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"Just Don't Frighten the Horses": Discussing Porn and Kink in Fandom Spaces

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Corporatization of fan spaces is ad revenues from corporations determining what is acceptable and unacceptable to post on fandom platforms. One of the factors that led to the corporatization of fandom spaces was the corporations themselves. The other major factor was the fans whose objections to the content were based on moral grounds. These fans have become more and more visible as fandom's online presence grows. They have been given the term anti (Aubrime). In order to understand antis, a definition must be reached. For the purpose of this essay, an anti is someone who is anti-pornography, anti-kink, and typically anti-sex in general. Although, it is not their stance against these things that classify them as antis. Antis are also defined by their desire to eradicate everything they disagree with as they see the material as "harmful." It should not be concluded that antis are intruders or not a part of the fandom community. Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, who are both sociologists with publications on cultural studies, point out "the study of subcultures tends to treat them as if they were...homogenous-more or less as if all members of the group were the same and all shared exactly the same beliefs and practices" (Abercrombie and Longhurst 160). Antis do not share the same views as the creators and consumers of pornographic fanfiction but they are still part of the community. Indeed, this is a key part of the definition of an anti. As members of the fandom community, they engage with fandom in fandom spaces. This engagement leads them to have more influence over other fans which is how new antis are made.

The belief that all pornography is harmful as are the people who create pornography is an antifeminist belief. Shame around pornography, especially pornography mainly produced by and for women, can have harmful consequences,

such as the repression of sexual pleasure and agency. Antis, through their belief that kink and pornography are harmful, believe that “fiction affects reality, in that any problematic behaviors or topics in media, fictitious or not, will cause people to normalize those behaviors resulting in people (specifically minors) thinking that such actions are acceptable in real life” (Aubrime 1.2). Antis frequently target content creators with death threats, suicide baiting, and accusations of child abuse. They,

perpetuate a climate of fear, shame, and trauma in fan spaces. The most common targets of such abuse are women, people of color, teens, abuse survivors, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Fans who are already marginalized are further deprived of safety, anonymity, outlets for growth, self-expression, and relationships. (Aubrime 1.3)

Antis often use buzzwords, words that are designed to cause a negative knee-jerk reaction, to get people on their side. The words they use most often are pedophilia, rape, and incest. They tell fans they are supporting these things if they create, or even engage in, fanfics that they consider immoral. Antis not only use these tactics to convince other fans of the immorality of sexually explicit material in fandom, they also use them to convince themselves of their own morality and righteousness. When they,

[convince] themselves that all nonantis are pedophiles, antis can excuse any ill behavior directed toward nonantis, which most often manifests as aggressive racism, misogyny, and homophobia. Antis may also describe ways they hope individuals (including minors) will suffer or die for their fictional interests or tell sexual assault victims their assault was deserved as a result of the “corrupt” nature of such interests. (Aubrime 3.2).

Antis, according to their beliefs, are free to harass and bully others in fandom as they serve as a guiding force of morality. Antis are inherently antisex. The view that sex is immoral is harmful to the very people that antis are trying to “protect,” mainly women and minors. Antis have a big influence over younger people and usually recruit minors to their cause. They bombard them with antisex views, especially the belief that any sexual activity is immoral for minors to engage in, and “in this way, sexual thoughts and feelings become criminal for [them] to express” (Aubrime 4.3). The minors then internalize the idea that sex is inherently problematic. Fan communities are made up of primarily women and women have been continuously shamed for their sexual pleasure. When teenage girls are told that all sex is immoral, their sexual pleasure as adults is also compromised.

Fifty Shades of Grey is an erotic novel written by E.L. James that features a BDSM relationship between the two main characters. It was written as *Twilight* fanfiction before it was traditionally published. It is marketed as pornography for women and was written by a woman. It has had calls to be censored, with the people objecting to this novel using the same rhetoric that is widely used by antis in fandom spaces, which is reading “harmful” pornography causes harmful sexual behavior. It is the first novel in a series where two characters, Christian Grey and Ana Steele, engage in a sexual relationship. Christian tells Ana early on in the novel, soon after they first meet, that he does not “do romance. [His] tastes are very singular” (James 72). Christian’s warning to Ana is the narrative declaring itself as more sex-focused rather than romance-focused. While this changes toward the end of the novel and most likely the subsequent novels in the series, there is still an emphasis on sex. By Christian declaring his tastes to be “very

singular,” this emphasis on sex becomes focused on kink, which is the plot of the novel. Christian desires a BDSM relationship and Ana is open to exploring it. There are problematic depictions of Christian and Ana’s relationship throughout the novel. However, the function of this novel is to be sexually titillating to women; therefore, the novel is subversive in that it encourages women’s sexual pleasure. It also does this in the text itself. Ana calls the sexual part of herself her “inner goddess” (James 137). This phrasing equates sex to power by using the term “goddess”; it also equates sex with femininity. One of the first times Ana uses this phrase in reference to herself is when she first experiences giving sexual pleasure to Christian and she is “watching him writhe subtly with carnal longing” (James 137). While this passage is not about her receiving her own sexual pleasure, it is still about power through giving sexual pleasure. She is not passive in this experience. She actively chooses to engage in sex and she finds power in the choice. Power in submission is also shown in the novel in relation to sex. Sometimes this power is depicted as her exploring her sexual fantasies and sometimes this power is depicted as her making decisions in her relationship with Christian.

Ana has a fantasy where she is teased with a riding crop. She relates this fantasy to Christian. In the novel, he fulfills this fantasy, even down to the type of riding crop he uses which is “brown plaited leather” (James 321). Ana specifies the riding crop to Christian when she tells him her fantasy. She is surprised that he brings this fantasy to life so exacting of her wishes, and he responds “[w]e aim to please, Ms. Steele” (James 322). While Christian is the dominant partner in their relationship, he still acknowledges Ana’s power through sex. The novel is not about Christian dismissing Ana’s wishes but rather it is about fulfilling her desires. As Ana is the main character in the novel, and as

such the narrative is from her point-of-view, the reader is put into the same position as Ana. Therefore, it is the reader's fantasy being fulfilled alongside Ana's fantasy. Ana also shows power in her relationship by deciding what is allowed or not allowed when it comes to the BDSM aspects. She exchanges emails with Christian detailing what she wants, what she does not want, and what she is unsure about in connection to their sex life. She tells him that there will be "no fisting of any kind" as well as setting deal breakers such as "not eating food from a prescribed list. The food list goes or [she] does" (James 204-205). Christian does not condescend to her about these deal breakers. He reassures her that "it is the sub who has all the power. That's [Ana]" and that he "can't touch [her] if [she] says no" (James 400). It is important to note that Christian is not "giving" her power; he is acknowledging it. She holds power in the relationship because she is the other person, besides Christian, in the relationship not because her partner is giving her permission to hold power. A woman practicing sexual agency in a relationship in order to gain sexual pleasure is a subversive concept for an erotic novel.

One of the aspects of *Fifty Shades of Grey* that people find problematic is that the couple engages in a BDSM relationship, and according to some, it is not a healthy one. The argument is that women will think that this kind of relationship is acceptable. Clare Phillipson, who is the director of a charity for victims of domestic violence, insists that the novel is "really about a domestic violence perpetrator, taking someone who is less powerful, inexperienced, not entirely confident about the area of life she has been led into, and then spinning her a yarn." She goes on to caution "[t]hat message is so dangerous" for women (Flood). However, this is a misreading of the novel. Ana, while

she is inexperienced in both sex and kink, is not taken advantage of by Christian as he does not attempt to manipulate her into dangerous sexual practices. He, instead, “suggest[s] [she] do some research” as she would “be amazed [at] what [she] can find on the Internet” (James 148). Ana does, in fact, do research and therefore she is able to come up with her own terms for their relationship. The novel features “Ana negotiat[ing] her own sexuality” (Dirks 83). Not only does Christian suggest that Ana research BDSM before committing herself to the contract; with his suggestion, this also encourages the curious reader to do their own research before establishing rules and boundaries. Even if the novel had no passage about research, it does not matter. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a fictional novel and not a how-to manual. It is not James’s responsibility to make sure the reader engages in safe, sane, and consensual BDSM practices. The idea that women who are interested in exploring sex and kink would use a novel as their instruction manual is absurd. This idea infantilizes women and puts too much responsibility on authors. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a popular novel as “in 2013 [James] was the Forbes top-earning author-she made \$95 million that year” (Dirks 82). As a popular book, it can be argued that it is also influential. However, the real influence of the novel is for women to find their own path to sexual pleasure; whether that path is through masturbation, kink, roleplay, fantasy, etc. It is still the reader’s responsibility to do their own research in order to engage in these practices (if they choose to do so) in an informed way. It is up to the individual to decide if the content of the novel is worth reading or not. Certainly it can be critiqued, but it should not be censored. The call for the novel to be censored and banned on the behalf of women is the call that women should not be reading

pornography (especially kink-based pornography) and therefore, functions as a denial of women's sexual pleasure, as is censoring pornographic fanfiction.

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