

Trans fandom

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[0.1] Abstract—Editorial for "Trans Fandom," edited by Jennifer Duggan and Angie Fazekas, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 39 (March 15, 2023).

[0.2] Keywords—Acafan; Gender nonnormative; Mpreg; Nonbinary; Omegaverse; Queer; Trans

Duggan, Jennifer, and Angie Fazekas. 2023. "Trans Fandom" [editorial]. In "Trans Fandom," edited by Jennifer Duggan and Angie Fazekas, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 39. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2023.2521>.

1. Introduction

[1.1] Although fan scholars have acknowledged the existence of trans fans and emphasized the importance of gender nonnormativity in many aspects of fandom, and although queer and trans theories have been utilized in analyses of fans' transformative works and fan behaviors, surprisingly little work has focused on trans fans, trans ways of doing fandom, and depictions of trans bodies within fan works. While gender fluidity has always been of interest within fan studies, there has been a marked increase in research focusing specifically on trans fans and fandoms in the past decade. Scholars have, for example, discussed the limits and affordances of Omegaverse genders (Busse 2013; Gunderson 2017; Popova 2018; Weisser 2019), mpreg (Åström 2010; Ingram-Waters 2015), trans fan fiction (Busse and Lothian 2009; Ledbetter 2020; Rose 2018, 2020), trans fans (Duggan 2022b; McInroy and Craig 2018, 2020), trans theory and fan fiction (Willis 2016), the politics of transing in/and fandom (Duggan 2022a), and other related topics.

[1.2] Nevertheless, works focusing specifically on trans fans—with "trans" here used as an umbrella term for individuals who express their gender identities in a variety of ways, including but not limited to transgender, transsexual, nonbinary, gender fluid, genderqueer, agender, intersex, or otherwise gender nonnormative—are few, and no special issue has yet focused on trans fans or trans fandoms. Moreover, fan studies, and particularly fan fiction studies, continues to focus largely on binary gender identities and, most often, women. Other expressions of genders have often been relegated to footnotes and margins, mentioned but rarely discussed in detail, or highlighted as a promising future area of research.

[1.3] This special issue has sought to widen our knowledge of trans fans and fandoms, with the aim of publishing articles that center trans people. It is our hope that this focus will not only bring trans fans out of the margins of fan studies but also that the special issue will reflect the changing face of fandom, in which gender identities appear to be increasingly diverse. We feel that this special issue is particularly

important in the face of increasing transphobia, enacted in legislations that seek to prevent discussions of gender difference in schools or through famous authors' tweets.

[1.4] This issue feels particularly timely in a political climate in which transphobic rhetoric has become increasingly emboldened and mainstream. Moral panics about "gender ideology" regularly threaten the safety and well-being of trans individuals. Nonetheless, and despite some recent controversies, fandom appears to provide a relatively safe space for fans. Trans fans are becoming increasingly visible within fandom, and trans characters are appearing in transformative works more frequently. The articles in this special issue emphasize the importance of fandom to the trans community, as well as the political work that is carried out by trans fans and their allies through their transformative works. We hope that this special issue acts as a catalyst for further work considering trans fans and trans fandoms.

2. Articles

[2.1] In the first article in the issue, Jennifer Duggan reviews previous work discussing trans fans and trans fan fiction, both of which Duggan widely defines. Previous scholarship has found that fandom can be a particularly meaningful space for trans identity building and that fan fiction acts as a space of gender experimentation.

[2.2] Through an autoethnographic lens, Xavia Andromeda Publius uses Susan Stryker's (2006) articulation of transgender rage to explore the complicated disidentificatory potentials and limitations of cyborg characters such as the catfish—people who pretend to be someone else online. Using José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) concept of disidentification as a performative strategy for minority subjects to navigate a hostile media landscape, Publius considers the trans politics of catfishing, Turing tests, and passing through catfish characters in *Glee* (2009–15), *Pretty Little Liars* (2010–17), and *Gossip Girl* (2007–12). Drawing on personal diaries, Publius argues that catfish characters both reinforce transphobic and racist ideologies that position white femininity as the hegemonic standard for womanhood and simultaneously provide a mechanism for venting and enacting transgender rage. Publius further cautions that while anger and rage can be healthy, disidentifying with characters like the catfish that are borne from transphobic fear and hatred runs the risk of causing harm to trans viewers who "must be vigilant that in our attempts to find ourselves in whatever scraps are available to us, we don't lose sight of the fact that we're not actually monsters; we're just drawn that way" (§ 6.5).

[2.3] Peizhen Wu discusses possible approaches to teaching trans studies through fan fiction in higher education across various disciplines. The article explores how considering gender fluidity through the *Loki* miniseries (2021; since upgraded to a series), *Loki*-focused transgender fan fiction, and Omegaverse fan fiction in a college English classroom can enact trans pedagogies by providing "students a comfortable space to discuss trans issues" (§ 1.5).

[2.4] Ari Page explores the transformative and reparative potential of online fandoms for transmasculine representation. Focusing specifically on *Teen Wolf* (2011–17) fandom and the character of Stiles Stilinski, Page considers fan art and Tumblr posts to argue that fans take advantage of particular narratives and tropes in *Teen Wolf* to imagine Stiles as a transmasculine character. Specifically, Page argues that the lycanthropic elements of the show create a world in which bodies are already inherently fluid and changeable—a narrative that fans take advantage of by drawing comparisons between the shifting bodies of werewolves and trans characters. Page additionally argues that while the show ostensibly exists in a universe without homophobia and transphobia, queer characters are not canonically afforded the same level of affection and openness as cisgender, straight characters. *Teen Wolf* fandom, alternatively, provides open, affectionate, embodied representations of queer and trans masculinities that make way for an exploration of transmasculine experiences and what Page names trans euphoria.

[2.5] Jon Heggstad examines the mpreg (male pregnancy) trope in *Teen Wolf* fandom through the lens of Jack Halberstam's (1998) notion of cultural border wars, which posits that the representational potential of a piece of media is often limited when the interpretation of a particular marginalized group conflicts with another. Mpreg has long been a fraught topic in fandom spaces, with some fans arguing

that it reinforces gender essentialism and fetishizes gay men while others assert that it provides a means of representing embodied transmasculine and nonbinary experiences. Heggstad undertakes a close reading of three pieces of mpreg *Teen Wolf* fan fiction to ultimately argue that while mpreg is not an inherently trans-positive trope, the multiplicity of readings offered through fan fiction creates an "economics of abundance" (§ 6.1) in which transmasculine and nonbinary fans can see themselves represented in ways often unavailable in mainstream media.

[2.6] Damien Hagen focuses on *Doctor Who* fandom and the way in which the Doctor's regenerative capacity provides the means for queer and trans fans to explore trans possibilities and gender euphoria. Long before the Doctor's ability to change genders became canon in *Doctor Who* in 2018 with Jodie Whittaker's Doctor, trans fans have been drawn to the series for its emphasis on changeability, malleability, and bodily fluidity. Through an autoethnographic lens, Hagen argues that *Doctor Who* can be read as a trans media object—one that is not necessarily explicitly transgender but instead opens up gendered possibilities in which trans fans can imagine otherwise. Hagen further draws on other trans fans' queer and trans readings of a variety of canonical moments in *Doctor Who* to argue that the ephemerality and liminality of the series can be particularly pleasurable and gender affirming for trans and nonbinary fans who are undertaking their own processes of regeneration. While the series might never have been intended as a trans narrative, Hagen argues that through fannish interpretations and queer readings, it has the potential to provide a mechanism for survival, self-love, and gender euphoria.

3. Symposium

[3.1] The first symposium piece in the issue opens by discussing Riverside Studios London's 2014 interpretation of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, entitled *Drag King Richard III*, which brought into focus the latent transgender tropes of the play and characteristics of its characters. The piece argues that the character of Richard can be read through the lens of dysphoria and that the adaptation of the play can be considered transformative. The piece then goes on to discuss Shakespeare trans fan fiction with a specific focus on the *King Lear* character Edmund. Similarly villainous in the play, Edmund is also read as trans by many fans. Yves Herak concludes that many trans fans of Shakespeare find aspects of themselves mirrored in these characters and that this act of trans self-recognition is central to their transformative writings of the characters.

[3.2] Ben Cromwell considers the state of Harry Potter fandom in the wake of J. K. Rowling's increasing transphobia and alignment with TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) ideology. Rather than arguing that Rowling's politics should mean that fans abandon the Harry Potter fandom, Cromwell instead asserts that creative transformative work provides an ideal venue to push back against Rowling's bigotry and create safe and comforting trans and queer worlds for fans to explore. Analyzing two particular pieces of Harry Potter fan fiction that center trans characters, Cromwell argues that while these pieces may have been written with the intention to spite Rowling, they also take advantage of the magical setting of the books to craft affirming narratives for queer, trans, and nonbinary fans.

[3.3] Casey Friedmann Kelley presents the findings of a Likert-scale survey study of Harry Potter fans and discusses the dissonance between their responses to J. K. Rowling and the Harry Potter franchise following her tweets about transgendered people. Participants were invited to take part in the study via Tumblr. The results make clear that the vast majority of Harry Potter fans using Tumblr strongly disagree with Rowling's stance on gender but wish to preserve her freedom of speech. They also indicate that fans feel uncertain about how to react to the franchise, reporting that Rowling's comments made them more able to recognize various kinds of discrimination in the original series and that fans disagree about whether they can still enjoy the series and whether authors and their works can be considered separately.

4. Book reviews

[4.1] Jessica Ruth Austin's *Fan Identities in the Furry Fandom*, the first academic monograph on furry fandom, is reviewed by yerf. The book considers furies both quantitatively and qualitatively, and while yerf's overall impression of the text is that it makes some positive contributions to the field and

"engages a breadth of academic fields" (§ 11), they argue that it is "predictable" (§ 9), that it does not engage race and racism as thoroughly as it could, and that it is most likely to interest academics, not fans.

[4.2] Maria K. Alberto reviews the collection *Representing Kink: Fringe Sexuality and Textuality in Literature, Digital Narrative, and Popular Culture*, edited by Sara K. Howe and Susan E. Cook. The chapters are, Alberto suggests, of variable quality, and the collection "suffers from several significant shortfalls in its theoretical framings" (§ 2), notably its overreliance on Henry Jenkins, its lack of discussion of the overlappings of *kink* and *queer*, and its lack of engagement with race. However, the collection discusses "a welcome range of subjects and makes a persuasive case for the ongoing necessity of open, inclusive scholarly approaches to kink" (§ 2), and Alberto suggests it may yet be of interest to scholars interested in the subject of kink.

[4.3] Finally, Melissa A. Click positively reviews Jonathan Gray's *Dislike-Minded: Media, Audiences, and the Dynamics of Taste*, describing it as "involving emotion and affect, marginalized audiences, and/or citizenship," among other topics, and calling it an "energizing, thought-provoking book" (§ 1). In the text, Gray carefully defines *dislike* as opposed to related terms, like *hate*, and engages with gaps in audience and fan studies scholarship, offering new insights and potential methodologies and topics for future research. Click suggests that the text is one that would be useful for a wide range of readers and that it will surely inspire readers to pay more attention to a range of affects—and a range of understandings of specific affects—in their future work.

5. Acknowledgments

[5.1] The following people worked on TWC No. 39 in an editorial capacity: Kristina Busse, Karen Hellekson, Poe Johnson, and Mel Stanfill (editors); Hanna Hacker and Bridget Kies (Symposium); and Katie Morrissey, Louisa Ellen Stein, Melanie E. S. Kohnen, and Regina Yung Lee (Review)

[5.2] The following people worked on TWC No. 39 in a production capacity: Christine Mains (production editor); Beth Friedman, Jillian Kovich, Christine Mains, A. Smith, and Vickie West (copyeditors); Claire Baker, Christine Mains, Sarah New, Rebecca Sentance, and Latina Vidolova (layout); and Emily Cohen, Rachel P. Kreiter, Christine Mains, Cheng Shon, and Latina Vidolova (proofreaders).

[5.3] TWC thanks the board of the Organization for Transformative Works. OTW provides financial support to TWC but is not involved in any way in the content of the journal, which is editorially independent.

[5.4] TWC thanks all its board members, whose names appear on TWC's masthead, as well as the additional peer reviewers who provided service for TWC No. 39: Julia Elena Goldmann, Damien Hagen, Jon Heggstad, Mary Ingram-Waters, Alexis Lothian, Rowan Maddox, Keshia McClantoc, Ann McClellan, Lauren C. Rouse, Houman Sadri, and Dan Vena.

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