

# DEAN LEETAL

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## Stubbly and Lickable Nonbinary Genders in the Supernatural Fandom

### ABSTRACT

What if fandom were a huge environment of nonbinary representation? This work explores nonbinary gender in Supernatural fanfiction and television show. It demonstrates that Dean Winchester is characterized as having multiple genders: a for of nonbinary gender. As such, it establishes that Dean is characterized as nonbinary. It then demonstrates similar coding to characters who represent fans in stories. It suggests that such characters, as opposed to a common truism of the field, are not of binary and opposite genders to the main characters (here, Dean Winchester). On the contrary, they are both of nonbinary genders, perhaps the same gender. The research for this work used thematic text analysis to locate gendered themes in over 600 fanfiction stories and television episodes. It then used close reading of texts in which the themes were prominent, to further explore and demonstrate these themes. For all their gay readings, fanfiction and the Supernatural fandom are often trans- and nonbinary-exclusionary spaces. This is made even worse by the anti-nonbinary wave we are experiencing these days in almost every aspect of life. This paper suggests that trans and otherwise nonbinary elements are deeply significant in Supernatural and some of its fanfiction.

### KEYWORDS

Transgender Studies; Fan Studies; nonbinary gender, Supernatural

### BIO

Dean Leetal graduated Magna Cum Laude from their MA studies, their dissertation research winning the Ze'evi, the Zafirir, and a departmental award for excellence. They published about alternative disability activism, as well as different trans and non-binary readings. Recently they published the papers "Revisiting gender theory in fan fiction: Bringing nonbinary genders into the world" and "Let Me Turn Monster. Shakespeare's Arden Forest and Trans Geography". They organized the first rights and education non binary campaigns in their country.



Working Paper Series  
Volume 7  
Issue 5

ISSN: 2700-1415

Editor: Jessica A. Albrecht  
All papers have been peer  
reviewed

Layout and Publishing:  
Jessica A. Albrecht

To cite this article:

Leetal, Dean: "Stubbly and  
Lickable. Nonbinary Genders in  
the Supernatural Fandom", En-  
Gender 7:5 (2024), 83-106.

## **Stubbly and Lickable: Nonbinary Genders in the Supernatural Fandom**

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by *Dean Leetal*

### **Introduction**

*Supernatural* (2005) is one of the most popular shows in fanfiction spaces. At the time of writing, 257,718 works about it can be found on the central fanfiction site ‘Archive of Our Own’. The show tells the story of Dean and Sam Winchester, two brothers who hunt supernatural monsters, and Castiel, an angel who joins them. In this article, I explore the gender of fan representations in fanfiction, and of Dean Winchester. I demonstrate that Dean is characterized as having multiple genders, on the show and in fanfiction, therefore being nonbinary. Having multiple genders is a common form of nonbinary gender (Richards et al 2018: 95-102) and is not explainable within a cisgender gender binary. I then demonstrate that fan representations (such as Mary Sue) in *Supernatural* fanfiction are repeatedly characterized as nonbinary as well, and their gender is equated with the nonbinary gender of Dean’s within the texts. This discovery means that despite nonbinary erasure and discrimination, more fan spaces are in fact nonbinary than ever considered before. It might also point to part of the reason fandom is often derided by mainstream society: it is a nonbinary space, and as such it is subversive.

The paper is divided into two main parts. The first half of this paper is divided into four sections: firstly, it establishes Dean is characterized as a man, based on previous research such as David Grazian's (2007). Secondly, it establishes Dean is characterized as a woman, based on previous research such as Carol Gilligan's (1993). Thirdly, it establishes that these genders appear together, as part of a whole characterization, and are more than disparate interpretations. Lastly, it discusses some of the other genders with which Dean is characterized, such as 'queen' and 'butch', based on previous research such as Gayle Rubin's (2006:NP). The existence of these truths together means that Dean's gender is outside of the binary, based on definitions such as Christina Richards et al.'s (2016: 95-102). The second half of the paper continues this exploration of Dean's gender, and links it with the exploration of fan representations' gender. It explores the similarity in gender between Dean's gender to that of representations of fans in some fan fiction, named Mary Sue characters.

Fanfiction is a form of literature that borrows elements from existing texts. I would stress that it is fanfiction when borrowing elements takes place within the social and literary context of fanfiction communities. While some may assume that fanfiction intends to provide a subversive read to texts like television shows, Tosenberger (2008) finds that even in fanfiction about incest, the intent is often to bring to the surface themes that already exist in the original text. As Tosenberger explains, making characters marginalized is not a subversive act – however giving marginalized characters happy endings, is subversive. A popular type of fanfiction is named 'slash', fanfiction in which the characters want or have a queer sexual or romantic relationship. Another common form of fanfiction is named 'reader insert'. As the title implies, it allows for the reader to be inserted as a character into a story. This can take many forms, including inviting readers to search and replace the combination 'your name' with their name, then read the story with themselves as main characters. Another form of reader insert is named 'Mary Sue' – writing a character to represent the reader, or rather, a character the

reader is intended to identify with. This character is assumed by most research to generally be a cisgender woman. Bacon-Smith (1992:94-98) describes Mary Sue characters as young, blonde, and highly educated. I would suggest that this implies several social privileges - youth, whiteness, and socioeconomic privilege. Making such privileged characters point of view characters, may cause alienation and prevent some marginalized readers from enjoying the story.

Fanfiction communities are also commonly assumed to be women's spaces, even though they have high rates of nonbinary participants (Centrumlumina 2013). These spaces are also known for their feminism and social awareness (Kustritz 2003:371), though recent scholarship notes their erasure of disabled (Leetal 2019:NP), and racialized (Pande and Moitra 2018:NP) participants. Fanfiction is also very cisgender. Lothian found that even stories in which characters are officially trans are often written for the benefit and pleasure of cisgender readers (2008).

## **Methods**

This work is at the heart of a larger research, which focuses on the television show *Supernatural*, as well as over 600 Sam/Dean fanfiction stories I have chosen according to popularity. I used stories that were posted to the central fanfiction site Archive of Our Own, which had over 150 'kudos' (the site's version of likes) over 60 comments, or both. I focused on stories posted up to 2019, that didn't involve other central pairings. I also used stories that had fan-made audiobooks, which I consider a sign of popularity in the *Supernatural* fandom in those years. It should be noted that the choice to base selection on popularity, intrinsically leaves out more marginalized voices: choosing a popular pairing in a popular fandom and focusing on fic chosen for popularity, would leave out less popular fic, and with it some marginalized voices. At the same time, this choice is used to demonstrate that even in an environment where nonbinary gender is not officially included, and rather erased – it is central.

Using thematic analysis methodology, I mapped each of the texts of these stories as well as of the television show for recurring themes. I focused on themes relating to gender characterization based on previous gender studies works, such as Gilligan and Grazian. Many scholars have discussed ‘women’s’ and ‘men’s’ characteristics. While I disagree with this binary, I use it here to demonstrate that this is a nonbinary representation when seen in total. To be clear, inclusion of a text is not endorsement of it, but an attempt to be heard in a transphobic academic environment. Some of the previous research included is misogynistic, some transphobic, and most of it is binarist. I intend to use these binarist, often transphobic works, to demonstrate that there is an instance of gender outside of the binary existent in these works themselves. Once I found the themes based on previous research, I examined them across the stories and show, and further analyzed them using close reading.

From the perspective of fan studies as well as literary studies, I consider that fictional (imagined) characters are subjects whose gender is assigned to them by others. As imaginary characters, they cannot assign their own genders based on their sense of self. Moreover, while some may imagine Dean officially explaining his gender, he does not do so in any text I am aware of. But even had he done so, he is a character. This is a crucial difference to how subjects are usually conceptualized in trans / queer studies. In this case, though, I consider it legitimate and even important for others to address and assign them genders, particularly marginalized genders. This approach is of course not legitimate to enact against those who are not imaginary – it is for them to claim (or not claim) their own genders (or absence of genders).

This paper follows research such as Catharine Tosenberger’s (2008:NP), in which she demonstrates that fanfiction and the show *Supernatural* have similar themes, rather than contradicting ones. One may imagine that Dean’s nonbinary characterization appears only in fanfiction, and not in the television show *Supernatural*. This paper is intent on demonstrating that Dean’s genders appear both on the show and in fanfiction. As such, every point is demonstrated by an example from the show as well as

an example from fanfiction. This means that not only do fans invent queerness for their characters, but they also choose favorite characters and shows based on queerness – at least in this case.

## **Argument**

The following sections address some of Dean's genders, establishing that Dean is coded as each of them separately. It then demonstrates that these genders are portrayed together as part of Dean's whole characterization. As such, this paper suggests, Dean's gender is multiple and therefore - nonbinary.

### ***Dean is Portrayed as a Man***

It is likely that casual viewers of *Supernatural* the TV series know Dean Winchester is supposed to epitomizes “a real man” based on cultural archetypes. Dean drives into town in a slick muscle car he built and rebuilt himself. Dean wears boots covered in real road dust, winks at the waitress, and orders something bloody. Dean is muscular, wears denim, plaid and leather, and has perpetual stubble. He is not only a car expert, but a weapons expert and a builder, a man who knows how to use his hands. Dean takes care of the monsters, takes care of cute one night stands in a different way, leaving them satisfied as they kiss him goodbye by his car before he goes on his next killing.

He likes his coffee black, his pie American, and his steak and burgers rare - taste choices associated with conventional masculinity (Sasso 2015:14–30). He makes fun of Sam for drinking lattes and shakes, for having salad, and for liking the farmer's market – all markers of femininity (Reizt 2015). Dean drinks beer and whiskey and may fit the manly trope of the alcoholic drinking to numb pain. Dean scoffs at therapy, and claims he is not physically hurt even when he is, sometimes. He is characterized as his veteran father's son. He follows in his father's footsteps, carrying the artifacts he inherited: the gun, the car, the jacket. Listening to his father's music. Raising his father's younger son.

Dean likes casual sex but seems to like showing off about it even more. His attitude about it is reminiscent of a study about college students' casual sex rituals, where Grazian (2007) concluded that the students' practices around casual sex is more about bonding, showing off, and hierarchy between men than about their relationships with women. Dean's behavior resonates with this finding in the way he shows off to peers and seems to lose interest when they are not around. For example, in the episode titled 'Season Seven, Time for a Wedding,' Dean is seen sitting at a bar, talking with a gorgeous, kind waitress. Based on his behavior in other episodes, it appears that Dean foregoes flirting with the waitress because there is no peer audience. Instead, Dean mopes about Sam having gone on a hike.

Existing scholarship on the show also frames Dean as a man. Gray describes Sam and Dean at the start of the show as 'regular blue-collar guys from Lawrence, Kansas' (2010:12). Astrom suggests that Dean is characterized as the man to Sam's woman, and notes that:

Dean is a man of action who is interested in car maintenance and heavy metal music and who shies away from emotions. When he wants to express comfort, sympathy, or other tender emotions, he slaps Sam on the arm. He avoids hugs, and refers to any emotional displays as 'chick flick moments.' (2010: 2.2).

Dean fits the model of a rural or working-class man, positioned within the world of the show to be at odds with his urban, academic brother. This is reminiscent of a study by Lamont (2009), about blue-collar masculinity in the United States. As Lamont explains, blue-collar masculinity can be understood as hegemonic, meaning that it is perceived as authentic, real, and the most masculine of masculinities. As a firefighter, Lamont's informant is exposed to things '99 percent of the other people in this world can't or won't do.' (2009:18). Similarly, Dean is exposed to the supernatural and truths about life that others do not know. This, as opposed to the life urbanely masculine Sam wishes for, disconnected from monsters and pretending to be normative.

The firefighter's sentiments echo Dean's attitude about his lifestyle and class. Dean means to die young because monster hunting is a dangerous profession. Dean also agrees with the firefighter's statement about the perks of having an unusual life. In the episode 'It's a Terrible Life', an angel, Zachariah, temporarily alters Dean's memory and gives him a normative life as a middle management drone. He then returns Dean's memory and asks Dean to choose what life Dean would lead. As the angel tells Dean, his life is filled with unique experiences, alongside danger and pain. Dean seems to appreciate that, as he returns to his old life. In fic, similarly, Dean appreciates the unique aspects of his life as well. For example, in Queenklu's 'Holly, Ivy Mistletoe,' Dean tells Sam, 'I killed a griffin last Friday [...] We grew up in the back seat of a car. What's one more impossible thing?' (np)

Dean's masculinity is often characterized as white and working class. Hernandez (2014) discusses the relationship between urban middle class and rural blue-collar masculinities, which resonate in Dean's characterization. Hernandez explains that rural masculinity frames urban masculinity as feminine, lacking, academic, and 'gay'. These are ways in which Dean frames Sam's Stanford academic masculinity (Tosenberger 2010). Friedman (2014) also describes the rift between him and his working-class father, who felt as if Friedman leaving for academia was a rejection and betrayal. This strongly reflects the relationship between Dean and Sam. Dean often bitterly mentions Sam's leaving for college. For example, in 'Pilot,' Dean says, 'So what are you going to do? You're just going to live some normal, apple-pie life? Is that it?' (Pilot). To Summarize, Dean is coded as a man through his habits, body characterization and attitudes.

### ***Dean is portrayed as a Woman***

The previous section established that Dean is coded as a man throughout the series and fan fiction. This section establishes that Dean is coded as a woman in the same texts. Dean is repeatedly called a woman – by fandom, scholarship, occasional show and fic characters, and at times Dean himself, as

will be discussed. One of the primary reasons for imagining Dean as a man is that Jensen Ackles, the actor who portrays him, is assumed to be a cisgender man.

I would suggest that most viewers assume Dean shares this body assignment with Ackles. However, Dean is often played by people who are not cis men, mainly outside the show. Women and people outside of the gender binary ubiquitously cosplay as Dean, play Dean in fan shows, read Dean in podfic and so on. Dean was also played by a woman on the show, in an episode notably called 'Fanfiction'. Had Dean been played by a person we assume has been assigned woman, people may have considered her a woman, and even excessively stereotypical.

Codings of Dean as a woman appear both in fic and the show. Dean is far shorter than Sam and has long eyelashes, which, as Chen (2010) discusses, are feminine tropes. Fic often lovingly describes Dean's round belly, large eyes, and full lips. For example, 'Phthonus in Lethe' by LeonidasLion carefully discusses the way Dean looks in eyeliner. Fandom has repeatedly compared Dean to a Disney Princess (Hello-Everything 2012). Even Dean's function towards Sam on the show maps onto our cultural ideas of caretaking usually ascribed to a mother. Dean directly says that he was Sam's mother in the episode 'Who We Are'. This takes place in a gendered context that relates motherhood to womanhood. Dean takes on caretaking roles conventionally associated with 'motherhood' and thus gendered as 'women's work'. Schmidt (2010) suggests that Dean fits Gilligan's model of feminine ethics. This means that while rationalist ethics require universalized rules, care ethics require a more in-depth understanding of every case. For example, Dean grew up feeling strongly that supernatural beings are evil across the board, a teaching from his rationalist father. However, when Dean finds out that his brother is supernatural, he is intent on protecting and caring for him. Since Sam was a toddler and throughout Sam's life, Dean had been caring for Sam's physical needs. Dean cooked, and kept Sam hydrated and fed, even getting in trouble for stealing food when they had none, and Sam got too

hungry. Dean had been caring for Sam's medical needs, dressing and even stitching wounds. To summarize, Dean is coded as a woman through actions, body characterization, practices and care.

### ***Dean Is portrayed as a Man and a Woman***

The two previous sections established that Dean is coded as a man and as a woman. However, one may wonder whether these characterizations appear only in different stories or only in episodes by different writers. This section finds that the above characterizations often appear next to one another, in the same paragraph or scene. For example, in the TV episode 'LARP And The Real Girl,' while LARPing, Charlie claims Dean is her handmaiden. In the same scene, Dean strategizes and orders others around, in a way common for men action-heroes. In the episode 'It's the Great Pumpkin Sam Winchester,' Dean repeats a misogynistic curse, then casually mentions that had he been able to choose a form, he would have been a 'hot cheerleader'.

Research has discussed this proximity and multiplicity. Chan (2010) discusses one such gender:

Sam and Dean have many traits of the Final Girl in slasher horror movies. While Final Girls have gender neutral or masculinized names [...] Dean is named after his maternal grandmother, Deanna; just as Final Girls are tomboyish, Sam and Dean's feminized features (Sam's long hair; Dean's lush eyelashes and lips) are routinely fetishized by fanfiction writers (Chen 2010: note 3).

In other words, Dean is again characterized as having a blend of genders. In fic Dean is also regularly characterized using multiple traditional gender traits (meaning, gender traits perceived as basic, authentic and 'real'). For example, in Rivkat's 'Captured by the Game,' Sam and Dean grew up apart. This is Sam's first impression of Dean: 'Winchester was *gorgeous*. It was impossible to tell the color of his eyes in the bad light, but they were framed by lashes that wouldn't have been out of place on a fashion model. His lips were plump and pink as if anticipating what kisses would do to them, and his heavy stubble made Sam's thighs itch to feel those cheeks against his own skin'. Sam notes

hegemonic feminine attributes, such as Dean's lips and eyelashes alongside his manly stubble. But rather than read Dean's stubble as a sign of Dean being hegemonically masculine, it resonates as queer.

Similarly, in a story by Fleshflutter, Dean temporarily swaps bodies with a woman, Jess, who describes Dean's body: 'She's got a cock that's much nicer than any other she's had the chance to examine, green eyes with stupidly long, dark lashes, and a mouth that is possibly the most kissable, lickable, fuckable mouth in the history of mouths. Her new mouth is *lethal*'. Here as well, Jess notes attributes traditionally associated with men and with women, combined. Her description of Dean's mouth as lethal (traditionally masculine) and fuckable (traditionally feminine) is particularly clear.

A different example is the fic 'Green and Gamboge' by Sevenfists. There, Dean mothers a group of gremlins. He carries, names, feeds, genders them, and deals with their whining. At the same time, he teaches them about porn, and to claim that 'pussy is delicious'. This camaraderie is reminiscent of that described by Grazian (2007). The mothering paired with it is another demonstration of feminine tropes.

The stories in the second half of the paper also strongly demonstrate this pairing of coding as a woman and as a man. The story 'TMI' by Astolat, shows Dean craving to be pretty, as he puts it, through wearing makeup and clothes marketed for women. In the same scene, Dean teases Sam as a brother, wrestles, and intentionally farts on him. The story 'Not Time's Fool' by FayJay shows Dean experiencing a range of traditional women's experiences – among them, almost being raped as a woman. In the same scene, Dean realized he recognizes this experience from porn he watched as a man. Similarly, in Lazy-Daze's 'Realtime Girl', Dean enjoys embodiment traditionally linked with womanhood and recognizes himself from porn he watched as a man – but here Dean delights in it rather than being horrified. To summarize, Dean is coded as a woman and as a man in the same places, often as part of a single, whole characterization.

***Dean is Portrayed as Having Other Gender Entirely***

The previous sections established that Dean is coded as a man and as a woman. But on top of the genders discussed above, Dean is repeatedly characterized as other genders. Some of these genders do not have names. For example, in 'On Phthonus' Altar,' Leonidaslion describes how 'Dean thought he'd look softer with the eyeliner on: more feminine. But instead, he looks... other. Like something that isn't quite human'.

One word that is sometimes used as a name of a gender, is butch (Rubin 2006:NP). I use it here to discuss gender. Again, in this paper characters' gender is considered fair game for interpretation, especially when it has the potential outcome of benefiting marginalized genders. As imaginary characters are always created and designed, their gender is assigned through the authors and the readers, never themselves. Consequently, interpretation used in this paper is as much an interpretation as any other by previous scholarship, also and explicitly when these stayed within the gender binary. Additionally, I should note that in this paper I use several words situated in binarism and bigotry, as a starting point, to join the academic discourse. It should also be noted that some take a transphobic approach to who can be butch, and this is reflected in the paper by Gayle Rubin (2006), discussed in the following section. Since the notion that a person assigned male at birth can be butch, is established by more recent scholarship, such as Hannah Rossiter's (2016: 87–96), I base my argument on these, rather than trans- and nonbinary-exclusionary readings.

While Rubin stresses that there are a variety of ways to be butch, she suggests a traditional format, that may be familiar: a young, white, working-class person, with a slick motorbike, who is 'irresistible' to women. This is exactly the format Dean plays, especially in early seasons and early fic. The main difference is that instead of a classic bike, Dean has a classic car, that he works on and fixes himself.

It should be noted that whiteness is unfortunately linked with nonbinary gender by a common stereotype, that nonbinary people are white and middle-class. The fact that Dean's whiteness upholds this aspect of the stereotype makes this representation less valuable. However, Dean's working class status growing up and throughout most of the series and fan fiction, provides a rare representation of a working-class nonbinary person, less at odds with the reality of many nonbinary people (Harrison 2012).

Hannah Rossiter (2016:87–96) explains that butch women are often perceived as combining or parodying (binary) genders. 'Butch' generally involves some element of pastiche, of subversion, perhaps of camp, differentiating it from cis masculinity. Dean's over-the-top performances of butchness serve as this element of subversion, of camp. Sam, on the television show, describes it as 'overcompensating', while Tosenberger describes it as a reason to assume Dean is queer (Tosenberger 2010:NP).

Dean is regularly put in costumes, celebrating men's roles with chaotic glee. Dean does not slide into these roles pretending that they are natural, or authentic. He crashes into them with delight and mayhem; pretends to be a musician, a park ranger, a gym teacher, and a leader based on William Wallace. Dean very often jumps into such roles with delight. For example, when wearing tiny shorts and bossing children around as a gym teacher with his whistle in the episode 'After School Special.' At a different time, Dean finds out that he and Sam are traveling to the past, and he needs to dress up as a cowboy. Dean is so enthusiastic and extravagant with his costume that 'authentic' cowboys make fun of it. . Sam tells Dean that his enthusiasm is a fetish – further highlighting it as perhaps queer, rather than 'real' masculinity. In the fic 'Save a Horse' by lazy\_daze, Dean explores this fetish further.

Both in fic and on the show, Dean is characterized as an expert in forging IDs. This can be read as a metaphor for Dean's camp identities. Moreover, Dean regularly chooses fake names not for

inconspicuous practicality, but for his pleasure. They are generally names of hard rock musicians, adding more of a playful and performative element to Dean's undercover identities.

The show also repeatedly examines Dean against the idea of 'butch'. As Tosenberger (2008) mentions, in the episode 'Playthings,' Dean is repeatedly read as Sam's romantic partner. Dean asks Sam why, and Sam replies that it might be because Dean is butch, and that it may seem as if Dean is overcompensating. Tosenberger reads this to say that Dean is characterized as butch in a format perhaps linked with gay men. This is a valid reading, but I would add the possibility of reading it in a format commonly linked with lesbianism.

Dean also faces boggling comparisons to himself as a 'real' man. The notion of 'real' gender is regularly used to frame trans people as lesser people than cis, as Serrano discusses (2016). In the episode 'Monster at the End of this Book,' Dean and Sam find out that there is a book series, in their world, that depicts their adventures and their private lives. There are fans and even fan fic authors. Dean and Sam go undercover as fans of the book series, and in one scene must try to convince a fan that they really are fellow fans. The fan tells the undercover Dean about her appreciation of Dean, the fictional character she loves. According to the fan, fictional book-Dean cries a lot. She guesses that our Dean doesn't cry that much, because real men don't allow themselves to. As she puts it, 'if only real men were so open and in touch with their feelings,' ('Monster').

This moment raises questions about the different meanings of 'real' in this context. One meaning of 'real man' here is flesh and blood versus fictional. However, Dean and the fictional Dean in the book series are identical, including the number of times they cry. Not to mention that even the show's Dean is fictional in the sense that Dean is a character. Another meaning of 'real man' is 'successful in masculinity.' The fan, here, frames 'real men' as less successful, in that they are less free and less attractive. Putting together the meanings may hint at a few more. Perhaps this shaping of categories is part of what happens in fandom, and the work that fandom does. I discuss such claims in the context

of Butler's theory (Leetal 2022). It is also worth noting the trans connotations of discussing the notion that 'boys don't cry,' also the title of a movie about a trans person whose masculinity is not too different from Dean's.

In the episode, Dean shows the fan his anti-possession tattoo. A lot of fans have those, as does the fan they are talking to. This instance puts into question the nature of authenticity. Dean's tattoo is real, in the sense that it is a monster hunter's tattoo. Dean uses it for his monster hunting. However, it is a fake fan tattoo. The fan's tattoo is the real deal; she got it because she is a fan. Dean's authentic tattoo is fake as a fake fan tattoo.

Dean's struggles with being 'a real man' are a common theme in fic, as well. They usually conclude that Dean fits that role and does not fit it, as well. For example, in the fic 'The Art of Manly Hugging' by Sevenfists, Dean craves intimate touch, but struggles to find ways to receive it, while maintaining his status as 'a real man.'

Dean is characterized not only as butch, but also as a queen, or rather, an endangered gay youth. Dean is repeatedly framed as having been, perhaps always being, a neglected and often desperate pretty teen, in relationships with older men. Whether those men used their power to hurt him is a question of text.

The show regularly establishes that Dean was left to care for a younger Sam, by their father, for long periods and not always have basic protection or survival needs met. For example, the episode 'Bad Boys' tells the story of Dean stealing bread and peanut butter, as a teenager because they were Sam's favorite, and the two didn't have enough food. In fic, such issues are made more explicit. For example, in 'Finders Keepers' by Rivkat, where Dean goes out to find ways to get food and is taken by a demon. In FayJay's 'Not Time's Fool,' Dean tries to casually brush off having done sex work for his and the family's basic needs. Whether explicit about Dean's exploitation or not, the framed gender is different from a 'hegemonic man.' It resonates with genders such as a youth involved in pederasty

– Tadzio, Dorian Gray, and numerous other pretty young ones desired by older men. A less sinister version of ‘pretty one desired by men’ might be found in the word ‘queen.’ Dean is directly called a queen in the episode ‘Something Vicious,’ and in stories such as Astolat’s ‘Of Kings, and Queens, and Jokers, Too’. Even the simple fact that the same character is called both ‘queen’ and ‘butch’ indicates multiple genders.

The first half of the paper demonstrated that Dean is characterized as having multiple genders. This is a form of nonbinary gender, that is not explainable as cis (Richards, 2016: 95-102). As such, Dean’s gender is characterized as nonbinary.

### ***Mary Sue and Dean borrow one another’s genders***

The following section will apply the same type of reading to characters who represent fans in fanfiction and demonstrate that these characters also have multiple genders. The stories I chose for the following section are ones in which Dean’s gender is officially queered. Previous fan studies research has generally assumed Reader Insert characters, and particularly Mary Sue characters, to be women or girls. It is also commonly assumed that their genders are a binary opposite of the gender of fan-favorite characters (Bacon-Smith 1992:94-98). In other words, based on existing research, Dean and the Fan Insert characters described in this section would be assumed to be a cis man and a cis woman. The following section demonstrates that this is not always correct. In the research described above, I found that most Fan Insert characters were characterized as having multiple genders, alongside Dean. The rest of this paper is dedicated to close readings of some of these stories, intended to demonstrate these findings.

The first Mary Sue story examined in this section features, from the story ‘TMI’ by Astolat, an unnamed original character who picks Dean up at a bar and proceeds to have friendly and adventurous sex with him over three days. Dean tells the story to Sam at a later time, and they do the same. The

## *En-Gender!*

unnamed Mary Sue and Dean exchange or share gender for their pleasure. First, the unnamed character demonstrates traditionally masculine traits that Dean is established as identifying by. The unnamed character beats Dean at poker, a skill Dean uses semi-professionally and seems to consider part of his masculine identity. She tries to get Dean to bet on his car, another part of Dean's masculine identity. The unnamed character uses a line to hit on Dean, as Dean often does himself. Dean feigns weakness to have her invite him to dinner, a technique socially linked with traditional womanhood. The two take Dean's role further: They shave Dean's legs and dress him up in a skirt and makeup. This is a continuation of the two being characterized as switching genders with one another, as the makeup and skirt presumably belong to the unnamed character. The Unnamed character penetrates Dean repeatedly. While penetration is not gendered in any essential way, and shouldn't be socially linked with gender, it still is. Dean taking the role of penetrated and his partner repeatedly penetrating are socially characterized as feminine and masculine. First, she penetrates Dean by rimming, then with a little vibrator. On their last night, the unnamed character picks up a guy to penetrate Dean. While the first vibrator is described as 'one of those little bullet ones', the entire description of the guy is Sam's speculation that he was 'a really big guy.' Equated with the vibrator, and only described with regards to size, the guy is not much of a character in this story, but a flesh vibrator that the unnamed character chooses to penetrate Dean with. This, again, puts her in a masculine role Dean is characterized as used to taking, and Dean in the role she usually takes, meaning this is another way they switch genders between them.

Dean enjoys his femininity. He seems quite happy to explore it again and again. Fans of the show would also know from the series episode "The End" that Dean has enjoyed wearing their partner's panties. As Dean puts it in the fanfiction story, he 'got off on being all pretty', ("TMI"). However, when Sam teases him about possibly wanting to be a woman, he wrestles him and claims he is not a woman. This may be read in different ways, including several trans ways, such as Dean not being a

woman but outside of the gender binary. This claim mirrors the unnamed character's assertion that she is not really a lesbian, despite being interested in Dean. Perhaps both simply enjoy playing out the fantasy; perhaps both enjoy being nonbinary.

### **Mary Sue Fits the Trans Definition**

In the story 'Not Time's Fool' by FayJay, Dean had been cursed to 'be a woman', meaning to have a body assigned female, and some feminine traits. The story takes place during season 4 of the *Supernatural* television series. A demon named Ruby is trying to push Sam to serve her purposes, building a romantic (if coercive) relationship with him. In the world of Supernatural fandom, demons are generally embodied as mist, unless they take the body of a different being. When this is done to humans, the human is almost always unable to control their body at all. Sometimes they are conscious other times the demon keeps them unconscious or kills them. Demons' notions of gender are not officially discussed a lot, but it seems many demons are comfortable choosing human bodies of whatever assigned sex and belonging to humans of whatever genders. In the story, Dean has been following Ruby's manipulations of Sam with alarm and bitterness. However, one of the upsides of having been turned 'into a woman', is that Sam becomes more protective of Dean. Sam is more intent on staying with Dean to protect him now that Dean is small-framed and must relearn how to fight with a different body.

This seems to result in Ruby's bitter displeasure, leading her to kidnap Dean. Dean wakes up tied on a concrete floor, only wearing undergarments and a button-up shirt. He is vulnerable and horrified, fighting to get free but failing. It should be noted that people outside of the gender binary are at high risk of sexual assault (Harrison 2012). Ruby takes on a body of a policeman and intends to use it to rape Dean. Again, many trans people and people outside of the gender binary find police dangerous and unsafe (Harrison 2012:NP). If nothing else, it may be meaningful to read this story of danger in

pronouns usually not used with Dean's current embodiment, that is, he/him pronouns with a body socially read as 'woman'.

Ruby intends to possess Dean and live in Dean's body moving forward. As Dean, she would again be able to manipulate Sam and to enjoy Sam's affection. Ruby's plan is the sinister in-story fantasy many fans may share. As many fans, scholars (Schmidt 2010:NP), and Ruby herself know it is virtually impossible to be loved by Sam or by Dean the way they love one another (n.p.). It is easy to imagine (and to find stories in which) Mary Sue characters or original characters are flung aside with or without delicacy for the love between the two, be it written as romantic or not. Ruby, on the show and in this story, tries to have a romantic relationship with Sam, but fails, because Sam is too focused on Dean. It seems as if Ruby intended to play the role of Mary Sue but found it too difficult. Frustrated – she takes on a different fan practice – writing herself onto a canon character.

Ruby is planning to orchestrate Dean and Sam's love story, while she is playing the role of Dean. To experience being loved by Sam – as Dean – a love no one else seems able to receive from Sam. In this scene, Dean and Ruby are repeatedly compared to one another in their shifting or multiple genders. First, Dean's embodiment, as a petite assigned female person with a pixie cut, is very similar to one of the bodies Ruby had regularly used. The embodiment Ruby chooses, of a seemingly hegemonic, working-class man may be read as a reflection of one of Dean's most common embodiments. Alongside this, Dean compares his and Ruby's genders directly:

Somehow Dean has let himself – not forget that she's a demon, exactly, but still somehow be fooled by her big cow eyes and her little girl pout. And he, of all people, should know perfectly well that this is bullshit, that the shape of the skin and bones tells you precisely Jack Shit about who somebody is.

Dean isn't a girl, and neither is Ruby, no matter what appearances might suggest. (n.p.)

This trans-sharing and combining of gender repeat in other stories as well.

### **The Trans Ideal Reader bonds with Sam and Dean**

In lazy\_daze's 'She's a Real Time Girl (in My Imaginary World)', (2010) Dean is framed directly as a fan – further comparing him with the readers. The story takes place during the television show's episode, 'Changing Channels.' In the episode, Dean and Sam are put into a series of worlds, based on television shows. A powerful being they know from other episodes, Gabriel, is trying to teach them a lesson; they must play their parts. As such, the two are trapped in each television show until they 'play their parts.' In other words, the pair is put into a procedural show, in which they are required to exclaim dramatic and witty lines at a murder scene. They are put into a *Knight Rider*-like show, in which Sam is the talking car and Dean is the hero riding it. Initially, the two are put into a show about doctors, named Dr. Sexy. It is soon discovered that Dean is a devoted fan of the show.

In the episode, Dean is the one able to first identify what is happening and move forward solving the mystery, because of the knowledge Dean has as a fan. Dean can do this in lazy\_daze's story as well. There, one of the shows Dean and Sam are thrown into is a 'cheesy lesbian porno' (n.p.) that Dean is a fan of. Dean is turned into Cassandra, a gorgeous woman in need of a plumber. Sam is playing the role of the plumber, Lilya. Dean's role here as a fan places him even more clearly as linked with fans reading the story and sharing the experience. Dean declares Sam and he are hot, seeming to enjoy and find meaning in reading himself as a woman and in filling that role. While different readings of this behavior may be possible, a lot of trans people would recognize the excitement of checking out one's body when it finally starts to fit the way one feels. Dean and Sam soon conclude that they want 'hot lesbian sex' (n.p.).

Centrumlumina (2013) found that a significant majority of AO3 users are LGBT+, and nearly none are cisgender men. As such, it may not be amiss to assume this story was written and enjoyed in an environment of queer people, many of whom are Sapphic. One of the pleasures of reading, and perhaps specifically of reading fanfiction, is finding oneself in the characters, and finding pleasure in

fantasizing about playing their roles (Schmidt 2010). Here, the readers have the pleasure of fantasizing about being Dean or Sam – as Dean and Sam enjoy the fantasy of being hot lesbians – as many of their readers are. Throughout the story, the two refer to one another using words gendered any which way, from ‘lady’ to ‘dude’. They mix teasing one another as guys and delighting in their own and in one another’s femininity. Dean’s meta understanding of their situation, as a fan of the movie Dean is partaking in, mirrors the pleasure of fans of *Supernatural*, enjoying reading the story. The role and gender switching goes further still, Sam, in the role of the point of view character, discusses his experiences in that world, with a particular imagined reader. One who in this story is used to having an assigned male body. Sam describes his experiences to such a reader, trying to help ‘him’ understand the experience: ‘Sam was turned on, but it felt so different - good, but different; his urgency wasn’t centered on his straining cock, that urge to fuck his hips forward into something’ (n.p.). The narration supposedly assumes an imagined reader who knows just what it feels like to have a penis, and who does not need a lot of explanation regarding how that feels.

Later in the story, Sam experiences clitoral stimulation for the first time: ‘In a way it was like a finger playing right at the slit of his cock, and it was a little like direct internal stimulation of his prostate, but it also wasn’t exactly like either of those sensations. It was this focused, tiny spot that felt like everything, white-hot feeling that was almost too much, and he had to clench his thighs to stop himself from arching away’ (n.p.). Again, here the reader is assumed to know what it feels like to have a penis and to not be familiar with sensations that may be related to having a clitoris. This can be read as the story inviting readers to also be trans or play roles of different embodiments or perhaps of embodiment transition. Readers are invited to play at taking on an embodiment they are not used to, just like Dean and Sam take on the embodiment of their characters. Like Dean and the unnamed character in *TMI*, the characters representing readers playfully switch genders with Dean, sharing having multiple genders.

## Conclusions

Both in fic and the show, Dean is characterized as ‘good at being a man’. At the same time, Dean is characterized as a woman, and as different genders – often in the same scene. In other words, Dean is characterized as having multiple genders and fits the definition of nonbinary gender. Similarly to Dean, the gender of characters who represent fans are repeatedly coded as trans and equated to Dean’s nonbinary gender. As demonstrated, Dean is repeatedly characterized as having several genders at the same time. It is part of Dean’s characterization, on the television show as well as in fanfiction. This would mean that Dean is characterized as not cis and is very likely of nonbinary gender. Similarly, representations by fans are characterized as having several genders, and their genders are compared with Dean’s. Dean and fan representations exchange and share both the status of ‘fan’ and multiple genders.

The first half of the paper focuses on Dean’s gender, using a broad overview of the materials to establish the recurring themes referred to. Having established the parameters for establishing different genders, and having demonstrated that Dean fits them, the second half of the paper uses close reading to demonstrate that the parameters apply to fan representations as well. It then demonstrates ways in which fan representations are invited to enjoy gender transition. Moreover, and this leads to my main argument, they are characterized as sharing their gender with Dean who is usually assumed to have a binary and, therefore, “opposite” gender than them (Kustritz 2003:371). I argue that the conclusion I draw is important for several reasons that can influence future research in fan studies and gender studies and is not restricted to *Supernatural* fanfiction. Usually, Dean is considered to be a deeply masculine character. As Carol Stabile puts it, ‘Dean Winchester, one of the heroes of *Supernatural*—a television series that combines the genre of horror with both road and superhero narratives for a triple dose of testosterone’ (2009:87). Furthermore, Dean is a fan favorite character, as demonstrated by the television show lasting 15 seasons, and Dean appearing in 217,452 fanfiction works on central

fanfiction site Archive of Our Own. Following from my analysis, we then can ask questions on forms of attraction, identification, or other types of interest in binary and nonbinary characters through the conceptualization of them in fanfiction.

It is often assumed that fanfiction is written by women and girl and, to a lesser amount, by men (Kustritz, 2003:371) – nonbinary folks are mostly not even considered. As I show, Dean is nonbinary, and some fan-representing characters are as well. In any case, it signals a high interest in nonbinary genders for various reasons. Conceptualizing the main character Dean as having a nonbinary gender, might change the view on “normality” and “normativity” when it comes to the image of nonbinary being either a postmodern invention or a tiny minority to be ignored. As Stryker et al. (2008:11–22) explain, representation is a sign of importance in society, as well as part of what creates such significance. For marginalized groups that have little good representation in mainstream media, an alternative representation may be significant. This paper demonstrates that some such representation exists in fanfiction of the show *Supernatural*. At this time, when trans and otherwise nonbinary people are targeted by politicians, this environment can be very meaningful.

### **Disclosure statement**

This research won the Zafirir and the Ze’evi awards.

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