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Mel Stanfill, **Fandom Is Ugly: Networked Harassment in Participatory Culture,** New York: New York University Press, 2024, 264 pp., $30.00 (paperback).

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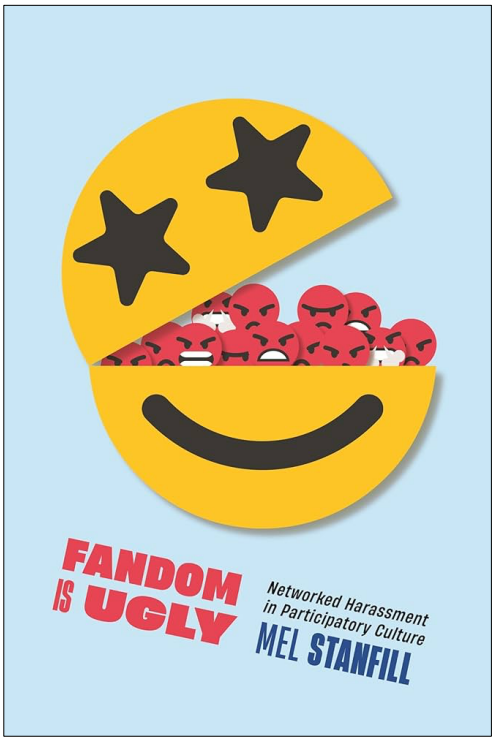

In **Fandom Is Ugly: Networked Harassment in Participatory Culture**, Mel Stanfill proposes a new way of thinking about reactionary politics and harassment in contemporary participatory culture. Shifting away from one of fan studies' foundational assertions that "fandom is beautiful" (p. 2), Stanfill argues that fandom is, in fact, often ugly. In this project, they take up fandom as a site and mode of articulation of power, turning fandom into a theoretical lens. *Fandom Is Ugly* emphasizes the relationship between reactionary politics, harassment, and fan culture; Stanfill argues that ugly fandom is rooted in fannish beliefs about fans being victims and, as such, it is crucial for fan studies scholars—and anyone invested in contemporary reactionary politics—to take seriously the deeply affective "feels" and pleasure-based nature of fan ugliness and, thus, contemporary politics and power.

Stanfill organizes *Fandom Is Ugly* around three kinds of ugly fannish objects: (1) clearly ugly and fannish objects (e.g., political fandom); (2) traditional fan studies objects (e.g., fanfiction); and (3) clearly ugly objects not traditionally conceptualized as fannish (e.g., critical race theory [CRT] moral panic). Stanfill argues there is an undercurrent of affective victimhood in each that pushes fans to act vitriolically. These communities and individuals grasp onto an "iota of reality" (p. 182) in their situations that researchers must take seriously, even when fans are incorrect in their assessment of reality, lest we trivialize these matters and ignore their harmful potential.

Beginning with the clearly ugly and fannish, Stanfill explores Comicsgate, a movement in the late 2010s by comic book fans in opposition to more diverse characters and creators in superhero comics. Stanfill explores what they call reactionary fandom, where "fandoms overtly embrace reactionary politics and reactionary politics increasingly take fannish forms" (p. 26). Specifically, they analyze how White male comic book fans define an "us" and "them," where fans invested in social justice issues or who desire more diverse heroes are made a problematic "them" who jeopardize the quality of comics or traditionally maintained community boundaries in comic fandom. Stanfill emphasizes that this response is a *fannish* one—Comicsgate fans see themselves as downtrodden, victims of both social justice–oriented fans and the comics industry for "indulging" those "bad" fans by creating more diverse characters in comics. Continuing in this thematic lens, Stanfill analyzes political engagement via the intertwined fandom of Bernie Sanders and antifandom of Elizabeth Warren, asking what happens when a political movement

"assumes the character of a fandom" (p. 43). Stanfill argues that Sanders fans who used a snake emoji to describe Warren often engaged in fannish magical and conspiracy thinking about both candidates; these fans' discussions and critiques of her used sexist tropes and, seemingly paradoxically, even promoted right-wing beliefs. Stanfill argues that this is possible because of their affective, fannish attachment to *Sanders*, rather than his actual politics. Stanfill highlights how "irrational" contemporary politics are, arguing that fandom is a useful lens to understand such irrationality because of fan studies' serious treatment of affect.

Stanfill then transitions to traditional fan studies objects, interrogating slash's homonormativity, vitriol in response to queerbaiting, and the "anti wars," all of which are demonstrative of ugly fandom in fan studies' traditional domain. In their chapter on homonormativity within slash, they argue that fan studies has neglected the shortcomings of fandom-as-queer, as in politically transgressive, in favor of prioritizing queer sexualities in fanfiction—Stanfill asks fan studies to pay more critical attention to intersecting forms of power, particularly around misogyny, homonormativity, and racism within slash. For instance, Stanfill highlights that (White) fans are open to and encourage discussion of gender and sexuality but refuse to discuss race or racism, which in turn impacts the "normativity of whiteness" (p. 74) found in slash. In other words, fandom may very well be gay, but it is not all that queer. In their chapter on queerbaiting, Stanfill analyzes lesbian fans' response to the death of a lesbian character on *The 100*, asking what it means when fans were "so clearly marginalized," and yet so "clearly awful in the way they responded" (p. 84). Stanfill explores how fannish belief in powerlessness against the entertainment industry produced a social media reaction that made lesbian fans who *had* been wronged look similar to the Comicsgate or Gamergate crowd. They argue that violence was not merely an aspect of fannish response but was, instead, essential to understanding it. In their chapter on "appropriate" sexuality in the "anti wars"—a term for conflicts between "antis," fans who hold such a level of hatred for something that their fandom revolves around tearing it down (p. 103)—Stanfill focuses on the moral dynamics of the conflicts, arguing that even though both sides of these kinds of conflicts consider themselves sociomorally progressive, the collective emphasis on "appropriate" sexuality in these spaces overshadows concerns about racism in fandom, treating it as incidental rather than central. When race *is* discussed in these circumstances, it is merely mentioned, not actually interrogated on its own merits. In all three of these chapters, Stanfill demonstrates how these traditionally fannish activities produce forms of ugly fandom.

In their final chapters, Stanfill transitions to objects that are clearly ugly but not traditionally thought of as fannish. This extension of fan studies is one of the central aims of their book, and they explore it through fan consumer activism in the culture wars and antifandom around CRT. In their chapter on fan consumer activism, Stanfill analyzes conservative responses to an incident believed to threaten free speech (wherein YouTube commentator Steven Crowder was demonetized after repeatedly harassing a journalist for years). They argue that fans' response to this event demonstrates how ugly fandom "understands its in-group to be a target rather than a wielder of sociocultural power" (p. 132). Because these fans constructed identity around a media object (Crowder) and engaged in consumption to demonstrate that fandom (via consumer activism to support Crowder and, in turn, "free speech"), Stanfill argues that this kind of event, though not immediately thought of as a form of fandom, is nonetheless well understood by an ugly fandom framework. Fans perceive themselves and "free speech" as victims of a culture war and publicly perform fannish activism via harassment of Crowder's "enemies" (as

Crowder/what he stands for becomes an object of fandom) and financial support to Crowder. Stanfill suggests that this is a particularly poignant example of the role victimhood plays in establishing the justification for "nearly endless vitriol" (p. 149) in ugly fandom. Finally, in their last chapter, Stanfill engages the antifandom around CRT and fannish attachment to whiteness in the United States, arguing that fan studies' frameworks, which center the relationship between feels, texts, and community, can help us make sense of phenomena like attachment to whiteness and narrativizing around a legal theory. Stanfill describes this antifannish response to CRT as "an intense and collective affective relationship to a mediated narrative" (p. 153), much like other forms of fandom; however, they argue that, instead of fostering positive attachment, "CRT panickers create a negative attachment and collective interpretations in opposition to a text (what I call an antifanon)" (p. 153). In other words, there is a positive affective attachment to a fannish object—whiteness—and a negative, antifanon attachment to a transmedia text that is perceived as attacking it—CRT.

Stanfill concludes *Fandom Is Ugly* with a reminder of the centrality of affect, emphasizing that "fans may be misinterpreting what they see, and acting horribly in response, but they are not making it up" (p. 174), arguing that scholars must take seriously this affect as well as the mistaken sense of victimhood because of its material effects. In doing so, researchers can better identify warning signs when group identity becomes structured around victimhood. They argue that fan studies is uniquely situated to handle this ugliness because it is a matter of "textual engagements—rather than attached directly to identity" (p. 185).

Stanfill offers a persuasive call to fan studies scholars, and those interested in contemporary power, politics, and culture (particularly in the United States), to take seriously that which might be swept aside in the name of frivolousness or being "clearly" wrong, interrogate the affective relationships to victimhood that pervade contemporary relations, and understand the role that fandom plays in all of it, even—and especially—when it is not beautiful.

Fandom Is Ugly illuminates the use of fandom as a theoretical lens and orientation, a move that can reveal much about objects not traditionally thought of as fannish. Though *Fandom Is Ugly* is situated primarily in the Anglosphere, researchers interested in the interplay between fannish affect/behavior and reactionary politics in other geocultural contexts will still find Stanfill's framework useful. Stanfill sets the groundwork for future exploration in the Anglosphere and contributes a substantial model for adopting this approach to study other cultural contexts. *Fandom Is Ugly* is a critical intervention in fan studies that anyone interested in what fan studies can "teach us" (p. 186) will find useful for testing the limits of what fan studies can do in action.