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## 5. But, How Is That Sexy? The Fan Fiction Kink Meme

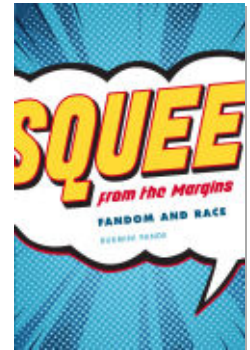
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## ***But, How Is That Sexy?***



### **THE FAN FICTION KINK MEME**

The scope of fan studies continues to expand rapidly as new relationships are being mapped among media fan communities as well as the producers and marketers of popular cultural texts. Researchers are increasingly considering the repercussions of working more closely with industry partners and the ethical implications of such collaborations even as notions of legitimate fan activity are being interrogated (Scott 2009; Zubernis and Larsen 2012; De Kosnik 2012; Bennett, Chin, and Jones 2016). This has placed an increasing focus on more public fannish behavior, such as fan conventions, cosplay, and fan tourism, as well as on the ramifications of transmedia convergence among fans, actors, and producers (Porter 2004; Brooker 2007; Alden 2007; Booth and Kelly 2013; Duchesne 2010). At the same time, however, this mainstreaming of fan activity has meant that fan works that have traditionally been seen as covert subcultural practices, such as fan fiction, are now in the public eye. This can be seen in attempts by fan writers and corporations to monetize fan fiction, as examples like the publication of James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the establishment of official fan fiction publication platforms like Kindle Worlds show.

The widespread discovery of what is perceived as outré genres of fan fiction—mainly slash—has led to mainstream news outlets confronting actors and creators with racy excerpts in order to garner clickbait responses (Romano 2013; Wilken 2015). These instances now generate their own cycles of reaction and critique. Inevitably celebrities or mainstream commentators will belittle or mock such practices, leading to fan scholars producing

defenses of them by highlighting these texts' fruitful engagement with gender and sexuality in particular. I hope that it is clear that aspects of these engagements provoke my discomfort. Of course it is important to defend fans against repeated critiques that reduce fan work to such sensationalized exchanges. However, I prefer to focus on how these defenses inevitably minimize troubling intrafandom dynamics, notably around racial identity. The academic framing of fan fiction has almost exclusively proceeded along the axes of sexuality and gender, with race remaining consistently sidelined. This is particularly true for the studies that have gained canonical status in the field, whose white-centric theoretical models continue to dominate contemporary scholarship. These theoretical models have their roots in pornography and romance studies—two fields that have also been critiqued regarding these same issues of erasure or sidelining of racial dynamics.

I find it fruitful to analyze the practice of fan fiction from all three main vectors—gender, sexuality, and race—at once in order to push against some of its foundational tenets and popularized truisms. I will consider fan fiction's relationship to the mainstream genres of pornography and romance novels, highlighting how it functions in a liminal space, not just in terms of content but also in terms of people who participate in these spaces. The genre of slash fan fiction has been the focus of most academic theorizations of how fan writing functions, so my own work must engage with these arguments. However, the generic divisions—het, slash, femslash—are not closed-off compartments. Continuing to conceptualize these spaces as completely different in their functioning has led to blinkered conclusions about how the fannish ecosystem works today, as many fans have moved among these positions.

The analysis of fan fiction (particularly slash) as itself a subgenre of pornography is not new; many theorists have framed their analyses within this interpretive rubric (Penley 1992; Kustritz 2003; Driscoll 2006). Others have argued that an emphasis on explicitness is misleading, noting that fan texts also draw on romance novels for narrative structures and generic expectations (Bacon-Smith 1992; Woledge 2006). Another thing to be considered is that initially, when slash fan fiction was talked about as pornography, it was seen as more egalitarian, based on notions of intimacy rather than the more extreme examples of market-produced, image-based pornographic material. This has been complicated somewhat since then, with theorists now considering texts with edgy sexual content, but the romance versus

pornography disciplinary split remains evident (Isaksson 2009; Reid 2009; Flegel and Roth 2010). Yet the fields of pornography studies and romance novel studies have not acknowledged where and how they intersect, leading to a split in how their consumers are conceptualized (particularly in the case of women) in terms of what uses these texts are put to, and by whom. Also relevant here is the place of erotica as a genre that draws from both fields while paradoxically maintaining that it is neither.

The divisions among pornography, erotica, and romance novels (especially as the latter have become more explicit in their content) do not stand up to scrutiny, and in ignoring these divisions, work on pornography geared to women limits itself. Driscoll (2006) positions fan fiction as an example of text-based pornography-romance that blurs these categories. I follow on from Driscoll's work, contextualizing these fan writings within already existing trends in genres of women's reading and writing. I also consider the relationships among different genres of fan fiction itself. Further, I want to disrupt ideas that split fan fiction's focus between notions of vanilla versus hard-core sexual explicitness. Through a study of kink memes—that is, interactive fan fiction writing communities focusing on sexual kinks usually hosted on sites like LiveJournal and Dreamwidth—I examine how these communities produce notions of kink that encapsulate the categorizations of vanilla and hard core within their continuum.

Pornography and romance novel studies are wide-ranging fields, so my primary aim in the brief overview that follows is to interrogate the particular assumptions they reinforce about the composition of their audiences. For pornography studies, this circulates around the focus on film, the relation to authenticity, the assumed correlations between viewers' gender and sexual identities, porn's engagement with racial identity, the effects of the advent of internet platforms, and the rise of queer pornography.

### ***Foundational Texts and Trends***

What is perceived as pornographic depends on notions of audiences, aesthetics, and economic and material conditions. Although initial analyses revolved around a range of primarily textual material (Marcus 1966; Sontag 1967; Carter 1978), the defining movement of the field, which established the trajectory for pornography studies as a whole, was the porn wars in feminist thought, a debate that took place in the 1980s and 1990s. My focus here is

not on the feminist critiques of pornographic material in North America led by feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon in the 1970s and 1980s, which resulted in an uneasy alliance with a conservative legal system. However, these critiques still resound in any conversation about the field (MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997; Vance 1984; Segal and McIntosh 1992; Gibson and Gibson 1993), as they deeply influenced which pornographic material would remain a focus for scholars, partly as a result of legal actions. Although Dworkin and MacKinnon include both pictures and words in their definitions of porn—and Dworkin (1974) wrote a scathing article on Pauline Réage's classic erotic tale, *Story of O* (1954)—their work was used in legal prosecution primarily directed at visual pornography (Cossman 1997).

Yet notably absent here is a consideration of the genre of textual pornography—to be precise, sexually explicit novels and other erotic prose written by women. This omission is puzzling, especially in light of how far and wide the net of pornography studies has been cast; it has examined a wide variety of topics, including reality television, talk shows, and advertisements (Paasonen, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa 2007). A notable exception to this is Ann Snitow's (1979) work on the genre of Harlequin romance novels. Snitow does not have a high regard for the genre itself, characterizing it as "unrealistic, distorted and flat" (143), but she does propose a radical idea: positioning traditionally nonexplicit material as "essentially pornographic" (154). Although Snitow's particular analysis of how Harlequin romances functioned vis-à-vis their readers is dated, I am primarily interested in her acknowledgment that these texts were written unequivocally to "elicit sexual excitation" (156). This idea has been underexplored even as the overtly sexually explicit content contained in these texts has grown. The connected genre of erotica has also been virtually ignored.

In the book widely considered to have launched porn studies as an academic field—*Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (1989)—Linda Williams admits that her focus on the visual and "hard-core" examples of it are motivated by a combination of "practical, theoretical, and political reasons" (6) rather than any belief that they form consistent characteristics that might delimit the genre. Additionally, while Williams admitted in the 1999 revised edition of *Hard Core* that her shying away from other genres, particularly LGBT pornography, was unnecessary, her original stated reasons for doing so remain thought provoking. She explains,

First, as a heterosexual woman I do not feel that I should be the first one to address questions raised by a body of films not aimed primarily at me. . . . It is thus precisely because heterosexual pornography has begun to address me that I may very well be its ideal reader. Conversely, because lesbian and gay pornography do not address me personally, their initial mapping as genres properly belongs to those who can read them better. (1989, 7)

Several key assumptions are at work here that continue to be present in scholarship on pornography:<sup>1</sup> Williams draws clear connections between her identity as a heterosexual cisgender woman and the type of pornographic film that she feels that she is qualified to analyze. Even though she admits that she is not precisely the intended audience for much of the heterosexual material that is her subject, the overlap in the sex acts depicted and her own sexual preferences are enough for her to presume to embark on the exercise. This correlation between the sex acts depicted in a pornographic text and the sexual and gender identity of the imagined audience is a tenuous one, but it has remained influential.

### ***Ideas of Authenticity***

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a veritable explosion in the field, with scholars attempting more situated and nuanced analyses of different genres of (still visual) pornography. These studies split along axes of sexual identity such as that envisaged by Williams (1989)—gay male scholars analyzed gay pornography, lesbian scholars analyzed lesbian pornography, and so on. Gay pornography in particular was interrogated in a variety of ways: its political role in making gay sexuality visible (Bronski 1984; Waugh 1985; Dyer 1994; Fejes 2002), the types of bodies presented as desirable (Harris 1997; Duggan and McCreary 2004; Padva 2002), and contested notions of masculinity and desire that intersect with race (R. Fung 1991; Hamamoto 2000). Significantly, although the importance of such pornography to the formation of cisgender gay male identity and subjectivity has been theorized in academic circles, there is little anxiety registered around notions of authenticity vis-à-vis the performers in the videos; in fact, straight hunks are often a selling point of certain videos. Furthermore, scholars remain unconcerned with questioning the gender and sexual identity of viewers of such material.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, the anxieties around lesbian visual pornography are

manifold. The phenomenon of pornographic material featuring ersatz lesbian sex or girl-on-girl action, produced explicitly for heterosexual male audiences, has complicated notions of the representation of true lesbian desire. Commodification and fetishization of lesbian sexuality in a larger heterosexist male-oriented culture continue to haunt writing on lesbian visual pornography, with the figure of the butch lesbian emerging as an early marker of authentic lesbian sex. For instance, in her review of trends in lesbian pornographic film, Heather Butler (2004) maintains that the figure of the butch authenticates lesbian pornography: “She turns the screen into a potentially safe space for the visual representation of lesbian desire” (169). The idea that most commercially available lesbian pornography does not feature real lesbians is a well-established critique, and there have been repeated attempts to produce a distinct aesthetic of filmed pornography in opposition to such mainstream productions (Smyth 1990; Bensinger 1992; Ryberg 2015).<sup>3</sup>

This need for markers of authenticity must be located within the specific political movements of the 1980s and 1990s (both within and outside feminist discourse) as well in terms of a larger resistance to the co-optation of lesbian sexuality to evoke male heterosexual pleasure. However, this anxiety also points to slippages whenever strict correlations between sexual and gender identity and the consumption of sexually explicit media are put into place. In line with Jane Juffer (1998), who warns against the tendency of criticism about sexually explicit material to fall into either wildly celebratory or condemnatory positions—either hunting for good transgressions or bad hegemonic structures—I do not intend to position these slippages as always productive of positive outcomes. Rather, I aim to interrogate the dialogic and dialectical relationships they expose among categories presumed to be entirely separate.

### ***Pornography and Racial Identity***

The split between “good” and “bad” pornographic texts is even more charged when it comes to the theorization around the role of racial identity within pornographic visual texts. This has been a fraught engagement; it interrupts the habitual mapping along heterosexual and homosexual axes of interpretation and identification. To recall once again the “science” of racism, which I discuss in Chapter 3 with regard to creation of the category of

race itself, it is vital to trace its effects in the ways that racialized bodies are also sexualized. Indeed, as numerous theorists have argued, racialization is always already sexualized (S. Somerville 2000; Barnard 2004; P. Johnson 2001). This racialization has proceeded on differential lines across bodies, and it affects individuals in various ways. As Jennifer C. Nash (2014) reflects on Patricia Hill Collins's (1990) pathbreaking work on the representation of Black female sexuality, this is a complex process, often drawing together altogether oppositional imagery. Nash notes,

Images of deviant black maternity (the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare queen) and of an excessive black female libido (the jezebel, the hoochie, the video ho) present black female sexuality as uncontrollable, even as they point to different sites of sexual excess. For example, if the mammy is masculine, effectively feminizing (and possibly queering) her male children, the jezebel is excessively desirous and hyper-reproductive. Even though these images are, in some ways, at odds, the underlying ideological consistency is that both contain an excessive performance of gender and sexuality, which endangers the viability of the state, the heteronormative family, and conventional gender roles. (2014, 82)

This hypersexualization is not limited to heterosexual pornography, as Kobena Mercer (1994) points out in an analysis of Robert Mapplethorpe's fetishized homoerotic images of Black male bodies. Similar processes can also be seen in the images of the hypersexual yet submissive Asian woman versus the desexualized Asian man, the exotic Indian body with its secretive sexual knowledge enshrined in the *Kamasutra*, and so forth (Hansen, Needham, and Nichols 1989; Uchida 1998; Capinho 2006). The effects of these stereotypical images can of course be seen everywhere in the mainstream mediascape, but perhaps nowhere are these stereotypes made as visible, and in a sense naturalized, as within filmic pornography. I use the word "naturalized" because these depictions are placed within a space that foregrounds the inherently problematic nature of human sexuality itself, thus making it difficult to make specific critiques.

A central question for scholars who wish to critically engage with the racialized tropes that structure such texts is whether this structuring forecloses the possibility of pleasure for their nonwhite, male, and heterosexual viewers. If the answer is yes, then this position becomes uncomfortably allied



with the conservative antipornography arguments that disproportionately targeted marginalized communities through their censorship (Cossman 1997). Relatedly, the question of viewers who are not white has rarely been a focus for pornography studies, especially where it concerns women. As Nash (2014) notes of her experiences studying the depiction of Black women in pornography,

My interest in how black women are depicted in pornography is often heard—or *misheard*—as an interest in how black women are violated by pornography. These experiences of being misheard prompted me to wonder if a black feminist project on pornography could articulate a theoretical and political stance that *avoided* a condemnation of the racism imagined to underpin racialized pornography. What would it mean to read racialized pornography not for evidence of the wounds it inflicts on black women's flesh, but for moments of racialized excitement, for instances of surprising pleasures in racialization, and for hyperbolic performances of race that poke fun at the very project of race? (14–15)

These are charged questions, and not something that I have space to answer here. However, they do point to research directions that push toward possible pornographic representative practices that allow nonwhite bodies the same breadth of sexual possibility granted to white bodies. Texts can work toward destabilizing and interrogating historically charged tropes in line with Nash's conceptualization of "surprising pleasures." This concern is increasingly forming a focus for researchers who study amateur do-it-yourself (DIY) pornographic cultures that have been facilitated by internet-enabled platforms.

### ***Online Platforms***

The growing importance of internet technologies in the production and dissemination of, as well as access to, sexually explicit material—or Porn 2.0, as it is sometimes called—remains focused on visual media (Attwood 2010). Researchers have concentrated on newer production avenues being used by women producers in particular, including women-run websites, the work of cam girls, and the production of queer porn (Magnet 2007; Russo 2007; deGenevieve 2007). The move online has also meant an explosion of

amateur-produced films, with DIY and indie aesthetics becoming more and more popular (Attwood 2007). This diversity extends from the types of bodies being filmed to the sexual acts, sexualities, and gender identities being represented and framed as sexually arousing. However, as Jennifer Moorman (2010) points out, the simple availability of diverse visual pornographies does not mean a lack of regulation by a hierarchy of allowable desires. She argues, "Online architecture, visual language and address often endorse a dominant view of sex and gender identity, particular positions from which to see and understand the online environment" (155). As Moorman found in her review of popular pornography sites, "Some kinds of 'lesbian' and 'bisexual' pornography, typically focused on the display of women's bodies, are grouped with straight pornography, while gay male pornography and bisexual pornography that includes guy-on-guy action are generally not included at all, or they are segregated to other categories" (155–56). I agree with critics who see mainstream visual pornography websites as ordered by hierarchical, normalizing binaries that for the most part engage with alternative sexualities and with racial and gender identities largely in a fetishistic manner—as evidenced by labels such as "gay" and "lesbian," but there is also more nuance to this narrative (Patterson 2004). One complicating factor is that these websites are used by a diverse range of people, both as producers and as viewers. Members' ratings of and comments on videos influence the videos' overall rank, thus opening up the possibility of nonnormative performances gaining visibility. Additionally, the slipperiness of markers signifying authenticity versus fake performances is evident: "While some recent girl-on-girl pornography includes markers of lesbian authenticity such as strap-ons, dirty talk and rough sex, it does not appeal to a sense of community or shared experience through visual and verbal cues such as the figure of the butch, the word 'dyke,' or practices such as fisting" (Moorman 2010, 159). However, my own review of such material indicates that practices such as fisting now do appear in videos categorized under the Lesbian tag. We clearly cannot take such community-based cues as absolute or unchanging; nor can we dismiss them as co-optation. Further, we must also interrogate the universalization of such community cues. Considerations of access (as aggregator websites host a large amount of free material) must also play a part in analyzing how such material interfaces with users, regardless of the intended audience.

This also the case with queer visual porn. Facilitated by the internet,

such porn provides a space wherein both performers and producers aim to destabilize normative categories. I am wary of privileging one genre of explicit material over another, with subversiveness as the only marker of value, but this genre does show some of the possibilities of usually fetishized bodies regaining some agency. Indeed, self-identified queer porn sites explicitly position themselves against the websites that aggregate content. These sites are avowedly political, declaring that they aim to deconstruct the categories that order most aggregator sites ("Indie Porn Revolution," <http://indiepornrevolution.com/indie-porn/>).

Queer porn, like lesbian or dyke porn, depends on the production and maintenance of authenticity to ground its subversive ethos. The difference between it and mainstream visual pornography is not so much in the acts depicted but rather the assurance that the performers in the videos are genuinely enjoying themselves and the videos themselves are produced ethically. The sense of community that is projected is as important as the perception of fluidity among rigorously defined categories. Moorman's (2010) interview with Courtney Trouble, webmistress of NoFauxxx.com, touches on this last aspect. For Trouble, "Everything is so fluid, and it all gets lost in the creation to consumption translation anyway—why label it? I also work under the understanding that people do not watch pornography that matches their sexual orientation. (For example, dykes don't only watch 'dyke pornography,' heterosexuals don't only watch heterosexual pornography)" (165). Moorman does not pursue this thread of discussion but does point to the lack of categorization that is a feature of videos on queer porn websites and the implications of that refusal to label in the manner of larger aggregator sites. An aggregator website called Queerporntube.com functions in much the same manner as more mainstream sites, providing links to free pornography clips from a number of sources and encouraging people to upload their own. Although this site uses categories to organize material, it does not use slurs in its terminology, and the site is respectful of its visitors and the sex acts depicted, thus hinting that organization does not always produce a hierarchy of desire. It must be noted, however, that if taken without the context that the queer porn community insists it provides, some of these terms by themselves can be problematic and fetishizing.

For instance, NoFauxxx.com's refusal to racially mark its models was seen by Moorman (2010) as a pushback against the excessive exoticization of certain communities by mainstream visual pornography. The category

of “people of color” might be seen to be working against that, except that within the particular context of the queer pornography community, potential viewers have some assurance that it is a category used productively to represent those individuals in nonfetishistic ways. This is admittedly not a foolproof set of standards. Indeed, it results in a certain amount of judgment of the nonwhite performers who choose to participate in more mainstream sites. People habitually use labels to order their experiences, sometimes productively, and although the context of queer pornography certainly allows for a subversive reappraisal of dominant categories, the constant dialectic between mainstream and underground movements, as well as the possibility of people being present in both simultaneously, must not be overlooked. It is this, as well as Trouble’s radical insight into the lack of correlation between what visual pornographies depict and the gender and sexual identities of their audiences that I wish to take forward as I turn to the field of romance novel scholarship.

### ***Theorizations around the Romance Novel***

A notable deviation from the focus on filmic pornography is Jane Juffer’s *At Home with Pornography* (1998), in which she considers a variety of materials, including self-identified feminist pornography, couples pornography, lingerie advertisements, romance novels, and erotica. Juffer’s primary gesture is a move away from the “tired binary” (2) of the pro- and antipornography debates that had so dominated the field. She locates the distinctions among pornography, erotica, and romance novels as not grounded in any concrete set of identifiable characteristics but rather driven by notions of aesthetics and, importantly, questions about access. Juffer points out that publishers are aware of the association of the pornographic with dangers of censorship. The positioning of explicit material is therefore dictated by economic strategies that maximize visibility while still remaining within normative standards of decency, especially when displayed in public spaces like bookshops. Juffer illustrates this point through Susie Bright’s multivolume edited series, *Herotica* (first volume published 1988). Bright edited the first three volumes before moving on to *Best American Erotica* (1993).

Juffer’s (1998) assessment of *Herotica* (1988) as self-consciously distancing itself from the falsity of mainstream visual pornography’s ideas about women’s sexuality shows how claims of representing authenticity

are complex within the textual sphere as well. These claims emerged from contemporary debates about women's sexuality and sexual pleasure as well as the privileging of certain sets of aesthetic principles, such as "the valorization of the clitoral orgasm, the emphasis on the naturalness of female sexuality, and the reconciliation of fantasy and reality, all of which worked to differentiate erotica from pornography" (Juffer 1998, 73). The first volume of the *Herotica* series declares, "The most obvious feature of women's erotic writing is the nature of the woman's arousal. Her path to orgasm, her anticipation, are front and center in each story" (quoted in Juffer 1998, 125). Significantly, the second volume includes depictions of a wide range of sexual fantasies, encompassing heterosexual, gay, and lesbian scenarios. The series is still aimed explicitly at women, but there is a move away from correlating that to any one stable sexual identity.

Apart from Juffer (1998), there is little critical consideration of these and other volumes of erotica that were published at around the same time, perhaps because their overt positioning as literary texts succeeded, thus removing them from the purview of both pornography and romance novel studies. This omission is significant in light of the fact that these volumes were specifically linked not just to broad feminist political concerns but also to the actual practice of women exploring sexual pleasure in an embodied fashion—that is, they are explicitly tied to masturbation discourses.

The practice of publishing collections of, as Juffer terms it, "identity erotica" (1998, 128) gradually moved toward more general framings of sexual fantasy, and Bright herself moved on to edit *Best American Erotica* in 1998. However, the influence of these more explicit collections were felt in the larger industry, with mass-market paperback romance novel publishers like Harlequin and Mills & Boon commissioning series that were advertised as far steamier than those previously published. I would like to link back to Snitow's (1979) contention that the popular romance novel was always functioning as a pornographic text. The introduction of explicitness is not really a change in their function, so to speak. Rather, it is a response to the evolving ways in which women approached their bodies and sexual pleasure. If pornography studies has shown a consistent privileging of film over print, romance novel studies have largely ignored the use of these texts by women for sexual pleasure, adding to the "romance is for the mind, pornography is for the body" split.

### ***The Embodied Pleasures of Reading***

Written material as pornography is often positioned as “pornography of the past” (Kipnis 1996, viii), before the accessibility of visual media improved. Even in spaces where one might expect a deeper examination of this generic assumption—that is, work devoted to women’s consumption of pornography, as this has historically been seen to be—it remains underexamined. For instance, for Tristan Taormino (2012), the importance of women’s erotic writing, particularly in light of E. L. James’s controversial success with *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012), is noted as significant. However, Taormino’s edited volume goes on to focus exclusively on filmed pornography. Nevertheless, even a cursory glance at the circulation of romance novels/erotica shows that there has only been an increase in this sector over the years, even before the spectacular success of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. With the advent of e-readers, it has become even easier for sexually explicit novels to be downloaded and accessed.

The pornographic function of romance novels needs to be underlined in order to break generic divisions that do not hold up to scrutiny. This is not to adopt the oversimplified position that women read and men watch; such generalizations have long been proven false. Yet surely there is room within this paradigm to acknowledge that women also read in order to experience sexual arousal. In my own experience, conversations around romance novels with my peers while growing up and through college life certainly took into account aspects of the narrative involved, but the primary rating, as it were, was assigned according to the hotness of the sex scenes.

While research on the romance novel has certainly diversified since the early attacks on them as perpetuating sexist ideologies on unaware readers (Millet 1968; Firestone 1970; Greer 1970), the notions of the pleasure to be found in reading them have largely followed (white) heterosexist conventions and singular reader-identity models (Sonnet 1999). For romance novels, readers’ pleasure has been most commonly conceptualized as escapist fantasy from their dreary day-to-day lives (Radway 1984) or as dealing with the issues that (straight and mostly white) women face in order to offer reconciliation strategies that are based on the temporary and symbolic (Modleski 1982). The foundational work both Janice Radway and Tania Modleski has been such that these positions have persisted in most research on the subject. Research on the romance novel has moved toward more situated

analyses in recent years, working against the idea that there is no differentiation among the various texts available (Ramsdell 2012; Fletcher 2016).

What remains scarce is any examination of the embodied pleasures that readers may gain from the romance novel. Most analyses of the sexual aspect of the narratives inevitably shift into considerations of how the erotic scenes play out in traditional, scripted ways that reinforce dominant patriarchal notions about women's sexuality, with female sexual responses coded as passive and reactive to aggressive male desire (Patthey-Chavez, Clare, and Youmans 1996; Sonnet 1999).

In such analyses, the sexual pleasure of female characters in romance novels is almost never evaluated in terms of the readers' affective, bodily response; further, any pleasure they afford is implicated in larger considerations of capitalist commodifications of female sexuality. As scholarship has asserted, romance novels do indeed play on and reify traditional gender roles, and they have a sometimes troubled relationship with the depiction of the modern woman. Further, women readers of such texts must negotiate these issues, both in their everyday lives and within the stories themselves. Yet readers also bring complex reading identity positions to texts and use them in different ways, including sexual arousal. Analyses to date fail to account for models of sexual arousal and pleasure that might incorporate narrative and explicitness, without either taking precedence. In my examination of the phenomenon of the fan fiction kink meme, this idea is explicitly foregrounded, with fan notions of kink incorporating both explicit sex and narrative tropes.

### ***Diversity in Reading Positions***

Research on young readers has indicated that girls tend to adopt multiple reading positions in texts that are not always correlated to their gender and sexual identity (Fetterley 1978; Bradford 2008; Honeyman 2013; W. Jones 2014). However, this possibility has remained largely unexplored when investigating how women may read romance novels. Laura Kinsale (1992), though still working from a heterosexual model, complicates Modleski's (1982) and Radway's (1984) ideas. She posits that women read a romance narrative from multiple positions, citing her own experience of writing the texts as well her readers' insistence on the inclusion of the male point of view. This argument is stymied by the insistence on a heterosexist frame of analysis, but it does

open up models of interpretation. Andrea Wood (2008) goes further in her interrogation of the possibilities of queering the romance novel, noting, "By and large, scholars persist in studying and defining romance according to heteronormative paradigms that ignore or relegate LGBTQ texts and their readers to the margins as exceptions to the rule. In part, this tendency has been fueled by feminist focus on mass-marketed texts like Harlequins and problematic assumptions about the gender and sexuality of readers" (12). Wood's larger project, like mine, examines LGBTQ texts of various kinds published online that, connected to participatory reading practices, challenge the heterosexist definitions of the romance genre. She also questions the "studious" (24) differentiation between the categories of romance and pornography that most analysts on the genre reify. However, what I find most attention-grabbing here is her treatment of the always already existing readers of normative romance novels. She cites Stephanie Burley (2009) to support her argument that the homosocial world of romance reading already queers simplistic formulations of reading practices. Burley maintains, "When we find the heroines irresistible, love our favorite authors, and experience close personal relationships to our fellow readers of erotic literature, we are in fact engaged in a homoerotic practice" (quoted in Wood 2008, 24). Wood argues, building on this, that "ignoring obvious possibilities for queer identifications with or desire for the heroine on the part of female readers is a rather telling and problematic omission" (24). I would go further here: point of view may be connected with reader identification, and reader constructions of gender and sexual identity are fraught with the possibilities of rupture. Wood goes on to examine certain published romance and graphic novels featuring gay and lesbian protagonists, respectively, whose very existence disrupts normative ideas about how a romance novel works.

Slash fan fiction theorists like Penley (1992) have also noted the possibilities of rupture, particularly in line with Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis (1986). Penley locates the importance of their essay particularly in film studies, where it has allowed the idea that "unconscious identification with the characters or the scenario is not necessarily dependent on gender" (quoted in De Lauretis 1994, 140). Penley's theorization of slash fan fiction itself is not unproblematic, and I will interrogate it further in my examination of the kink meme, but her intervention here is crucial. Indeed, Modleski, in a new introduction to the 2008 second edition of *Loving with a Vengeance*, grudgingly notes, "Were I to write *Loving with a Vengeance* today, in light of the essay



by Laplanche and Pontalis as well as of work by gay and lesbian scholars, I would have to acknowledge the possibility of cross-gender and cross-sexuality identifications" (14).

Penley's (1992) work, and that of other analysts of fan writing, especially slash fan fiction, remains the most likely to talk about the masturbatory potential of written sexually explicit material (Upham 2017). The possibilities of internet publishing have led to a boom in sexually explicit textual materials of all kinds, including the gay- and lesbian-centered narratives that Wood (2008) examines and increases in the circulation of more conventional novels driven by the advent of e-readers. Susanna Paasonen's (2010) examination of Literotica.com draws on theorizations of fan writing by Penley (1992) and Driscoll (2006). Paasonen traces the lack of engagement with how erotica affects readers to a general "scholarly unwillingness to address bodily reactions to texts." She points out, "If acknowledged at all, their sexual dynamics have, for the most part, been analyzed on the general level of 'experience' detached from actual reading bodies, even though these sensations are obvious motivation for reading such texts. However, the sensations and experiences conveyed in Literotica feedback and reviews are decidedly personal and intimate" (147). Indeed, the nature of feedback on internet forums—textual descriptions of emotional and bodily responses—does make this "unwillingness" rather stark. Reading communities, like those found on sites like Goodreads.com, now offer the possibility of examining reader responses to sexually explicit material without placing them in environments like focus groups or interviews, where they may feel pressured to give studied answers about their responses to such writing. The romance novel section, or virtual shelf, as it is termed on Goodreads.com, is illustrative of the well-documented variety of the genre, with *Fifty Shades of Grey* being listed alongside *Romeo and Juliet* and *Sense and Sensibility*, along with contemporary romances that feature heterosexual, gay, and lesbian protagonists. Readers rate books on a five-point scale, with an additional option to leave more detailed reviews. They use a wide range of media to communicate their feelings about a novel: they may choose actors to cast a virtual film, thus embodying characters; they may provide pictures of how they conceive of the characters; they may use animated GIFs to communicate feelings of arousal or disgust.

Scans of these comments reveal that many readers wish to communicate their physical responses to the romance texts, and they often disrupt

supposedly fixed identificatory positions based on gender, sexuality, or both. Women readers clearly use these texts for physically expressed arousal, responding most volubly to those that use both sexually explicit and non-explicit material to heighten the experience. To insist that one is somehow more important than the other, or to ignore the blatant sexual aspects of a text, is to collapse into reductive models of how the category of the pornographic may be conceptualized.

It is also vital to talk about the ways in which readers' racial identities have largely been subsumed within this theoretical discourse. As Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey (1995) note, "As in other areas of feminist work, white agendas have dominated discussions of love and romance. Despite the centrality of colonial and postcolonial 'others' (countries, cultures, religions, races, ethnicities and skin colors) to romantic discourses, there has been a stunning silence about such issues within standard feminist debates about romance" (22). In Pearce and Stacey's edited volume, this is interrogated in contributions by Kathryn Perry, Inge Blackman, Helen (Charles), and Felly Nkweto Simmonds, who make critical interventions around axes of sexuality, race, and class. However, the larger normalization of the romance novel as essentially centered on white women characters as a genre has persisted within broad-based interrogations of how the genre works for a universalized audience. As Belinda Edmondson (2007) points out when analyzing specific imprints such as *Arabesque* (launched in 1994 and eventually acquired by Harlequin), within a larger history of romance writing aimed at Black readers in the United States and the Caribbean, the aims and histories of these texts are intrinsically connected to the personal and the political. Edmondson's observation of the intermingling of the romantic/erotic divide in this context also echoes my larger concerns: "My conflation of the romantic with the erotic bears some explanation here, since central to my argument is the point that for the black communities of the United States and the Caribbean, it is precisely the eroticism of the conventional romance that must be recovered and highlighted, because it is the black erotic that has long been taboo in the conventional black romantic script" (194). This analysis points to the differential ways in which the emotional/physical divide is problematized across reading positions. However, such specificity is held to be an exception to the (white, heterosexual) norm; lacking are considerations of how such readers may also participate in reading outside these particular imprints.

This is not to say that issues of race within the romance novel have not been addressed. Recent scholarship has provided a welcome diversification, but these efforts have centered mainly around the depictions of othered, dangerous masculinity accruing around figures like the orientalized sheikh, especially with regard to the United States' continuing fraught relationship with the Middle East and its associations with terrorism (Teo 1999; Taylor 2007; Jarmakani 2015). In terms of diverse audiences, there has also been some attention given to postcolonial audiences in India with regard to reading English-language romance novels published by companies such as Mills & Boon and Harlequin. These relationships have mainly been analyzed around readers negotiating ideas of love and intimacy through texts disconnected from their own social realities (Puri 1997; Parameswaran 2002). This has had the effect of bracketing them off as discrete audiences, away from mainstream reading publics through geographical and cultural distance.

This bracketing off also extends to the actual marketing and shelving of multicultural romance, as the genre is known, in the current moment. If bookstore "porn shelves are organized by race" (Shimizu 2007, 140), then so are romance novels (Faircloth 2015). This is being remedied thanks to the effects of internet-enabled publishing platforms and e-reader-based audiences, the interventions of which have in some cases allowed independent authors to break out of such prescribed niches. These changes have affected reading habits and the possibility of queer story lines; they have also allowed individual authors to include more racially diverse characters in traditionally white-centric genres like the historical romance, which risk-averse publishers have shied away from in the past.

Tracing these specific trajectories in both pornography and romance novel studies reveals how slippages between the discrete categories of the romantic and the erotic have been shored up and how such formulations have not allowed for a flexibility and fluidity in reading or viewing positions across gender, sexuality, and racial identity. I turn now to an analysis of the fan fiction kink meme to highlight how the interactions of fan communities are particularly useful in illuminating splits in theorizing the romantic and the erotic when considering diversity in community demographics with regard to gender and sexuality. I also interrogate the limitations of these formulations specifically with regard to racial identity.

### ***Kink Memes and Constructions of Desire***

The larger field of fan fiction studies is broad; fan fiction is one of the most studied genres of fan work, with foundational scholarship establishing it as a site that marks media fandom participation. It has been approached from an equally broad variety of theoretical standpoints, the most influential of which have coalesced around it as a kind of literary writing produced by a community of women that functions as a critique and expansion around the axes of gender and sexuality in popular cultural texts (Russ 1985; Lamb and Veith 1986; Bacon-Smith 1992; Penley 1992; Pugh 2005; Derecho 2006; Coppa 2006b; Lackner, Lucas, and Reid 2006; Busse and Lothian 2009). The communitarian underpinning of these texts has also been theorized to be a key aspect of their production, circulation, and reception. The focus on fan fiction as a democratized form of writing—by women and for women—has remained central to how scholars approach these spaces. These analyses have thus repeatedly underlined the value of such writing even as the genre routinely comes under attack from mainstream commentators, who often see it as a form of plagiarism or underdeveloped writing by adolescents or as evidence of disturbing erotic adventuring (Jamison 2013; Coppa 2014).

This must be seen within the larger context of the interest feminist and gender studies have shown in highlighting the historical prejudices women's writing and leisure activities have long faced in the patriarchal mainstream, from their interest in novels in the 1800s to their love of pop music in the contemporary moment (Henderson 1989; S. Shaw 1994; Driscoll 1999; Fairclough 2015). As I have detailed in Chapter 4, perhaps more than anything else, scholars have been interested in the subversive potential of fan fiction as writing against hegemonic popular cultural narratives surrounding conceptualizations of gender and sexuality. As Jamison (2013) argues, "Fanwriting communities enjoy and consume commercial culture voraciously, celebrate it, even as they challenge and transform its products for their sometimes radical purposes. . . . Persuaded by the presence of favorite characters, even the least adventurous readers sometimes embrace stories featuring alternative sexualities and genders or enjoy more stylistically and thematically challenging material than they would otherwise have turned to" (22). This interest has also motivated a scholarly concentration on the

category of slash fan fiction. As I note in Chapter 4, early theorization focused on why (then presumed) heterosexual women would read and write such material. The perceived shockingness of the disjuncture between who these women were and what sexual or romantic pairings they were interested in therefore follows in the same assumed correlations that I have also traced in pornography and romance novel studies. I have already queried the limits of subversion as articulated in theorizations around slash fan fiction, but here I would like to talk about this aspect in a slightly different fashion.

Penley's (1992) theorization of slash fan fiction involved the notion of multiple points of identification within a given text. With regard to stories about the characters of Kirk and Spock in Star Trek fandom, she uses a psychoanalytical model to posit, "In the fantasy one can be Kirk or Spock (a possible phallic identification) and also still have (as sexual objects) either or *both* of them, since, as heterosexuals, they are not unavailable to women" (7). Today, as knowledge of the participants of media fandom has diversified, it is generally accepted that there is a broad spectrum of identification in terms of both gender identification (though still female allied) and sexuality in these spaces (Melannen 2010; Centrumlumina 2013). This has had the effect of further identifying slash fan fiction as a queer practice, in this case turning around the nature of relationships within these communities, and writing through a different embodiment (Lackner, Lucas, and Reid 2006; Busse and Lothian 2009; Rachel A. 2015).

This paradigm shift affects conceptualizations of slash fandom participants; it also affects conceptualizations of readers who move between the (largely artificial) generic boundaries of gen, het, slash, and femslash, as well as relationship combinations that cause these categories to overlap, such as genderswap, threesomes, and polyamory. As I note in my cowritten study of femslash fandoms,

Since femslash fandoms have been assumed to be dominated by queer women from their inception, there has been very little impetus to examine the motives for their engagement in such activities. In actual fannish practice, particularly with the convergence of fannish activity on shared platforms like Twitter and Tumblr, there has been a noticeable engagement of fans with differing entry points into the common fannish universe. This has led to a significant disruption of long accepted narratives about what has constituted "visible" or "significant" fan activity. (Pande and Moitra 2017, ¶ 2.3)

This is not to say that there is nothing to be gained from paying attention to differences in how fan fiction works with male-embodied and female-embodied characters and tropes, but there is real danger in observing such trends in isolation rather than on a continuum that takes into account the larger fannish universe.

Slash has been theorized as feminist pornography (Russ 1985); as women projecting their desire for equality onto male homosexual relationships (Lamb and Veith 1986); and as foregrounding intimacy (Woledge 2006). Camille Bacon-Smith's (1992) ethnographic approach highlights the importance of community bonds in slash fandom, while Catherine Salmon and Donald Symons's (2001) controversial (and reductive) reading is based on an evolutionary biology model. Scholars have since moved beyond this pigeonholing of the genre and have explored its links to other modes of writing such as parody (Booth 2014) and commercially published romantic fiction (Morrissey 2014). Yet none of these analyses has taken into account the effect of racial differences.

The fluidity of participants as they move from one genre of fan fiction to another informs my approach to these spaces. Individual fans certainly might have certain preferences, entry points, and experiences depending on their fannish engagements, but these are rarely watertight compartments. As Chapter 1 illustrates, histories of fan activity are heavily biased toward recording and valuing the activities of white women fans based in the United States and the United Kingdom. This is also true of research on slash fandoms—at the expense of other, interconnected areas of fan interest. A recent instance of this process was seen when the online magazine *Vulture* showcased fan fiction in a lengthy essay entitled “It’s a Fanmade World: Your Guide to the Fanfiction Explosion” (2015). Part of the feature was a section entitled “A Fanfiction Syllabus: Ten Classics that Cover the History, Breadth, and Depth of the Form, with Original Custom-Designed Covers” (Reisman 2015). The “classic” fan fiction that was highlighted had been curated through consultation with longtime fans and did indeed list some excellent examples. However, the list was dominated by texts that focused on cisgender white men, with no femslash texts included at all. This erasure was criticized by both femslashers and nonwhite fans of other genres, who pointed out how these selections of what is considered noteworthy in fan texts perpetuate and reinscribe erasures and biases within fan communities (allofthe feelings 2015). In a collection of published fan fiction aimed at being

taught in university courses, *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age* (Coppa 2017), there is one femslash story versus five male slash stories, all featuring primarily white characters.

With these contexts in mind, I now turn to an analysis of the fan fiction kink meme because it in a sense foregrounds the slipperiness and tension between these generic divisions and the fan writers and readers who move among them. Kink memes function on a prompt-and-response model where commentators create a prompt, usually comprising a pairing and a kink, though some prompts can get quite long and detailed. Other participants can then choose to respond to the prompt with a story. Requests are often seconded by other commenters to express approval and are seen as signs of encouragement to potential contributors. Kink memes are generally hosted on the blogging platforms Dreamwidth or LiveJournal, which have comment structures that allow for specific requests to be put up and responded to in a linked manner. The first kink meme, which dates to May 7 or 8, 2007, was reportedly started on a personal LiveJournal and was based around the anime *Bleach* ("Kink Meme," Fanlore.org). It is possible that it was not initially intended to go beyond that particular user and her circle of friends, but the idea caught on, and other fandoms soon started to host their own as well. Although fans would sometimes host them on their personal journals, common practice gradually became to create separate, dedicated journals.

Crucially for my argument, kink memes are generally open to all pairing permutations and combinations. Of course there are certainly more and less popular pairings in each fandom, with a trend toward slash generating the most volume of writing, but there is usually no restriction imposed on the kinds of character pairings allowed. Because of its popularity, much of the fan fiction I discuss here will be slash, but I do not want to imply that is unique in what it offers fan writers and readers. What the genre does help to underline is that correlations between sexual acts and gender identity depicted in sexually explicit material and those of its viewers or readers are largely unstable. Further, theoretical models that base such identification positions on simplistic heterocentric and cissexist gender identity formulations are flawed. The kink meme, although incorporating aspects of more conventional fan fiction communities and modes of production, offers a unique opportunity to show the operations of the slippages I have talked about so far. Additionally, by tracing how fan communities negotiate the category of kink, I argue that such operations display how binary conceptualizations that divide the

romantic and sexually explicit material are reductive when conceptualizing the category of the pornographic, especially as linked to sexual arousal. I will also consider how kink memes have affected larger fandom practices around ideas of anonymity, communication, conflict, and ownership of deviant desires.

My broader argument, however, is not focused primarily on only the taboo as linked to fannish ideas of kink; that would lead me right back to notions of classification based on greater or lesser subversiveness, which would be counterproductive. Rather, the larger category of fannish kink has come to encapsulate a variety of tropes, including HEA (happily ever after) narratives, BDSM, bestiality, and Harlequin-style arranged-marriage shenanigans. To accomplish this, I will focus on the kink memes around the US-based television shows *Supernatural* (2005–) and *Glee* (2009–15) as well as the movie *Star Trek* (2009). Before doing so, however, I must contextualize this discussion by considering how other fan fiction communities have engaged more formally with the category of kink, focusing on the Kink Bingo challenge community in particular.

### ***Fan Engagements with Kink***

When engaging with the possibility of cross-sexuality and gender identity models in reading the romance novel, Modleski (1982) resists the notion that these positions are open ended, stressing that readers would have to go through significant questioning of their own inner psychological processes before “unearthing” their “true” responses to texts. She points to an example where Biddy Martin, a lesbian critic, examines her reactions to a particular sports figure, working through multiple layers of self-analysis before attaining a new level of self-knowledge (17). In Modleski’s opinion, this level of self-examination is only available to the highly self-aware—that is, those who have been equipped with the necessary critical tools to analyze such deeply subconscious processes. This is a common script in examinations of popular cultural participants, where the trained critic, who is unmoved by the source text and therefore objective, reads and analyzes the reactions of unaware readers to come to a true conclusion about their motivations. Critics may turn this gaze upon themselves, but that kind of self-examination is not available to all. This idea is contentious and elitist, but certainly when it comes to any discussion of fan fiction communities, the level of



self-examination is high and constant. These examinations rarely come to any broadly accepted conclusions and inevitably have their own individual blind spots, particularly regarding the role of racial identity and its relationship to shaping fandom trends. However, the polyphonic nature of these spaces does allow for these formulations to be critiqued in turn.

One such example is the Kink Bingo challenge, which has been hosted on LiveJournal, then Dreamwidth, from 2008 to 2013. This was initially a challenge focused on fan fiction writing (with fan work like art and videos allowed later) organized around the idea of bingo cards (Figure 3). The challenge ran every year for about three months, from June to September, with various nonmonetary incentives being offered for fulfilling challenges. Participants were encouraged to fill in as many bingo squares as they can, and

silk velvet feathers furs	<b>voyeurism</b>	virginity / celibacy	humiliation (situational)	orgies / decadence
obedience	<b>plushie or furry kink</b>	crossdressing	spanking / paddling	gags / silence
chastity devices	<b>tentacles</b>	wildcard	dirty talk	smacking / slapping
begging	<b>service</b>	genital torture	piercings / needleplay	suspension
tattoos / tattooing	<b>humiliation (verbal)</b>	foot / shoe fetish	fucking machines	in public

Figure 3. Example of kink bingo card.

after the main challenge is over, they were encouraged to post their stories to the community even if they had not completed their card. Kink Bingo has always been a highly self-conscious forum, with fan creators engaged in breaking down what various kinks mean to them. Cards initially listed activities that would fit into more conventional ideas of kink, as Figure 3 shows, but the community has engaged in significant amounts of dialogue around making the challenge as accessible to as many people as possible. In the 2011 challenge, for example, new cards that featured asexual-friendly categories of kink were introduced and new achievement and incentive categories were announced, with special prizes being earmarked for participants who featured “underrepresented communities.” The Kink Bingo moderators introduced the latter by saying,

We’ve inaugurated the “Underrepresented Identities in Kink” category because—well—many of these identity categories are underrepresented in kink; identity is an extremely important factor in understanding what a kink means to a particular person. So more diversity in representation of identity, in addition to being a good thing in itself, will necessarily mean more diversity in the representation of kinks and their meanings.

The goal of these achievements is to a) encourage more kinky fanworks about often-ignored characters and identities, and b) encourage more representation of these minority identities at kink\_bingo. For more info on identity and kink, check out the Identity and Kink section of the kink\_wiki general resources page.

It’s up to you to responsibly decide whether a given character belongs to one of these identity categories. Quite often, it is possible for the fanartist to reimagine characters as, for example, disabled, trans, genderqueer, or asexual, even if they don’t belong to those identity categories in canon. We also happily accept Racebending Revenge-style fanworks to fill prompts for a chromatic characters bingo. (kink\_bingo\_mods 2011)

The post goes on to discuss modes of writing around other underrepresented categories such as “fat pornography,” explaining why they choose to use that term as well as providing resources so that participants may gain information about how to write respectfully about those communities. Certainly, then, the participants and moderators of Kink Bingo were engaged in

a highly self-aware and self-reflexive practice, deconstructing their own attitudes toward the category of kink within the boundaries of the challenge. Their tracking of underrepresented identities shows an awareness of their marginalization within fandom spaces and attempts to create an atmosphere that would encourage participants to engage with them while also providing resources. This is not to frame this community as a perfect or activist space but rather to show how fannish negotiations around contested issues can change productively. As I argue in Chapter 4, these negotiations seem to glitch more often than they work, but Kink Bingo provides a good template for creating inclusive spaces.

I must note, however, that the kinks tackled in the challenge continue to fit into conventional framings of the term, even when adapted to alternative models. Also, the community is not an anonymous space, as participants have to be able to be identified to be awarded incentives and to claim their completed bingo challenges. I turn next to an examination of the disruption of both those criteria within the framework of the kink meme, particularly the effect of anonymity. These differential modes of fan engagement with the categories of kink occur simultaneously.

### ***Anonymity and Kink Memes***

Examinations of kink memes are rare, and when they have been undertaken, they remain fandom specific, without taking into account the ways in which they have affected fandom dynamics as a whole (Wall 2010; Ellison 2013). One of the key factors in these exchanges has been the effect of anonymity. Although it was not a feature of the initial kink memes, anonymity (at least as an option if not a requirement) has now become common. This has led to a much greater amount of experimentation—in terms of specific prompts, if not which characters remain the focus of fan works—around what is requested and written. One fan, drawing from her own experience, notes that this has led to a lessening of inhibition around taboo sex acts requested and also to a difference in the nature of feedback:

Having written slash pre-kinkmeme and post-kinkmeme, I can tell you one thing that's changed: writers used to be mainly inhibited by fear that their story might be too outrageous. Now that everyone is able to post

outrageously kinky things as Anons, people have instead become more inhibited by the unprecedented number of complaints that are levelled by other fans with the privilege of going Anon.

. . . Back in those days [before 2002], it was a much bigger deal to criticize things you didn't like in fic, because you didn't want to be That Fan, who pissed in everyone's cornflakes. Very few fandoms had fics in the triple digits, so most slash readers would hope that a lousy writer got better over time, rather than criticize her and risk scaring her away entirely. Now that readers can go Anon, complaints are more common (though I wouldn't go so far as to say ubiquitous). (berlynn\_wohl 2011)

This summary encapsulates several issues central to any understanding of contemporary fan writing communities. First, although the commentator sees these trends as unique to slash writing practices, it is also reflected in het and femslash writing. As Hannah Ellison's (2013) examination of the *Glee* kink meme shows, both the femslash pairings of Rachel Berry (Lea Michele) and Quinn Fabray (Dianna Agron), and Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera) and Brittany Pierce (Heather Morris) prompted a high volume of requests that placed them in explicitly experimental sexual situations. These included not only common kinks such as BDSM, somnophilia, gang bangs, scat, and body modification, but also variations around genitalia such as the phenomenon of girl!penis (G!P). I mention G!P in particular because so far, the academic discussion around the genderplay that fan writers explore has concentrated mainly on male-embodied characters, with this seen as unique to slash writing (Busse and Lothian 2009). Yet the implications of genderfuck or genderbending (to use the fannish terms) extend beyond just male slash-centric spaces. When observed in isolation, theorization on such gender play misses how it links to other tropes that are evolving in the same sites, such as the kink meme.

Second, the operation of anonymity has allowed a greater range of expression and commentary than was previously possible within fandom's intensely social structure, with an increased level of criticism evident across these spaces. As Karen Hellekson (2009a) has noted, the gift economy that is characteristic of fandom production, whereby fans create content for free, has historically depended on a feedback loop of encouragement from other fans. Though generally framed in celebratory ways, this economy has its own biases, as I note in my discussion of fandom histories in Chapters 1 and 2, my

analysis of the effects of changes in fandom platforms in Chapter 3, and my discussion of fan antagonisms in Chapter 4. The kink meme reflects these trends: both fan writers and readers (this line is blurred in these spaces) have become more vocal in expressing their opinions about these texts. Kink memes have dealt with this by disallowing kink bashing or negative reactions to prompts and by encouraging a “your kink is not my kink, and that’s OK” attitude. The latter formulation has been an approach that has long been a cornerstone of the functioning of fan writing communities in particular. It encourages individual fans to seek out what they enjoy without declaring that other tropes or pairings are inherently bad or wrong.

The axiom “your kink is not my kink, and that’s OK” follows on from more general assumptions about the operations of free speech and the wariness about moral policing around fan attachments to certain characters and pairings. Nevertheless, these tenets have not gone uncontested. For example, although most common-use fan writing spaces such as archive sites and kink memes now ask that certain issues (usually rape and sexual assault, but these have expanded) to be flagged or warned for appropriately, this (tenuous) consensus was not reached easily or without considerable acrimony.<sup>4</sup> As I discuss in Chapter 4, the relationships that fandom algorithms have with the specific debates around racial identity in fandom have been similarly acrimonious. However, this increased vocality has had an effect on fan writers even outside the issues of racial representation in fan works. Zubernis and Larsen (2012) remark on this in their study of *Supernatural* fandom, in which anonymity was seen to operate in various ways, including aggression and bullying, but also at times facilitating a questioning of established hierarchies.

Another aspect of anonymity was, and remains, the threat of legal action to fan communities that explore sexually explicit material or alternative sexualities. Fan fiction itself has always had an uneasy relationship to source texts, particularly with creators who are opposed to transformative work. Fan writers have also been the target of legal action from studios and publishers (Katyal 2006; Tushnet 2007; Schwabach 2009). Some fan writers have also been the target of legal action in their professional lives because their fan work was classified as obscene.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, as more edgy modes of kink continue to expand, fan communities must continue to negotiate to accommodate them.

### ***Differential Modes of Fannish Kink***

My focus in this section is on the kink meme of the long-running US-based television show *Supernatural*, a fandom that has generated an intense amount of fan activity.<sup>6</sup> Its plot focuses on the fate of two brothers, Dean and Sam Winchester (Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki), and their fight against various supernatural forces. The source text has generated a plethora of fan fiction around a number of pairings, but the relationship between the brothers was a major focal point of fic written during the show's first few seasons. Simultaneously, fan writers wrote (and continue to write) RPF around the personas of Ackles and Padalecki, a fandom known as J2.<sup>7</sup>

Although writing stories around incestuous relationships is not new in fan fiction—the Harry Potter fandom, for instance, had previously seen a lot of incest fic written about the Weasley twins, called twincest—it was the first time that it became the main focus of a prolific fandom. This has been analyzed in various ways, with Catherine Tosenberger (2008b) arguing that such stories were a way for fans to subvert the relentlessly miserable source text, maintaining that the fics “make things happy—a consistent theme of *Supernatural* slash is that a romance between Sam and Dean will give them a measure of comfort and happiness that they are denied in the series” (¶ 1.5). Conversely, Flegel and Roth (2010) propose that dark!fic (fan fiction that shows Sam and Dean in emotionally and physically traumatizing circumstances) that writes them as lovers provides a truly alternative sexuality to the often heteronormative scripts played out in J2 fics.

These fandom-specific critiques are valuable for the nuance they provide, but examining incest fic in isolation misses out on situating it as a trope, or in my formulation a kink, present in many different fandoms. What is unique in *Supernatural* fandom's case is the level of attention it receives, which forces a broader consideration of incest as a kink. This results in communities in this fandom developing strategies that facilitate the engagement of fan writers and readers with incest fic in a way that also minimizes judgment. This negotiation occurs in many different spaces, but the discussions remain the most formalized and documented in kink memes, as their anonymous spaces permit negotiations around a taboo subject in ways not possible on other platforms.

I turn now to examples of how negotiations around both anonymity and kink evolved. The first entry on the *Supernatural* kink meme, dated July 13, 2009, is a simple prompt post. It evidently generated a large amount of activity: four hundred requests and sixty fills were written within the first four days. A second post was put up to commend the participants for their enthusiasm and to clarify some issues. The moderator was careful to establish that the community was not in competition with other existing communities, such as Supernatural Hardcore:

I've seen some folks outside of the community saying that they are intimidated to request fics here that aren't hardcore kink. I really want to reiterate that while the name of the community is "kink" that is a very subjective term. If something gets YOU off, it's your kink, and it is very welcome here no matter how "vanilla" or tame you may think it is.

This community is for EVERYONE, truly. So please, let your friends know that while there may be some things here that aren't necessarily their cup of tea, if they would like to request a fic—no matter the subject or pairing or genre—they are very, very welcome here. Me and the other two mods are committed to ensuring that above all else this community remains completely free of judgment, and that goes for the most hardcore to the most vanilla request posted. (spnkink\_mod 2009)

As this post makes clear, this kink meme site did not spring up to cater only to hard-core fan writers, as Supernatural Hardcore was already established. Rather, it sought to address the need to allow fans the option of anonymity (not everyone took this option, of course). Issues around maintaining that anonymity were therefore kept in mind, even when floating the idea of cross-posting. Further, the commentary on the category of kink itself, as well as the signaled openness to all characters and pairings, follows my previous arguments about the functioning of such spaces. What is perceived as vanilla versus what is hard core depends on the individual fan: "If something get YOU off, it's your kink, and it is very welcome here no matter how 'vanilla' or tame you may think it is."

The definitions of vanilla and hard core are context specific. Contrast the prior notion of hard core to the definition that the Supernatural Hardcore community mobilized:

In general, our idea of hardcore is one of “Okay, that was fucked up but intriguing—and maybe a little hot.”

Please note that even though in many corners of the world “incest” may fall into the taboo category, most of the authors in this fandom consider that more or less canon. There are quite a few wonderful SPN communities that can deliver that for you hourly and while incest is more than welcome here, if incest is your only taboo there are better communities to suit your needs. (spn\_hardcore 2008)

The notions of kink and taboo are thus constantly shifting and highly relative. Even within the communities that attempt to differentiate themselves as hard core, a scan of the tags used reveals categories like “kink: first time” and “kink: cop!Jared,” which complicate any ideas that specific acts may be deemed inherently more or less kinky as they are generally categorized outside fan spaces.

Figures 4 and 5 provide examples of these trends. Figure 4 shows an RPF prompt with a request to also feature the personas of Ackles and Jeffrey Dean Morgan. The framing of the request enacts the process whereby the prompter comes to recognize that subdrop (the mental state that can affect a submissive partner in a dominant/submissive relationship after an intense interaction or scene) could be a kink, as well as the fact that it was a kink

**Request: Jeff/Jensen; sub-drop**  
(Anonymous)  
[2009-07-17 06:07 pm \(UTC\)](#)

this may be weird to list as a kink but I just recently realized that it \*was\* one for me :) Jeff/Jensen D/s where it's their first scene together and afterwards Jensen experiences sub-drop and Jeff takes care of him and helps him through it.

If you write this, I will have your babies.

[\(Reply\)](#) [\(Thread\)](#) [\(Expand\)](#)

**Re: Request: Jeff/Jensen; sub-drop**  
(Anonymous)  
[2009-07-19 04:47 pm \(UTC\)](#)

Seconded liek *whoa*.

Figure 4. Example of prompt and response from kink meme detailing prompter’s self-discovery of a particular kink.



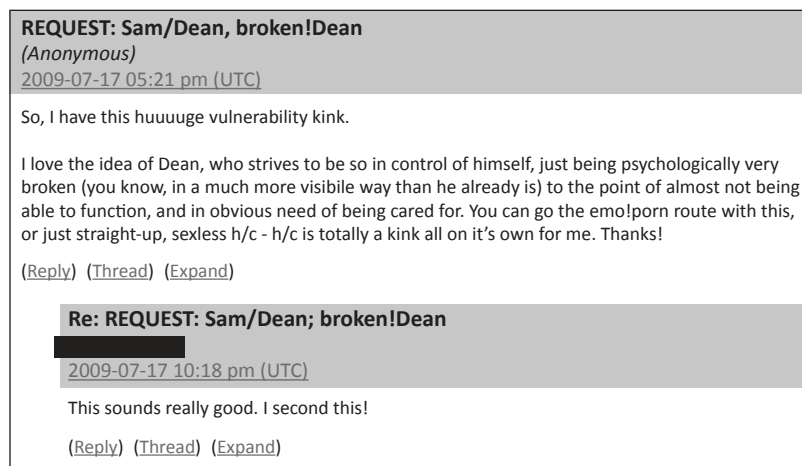


Figure 5. Example of prompt and response from kink meme detailing both sexual and nonsexual possibilities of a kink.

for the prompter specifically. In Figure 5, the prompter sketches out the different kinds of porn that could be written in response to the request. In this prompt, the idea of kink is deconstructed, placing vulnerability at the heart of the desire for a depiction of “broken!Dean” while leaving it open-ended as to whether the fill should include a sexual aspect. This prompt was placed alongside an explicit rape fantasy, which only adds to the feeling that the categories of romance and porn have been utterly dissolved.

In her analysis of the *Star Trek* (2009) kink meme, Mary Amanda Wall (2010) examines the category of fannish kink, linking it to Audre Lorde’s (1993) ideas of the erotic as opposed to the pornographic:

Just as kink is a trope or genre that gives a reader a particular and personal satisfaction, the erotic for Lorde “is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire” (340). Just as fans can declare their satisfaction with the phrase “this is my kink,” Lorde might use the considered phrase, “It feels right to me” (341), [to] acknowledge the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge. (12)

This is a utopian formulation of the ways in which fan writers and readers interact with the category of kink. Certainly Lorde was aware of the

intersectional forces of race and gender that combine at the site of desire. Nevertheless, I agree with Wall's contention that the category of fannish kink leverages the idea of the erotic with greater flexibility than has so far been theorized.

This flexibility is also evident in the lexical strategies that identify and activate fandom tropes. Fans use a shorthand illegible to those unfamiliar with these spaces. In Figure 5, for instance, the prompt line contains the key kink to be considered as "broken!Dean," with the expectation that the individuals scrolling down the page will have an immediate understanding of what the construction broadly means, even as the explanatory notes provide a more specific description. This conjugation can also instantly create new tropes, kinks, or combinations thereof by choosing a specific aspect of a character to magnify. As Wall (2010) points out, this can be a way for a fan to identify the "parts of the whole that bring her pleasure, whether those parts are pairings, body parts, story tropes, or something else, and requests those parts as the kink she wants in her fanfiction" (9). For Wall, fannish kink creates "a moment of heightened attention (heightened!attention) that makes patterns out of isolated moments and fetishes out of a particular arrangement of the canon. This focus of the attention undoes the restraints of the 'otherwise coherent wholes' or source narratives and recombines the fetishized parts" (11–12). Here canon is a nebulous concept; prompts will often ask for completely unrelated alternate universe setups, which permit comparisons to more conventional frameworks of pornographic and romantic films and novels. Relatedly, a prompt such as "Cop!Jared finds hooker!Jensen completely irresistible and buys his time for the night. HEA please!" does not actually draw on canon because this is an RPF scenario. It combines the instant gratification and suspension of disbelief for the purposes of sex with theorizations of visual pornography, with the assurance that the narrative will conclude in a way that fits into a happy-ending romance novel formula. This framing emphasizes how mingled romance and porn have always been.

Driscoll's (2006) discussion of fan fiction as located at the intersection of pornography and romance is useful here, although she does see them as two traditionally separate and separable genres. Her theorization contrasts with the current use of fannish terms, which reveals the changes that new platforms have effected. One of Driscoll's key considerations is the difference

between attitudes of canon, which refers to events that the text under consideration factually contains, and fanon, which indicates popularized fan interpretations of the same. Concerning these categories, she argues that canon is what is required to engage with a fan fiction community because it provides “a means of sharing the story—but fan fiction realism is not an agreed degree of accuracy in representation, but rather a registering of affective power. This is one of the most important ways in which fan fiction locates an intersection of pornography and romance” (89). Conversely, fanon is marked by almost guilty pleasure: “Most fanfic readers will admit to one or more favorite fanon tropes, like Gentleman!Spike or Prostitute!Harry, but hesitantly, because fanon connotes undiscerning identification with an unreal object” (90).

It is thus startling, in light of the examples I provide from kink memes, to examine how the signification of the embedded exclamation point (!) has shifted. This shift has occurred in part because of the ways in which the forum of the kink meme allows fan writers and readers to anonymously (re) mix their canon and fanon desires, without either being able to take precedence or be marked by the hesitant pleasures that Driscoll sees as significant. Zubernis and Larsen’s (2012) identification of the therapeutic value of such writing is also important here, although they also identify the operations of shame, both as a product of the threat of exposure and as an internalized emotional variable in such operations. Relatedly, and more crucially for my argument here, kink memes allow the interrogation of the category of kink itself, thus foregrounding the central subjectivity of any absolute differential markers of the romantic and the pornographic.

In the context of the nature of embodied reading that I discuss in relation to romance novels, the response patterns to prompts in kink memes show similar expressions of arousal and excitement. Although readers of romance novels have always been suspected of being too easily swayed by such material, this has always been rooted in a particularly heterosexist and gender-essentialist model of reading positions. When put into the context of kink memes, with fandom’s (documented) queer readers as the participants in these exchanges, this articulation becomes even more significant. This contention is supported by the forms of communication used in these spaces. Because kink memes are structured on a prompt-and-response pattern, and because writers often post responses slowly, over a period of time,

participants often respond enthusiastically to encourage the writers to continue. An additional effect of anonymity in such spaces is that writers feel less pressured to finish something, which is why encouragement is seen as vital to the functioning of the community. These responses include singular exclamations of pleasure, long examinations of possible character motivations, and expressions like "I'll be in my bunk" or "BRB need a cold shower," which are understood to indicate sexual pleasure. There is some debate about whether these are real expressions of actual bodily pleasure or whether they are more about following a fannish convention in responses.

Wall (2010), for instance, speculates that kink memes lend themselves to a "performance of the erotics of fanfiction" (5) that sometimes has the result of fans distancing themselves from what she contends to be the most powerful aspect of such interaction. Conversely, she finds the most powerful points of exchange to be those "moments when fans do not distance themselves from this erotics of genre—one of unearthing and understanding diverse and diffuse pleasures—[which] hold the potential to become what Audre Lorde [1993] calls 'creative energy empowered,' a shared pleasure that can 'lessen the threat of difference'" (vii). This "shared pleasure" for Wall (and drawing on Coppa's 2006b theorizations as well) is rooted in the possibility that individual fan writers and readers are themselves participating in sexualized exchange when they engage via a kink meme, performing both themselves and the characters they are writing. Any attempt by these individuals to distance themselves from this notion is for Wall a lessening of its subversive potential.

However, this position, of ascribing less and more subversiveness, can be seen as assigning value judgments to fan practices, especially because Wall (2010) does not account for the effect that anonymity has on these interactions. It is debatable whether fan writers or readers identify with the characters for which they write prompts and responses to the extent that Wall speculates, as she admits. Furthermore, locating true subversive potential only in cases of identification with characters is counterproductive when looking at the workings of such a wide-ranging structure. A consensus emerges around the contention that fan fiction readers express physical arousal to these texts, but that consensus does not locate the source of arousal to specific markers of explicitness. This can be seen in responses to polling:

In two informal polls on LiveJournal of 386 and 574 fans, respectively, about 80% of both groups said that sexually explicit fanfiction made them physically aroused at least sometimes, but the majority of these respondents specified that physical arousal occurred only sometimes and that it may not be tied to explicit descriptions of sex so much as stories that “hit their kinks” by using tropes such as hurt/comfort or particular power dynamics in a relationship. (Wall 2010, 16)

Crucial here is the spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations expressed within media fandom spaces, as evidenced by anecdotal evidence, fannish interaction, and surveys such as the one hosted by Tumblr user *Centrumlumina*. *Centrumlumina*’s survey, which focused on AO3, was conducted 2013 and received around 10,000 responses. Although it suffers from a certain level of selection bias, it did indicate that a significant number—54 percent—of participants in media fan writing spaces identified as belonging to a gender, sexual, or romantic minority. This finding is also reflected in my own respondent data. With such a range of participants, it is also important to evaluate what sexual pleasure might mean as expressed by individuals and whether it is indeed useful to ask whether they really all felt physical arousal. Indeed, when conceptualizing “netpornography,” particularly on blogging platforms, Nishant Shah (2007) observes, “Self-representation (visual as well as verbal) becomes pornographic because of the address the representation carries and the responses it elicits from the consumers of the representation. The ‘pay off’ moment in netpornography is not in the physical orgasm of the consumer/producer, but in the desired or projected orgasm of the user behind the virtual handle. This disembodiment of pornography and its severe wrenching from the notions of body is definitely a unique characteristic of cyberspatial pornography” (35–36). Shah is not talking specifically about fandom practices here; rather, he is referring to interactions on LiveJournal, so the comparison of the textual strategies being used here is productive. Whether using linguistic conventions, the notion of performance, or indeed expressing physical arousal, the readers of sexually explicit materials quoted here are certainly expressing their pleasure in an embodied way, using a vocabulary that has been historically unavailable to noncisgender men (Gordon 1993; Fahs and Swank 2013).

### ***Limitations of Fannish Kink***

Until now I have largely dwelled on the potentialities of fannish kink as opposed to its limitations, but when brought into conversation with the operations of racial identity, these formulations are stressed. How does race affect the operations of anonymity, reader positions, and free-flowing exchange of erotic potential? As I have argued throughout, these interactions are not outliers of a somehow neutral norm; rather, they show how the structures that facilitate expressions of fannish pleasure also actively work toward marginalizing nonwhite characters. The pleasures of nonwhite fans in these interactions are often contingent and precarious.

Media fandom is a difficult space to navigate critically because it has many queer- and woman-identified participants who are regularly castigated in the mainstream for the ways they express their sexuality. However, this does not mean that these same participants do not hold privilege relating to racial, cultural, and ethnic identity within these spaces. By concentrating on only certain aspects of media fan identity, scholars often erase the complexity of these interactions in order to arrive at more comforting, broad-based theorizations about intrafandom power dynamics. This results in skewed and incomplete analyses about how these spaces function. It also results in further alienation for nonwhite fandom participants.

Relevant here is Richard Fung's (1991) examination of the ways in which gay pornography's treatment of racial difference affects the material ways in which nonwhite men navigate these spaces. By turns desexualized, fetishized, and dehumanized, the figure of the Asian boy in gay pornography, while generative of pleasure for certain viewers, makes what should be a site of community and acceptance into one of pain. Fung points out,

The "ghetto," the mainstream gay movement, can be a place of freedom and sexual identity. But it is also a site of racial, cultural, and sexual alienation sometimes more pronounced than that in straight society. For me sex is a source of pleasure, but also a site of humiliation and pain. Released from the social constraints against expressing overt racism in public, the intimacy of sex can provide my (non-Asian) partner an opening for letting me know my place—sometimes literally, as when after we come, he turns over and asks where I come from. Most gay Asian men I know have similar experiences. (159)

This complex intersection demands a reconsideration of the operations of power, privilege, belonging, and desire within queer spaces. This demand becomes even more urgent when spaces—like fan fiction kink memes, but also fan fiction spaces more generally—are positioned as welcoming difference.

A historic difficulty of discussing the problematic aspects of pornographic/romantic/erotic materials is the tendency to impose value judgments on its consumption. This is something that I have flagged in my discussion of race in pornography as well as the categorization of online pornography. However, being wary of value judgments does not preclude examinations of the hierarchies that persist within these texts. The fan fiction kink meme may be conceptualized as a space that specifically foregrounds certain qualities that allow for a more fluid idea of how pornographic, romantic, or erotic texts are used, and by whom. Fannish kink encapsulates a broad spectrum of tropes, acts, bodies, emotional states, and genders; it also permits an expansive theorization of how participants in these spaces identify in terms of gender and sexuality. Yet it is vital to see how this fluidity has failed to elicit a similar reconsideration of which characters are allowed (or excluded from) this expansiveness of experience in spaces where communitarian sharing of pleasure is crucial to their successful operation. Anonymity may allow for a greater amount of experimentation and personal levels of discovery about which sexual acts and emotional states may function as kinks for participants, but it also allows the expression of desires that operationalize racialized, dehumanizing tropes.

To return to Ellison's (2013) examination of the *Glee* kink meme, her analysis finds that Santana Lopez (played by Naya Rivera), whose canon portrayal leans heavily on the stereotype of the promiscuous Latina, is most often placed in sexual situations that highlight this promiscuity. Such a stereotypical pattern is also seen within nonsexual prompts, with nonwhite characters cast in the role of caretakers of white characters, as I note in my discussion of Sam Wilson (an African American character) in the MCU in Chapter 4. Racial prejudice in fandom spaces not only influences the depiction of characters in sexual situations but also forecloses them from participating in broad-ranging notions of kink, which can be generative of thoughtful and nuanced representations of queerness that are not generally available to queer characters in more mainstream texts. It also has the effect of cutting nonwhite fans off from the therapeutic benefits of these spaces.

It is tempting to place the responsibility for the perpetuation of these stereotypes on larger societal prejudices and institutional discrimination; fan spaces are not immune from these forces, of course. However, although such institutional forces have power, I am disinclined to follow this line of reasoning because it discounts the fact that fan spaces can and do interrogate the operations of other modes of institutional discrimination, most notably gender and sexuality. It also places the driving force behind these operations firmly outside the mechanisms of media fandom structures. As I note in Chapter 4, most of the truisms concerning fan fiction as a democratized form of writing and fandom communities as subversive spaces must deliberately and repeatedly set aside racial identity in these interactions in order to remain stable. This has the effect of framing the whiteness central to fandom's structures as neutral or natural and positioning the introduction of racial identity as something that disturbs that space.

Fung's (1991) feeling of alienation from a community that is meant to be his safe space parallels that of nonwhite participants in fan spaces. These participants are systemically denied access to modes of fan pleasure even though they have participated in the formation of these spaces and are well versed in how they function. However, the act of criticizing the limitations of these spaces in terms of race is often seen as damaging to fandom norms and is blamed for making authors feel less inclined to write stories around nonwhite characters. In essence, nonwhite fans are blamed for creating a hostile space. This is a disingenuous argument because it locates this trend only in relation to the ways in which depictions of nonwhite characters are received, whereas the increase in critical feedback on fan work (facilitated by anonymity) has also been seen in other contexts.

### ***Conclusion***

The broad scope of this chapter is justified in order to locate the genre of fan fiction within the various overlapping domains that inform it as a form of fan work and as a community-built structure. Tracing the multiple trajectories of both pornography and romance novels studies highlights the slippages that both these genres fail to take into account within the (assumed) correlations between viewers and readers. Fan fiction kink meme communities offer one way of interrogating the ways women approach the categories of pleasure and arousal, and how these are informed by the fannish notion of kink.



By including an examination of how racial identity interrupts the assumed functioning of these domains, it becomes clear that an intersectional frame is crucial when approaching these categories in order to complicate the identity positions of participants in fandom spaces. An examination is necessary of the friction produced by the consideration of race on truisms of how fan works function vis-à-vis their relationship to an inhospitable canon, the role and meaning of escapism that such fan works enable, and the related idea of precarious pleasure as a mode of fannish interaction.