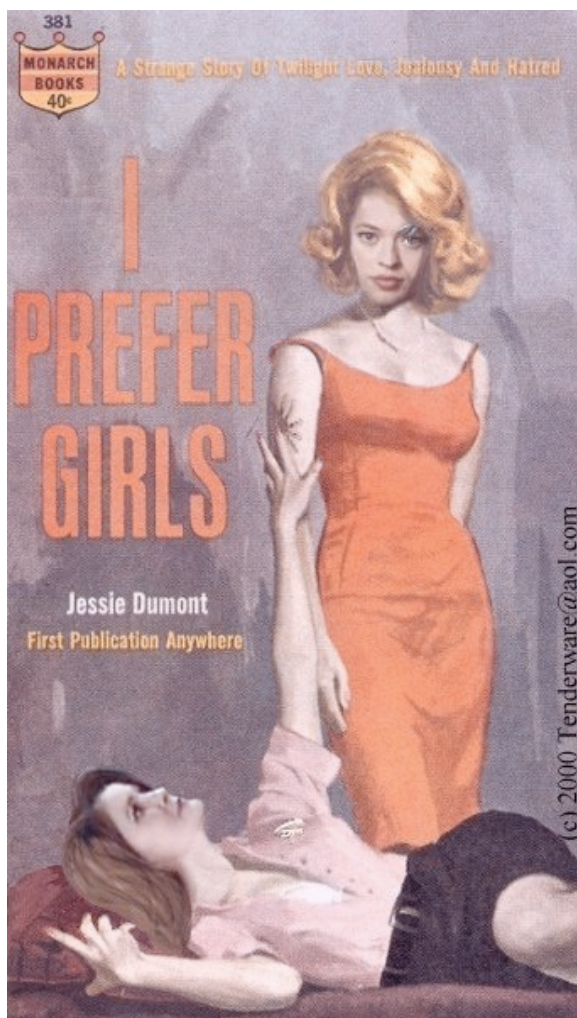


**cyborg sex in public,
fan fiction on-line,
and a fantasy
of political
consumption**



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this paper was presented at the
TECHNOTOPIAS
conference, with the panel
“Redefining the Local”
at the University of Strathclyde
Glasgow, Scotland
July 12, 2002

*J/7 Pulp Fiction Cover Art Series!
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She sat, transfixed, as Seven used her left hand, her Borg hand, to caress and excite herself... She leaned over her, to watch as the glistening metal implants swam through the evidence of Seven's approach to the border of her fulfillment. And she marveled that something so inhuman as that hand could move with such purposeful tenderness.

But then, when she saw Seven extend and insert her assimilation tubules into her opening, it terrified her and she grabbed her lover's hand, forcing her to stop.

"Seven, dear God, what are you doing?"...

[Seven] pulled Kathryn into a kiss, whimpering into her mouth as she continued, "Kathryn... My Borg... hand is more flexible and stronger than... the other... therefore I am able..." ...

She pulled Seven's hand from its cradle between the young woman's legs and forced it into her own, again aching well. ...she couldn't help it. She couldn't stop it. She had to be the recipient of that hand's potential. She had to be the one it made scream.

~ from "Freeing Kathryn" by Paulann Hughes

The heroines of this story are from the television show *Star Trek: Voyager*: on the show, Captain Kathryn Janeway, an arrogant and sexually frustrated female leader, has forcibly liberated the cyborg Seven of Nine from the malevolent and anti-individualist Borg collective, and is Seven's mentor in her quest to regain her "humanity." The intense emotional connection and conflict of their on-screen relationship is what some fans of *Voyager* identify as "subtext": narrative and visual structures that, while on the most literal level disavowing any erotic content, nevertheless invite a romantic (in this case lesbian) interpretation. Fan-written stories which depict Janeway and Seven having a sexual relationship must, by definition and even inadvertently, deal with non-reproductive sex and bodies, simultaneously the lesbian kind and the cyborg kind, merging the territories beyond humanity and heteronormativity into a single erotic narrative. The story I just quoted paints a picture of a new mode of intimacy in which two transformations are considered inseparable from each other: the transformation of a female professional's public persona into a space open to sexual and homosexual experience and the transformation of sex

into a pleasurable site for embracing the cyborg's subversions. Because it was written by a fan in response to a TV text, it illustrates the fact that mass culture is hegemonic, and as such it is not an ideological monolith: its meanings are constantly contested in a dynamic dialogue with their resistant or marginal counterparts. What is most interesting about Janeway/Seven fiction as a genre is what it can tell us about the complex conversations that take place between consumers and the mass media outside the expected boundaries of television, and about the technologies and communities that provide relatively independent environments for fan interpretations. Because of course we would never go read it just because it's smutty.

Fan fiction, or amateur fiction about characters lifted from television, movies, or other mass media, has existed for at least 30 years. Until recently, it was primarily distributed in fan-printed zines whose circulation was confined, for the most part, to the subcultural network of fan conventions. Fan fiction has attracted academic attention since the 1980's, and scholarly work about it tends to fall broadly within a tradition called audience studies or media reception theory. Particular interest has been given to a sub-category called "slash", or gay fan fiction. Historically, almost all slash was about male couples, and was written by straight women. Academics have often focused on exploring and interpreting this fascinating demographic quirk. With the rapid popularization of the internet, however, fan fiction has undergone a dramatic evolution: in the past few years, there has been an explosion in the number of readers and writers, and in the volume and diversity of stories produced. Slash is now being created and consumed by a varied cross-section of the online population, and although some print zines still exist, the vast majority of fan fiction is now produced and distributed in cyberspace, where it is much more feely accessible. The story I read from is posted on the web at a large lesbian fanfic archive called "The Pink Rabbit Consortium Subtext Zone." The web is changing the tenor of

fan communities, increasing the popularity of fanfic and its recognition by mainstream culture, creating new tensions in the relationship between fans and the culture industry, and demanding new approaches to fandom from academics.

Reception researchers originally turned away from the critical traditions that were the purview of literary theory (and then cultural studies) because they found theoretical models to be too abstract and streamlined to reflect the complexities of lived relations. To rectify this problem, scholars (beginning with David Morley) widely incorporated a social science standard: ethnography. While ethnography certainly has a number of methodological advantages, ethnographically influenced work also has serious limitations which make the categorical rejection of theory unduly extravagant. Ethnography's focus on the descriptive, the demonstrable, the representative, and the concrete closes off intellectual inquiry to the imaginative power to perceive connections that are not directly observable, but nonetheless culturally central. In particular, it is extremely difficult within this model to ask questions about how the activities of fans may influence and even reshape the dynamic relations of power that organize our society.

With Stuart Hall and the Birmingham school (around the same time as Morley), there was a shift from seeing popular audiences as passive receptors of the hypnotizing messages of mass culture, to understanding them as active meaning-makers who interpret media texts in diverse and unpredictable ways according to their own imperatives. The latter framework, widely considered to be progressive, nevertheless theorizes reception in isolation, as a moment discrete from and in opposition to cultural production. This implies (perhaps inadvertently) that, although the audience can read the material handed down from on high in resistant ways, this process doesn't give them any access to or have any effect on the mechanisms of this production.

I don't have time here to survey academic work on fan fiction to date, a genre whose canon would include work by Joanna Russ, Camille Bacon-Smith, Constance Penley, and Henry Jenkins, so you're just going to have to take my word for it when I say that these general criticisms apply. I am certainly indebted, in my work, to claims that scholars like Jenkins have made: by arguing that fan fiction is a powerfully productive site of resistant expression, they lay the groundwork for a political reading, and I take up their analytic structure of examining the discursive attributes of fan texts and the context of their production and distribution in relation to each other. However, while I do concede that the mass media industry is insulated in real and important ways from direct intervention by its audiences, I think it is important to contemplate reception from within a more complex, more imaginative model of the production/consumption system. The two modes are composed of and connected by a diffuse web of practices that have both material and ideological components, breeding an environment in which seemingly distant operations may have reciprocal effects.

So, if I am going to be redefining the local in this paper, I'd first like to scrutinize the proper neighborhoods we media theorists construct for ourselves and our subjects, particularly how we position our activities in relation to seats of power like Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and Washington DC (if we're American). As a theorist, I might turn to critical theory for an alternative model of reception that takes into account radical alterations in the nature of locality, both spatial and temporal, that are part of current cultural transformations, and that recognizes the opportunities these changes harbor to undermine and recast modern oppressions. Two theoretical moments with a particular synergy in this case are Donna Haraway's classic feminist essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" and Berlant and Warner's "Sex in Public." The cyborg is a metaphoric figure for resistance from within terrifying new dominations; public sex is a

challenge, from within a queer tradition, to the most intimate foundations of patriarchal capitalism. The cyborg was always a metaphorically queer figure, and the doctrine of public sex is at least implicitly addressed to the ways new technologies are restructuring privacy. Put together they make the cyborg sex of my title: non-sexual reproduction plus non-reproductive sex equals a potentially powerful fantasy of a location for political resistance and change. That is, I am actually using fan fiction as an example. I am primarily interested in proposing methodological alternatives to conventional reception studies, with the objective of providing a framework for how to see (how to imagine, even) what kinds of tactics consumers exercise that have the potential to reshape our culture. I acknowledge that fan fiction is not inherently subversive, and it is not going to change the world all by itself, but it demonstrates in microcosm an array of hotly contested struggles in which the winners have yet to be declared. It provides an especially concrete embodiment of the creative processes that are associated with reception, and fan writers have always played in the gray area of cyborg sex, dismembering and recombining narratives in unnatural acts of creation. Furthermore, fan fiction's recent evolution is intimately knit with the transformations that new forms of technology and communications are generating in our lives: its new stomping ground, cyberspace, is pregnant with cyborgian forces, in both their progressive and totalitarian forms, and the new and different opportunities the internet provides for social organization have made sex publicly available and fantasy publicly expressible in unprecedented ways. By turning both people and things into information that can travel the globe instantaneously, cyberspace is also forcing us to reconsider what it means to BE somewhere, and altering what beings, sites and activities can be in direct contact with each other, or local. Fans are capitalizing on this, along with the way the net shifts other supposedly stable

categories like consumer and producer, and I propose that looking at fan fiction as it exists on the internet suggests why theorists should stop thinking of reception as a one-way street.

Simply by existing, fan fiction is implicitly making certain claims about the boundaries between producers and consumers of mass media: it suggests that media products don't always meet the needs of satisfy the desires of consumers, and are therefore subject to continuing work by consumers which destabilizes their textual perimeters and contests producers' "ownership" of them. This idea is standard fare in analyses of fan fiction, and in work on active audience reception in general. To take this conflict literally is to describe the legal disputes and tacit negotiations that are a sort of conversation between corporations and fans (and not always a polite one). What critics don't often point out, in their descriptions of the legal discourses that are always implicated in the shape of fan culture, is that intellectual property law is as much a piecemeal, contingent, constantly renegotiated tangle as the fan texts themselves.

Given the difficulty of legally defining meaning as property, it is not surprising that the legal precedents surrounding fan fiction are vague and uneasy. Part of the explanation for this may be that fans have few legal resources in comparison with media conglomerates, so when the corporations take issue with their activities, they often choose to go further underground rather than to stand and fight. But, between the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech and the ambiguousness of the distinction between derivative branded material and independent creative work, the corporations may not be sure the law will come down on their side. They are also forced into compromise by the paradox of their position as producers: they need to guard their sole possession of their lucrative commodities as a source of revenue, but for the same reason they need the goodwill of fans. They can't afford to indiscriminately alienate the people who spend the most time and money on their products (the most obvious form of authority that

consumers have), and so they must choose their battles carefully. The implied compromise that has been reached is that fan writing is tolerated provided it is strictly not-for-profit, and this stipulation is likely to stand. That is, in spite of (presumably) having dominant social forces on their side, the TV studios have been relatively unsuccessful at setting precedents that contain the proliferation of resistant fan interpretations.

Here are some examples. In a typical non-case, Fox sent a warning to a *Simpsons* fan who had sounds, images, and video from the show on his web site—he removed the material and was forced to move (not disappear) by his web server, but not without a flurry of online protest. When cases go to trial, even the not-for-profit clause is up for grabs: the Mitchell estate tried and ultimately failed to block the publication of Gone with the Wind parody The Wind Done Gone. And Best Lesbian Erotica slipped in an author’s slashy rendition of characters “like” Xena and Gabrielle. Perhaps as a response to this lack of control, Paramount/Viacom is now holding an annual *Star Trek* fan fiction contest, and publishing anthologies of the winning stories—royalties are even paid to the authors. On one hand, they get to decide which fan interpretations are kosher (and you can bet those aren’t the queer readings), but on the other, they’re validating the work of fan writers overall.

Fans do engage very consciously with the legal inflections of conceptions of production that hover over their activities. As a nod to the provisions of intellectual property law, all fan stories carry a disclaimer that states that the characters and setting are corporate property. The degree to which fan writers are aware of the dominations that circumscribe their work is evident in the more creative disclaimers that are quite common; here is the most elaborate example I’ve seen, by T. Dancinghands:

The Lord's Disclaimer

Our Paramount/Viacom, who art in Hollywood,
Copyrighted be thy name.
Thy profits come,
Thy royalties be honored,
In Asia as they are in the "Free World".
Give us this week our piece of cannon, [sic]
And forgive us our fanfics,
As we forgive the real klunkers you occasionally produce.
And lead us not into litigation,
But deliver us from cancellations.
For thine is the franchise, and the trade marks, and the merchandising,
For ever and ever
Amen

This ingenious spoof expresses a fannish tension between the real frustration of depending on the media industry, which is indeed very powerful, for cultural raw materials, and a smug sense that fan activities have special powers of their own. "Adult" fanfic is also usually accompanied by a disclaimer or warning about sex, often describing the specific kind(s) of sex that occur in the story—its legal *raison d'être* is restrictions on underage access to pornography. These disclaimers also can provide a brief commentary on the social environment that the story's fantasies of queer relationships are situated in. In this way, the legal strictures circumscribing fan smut provide fans with an opportunity to explicitly identify their resistance. Disclaimers demonstrate the disjuncture between what is considered significant in the dominant discourse and in fan discourse: to the studios, production is apparently only meaningful (that is, threatening to their containment of their property) if it generates money; "amateur" writing is allowed to proliferate freely. For fan writers, it is precisely the freedom to create texts outside of and in response to capitalist management of narrative that is valued.

In his book Textual Poachers, Jenkins implies that even though the copyright compromise protects the studios' status as producers (in economic terms), it leaves space for fans

to challenge their power to dictate the meanings received from TV texts. I would argue that the challenge fan fiction poses to dominant models of textual production is actually far more seeping. By narrating around, over, in between, and parallel to television, fanfic attacks any attempt to see texts as discrete and bounded events that can be packaged as products. As manifested in fanfic, textual meaning is a fluid practice that invites communal participation in public forums. The relative lack of legal restrictions on fan fiction is evidence for fans' contention that characters and stories are public property, and demonstrates the difficulty of officially legitimizing one meaning over another. Even more importantly, fans activities' challenge the definition, as well as the borders, of products. Fan writers turn the production of new texts into an integral part of the process of mass culture consumption, compromising the rigid dichotomy a capitalist model maintains between the two activities, and representing production and consumption as interrelated, even similar operations.

In terms of political influence, all of this was largely moot when fan fiction was distributed in paper zines. With modes of reproduction and distribution that were shackled to the physical, the sedition of fan production could circulate in only very limited ways. But, along with other recently developed technologies, the internet is giving property a new geography. In his article "Selling Wine Without Bottles," John Perry Barlow points out that we are well on our way to converting to an economy where information itself is the primary, privileged commodity. At the same time, the nature of information—what it is made of, how it travels, who has the capability to produce and reproduce it—is being radically transformed. This is, Barlow argues, a crisis for intellectual property law as we know it, and corporations are the ones falling behind. Their strategy seems to be to ignore the fact that virtual property is fundamentally different from information that has physical traces, while aggressively expanding existing law to manhandle it

into submission. Meanwhile, regular folks have already figured out this isn't going to work. Popular practice has overrun the boundaries of unenforceable laws: take, for example, the almost universal habit of software piracy, or the court's impotent attempt to stop the online sharing of music files. The activities that define producers of information and consumers of it are shifting irrevocably.

Cyberspace also mucks up traditional inflections of the public and the private (along with their intermediary, the local), destabilizing these supposedly distinct locations by bringing the home (where many of us do our surfing) into immediate contact with a global community. If all information can now be universally shared from any access point, where (in the e world) do we locate the border between an insulated private space of subjectivity and intimacy and a public space for commerce and civics, a distinction that is ideologically central to modern capitalism? In discourse about the internet, the connection of this question to sex is clear. One of the anxieties of "internet privacy" is that formerly private preferences and acts will be converted into data in the public domain. And pornographic content and activity online has been the obsessive hub of much of the US government's e-regulatory energy. Indeed, porn (erotic fan fiction included) is the net's biggest industry, both commercial and cottage.

The internet has indeed stimulated the rapid proliferation of fan fiction and other kinds of public fan response and dialogue. But what makes it so conducive to this growth is that its modes of structuring the exchange of information are a radical departure from economic models. Scholars have already made much of how fan activities problematize the rigid separation between producers and consumers, but the internet allows this subversion to be realized more concretely and completely than in their analyses. Because the net doesn't have the limitations of physical matter and space, fan readers can be writers simultaneously, and any writer with internet

access can self-publish instantaneously, to practically the entire fan fiction audience, without additional cost: a powerful triple reconstitution of the system of fan production. The web's facility for spontaneously organizing vast amounts of information into smaller thematic pockets permits both flexibility and communalism: if you can find one J/7 web site, you can probably find them all by exploring authors' lists of links (because authors keep track of and communicate with each other, structuring local spaces around shared passions rather than geography). And if you don't have your own web site, you can join a newsgroup or discussion list and post your stories there, or have them collected at an archive page—another example of the effectiveness of new, cyberspatial forms of community organization. The internet's cultural cachet, as well as its properties of wide circulation, have contributed to the expansion of fan fiction participation beyond a show's die-hard fanatics. The increase in numbers has allowed fanfic to diversify and specialize (to admit much more lesbian fic, for example), while more general connections remain in place. Last but not least, while it's not quite a public service, the internet isn't bought and sold like a traditional commodity. Whatever their hidden costs, the pop-up windows and banner ads we all know and love are supporting a free internet where fan production can be structured as a new realm of public pleasures with an autonomy and agility that comes of sidestepping a system based on the exchange of money between designated producers and consumers.

My point is that it is too soon to dismiss reception as a practice whose effects are contained in its immediate environs, without seriously re-examining what kind of locality those immediate environs might encompass. Through their practices on the internet, fan writers have developed a culture that makes good on the demands that are inherent in their texts: demands not only for public narratives that are embodied and erotic, but for new ways of making and disseminating such narratives. Fans themselves are the sexy cyborgs they write about: interfaced

with computers and the virtual environments that technology gives them access to, their online personas resist construction as unitary, embodied, gendered citizens. From this position in the passageways that the cyborg opens up between categories, they create communities (and not just textual visions) structured around new sexual and relational possibilities that are produced and consumed in new ways. It is in these connections between the raw material of reception itself and the political context of that reception that some of the most interesting and valuable questions about mass media consumption lie.

I am not making the claim that fans are always satisfied with their power to rework mass narratives, or ignoring the fact that only the privileged in our increasingly stratified economy have access to computers and the incipient transformations of the internet. At this point in our theories of culture, it is often just frustrating to try to answer the question of whether any particular discourse or relation harbors the seeds of fundamental changes, within a dominant ideological system which is capable of very sensitive evolution and expert at incorporating into itself expressions of resistance. I am simply presenting fan fiction as a test case to argue for a new way of understanding where radical possibilities might germinate (in the realm of reception). One of the lessons fan fiction teaches is that mass culture can be much more fertile if you fantasize about it, and I will suggest that if we are not willing, as theorists, to fantasize about the potentialities and not just the realities of culture as we observe it, we can't hope to be engaged with the political struggles that are in play in that culture. For both fans and theorists, there are new neighborhoods for us to play in, new localities for us to travel to, and new ways to get there.

bibliography and other documentation at www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/~julier/thesis/