"Captain," Seven said huskily when Janeway finally ended the kiss. "I wish to engage in non-reproductive copulation with you."

~ G. L. Dartt, "Just Between Us"

Production is also immediately consumption… Consumption is also immediately production… Each is immediately its opposite. But at the same time a mediating movement takes place between the two.

~ Karl Marx, Grundrisse (Tucker 228-9)
When the character of Seven of Nine was introduced at the beginning of *Star Trek: Voyager*’s fourth season (1997), the move was widely spoken of as a transparent ploy to increase the show’s popularity in the coveted 18-24-year-old-male ratings bracket—this from a series that had originally made TV history by instating Captain Kathryn Janeway, the first woman in *Trek* who was captain for longer than a cameo. But in spite of her Barbie-doll body and skin-tight outfit, Seven does not fit easily into satisfying stereotypes of the female sex object. In contrast to your typical bimbo (even of the action hero variety) she is extremely intelligent and physically powerful, presents herself as logical, emotionless, and arrogant, and is relentlessly desexualized (her naïveté, social incompetence, and self-assuredness have been enough to cow most men who have shown an interest). Seven is a cyborg hybrid: a human assimilated by the malevolent Borg collective at age 6. When she was assigned as the Borg liaison to Captain Janeway, Janeway severed Seven's link to the collective, effectively deassimilating her by force, and insisted that she be re-humanized against her will [fig. 1]. Most of her cybernetic implants were rejected by her body and removed, and she took on a basically human (if somewhat topheavy) appearance. Permanent reminders of her Borg past and cyborg present remain, however, in metallic ornaments visible on her face and hand (and who knows where else!).

Seven's transition to "individuality" in affect and attitude was much more gradual and incomplete than her physical transformation, and Captain Janeway quickly took on the role of primary mentor in her journey toward "humanity" [fig. 2]. In the course of Janeway's fixation with humanizing Seven, the two women developed an emotionally potent and often highly contentious relationship that is a counterpoint to Janeway's self-imposed celibacy. In the show's explicit narrative, their codependence is justified as a result of Janeway's sense of responsibility to Seven, or as a manifestation of her maternal instincts. But as a hybrid, Seven in fact has two
mommies: the other is the Borg Queen [fig. 3], a decapitated head and svelte robotic body suspended in the Borg collective's command center, processing and organizing the thoughts of trillions of cyborg drones. If Janeway's trademark is an obsessional anxiety about maintaining Trek's liberal humanist values in the unmapped and hostile Delta Quadrant, the Borg Queen suggests the insidiously seductive pleasures of abandoning those values as a Borg drone: completely sharing experience in an unbounded flow of information, perfect efficiency unhindered by morality, omnipotence, omniscience, and immortality. Both these characters seem inclined to duke out their ideological differences across Seven's mind and body: in the epic Voyager episode "Dark Frontier," the Borg Queen kidnaps Seven, Janeway goes on a suicidal solo mission to rescue her, and each of them claims Seven as "mine" or "one of us." Thus, the central conflict of Star Trek, between the civilized and the monstrous, is inflected as a lesbian love triangle.

So, if some fans of Voyager identify the intensely invested relationships of these three women as subtext—that is, narrative and visual structures that, while on the most literal level disavowing any erotic content, nevertheless invite a queer interpretation—we must acknowledge, first of all, that the show is doing some of the work by setting up Janeway's desire to win Seven for her own. Slash is by definition a genre of "poaching", which means that there must be something attractive in the lord's preserve that fans want to get their hands on. Within Trek fandom, J/7 is one of the only lesbian pairings to develop a large following, perhaps because the characters have the archetypal quality of a slash couple: an on-screen relationship fraught with deep emotional connection and conflict. But we must also observe, second of all, that fans have their own desires and investments that they read onto Voyager's narratives. The analysis I just presented of Voyager is intimately a product of my own fantasies as a lesbian fan, and if my
desires for erotic stimulation and representation were different, I would have seen something entirely different in *Voyager* (perhaps nothing interesting at all). This idea, that fans use mass media texts as raw material to create interpretations and stories that realize their own desires, is the standard reading of the fan fiction phenomenon, even of mass media reception in general.

If fans are active readers who interpret TV shows in diverse and unpredictable ways according to their own imperatives, though, we can say the same for the academics who write articles about fan fiction. Just as J/7 writers aren't making up the fact that Janeway and Seven are doing suggestive things on television, scholars are certainly not inventing the fascinating and revealing aspects of fan activities. But, in their creative work, both groups are driven by their own desires to expand and expound what they observe. If the defining fantasy of slash is that characters of the same gender are having sex with each other, I would propose that the defining fantasy of academic work on it is that slash is a form of grassroots political resistance. As Jenkins puts it, fan texts and communities "draw on elements from dominant culture in order to produce underground art that explicitly challenges patriarchal assumptions" (31). But although they seem willing to describe fans' activities in glowingly rebellious terms, slash theorists are collectively reluctant to go on to ask the question their work raises: Does slash change the world? I suspect that many people who are passionate about slash, academics included, fantasize that it could, but in academic writing this utopian vision is rarely acknowledged or elaborated on. I, on the other hand, am in favor of fantasy. I fantasize about what Janeway and Seven do together when they're not on camera in my own slash fiction, and I'm equally willing to try to write a believable scholarly analysis that will tell the story of my own desire for a way to theorize real possibilities for political change. To me, this is a matter of methodology: if most scholars of slash have, at best, pessimistically foisted this issue off on political economy (Jenkins writes that
"only by locating the market conditions that block fan access to the means of mass cultural production can we understand the political dimensions of their relationship with the media" ([285]), I will argue that critical theory can offer equally valuable models of the complexity of culture, which can allow desire to animate slash theory as it animates slash fiction, with a result that is hopefully just as exciting.

In this paper, I present a gloss of the methodological origins of reception studies as we now know it, and of well-known academic work on slash and other fan fiction within this tradition, including a closer reading of Jenkins's book *Textual Poachers*. I argue that conventional perspectives on slash are limited, first of all, because extreme and rapid changes in fan fiction production and distribution facilitated by the internet make their demographic basis obsolete. More importantly, this work demonstrates the limitations of conventional reception theory, which understands popular audiences as active readers who appropriate materials from mass culture in the process of making meanings that fulfill their own needs and desires. By theorizing reception in isolation, as a moment discrete from and in opposition to cultural production, this paradigm ultimately implies that, although the audience can read the material handed down from on high in resistant ways, this process doesn't give them any access to or have any effect on the mechanisms of this production. While I don't mean to ignore the very real economic and social dominance of the mass media industry, I do believe it is important to interrogate how mass media consumers and their resistant meanings may be participating in hegemonic power struggles. In order to ask these questions, it is necessary to turn to new methodologies for the study of reception which postulate realistically intricate and expansive connections between the site of production and the site of consumption, which acknowledge that the two modes are in play simultaneously, and are composed of and connected by a diffuse web
of practices that have both material and ideological components, breeding an environment in
which seemingly distant operations may have reciprocal effects.

Addressing myself to these problems, I go on to suggest an alternative framework for
understanding the relationship of fan fiction to mass media production, one based in critical
theory. I turn to two specific moments in feminist and queer theory, Donna Haraway's "A
Cyborg Manifesto" and Berlant and Warner's "Sex in Public," to allow for more complex and
imaginative ways in which slash (re)structures consumption, and to suggest how these mutations
are intimately bound up with progressive changes in other discourses (such as sexuality). I
emphasize the models these theorists provide for understanding the magnitude of current cultural
transformations, and for recognizing the opportunities that are consequently appearing to
undermine and recast modern oppressions. The cyborg is a metaphoric figure for resistance from
within terrifying new dominations; public sex is a challenge to the most intimate foundations of
patriarchal capitalism. Put together they make cyborg sex: non-sexual reproduction plus non-
reproductive sex equals a potentially powerful fantasy of a site for political resistance and
change.

As a demonstration of how this formulation works as an interpretive tool, I then offer a
close reading of the J/7 story "Freeing Kathryn," by Paulann Hughes. This story illustrates the
fact that mass culture is hegemonic, and as such it is not an ideological monolith: its meanings
are constantly contested in a dynamic dialogue with their resistant or marginal counterparts. J/7
smut wrestles with both queer sexual modes and the boundaries of the human, merging these two
post-reproductive sites into a single erotic narrative. But what is most interesting about it is what
its textual tendencies can tell us about the complex conversations that take place between
consumers and the mass media outside the expected boundaries of television, and in particular
about the relationship of these texts to the technologies and communities that provide relatively independent environments for fan interpretations. I must make it clear here that this is not a survey of J/7 fiction, or of lesbian slash—that is a worthy project, but one I will leave to the ethnographers.

Finally, I discuss the current state of slash production, distribution, and containment more generally. Beginning from the conviction that it is vital to consider reception in terms of both its immediate environment and its potential social consequences, I argue that slash illustrates (in its narratives and especially in its circumstances) new and provocative challenges to cultural dominations. These challenges are centered in the internet and the ways its technologies are reorganizing relations of power, but they incorporate titillating questions about sex, identity, corporeality, privacy, and ownership. That is, I am actually using slash as an example. I am primarily interested in proposing methodological alternatives to conventional reception studies, with the objective of providing a framework for how to see (how to imagine, even) what kinds of tactics consumers exercise that have the potential to reshape our culture. Slash provides an especially concrete embodiment of the creative processes that are associated with reception, and its recent evolution is intimately knit with the transformations that new forms of technology and communications are generating in our lives. It is only a tiny corner of a vast movement, but as such it can serve as a fruitful illustration of what new possibilities are opening up. I acknowledge that slash is not inherently subversive, and it is not going to change the world all by itself, but it demonstrates in microcosm an array of hotly contested struggles in which the winners have yet to be declared.
The major analyses of slash are affiliated with a specific school of inquiry within cultural studies (called reception studies, reception theory or, more broadly, audience studies), and I would like to say a few words about the historical development of this field. In the 50's and 60's, there were essentially two schools of audience studies, conventionally called "optimistic" and "pessimistic." Pessimistic theorists, who were identified with the emerging discipline of cultural studies, drew on Marxist, structuralist, and semiotic critical traditions to advance a "hypodermic" model of media consumption: an entirely passive audience is injected with a belief system by texts that are the purveyors of the dominant ideology. Optimistic inquiry was associated with the more mainstream "uses and gratifications" school of media research, which operated within a positivist, quantitative social science convention and viewed audiences as entirely free to receive any meanings from media texts. In the 70's, cultural theorists at the Birmingham Center for Cultural Studies began to reject the totalizing model of the passive audience in favor of a more nuanced approach that incorporated some of the assumptions of "uses and gratifications" researchers: Stuart Hall's seminal 1974 essay "Encoding, Decoding" attempted to bridge the two by theorizing reception as a process of active reading that may or may not reproduce the ideologies that are encoded in a media text. At around the same time, David Morley first argued that the antidote to the abstraction of cultural studies debates about whether audiences make dominant or resistant meanings was qualitative empirical research: ethnography (his initial influential book was The Nationwide Audience, 1980). Although reception theory has undergone significant development in the past three decades, most scholars remain committed to more or less ethnographic methodologies.
The researchers who established ethnography as the canonical methodology for audience studies claimed it has several main advantages: it prevents the critic from making things up about audiences by theorizing in the abstract, and creates the possibility that s/he could "be surprised" by the data collected; and it provides a means of linking the textual moment of reception to "a more historicized insight into the ways in which 'audience activity' is related to social and political structures and processes" (Ang 101) through the researcher's acts of interpretation. The political inflection Ang references here involves describing the relations of power (e.g. gender, race, class) that provide the context for and shape audience activity, rather than exploring the political influence that audience's acts of reception themselves might command.

The first academic acknowledgement of slash was actually closer to traditional feminist criticism than to ethnography: sci-fi writer Joanna Russ's 1985 essay about K/S slash "Pornography by Women, for Women, with Love." Motivated by the admittedly titillating question of why middle-aged housewives were writing gay male porn, Russ argues that the women who write K/S do so in order to imagine a utopian alternative to their unsatisfying lives. They envision an intimate relationship of equals, but because it is impossible in our culture to conceive of a heterosexual couple in this way, they make use of two male characters (Kirk and Spock), who can integrate both masculine and feminine characteristics. This approach, while not uninteresting, stops at offering women a coded way of expressing resistance, without asking questions about how this mode of expression might succeed or fail at altering the oppressive material or ideological realities that make it necessary in the first place. Most subsequent studies of slash have built on this demographically-based reading. The first book about Trek slash, Enterprising Women, by Camille Bacon-Smith (1991), is essentially an ethnography that
supports Russ's conclusion, elaborating on the empowering and supportive community women create in slash culture.

Henry Jenkins and Constance Penley are the two most prolific and recognized writers on fan fiction. Penley's work is unique in its emphasis on technology within a feminist framework: in "Brownian Motion," she makes the case that both the content and the context of slash fiction are a site for "debate [about] the issues of women's relation to the technologies of science, the mind, and the body" (158-9). However, the connections she makes around these issues are unfocused and undertheorized, and she tends to raise an array of interesting questions without effectively answering them. As an example particularly suited to this paper, Penley identifies "the deepest wish of Star Trek fan culture: that the fandom matter, that what the fans do can affect the world in significant ways," and argues that "it is not enough for the critic to identify this wish and be satisfied with designating it as a symptom" (152). Instead of going on to attempt to address the tantalizing question of whether fans are actually fulfilling their wish, though, she continues with a discussion of how they share the preoccupations and ideologies of Trek (hearkening back to the hypodermic model). While she is not an ethnographer, her tendency toward the descriptive reflects the influence of ethnography on her work.

The authoritative text on fan fiction is, of course, Henry Jenkins's book Textual Poachers, and his work is also the most theoretical. Taking this book as an analysis representative of ethnographically oriented reception theory at its most interesting, I would like to look at it more closely here. In Textual Poachers, Jenkins makes some of the seminal claims about fan fiction: arguing against popular and academic "stereotypes of fans as cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers," he proposes that "fans actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis
for their social interactions. In the process... they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings" (23-24). This formulation goes one step beyond understanding popular reception only as resistant reading—Jenkins allows that fan writers are producers (in some sense) of culture. This framework draws on Michel de Certeau's "poaching" metaphor, which conceptualizes reading not as the passive absorption of authorial meaning passed down from positions of dominance, but as "an ongoing struggle for possession of the text and for control over its meanings" (24). But de Certeau's model theorizes only "ways that the subordinate classes elude or escape institutional control" (26), and pessimistically disregards the possibility that their tactics might have any effect on these dominant institutions—readers are poachers, not guerrillas. Jenkins agrees that "fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness... lack direct access to the means of commercial cultural production and have only the most limited resources with which to influence the entertainment industry's decisions" (26).

This rather abrupt halt in the optimistic flow of Jenkins's ideas exposes some of the contradictions in his account: if readers (not to mention fan writers) can produce meaning, but it is still only members of the culture industry who have power as Producers, there is some confusion over what exactly production is, or at least how it should be evaluated. That is, it is not clear whether he wants to ultimately adhere to economic definitions of consumption and production that privilege the commercial, or whether he is proposing that fan activities could radically redefine these terms: this is a theoretical question he avoids wrestling with by remaining primarily in the realm of the descriptive. Jenkins does strongly emphasize that "Fandom constitutes a base for consumer activism" (278), but he understands this only in its most narrowly literal formulation, as bids by television fans to influence programming decisions.
By leaving no route open to theorize fans' interactions with the deeper underpinnings of the systems of cultural production, Jenkins is effectively constructing reception as a process whose effects are contained within the fan community. Although he lays an important critical foundation for an understanding of fan fiction, it is extremely difficult, if you accept the terms of his analysis, to ask questions about the impact that fans' textual work might have within the network of social and economic relations that generate the media in the first place.

In Jenkins's mode of reading, fan fiction is always subordinate to its father text: he writes that "Because popular narratives often fail to satisfy, fans must struggle with them, to try to articulate to themselves and others unrealized possibilities within the original works. Because the texts continue to fascinate, fans cannot dismiss them from their attention but rather must try to find ways to salvage them for their interests" (23). In other words, it is fans' torturous enthralment to an inadequate mass media that constrains them to add their own ancillary narratives to it. But it is equally possible to read the interpenetration of TV and fan texts as a sign that fans are appropriating the signifiers of mass culture in the service of their independent narrative and social needs—or to avoid rankings altogether, and begin by thinking of TV shows and fan writing as related manifestations of equally legitimate forms of desire. There is also a hierarchy of sex in Jenkins's work: in his opinion (one he shares with other slash theorists),

While character sexuality constitutes one of the most striking characteristics of slash, and most slash fans concede that erotic pleasure is central to their interest in the genre, it seems false to define this genre exclusively in terms of its representation of sexuality. Slash is not so much a genre about sex as it is a genre about the limitations of traditional masculinity and about reconfiguring male identity. (191)

Rather than offering something else ("male identity," no less) to take precedence over and draw attention away from the smut that readers reluctantly "concede" is important to them, I would
like to propose that sexual explicitness can, in itself, be a primary, privileged realm of significance.

With these criticisms of prominent analyses of slash in mind, I would like to advance two reasons why it is time to reapproach the study of slash, and of mass media reception in general, from a new direction. First, and most literally, the rapid popularization of the internet has made possible remarkable transformations in the production and distribution of slash. Whereas its dependence on formalized zines tied to the convention circuit had previously kept its distribution fairly circumscribed, as the internet expanded fan fiction became much more freely accessible. There was an explosion in the number of readers and writers, and in the volume and diversity of stories produced (which included an unprecedented abundance of lesbian slash). Although some print zines still exist, the majority of fan fiction is now produced and distributed in cyberspace.

The web is changing the tenor of fan communities, increasing the popularity of fanfic and its recognition by mainstream culture, creating new tensions in the relationship between fans and the culture industry, and demanding new approaches to fandom from academics. Work based on the demographic dominance of middle-class white women in m/m slash circles, while still historically interesting, is now factually obsolete. More critically, I believe that the concrete, unimaginative analytical structures characteristic of this methodological bent are inadequate to ever fully represent the surprising, inconceivable aspects and possibilities of the technological revolution, and of slash's participation in it.

My second and more complex departure, then, is a methodological one. Reception researchers originally turned away from the critical traditions that were the purview of literary theory (and then cultural studies) because they found theoretical models to be too abstract and streamlined to reflect the complexities of lived relations. For example, David Morley writes that
"the ‘speculative' approach... in which the theorist simply attempts to imagine the possible implications of spectator positioning by the text... can, at times, lead to inappropriate ‘universalizations' of analysis which turn out to be premised on particular assumptions" (25). I would argue that ethnographically influenced work is also limited by a set of assumptions which make the categorical rejection of theory unduly extravagant. Ethnography's focus on the descriptive, the demonstrable, the representative, and the concrete closes off intellectual inquiry to the imaginative power to perceive connections that are not directly observable, but nonetheless culturally central. In particular, it is extremely difficult within this model to ask questions about how the activities of fans may influence and even reshape the dynamic relations of power which organize our society.

Theoretical traditions can provide an invaluable methodological foundation for work which allows for and is enriched by the meanings and relations imaginable beyond slash's literal and observable features. I am certainly indebted, in my work, to claims that critics like Jenkins have made: by arguing that fan fiction is a powerfully productive site of resistant expression, they lay the groundwork for a political reading, and I take up their analytic structure of examining the discursive attributes of fan texts and the contexts of their production and distribution in relation to each other. However, while I do concede that the mass media industry is insulated in real and important ways from direct intervention by its audiences, I think it is important to contemplate reception from within a more complex, more inventive model of the production/consumption system.

Because I am discussing an actual cyborg (Seven of Nine) nesting within the transformations of cybertulture, the obvious connection is to Donna Haraway's classic feminist essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985). Haraway theorizes that we are on the cusp of a global
social transformation with as great a significance as the industrial revolution. This is the shift from what she calls "hierarchical dominations" to an "informatics of domination," a technological culture which breaks down the stable boundaries which formerly constituted the "human" (283). In her view, any effective politics must not only address itself to science and technology, but appropriate this new domain's positionalities and tactics. To this end, she imagines the figure of the cyborg as an embodiment of this internal site of resistance. It is the suggestion that the same transmutations, fragmentations, and systematizations that enable terrifying new dominations simultaneously give rise to the most fertile ground for its subversion, that one can be within ideologies (as one always is) and still not reproduce them, that I find most useful in Haraway's work. Unlike Seven of Nine in a fan story, however, one thing Haraway's (metaphorical, disembodied, indeterminate) cyborg doesn't do very well is have sex. In her formulation, part of the frightening and subversive promise of the cyborg is the transformation of "sex" into "genetic engineering" (282), replication, non- (or post-) sexual reproduction. What is missing is non-reproductive sex, the cyborg sex that would bring together both replication and bodily pleasure in a way that could fatally compromise the allure of patriarchal reproductive sexuality.

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's essay "Public Sex" can contribute the other half of this formulation by visualizing new, non-reproductive modes of sexuality. For them, (queer) sexual counterpublics are the privileged site of resistance to hierarchical (pre-cyborg) dominations (e.g. racial, economic, gender oppressions), because these dominations are founded in large part on the constructed private space of heterosexual intimacy. Berlant and Warner argue that the potential to change our social system lies in freeing sex and intimacy from their "obnoxiously cramped" position as the linchpin of these dominations. By "public" sex, Berlant
and Warner mean not so much sex that is out in the open as sexual relationships that don't pretend they have no connection to any social context, that can be a foundation for new communities that may then become dissenting political bodies. "public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity" (364). Putting this strategy of resistance in conversation with Haraway's cyborg metaphor offers a vision of a fully transgressive cyborg sex, which combines a public erotics (non-reproductive sex) with futuristic boundary subversions like replication (non-sexual reproduction) into a compelling threat to the ideological stability of patriarchal capitalism. This imaginative model of a site for political agitation offers a structural response to the interpenetration of an extensive network of different dominations. As such, it provides one ground from which to begin to ask questions about how the resistant meanings encoded in fan-written texts, as well as their modes of production and distribution, are engaged in shaping larger political realities.

There is a lot of obvious synergy here. The cyborg was always a metaphorically queer figure, and the doctrine of public sex is at least implicitly addressed to the ways new technologies are restructuring privacy. Television, and now the internet, straddles the boundary between public discourse and private space in an uncomfortable compromise. Fan writers have always played in this grey area as well, dismembering and recombining narratives in cyborgian acts of creation. The lesbian is both a queer figure who besieges heterosexual domesticity and a dangerous species of cyborg whose altered body threatens all sorts of boundaries. That is, I have culled my theory with specifics in mind, intending a methodological demonstration of the kinds of advantages critical theory can bring to the study of mass culture consumption. My framework is most specific and most literal when it is read along with my featured texts: the relations on TV and in fan imaginations between Star Trek: Voyager's Captain Janeway and Seven of Nine.
Many fan writers say that what they do is fix things that are wrong with the shows they love, or pick up and carry out possibilities that are unavailable to television. In the case of erotic fan fiction, one thing fans seem to indignantly assert is lacking in the mass media is public characters and discourses that are meaningfully embodied and erotic. Slash makes the additional demand that queer sexuality and relationships be publicly celebrated. In the thousands of J/7 stories published on the internet, becoming involved with a woman may be new and unexpected, but the characters never have to agonize over coming out. A debate about how a romantic relationship can fit into Janeway's role as captain is another common trope. And J/7 always deals in some way with Seven's Borg hybridity, as a character trait and as a bodily characteristic. As a genre, J/7 smut spins an erotic narrative out of the tensions and intersections in the unmapped, post-reproductive territories beyond the boundaries of humanity and heteronormativity. That said, J/7 stories exhibit an impressive diversity of styles: they range in length from vignettes of a few pages to novel-size series; they may conform to the codes of romance or be dark SM fantasies that capitalize on Janeway and Seven's on-screen power dynamics. Online, they are found on individual authors' pages or within small communities of authors, at Trek archives or as part of general lesbian slash circles. I offer here a closer reading of one story, "Freeing Kathryn," by Paulann Hughes, as a more detailed and specific taste of some of the possibilities of active consumption that slash can exemplify—it is posted at a large f/f slash archive called "The Pink Rabbit Consortium Subtext Zone." No one story is typical of J/7 fiction, but this one combines several recurring elements, and strikes a balance between romance and more original narrative structures.

The plot of "Freeing Kathryn" revolves around a subtly enumerated interrogation of how and why Janeway and Seven's sexual relationship should be made public knowledge. For Seven,
Janeway's struggle to reconcile her needs as a captain and as a woman is connected to Seven's own acceptance on Voyager as a former Borg. At the beginning of the story, the two women are already lovers, but only in stolen moments on the sly, and this "had left Seven feeling as though there was no difference between being the [Borg] queen's drone and being Kathryn Janeway's partner." Janeway, on the other hand, is certain that her duty to the ship compels her to rigidly compartmentalize her life into personal and public zones. When another woman falls in love with Seven it precipitates a crisis, and Janeway realizes she must "make it clear that Seven is taken" if she wants to maintain a monogamous romance with her. She orchestrates an elaborate scene in the mess hall that puts her erotic bond with Seven on display:

she said, loud enough to regain the attention of those who had politely stopped staring at her, ‘The Commander has been kind enough to give me the day off to spend with you, Darling, so, I'm not on duty. So you can dispense with the rank and call me Kathryn.’ Then she added for the benefit of those whose chins hadn't yet hit their tables, ‘Like you do when we're alone'...and gave her a kiss that was intended to appear anything but chaste.

It is only after this public performance that the couple can retire to the privacy of the holodeck for the day-long tryst they'd been denying themselves. Even as this romance fails to challenge the heteronormative understanding of relationships as aimed toward a monogamous "marriage", it works against these dominations by elaborating a world where a professional woman can have a public lesbian sexuality. Within its ideological hybridity, it dramatically reconceives sexuality, heterosexuality, and most importantly, humanity.

Because one more thing must happen before Janeway and Seven's love is truly consummated: Seven's Borg half must be productively consolidated with their newly integrated sex life. Seven's most threatening Borg apparatus turns into a sex toy, forcing Janeway to confront the boundary anxieties that are holding her back:
She sat, transfixed, as Seven used her left hand, her Borg hand, to caress and excite herself... she marveled that something so inhuman as that hand could move with such purposeful tenderness. But then, when she saw Seven extend and insert her assimilation tubules into her opening, it terrified her and she grabbed her lover's hand, forcing her to stop.

[Seven] pulled Kathryn into a kiss, whimpering into her mouth as she continued, "Kathryn… My Borg… hand is more flexible and stronger than… the other… therefore I am able…"

She pulled Seven's hand from its cradle between the young woman's legs and forced it into her own, again aching well. …she couldn't help it. She couldn't stop it. She had to be the recipient of that hand's potential. She had to be the one it made scream.

It is this moment of cyborg sexual synthesis, specifically, that frees Janeway to have a happy, healthy relationship, the Borg hand that represents all the potential of their newly public love. Their narrative ends with a rousing affirmation of duality and hybridity (in the form of Seven's cyborg name—half of it human, from before her assimilation): "I realized some time ago that Annika is someone I never knew. That you, the woman I love and have always intended to spend my life loving, are Seven of Nine. Not Borg. Not human. But the best of both."

This story paints a picture of a new mode of intimacy in which two transformations are considered inseparable from each other: the transformation of publicity into a space open to sexual and homosexual experience and the transformation of sex into a pleasurable site for embracing the cyborg's subversions. What is exciting about all J/7 smut is that it must, by definition and even inadvertently, deal with non-reproductive sex and bodies, simultaneously the lesbian kind and the cyborg kind [fig. 4]. I am aware that J/7 is the only pairing so literally suited to a discussion of cyborg sex and public sex—I constructed my theoretical framework with J/7 in mind. Just because J/7 is the most obvious example, however, does not exclude the possibility that other fan fiction or other consumers are having the same conversations in less literal terms, or alternately, that their activities could be approached within a different framework that would also open them to political engagement.
In my formulation, a politically engaged theory must facilitate specific questions not only about what surprising ideas pop culture articulates, but about whether these articulations are a significant force in the ongoing renegotiations of the material and ideological structures that dominate our culture. It is interesting that *J*/*J* fan fiction expresses alternative formations of desire that call oppressive conceptions of privacy and humanity into question, but it is not clear whether the power to express a resistant viewpoint is a politically effective power in a hegemony. The more interesting potential of this potent elaboration of sexual, social, and bodily alternatives lies in its relations with dominant ideological and material contexts—in particular with systems of production and consumption. In order to theorize these relations in a novel way, I would like to begin to think about consumption from the perspective of the cyborg, who sees positions as contingent, contradictory, unstable, and intangible, and defines culture as connectivity, simultaneity, impurity, and information. And from a queer perspective which calls into question the appropriate distinctions between and substance of the private and the public.

The conventional understanding of the economic structure of mass media is fairly nuanced and complex, and it is actually not accurate to assume that the TV studio is the producer, the program the product, and the viewer the consumer. Media commodities circulate on several different levels, which entail corresponding role reversals. First, independent contractors produce a program and sell it (as a commodity) to distributors. In the hands of the distributors (media corporations), the program becomes the producer: it is responsible for delivering an audience (the commodity) that the station can sell to advertisers. The audience's role as a commodity is dependent on the more abstract realm of the cultural economy, in which
viewers produce meanings and pleasures from television texts (reception)—that is, these meanings and pleasures are one of the main reasons people watch TV (Fiske 312). Although, for the sake of simplicity, I will continue to call audiences "consumers," I wanted to point out that it is not only in speculative, metaphorical terms that this demarcation is complex and unstable. I am going to go on to explore both the concrete traces of fan fiction's interactions with the culture industry's dominations and their more figurative components. And I would still like to keep open the option that, while I'm offering fan fiction as a tangible trace of meaning-making, less concrete effects of audience activity may be dispersed in similar ways.

Simply by existing, fan fiction is implicitly making certain claims about the boundaries between producers and consumers of mass media: it suggests that media products don't always meet the needs or satisfy the desires of consumers, and are therefore subject to continuing work by consumers which destabilizes their textual perimeters and contests producers' "ownership" of them. This idea is standard fare in analyses of fan fiction, and in work on active audience reception in general. To take this conflict literally is to describe the legal disputes and tacit negotiations that are a sort of conversation between corporations and fans (and not always a polite one). What critics don't often point out, in their descriptions of the legal discourses that are always implicated in the shape of fan culture, is that intellectual property law is as much a piecemeal, contingent, constantly renegotiated tangle as the fan texts themselves.

Given the difficulty of legally defining meaning as property, it is not surprising that the legal precedents surrounding fan fiction are vague and uneasy. Part of the explanation for this may be that fans have few legal resources in comparison with media conglomerates, so when the corporations take issue with their activities, they often choose to go further underground rather than to stand and fight. But, between the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech and

Julie Levin Russo - 21/32
the ambiguousness of the distinction between derivative branded material and independent creative work, the corporations may not be sure the law will come down on their side. They are also forced into compromise by the paradox of their position as producers: they need to guard their sole possession of their lucrative commodities as a source of revenue, but for the same reason they need the goodwill of fans. They can't afford to indiscriminately alienate the people who spend the most time and money on their products (the most obvious form of authority that consumers have), and so they must choose their battles carefully. The implied compromise that has been reached is that fan writing is tolerated provided it is strictly not-for-profit, and this stipulation is likely to stand. That is, in spite of (presumably) having dominant social forces on their side, the TV studios have been relatively unsuccessful at setting precedents that contain the proliferation of resistant fan interpretations.

Here are some examples. In a typical non-case, Fox sent a warning to a Simpsons fan who had sounds, images, and video from the show on his web site—he removed the material and was forced to move (not disappear) by his web server, but not without a flurry of online protest (Powers). When cases go to trial, even the not-for-profit clause is up for grabs: the Mitchell estate tried and ultimately failed to block the publication of Gone with the Wind parody The Wind Done Gone. And Best Lesbian Erotica slipped in an author's slashy rendition of characters "like" Xena and Gabrielle. Perhaps as a response to this lack of control, Paramount/Viacom is now holding an annual Star Trek fan fiction contest, and publishing anthologies of the winning stories under the title Strange New Worlds—royalties are even paid to the authors. On one hand, the corporation gets to decide which fan interpretations are kosher (and you can bet those aren't the queer readings), but on the other, they're validating the work of fan writers overall.
Fans do engage very consciously with the legal inflections of conceptions of production that hover over their activities. As a nod to the provisions of intellectual property law, all fan stories carry a disclaimer that states that the characters and setting are corporate property. The degree to which fan writers are aware of the dominations that circumscribe their work is evident in the more creative disclaimers that are quite common; here is the most elaborate example I've seen, by T. Dancinghands (ASCEM):

The Lord's Disclaimer

Our Paramount/Viacom, who art in Hollywood,  
Copyrighted be thy name.  
Thy profits come,  
Thy royalties be honored,  
In Asia as they are in the "Free World".  
Give us this week our piece of cannon, [sic]  
And forgive us our fanfics,  
As we forgive the real klunkers you occasionally produce.  
And lead us not into litigation,  
But deliver us from cancellations.  
For thine is the franchise, and the trade marks, and the merchandising,  
For ever and ever  
Amen

This ingenious spoof expresses a fannish tension between the real frustration of depending on the media industry, which is indeed very powerful, for cultural raw materials, and a smug sense that fan activities have special powers of their own. "Adult" fanfic is also usually accompanied by a disclaimer or warning about sex, often describing the specific kind(s) of sex that occur in the story—its legal raison d'être is restrictions on underage access to pornography. These disclaimers also can provide a brief commentary on the social environment that the story's fantasies of queer relationships are situated in. In this way, the legal strictures circumscribing fan smut provide fans with an opportunity to explicitly identify their resistance. Disclaimers
demonstrate the disjuncture between what is considered significant in the dominant discourse and in fan discourse: to the studios, production is apparently only meaningful (that is, threatening to their containment of their property) if it generates money; "amateur" writing is allowed to proliferate freely. For fan writers, it is precisely the freedom to create texts outside of and in response to capitalist management of narrative that is valued.

Jenkins implies that even though the copyright compromise protects the studios' status as producers (in economic terms), it leaves space for fans to challenge their power to dictate the meanings received from TV texts. I would argue that the challenge fan fiction poses to dominant models of textual production is actually far more sweeping. By narrating around, over, in between, and parallel to television, it attacks any attempt to see texts as discrete and bounded events that can be packaged as products. As manifested in fanfic, textual meaning is a fluid practice that invites communal participation in public forums. The relative lack of legal restrictions on fan fiction is evidence for fans' contention that characters and stories are public property, and demonstrates the difficulty of officially legitimizing one meaning over another. Even more importantly, fans activities' challenge the definition, as well as the borders, of products. Fan writers turn the production of new texts into an integral part of the process of mass culture consumption, compromising the rigid dichotomy a capitalist model maintains between the two activities, and representing production and consumption as interrelated, even similar operations.

In terms of political influence, all of this was largely moot when fan fiction was distributed in paper zines. With modes of reproduction and distribution that were shackled to the physical, the sedition of fan production could circulate in only very limited ways. But, along with other recently developed technologies, the internet is giving property a new geography.
his article "Selling Wine Without Bottles," John Perry Barlow points out that we are well on our way to converting to an economy where information itself is the primary, privileged commodity. At the same time, the nature of information—what it is made of, how it travels, who has the capability to produce and reproduce it—is being radically transformed. This is, Barlow argues, a crisis for intellectual property law as we know it, and corporations are the ones falling behind. Their strategy seems to be to ignore the fact that virtual property is fundamentally different from information that has physical traces, while aggressively expanding existing law to manhandle it into submission. Meanwhile, regular folks have already figured out this isn't going to work.

Popular practice has overrun the boundaries of unenforceable laws: take, for example, the almost universal habit of software piracy, or the court's impotent attempt to stop the online sharing of music files. The activities that define producers of information and consumers of it are shifting irrevocably.

Cyberspace also mucks up traditional inflections of the public and the private, destabilizing these supposedly distinct sites by bringing the home (where many of us do our surfing) into immediate contact with a global community. If all information can now be universally shared from any access point, where (in the e world) do we locate the border between an insulated private space of subjectivity and intimacy and a public space for commerce and civics, a distinction that is ideologically central to modern capitalism? In discourse about the internet, the connection of this question to sex is clear. One of the anxieties of "internet privacy" is that formerly private preferences and acts will be converted into data in the public domain. And pornographic content and activity online has been the obsessive hub of much of the US government's e-regulatory energy. Indeed, porn (erotic fan fiction included) is the net's biggest industry, both commercial and cottage.
I am arguing here that both the theoretical metaphors I explored earlier interface fruitfully with cyberspace: the net is pregnant with cyborgian forces, in both their progressive and totalitarian forms. It puts humans into new relationships with technology that call into question the boundaries of identity and the body and fundamentally restructure the fabric of relations both locally and globally. And the new and different opportunities the internet provides for social organization have made sex publicly available and fantasy publicly expressible in unprecedented ways, potentially lining up with Berlant and Warner's call for erotically engaged counterpublics. I am concerned here only with what these new formations mean for slash: I am suggesting that they are a powerful and comprehensive realization of the possibilities for radically restructuring systems of domination that were already nascent in fans' creative activities. And I am suggesting that, at this stage in the emergence of internet culture, hegemonic forces don't necessarily have these possibilities under control. Fans are capitalizing on this, and I propose that looking at slash as it exists on the internet suggests why theorists should stop thinking of reception as a one-way street.

The internet has indeed stimulated the rapid proliferation of fan fiction and other kinds of public fan response and dialogue. But what makes it so conducive to this growth is that its modes of structuring the exchange of information are a radical departure from economic models. Scholars have already made much of how fan activities problematize the rigid separation between producers and consumers, but the internet allows this subversion to be realized more concretely and completely than in their analyses. Because the net doesn't have the limitations of physical matter and space, fan readers can be writers simultaneously, and any writer with internet access can self-publish instantaneously, to practically the entire fan fiction audience, without additional cost: a powerful triple reconstitution of the system of fan production. The web's
facility for spontaneously organizing vast amounts of information into smaller thematic pockets permits both flexibility and communalism: if you can find one J/7 web site, you can probably find them all by exploring authors' lists of links (because authors keep track of and communicate with each other). And if you don't have your own web site, you can join a newsgroup or discussion list and post your stories there, or have them collected at an archive page—another example of the effectiveness of new, cyberspatial forms of community organization. The internet's cultural cachet, as well as its properties of wide circulation, have contributed to the expansion of fan fiction participation beyond a show's die-hard fanatics. The increase in numbers has allowed fanfic to diversify and specialize (to admit much more lesbian slash, for example), while more general connections remain in place. Last but not least, while it's not quite a public service, the internet isn't bought and sold like a traditional commodity. Whatever their hidden costs, the pop-up windows and banner ads we all know and love are supporting a free internet where fan production can be structured as a new realm of public pleasures with an autonomy and agility that comes of sidestepping a system based on the exchange of money between designated producers and consumers.

Because the internet is so diffuse, it is impossible to pin down all the sites where J/7 fic might be popping up. But if you're looking for an example of the context in which it is typically created and distributed, direct your browser to a J/7 page found at <members.aol.com/Tenderware>. Tenderware's page straddles the private/public dichotomy: it has a very personal tone, and refers itself to an intimate network of "friends and family." But it is interfaced with the high-traffic thoroughfares of slash fiction as part of a web ring and through its own web of links. The personal and the civic have an effortless connectivity. In addition to fiction, it offers artwork and articles: an ingeniously intertextual response to some J/7-related
comments made by Jeri Ryan (the actor who plays Seven of Nine), and an intelligent FAQ that makes references to Jenkins and other studies of fan fiction. The fic, here, is part of a network of complex practices that constitute the fan's relationship to the media industry—critical understanding and ready defense of fan activities, non-fictional commentary on the show and its meta-texts, deliberate community building, and consciousness of academic perspectives—and these practices are being developed and extended in cyberspace together. Although we could make educated guesses about the real gender, sexual orientation, race, or class attached to the alias "Tenderware" in the physical world, online environments elude demographics in favor of a freer play with positions and meanings. And in spite of its friendly and wholesome appearance, this web page has plenty of smut, and it is the pleasures of fan smut that its community is organized around.

My point is that it is too soon to dismiss reception as a practice whose effects are contained in its immediate environs. Through their practices on the internet, slash writers have developed a culture that makes good on the demands that are inherent in their texts: demands not only for public narratives that are embodied and erotic, but for new ways of making and disseminating such narratives. Fans themselves are the sexy cyborgs they write about: interfaced with computers and the virtual environments that technology gives them access to, their online personas resist construction as unitary, embodied, gendered citizens. From this position in the passageways that the cyborg opens up between categories, they create communities (and not just textual visions) structured around new sexual and relational possibilities that are produced and consumed in new ways. It is in these connections between the raw material of reception itself and the political context of that reception that some of the most interesting and valuable questions about mass media consumption lie.
Fan texts are not immune to mainstream ideology: a romance in which Seven becomes fully human and ends up marrying Janeway, for example, is hardly a bastion of radicalism. What is interesting about fan fiction is not that it is inherently revolutionary, but that it makes manifest the complex interactivity that characterizes the relationship between consumers and the mass media, its surprising scope, and the technologies and communities that support this unpredictable interpretive agency. I am not making the claim that fans are always satisfied with their power to rework mass narratives, or ignoring the fact that only the privileged in our increasingly stratified economy have access to computers and the incipient transformations of the internet. At this point in our theories of culture, it is often just frustrating to try to answer the question of whether any particular discourse or relation harbors the seeds of fundamental changes, within a dominant ideological system which is capable of very sensitive evolution and expert at incorporating into itself expressions of resistance. I am simply presenting fan fiction as a test case to argue for a new way of understanding where radical possibilities might germinate (in the realm of reception). One of the lessons fan fiction teaches is that mass culture can be much more fertile if you fantasize about it, and I will suggest that if we are not willing, as theorists, to fantasize about the potentialities and not just the realities of culture as we observe it, we can't hope to be engaged with the political struggles that are in play in that culture.
* This is the way the subject heading of the message would appear on a story posted to the alt.startrek.creative.erotica.moderated (ASCEM) listserv. In addition to the title of the story (in quotes), this header contains codes for the TV series it is based on, the pairing (what characters/couples the story focuses on), the rating (usually based on the level of sexual explicitness), the part number (many stories are too long to email and are posted in multiple parts), and sometimes other miscellaneous codes as well.

+ In the Star Trek canon, there is a Vulcan motto: IDIC, or "Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations." The Trek smut writing community has adopted this altered version: IPIC, "Infinite Perversity in Infinite Combinations."

works cited

ASCEM(L): The Home of Treksmut. alt.startrek.creative.erotica.moderated 1999-2002.<members.tripod.com/TSU_Campus/ASCEML>


Tenderware. *Delta Quadrant of Venus*. 2002. <members.aol.com/Tenderware>


Vaxen's Janeway/Seven Fanfiction Index. 2002. <home.earthlink.net/~ivaxen/fflink.htm>
stills above and left from *Voyager*:
1. Janeway comforts Seven in the brig during her deassimilation.
2. Janeway tries to assist Seven with social skills at a party.
3. The Borg Queen fights with Seven while her assimilated father looks on.
   (© Paramount/Viacom, reproduced without permission)

below:
   (by permission of the artist)

---

Julie Levin Russo - 32/32