded, reliable, economical and gives the confidentiality that your publications deserve. If you have missed

deadlines, encountered poor printing quality and/or disapproving counter personnel, then look no further for a remedy—CopyMat can save the day.

Occasionally, however, there will be a fan revolt against even this apparently easy and democratic access to new publishing technologies. Many of the female fans of *The Professionals* (a British secret service show), one of the strongest non-SF slash alternatives to K/S, have almost entirely eschewed zine publishing in favor of what is called “circuit fandom.” If a fan wants to read the latest *Professionals* stories, she sends a stamped, self-addressed envelope to a designated fan in Illinois, who sends out ten of the most recently received stories. Or, if she is a new fan, she can ask the fan who manages the circuit to pick out the “ten best” stories to send to her. The fan does her own photocopying and sends the originals back to Illinois. *Professionals* stories are often not advertised, edited, or even “published,” but are simply disseminated in the most basic way imaginable, among fans who say they are fed up with what they see as the technological hassles of zine publishing, its ridiculously high standards for copy-editing and illustration, and its resultant overprofessionalization. They also object to the “difficult” personalities of some zine editors, by which they mean editors who publish only themselves and their friends or who censor certain kinds of stories.⁷⁶

The issue of observing appropriate levels of technology is a contested one for the fans. Fan editors who are skilled with, have access to, and are unable to resist the lure of the latest technology (“Take advantage of CopyMat’s Canon Laser Color Copier”)

often wish to produce ever more sophisticated looking zines. On the other hand, fan readers are often suspicious of this tendency toward more professional looking publications, feeling that the "look" of the zine is entirely secondary to the content of the stories and the quality of the writing. And fan writers object when they feel that editors are spending less time copyediting and proofreading their work than soliciting work from fan artists and perfecting their graphics technology. Complicating this debate even further is the fact that there are no clear divisions among readers, writers, artists, and editor/publishers, and therefore no correspondingly clear conflicts among their respective interests. Almost all fan readers are also writers, many are editors of their own zines, and some are also artists; some of the most enduring and prolific editor/publishers also perform all the other roles. Conflicting impulses, then, about appropriate levels of technology can be harbored by a single person. But all of the fans, no matter how much some of them might feel pulled toward a greater "professionalism," still voice the shared desire to keep the technology of the publishing apparatus within the reach of all.

Just as the fans are split over the uses of technology, they also have conflicting desires about amateur versus professional levels of writing. They are militant in their desire to maintain an unintimidating milieu in which women who want to write can do so without fear of being held to external, professional standards of "good writing." The pride and pleasure the fans take in their writing is immense. They talk about it as a form of escape from the pressures of their daily domestic and work lives; they see it as superior to the more passive escape provided by romance read-

ing, for example. But they value writing even more for the expression of individual creativity it allows. Above all, they recognize that they feel free to express themselves as writers only insofar as they can conceive of their writing as a hobby and nothing more. Even this commitment to thinking of what they do as a hobby, however, gets subtly subverted by the fans themselves. At the most basic level of standards of punctuation and typographical accuracy, for example, fans demand that writers and editors be meticulous in catching and correcting errors. Such errors, they claim, can break the erotic fantasy when they occur at important moments in the story. There are fan editors, of course, who defend themselves by saying that they would rather spend their time finding good stories than nitpicking over every typo and misspelling. But in general everyone prefers errorless stories.

The strong pull toward "professionalization" is described by the fans in terms of getting "hooked" or "contaminated" by the writing and editing process. One fan writer and editor came up with what she calls "the virus theory of fandom":

reading = contact

writing = infection

editing = full-blown disease

The virus theory of fandom attempts to account for the tendency to become fascinated and then obsessed with the craft of writing, to want to delve ever deeper into its techniques to produce something that pleases both the author and the readers. As two fan editors remarked during a slash convention writing panel, "Fans go in because they need to create something and then feel good when it goes out and others like it." Another pos-

sible motive for wanting to write, and write well, was voiced by a third editor on this panel: "It also makes you feel that you're not abnormal for having picked up on the relationship between Starsky and Hutch!"

The most palpable tension between the commitment to amateurism and the wish to perfect one's craft along more professional lines can be seen in the popular writing panel discussions and workshops offered at every slash convention. Although the fans want to learn all they can from the more experienced writers leading the discussion, they often tend to resist workshop leaders' emphasis on technique and craft in favor of a focus on inspiration and the "magic" of writing. And in response to a long series of specific suggestions by one experienced fan writer about how to fashion a story idea as effectively as possible, another fan objected by insisting (albeit rather plaintively), "There's a place for stuff that's just so-so." But perhaps the greatest source of tension lies in the fans' knowledge of how many of their cohorts have "crossed over" into professional writing. Many of these writers (indeed, most of them) maintain their relation to fandom because they still want to be part of that supportive community, and they feel very loyal to it, even when they have become successful in commercial writing. One of America's most respected female science fiction writers, who has more than dabbled in slash writing (and who wishes to go unnamed), told poet and novelist Marge Piercy, who told me, "Forget Breadloaf. Forget the Iowa Writers Workshop. Slash fandom is the best writing workshop in the country."

Many of the fans show visible pride in fellow slash writers who have gone pro, even those who have done so by deslashing

and heterosexualizing their own or others' work to turn it into commercial stories or novels. (Some of the *Star Trek* paperback novels are based on slash stories or were written by slash writers.) But their ambivalence, which is, I think, finally productive, still manifests itself. At a slash convention panel discussion on precisely this topic, one fan commented, "It's not our best writers who've gone pro." Another fan scoffed, "That's what we like to think!" I call it a productive ambivalence because it is one that impels the fans to debate not simply the merits of "amateur" versus "pro" writing. They must also address the assumptions shaping those categories, and do so by challenging the idea that only those who are already "credentialed" may be allowed access to the means of acquiring cultural capital through writing fiction or poetry.

The fans seem less concerned about their relation to video technologies than they are to writing technologies. Although the video contest is often the high point of a slash convention, going on for a tremendously raucous and pleasurable three or four hours, fewer of the fans are involved in making videos, or "songtapes," as they are called. One reason is obvious: the greater difficulty of access to video equipment, especially editing equipment, than to desktop publishing and photocopying technologies, which are often available in the fan's own workplace and can be used even while on the job. That the fans are concerned to make this technology more available, however, can be seen in the scheduling at fan conventions of workshops such as one I attended called "Song Tapes for the Masses." The workshop, organized by two fan video artists known for making songtapes that are not particularly slick but highly effective and popular with the fans,

offered the novice or would-be songtape producer advice that was both practical and aesthetic. The songtapes are, in fact, music videos made right at home with two VCRs, an audio cassette deck, and a stopwatch. The organizers of the workshop handed out a helpful chart that allows the songtape maker to write down each line of, usually, a rock song with a love theme, the duration of each phrase, and the duration of the video segment that will be matched with it. The video segments are taken from fans' private collections of the seventy-eight (plus the pilot) *Star Trek* episodes and the seven *Star Trek* films, which are also on tape, copied from video store rentals.

The K/S video artist begins by cataloguing all the scenes of Kirk and Spock together, and then selects the ones that when matched with the music will bring out what the fans call the "slash premise," that is, that the two men are in love and sexually involved with each other. As I said before, the advice ranges from the practical ("Look at your video material without sound—the sound will confuse you"; "Use the show's own cuts, fades, dissolves, etc. since you can't do them yourself") to the aesthetic ("Watch MTV or VH1 and just see what they do"; "Don't be too literal, for example, having a line like 'rain is pouring down' and showing someone in the shower").

What was stressed throughout the workshop was keeping the production as cheap as possible ("Time the song segments with a \$5.00 stopwatch") and the built-in advantages of lo-tech ("Hi-fi isn't important since it will come out mono on most machines anyway"). However, as the workshop progressed, the organizers, who have been making songtapes for many years,

could not resist telling us about some of the neat things they have learned to do with this basic equipment and demonstrating a few of their shortcuts through what is admittedly a tedious and labor-intensive process. The discussion began to get increasingly more technical, involving editing processes that would require additional, and relatively more expensive, equipment. For example, they suggested that everyone get a video insert machine ("no roll-back") and a machine with a flying advance head ("no jittery shots or rainbows"). And, finally, at the very end of the workshop: "Really, what you should do is buy an editing machine." They recommended the Panasonic lap editor from Radio Shack for \$147.00, a price that would be out of the range of many of the novice songtape producers. Still, the advice was so clear and the directions so explicit that one came away from the workshop not feeling intimidated by the apparatus but rather that one could adopt whatever level of technology one felt able to handle and could afford.

One piece of technology about which the fans have no ambivalence whatever is the VCR, which, along with zine publishing machinery, is the lifeblood of the fandom. The ubiquitous VCR allows fans to copy episodes for swapping or for closer examination of their slash possibilities, and provides the basic technology for producing songtapes. Fans are deeply invested in VCR technology because it is cheap, widely available, easy to use, and provides both escape and a chance to criticize the sexual status quo. As one beautifully embroidered sampler at a fan art auction put it, "The more I see of men, the more I love my VCR."

Slash fandom's move onto the Internet was as carefully and

thoughtfully negotiated as its step up to other newer, more advanced technologies. At a fan convention I attended in 1996, about forty women met to discuss the impact of the Internet on slash writing and the fan community. All but two of the women were already active in fan culture on the Internet. The on-line fans spoke glowingly of the possibilities the Internet offered for sharing writing and ideas but expressed some ambivalence about slash becoming more widely known if this brought the risk of diluting the fandom. They also evinced concern over the risk of erosion of community if electronic communication ever came to substitute for face-to-face contact. The majority of the fans in the room were enthusiastic yet thoughtfully cautious about the new Internet fan culture. The two women who were not yet on the Internet were far less enthusiastic about the move into cyberspace. They expressed resentment over the cost of joining fan culture on the Internet and said they felt intimidated by its technological complexity. In typical slash fashion, by the end of the hour-long discussion, the holdouts had been humorously cajoled and mentored into a promise to give the Internet a try.

SLASH TACTICS: TECHNOLOGIES OF WRITING

Just as slash fans are constantly debating and negotiating their relation to technology within the fandom, so does this concern appear in the fictions of the stories they write. In one way, the fans' task of writing stories involving science and technology has been made easier for them. For such an elaborately produced science fiction show (even though much of it looks hokey to us now), the original *Star Trek* had a curiously ambivalent relation to

the representation of futuristic technology. Although the producers of the show consulted scientists, engineers, and technicians in their efforts to make the science and technology plausible, they decided finally to give only the barest and sketchiest of outlines, to keep, for example, the design of the ship and the various scientific, medical, and military instruments extremely basic and simple. Not only was this decision an economical one (for example, some of Dr. McCoy's medical instruments were made from saltshakers), simplicity helped to ensure that the technology would not quickly look dated. "Phasers," "tricorders," "communicators," "scanners," "photon torpedoes," and "warp drive" were therefore designed to reveal their functions without divulging anything about how they were actually supposed to work. Franz Joseph's *Star Fleet Technical Manual*, first published in 1975, promises on its cover that one will find inside "detailed schematics of Star Fleet equipment," "navigational charts and equipment," and "interstellar space/warp technology," but fails to deliver anything but exhaustive descriptions of the way the instruments *look*, saying nothing of their functioning or theoretical basis.⁷⁷

While some fans have felt compelled to flesh out the sketchy contours of *Star Trek* science and technology, they have mostly been men. For example, an ad in an issue of *Datazine* for a zine called *Sensor Readings*, edited by Bill Hupe, says that it "features articles on warp factor cubed theory (by Tim Farley), shuttlecraft landing approach methods (by Steven K. Dixon), [and] the electronic printing methods available to fanzine editors today (by Randall Landers, a former Kinko's manager)." This is not to say that male *Star Trek* fans, who are more likely to edit the nonfic-

tion zines, invariably exhibit a more developed relation to high technology than do women fans, who form the great majority of fiction zine writers and publishers. Rather, what I want to emphasize is that the women *Star Trek* fans, especially the slash fans, have defined *technology* in a way that includes the technologies of the body, the mind, and everyday life. It is a notion of technology that sees everything in the world (and out of this world) as interrelated and subject to influence by more utopian and imaginative desires than those embodied in existing technological hardware.

This is the way Alexis Fegan Black, one of the most prolific K/S writers and publishers, suggests that aspiring slash writers approach the question of technology:

Perhaps most importantly, WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW! That isn't to say that you can't write about being on board the *Enterprise* because you obviously have never been there. But if you *are* going to write a story that deals in mechanical or electronic details with the workings of the *Enterprise*, do so convincingly. A good rule of thumb is that it's best *not* to use what sci-fi writers call "pseudo-science" (cursory explanations of something dredged up solely from imagination) unless absolutely necessary.

But Black tells slash writers to take heart:

Fortunately, the K/S genre is one wherein technology can usually be kept to a minimum. And writing what you know

should be on a more emotional level than a technological one in most cases.

She goes on to say that she herself has been able to take up subjects like martial arts, cryogenics, and metaphysics because she has already researched those areas and thus the effort to come up with convincing detail does not take away from attention to the "emotional" aspects of the story. Black describes her own writing as "technomysticism," and even though her work is more directly inspired by New Age ideas than most slash writing, it is instructive for understanding the genre's relation to technology to see how this extremely influential writer (she has written more K/S novels than any other slash writer and manages the largest K/S press) folds descriptions of outer space into meditations on inner space.

Science fiction writing is usually broken down into two schools: so-called hard SF (men and machines colonizing the galaxies) and soft SF (work that extrapolates from ideas found in the human and social sciences, like sociology, psychology, or anthropology, rather than the natural or physical sciences). There are, of course, countless examples of blurred boundaries and crossovers (and increasingly so), but work like Black's would seem at first sight firmly ensconced in the soft school. Her work, however, does not read like, say, that of Ursula Le Guin, the avatar of SF based in the human and social sciences, and indeed Black's references are not to any disciplines recognized by the academy but to more popular ones derived from "pop" psychology, New Age ideas, the environmental movement, and a

peculiarly American brand of libertarianism that believes itself to be the inheritor of Kennedy-era liberalism.

A closer look at Black's most well-received novel, *Dreams of the Sleepers*, the first in a trilogy of fan award-winning books, will give a sense of what she means by "technomysticism." Published in 1985, *Dreams of the Sleepers* is a time-travel story, which, like most such stories, revels in the dizzying paradoxes of journeying through time. The zine/book begins with an editorial titled "What's It All About?" We are plunged into a narrative in which four men in black arrive at the author's home in vans with government license plates. Her home is next to a "missile testing range" that she is sure is really a government installation for detaining captured aliens. They want to know how she found out about Kirk and Spock, and say that they would like "to ask...a few questions about this manuscript....What's this all about?" This little narrative turns into a proper editorial in which the author says that *Dreams of the Sleepers* aims to get the reader to ask the crucial question, "What *would* this world be like without *Star Trek*?"

We are then returned to the narrative, in which Alexis finds what she takes to be a prank letter under her door, a letter from Dr. McCoy to Admiral Nogura of Star Fleet Command. The letter accompanies a manuscript that McCoy claims he confiscated during the *Enterprise* crew's continuing mission into Earth's past, while they wait for Kirk and Spock's return, the two having inexplicably disappeared. Now the novel itself begins, with an entry in the captain's log: the crew has been ordered on a mission into Earth's past, to the year 1963, to be precise. Their mission is to find out everything they can about old Earth's early experimen-

tation with "psychotronics," the psychic manipulation of reality. Meanwhile, Kirk and Spock are feeling the first stirrings of what they are slowly realizing is their love and passion for one another, although their relationship has not yet been consummated, and each man does not yet know the depth of the other man's feelings. Just before beaming down to Earth, Spock suggests that he and Kirk form a mind link "for security reasons" while on their mission (as a half-Vulcan, Spock has the ability to link up with another mind empathically and even telepathically). Through the link, Kirk and Spock understand for the first time that their desire is mutual.

Almost immediately after beaming down to the military/scientific installation, which turns out to be the private but government-funded Futura Technics, Kirk and Spock are captured and put into life suspension units, but not before they learn the purpose of the project. Scientists have been lured to Futura Technics to work on life suspension for space exploration, but soon find out that the project's real aim is to harness the psychic energy of the "sleepers" for use as defensive and offensive weapons, as well as sabotage of all kinds. Humans have been captured and suspended, and aliens, too. Indeed, a Klingon sleeper is slated to travel out of his body on the next mission, two days hence—the assassination of John F. Kennedy! (Oliver Stone, take note.) The head of the project explains to Kirk and Spock, before putting them under, that certain people in the government and military fear Kennedy's popularity and believe that if he lives, the country will become truly united and could then be led into peace, not war. But the Futura Technics scientists do not want peace to

come so soon, and certainly not on Kennedy's terms. They also want "peace," but only after conquering the rest of the world with their psychotronic weapons—the dreams of the sleepers. They will kill people by making them *believe* they have been attacked by nuclear weapons.

After Kirk and Spock are put to "sleep" in life suspension units, it is Spock who first awakes into his astral form. Another astral traveler who is also a sleeper in the complex teaches Spock how to move around in space but also in time. He takes Spock twenty-two years into the future to show him a world devastated by war and hints to him that the end of the world is somehow linked to something Spock and Kirk either did or did not do. Kirk finally awakes into his astral body and joins Spock, eventually setting up housekeeping on the astral plane; finding a nicely decorated and uninhabited ranch house nearby, they "move in" and begin to pass the time with elaborate sexual fantasies and love-making (a prescient description of virtual reality cybersex).

Spock takes Kirk forward twenty-two years to see the postapocalyptic ruin of the planet. Kirk weeps for all the dead but also, more selfishly, for himself, because if this future comes to pass, he will never have been born and he and Spock will never be able to join together as friends, lovers, or the twin souls they have now become. Suddenly, they notice that another man has materialized, sitting cross-legged under a tree. The man shakes hands with Spock, then laughs with joy and disbelief. "I *knew* it!...Damn! I knew it...You're *real*." "Gene," the man under the tree, is, of course, Gene Roddenberry. Spock immediately recognizes him as the key to changing the future: if this "strange mes-

siah in polyester leisure-wear" can only realize his dream for all to see—of a populous and peace-loving federation of all the galaxies' creatures—then humans will be inspired to give up waging war on each other and go to the stars instead.

To help Roddenberry realize his dream, Spock links his mind with Gene's to show him the future. Spock decides that this is the "logical" thing to do, even though Gene will also see his most private thoughts and will understand the nature of his relationship with Kirk. But coming out in this fashion is "a fair price to purchase a world's survival." Gene promises that in return he will find some way to help rescue them from the complex. Thus: "On September 8, 1966 [the date the first episode of *Star Trek* was broadcast], the future formed a tentative bond with the present, interlinking its parts with the past. After three years, however, that link was severed. But throughout the world, minds were altered in subtle ways." Underachievers and autistic children begin functioning brilliantly. Technology is turned to peaceful purposes. Educational levels rise dramatically and knowledge is no longer the property of the elite. Advanced computers become available to everyone. Peace breaks out all over. The space program expands, transforming science fiction into fact, and the first space shuttle is named *Enterprise* by popular acclaim (which, as we saw, actually happened). Meanwhile, Kirk and Spock dream on, not knowing about the new world they have helped to create, and not knowing when or if their liberator will ever come. They again travel into the future, but this time apocalypse has been avoided. Gene appears, saying maybe he's just an idealist but he'd like to think that they had something to do with it. And he shows

Kirk and Spock episodes of *Star Trek*, telling them how influential the show has been, how many followers it has had, and so on.

In talking about *Star Trek* later, Kirk says to Spock that Gene was wrong about one thing: "Space isn't the final frontier...*You* are!" The Vulcan replies, "Indeed. Then perhaps, Jim," he suggests, leaning closer to whisper softly into one ear, "we should...boldly go...where no man has gone before." This erotic exchange is mapped onto the realization that they *must* return to the future so that they can have existed to be able to go back into the past to make sure that *Star Trek* gets produced, the world gets saved, and humans go into space. (Kirk has a hard time following this, but fortunately the more intellectual Spock grasps the intricacies and paradoxes of time travel.) The novel ends with their dramatic rescue by the female security officer of the *Enterprise*.

The popularity of Black's *Dreams of the Sleepers* and its two sequels lies in the way she is able to elaborate her idea of "technomysticism" to express the deepest wish of *Star Trek* fan culture: that the fandom matters, that what the fans do can affect the world in significant ways. However, it is not enough for the critic to identify this wish and be satisfied with designating it as a *symptom* — of the fans' need, for example, for an imaginary family or community, or as a substitute for their lack of real social agency or cultural capital. This is the way fan culture is usually discussed.⁷⁸ The conceptual strength of slash writing forces us to see that it is more interesting to look at what the fans are *doing* with this individually and collectively elaborated discourse than it is to discuss what it "represents." And, because this discourse is so imbued with utopian longings ("to free the individual, through

leisure, technology, and self-realization, to go out and meet others as equals instead of enemies"⁷⁹), it also begs a reconsideration of the role and value of utopian thinking, especially when this form of popular argument is carried out in and through a mass-culture product, and by the relatively disempowered.

FUTURE MEN

The K/Sers are constantly asking themselves why they are drawn to writing their sexual and social utopian romances across the bodies of two men, and why these two men in particular. Their answers range from the pleasures of writing explicit same-sex erotica to the fact that writing a story about two men avoids the built-in inequality of the romance formula, in which dominance and submission are invariably the respective roles of men and women. There are also advantages to writing about a futuristic couple: it is far from incidental that women have chosen to write their erotic stories about a couple living in a fully automated world in which there will never be fights over who has to scrub the tub, take care of the kids, cook, or do the laundry. Indeed, one reason the fans give for their difficulty in slashing *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is that children and families now live on the *Enterprise* (albeit in a detachable section!), and that those circumstances severely limit the erotic possibilities.

All the same, one still wonders why these futuristic bodies — this couple of the twenty-third century — must be imagined and written as male bodies. Why are the women fans so alienated from their own bodies that they can write erotic fantasies only in relation to a nonfemale body? Some who have thought about this