

Trans fans and fan fiction: A literature review

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[0.1] Abstract—Although fan fiction studies has historically focused overwhelmingly on (cis)female fans, research suggests that trans fans—here used as an umbrella term for gender nonnormative fans—are a significant proportion of fan fiction communities. This literature review summarizes recent studies that discuss fan fiction and trans fans, as well as research exploring various genres of fan fiction that play with gender to consider the reasons such fan fiction may appeal to trans fans specifically.

[0.2] Keywords—Fandom; Gender; Gender nonnormative; Mpreg; Omegaverse; Transfic

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1. The trans turn

[1.1] Fan fiction studies has largely focused on female fans, but as Jenkins has argued, this "initial focus on women as fans resulted in some hasty and easy generalizations" (quoted in Scott 2013, ix): not only is the fan who is centered female but she is usually implied to be adult, cisgender, straight, "middle-class, educated, liberal, English-speaking, white [and,] North American" (Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007, 104). This has created an "aura of safety...in numbers...in being among like-minded individuals" (De Kosnik 2016, 141) for some fans while masking the "power plays" and "member exclusion and inclusion" (Hellekson 2018, 68) affecting others.

[1.2] These exclusions have thus recently spurred calls for us to consider how some fans "feel welcome and others less so" alongside the "exclusions and marginalizations" beneath fandom's apparently inclusive surface (Jenkins 2014, 97–98). The figure of the stereotypical fan has been critiqued—from the focus on adult fans (Duggan 2021; Walton 2018) to that on white fans (Wanzo 2015), straight fans (Brennan 2014), and English-speaking North American fans (Chin and Morimoto 2013)—and the voices of fans and fan scholars "who feel they have been ignored (or relegated to the periphery) by researchers and other fans" (Brennan 2014, 376) have become increasingly prominent. Trans fans and their practices have thus recently gained attention.

[1.3] While examinations of fan demographics are rare, two recent studies suggest that trans fans are a significant group in fandom: my own (2020) study of Harry Potter fans' profiles and authors' notes suggests that roughly one-third of fans are trans, while *centreoftheselights'* (2013) Archive of Our Own (AO3) survey found that over 15 percent of fans identified as trans. Among young fans who identify as LGBTQ+, 27.5 percent identify as nonbinary/gender independent, 18.8 percent as genderqueer, 13.9 percent as trans* man/male, and 2 percent as trans* women/female (McInroy and Craig 2018; 2020). Since an increasing number of fans participating in fandom identify as trans, trans experiences of fandom have become increasingly important to consider.

[1.4] This special issue, dedicated to a long-present yet often overlooked group of fans, would not be complete without a review of earlier research. This review focuses specifically on fan fiction studies and aims to remind readers that transing has always been an integral part of fan fiction, which has long hinged on subverting and playing with gender expressions and embodiments. It also provides an overview of previous work relating to trans fans, transing, and transfic. It does not address scholarship that does not focus on fan fiction, which I hope can be reviewed in later work.

[1.5] This paper locates "the trans turn"—the moment at which trans studies and fan fiction studies came into explicit and deliberate contact, when explicit attention began to be paid to trans fans, transgender characters in fan fiction, and fans' transing practices—within the recent movement that seeks to address historical and ongoing elisions in fan studies. It links the trans turn to a wider body of work on gender fluidity in/and fandom, a focus that is neither new nor unique. Gender mobility, flexibility, and fluidity are long-standing topics in fan fiction studies, and the intersections and complexities of genders and sexualities have always been central concerns (Busse and Lothian 2009; Driscoll 2006). Of course, a focus on women and a focus on trans fans/transing are not mutually exclusive: all gendered categories, including "woman," are slippery and capacious. The review therefore includes some works focusing on forms of fan fiction other than transfic, using theory other than trans theory, and centering fans other than trans fans (but not necessarily excluding trans fans from consideration)—all of which are relevant for scholars interested in gender in/and fan fiction. These include genderfuck/genderswap, omegaverse, and mpreg fan fiction in addition to transfic.

[1.6] Before I begin, I feel it is necessary to define the key terms and theoretical orientations of this review. Trans studies focuses more on embodiment than queer studies does, even as both "are linked through shared histories, methods, and commitments to transforming the situation of gender and sexual outsiders" (Love 2014, 172). It critiques queer studies as being too focused on discourse and too little on the "material specificity" of the body (Solomon 2010, 1). Susan Stryker (2006) defines transgender studies as concerning, "analyzing[,] and interpreting gender, desire, embodiment, and identity" (3). She argues trans studies emerged because "neither feminism nor queer studies...were up to the task of making sense of the lived complexity of contemporary gender" (7). As such, *trans* is used here "as an umbrella term for describing a range of gender-variant identities" (Williams 2014, 232) and here refers to any person whose gender identity does not mirror the sex they were assigned at birth, while *transing* describes the process of examining, playing with, or subverting gendered embodiments (Yep 2013) and here refers to gender play, experimentation, and subversion in, through, and alongside fan fiction.

2. Understanding trans fans

[2.1] Scholars' interest in fans and gender has long considered how fan practices express "concerns with the cultural meanings and effects of gendered bodies" as well as tensions surrounding gendered embodiment and discourses (Busse and Lothian 2009, 105). Although early research focused on communities of women writing fan fiction, their practices, and their interests, scholars in the early 2000s acknowledged that a lack of

quantitative research on the genders and sexualities of fans left these "uncertain and open to debate" (Busse and Lothian 2017, 117). In "A History of Slash Sexualities" (2017), Busse and Lothian identified three waves of fan studies scholarship examining the relationship between slash fan fiction and queer cultures: the first, a "woman-centric" wave idealizing relationships and taboo sexual expressions; the second, a "politically self-aware" wave including more realistic depictions of queer lives; the third, the current wave, during which fan fiction communities have self-defined as queer, with fan fiction depicting "multiple genders and sexualities as both reflections and fantasies of the complexly diverse community of readers and writers" (118).

[2.2] Twenty-first century slash fan fiction includes a whole "spectrum of gender identifies [and] sexual desires" (Busse and Lothian 2017, 124), so scholars began to wonder whether "the fantasies of gender mobility and sexual freedom apparently played out in fan fiction may be really manifest" (Driscoll 2006, 86). However, while scholars more readily acknowledged the existence of fans whose identities might exceed the category "woman" in fan fiction communities, including "nonbinary identified individuals and both transgender and cisgender men" (Busse and Lothian 2017, 124), most academic considerations of fans and their practices still focused on women.

[2.3] Scholars also began to engage more explicitly with trans theory. This is most marked in Ika Willis's (2016) article "Writing the Fables of Sexual Difference," in which Willis operationalizes trans theory to examine fans' gender fluidity. While her focus remains explicitly on women, this article was one of the first in fan studies to explicitly apply trans theory in seeking to understand how "certain fantasmatic, identificatory and bodily practices associated with slash fiction cut across (*trans-*) existing categories for sexuality and gender" and to consider how "the increased visibility of trans embodiment, experience and theory... has put new kinds of pressure on the ways in which we think about the relationship between gendered embodiment, gender identity, and the legal, social and political forms of binary gender" (290). Willis applies these theories to her own fannish experiences through an autoethnographic reflection on how slash has provided her with new ways of understanding her own embodied and gendered experiences and desires.

[2.4] Charles Ledbetter (2020) also uses autoethnography when theorizing the trans politics of fan fiction. Ledbetter considers fan fiction to be a symptom of "political dysphoria" (§ 4)—a sense of political friction, dissonance, or unbelonging—which spurs fans to create "visionary alternative[s]" to their lived realities (§ 4.5) that can provide "access to fulfillment that is otherwise impossible" (§ 9.5).

[2.5] New scholarship also considers how earlier fan practices and communities have created opportunities for young fans in particular "to explore and come to terms with their own queer identifications" (Busse and Lothian 2017, 124). This is particularly emphasized in an important and growing cluster of articles published by Lauren B. McInroy and colleagues Ian Zapcic, Oliver W. J. Beer, and Shelley L. Craig between 2018 and 2022, which discuss survey data from five thousand North American LGBTQ+ youth who participated in online fandom (McInroy 2020; McInroy and Craig 2018; 2020; McInroy, Zapcic, and Beer 2021; McInroy and Beer 2022). These articles provide valuable insight into the importance of fandom to LGBTQ+ individuals and the challenges LGBTQ+ fans face online.

[2.6] The first article (McInroy and Craig 2018) explored whether respondents' participation in online fandom versus other online communities affected their self-identification, and it found that LGBTQ+ youth who participate in online fandom both identified as LGBTQ+ sooner than their nonfandom-participating peers and also used a wider range of terms to describe their identities, including trans*male (13.9 percent), genderqueer (18.8 percent), and nonbinary or gender independent (27.5 percent) (184). The fans surveyed participated in a wide range of online fannish activities across a wide range of fandoms (185–86), and they reported "that without fandom they 'never would have known' they were SGM [sexual or gender minority], or indicated that they would not currently identify as SGM without having engaged with fandom" (188–89). However, McInroy and Craig (2018) acknowledge some limitations to their study: First, they worried that because the study mentioned fandom, those familiar with the term were more likely to participate—and that this might have "contributed to the comparatively low number of male-identified fandom participants" (193). Second, they emphasized that participants were largely white and suggested that fans with intersecting ethnoracial minority identities may not have participated as eagerly due to ongoing racism in fandom (193). Nonetheless, they highlighted that a "significant proportion" of fandom-participating youth identified as "transgender and/or in some way gender non-conforming" (193).

[2.7] The second article (McInroy 2020) explored online fan communities as spaces of social support for LGBTQ+ youth. The quantitative data suggest that participants ranked their favorite fan fiction websites (Fanfiction.net, AO3) as the second-most important online sources for general well-being (1879). This is not insignificant, as 87 percent of respondents suffered from anxiety and 84 percent from depression, while 44 percent reported having attempted suicide (1879). The qualitative data suggested that online fan spaces "reduced isolation and increased connectedness" (1880), provided "guidance and mentorship" (1880), helped participants to navigate challenges (1882), and fostered "strength and well-being" (1883). A fifteen-year-old participant reported, for example, that "online fandom has helped me come out as trans because there was so much positive vibes that it always made me feel welcome and happy" (1883), while an eighteen-year-old participant stated, "It just makes me feel so much better, like I'm not a freak... I think queer fanwork is probably one of the very best things that's ever happened to me... I would've killed myself without it" (1882). McInroy (2020) concluded that online fandoms are important for young LGBTQ+ individuals because "participation... reduced isolation, increased belonging and connectedness, and provided opportunities for guidance and mentorship" as well as "permitting respite from challenging situations... and supporting successful navigation through difficult or hostile circumstances" (1888).

[2.8] The third article (McInroy and Craig 2020) explored six key themes emphasized by fandom-participating LGBTQ+ youth in a mixed-methods online survey: (1) discovery and realization of LGBTQ+ identities, (2) exploration and experimentation, (3) safety and anonymity, (4) validation and normalization, (5) authenticity and self-acceptance, and (6) sharing identities. Trans fans reported that fan fiction was important to identity development. For example, one sixteen-year-old wrote, "I got into reading about boys liking boys and girls liking girls and being neither a boy or a girl and it helped me figure out what I was doing" (240); a seventeen-year-old wrote, "I realized I was not alone... That if I wanted to transition that was okay and if not that was okay too" (241); while a twenty-year-old wrote, "Reading fic especially including nonbinary characters made me feel more secure in the validity of my gender... by... providing me with worlds where it could be accepted, valued and supported without all the difficulties of our society" (241). Respondents also reported feeling safer exploring their identities because of the anonymity of fannish environments.

[2.9] The fourth article (McInroy, Zapcic, and Beer 2021) aimed to understand LGBTQ+ young people's perceptions of online fan communities and LGBTQ+ representation therein. It found three primary themes in survey responses: (1) mass media narratives focusing on LGBTQ+ characters were insufficient, (2) the counternarratives produced in fandoms were better, and (3) while fandoms were positive spaces, they were nonetheless challenging and included problematic or limited representation. In particular, respondents emphasized that fanworks did not include enough intersectional representation (10), that some fandoms were "anti-LGBTQ+" (11), and that even in supportive fandoms, they were subject to microaggressions and harassment (10–11). As a result, respondents often "depended heavily on... sub-communities... or 'corners' of online fandom" and were often forced to act "strategically (e.g., lurking and using pseudonyms) to avoid discrimination" (11). Other concerns included "explicit fetishization, tokenization, and stereotyping of LGBTQ+ identities, relationships, and sexuality" (12). Nonetheless, the "overpowering perception of respondents" was that online fandoms provide more, more diverse, and more realistic representations of LGBTQ+ individuals than mass media does (9).

[2.10] Further, smaller-scale studies—including my own case study based on two participants' written autobiographical reflections on their encounters with fan fiction and what these encounters had meant to them—demonstrate the role of speculative (fan) fiction in gender identity

development. While there were many differences in how the two participants engaged with and experienced fan fiction, both emphasized that speculative (fan) fiction allowed them to imaginatively and reparatively transcend the limits of their gendered embodiments: for Beren ([note 1](#)), who identifies as genderqueer, fan fiction allowed a fantasy of simplicity that their everyday gendered experiences did not allow, while for John, fan fiction allowed for gender cross-identifications and, later in life, identification with trans characters. He quipped, "I may flippantly joke about how Sherlock Holmes made me bi and trans, but there's a germ of truth there" (quoted in Duggan 2022a, 10), reporting that fan fiction "normalized the idea of being a trans man with a normal life" both by providing "models for transmasculinity that wasn't het and macho" and by presenting the "medically-transitioned male body...as something both normal and desirable" (11).

[2.11] The participants' accounts also made clear the deep entanglements of real-life LGBTQ+ communities and the online communities surrounding fan fiction. Both emphasized that they felt their experiences of fandom differed significantly from those of the adult women who are so often centered in fan fiction studies. Both Beren and John felt that real-life, activist queer communities were much more important than online fan communities in supporting their identity development. Beren reported this was because they did not engage with online fan communities except to read, while John "lurked" in Holmes/Watson communities and trans men's blogs, using them to find the courage to reach out to real-life support groups (Duggan 2022a, 9–10).

[2.12] The entanglement of real-life and online communities and shifts in the identificatory practices of young fans have also precipitated an increase in fan activism relating to (trans)gender identity. As McInroy and Beer (2022) and Jenkins (2012) have suggested, fans often undertake advocacy work alongside/through online fandoms. A clear example of how such work overlaps with fans' trans identities is that of the Harry Potter Alliance ([note 2](#)): their Protego campaign (Harry Potter Alliance 2016a) sought to create safer spaces for trans individuals through letter campaigns aimed at protecting trans bathroom rights (Harry Potter Alliance 2016c) and the *Restroom Revelio!* app providing a crowdsourced global map of gender-neutral toilets (Harry Potter Alliance 2016b). More, a full 8 percent of the Alliance's organizers identified as transgender in 2016 (Harry Potter Alliance 2016c), including influential activist Jackson Bird, whose autobiography *Sorted* (2019b) details the importance of the Harry Potter fan community to his own gender journey. In an opinion piece published in the *New York Times*, Bird (2019a) argued that the Harry Potter septet allowed fans to learn "not just of tolerance, but fierce acceptance and unconditional love" and that the fan community "continues to foster that same safe space for every queer or trans person who needs it, and which commits itself intentionally toward growth and learning in its inclusion." Bird (2019a) states despite feeling uncertain about coming out as trans to some friends and relatives, he "never doubted that the Harry Potter fan community would accept me."

[2.13] The research is clear: Being a fan creates opportunities for playing with gender(ed) identities and expressions, and fan fiction communities have thus become particularly important spaces for (young) trans individuals seeking to explore and play with their own identities. This is confirmed by large-scale studies (McInroy 2020; McInroy and Craig 2018; 2020; McInroy, Zapcic, and Beer 2021), case studies (Duggan 2022a), and autoethnographic theorizations (Ledbetter 2020; Willis 2016).

[2.14] The following sections consider transing practices expressed within fan fiction by discussing fan fiction in which gender is thematized. They focus on the genres that play with gender—including genderfuck, mpreg, omegaverse (also called "Alpha/Beta/Omega" or "A/B/O"), and transfic—and discuss their trans and "queer potentiality" (Weisser 2019).

3. Genderfuck(/-swap)

[3.1] Busse and Lothian (2009) define genderfuck as a genre using speculative "tropes to alter and reimagine characters' sexed and gendered bodies" (103). Genderfuck texts typically depict the sudden transformation or "swap" of one or more characters' genders/sexes and usually conclude "with a restoration of the character's original sex" (Beazley 2014, 34). Genderfuck stories aim to explore how such switches would change a character's lived experiences and thus reveal "the tensions around gendered embodiment explored by queer and trans theorists" (Busse and Lothian 2009, 103). As such, genderfuck "foreground[s] gender expectations and how they are both attached to and separate from biological sex," and in so doing complicates norms relating to identity, focuses intensely on embodiment, and inspires readers to consider gender and sex as interwoven aspects of identity (McClellan 2018, 118). In short, genderfuck fan fiction considers both the connections and the ruptures between our embodiments, genders, identities, and desires (Busse and Lothian 2009).

[3.2] While genderfuck has been criticized as indulging in gendered stereotypes, the genre nonetheless "intentionally disrupt[s] static notions of gender" and acts, "whether intentionally or not, as a strategy of resistance to the cisgender bias...of popular texts" (Beazley 2014, 33). Genderfuck is a central precursor to transfic as stories can reference "the difficulty of fitting transsexual and transgendered subjects into the [cis-/hetero]normative regulation of sexuality" (Busse and Lothian 2009, 113). Occasionally, then, genderfuck allows authors and readers of fan fiction to consider the lived realities of transgendered lives through a metaphoric lens (120).

[3.3] However, genderfuck stories are not transfic. They neither depict realistic trans bodies nor "account for how transgender people deal with issues...such as gender dysphoria, the use of proper gender pronouns, and the mechanics of sexual activity after sex reassignment surgery" (Beazley 2014, 35). As Busse and Lothian (2009) highlight, these fics often aim to "use transgendered and transsexual bodies...in the exploration of cisgendered identities" (120), and as such, genderfuck includes many "tropes that negate or trivialize transgender experiences" (Beazley 2014, 39). Thus, genderfuck narratives can be said to hold a "paradoxical position" (Beazley 2014, 51): they both undermine and reinforce cisnormative notions of gender, and depending on how they are written and received, may be perceived by trans readers as either reparative or damaging texts.

4. Mpreg and the omegaverse

[4.1] Mpreg, short for "male pregnancy," is a subgenre of slash fan fiction usually centering male/male homosexual relationships. Goldmann (2020) defines mpreg simply as stories in which "at least one man gets pregnant" (253), while Fathallah (2017) further specifies that male pregnancy results from "magic, technology or by virtue of the rules of an alternative universe" (65). In most mpreg, the male characters who fall pregnant have "a normative masculine gender identity that also matches their physical sex," so "none of them are transgender or genderqueer" (Ingram-Waters 2015, ¶ 4.3). While Ingram-Waters argues that mpreg fans' "redefinition of cisgender masculinity...includes bodies that are technologically altered in ways that can be recognized as transgendered," she concludes that mpreg ultimately erases or downplays "transgender identity" because characters are rarely explicitly depicted as trans (¶ 5.1). While mpreg has existed for decades, was first discussed by Constance Penley in the 1990s, and has become more popular since fan fiction communities moved online (Ingram-Waters 2015, ¶ 1.4), it is often lambasted (Ingram-Waters 2015). Nonetheless, there were over 70,000 fics tagged as "mpreg" (including related tags) on AO3 in December 2022 ([note 3](#)).

[4.2] The omegaverse, a subgenre of mpreg which emerged in 2010 (Popova 2018), is more popular than traditional mpreg: over 136,000 fics were tagged "Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics" on AO3 in December 2022 ([note 4](#)). The genre includes a "biologically determined" hierarchy of six genders including both human and wolf traits, with the wolfy aspects of characters usually relating to sexual reproduction through heat, bonding, and "the ever-popular *knot* (a swelling at the base of the penis found in canines after ejaculation that forces the penis to stay inside to ensure impregnation)" (Busse 2013, 289). Omegaverse fan fiction appears to have become popular and spread from fandoms for texts that include

werewolves, like *Teen Wolf*, *Harry Potter*, and *Twilight* (Busse 2013): the terminology is borrowed from *Teen Wolf* (Fazekas 2014); the stories include concepts from *Twilight*, such as imprinting (Busse 2013); and the entire idea of "these wolf-like humans" and their "wolf-like traits" (Busse 2013, 289) is, obviously, (were)wolf-inspired. Precisely which fandom birthed omegaverse fic is uncertain, but Busse (2013) speculates that "it was the *Supernatural* RPF fandom, J2" (291).

[4.3] Mpreg and omegaverse stories are increasingly abundant across numerous fandoms (Fathallah 2017), but scholarship on these genres and the communities surrounding them is limited, in part because both genres face stigma (Ingram-Waters 2015; Popova 2018). Within the limited scholarship, the genres are both criticized as gender normative and praised as anti-gender normative. That "existing fandom scholarship has not wholly embraced fans beyond cisgender women" (Weisser 2019) may also have limited how the genres' alternatively gendered bodies have been interpreted.

[4.4] Those who critique the genres focus on their reliance on homonormative tropes, including the monogamous nuclear family (Goldmann 2020; Hunting 2012; Ingram-Waters 2015; Åström 2010) and a focus on "homemaking" (Åström 2010, ¶ 1.1). Gunderson (2017) describes omegaverse stories as "a heteronormative rewriting of queer relationships" (98) in which "gendered characteristics and behaviors can be straightforwardly traced back to biological dictums" (97). This is in part because omegaverse genders allow writers to describe and explore gender-based experiences and oppressions while simultaneously not being required to be accurate or realistic in their accounts (Gunderson 2017; Fathallah 2017). As the informants in Ingram-Waters's (2015) study argued, "male pregnancy in a magical universe [is] feasible and therefore much easier to create than in a nonmagical one" (¶ 4.3), since male pregnancy in a realistic setting requires authors "to be 'significantly more inventive'" and knowledgeable about trans pregnancies (¶ 4.2).

[4.5] The reliance on magic, alternative realities, or technologies to achieve the aim of male pregnancy, then, can come at the cost of invisibilizing trans experiences and bodies (Ingram-Waters 2015). Indeed, most male characters who fall pregnant in mpreg are cisgender, having "a normative masculine gender identity that also matches their physical sex" (Ingram-Waters 2015, ¶ 4.3). Mpreg and omegaverse fan fiction is also frequently limited by Eurocentric story structures in which norms associated with whiteness and "the civilized mind [are] ultimately called on to prevail" (Fathallah 2017, 76). So although male pregnancy can appear to "be a radical story element that blurs gender boundaries and works to be inclusive of trans and genderqueer people by foregrounding gender variance," it both falls short of this mark and fails to account for intersectional identities (Fazekas 2014, 42–43).

[4.6] More, narratives involving male pregnancy often exaggerate stereotypes about pregnancy, including tropes from commercial narratives, like worsened morning sickness (Åström 2010, ¶ 4.1); infrequent traits aimed at heightening drama, like "a constant threat of miscarriage" (¶ 4.1); and overstated side-effects of pregnancy, like food cravings (¶ 4.2), worry over appearing "fat" (¶ 5.3), and hormone-induced emotional displays (¶ 5.3). As such, fan fiction involving male pregnancies very often reaffirms stereotypes about the "monstrousness" of pregnancy (Weisser 2019; Åström 2010).

[4.7] Nonetheless, mpreg and omegaverse stories have also been praised for the ways in which they challenge binary gender. Mpreg is, of course, largely "a thought experiment about gender, sexuality, and the male body" (Ingram-Waters 2015, ¶ 1.1), with the caveat that transmen can and do experience pregnancy (¶ 1.2), and although mpreg cannot always be said to be directly related to realistic transmasculine pregnancies, there is a clear trend toward acceptance of pregnant male bodies in mpreg communities (¶ 1.4). As such, Weisser (2019) has argued that the pregnancies depicted in mpreg may well "resonate with queer and transgender experiences of pregnancy," Åström (2010) has stated mpreg "has the potential to produce narratives that challenge our notions of gender, identity, sexual, and social practices, as well as parenthood" (¶ 7.1), and Fathallah (2017) has suggested mpreg emphasizes the "linking of bodies and social position" (72). Mpreg opens male bodies up and makes them "more receptive, penetrable, productive and porous" (Fathallah 2017, 78). For Weisser (2019), "the omega male embodies [a] contradictory sense of gender identity[...]. a site of simultaneity...[that] can variably and simultaneously connote a trans man, a cis woman, a cis man, and/or an intersex person of any gender (to name only a few)."

[4.8] Elliot Aaron Director's (2017) doctoral dissertation examining genderbending, omegaverse, and transgender *Sherlock* and *Hobbit* fan fiction emphasizes the value such fan fiction has for those who struggle with questions of gender. Director acknowledges that although not all such stories resist norms or promote "a more gender-fluid social paradigm," every story confirms "that there is a sustained desire among fan creators to engage with norms and taboos around gender, sexuality, and reproduction" (186). Goldmann's (2020) case study of omegaverse fan fiction found that blood relatives outside of the central Alpha/Omega pair were clearly less important than the found families common to queer communities. More, mpreg and omegaverse fan fiction is often framed as critical response to real-life political tensions surrounding gender and sexual expression (Goldmann 2020). As such, Goldmann concludes that omegaverse mpreg fics are queerer and more transformative than they may seem.

[4.9] Additionally, an important trope in omegaverse fiction is characters' reliance on hormones, medicines, potions, or chemicals to mask or alter their sex assigned at birth, usually because they don't wish "to be prey to biological prejudices" (Busse 2013, 294). This mirrors transfic's inclusion of hormone therapy—for example, in the *Sherlock* transfic explored by Fathallah (2017), Sherlock uses "testosterone rather than nicotine" (77), an easy transformation from a drug taken via transdermal patch in the canon to a hormone in the fic (note 5). As Weisser (2019) has discussed, many omegaverse texts include a trope of Alphas and Omegas taking "heat suppressants" or masking their scents so they can pass as Betas. The widespread reference to various kinds of birth/heat control, pheromone suppressant drugs and sprays, and hormone altering medications clearly references lived trans experiences. As Weisser (2019) has argued, then, "while the allegory is not exact, the concerns of both [real-world trans individuals and omegaverse characters] converge in...a desire to 'pass.'"

[4.10] Nonetheless, gender suppression is often framed as unhealthy in omegaverse fan fiction, and characters must usually "detransition" and accept a "biologically ordained identity" by story's end (Weisser 2019). While this is obviously problematic from a trans perspective, the stories nonetheless draw attention to the social, medical, political, and interpersonal pressures experienced by trans individuals, whose bodies are subject to intense scrutiny and policing. Omegaverse narratives thus draw attention to the oppressions and tensions experienced by trans individuals when navigating their identities through medical intervention, whether or not this involves the medical complications or dysphoria of pregnancy.

[4.11] In sum, while mpreg and omegaverse fic can and do create spaces for thinking through real-life trans issues, their "gendered allegories are inconsistent and ambivalent" (Weisser 2019), and they may "draw on essentialist, stereotypical, and heteronormative representations of sex and gender" (Gunderson 2017, 100). Nevertheless, they do draw attention to the ways in which bodies are read as gendered, how embodied experiences such as "heat" can undermine one's own and others' experiences of one's gender, and "the traumatic process of becoming a gendered body...subject to constricting gender norms" (Gunderson 2017, 99). This means that these genres cannot "be said to straightforwardly reproduce or resist" stereotypes (Gunderson 2017, 100) and that they can be read as embracing "a sense of confusion, a queer fluidity" (Weisser 2019). Since an explicit aim of trans theory has been to critique overly discursive accounts of gender and to focus more on embodiment (Solomon 2010), mpreg and omegaverse narratives, which explicitly center sexed and gendered bodies, "explore the interactions of materiality and meaning" (Gunderson 2017, 102). These genres sensationalize through excess material embodiment "to mobilize intensity of sensation and emotion in both their characters and the readers" (103; see also Popova 2018), but they also draw on real-life embodied experiences, such as puberty,

menstruation, and desire, as well as affects—like shame, pleasure, or disgust—linked to such experiences, and this calls "attention to both devastating and exalting experiences that can come from existing as a gendered body in the world" (Gunderson 2017, 103).

5. Transfic

[5.1] *Transfic*, that is, fan fiction including a variety of trans representations (Beazley 2014; Rose 2018; 2020) that "convey nuance, complexity, and specificity through its tropes, characters, and narratives that account for a full-range of transgender experiences" (Beazley 2014, 53). The genre developed largely in response to the contradictions and tensions within the above-mentioned genres and due to the historical elision of trans characters in popular cultural texts. As such, most transfic "involve[s] (re)writing popular cisgender characters as transgender" or imagining a future in which those characters transition (Beazley 2014, 55). Through transfic, then, "fans regularly create alternative, more diverse and multifaceted gender narratives by adding transgender characters to the storyworld or rewriting cisgender (main) characters as trans" (Rose 2018, 107). These stories have several aims: first, to repudiate some of the negative tropes in other gender-focused genres of fan fiction (Beazley 2014, 2016); second, to create "a pedagogical space that encourages positive and progressive depictions of uniquely transgender experiences" (Beazley 2014, 57); and finally, to depict and reflect realistic trans individuals (Rose 2018; 2020).

[5.2] The first transfic stories appeared in the early twenty-first century (Beazley 2014), and the genre was first recognized as distinct in 2008, when kyuuketsukirui published a collection of trans-focused fan fiction on LiveJournal (Beazley 2014; Rose 2018). Since then, transfic has grown to be a popular genre—in December 2022, there were well over one hundred thousand fics tagged as including trans, genderqueer, nonbinary, or genderfluid characters on AO3 [note 6](#)). In certain fandoms, like the *Sherlock* fandom, transfic appears particularly popular: as Rose (2018) has shown, over 13,000 of the 94,000 *Sherlock* stories on AO3—or roughly 14 percent—include the tag "Trans Character" (§ 5).

[5.3] The growing popularity of transfic is, of course, directly linked to the activist nature of fandom (see § 2, above), and the genre can be seen as "a compelling form of fan activism" (Beazley 2014, 57). Certainly in the Harry Potter fandom, transfic is often framed as a direct critique of the creator's statements on Twitter and elsewhere (Duggan 2022b)—including J. K. Rowling's December 14, 2022 tweet, "Merry Terfmas" (https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1603064588223893505).

[5.4] However, scholarship explicitly examining transfic is limited. Rose (2018) laments that "trans representations in fan fiction" have, until recently, been largely "treated as an afterthought" (§ 2), while Weisser (2019) argues that fan scholarship has "not wholly embraced fans beyond cisgender women." Nonetheless, the body of work is growing: Beazley (2014), the first to discuss transfic as a genre of its own, considered trans (re)imaginings of Harry Potter characters in fan fiction; Busse and Lothian (2009) touched upon transfic in the *Stargate: Atlantis* fandom; Director's (2017) PhD dissertation discusses intersectional trans reimaginings of Bilbo Baggins; and Rose (2018; 2020), Fathallah (2017), and McClellan (2018) have all discussed transfic in the *Sherlock* fandom, with Rose (2018; 2020) focusing most explicitly on transfic. Finally, my own (Duggan 2022a; 2022b; 2022c) work has considered transfic, trans fans, and transing across various fandoms. These articles make clear that transfic has developed and become increasingly popular since its inception.

[5.5] Early iterations of transfic sometimes "romanticized" aspects of trans life and functioned as "a phantasmic space that is less concerned with accurately representing transgendered or transsexual identities and politics than it is with exploring the show's characters and their dynamics" (Busse and Lothian 2009, 121). While well-meaning, these stories occasionally made mistakes or assumptions about trans lives, or simply glossed over challenges. While this could be interpreted as an attempt to create reparative stories, a more realistic interpretation suggests that in these stories, trans narratives functioned as tropes "to comment on the show" and that "the multiple realities of transpeople's lives...[were] relegated or dismissed in favor of greater character explorations or romantic plots" (Busse and Lothian 2009, 121). As Director (2017) convincingly argues, "even attempts to depict complex, well-rounded transgender characters can go awry without adequate research and at least a moderate understanding of policies...which often rigidly shape the contours of trans lived experience" (99–106).

[5.6] As the genre developed, stories became less likely to "ignore, negate, or push...transgender materialities to the margins," instead "highlight[ing] the complexities of living as transgender in a cisgender-biased world" (Beazley 2014, 56), including intersectional concerns (Director 2017). Transfic came to be characterized by its social, political, and medical realism, including explicitly addressing "gender expectations and gender roles that inform the characters' (intimate) interactions with others" (Rose 2018, § 11). Transfic presents trans bodies—medically transitioned or not—"as something both normal and desirable" (Duggan 2022a, 11) by "position[ing] the medically altered trans body as beautiful and lovable" (Rose 2018, § 26). Contemporary transfic thus centers the complex lives of realistic trans characters, including tensions they may experience relating to their genders, their bodies, and their intimate or public lives, but it also focuses on hope and joy more often than despair. As the genre has developed, the commentary surrounding transfic has shown how meaningful transfic is to fans (Director 2017; Rose 2018).

[5.7] Like other fan fiction, transfic takes cues from the canon on which it is based to justify trans interpretations of characters. As both Fathallah (2017, 77) and Rose (2018) have observed, *Sherlock* transfic often references Sherlock's line in the third-season episode of *Sherlock* "His Last Vow" (2014): "Sherlock is actually a girl's name." This line inspired "a wistful hope for this [Sherlock's being trans*] to be the canonical explanation" (Fathallah 2017, 77), and while that hope was crushed in the canon, trans!Sherlock became a popular trope in the fandom. Similarly, in the Harry Potter fandom, while there is a great deal of focus on the possibilities of experimenting with gender shifts via magic (Duggan 2022b), an increasing number of stories and art focus on medically realistic trans characters (Duggan 2022c).

[5.8] Because transfic is aimed at "an audience that is familiar, or willing to familiarize itself, with trans experiences" (Rose 2018, § 23), it allows both cis and trans fans to explore gender, creates opportunities for trans fans to see themselves reflected, helps cis fans to "experience" transness through windows, and grants those who are questioning opportunities to vicariously experience being trans. It thus "question[s] the very opposition between cis and trans" (Rose 2020, 25; see also Willis 2016). As such, as Rose (2020) argues, "while fan fiction does not do the same work as advocacy groups and educational campaigns, [it]...offers opportunities for trans people to express their transness and to find a sense of trans belonging within their fan community" (25).

6. The trans turn

[6.1] The above review of scholarship on trans fans and fans' transing practices demonstrates what I have termed "the trans turn," an ongoing movement in fandom and fan scholarship in which trans ways of seeing, perceiving, desiring, and being are increasingly acknowledged, applied, and centered. While the porousness and fluidity of gender have long been central concerns of fan fiction studies, this new and explicit focus on trans practices, theories, fans, and experiences represents a significant departure from an earlier focus on female fans. It is important to stress, however, that this new body of scholarship seeks to widen our discussion, building upon previous feminist and queer work, not to dismiss earlier work or other fans' experiences. The trans turn thus also includes considerations of what transing might mean for female fans: Willis (2016) argues that fan fiction allows the female reader "to experience her body as (if it were) male" (202), while Rose (2020) suggests that transfic

includes "the potential for cis people to experience transness...[since] transing...becomes a way of engaging with genders and texts, regardless of one's own gender" (33–34).

[6.2] Beyond providing spaces of recognition and support, the various genres of fan fiction explicitly engaging with gender(ed) experience, fluidity, and embodiment provide opportunities for cross-identification, reflection, and play regardless of readers' identities. Cross-identification with male characters is important to both cis and trans fans (Duggan 2022b; Willis 2016), transfic provides "models for transmasculinity" (Duggan 2022a, 11), slash allows nonbinary fans to imagine the simplicity of a straightforwardly stable gender (Duggan 2022a, 12), and all these genres allow all readers to "rethink the gendered and sexual possibilities latent even in the (painfully unmagical, it sometimes seems) [real] world" (Duggan 2022a, 12). Reading and writing fan fiction is both "a practice in which the body and its representation[s] are particularly relevant for meaning-making processes" (Rose 2020, 27) and a practice that allows for questioning of, experimentation with, and escape from lived realities. The capaciousness of fan fiction engaging with gender can thus offer very different reparative and phantasmic experiences for different readers and writers.

[6.3] As such, while depictions of gender in omegaverse and mpreg stories have occasionally been criticized, we can read omegaverse exaggerations of gendering through the lens of dysphoria. The discomfort, shame, and disgust felt by both characters and readers provides insight into similar intense feelings brought about by puberty, particularly in trans individuals, or what John, a transmasculine reader and writer of fan fiction, has described as "the eldritch horror...[of a] mutating pubertal body" (Duggan 2022a, 10). Exaggerations in these texts can also highlight feminist/transgender rage felt in response to the various and intersecting political, educational, medical, and social conditions of oppression one is forced to take on "for the sake of one's continued survival as a subject" (Stryker 2006, 253), even as embodying these ill-fitting positions results in "disidentification" (253) and discomfort (Ahmed 2006).

[6.4] The dysphoria and discomfort expressed through these fictions makes evident the links between the embodied and the political, as stories emphasize the ways in which gendered bodies are shaped and policed through social, medical, educational, and political conditions (Ledbetter 2020). Indeed, as Gunderson (2017) argues, a male omega represents both the norm, as a male, and the other, as an omega. Certainly, whether cis or trans, many individuals in the fan fiction community have complicated and shifting relationships with their gendered embodiments that is best understood through the lens of trans theory and/or the concept of dysphoria (Duggan 2022a; Ledbetter 2020; Willis 2016), which Ledbetter (2020) argues ought not to be understood as a pathology but rather as "a resource for understanding and imagining what kind of world might bring us fulfillment" (§4.4). The "us" here is a coalitional gesture emphasizing both that there are multiple axes of oppression at work in our everyday lives and that "certain fantasmic, identificatory and bodily practices associated with [fan fiction]...help[] us to understand the way in which practices of gender identity both require and refuse a stable boundary between gendered categories" (Willis 2016, 290).

[6.5] Recent research makes clear, too, both that fans are more gender diverse than previously acknowledged and that the proportion of trans fans in fan fiction communities is increasing. Of the young fans identifying as LGBTQ+ included in McInroy and her colleagues' work, six of ten identified as trans as it is defined in this paper (McInroy and Craig 2018, 184). *centreoftheselights's* (2013) AO3 survey demonstrated that over 15 percent of fans identified as trans, and recent work has suggested that between 20 and 40 percent of fans posting Harry Potter fan fiction on AO3 identify as trans (Duggan 2020, §9.10). These identifications impact the stories being told, the ways they are received, and the theoretical lenses we ought to engage when considering fans, fan communities, and fan fiction.

[6.6] Finally, the research above makes very clear that fans' real-life communities, concerns, and activism directly impact the stories circulating in fandom, just as the stories circulating in fandom impact fans' lives and identities. This is demonstrated through, for example, the trans-positive work of the Harry Potter Alliance (now "Fandom Forward"), through the prevalence of fan fiction authors and readers in activist communities (Duggan 2022a, 9–10), and through the activist work that fan fiction can be said to carry out through its continued evolutions, visibilizations, and dedication to speculatively exploring real-life issues. As Rose (2020, 25) has argued, "[W]hile fanfiction does not do the same work as advocacy groups and educational campaigns, [fandom and fan fiction provide]...opportunities for trans people to express their transness and find a sense of trans belonging"—and, as Busse and Lothian (2009) have argued, transformative works provide "hope...in a hostile, homophobic, transphobic world" (122).

7. The road ahead

[7.1] While the discussed studies provide an excellent foundation, the trans turn is still in its infancy and there are many opportunities for further research. First, certain ethnoracial identities remain underrepresented in all fan studies work. Many of the smaller-scale studies included in this review identify their inclusion only of white participants as a significant and meaningful elision. More, the research participation rates of Black fans, at under 4 percent (McInroy 2020, 1878), and Asian(-heritage) fans, at 5 percent (McInroy 2020), may not reflect the true diversity of fans nor mirror the demographics of specific countries or geographic areas.

[7.2] This intersectional concern ought also to make us consider fandoms' transnational contexts: Almost all research carried out on trans fans and fandoms has, thus far, focused almost exclusively on North American fans and on Anglo-American cultural objects. But trans identities are not limited to North America (Stryker and Aizura 2013), nor are trans fans drawn only to Anglo-American cultural objects. Trans fans also participate in K-pop, anime, and manga fandoms, for example (McInroy and Craig 2018). Both transnational fans and the transnational contexts for localized trans identities are thus significant areas for further study.

[7.3] Similar concerns could form the basis of further work on fan fiction. As Fathallah (2017) has noted, many of the characters who are the subject of transing are white in the canon. While fans do undertake intersectional work, bending both gender and race (Director 2017; Duggan 2022c), the specific intersection of race and gender in fan fiction has yet to be given the full and thorough consideration it deserves.

[7.4] More, there is ample opportunity for the study of differences between fan spaces, whether within one fandom or between/across fandoms. Many scholars have emphasized that LGBTQ+ fans are not always welcomed into fan communities—in fact, they may be threatened and harassed there (Walton 2018). The last decade of fan studies has made very clear that social prejudices continue to shape fan communities, including who participates, how they participate, and how long they participate, and while the above research suggests that some fandoms are more trans-friendly than others, this requires confirmation.

[7.5] In closing, using trans theory, studying trans fans, and considering fans' transing practices remain fruitful areas of enquiry. Future considerations of intersectionality and transnationality are important areas for future research, as is exploring why certain fandoms appeal to trans fans and/or invite transing practices.

8. Notes

¹ Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity.

2. The Harry Potter Alliance rebranded as "Fandom Forward" in the aftermath of Rowling's online commentary (Wolff 2021).

3. See <https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Mpreg> for tags considered to fall under "mpreg."

4. "Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics" wrangles most omegaverse-related tags (https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Alpha*s*Beta*s*Omega%20Dynamics).

5. Real-life gender-affirming hormone therapy can occur using testosterone injections, gels, patches, pills, or subcutaneous pellets.

6. "Trans Character" wrangles most trans-related tags and stories (<https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Trans%20Character>); see also "Nonbinary Character" (<https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Nonbinary%20Character>).

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