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REB/VODKA IS MY OTP: SCHOOL SHOOTER AND MASS MURDERER FANFICTION AS NARRATIVES OF RESISTANCE

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In 2019 a white supremacist livestreamed the murder of 51 people, and the injuring of another 40, at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, telling Reddit users that it was “time to stop shitposting and time to make a real life effort post” (quoted in Macklin, 2019). It was, as the *New York Times* indicated, “an internet-native mass shooting, conceived and produced entirely within the irony-soaked discourse of modern extremism” (Roose, 2019). Though perhaps distinct in indicating how the internet’s strange mix of playful memes, spreadable media logics and reactionary politics could have very material, very murderous consequences, the event has been one of many that pose challenging questions about foundational assumptions in fan studies and the role and status of fandom and participatory culture in contemporary life. Though it is critical that we avoid the crudest of media effects and moral panics, it has certainly become clear that fandoms specifically, and participatory cultures more broadly, are sites of controversy, conflict, and complicity; complicating earlier assessments that sought to celebrate creativity, collegiality, and community.

Early work in the emerging field of fan studies quite deliberately focused on the positive aspects of fandom: the creativity at play in transformative works; the ways in which participatory cultures could resist dominant, heteronormative narratives; and the affective communities that rose around beloved texts. This approach was designed to combat the stereotyping and pathologizing of fans perpetrated by mass media until well into the 2000s (Jenson, 1992; Zubernis and Larsen, 2012) and has broadly been successful: fans are now mainstream, actively courted and commercialised in a range of industries. It is worth at this point reiterating some taken-for-granted assumptions in fan and audience studies. First, popular culture is a site of political meaning and ideological conflict. Second, the meaning of a text is not fixed but open to multiple interpretations; audiences are active not just in their readings but productive in the creation of auxiliary texts, refracting the subject position(s) of the reader. Third, in a highly mediatized consumer society popular cultures are important for identity maintenance, and fandom is often a critical site of kinship and community. Cultural studies has always been

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acutely attuned to the intersections of ideology and popular culture, but recent shifts feel more pressing and fan studies, in particular, has recognised that fannish spaces can also be sites of hatred, toxicity and other, darker, emotions. Yet while work is now being undertaken on white supremacy, conspiracy theories and the fandoms arising round true crime podcasts and serial killers (Stanfill, 2020; Reinhard et al., 2021; Wiest, 2016), the communities around people like Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (the Columbine school shooters), Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (the Boston Bomber), and Brenton Tarrant (the perpetrator of the Christchurch attacks) remain unexplored.

This paper returns to some of the early discourses surrounding fandom and applies them to contemporary expressions of 'dark' fandom, in particular school shooters and mass killers. Undertaking a content analysis of fanfiction posted to Archive of Our Own, as well as media reports focusing on these fans, I demonstrate – as Rico suggests – that “dark fandoms remain rooted in the first wave [of fan studies] where these fans are dismissed as Others and their communities lack legitimization and acceptance by society” (2015, online). I focus on fanfiction given its status as a still maligned activity, predominantly the domain of teenage girls who can be written off as obsessive or naïve fangirls. Typically stigmatised through its gendered associations – fanfiction writers are irrational, hysterical and immature – fanfiction dedicated to mass killers is subject to a double multiple discourses of othering, but also offers multiple forms of resistance to these dominant narratives. Rather than fanfiction as a practice through which fans express emotional connections with popular media texts, I argue that fans write fanfiction about school shooters and mass killers not as a means of showing their 'love' for the perpetrators, but as a way to recontextualize and understand their motives and actions. Although not stars in the traditional sense (Broll, 2020) these killers attain a level of celebrity which comes with a following – similar to that of serial killers, who Schmid refers to as the “exemplary modern celebrity” (2005, 15) – and while this may not be understandable to most it nevertheless offers us ways to think about dominant narratives, resistance and whose voices are, and aren't, being heard. This paper thus examines dark fan cultural production through the lens of resistance and suggests that different dark fandoms function as sites of resistance against dominant cultural narratives – be those 'real' or perceived. Following Ford, who suggests “The strength of fan studies [...] stems [...] from the interdisciplinarity that has allowed scholars from varied fields to bring their research methods and theoretical constructs to bear on the relationships active audiences have with and around media texts” (2014, 53–54) I highlight the darker, more uncomfortable relationships audiences have with particular mediated events. In particular I argue that we cannot afford to simply look at the audiences who engage in 'approved' versions of fannish production and involvement: if we examine how writing fanfiction can push back against patriarchal narratives we also need to include those writing about school shooters and mass killers to ensure we are not perpetuating a hierarchy within academia that says certain forms of behaviour and engagement are more appropriate to research than others.

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