

Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet

New Essays

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9. My Life Is a WIP on My LJ

Slashing the Slasher and the Reality of Celebrity and Internet Performances

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ABSTRACT.—I connect the performance of queerness with a general reading of real person slash (RPS), focusing on LiveJournal.com (LJ)'s often highly sexualized interactions and the way identity is performed in this medium. This performance brings together the fannish, political, and personal in ways previously separated. By looking at the way fans perform their online identities and enact certain roles with and for one another, I suggest that much of fannish interaction contains its own version of RPS. I use discussions centered around fannish displays of affection, mock queerness, and concerns about the political implications of such behavior. LJ users relate to each other through adopted personas and avatars, tending to view one another as extrapolations of these highly performative roles. In so doing, our fannish daily interaction on LJ and off may not be that dissimilar from the RPS that LJ users read and write. Discourses about fans—where real-life identity is partially hidden and where online identities are partially performed—allow fans to engage with one another's personas, which are understood to not fully coincide with the actual person. In both RPS and LJ discourses, there is a certain awareness of its simultaneous reality and performativity. Rather than dismissing LJ and other fannish roles as false, we must acknowledge the similarities of online social networks to face-to-face ones. These roles may tell us more about our actual identities than any attempt to separate real from false, real from virtual, or real from fictional ever could.

Fandom as Queer Female Space

Although fan fiction may always have had its share of lesbian, bisexual, and even gay male writers, their greater visibility among both fans and academics is more recent. As late as 2004, academics still claimed that the majority of fan writers were straight women (Smol 2004). However, anecdotal evidence and informal polls suggest that the number of self-identified not-straight women is proportionally greater in fandom than in the population at large. Part of the recent greater visibility is obviously a reflection of changes in culture, so that there are both more young women who are out as well as women who may not have been comfortable declaring their sexuality in surveys in the 1980s but who can do so now that there are more inclusive understandings of queerness.

Within slash fandom in particular, issues of homosexuality are central, and fandom, with its greater tolerance, has often been a place for women to explore and negotiate issues of sexuality by reading and writing their desires, by acknowledging and sharing sexual preferences. Validating various desires in media fandom dates at least to *Star Trek's* IDIC (“infinite diversity in infinite combinations”), but slash in particular raises particular issues of identity and sexualities: women writing fantasies with and for one another projected through and by same-sex desires suggests that fandom may be a queer female space—if not at the level of the text and the writers, then at least at the level of their interaction. I have previously inverted Sedgwick’s (1985) argument and described this phenomenon as “a homosocial—even homoerotic—bond ‘between women’ where reader and author are making love over the naked bodies of attractive men” (Busse 2005, 121). Furthermore, within the often disembodied culture of the Internet, physical gestures of interaction, such as *hugs*, *pets*, or even *smooches*, are common. In the absence of real physicality, the virtual one is exaggerated and often sexualized (Lackner et al., this volume). Emotional intimacy frequently gets translated into images of physical intimacy so that close fannish ties become verbalized in sexual language. After all, slashers are trained to tease out homoerotic subtext in the texts they encounter, which applies to their own interaction as well. Also, the vocabulary of slashers tends to be sexual, so it does not seem far-fetched to use similar images and terms in other areas of discourse: slashed objects and other slashers alike get appraised with a *lick*. Random *snogs* and *humps* get distributed as general tokens of friendship in the same way porn gets written as metaphoric interaction: gratitude, comfort, or even apology.

These modes of discourse create an ambiguous space in which sexuality has shifted almost completely into the realm of fantasy: slashers can present

themselves as any chosen gender or none at all, with any degree of sexual orientation and preferences they want to project. We don't live in the virtual world alone, however, so embodied reality and virtual fantasies can clash. Moreover, the virtual exhibitionist demonstrations of this sexual behavior often seem strange, even sometimes offensive, to those who live with discrimination on a daily basis, rather than those who simply playfully engage with their sexualities in a safe, queer-friendly space. Although statements about sexual identity are hard to substantiate, many women acknowledge that their queerness often is restricted to the virtual realm as they live their "real" heteronormative lives. Fans for whom there are less clearly defined boundaries between their "real" and online queerness often resent behavior that restricts itself to the safety of the online community. But sexualities are just one aspect of fannish identity: slashers perform their identities in many ways, and the concept of queerness itself is clearly complex and not wholly containable in a straight/gay binary, or even a continuum including a variety of sexualities and expressions thereof (see Halperin 1990; Doty 1995).

Here, I want to connect the performance of queerness with a general reading of real person slash (RPS). In particular, I focus on LiveJournal.com's often highly sexualized interactions and how LJ users (and I am one myself, so I say "we" and "our") perform identity in this medium that brings together the fannish, political, and personal in ways previously separated in fannish discourses. By looking at the way fans perform their online identities and enact certain roles with and for one another, I suggest that much of fannish interaction contains its own version of RPS. LJ fan discourses at times read like slash narratives; this is especially the case for cowritten erotic stories and role-playing games, which present more formalized and performed instantiations of such erotic interactions. There is an awareness in both RPS and LJ discourses of their simultaneous reality and performativity. RPS discussions address the fact that for most fans, celebrities are simultaneously real and fictional, and that fans can talk about their fantasies as if they were real while being aware that this "reality" merely constitutes a fandomwide conceit. Fans engage with one another's personas, all the while knowing that they may not fully coincide with the actual person offline. In fact, within fannish spaces, it is not altogether clear whether one persona is any more "real" than another; after all, the extreme intimacies shared among fans may reveal more of a person than most offline interactions can.

I begin this essay with a review of some of the arguments about what one fan has termed the "queer minstrel show" (Jenny, LJ, January 1, 2005) by using a

particular incident that spawned debate within the LJ fan community. These discussions centered around fannish displays of affection and concerns about the political implications of such behavior. In order to find one possible explanation of such sexual LJ performances, I turn toward RPS, its relationship to reality, and its particular canon construction. From this perspective, I analyze Isilya's 2004 fan fiction "Not Based on a True Story," which connects fannish friendships and RPS concerns. Much of our fannish interaction and behavior must be read as partially performative. Although I don't want to dismiss the real friendships and romantic relationships that evolve around online fandom, I want to foreground the ways in which many of us do interact through various personas and avatars, and how easily we view one another as extrapolations of the performative role enacted within fannish spaces. In so doing, I suggest that our fannish daily interaction, both on and off LJ, may not be that dissimilar from the RPS we read and write insofar as both draw from the contradictory information presented by a consciously constructed public persona. These imagined and imaginative roles may tell us more about who we are than any facile attempt to separate real from false, virtual, or fictional ever could.

Lust Memes and Sexualized Discourses

This essay was inspired by debates sparked by a late 2004 "lust meme," which introduced me to the term "queer mistrel show." The lust meme asked respondents to anonymously name a person on LJ with whom they wanted to have sex. The question this immediately raises, of course, is whether any these posters actually experience real lust for their chosen LJ user, or whether such an articulation of appreciating someone's thoughts, writing, or friendship ought to be articulated in terms of sexual desire. The responses on the issue range from seeing such sexualized discourse as innocent play to finding these highly charged same-sex interactions offensive. Much of the debates ultimately depend on how closely one connects online fannish with real-life identities. As such, many want to distinguish between women who come to terms with their own sexualities in safe fannish spaces and those who use fandom to play at a queerness that they would refuse to acknowledge in real life. Whereas the former constructs the fannish fantasy space as a place where women can experiment and explore, the latter uses the fantasy as a self-contained space where queerness is played out in lieu of any potential effects on real lives. In other words, if the

fannish space is seen by most sides as a safe place to explore one's sexualities and sexual fantasies, the question remains whether and how these insights connect to nonfannish areas of the fans' lives.

Some fans see this playful exploration of queerness and sexualities without consequences as exploitative and offensive. Not being able to distinguish between actual flirting and its safe, straight mimicry, not being able to separate potential partners from women who simply like to draw attention, some lesbian and bi fans feel marginalized by a culture that permits a masquerade of queer discourse and thereby trivializes queer identities and experiences. The following description is fairly representative of a particular response on the part of some fans to the sexualization of fan space that threatens to exclude gays and bisexuals in its very appropriation of discourses of queerness and in its simultaneous seeming dismissal of their sexual desires:

That discourse makes me cranky. The gay-for-LJ stuff as a whole makes me cranky—not just the **licks** and *I love yous*, but the *oh, look, we're so *cool* because we're straight chicks turning on other straight chicks!* stuff, too. 'cause, hey, we're not all straight chicks. And we're not all always about the pseudo-porn, either. The discourse, both the performative stuff and the meta **about** the sexualization, usually ends up estranging me even farther, because at my crankiest, it feels like offensive, demeaning play of the overprivileged [Glossing, LJ, January 1, 2005].

Beyond such a sense of exclusion, many gay, lesbian, and bisexual writers indicate that they perceive homophobia within slash writing and its surrounding discourses, most importantly in the fetishization of gay sex and the lack of a clear sociocultural and historicopolitical context. These objections are important, if only to sustain a debate about the difference between fan fiction and political activism. Simply reading and writing gay sex and enjoying the depiction of gay characters is not necessarily an act of subversion; in fact, it may become its opposite when such an engagement occurs completely divorced from any realistic context and in the absence of awareness of sexual politics in general and gay rights in particular.

Given postmodern gender theory's propensity for performativity and ludic experimentation, it would be easy to simply write off fannish queer gender performance as a positive and useful fantasy; in fact, it would be easy to

subsume it under the larger categories of all identity construction and the way we enact multiple roles online and off (Schechner 1988; Butler 1990; Haraway 1991; Balsamo 1997). Then again, for many slashers, their hobby may ultimately be a highly personal exploration of desires. Although they may be politically aware and working in varying degrees to fight homophobia, they do not necessarily do so through their fan fiction. Their writings, and the discourses surrounding them, are as varied as they are. Often the particular genre or even the fandom makes it difficult to foreground political statements: for example, many science fiction–based fandoms have difficulties addressing contemporary sociohistorical issues such as gay marriage or AIDS; they may be mapped onto other concerns, such as xenophobia. Moreover, much slash writing focuses on the lives *not* seen on screen. Where most series focus on the protagonists’ jobs or callings, often showing them encountering (and fighting) crime, evil, or aliens, many slash stories skew towards the personal. Slash fic is thus often more concerned with the characters’ feelings than the political climate surrounding them.

This phenomenon of sexualized online interaction can possibly be explained by regarding these discourses as an extended metaphor for a variety of relationships along a continuum of friendship and intimacy that can—but need not—be sexual. In effect, this recalls discourses on nineteenth-century female friendship that foreground the range from friendship and emotional intimacy to desire and sexual relationships (Smith-Rosenberg 1985; Faderman 1981). Fabu, for example, suggests that the sexualized discourse in fandom may be a signifier for levels of intimacy and friendship:

But I wonder if, for those who are “performing,” if what they’re acting out isn’t sexual identity but friendship; if the credibility that people gain from those interactions is not “queer street cred” but a more general kind of status.... If nothing else, that sort of flirty talk makes it very clear to everyone else in the conversation that these two posters are friendly with one another. So do all the ::squishes your boobies:: and ::dipsnog::s function as a kind of advertisement of how close we are? [LJ, May 11, 2005].

Only close friends can comfortably address one another in such a manner, so that communicating in such a suggestively sexual way, especially in a semipublic forum, in effect clearly indicates one’s friendship. Explicit forms of affection become a code used by the participants to signify their relationships, and the

terms of affection also function as a form of symbolic currency to signify these friendships to others. This evidence of friendship is especially important in an environment like LJ, where one's social capital often is measured in length of "friends-of" lists (an indication of readership), numbers of comments received, and acknowledgments in other journals.

This interpretation of the sexualized discourse among fans interestingly mirrors one of the earliest explanations of slash: Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diane Veith suggest that slash should not be understood as pornography but rather in terms of "true love and authentic intimacy" (1986, 238). In other words, explicit sexual descriptions in slash resonate on some level as metaphors for close friendship and intimacy between the slashed protagonists. The relationship between slashers thus parallels the relationship between the men that they write about: both for descriptions of their own relationships and in their slash narratives, women use sexual metaphors that stand in for, or stand instead of, emotional intimacy and friendship love. Returning to Fabu's argument, slashers are women who write sexually explicit fiction with and for one another at the same time as they often use similar explicitness in their actual interaction. Although one purpose of these sexualized discourses within and outside the fiction is certainly sexual, another aspect testifies to close friendship and intimacy that may be eroticized, but not necessarily sexual.

Many women describe fandom as the first place where they truly created friendship ties with other women and found levels of intimacy otherwise foreclosed to them. These friendships may include or may be played out in physical closeness—for example, some women meet partners or lovers through slashdom. Others simply enjoy the comfort they feel around other slashers and can show that through physical affection. Michelle, for example, describes how "physical affection as an expression of respect is something I've rarely seen outside of feminist and fandom circles" (personal communication, May 21, 2005). The sexualized discourse then becomes as much a testament to these friendships as it celebrates women taking control of their own sexuality, if only in their minds and virtual bodies. Far from arguing that online friendships are less real than ones initiated offline, I'd suggest that the lines often blur: many slashers who are close will get to know one another offline and thus add another level of meaning to their online relationship. Moreover, these friendships can be often more intense (both in terms of frequency of contact and levels of intimacy) as a result of a different level of anonymity that invites opening up quickly (Turkle 1995; Rheingold 2000; Donath 2003; Henderson and Gilding 2004).

How Real Is Reality?

This metaphoric reading of online sexualized LJ discourses suggests that there exists a strong performative aspect of demonstrating one's relationship to other fans (Hills 2002). I therefore want to put forth a related yet slightly different reading of the lust meme, one that connects it to its medium, LJ. The move to LJ as the primary mode of fannish interaction in many fandoms has created a plethora of discussions and self-analysis among fans. One of the central differences between mailing lists and LJ is the personalization of interaction, as noted in Busse and Hellekson's introduction to this volume. On LJ, all levels of discourse—personal, public, fannish—exist on the same level: a reader must read what is posted, whether it is an update on someone's personal life or her latest story update. Fannish discourse is thus often merged with the personal, and someone's stories may become inextricably linked with the way she performs her identity on LJ. People as well as stories become central to fannish interaction because the fan follows an individual's LJ, where before she would have joined a fandom- or pairing-specific mailing list. This growing emphasis on personality partly explains the lust meme and its underlying motivations.

I want to consider the lust meme and the sexualized LJ discourse as an engagement between the personalities constructed for the specific LJ interaction. Much of the sexualized LJ discourse between slash fans can instead be understood as a performance played out between the slashers' LJ personas. In RPS, fans purposefully use real-life information to create fictional worlds inhabited by fictional protagonists. Likewise, the process of creating LJ personas is not unlike RPS character construction: in both cases, "real people" get transformed into characters, and factual information becomes the canon on which to base fan fiction. Understanding the way fan writers create RPS canon and conceive of their creations as ultimately fictional and constructed—and yet with a basis in a certain mediated reality—allows us to reconsider online fannish interactions as similarly constructed, yet tied to reality. The lust meme, read in relation to a close study of RPS, can be understood as another version of RPS, with fandom itself as the playing field; or rather, fannish engagement among fans within the LJ space encompasses some of the same concerns with identity, reality, and performance as RPS.

One of the central concerns of RPS is the question of reality, both in the sense of

how real events enter and shape the stories, and the impact these stories can have on the real lives of fans. Unlike much of the tabloid press, which purports to tell the truth, RPS writers consciously declare their writing to be fictional and clearly separate their stories from rumors. But they simultaneously refuse to follow the cliché of declaring the stars' public performances a fiction and the celebrities fake and fabricated. Instead, RPS narratives present celebrities as fully formed, intricate, and interesting characters, in opposition to their often one-dimensional media portrayals. This humanizing process allows the RPS authors to create the celebrity as she wishes: as an object of desire, as someone to identify with, or as a re-creation of the celebrity's supposedly "real" self.

Canon formation in RPS is more complicated than in most media- and book-based fandoms—or rather, its complications are more clearly visible. Canon is a constructed narrative created by selecting and juxtaposing "official" and "personal" material. Official material may be as varied as magazine, TV, and radio interviews, commercially released DVDs and CDs, or even more or less supported rumors. Personal material includes accounts of celebrity encounters by fans, shared through a fannish online network. Because there doesn't exist any true author(ity) or true owner of the source text, no single canon source can be claimed; as a result, the canon is created simultaneously by the celebrities, the media, and the fans. As RPS writers try to establish what exactly constitutes canon, they constantly determine the authenticity and truth status of any given footage, debating whether seemingly candid moments are really premeditated or rehearsed. Given that most RPS is written in a "collaborative fantasy space" (Mary, LJ, November 23, 2002), the authenticity of any canon fact is ultimately irrelevant. If the fans agree to treat given information as fact, if they collectively include it in their canon, it has become truth within the fannish universe, regardless of its objective truth status.

As I've argued elsewhere (Busse 2006), RPS lends itself to investigating issues of identity: it imagines the real life of a celebrity, someone whose life is forever in the public eye, whose every action and feeling is put on display for the world to see. The relationship between the media image and the actual person is a constant topic for celebrities because the discrepancy between the public and the "real" self is significant at that level of public exposure. RPS stories thus often tease out the relationship between private and public self as they imagine a reality behind the celebrity persona; these inquiries also allow readers and writers to contemplate their own identity construction and performative roles. At the center of most RPS lies the complicated negotiation between the actual

public performances and the author-imagined fantasies of the celebrity's reality.

The anxieties among RPS writers about their ability to separate public and private became clear in the aftermath of the October 2004 discovery of personal photos of the *Lord of the Rings* cast. After pictures from a private party were leaked online, the fan community passionately debated the appropriateness of seeing these photos, which were clearly not meant for public consumption. One *LotR* RPS fan pinpoints the discomfort as being situated within fans' desire for observing the celebrity privately as well as in their guilt in so doing:

there probably isn't any direct effect on the guys of having a bunch of fans see their personal photos. i think people chose to see it as that, though, because of the way it made *them* feel to see them—I know that when i was looking at them i was like “hee, these are great!” but the more i looked the more i could see they were personal, and that made me uncomfortable [Hope, LJ, October 15, 2004].

Rather than agreeing with the consensus that viewing these personal photos offends the actors because their privacy is violated, Hope suggests that the pictures and their seeming intimacy and private nature make fans uncomfortable because they collapse an imagined and fictionalized private life onto actual personal images. She argues that fans' own anxieties about RPS get projected onto the celebrities so that the fans' own sense of intrusion becomes a protective gesture for the stars' privacies. One of the reasons fans may be so protective of the celebrity's privacy is an underlying discomfort with slashing actual people. This concern is controlled by maintaining a clear dichotomy between the public and the private, a dichotomy that collapsed with the publication of these clearly private shots. Moreover, aware of the fact that any celebrity's public face is necessarily a well-constructed performance, fans often fetishize a conceived reality behind the media facade, and fans identify with these fetishized, protected, private aspects of the stars, even as the fans' very observation destroys its private quality.

RPS writers use media images to create their own versions of the celebrity to interrogate the relationship between these various constructions and, self-consciously aware of how any social interaction shapes and constructs identity, thematize the difficulties in negotiating public and private self. They repeatedly confront the issue of reality and performativity, both in regard to the celebrities and in their perceptions of their own experiences as author-fans. RPS then is

both about a collectively created fan space and about a desire to reach the private persona behind the public one; it functions in the constant paradox of being simultaneously real and constructed, of reveling in its own constructedness at the same time as it purports a clear connection to reality. RPS is both more fictional and more real than its media-based counterparts, and possibly because of this, its writers are often more self-conscious of their role and the various functions that RPS serves.

Not Based on a True Story

Celebrity studies, following Richard Dyer's groundbreaking *Stars* (1998), has often focused on the ways in which fans interact with celebrities, and, most importantly, how they use celebrities as objects of identification (Stacey 1991; Rojek 2001; Turner 2004). However, it is also important to note that fans relate to celebrities in any number of identificatory patterns, and that slash fans in particular often control and manipulate these identifications. Slash fans write their RPS characters as addressing issues of identity construction and performativity, and in so doing, they deal with their own identities, relationships, and desires (Busse 2006). Isilya's popslash story "Not Based on a True Story" (2004) is an unsettlingly familiar account of fannish anxieties and hopes, dreams, and fears that casts *NSYNC's band members as boy band slashers and describes in great detail the writing of a popslash story and the emotions that accompany such a process. Isilya creates characters that readers recognize: they are simultaneously the celebrities they actually are and representations of slashers. In so doing, this self-recursive story recounts not only the act of fannish writing, but also the complicated, often homoerotic, ties it creates between slash readers and writers.

"Not Based on a True Story" begins with an excerpt from "This Must Be Pop," an RPS story written by the central character, Justin. The creation of this fanfic constitutes the essential part of the plot: "Nick is not a snob, but AJ is a fanboi with an i. It's maybe something to do with the endless song lyrics AJ posts in his journal, the quizzes, the anime smilies." The title evokes a line from *NSYNC's "Pop" and thus clearly situates the story within a fannish alternate universe where Justin doesn't pen song lyrics but fan fiction instead.

The story's central characters, *NSYNC band members Justin and JC, are cast as

slashers, who in turn slash the pop stars of their own reality. Justin's fan fiction, "This Must Be Pop," is in itself a slasher AU in which its protagonists, Backstreet Boys band members Nick and Howie, have themselves become authors of popslash. In other words, the story operates on three levels of reality: Isilya's (and our own) reality with her as a popslasher and Justin, JC, Nick, and Howie as pop stars; the reality of "Not Based on a True Story," with Justin and JC as popslashers and Nick and Howie as pop stars; and the reality of "This Must Be Pop," with Nick and Howie as popslashers. By placing boy band celebrities in the role of "us," the story evokes several analogies: the use of well-known song lyrics in place of a fanfic title suggest similarities between various creative writing impulses, and the relationship between *NSYNC's band members (which popslashers obviously have already accepted as homoerotic) is sketched onto the relationship of the slashers within the story and—by extension—onto the readers.

Like most recursive fiction, "Not Based on a True Story" invites the reader to move in both directions. Although every story becomes an indistinct replica of the reality of its writing, the reverse is also true: as Justin writes his life onto the character of Nick, Nick's story offers insight into Justin. The various excerpts from "This Must Be Pop," which track the meeting, instant connection, and subsequent friendship between Nick and Howie, are interspersed with Justin's thoughts about himself, the story, fandom, and his aborted friendship with former friend and cowriter JC. Justin and JC's relationship is thus mirrored in Nick and Howie's, and the happy ending between the latter two becomes a means to invite the same for the former. The conclusion finds Justin using his writing to approach JC anew, so that the story within the story becomes a means to create a potentially happy ending.

This invites the reader to create a second mirroring of realities and wonder whether "Not Based on a True Story" might have a purpose within real life fannish interaction as well. In other words, by realizing how much of Nick is in Justin, and how much of Nick's reality mirrors Justin's, the reader is encouraged to question how similar Justin and JC's world is to our own. In fact, although "Not Based on a True Story" itself denounces its basis in reality in its title, the similarities between the two levels of narrative within the text are obvious. Readers are invited to move beyond the boundaries of the fictional text by seeing the fictional interactions mirrored in actual fannish ones. With Justin autobiographically writing Nick's anxieties about self-insertion and other fannish concerns, Isilya succeeds in distancing these issues while simultaneously

bringing them to the fore. By making all characters male, she allows readers a certain level of detachment (Lamb and Veith 1986; Penley 1992; Jenkins 1992). By displacing our neuroses onto these celebrities, who in turn write them into their own stories, she forces us to confront some of our more embarrassing behavior while making it more attractive in the familiar characters of Justin and Nick. The story displaces onto fictionalized celebrities “unpopular fannish truths,” as in this moment of fannish fatigue where Justin fantasizes about leaving fandom:

You brush your teeth, staring at yourself in the mirror, thinking about how you came to be in fandom, who you’ve loved, who you’ve lost and all the reasons for you now to leave. You spit and rinse and pull out a length of floss, counting wanks and wars and flames ... you have stored in copy-pasted emails and chat logs. Kind of a litany of unpopular fannish truths, if you like. Bizarre and slightly sickening sex triangles. Cat chemotherapy. Authors flaming their own stories under religious sockpuppets to rally support. Betrayal, backstabbing and the IP addresses of all 567 comments in the Anonymous Hate meme.

Isilya’s story creates a certain level of discomfort in many of its readers. By casting the pop stars as slashers, she makes them more like fans and thus not protected by their celebrity otherness; and by revealing aspects of fandom that fans do not often talk about in public, she holds up a disconcerting mirror to fandom. Trobadora describes, “In a way it hits just a bit too close to home, doesn’t it? It feels like publicly psychoanalysing your own family, and part of it is not that you don’t want to, but that you don’t want to expose yourself in that way to outsiders” (LJ, December 28, 2004). And Betty Plotnick writes, “I very much enjoyed it, and at the same time it made me extremely uncomfortable and I wondered if I should maybe be telling a trusted adult about it” (LJ, December 28, 2004). Part of the discomfort, of course, is how much of the Nick to Justin analogy can be read as Justin to author, and how intimately the story explores the homosocial and homoerotic space of fandom, with all its positive and negative characteristics.

The slash community has extensively discussed this issue of slashdom as a homoerotic space. A panel at Escapade (an annual slash convention) in 2004 was entitled “Slashing the Slasher: Slash as Not So Virtual Circle Jerk.” Many slashers agree that the writing and reading as well as the interaction surrounding the fiction is erotically charged and that this may or may not extend into real life

and actual relations. Elizabeth Guzick calls this the “erotics of talk” and notes, “No matter what identity of behaviors many women readers and writers of slash claim, there is an unmistakable erotics between and among them, often taking a triangular form like Justin’s new song or Chris’s script being the point of contact between the two mutual readers” (personal communication, 2004). Guzick’s description of the erotics of reading and writing with and for one another, triangulated through the erotic slash text, is exemplified both in the way Justin describes his slow courtship with JC and in the way he finally uses his story as an offer of reconciliation.

In a way, then, Isilya’s story strongly resonates with many readers because she captures both the psychological dimension of many fan experiences and the complicated dynamic of many fannish relations. The story is clearly set in a version of our own fannish space of LJ. Current fan vocabulary is used and specific fan events are referenced—wank, hate threads, Escapade, sock puppets. Moreover, the relationship between Justin and JC, written into an alternate universe in which their avatars, Nick and Howie, are popslashers, is perhaps uncomfortably familiar to many slashers. Justin’s memories of his and JC’s relationship resonate with the way most slash fans interact online, growing closer through intense LJ debates, extensive e-mail exchange, instant message conversations, phone calls, and personal meetings. As such, Justin and JC stand in for slashers, and the homoerotic relationships explored within the stories facilitate and mirror the ones between the fans.

LJ, Slashing the Slasher, and Performing Identities

In order to slash Justin, the writer must imagine what the “true” version underneath could look like; in other words, RPS creates a fictional “real” self, extrapolated from the public persona. As a result, RPS deals with at least three different versions of the celebrity: the real star whom we can never know, the public performance of the star, and the extrapolated star where the writer fictionalizes a supposed private life. Similarly, slashers themselves exist in these various roles where the “real” person is not necessarily much like her LJ persona. After all, RPS fictionalizes a reality out of clues gathered from public discourse—in this context, LJ. Such a “real” persona might be extrapolated by readers from the information, tone, and ethos they have picked up in LJ, but it can never be more than an approximation of the actual person.

One of the repeated objections most RPS writers encounter is the question of how they themselves would feel if someone used them as raw material for writing fan fiction, which most RPS writers refute by emphasizing the split between public and private individuals. After all, although all of us create various identities to present to the world, celebrities display them publicly, as part of their celebrity text, and as a result, “celebrity status always implies a split between a private and a public self” (Rojek 2001, 11). Such a clearly pronounced public persona makes celebrities particularly apt for fanfic writers who manipulate the celebrity text to imagine a more private alternative identity. Nevertheless, the often-voiced objection invites the comparison of how similar slashers’ online personas may be to those of public celebrities: both pop star and slasher exist on the same ontological status of textual artifact, neither being real but only referencing the real person and body. The fall 2002 “Slashing the Slasher” challenge exemplified the awareness that there often is little difference in what kind of source text produces the slash stories’ canon. The challenge, which asked writers to slash an assigned slasher with other characters (other slashers, celebrities, fictional characters), places all three on a level and reveals all of them to be textual creations. Louisa Ellen Stein (this volume) describes how role-playing games often create a similar situation: RPG character journals coexist with “real” journals, and the characters communicate with regular LJ users.

In many cases, then, the lust meme did not actually make any statements about real sexual desire, but rather performed a sexualized discourse by taking personas and expanding a fictional universe for them. In fact, given the often elusive nature of Internet identities in general, readers have to rely on the information that is revealed by the Internet persona. Often, we share aspects of our “real” lives on LJ, but rarely can others determine whether they are truthful or not. At the same time, especially on LJ, there are all kinds of overlaps between these various selves. There is no clear separation between the various roles any subject performs. Even though LJ is indeed a performance, this performance is often supplemented by other forms of interaction that may contradict or enhance the information provided on LJ. Just like RPS canon construction, with its contradictory and complicated sources, extrapolating any real person from the various information we are given is complicated and likely impossible.

LJ as Postmodern Space

All subjects perform a variety of roles when interacting, and any real person one might meet is similarly an extrapolation of the information she discloses, a creation of their (fictionally “real”) persona. We all play roles; we all interact with versions of our interlocutors that often depend on the context of these interactions. Online discourses, however, which lack all but the purely textual levels of interaction, allow for a greater variety of role playing, and at times a greater ability for a subject to control her performance of varying roles. After all, online interaction allows people to meet, talk, and interact without the restraints of knowing one another’s physical status, whether it be gender, age, color, or any other qualifying characteristics. In fact, much of the research in the area of Internet identity construction has focused on the fact that identity claims are generally not verifiable, so one can enact different identities (Haraway 1991; Balsamo 1997; Turkle 1995; Donath 2003). Interestingly, fandom on the whole rarely seems to engage in such blatant role playing; although some fans choose to not reveal central identifying characteristics, in my experience and that of most people I have talked to, how fans present themselves online is often very similar to the way they present themselves in real life. Yet it would be wrong to simply assume that our fannish online personas are identical to our real life ones—if only in the most basic sense that it is impossible to determine one’s real identity.

LJ, in particular, as a result of its rhizomatic and multipurpose quality, provides a complex and challenging medium in which to construct a textual identity. Not only do we get the serial narrative of a poster’s life in her own journal, we may also see her name referenced, or come across comments she has written in other places. LJ users constantly interlink and reference each other, so that one can easily have a sense of another user solely from encounters in other journals. Of course, even an LJ persona is not necessarily consistent. Just like in offline interaction, context affects behavior. One LJ user says of personas,

I’m beginning to think there are two aspects to the LJ persona: there’s the more ornate “performance” of the personal blog and commenting within that (decorating your house just the way you want, and then inviting the neighbourhood); and most LJs have a definite, individual mood to them; and then there is the commenting persona, running off to chat and argue, and in so doing performing the dialogue and creating the mood on yet another LJ [Parthenia, LJ, May 26, 2005].

Parthenia perceives her identity as constructed in different ways, depending on the context and environment in which she writes. Any factual evidence about a given LJ user that contributes to her LJ identity—her canon, so to speak—may be contradictory or false. And as noted above, LJ interaction is often supplemented with other forms of communication, including e-mail and face-to-face encounters. The LJ persona is actually a complex and complicated construction, drawn from various sources. Like with celebrity constructions, there is a shared understanding, yet each observer has her own idiosyncratic reading. In other words, although fandom may interpret a celebrity/LJ user in a certain way, any individual fan's personal interpretation and/or experience may subtly change this common reading.

As the last few years have experienced the shift from a more formalized mailing list culture to LJ as the primary mode of interaction, issues of popularity and fame have become more pertinent and visible. The very nature of Big Name Fan as something to be aspired to (or derided), the repeated discussions on how to become “someone” in fandom, all suggest that online persona is indeed an important aspect of many fans' identity and affects their self-worth in a supposedly separate “real life” as well. What is interesting in terms of our discussion here is the way we have become accustomed to the various manipulations of reality and the way reality is always already narrativized and packaged to entertain. Pop stars may be more obvious instantiations of this trend, with Jessica Simpson and Britney Spears performing even their most intimate private moments, but these are just examples of a more general interest in stars' supposedly private lives that in turn become public.

Similarly, LJ has effectively placed public and private personas next to each other, allowing them to intersect, mix, and merge. Where before we had a seeming distinction between an author persona and a more focused and thematically contained discussion of shows and stories on mailing lists, LJ places all information on an equal level, whether it be an intensely personal revelation, a random show discussion, a generic quiz, or a political call for action. As a result, the LJ poster becomes a performer of her own life, sharing private details next to fannish ones, switching between her various roles and between a variety of discourses. In effect, this is what Swmbo alludes to when she says, “my life is a WIP on LJ” (LJ, January 6, 2005): she narrates her life in installments—serially, a work in progress, just like many of the stories we follow; and the character she plays may be as constructed as the protagonist of that story.

When looking at LJ identities in such a way, it becomes obvious how slashers who already are used to sexualizing interaction between the characters they fictionalize may indeed do the same to their own LJ personas, that the lust meme is indeed another RPS in which the anonymous commenter imagines her LJ identity having sex with the admired, fangirled, maybe even fantasized about and desired LJ user persona. One of the things RPS can teach us, then—especially RPS, which blurs the lines between authors and celebrities and imagines authors as fictional personas—is that any belief in clear separation of the real and fictional are illusory. Rather than use that awareness to vilify RPS as more real than we'd like it to be, I think we need to look at interactions fans perceive as “real” and observe their performative components. This may be particularly apparent in the online world, but performative behavior is clearly not restricted to online interaction; it affects every aspect of our “real” lives.

Rather than dismissing LJ and other fannish roles as false or using them to imply that the fannish online community is, at best, an illusory space and, at worst, dangerous in its mimicry of personal intimacy (Ludlow 1996), we must acknowledge the similarities of online social networks to other, face-to-face, ones (Henderson and Gilding 2004). On a practical level, many fans don't rely solely on online contact, so the dichotomy becomes ineffectual; on a theoretical level, real-life encounters enact similar but different modes of performances. Critics of queer online performativity are correct in assessing a danger that such engagement may try to function as a sole substitute for political action. However, with the ever-widening reach of fanfic and slash, not only do its uses and abuses increase, so do the debates surrounding it. It is these ongoing and important discussion about homophobic slash and slashers—it is the dialogue, however aggressive or confrontational at times, that make this fannish space not a utopian community but a real one.

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