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### Femme-ing the Fandom: A Cross-Cultural Approach

Whovians, Trekkies, Homestucks, steampunks, Gladiators, and otaku; for the casual television watcher, this list of attributes probably means little to nothing, but for those who ascribe those characteristics to themselves, it means a way of life, both virtual and real. While fandoms themselves are not new, the way in which fans can and do interact with media texts and each other is increasingly broad due to the Internet, often allowing like-minded fans to reach each other across the globe. But how do fans move from individual observers to active, contributing members of a fandom? Is fandom one singular notion for all fans everywhere? Although the actions of fandoms are more similar than different, I argue that female fandoms mobilize the particular participatory practices of textual creation and ‘dress up’ in order to create narratives and foster affective connection with characters. Because of new media literacies’ tendency to be global, below I analyze US and Japanese women’s interactions with the media texts *Scandal* and *Kuroshitsuji (Black Butler)* as examples. I will also discuss the implications of power structures in the form of media ownership and the possibilities “femme-ing” the fandom has for resistance and subversion.

Fans of the 1960s NBC science fiction TV show *Star Trek*, who call themselves Trekkies, can most likely lay claim to being the first fandom. Trekkies’ participatory fan practices paved the road for many of the practices fandoms engage in today, including fan communications, art work, fan fiction, fan-made videos, conventions, and the character emulation that would later come to be known as cosplay. According to Dr. Kristina Busse, professor at the University of South Alabama who researches fan culture, many of the fans producing this work were women (p. 104). Soon after, a listserv type of pre-web Internet service emerged, called Usenet, which

originally functioned as distributed newsgroups, allowing fans a way in which to organize and share. Although female fans were beginning to use the Internet more frequently, Usenet fan groups were still a boys' club of sorts and, at times, unwelcoming to women. In *Cyberspaces of Their Own*, Rhiannon Bury (2005) states, "Facing varying degrees of harassment and denigration on the male-dominated forums, many female fans chose to stake out and colonize cyberspaces of their own" (p. 2). These women turned to private mailing lists, where they disseminated fan-produced texts, which will be discussed more in-depth later. This ultimately led to some of the first female fandoms' presence online, which since then, has grown tremendously. However, simply being a fan in a forum does not constitute a fandom alone.

In *Spreadable Media*, Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) make the distinction between fans and fandom. Fans, they argue, are individual audience members who are produced by "acts of measurement and surveillance". A fandom, according to Jenkins et al., has the makings of a public. I argue that fandoms are a public as they meet several, if not all, of Michael Warner's criteria for a public, including that they are self-organized, direct attention to something they value, rely on stranger sociability and a "reflexive circulation of discourse", and exist with a sense of "poetic world-making". Following Warner's lead, not only are fandoms a public, but the spaces of female fandom, particularly, can be seen as an artistic counterpublic. He states that, "counterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be trans-formative, not replicative merely" (p. 88). Female fandom, especially in the vein of fan fiction, has historically been one of transformation of characters and extension of original plot lines, which go against what is considered "canon" or elements fundamentally sacred to the story. This has been in large opposition to male fandom members. In an ongoing discussion of gender and fandom on Tumblr, user scifigr147, posits that there is a gender split in fandom as far

as what participatory practices male and female fans take up. She claims that male fandoms tend to be focused on collecting knowledge like facts, figures, and technical aspects of the fandom, deeming them “keepers of the canon”, while female fandoms are more creative, focusing on the relationships and back stories of the characters and filling in the gaps when necessary, thus altering the canon. This desire for a different type of public within the larger public of fandoms is the same reason behind the creation of female fandom spaces in the 1970s and the resulting popularity of fan fiction with women.

Jenkins, borrowing a concept from Michel de Certeau, calls this altering of the canon “textual poaching”, meaning that fans co-opt and appropriate an existing text for themselves. In this case, Japanese and US women have taken up popular television shows and created various narratives of their own, usually focusing on interpersonal relationships, under the genres of doujinshi, slash, and the more encompassing, fan fiction. I will focus on Japanese doujinshi and US fan fiction, as slash has many similarities to doujinshi that do not call for a separate analysis here.

Doujinshi comes from the Japanese words *dojin*, meaning “group of fans”, and *shi*, meaning “printed publication” (Hemmann, 2013, p. 179). However, unlike US produced fan fiction, doujinshi are professional-grade graphic stories, funded by fans. Doujinshi also make a profit, unlike the gift culture associated with US fan fiction, which will be discussed later. Like the gender split in fandoms, doujinshi are also often split in their audiences across gender lines, with men and women writing for their respective gender’s consumption. Doujinshi writers tend to follow similar patterns as US fan fiction writers by using relationships as content. However, doujinshi written by women often depicts homoerotic or homosexual relationships, referred to in Japanese as *yaoi* or “boy love”. Most of these *yaoi* relationships are not canonical and rely on

either a reading between the lines of character interactions or simply a created narrative, such as the over 200 *Kuroshitsuji* doujinshi found on yaoi-sei.com, a doujin site dedicated to boy love. Because of the Japanese consumption of anime, doujinshi is almost always written (and drawn) about animated characters, as opposed to human actors.

*Kuroshitsuji* is the story of a young, wealthy orphan named Ciel Phantomhive, who upon dying, summons a demon/butler by the name of Sebastian Michaelis. Sebastian saves Ciel's life in exchange for the promise to devour Ciel's soul at a later time. The plot follows Ciel as he navigates revenge and duty with the assistance of Sebastian. With the exception of two or three characters, all of the main characters are men, giving doujinshi writers plenty of *yaoi* content with which to work. Yaoi doujinshi does not shy away from sexually explicit scenes or sexual taboos, as Sebastian and Ciel are often "shipped" (lingo for putting characters into a relationship), although Ciel is a preteen and Sebastian hundreds of years old. Albeit, there are many scenes in the original plot where Sebastian acts in a seductive manner towards Ciel (for his soul), there is no actual sexual relationship between the characters. This "ship" in doujinshi is a read-in, created by the female fandom's eye for possible couplings. On another hand, *Kuroshitsuji* doujinshi is not always a figment of the fandom's imagination, but instead, at times, plays out the fantasy of some character. For example, Sebastian is adored by a grim reaper by the name of Grell Sutcliffe. Grell is a man who dresses as a woman and has a penchant for men. In many of the doujinshi where Sebastian is not shipped with Ciel, he is shipped with Grell, the writer carrying out Grell's (and many fans') undying wish to be with Sebastian. These homosexual couplings are not exclusive, however, to Japanese female fandoms. Slash, so-called due to the slash mark between shipped characters' names, is essentially the US version of *yaoi*, the exception being the use of human actors in their work. But slash does not have the

overwhelming popularity as a form of textual poaching in the US as does the more broadly termed fan fiction. The use of read-ins and “shipping” is not limited to a Japanese style of fan participation, but is also seen in iterations of American television.

US women have been writing fan fiction about popular soap operas and primetime television shows for many years, so it is no surprise that *Scandal*, executive producer Shonda Rhimes’ high-rating TV drama, would get the female fandom treatment. *Scandal* is a show about a high profile, Washington, DC fixer named Olivia Pope, played by Kerry Washington, who is mistress to the President of the United States. While the show chronicles more than just their relationship, including Olivia’s work at her firm and the drama of DC politicians and elites, the fan fiction centers mostly around Olivia and President Fitzgerald Grant (Tony Goldwyn), referred to as Fitz. But Olivia also has an on again-off again sexual relationship with a former intelligence officer named Jake Ballard (Scott Foley). These conflicting storylines in the plot lead to fan fictions that are a combination of the models in doujinshi. In some aspect, the writers are relying on what is already present between characters and in other aspects, they are creating their own fantasies for the characters, usually based on what they think is best for the characters involved. This is evident when browsing the *Scandal* pages on fanfiction.net. In the former instance, stories revolve around a house in Vermont (depicted in Season 3, Episode 8, Vermont is for Lovers, Too) or Fitz’s suicide attempt (mentioned in Season 4, Episode 1, Randy, Red, Superfreak and Julia). In the latter, characters are shipped and named as a way to signal to readers who should be together, such as Olitz (Olivia and Fitz), Olake (Olivia and Jake), or Huckleberry Quinn (Huck and Quinn Perkins). Other fantasy types of fan fiction delve into storylines that have never been, such as the Grant children’s perspectives or Secret Service agent Tom’s love life. However, despite their differences, what *Kuroshitsuji* doujinshi and *Scandal* fan

fiction both do is allow female fans a space to create narratives that otherwise, may not be explored. Further analysis of both media texts shows that not only can narratives be articulated in written form, but a different kind of narrative can also be written on the body.

Cosplay is a hybrid of the term “costume play”, which refers to the dressing up as a character from a fandom. Where cosplay differs from simple costuming is in fans’ desire to emulate the personality of the character they are performing as, hence the aspect of “play”. Although it originated in the US with sci-fi fandoms, it spread rapidly and largely to Japan and anime fandoms. While men also cosplay, according to Daisuke Okabe in “Cosplay, Learning, and Cultural Practice”, most Japanese cosplayers are college-age women (p. 225). This is a participatory practice that depends on the connections and creativity of the counterpublic of female fandom as most cosplayers make their own costumes and rely on other cosplayers for advice. Just as Japanese female fans do not limit themselves to heteronormative interpellations in their writing/reading, those who cosplay may also find themselves reiterating that sentiment in which characters they choose to cosplay. *Kuroshitsuji* is extremely popular at cosplay conventions, yet the large number of male characters doesn’t detract female fans. Cross-play is the act of cosplaying a character of a gender different than one’s own. Women cosplayers participate in cross-play more often than their male counterparts. For example, most Ciel and Grell cosplayers are women. Other times women cosplayers will “gender bend” a character, subverting their original gender into the opposite. Thus cross-play and gender-bending serve as another way in which female fandoms alter the canon.

While the *Scandal* fandom does not attempt to alter the canon in the same way that cosplayers may, the recent release of a *Scandal* edition clothing line at women’s retailer The Limited suggests that US female fans also participate in ‘dressing up’. The line features clothing

designed by a collaboration of *Scandal*'s own costume designers, echoing the signature looks of Olivia Pope. Although The Limited only sells women's apparel, no plans have been discussed to create a men's line modeled after the dapper (now deceased) Harrison Wright, indicating that 'dressing up' is more geared towards the female section of the larger *Scandal* fandom. Female fans are not only encouraged to post pictures of themselves "Popping" to social media, but are also given the brands and style or color names of most of the apparel and beauty products worn by each female character via the *Scandal* Pinterest account or the actors' Twitter feeds. Where *Kuroshitsuji* female fans have interpellated themselves through 'dress up', these marketing tactics may prevent *Scandal*'s female fans from clearly drawing that line.

From a gender and media perspective, a more interesting line to ask is where does female fandom become subversion and resistance? Here the arguments are greatly dispersed. In "Beyond Democratization and Subversion", Rosalind Sibielski argues that although girls and women may produce texts that resist ideologies of heteronormativity "when it comes to their appropriation of content from their source texts, they do not evidence any of the feminist critique that is routinely ascribed to girls' cultural production on the Internet" (p. 98). But feminist critique does not always need to be explicit in order for subversion to take place. Kathryn Hemmann, doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania successfully argues that in Japanese writing, "the female gaze thus acts as a mode of resistant reading" (p. 327). The role of subversion also must take into account the perspectives of those producing the work, as Okabe claims that female writers of *yaoi*, also called *fujoshi*, "reject dominant feminine cultures that center on fashion and heteronormative romance" (p. 221). Not only have Japanese women altered and subverted the text, they have largely resisted media corporations.

In Japan, doujinshi is a viable, profitable market for members of female fandoms. The nature of its off-line production makes it difficult to mark it as inferior to the source text (p. 170). The commodification of texts via doujinshi is typically welcomed by the publishing houses as it creates free marketing and demand for the source text. But US perspectives on fan fiction and ownership have prevented the monetization of this participatory effort by female fans. Karen Hellekson, in “A Fannish Field of Value”, asserts that “fans insist on a gift culture, not a commercial one” (p. 114) citing a failed attempt to commercialize fan fiction. Yet Japanese women (doujins) and US men (fan filmmakers and game modifiers) have successfully employed a bottom-up strategy to monetize the work they produce, thus the US female fandom persists in operating as an almost underground subculture.

As evidenced, when women come together and form female fandoms, they set out to make changes that were previously (and still are largely) unseen. The ability to apply a female centered mode of articulation has allowed female fandoms to subvert text, challenge ideologies about gender roles, heteronormativity, and sex, as well as to create a place for themselves in the media power structure as consumer-producers. While their work may not be overtly feminist or challenge patriarchy and male fandom head on, it is most definitely a politically produced new media.