

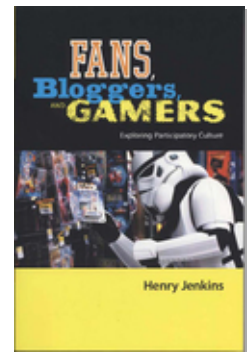


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Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten

Fan Writing as Textual Poaching

One of my first and most often reproduced essays, “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten,” was the rough draft for Textual Poachers. The idea of writing about fan cultures can be traced back to the culture shock I experienced upon entering graduate school at what can now be seen as a moment of transition within American media studies. When I arrived, the University of Iowa’s communication studies program was dominated by the language of subject positioning and ideological manipulation associated with the British film journal Screen; by the time I left two years later, the program was still absorbing the impact of a visit by John Fiske, who had introduced my cohort to Birmingham School perspectives and ethnographic audience research. My arrival compelled me to write the essay because my previous experiences as a fan were so at odds with what I was being taught; Fiske’s visit enabled me to write it because his mentorship provided a context in which what I wanted to say might get a sympathetic hearing.

Rereading the essay today, it strikes me how late the concept of “poaching” entered my thinking: this was my third attempt at a theoretical framing, and many of the paragraphs are holdovers from previous drafts. The passages most often quoted were among the very last I wrote. Like all metaphors, “poaching” enabled us to see certain things about fandom, offering a powerful counterimage to prevailing stereotypes of fans as passive consumers and cultural dupes; yet it also masked or distorted some significant aspects of the phenomenon, focusing on the frustration more than the fascination, encouraging academics to read fan fiction primarily in political terms, and constructing a world in which producers and consumers remain locked in permanent opposition. My more recent work has been more focused on negotiations or

collaboration as media industries embrace some still ill-formulated and often contradictory notion of audience participation.

Today, I find myself returning to the concept of “moral economy” that runs through the closing sections of this essay, but which disappeared from Textual Poachers itself. In some cases, the moral economy of fandom justifies fans’ active appropriation of media content; in others, it sets limits on what they can do with those contents. The moral economy balances between the community’s own desires and its respect for creators’ rights. At the present moment, that moral economy is frayed because of the hostile rhetoric and practices of media companies eager to regulate peer-to-peer culture. The companies might productively rethink their relations to their consumers based on principles of legitimacy and reciprocity rather than legality. I am sometimes shocked to see people write about this essay as if it were still an accurate description of Star Trek fandom. How could it be? It was written before the impact of the Internet was felt on the fan community, before the death of Gene Roddenberry, and before Star Trek: The Next Generation, let alone the three subsequent television series. Over the past decade and a half, everything I described here has changed. The nature of these changes can be glimpsed through subsequent essays in this collection.

“Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten” first appeared in Critical Studies in Mass Communications in June 1988.

Suppose we were to ask the question: what became of the Sphinx after the encounter with Oedipus on his way to Thebes? Or, how did Medusa feel seeing herself in Perseus’ mirror just before being slain?

—Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t* (1982)

How does Uhura feel about her lack of promotion, what does she try to do about it, how would she handle an emergency, or a case of sexual harassment? What were Chapel’s experiences in medical school, what is her job at Starfleet headquarters, what is her relationship with Sarek and Amanda now . . . ?

—E. Osbourne, *Star Trek* fan (1987)

In late December 1986, *Newsweek* marked the twentieth anniversary of *Star Trek* with a cover story on the program’s fans, “the Trekkies, who love nothing more than to watch the same 79 episodes over and over.”¹

The *Newsweek* article, with its relentless focus on conspicuous consumption and “infantile” behavior and its patronizing language and smug superiority to all fan activity, is a textbook example of the stereotyped representation of fandom found in both popular writing and academic criticism: “Hang on: You are being beamed to one of those *Star Trek* conventions, where grownups greet each other with the Vulcan salute and offer in reverent tones to pay \$100 for the autobiography of Leonard Nimoy” (p. 66). Illustrated with photographs of a sixty-six-year-old bookstore worker who goes by the name of “Grandma Trek” and who loves to play with toy spaceships, of a balding and paunchy man in a snug Federation uniform, and of an overweight, middle-aged woman with heavy eyeshadow and rubber “Spock ears,” the article offers a lurid account of the program’s loyal followers. Fans are characterized as “kooks” (p. 68) obsessed with trivia, celebrity, and collectibles; as social inepts, cultural misfits, and crazies; as “a lot of overweight women, a lot of divorced and single women” (p. 68). . . .

The fan constitutes a scandalous category in contemporary American culture, one that calls into question the logic by which others order their aesthetic experiences, one that provokes an excessive response from those committed to the interests of textual producers. Fans appear to be frighteningly “out of control,” undisciplined and unrepentant, rogue readers. Rejecting “aesthetic distance,” fans passionately embrace favored texts and attempt to integrate media representations within their own social experience. Like cultural scavengers, fans reclaim works that others regard as “worthless” trash, finding them a source of popular capital. Like rebellious children, fans refuse to read by the rules imposed upon them by the schoolmasters. For the fan, reading becomes a kind of play, responsive only to its own loosely structured rules and generating its own kinds of pleasure.

Michel de Certeau has characterized this type of reading as “poaching,” an impertinent “raid” on the literary “preserve” that takes away only those things that seem useful or pleasurable to the reader: “Far from being writers . . . readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves.”² De Certeau perceives popular reading as a series of “advances and retreats, tactics and games played with the text” (p. 175), as a kind of cultural bricolage through which readers fragment texts and reassemble the broken shards according to their own blueprint, salvaging bits

and pieces of found material in making sense of their own social experience. Far from viewing consumption as imposing meanings upon the public, de Certeau suggests, consumption involves reclaiming textual material, “making it one’s own, appropriating or reappropriating it” (p. 166).

But such conduct cannot be sanctioned; it must be contained, through ridicule if necessary, since it challenges the very notion of literature as a kind of private property to be controlled by textual producers and their academic interpreters. Public attacks on media fans keep other viewers in line, making it uncomfortable for readers to adapt such “inappropriate” strategies of making sense of popular texts. . . . Such representations isolate potential fans from others who share common interests and reading practices, marginalize fan-related activities as outside the mainstream and beneath dignity. These same stereotypes reassure academic writers of the validity of their own interpretations of the program content, readings made in conformity with established critical protocols, and free them of any need to come into direct contact with the program’s “crazed” followers.³

In this essay, I propose an alternative approach to fandom, one that perceives “Trekkers” (as they prefer to be called) not as cultural dupes, social misfits, or mindless consumers, but rather as, in de Certeau’s terms, “poachers” of textual meanings. Behind the exotic stereotypes fostered by the media lies a largely unexplored terrain of cultural activity, a subterranean network of readers and writers who remake programs in their own image. Fandom is a vehicle for marginalized sub-cultural groups (women, the young, gays, and so on) to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations; fandom is a way of appropriating media texts and rereading them in a fashion that serves different interests, a way of transforming mass culture into popular culture. . . . For these fans, *Star Trek* is not simply something that can be reread; it is something that can and must be rewritten to make it more responsive to their needs, to make it a better producer of personal meanings and pleasures.

No legalistic notion of literary property can adequately constrain the rapid proliferation of meanings surrounding a popular text. But there are other constraints, ethical constraints and self-imposed rules, enacted by the fans, either individually or as part of a larger community, in response to their felt need to legitimate their unorthodox appropriation of mass media texts. E. P. Thompson has suggested that eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century peasant leaders, the historical poachers behind de Certeau's apt metaphor, responded to a kind of "moral economy," an informal set of consensual norms, that justified their uprising against the landowners and tax collectors in terms of a restoration of a preexisting order being corrupted by those who were supposed to protect it.⁴ Similarly, the fans often cast themselves not as poachers but as loyalists, rescuing essential elements of the primary text "misused" by those who maintain copyright control over the program materials. Respecting literary property even as they seek to appropriate it for their own uses, these fans become reluctant poachers, hesitant about their relationship to the program text, uneasy about the degree of manipulation they can "legitimately" perform on its materials, policing each other for "abuses" of their interpretive license, as they wander across a terrain pockmarked with confusions and contradictions. . . .

Fan Readers / Fan Writers

The popularity of *Star Trek* has motivated a wide range of cultural productions, creative reworkings of program materials from children's backyard play to adult interaction games, from needlework to elaborate costumes, from private fantasies to computer programming and home video production. This ability to transform personal reaction into social interaction, spectatorial culture into participatory culture, is one of the central characteristics of fandom. One becomes a "fan" not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a "community" of other fans who share common interests. For fans, consumption naturally sparks production, reading generates writing, until the terms seem logically inseparable. . . .

Many fans characterize their entry into fandom in terms of a movement from the social and cultural isolation doubly imposed upon them as women within a patriarchal society and as seekers after alternative pleasures within dominant media representations, toward more and more active participation in a "community" receptive to their cultural productions, a "community" within which they may feel a sense of "belonging." . . . Some fans are drawn gradually from intimate interactions with others who live near them toward participation in a broader

network of fans who attend regional, national, and even international science fiction conventions. . . .

For some women, trapped in low-paying jobs or within the socially isolated sphere of the housewife, participation within an (inter)national network of fans grants a degree of dignity and respect otherwise lacking. For others, fandom offers a training ground for the development of professional skills and an outlet for creative impulses constrained by their workday lives. Fan slang draws a sharp contrast between the “mundane”—the realm of everyday experience and/or those who dwell exclusively within that space—and fandom, an alternative sphere of cultural experience that restores the excitement and freedom that must be repressed to function in ordinary life. One fan writes, “Not only does ‘mundane’ mean ‘everyday life,’ it is also a term used to describe narrow-minded, pettiness, judgmental, conformity, and a shallow and silly nature. It is used by people who feel very alienated from society.”⁵ To enter fandom is to “escape” from the “mundane” into the marvelous. . . .

Over the twenty years since *Star Trek* was first aired, fan writing has achieved a semi-institutional status. Fan magazines, sometimes hand-typed, photocopied, and stapled, other times offset printed and commercially bound, are distributed through the mail and sold at conventions, frequently reaching an international readership. . . . *Datazine*, one of several magazines that serve as central clearinghouses for information about fanzines, lists some 120 different *Star Trek*-centered publications currently in distribution. Although fan publications may take a variety of forms, fans generally divide them into two major categories: “letterzines,” which publish short articles and letters from fans on issues surrounding their favorite shows, and “fictionzines,” which publish short stories, poems, and novels concerning the program characters and concepts.⁶ . . .

It is important to distinguish between these fan-generated materials and commercially produced works, such as the series of *Star Trek* novels released by Pocket Books under the official supervision of Paramount, the studio that owns the rights to the *Star Trek* characters. Fanzines are totally unauthorized by the program producers and indeed face the constant threat of legal action for their open violation of the producer’s copyright authority over the show’s characters and concepts. Paramount has tended to treat fan magazines with benign neglect so long as they are handled on an exclusively nonprofit basis. Producer Gene Roddenberry and many of the cast members have been known to

contribute to such magazines. Bantam Books even released several anthologies showcasing the work of fan writers.⁷ . . .

Gendered Readers / Gendered Writers

Media fan writing is an almost exclusively feminine response to mass media texts.⁸ Men actively participate in a wide range of fan-related activities, notably interactive games and conference-planning committees, roles consistent with patriarchal norms that typically relegate combat—even combat fantasies—and organizational authority to the “masculine” sphere. Media fan writers and fanzine readers, however, are almost always female. Camille Bacon-Smith has estimated that more than 90 percent of all media fan writers are female.⁹ The greatest percentage of male participation is found in the “letterzines,” like *Comlink* and *Treklink*, and in “nonfiction” magazines, like *Trek*, that publish speculative essays on aspects of the program’s “universe”; men may feel comfortable joining discussions of future technologies or military lifestyle, but not in pondering Vulcan sexuality, McCoy’s childhood, or Kirk’s love life.

Why this predominance of women within the media fan-writing community? Research suggests that men and women have been socialized to read for different purposes and in different ways. David Bleich asked a mixed group of college students to comment, in free-association fashion, on a body of canonized literary works. His analysis of their responses suggested that men focused primarily on narrative organization and authorial intent, while women devoted more energy to reconstructing the textual world and understanding the characters. He writes, “Women enter the world of the novel, take it as something ‘there’ for that purpose; men see the novel as a result of someone’s action and construe its meaning or logic in those terms.”¹⁰ In a related study, Bleich asked some 120 University of Indiana freshmen to “retell as fully and as accurately as you can [William] Faulkner’s ‘Barn Burning,’” and again, noted substantial differences between men and women:

The men retold the story as if the purpose was to deliver a clear simple structure or chain of information: these are the main characters, this is the main action, this is how it turned out. . . . The women present the narrative as if it were an atmosphere or an experience. (p. 256)

Bleich also found that women were more willing to enjoy free play with the story content, making inferences about character relationships that took them well beyond the information explicitly contained within the text. Such data strongly suggest that the practice of fan writing, the compulsion to expand speculations about characters and story events beyond textual boundaries, draws more heavily upon the types of interpretive strategies common to the “feminine” than to the “masculine.”

Bleich’s observations provide only a partial explanation as they do not fully account for why many women find it necessary to go beyond the narrative information while most men do not. . . . Texts written by and for men yield easy pleasures to their male readers yet may resist feminine pleasure. To fully enjoy the text, women are often forced to perform a kind of intellectual transvestism—identifying with male characters in opposition to their own cultural experiences, or constructing unwritten countertexts through their daydreams or through their oral interaction with other women—that allows them to explore their own narrative concerns. This need to reclaim feminine interests from the margins of “masculine” texts produces endless speculation that draws the reader well beyond textual boundaries into the domain of the intertextual. Mary Ellen Brown and Linda Barwick have shown how women’s gossip about soap opera inserts program content into an existing feminine oral culture.¹¹ Fan writing represents the logical next step in this cultural process: the transformation of oral countertexts into a more tangible form, the translation of verbal speculations into written works that can be shared with a broader circle of women. To do so, their status must change; no longer simply spectators, these women become textual producers.

Just as women’s gossip about soap operas assumes a place within a preexisting feminine oral culture, fan writing adopts forms and functions traditional to women’s literary culture. Cheris Kramarae has traced the history of women’s efforts to “find ways to express themselves outside the dominant modes of expression used by men,” to circumvent the ideologically constructed interpretive strategies of masculine literary genres. Kramarae concludes that women have found the greatest room to explore their feelings and ideas within privately circulated letters and diaries and through collective writing projects.¹² Similarly, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has discussed the ways in which the exchange of letters allowed nineteenth-century women to maintain close ties with other women, even when separated by great geographic dis-

tances and isolated within the narrow confines of Victorian marriage. Such letters provided a covert vehicle by which women could explore common concerns and even ridicule the men in their lives.¹³ . . .

Fan writing—with its circulation conducted largely through the mail, with its marketing mostly a matter of word of mouth, with the often collective construction of fantasy “universes,” and with its highly confessional tone—clearly follows within that same tradition and serves some of the same functions. The ready-made characters of popular culture provide these women with a set of common references that can help to facilitate discussions of their similar experiences and feelings with others with whom they may never have enjoyed face-to-face contact. They draw upon these shared points of reference to confront many of the same issues that concerned nineteenth-century women: religion, gender roles, sexuality, family, and professional ambition.

Why Star Trek?

While most texts within a male-dominated culture potentially spark some sort of feminine counter-text, only certain programs have generated the kind of extended written responses characteristic of media fandom. Why, then, has the bulk of fan writing centered on science fiction, which Judith Spector has characterized as a “genre which . . . [has been until recently] hostile toward women,” a genre “by, for and about men of action”?¹⁴ Or around others like it (the cop show, the detective drama, or the western) that have represented the traditional domain of male readers? Why do these women struggle to reclaim such seemingly unfertile soil when there are so many other texts that more traditionally reflect “feminine” interests, and which feminist media critics are now trying to reclaim for their cause? In short, why *Star Trek*?

Obviously, no single factor can adequately account for all fanzines, a literary form that necessarily involves the translation of homogeneous media texts into a plurality of personal and subcultural responses. One partial explanation, however, might be that traditionally “feminine” texts—the soap opera, the popular romance, the “woman’s picture”—do not need as much reworking as science fiction and westerns do in order to accommodate the social experience of women. The resistance of such texts to feminist reconstruction may require a greater expenditure of creative effort and therefore may push women toward a more

thorough reworking of program materials than so-called feminine texts that can be more easily assimilated or negated.

Another explanation would be that these “feminine” texts satisfy, at least partially, the desires of traditional women yet fail to meet the needs of more professionally oriented women. Indeed, a particular fascination of *Star Trek* for these women appears to be rooted in the way that the program seems to hold out a suggestion of nontraditional feminine pleasures, of greater and more active involvement for women within the adventure of professional space travel, while finally reneging on those promises. Sexual equality was an essential component of producer Gene Roddenberry’s optimistic vision of the future. A woman, Number One (Majel Barrett), was originally slated to be the *Enterprise*’s second-in-command. Network executives, however, consistently fought efforts to break with traditional “feminine” stereotypes, fearing the alienation of more conservative audience members.¹⁵ “Number One” was scratched after the program pilot, but throughout the run of the series, women were often cast in nontraditional jobs, everything from Romulan commanders to weapons specialists. The networks, however reluctantly, were offering women a future, a “final frontier,” that included them.

Fan writers, though, frequently express dissatisfaction with these women’s characterizations within the episodes. In the words of fan writer Pamela Rose (1977), “When a woman is a guest star on *Star Trek*, nine out of ten times there is something wrong with her.”¹⁶ Rose notes that these female characters have been granted positions of power within the program only to demonstrate through their erratic, emotion-driven conduct that women are unfit to fill such roles. Another fan writer, Toni Lay, expressed her mixed feelings about *Star Trek*’s social vision:

It was ahead of its time in some ways, like showing that a Caucasian, all-American, all-male crew was not the only possibility for space travel. Still, the show was sadly deficient in other ways, in particular, its treatment of women. Most of the time, women were referred to as “girls.” And women were never shown in a position of authority unless they were aliens, i.e., Deela, T’Pau, Natira, Sylvia, etc. It was like the show was saying “Equal opportunity is OK for their women but not for our girls.”¹⁷

Lay states that she felt “devastated” over the repeated failure of the series and the later feature films to give Lieutenant Penda Uhura command duties commensurate with her rank: “When the going gets tough, the tough leave the womenfolk behind” (p. 15). She contends that Uhura and the other women characters should have been given a chance to demonstrate what they could do confronted by the same kinds of problems that their male counterparts so heroically overcome. The constant availability of the original episodes through reruns and shifts in the status of women within American society throughout the past two decades have only made these unfulfilled promises more difficult to accept, requiring progressively greater efforts to restructure the program in order to allow it to produce pleasures appropriate to the current reception context.

Indeed, many fan writers characterize themselves as “repairing the damage” caused by the program’s inconsistent and often demeaning treatment of its female characters. Jane Land, for instance, characterizes her fan novel *Kista* as “an attempt to rescue one of *Star Trek*’s female characters [Christine Chapel] from an artificially imposed case of foolishness.”¹⁸ Promising to show “the way the future never was,” *The Woman’s List*, a recently established fanzine with an explicitly feminist orientation, has called for “material dealing with all range of possibilities for women, including: women of color, lesbians, women of alien cultures and women of all ages and backgrounds.” Its editors acknowledge that their publication’s project necessarily involves telling the kinds of stories that network policy blocked from airing when the series was originally produced. A recent flier for that publication explains:

We hope to raise and explore those questions which the network censors, the television genre and the prevailing norms of the time made it difficult to address. We believe that both the nature of human interaction and sexual mores and the structure of both families and relationships will have changed by the twenty-third century and we are interested in exploring those changes.

Telling such stories requires the stripping away of stereotypically feminine traits. The series characters must be reconceptualized in ways that suggest hidden motivations and interests heretofore unsuspected. They must be reshaped into full-blooded feminist role models. While in the

series Chapel is defined almost exclusively in terms of her unrequited passion for Spock and her professional subservience to Dr. McCoy, Jane Land represents her as a fiercely independent woman, capable of accepting love only on her own terms, prepared to pursue her own ambitions wherever they take her, outspoken in response to the patronizing attitudes of the command crew. C. A. Siebert has performed a similar operation on the character of Lieutenant Uhura, as maybe suggested by this passage from one of her stories:

There were too few men like Spock who saw her as a person. Even Captain Kirk, she smiled, especially Captain Kirk, saw her as a woman first. He let her do certain things but only because military discipline required it. Whenever there was any danger, he tried to protect her. . . . Uhura smiled sadly, she would go on as she had been, outwardly a feminine toy, inwardly a woman who was capable and human.¹⁹

Here, Siebert attempts to resolve the apparent contradiction created within the series text by Uhura's official status as a command officer and her constant displays of "feminine frailty." Uhura's situation, Siebert suggests, is characteristic of the way that women must mask their actual competency behind traditionally "feminine" mannerisms within a world dominated by patriarchal assumptions and masculine authority. By rehabilitating Uhura's character in this fashion, Siebert has constructed a vehicle through which she can document the overt and subtle forms of sexual discrimination that an ambitious and determined woman faces as she struggles for a command post in Star Fleet (or for that matter, within a twentieth-century corporate boardroom).

Fan writers like Siebert, Land, and Karen Bates (whose novels explore the progression of a Chapel–Spock marriage through many of the problems encountered by contemporary couples trying to juggle the conflicting demands of career and family)²⁰ speak directly to the concerns of professional women in a way that more traditionally "feminine" works fail to do.²¹ These writers create situations in which Chapel and Uhura must heroically overcome the same kinds of obstacles that challenged their male counterparts within the primary texts and often discuss directly the types of personal and professional problems particular to working women. Land's fan novel, *Demeter*, is exemplary in its treatment of the professional life of its central character, Nurse Chapel.²² Land deftly melds action sequences with debates about

gender relations and professional discrimination, images of command decisions with intimate glimpses of a Spock–Chapel marriage. An all-woman crew, headed by Uhura and Chapel, is dispatched on a mission to a feminist separatist space colony under siege from a pack of intergalactic drug smugglers who regard rape as a “manly” sport. In helping the colonists to overpower their would-be assailants, the women are at last given a chance to demonstrate their professional competence under fire, forcing Captain Kirk to reevaluate some of his command policies. *Demeter* raises significant questions about the possibilities of male–female interaction outside of patriarchal dominance. The meeting of a variety of different planetary cultures that represent alternative social philosophies and organizations, alternative ways of coping with the same essential debates surrounding sexual difference, allows for a far-reaching exploration of contemporary gender relations.

Genre Switching: From “Space Opera” to “Soap Opera”

If works like *Demeter* constitute intriguing prototypes for a new breed of feminist popular literature, they frequently do so within conventions borrowed as much from more traditionally “feminine” forms of mass culture as from *Star Trek* itself. For one thing, the female fans perceive the individual episodes as contributing to one great program text. As a result, fan stories often follow the format of a continuous serial rather than operating as a series of self-enclosed works. Tania Modleski has demonstrated the ways that the serial format of much women’s fiction, particularly of soap opera, responds to the rhythms of women’s social experience.²³ The shaky financing characteristic of the fanzine mode of production, the writers’ predilections to engage in endless speculations about the program content and to continually revise their understanding of the textual world, amplifies the tendency of women’s fiction to postpone resolution, transforming *Star Trek* into a “never-ending story.” Fan fiction marches forward through a series of digressions as new speculations cause the writers to halt the advance of their chronicles to introduce events that “must have occurred” prior to the start of their stories or to introduce secondary plotlines that pull them from the main movement of the event chain. . . .

Moreover, this type of reading and writing strategy focuses greater attention on ongoing character relationships than on more temporally

concentrated plot elements. Long-time fan writer Jacqueline Lichtenberg has summarized the difference: “Men want a physical problem with physical action leading to a physical resolution. Women want a psychological problem with psychological action leading to a psychological resolution.”²⁴ These women express a desire for narratives that concentrate on the character relationships and explore them in a “realistic” or “mature” fashion rather than in purely formulaic terms, stories that are “true” and “believable” not “syrupy” or “sweet.” Fan writers seek to satisfy these demands through their own *Star Trek* fiction, to write the kind of stories that they and other fans desire to read.

The result is a kind of genre switching, the rereading/rewriting of “space opera” as an exotic type of romance (and, often, the reconceptualization of romance itself as feminist fiction). Fanzines rarely publish exclusively action-oriented stories glorifying the *Enterprise*’s victories over the Klingon–Romulan Alliance, their conquest of alien creatures, their restructuring of planetary governments, or their repair of potential flaws in new technologies, despite the prevalence of such plots in the original episodes. When such elements do appear, they are usually evoked as a background against which the more typical romance or relationship-centered stories are played or as a test through which female protagonists can demonstrate their professional skills. In doing so, these fan writers draw inspiration from feminist science fiction writers, including Joanna Russ, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Zenna Henderson, Marge Piercy, Andre Norton, and Ursula Le Guin, whose entry into the genre helped to redefine reader expectations about what constituted science fiction, pushing the genre toward greater and greater interest in “soft” science and sociological concerns and increased attention on interpersonal relationships and gender roles.²⁵ *Star Trek*, produced in a period when “masculine” concerns still dominated science fiction, is reconsidered in light of the newer, more feminist orientation of the genre, becoming less a program about the *Enterprise*’s struggles against the Klingon–Romulan Alliance and more an examination of characters’ efforts to come to grips with conflicting emotional needs and professional responsibilities.

Women, confronting a traditionally “masculine” “space opera,” choose to read it instead as a type of women’s fiction. In constructing their own stories about the series’ characters, they turn frequently to the more familiar and comfortable formulas of the soap, the romance, and the feminist coming-of-age novel for models of storytelling technique.

While the fans themselves often dismiss such genres as too focused on “mundane” concerns to be of great interest, the influence of such materials may be harder to escape. . . . As fans attempt to reconstruct the feminine “countertexts” that exist on the margins of the original series episodes, they have, in the process, refocused the series around traditional “feminine” and contemporary feminist concerns, around sexuality and gender politics, around religion, family, marriage, and romance.

Many fans’ first stories take the form of romantic fantasies about the series’ characters and frequently involve inserting glorified versions of themselves into the world of Star Fleet. A story by Bethann, “The Measure of Love,” for instance, deals with a young woman, recently transferred to the *Enterprise*, who has a love affair with Kirk:

We went to dinner that evening. Till that time, I was sure he’d never really noticed me. Sitting across the table from him, I realized just what a vital alive person this man was. I had dreamed of him, but never imagined my hopes might become a reality. But, this was real—not a dream. His eyes were intense, yet they twinkled in an amused sort of way. “Captain . . .”

“Call me Jim.”²⁶

Her romance with Kirk comes to an abrupt end when the young woman transfers to another ship without telling the Captain that she carries his child because she does not want her love to interfere with his career.

Fans are often harshly critical of these so-called “Lieutenant Mary Sue” stories, which one writer labeled “groupie fantasies”²⁷ because of their self-indulgence, their often hackneyed writing styles, their formulaic plots, and their violations of the established characterizations. In reconstituting *Star Trek* as a popular romance, these young women have reshaped the series characters into traditional romantic heroes, into “someone who is intensely and exclusively interested in her and in her needs.”²⁸ But many fan writers are more interested in what happens when this romantic ideal confronts a world that places professional duty over personal needs, when men and women must somehow reconcile careers and marriage in a confusing period of shifting gender relationships. Veteran fan writer Kendra Hunter writes, “Kirk is not going to go off into the sunset with anyone because he is owned body and soul by the *Enterprise*.”²⁹ *Treklink* editor Joan Verba comments: “No believable character is gushed over by so many normally levelheaded

characters such as Kirk and Spock as a typical Mary Sue.”³⁰ Nor are the women of tomorrow apt to place any man, even Jim Kirk, totally above all other concerns.

Some, though by no means all, of the most sophisticated fan fiction also takes the form of the romance. Both Radway and Modleski note popular romances’ obsession with a semiotics of masculinity, with the need to read men’s often repressed emotional states from the subtle signs of outward gesture and expression. The cold logic of Vulcan, the desire to suppress all signs of emotion, make Spock and his father, Sarek, especially rich for such interpretations. Consider this passage from Jean Lorrah’s *Full Moon Rising*:

The intense sensuality she saw in him [Sarek] in other ways suggested a hidden sexuality. She [Amanda] had noticed everything from the way he appreciated the beauty of a moonlit night or a finely-cut sapphire to the way his strongly-molded hands caressed the mellowed leather binding of the book she had given him. . . . That incredible control which she could not penetrate. Sometimes he deliberately let her see beyond it, as he had done earlier this evening, but if she succeeded in making him lose control he would never be able to forgive her.³¹

In Lorrah’s writings, the alienness of Vulcan culture becomes a metaphor for the many things that separate men and women, for the factors that block total intimacy within marriage. She describes her fiction as the story of “two people who are different physically, mentally, and emotionally, but who nonetheless manage to make a pretty good marriage” (p. 2). While Vulcan restraint suggests the emotional sterility of traditional masculinity, their alien sexuality allows Lorrah to propose alternatives. Her Vulcans find sexual inequality to be “illogical,” allowing very little difference in the treatment of men and women, an assumption shared by many fan writers. Moreover, the Vulcan mind-meld grants a degree of sexual and emotional intimacy unknown on earth; Vulcan men even employ this power to relieve women of labor pains and to share the experience of childbirth. Her lengthy writings on the decades-long romance between Spock’s parents, Amanda and Sarek, represent a painstaking effort to construct a feminist utopia, to propose how traditional marriage might be reworked to allow it to satisfy the personal and professional needs of both men and women.

Frequently, the fictional formulas of popular romance are tempered

by women's common social experiences as lovers, wives, and mothers under patriarchy. In Karen Bates's novels, Nurse Chapel must confront and overcome her feelings of abandonment and jealousy during those long periods of time when her husband, Spock, is totally absorbed in his work. Consider this passage from *Starweaver Two*:

The pattern had been repeated so often, it was ingrained. . . . Days would pass without a word between them because of the hours he labored and poured over his computers. Their shifts rarely matched and the few hours they could be together disappeared for one reason or another. (p. 10)

Far from an idyllic romance, Bates's characters struggle to make their marriage work in a world where professionalism is everything and the personal counts for relatively little. Jane Land's version of a Chapel–Spock marriage is complicated by the existence of children who must remain at home under the care of Sarek and Amanda while their parents pursue their space adventures. In one scene, Chapel confesses her confused feelings about this situation to a young Andorian friend: “I spend my life weighing the children's needs against my needs against Spock's needs, and at any given time I know I'm shortchanging someone” (p. 27).

While some male fans denigrate these kinds of fan fiction as “soap operas with Kirk and Spock,”³² these women see themselves as constructing “soap operas” with a difference—“soap operas” that reflect a feminist vision. In C. A. Siebert's words, “I write erotic stories for myself and for other women who will not settle for being less than human.”³³ Siebert suggests that her stories about Lieutenant Uhura and her struggle for recognition and romance in a male-dominated Star Fleet have helped her to resolve her own conflicting feelings within a world of changing gender relations and to explore hidden aspects of her own sexuality. Through her erotica, she hopes to increase other women's awareness of the need to struggle against entrenched patriarchal norms. Unlike their counterparts in Harlequin romances, these women refuse to accept marriage and the love of a man as their primary goal; rather, these stories push toward resolutions that allow Chapel or Uhura to achieve both professional advancement and personal satisfaction. Unlike almost every other form of popular fiction, fanzine stories frequently explore the maturing of relationships beyond the nuptial vows,

seeing marriage as continually open to new adventures, new conflicts, and new discoveries. . . .

Fan writing is a literature of reform, not of revolt. The women still acknowledge their need for the companionship of men, for men who care for them and make them feel special, even as they are asking for those relationships to be conducted in different terms. Jane Land's Nurse Chapel, who in *Demeter* is both fascinated and repelled by the feminist separatist colony, reflects these women's ambiguous and sometimes contradictory responses toward more radical forms of feminism. In the end, Chapel recognizes the potential need for such a place, for a "room of one's own," but sees greater potential in achieving a more liberated relationship between men and women. She learns to develop self-sufficiency, yet chooses to share her life with her husband, Spock, and to achieve a deeper understanding of their differing expectations about their relationship. Each writer grapples with these concerns in her own terms, but most achieve some compromise between the needs of women for independence and self-sufficiency on the one hand, and their needs for romance and companionship on the other. If this does not constitute a radical break with the romance formula, it does represent a progressive reformulation of that formula that pushes toward a gradual redefinition of existing gender roles within marriage and the workplace.

"The Right Way": The "Moral Economy" of Fan Fiction

Their underground status allows fan writers the creative freedom to promote a range of different interpretations of the basic program material and a variety of reconstructions of marginalized characters and interests, to explore a diversity of different solutions to the dilemma of contemporary gender relations. Fandom's IDIC philosophy ("Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations," a cornerstone of Vulcan thought) actively encourages its participants to explore and find pleasure within their different and often contradictory responses to the program text. It should not be forgotten, however, that fan writing involves a translation of personal response into a social expression and that fans, like any other interpretive community, generate their own norms, which work to ensure a reasonable degree of conformity among readings of the primary text. The economic risk of fanzine publishing and the desire for personal popularity ensure some responsiveness to audience demand,

discouraging totally idiosyncratic versions of the program content. Fans try to write stories to please other fans; lines of development that do not find popular support usually cannot achieve financial viability.

Moreover, the strange mixture of fascination and frustration characteristic of fannish response means that fans continue to respect the creators of the original series, even as they wish to rework some program materials to better satisfy their personal interests. Their desire to revise the program material is often counterbalanced by their desire to remain faithful to those aspects of the show that first captured their interests. E. P. Thompson has employed the term “moral economy” to describe the way that eighteenth-century peasant leaders and street rioters legitimized their revolts through an appeal to “traditional rights and customs” and “the wider consensus of the community,” asserting that their actions worked to protect existing property rights against those who sought to abuse them for their own gain.³⁴ The peasants’ conception of a “moral economy” allowed them to claim for themselves the right to judge the legitimacy both of their own actions and those of the landowners and property holders: “Consensus was so strong that it overrode motives of fear or deference” (pp. 78–79).

An analogous situation exists in fandom: the fans respect the original texts yet fear that their conceptions of the characters and concepts may be jeopardized by those who wish to exploit them for easy profits, a category that typically includes Paramount and the network but excludes Roddenberry and many of the show’s writers. The ideology of fandom involves both a commitment to some degree of conformity to the original program materials, as well as a perceived right to evaluate the legitimacy of any use of those materials, either by textual producers or by textual consumers. The fans perceive themselves as rescuing the show from its producers, who have manhandled its characters and then allowed it to die. In one fan’s words, “I think we have made *ST* uniquely our own, so we do have all the right in the world (universe) to try to change it for the better when the gang at Paramount start worshipping the almighty dollar, as they are wont to do.”³⁵ Rather than rewriting the series content, the fans claim to be keeping *Star Trek* “alive” in the face of network indifference and studio incompetence, of remaining “true” to the text that first captured their interest some twenty years before: “This relationship came into being because the fan writers loved the characters and cared about the ideas that are *Star Trek* and they refused to let it fade away into oblivion.”³⁶ Such a relationship obliges fans to

preserve a certain degree of “fidelity” to program materials, even as they seek to rework them toward their own ends. *Trek* magazine contributor Kendra Hunter writes, “*Trek* is a format for expressing rights, opinions, and ideals. Most every imaginable idea can be expressed through *Trek*. . . . But there is a right way.”³⁷ Gross “infidelity” to the series’ concepts constitutes what fans call “character rape” and falls outside of the community’s norms. In Hunter’s words:

A writer, either professional or amateur, must realize that she . . . is not omnipotent. She cannot force her characters to do as she pleases. . . . The writer must have respect for her characters or those created by others that she is using, and have a full working knowledge of each before committing her words to paper. (p. 75)

Hunter’s conception of “character rape,” one widely shared within the fan community, rejects abuses by the original series writers as well as by the most novice fan and implies that the fans themselves, not program producers, are best qualified to arbitrate conflicting claims about character psychology because they care about the characters in a way that more commercially motivated parties frequently do not. In practice, the concept of “character rape” frees fans to reject large chunks of the aired material, including entire episodes, and even to radically restructure the concerns of the show in the name of defending the purity of the original series concept. What determines the range of permissible fan narratives is finally not fidelity to the original texts but consensus within the fan community itself. The text they so lovingly preserve is the *Star Trek* they created through their own speculations, not the one that Gene Roddenberry produced for network airplay.

Consequently, the fan community continually debates what constitutes a legitimate reworking of program materials and what represents a violation of the special reader–text relationship that the fans hope to foster. The earliest *Trek* fan writers were careful to work within the framework of the information explicitly included within the broadcast episodes and to minimize their breaks with series conventions. In fan writer Jean Lorrh’s words, “Anyone creating a *Star Trek* universe is bound by what was seen in the aired episodes; however, he is free to extrapolate from those episodes to explain what was seen in them.”³⁸

Leslie Thompson explains, “If the reasoning [of fan speculations] doesn’t fit into the framework of the events as given [on the program],

then it cannot apply no matter how logical or detailed it may be.”³⁹ As *Star Trek* fan writing has come to assume an institutional status in its own right and therefore to require less legitimization through appeals to textual “fidelity,” a new conception of fan fiction has emerged, one that perceives the stories not as a necessary expansion of the original series text but rather as chronicles of “alternate universes,” similar to the program world in some ways and different in others. . . .

Such an approach frees the writers to engage in much broader play with the program concepts and characterizations, to produce stories that reflect more diverse visions of human interrelationships and future worlds, to overwrite elements within the primary texts that hinder fan interests. But even “alternate universe” stories struggle to maintain some consistency with the original broadcast material and to establish some point of contact with existing fan interests, just as more “faithful” fan writers feel compelled to rewrite and revise the program material in order to keep it alive in a new cultural context.

Borrowed Terms: Kirk/Spock Stories

The debate in fan circles surrounding Kirk/Spock (K/S) fiction, stories that posit a homoerotic relationship between the show’s two primary characters and frequently offer detailed accounts of their sexual couplings, illustrates these differing conceptions of the relationship between fan fiction and the primary series text.⁴⁰ Over the past decade, K/S stories have emerged from the margins of fandom toward numerical dominance over *Star Trek* fan fiction, a movement that has been met with considerable opposition from more traditional fans. For many, such stories constitute the worst form of character rape, a total violation of the established characterizations. Kendra Hunter argues that “it is out of character for both men, and as such, comes across in the stories as bad writing. . . . A relationship as complex and deep as Kirk/Spock does not climax with a sexual relationship” (p. 81). . . . Others struggle to reconcile the information provided on the show with their own assumptions about the nature of human sexuality: “It is just as possible for their friendship to progress into a love affair, for that is what it is, than to remain status quo. . . . Most of us see Kirk and Spock simply as two people who love each other and just happen to be of the same gender.”⁴¹

Some K/S fans frankly acknowledge the gap between the series characterizations and their own representations but refuse to allow their fantasy life to be governed by the limitations of what was actually aired. One fan writes, “While I read K/S and enjoy it, when you stop to re-view the two main characters of *Star Trek* as extrapolated from the TV series, a sexual relationship between them is absurd.”⁴² Another argues somewhat differently:

We actually saw a very small portion of the lives of the Enterprise crew through 79 episodes and some six hours of movies. . . . How can we possibly define the entire personalities of Kirk, Spock, etc., if we only go by what we’ve seen on screen? Surely there is more to them than that! . . . Since I doubt any two of us would agree on a definition of what is “in character,” I leave it to the skill of the writer to make the reader believe in the story she is trying to tell. There isn’t any limit to what could be depicted as accurate behavior for our heroes.⁴³

Many fans find this bold rejection of program limitations on creative activity, this open appropriation of characters, to be unacceptable since it violates the moral economy of fan writing and threatens fan fiction’s privileged relationship to the primary text:

[If] “there isn’t any limit to what could be depicted as accurate behavior of our heroes,” we might well have been treated to the sight of Spock shooting up heroin or Kirk raping a yeoman on the bridge (or vice-versa). . . . The writer whose characters don’t have clearly defined personalities, thus limits and idiosyncrasies and definite characteristics, is the writer who is either very inexperienced or who doesn’t have any respect for his characters, not to mention his audience.⁴⁴

But as I have shown, all fan writing necessarily involves an appropriation of series characters and a reworking of program concepts as the text is forced to respond to the fan’s own social agenda and interpretive strategies. What K/S does openly, all fans do covertly. In constructing the feminine countertext that lurks in the margins of the primary text, these readers necessarily redefine the text in the process of rereading and rewriting it. As one fan acknowledges, “All writers alter and transform the basic *Trek* universe to some extent, choosing some things to emphasize and others to play down, filtering the characters and con-

cepts through their own perceptions.”⁴⁵ If these fans have rewritten *Star Trek* in their own terms, however, many of them are reluctant to break all ties to the primary text that sparked their creative activity and, hence, feel the necessity to legitimate their activity through appeals to textual fidelity. The fans are uncertain how far they can push against the limitations of the original material without violating and finally destroying a relationship that has given them great pleasure. Some feel stifled by those constraints; others find comfort within them. . . .

What should be remembered is that whether they cast themselves as rebels or loyalists, it is the fans themselves who are determining what aspects of the original series concept are binding on their play with the program material and to what degree. The fans have embraced *Star Trek* because they found its vision somehow compatible with their own, and they have assimilated only those textual materials that feel comfortable to them. Whenever a choice must be made between fidelity to their program and fidelity to their own social norms, it is almost inevitably made in favor of lived experience. The women’s conception of the *Star Trek* realm as inhabited by psychologically rounded and realistic characters ensures that no characterization that violated their own social perceptions could be satisfactory. The reason some fans reject K/S fiction has, in the end, less to do with the stated reason that it violates established characterization than with unstated beliefs about the nature of human sexuality that determine what kinds of character conduct can be viewed as plausible. . . .

Conclusion

The fans are reluctant poachers who steal only those things that they truly love, who seize televisual property only to protect it against abuse from those who created it and who have claimed ownership over it. In embracing popular texts, the fans claim those works as their own, re-making them in their own image, forcing them to respond to their needs and to gratify their desires. Female fans transform *Star Trek* into women’s culture, shifting it from space opera into feminist romance, bringing to the surface the unwritten feminine countertext that hides in the margins of the written masculine text. Kirk’s story becomes Uhura’s story and Chapel’s and Amanda’s as well as the story of the women who weave their own personal experiences into the lives of the characters.

Consumption becomes production; reading becomes writing; spectator culture becomes participatory culture.

Neither the popular stereotype of the crazed Trekkie nor academic notions of commodity fetishism or repetition compulsion are adequate to explain the complexity of fan culture. Rather, fan writers suggest the need to redefine the politics of reading, to view textual property not as the exclusive domain of textual producers but as open to repossession by textual consumers. Fans continuously debate the etiquette of this relationship, yet all take for granted the fact that they are finally free to do with the text as they please. The world of *Star Trek* is what they choose to make it. . . . The one text shatters and becomes many texts as it is fit into the lives of the people who use it, each in her or his own way, each for her or his own purposes. . . .

Like de Certeau's poachers, the fans harvest fields that they did not cultivate and draw upon materials not of their making, materials already at hand in their cultural environment, but they make those raw materials work for them. They employ images and concepts drawn from mass culture texts to explore their subordinate status, to envision alternatives, to voice their frustrations and anger, and to share their new understandings with others. Resistance comes from the uses they make of these popular texts, from what they add to them and what they do with them, not from subversive meanings that are somehow embedded within them. . . .

Alert to the challenge such uses pose to their cultural hegemony, textual producers openly protest this uncontrollable proliferation of meanings from their texts, this popular rewriting of their stories, this trespass upon their literary properties. Actor William Shatner (Kirk), for instance, has said of *Star Trek* fan fiction: "People read into it things that were not intended. In *Star Trek*'s case, in many instances, things were done just for entertainment purposes."⁴⁶ Producers insist upon their right to regulate what their texts may mean and what kinds of pleasure they can produce. But such remarks carry little weight. Undaunted by the barking dogs, the "no trespassing" signs, and the threats of prosecution, the fans have already poached those texts from under the proprietors' noses.