

The monstrous narratives of transformative fandom

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Abstract:

This essay examines the social stigma surrounding transformative fandom: particularly fanfiction and fanart, and particularly the romance and erotica genres. I offer a framework for understanding the prejudices, taboos, and attractions of transformative fandom through gendered monstrosity. Using a combination of theoretical perspectives on monstrosity and femininity such as Julia Kristeva's abjection; Linda Williams' body genres, Mary Russo's female grotesque, and Barbara Creed's monstrous feminine, I argue that the suppression of – and grotesque fascination with – transformative fandom in mainstream discourse is rooted in monstrosity and misogyny. Kristina Busse argues that while data is difficult to gather due to the necessary anonymity of transformative fandom, this area of fandom is generally associated with female fans. I argue that this association – whether accurate or not – informs the specific type of stigma attached to transformative fandom. Transformative fans may or may not be female, but they are marginalised and cast as monstrous in feminine ways. The monstrous female body grotesquely over-produces affect and sexuality, resulting in a hysterical overreaction that has been used since Lizstomania to characterise female fandom. Like hair, blood, mucus, and tears, fanworks are treated with a strain of disgust linked to excess excretions of the female body, which must be controlled, shamed, and stymied. Fanworks are publicly stereotyped as similarly disgusting products of overactive desire, and objects of revulsion. However, abjection is underpinned by attraction, which explains the ostensibly-perverse fascination with fandom. Robin Wood argues that monstrosity has a radical potential: a potential that I argue, complements the optimistic projections Roberta Pearson and Henry Jenkins make about transformative fandom as a vehicle for social change. With transformative fandom at a tipping point between underground and mainstream, its monstrosity could become domesticated, or it could transgress the misogynist boundaries that kept it safely suppressed.

Keywords: transformative fandom; fan fiction; slash; monstrous feminine; horror;

This essay examines the marginalisation of transformative fandom in the context of the horror genre.¹ While the marginalisation of transformative fandom is discussed and debated thoroughly in the field of fan studies, I use horror to illustrate precisely *how* transformative fandom is marginalised. The language and stereotypes to position transformative fandom as Other rely specifically on cultural narratives of monstrosity, the female-coded body, and the abject.² These monstrous allusions can be found in fan studies; in journalism; and in fan communities: while each field may embrace, defy, or downplay them, they continue to suffuse the way we understand transformative fanworks. By using monstrous allegories, these narratives about transformative fandom function as horror stories.³ This essay constructs a framework of theoretical perspectives on monstrosity: Julia Kristeva's abjection; Linda Williams' body genres; Barbara Creed's monstrous feminine; and Robin Wood's return of the repressed, to argue that the repression of – and grotesque fascination with – transformative fandom in mainstream discourse is anchored in horror. This framework for reading horror into transformative fandom can be an effective model for understanding how monstrosity can function both as a tool of repression and a tool for challenging dominant paradigms, supported by the parallels between genre theory and fan studies.

Fangirling as a Bodily Dysfunction

This section provides an overview of the stereotypes that connote transformative fandom as female-coded; as an allegory for bodily dysfunction; and thus as an object of misogynist disgust. There is potential for expansion of research in this area, especially in ethnographic projects. In giving an overview of these stereotypes, I draw from sources which have already collated and discussed them, rather than performing a close reading of any one article on the subject. These stereotypes apply particularly to fans creating transformative works (fanfiction, fanart, fanvids, et cetera); particularly in works seen to contain an overabundance of romantic or erotic affect (shipping); particularly where there is no straightforward correspondence to heteronormative patterns of desire (slash). The monstrous associations can be seen most clearly when examining slash, but similar connotations can be found with other shipping fanworks; with transformative fandom more broadly; and an undercurrent of monstrous anxieties can appear in discourses around fandom as a whole. I use 'transformative fandom' to refer to communities of transformative fans as well as the works they produce: this study will demonstrate a collapse between creators, consumers, and their works as they become abjected.

While there are few broadly quantifiable connections between women and transformative fandom I argue that discourse around transformative fandom has been shaped by the *assumed* connection, and by cultural narratives about female-coded bodies, affect, and disgust. The association is tautological: proof is so difficult to gather because fans and researchers are aware of the negative stereotypes that precede them, and choose to remain anonymous. Kristina Busse notes that the gendering of transformational fans 'tends to be accepted as a truism,' going on to discuss how this informs the policing of fandom 'in

terms of non-normative sexuality.⁴ Some ethnographic research suggests that large fanfiction communities are indeed overwhelmingly female: on leading fanfiction site Archive Of Our Own, a 2013 census asking fans to tick applicable gender identities showed 90% of respondents ticked 'female' as at least one option.⁵ However, this statistic only accounts for voluntary participants, on a single website, responding to a limited set of gender options. The assumption that most participants in transformative fandom are female predates such ethnographic research regardless; as do the misogynist stereotypes levelled in response. Early fan studies scholars such as Constance Penley and Camille Bacon-Smith acknowledge and address these stereotypes in their work.⁶ While not all transformative fans are female, I argue that the negative connotations of transformative fandom rely on misogynist narratives of the monstrous-feminine.

The gendering of transformative fandom often locates the genre on an imagined female body, even diagnosing transformative works as a bodily dysfunction. Constance Penley's seminal work on slash in 1991 works from the anecdotal evidence that most slash fans are women. Penley uses this assumption to psychoanalyse fangirls and contextualise slash as a potentially feminist praxis. She argues:

The bodies from which [female slash creators] are indeed alienated are twentieth-century women's bodies: bodies that are a legal, moral, and religious battleground, that are the site of contraceptive failure, that are publicly defined as *the* greatest potential danger to the fetuses they house, that are held to painfully greater standards of physical beauty than those of the other sex.⁷

Penley identifies the desire for slash as originating from a female body: specifically the cisgender American female body in the 1980s as a site of turmoil. In doing so, she treats slash as a symptom produced by a troubled womb; a metaphorical hysteria. As Matt Hills points out, many scholars' attempts at psychoanalysing fandom this way are deeply problematic, but continue to shape discourses around fandom.⁸ Penley identifies, while perpetuating, the gendered narratives that surround transformative fandom and its participants. Hills observes this when quoting detractors who call Penley's work '[...] a rather bizarre enthusiasm for the sexual fantasies of a tiny group of fans.'⁹ This phrasing demonstrates a preoccupation with slash as a product of dysfunctional female sexuality, whether cast in a positive or negative light.

The connotations of female sexuality gone awry are especially prevalent in mainstream journalism discussing fanfiction. Ross Hagen claims: 'On a larger scale, media coverage of the practice of fan fiction as a whole is generally condescending and focuses on the perceived abnormality of the practice and its participants.'¹⁰ Attitudes are beginning to shift, however: positive and celebratory articles about fandom appear more frequently, with journalists such as Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, Elizabeth Minkel, and Aja Romano writing sympathetically about transformative fandom for broader readerships.¹¹ As awareness and

understanding of transformative fandom grows more mainstream, feature articles still appear with overtones of sensationalism: Devin Faraci's 'Fandom is Broken' uses Kathy Bates' character the 1990 film *Misery* as an allegory for fans in 2016.¹² Bates' character is a well-known embodiment of this archetypal fangirl: socially isolated, emotionally immature, meticulously detail-oriented, middle-aged, overweight, romance-obsessed, and prone to extreme violence when she doesn't get her way. More sympathetic articles are still tasked with debunking such stereotypes: Baker-Whitelaw and Romano's 'A guide to fanfiction for people who can't stop getting it wrong' from 2014 addresses myths that 'Fanfic writers are all teenagers or modest young women who shouldn't be exposed to this kind of Internet filth,' or that 'fanfic writers are sexless, fat, repressed middle-aged spinsters.'¹³ Darlene Hampton researches this topic in detail, describing how Chinese slash fangirls are featured in British journalism: 'Female fans, for example, are still subject to associations with pathology (with terms such as *hysteria*, *rabid*, and *obsessive* used to characterize behavior) [...]'.¹⁴ The biological-dysfunctional connotations of slash are echoed in Chinese and Japanese nickname for fangirls, which translates to 'rotten.'¹⁵ Hampton finds that intersections of orientalism and misogyny compound the marginalisation and sensationalism of transformative fandom.¹⁶ She identifies how the anxieties expressed in these discourses allude to a disruptive potential in the fangirl's body:

Within transnational media representation, the body of the fangirl acts as a global site for the performance of overlapping cultural, economic, and geopolitical anxieties – anxieties rooted in the economic power of the female consumer, the increased visibility of women's sexual desires and pleasures in the public sphere, and a sense that the balance of power in the world is becoming more fluid and unstable.¹⁷

To assuage these anxieties, Hampton argues that the language in these articles:

[...] shames women and girls, reinforces the characterization of female fans as hysterical and hormone-fueled, and seeks to reestablish their cultural powerlessness, raising the specter of the pathological fangirl only to dismiss the threat as laughable, disavowing the economic power of female consumers ideologically[.]¹⁸

The attempts to re-marginalise 'rotten' fangirls strategically perpetuate the biological connotations of shipping in order to dismiss it as unseemly. Conversely, Hampton's title 'Slashy Rotten Pervs' echoes the reclamation of the term 'rotten' by these fangirls, embracing the suggested relationship between biological dysfunction and fangirl behaviour.

The obsession with fangirl behaviour as biologically-influenced also occurs in research by Joli Jenson and Neta Yodovich. Jenson's work, from 1992, examines the broader stereotypes, while Yodovich's ethnographic study conducted in 2014 demonstrates the

persistent stigma both surrounding and within women fans. Jenson discusses 'pathological' behaviour in male and female fans and how it is stereotyped as hooliganism and hysteria respectively: however, the term 'hysteria' is tellingly applied to both male and female fans.¹⁹ Jenson describes the stereotypical fan meeting a celebrity as a process of bodily reactions: 'If [a fan] is female, the image includes sobbing and screaming and fainting, and assumes that an uncontrollable erotic energy is sparked by the chance to see or touch a male idol.'²⁰ Yodovich similarly identifies these connotations in her research: 'Women fans are seen as hormonal, sexual, and unleashed entities with 'squeaky voices and imagined wet dreams' (Bode, 2010, p. 710) who are willing to demonstrate their sexual desire for their fanned artists at any given time' (Wise, 1984).'²¹ Jenson and Yodovich do not focus specifically on transformative fandom, but if we recall Busse and Penley's arguments that transformative fandom is female-coded, if not predominantly female, we can see how fanworks are implied to be another result of an overreactive female-coded body. Mimetic or 'affirmational' fans, whose fandom practices seek to support and consume a text rather than transform it, may still be pathologised as excessively affected and gluttonous, particularly when they are identified as female. Transformative fandom is abjected further because it is productive as well as consumptive, changing and corrupting original texts. The disgust, grotesque fascination with – and attempts to sanitise – transformative fandom can thus be seen as anxiety surrounding the female-coded body's monstrous dysfunctions.

Transformative Fanworks as Body Genres

The connotations that suffuse this discourse rely on broader cultural narratives of monstrosity, and gender. In this sense, narratives *about* transformative fandom can be read as horror stories, replete with monsters, gore, and threats to the social order. Horror studies has explored the field of gendered monstrosity thoroughly: Julia Kristeva, Linda Williams, Barbara Creed, and Robin Wood are four of the key horror theorists used in this essay. Few horror scholars have applied it in detail to transformative fan cultures to explain why the imagined-fangirl is stereotyped as an object of disgust and danger. This section draws on seminal horror theories to contextualise the functions of Kristeva's abjection and Wood's monstrosity as social allegory. I attempt to construct a horror-based framework in which transformative fandom can be seen as abjected and gendered. I argue that transformative fanworks can be categorised with Williams' 'body genres' to identify the precise ways in which transformative fandom is marginalised as abject, embodied, and culturally 'low.' This approach is similar to Hills' framework for contextualising theory as a body genre drawing '[...] intertextually on horror's narrative and affective structures.'²² Upon recognising the monstrosity in these horror-adjacent narratives, productive readings of monstrosity as a social allegory can be applied to transformative fandom.

In horror, the female-coded body is mythologised as a site of deep anxiety, in part for its potential to over-produce affect and the abject. In the context of fandom, we see how the over-production of affect in fangirls is medicalised as hysteria, a dysfunction of the female-coded body. This bodily dysfunction, to recall Hampton's discussion of 'rotten'

women, and Baker-Whitelaw and Romano's reference to fanfiction as 'filth,' is narrativised as an inappropriate, excessive response to the text – metaphorically triggers the creation of transformative fanworks. Fanworks become a bodily function which disturbs the boundaries of the canonical text, often exaggerating its affective qualities and existing beyond what is considered socially or (in the context of intellectual property) legally proper. Transformative fanworks are thus to be treated with disgust in polite society: recall the language of hormones, rot, wet dreams, and pathology used to marginalise fangirls and transformative fandom. The biologically-infused language used to 'other' transformative fandom may be read as an example of abjection. Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* is the foundational work on the abject as a social and narrative phenomenon.²³ Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, developing on Kristeva's theory, locate a metaphorical unease with '[...] bodily, and especially female bodily, fluids. In an effort to secure the 'clean and proper' male body, the body that is sealed off and self-sufficient, it is women who are marked by their capacity of that which leaks from the body – menstrual blood is the best exemplar – to defile and contaminate.'²⁴ Kristeva argues that disgust a tool that reinforces hegemonic boundaries in the face of the abject: 'It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'²⁵ By emphasising disgust as a social rather than a biological practice, Kristeva is able to contextualise that which is abjected as a social Other and explore its potential to disturb hegemony. This subtext informs much of the theory reclaiming transformative fandom as feminist: it is cast as the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite, and it is thus imbued with potential to disturb identity, system, and order. Along with disgust, Kristeva describes a morbid fascination with the abject: in the context of transformative fanworks, this can be seen from the grotesque fascination that drives theatrical readings of fanfiction as a form of comedy, such as one recently cancelled at WonderCon.²⁶

Understanding transformative works as an abjected genre may be complemented by the research of Linda Williams. Williams' work on 'body genres' is helpful in linking theoretical frameworks of horror – and popular reactions of horror – to fanworks. Williams identifies the genres of melodrama, pornography, and horror as linked through their marginalisation as excessive: 'Alone or in combination, heavy doses of sex, violence, and emotion are dismissed by one faction or another as having no logic or reason for existence beyond their power to excite.'²⁷ Williams links the impropriety of these genres with their ability to collapse the viewers' and characters' bodily responses: melodramas as 'tear jerkers'; horror as 'fear jerkers'; pornography as 'texts to which some people might be inclined to 'jerk off'.²⁸ She discusses the anxiety and pleasure around the audience's collapse with the text through physical reactions: 'Rather, what may especially mark these body genres as low is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen.'²⁹ The anxiety and derision surrounding the collapse between fantasy and reality is a narrative found surrounding many fandom practices: when applied to transformative fandom, the

production of transformative ‘filth’ identifies this collapse as one played out through the body. Williams offers a complex psychoanalytic breakdown of how the onscreen body is gendered in relation to the audience, exploring how each genre articulates primal fantasies. My interest in applying Williams’ generic framework to transformative fandom deviates from this to discuss its social context: in transformative fanworks, particularly slash fanfiction, the ‘body genres’ of melodrama and pornography dominate, with a ‘centrality of romance and sex’ described by Abigail de Kosnik.³⁰ Horror is less textually apparent: instead, I argue that horror – another genre found, but not predominant, in fanfiction – intersects significantly with transformative fandom as the *reaction* to fanfiction in mainstream popular – culture. Williams’ analysis focuses on female *characters* and their relationship to viewers: I am interested in female *creators* and their positioning as abject.³¹ That is to say, narratives which sensationalise transformative fandom *are themselves* horror stories: they present thrilling tales of monsters stalking the boundaries of popular culture, hunting (or, if you will, poaching) proper texts to transform them into grotesque hybrids and devour them. To understand fanworks as ‘body genres’ explains their ‘low’ status, entrenched by narratives coding them as bodily excesses. These narratives of fanworks as horrific are themselves horror stories, in which fandom is the monster.

The gendering of abjection and monstrosity is explored thoroughly in Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*.³² She establishes many aspects of the monstrous-feminine, developing from Kristeva’s theory of abjection to describe how female-coded bodies are monstrous when they are abject, emphasising: ‘Woman is not, by her very nature, an abject being. Her representation in popular discourse as monstrous is a function of the ideological project of the horror film – a project designed to perpetuate the belief that woman’s monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her difference as man’s sexual other.’³³ While potentially reductive of the ideological possibilities in the horror genre, Creed’s psychoanalytic approach outlines the historic and contemporary anxieties around monsters coded as female, and female behaviours coded as monstrous. Her framework may help us understand how the abjection of transformative fanworks in mainstream discourse codes transformative fans as the monstrous-feminine. Transformative fans are female-coded; and transformative fanworks are abjected through body horror: this connection casts transformative fans as the monstrous-feminine. Monsters are Other; liminal creatures of excess; objects of disgust and abjection; creatures who threaten and transgress social and physical boundaries. Narratives of disgust and monstrosity frame transformative fanworks as acts of violence upon the text, disturbing the hermetic boundaries of licensed canon. Hampton’s study detects a similarly capitalist narrative in her study, in which fangirls must be recuperated as harmless and receptive consumers.³⁴ As Creed notes, monstrous-feminine narratives often serve a social function of stigmatising female-coded behaviour as monstrous and abject to reinforce hegemonic boundaries. However, not all horror stories reinforce hegemonic narratives: the monster is not always vilified. In some horror narratives, the monster is tamed or de-fanged; in others, the monster’s triumphant destruction of the status quo is celebrated with ironic or nihilistic

delight. These alternate narratives suggest other ways of understanding monstrous-feminine fandom and its relationships with hegemonic power.

Horror Narratives and Hegemony

Upon contextualising transformative fans as iterations of the monstrous-feminine, the function of monsters as a social allegory in horror must be examined. I use Robin Wood's reading of the monster as the 'return of the repressed' in society; an avatar of marginalisation which, unless annihilated or assimilated, promises an apocalyptic end to the status quo.³⁵ This illustrates productive methods of understanding transformative fandom as mainstream awareness and acceptance grows in entertainment journalism and academia. By no stretch of the imagination is transformative fandom entirely Othered by popular discourse; especially not in academia, where it is frequently celebrated. Wood's reading of the monster's fate in different cycles of horror films offers a model for how transformative fandoms are reconciled with popular culture through annihilation and assimilation; or they are celebrated for their disruptive social power.

Wood's approach to psychoanalysing horror differs from Williams and Creed, as he applies the concept of repression and the Other to society more than the individual. He identifies monsters in horror narratives as allegories for repressed social groups and behaviours, describing how bourgeois heteronormative society relies on repression to maintain its normativity and hegemonic power. Among forms of repression, he describes:

[...] the particularly severe repression of female sexuality/creativity; the attribution to the female of passivity, her preparation for her subordinate and dependent role in our culture. Clearly, a crucial aspect of the repression of bisexuality is the denial to women of drives culturally associated with masculinity: activeness, aggression, self-assertion, organizational power, creativity itself.³⁶

Wood's analysis echoes the anxious narratives in which transformative fandom's creativity is coded as female, and as a product of errant sexuality. Wood uses this to contextualise repression as a social function, in which the Other 'functions not simply as something external to the culture or to the self, but also as what is repressed (but never destroyed) in the self and projected outwards in order to be hated or destroyed.'³⁷ Wood then outlines some incarnations of the Other that are repressed in hegemonic narratives: women; the proletariat; other cultures; minority ethnic groups; people with alternative ideologies; gay and bisexual people; and children.³⁸ Using the case study of American horror films, he argues: 'central to [the horror film] is the actual dramatization of the dual concept, the repressed/the other, in the figure of the Monster.'³⁹ Wood analyses examples of monsters coded as Others in horror films, exploring how each monster threatens a re-emergence of the repressed in society.⁴⁰ This allows Wood to explore how the horror film conceives 'normality' in opposition to the monster, and to align the fate of the monster with the

imagined fate of the repressed. This understanding of the monster as Other makes the monster's fate in horror films fundamental to Wood's sociopolitical readings of the genre. Wood roughly categorises the horror film into two formulae: the 'apocalyptic' narrative, in which the monster endures or triumphs; and the 'reactionary' narrative, in which the monster is defeated and repression is restored. The apocalyptic horror film may be ambivalent or nihilistic, but also progressive, as the apocalypse promised by the monster '[...] is generally reinterpretable in social/political [terms] (the end of the highly specific world of patriarchal capitalism).'⁴¹ Wood argues: '[apocalyptic horror films] are progressive in so far as their negativity is not recuperable into the dominant ideology, but constitutes (on the contrary) the recognition of that ideology's disintegration, its untenability, as all it has repressed explodes and blows it apart.'⁴²

Wood's apocalyptic horror film might be paralleled with those narratives which celebrate transformative fandom as progressive. The argument generally builds along the formula: transformative fandom is female-coded; therefore, transformative fandom is marginalised; therefore, transformative fandom in the face of marginalisation is progressive. Of course, each 'therefore' in the preceding clause may only be building on problematic and outdated assumptions about transformative fandom that could develop unproductively. However, it is worth examining these examples as they usefully articulate the relationship of repression in which transformative fandoms and monsters originate from the system which represses them. Wood argues that the repressed can never be totally Othered as this is precisely what gives it the potential to expose and resist repressive power.⁴³ This is echoed in arguments which celebrate transformative fandom as progressive, empowering fans to creatively challenge the status quo. Discourse within fan communities such as an essay by Tumblr user fozmeadows on how creative fandom 'such as making costumes, writing fanfic and drawing fanart' is 'often either female dominated or coded as feminine' and thus 'considered insincere, non-serious or 'unreal'.⁴⁴ Arguments such as these highlight transformative fanworks as a women's art practiced in the margins, re-appropriating hegemonic texts to resist dominant narratives (both canonical narratives and social narratives). In early fan studies research, the application of Michel De Certeau's theories by Constance Penley and Henry Jenkins exemplifies a similar argument. Penley contextualises slash as exemplary of De Certeau's tactics, where women 'are not just reading, viewing, or consuming in tactical ways that offer fleeting moments of resistance or pleasure [... slash fans] do more than 'make do'; they make.'⁴⁵ Penley refers to the presumed antagonism between fans and their texts by insisting fans are not 'parasitic': this, in conjunction with her analysis of slash as an articulation of the marginalised female-coded body, still echoes the monstrous allusions she seeks to dispute.⁴⁶ By contextualising slash as a women's art, and as 'one that necessarily makes no money,' she implies what Robin Wood's apocalyptic horror film threatens: 'the end of the highly specific world of patriarchal capitalism.'⁴⁷ Even as she refutes the negative connotations, her narrative depends upon the monstrous language of parasites and dangerous female bodies. Jenkins similarly uses De Certeau's tactical resistance in his seminal *Textual Poachers*.⁴⁸ Borrowing De Certeau's analogy of 'poaching'

as his framework, Jenkins only addresses the term ‘poachers’ literally in a brief comparison to wildlife poachers.⁴⁹ The term calls to mind a particular kind of monster: one which hunts in the margins, stealing and slaughtering on the property of others. In this case, fan is not a gendered monster (reflective of Jenkins’ broader study of fans), but the ‘poacher’ is reclaimed from its expected context. The use of language demonstrates that while these arguments are largely affirming, they implicitly cast fans as misunderstood monsters as is characteristic of apocalyptic horror. While their threat to normative systems is far from apocalyptic, the monsters endure and resist their repression as they do in Wood’s model. Fan studies has developed significantly since these foundations, with greater skepticism surrounding the conceptualisation of transformative fandom as a resistant entity, or as an entity at all.⁵⁰ However, I argue that outdated though this argument may be, it shares key elements with the horror genre which continue to structure fan discourse today.

Wood’s ‘reactionary’ horror defines a wave of movies in which the monster is dealt with ‘[...] either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself.’⁵¹ Wood sees this as the conservative version of horror, where the status quo is restored, its repressive dichotomies reasserted and normality assured. Applied to current narratives about transformative fandom, annihilation appears when transformative fandom is dismissed outright, as seen in the example of the ‘sexual fantasies of a tiny group’ Hills quotes. Assimilation appears to be a recurring theme. As transformative fandom shifts away from a marginal subculture into mainstream exposure, its monstrous elements are – to echo Wood – rendered safe, converted as far as possible into a replica of normality. In a recent article, I used ‘fanfiction without teeth’ to characterise the conditional nature of transformative works going mainstream.⁵² Pieces such as *CNN*’s ‘Inside the racy, nerdy world of fanfiction’ are – in spite of the headline – filled with assurances that fanfiction can be clean and child-appropriate, its undesirable elements safely erased.⁵³ Hampton describes similar cases of the ‘[...] hyperbolic language and condescending tone [...]’ of British articles sensationalising Chinese fangirls, which ‘[...] cast them as silly, sweet, and adorable.’⁵⁴ While Hampton does not address the subtext of horror, her argument that this reinforces patriarchal and economic dominance – as well as nationalist stereotypes – parallels Wood’s model of normality and repression.

In corporate media, the growing legitimacy of transformative fanworks still requires compromise of their transformative capacity, or their recognisability as fanworks. Corporations attempting to capitalise on transformative fanworks seek to assimilate them, in an example such as *Star Trek*, or annihilate them, in an example such as *Twilight*. Jenkins has blogged about CBS’ attempt to regulate *Star Trek* fan films, which placed such exhaustive restrictions that the results would be closer to outsourced promotions than transformative works.⁵⁵ Amazon has similarly attempted to license and monetise fanfiction through Kindle Worlds, which Monica Flegel and Jenny Roth argue ‘treats fanfiction as wholly derivative,’ rather than transformative – a constriction they note impacts negatively on creativity.⁵⁶ The alternate strategy to licensed-but-limited fanfiction is nicknamed ‘filing

off the serial numbers,' a practice researched by Abigail de Kosnik.⁵⁷ This process – most famously seen in the adaptation of *Twilight* into *50 Shades of Grey* – occurs when a creator changes enough names and details in a transformative work that it appears original, annihilating any obvious relationship to fandom. The remaining work, no longer an overt cannibalisation, can be safely assimilated into the commercial mediascape as a unique product with definable intellectual property limitations. Using the allegory of hip hop as 'a subcultural, appropriative, copyright-defying genre,' de Kosnik describes fanfiction's 'Sugarhill moment' as an ambivalent burst in mainstream popularity. She argues that 'filing off the serial numbers' disconnects officially-published works from their original, valuable context in a plurality of other fanfiction, seen with *50 Shades of Grey* and the *Mortal Instruments* film (the latter adapted from Cassandra Clare's novels, which were originally Harry Potter fanfiction).⁵⁸ Thus, de Kosnik argues 'commercial publishing [would] strip fan fiction of what makes it new and special,' denying a feminist potential for fanfiction.⁵⁹ In each case – each compromise – transformative fanworks' monstrous aspects are repressed, in order that normal media engagement is restored.

Annihilation; assimilation; and apocalypse: these three fates characterise the narratives of transformative fandom even today. I use horror's generic conventions to contextualise the changing status of transformative fandom because the spectre of monstrosity still structures narratives of redemption and assimilation. In critical discussion around the mainstreaming of transformative fandom, it is worth considering how the monstrous elements are dealt with. While many of the stereotypes which connect transformative fandom and monstrosity are problematic, their existence also offers productive ways to critique monsters as a tool to challenge repressive paradigms. Horror's capacity to rattle our cages may also be found in works which are not themselves horror, but are treated as horrifying: not only in stories about monsters but stories by those who have been cast as monsters.

Conclusion

In seeking to illuminate the monstrous connotations of transformative fandom, I hope to develop a more nuanced understanding of narratives taken for granted in fan studies. Horror demonstrates how cultures grapple with liminality, repression, and change. Even as discourse shifts away from transformative fandom as a marginal field, the echoes of monstrosity continue to shape new arguments. Foregrounding the conventions of horror that underpin discourse on transformative fandom help us critically address the nuances of repressive strategies, and the nature of assimilation. Narratives about monsters can be a means of repression, and in spite of this – or because of this – monsters can also be used as a means of challenging repression.

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Notes and references:

¹ Transformative works are defined by the Organization for Transformative Works as: 'A transformative work takes something extant and turns it into something with a new purpose, sensibility, or mode of expression. Transformative works include but are not limited to fanfiction, real person fiction, fan vids, and fan art.' ('What do you mean by a transformative work?', the Organisation for Transformative Works, accessed November 12, 2018 <<http://www.transformativeworks.org/faq/>>)

² A similar approach to reading monstrous-feminine allusions in pejorative stereotypes is taken by Adrienne L. Massanari and Shira Chess in their essay 'Attack of the 50-foot social justice warrior.' Massanari and Chess argue for a feminist reclamation of the monster, a possibility I discuss in the final part of this paper. (Adrienne L. Massanari and Shira Chess, 2018, 'Attack of the 50-foot social justice warrior: the discursive construction of SJW memes as the monstrous feminine,' *Feminist Media Studies* 18:4, 525-542.)

³ Matt Hills discusses this approach through the lens of 'theory horror,' where horror narratives can be found in non-fiction.

Matt Hills, 2005, *The Pleasures of Horror* (London, New York: Continuum).

⁴ Kristina Busse, 2013, 'Geek hierarchies, boundary policing, and the gendering of the good fan,' *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10:1 (May): 73–91. 75, 83.

⁵ 'AO3 Census Masterpost,' *centrumlumina.tumblr.com*, October 5, 2013, accessed January 31, 2017 <<http://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/62816996032/gender>>.

⁶ Constance Penley, 1991, 'Brownian Motion: Women, tactics, and technology,' in *Technoculture*, edited by Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, 135–161 (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press).
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⁷ Penley, 'Brownian Motion,' 154.

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- ²⁸ Williams, 'Film Bodies,' 5.
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- ³⁰ Abigail de Kosnik, 2015, '*Fifty Shades* and the Archive of Women's Culture,' *Cinema Journal* 54:3 (Spring): 116-125, 119.
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- ³⁶ Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film,' 167.
- ³⁷ Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film,' 168.
- ³⁸ Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film,' 169-170.
- ³⁹ Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film,' 171.
- ⁴⁰ Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film,' 171-173.
- ⁴¹ Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film,' 192.
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- ⁴⁴ Foz Meadows, 2014, 'Fandom Thoughts,' *What Happens Next: A Gallimaufry*, accessed November 12, 2018, <<http://fozmeadows.tumblr.com/post/89576778116/fandom-thoughts>>.
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- ⁴⁶ Penley, 'Brownian Motion,' 140.
- ⁴⁷ Penley, 'Brownian Motion,' 139.
- ⁴⁸ This analysis draws from an earlier project of my own, which read Hannibal Lecter as a poacher of humans paralleled with fans as poachers of his texts. Naja Later, forthcoming, 'Poaching and Scrambling: Transforming Hannibal In The Kitchen,' in *Hannibal Lecter and the Fannibals, Criminals, and Legacy of America's Favourite Cannibal*, n.p. (Jefferson: McFarland).
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- ⁵⁰ Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington, eds., 2007, *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (New York: New York University Press).
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- ⁵³ Caroline Knorr, 2017, 'Inside the racy, nerdy world of fanfiction,' *CNN*, accessed November 12, 2018 <<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/05/health/kids-teens-fanfiction-partner/index.html>>.
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- ⁵⁵ Henry Jenkins, 2016, 'How the New Star Trek Fan Film Guidelines May Change Fandom,' *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, accessed November 12, 2018, <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2016/09/how-the-new-star-trek-fan-film-guidelines-may-change-fandom.html>.
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- ⁵⁷ de Kosnik, 'Fifty Shades,' 121.
- ⁵⁸ de Kosnik, 'Fifty Shades,' 122-123.
- ⁵⁹ de Kosnik, 'Fifty Shades,' 124.