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Shipping Disability/Fanfiction: Disrupting Narratives of Fanfiction as Inclusive

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Abstract: In this essay I will first give a definition of what fanfiction is within the wider online environment of online participatory cultures, as well examine whether inclusiveness holds up as a defining characteristic when disability is taken into consideration. I then examine how the development of fanfiction as a creative practice and of fanfiction-specific genres, have contributed to the queering of fanfiction spaces and practices. Finally I argue that subversion and transgression are not best suited to conceptualize fanfiction, and that instead disruption can generate more apt interrogations. Specifically, disruption allows for us to explore fanfiction as both disrupting heteronormative narratives, gendered and fan behaviour expectations, and as disrupting the notion of the fan as a somehow homogenous construction. This affords disability the possibility of being disruptive in turn.

Keywords: disability; fanfiction; disruption; affordances

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What is fanfiction?

For millions of fans worldwide, an integral part of being a consumer of popular culture includes taking part in fanfiction production and consumption. Fanfics have been defined as transformative works: new creative works that use already existing cultural products as its material of creation, transforming them into something new, but also changing the relationship between creators and audience (Jenkins, 1992/2013), from passive audiences that consume mass media products, to an active audience that produces its own creation as part of its consumption of mass media. A fanfic is any new story written by fans, using an already existing source-text, such as a TV show, movie, book, Manga/Anime, or any other fandom around which fan communities have organized (such as bands or plays, or even celebrities), and shared with other fans. In this paper, I examine online media fans, who are responsible for the majority of fanfiction produced and engaged with. Fanfics expand the narrative possibilities of existing source-texts through developing either secondary characters or aspects of main characters that have not been dealt with in the "official story" (also known as "canon") (Pugh, 2005).

"Fanfiction is an old story. Literally, of course: fanfiction takes someone else's old story and arguably makes it new, or makes it over, or just simply makes more of it, because the fan writers loves the story so much they want it to keep going" (Jamison, 2013, pp17-18)

The story of fanfiction, however, goes beyond this definition. Fanfiction is a very particular type of culture, of literature, of practice, and of space. Mostly, fanfiction is a new type of cultural production (Jenkins, 1992/2013), shaped by networked digital technologies and the affordances they allow for participation and creation. Fanfiction allow fans to interact on their own terms with the media they love, (and love to hate) and to include themselves, their interests, obsessions, and their creativity, as fannish activities within fandom.

In this essay I will first explore how fanfiction is part of the wider online environment of online participatory cultures, as well examine whether inclusiveness holds up as a defining characteristic when disability is taken into consideration. I then examine how the development of fanfiction as a creative practice and of fanfiction-specific genres, have contributed to the queering of fanfiction spaces and practices. Finally, I argue that subversion and transgression are not best suited to conceptualize fanfiction, and that instead disruption can generate more apt interrogations. Specifically, disruption allows for us to explore fanfiction as both disrupting heteronormative narratives, gendered and fan behaviour expectations, and as disrupting the notion of the fan as a somehow homogenous construction. This affords disability the possibility of being disruptive in turn.

Fanfic and me

My interest in disabled fans and disability in online fanfiction spaces is a personal one, since I am both a fan who loves fanfic and disabled. As a fan of popular media and culture, which often depicts stereotypes and tropes that misrepresent disability and our experiences, I

have groaned at how disability has been made to signify adversity, villainy, pity, innocence and inspiration to an audience presumed to be able-bodied.

Like many disabled people I was taught to not want to associate with disability or other disabled people. My disability, epilepsy, is invisible, and, as I my parents often reminded me growing up, I was "normal". This supposed normalcy was nonetheless contradicted by the reality of the constant necessity in my life of medical control through medications, blood tests, EEG¹, and other forms of medical control. The disavowal of my disability status was a refusal to acknowledge my desire to have an authentic sense of self as disabled, and to have a narrative that reflected my realities as a neurologically diverse young person, who very much wanted to feel part of the world.

While I have consumed stories of heroes, explorers, and adventurers in any format I could find them from as long as I can remember (fairy and folk tales, TV shows, movies, comics, literature), being disabled, I knew I wasn't someone who could go on adventures. I didn't have any disabled heroes to rely on, and if disability was present in any stories I read, it wasn't a quality that made for heroes. Disability was often a physical sign of a character's evil or their tragic destiny, and if heroes became disabled, it was in order to transform into better versions of themselves through cure and awareness of their good luck in being abled.

I found disability studies, social justice, and fanfiction, in adulthood, roughly at around the same time, while I was discovering my queerness and gender non-conformity. It was a difficult time in my life, following more than a decade of neurologists overmedicating me; the main goal of drug therapies imposed on me was to control my epileptic, impoverished, fat, and

1 Electroencephalogram

female-presenting body and mind as much as possible, regardless of how it affected my life. I was mourning the years wasted to this medical abuse, and I was deeply ashamed of having let doctors take over my life, of not having been in control of deciding what my life could be. Disability studies, especially narratives and poems by disabled people (Clare, 1999; Julia/Dolphin Trahan, 1997; Tremain; 1996; Wade, 1997), spoke to me about the possibility of telling one's own story, of interpreting one's own biography, as a disabled person. Fanfiction offered a similar possibility of seeing my own story, a story not represented in mainstream culture or society, through narratives about shows I loved.

Participatory cultures

Fanfiction is a type of culture that is inseparable from fan culture that fosters participation and engagement between fans and with fandom, and, "...its celebration of deeply held emotions and passionately embraced pleasures" (Jenkins, 1992/2013, p.283). Participatory cultures have thrived in online spaces through the development, proliferation, and wider accessibility of digital information and communication technologies and media (Jenkins, 2008). According to Jenkins, participatory cultures are those that have low barriers to access (via availability, cost, knowledge required to access them), and enable participation by the public in media, as both consumer and producers (Jenkins, 1992/2013). They also enable the development of relationships between participants based on mentorship (Baym, 2000; Black, 2008), shared interests, and the knowledge that their contributions matter to each other (Jenkins et. al., 2009). Through digital practices fans can re-produce, share, and manipulate images and texts, and engage with one another across barriers of shared space and synchronous time (Black, 2009). Meme-making, blogs, fan videos and fan art, selfies, posts on social media, hashtags, are some of the ways that participatory cultures manifest online (Jenkins 2008). The emergence of online archiving and

social media platforms support and facilitate these different forms of user-generated media production (De Kosnik, 2016). Nowadays, fans share and read stories and interact with one another on online fan archives (through comments, direct messaging), on Tumblr (See Dean Leetal, this issue), Wattpad, and online personal journals, via Facebook groups, Instagram accounts and so on. Previously they did so using web rings, earlier even by photocopying and distributing paper copies at conventions (Coppa, 2006).

The notion at the heart of participatory culture is inclusiveness: in theory, anyone and everyone can participate. Or almost everyone; disabled Internet users' experiences with web (in)accessibility challenge the assumption of participatory culture as inherently inclusive. Ellcessor (2016) states, "The exclusion of people with disabilities from online media and attendant participatory cultures is particularly troubling given the potential of these spaces to foster engaged, active citizens of the world" (p.5). While digital technologies and media have granted many disabled people greater access to cultural and social participation (Ellis & Kent, 2011), online spaces are not equally accessible to disabled and abled Internet users. Much of the World Wide Web has developed, and continues to develop, with very little concern for web accessibility or the development of accessible community standards. This has led to digital environments that create new forms of disablement for disabled people online (Ellis & Kent, 2011; Goggin & Newell, 2003). Disabled people's contribution to online cultures should not be underestimated: disabled people have been creating culture online with each other (Cole et al, 2011), and have been contributing to the development of media platforms and online cultures (Ellis & Kent, 2011) from the beginning² (smith, 2012). Therefore, definitions of online participatory cultures and archives, such as fanfiction, as inherently *accessible to all* must be

² See also s.e. smith's "Access & praxis: Disability at the digital frontier, in the 2012 issue of Bitch Magazine, for a discussion on how one of the first usenet discussion groups to manifest online in the early 90s.

questioned further. Certainly, how disability emerges in fanfiction through different participatory culture practices, such as archiving (See Baumgartner, and Raw, this issue) are relevant to further theorizing the nature of all online participatory cultures.

Fanfiction genres

Fanfiction relies on both established genres of stories, such as drama, romance, mystery, thrillers, humour, and so on, as well as on fanfiction-specific genres around which fanfiction has developed, such as crossovers, missing scenes, alternative universe (Pugh, 2005, p.47). Because fans are interested in expanding the existing narratives, fanfiction genres go beyond what is there, to explore what might have been, could have be, or should have been. While fanfiction that features missing scenes, prequels, and sequels allow for fans to imagine a richer backstory that what was given in the original texts, and fills in what was only hinted at, alternative universes and crossovers offer what Turk (2011) calls a "merging of textual levels within the world of the story" (p.83), or metalepsis. Alternative Universes, and crossovers (also a form of AU) can offer a small difference that changes everything (Buffy doesn't sacrifice herself at the end of season 5), or a more comprehensive one (Game of Throne now take place in space). These kinds of exploration of alternate possibilities are constitutive of fanfiction itself, and can at times be pushed beyond the internal logic of any given show: for example, the coffee shop and pizza parlour AU (all the characters of X show work in a coffee shop or pizza parlour) are formulas that can be applied to any fandom, regardless of whether it fits its storylines or universe.

Fanfiction has also over the years solidified certain types of narratives into genres that are particular to the fanfiction community, such as 5 things, male pregnancy, hurt/comfort, Omega-

verse, Porn without Plot (PWP), and disability fics³. These genres have established themselves as representational of the type of creative practice and space fanfiction is, through their popularity with authors and readers of fanfic over time. Unlike mass media, fanfiction has been shaped as much by its readers than its writers, through comments and reviews that can be shared to the author directly, and by the understanding that authors depend on readers and commenters to guide their stories. Thus, there has been a certain amount of consensus in the development of literary and creative norms in fanfiction genres. Additionally, because fanfiction is not created for profit,⁴ it does not have to follow any market constraints, or advertisers' demands regarding profitability and popularity, authors and readers are free to let their imagination run wild in exploring their creativity (Jamison, 2013).

Many fanfiction- specific genres stem do not from fans' satisfaction with the fandoms they love, but instead from their dissatisfaction, and at time disappointment with them (Jenkins, 1992/2013). Faced with an absence of the types of representations that fans want, they create or go on a search for what they crave. Fanfiction thus allows for fans to transgress what is expected of them as audience members that are expected only passively to consume whatever media is given to them (Jenkins, 1992/2013).

³ 5 things: fic organized either around vignettes depicting 5 things that never happened, or did happen, or a mixture of both

male pregnancy: fics where one of the male character becomes pregnant in some way (magic, science, evolution, etc.)

hurt/comfort: fics that explore themes of vulnerability and intimacy through one character being physically or emotionally hurt, and having to depend on another character's help

Omega verse: A specific AU that developed from the *Supernatural* fandom where everyone is born with what some call a secondary gender: either alpha, beta, or omega. This AU was created in order to justify malepreg and to reify heterosexual dynamics in gay sex.

Porn without Plot/Plot? What plot?: fic that depicts a sexual encounter between characters with very little effort towards constructing any type of story.

Disability fics: fics where a character is given a disability or where disability is explored as a central element (See Rogers, this issue)

⁴ With very few exceptions, for ex 50 Shades of Grey was originally a *Twilight* fanfiction. Nonetheless 99.99% of fanfics are not profit-driven.

Absence of accurate and relatable representations in pop culture is something many disabled fans know too much about. While popular culture could be said to have a disability fetish in some regard, whereas disability tropes reproduce stereotypes about what disability means in a narrative (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Quayson, 2007) and what disabled people's lives mean in society (McRuer, 2006). These tropes don't offer very complex or layered depictions of either. While nothing will lead us to believe that disabled people are any less likely to be fans of popular culture, and fanfiction participants, very little research, until this special issue, has been done to tease out the relationships between disabled fans, disability, and fanfiction. One area of investigation that deserves attention is how the same disability tropes used in mainstream media tend to be reproduced by fan authors in fanfiction. (sasha_feather, 2005; see also Rogers, this issue).

At the heart of why fans write and read, and why fanfiction genres can appear excessive and extravagant to outsiders, is play. While the impulse to create what isn't there, or to transgress a mainstream rule about appropriate sexuality or behaviour is part of the equation, fans also participate in fanfiction because it is fun, and fun "resists all analysis, all logical interpretation" (Huizinga, 1937, p.3). Johan Huizinga (1937), demonstrated that play was the foundational elements of all aspects of society: language, law, war, science, knowledge, as well as in all forms of creative expression such as philosophy, poetry, and art. Play is intrinsically, if not exclusively, human for Huizinga (non-human animals play too). Most importantly for fanfiction, play is a voluntary activity, performed outside of ordinary tasks and work, for itself, and with complete absorption and devotion, (p.8) which seems as good a definition of what fanfiction is as any. Play could be an important element to explore in future research about disability and/in/through

fanfiction, especially as it could relate to playful activities that disabled fans take part in, and, in how disability is deployed as part of play in fanfiction genres.

Subverting gender and sexuality

Initially, studies of fanfiction determined fans to be mainly white, middle-aged, professional, heterosexual women and this influenced how queerness has been viewed in fanfiction. For example, a large portion of fanfics explore romantic or sexual relationship between characters who are not canonically involved with one another (Russ, 2006; Zubernis & Larsen, 2012). One of fanfiction's most central, and oldest genre is called "slash"⁵, which are stories where male protagonists are in passionate romantic and sexual relationship with one another (see Newman-Stille, this issue). Slash and fanfiction co-constituted one another through the Kirk/Spock pairing explored by female Star trek fans in the 1960s (Coppa, 2006; Jamison, 2013). As such slash is representational of the type of creative/literary practice fanfiction is; a queering⁶ of mainstream narrative that transcends authors and readers' personal sexual and gender identity. Fatallah (2016) considers slash queer because it is "a non-heterosexual response to mass culture" by people who most probably aren't queer (p.29). The notion that disability fics, and disability in fanfiction more generally, could similarly be considered a crippling (and therefore also queering, see McRuer, 2006) because it is a non-disabled response to mass culture by people who most probably are not disabled seems a potentially rich avenue to investigate in future scholarship on disability and/in/through fanfiction.

⁵ Femslash, fanfics where female characters are in passionate sexual and/or romantic relationships. It is much less popular than slash and under theorized. My personal understanding of its history is that it emerges as a substantial genres with the Xena/Gabrielle (from the Xena: Warrior Princess TV show) pairing in the early to mid 90s, but this is anecdotal. For more information about femslash see centrumlumina's "femslash revolution" tumblr <http://femslashrevolution.tumblr.com/>, Passion & Perfection ralst.com. For scholarship on it see Transformative Works and Culture volume 24 (2017) "Queer Female Fandom".

The queerness of fanfiction has been uncomfortable for many scholars in fanfiction studies (Bury, 2005; Jenkins, 1992/2013; Pugh, 2005), and the tendency has been to want slash and fanfiction to mean something else than queerness. Joanna Russ's (2014) essay "Pornography by women, for women, with love" initially published in 1985, tried to explain away women fans of Star Trek's fascination with Kirk and Spock slash by a number of hypothesis: Spock was female-coded because of being Vulcan and therefore alien, male/male relationships were perceived by fans as more noble and egalitarian and a way for woman to insert themselves as an equal partner, it was a way to objectify male bodies. This analysis seems to imply was that slash was popular with heterosexual women because it was really about heterosexuality. In part, I believe this analytical tendency was related to whom the fanfiction participant in slash was defined as: white, heterosexual, middle-class, and professional women.

In fanfiction communities, women have always dominated, and this has stayed a constant in fanfiction demographics (Baym, 2000; Black, 2008; Bury, 2005; Coppa, 2006; De Kosnik, 2016; Jenkins 1992/2013; Russ, 1985/2014; Zubernis & Larsen, 2012). However, more recent studies have complicated this demographic. Fanfiction has developed from an alternative practice, reserved to small groups of fans and distributed offline through photocopied zines in the 1960 at fan conventions (Coppa, 2006) to a worldwide, and more mainstream fan practice, millions engage in online. Age demographics have also changed since these early studies, with much younger fans composing an important subset of that population (Warburton; Black 2008). User Centrumlumina's (<http://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/63208278796/ao3-census-masterpost>) 2013 census survey of AO3 participants contained 10,005 responses: 3.6% were 15 and younger, 77.2% were between 16 and 29, 13.3% were between 30 and 39 years old, and only

⁶ I understand "queering" to mean a process by which the already existing queerness in many narratives is highlighted and brought to the fore.

5.8% were 40 and older. Mid-teens to late twenties now seem to comprise the majority of fans that participate in fanfiction on AO3. A 2010 study of fans with profiles on fanfiction.net (<http://ffnresearch.blogspot.com/2011/03/fan-fiction-demographics-in-2010-age.html>), similarly reveals that most fans were between the ages of 12 and 19 years old. Since AO3 and Fanfiction.net are both mega archives that comprise a number of fandoms and genres, with millions of users, they attract a wide diversity of fans, and could be said to be representational of fanfiction as a population.

Similarly, while women have been considered to comprise up to 90% of participants in any given fanfiction space, the queering of fans and fan spaces (See Liang, this issue), have also seen more diverse gender identities emerge as significant in online fanfiction spaces. As such, fanfiction is an anomaly as both a fan practice, and as a type of participatory culture, in that it is not dominated by male-identified people or by heterosexual sexual and romantic narratives. Other fanfiction scholars have insisted that slash and fanfiction space more generally should be considered, and are considered by fans themselves to be "queer female space" (Lothian, Busse, Reid, 2007) because it is queer women who are writing and reading slash. Furthermore, online fanfiction spaces should be considered "queer virtual spaces" (Lackner, Lucas, Reid, 2006, p.196) because they are online spaces where queer erotics are well entrenched, and denoted by a multiplicity of participants, relationships, and genders.

The assumptions in data collection has influenced these results as well; Collecting data about gender and sexuality in fan spaces requires a recognition of that gender and sexual diversity. Centrumlumina's survey asked respondents to choose all genders (and sexualities) they identified with, as well as including an "other " box that allowed for genders not included in the list given to respondents to emerge as significant. This allowed some respondents to choose

multiple boxes (41.5%) and while 60% of those respondents selected female, 25.6% selected male, 56.6% selected genderqueer and 42.6% selected either transgender or trans*. These results challenge the notions of fanfiction as mainly female practices and spaces. A more accurate description would be to say that they are queer, female and trans/non-binary dominated spaces, where gender is often understood as fluid.

The pleasure of shipping disability/sex

It was through fanfiction from the TV show "Firefly" (Joss Whedon, 2002-2003), specifically the heterosexual Jayne/River pairing, that I started paying attention to how disability was represented in fanfiction and thinking about disability representation created by ordinary people outside of mainstream popular culture and mass media. I am uncertain why a heterosexual pairing continues to be so romantically and sexually enticing to me as an AFAB (assigned female at birth) non-binary queer person, but it does. Perhaps the notion of "queer erotics" (Lackner, Lucas, Reid, 2006) do not simply apply to straight or queer women reading slash, but to all possible pairings in fanfiction regardless of who the reader is? I do know that disability has everything to do with my interest.

I feel a connection with River Tam, in part because her impairment is located in her brain and nervous system, and because she cannot control how this manifests in the world. Her way of being in the world is framed as excessive, unpredictable, and largely undesirable. Consequently, she is always under surveillance, administered drugs and therapies without her consent, and these are always done "for her own good", by those who love her. An experience many children (and adults) with disability share. She is perceived as irremediably broken, always potentially dangerous, and without a place in the world. And yet, in both the series finale and the film, River

is at the heart of the narrative with other character's narratives always in relation with hers. Her very existence in the plot spurs actions on, and in the end, in both the series and the film, River saves them all, because and not despite who she is. Because she is disabled in an abled world she is a misfit (Garland Thomson, 2011) who must create her own ways of being in inaccessible environments (Dokumaci, 2016) and constantly encounters people who misunderstand and devalue her. Like many disabled people, River's authentic self, as she experienced her disabled bodymind in the world, was either rejected as insufficiently normative, as requiring interventions in order to become someone approximating that norm, or, as worthless in its authenticity. Yet, as audience members, we know that she is so much more than how she is perceived by other characters. *Firefly* was that rare show that challenged its own representation of River as a brave, broken victim and turned her into a (still disabled) hero. And this was reflected in the fanfiction. Although numerous authors could only see River as having agency by curing her of her disability, or by showing her capable of overcoming it in some way, others didn't. In these stories, it is the other characters who must change their perceptions of her. In River/Jayne (Rayne) shipping communities⁷ that is done through a romantic and sexual relationship with Jayne, a character that while fearing and respecting her because she is "crazy", nonetheless recognizes her talents, her strengths, her value, and that simply accepts her "craziness" as an intrinsic part of who she is. Those fan authors who explored River as a character with agency, not despite of her disability, but because of it, were subverting not only the accepted tropes about

⁷ Community of fans who like fanfictions about River and Jayne in a sexual and romantic relationships (or ships), such as the LiveJournal Copper for a Kiss <https://rayne-shippers.livejournal.com/>. Nowadays many fans would also visit AO3's Jayne Cobb/River Tam pairing page https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Jayne%20Cobb*s*River%20Tam/works

disabled characters' worth as depending on what their experiences mean to abled characters, but also were subverting the social anxiety around sexualized disabled people with agency. Rayne fanfictions that depicts explicit and graphic sexual encounters that involve a still disabled, in fact always disabled character (in no danger of a cure), are one way of talking about disability as a source of erotic energies, as pleasurable, and smutty (See *Disabled!*, this issue). Because fanfiction is written by ordinary people, who are creating their own culture and their own pleasure, I think that fanfiction can be quite a subversive experience for many people who do not see themselves represented in mainstream culture. For disabled fans who can finally see themselves sexually represented, not only is it subversive, it is also quite rare to see someone like you (see Mullis, this issue), as a source of erotic pleasure in media, over and over again.

Transgressing fanfiction's subversive nature

Fanfiction is considered to be a subversive way of engaging with media, which transgresses roles an audience member is supposed to play. Jenkins (1992/2013) considers that fans "poach" (p.24) whichever aspects of their fandom resonate with them, omitting others that do not, with no other intent than their own desires to "play" with the characters, timelines and worlds. This active form of participation by fans was a way for Jenkins to challenge the notion that fans were only passively consuming media. From this perspective, fan practices such as participating in fanfiction, indicates that the meaning of media texts, far from being given to audience, is in fact co-constituted by them through their interpretations of them (p.33). Fans give themselves the right to interpret, critique, borrow, manipulate and transform existing media texts, because their love of these fandoms allows them to feel a proprietary sense towards them. Jenkins argues that, "Undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary and intellectual property, fans raid mass culture, claiming its material for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural

creations and social interactions" (p.18). Fanfiction thus allows fans to re-write characters and storylines to explore issues and identities that are meaningful to them, and in some cases, to write themselves in to the fandom (also known as Mary Sues, see Dreisinger, this issue). While producers of mass media cultural products may assume they should have the last word on their texts, fans know that their position as fans allows them to explore whatever else could happen in the spaces in between words, scenes, looks, gestures. Those spaces are where fans' imagination takes flight, and where what is either left unsaid and unfelt, or that is glaringly absent, can be explored. This disregard for expected and appropriate behaviours is an important part of fanfiction's subversive nature.

Despite its subversion of gender and sexuality, fanfiction is not always subversive. Fanfiction often reproduces disability tropes uncritically. While there are pockets of resistance where disability also can be playfully imagined otherwise, disability has been solidified into literary tropes in fanfiction. And, while fanfiction allows fans to transgress what is expected of them, as fans, as individuals, it does not transgress systems of oppression current in society, such as racism. Fanfiction reproduces the devaluing of racialized characters by preferring white characters over all others in fanfiction pairings, and by silencing any critiques black fans and fans of colour have relating to racism in fan communities (centrumlumina, 2013; Fazekas, 2014). In her thesis "Queer and unusual space: White supremacy in the ostensibly queer practice of writing slash fiction", Angela Fazekas makes the argument that fanfiction, and slash more particularly, reproduce whiteness as the ideal norm, as an ideology, and as a practice. She demonstrates, by examining slash in the *Teen Wolf* fandom, that fans privilege pairings between

white characters, above all others⁸. She also addresses the problems Black fans and fans who are POC encounter when trying to challenge racism in fanfiction or fans' reproduction of racist tropes in fanfic. She argues that because fanfiction is perceived by (white) fans both as a subversive and transgressive practice by/for women and queer people against the heteropatriarchal mainstream, critiques of racism in fanfiction communities or slash are perceived as an attack on fanfiction itself by these same white fans (p.66). Fazekas' point is that the subversive queer female fan transgressing mainstream norms through fanfiction is implicitly white. Ultimately, this results in fans of colour feeling alienated from online fanfiction spaces where they can neither be represented in fanfics, nor talk about race (p.74). Fazekas compellingly argues that:

"...the affective engagement of white fans to fandom is intertwined with a possessive investment in whiteness that works to preserve white supremacist and queer liberal ideology, and results in vehement, derisive denials of racism and white privilege." (Fazekas, 2014, p.68)

Similar pushbacks have also happened to disabled fans who have attempted to challenge another fanfiction genre, hurt/comfort. Hurt/comfort is a genre that depicts characters being hurt, and other characters taking care of them, and relies heavily on representation of illness, disease, disability, loss of function. In 2010 disabled fans, most of whom were also POC and queer, tried to challenge the ableism of a list of prompts in a fanfiction writing challenge⁹. The reaction was also "vehement and derisive", and those fans were ridiculed, attacked, and accused of not being "real fans" and of not understanding what Hurt/comfort was, or why fans wrote and read it. To complicate matters, many fans who were doing the silencing self-identified as having a

⁸ centrumlumina's research on which pairings are the most popular on AO3, which has been produced yearly from 2013 to the present, demonstrates the same tendency. Almost all 100 most popular pairings are male/male and white.

⁹ Writing challenges in fanfic can take many forms, but usually include prompts being given writers who must then fulfill them and have their fanfics judged by the community.

disability, or having experienced trauma. Counter-accusations of censorship by the fans having their practice challenged as ableist abounded. This situation was not resolved in any satisfactory way: disabled fans left those particular spaces, and made their own elsewhere.

In their otherwise excellent book "Fandom at the crossroads" (2015), Zubernis and Larsen disabled fans who challenged the hurt/comfort bingo, were constructed as external to fanfiction and/or those who enjoy Hurt/Comfort, stating that, "Such misunderstanding sometimes occur when readers perceive the hurt in the story but miss the potential for healing" (p.91). Hurt/comfort was presented as a therapeutic practice that disabled fans were disturbing, Disabled fans who criticized hurt/comfort were creating unsafe online spaces for those wanting to explore trauma, and of constraining "the joy inherent in a freedom of expression rarely found elsewhere, a place for open experimentation and self-discovery" (p.89)¹⁰. Disabled fans, then, can be part of fanfiction spaces as long as they are not critical of the reproduction of ableist tropes in fanfiction. Fazekas' arguments could thus be applied to an analysis of how fandom reproduces not only compulsory whiteness, and compulsory ablebodiedness, but also in how it deals with dissenting views within its own community. While seeing these conflicts as isolated may be a way to keep our view of fanfiction as a haven for like-minded subversive fans, I argue that are also an indication of how fanfiction polices its borders and reinforces its norms. Fanfiction's characterization as inherently subversive and transgressive seems to be troubled by fans who are being marginalized in fanfiction communities.

Disruption

¹⁰ Zubernis and Larsen also end up dismissing the concern of the disabled fans of colour in another way later on in their book by arguing that people from already marginalized communities are biologically and culturally predisposed to "become overly defensive, constantly perceiving threats or provocation even when they don't actually exist...Experiences of social exclusion foster a particularly strong hostile cognitive bias because of the evolutionary significance of that group affiliation" p.119

I argue that subversion and transgression are insufficient in conceptualizing fanfiction and the practices and creation it supports. Instead, in order to be able to address issues such as the marginalization of Black fans, fans of colour, trans fans, and disabled fans (and others), and the reproduction of systems of oppressions in both fanfics and fanfiction spaces, another concept is needed. Disruption, as a break from the normal course of things (or of normal tout court), an interruption into what was expected, but also as denoting the breaking apart or rupturing of something, can be useful here.

Disability and performance scholar Arseli Dokumaci (2017) uses Gibson's notion of affordances (1977), to explore how disabled people's embodied performances of everyday mundane tasks are a form of "affordance- creation" (Dokumaci, 2013). Affordances are what Gibson calls the possibilities for action an environment allows, in relation to an agent that can perceive them (Gibson, 1977, p.67). When Gibson talks of affordances he is taking about, real material properties of an environment, which, when it is in relation with someone who perceives them, enables that someone to act. The notion of affordances is often taken up in engineering and design to talk about the properties of a technological product, like a cell phone or a chair. However, Gibson was trying to come up with a way of talking about the relationship we have with our environment in a very material sense. Although how Gibson's notion of affordances can be applied to online fanfiction spaces is an interesting one (Nagy & Neff,) it would take us far beyond the scope of this essay.

Dokumaci (2014) argues that disabled people, because they are interacting within an inaccessible world, must figure their own ways of doing things that suits their bodies: using a rubber glove to open a jar because of weakness or pain, or certain body contortions to get on or off a couch to take into account painful limbs, for example (2017). Dokumaci compellingly

argues that disruption creates a space of creation, for disabled people and the environment. In being confronted with inaccessibility, it allows disabled people to find new affordances, within the same environment they do not fit in. For example, using rubber gloves and a pincers to open a jar when you are in pain (Dokumaci, 2017). But more than this, for Dokumaci, the performance of those everyday tasks in new ways, challenges the way things are done, they way lives can be lived, and ultimately, whose bodies and lives matter (Dokumaci, 2013, p.114). I argue that disruption as a site of creation, that can bring to the fore other possibilities already in existence, is useful to the analysis of fanfiction.

Fanfiction is a disruption, and it creates disruptions; fanfiction is a disruption because it breaks the expectations mainstream media creators have about how fans should behave towards their creation: consuming, accepting and respecting the official story as it is given.

Fanfiction also is a disruption to the notion that in order to be valuable, labour must be assigned a monetary value. Fanfictions are labours of love, not only for the authors who write them, but for the readers who spend countless hours reading them, commenting on them, talking about them. And of course, fanfiction is a queer disruption to mainstream heterosexual and gender norms, and fans' unrepentant love of slash, of kink, of sex, of romance, and pleasure resists all attempts at being reproached by those who consider it bad literature, in poor taste (or as a proof of), and not worth anyone's time.

Fanfiction as a site of disruption is also the ground on which new ways of doing things can be found. While this has afforded fanfiction the possibilities to create and re-imagine new kinds of genres and practices for writing narratives and engaging with popular culture and participating in online culture, it also affords fans the possibility to challenge one another and fanfiction itself. Marginalized fans who are voicing their dissent about racism and ableism are

using the same affordance, stemming from the same disruption, that fanfiction does towards mainstream pop culture. But they are also breaking apart from fanfiction norms about what fans can say about fanfiction. They are disrupting acceptable notions about what fanfiction is subversive about (sex and gender), what norms it transgresses (heteropatriarchal norms of behaviour) by wanting fanfiction to also be subversive about disability and racial representation, by also wanting it to transgress white supremacy and ableism.

Conclusion

Fanfiction can be understood as fulfilling the creative, playful, social, disruptive needs of a multitude of fans who are disenfranchised from the production of mainstream popular culture, and have access to digital media and technologies to produce, share, and access all types of fan works. Fanfiction does not only draw outside the lines, it erases and redraws them entirely. Fans are often self-critical (and simultaneously proud) of the many and varied forms of narratives, creative practices, and different genres of narratives fanfiction allow them to engage with.

Fanfiction is a disruptive practice, the fan a disruptive figure, and by existing and growing, fanfiction spaces are disruptive to mainstream media. Fans' enjoyment of mainstream popular culture is not dependent on a few creators producing a relatively small number of movies, TV shows and books; instead fans can engage with any number of different interpretations of the same texts in the millions of fanfics available online.

Fanfiction, like any self-defined community depends on the defining and enforcing of norms, and fanfiction is very much about creating its own norms. The notion that the ideal fan who participate in fanfiction is white, heteroflexible or queer, female or gender-ful, young, and able-bodied has often been implicitly woven into fanfiction studies, as well as in expectations that fans should not challenge oppression in fanfiction space or fanfics. Conceiving of fanfiction as a

generative disruption that affords fans to be disruptive in all kinds of ways, including towards and within fanfiction itself, could be an important shift in thinking through the importance of fanfiction as an online form of participatory culture.

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