

“Writing To Cope”: Anti-Shipping Rhetoric in Media Fandom

Allegra Rosenberg

Over the last decade, as the varied and diverse participatory cultures of media fandom have moved from home to home, and been populated anew by younger generations with priorities affected by general cultural shifts, norms are changing almost too quickly to be documented. Formerly sacred concepts such as “the fourth wall,” the dividing line between creators (known as “the powers that be,” or TPTB) and fans, have been broken down; accepted practices of creation and participation are being challenged.



Brit Kelley has detailed the movement over the last few years towards the “platform model” of fandom, in which “the nearly global connectedness of Twitter has further lowered the bar for interaction between creative producers and fans” (2021). This has had an increasingly visible effect on the digital spaces in which transformative fanworks, specifically erotic literature and artwork, are shared. I am not interested in untangling the actual ethical implications behind individual examples of “problematic” erotic material, or pathologizing either its supporters or its decriers. Instead, I am seeking to examine the effects the recent shifts in digital platforming of fandom culture has had on the discourse around its production and consumption, through the lens Boyd and Marwick (2010) define as “context collapse” and Jurgenson and Davis (2014) separate out into “context collision” and “context collusion,” as well as through Joanna Russ’s writing on the authoring of, and affective responses to, erotic fan literature.

Abigail De Kosnik (2016) cites several examples of fandom participation as activism, noting that since 2009, many fans have committed to making social justice and critical accountability part of their fandom practice. Recent events in the world of digitally platformed fandom have illuminated not only the increasingly visible struggle among fans to define what constitutes “acceptable” works to produce and consume, but the ways in which the collapse of formerly standard fandom contexts have affected that struggle.

On October 6, 2020, screenwriter and showrunner Bryan Fuller retweeted to his Twitter account a pornographic artwork depicting the two main characters of his show, NBC’s *Hannibal*, engaging in explicitly depicted oral sex. Fuller, an out gay man known for his irreverent social

media presence and support for the central “ship,” or quasi-canonical relationship between Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham, quickly became the subject of controversy amongst the Hannibal fan community.

You aint never gon catch me replying to nsfw fanart of my employees that shit weird as hell lmao, tweeted one user. *bro wtf. it's disgusting,* tweeted another. Fuller responded: *I'm not disgusted by Art. I'm disgusted by cruelty. I'm disgusted by hate. I'm disgusted by those who would shame others for expressing themselves creatively.* The artist in question was identified by Twitter users as belonging to a group known as the “rainbow meats.” *its really unprofessional as a creator of a show to be interacting with such nsfw art especially by someone who is in a known group that supports pedophilia,* stated one Twitter user, categorically denouncing Fuller’s tweet.

According to Fanlore, the fandom-culture wiki maintained by the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), “anti-shipper (or just an anti) has been used [in the 2010s] to describe fans who disapprove of a ship and its shippers due to the ship being considered problematic or morally wrong” (Fanlore, n.d.). Within the Hannibal Twitter community, affiliation with one “side” or another became indicated by the use of demonstrative emojis in display names or profile descriptions: “” or “rainbow meat” to indicate a pro-shipper position, and in response “” or “steak knife” indicated the opposite.

This ongoing controversy, known as the “Hannibal Twitter Wars” (Fanlore, n.d.) shed a public light on a general trend that has been gaining momentum in digital fan spaces, in conjunction with With the continued active engagement of Fuller with supportive followers and against critical ones, the argument spiraled from one about the appropriateness of the specific explicit art in question, and into one with much higher and broader stakes. Embedded in this incident of “fantagonism” —defined by Derek Johnson as “ongoing, competitive struggles between both internal factions and external institutions to discursively codify the fan-text-producer relationship according to their respective interests” (2017)—and exposed to a wide audience by its very public nature, were clear delineations between the essential perspectives of the “anti-shipper,” or more plainly “anti” (frequently “fancop”), and, conversely, the “pro-shipper,” or “anti-anti.” Just like any other social group, the identification of an enemy within fandom is a powerful factor in social cohesion (Zubernis & Larsen 2012). These relatively niche positions, and the fervor with which they are defended from entrenched distances across digital spaces,

are reflective of the deep emotional attachment which fans have to their beliefs about how fandom practices should and shouldn't be performed.

Certainly, the deeply political language used around pro/anti-shipping arguments reflects the issue's prioritization in the minds of its proponents. This is particularly important in the public landscape of Twitter, where their fandom activities are visible to the world at large, and there is an intrinsic desire to be seen as "good" fans in the eyes of that potentially infinite, collapsed public. "The sanctioning of deviant in-group members is particularly harsh when there is an external audience with some powers of sanction (which it can be argued is always the case on the internet, as opposed to a deserted high school hallway)" (Zubernis & Larsen 2012). Henry Jenkins predicted in *Convergence Culture* that one of the skills young people would need in order to become full-fledged participants in the oncoming cultural shift he characterized as "convergence culture" was "the ability to share and compare value systems by evaluating ethical dramas" (2006). What has emerged in the platform stage of fandom culture is a mildly dystopian version of this outcome, in which the constant and heated evaluation of ethical dramas, and one's position within those evaluations, plays a central role in the identities of individual fans and intra-fandom communities. Fandom has always been a space in which "differing opinions become co-present, competing interests struggling to define interpretative and evaluative consensus" (Johnson 2017), but the highly public politicization of those differing opinions is a phenomenon which speaks to novel trends in fandom as well as social media's potential to amplify and complicate those trends.

Hannibal, which was popular on Tumblr during its original airing period of 2014-17, was released onto Netflix in 2019, resulting in a new wave of fans gathering on Twitter, many in their teens who had been too young to watch Hannibal during its original airing. This new wave coincided with the late-2010s rise of the "platform model," and the transformation of fandom culture from individualized, siloed communities with specific rules and mores to mere commercial segments of larger mainstream app communities with fluid, shifting boundaries. A conversation with a young fan following the controversy summed up Fuller's hardline stance against the anti-shippers:

@BryanFuller

A LITTLE REMINDER FOR WHOEVER NEEDS IT

[Gif of Hannibal saying "It's Ok to be weird"]

[user]

hey bryan, ive watched hannibal ever since the first episode aired, and the first season of american gods b4 you left. im confused as to why you're taking the side of pedophile, incest & zoophile supporters/defenders & really only supporting them? its a really bad look on ya dude

@BryanFuller

They're not any of those things. You've twisted their art/artistic expression into those extremes because you don't understand art history, Greco Roman mythology, or metaphorical, allegorical, or thematic storytelling. Your narrowmindedness is your own shortcoming, not theirs.

Celia Lam noted the result of the shift, decades ago, between analog and digital production of fanfiction and transformative fanworks: "In the public visibility of online publication, the insular nature of fan fiction – which could practically be maintained in its previous offline mode – is dispelled" (2014). This loss of insularity has only accelerated thanks to the adoption of newer, more public platforms for fan activity. The comparatively locked and private worlds of mailing lists and Livejournal communities gave rise to Tumblr; from there fandom practices moved to dominant social media platforms such as Twitter where they have become visible alongside non-fandom, political, and otherwise mainstream conversation (Kohnen 2018). More specifically, after Tumblr banned NSFW (Not Safe For Work) content in late 2018, the "shared practices of representation and interpretation" of erotic content on Tumblr (Tiidenberg 2019) were destroyed. In moving to Twitter, and leaving those shared practices behind, as well as the protective affordances that Tumblr's interface lent to their interactions, NSFW and erotic content became much more visible to and accessible by a broader platformed public.

danah boyd's work on context collapse (2008, 2010) prefigures the current era of fandom culture, but is useful in identifying the nature of the changes in digital communication that have led to the present situation. Moreso by far than LiveJournal and Tumblr, fandom content on Twitter has the chance to reach outside its intended audience, all the while inside an environment in which the "networked audience [...] has a presumption of personal authenticity and connection" (boyd & Marwick 2010). Kelley notes that "the nearly global connectedness of Twitter has further lowered the bar for interaction between creative producers and fans" (2021), and the subsequent

damage to the so-called “fourth wall” has irrevocably changed the way fans communicate and behave with regards to public figures such as actors, writers, and brands. In contrast to the relatively sanitized and bland corporate feeds examined by Kelley, however Fuller’s unusually interactive and authentic involvement with the transformative side of fandom, over a period of years spanning the show’s airing and post-cancellation revival (Williams 2018), provides an alternative lens into the dark side of context collapse and the platforming of fan culture.

While “historically, fans have seen themselves as resistant to dominant forms of consumption” (Kelley 2021), Twitter’s acceleration of the breakdown of the boundaries between creators and fans, and younger generations of fans’ increasing acceptance of the public and corporate nature of fandom as given has changed the stakes (Jenkins 2018). According to Zubernis & Larsen, “there is often a sense of self-righteousness on the part of those attempting to police other fans’ behavior, a sense that this is a necessary step to protect the community and maintain standards” (2012). In a community that is not only publicly accessible to the millions of non-fan users of Twitter but by the creators and performers of popular works themselves, this two-way policing seems almost inevitable.

The seeming endorsement, in this case, of series creator Bryan Fuller, led to the entrenchment of pro-shipper and anti-shipper positions in reaction. What Bertha Chin identifies as the social capital inherent in approval from the TPTB is the currency with which fans’ ideas and works are imbued: in practice, “the performance of the fan (via tweeting and perhaps even behaving ‘appropriately’) will attract the attention of the celebrity or the media producer, thus gaining the fans status and recognition, in both the eyes of the producers/celebrities and other fans” (2018). During the Fuller kerfuffle, the declared alliance with an “enemy” group—the pro-shippers—caused a rift in the fandom, with some fans declaring that they would no longer support Fuller as a creator, that his support of the pro-shipper contingent was unacceptable.

The problem at hand is, in no small part, due to the deeply affective nature of individual reactions to sexual or taboo content. Conversations about the moral appropriateness of taboo/kinky content have been endemic to fan spaces, specifically spaces where literature is produced specifically for erotic purposes, for as long as such spaces have existed. Joanna Russ’s 1985 essay “Pornography By Women, For Women, With Love” examines the presence of such content in Kirk/Spock erotica, and comes to an important conclusion:

“I’m convinced, after reading through more than fifty volumes of K/S material (most of it “X-rated”) that only those for whom a sexual fantasy “works,” that is, those who are aroused by it, have a chance of telling us to what particular set of conditions that fantasy speaks, and can analyze how and why it works and for whom [...] Sexual fantasy that doesn’t arouse is boring, funny, or repellent, and unsympathetic outsiders trying to decode these fantasies (or any others) will make all sorts of mistakes.”

Referring specifically in this case to rape fantasies, and other “abusive” fantasies such as those depicting violence and injury leading to sex, Russ’s acknowledgement, that those outsiders who are repelled by fantasies and erotic content that does not arouse them have no chance of understanding or sympathizing with the mechanisms behind its production, contextualizes the moral conflict that has arisen on social media around issues relating to transformative works.

In Kelley’s recognition of fanfiction as an emotioned, affective practice (2021), she quotes Kylie Jarrett’s argument that “the affective intensities experienced by the user also reproduce a subjective positioning that reflects an ideological social relation in which even the most intimate of experiences are open to, albeit never entirely captured by, the structures of exploitation associated with capital.” Social media platforms, as marketed products, exist within these structures; so too do their users. The purposeful gathering of fellow-minded fans in a digital space whose affordances are dictated by commercial needs frequently produces the negative consequences of what Jurgensen and David identify as “context collusions,” which occur when “users draw on the affordances of interaction platforms to bring together multiple networks, for varying purposes and to varying degrees” (2014). In order to share their work on Twitter, an artist or writer must contend with the possibility of it being viewed by those who have no interest in it, those who might be offended by it, or, in the case of Fuller, those who amplify it to hundreds of thousands of followers and spark off a days-long controversy.

On a platform such as Twitter where the “networked digital structures of expression and connection are overwhelmingly characterized by affect” (Papacharissi 2015), the platform affordances that restrict Twitter conversation to 280-character threads and encourage the construction of each individual user’s identity as an ongoing response to an imagined or real audience (boyd 2010) mean that perceived approval or defense of—let alone arousal

by—transgressive content by any given user has the potential to evoke fear and disgust in any other user or group of users, a process that reduces the spectrum of possible reactions even further from the limited options provided by the platform. Vice versa, the need to defend the creation or consumption of such content can easily become an essential part of one's public identity as a fan.

Zubernis and Larsen's 2012 book *Fandom at the Crossroads* examines issues of fan shame, bullying, and the complicated nature of physical desire in fandom practices. Using psychological and therapeutic approaches, they discuss fanfiction through the lens of coping strategies to deal with past trauma, explaining how "catharsis and written emotional expression displaced through fiction, fanfic or otherwise, may offer a greater sense of safety and control, and facilitate development of a more resilient sense of self." Anti-shipper philosophy, on the other hand, posits that fan literature and art dealing with morally reprehensible themes of pedophilia, incest, and abuse as might appear in such cathartic literature, are outright harmful and should not, under any circumstances, be written, shared, or consumed. Within the high-strung discursive field of fandom politics, the dialectically opposed hardline rhetoric of these self-declared positions does not allow for much nuance. Additionally, the extremely public nature of the debates lends itself to misunderstanding, simplification, and stereotyping. What is seen by pro-shippers as simply the desire for everyone to be able to write, draw, and publish what they want, even if it offends or "squicks," is viewed by anti-shippers as unforgivably harmful.

Questions about the moral responsibility of art and literature have been debated for thousands of years, from Plato onwards. As recently as a decade ago, when Zubernis & Larsen were investigating the Wincest shipping community in the Supernatural fandom, shipping two fictional brothers was seen largely as an activity perfectly in line with the transformative, subversive erotics of adult participation in fanfiction cultures. The common "writing to cope" argument, in line with Zubernis & Larsen's assessment that "the writing of fanfiction can be seen as a relatively pure form of re-authoring one's own narrative, a freedom emphasized in the research as crucial to therapeutic outcomes" (2012), may be useful to some, but the idea that one must be forced to disclose one's past trauma in order to be "allowed" to write fiction that deals with it could easily backfire.

As Kelley (2021) draws our attention to, fanfiction is a deeply “emotioned” practice, with affect circulating within a given community and “sticking” to bodies, some more so than others. In this case, the platform era of fandom has had the effect of introducing niche fetishism into a public sphere populated partly with those to whom such intense obsession with taboo sexuality is a total cipher, unable to be comprehended because it does not arouse. Affect transmutes, as it crosses these broken-down boundaries, from arousal to deep instinctive disgust, becoming in the process an intensely “sticky” and distressing phenomenon to which the instinct is to disavow and protect against.

The rhetorically reductive assignation of cultural signifiers like “pedophilic” “abusive” and “freak” to those who interact with and/or create certain fictional or visual types of taboo pornography is, per Wetherell’s definition (2012), an example of affective-discursive meaning-making in the context of the ongoing social event of fandom, distilling down into visceral simplicity users’ own reactions to its entry into their conscious awareness. Subsequently such signifiers lend power to the arsenal of an anti-shipper’s semantic arguments, framing their moral perspective to outsiders in visceral simplicity that it’s difficult to argue with. The same path is traced on the opposite side, as demonstrated by Fuller’s alignment with the pro-shipping position. The corresponding signifiers assigned to the opposition being “narrowminded” (in Fuller’s words) as well as commonly “puritans,” and “dumb teens” also allow for a discursive path to dismissing broader concerns about fiction’s effect on reality, and the reproduction of real-world harms through transformative fanworks.

Flourish Klink, host of fan culture podcast Fansplaining, described the conflict: “When you yourself feel like you’re under siege, it can be really hard to hear any other perspectives than your own” (Fansplaining, 2020). For every writer or creator who engages with or creates “problematic” content in order to cope with past traumas, and will defend the general right to do the same, regardless of disclosure of a traumatic past, there’s one for whom the mere existence of such content and its easy accessibility via an online platform like AO3 is deeply painful to confront, and for whom the publicly displayed support of pro-shipper mentality by a formerly trusted creator like Fuller is a betrayal of the highest order. An example of this can be seen in the semi-annual responses to the Archive Of Our Own’s (AO3) donation drives. The AO3, a central repository of transformative fan literature, was founded in 2009 in response to threats of censorship for explicit content from Livejournal, among other issues (De Kosnik 2016).

The Archive's terms of service explicitly permit rape, violence, and underage content, which must be warned for using the interface's default Archive Warning system. Incest, abuse, and other potentially problematic topics can be further voluntarily warned for in the "Additional Tags" section. In response to AO3's calls for donations, a regular event in the lifecycle of any non-profit organization, posts are made on Tumblr and Twitter decrying AO3 and those who donate to them, on the basis of the Archive's open allowance of these types of content. On a Tumblr post commenting on the necessity of donation to AO3, a user replied, *AO3 is a pedophiles safe haven and everything on it should burn. Also save your own content.* Another user replying to the same post, identifying themselves as a survivor of child sexual abuse, declared that *if you have the right to claim that fictional pedophilia is harmless and good and spread it, i have every right as a csa survivor to be disgusted by y'all.*

Activist pro-shippers have taken it upon themselves to document the origin and makeup of the fancop philosophy, drawing equivalences with TERF (Trans-Exclusive Radical Feminist) thought and specifically American strains of Protestant puritanism (dionysiaca, 2019). The desire of activist anti-shippers, on the other hand, to harshly condemn the "immoral" activities of both self-identified pro-shippers and unaffiliated parties, with reactions ranging from displays of disaffiliation to active harassment and punitive public "cancellation," can be seen as not only as a desire to exert power over members of their community, but as a genuine counterpart to their progressive/feminist ideals. The sometimes violent methods of disaffiliation that anti-shippers resort to in their strategies of content policing include doxxing, harassment, brigading, and mass-reporting. A user on the anonymous fandom forum Fail_Fandomanon posted a plaintive commentary on the phenomenon, specifically in relation to Fuller and the disturbing responses to his support of pro-shipping ideals:

I would really like to be able to peacefully browse Hannibal content on tumblr/twitter without running into deranged antis calling for violence against Bryan Fuller. [...] It would be different if it was just the same old toothless "proship dni" crap, but this gleeful, shameless pride in calling for his death is sickening. They're absolutely convinced they are in the moral right and there's no grey area of any kind. [...] I don't know what to do. It's probably not going to get better.

The "presumption of personal authenticity and connection" inherent in social media identified by boyd (2010) gives rise to the need within platformed fandom for one's public persona to

represent the truth of oneself, encompassing an authentic representation of beliefs and priorities. A young user demonstrating their affiliation with the anti-shipping community by placing “🔪👄” or “PROSHIPPERS DNI [do not interact]” in their bio is an easy way to signal that they do not approve of what they, as anti-shippers, perceive to be the pro-shipper *modus operandi*: inflicting real-world damage by producing or consuming works, illustrated or written, depicting harmful power dynamics between fictional characters.

The merging of youth activist spaces with fandom spaces has been documented as far back as the “social justice” culture of Tumblr (Kohnen 2018). As Ursula K. Le Guin said, “Immature people crave and demand moral certainty: This is bad, this is good. Kids and adolescents struggle to find a sure moral foothold in this bewildering world; they long to feel they’re on the winning side, or at least a member of the team” (2004). With media fandom as a far less subversive and private cultural practice than it was even ten years ago, its more taboo elements are in the process of being surfaced and criticized, through fourth-wall breaking events like the “Hannibal Twitter Wars”—as if a rock were being lifted up and the complex, isolated ecology below was exposed to light for the first time, with wide-ranging consequences. The effect of formerly private fandom practices such as the production of erotic literature and art being widely observed and subsequently subsumed into the broadly platformed cultural matrix of social media is complex and ongoing. Increased visibility from, and incorporation into, the larger machinery of cultural production (Jenkins 2018), has resulted in fandom’s attempt to jettison the more unsavory elements of fan identity: embrace of taboo sexuality, often queer and/or female, and the shamelessness around that embrace.

Zubernis & Larsen wondered nearly a decade ago if “the open acknowledgement in various public forums that fanfiction isn’t universally derided will eventually result in decreased fan shame and increased fan openness” (2012). Now, the outcome of that acknowledgement can be seen clearly in the ongoing discursive battles over taboo subjects in fanfiction and fanart being waged on social media. The production of transformative works itself is no longer nearly as controversial—now it is the type, kind, and subject of such works that is becoming open to scrutiny. Fan openness has increased, yes—but the cost of such visibility can be seen in the increased harassment over participation in formerly private practices, the intrusion of creators into fan spaces, and the heightened discursive stakes surrounding what the production and consumption of transformative works says about any given individual’s morality and beliefs.

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