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Feminist Conflict and the Politics of Fantasy
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This is the first talk for a book project, Alexis Lothian and I are working on right now, tentatively entitled *Slash Fan Fiction and the Politics of Fantasy*. In it we are tracing popular slash tropes in order to understand their appeal within a framework of fantasy—sexual, narrative, and political. And while both of us start from a place that embraces sexual fantasies, we also self-reflexively interrogate what it means when certain fantasies dominate and how they may interact with our lived realities.

INTRODUCTION

Two weeks ago the Organization for Transformative Works, the parent nonprofit that created and runs the Archive of Our Own (AO3) had its biannual fundraiser. And among the biannual complaints about how the AO3 could be run much more cheaply, how the org wasted everyone's money, and how the code running the archive was total crap, there were a large number of calls to not support this fanwork archive because it publishes all fan fiction, even stories that many readers would find problematic or offensive.

Fan fiction archives come large and small, thematic or fandom focused, and many restrict certain forms of fiction. When the OTW was founded in 2007 it was in response to both the increased monetization of user-created content on the one hand and the fear of having one's writing deleted by the content host on the other. The battle cries of "We are not your user-created content" and "I want us to own the goddamn servers" illustrated clearly that what was at stake from the beginning was a safe space in which authors could archive their stories—regardless of quality, fandom, rating, trope, or taste.

Since then several generations of new fans and fandoms have spawned, the central fannish platform has moved from LJ/DW to Tumblr (and maybe since then to Slack and Discord). And fannish and cultural politics have shifted over more than a decade. And one of the loudest complaints geared at the AO3 is its supposed inclusion and acceptance of Child Pornography. In one central Tumblr thread debating the AO3 fundraiser, there are dozens of callouts describing the Archive as "a site that actively turns a blind eye to child pornography" and as "making/supporting spaces for paedophiles and their apologists."

There are two central issues at stake here that I want to look at more closely: (1) the complex role of fantasies and how they reflect and shape cultural ideologies; and (2) the questions and negotiations of spaces and platforms. In looking at these issues, I am not necessarily taking sides—though I certainly am more on the pro-free speech, anti-anti side and subscribe to OTW and AO3's core values. Instead, I want to historically situate these conversations, articulate the anxieties surrounding problematic fiction, contemplate the ethics of reading, and the potential dangers of sharing politically damaging ideologies.

SEX WARS

None of these questions are new. In fact, many older fans look at the antis as a callback to the vicious scholarly and activist debates of the late 70s through the mid-80s, when the fight against pornography became one of the central targets for many second wave radical feminists. Fighting both

the exploitation of women in the sex industries and the ideological framework perpetuated in pornographic media, anti-pornography feminists wrote, organized, and marched to raise consciousness and enact legislature to the exclusion of other models of feminism. They opposed pornography as a patriarchal tool that reflected and perpetuated the systemic oppression of women, and they believed that violent and sexual assaults against women by men were undergirded by an ideological imaginary that normalized if not taught such sexual aggression and abuse. Beyond creating public awareness and attempts to protect and remove women in the sex industries, anti-porn groups also believed that censorship laws would remove these harmful images and, with it, these harmful ideas and ideologies they reflected and created.

Most of the anti-porn feminists were white, middle-class, and, if not straight than definitely not kinky. Among the many responses to US feminism's narrow focus and exclusion of women of color, poor women, kinky women, non-USians, were a set of collections and engagements that clearly challenged the anti-porn, if not anti-sex, focus by celebrating lesbian sexuality, kink, and BDSM. One of the central points of the anti-anti-pornography movement was the embrace and enjoyment of sex and sexualities in all its forms, including pain. Politics of pleasure were complex after all, and power relationships could be eroticized in representation and play without necessarily being perpetuated elsewhere in life. Another, however, was also the awareness of minorities that laws are all too easily abused by those in power and that curbing civil rights affects the disempowered disproportionately.

The question at the heart of the sex wars then was not only one of feminist centers versus margins and the role of pleasure and sexuality but also the relationship between fantasy and reality, the question as to how fictional representations, be they film, photography, video games, or writing, influence and affect audiences and their actions in the real world. This, of course, is not a debate that was settled in the 1980s. Even if most accounts will declare the sex wars concluded with the pro-sex side winning, the underlying question continues to rear its head from the violence in video games hearings after Columbine to current fannish intra fandom censorship debates.

The anti-side in both the 1980s and the current sex wars are not disingenuous: they firmly believe they are battling injustices and power abuses of vulnerable populations. In so doing, however, they not only simplify the complicated matrix that established any subject's identities and desires, their arguments also level the complexity of the reading process to an almost mechanistic input/output model. Just like there's no one to one correspondence between watching violent pornography and sexually abusing women, there is no direct link connecting fantasizing about harmful events and actually doing so.

I want to invoke an essay from the feminist sex wars to highlight some of these questions still facing us today. Joanna Russ's 1985 "Pornography by Women, For Women, With Love" is not the first published academic essay to discuss m/m slash fan fiction—or any fan fiction really—but also announces its pro-pornography stance. By describing m/m slash as "pornography," Russ takes a stand in the porn debate. By describing it as a form of "sexual fantasy" created and shared among women, she uses it as an exemplary genre to discuss the roles of fantasy in women's emotional and sexual lives. In fact, she describes how the stories she analyzes are often unrealistic and stereotypical, but how the circulation of those representations offers a way to think through and untangle the restrictions that gendered power places on sexual expression for men and women alike (Russ, 1985: 79). In addition to her overt pleasure in the text ("I love the stuff, I love the way it turns

me on”), she emphasizes the empowering nature of sexual fantasy, especially when combined with a community of women (“all of the editors, writers, and readers are women,” she writes) and free from commercial restrictions.

It is that approach to slash as fantasy that remains powerful today, because it clearly separates fiction and reality without ignoring the fact that these fantasies matter for their writers and readers. After all, fans are perfect examples both of the resistant readers who showcase the vast range of possible receptions and of the importance of art as shaping ideological beliefs. One only has to look at ship wars or other fannish conflicts to see that the same text often means different things to different readers. And the fact that one beloved (and hated) text can produce the hundreds of thousands of diverse and contradictory stories that many popular fandoms have engendered, illustrates that any concept of a unified (let alone correct) reading and response must be complicated.

And yet, given fans’ intimate, affective relationships with shows, characters, and universes they can’t and won’t underestimate the effects texts have, both in their messages and their affect. Fan fiction, in particular, is highly charged emotionally: the characters and worlds are ones in which writers and reader have a strong emotional investments and oftentimes these emotional investments are intimately bound up with concepts of one’s identity, and social and erotic fantasies.

Most fannish discussions surrounding fiction and reality occur in this dual bind. Certainly, depiction does not mean endorsement. But neither can the writer simply extract their responsibility of likely reader responses and interpretations. Artistic texts are meaningful as are is affective impact. And yet any attempts to separate erotic depictions by their (intended) effects are bound to fail: we continuously see in the ways readers can gain erotic charges from texts not intended for it as well as the ways readers bounce off erotic scenarios clearly meant to arouse.

The sex-positive side won the sex wars, and I don’t fear that the antis will ultimately win the day—either culturally or legislatively. So when I hear an accusation like “AO3 endorses pedophiles” I recall slogans like “Porn is the Theory; Rape is the Practice” and dismiss both for their exaggeration. And yet, I find it worthwhile to use the superficially faulty complaints to get to the more complicated questions underneath. Because if nothing else, the antis remind us that we might want to be mindful of what exactly constitutes our sexual (and social) fantasies: What we fantasize about, What these fantasies may mean, How certain narratives may encourage or reflect shared fantasies, and, possibly most importantly, What happens when these fantasies are not ones we are comfortable with, when our sexual fantasies clash with our political beliefs—whether that happens to be racialized BDSM play or heteronormative domesticity.

SAFE SPACES

And yet even with a robust understanding of the important role of fantasy in our imaginaries and the centrality of fiction in this fantasy life, we have to confront the question of where, when, and how to share these fantasies. It is here that I think some of the anti arguments might actually have the most traction. Even if we agree that we have the right to write (and even to share) all kinds of offensive and deeply fucked up fantasies, the question of platforms and online spaces is an important one. At the moment, large social network services such as Facebook and Twitter are beginning to realize their culpability in having provided spaces without proper (and properly implemented) abuse rules. Antis are making a similar argument when accusing AO3 of hurting fans as they are confronted with

harmful and hateful material on the archive. The argument thus is: if you cannot eliminate the hurtful stuff entirely, a vulnerable user shouldn't come across it accidentally.

This narrative has two central problems: (1) the idea of online fans as vulnerable and in need to be protected removes all agency and releases users from curating their own online experiences. (2) this is a particularly unfair criticism given that the AO3 provides multiple layers that allow users to curate their experience: the combination of mandatory warnings and user-generated tags models one of the more complex interactive systems that require explicit information and active consent.

Paratextual commentary places readers and writers into a negotiation that effectively creates the very spaces antis are asking for. In an older essay, fan writer the_drifter draws a powerful comparison when likening reader-writer contracts to BDSM negotiations:

[W]arnings are the author's request for consent. By continuing past cut-tags, headers, and preliminary pages, the reader implicitly consents to what may follow... As readers, we are responsible for knowing our own limits, our own boundaries, and crossing those limits with forethought and care.

The_drifter here draws attention to the power discourse implicit in reader-writer contracts and the level of trust that goes both ways. Beyond trust, however, the essay also focuses on the responsibilities of both the writer's, in offering a useful and honest header, and the reader's, in knowing her own limits. Using BDSM consent negotiations as a central conceit is provocative and offers a useful tool to consider the responsibilities of both readers and writers. BDSM is built on a conscious and conscientious power exchange and foregrounds risk awareness and mutual consent.

This acknowledgement of risk awareness and mutual consent is equally important in fannish discussions of headers. Headers explicitly shorthand pairings and themes, tropes and kinks in order to inform potential readers, who—when proceeding on to the text—explicitly agree that they understand what they are about to read. The writer promises that these are the features that the story will contain and, furthermore, that it does not contain others that collectively are considered noteworthy (such as rape/non-con or underage). In turn, the reader takes responsibility for her own reading experience when opening the story. In order for headers to be properly read and understood, readers and writers must share vocabulary and principles for both sides to agree on nuances, implications, and intentions. As such, clicking through or scrolling down to the story is, in fact, affirmative consent.

There are many ways in which this process can go awry, of course, and this is the moments antis seem to hone in on: authors may be disingenuous and mis- or undertag. And readers may ignore warnings (such as the AO3 ability to Choose Not to Warn!) and enter spaces that turn out to not be safe for them. But even beyond those cases, there remains a larger issue of what an archive like AO3, proudly created and run by and for fans can do to make it a welcoming space for the largest number of writers and reader—to get all utilitarian here. This does not mean excluding entire categories of kinky fantasies but it does raise questions about coding and infrastructure that Casey Fiesler, for example, has studied. How do search engines and tagging systems shape our experiences and what can we do to improve these experiences.

In an earlier discussion of tags as reader/writer negotiations I have suggested that fan fiction communities ought to be an ethical space not in spite but because of its commitment to sharing our dangerous and pleasurable fantasies. I said: There exists an ethos (generally endorsed if not always

fully achieved) within BDSM communities that awareness, responsibility, and consent are not restricted to the specificity of contract negotiation but indeed encompass all levels of relationships and social engagements. When applying this ethos of consent to fan fiction communities, it showcases how a culture of headers as reader-writer contracts must function within a broader intersectional feminist understanding of sexuality. Much like contributors to feminist and anti-racist blogs, many fans want to engage in online spaces not driven by trolling and doxing, but rather by an ethics of care.

Clearly, such an ethics is neither always possible nor followed by everyone. As much as we'd wish it, fandom is not an idyllic utopia of intersectional activism. And yet certain norms tend to be followed and respected by most, such as the long-observed implicit agreement within fannish spaces not to out other fans. Because many fan fiction communities tend to share a general feminist ethos, participants (as readers and writers) can be expected to encounter shared values. Thus, I suggest that this shared ethos is one in a series of framing devices that fan fiction communities use to establish shared risk-aware consensual kink spaces, i.e., spaces that permit writing that may be emotionally satisfying yet dangerous.

And, to return to the very questions I started with (and that continue to drive Alexis's and my project): How can we use these spaces to not only share but also discuss the complex erotic and political fantasies that drive and complicate our enjoyments of slash fantasies.