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Title: Writing Oneself into Someone Else's Story – Experiments With Identity And Speculative Life Writing in Twilight Fan Fiction

Year: 2015

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Lehtonen, S. (2015). Writing Oneself into Someone Else's Story – Experiments With Identity And Speculative Life Writing in Twilight Fan Fiction. *Fafnir : Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*, 2(2), 7-18.
<http://journal.finfar.org/articles/316.pdf>

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Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and
Fantasy Research
journal.finfar.org

Writing Oneself into Someone Else’s Story –
Experiments With Identity And Speculative Life Writing in *Twilight*
Fan Fiction

Sanna Lehtonen

Abstract: Fan fiction offers rich data to explore readers’ understanding of gendered discourses informing the narrative construction of fictional and real-life identities. This paper focuses on gender identity construction in self-insertion fan fiction texts – stories that involve avatars of fan writers – based on Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight novels. Self-insertion fan fiction stories can be considered a form of life writing where authors play with their identity in a virtual context in texts that mix documentary elements and fiction; a combination that is here termed as speculative life writing. While earlier studies have discussed self-insertion fan fiction as a potentially empowering form of resistance to conventional gendered discourses, or a space for (young) women to explore and play with their gendered and sexual identities, among fans themselves self-insertion fan fiction stories – especially stories involving ‘Mary Sues’, characters that are highly idealised versions of the author – are often ridiculed. By drawing on concepts from narrative theory, discursive psychology and feminist discourse theory, the paper examines female protagonists in selected self-insertion fanfics categorised as heterosexual romance and relates these representations to readers’ comments about the stories. While self-insertion fan fiction as speculative life writing allows for creatively experimenting with gendered identities, it is also conditioned by hegemonic gendered discourses and the norms of the particular online community.

Keywords: fan fiction, self-insertion, life writing, gender, feminist discourse theory

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Online fan fiction – stories based on books, films, television series, and other cultural products, written by fans and published online for no profit – is an immensely popular form of what Henry Jenkins has called “participatory culture” (3) and what Lawrence Lessig characterises as “Read/Write culture” as opposed to “Read/Only culture” (28). Instead of passive consumption of cultural goods, participatory culture involves active spectatorship or readership that may take many forms, such as participating in discussions on publishers’ and production companies’ websites,

writing reviews, maintaining fan sites, producing one's own art inspired by published works, or producing fan art, texts, music, and videos that mix and edit existing cultural works. In fan fiction, fans create reimagined and adapted versions of their favourite stories by changing style, genre, plotlines, events, settings, characters, or relationships between characters.

Writing fan fiction is communal activity and often a collaborative process – apart from reading and giving feedback to one another, and revising one's own stories according to feedback, stories are often co-authored. Usually, longer stories are published chapter by chapter over a period of time and edited and developed further according to readers' feedback; as a result of these negotiations and rewriting processes the stories are often better characterised as “work in progress” rather than completed works (cf. Busse and Hellekson 7). Currently there is a vast amount of online fan fiction published on blogs, fan forums, and websites dedicated to archiving fan fiction stories. The largest online archive for fan fiction, FanFiction.net has been running since 1998 and currently hosts over two million registered users and millions of stories – the most popular book canon, *Harry Potter* alone features over half a million of fan fiction stories.¹

In fan fiction stories, writers may “fix” some aspects of the original story, for instance, by changing key plot elements or expanding the world of the original work by continuing plotlines, adding backstories, or, for instance, transporting the characters into a new setting. Fan fiction writers do not aspire to produce completely new stories; they enjoy creatively experimenting with the existing story-world and characters that they love (or, sometimes, hate). Through characterisation, fan fiction writers can also experiment with the textual construction of gender and sexual identity. Although fan fiction is usually based on introducing new scenes and story-lines featuring the “canonical” characters in the source texts (that is, the characters created by the author of the published text), it is also common to include new, original characters (OCs) in the stories, some of them functioning as avatars of the fan writers. These stories are often called self-insertions (or self-inserts) because a version of the writer's own persona is inserted in the text. The self-insertion stories provide rich data for a researcher interested in how young women construct their identities through writing that combines their real-life elements with fiction; a type of writing that I will call *speculative life writing*.

Most online fan fiction writers are not writing their full lives in fictional form but, often in rather short narratives, explore certain aspects of their lives and identities, such as gender, sexuality, or ethnicity.² Of different aspects of identity, gender and sexuality come to fore in fan fiction sites where the most popular story types involve various types of romantic pairings, be them heterosexual or queer. Considering the popularity of romance content, it may not come as a surprise that most fan fiction readers and writers are girls and young women (Busse and Hellekson 17; Warburton 120). Fan fiction sites are often viewed as safe, emancipatory spaces where participants can share their experiences as fans, experiment with their own writing in a supporting, interactive environment, and in their writing, play with their gendered and sexual identities in potentially empowering and unconventional ways.³

There has been an extensive amount of research on queer fan fiction – especially the so-called slash and femme-slash stories that pair homosexual characters – that clearly points out the subversive potential of fan fiction narratives in terms of gender and sexuality construction.⁴ There has been less discussion of how fan fiction authors reimagine heterosexual romance (see, however, Driscoll; Leppänen). When contrasted to queer fan fictions, heterosexual romance may seem more conservative – not that there is any consensus in regarding slash automatically subversive

¹ On FanFiction.net fans can publish their own texts and read and comment on other fans' writings, as regular reviewers or beta readers (experienced readers who give feedback on the story before it is published). The stories are categorised according to the ‘canon’, that is, the original, published work that the fan fiction stories are based on.

² See Black; Driscoll; Leppänen; Warburton.

³ See Bonnstetter and Ott; Leppänen; Warburton.

⁴ See, for instance, Busse and Lothian; Kustritz; Tosenberger; Willis.

(Warburton, 128; Hunting). In actuality, heterosexual romance fiction consists of a variety of gendered discourses, and writing and reading romance as activities have a long history of being associated with both moral conservatism and dubious immorality and subversiveness by researchers and general audiences alike (Driscoll, 80; Fletcher, 2; Murphy Selinger and Frantz, 2). As Lisa Fletcher suggests, romance as a genre is “irresolvably both ‘conservative’ and ‘progressive’ in its form and function” (2). It has been suggested that similar variety and associations exist in and relation to heterosexual romance fan fictions (Driscoll; Leppänen); the examples of *Twilight* fan fiction that I will discuss below also reflect this.

Drawing on feminist discourse theory, especially the work of Judith Butler, Sara Mills, and Mary Talbot, it is here understood that gender is (partly) discursively constructed through language and other semiotic resources. Also, while gender is not viewed as a binary structure (male/female) but as an identity category consisting of a range of different forms (femininities, masculinities, transgender), ways of doing gender are regulated by cultural norms – often in relation to sexuality. These norms may vary from one cultural context to another and breaking the norms may lead to sanctions but also to new, creative ways of doing gender. Writing, reading and rewriting romance are key discursive practices where norms for gendered and sexualised behaviour are created and maintained but can also be challenged and reimagined.

In my research, I have been interested in what kind of heterosexual female romance protagonists fan fiction writers create in their self-insertion narratives that mix aspects of their real-life selves and fantasy fiction. My focus has been on stories based on Stephenie Meyer’s paranormal romance series *Twilight Saga*.⁵ *Twilight* is a prototypical example of contemporary product marketed at and almost exclusively consumed by girls and young women. The *Twilight* franchise including the books, films, and spin-off products is, as Catherine Driscoll suggests, “popular culture *for* girls, *about* girls, and circulated *by* girls” (1, emphasises original) – although the series has been also hugely popular among adult women fans (Behm-Morawitz et al. 137; Erzen xxi). Like Driscoll, I emphasise the active role of girls as consumers – many of them do not merely read or watch the *Twilight* series but actively do something with it, such as rewrite the original stories in their fan fiction. The main plot in the *Twilight Saga* revolves around the teenage protagonist Bella and her relationships with two supernatural men – Edward, a vampire and Jacob, a werewolf. Thus the fan fictions also involve romance texts where writers often insert themselves into the text as a new female protagonist that has a romantic relationship with one of the fictional male main characters, although there is also a great number of stories where the romance takes place with one of the minor vampire or werewolf characters, male or female.

While I have collected a large corpus of the so-called OC romance fan fiction stories in the *Twilight* canon that involve various ways of rewriting heterosexual romance – ranging from parodies to stories featuring polyamory – this paper focuses on stories that have been explicitly labelled self-insertions by their authors.⁶ These form a specific group of OC stories that often attract a lot of criticism inside the fan community: self-insertion stories are judged as wish-fulfilment with idealised protagonists. From a feminist researcher’s point of view, self-insertion stories are especially interesting because the criticism that the stories attract suggests that fan fiction forums offer space for an open negotiation of the norms of the romance genre, which are, again, linked with norms concerning gender and sexuality. The scope of this paper is mainly theoretical – to suggest the possibilities that approaching self-insertion fan fictions as speculative life writing might add to the discussions of gender identity construction in, through and around (fantasy) fictions. I will illustrate my theoretical points by comparing three self-insertion fan fiction texts – produced by

⁵ I have collected my data on FanFiction.net that hosted over 200 000 fan fiction texts based on the *Twilight Saga* in July-August 2012 when I was doing my data collection – after *Harry Potter*, *Twilight* is the second most popular book fandom.

⁶ My larger corpus of OC fan fiction stories in the *Twilight* canon on FanFiction.net consists of 169 narratives. The selection criteria were that the stories were categorised as romance and OC narratives and had at least five reviews. Only 12 stories were explicitly labelled as self-insertions and half of those were parodies mocking the practice of writing self-insertion narratives.

authors who construct themselves as girls or young women online both in their fan fictions and on their author's pages – as well as the peer reviews attached to them. In the following, I will start by conceptualising self-insertion fan fiction writing as speculative life writing that, I argue, is a significant discursive practice of identity construction.

Fan Fiction, Identity and Life Writing

Children play make-believe games on the basis of stories and events that they have seen or heard, and insert themselves into these games as different characters. Professional musicians and athletes are trained to go through their performances in their minds – to tell themselves and act out mini-narratives of their performance, if you wish – so that they will be better prepared when the actual performance takes place. Students are asked to fill in study plans where they envision themselves as graduated future professionals and a stereotypical question in a job interview is “where do you see yourself in five years time?” – expected answers are speculative narratives in the first person. This kind of “what if this happened to me” story-telling is immensely meaningful for people not only in terms of practicing for a specific future event but also more broadly in terms of constructing their sense of self. It is obviously not the only ingredient in self-making but still an important one.

We learn from both real-world and fictional encounters, and the power of speculation and imagination guarantee that we do not need first-hand experience of everything to learn. Most people have never tried to set themselves on fire, and do not need to try it to be able to realise the consequences. Indeed, current neuropsychology talks about the “prospective brain”: we use the stored information in our brains – memory, that is – to simulate possible future events (see Schacter et al. 657). We do not need to remember and store events and things in our brain only for the sake of learning from the past but, crucially, to imagine the future. Our identities are also not only based on our past. We habitually write our whole lives speculatively towards the future, or, as Jerome Bruner suggests, “constantly construct and reconstruct our selves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter ... with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future” (67). All kinds of life writing with an orientation towards the future rather than the past, be it a personal plan for one's job development, a diary entry about hopes for the coming year, or a fan fiction piece where the writer tests how she might react in a fictional situation fall under the category of *speculative life writing*.

In self-insertion fan fiction stories, the authors construct their identities and romantic experiences through speculative life writing in a fictional (and virtual) context. On a conceptual level, this is not necessarily very different from authors producing (semi)autobiographical works, as Tom Cho's comparison of his own literary and fan fiction texts shows – for him self-insertion, or “making texts literally accommodate myself” is “the best way to write my identity into being” (n. pag.). For younger writers in particular producing self-insertion fan fiction may be a practice of learning “how-to” do romance by appropriating elements from (popular) cultural narratives of romance when constituting their own romantic experiences and emotions. As Margaret Wetherell suggests, “[r]omance is, supposedly, highly individual, yet it is also another of those moments through which the individual affirms their sociality and instantiates their culture” (135). Our understanding and performance of both experienced and written romance is based both on observations of real-life situations and (fictional) representations of romance in literature, films, tv-programmes, music, art, and advertisement. Fan fiction offers a venue where writers can mix elements from their real lives with a fictional setting to explore and speculate about aspects of their identity and their desires, hopes and fears in regard to romance. According to Sirpa Leppänen, “despite the fact these constructions are essentially fictional ... fan fiction forums provide [the writers] with virtual rooms of their own where they can investigate the questions, challenges and troubles they face in their real lives” (160). Also Jamie Warburton views fan fiction forums as

virtual rehearsal rooms where the author can “try on a variety of identities and test-drive them, as it were, in the social settings that she has observed in her favourite stories” (134).

It might seem that in a virtual, anonymous space (most writers use nicknames), authors can experiment with their identities in ways that are not necessarily possible in offline, face-to-face contexts, such as schools where performance of identity is constantly monitored and assessed by peers and adults. On the other hand, fan fiction sites have their own norms and practices, and author’s freedom to experiment with her writing is limited if she wants to attract devoted readers who read and review the stories. Among fans, self-insertion fan fiction stories – especially stories involving “Mary Sues,” characters that are highly idealised female heroes – are often mocked.⁷ Mary Sue stories are often disdained because they are (supposedly) written by younger members in fandom (Leppänen 159), although it is clear that Mary Sue stories are not only written by inexperienced writers, as evidenced by, for instance, research by those adult aca-fans – that is, academic scholars who are also fans – who discuss their own Mary Sue fan fictions in their articles (see Bonnstetter and Ott 2011; Willis 2006). As the mixed reviews to the examples discussed below show, there is hardly agreement on what kind of self-insertion characters are acceptable or what exactly makes a Mary Sue, or a realistic character, for that matter. I am interested in how the terms ‘Mary Sue’ or ‘realistic’ are used by fan fiction writers and reviewers and, in general, how the reviewers assess the original female characters in stories when they know that the characters are the author’s self-insertions.⁸ In other words, I am interested in the norms related to construction of gender identity that emerge through writing and reviewing self-insertion romance fan fiction.

To decide whether a fan fiction story includes a self-insertion character and can be deemed speculative life writing, paratextual information about the story is necessary – *paratext* referring to items surrounding a narrative but not part of it, such as book covers, prefaces, notes or author interviews (see Genette 1–2). This is true of all life writing, as Lydia Kokkola (57–58; 85) has demonstrated: on the textual level of a narrative there is not necessarily anything that separates fiction from life writing. Instead, it is the paratextual information – such as a book cover or an author interview – that tells readers if the protagonist is a real-life person that also exists or has existed outside the text and whether the story should be read as (at least partly) true, rather than completely made up.

Likewise, I can only treat fan fiction stories as self-insertion stories if the authors themselves explicitly provide this information. Since I have not interviewed any of the authors, I am relying on the information that they give in their Author’s notes attached to their fan fiction texts. Author’s notes are paratextual remarks providing contextual information about the story and the process of writing – they usually involve a disclaimer where the fan fiction author recognises the original writers of the works and often state the author’s motifs for writing the fan fiction story, or explain some elements of the story. They usually occur at the beginning of the whole text or each chapter, but can also be found elsewhere. Author’s notes function as framing devices that, like prologues or framing narratives in literary texts, “establish a context for evaluating subsequent events” (Dittmar 192). In cases where author’s notes involve an explicit mention of a self-insertion character, many readers take this as an invitation to interpret the story differently from purely fictional texts. Author’s notes that mention a self-insertion character may disturb those readers who want to read

⁷ See McGee; Beck and Herrling. This is also apparent on FanFiction.net where several forum threads are dedicated to Sue-bashing, with titles such as “Die, Mary Sue, Die spitting blood” or “Anti-Cliché and Mary Sue Elimination Society.” A number of other threads that use less violent terms discuss the flaws of Mary Sues, or give tips on how to avoid or revise Mary Sues in one’s stories.

⁸ Despite the common notion that self-insertion Mary Sue fan fiction stories are all over the place, due to the negative associations that OCs and Mary Sues have it is actually difficult to find stories where authors explicitly admit that they are writing a self-insertion story. This is also reflected in Warburton’s survey study where 48% of participants claimed never to base characters on themselves, 32% stated that they did and 20% said that they might have done it inadvertently (130).

the story purely as fiction, while for some readers the knowledge that the protagonist has a real-life equivalent may increase the level of involvement with the story.

The three pieces of fan fiction that I have selected for this paper are all explicit self-insertion stories – all three stories involve various degrees of adding elements of the writer’s self (as described by her) or personal life to Meyer’s fictional narrative. While none of the stories challenges the romance plot, they play with the construction of femininity and rewrite the female characters of *Twilight* by introducing original female characters that represent a range of different femininities. This happens partly in negotiation with readers who participate in co-constructing the character, at the minimum by relating to or identifying with her but often by offering suggestions on how the character should behave as the story unfolds. In the following, I will discuss some of the sections of the fan fiction stories that point towards the authors’ own lives rather than Meyer’s fiction and relate these both to the author’s own notes and reviewers’ reactions to the stories. I will pursue answers to the following questions: What kind of female protagonists do the authors construct in their heterosexual romance narratives? Apart from Meyer’s books, what gendered representations and discourses are they drawing on? How do they mix elements from their real lives with fiction? How do their readers react to their stories? On a more general level, I am interested in the writers’ and the commentators’ views of constructing gendered identities – what are regarded as realistic or likeable female characters and what does this say about young female writers’ and readers’ understanding of romance as part of the constitution of gendered and sexual identity?

Mary Sues vs. “Real” Young Women

The first story by darkviolet123⁹ is a typical example of a *Twilight* fanfic that puts an original character in the place of the canonical female protagonist, Bella, as the love interest of Edward. This is a self-insertion story where the author has made minimal changes to the original narrative – that is, the speculative life writing elements in her fan fiction are very few – yet some of those tiny, added details may be significant in terms of gendered identity construction, as one of the review comments discussed below suggests. The story follows Meyer’s *Twilight* very closely; the events proceed exactly in the same order and large sections are word-for-word copies from the original text, including dialogue and descriptions of characters – her self-insertion character is very much like Bella at the beginning of *Twilight*: shy, keeping to herself, clumsy, and rather passive in social encounters.

In her author’s notes at the beginning, darkviolet123 gives a synopsis of the plot and explicitly states that she is writing a self-insertion narrative: “[the protagonist] is persona of myself; ... [this is] what if I was her kind of Fan fiction.” At the end of her notes, she also tells her readers to keep their opinions to themselves if they are going to say that the protagonist is a Mary Sue. Also on her profile page, darkviolet123 describes herself as an ‘OC writer’ and expresses her persistence for doing it despite the negative feedback. Thus, regardless of the lack of reviews and a couple of extremely negative reviews, darkviolet123 has added seventeen chapters to her story. She does not add any further Author’s notes to the later chapters and thus does not comment on any of the reviews that she receives. This is unsurprising, since one reviewer calls her sad and shameless for turning herself into a perfect Mary Sue and pairing her with a fictional guy that would have no interest in her in real life. Another one labels the writer a “Suethor,” a term used by writers who portray Mary Sues in their texts and tells her in very harsh terms to delete her story and dream

⁹ Although all these stories are publicly available online and the authors can be assumed to be aware that their texts are public – they are eliciting reader responses themselves in a forum that is accessible to non-registered users – I have changed the authors’ nicknames and excluded names of stories and longer direct quotes to protect the authors’ privacy since I am here highlighting the real-life elements in their fictions and want to avoid any risk of including any features that might make the authors identifiable (cf. Freund and Fielding 332; boyd and Crawford 672–673). While this means that I have not included any longer passages from their texts for close reading, I have tried to paraphrase relevant contents of the fan fiction stories sufficiently for the analytical discussion.

instead of writing. These reviewers tell in pretty plain terms that wish-fulfilment stories featuring idealised female characters such as darkviolet123's self-insertion protagonist should not be published at all. A few other readers are more polite but do not like the story because it follows Meyer's text too closely.

However, other reviewers like the story, and several appreciate the fact that the author has tried to make *Twilight* her own by inserting an original character. Moreover, instead of an ideal Mary Sue, one reviewer finds that darkviolet123's protagonist is "original and REAL" – why this is the case is not specified, however. For another reader, the likability of the self-insertion protagonist lies in a small detail; she especially loves "the little drawing of Pokemon." This refers to a part of the story where the protagonist is drawing a "chibi" of "Mewtwo" at school before class. This tiny detail potentially changes the whole character in the eyes of a reader who likes anime and can relate to the protagonist – she has a favourite anime character, she is engaged in a typical anime-fan activity, and she knows what a "chibi" is.¹⁰ In this, darkviolet123's self-insertion protagonist is significantly different from Meyer's Bella whose literary interests are *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. This might also make her more realistic from the perspective of a contemporary young reader. Moreover, in contrast to the two other stories below, darkviolet123's protagonist's appearance is not described as particularly beautiful – she is pale and plump; the character herself says that she is not pretty. All in all, even though darkviolet123's story is only a slight variation from Meyer's text, it allows her to speculate about romance through a character that is closer to herself than Meyer's Bella.

While darkviolet123's story is criticised for being too much like Meyer's book, writing a story that actually reports events from the author's everyday life and mixes them with fictional characters can also be tricky in relation to the norms concerning writing in the *Twilight* canon on FanFiction.net – at least if no effort is made to explain background information and details to the general audience. In my second example, the author Abbie.x brings the fictional vampires (and one werewolf) into her own school. This is a completely different example from the previous one, since here the author borrows only the characters from Meyer's work and inserts a significant amount of life writing into the story.

Like darkviolet123, Abbie.x explicitly describes her narrative as a self-insertion story in her opening notes: "[the protagonist] is based loosely around myself and [the milieu] is inspired by my little village." Her second chapter not only involves real people as characters and a setting that is based on a real-world place but mixes fiction and a documentation of real events, as the author explains in her notes preceding the chapter: "[this chapter is] based on real happenings in our ICT lessons". The author gives examples of what these include, ranging from specific learning activities to citing the teacher's utterances. The story is thus represented as being partly documentary – further supported by a review comment by the author's classmate who is amused by the possibility that their teacher might be reading the story online. The rest of it is speculative writing playing with the possibility that Emmett Cullen, one of the minor vampire characters in Meyer's books would become interested in the author's self-insertion character. The story is told from Emmett's point of view and, in his eyes, Lexie is portrayed rather idealistically: her complexion is "the colour of latte" and her eyes are "brown with a golden twist" and, as regards her personal features, she is "caring and friendly". She is also very good at juggling, and happy doing it, which captures Emmett's attention – thus she is a stereotypically portrayed beautiful and kind heroine with a twist; in any case she is represented as much more socially initiative than Meyer's Bella.

The question about whether the original characters are realistic does not enter the discussion in the reader reviews since the author claims to be reporting real *events*, mixed with the introduction of fictional characters in the classroom. Several reviews are positive but one reviewer finds the

¹⁰ In reviews that I have encountered while reading other fan fiction stories, readers often identify with small details, such as a character with the same name, the same hair colour, the number of siblings, place of origins, and so forth.

story confusing because it is “like an inside joke”. The reviewer seems to imply that a fan fiction site is not the place for personal life narratives that should be kept between those real-life friends who have shared the experience – in other words, too detailed documentation of real life events in fan fiction may go against the norms of the forum. Moreover, as one of the reviewers – the one that introduces herself as Abbie.x’s real-life classmate – indicates by being jokingly worried about one of the real-life teachers finding the story, telling about real events online is risky business since it may violate other people’s privacy and lead to consequences in one’s offline life. Abbie.x’s narrative is a curious mix of documentary life writing and fiction and, although it serves its author a chance to speculate about herself in a romantic situation, it finds a very limited audience on FanFiction.net. Many reviewers may crave for realistic characters (however that is defined) but they rarely want stories to be (partly) based on real events that have actually taken place in the author’s past. Obviously, the past leaves less room for speculation and to me it seems that one of the key attractions of self-insertion stories is to experiment with possible identities in the most unlikely situations.

While the first two examples have found limited audience on FanFiction.net, my last example is a fairly successful self-insertion story by NewBreakingDawn. The story is situated in the setting of the original novels but the author introduces completely new plotlines – in comparison to the examples above, it is yet another way of constructing a self-insertion narrative. This is a popular story with almost 400 reviews that the author has been updating during a time-span of four years finally ending up with a 26-chapter narrative. On her profile page, the author has added links to photos of actors and models who serve as stand-ins for the characters, and a link to her remix YouTube video featuring an actor and a model that represent the romantic pairing in her story – thus, in addition to Meyer’s books, she draws on other popular cultural resources to construct her original character. The romantic pairing here is one of the young male werewolves in Meyer’s books and an original character that is partly based on the author herself – this is not, however, revealed at the beginning of the story, where the character is only described as a party girl “with a bad attitude”. Yet, it is clear right from the start that the author shares her character’s desire for the werewolf Paul, as stated in her opening author’s notes: “I love Paul he is now my favorite werewolf I mean have you seen his actor!!!” Thus the story partly deals with the author’s own desires through the main character.

NewBreakingDawn opens each chapter with author’s notes that get more detailed towards the end as the author engages in a dialogue with the reviewers by answering to their comments one by one. It is in these later author’s notes in chapter sixteen that she reveals in her replies to reviewers that the protagonist, Alani, is like her not only in their shared passion for Paul: “most girls would be mad but [the protagonist] would be like me and laugh ... she is like me but not the height”. It seems that the author has been drawing on (an ideal version of) herself when creating Alani’s personality. In the cited example she is described as more relaxed than an average girl, and elsewhere in the story her humour, strong-mindedness and straightforward, even violent behaviour are represented as positive features. These features are also appreciated in the readers’ reviews. Moreover, as regards the protagonist’s appearance, the author posts an image of a Brazilian supermodel to suggest how she is supposed to look.

The combination of these features results in a character that shares a lot more with such female action heroes as Lara Croft or Buffy the Vampire Slayer than any of the female characters in Meyer’s books. Despite the clear Mary Sue potential of the character – she is good-looking, witty and funny – it is only the author herself who suspects that her self-insertion character might be a Mary Sue while her readers disagree: “I was a little scared she would be a Mary Sue in the beginning, glad she isn't!” Indeed, what makes NewBreakingDawn’s protagonist a successful self-insertion is that most of the readers like her and can relate to her, mostly due to her personality features and behaviour: “refreshing to finally see a strong female character”; “I loved how [the

protagonist] punched [him] in the face”; “[the protagonist] isn’t your average imprint that is sweetness and girly shit like that ... a more realistic imprint.” While the readers deem the protagonist’s features “realistic,” they may also be associated with the girl power and “strong female hero” discourses circulating in popular culture since the 1990s. Thus, what is understood as realistic here may actually be realistic in the sense of *familiar* and *recognisable* in relation to other popular cultural discourses rather than how “real” people behave. Discussions about “realism” and “realistic” characters have to do with defining norms for the gendered behaviour of likeable heroes – here the author and her readers share the view that a successful female hero is not about “sweetness and girly shit.”

It is this shared understanding of norms that allows for another level of “realness” in the case of the self-insertion protagonist in NewBreakingDawn’s story: the reviewers’ emotional commitment to the story. This is evident in the great number of comments that are, in Black’s terms, “editorialized gossip,” talk where the reviewers discuss the characters and their reactions as if they were real persons (107). This is not life writing in the sense of reporting real-life events but is clearly speculative life writing in the sense that both the author and the readers are discussing their own, very actual desires and feelings in relation to a romantic scenario that is mainly drafted by the author but partly also the readers’ creation.

Speculative Lives, Modified Romances

Self-insertion fan fiction offers its writers (and readers) a semiotic practice where they can experiment with their romantic desires, hopes, and fears and experiment with their gendered identities through speculative life writing mixing real-life elements and fiction. Instead of labelling this kind of speculative life writing as wish-fulfilment narratives – as the critics of Mary Sues do – I would suggest that this kind of imaginative play with identities is a significant part of understanding and constructing selfhood that happens by drawing on various (popular) cultural discourses and making them creatively one’s own through speculative narratives. It seems to me that at least for some self-insertion fan fiction writers the call for reviews is as much a call for an acceptance of a part of their identity expressed through writing and a willingness to discuss their real-life fears and hopes in a safe, fictional surroundings, as it is a call for comments to improve their story. However, it is also important to bear in mind that there are limitations to the speculative play with identity: fan fiction forums are normative spaces where the popularity of a story is dependent on readers who appreciate its textual and narrative elements, including gendered characters.

Constructing textual selfhood in the above examples is intersubjective activity where the public representation of the gendered self is not only the writer’s creation but instead a textual construct negotiated together with readers and regulated by the norms and expectations of a particular online space and, more broadly, gendered discourses circulating in the surrounding society. In the three stories above, the degree of self-insertion varies but in each case it allows the author to create an original character that departs from Meyer’s creations – the three self-insertion protagonists here represent young women with various talents, personalities, and types of behaviour, ranging from an anime-enthusiast to a skilful juggler, and a bad-ass fighter girl. Thus, while all the plotlines follow some key conventions of romance – such as the notions of one true love and fate – there is a lot more variation in terms of the gendered conventions and tropes that the self-insertion characters are built on. In the above examples, also readers pay attention to the details of characterisation and are looking for signs that invite or discourage them to *like* the characters. For several readers a likeable female character that they can relate to (or identify with) does not have to be exactly similar to them or resemble their ideal girl. The element that signals familiarity and encourages identification can be minimal, such as a brief scene where character is drawing pokemons in one’s notebook, or more extensive, such as the female action hero trope that readers

are familiar with. In any case, the likeability of the character – and, thus, in self-insertion texts the likeability of (part of) the author’s persona – is negotiated together with readers, which makes the whole process rather different from private day dreaming and more like other public interactions where we learn to construct our identities in relation to other people and social norms.

Self-insertion fan fiction is thus a form of speculative life writing where the authors are actively looking for feedback for their imaginative construction of gendered selves – this is identity building in collaboration rather than isolation. More broadly, examining self-insertion fan fictions illustrate how gendered representations, discourses and norms become internalised not only by passively absorbing information but through actively producing speculative life writing. In speculative life writing, gendered discourses may be creatively reimagined and modified or faithfully reproduced, for the better or worse; either following or subverting romance conventions is not automatically a good or a bad thing. Whether conventional or radical, speculative life writing plays a significant role in our identity construction and fan fiction forums provide one venue where this identity work and negotiations around it are documented in writing – more work in this area is definitely called for.

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