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spectators, whether on the big screen at fannish conventions like MediaWest, Escapade, and Vividcon, or by distributing them to female-dominated fan communities online. In either case, their audience is specifically constituted of women who have come together, not just as fans of the visual source texts, but as fans of the vidders and of vidding itself—this particular way of seeing. Julie Levin Russo suggests that “A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness” should be read as an allegory for female fans themselves: “I think part of what [this vid is] saying in creating this largely joyous collection (there’s a lot of dancing in this vid) is: ‘Look how much fun we’re having—we’re really hot!’”<sup>12</sup> But if female fans are hot, they’re hot in the sense of being turned on, and the fun they’re having is explicitly the fun of watching, not of being watched. Fan activities such as vidding may be crucial to theorizing the social conditions necessary for female fetishism and the safe expression of female desire. \*

12 Julie Levin Russo, notes on Media Fetish: The Vidshow, August 22, 2008, <http://cyborganize.livejournal.com/24374.html>. Accessed November 28, 2008.

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## A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture

by KAREN HELLEKSON

**T**o the uninitiated outsider, media fandom as it’s currently practiced online in blog spaces such as LiveJournal makes little sense: strange jargon with unclear acronyms and lots of punctuation sits next to YouTube or Imeem video embeddings. Perhaps a post announces part 18 of a long piece of fan fiction. In the comments someone has left the writer a gift: a manipulated image of her two favorite characters cleverly sized so she can upload it into the blog software interface and immediately start putting it up next to her name as an avatar to represent her. Someone else writes a short fic in response and hotlinks to it: “Come over here and look!” she invites. A third person uses the story as a pretext to write a detailed episode review to illustrate the show’s shortcomings.

To engage is to click, read, comment, write, make up a song and sing it; to hotlink, to create a video, to be invited to move on, to come over here or go over there—to become part of a larger metatext, the off-putting jargon and the unspoken rules meaning that only *this* group of *that* people can negotiate the terrain. Within this circle of

community—and in media fandom, women overwhelmingly make up this community<sup>1</sup>—learning how to engage is part of the initiation, the *us* versus *them*, the fan versus the nonfan. The metatext thus created has something to say, sometimes critical things, about the media source, but for those of us who engage in it, it has even more to say about ourselves.

This exchange in the fan community is made up of three elements related to the gift: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate.<sup>2</sup> The tension and negotiation between the three result in fan creation of social relationships that are constructed voluntarily on the basis of a shared interest—perhaps a media source like a TV show or, perhaps, fandom itself. Fan communities as they are currently comprised, require exchanges of gifts: you do not pay to read fan fiction or watch a fan-made music vid. They are offered for free (although circulation may be restricted and you have to know where to obtain them), yet within a web of context that specifies an appropriate mode of “payment.” At the heart of this anticommmercial requirement of fan works is fans’ fear that they will be sued by producers of content for copyright violation. The general understanding is that if no money is exchanged, the copyright owners have no reason to sue because they retain exclusive rights to make money from their property.<sup>3</sup> The notion of the gift is thus central to fan economy as it currently stands, although, as Abigail De Kosnik argues in her essay in this issue, it may be time for the community to consider creating an alternative model that will permit women to profit.

Fans insist on a gift economy, not a commercial one, but it goes beyond self-protective attempts to fly under the radar of large corporations, their lawyers, and their cease-and-desist letters. Online media fandom is a gift culture 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 that results in a community occupied with theorizing its own genderedness.

**To Give, to Receive, to Reciprocate.** The gifts that fans exchange, which Rachael Sabotini describes as “the centerpiece of fandom,”<sup>4</sup> require skill and effort to make. They may be artworks, as in vids (described in more detail in the contributions to this

1 See Sonia K. Katyal, “Performance, Property, and the Slashing of Gender in Fan Fiction,” *Journal of Gender, Social Policy and Law* 14 (2005): 461–518; Helen Merrick, “‘We was cross-dressing ‘afore you were born!’ or, How SF Fans Invented Virtual Community,” *Refractory*, no. 6 (2004), <http://blogs.arts.unimelb.edu.au/refractory/2004/06/17/we-was-cross-dressing-afore-you-were-born-or-how-sf-fans-invented-virtual-community-helen-merrick/>; Christine Scodari, “Resistance Re-examined: Gender, Fan Practices, and Science Fiction Television,” *Popular Communication* 1 (2003): 111–130. All URLs cited herein were accessed February 22, 2009.

2 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: Norton, 1990), 39.

3 Christina Z. Ranon, “Honor Among Thieves: Copyright Infringement in Internet Fandom,” *Vanderbilt Journal of Entertainment and Technology Law* 8, no. 2 (2006): 423. For recent fan reiteration of the centrality to fan culture of not making money for fan labor, see Madeline “Flourish” Klink, “Tell the Man What You Want!” October 9, 2008, <http://flourish.livejournal.com/250092.html>.

4 Rachael Sabotini, “The Fannish Potlatch: Creation of Status Within the Fan Community,” *The Fanfic Symposium*, December 20, 1999, <http://www.trickster.org/symposium/symp41.htm>.

issue by Francesca Coppa and Alexis Lothian), podcasts, fan fiction, or manipulated images. But they may also be narrative analysis, known as *meta*, of the primary source or of a fan artwork. They may be fan fiction archives, bulletin board forums, screen-capture galleries, fandom-specific wikis, or other aggregates of information. But the items exchanged have no value outside their fannish context. In fact, it is likely that they do not literally exist; fandom's move to the Internet means that the items exchanged are hyperreal and capable of being endlessly replicated. Erika Pearson, in her analysis of LiveJournal gifting, calls these gifts of time and skill "effort gifts."<sup>5</sup> To these she adds "object gifts," which can be physical objects or money. For the latter, fans may purchase from the blog source virtual online gifts, such as chocolate or flowers, or monetary gifts, such as paid time or extra user pictures, or they may send money to a fanfic archive to help defray the server costs, thus reimbursing someone for a financial outlay. Yet even in fannish commercial exchanges like this, gifting is the goal. Money is presented less as a payment than as a token of enjoyment.

The gifts have value within the fannish economy in that they are designed to create and cement a social structure, but they themselves are not meaningful outside their context. Anthropologist Marcel Mauss—the first to explain the gift's role in terms of social (rather than economic) exchange in *Essai sur le don* (1923–1924)—provides extreme examples drawn from his fieldwork of the anti-utilitarian nature of gifts meant to cement a social structure: specially created gift items are thrown into the sea or burned. The fan exchange is a metaphorical, symbolic extension of the literal destruction that Mauss describes. The items offered as gifts are not destroyed but are incorporated into a multivocal dialogue that creates a metatext, the continual composition of which creates a community, and the rhetorical stance of that dialogue is to create a gendered space. When the fan work is proffered, it is taken into the metatext. The individuality of that piece is lost; it becomes a part of something greater. The fan work is an element of symbolic exchange, which Jean Baudrillard, who coined the term, defines as the symbolic relation created through Maussian gift exchange.<sup>6</sup>

This symbolic exchange, according to Baudrillard, "defines itself precisely as something distinct from, and beyond value and code. All forms of value (object, commodity or sign) must be negated in order to inaugurate symbolic exchange. This is the radical rupture of the field of value."<sup>7</sup> On this renegotiated field that specifically rejects commercial exchange, fans engage with their metatext by presenting gift artworks, by reciprocating these gifts in certain approved, fandom-specific ways, and by providing commentary about these gifts. Writer and reader create a shared dialogue that results in a feedback loop of gift exchange, whereby the gift of artwork

5 Erika Pearson, "Digital Gifts: Participation and Gift Exchange in LiveJournal Communities," *First Monday* 12, no. 5 (2007), <http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1835/1719>.

6 Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (New York: Telos, 1981). See also Andrew M. Koch and Rich Elmore, "Simulation and Symbolic Exchange: Jean Baudrillard's Augmentation of Marx's Theory of Value," *Politics and Policy* 34, no. 3 (2006): 556–575; William Merrin, "Television Is Killing the Art of Symbolic Exchange: Baudrillard's Theory of Communication," *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 3 (1999): 119–140.

7 Baudrillard, 125.

or text is repetitively exchanged for the gift of reaction, which is itself exchanged, with the goal of creating and maintaining social solidarity.<sup>8</sup> The generation of this metatext and of fan-generated underpinnings to the metatext are thus elevated to central importance.

**Construction of a Gendered Community.** Fandom's gift culture provides an example of Mauss's linkage of the gift and social cohesion. This symbolic field privileges the female-gendered task of maintaining social ties. In terms of the discourse of gift culture, fandom might best be understood as part of what is traditionally the women's sphere: the social, rather than the economic. At the most basic level, in terms of a gift economy, women are themselves gifts—indeed, gifts crucial to the maintenance of a (patriarchal) culture.<sup>9</sup> Further, women handle symbolic gifts that relate to “managing the emotional aspects of relationships.”<sup>10</sup> In the realm of symbolic relations, where the market economy has been removed as a factor, all exchanges result in social cohesion. In female fandom's gift culture, gifts correlate to aspects of the self, such as time or talent. This sort of exchange turns one role of woman and gift on its head: the woman is still the gift, but now she can give herself. This permits women agency that they lack under traditional patriarchal models. They construct a new, gendered space that relies on the circulation of gifts for its cohesion with no currency and little meaning outside the economy, and that deliberately repudiates a monetary model (because it is gendered male). The goal of community-building transactions in online media fandom is the creation of a stable space set apart via implementation of rhetorical strategies that exclude outsiders, from what fans call “real life,” to permit performance of gendered, alternative, queered identity.<sup>11</sup>

Women have created a system of exchange based on symbolic gifts that represent the self while constituting the community. Although fandom is hardly the only expression of this kind of exchange, just as social cohesion may not be the only goal (for example, Sabotini, following Mauss, argues that gifting is related to attempts to gain status within the community), it has been fanned into a flame by easy Web-based transactions, becoming ever more visible even as Web 2.0's focus on interactive, community-

8 On online-community gifting, see Markus Giesler, “Consumer Gift Systems,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 33 (September 2006): 283–290; Peter Kollock, “The Economies of Online Cooperation: Gifts and Public Goods in Cyberspace,” in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Marc Smith and Peter Kollock (London: Routledge, 1999), 220–242; Pearson, “Digital Gifts”; Kylie J. Veale, “Internet Gift Economies: Voluntary Payment Schemes as Tangible Reciprocity,” *First Monday* 8, no. 12 (December 2003), [http://131.193.153.231/www/issues/issue8\\_12/veale/index.html](http://131.193.153.231/www/issues/issue8_12/veale/index.html).

9 Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (1979; New York: Vintage, 1983), chap. 6; Luce Irigaray, “Women on the Market,” in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, with Carolyn Burke, in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (1977; New York: Routledge, 1997), 174; Mauss, *Gift*, 14.

10 David Cheal, *The Gift Economy* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 5.

11 On gendered performativity, see Kristina Busse, “My Life Is a WIP on My LJ,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 207–224; Judith Donath, “Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community: Communities in Cyberspace,” in Smith and Kollock, *Communities in Cyberspace*, 29–59; Katyay, “Performance, Property”; and Eden Lackner et al., “Cunning Linguists: The Bisexual Erotics of *Words/Silence/Flesh*,” in Hellekson and Busse, *Fan Fiction*, 189–206.

generated media has brought this kind of constitution of culture to everyone's attention. By exchanging aspects of itself, the fan culture preserves its own autonomy while simultaneously solidifying the group and permitting encoding of transactions by imbuing them with community-specific meaning.

There are several important repercussions of the gift model of symbolic exchange. Mauss speaks of artifacts, like cloaks or pieces of jewelry, that, in a gift culture, resonate beyond the thing itself. Similarly, in fan exchange, the text becomes a charged aspect of a larger metatext, with one goal—perhaps the ultimate goal—being female-gendered social cohesion. Each item, representing an expression of self, contributes to the larger whole. The metatext is not the pretext for the community; rather, its generation comprises the community and is its goal. Each proffered item represents an aspect of the giver: time, talent, love, desire. The result—"personally charged"<sup>12</sup> gifts, responses in kind—generates a female-gendered community, but the role of the individual within that community is equally crucial.

**The Case of FanLib.** When the rules of exchange are broken, the punishment is swift. One recent incident that exemplifies this was the attempt of (male) venture capitalists to profit financially from (female-generated) fan fiction. FanLib, founded by industry insiders Jon Landau (producer), Jon Moonves (entertainment lawyer), and Anil Singh (former Yahoo CEO), launched in May 2007 with \$3 million in funds, sought to commodify fan fiction at a newly created fanfic archive site.<sup>13</sup> Although outreach included targeting and e-mailing fanfic writers and encouraging them to upload fic to the site in exchange for prizes, participation in contests leading to e-publication, and attention from the producers of TV shows like *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004–present) and *The Ghost Whisperer* (CBS, 2005–present),<sup>14</sup> FanLib's persistent misreading of the situation alienated fans, as did the draconian terms of service. One fan closes her analysis of FanLib's terms of service by noting, "It's perfectly clear—they get the bucks and we get the lawsuits."<sup>15</sup> The site closed down in August 2008.<sup>16</sup>

The FanLib debacle illustrates that attempts to encroach on the meaning of the gift and to perform a new kind of (commerce-based) transaction with fan-created items will not be tolerated. Henry Jenkins notes, "They simply hadn't really listened to, talked with, or respected the existing grassroots community which surrounded the production and distribution of fan fiction."<sup>17</sup> The site attempted to bypass the artwork-generating

12 David Graeber, "Give It Away," <http://www.freewords.org/graeber.html>.

13 David Kaplan, "Storytelling Social Net FanLib Launches with \$3 Million in Funding," May 18, 2007, <http://www.paidcontent.org/entry/419-storytelling-social-net-fan>; Henry Jenkins, "Transforming Fan Culture into User-Generated Content: The Case of FanLib," May 22, 2007, [http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/05/transforming\\_fan\\_culture\\_into.html](http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/05/transforming_fan_culture_into.html). For more on FanLib, see Abigail De Kosnik's article in this issue.

14 Henry Jenkins, "Chris Williams Responds to Our Questions About FanLib," May 25, 2007, [http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/05/chris\\_williams\\_respond\\_to\\_our.html](http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/05/chris_williams_respond_to_our.html).

15 AngiePen, "Browsing the FanLib TOS," May 14, 2007, <http://angiepen.livejournal.com/38593.html>.

16 Rafat Ali, "Fan Fiction Site Fanlib Closing Down; Disney Deal Nixed?" July 29, 2008, <http://www.paidcontent.org/entry/419-fan-fiction-site-fanlib-closing-down-disney-deal-nixed/>.

17 Jenkins, "Transforming."

fan community altogether—a serious misreading of FanLib’s audience. FanLib broke the rules of the community’s engagement by misreading “community” as “commodity,” and the site failed thanks to intense backlash, an expression of fannish defense of their field of value.

FanLib’s example shows what happens when outside attempts are made to reconfigure the field of value in such a way as to attempt to control the community component without the community members’ cooperation. One fan, in an open letter to a FanLib insider, says, “You do not understand us and our communities, nor do you respect us. . . . If you want us to participate in your endeavor then make it something in which we would want to participate. . . . You do not come to us as equals and that is your fundamental failing in this endeavor. You cannot build a new community at your site all nicely regimented and controlled because the community already exists and we will not be controlled by the likes of you.”<sup>18</sup>

**Conclusion.** Fan community clearly cannot be constituted by anyone other than the fans themselves. This tenet remains central to the constitution of fan culture, just as it is continually renewed by the exchange of symbolic gifts. On a continually constituted and reconstituted field of value, women or the artworks they offer as stand-ins for themselves are not tokens to be exchanged, particularly for items that lack value within the community, like a FanLib T-shirt or attention from a producer of *The L Word*. Instead, they exchange personally charged aspects of themselves in a gift culture whose field of value specifically excludes profit, further separating their community from the larger (male-gendered) community of commerce. \*

18 Chronolith, May 29, 2007, comment to Jenkins, “Chris Williams Responds.”

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## Should Fan Fiction Be Free?

by ABIGAIL DE KOSNIK

It seems strange, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, that I should feel a pressing need to reiterate Virginia Woolf’s argument from eighty years ago, that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”<sup>1</sup> But the need has arisen because the authors of fan fiction, who are predominantly women, have never, as a group, sought payment for their labor. This situation deserves scrutiny, especially because fan fiction is be-

1 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1929).