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**“Textual Glory Holes”: Genre and Community in Fan Kink Memes**

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**“Textual Glory Holes”: Genre and Community in Fan Kink Memes**

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**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2010**

## **Dedication**

To Saint Anon, and the many other anonymous, pseudonymous, and named moderators  
whose labors of love make fannish communities go round.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am indebted to my readers, Lisa Moore and Ann Cvetkovich, who not only kept straight faces when I explained my project, but actually encouraged me to continue it. I also thank Tekla Schell for reading an early draft and providing insightful advice. I am grateful for the support of Rick and Jean Wall, who would not have cared if I specialized in underwater basket-weaving, so long as I was happy. Finally, thanks to Andrew Murphy, who is, to use a fannish phrase, my bulletproof kink.

May 2010

## Abstract

### **“Textual Glory Holes”: Genre and Community in Fan Kink Memes**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

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“Textual Glory Holes” examines a particular online fan community called a kink meme, in which fans exchange sexually-charged fanfiction as gifts. In this essay, I argue that, not only does the genre of fanfiction help to create and sustain the concept of kink, but that kink as a category is an interpellation of, experimentation with, and performance of the eroticism of genre in fanfiction. Furthermore, the kink meme community constitutes itself by performing this fannish erotics for each other in fiction and in sexualized feedback, resulting in a community that embraces the pleasures of this performance but sometimes distances itself from the power and political implications of the performance. Moments when fans do *not* distance themselves from this erotics of genre—one of unearthing and understanding diverse and diffuse pleasures—hold the potential to become what Audre Lorde calls “creative energy empowered,” a shared pleasure that can “lessen the threat of difference.”

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## Introduction

Anonymous KINK memes are the awesomest awesome that ever awesomed...because they are **textual glory holes**. They are places for people to shake-off their cultural kink-shame and GET EACH OTHER OFF freely and playfully. (vulgarweed)

On May 10, 2009, two days after the premiere of the 2009 film *Star Trek*, a new community was created on the blogging platform LiveJournal: *The Star Trek XI Kink Meme* (*The Star Trek...*). In this “meme”—that is, any activity which others can join by repeating the same activity—fans of the new movie could anonymously request kinky stories based on the film by specifying what kinds of romantic pairings and scenarios they would like to read, and other fans could anonymously fill these requests with fiction. The very first prompt posted to the meme was “McCoy/Kirk, set when they're at the academy; post-exam de-stressing” (“Part One”). Appendix A is the story written for this prompt: “Two Guys Walk Into a Bar” by ink\_n\_imp (ink\_n\_imp). In this 621-word story, Dr. Leonard McCoy reflects on some of his hasty life choices and how Jim Kirk has helped him reconsider impulsivity in a more positive light, namely by having sex with him in a bar restroom. Another prompt requests “Chekov/Sulu, knifeplay,” and another prompts, “Nero/Pike, any variation on ‘mindfuck’” (“Part One”). This community was not the first of its kind, by any means: over the last several years, online fans have created kink memes, played “Kink Bingo,” and engaged in critical discussions about kink in fandom. In particular, fans have already done a significant amount of thinking on the topic of the kink fanfiction (fiction by fans) as a sexual practice; they



have explored the connection between kink memes and real life BDSM cultures (v\_anglique, ivanolix) and the use of fanfiction as a masturbatory aid (damned-colonial). Additionally, recent fan scholars have discussed the idea of fanfiction communities as “queer female spaces,” an idea especially pertinent to the kink meme, where a primarily female group exchanges sexually-charged fiction for each other’s pleasure (Lackner et al, Busse). The premise of this essay, however, is that understanding the sexuality of the kink meme requires an analysis not just of the sexual content but also of the generic conventions, constraints, and possibilities of the form itself.

One of the defining characteristics of fannish “kink” is the genre: fanfiction. Fanfiction is “fiction written by fans for other fans, taking a source text as a point of departure” (“Fanfiction”). In the case of the kink meme I am discussing here, this source text is the 2009 film *Star Trek* directed by J.J. Abrams (*Star Trek*), which draws on another source text: *Star Trek: The Original Series*, the television series that ran from 1966-1969<sup>1</sup> (*Star Trek: The Original Series*). Fans use the characters, settings, and plotlines of the series to write new stories, sometimes sticking closely to canon (the story as set down by the franchise) and sometimes spinning off into widely divergent AUs (Alternate Universes). In this paper, I will use the words “fanfiction” and “fanfic”

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<sup>1</sup> This paper will assume a certain degree of cultural knowledge about *Star Trek*, the franchise. In broad terms, the television show and movie are about a crew aboard a spaceship in the 23<sup>rd</sup> century on a mission of exploration. The most popular characters (in the meme, at least) are Captain James T. Kirk (commander of the ship), Commander Spock (second in command), and Dr. Leonard “Bones” McCoy (medical doctor). However, what is important here is not so much the specifics of *Star Trek* as the community that surrounds it.

interchangeably to refer to these fan-produced stories and the genre(s) they embody.<sup>2</sup> I will use the word “fic” to refer to a single such story: just as a work of drama is a play, a work of fanfiction is (most commonly referred to as) a fic.<sup>3</sup> Fanfiction in its current form<sup>4</sup> dates back to the 1960s, starting with fans of *Star Trek* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E* (Coppa, “A Brief History...”). *Star Trek* fans<sup>5</sup>, then, have a significant heritage of fan writings, conventions, communities, and practices that they may draw on when they write fics for a kink meme.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Fanfiction is variously called fan fiction, fan-fiction, fanfic, fan-fic, fan fic, and fic. I perceive the compound spelling (fanfiction and fanfic) to be the most common among fans, and it is the spelling that I myself use as a fan. Depending on one’s audience, there may be some insider/outsider politics attached to the spelling of fanfiction; fan fiction may denote an outsider or academic perspective (“Fanfiction”). However, the fan studies journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* uses “fan fiction,” persuasively arguing that this spelling puts more emphasis on the creative agency of the fan (Hellekson “Fan fiction”).

<sup>3</sup> Fans may also say “a fanfic,” but “a fanfiction” is less common and sounds jarring to me personally. “Fic” can also refer to a body of works, i.e. “Sarah’s fic tends to be angsty” or “Fic like that make me happy.” For more on fannish vocabulary, see the entry for “Fanfiction” at *Fanlore.org*.

<sup>4</sup> Scholars such as Catherine Driscoll have rightly pointed out that the reimagining of source texts, the writing of “derivative” stories, and the communal story-telling of fanfiction are not at all new and have existed as long as stories have been told. Homer, for instance, is retelling old stories with a twist, as is Shakespeare.

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I will be making a distinction between the franchise—*Star Trek*, italicized as a title—and the fandom—Star Trek. This distinction stakes out Star Trek not just as a source text, with a single creator/writer and corporate owner, but as a community, with many writers/creators and public ownership. I do not say “*Star Trek* fans,” for instance, because this would mean fans OF *Star Trek*, the franchise, positing a derivative relationship between source text and fan. I say “Star Trek fans” simply to specify a fandom, one of many that a fan might engage in, and to specify that the Star Trek fandom is something the fan participates in creating. This choice is thus primarily political, but it also happens to reflect the fact that fans do not tend to italicize their source texts, for whatever reason, and is thus more reflective of the fannish vocabulary.

<sup>6</sup> See Henry Jenkins, Constance Penley, and Francesca Coppa, for example.

Like any other subgenre then, kink is necessarily tied to the inherited genre conventions of fanfiction, but unlike other subgenres or concepts, kink is a word that can stand in for “genre” itself. As LiveJournal user kaiz explains,

I'm going to define kinks a bit differently than you might usually expect. Rather than a scenario that a reader/writer/viewer finds erotic, I'm going to broaden the definition to include "The Stuff That You Really *Really* Love to Read/Write/View." (kaiz)

The kink definition that we might “usually expect” in fandom is whatever one finds sexually erotic, whether that desire is traditionally deviant or not. This definition is already different from the dictionary definition of kink as a deviant desire or practice. However, kaiz expands that definition to include a common conversational usage of the term among fans: whatever one strongly enjoys, even if that enjoyment is not sexual. For instance, a fan might say that domestic fanfic is her “kink,” meaning that she gets a particular satisfaction from reading about characters doing their laundry or making soup. Thus in addition to particular sexual practices (e.g. waterplay, bondage), the word kink can describe any trope or theme or cliché that one enjoys (e.g. infidelity, vampires, angst). The most-cited authority on this wide variety of kinks is Anna S.’s massive, alphabetical “List of Fan-fiction Kinks, Tropes, and Clichés” (eliade) which includes everything from breathplay to washing (See Appendix for the “As” of this list). As her title suggests, “kinks,” “tropes,” and “clichés” are practically interchangeable categories within fanfiction.

Kink, then, acts both as an exploration of sexuality, including some traditionally defined BDSM, but it also acts as a broader affective and generic category: whatever you “Really *Really* Love to Read/Write/View.” In this essay, I argue that, not only does the genre of fanfiction help to create and sustain the concept of kink, but that kink as a category is an interpellation of, experimentation with, and performance of the erotics of genre in fanfiction. Furthermore, the kink meme community constitutes itself by performing this fannish erotics for each other in fiction and in sexualized feedback, resulting in a community that embraces the pleasures of this performance but sometimes distances itself from the power and political implications of the performance precisely by naming it *just* a “performance,” or “convention,” or “genre.” Moments when fans do *not* distance themselves from this erotics of genre—one of unearthing and understanding diverse and diffuse pleasures—hold the potential to become what Audre Lorde calls “creative energy empowered,” a shared pleasure that can “lessen the threat of difference” (394).

## The Kink Meme

Although there are several ways in which fans play with kink, I focus in this paper on a kink meme. In its most common form, a kink meme is a fandom-specific community, usually on LiveJournal or another blogging site, in which fans can anonymously request and write kinky fanfiction. The intent is to create a space where fans can request (almost) *anything* their hearts desire without shame. The most commonly enforced format for requests is a pairing, followed by kink: “Spock/Uhura, Kirk as voyeur” (“Part One”). Writers are limited by the length of the character limit for comments (LiveJournal’s limit is currently 4300 characters (“What is a comment?”)), but most memes allow fics that span multiple comments. Some fics are quite long, spanning 40 or 50 comment posts.

This paper concentrates on the *Star Trek XI Kink Meme*, one of the largest kink memes on the internet (“Kink Meme”). After starting in May 2009, it ran for five months and garnered almost constant participation. It has more than 110,000 comment posts, and a little fewer than 10,000 bookmarked prompts (i.e. requests for fanfiction). When the moderator closed the meme on October 1, 2009, a continuation of the meme was started the same day. The single moderator, st\_anon, was affectionately referred to as Saint Anon (the “st” originally referring to Star Trek). Although a team of volunteers helped to tag the stories and make them searchable, st\_anon was the single authority for all rules and their enforcement. The meme was open to all pairings, all genres, and is open to nonexplicit fanfic, although the moderator encourages sexual explicitness (st\_anon). Because of this openness, there is wide variety of fanfic on the kink meme, ranging from

sex pollen threesomes (in which magical or alien flower pollen has aphrodisiac qualities causing spontaneous sexual escapades) to domestic fluff (in which characters happily complete everyday chores in domestic settings). Both of these examples are actually common tropes that could themselves represent subgenres within the meme. As we will see, a kink meme, *particularly* when it is inside a fandom as large and varied as Star Trek and when the meme itself is large, can function as an arena for exploring tropes writ large, although there is usually a sense that sexual explicitness is the center of the meme.

## Orgy of Genres: Recombining the Pieces

Fanfiction has a vast number of subgenres, tropes, clichés, and recurring themes, and a fan may use the word “kink” to describe a preference for any of these. The widest and probably the most important distinctions are slash (homosexual romantic and/or sexual pairings), het (heterosexual romantic and/or sexual pairings), and gen (in which romance and/or sex is not the featured plot point). There are subgenres that describe affects, like angst and hurt/comfort, and subgenres that describe plots or settings, like domestic!fic and AU (Alternate Universe). Ratings, like PG-13 or NC-17, can also act as generic indicators or advertisements. Then there are story conventions or tropes that can act as subgenres in themselves, such as genderswap (where a character’s gender is swapped, either from birth, or by magical means), “aliens made them do it” (where characters are forced to have sex by outside forces), mpreg (male pregnancy, either by magical/science fiction means or because it is natural in the story universe), or kidfic (where either we see characters as children in the past or a character is magically de-aged and must be taken care of by other characters).<sup>7</sup> These kinds of story conventions are

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<sup>7</sup> In the kink meme, fanfic almost never comes with the typical heading information, if posted inside the meme. At most, the title of the post may include a rating (i.e. “Vacant, R”). (This of course does not apply to fanfic that is hyperlinked inside the meme and housed elsewhere.) Labeling fics for genre is even more tenuous in the kink meme, then, than in other parts of the internet. The kink meme’s Delicious bookmarking page (“st\_xi\_kink’s Bookmarks”) shows this overlapping with tags like “slash” and “het” living alongside tags like specific tags like “hand!kink” and “kid!fic”. LiveJournal communities for fanfiction also use tags to categorize fanfic, but these tags are more likely to be mandated by a moderator and added by the author. The Delicious bookmarks are added post facto by a team of volunteers, so the tags for specific kinks are unlikely to be widely used, partly because so many different people are doing the work of tagging, partly because any person can make up a tag to fit the specific fic, and partly because the

often signaled to the reader with exclamation points: *always-a-girl!Bones* indicates a story where Dr. McCoy has always been female, and *kid!Spock* indicates a story where Spock has likely been de-aged. The exclamation point system is used widely for discussing characters, plots, settings, and objects in terms of a particular characteristic or genre or kink. For instance, some fans have a fondness for *smart!Kirk*, that is, the emphasis on Kirk's genius or intelligence in fanfiction. The use of the exclamation point system is especially useful for the kink meme, in which a fan distinguishes the parts of the whole that bring her pleasure, whether those parts are pairings, body parts, story tropes, or something else, and requests those parts as the kink she wants in her fanfiction (I.e. "*Spock/Kirk, chubby!Kirk*" or "*Scotty/Uhura, vampire!Uhura*"). This specification—this declaration of one's kink in a prompt—is what Francesca Coppa describes as "a way of watching television familiar to most female fans and to all fan vidders: a selective seeing, or seeing in parts" (109-110). What comes before an exclamation point, in others words, is a way to see what comes after it; the exclamation point in the middle proclaims that what you will see is exciting!

In "A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness," Coppa discusses the celebration of television tropes in a fanvid, or fan-made video, by the Clucking Belles. The vid cuts

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fits engage larger tropes in a dizzying array of permutations, so that each permutation could conceivably have its own tag. For instance, there are tags for *kid!Bones* and *kid!Sulu*, but fits tagged in these two categories may or may not be tagged also for the more general *kid!fic* category. Thus, a difference between normal fic and kink meme fic is that kink meme fic gets categorized by kinks, while descriptors like angst or drama or comedy are less important. Whereas outside of the meme, a particular fic might be rated and categorized with rating and genre words like "NC-17 angst hurt/comfort," the same fic within the meme would more likely be categorized by specific kink, like "spanking."



together surprisingly similar clips from many popular movies and television shows: characters swordfighting, characters shoving each other up against walls, characters tipping their hats, characters whipping off their glasses, characters gratuitously removing their clothing, characters in bathtubs, characters hanging from the ceiling and being tortured, all of which are interspersed with scenes of dancing and partying and set to Buster Poindexter's dance hit "Hot, Hot, Hot" (108). Coppa describes this fanvid as being a dance floor where media tropes are brought together for a fannish party: "The clichés of mass media are reinscribed, and appreciated, as erotic choreography" (108). Like the kink meme, this fanvid is a celebration and fetishization of tropes and genres. Coppa's observations about vidding are also illuminating for kink memes:

Vidding women cut, slicing visual texts into pieces before putting them together again, fetishizing not only body parts and visual tropes, but the frame, the filmic moment, that they pull out of otherwise coherent wholes. (107)

Like vidders, kink meme participants selectively pilfer source material, especially fetishized body parts, characteristics, and other tropes. Kink, in other words, is a moment of heightened attention (heightened!attention) that makes patterns out of isolated moments and fetishes out of a particular arrangement of the canon. This focus of the attention undoes the restraints of the "otherwise coherent wholes" or source narratives and recombines the fetishized parts.

Recent scholars who have theorized fanfiction genres have described this recombination in terms of "layers." Mafalda Stasi, for instance, describes slash as a "*palimpsest* to indicate a nonhierarchical, rich layering of genres, more or less partially

erased and resurfacing, and a rich and complex continuum of themes, techniques, voices, moods, and registers” (119). Catherine Driscoll also notes a “layering effect to classification of fan fiction,” where pairings, ratings, and the het-slash-gen distinction overlap with categories like “comedy” or “angst” (84). Both Stasi and Driscoll are describing the way that fanfiction genres are already overlapping and inter-penetrating; the concept of kink simply shines a light on the inherent promiscuity of this overlap.

In this excerpt, an anonymous fan of the kink meme has rewritten the Lord’s Prayer as an homage to the moderator of the meme, st\_anon, whom the writer figures as a god-like patron.

Oh Saint Anon, who art (or fics) in mod heaven.  
Hallowed be this kink!meme,  
Thy prompts will come,  
Thy ~~Chekov Sulu Chekov and Sulu~~ **fic** will be done,  
On Earth as it is in New Vulcan.  
Give us today our daily Kirk,  
And forgive us our wank,  
As we ignore with a **FIRE EVERYTHING** those who wank against us.  
And lead us not into sane pairings,  
But deliver us into vampire!Bones/mirror!Kirk/girl!Spock sex pollen threesomes.  
For thine is the kink!meme, Jim's libido and Chekov's hair,  
Now and until the kink!meme gives us back our souls.  
Amen.

(Or awoman whatever, dudes, we don't judge.) (Anonymous “And so...”)

This commentfic (a piece of fanfic rendered in a comment post) points to the fetish- and trope-based nature of the kink meme. The meme is kinky not because its content includes non-mainstream sexual practices, but because it stages elaborate, orgiastic re-combinations of its own tropes: “vampire!Bones/mirror!Kirk/girl!Spock sex pollen threesomes.” The meme also takes up the fetishized objects of fandom, such as “Jim’s

libido and Chekov's hair," and names them as such. It calls out the eroticism of the fannish way of viewing that puts emphasis on body parts and particular character traits.

The fannish erotics I have described—an erotics that is diffuse, piecemeal, and not constrained to bodily sensation—coincides with the work of other theorists of the erotic. In fact, when Lorde asserts the power of the erotic in "Uses of the Erotic," she actually defines it similarly to the way in which fans define kink. Just as kink is a trope or genre that gives a reader a particular and personal satisfaction, the erotic for Lorde "is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire" (340). Just as fans can declare their satisfaction with the phrase "this is my kink," Lorde might use "the considered phrase, 'It feels right to me,' [to] acknowledge the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge" (341). Lorde describes the erotic as a potential source of spiritual and political power: one to be channeled into work, creativity, activism, and relationships. It could be argued that fandom does not often integrate the spiritual or political and is thus closer to what Lorde calls pornography. Lorde defines the pornographic as the opposite of the erotic: something that "emphasizes sensation without feeling," without emotion. Kink, however, encompasses feeling alongside sensation: finds the erotic in every permutation of emotional, psychical, intellectual, and physical connection, specifically in the affect-organizing categories of genre. For instance, Anna S. delves into the emotional base of a master/slave kink:

The very first fan-fiction I ever wrote, a Trek story, had a very similar outline-- Spock gets enslaved, treated cruelly, then is rescued by a Klingon who is forced by circumstances to own him, but who treats him like a highly valuable pet,

something rare and exotic and noble. Somewhere at the heart of this is the feeling:  
"I am a monster. Love me." Monster or "alien." Because the deepest kink is about  
a profound sense of alienation and difference, and the feeling of being loved  
despite this, or for this. (eliade, "bulletproof kink")

Although not all fans analyze their kinks in this way, many do, and many, at the very  
least, go to the trouble of specifying their kinks to themselves, a process that requires  
both self-analysis and analysis of the media they enjoy. The existence of the category of  
kink represents the efforts of fans to break down their own satisfactions or pleasures into  
identifiable pieces, pieces describable in terms of genre. Because of this level of self-  
examination, then, the possibility to transcend mere "flattened affect," as Lorde calls it,  
inheres in the concept of kink, even if it is not always realized.

## **“Textual Glory Holes”: Kink Meme as a Sexual Community**

In the first part of this essay, I have suggested that the salacious recombination of generic forms taken on by the concept of kink, and not just sexual content, is responsible for its “kinkiness,” that is, that partially constitutes what kink *is*. Kink is also a category of community, though, so for a kink meme, kink is also constituted by the sexual interactions of fans who perform more-or-less personalized sexual production for each other.

Although the meme acts as a not-for-profit gift culture just like the rest of online fandom, the personalization of the gifts runs parallel to a similar trend often projected in mass media industries. Ashley Highfield of the BBC has commented “Future TV may be unrecognizable from today, defined not just by linear TV channels...but instead will resemble more of a kaleidoscope, thousands of streams of content, some indistinguishable as actual channels” (253). Audiences will want to personalize their media content by choosing it from among thousands of options or even by creating it themselves, in what digital theorist George Gilder calls a “feast of niches and specialties” (255). Clearly, a kink meme functions in this vein; fans need not wait for either the source author nor a fan author to independently produce the story they have been craving. In this way, even though kink fics in the meme are not quite commodities, because they are free, they exist within the modern ethos of personalization. Common fannish parlance, after all, involves phrases like “This is *my* kink” and “*Your* kink is not okay,” putting the emphasis on a seemingly individual desire.

However, individual desires are often expressed using categories produced by the wider community, something Henry Jenkins acknowledges when he responds to Highfield's and Gilder's projections of increased personalization by arguing that the convergence of multiple media—television, newspapers, internet, etc—fosters not “personal media,” but “communal media—media that become part of our lives *as members of communities*” (256, my emphasis). Thus, each fic posted on the meme may be positioned as a response to an individual's prompt, but authors often do not restrict themselves solely to the prompt and likely see themselves as writing for a much wider audience than the single, original prompter. All posts are public, and anyone can read and give feedback to a fic. Additionally, the feedback given to a fic is often phrased in conventional phrases that have currency within that particular community. Consequently, even though there is the idea of a kink as something that fulfills a personal desire, these desires tend to be phrased or prompted in generic or conventional ways, produce genre-based fiction, and then elicit convention-based feedback.

The nature of the communal conventions is moreover very intimate, if not sexualized. The exchange of fic, for instance, is organized as a gift culture, a culture that Karen Hellekson argues operates “in the symbolic realm in which fan gift exchange is performed in complex, even exclusionary symbolic ways that create a stable nexus of giving, receiving, and reciprocity” (114). The exchange of free fanfiction, artwork, administrative work, and other gifts of time, effort, and skill, is the constitutive activity of the community. This activity is moreover personal and emotional: fans give to each other “aspects of the self, such as time or talent” (114), effectively giving *themselves* to each

other. A particularly apt example of this conventionalized exchange of self is the sexualized discourses of the ways in which fans show approval for well-written sex scenes, noted by both Lackner, et al. and Kristina Busse. For example, a few responses to one fic from the kink meme are, “Fuck, yes. \*fans self\*,” “Guh,” “... ded from guh,” and “I think I just jizzed in my pants.” Another common and similar response is, “I’ll be in my bunk,” implying masturbation. These types of responses imply a kind of sexual exchange or interaction: the writer gives sexual pleasure to a set of readers.

Let us return to vulgarweed’s definition of kink memes: “they are **textual glory holes**. They are places for people to shake-off their cultural kink-shame and GET EACH OTHER OFF freely and playfully.” This idea that members of the kink meme are “getting each other off,” that is, sexually interacting with each other, is the logical conclusion of the idea that fan culture involves the exchange of gifts and the idea that the gifts of a kink meme are, at least in part, sexual pleasure. However, it is highly debatable to what extent fans believe they are engaging sexually with each other or to what extent they themselves experience a bodily sexual experience when they read explicit fanfiction. In two informal polls on LiveJournal of 386 and 574 fans, respectively, about 80% of both groups said that sexually explicit fanfiction made them physically aroused at least sometimes, but the majority of these respondents specified that physical arousal occurred only sometimes and that it may not be tied to explicit descriptions of sex so much as stories that “hit their kinks” by using tropes such as hurt/comfort or particular power dynamics in a relationships (damned\_colonial, friendship). In fact, in response to the poll question “When you comment on an NC-17 fanfic with some variation on ‘That’s so

hot!' or 'I'll be in my bunk!' do you mean it literally?," 168 fans (30%) chose the answer "No, it's just a polite convention to let the author know they succeeded in writing a sex scene I enjoyed reading" (friendshipper). For at least part of the fan audience, then, the sexualized discourses are conventional and therefore distance the fan from the idea that they are participating in a sexual exchange. Many fans moreover experience limited physical arousal while reading explicit fanfic; some fans even say they skip over extended descriptions of sex in order to attend to the plot. Just as Lorde would say about the erotic, then, kink is not only about sensation: it also involves emotional satisfaction and reveling in particular kinds of psychological connection, in addition to whatever sexual interaction may occur between the reader and writer of fanfiction.

Some may question whether they *are* engaging in a sexual interaction, since the interaction happens primarily through online storytelling and discourse. Whereas thinking of these responses solely as gifts—products that are detached from the creator when they are given away—can distance the recipient from the sexual nature of the exchange, thinking of the way Hellekson argues that online gift culture involves gifts of the self leads us to a better terminology for this exchange that takes into account the interaction between reader and writer: performance. As many scholars have noted, the sexual congress that happens in the kink meme is, at the very least, a *performance* of sexuality. Lackner, Lucas, and Reid, for instance, say the eroticism of the fannish social exchange is "performative and playful" (201). In "Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance," Coppa argues that fanfiction is fundamentally performative and developed in response to "dramatic rather than literary modes of



storytelling” (226). Fanfiction’s performativity is based several things, including its focus on bodies and how fan writers direct the movement of characters’ bodies in space. It is also based on the formulation of the fan community; it is a “cultural performance that requires a live audience...not merely a text, [but] an event” (239). Jennifer Gunnels theorizes the fan as an “ethnodramaturg”: both an ethnographer who “min[es] ethnographic fragments from the source material in order to explore and explain the workings of a fictive culture within fictive universe,” and then, because these ethnographic fragments are themselves dramatic, dramaturgically assembles the fragments into a new dramatic work (Gunnels 1). These writers suggest that, not only are fans staging characters’ interactions in their fanfic, but they are also performing themselves as fans, and in the kink meme, performing a sexualized interaction (“I’ll be in my bunk”), whether that performance maps onto the fan’s embodied experience or not. Some fans even explicitly consider themselves as inhabiting a separate online persona within fandom. Vulgarweed, the author of the epigraph to this paper, is one such writer: “It’s hard to write an autobiography since I’m really just a persona” (“Bio”).

The concepts of performance and personae are particularly relevant to a kink meme, which owes much of its terminology and content to BDSM cultures. SM encounters, after all, are called “scenes” in which participants play “roles.” Thomas S. Weinberg notes that “S&M activity appears to fall within what [Irving] Goffman calls the ‘theatrical frame’” and that SM scenes have “dramatic scripting” (106). Just as BDSM practitioners play out a scene for their sexual and emotional pleasure, so do kink meme participants play out scenarios with their characters in the fanfiction and with each other

in feedback or conversation. One of the most explicit connections to BDSM in the kink meme is roleplaying, in which a fan responds to a post *as* a character, often using an appropriate avatar (called an “icon”) to indicate their character. For example, in response to one request, two roleplayers stage an extensive sexual encounter between Dr. McCoy and Winona Kirk (Capt. Kirk’s mother). Such roleplaying is clearly dramatic, but even more typical fanfiction could also be called dramatic. In fanfiction on the kink meme, participants often explore the dynamics of personae like guard/prisoner, teacher/student, parent/child, whore/client, just as SM people do (Califia 174). Many of the other tropes or kinks explored on the meme (see for instance Appendix B: abuse, age differences, animalistic behavior) are also drawing on BDSM traditions. Goffman also notes that “S&M play has complex rules, rituals, roles and dynamics that create a “frame” around the experience” (108), much in the same way that the conventions and genres of online kink memes frame the interactions of its participants.

## **Appropriating and Performing BDSM and Queer Concepts**

It is important to ask, though, about the relation of BDSM and queerness to the category of kink, and whether this relation is entirely fair or progressive. Are fans appropriating BDSM culture? Is queer an accurate or fair label for a kink meme? Fandom has often had to negotiate issues of appropriation, most notably in regards to slash fanfiction's co-opting of male/male relationships without (usually) representing realistic gay men or their experiences. Transgendered fans have also critiqued the subgenre of genderswap, in which characters change gender but issues of gender dysphoria and the sex/gender distinction are rarely addressed.

One of the most pertinent questions for the category of kink and its attending erotics is whether it is queer. Scholars such as Busse have argued that fan spaces, particularly in their exchange of sexual fiction, are "queer female spaces," a phrase that has been widely repeated and debated not only in academic publications but also in online fan spaces. These debate here breaks down into what Eve Sedgwick calls "minoritizing" and "universalizing" definitions of the queer:

the minoritizing view [is] that there is a distinct population of persons who 'really are' gay....the universalizing views [are] that sexual desire is an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities; that apparently heterosexual persons and object choices are strongly marked by same-sex influences and desires, and vice versa for apparently homosexual ones. (56)

The queer female space is a universalizing idea: the (predominantly) homosocial, female realm in which fans exchange of sexually charged fiction is a space in which "apparently

heterosexual persons and object choices are strongly marked by same-sex influences and desires.” Lackner, Lucas, and Reid , for instance, protest how the “too-easy identification of slash as *straight women writing gay men* has served to mask the extent to which the sexual pleasure is created by women (of all genders/sexual identities) for women (of all genders/sexual identities),” an interaction which they call a “bisexual erotics” (201). Others have taken a minoritizing view, arguing that a majority of female fans are heterosexual and that, even in "queer" female spaces, they maintain heterosexual privilege that can result in the marginalization of queer fans, characters, and experiences. As Busse notes, some fans have objected to what they see as the straight privilege of the fannish playing at queerness: “some lesbian and bi fans feel marginalized by a culture that permits a masquerade of queer discourse and thereby trivializes queer identities and experiences” (211). Busse is discussing lust memes in which LiveJournal users express their “lust” for other users, but the kink meme could be similarly critiqued for allowing fans to play at both queer and BDSM experiences or cultures.

Pop culture depictions of BDSM in the past decades have been a double-edged sword; Margot D. Weiss argues that these mass media representations only accept BDSM when they can normalize or pathologize it. It is true that the *Star Trek XI Kink Meme* normalizes kink at least to some extent; that is, it puts emphasis on the parts that can be put to the service of normative American sexuality. Despite its name, the *Star Trek XI Kink Meme* actually contains relatively little content that would fall under the purview of a BDSM community, if we take a minoritizing approach to BDSM. The majority of fanfiction on this particular meme concerns more-or-less straightforward male/male sex.

For example, “Post-exam de-stressing,” the first request of the meme, would not traditionally be considered kinky. Neither, I think, would the story that accompanies it (Appendix A): sex in public places could be considered a traditional kink, but the story mentions the setting only in passing, focuses on characterization, and contains no direct descriptions of sexual acts. The “kink” this story expresses is actually a more emotional one: the thrill of impulsivity in the face of unknown consequences. The idea of impulsivity as a kink is indicative of a more universalizing view of BDSM, in which the focus is on the erotic emotional resonances that permeate the world, instead of the carefully scripted ways in which sexual partners might produce these emotions through BDSM play.

There is some evidence, though, that kink memes can act as a tool for fostering acceptance and understanding of BDSM both in the minoritizing sense (a particular sexual community that may be discriminated against) and in the universalizing sense (a concept of the kinky that pervades the wider culture and disrupts concepts of normative sex). In the minoritizing vein, the story that answers the prompt “Chekov/Sulu, knifeplay” clearly describes a consensual and loving D/s relationship with carefully controlled knifeplay and appropriate post-sex medical care (Anonymous, “Knifeplay...”). Although most fan writers are probably not practitioners of BDSM in their offline lives, many fans *are* and have written metatextual essays (called “meta”) about the appropriate treatment of kink in fanworks, realistic depictions of D/s sexual encounters and relationships, and other topics. For example, thingswithwings discusses the common practice of giving back-handed feedback on a kinky story. She provides an exaggerated

example: “I normally hate enemas/watersports/bondage/tickling/uniform fetish stories, because they're disgusting, but this story was SO GREAT that I loved it and thought it was tly hot even though normally I'd be throwing up!” thingswithwings advocates a more carefully worded form of feedback to avoid the offensive implication that, outside of fanfiction, kinky practices are repulsive. To some extent, then, activist-fans may be making political progress for BDSM cultures by giving sympathetic renditions of their practices to new audiences, audiences that are eager to learn so that they can write their own kinky fanfiction.

In the more universalizing sense, kink may work to undermine conceptions of the normative, and not only in sex acts. If we take the components of Gayle Rubin’s “charmed circle” of “good” sex, then normative sex is heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, free (not for money), coupled, in a relationship, same generation, at home, without pornography, without manufactured objects, and vanilla (that is, not SM) (Rubin 74). Exploring the disruptions of these expectations is one of the aims of kinky fanfiction: the story in Appendix A, for instance, leads up to male/male homosexual, non-procreative, and casual sex in public. On a broader scope, though, the category of kink may make fandom a more congenial place for all kinds of difference, not just sexual ones. For Lorde, the possibility for and power of radical change that comes from the erotic inheres in “the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual,” which is exactly what fandom *is*. That sharing “forms a bridge...which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them and lessens the threat of their difference” (341). A community of people who have opened themselves to

erotic pleasure from each other—erotic pleasure that arrives intellectually, emotionally, and sexually—is a community of people who are already open, even vulnerable, in the way that is necessary to discuss the inequalities of power that attach to identity. This vulnerability, of course, also paves the way for personal attacks and vitriolic rhetoric, for example, in discussions such as the massive fannish debate on racism and cultural appropriation that has been called RaceFail. Many fans, however, have enacted creative, critical, and organizational projects meant to create a more just and difference-positive space, combating racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression. I believe that the psychic basis for this awesome organizational power is the erotics—the kink—of fandom: the constant recombination and layering of tropes and genres, of *ideas*, makes fan spaces not only promiscuous spaces, but *flexible* spaces. Change is not only possible, but probable, when both the ethos and ethics of a space is grounded in the erotic.

## Conclusion: The Interanimating Tropes of Kink

I have argued that kink as a fannish category is based on both the genres and tropes that make up fanfiction and the performative eroticism of the interactions in the kink meme. Even though the kink meme is meant to act as a safe space for all kinds of pleasure, some fans may distance themselves from the intimacy of their interactions with other fans, a distance maintained by the performativity and conventionality of the kink meme as a community. For other fans, these same characteristics make the meme a safe and exciting place to try out personae and explore sexual practices that they otherwise would not have read or written about.

Kink as a category is telling not just for this limited group of fans, but can show us something about the way that desire and genre interanimate each other for consumers of all pop culture texts. In his *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, I.A. Richards explains the interanimation of words this way: “fundamentally it is a borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts. Thought is metaphoric, and proceeds by comparison, and the metaphors of language derive therefrom” (94). Although Richards is developing a theory of language itself here, his metaphor is particularly apt for kink. Kink as a category and the kink meme as a community can be fully understood only when one can see an instance of either as a single point on a large web of tropes, genres, and conventions. Kink is “a borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts,” or perhaps more aptly, a borrowing *of* thoughts, in that fans pillage source texts for content, and an intercourse *between* thoughts, as the genres and tropes of fandom and pop culture interpenetrate and procreate to form infinite iterations of stories.



## Appendices

### APPENDIX A: “TWO GUYS WALK INTO A BAR” BY INK\_N\_IMP.

*This fanfic is the response to the first prompt posted on the meme (McCoy/Kirk, set when they're at the academy; post-exam de-stressing) and is an excellent example of commentfic, since it was posted within a single comment post. “Two Guys” is reproduced here without alteration or editing.*

He'd always thought he was too damn impulsive for his own good. He's admitted it now, in his bitter old age of 27—he was too quick to do whatever seemed like the right thing at the time, and Hindsight, never one of give a man a break, was 20/20.

Marrying between college and med school seemed like a great idea, for one. They had been in love, after all, had been for two years, and they happily and—rather naively—decided they could support each other through the years of school work and loans and residency and misery they had been warned would come. Becoming parents while he was still in med school, that—Joanna would never be a mistake...but the timing could have been better.

Joining research projects while in his residency when deep down inside he really only wanted to be a general practitioner somewhere quiet and small—it wasn't really what he wanted, but it had felt like a GREAT idea when he thought of all the people he could help if they only could find a breakthrough!--while his wife spend long days and evenings alone, and his daughter flew past all the major milestones of infancy and toddlerhood without him there to witness them.

--Yea. That would be something he'd do differently, if time travel were possible.

He was too quick to anger and too quick to melancholy. People who didn't know him tended to praise his southern charm. People who knew him tended to complain about his southern temper. Even when he was right (and he was OFTEN RIGHT) he had a knack for saying so in the most caustic manner possible that people did the opposite of whatever he said out of SPITE.

He'd signed the divorce papers, got taken to the cleaners because her lawyers had been better than his (the student loans were under HIS name, after all), lost all but the barest of visitation rights (to his own DAUGHTER) and—in a fit of madness—had joined Starfleet to get as far away from his old life as one man could get; which was deep into the far reaches of cold, inhumane space.

Yea, he thought HE was too damn impulsive--and then he met James T. Kirk, the Grand

Master of It-Seemed-Like-A-Good-Idea-At-The-Time.

“Damn it, Jim,” he hissed, pushing hands away from his belt, though from Jim’s dirty, smug laughter, he knows he’s not really putting up a fight. The fact they ARE alone in the bar restroom, and he’s so hard it hurts isn’t helping his resolve. But it would be nice to pretend that he’s an adult, a doctor, damn it, not some horny wet-behind-the-ears cadet-

-

*Come on, Bones, his inner ear repeats in a voice far too whiny and ridiculous to be what Jim actually sounded like when the night was still young and they were still in the dorm. We survived finals to live another day and take more of them next semester! We need to celebrate! We need to drink until we forget everything we learned! We need to get **laid**, Bones--*

He bite back a moan as he leaned heavily against the sink, looking through his dark bangs and into the mirror, catching the blue eyes looking at him over his shoulder. He’s pretty sure Jim’s just undone his belt with ONE HAND, and his eyes are the very devil incarnate, offering a world of temptation and desire and what will probably be the shortest mind-blowing non-sex he’s ever had if Jim doesn’t get his hand out of his pants RIGHT NOW—

And as he gets pushed into the bathroom stall, he promises himself that this time, THIS TIME, this IS a good idea.

Really.

**APPENDIX B: EXCERPT FROM “LIST OF FAN-FICTION KINKS, TROPES, AND CLICHÉS” BY ANNA S.**

- Absence makes the heart grow fonder
- Abuse (sexual, emotional, and/or violent childhood abuse; past abusive relationships; character A's abuse drives character B into arms of character C; the wounded child as an adult archetype)
- Abduction as seduction (beloved captives)
- Accidental stimulation (proximity and friction; involuntary arousal; situations of adrenaline and reflexes)
- Adrenaline and crises (pre-, mid-, or post-crisis sex; speed-freaks or adrenaline junkies; near-death experiences; the shadow of impending death--hours, minutes, or moments; see also Situational engineering)
- Age differences (e.g., older man/younger man pairing)
- Age regression (mental and/or physical regression; childlike behavior caused by brain damage; characters met before in the past; high school AUs; time-travel)
- Aliens make them have sex (fuck or die; fertility rituals; intoxication; taking one for the team)
- Alpha males (alpha/beta male pairings; alpha/alpha pairings; het alpha males)
- Amazons and strong women (warrior women; women as soldiers, law enforcement figures, or leaders; goddesses; tough, butch, or muscled women; lesbians or dykes; quasi-masculine characteristics in general, such as a boyish body type: slim, athletic, and small-breasted; forcefulness or brusqueness)
- Amnesia
- Anal penetration with foreign objects
- Anal sex (face to face, from behind, bottom riding top; standing; bent over desk; gay or straight; girl-on-boy with strap-on; girl-on-girl with strap-on)
- Anal/butt plugs (during sex; worn under clothes in public)
- Angst (see Emotional themes)
- Animalistic behaviors and characteristics, dominant (snarling; sniffing; scent-marking or biting; other claiming acts; territoriality; predatory stalking; cuffing; forcing the partner's neck down; claws and other features)

- Animalistic behaviors and characteristics, submissive (feral characters or behavior; domesticated pet behavior such as sitting at owner's foot and cheeking their thigh; purring; licking; characters objectified as animals, e.g., ponyboys)
- Animal themes or fetishization (physical transformation, e.g., animagi or werewolves; animalistic features; hirsutism as a fetish; tentacle sex; quasi animal forms such as centaurs, merfolk, intelligent dragons; pets, wild or domesticated; familiars; men showing affection toward animals, e.g., holding kittens, or nuzzling their horses; see also Otherness)
- Anonymous sex (clubbing; glory-holes; alley sex; alien fertility rituals; one-night stands)
- Anti-heroes (sympathetic villains; villains with principles; noble demons; enemies who keep their word)
- Aphrodisiacs (see Intoxication and altered states)
- Aristocracy (aristocratic behaviors, characteristics, and/or identity; chivalry and noblesse oblige; royal blood; elegance or effeteness; dignity; royal courts or castles; imperial cultures; Greco-Roman classicism; dynastic families; gentlemen; aristocrat pairings with houseboys, stable-boys, or secretaries)
- Asphyxiation (asphyxiophilia; autoerotic asphyxiation; scarfing; choking; breath play)
- Ass-play and/or fetishization (ass lifted in the air for penetration; emphasized by harness or blue jeans; ass slapping; spreading cheeks; rimming)
- Attention (singling someone out; treating someone specially in front of others; making a point of showing respect to or interest in someone who doesn't usually receive it; observing, studying, or analyzing someone to understand them)
- AUs (alternate characterizations and situations; sex between alternates of one character or between different characters; alternates as catalysts for realization of desire; role reversal; darker mirror universe characters; mistaken identity)
- Auctions (slave or slave charity)

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