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Sex Sells (Out): Neoliberalism and Erotic Fan Fiction

As nature's ties decay,
As duty, love and honour fail to sway,
Fictitious bonds, the bonds of wealth and law,
Still gather strength, and force unwilling awe.
Hence all obedience bows to these alone.

Oliver Goldsmith, "The Traveller" (1764), 349-54.

Fan Fiction and the Market

Fiction by fans is not new: despite the development of copyright law in the eighteenth century, unofficial sequels were common. For example, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) was followed by anonymous and pseudonymous sequels and satires, including *Pamela's Conduct in High Life* (1741) and Conny Keyber's (Henry Fielding's) *An Apology for the Life of Mrs Shamela Andrews* (1741). The commercial publishing world still produces such work: Jane Austen sequels and retellings include Arielle Eckstut's *Pride and Promiscuity: The Lost Sex Scenes of Jane Austen*, Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), Mitzi Szereto's *Pride and Prejudice: Hidden Lusts* (2011), P. D. James's *Death Comes To Pemberley* (2011), Jo Baker's *Longbourn* (2014), Val McDermid's *Northanger Abbey* (2015), and Curtis Sittenfeld's *Eligible* (2016). The market recognizes and legitimizes consumer demand for derivative fiction.

Amateur production of similar work, known as "fan fiction" or "fan fic," also has a long history, although the Web has made such work more accessible. The term first appeared in 1939 in Bob Tucker's science fiction bulletin *Le Zombie* where it was used to distinguish amateur science fiction from commercially available material (4). Today, Matt Hills defines fan fiction as amateur work utilizing and extrapolating from imaginary worlds created within the commercial sphere (35). The contextual difference between professional and fan fiction is the mode of production. While commercial texts undergo the processes of commissioning,

editing, marketing and purchasing—all inflected by capitalist hegemony—fan fiction prides itself on being free, usually online, with a degree of collaboration between authors and readers. Texts often appear with meta-textual commentary, which invites comments, responds to previous comments, and highlights the text as the product of a new author. When a fan text is appropriated by commercial publishers, it often attracts the ire of its original community, as was the case when *Twilight* fan fiction *Master of the Universe* disappeared from the web only to emerge commercially as the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy. Fans of the original objected to the fact that publishers had shorn the text of all references to its originary universe and to the readers who provided encouragement, ideas, and comments during its composition.

Fan fiction’s organizational model allows its proponents to claim that it is a space outside capitalism’s regular channels, despite relying on commercially-produced texts for its source material. Some fictions are generated by fans’ desires to extend the original text beyond what the market provides, such as the multiple *Star Trek* episodes, films, and books produced by fans. However, implied in the production of some fan fiction is a Frankfurt-influenced critique of commercial texts’ social conservatism, hence, for example, the prevalence of “shipping” or “slash” fiction, the tradition of writing (often same-sex) erotica about apparently “straight” characters.¹ Given this relationship between the market and desire, and the web’s general move from privately-funded to advertiser-funded hosting, a range of erotic and pornographic fan fictions make it possible to interrogate claims made about fan fiction as a space outside of neoliberal discourse.

While the fraught relationship between capitalism and fan fiction is well-known, whether fan fiction resists the dictates of neoliberalism remains uncertain. Neoliberalism, understood as a form of hyper-capitalism in which “market instrumental rationality” reduces cultural and human exchanges to goal-oriented transactions, generates subjects behaving as

self-investors with little conception of morality, pleasure or “the good life” (Brown 33, 41-2).² The cultural and economic framework of fan fiction, especially erotic fan fiction subgenres, allows the critic to ask whether the texts themselves resist or reflect the neoliberal order. Especially in the context of meta-textual commentary that reveals how authors and readers understand their practices, fan fiction reflects the inroads neoliberalism has made into all aspects of human activity.

The legal status of fan fiction produced out of American cultural artefacts by US-based creators and for websites hosted in the United States depends on interpretation of US copyright law. Fan fiction exists in a semi-legal space created by case law and interpretation of the terms “fair use” and “harm” (Schwabach, “Harry Potter” 398-99). Fan writers sometimes stress that their work does not benefit commercially from the use of copyrighted material, defining “harm” as a commercial rather than a moral or cultural concept, somewhat undercutting the anti-capitalist claims made by some fan fiction advocates (Schwabach, “Harry Potter” 402). In the case of Paramount Pictures Corporation and CBS Studios Inc. versus Axanar Productions Inc., Alec Peters and others argued over the possible ownership of *Star Trek* attributes including “clothing, shapes, worlds, colors, short phrases, the Klingon Language” which a group of fans used in crowd-funded *Star Trek* films and new episodes. In her support of the defendants’ motion, Erin Ranahan asserts that the non-commercial appropriation of pre-existing cultural material is “fair use” (12-13): a tribute, extension or reorientation of the “original” material with an honorable history. The defense summarizes the history of *Star Trek* fan fiction and notes that the copyright holders have historically tolerated, and even encouraged, fan fiction. David Grossman, lawyer for Paramount and CBS, recognizes the fair use defense but restricts it to “criticism, comment, news reporting or teaching ... parody or satire” (11). For Grossman, fair use protects both the commercial value in an original work and its author’s moral rights over their creation. Writers—and their

lawyers—also worry about the possibility of fans accusing them of plagiarism. Pugh cites Terry Pratchett, grumpily accepting the existence of fan fiction from the perspective of a commercial writer:

If [fan fiction] is done for fun and not for money and not presented as if it's some canonical work by the original author, then it comes under the heading of what the Hell. I'd prefer it kept off Web pages and not put where I can stumble over it, just in case some joker decides to claim that I've 'stolen their idea.' (126)

Other authors are more enthusiastic. J. K. Rowling, for example, regularly reads *Harry Potter* fan fiction: “It was like Christmas—Christmas in August ... I have read some, and I've been very flattered to see how absorbed people are in the world” (Pugh 124-25). But Rowling's literary agent, Christopher Little, is more cautiously supportive, couching his arguments in commercial terms:

She is very flattered by the fact there is such great interest in her Harry Potter series and that people take the time to write their own stories. Her concern would be to make sure that it remains a non-commercial activity to ensure fans are not exploited and it is not being published in the strict sense of traditional print publishing. (Pugh 125)

Beyond legal issues are those of cultural practice. Michel de Certeau characterizes active reading as “poaching” an impertinent raid on the literary preserve that takes away only those things that are useful or pleasurable to the reader:

Far from being writers ... readers are travelers, they move across landscapes belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves. (qtd. in Ahearne 33)

Poaching shifts power to the reader in the struggle for possession of texts and the meanings they incite. Fan fiction is perhaps the ultimate victory of readers turned authors: they have not only wrested control of interpretation but of the text's raw materials, while knowing that their own readers may in turn do the same to them. Akin to the poachers of old—who operated from marginal positions—fans appropriate the means of cultural production and instantiate an antagonistic relationship with “legitimate” channels in a struggle over the nature of economic, moral, and artistic rights. Henry Jenkins extended the notion of poaching to encompass the production of fan fiction. He positions fans as active consumers and challenges the existing stereotypes of fans as “cultural dupes, social misfits and mindless consumers.” Instead, Jenkins perceives fans as producers and manipulators of meaning who “actively assert their mastery over mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions” (23-24). He and others (Bacon-Smith; Baym) have made much of fan activity as resistant, and Melissa Gray asserts that writing fan fiction has affected the ways in which she consumes popular culture: “I can no longer watch episodes the way TPTB [The Powers That Be] likely intended. I bring not only my unique experiences to my viewing, but also the wealth of fanon background material that I’ve absorbed over the years” (98).

The assumption—sometimes explicit, sometimes implied—is that fan fiction is a wholly separate space from the commodified circulation of cultural texts in the capitalist system. Proponents consider the fan fiction universe to be a challenge *per se* to art's subjugation to capitalist discourse. Ian Watt and others argue that prose fiction is a product of capitalism: dependent on new industrial processes, distribution methods, and consumer demands. Furthermore, the novel represented and constructed the privatization of desire and the internalization of the social and economic *status quo*. The classic protagonist is a young, white, heterosexual male who overcomes a series of challenges, the reward being integration

into the cultural and economic hegemony, marked by riches and the acquisition of a wife: in the female *Bildungsroman*, such as Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* (1724), the protagonist's sexuality and marriageability are her commodity goods. Thus, literature was both produced by and produced capitalist patriarchy. While the market has subsequently permitted the representation of more diverse protagonists and viewpoints, the commodification of literature in the marketplace has restricted formal and ideological challenges to sub-genres such as "experimental" or "gay" fiction.

Fan fiction sidesteps the literary marketplace by insisting on the free circulation of texts and by inviting non-hierarchical interaction between authors and readers, many of whom are 'prosumers': creators and consumers.³ These texts appropriate material popularized by capitalist circulation and repurpose it, replacing monetary exchange for respect, kudos, or upvotes. For some authors, this is more than avoiding the marketplace, it is a deliberate subversion of the capitalist model, but even though capital may not circulate in these exchanges of status, a neoliberal economy of kudos operates in the consumption and production of fan fiction.

Changing Sides: The Curious History of *Fifty Shades of Grey*

One text illustrates well the cultural and economic tensions inherent in fan fiction. *Master of the Universe* (2009-11) was a sado-masochistic *Twilight* fan fiction published serially online under the pseudonym "Snowqueen's Icedragon." Having attracted commercial publishers, the work was withdrawn from public access. It reappeared in 2012, shorn of *Twilight*'s intellectual property and any indication of its collaborative production, under the title *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E. L. James. The novel became a publishing and media phenomenon, the biggest-selling BDSM novel to date. In it, a virginal female protagonist, Anastasia Steele, learns to submit sexually, physically, culturally, and economically to the psychologically-

damaged billionaire CEO Christian Grey. While media coverage focused on the sexual action, the novel's genesis provoked vociferous debates in fandom regarding the ethics of producing work collaboratively then deleting the "original" text and publishing it as a new work by a single author.

In transitioning from *Master* to *Fifty Shades*, the derivative settings and characters were replaced, presenting the revised text as superficially new, although the deeper structures of *Twilight*, *Master*, and *Fifty Shades* retain the characteristics of romance, including its patriarchal attitudes. In the process of changing the publishing environment, the text's ties to fan culture and the *Twilight* series fade from view. Fans' reactions to the move fell into two general camps. They either applauded James for making the leap to professional status or criticized her for exploiting her fans and bringing fandom into disrepute. This latter perspective represents fan fiction as an autonomous activity with values and structures at odds with those of mainstream publishing. The success of *Fifty Shades* raised ideological concerns beyond the qualitative objections raised by book reviewers. The series attracted criticism not solely for being "badly written, poorly researched ... and anti-woman" (Jones 3), but also because the effacement of its origins denied the collaborative process of fandom. Fans objected vociferously to this discourse as 'Has', a commenter on Jane Litte's 'Master of the Universe versus Fifty Shades of Grey by E. L. James Comparison' demonstrates:

E. L. James has used and taken advantage of *Twilight* fandom, yes she has got her fans and supporters but overall she has left a huge wankfest on her road to publication. . . . When you are writing FF [fan fic], you are writing for that fandom and the universe which you love, no profit should be made from it because that is taking advantage and using a fanbase to get a step up. ('Has', online).

“Ros” expresses a similar viewpoint in response to the same article. Stories, Ros explains, are the moral property of those who contributed to their production within the gift economy:

I cannot imagine ever taking one of my fan fics and rewriting it as original fiction. ... I would be breaking the trust of my fannish readers ... They were the people who encouraged me and gave me feedback and let me do my learning and making mistakes without giving up on me. Those stories were freely offered and I was grateful for every single person who read them, commented on them or recommended them to others. In some way, those stories belong to my early readers as much as they belong to me. I do think that this is a huge difference between the way that fan fic works and the way that published fic works. ... So if I were a Twilight fan who had read MOTU, I would be feeling seriously betrayed by the author. (‘Ros’, online).

E. L. James personifies the ambiguity of the prosumer, straddling the line between producer and consumer, stealing from mass culture to create *Master of the Universe* then stealing from fandom to re-enter mass culture structures with *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Whether James’s fans would have encouraged and contributed to her text had they been aware their efforts would result in commercialization is both a valid and an unanswerable question. Having been in a position of cultural marginality where they can poach and re-write their favorite texts and espouse ideological purity, fans are now being poached from and having to reassess their cultural and ideological perspectives.

While *Fifty Shades* was an early example, other texts have made the leap to commercial circulation, suggesting that rather than being a space outside or in opposition to the market, fan fiction sites are waiting rooms or sites for the production of raw material for hopeful authors ready to parlay readers’ approbation into hard currency. Increased

opportunities for digital commercial or self-publishing—such as Amazon’s Kindle Worlds outlet for authorized fan fiction—blur the boundaries between amateur and professional status reducing the space for cultural resistance to neoliberalism despite the gatekeeping of the community’s most vociferous advocates.⁴ The production of “authorized” fan fiction rejects the traditional humanist view of artistic creation as an individual act, while denying the collaborative and collective elements that marked fan fiction as in some way resistant, reducing it to a franchiseable activity and exchanging the pleasures of amateur writing for piecework labor.

Fan fiction’s inherent intertextuality goes beyond the relationship between source text and fan work and encompasses social relations between fans. As Basu explains,

fan fiction is an intertextual communication with the source text; however, in practice, it also engages with a host of other texts, be they clearly stated requests [from other fans], shared interpretive characterizations, or even particular instantiations of the universes that the fan writer chooses to expand upon. (199-200)

Fan writers comment on these broader community ideas, critiques and interpretations, adding to them with their own writing. Stories in this network influence and implicitly critique each other, feeding into the broader community dialogue. Texts and advice are the products of a non-hierarchical network of exchange. Online media fandom is a gift culture in which fan gift exchange is performed in exclusionary symbolic ways to create a stable nexus of giving, receiving, and reciprocity. The gifts that fans exchange, which Rachael Sabotini describes as “the centerpiece of fandom” require skill and effort to make (para. 6). The monetization of fan work often results in an ‘author’ doing what fans refer to as “pulling to publish”: deleting files on fan archives, withdrawing from the community and erasing as much history as possible, rewriting textual history to silence evidence of collective effort. Removing a

particular story from this network “threatens the gift economy through which fan network operates” (Hellekson 115). Although the indexes of approbation (comments, upvotes, etc.) ultimately function as currency in a neoliberalized community, the gift structure of the fan community is the most tangible sign of its potential to resist hegemonic pressures.

However, the successful transformation of *Master* into *Fifty Shades of Grey* with minimal editing suggests that its original mode of production did not generate a new consciousness, nor that the fanfic community is coherently resistant to neoliberal discourse. *Fifty Shades* retains the heteronormativity of mainstream popular romance. Its obsession with consumption, money, legal contracts, brands, physical self-improvement, and self-investment are so pervasive that it transcends the traditional capitalist novel form and becomes a truly neoliberal work. Ana’s social and sexual fears reflect those of neoliberal woman. Ana’s status as a young, conventionally-attractive virgin marks her out as a fresh commodity in the sexual marketplace. She is therefore constantly aware of the work required to maintain her desirability, demonstrating Rosalind Gill’s concept of the makeover paradigm in which women are expected to aspire towards passivity while improving their bodies and minds for the purpose of winning a sexual competition. Left to herself Ana is largely indifferent to food and exercise until Christian makes it clear that he expects her to conform to his definitions of health and attractiveness. Ana evolves from a timid, insecure girl into a well-groomed, stylish woman worthy of the megabillionaire husband she acquires. Her reward is not increased self-confidence. Instead, success consists of appreciating and consuming the goods and services Christian makes available. Ana learns to wear high heels, becomes considerably leaner and fitter, has her hair styled, and has pedicures and manicures (James, *Freed* 41). She even shaves her pubic hair because Christian wants her to (*Freed* 48). Even the high cultural sphere, traditionally kept separate from mass culture, is not immune to the discourse of self-

investment. Ana's burgeoning taste in mainstream classical music reduces autonomous pieces of art to an index of readily-acquisitioned taste:

The singing starts again ... building and building, and he rains down
blows on me ... and I groan and writhe. ... Lost in him, lost in the astral,
seraphic voices. ... I am completely at the mercy of his expert touch.

"What was that music?" I mumble almost inarticulately.

"It's called Spem in Alium, a 40-part motet by Thomas Tallis."

"It was ... overwhelming." (James, *Grey* 142)

James's endorsement of specific recordings of classical music and art allows readers to follow the protagonist on her path to self-investment without undue difficulties: a point not lost on the producers and buyers of *Fifty Shades of Grey: The Classical Album* (Capitol Records, 2012). Learning to like the same things will make them "better" in the sense that they will be considered more desirable by richer, more sophisticated men. The consequence is that products of what was formerly known as "high" culture maintain their prestige in the novel's economy, implicitly reinforcing the cultural hierarchy but simultaneously reducing the cultural object to a market commodity. While submitting to the whips of Christian, Ana is also persuaded to submit to his tastes as a means of self-empowerment.

The *Fifty Shades of Grey* novels dramatize the tensions inherent in fan culture's relationship to late capitalism. While the text was produced within a space adjacent to capitalism and drew on the contributions of people who considered themselves outside neoliberal discourse, James's text discards even the conservative resistance found in traditional romance novels by depicting relationships, personal narratives, and tastes reduced to the status of commodities within a competitive market. In this case of erotic fan fiction left its community behind, but other examples of non-commercial fan erotica share, reject, and modify the neoliberal discourses identified in *Fifty Shades*.

The Sexual Economies of Erotic Fan Fiction

Pornography lends itself to transactional or neoliberal culture more readily than most genres. It is explicitly goal-oriented: the vast majority of pornography strips away extraneous material (such as plot and characterization) and trades in bodies in pursuit of its consumer's orgasm. Some fan pornography manifests the qualities of the neoliberal imagination more pervasively than commercial fiction because it appropriates the bodies, identities, and histories of celebrities and fictional characters without regard for ethics, morality, or intellectual property. *Literotica.com* is a free-to-access website hosting amateur pornographic stories, funded by advertising and an online shop: while the authors do not financially benefit from their work, they provide material which drives profit via click-through advertising. *Literotica* authors hope to gain readers' approval just as other fan authors do. Mark McGurl describes the author in the Age of Amazon as a "servant, server, and service provider" (453): the *Literotica* author, having foregone a share of the profits of her labor, epitomizes even more clearly the end-point of neoliberal cultural production.

Literotica includes the communal features associated with other fan sites: interaction with readers through liking, comments, fora, and reader-nominated awards. The prominent tabulation of ranking and commenting statistics represents a neoliberalized, competitive pursuit of social capital. Texts are divided into categories by sexual preference, plus a "celebrities and fan fiction" section which carries roughly 10,000 texts, around the same size as "Interracial Love," and a third of the size of the BDSM section. The "Hall of Fame" lists the most appreciated stories. The top ten features work by only four authors. "Inishfree" wrote the top three stories, one based on the sitcom *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965-70), a second featuring Kelly Bundy of the sitcom *Married... With Children* (1987-97), and a third centered on TV talk-show host and actor Kelly Ripa. The other places are taken by three chapters of

“What the Cat Dragged In,” a 32-part story by “Psyche_b_Mused” derived from Marvel Comics’ *X-Men* series, an 8-part story called “Hunting the Hunter” by “Enithermon” set in the *Elder Scrolls* computer game world, and “Dark Miracle” by “WickedWendyDru,” inspired by Christine Feehan’s *Dark* series of vampire-romance novels (1999-present). The authors’ names are perhaps culturally significant: “Inishfree” is an Irish island and an echo of Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (1888); Psyche was a Greek muse and Cupid’s wife; and Enithermon may refer to Enitharmon, William Blake’s muse and beauty. This author also posted four poems, two erotic and two listed as “non-erotic.” These aspirational pseudonyms and practices represent attempts to generate cultural capital in competition with other authors on the site and perhaps consciousness of pornography’s low cultural status.

In terms of literary qualities, the subgenre known as “real person fiction,” which consists of sexual fantasies involving public figures, raises moral, ethical, and philosophical questions about culture under neoliberalism. *Literotica*’s disclaimer (displayed above every celebrity story) takes a legalistic stance: work based on fictional universes is clearly considered uncontroversial.⁵ Beyond the case law cited, *Literotica* asserts two authorial justifications: “because they can” and because celebrities are “public figures [who] must accept that they are fair target for parodies by the public.” This stance endorses neoliberalism: fantasy versions of the celebrities featured become the property of their authors without regard for feelings or actual personal qualities.

The authors frequently make personal statements about their work. For instance, Psyche_b_Mused introduces “What the Cat Dragged In” thus:

Okay, so here goes a bit of wish fulfillment! It’ll be delightfully dark in places, hopefully funny in others and will—I promise—contain a plot. As always, I love to know what people think. I don’t own any of the X-Men characters who appear and make no money from this story.

It's based on the Origins characterization of Victor Creed as portrayed by Liev Schreiber.

This will be a multi-chapter story!

Enjoy!

Enithermon prefaces “Hunting the Hunter” similarly:

And now for something completely different...

Hey there, this is a bit of random fantasy based on the Elderscrolls games ... So yes, most of it, excepting the bits I messed with and made up, is the intellectual property of the fine people at Bethesda.

Bethesda you're the bomb, please don't sue me or anything.

On another note, if you're a 'Fire' reader, this may or may not be your cup of tea. Considered yourself fairly warned, but you never know until you try. This also isn't a 'quicky', if you catch me, so be warned there as well.

Other wise, have fun! Or criticize me brutally, whatever turns your twisted crank.

These introductions mix informality with self-deprecation and appeal to an imagined readership with whom authors perceive kinship, to which are added disclaimers about ownership and money. These prefaces demonstrate the tensions inherent in fan fiction: dependence on the goodwill of copyright holders, manifestations of literary ambitions, and anxiety about maintaining relationships with readers. Interestingly, the most fully neoliberalized stories—those by Inishfree—ignore the community. The introduction to “Kelly Ripa Wants To Be On Top” avoids sentiment or recognition of the kind of mutual relationships commonly invoked by other authors:

The story behind Kelly Ripa's rise to stardom as a morning talk show host.

This story begins in 2011 when Kelly Ripa was co-host on Live with Regis and Kelly. The story moves through the next year when Kelly finally becomes the star of her own TV show, Live with Kelly and Michael.

Inishfree writes about an actor and talk-show host who bores her dentist with her career problems. Dr. Sullivan implants a radio and electric shock transmitter in her teeth, and his security consultant friend Jim Coleman pretends to be God to coerce “Ripa” into degrading sexual activities with him, also telling her ““You are far too selfish in your life and in the way you treat people”” and paradoxically that ““Frankly, I don't care about your celebrity status.””⁶ Despite the sexual humiliation, “Ripa” accepts the transactional basis of the sex-for-career agreement and comes to enjoy the acts she is forced into: “not only becoming excited by his groping but she is just reeling emotionally from the compliments that she is receiving.” She internalizes critical commentary about her personality and appearance—known as “negging” and popularized by *The Game*, Neil Strauss’s 2005 pick-up book and a foundational text of neoliberal male sexuality—and acts on it, enacting the neoliberal discourse of self-investment. By the end she has initiated group sex with her superiors for the purposes of blackmail, and she is blackmailed in turn without appearing to mind very much: further sexual humiliation becomes the basis of an ongoing business relationship with Coleman.

“Kelly Ripa Wants To Be On Top” does not initially diverge from many commercially published texts: the sexually-active woman using her body to rise socially and economically is commonplace in literature from *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748; popularly known as *Fanny Hill* to *Vanity Fair*’s (1848) Becky Sharp. The difference is the

protagonist's denial of agency and acceptance of humiliation. The characters and narrator assume that the exchange of sexual acts for status and career enhancement is normative and that women—whatever their social status—must “serve” men. Patriarchal supremacy is the main pre-neoliberal aspect retained within the story's cultural paradigm. This, plus the easy and early effacement of moral or emotional qualms, demonstrates the pervasive influence of neoliberalism into erotic discourse and its exclusion of ideology and morality. The readers' comments reflect this perspective: the narrative function is reduced to whether it induced ejaculation or not, and a debate follows on whether Ripa is attractive and sexually promiscuous, ending with a contributor assuring readers that she is “demeaned quite handsomely.” Although some commenters refer to literary qualities (“well thought out and written”), most make no distinction between Kelly Ripa and “Kelly Ripa,” using the story as a springboard for their opinions and mini-fictions about the real individual. One anonymous commenter (20 Jan. 2015) claims he “used 2 work for Regis for 5 years ... I got a hand job from Kathie Lee and a blowjob from Kelly she's a sweet person and so sexy” (*sic*). In the course of production and consumption, the celebrity is replaced by a simulation which is traded by readers in pursuit of kudos (Baudrillard 5).

Inishfree's “I Dream Of Jeannie” employs some curious tropes to ineffectually disguise that story's transactional nature. Jeannie, upset that she is too sexually inexperienced to please Tony, accepts Major Healy's self-interested offer to tutor her. Healy is a neoliberalised subject for whom all human relations are competitive, a characteristic authorially endorsed through free indirect discourse:

He has tried several times to get Jeannie away from Tony but his plans have always failed. The wheels of deception are starting to turn in Roger's head once more. With a little luck, perhaps he can slice off a piece of this pie for himself. After all, Tony is his best friend, but that

freaking idiot has had more than enough chances to have this babe.

The story unfolds predictably: Healey and Jeannie's sexual experiments are recounted in detail and she learns to be both skillful and submissive. However, while Healey's self-interested behavior is narrated explicitly, he presents himself differently to Jeannie:

“Before I became an astronaut,” he says, “I was a college professor. I was the leading educator in my field. I was the dean of the physical science department teaching ‘Sexual Understanding.’ I was a pioneer in teaching young women the art of sexual technique. ... but I would be willing to teach you; if you are willing to be my student...you must respect me as your teacher. When I conduct lessons with you, I can no longer be thought of as Maj. Healy, your friend. I am your teacher. In some countries a teacher is called ‘Sensei.’ This means great teacher. It is a word showing proper respect. During the times I teach, you will address me as ‘Sensei.’”

Healey's unorthodox employment history may or may not be a humorous reference to pornography's infamously unrealistic plot devices, but “sensei” is an orientalist device for disguising their exploitative, transactional relationship. Jeannie is not immune. Although her racialized innocence (she is a 2000-year old Baghdadi trapped in a lamp for refusing to marry a Djinn) protects the character from accusations of scheming, she sees these “lessons” as challenges in a quest for self-improvement which will allow her to serve her “Master” better: “She knows ... that his deep throat challenge is not completely out of her reach.” The “sensei” framework indicates denial of the characters' neoliberalised relationship but also that between author and reader. Inishfree requires the upvotes of an audience which wants efficient masturbatory material, while the educational structure subtly insists on authorial authority and cloaks the text's true purpose with a little cultural elevation.

However, these erotic texts can also challenge neoliberal discourses. Enithermon's "Hunting the Hunter" and Psyche_b_Mused's "What the Cat Dragged In" series are less inflected with transactionality. "Hunting the Hunter" centers on the complicated romance of a female Dark Elf magician for a male were-lion within an overarching quest plot. The parameters of their relationship, an amalgam of "human" pair bonding and feline pride-based society, are major aspects of the narrative. "What the Cat Dragged In" features Sabretooth/Victor Creed, a human-feline mutant supervillain with a taste for raping and murdering young women first seen in Marvel's *Iron Fist* comic series. In this fan series a young woman called Kelly perceives the good in him while Creed struggles with his newfound desire to protect and mate permanently with what he calls the "frail" rather than murder her and move on to the next victim. In a sense he is wrestling with the emotional labor required in transitioning from neoliberal monster to non-economically socialized human being. Both stories therefore utilize the same trope (human relationships with and understanding of felines) to address the essential nature of what it means to be a contemporary human. "Hunting the Hunted" proposes a hierarchy of social structures in which big cats' prides are superior to the individualized nature of anthropoid communities; "What the Cat Dragged In" reverses the hierarchy by depicting Sabretooth as a selfish individualist who can be saved by the right woman.

The length and serial nature of these two texts resemble Victorian serial novels, and their popularity amongst readers despite a relative lack of sexual content implies a readership interested in extended, non-transactional content and reading experiences: these stories are not simply masturbatory aids. "Hunting the Hunted" explores the ramifications of alternative social structures within a familiar and vaguely non-capitalist quest narrative, while "What the Cat Dragged In" literalizes the familiar cliché of a woman taming a violent man-beast into an enduring relationship while acknowledging her desire to be sexually dominated and

physically injured. That both male protagonists in these stories are chimeras or hybrids suggests an interest in liminality and exploring the boundaries of “civilized” behavior, and their conceptualization of ideal relationships function as conservative defenses against neoliberal culture. Their use of animal bodies and communities propose opposing views of animal and human society: “Hunting the Hunter” posits communal relationships as largely positive alternatives to human binary pair-bonding, whereas “What The Cat Dragged In” constructs animal relationships as Hobbesian and ideal human relationships as based on mutual dependence and desire. While these women’s relationships are physically and emotionally traumatic, they are not transactional, and neither is the relationship between text and reader. There are relatively few opportunities for orgasmic closure and a considerable degree of commitment is required to follow the series. Instead the texts valorize hegemonically-constructed but pre-neoliberal values such as love, desire, redemption, and *communitas*, notions entirely absent in Inishfree’s celebrity stories. These two narratives adapt commercial popular cultural products and structures, in a pornographic and neoliberalised context, for conservative purposes. This represents a bourgeois variation of what Rachel Smith describes as “compromise aesthetics”: “the belief that contemporary art is at its most socially relevant when it forges compromises between strategies traditionally associated with the mainstream on the one hand and those associated with experimental departures from the mainstream on the other” (para. 1).

Readers’ responses to these serial fan fictions reflect their relative resistance to neoliberalized discourse. Comments on “What the Cat Dragged In” contain no sexual references at all: they are about either the quality of the writing or the reader’s emotions and commitment to the entire story. Readers repeatedly refer to the characters’ “growth” or “journey.” “Trueromantic” represents the general tone:

I am so happy about the way in which you have ended this fantastic

series, but I am also sad to see it end. You really are a great writer and I hope to see even better work from you in the future.

P.S. Haven't you had anything published yet? If not why? I've told so many people about your great work!

Other contributors echo the sentiment that good fan fiction should be rewarded with commercial publication. While the comments assume and discuss literary qualities derived from reading popular fiction, there is little sense that amateur writing is its own reward, as these two commenters reveal:

by Anonymous

10/04/12

Thank you

Thanks so much for this really pleasant bit of fan fiction. I really liked you sticking one two the X-Men goody two shoes.

I've also enjoyed your handling of the intimate scenes, descriptive, to the point and blended nicely into the story arc. You have a talent for this ... You should attempt an equivalent outside the copyrighted characters and self publish. I'd buy it!

by Wellsywife

10/05/12

I have followed this story from the beginning and have adored every chapter. I love the depth of character that you gave Victor, the way he and Kelly grew and changed throughout the story. Unlike a previous commenter, I'm thrilled that you didn't throw in some gushy "I love you"

scene, because it would have been completely out of keeping with their characters. They know that they love each other, now that Victor knows what love is, and they don't need to say the actual words.

These *Literotica* texts are not formally experimental. They bear the traces of commercial fiction, but they also represent a continuum from endorsement to rejection of neoliberalism's economization of all aspects of human activity. They exist within a competitive capitalist system and seek forms of reward and respect despite being free to view and represent a wide range of responses to their socio-economic positions. Some, particularly the "real person fictions," bear all the hallmarks of a fully neoliberalised mindset, while the extended fictions draw on much older concepts of morality and community to explore alternatives to contemporary social structures. In particular, the stories which juxtapose human and animal societies propose alternatives to neoliberal hegemony derived from "nature" as a pre-capitalist, innocent space, but there is little sign of radical critique. Instead, those stories which do challenge neoliberalism do so by reaching back to pre-neoliberal paternalistic, patriarchal, and bourgeois values.

Conclusion

Supporters sometimes claim that fan fiction operates outside the commercial sphere, that it is immune from neoliberal hegemony. Texts generated within the community are the product of communal labor and their benefits are neither economic nor exclusive. Some producers of fan fiction see their work as not simply outside capitalist culture but subverting it by putting commercially-generated concepts to fresh, unendorsed uses. However, fan culture is a continuum of practices ranging from wish-fulfilment to opposition. Some authors and readers see their activities as anti-capitalist, and they fully engage with each other on a non-

hierarchical basis. But others operate according to the same kinds of reader-author relations as the commercial world, absent the transfer of money. When a text makes the transition from fan fiction to commercial publishing, as in the case of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, fan responses reflect the tensions at play within the community. Fans who see their practice as communal feel betrayed and used, while others see publication as encouraging, conceiving of fan circulation of texts as a form of apprenticeship. Despite the more elevated claims made for fan authorship, it is clear that the extensive systems of commenting and ratings on fan fiction sites are non-profit forms of neoliberal economization: kudos becomes the currency but an economy remains in place.

The literary qualities and internal structures of these fan texts reflect the neoliberalization of popular culture. Again, there is a continuum of practice. Erotic and pornographic material reflect the inroads neoliberalism has made into all aspects of human activity. Bodies, identities, relationships, and personal encounters represented in these texts are not simply ends or meanings in themselves, but are instead currency to be traded in a system which values only self-investment and self-improvement for the purposes of winning. However, there are points of resistance. Even on pornographic websites fan authors produce texts which subvert this sexual economy by writing sprawling epics which posit alternative modes of living. However, these alternatives are not radical critiques. Instead they tend to draw on the ameliorationist modes of commercial popular fiction—particularly romance—to stress the benefits of conservative relationships and community values. The fan fiction community is not an inherently anti-neoliberal space, but it does present opportunities for resistance engaged in similar critiques to those found in other cultural spheres.

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¹ See Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic*; Schwabach, "Harry Potter Lexicon."

² For an extensive history of relations between fan fiction and intellectual copyright holders, see Schwabach, *Fan Fiction and Copyright*.

³ See Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

⁴ For more about Kindle Worlds, see, <https://kindleworlds.amazon.com>. See also, the Kindle Worlds press release, <http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=176060&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1823219>.

⁵ The Disclaimer reads:

The stories in the "Celebrity" section of Literotica are all fictional parodies - none are true, nor are they approved of by the celebrities named in the stories. Authors write these fictitious stories about famous people for the same reason that Larry Flynt made fun of Jerry Falwell, because they can. The Supreme Court of the United States, the country where this site is located, has ruled that parodies involving famous people are perfectly and totally legal under the United States Constitution. The specific case law on this was decided in the case of "[Hustler Magazine, Inc. et al. v. Jerry Falwell](#)" in 1988. No harm is intended toward the celebrities featured in these stories, but they are public figures and in being so, they must accept that they are fair target for parodies by the public. We believe in the first amendment, and more broadly, in the basic principle of free speech and this section may push the boundaries of that principle, but the United States Supreme Court has approved of this type of material. We believe that the Supreme Court was correct in their decision.

⁶ To distinguish between the celebrity and the character, we use quotation marks for the character.