



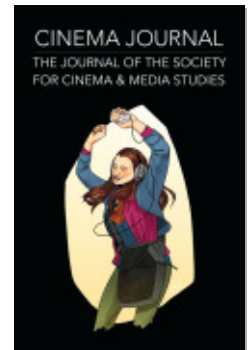
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A Different Kind of Love Song: Vidding Fandom's Undercommons

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A Different Kind of Love Song: Vidding Fandom's Undercommons

by ALEXIS LOTHIAN

Thieves and Lovers. Now more than ever, fannish love is an essential part of industrial production. To keep the machinery of content creation profitable, someone has to care about what is being produced; the more money spent on a product, the more it needs fans. As Abigail De Kosnik points out, fans are “essential components of the capitalist system within which official producers operate.”¹ According to a 2014 article in the *Toronto Star*, fan-made music videos make more money for recording artists than officially produced ones, all without costing the producers a penny.² Fannish labors of love, manifested in creative works or in less tangible, affective forms, may not typically be compensated, but the ways in which these labors produce value has become paradigmatic of digital capital's blur between work, play, community, and advertising.³ Yet this capitalist-realist model for understanding fan creativity fails to account for many practices and collectivities that exist under the broad heading “fandom.” In “Living in a Den of Thieves: Fan Video and Digital Challenges to Ownership,” my contribution to 2009's “In Focus” on fandom and feminism, I insisted on the importance of countercapitalist currents within fan production. This piece updates and extends those arguments.⁴

Considering fandom as theft seems to be the opposite of thinking of fandom as love; lovers, after all, would surely work to keep order in the systems that benefit their beloveds. Thieves, however, will take anything they want for their own, laboring to disrupt the structures that maintain a property-based social order. You wouldn't steal from the people you loved. Or would you? Seeking an answer to that question that can honor the complications and contradictions within

1 Abigail De Kosnik, “Fandom as Free Labor,” in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. Trebor Scholz (New York: Routledge, 2013), 102–103.

2 Joel Eastwood, “Recording Industry Earns More from Fan Videos Than from Official Music Videos,” *Toronto Star*, March 18, 2014, http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/music/2014/03/18/recording_industry_earns_more_from_fan_videos_than_from_official_music_videos.html.

3 For full elaboration of these arguments, see Mel Stanfill and Megan Condis, “Fandom and/as Labor,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 15 (2014), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0593>.

4 Alexis Lothian, “Living in a Den of Thieves: Fan Video and Digital Challenges to Ownership,” *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 130–136.

fannish communities, I borrow Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's term *undercommons*. Moten and Harney use the term to name the revolutionary, elusive, and very real zone in which delegitimized subjects steal from and steal away from the production of official knowledge to which their labor, in other contexts, also contributes.⁵ I argue that fan production forms part of an undercommons in which dominant media and cultural forms are both reproduced and unmade.

"Living in a Den of Thieves" engaged Lim's 2007 fan vid "Us," which combined pop-culture images of rebellion with clips from shows familiar to slash fan communities to suggest that fandom's revolutionary potential was real, if contingent and contradictory.⁶ Here, I turn to a more recent metadepiction of fans' collective self-understanding. Gianduja Kiss's 2012 vid "A Different Kind of Love Song" gathers TV and film imagery of fan practices, connecting this growing archive to extralegal content sharing.⁷ Looking to this vid enables me to think through labor and value in terms of not only intellectual property but also transient collectives that emerge among fans themselves—forms of being together that fan creations can capture and produce, where ideas of intellectual property as the dominant culture knows them simply do not apply.

Dedicated to Everyone. The opening sequence of "A Different Kind of Love Song" lays out its focus on fandom, copyright, and love. The first shot depicts a black man speaking to a white woman whose face blurs in the foreground. He complains, "Took more than an hour to torrent the last episode of *Doctor Who*" (BBC, 2005–). Fans will recognize the character of Alec Hardison (Aldis Hodge) from TNT's *Leverage* (2008–2012), a show about a team of con artists who combine their skills to fight corporate injustice. Those who don't know the show will recognize the speaker as an American fan keen to keep up with a popular BBC production. That the epigraph for this celebration of fannish pleasures is a man of color is worth noting, given the commonplace stereotype of TV science fiction fans as white—though popular media representations and scholarly work alike have given the lie to this in recent years.⁸ From here, we cross-fade to a game of Klingon Boggle (Figure 1), complete with a *Star Trek*-brand dictionary (*Star Trek*, CBS/Paramount, 1966–2005), played by the four male leads of *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007–) as the music swells and Cher's Auto-Tuned voice sings, "This is a different kind of love song" ("A Different Kind of Love Song," from the album *Living Proof*, 2002). Next comes a close-up of one particular kind of fannish love: slash fan fiction, as depicted in a meta-story line of *Supernatural* (CW, 2005–) in which the character of Becky Rosen (Emily Perkins) stands in for real-life fans who

5 Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, "The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses," *Social Text* 79, no. 2 (2004): 101–115; Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013). Moten and Harney's 2004 article refers specifically to the university; their 2013 book extends the idea into larger social realms.

6 Lim, "Us," YouTube video, 3:56, March 1, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxHKgQyGx0>.

7 Gianduja Kiss, "New Club Vivid Vid: A Different Kind of Love Song (Multifandom)," video, August 11, 2012, <http://giandujakiss.dreamwidth.org/785401.html>.

8 See, for example, Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013).

write about same-sex love between brothers Sam and Dean.⁹ We cut from sentences on Becky's screen to her face at the computer, deep in concentration, then move to another computer screen, this one open to a fan site in the process of being updated. Its author, pictured next, is Sarah Silverman playing Marci Maven, the self-professed biggest fan of the eponymous detective in TV's *Monk* (NBC Universal, 2002–2009)



Figure 1. Geeks play Klingon Boggle in *The Big Bang Theory*. From Gianduja Kiss's 2012 fan vid "A Different Kind of Love Song."



Figure 2. Sarah Silverman as superfan Marci Maven in *Monk*. From Gianduja Kiss's 2012 fan vid "A Different Kind of Love Song."

(Figure 2).

Pushed along by the song's driving beat, the slower opening gives way to clip after clip of fan communities and activities. The list of sources at the end of the four-minute vid has forty-two entries and takes eighteen seconds to scroll through. Gianduja Kiss uses Cher's lyrics to guide our interpretation of this vast aggregate as a collectivity greater than the context of any of its component parts, "dedicated to everyone." Most scholarship on fan vidding has emphasized the way that fans make meaning in a deep context that relies on shared source knowledge to

make an interpretive community.¹⁰ "A Different Kind of Love Song" highlights the extended reach of fannish references created by the mainstreaming of geek culture. Indeed, as Gianduja Kiss describes in her announcement post, to find the sources she used for the vid, she turned to personal friends within her fan communities and to online resources where fans had cataloged cultural references to their favorite shows. "This is a different kind of love song / Dedicated to everyone": it is not just about the fact that fan activity is now easy to find on television but about the love and the labor that puts it there and the ways that fannish love brings diverse people together.

9 For discussion of Becky and fans' responses to her, see Judith May Fathallah, "Becky Is My Hero: The Power of Laughter and Disruption in *Supernatural*," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 5 (2010), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2010.0220>.

10 See Francesca Coppa, "An Editing Room of One's Own: Vidding as Women's Work," *Camera Obscura* 26, no. 2 77 (2011): 123–130; Tisha Turk, "Your Own Imagination: Vidding and Vidwatching as Collaborative Interpretation," *Film and Film Culture*, no. 5 (2010): 88–111.

The ending satirically underlines this message. In the same *Leverage* clip that began the vid, the woman in the car speaks back, her tone serious: “Hey. Illegal downloading’s wrong.” The irony intensifies for those with contextual knowledge: this character, Parker (Beth Riesgraf), is a professional thief. The use of this scene to bookend a video praise song to the fun of fandom comments on the counterintuitive legal structure of intellectual property in the 2010s. How can so much innocent fun and joy be illegal, and whose interests are served by making it so? Vidder and fan scholar Thingswithwings praises the vid’s representation of “how completely ludicrous it is to apply outside ideas of ‘intellectual property’ to what we do.”¹¹ For Thingswithwings, fan creativity is bigger than economic and property-based justifications; fannish collectivity is a peer-to-peer affective creation where the transformation of each show’s cathected elements makes something that is greater than the sum of its parts.

“Illegal Downloading’s Wrong?” Fannish investment is the reproductive labor that keeps media companies going, enabling media corporations to produce surplus value in an age when the manner of paying for content has become very uncertain. “A Different Kind of Love Song” pays homage to that process as much as it does to the love that plays out among fans. The images it presents are, with a few exceptions, things that you can buy: a Klingon dictionary, a light saber, a Wonder Woman mug. Merchandise is essential in an era when paying for content is not as reliable a revenue source as it once was; licensing fees can be minimal and profit margins high. Meanwhile, crafted costumes (Figure 3) and other objects show the labor of fannish hands as both self-expression and free advertising. Lim’s earlier metavid “Us” painted fans as copyright outlaws standing against “the Man”; here, we see mainly gratitude that a love song this collective and sincere can exist, that the labor of fans can be accepted by their objects.

Attending to gender makes some changes to this story. TV shows are less likely to represent the most feminized and least mainstreamed kinds



Figure 3. Yvette Nicole Brown as Shirley in *Harry Potter* costume on *Community*. From Gianduja Kiss’s 2012 fan vid “A Different Kind of Love Song.”

of fan labor, nontelegenic activities like fan fiction writing and vidding.¹² Creating a video for an audience composed primarily of women, Gianduja Kiss chooses as her entry points two depictions of fan fic-writing women, whose meaning is shaped by the joyful depictions of fannish happiness that follow. Yet in the context of the original

11 Thingswithwings, “Three Little Vid Recs,” August 12, 2012, <http://thingswithwings.dreamwidth.org/185168.html>.

12 See Kristina Busse, “Geek Hierarchies, Boundary Policing, and the Gendering of the Good Fan,” *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 73–91; Francesca Coppa and Rebecca Tushnet, “How to Suppress Women’s Remix,” *Camera Obscura* 26, no. 2 77 (2011): 131–138.

shows, their fannish activity is not celebrated but mocked and punished. In *Supernatural*, Becky's obsession forwards the plot and perhaps even saves the world, but we see little in the way of self-aware intelligence behind her wide-eyed stare. Unlike two male fans who teach the protagonists a lesson by explaining how *Supernatural* fandom rescues them from the mundanity of lower-middle-class wage labor, she stands for an excess that culminates in near rape when she finally tricks the drugged hero into marriage before agreeing to give up her claim on his body and the show's story line. *Monk's* Marci, whose handmade tributes to her fannish object feature in several montages (see Figure 2), is similarly excessive, violating a restraining order to force herself on her loved detective and even usurping his paid assistant's position, hinting that free fan labor might prove a threat to content creators' union jobs. Her incompetence sends a message that taking fans' work too seriously could risk endangering the smooth running of productive operations: Marci is a dreadful assistant who confuses details of past cases with her own fan fiction.

Becky and Marci are figures of fun who are disciplined by their shows for taking fannish love too far. Their excess of fannish femininity endangers its very objects, suggesting that they have been placed in the text to rein in unruly fans who won't cede control of narratives and characters to their rightful creators. When Gianduja Kiss brings together these representations with the more positive masculine ones from other shows, one effect is a flattening that obscures the sexism of fan representation.¹³ Yet the juxtaposition also works to make heroic the unheroic, creating a different kind of love song in which the weirdness of Becky and Marci no longer need be held in check. Cher sings, "What if the world was crazy and we were sane?" What if the irritating excesses, the unreasonable demands for narrative control, that these figures display could be part of the conversation about ownership and legitimacy begun by fan works more explicit in their rebellion? In "Us," Lim ends the vid with an image of a revolutionary girl from the 2006 movie *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue) as her fangirl-creator stand-in. The girl removes the iconic mask that has come to be associated with Anonymous, sold and worn at Occupy protests, as Lim implicitly insists that fans' rebellion inheres in the practice of taking what media gives and making it their own, in any way they want.¹⁴ This possibility of gendered rebellion is important even when it follows the line of fannish affirmation, as "A Different Kind of Love Song" does; Becky and Marci have a place in the fannish undercommons alongside Lim's more easily politicized avatar.

In 2009, I wondered whether the formation of the fan-advocacy nonprofit Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) would lead to a point at which legally transformative uses of copyrighted material would be valued as "the new originality."¹⁵ Although the legal battles are far from won, recent developments involving Gianduja Kiss's vids show that this has in some ways become the case. The OTW has successfully used fan videos as evidence to gain and renew an exemption to the Digital

13 The choice to focus on these characters is itself a commentary on media depictions of fandom because it was driven by an absence of positively depicted women fans (Gianduja Kiss, personal communication, July 2014).

14 Lothian, "Living in a Den of Thieves," 134.

15 *Ibid.*, 133.

Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), legalizing DVD capture for the purposes of video remix. Gianduja Kiss's vid "It Depends on What You Pay" (2009), a *Dollhouse* (Fox, 2009–2010) vid that calls out the show for its sexual violence, was sent to Congress as part of this campaign. Finding the thesis of "It Depends" apparently unarguable, respondents singled out an earlier one of her vids, "Der Kommissar" (2007), as self-evidently illegitimate and illegal, simply a jumble of images set to music. Gianduja Kiss responded by explaining the ways in which she had made a critical interpretation through her choice of images.¹⁶ To argue for the legal legitimacy of the creative work they do, vidders must show not only that what they do is not theft but also that it is about more than love—that remix has critical uses and is not just a mechanism for sharing the kinds of fannish joy that "A Different Kind of Love Song" depicts.

Arguments for fan labor's economic and social legitimacy frequently contradict themselves. On the one hand, fan production is defensible to copyright holders inasmuch as it performs free labor for a brand; on the other hand, fan laborers become lawbreakers if they share and create too freely. The methods available to vidders perpetuate this contradiction. It is far more difficult and expensive to capture copyrighted images through the methods legitimated by the DMCA exemption than it is to download illegal reproductions of episodes and movies over peer-to-peer networks, obtaining media from a collective commons whose origins are fuzzy but whose feelings can be trusted. This is the realm that "A Different Kind of Love Song" celebrates. It is not only a happy, fannish world in which the concept of illegal downloading has become irrelevant in the face of fannish world making but also an undercommons in which lacking the resources to buy fannish things, whether DVD sets or con memberships or merchandise, is no barrier to sharing the love.

Dancing through the Undercommons. In a 2014 *Cinema Journal* roundtable responding to Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green's book *Spreadable Media*, Kristina Busse raised the question of fan studies' broad significance, given the extensive applicability of the term *fan* beyond the subcultural groups around whom the field first cohered in the 1990s: "What does fan studies let us see? In other words, what critical lens does it afford us that broader audience studies may not?"¹⁷ For me, fan studies offers a range of models for relating to popular culture and digital media that centralize affective connections and ways of being that cannot be reduced to the economic, even as they inevitably become forms of exploited labor. It is a field that takes seriously the work done by intense emotion attached to objects that are widely considered unworthy of such cathexis. As a form, fan video can often feel embarrassing in its earnestness. After all, it takes the lyrics of ephemeral pop songs seriously, and it believes in the

16 For a full account of these events, see Rebecca Tushnet, "'I'm a Lawyer, Not an Ethnographer, Jim': Textual Poachers and Fair Use," *Journal of Fandom Studies* 2, no. 1 (2014): 21–30.

17 Louisa Stein, moderator, "Online Roundtable on Spreadable Media by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, with participants Paul Booth, Kristina Busse, Melissa Click, Sam Ford, Henry Jenkins, Xiaochang Li, and Sharon Ross" (review of *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green), *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 3 (2014): 174.

capacity for truly transformative work from a form most widely associated with advertisements and throwaway clips on YouTube.

One way of arguing for fan works' validity is to showcase the myriad ways in which their techniques enable the production of necessary and important knowledge by fans and others.¹⁸ Yet the mockable, uncritical, reproductive-of-capital facets of fandom coexist with its radical transformative capacities. Writing of the undercommons created by state workers' labor, Harney and Moten note, "There are all kinds of little holes and tunnels and ditches and highways and byways through the state that are being produced and maintained constantly by the people who are also at the same time doing this labor that ends in the production of the state. So, what is it that these folks are producing?"¹⁹ Fans are, I would suggest, among the producers of the holes and tunnels that aerate our deeply capitalistic, endlessly surveilled digital world.

In the 2013 book that grew from their 2004 article, Harney and Moten extend the idea of the undercommons with the notion of study: a collective learning together, exemplified by the black radical tradition of cultural, political, intellectual, and artistic forms developed in opposition to white supremacist capitalism, that does not solidify into institutional knowledge production. Fan cultures are not without connections to radical movements for racial, gender, and disability justice, but it is a smaller kind of revolution that we are most likely to see continuing in the fannish undercommons celebrated in vids like "A Different Kind of Love Song."²⁰ Nevertheless, I do want to insist that a dance vid's translation of awkwardness into beauty can be a moment of transformative world making. Drawing on the slippery concept of an undercommons allows that potential to remain present even when the content of fannish activity may undermine the capacities inherent in its distribution.

The context of many of the clips in "A Different Kind of Love Song" is comic, albeit not always as cruelly comic as the depictions of Becky and Marci. Gathered together and placed in a gathering of people who recognize themselves within them, the mockable becomes sincere through Cher's lyrics as they animate the vid:

What if the world calmed down
And we all could breathe together easily?
Connecting the sky and ground with you and me
And everything in between.
I am part of you
We have living proof
We're all part of the light that flows through everything

Here, a final place to turn to is the scene of bodies dancing, a scene that queer and especially queer of color scholarship has highlighted again and again as a space of

18 See Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian, "Scholarly Critiques and Critiques of Scholarship: The Uses of Remix Video," *Camera Obscura* 26, no. 2 77 (2011): 139–146.

19 Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 145.

20 For some connections between science fiction fan culture and women-of-color feminisms, see TWC editor, "Pattern Recognition: A Dialogue on Racism in Fan Communities," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 3 (2009), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.0172>.

making a world.²¹ I danced at the premiere of “A Different Kind of Love Song” and felt thrills of recognition, knowing they would extend out of the bounds of one Chicago hotel function room (the site of Club Vivid, a dance party held at the vidding convention VividCon) and into the eyes and ears of those who watched the vid online. A fan convention might not make the kind of space for the excluded that an underground queer club can, yet it is likely that few of the dancers in person or online experience themselves as completely at home in the mainstream world. The feelings of the dance, and Gianduja Kiss’s connection of those feelings to the undercommons of downloadable media, should call us to awareness that we miss out on much if we think of access to fannish love and labor as only for those with economic privilege. “You and me and everything in between”: dancing along also means joining an awkward undercommons whose members will not all be living through the violence of racialized oppression but who are nevertheless likely at any moment to be experiencing depression, anxiety, disability, and poverty, as well as gender- and sexuality-based oppression.²² By vidding a revolution composed of dancing, Gianduja Kiss composes and archives fannish love as something that slices through the labyrinth of copyright restrictions and media ownership. It might not leave anything to hold on to, but it lets those who feel it breathe more easily. *

21 See José Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

22 Little has yet been published on forms of exclusion and marginalization experienced by many self-identified fans, including discrimination on the basis of body size and (dis)ability as well as poverty and unemployment. There are some brief allusions to the first of these in Francesca Coppa, “Fuck Yeah, Fandom Is Beautiful,” *Journal of Fandom Studies* 2, no. 1 (2014): 73–82.