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Fifty shades of ghey:¹ Snark fandom and the figure of the anti-fan

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Abstract

Early work in fan studies examined fan activities as forms of resistance, enabling fans to reclaim ownership of popular culture. Jonathan Gray (2003) and Cornel Sandvoss (2005), however, argue that to fully understand what it means to interact with texts we must also examine anti-fans. This article builds on Gray and Sandvoss's work by expanding on Francesca Haig's (2013) discussion of 'snark' fandom. We suggest that the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy (2012) has generated an ironic, even guilty fandom, in which readers and viewers bemoan the series' flaws, while enjoying (sometimes furtively) the texts. We structure this as an analysis of the anti-fandom's denigration of *Fifty Shades* as 'bad literature' and 'bad eroticism' to be consumed by an imagined female reader. We argue that this cultural disavowal of *Fifty Shades* is based upon cultural distinctions of taste (Bourdieu, 1984) and suggest that the BDSM community's rejection of the books' sexual politics is founded upon its own distinction of taste.

Keywords

Anti-fandom, audience studies, BDSM, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, romance novels

Introduction

The recent explosion of EL James's *Fifty Shades* (2012a, 2012b, 2012c) trilogy into the best-seller lists has drawn a vastly negative, critical reception. Media discourse around *Fifty Shades* has focused predominantly on two areas: the trilogy's genesis as fan fiction (Boog, 2012; Deahl, 2012; Knobloch, 2012; Razer, 2012) and its erotic content (Bennett-Smith, 2012; Davis, 2012; Goudreau, 2012; Pelling, 2012), with the press decrying the former and seemingly perplexed that women read the latter.

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We suggest that *Fifty Shades* has, in a similar way to *Twilight* (the literary and cinematic series which inspired author EL James's trilogy), generated an ironic, even guilty, fandom in which readers and viewers bemoan the series' flaws, while enjoying (sometimes furtively) the texts. This article, through an overview of audience and anti-fandom studies, posits that *Fifty Shades*' status as the current hated text *par excellence* offers a critical case study for analysing the ways in which anti-fans respond to a text. We suggest that the propensity for contemporary fan studies to focus only on fans of a text fails to engage with a significant number of readers, and thus does not allow for a wide variety of understandings of that text.

We structure this as an analysis of the anti-fandom's denigration of *Fifty Shades* as 'bad literature', and furthermore 'bad eroticism' to be consumed by an imagined female reader. We suggest that anti-fans position themselves not only against and in opposition to the novels but also as superior to fans, drawing on distinctions of taste as defined by Bourdieu (1984), and utilizing forms of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). We undertake an analysis of *Fifty Shades* anti-fandom as evidenced on Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube and LiveJournal² to demonstrate that engagement with the trilogy happens not just through a rejection of the text, but in fact through a close reading of and critical engagement with it, which is performed and then shared over differing media and modes. We further contend that in doing so *Fifty Shades* anti-fans position themselves as gatekeepers, thus reinforcing their subcultural capital which in turn enforces specific taste cultures.³

In writing this article we have also been aware of our own positions as fans and academics. Much as Jenkins positions himself as an 'acafan' (Hills, 2002) in his 1992 work on *Star Trek* fandom, we too consider ourselves acafans. While not *Twilight* or *Fifty Shades* fans, we have written about the fandoms and are members of various fan communities as well as scholars. We have therefore attempted to achieve a balance between these positions of mutual knowledge and critical distance (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995). Recent work on fan studies has focused predominantly on fan cultural production, situating fans as resistant to mainstream commercial culture. As Anne Gilbert points out, this shift in theorizing the fan appears largely to be a result of acafan⁴ analysis deliberately moving away from earlier, negative understandings of fannish behaviour:

Perhaps because a good deal of fan scholarship has been produced by individuals who also participate in fandom (see, for instance, Jenkins, *Poachers*; Hills, *Cultures*; Baym, *Tune In*), this scholarship frequently has a decidedly positive slant, focusing on the potential for agency and self-enrichment inherent in audience activity. (Gilbert, 2012: 166)

Our intention is therefore to be aware of the ways in which our prior engagement with and studies of fandom may affect our analyses of anti-fans, and may position ourselves as gatekeepers of taste as well as the fans we are studying.

Central to this analysis then, is the notion of taste, and its interrelation with the hierarchical structure of cultural consumption. Cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu asserts in his study of distinctions of taste that

[t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed. (Bourdieu, 1984: 6)

Taste then, under Bourdieu's schema says more about the taste-maker and their gatekeeping, than it does about the object of dis/taste itself. Indeed as Sandvoss notes, Bourdieu's sociology of consumption has formed a popular theoretical framework of fan studies as 'in addition to a Marxist definition of class in terms of economic capital, and hence means of production, [he] identifies further important resources that shape class positions, such as social capital, educational capital and cultural capital' (Sandvoss, 2005: 33–34) the latter of which, as Fiske asserts 'works hand in hand with economic capital to produce social privilege and distinction' (Fiske, 1992: 21). Such cultural tastes are thus not only produced, but further promoted and privileged whilst others are rejected to maintain this social hierarchy:

The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile – in a word, natural – enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences. (Bourdieu, 1984: 7)

Thus the notion of taste is relative; not only defined by one's own preferences informed by social standing via cultural capital, but further predicated upon the rejection of another's – that which is often associated with popular mainstream, or 'low' culture. It is this paradigm which informs our understanding of the cultural distinctions at play in the relationship that the fan or anti-fan holds with a given text.

Situating audience studies

Work on fandom over the last two decades has proved instrumental in moving the field away from early notions of the fan as dysfunctional (Fiske, 1989; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992) and is revealing 'a more complex relationship between fans as agents and the structural confines of popular culture in which they operate, a relationship which cannot be reduced to one being simply a consequence of the other' (Sandvoss, 2005: 3). An examination of what it means to be a fan in this recent discourse has focused primarily on the participatory, resistive elements of fan

culture: Abercrombie and Longhurst developed a sliding scale of fans, cultists and enthusiasts, defining fans on one end as 'those people who become particularly attached to certain programmes or stars within the context of relatively heavy mass media use' while enthusiasts on the other end are likely to have specialized media use which 'may be based around a specialist literature, produced by enthusiasts for enthusiasts, even though the producing company may be part of a conglomerate' (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 138–139). Grossberg (1992) suggests that fandom can be associated with a particular form of emotional intensity or 'affect', and Jenkins argues that 'fans enthusiastically embrace favoured texts' (Jenkins, 1992: 18). Indeed, Jenkins later argues that fan responses to texts do not simply involve fascination or adoration, but also encompass frustration and antagonism, and the combination of these responses motivates fan engagement with the media: 'If the original work did not fascinate fans, they would not continue to engage with it. If it did not frustrate them on some level, they would feel no need to write new stories' (Jenkins, 2006). Work on fandom has also moved into the second and third waves of fan studies (Gray et al., 2007), which moves away from the 'incorporation/resistance' paradigm favoured by Abercrombie and Longhurst towards an analysis of the social and cultural hierarchies within fandom, and the role that various kinds of capital play in fan consumption. Under these newer waves of fan studies, fans, particularly those involved in fan cultural production, have often been discussed as interpretive communities (Costello and Moore, 2007; Felschow, 2010; Hills, 2006). As Deborah Kaplan suggests: '(t)o be a member of fandom is to be a member of this interpretive community, because regardless of whether or not an individual fan produces or consumes analysis, the environment of fandom is richly interpretive' (Kaplan, 2006: 137).

Within this community is the potential for the negotiation of the meanings of texts, as Parrish (2007) contends. Meanings are negotiated within fandom in a variety of ways. Categories in fan fiction such as 'gen' (in which a sexual relationship between characters is not the primary focus), 'het' (whereby the characters' heterosexual relationship forms the basis of the story) and 'slash' (which posits a homoerotic relationship between two characters) allow writers to '(carve) out alternative pathways through texts' (Gray, 2010: 143), while meta, or fan-written analysis, provides further opportunity for fans to discuss and renegotiate meaning.

This negotiation is not limited to textual analysis, however. Coppa argues that fan-made videos 'reappropriate objects and turn them into sites of pleasure and surplus' (2009: 110), while Jenkins (2006) observes that fanvids 'are often presented as visual evidence in support of a slash hypothesis about the series.' Fan mixes (a compilation of songs inspired by a fannish source) offer a reflective analysis of a show or film by adopting songs which are neither officially sanctioned or fan-created to provide other fans with new ways of engaging with and understanding the text (Jones, 2012). Macros (an image superimposed with a caption which subverts the meaning of the picture) also allow fans to engage with, negotiate and at

times subvert the meaning of a text by bringing them into conversation with other topics or providing a humorous commentary (Klink, 2008).

Framing anti-fans

If fans and fan activity can tell us something about a series, as the scholars referred to thus far have demonstrated, does it therefore follow that we can also learn something about a text from the ways in which non-fans and anti-fans read it? Jonathan Gray raises an important critique of reception studies, arguing that by focusing so intently on the fan it distorts our 'understanding of the text, the consumer and the interaction between them... To fully understand what it means to interact with the media and their texts, though, we must look at anti-fans and nonfans too' (Gray, 2003: 68). Gray argues that the attitudes of non-fans to a text should lead scholars to assess the impact this has on the study of texts for

the very nature and physicality of the text changes when watched by the non-fan, becoming an entirely different entity... non-fan engagement with the televisual text denies us the existence of the solitary, agreed-on text with which to anchor such discussions. (Gray, 2003: 75)

We would argue that, as has long been contested, the 'solitary, agreed-on' text is denied as much by fan interpretations of texts as by non-fan interpretations. Sandvoss suggests that 'given (the) role of the reader in the constructing and shaping of meaning, questions of polysemy and neutrosemy are dependent on the *reception context* rather than the text itself' (Sandvoss, 2005: 130, emphasis ours) and further states that 'in qualitative studies of fan cultures, we often encounter unexpected readings which are in opposition to the meanings we construct from the same text' (Sandvoss, 2005: 127). Such unexpected readings can be encountered as much from non-fans as from fans. Yet non-fans or anti-fans of a text must also engage in a similar, self-reflective relationship. Instead of seeing themselves *in* the text, however, they find elements within the text that they react against and oppose.

In his analysis of *The Simpsons* fans, anti-fans and non-fans, Gray suggests that although fandom and anti-fandom could be positioned on opposite ends of the spectrum they perhaps more accurately exist on a Möbius strip with 'many fans and anti-fan behaviours and performances resembling, if not replicating, each other' (Gray, 2005: 845). Haig suggests that the critical fandom generated by *Twilight* fits this description 'in both its regularity and its emotional involvement: critical fans both devour each new book and film, and engage in sustained, passionate debates about the series and its flaws' (Haig, 2013). For Haig, however, ironic anti-fandom (or snark) is neither uncritically affectionate, or unaffectionately critical, rather, it recognizes *Twilight* as 'junk food' for the brain:

When one enjoys junk food, one doesn't engage in a critical analysis of it. You know it's bad for you and take pleasure in it, but engaging in a detailed analysis of its dietary

shortcomings isn't part of the pleasure. This is what seems to me to be distinctive about *Twilight* snark: the criticisms aren't incidental to the pleasure taken in the texts; they appear, in large part, to constitute that pleasure. This form of critical fandom does not simply recognise *Twilight* as rubbish and enjoy it *in spite of* that recognition; the recognition *itself* and the analysis, discussion and parody that it permits, provide much of the fans' pleasure. (Haig, 2013)

Both Haig and Gray argue that anti-fans are under-theorized and can bring value to studies of fandom. Gray further argues that the anti-fan can provide an 'interesting window to issues of textuality and its place in society' (Gray, 2003: 71) as anti-fans, as well as fans, construct an image of the text – and moreover a conceptualization strong enough to cause them to react against it. In discussing *The Simpsons* anti-fans, he notes that he found a near-perfect fan/anti-fan correlation between those viewers who loved or disliked the series, seeing it as, respectively, critical of America or as yet another symbol of crass American culture. Gray suggests that this correlation had little to do with differences of culture, or a predisposition to view America in a particular way, but was to do with differences in the text as perceived by close or distant readers. He argues that, particularly for anti-fans who have not watched the show but judge it so harshly, 'a textuality is born into existence in large part separate of what might be "in" the text as produced' (2003). Gray's analysis is useful for understanding the ways in which readers perceive texts, although the anti-fans we examine in this article are what Gray would call close readers. They engage with the text of *Fifty Shades*, often having opted to read the trilogy, yet position themselves in opposition to it, indeed often bemoaning their reading experience. We suggest that the anti-fans examined in this article are closer to Haig's critical *Twilight* fans, particularly given their familiarity with the text of *Fifty Shades* (and, often, *Twilight*) and the pleasure they take in criticizing it. Further, we argue that these 'close-reading anti-fans' distinguish themselves through differences of both culture and taste. Regardless of their position as close or distant readers, however, studying this audience can further allow us to understand how affect works more clearly.

***Fifty Shades* anti-fandom: Fighting the evil of horrific erotica so you don't have to**

While studies thus far have tended to focus on internet forums and message boards (cf. Edwards-Behi, forthcoming; Gray, 2005; Strong, 2009) as the prime locales for both the performance and observation of anti-fandom, discursive rejection of *Fifty Shades of Grey* has been enacted in differing online realms. From micro-blogging sites such as Twitter or Tumblr, to the communities of Facebook and Livejournal and the videoblogging of YouTube, *Fifty Shades* anti-fandom is performed to be viewed but also, more importantly, shared.

On YouTube this is most apparent in the '...reads' series, in which video bloggers recite *favourite* loathed passages of James's text, such as American actor and

comedian Gilbert Gottfried's recital⁵ which, as of the time of writing had exceeded two-and-a-half million views (JestComedy, 2012).⁶ However, as the anonymous author of 'The Joys of Live-Reading the Hated Book' has recently observed, this YouTube craze is not limited to the supposed authority of celebrities, such as Gottfried or indeed *Twilight* actress Kristen Stewart, but also extends to the viewing public overall (Anon, 2012) as well as academics, if such a division can even be considered unproblematically. Such videos verge on parodic performance, reinforcing what is seen to be the aforementioned inherent 'bad quality' of the author's prose, and enacting a carnivalesque inversion of the private 'shame' reading into public hate reading.

Madeline Klink (2008) discusses anti-fans' use of humour in her analysis of the LiveJournal *Twilight* fan (and anti-fan) community, Twatlight, noting that – not unlike Tumblr users – 'Twats' (as community members refer to themselves) gather media clips from around the internet, from their own cameras and mobile phones, and from physical texts, posting them to the site along with their own commentary. Macros and other explicitly humorous productions form a major part of the site, with 'lofans' (the term Klink uses for people who read the books solely for the purpose of snarking on them) contributing many of the texts. Furthermore, Twatlight is interesting not only for the way in which it positions *Twilight* fans, but because it gave rise to the *Fifty Shades of Grey* anti-fan community, 50shadesofWTF. The community description makes no bones about positioning the community as a site of anti-fandom:

Three books. THREE.

Three movies. THREE.

The Twilight/New Moon/Eclipse/Breaking ~~Down~~ [sic] Dawn madness ~~has fucking ended already~~ [sic] is slowly coming to an end (THANK YOU, LORD OF MORMONISM). The last film came out on November 2012 [sic] and that's it, right? Right?!

"Wrong, bitches!"

– E.L. James

There's tons of Twilight fanfiction all over the Internet, but there's this particular piece that inexplicably stood out from the rest: *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Apparently, editorials still have no problem in publishing bad literature, and people still have no problem in making it popular. I do. We do. And we get to make fun of it with a vengeance. (say2, 2012)

The negotiation of meaning is as apparent in 50shadesofWTF as it is in more traditional fannish communities: although several of the posts contained within the community share news about the forthcoming film adaptation/s of *Fifty Shades*, or contain links to parodic videos, the majority of the entries involve community members 'sporking'⁷ the trilogy. Two of the most prominent are Gehayi and Ket Makura Makura, who began sporking the series shortly after its publication by Vintage in April 2012, and whose posts garner comments totalling

several pages. In their LiveJournal entry on Chapter One, they explain why they hate the trilogy:

KET: All right, personal history time! Anyone who's read other sporkings I've done will probably not be *shocked* to find out that I'm into BDSM. What you might not know is that I was in the Lifestyle for a while. As a Submissive. Yes, really. While I'm not in it now for reasons that will surely come up during the sporking, I know that there are healthy, happy Total Power Exchange relationships. But too often, they're written as abusive, as predatory, and hey, let's call a spade a spade here – as rape. And this...this piece of died-up [sic] shit here? Is all three of those things. And that just pisses me right the fuck off. (Ket Makura in Ket Makura and Gehayi, 2012)

GEHAYI: Those of you who have been reading the sporkings for a while know that I'm an editor, and that many of the things I edit are romances. Now, I have MAJOR issues with rape, stalking and controlling another person against his or her will being presented as romantic. All of these things are rife in the romance genre and I HATE that, because people are idiots and will believe that if an author SAYS it is romantic, the author must be right. This kind of drivel...tells women that stalking is love, that rape is love, that physical and mental degradation which they loathe and want no part of are love...It is a vile, contemptible, anti-woman message. (Gehayi in Ket Makura and Gehayi, 2012)

In detailing their criticisms of the trilogy, Gehayi and Ket Makura thus position themselves as possessing superior knowledge to *Fifty Shades* fans. Not only are they each aware of BDSM⁸ (through personal experience); Gehayi has significant cultural capital through her work as an editor. This possession of capital thus works to affect the balance of power between anti-fans and fans, as well as between anti-fans and James herself. Sporkers position themselves in an elevated position within fandom and, through sporking, promote a distinction within fan culture based on cultural capital that they possess, and which the authors and fans of the fiction they spork do not. Gehayi and Ket Makura's use of humour to make serious arguments about the trilogy, however, makes their criticisms easier to accept. Much like the *Twilight* macros Klink discusses, Gehayi and Ket Makura's comments invite the reader to stop Christian 'in his creepy, stalkerish tracks by laughing at him' (Klink, 2008: 32):

I employ an exceptional team, and I reward them well.

KET: (Grey): With my dick.

GEHAYI: (Grey): And my riding crop.

KET: (Grey): At the same time.

GEHAYI: Do you suppose he ever gets them mixed up?

KET: He starts whacking away at some poor underling with his penis, leaving mushroom-shaped bruises for days... (Ket Makura and Gehayi, 2012)

Humour is also an important element of the hate-reading that finds expression on Twitter. As a social networking site in which users communicate via tweets of 140 characters or less, Twitter makes it difficult for users to engage in lengthy criticisms. Pithy messages are thus favoured, with hashtags also used to categorize (or provide a metacomment on) the subject of the tweets (Deller, 2011) as well as to search out others discussing the same subject. Of course, the participatory nature of Twitter makes it an almost ideal platform for engaging in fandom (cf. Bennett, 2012; Deller, 2011; Jones, 2012) as well as antifandom (Recuero et al., 2012) and both @50shadesofROFL and @myoutergoddess (formerly @50shadesofwtf) engage in dialogue with other anti-fans, which indeed include academics, blogger and members of the BDSM community. @50shadesofROFL and @myoutergoddess also often retweet the comments made by these anti-fans in order to further the discussion around the series. One of the recurring themes on the Twitter accounts, and indeed across much of the anti-fandom expressed on social media, is that of 'reading *Fifty* so you don't have to', as this tweet suggests: 'In summary: I read #fiftyshades. Now @lipsticklori is *forcing me* to read the sequel. I'll recount it here so you don't have to do the same' (@myoutergoddess, 2012a). The Facebook page 50 [sic] Shades of Craptastic Grey (an anti-fan page) lists its description as 'Fighting the evil of horrific erotica so you don't have to' (50 Shades of Craptastic Grey, 2012), and The *Daily Beast*'s video 'We Read 'Fifty Shades,' So You Don't Have To' (*Daily Beast*, n.d.) features Lizzie Crocker reading the erotic sections of the book in a video which has been speeded up to add humour. Anti-fans thus position themselves as gatekeepers of good literature, performing a service for the good of fandom (or the public) at large who do not want to read 'bad' erotica. This is further demonstrated by Tumblr bloggers, for example, one review asserts that 'MY inner goddess is telling you to never read this book' and further explains its failings through humorous gatekeeping:

It has been marketed as 'erotic', which invariably meant it would be as genuinely erotic as a soggy plaster ... The only ostensible difference between this book and those heavy-breathing Mills and Boon type paperbacks you can get for £3.99 in WH Smith is that you can read this on a Kindle, so when you're on the bus nobody can tell you're looking at filth. (Reynolds, 2012)

Not only is *Fifty Shades of Grey* bad fiction then – but bad through its association with, and as, erotica or 'mommy porn', which fails to be erotic, to boot (see Deller and Smith, this issue). Its only saving grace is its availability as an e-book, which obfuscates the *shame* of reading such a text where readers' desire for the 'soggy plaster' of 'filth' may be discovered. Of course, this relies on the public at large accepting the anti-fans' analysis of *Fifty Shades* as bad erotica and not simply bad writing, but it further exemplifies the cultural distinctions of taste evident in *Fifty Shades* anti-fandom.

We would suggest that these distinctions are also evident in @50shadesofROFL and @myoutergoddess' decision in July 2012 to continue live tweeting the books to

raise money for and awareness of the Spanner Trust (50ShadesOf ROFL, 2012). The Trust 'defend[s] the rights of sadomasochists of all sexual orientations and work[s] specifically to reverse the UK court ruling which made certain SM activities illegal even though all parties consent' (Spanner Trust, n.d.). The decision by @50shadesofROFL and @myoutergoddess to continue hate-reading the books in order to raise money for this charity clearly positions them in solidarity with the BDSM community and, as with Gehayi and Ket Makura on LiveJournal, in possession of more cultural capital than *Fifty Shades* fans whose understanding, it is supposed, of BDSM is minimal. Indeed, an analysis of the users' Twitter feeds demonstrates an awareness that the BDSM as portrayed in the books is not the same BDSM as members of the community understand it, demonstrated in the following tweets:

'the physical pain you inflicted wasn't as bad as the pain of losing you' Yes! That's why we do it! We put up with being hit to keep our men ... OH NO WAIT! THATS [sic] NOT BDSM, THAT'S *ABUSE* Oops! Easy mistake though, eh? #RAGERAGERAGE. (@50shadesofROFL, 2012a)

Note the stereotyping: old Dommies are 'impossibly glamorous'. Old subs are pathetic and broken. (@myoutergoddess, 2012b)

Further, the use of the hashtags '#thingsthatdontmakeyouadom' and '#thingsthatdontmakeyouasub' reflect and reposition some of the media discourse around the series which focus on the novels' BDSM content. In a similar way, Gehayi and Ket Makura comment on the way in which BDSM content is included in Ana and Christian's relationship while acknowledging that the relationship is not a *de facto* BDSM one. In their LiveJournal post on chapter 16 they write:

'Miss Steele, you are not just a pretty face. You've had six orgasms so far and all of them belong to me,' he boasts, playful again.

GEHAYI: Ana doesn't react the way he wants her to, I'm sure.

I flush and blink at the same time, as he stares down at me. He's keeping count!

KET: Not all that hard, considering how few times you've actually fucked.

GEHAYI: No, but it IS weird to grab someone else's orgasms and claim them your personal property. And to count them as if they were treasures.

KET: Some submissives do 'give' their orgasms to their Doms, and aren't allowed to have them without permission.

GEHAYI: But these two don't *have* that arrangement. I could understand if they'd talked about that, but they haven't. It's not even in the contract!

KET: I know, but it's pretty clear he's already thinking that way. (Ket Makura and Gehayi, 2012)

It is worth, however, acknowledging that there has been some resistance to such a simplistic reading of *Fifty Shades'* themes, for example in nonny's (2012) recent blog post which (along with enacting the aforementioned anti-fan

behaviours) places *Fifty Shades* as potentially reflecting the reality of some incidents of abuse within the BDSM community itself (nonny, 2012; cf. Barker in this issue). In this sense, the novels are not seen to act as a moral text in which the relationships played out on the page are intended to be aspired to by readers, but instead are amoral or even immoral texts, in which a potential for counter readings is invoked, and expressions of anti-fandom are framed 'explicitly as moral objections' (Gray, 2005: 847).

@50shadesofROFL and @myoutergoddess also comment on the trilogy's genesis as *Twilight* fan fiction, drawing on popular critiques of the genre as well as raising the issue of slash fiction. They tweet: 'Prediction 3: we continue to compare & contrast with *Twilight*. Only not so much if [sic] the contrast. #fiftyshadesofFanFic' (@myoutergoddess, 2012c). However, they again frame this in opposition to popular discourse, tweeting: 'Srsly [sic]. I read fanfic, *actual fanfic*, for free on teh [sic] interwebz [sic] and I'd've stopped reading this by now. This dialogue...just...*gobsmacked*' (@50shadesofROFL, 2012b) It is also worth noting that much of the *Fifty Shades* anti-fandom within *Twilight* fandom too is a result of the ideological conception of publishing fanfiction as an original work as being ethically wrong, as well as EL James's perceived contempt of the fandom. For many fans, as Sarah Wanenchak notes,

given that fannish works are driven primarily by collective love for a particular media property, there is a sense among most members of fandom as a whole that the seeking of monetary gain from fannish works is not only legally questionable but sullies the respect that fans ideally have for the object of their fandom. (Wanenchak, 2012)

Many *Fifty Shades* anti-fans thus evidently utilize notions of subcultural capital and a disavowal of capitalist concerns in their engagement with, and critique of the text, and take pleasure in this oppositional positioning.

Conclusion – anti-fans and the distinctions of (dis)taste

While Strong (2009) argues that *Twilight* anti-fandom enacts 'a form of symbolic violence, in that the underlying point of the discussion is not about *Twilight* at all, but about constructing teenage girls as a group not worth taking seriously' (Strong, 2009: 2) we would argue that the oppositional reception of *Fifty Shades of Grey* says more about anti-fans than it does about those actually 'enjoying' the trilogy, who are largely silent in mainstream discourses. In fact, one wonders whether this constructed Other of the 'vanilla' housewife, the undiscerning reader of 'trash', truly exists except as an imagined spectre, or whether, for the majority of readers, it is this 'hate-reading' (Anon, 2012) of a text with its constructed 'perfect storm of conflicted, critical fandom' (Haig, 2013), which offers the real readerly pleasures of performing and sharing distinctions of taste.

Such distinctions, as we have suggested, are enacted through a literary vanguard who deride the series, asserting that it is 'bad literature', 'popular', 'drivel', 'as erotic as a soggy plaster' and yet take on a role of extreme close reading and analysis so as to demonstrate their own cultural capital. This performance undoubtedly chimes with Haig's assertion that this is for anti-fans precisely how pleasure is derived. Indeed, a similar explanation can be mounted for the BDSM community's vocal rejection of James's novels. The community indeed engages with the books and creates a range of texts that critique elements such as the portrayal of BDSM as abusive and dangerous, but they do so while reinforcing taste culture and building cultural capital. Furthermore, the knowledge many of these anti-fans have of BDSM contributes to their rejection of the trilogy as more than simply bad erotica or bad writing. It becomes, not only 'doing erotica badly' but furthermore, 'doing (and representing) BDSM badly' which allows for the anti-fan to demonstrate their own superior knowledge. But can we consider this as a simple demonstration of cultural capital? To do so would mean to accept a model that posits the community as the dominant – no pun intended – culture, which of course is a problematic term to attribute to a pathologized, prosecuted and at times vilified group.⁹ It is in this respect that Sarah Thornton's (1995) analysis of club cultures (and their opposition to the mainstream) may well shed some light.

In coining the term 'subcultural capital' Thornton argues that subcultural groups are in possession of a subtype of cultural capital that operates outside the spheres of class and economy, and instead relies on taste. Sub-cultural capital works in a similar way to cultural capital by allowing its holders to see themselves as distinguished (and distinguishable from those without that subcultural capital, namely the mainstream) and to be seen as such by relevant subcultural others (Jenson, 2006). Sub-cultural capital within the BDSM community is thus accumulated through an engagement with the scene, a knowledge of the nuances of the community, and a distinction between BDSM and mainstream or 'vanilla' sexual practices. Are the BDSM community's responses to *Fifty Shades* then a demonstration of sub-cultural capital? Milly Williamson argues that Thornton's approach is a misinterpretation of Bourdieu, asserting instead that:

while fans may be accruing a form of cultural capital through their fandom, it is neither *subordinate* or *subcultural*. It is not possible to possess 'sub'cultural capital in Bourdieu's schema . . . Subcultural capital is simply the cultural capital that is jockeying for position with more traditional and established forms of cultural capital (Williamson, 2005: 105, emphasis in original).

Williamson's reading thus acknowledges the possibility of viewing the cultural capital exercised by the BDSM community as not outside of legitimate culture, but instead located within it, and the cultural capital exercised by the BDSM community's analysis of *Fifty Shades* as within fan culture, and not necessarily in opposition to it. Indeed, we would assert that the audience for the anti-fan output examined in this article can be defined as anti-fans themselves, while also

seeing anti-fan productivities as trying to appeal to an audience beyond those in their cultural sphere. As Gehayi noted in correspondence with us:

as we have said multiple times, the fans are NOT bad people for liking this series. We're saying that they aren't CAREFUL readers. The fans aren't reading the same way that we do . . . We worry about those messages [the novels send] and the possibility of someone picking up on them – consciously or subconsciously – and getting hurt. If even one person gets hurt because of those books, that's too many. And we worry about misogynistic messages being unintentionally passed on for another generation or two. That worry is largely why we're doing this in the first place. I don't know how many people we're reaching, but we have to say something. *But we do not pass judgment on the readers.* [sic] If they decide to get into BDSM, we want them to be fully informed. If they decide to consent to participate in a BDSM scene, we want them to understand what they're consenting to. But if they decide to get into something extremely kinky? More power to them, and we hope they enjoy themselves. (Gehayi, 2013)

The interpretive, communal nature of anti-fans and anti-fan communities thus plays an important role in not only enforcing taste, but in negotiating the meaning found in *Fifty Shades*. The analysis found in Gehayi and Ket Makura's sporking of the series serves a similar function to meta written for an object of fandom, and the various images posted to the '50 Shades of Craptastic Grey' Facebook page (such as the comic strip-style cover image, in which a blonde girl sits at a computer typing 'One Shade of Grey: A Feminist Fantasy' – "No," she said. And he respected her wishes and pestered her no more. The End.) subvert the meaning of the text by bringing it into conversation with other topics. The anti-fans we have examined in the course of this article thus complicate the reductive view of fandom as uncritically affectionate, but they are also distinguishable from Gray's concept of anti-fans as those 'who refuse to let their family watch a show (or) who campaign against the text' (Gray, 2005: 840). We suggest that, while criticism can indeed be a form of pleasurable engagement for some fans (and anti-fans) the role that taste distinctions play should not be underestimated.

Notes

1. 'Ghey' is a term specific to the internet lexicon, defined by Urban Dictionary as '[u]surping the traditional term GAY to take the homosexual meaning out and leaving in the lame.' (Urban Dictionary, n.d.) It is worth noting that controversy surrounds the use of this term, as another user asserts that 'ghey' is '(a) word used by homophobes who don't like to admit they are homophobic, so they hide behind a misspelling of a derogatory word so they can pretend like they aren't completely free of morals' (Urban Dictionary, n.d.). We use the term here both because it is a popular expression of disdain regarding the *Fifty Shades* series – a google search of "Fifty Shades of Ghey" returns at the time of writing, over half a million results – and in addition evokes the internet as its contextual locale, which is apt as our analysis focuses on online reception.

2. Technically, individual posts on internet message boards and website forums are considered to be within the public domain, but James E Porter (1998) argues that precedents for treating any and all internet writing with integrity in research situations must be established, and that it is methodologically valuable to treat every post as writing and every poster as a writer. In the course of this research, we treat the use of websites, Tumblr pages, LiveJournal posts and Twitter accounts as we would treat the use of a personal email interview. Each of the fans cited granted permission for their words to be used.
3. An important point to note here is the distinction between professional criticism, such as Tanya Gold's *Guardian* article 'Twilight is not feminist: it is female masochism', and user-generated criticism. We only have scope to analyse the latter in this piece, but each fulfils different aims and gatekeeping functions and a more detailed examination of professional criticism in terms of taste and cultural capital would, we believe, prove fruitful.
4. An aca-fan or scholar-fan is an academic who identifies as a fan. Hills popularized the term in *Fan Cultures* (2002) in which he argued that if the primary identity was academic, the people it was ascribed to were acafans; if it was fannish, they were fan scholars. The term has taken on other meanings since Hills, with many acafans now using it to indicate that there is no primary identity.
5. A link to which, coincidentally, was the subject of the first post on the 50shadesofWTF community, which will shortly be discussed.
6. Though in actuality, viewing figures are likely to be substantially higher, since there are numerous uploads of the same video hosted on YouTube.
7. The act of sporking involves writing and posting mocking and/or critical commentary on a work that is considered extraordinarily bad. Closely linked to hate-reading, in which a text is read for the express purpose of ridiculing it, or indulging the reader's disdain for the author and/or the content, the term takes its name from the utensil, which is the right size and shape to dig out an eye.
8. A compound acronym, which encompasses bondage and discipline, domination and submission, sadism and masochism.
9. Though it is worth noting that prosecutions thus far have been largely of homosexual practitioners, which further complicates this issue.

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