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**Camp and the Sublimation of the Homoerotic in Male Action Television Series of the
1980s: *Knight Rider* and *The A-Team***

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One of the great mysteries in Hollywood is, why do some television shows make it and others fail? And then, what makes a show likely to succeed in syndication, nationally and/or internationally? Given that most shows fail, there is no clear, singular predictor for a show's success. The two shows that I will address, *Knight Rider* (1982-86) and *The A-Team* (1982-87), are not particularly well-written, original, or thought-provoking, but both have proven highly successful during their original runs and in national and international syndication. *Knight Rider* is the story of a single man, Michael Knight (David Hasselhoff), who works for the Foundation for Law and Government (FLAG), and drives an interactive car, the Knight Industries Two Thousand (KITT); together, Knight and KITT fight crime, helping those in need. Likewise, *The A-Team* is the story of four men, Viet Nam veterans, John "Hannibal" Smith (George Peppard), Templeton "Face" Peck (Dirk Benedict), Bosco "B.A." Baracus (Mr. T), and H.M. "Howling Mad" Murdock (Dwight Schultz), who defend those who are in need. These are good-versus-evil narratives, where good always wins. These are "buddy" narratives, men doing things together. However, it is my contention that what makes these two shows particularly successful is that they have found ways to interweave a homosocial narrative into the text and a more subtle homoerotic narrative into the

subtext while maintaining the semblance of heterosexual hypermasculinity within the conservative racial and gender politics of the 1980s.

With the overtly campy nature of such shows as *Bewitched* (1964-72), *Star Trek* (1965-69), *Get Smart* (1965-70), *Wild, Wild West* (1965-70) and *Batman* (1966-69), and the flamboyance of much of disco, America seems to have recognized to some degree the queer nature of 1960s pop culture (Andy Warhol) and 1970s disco (the Village People), and this anxiety seems to have forced the homoerotic deeper into the cultural subtext. Shows like *Batman* and *Star Trek* disappear, and with the onset of the Reagan 1980s, they are replaced by much less overtly campy action shows. Camp culture is sublimated behind the veneer of heterosexuality and conservatism, but if one looks closely, the same homoerotic flirtation and dialog are present in the 1980s shows, specifically in *Knight Rider* and *The A-Team*.¹ In order to allay the fears of homosexuality—these are single men who have no real time for women—each show incorporates “heterosexual moments,” brief, plot-irrelevant scenes in which the male protagonist kisses or looks at some female who conforms to all the cliché, heterosexual marks of attractiveness. These heterosexual moments are necessary within a heteronormative culture because flirting, drag, and suggestive dialog in the subtext all contribute to undermine the heterosexuality of these shows.

In order to argue for a particular sexual and social politic, it is necessary to contextualize these shows within the larger genre of crime shows. One difficulty with the genre is the scope and range of perspectives from which one fights crime. Some shows involve the legitimate arms of the law, such as *Wild, Wild West*, *Get Smart*, *Mission Impossible* (1966-73), *Adam-12* (1968-75), *Hawaii Five-0* (1968-80), *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-79), *Wonder Woman* (1976-79), *CHiPs* (1977-83), *Scarecrow and Mrs. King* (1983-87), *Hunter* (1984-91), and *Miami Vice* (1984-89); others involve private organizations that work in semi-official capacities, such as *The Six-Million Dollar Man* (1973-78), *The Bionic Woman* (1976-79), *Knight Rider*, and *McGyver* (1985-92); others involve individuals “assisting” the police or working within the law, such as *Superman* (1951-57), *Batman*, *Charlie’s Angels* (1976-81), *Magnum P.I.* (1980-88), *Simon & Simon*

(1981-88), *Remington Steele* (1982-87), and *Murder, She Wrote* (1984-96); and some shows rely solely on well-meaning vigilante-ism, such as *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979-85) and *The A-Team*. From all of these perspectives, and from the thirty years that these shows span, we can see that there is an interpersonal (sexual) tension that underscores these shows. This tension is rarely overt; *Get Smart*, *Remington Steele*, *Hunter*, and *Scarecrow and Mrs. King* are the exceptions and are also the most heterosexual, although the relationships are usually only made official in the final season(s). *Superman* is overtly heterosexual within the confines of 1950s television decency codes, and *Murder, She Wrote* maintains an underlying heterosexuality for two reasons: the first is that Jessica Fletcher is a widow, and secondly she spends considerable time with Seth Hazlitt, a single man. However, the remaining shows fall somewhere on the homosocial-homosexual spectrum; none has a repeating opposite-sex character with whom the protagonist(s) is/are involved socially or sexually. Heterosexuality is suggested, from off-camera wives in *Adam-12* and *Hawaii Five-0* to conspicuous opposite-sex encounters that are blatantly superfluous to the plot in the rest. Even *Wild, Wild West*, *Knight Rider*, and *McGyver*, shows that focus on single men, weekly or periodically bring in “damsels-in-distress” who must be rescued and then who can reward their knights with an episode-ending, “heterosexually-confirming” kiss. Even *Batman*, the least “heterosexual” show of all, first uses the villainous Cat Woman to maintain the semblance of heterosexuality, and then Bat Girl, an even less convincing contrivance.

As we look at the genre, we can see a few particularly disturbing trends. The 1980s represent in American television and politics a reaction to the Civil Rights Movement, Women’s Liberation, Anti-war Liberalism, and the Gay Rights Movement. Especially within the construct of action and crime shows, we can see a radical shift to the right. In 1976, three crime-related shows appear starring women, *Charlie’s Angels*, *The Bionic Woman*, and *Wonder Woman*. While many feminists may argue the inherent feminism of these shows, nonetheless, they do show women placed in conventional male roles (although the women must still be conventionally beautiful). During the 1980s, one will not find a crime show where the woman is the focus, except possibly

Remington Steele, where the female character, Laura Holt, is in charge; however, the entire premise of the show is that she has to create Remington Steele because the culture cannot fathom a female detective.²

Furthermore, if we look at the issue of race, the trend is equally appalling. Again, while shows like *Sanford and Son* (1972-77) and *The Jeffersons* (1975-85) may not be considered politically correct today, both starred and centered on African Americans. In none of the crime shows of the eighties is the lead played by a person of color. In fact, the people of color are, when they are present, sidekicks. *CHiPs*, *Magnum, P.I.*, *Miami Vice*, and *The A-Team* all place persons of color in secondary roles, but none moves beyond stereotype, from the Latin lover of *CHiPs*, Frank "Ponch" Poncherello to the tough black males of *Magnum, P. I.* and *The A-Team*, Theodore "T.C." Calvin and B.A. Baracus. However, the most troubling show in this aspect may be *Knight Rider*. Given that *Knight Rider* was an early name for the Ku Klux Klan and KITT is referential of Kit Carson, a famed Indian killer,³ one must consider how race is present. The car itself is black, and as I will argue later is placed in the position of "feminized" male; similarly, during the last season, the shows adds a sidekick for Michael Knight, a black teenage male, Reginald "R.C." Cornelius III. It is also bothersome to note that all three African Americans in these shows are reduced to initials, "B.A.," "T.C.," and "R.C.," further removing them from the individuality inherent in a name. Arguably, none of the pre-1980s crime shows has an African American lead either, but two, *Mission Impossible* and *Hawaii 5-0* do have people of color as co-stars. What may have been progressive for *Mission Impossible* or *Hawaii 5-0* becomes conservatism or even tokenism by the time of the 1980s.

Since both *Knight Rider* and *The A-Team* work within or come out of such a conservative paradigm, any male-male desire will have to be sublimated or closeted. And, in fact, the first thing that both shows have in common is the closeted nature of the protagonists. This is significant because it is referenced at the beginning of each episode of both shows. Each *Knight Rider* episode begins with a narrative voice describing Michael Knight's existence as "the shadowy life of a man who does not exist." This is

similar to the narrative that begins each episode of *The A-Team*, which tells us that “these men promptly escaped [...] to the Los Angeles underground [...] If you have a problem [...] if you can find them – maybe you can hire the A-Team.” Knight “does not exist,” and the A-Team is hidden and “underground.” By giving these men “secret” identities, the writers of these shows place them outside of dominant culture, and it is this secrecy that allows them to escape the clutches of those evil forces that would seek to destroy them. It is also this secrecy that plays into the queer stereotype of Batman: “Batman [. . .] encode[s] a cultural stereotype of the male homosexual [. . .] a secretive, hypermasculine character who spends a lot of time prowling city streets at night” (Torres 240).

To counter the homosexual stereotype of the secretive, single man/men prowling the streets, both shows incorporate permanent female cast members into the show. *Knight Rider*, for its entire run, includes a female computer programmer Bonnie Barstow (Patricia McPherson), who, during the second season (1983-84) is replaced by April Curtis (Rebecca Holden); both women are conventionally attractive, although this attractiveness is masked by conservative clothing (a kind of Clark Kent disguise), and seem attracted to Michael but in whom he never shows any real interest.⁴ Likewise, *The A-Team* incorporates a female character, Amy Allen (Melinda Culea), during the first season (1983), and a second, Tawnia Baker (Maria Heasley) during the second season (1984); as a reporter, Amy represents the potential to expose the A-Team’s secret. However, both women are essentially tangential to the plot, and neither is successfully integrated into the team.⁵ Thus, by the third season, there is no female character appearing repeatedly, and the heterosexual markers for the show are forced to change. Both Amy and Tawnia do have a kind of flirtatious relationship with “Face,” confirming his desirability to women, but he never shows any serious interest. Bonnie/April and Amy/Tawnia do serve a larger purpose, which is to affirm the heterosexuality of the show: the male audience can “bond” with the male characters and channel sexual desire towards the female characters (based on many of the *Knight Rider* fan sites, KITT seems to be the object of desire of its male audience⁶).

Similarly, the female characters prevent the aura of homosexuality, which would be all too easy if there were no women on the show; the lack of viable women for Bruce Wayne and Dick is partially responsible for the repeated “queering” of *Batman*. The gratuitous presence of women, however, seems to be a product of the 1980s. *Hawaii Five-0* (1968-80), for example, is the narrative of four men—Steve McGarret, Dan Williams, Chin-Ho, and Kono—yet there is rarely a female presence in the episode. In fact, the episodes begin and end with the patently-homoerotic, shirtless, rowing Native Hawaiian males; there is not even the “bikini-fixation” that we see in *Magnum, P.I.* or *Miami Vice*. Even *Knight Rider* makes use of the “bikini fixation”: at the end of episode 61, “Knight in Retreat,” where Michael has infiltrated a spa for male scientists that is run by scantily clad women, Bonnie asks Michael, “What is so great about a bunch of women in bikinis?” to which he responds, “Do you have a few hours?” The episode ends before this question is answered, and thus Michael never has to reveal what he knows (or does not know). *The Dukes of Hazzard* uses the “gratuitous female” as well, where the female character, Daisy Duke, is a cousin; while she does not represent a viable sexual interest for either Bo or Luke, she does represent a viable sexual focus for the male audience.⁷

In many ways, *Knight Rider* and *The A-Team* are quintessential American buddy narratives: *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Lone Ranger*, *Easy Rider*, the Road movies of Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. As a genre, the “buddy narrative” is repeatedly read as homoerotic, from Leslie Fiedler’s “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey” to more contemporary gender theory. While *The A-Team* is relatively conventional in its use of the buddy narrative structure, *Knight Rider* replaces the “buddy” with a car. Michael Knight and KITT solve crimes together, and protect and rescue each other in their weekly adventures in saving humankind, most often represented by a young, attractive, and single white female. The choice of the car-buddy makes the series unique and seemingly moves it from the homoerotics of the buddy narrative and sets up the not-so-subtle pun of autoeroticism. The series can exist as autoerotic within a heterocentrist paradigm since one of the tenets of heterocentrism is to deny the homoerotic while

permitting the autoerotic to exist on the margins; the comic element of the sexually naïve car-buddy diffuses the homoerotic aspect of it being a male voice.⁸ To read the series as autoerotic is in effect to read the series as heterosexual.

In American popular culture, the car plays an important role in sexuality. The shapes of sports cars, especially during the seventies and eighties, seemed to be obvious references to female bodies. This association with curves, the female body, and beauty may go back, in effect, to the Egyptians and the Greeks, but it is specifically mentioned as early as 1753, by the British artist William Hogarth, in *The Analysis of Beauty*:

A still more perfect idea of the effects of the precise waving-line, and of those lines that deviate from it, may be conceived by the row of stays [...] Every whale-bone of a good stay must be made to bend in this manner: for the whole stay, when put close together behind, is truly a shell of well-varied contents, and its surface of course a fine form; so that if a line, or the lace were to be drawn, or brought from the top of the lacing of the stay behind, round the body, and down to the bottom peak of the stomacher; it would form such a perfect, precise, serpentine-line. (49)

Both *Knight Rider* and *The A-Team* utilize the car as sex signifier: KITT is a well-curved, black TransAm, and Face drives his own well-curved, white Corvette. Countering these “feminized” cars are the “masculinized” vehicles of Garth (Michael’s “evil twin”⁹), a massive, killer Big Rig, and B.A., the big, black van. The connections between cars and sexuality are legion. There are the jokes that are made about the inverse relationship between the size of a man’s car’s engine and the size of his penis. Since the era of the drive-in movie, the car has been a site for making out and having sex. But does this mean that the automobile is yet another sign of heterocentrism in America? If these cars are “female” why does “she” have such a big knob on “her” gearshift?

If we look closely at the dialog between Michael and KITT, we see a different relationship forming. KITT is not a cold, impersonal (even androgynous) computer like HAL in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* but exhibits emotions. KITT also has a distinctly *male* voice. The show can exist within a heterocentrist society only if the

audience views the car as machine, and not as pseudo-human. However, the tension of the show is that KITT is both car and human in the same way that Michael is. In a Frankenstein's monster sort of way, Michael comes into being when he is nearly killed—a woman shoots him in the head, but the bullet does not kill him because there is a metal plate in his head from a previous injury—and the Foundation saves him and rebuilds him, giving him a new face in the process. At the beginning of episode 1, "Knight of the Phoenix," Michael Long's partner, who is killed at the beginning of the episode, says that "I am the original man of steel." This sets up Michael to be the next "man of steel" when we learn how he survives a point-blank shot to the head. In "The Life Cycle of Cyborgs: Writing the Posthuman," N. Katherine Hayles writes: "Cyborgs actually do exist; about 10% of the current U.S. population are estimated to be cyborgs in the technical sense, including people with electronic pacemakers, artificial joints, drug implant systems, implanted corneal lenses, and artificial skin" (322). As a man with a metal plate in his head who has also been reconstructed, Michael Knight would clearly qualify as cyborg. And with both KITT and the watch/communicator that keeps them in constant contact, Michael Knight is part of a cyborg society which "refers to the full range of intimate organic-mechanic relations" (Hayles 3).

KITT's cyborg identity can be established based on his human voice, his personality, his emotions, etc. And the most interesting thing is, that he seems to be aware of his humanity. In episode 52, "Knight of the Chameleon," a man tries to put a flyer under KITT's windshield wiper when KITT says, "keep your advertisements off my person." The man responds, "you're a car," and KITT says, "a figure of speech." In episode 29, "Soul Survivor," KITT is "hacked" and the central processor (his "soul") is taken out. Michael finds the central processor and then takes it along while he tries to find the car itself. The CPU exhibits signs of jealousy (Michael is driving another car—Devon's Mercedes), and Michael must rescue the car (a rather cliché action for the male hero). This all goes back to episode 1, "Knight of the Phoenix": Michael has just let KITT be stolen, and when KITT returns after ejecting the thieves at the police station, he plays the injured party and makes Michael apologize sincerely. KITT accepts the apology by

saying, “we’re all human.” Having seen how KITT functions as cyborg, it is eerie how similar his character construction is to the cyborg, Number Five, from the movie *Short Circuit*. Hugh Gusterson, in “Short Circuit: Watching Television with a Nuclear-Weapons Scientist,” describes him as

appeal[ing] to audiences precisely because of his quality of childlike innocence; he does not expect his ‘father’ to save him, and the process of salvation involves a heterosexual union between Crosby and Stephanie that consummates Number Five’s own romance with Stephanie and suggests a new covenant between science, society, and technology. [...] he is haunted by the fear of being “disassembled”; finally, Number Five *does* dream of community on the model of the organic family. (115)

As we will see later, KITT too participates in Michael’s romance, but does not make it possible. Although he can detect weapons, he does not prevent the shooter from getting into the wedding and killing Michael’s bride, Stevie. He ends up keeping Michael for his own.

If both Michael and KITT are cyborgs, then the relationship between them is complicated, to say the least. Joseph Dumit, in “Brain-Mind Machines and American Technologies Dream Marketing Towards an Ethnography of Cyborg Envy,” cites Michel Carrouges, who “defined precisely this confluence of pleasure and mechanism as a Bachelor Machine: ‘The machine is essentially the symbol of autoeroticism. The image of pleasure is greater the more the machine seems a do-it-yourself one’” (352). If one machine “works” the other, then is it autoerotic, or is something else going on. Since both are human as well as machine, it would seem that homo-erotic would be equally applicable. It is important to look at the homoerotics, not only in the queer sense, but also in the human (*homo sapiens*) sense.

KITT is feminized throughout the entire series. His “name” is hardly masculine, at best it is adolescent (kitten: young cat) and at worst sounds like a stage name for a stripper. In the first episode, the personal relationship between KITT and Michael begins after Michael has jumped KITT through a semi trailer, and sounds worried because KITT hasn’t responded vocally; KITT says, “you really do care, don’t you,” and

Michael says, “yah, I do, but don’t tell anybody.” KITT pouts until Michael recognizes his “feelings.” In another episode, Michael is asked if there is anything KITT cannot do, and Michael answers that he cannot cook. Obviously, there are many things that KITT can’t do, but Michael chooses to mention his failure to perform a “wifely duty.” In “Lost Knight,” KITT and Michael are separated and KITT’s memory is erased. Michael must put in a new memory chip, and asks Bonnie where it goes. She says he has to go under the car to insert it, and Michael responds, “sounds Freudian.” If Michael is doing the “Freudian” inserting, then KITT is being penetrated or “feminized.” In “Scent of Roses,” Michael says to KITT, “I’ve never known you not to cover your backside,” yet if he has previously “feminized” him, then obviously the backside was not always covered. Beyond the jokes, KITT is also the more sensitive of the two. In “10-Wheel Trouble,” KITT remarks that it must be nice to have family, and Michael answers, “we have Devon and Bonnie, and I have you.” KITT asks for a family and Michael tells him that he is KITT’s family, and if we take the nuclear family as the model, KITT is the wife.

Within *Knight Rider*, we see the butch-femme paradigm in Michael and KITT.¹⁰ Michael is the dark-haired macho type who fights with his fists and gets the kiss at the end, while KITT is the sensitive, sexually naïve one who waits for Michael to return. At the end of “The Topaz Connection,” in which Knight works with the daughter, Lauren, of a murdered skin magazine (à la *Playboy*, and the women at the mansion do run around in bikinis) magnate and a flirtatious romance ensues, but not beyond a kiss, KITT is made part of the centerfold—the woman is on top of him/it. Michael Knight makes the comment—“look at those lines” before the audience knows who/what is being referenced. At the beginning of the episode, when KITT and Michael arrive at the mansion, KITT asks why the women are so scantily clad—showing a kind of naïve innocence that the more experienced Michael has to introduce him to.

In “Scent of Roses,” Michael is critically wounded at the beginning, but is saved from death when KITT plays the hero and drives in between the shooter and Michael’s body before a finishing shot can be fired (this parallels the end when Stevie jumps in front of Michael) and calls for an ambulance. Michael is saved by KITT but becomes

despondent and decides to quit FLAG for a woman, Stevie. The homoerotic potential of the name should not be discounted; of all the women Michael could have fallen in love with, he falls in love with one with a male name. Michael tells KITT in a manner that screams “relationship breakup”: “There’s something I gotta tell you.” KITT responds, “I’ve had you on my monitor. You’re programmed just like I am [...] I may not be flesh and blood, but I am a friend.” In this, Michael is mechanized – “you’re programmed” – at the same time as KITT is humanized – “I am a friend.” This makes the breakup one of equals, not of a man losing a car, but as a lover leaving one partner for another. KITT wants to stay with Michael, and so he plays the song from *Casablanca*, “As Time Goes By” to Michael and Stevie so that they will take him along. This song is highly ironic, because it is about a love that is not allowed: Bogart and Bergman’s characters have to split up just as KITT and Michael are going to have to split up (if he marries Stevie). At the beach house, Michael and Stevie play Frisbee on the beach while KITT is sitting there “watching.” The sexual weirdness of this *ménage à trois* is palpable as KITT becomes much more of a character, almost stalking. Michael says to Stevie, “I love you,” and KITT starts up with “As Time Goes By” again, and Michael says, “would you stop listening.” As soon as Stevie agrees to marry Michael, a model plane filled with explosives is flown into the house, nearly killing Michael and Stevie. KITT does not warn Michael about it until Michael notices that it is heading toward the house that Stevie is in (KITT and Michael are on the beach). It is as if KITT is not acting to protect Stevie at all. The wedding proceeds, and as soon as they are presented to the audience as Mr. and Mrs. Michael Knight, a man comes into garden and shoots her, and again, KITT did not notify anyone that a man with a gun was approaching.

One thing that marks the heterosexuality of the show is that a majority of episodes end with Michael kissing a young, single, attractive white woman. In episode 1, Michael is placed in the role of new boyfriend: the widowed woman’s kid asks, “are you going to marry my mom?,” very consciously setting up the hetero-narrative; this is a clear difference from the first episode of *The A-Team*, which contains homosexual innuendo. Among other episodes, “Buyout” ends with a few second lip-to-lip kiss with

the damsel in distress figure, shortly before the final banter with KITT. Although the majority of shows end with the kiss, there are a few heterosexual masculinity-affirming variations: at the end of episode 31, during which Knight has lost his memory and reverted to his pre-Knight persona, Michael Long, and KITT has had to help him get his memory back and find out who he is (i.e. there is no woman to be rescued – it is Knight who has to be saved), he drag races another man in a sports car and leaves him at the line, so to speak. And the series itself concludes with an episode that ends with Michael Knight in the arms of the damsel in distress, asking Devon for three days, implicitly to spend with the woman. These “kisses,” however, do should not be taken as complete proof of heterosexuality. In “‘Death Is Irrelevant’: Cyborgs, Reproduction, and the Future of Male Hysteria,” Cynthia J. Fuchs discusses the film *Robocop* and argues that

This “kiss” marks mechanical complications. While construed as “he” within and external to the narrative, Robocop is also not “complete”: without his penis, he can no longer properly service Murphy’s pert suburban wife. More interestingly, his copartner is a woman, so that while he is denied the buddy movie’s conventional thrill of (repressed) homoeroticism, he is also faced continually with his inability to “function” heterosexually. His own technologized, desexed body is the sign of his death and its irrelevance. He is reproduced as corporate product, simultaneously absent and excessive to biological and sexual processes. (286)

In many ways, this discussion is designed for Michael Knight. He is not permitted to consummate his marriage. This also sounds like KITT who can never consummate his own feelings either. Michael’s sexual experiences are limited to these kisses, and yet we are to believe that he is straight. The real relationship in the show is between Michael and KITT, but since we “know” that men and cars can’t have sex, we are denied the “thrill” of eroticism; however, if we can allow for “cyber-sexuality,” then it is a whole new ball game.

A few years after the show ended, a made-for-TV movie was produced, *Knight Rider 2000*. The movie begins with Devon begging Michael to come back for one more

job, but Michael says no, stating that he is no longer that person: “me is fishing, taking care of my Chevy outside.” The content of that statement as well as the diction is “cave-man” *machismo*. Heterosexuality is established at the onset. He finally agrees if KITT will be his partner, but is told that there is one missing computer chip from KITT. It turns out to be in a person, Shawn (another desexed name—since one only knows the spelling is not Sean if one reads the credits) McCormick, and she is sitting next to him; he looks at her, confused, in part it seems because he is attracted to her; she, meanwhile, is very obviously checking him out. In an odd twist, KITT has become a human female, a sexually compatible partner, and Michael seems confused.

When KITT meets the new Knight Industries 4000, he says, “so it’s going to be ‘mine’s bigger than yours?” and KI 4000 responds, “mine is bigger than yours.” Now, the cars are phallic. What had not been overtly sexualized now is. It is hard not to read the earlier episodes with this information: KITT’s big “engine.” That scene is followed by one where Michael, Shawn, and KITT are all together, KITT says, “Michael, please tell this obnoxious person to remove her hands from my wheel” and adds, “who is this repugnant female?” KITT never rejected Michael, even at the beginning when he was much more obnoxious than Shawn. Again, this scene focuses on the tactile, sensual relationship between car and driver. And when KITT finds out that Michael is only back for a month, he asks, “is that true? You should have never brought me back.” The car that had been left for ten years cannot stand the thought of losing Michael again.

In another scene between the three of them, in a memory/thought displayed on KITT’s monitor—he is linked with the chip in head by virtue of her gripping the gear shift knob and receiving an electric memory stimulus—Shawn is swinging with Michael and says, “I love you.” Michael, clearly surprised, looks at her. Like the moment he finds out KITT’s chip is in her head, he does not know what to do with these feelings that can now be physically expressed. It is as if all the desire/emotion he felt for KITT was safe because KITT was a car, but now that he is part female-human, the consequences of such a union are too much for him.

Later, Michael is talking to a rogue officer while KITT is downloading some files and Michael says, about KITT, “she can be a real pain in the butt sometimes. She’s got a mind of her own.” Michael feminizes KITT again, and uses anal imagery in doing so, yet KITT, instead of being slighted, coyly responds, “You enjoyed that, didn’t you.”

When Michael decides to help finish the case after Devon has been killed, he gets back in the car with KITT and Shawn, and says “you had something to do with it,” and KITT blurts out, “DESIRE [...] the scent is quite alluring.” This creates an ambiguous reference until he identifies what desire means, but until he does, it is not clear if the desire for Shawn or for KITT is why he returned, or if KITT was expressing his own desire for Shawn. The cyborg-human-machine relationship potential has become impossible to diagram by this point. The film ends with a loving hug between Michael and Shawn, and his telling her that she knows where to find him. She is the one now to take over KITT who has been transplanted in KI4000.

A far simpler homoeroticism is possible with *The A-Team*. One might argue that the show was originally constructed as overtly campy—this is the way the present European audience tends to read it—but whether an *overtly* campy show would have survived in the mid-1980s is questionable. For it to have survived, there would have had to be significant heterosexual markers to allay any suspicions of Camp by the majority of the audience (which was young and male). There are more overt homosexual references, but they tend to be presented as jokes; as such, it is not camp but hyper-masculinity, *machismo*. However, these stereotypical homosexual references do open up the question of the relationship between hyper-masculinity and homoeroticism. As we will see, each of the members of the A-Team can exist within this space of hyper-masculine homoeroticism because his heterosexuality is affirmed in at least one episode, if not more. Furthermore, their identities as soldiers validate their heterosexuality to the audience, since Americans are so insistent that gays and lesbians are not part of the military.¹¹

From the first episode, “Mexican Slayride,” the idea of homosexuality is referenced and associated with Hannibal, the leader of the team. After the team has

been captured, Hannibal is looking in Amy's purse, supposedly for something to facilitate an escape, and B. A. asks, "coming out of the closet, eh Hannibal?" B. A. can ask this question on the first episode only because of Hannibal's hyper-masculinity – big guns, soldier, and he has been flirting with a young woman – and we know the purse is someone else's. In the third episode, "Pros and Cons," an episode that begins with a very homoerotic scene of two sweaty men, chained together, fighting – one without a shirt, the other in a t-shirt – Hannibal, Murdock, and B. A. intentionally get thrown into jail, where Hannibal pretends to be a swishy hairdresser. Hannibal plays the stereotypical queer in a prison, a place where he will be instantly "feminized." Hannibal can do this, in part because the show has shown him to be so "masculine" that we "know" he will not be anally raped; a similar action can be found in the game "Smear the Queer," where it is only the most "manly" of boys who can take on the designation of "queer" and thus "affirm" his heterosexuality.¹² There are also at least two episodes where Hannibal goes in drag, once as a nun ("Beneath the Surface") and another as Murdock's mother ("Lease with an Option to Die"). To counter any lingering doubts, like *Knight Rider*, there are also token scenes in particular episodes where Hannibal presented as overtly heterosexual: in "Family Reunion," the episode begins with Hannibal and a sexy young woman cooking dinner (she is not referenced after her brief appearance); and in "A Little Town with an Accent," he spends much of the episode trying to seduce a female sheriff. The heterosexuality of the show is maintained because in almost every show, at least one of the four is engaged in some way with a woman, and in at least one show, each character shows some flicker of heterosexuality.

The character who is most often shown seducing women is Face, the most "effeminate" of the group: he dresses impeccably, has perfect hair, knows his *haute couture*. In effect, he is the stereotypical femme, and thus his sexuality must be continuously affirmed. In the second episode, "Children of Jamestown," the relationship between Murdock and Face is depicted in terms not usually permitted "men." When Murdock arrives to "save the day," Face calls him "sweetheart," and when Murdock leaves and Face tells the young woman, "I love that guy." This

exchange is permitted only because for the entire episode up until this point, Face has been flirting with this woman, the stereotypically sexual, "farmer's daughter." This episode ends with Face preparing to kiss this woman when Murdock interrupts and tells Face that he could not find a particular brand of bubble bath for him at the grocery store. Murdock, the object of Face's "love," prevents the heterosexual kiss by revealing Face's "effeminacy"; the woman is surprised. The relationship between Murdock and Face, although intimate, can exist because we see Face incessantly attracted to women and he shoots big guns. In an episode from the second season, "Recipe for Heavy Bread," Face is schmoozing a male maître d' at an exclusive restaurant and Hannibal says, "when's the wedding, Face?" Face answers, "head waiters need to be stroked, Hannibal." Later, everyone returns to the apartment that Face has scammed as "Mr. Tony"; B. A. says, "Mr. Tony – sounds like a hairdresser to me," and Amy asks, "isn't that the name of the famous decorator?" As either a male hairdresser or decorator, Face takes on a queer stereotype, but since he flirts with all the attractive, young women in the apartment complex, the audience is not allowed to pause on the question of his sexuality. Besides the countless episodes where we momentarily see Face with women, there is also an episode, "The Only Church in Town," where we learn that he almost married his college girlfriend; however, she leaves just before he is to ask her to marry him, circumventing any heterosexual consummation yet affirming his heterosexual desire in the same way that Michael Knight's pre-empted marriage does. Both men want to marry women but circumstances beyond their control prevent the marriages.

Murdock, as the mentally unstable individual, is the least constructed along conventional lines of masculinity and is also the freest to act in a "peculiar" manner. As mentally unstable, he can go in drag without it suggesting homosexuality; in different episodes, he is dressed as a nun ("The Only Church in Town"), as a pregnant woman ("Cowboy George"), and as a bride ("Till Death Do Us Part"). "Cowboy George" is inevitably the campiest episode, and the one that would provide the best evidence that this show was originally intended as parodic or campy. Although Boy George was not "out" in 1986, when he appeared in this episode as himself, there were rumors about his

sexuality and at very least, he would be considered “flamboyant” or “effeminate.” So, when Boy George and Murdock join forces to save the other three, the episode inverts their constructions: Boy George kicks in a door and Murdock wears the dress (although Boy George helps him pick it out). Murdock packs dynamite in the dress to appear pregnant, which then counters the sexual connotations of drag; however, Face says to him, “you look better to me as a woman than a man.” And the episode ends with Boy George being introduced as “the roughest, toughest cowpoke to ever ride the range.” Even though Murdock’s “peculiarities” can be attributed to his questionable sanity, he too has the episodes where he is presented as heterosexual. In one episode, “The Trouble with Harry,” Face and Murdock spend the entire episode calling two attractive young women to postpone their dates as the case interferes; heterosexuality is affirmed without sex. In an episode from the final season, “The Spy Who Mugged Me,” Murdock plays a James Bond-type spy, which involves him incessantly hitting on women; there is one scene that begins with him following a trail of woman’s clothing into a room, where she is standing wearing only his shirt, and concludes with him walking out of the bedroom in the morning. But, since he is “playing” a part, can we really determine that he is heterosexual. The only “convincing” episode is “Bounty,” where he kisses the female veterinarian goodbye and she visits him later at the VA asylum.

B.A. is just plain butch. Unlike the others, who are officers, he is the enlisted man, the sergeant. When someone big needs to be punched, it is his job. He does not go in drag, although in “Till Death Do Us Part,” he jumps out of a cake (with a machine gun blazing). Played by Mr. T, B.A. with his Mohawk and gold chains is simulacra and hyper-masculine at the same time, making him similar to a Schwarzenegger character:

In *The Terminator*, Schwarzenegger might appeal in that way to his self-identified straight male audience or to his self-hating gay male spectators: providing them assurance that he “must be” straight (look at those muscles, listen to that taciturnity). But if so, the assurance is everywhere transgressed and evacuated in the Terminator’s relentless opposition to the category of heterosexual. The film after all makes Arnold the apogee of simulation. (Goldberg 247)

What Jonathan Goldberg points out here is that this hypermasculinity is paradoxical, especially if the narrative itself resists heterosexual completion or union, which both *The Terminator* and *The A-Team* do. In “Lease with an Option to Die,” B.A.’s mother says, “A boy shouldn’t wear more jewelry than his mother,” suggesting that there could be questions raised about his masculinity, but since the entire episode is about his saving his mother’s apartment from hoodlums, any doubts are immediately squelched. In only one episode, “There Goes the Neighborhood,” is B.A.’s heterosexuality seriously impugned. All four are living in a suburban house in order to protect a young woman from her manager, and the neighborhood watch leader (male) asks if they are all living together and says, “you’re not?” and makes a waving motion with his hand. B.A. says, “I hope he’s not meaning what I think he means,” and starts towards the man. Hannibal intervenes, mentioning that they are all four recently divorced, and then all five men start talking about machine guns and weaponry. The association of weapons with heterosexual masculinity is blatant and simplistic, but it does seem to serve that function. Shortly thereafter, Hannibal and B.A. go down to confront two motorcycle hoodlums, and one of them says to Hannibal, referring to B.A., “who’s your girlfriend?” Hannibal and B.A. proceed to beat them up, in effect emasculating their opponents and reaffirming their own masculinity. In “The Duke of Whispering Pines,” an old girlfriend calls B.A. to rescue her husband, B.A.’s college rival; by rescuing his rival, B.A. can show that he is better—more “manly”—and we know that somewhere in the past B.A. had a girlfriend. In “Skins,” the A-Team goes to Africa to stop some poachers and B.A. meets a young African woman; he falls for her, but must leave her at the end to stay with the team. This episode is troubling in that it plays to American fears of miscegenation—so much so that the only time we see B.A. *actively* fall for a woman she is in Africa. Like all the other team members, B.A. gives up heterosexual romance to be with the men.

In *The A-Team*’s final year, it too adds a new character, Frankie Santana. By this season, the show has lost much of its whimsy and has become mired in Cold War, Reagan-era espionage plots. In “The Point of No Return,” Frankie and Murdock are

exposed to plutonium; Frankie says “do you think we can still have children?” and Murdock answers, “I don’t think I know you well enough.” This sexualized language can exist because the show has constructed these men as hyper-masculine, and the team undergoes a “treatment” for the radiation poisoning, which is to have Asian women wash them down in a hot spring, twice. B.A. is conspicuously absent from the two “bathing” scenes, which can only suggest a real anxiety on the part of the show about having light-skinned women in a highly suggestive, sexualized encounter with a hyper-masculinized black male. As such, even if we see this show as parody, it still reinforces American racial anxieties and prejudices.

Beyond the initial American audience, *Knight Rider* has been shown in at least eighty countries, and *The A-Team* appears to have been shown in most of the same countries. Based on rather extensive Internet research, however, both shows remain popular only in Europe (western and eastern), North America, and Australia and New Zealand. Obviously, these countries’ historical relationships, both in terms of shared colonialism and Judeo-Christian influence, create countless reasons why American TV shows may remain popular in these areas but not others. However, my interests are in the sexual politics of these countries, which are all derived from the same Judeo-Christian *ethos*. Although the sexual politics of each of these countries is somewhat different, most exhibit some state-sponsored homophobia; the best example of this that only the Netherlands allows gays and lesbians to enter into official marriages, and this has only happened in the last year, while a number of these countries still have anti-sodomy laws on the books. Within these constraints, especially during the considerably more repressive 1980s, a show must sublimate all homoerotic desire. Even now in Hollywood, finding “out” male television actors or “out” male television lead roles is rare.

In the years since both shows first aired in the United States, *Knight Rider* and *The A-Team* have evolved into new entities, and with the advent of the Internet, these shows have created international followings that can now communicate their responses worldwide. Based on self-identification among fan club members, on sites that are not

slash¹³—chat lists and heterosexual fan fiction, for example—all of the fans of *The A-Team* who openly identified themselves were women between 19 and 30 from the U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. The fans of *Knight Rider* were male, within the same age group and geography. Site organizers for both mentioned that their members are more evenly divided among the sexes (usually about half male and half female), but the activity among the groups is gendered. That *Knight Rider's* active audience seems to be comprised of a majority of males, who seem interested more interested in the car than much else, makes sense within a heteronormative society. There are fewer queer markers within the show, and the idea that the “buddy” is a car and the constant presence of Bonnie/April insulate the male audience from the “taint” of homosexuality. However, *The A-Team's* active audience, which is comprised of a majority of women, seems more interested in the characters and uses the show as the basis to interact. Discussions often center around show-oriented games and where particular cast members can be seen (Dirk Benedict is mentioned a lot).

Fan fiction is crucial to the understanding of both audiences. The content of fan fiction surrounding the show *Knight Rider* is almost exclusively heterosexual; however, unlike the show, there is much more sexual contact than the episode-ending kiss. The fact that sexuality is made much more integral to the plot suggests that there is some anxiety about the single man and his male-voiced KITT, some attempt to exorcise the homoerotic subtext. But even with *Knight Rider*, there are a few writers of slash. One of the three writers of *Knight Rider* slash (all self-identified as heterosexual women), “elfin,” takes KITT’s computer chip and implants it in a male android, making physical sex between KITT and Michael possible. Clearly the male audience is far more anxious about the homoerotic potential of the show, while the female audience does not share the same male homosexual anxieties.

The anxieties about male homosexuality seem to have kept men away from *The A-Team* in the present, a curious fact since their original audience was young men. The fan fiction of *The A-Team* is still comprised of countless pages of heterosexual encounters between the characters, but there is a much greater presence of slash. What

is interesting to note is the presence of “Face”: in heterosexual fiction, he is the most common sexual figure; and in slash, he and Murdock are the most often queered, generally together, and usually with Murdock as the “dominant” and Face the “submissive.”¹⁴ Slash often takes suggestive scenes from the shows (examples such as I have shown in earlier sections of this essay) and makes explicit the homoerotic subtext. All of the writers of *The A-Team* slash that self-identify are also American and European women, and a majority is under thirty. Age and sex are important to note because they are not part of the original audience; many were not even born or are too young to remember the shows.

Looking back, these shows appear campy; or maybe, when popular culture is removed from its context, by its very nature, it becomes camp. Are these shows any more removed from their context than TV dinners are from 1960s and 1970s “reality”? Based on the sexualized responses to these shows, both heterosexually and homosexually, it becomes clear that their sexual texts and subtexts are being recognized. There are still anxieties about the homoerotic potential of both *Knight Rider* and *The A-Team*, but fortunately, we are removed from the context, the ultra-conservative Reagan 1980s, and thus the exaggerated masculinity can now be recognized as camp because our concepts of masculinity are changing and our phobias about homosexuality have lessened. Remember, in the United States especially, the Reagan-era homophobia was directly linked to heterosexual society’s fear of AIDS, a disease that at the time was referred to as the “gay cancer.” A heteronormative society dictates that the homoerotic be repressed, but the effect of that repression is a redirection, a manifestation of those desires in other areas. In order for men to interact intimately and personally with other men, there must be some cultural mediation—a car, a football game, guns—to alleviate the fear of any expression of homosexual desire. Thus, Michael Knight and KITT can be read within a heterosexual paradigm in the same way that four men fighting evil can coexist without the suggestion that there is anything sexual between them; but once the structures are exposed, and the subtexts revealed, the relationships appear much more sexualized and suggestive. Are the characters gay? Of course not, but the concept of

masculinity is far more complex than can be reduced to a simple heterosexual/homosexual binary. There is always some degree of homoerotic potential.

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NOTES

¹ One might argue that the talking car in *Knight Rider*, so reminiscent of *Mr. Ed*, is a nod towards the campy, but the early 80s was also the time when a few car manufacturers were experimenting with cars that would tell the driver, "the door is ajar" (needless to say, this was not popular and quickly ended). With *The A-Team*, one could argue that the massive artillery barrages that never hurt anyone are themselves explicitly campy reenactments of hyper-masculinity.

² In the introduction to each episode, Holt says, "I do the work and he takes the bows."

³ John Smith (*The A-Team*) is also a famed Indian killer, but the generic nature of the name allows slightly more deniability.

⁴ A psychoanalytic look at Bonnie's (and April's) relationship to KITT might be interesting since she represents, within the conservative structure of the show, both mother (programmer, creator) at the same time that her job is generally associated with men, especially at the time the show is produced.

⁵ The role of "Bonnie" in *CHiPs* seems to represent the same thing.

⁶ There are quite a few fans who collect and restore the same make/year TransAm of KITT.

⁷ The presence of a repeated figure seems crucial for the male actors as well. Even as far back as *Perry Mason* (1957-66), Mason needs Della Street to affirm his heterosexual masculinity, especially since we now know that Raymond Burr was gay. In the opening credits of each episode of *Magnum P. I.*, Thomas Magnum is shown holding a bikini-clad, female snorkeler in the water as he is staring at her butt. This sequence is completely irrelevant except to affirm the heterosexuality of its star, Tom Selleck, a person about whom the rumors of homosexuality never cease.

⁸ As far as I can tell, all of the international dubbed versions of *Knight Rider* maintain KITT's voice as male.

⁹ Actually, "evil twin" is misleading, since Garth is the evil "original" that Michael is modeled on; the only difference is that Garth has the "evil-signifying" goatee, a camp reference taken from the "evil Spock" episode of the original *Star Trek*.

¹⁰ Butch/femme and light/dark structures are quite common among the men of action/crime series: Starsky and Hutch, Crockett and Tubbs (*Miami Vice*), A. J. and Rick (*Simon and Simon*), Bo and Luke (*Dukes of Hazzard*), John and Ponch (*CHiPs*),

¹¹ *Magnum, P.I.* uses this device as well, with Magnum, Rick, and T. C. all being Viet Nam war veterans.

¹² For a good discussion of the nature of this game and its sexual connotations, see Alan Dundes' "The American Game of 'Smear the Queer' and the Homosexual Component of Male Competitive Sport and Warfare" *Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology* 8.3 (1985): 115-29.

¹³ "Slash" is a term for fan fiction that depicts television (and some film) characters in homosexual situations when the shows that they were on presented them overtly as heterosexual. The name "slash" is taken from the slash in abbreviation "K/S," the short identifier for the most famous and possibly the first "slash" fiction, "Kirk/Spock." For a good explanation and analysis of "slash," see Constance Penley's "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture," 479-493, in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁴ "Dominant" and "submissive" represent a stereotypical positioning of gay men within a stereotypical heterosexual paradigm, where one male is the "man" (penetrator/dominant/active) and the other is "feminized" (penetrated/submissive/passive).