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Book Review

Anne Kustritz: Identity, Community, and Sexuality in Slash Fan Fiction: Pocket Publics

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Anne Kustritz: Identity, Community, and Sexuality in Slash Fan Fiction: Pocket Publics

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“Slash fan fiction not only takes sexual variation as benign, but positively revels in these ecstasies” (163). Anne Kustritz’s *Identity, Community, and Sexuality in Slash Fan Fiction: Pocket Publics* is a comprehensive and generous study of slash fan fiction and slash communities. Collected into four main parts, the book shows both the breadth and depth of Kustritz’s long-standing work on slash. Unafraid, she delves deep into slash texts, communities, conflicts, and legal ambiguities. She always keeps an open mind and shows the reader how slash is so much more than two men falling in love and having sex.

The book’s central achievement lies in its insistence that slash cannot be reduced to one textual form or one type of community. Slash has several, often conflicting, political positions, depending on the fans and fandom. Kustritz approaches slash as a set of practices that create spaces for the pleasures of storytelling. The relationships within slash spaces have made it possible for fans to explore their identity and sexuality, and to create and maintain communities. Kustritz’s study is especially important because it documents slash communities during the transition from print and in-person circulation to digital infrastructures. This makes the book not only a study of slash but also a history of how fandom helped shape ways of being together online.

The first part is aptly called “Meeting People, Meeting Texts,” giving us an overview of Kustritz’s research methods, different perspectives on slash and slash communities, and the notion of ‘pocket publics.’ The latter is a basic assumption throughout the book, explained in depth in the fourth and final part. Pocket publics can be seen as parallel public spaces, internally consistent but unique regarding their inherent laws, rules, and norms. Slash communities are such pocket publics—plural! They are public enough to be found but protected enough to shield participants from harassment, censorship, and unwanted attention.

Right from the start, Kustritz points to the futility of the idea that researchers should be able to explain and define slash and slash communities as one homogenous text type or community. Rather, her research approach is “to understand the social and artistic practices that unfolded around the millennium within that zone of possibility opened through the tactics of constructing and protecting pocket publics and social circulation of the term ‘slash’” (7).

Through autoethnographic participation, ethnographic observation, interviews, and active engagement with fans and fandom, Kustritz gains deep insights into the different perspectives slash provides on identity, community, and sexuality. As Kustritz points out time and again, she is unable to give one clear definition of slash in the context of these practices. While “‘slash’ does not describe a truly shared identity, it does become the organizing principle through which many participants create meaningful identities and lasting relationships” (12). These organizing principles vary, depending on the online platforms used by the communities, as well as the participants themselves.

Kustritz draws from extensive knowledge of earlier research into fandom, fan fiction, and slash. Citing Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 1992), Francesca Coppa's "A Brief History of Media Fandom" (In: Hellekson, Karen/Busse, Kristina [eds.]: *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2006, 41-60), and Kristina Busse's "My Life Is a WIP on My LJ: Slashing the Slasher and the Reality of Celebrity and Internet Performances" (In: Hellekson, Karen/idem. [eds.]: *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2006, 207-224) as well as Matt Hills' *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002) and Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), Kustritz builds on their contributions to fan studies and pushes into new territory. With the first part of the book, she clearly shows her own contribution to existing research: she explores fandom and slash at the beginning of the 2000s, showing the changes, anxieties, and possibilities brought by the internet. This historical focus is one of the strengths of the book. Kustritz documents a generation of fans whose infrastructures, norms, and conflicts continue to shape contemporary fandom, even when platforms and practices have changed.

At the same time, Kustritz pays attention to the fact that much of fandom research is grounded in Western, Anglophone, and white culture. To show the countermovement and the wider perspectives on fandom, she draws on Rukmini Pande (*Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*. Iowa City: Iowa UP, 2018), Mel Stanfill ("The Unbearable Whiteness of Fandom and Fan Studies." In: Booth, Paul [ed.]: *A Companion to Fandom and Fan Studies*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018, 305-317), and Lori Morimoto ("Ontological Security and the Politics of Transcultural Fandom." In: Booth, Paul [ed.]: *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2018, 257-276), among others. Kustritz places slash in conversation not only with fan studies but also with theories of counterpublics. Drawing on queer, feminist, and cultural theory, including thinkers such as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner ("Sex in Public." In: *Critical Inquiry* 24 [2], 1998, 547-566), Nancy Fraser (*Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989; "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." In: *Social Text* 25/26, 1990, 56-80), Michel Foucault (*The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, 1990; *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1995), bell hooks (*Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End, 1992), and Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990), she understands slash as a protected yet public space for oppositional reading, sexual imagination, and alternative community formation.

In the second and largest part of the book, entitled "Simulating Multiple Narrative Space: Reading Across Slash Texts," Kustritz delivers, among other examples, a comparative analysis between Pauline Réage's novel *The Story of O* (1954) and *The Story of Obi* (2001) "by Lilith Sedai, a radical subcultural homoerotic rewrite" (99). Here, she shows how consent, violence, submission, and BDSM can be used in storytelling to imagine a different world in which sex might be about power but more importantly about pleasure, first and foremost. She lays out one of the main themes throughout the book: sex and texts as pleasure. The characters in slash stories engage in sexual acts because it is pleasurable to them. At the same time, the fan fiction author can maintain a critical approach to society and future possibilities, if this is their intention. This critique can be found in readers' comments—as well as in meta-texts written by other fans.



Kustritz shows how texts do more than describe sexual pleasures. The texts themselves are pleasures within a given fandom. Every published text becomes a gift to the community, a new way of exploring relationships, gender, power dynamics, and most of all, the pleasure of being together. Kustritz's central contribution is to help us understand that slash is more than erotic fan production—it is the basic element in a set of socially organized, affective, and politically meaningful practices. Most importantly, Kustritz does not shy away from slash texts that might stir controversy within fandom. Especially slash texts that delve into BDSM can become controversial within fandom groups, turning comment sections into heavily opposing spaces. Kustritz explains how important these dynamics are for maintaining a community. Conflict is not simply a problem to be solved; it can also be part of how a community develops.

While slash can be seen as opposing the mainstream and as feminist in its storytelling, Kustritz also shows how heteronormativity is found in slash (e.g., in mpreg [male pregnancy], when two characters get their happily-ever-after as a married couple with a clear husband-and-wife pairing and children, thereby maintaining the status quo of heterosexual marriage). This is one of the great strengths of Kustritz's analysis: she does not romanticize slash as automatically radical. Instead, she shows its contradictions. Slash can open new possibilities, but it can also repeat familiar patterns. The texts and the communities built around these texts never remain static. They are in a constant dynamic state, creating the building blocks for lively debate and for an ever-evolving pocket public. These narrative spaces change depending on the people involved as well as the original and subsequent slash fiction published. With this, Kustritz shows how meaningful the examination of slash spaces is to studies of identity, community, and democracy.

The third and shortest part of the book, "Structures and Skirmishes," furthers these discussions. Kustritz elaborates on the laws, rules, and norms inherent in slash communities, as well as those surrounding them. Kustritz delves into a range of topics that have a real-life impact on what can be written, where it can be shared, and how fandom sees itself regarding copyright, plagiarism, and authority. She examines legal texts, existing verdicts, and conflicts around copyright to explain the apparent differences between fans' expectations and negotiations around fan fiction versus actual copyright law. In this part, Kustritz explores how fan fiction must toe the line between adhering to the mainstream public, including its laws and rules, and keeping fan fiction as a space in which stories are told, retold, and twisted to show future possibilities. As history has shown, fans have experienced the deletion of their fan fiction and archives, often without warning and without any possible recourse. Archive of Our Own (AO3) can be understood in relation to this broader history of platform deletion, censorship, and fans' desire for self-governed archival infrastructure. Discussing copyright in this context, therefore, is not only about legality but also about culture and politics.

The fourth and final part returns to the concept of pocket publics. This is where the book's broader importance becomes especially clear. Kustritz's argument is not only that slash communities create hidden or semi-hidden spaces for erotic writing. Rather, these spaces allow for unpredictable encounters with new ways of understanding sex, gender, relationships, community, and pleasure. Pocket publics are fragile, but they are also powerful. They are created through passwords, conventions, archives, pseudonyms, shared knowledge, and trust. They are never fully private and never simply public. This tension is what makes them productive.

The book's strength is also what can make it demanding. Kustritz works across fan studies, anthropology, literary theory, queer theory, legal studies, and public sphere theory. This gives the book great

depth, but it also means that readers unfamiliar with fan studies or slash terminology may find it dense at times. The historical focus on the late 1990s and early 2000s is one of the book's most valuable contributions, but it also raises questions about how these arguments travel into contemporary fandom shaped by AO3, Tumblr, TikTok, Discord, platform capitalism, and much more visible battles over identity and representation. The book opens these questions rather than answers them.

Identity, Community, and Sexuality in Slash Fan Fiction is therefore an important book for scholars and students of fan studies, media studies, queer studies, digital culture, anthropology, and copyright. It will be especially valuable for readers interested in how communities create their own norms, pleasures, and ways of knowing in the margins of mainstream culture. In showing slash as a space of multiplicity, contradiction, pleasure, conflict, and possibility, the book is most convincing: slash fan fiction is not merely about what characters do to each other in stories; it is about what people do with stories—how they find each other, protect each other, argue with each other, desire otherwise, and imagine worlds not yet fully available. Kustritz invites us to take these practices seriously. More than that, she invites us to revel in them.

In light of the continued development and encroachment of artificial intelligence into fandom spaces, let me finish by quoting the very last paragraph of the book—a plea for safeguarding open public spaces for the unimagined stories of the future: “It is my hope that this work will inspire academics and lay theorists to use slash as an object to think with as they develop theories of what women, audiences, or digital (counter)publics are capable of being and accomplishing, remembering that international investment in the preservation of open public spaces today is required to safeguard the unimagined stories of the future” (264).

