Textual Liberation and the Politics of Fan Works
Cait Coker, April 15, 2010
Textual Poaching vs. Textual Liberation
Twilight Remixed
Star Wars: The Phantom Edit
Star Trek 2009
The Uhura Racefail
What movie were YOU watching?

'Bitch best get her hands off a Vulcan before he breaks em'
# Racefail Bingo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I never saw Uhura as Black. Then you don't see HER.</th>
<th>I don't get white privilege EXPLAIN! WE has links!! do not ask BP!</th>
<th>Zoe is Dominican! She's NOT black! Zoe defines Zoe. She's black.</th>
<th>WHY SO ANGRY? only 35 times before Spock snapped, yo.</th>
<th>Why do we have to talk about race? You have a choice, bb. &quot;scroll&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My black friend says... So, it must be true!</td>
<td>Why do black people...? WE are not BORG.</td>
<td>Bringing up race CAUSES THE RACISMS!!</td>
<td>SPOCK = biracial Uhura =black THE SAME! I has cookie nac?</td>
<td>I don't want to offend you but... Don't say it!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I HATE racism. ...I has cookie, nao?</td>
<td>I'm Jewish, Polish, Irish! I TOTALLY understand racism.</td>
<td>Spock/Uhura = Racial Progress Yo.</td>
<td>I'm not racist but... RACEFAIL always follows this statement.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'm black and not offended. Therefore NO black people should be!</td>
<td>African Culture explain, please? There are MANY. Google, please.</td>
<td>THERE'S NO RACISM IN STAR TREK!</td>
<td>Vulcans? Totally JUST LIKE Black people.</td>
<td>I love black people! Therefore, I has no knapsack.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everybody's a little bit racist! Avenue Q songs do not equal truefax!</td>
<td>I LOVE Spock/Uhura. Therefore, I has no racisms.</td>
<td>WATCH YOUR TONE! Xerox machines: what we watch for tone.</td>
<td>Mean black people? As bad as teh racisms.</td>
<td>Interracial love? Making biege babies? Ultimate Racism cure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Where No Woman

WHERE NO WOMAN HAS GONE BEFORE
Un-erasing the women of Star Trek

I HAVE A STORY

GAJLA

MADELINE
Fan Works as Political Statements: A View of Textual Liberation

First off, let me say that an alternate version of the title of this paper is “The Angry!Textual!Poacher! is Angry!” with all the words punctuated by exclamation points. If that sounds like I’m borrowing from a popular web meme, well, I sort of am—and my title would like to pointedly echo what I’m going to talk about today. When Henry Jenkins published his seminal text on *Textual Poachers* in 1992, he conscientiously used the language of the French sociologist Michel de Certeau to talk about the acts of reading and borrowing texts. “Fandom celebrates not exceptional texts but rather exceptional readings,” he wrote. “De Certeau’s notion of ‘poaching’ is a theory of appropriation, not of ‘misreading.’ The term ‘misreading’ … preserves the traditional hierarchy bestowing privileged status to authorial meanings over reader’s meanings.” Though Jenkins’ own text views fan-produced materials as an active rather than a passive form of cultural digestion, it nonetheless primarily discusses fan texts as further forms of popular entertainment or literature rather than as a conscientiously political act. Though Jenkins and academics have been more or less successful in their quest to bestow a similar “hierarchically privileged status” to fan works, further critical attention is due to the fans’ own authorial intentions.

What I’m primarily going to be talking about is what I call textual liberation. Now what does it mean to liberate a text? First of all, it means that the fan author is intentionally setting out to defy the original text-creator’s own intentions to offer a critical or resistant reading of the text, even to pointedly subvert the text. A great and well-known (well-downloaded) example is “Buffy vs. Edward, Twilight Remixed” by Rebellious Pixels. Rebellious Pixels’ own description of
In this remixed narrative Edward Cullen from the *Twilight Series* meets Buffy the Vampire Slayer at Sunnydale High. It’s an example of transformative storytelling serving as a pro-feminist visual critique of Edward’s character and generally creepy behavior. Seen through Buffy’s eyes, some of the more sexist gender roles and patriarchal Hollywood themes embedded in the Twilight saga are exposed in hilarious ways. Ultimately this remix is about more than a decisive showdown between the slayer and the sparkly vampire. It also doubles as a metaphor for the ongoing battle between two opposing visions of gender roles in the 21st century.

Now those are the aca-fan’s own words, purposefully stated as a critique of popular media and as a liberation—or even transformation—of “sexy” hero to stalker. Though it is perhaps better articulated than other such works, it is by no means an isolated piece of work. Many fans, when interacting with texts, will consciously do so as a critique, either of the text, the author, or both.

In addition, when fans create a new work from the pre-existing mold of their fandom, they are doing so for their own, sometimes disparate purposes. And while most creator-authors [‘creator-author’ being the term I use to denote the creator of a truly original work and not fan-text] at best enjoy their admirer’s activity, and at worst actively pursue them to end it, very few are interested in engaging with it meaningfully. One of those few was the science fiction author Marion Zimmer Bradley, who said of her own most famous fictional world that “I didn’t invent Darkover, I discovered it.” From the 1970s through the early 1990s, Bradley actively engaged with her fans and their fan works by editing and publishing in fanzines, holding contests for fan works created from her universe, and finally professionally publishing with DAW Books a set of
twelve anthologies of fan-written stories. In most of these works, the fan-authors did not seek to subvert Bradley’s writings. Far from it, many of them wanted their works to be read favorably by Bradley—which she largely did. In a few cases, she would even say of a story, “yes, this is canon now.”\(^iv\) The truly remarkable thing about Bradley and her fans, called the Friends of Darkover, is that this sizeable community of fans, who altogether published some seventy group newsletters, several dozen zines and other small press publications, as well as other ephemeral matter, did so pretty harmoniously for over two decades.

This activity ended abruptly in 1992 when a fan named Jean Lamb wrote a novel starring one of Bradley’s minor characters. The custom at the time was to send Bradley a copy of the work; Bradley wrote a response to Lamb, commenting on what she thought worked and what didn’t, and closed saying she had enjoyed the book. Reportedly, Lamb felt spurned, and when Bradley announced the forthcoming publication of her next Darkover novel, threatened to sue, saying that Bradley had stolen material from her fan novel. Nervous, her publisher dropped Bradley’s book contract, and the novel was not published. Heartbroken, Bradley moved to dissolve the Friends of Darkover, and they ceased all publication efforts. Currently, even the DAW anthologies are out of print, possibly due to lingering legal issues. Last November, I interviewed Nina Boal, who edited Lamb’s novel for an issue of her fanzine *Moon Phases*. She described Lamb’s feeling as of being “convinced Marion wasn’t paying enough attention to Danvan. And it was like he was a real character, a person” whom she had to rescue from the author in order to “do right by him.”\(^v\) This cautionary tale en-acts the flip side of fan activity, when it really DOES do literal emotional and monetary damage to the creator-author.

In contrast, the fanworks in mega-fandoms such as *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* probably couldn’t do significant monetary damage if they tried. For instance, Mike J. Nichols’s notorious
reworking of Star Wars I, known popularly as *The Phantom Edit* and disseminated through the Internet in 2000 and 2001, has hardly hurt the DVD sales of George Lucas. In fact, reportedly Lucas himself praised Nichols’s film, at least until numerous media outlets such as Salon.com and NPR, etc. began reporting that the fan version was superior to Lucas’s own. Before Nichols’s identity was known, some speculated that the editor was indie darling Kevin Smith, whose well-known films starring slackers and fanboys often include profanity-laden fan critiques of Lucas’s films amongst others. Daniel Kraus, writing for Salon.com, said that the mystery “added to the mystique and appeal, for materialized from out of nowhere was a *good* film that had been hidden inside the disappointing original one -- perhaps the film that every adult "Star Wars" fan had been hoping "Episode 1" would be.” However, when the popular and fan praise for *The Phantom Edit* became a little too loud, or perhaps too close for comfort, Lucas and Lucasfilms Ltd. reversed their position. *The Phantom Edit* is not a political work itself, but the responses it provoked, in many ways, are. At the most basic level, the dialogue between creator-authors and fan-authors is primarily a discussion of control—a control of characters, a control of worlds, a control of money. And in the perceptions of others, who is really the one in control? Legally speaking, it will always be the one who holds the copyright (and the lawyers and their bank accounts) but in the eyes of the viewer, for instance, who is the “real” Jar Jar Binks? The annoying, racist comic-relief Jar Jar, or the subtitled koan-quoting Jar? Some fans might prefer, to borrow from the Mythbusters, to reject your reality and substitute our own.

The rest of this paper is going to focus on the fandom of *Star Trek*, and of the 2009 *Star Trek* reboot in particular. For one thing, the *Star Trek* fandom is among the longest-lived, the most studied, and the most active. For another, it is a fandom I’m actively involved in. Historically, *Star Trek* fandom is perhaps best-known as being among the progenitors of
slash fiction, even the name of which originates from the fandom. Slash is a specific genre of fan fiction in which two (or more!) characters, most often male, engage in homosexual relationships, and derives from the punctuation mark, the slash, inserted between the initials of the characters involved, for example K/S for Kirk/Spock stories. These stories began to circulate in the zines of the 1970s. Prior to the reboot film’s release, there was sizeable speculation as to how director J.J. Abrams would handle the issue. After all, in 1979 Gene Roddenberry, himself the creator-author of Star Trek, slipped a reference into his official novelization of Star Trek The Motion Picture. Explicating the Vulcan term t’hy’la, he noted that the word was used by Spock to describe Captain Kirk, and that it meant “brother,” “soulmate,” and finally, “lover.” Writing as Captain Kirk, he notes the “rumors” that he and Spock were lovers, before concluding that he, Kirk, has “always found his best gratification in that creature woman.” This being the sentence that launched a thousand (million) fics, active readers noted that, linguistically speaking at least, Kirk would have to have had some experience with males (or other sexual lifeforms) in order to even make the informed conclusion of “best” gratification.

So: the 2009 film. To the surprise of many, Abrams chose to portray Spock in a relationship after all—with Cadet Uhura instead of not-yet-Captain Kirk. Interestingly, a number of fans and others were shocked and outraged to find that Spock was portrayed in a romantic relationship with a woman—and sadly, not because they were angry that he wasn’t paired with his t’hy’la Kirk, but because more prosaically, he was with a black woman. This was Racefail 2009, the Abrams edition. Incidentally, Racefail 2009, aka the Great Cultural Appropriation Debate of Doom, was a lengthy discussion that took place online throughout 2009 regarding the implicit, explicit, complicit and otherwise any-plicit racism of science fiction books, culture, fandom, and criticism. It originated with a post on Elizabeth Bear’s journal discussing the
issues of writing “the Other” and cultural appropriation, and several hundred posts across numerous blog-posting software systems later we have numerous papers on the topic both here and at other conferences. But I digress by a lot.

The Uhura Racefail, specifically, is defined by the numerous online articles and blog posts that decried the black female character Uhura’s and actress Zoe Saldana’s “aggression” towards white male character Spock and actor Zachary Quinto. Her behavior is described variously as “attacking” or “raping” him in the turbolift scene. An illustrative example reads:

I will admit, it was a sexy scene. But imagine we switched the genders. A young woman is in an emotionally compromised state, having witnessed the murder of a parent and the genocide of her people. She is on the verge of some kind of breakdown. So she goes into a turbolift to head to her quarters, and who should appear but Male Crewmate? Male Crewmate starts caressing her all hotly, kissing her face, saying, “Hey, baby. What can I do for you? You look sad. You look like you need some comfort. Luckily I have some comfort...in my pants.”

All right, that’s not exactly what Uhura said, but it’s clearly what she meant. And when the genders are reversed, the scene gets kind of creepy. Actually, hell with that. It’s creepy when Uhura does it! What kind of person tries to take advantage of another person like that? I wouldn’t be all that surprised if Kirk tried something like that, but Uhura? Just give Spock a hug and be done with it! You don’t have to sexually assault him to make him feel better, Uhura!ix

For those who haven’t seen it, the scene in the film is as follows: Spock, having witnessed the death of his mother and the obliteration of his planet, walks into a turbolift. Uhura
follows him. The doors close, and she presses a button; the turbolift stops. She embraces Spock, says “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” and kisses him. He hugs her back and buries his face in her shoulder. “What do you need? Tell me. Tell me,” she says, tearing up. He looks away, restarts the turbolift, and says “I need everyone to continue performing admirably.” She nods, says “Okay,” and kisses him again before leaving.

Now, the first response to those who would make the claims regarding “aggression” in this sequence might well be “What movie were YOU people watching?” The second response would be to, again, look at authorial intentions. Now, to many the Uhura/Spock relationship would seem to canonize his heterosexuality at the expense of the long Kirk/Spock fan history. (Although in typical fan-fashion, the new slash One True Pairing for reboot fandom is now Kirk/Bones, with many pointing to the intercutting footage of Spock re-ordering the crew rolls so that Uhura is onboard the Enterprise instead of another ship, and Doctor Leonard “Bones” McCoy stowing a suspended Kirk aboard at the same time.) At any rate, the Spock/Uhura romance was placed there by the director and the writers, per numerous interviews in the media as well as DVD commentary etc. Early promotional interviews for the forthcoming sequel in 2012 also state that the characters’ romance will be one of the central plots in the film. In this case, authors wishing to liberate Spock and Uhura from the intentions of Abrams’s text would be committing numerous political “isms” that fans and fanworks are seldom known for. I thus find these readings to be both very interesting and very discomfiting.

I’m going to conclude with a discussion of the livejournal community Where No Woman. Subtitled “Un-Erasing the Women of Star Trek,” they are a self-described “community for fanwork dedicated to the women of Star Trek, particularly those of the 2009 film. [Their] ongoing mission: to seek out personalities not defined by […] husbands and sons, to explore the
lives lived only offscreen, to boldly go where all of these women should have gone before.⁷ Community members will often post “picspams” or long lists of screen-captured images of the women characters seen in the background of the film and of the other television series—and there are a lot of women in the background of the reboot, including many human women of color as well as aliens and alien women of color. Of particular note is the character Gaila, the green-skinned Orion woman Kirk has a romantic encounter with. It is never explicated in the film, but Trekkers will note that canonically, Orion women in the original series were the submissive dancing girls and otherwise quite literally sexual slaves to men. The appearance of one in a Starfleet uniform—well, kind of in one, mostly out of it—(and two Orion women in Starfleet generally, if you watch the Deleted Scenes) denotes a notable shift on the part of the authors. Likewise, Gaila’s popularity in fandom is absolutely rampant, as she is often depicted as a best friend, love partner, and general Girl Next Door Who Is Even More Sexually Liberated Than Kirk to... pretty much every character. And this despite that when you look at the film closely, the odds of her being among the survivors of Star fleet are probably on the miniscule side. But since it’s never addressed canonically, viewers will perceive that Gaila is alive, well, and thriving in fandom—and woe be unto Abrams and company if he doesn’t follow suit in 2012.

I am going to close with a sort of prose poem, which is taken verbatim from the tag list of Where No Woman. It says, probably better than I could, quite a lot about what happens when women of fandom are un-erased and the texts are liberated:

Interests (72): [Modify Yours]
- amanda grayson
- b'elanna torres
- beverly crusher
- charlene masters
- christine chapel
- daughters
- deanna troi
- deep space nine
- demora sulu
- ds9
- enterprise
- ezri dax
- feminism
- femslash
- friendship
- fuck you she's awesome
- gaila
- gender
- genfic
- guinan
- het
- hoshi
- sato
- intersectionality
- jadzia dax
- janice rand
- jennifer sisko
- joanna mccoy
- jocelyn
- treadway
- kasidy yates
- kathryn janeway
- keiko o'brien
- kes
- kira nerys
- lgbt
- lwaxana
troi, majel barrett, marriage, matriarchies in space, molly o'brien, motherhood, number one, nyota uhura, opaka, queer, rad women, ro laren, saavik, seven of nine, sisterhood, star trek, star trek xi, starfleet, strong female characters, t'pau, t'pol, t'pring, tasha yar, the borg queen, the final frontier, the next generation, tng, tora ziyal, tos, u.s.s. enterprise, uhura, vash, voyager, winn adami, winona kirk, womanism, women in refrigerators, women not in refrigerators.

Thank you.

i Jenkins, Poachers, p 284.

ii Ibid. p. 33


iv e.g. Patricia Floss’ “The Other Side of the Mirror.”

v Private interview with Boal.


vii Roddenberry, pp 6-7.


x Where No Woman Community, About page. http://community.livejournal.com/where_no_woman/profile

xi Ibid.