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Spreading the Word: What *Fifty Shades of Grey* Means for World Literature

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How does the global popularity of bestselling romance novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* complicate David Damrosch's seminal definition of World Literature as 'literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin,' and which are 'actively present within a literary system beyond that of [their] original culture'? By offering a formal textual analysis of a novel few would call 'literature,' I explore how *Fifty Shades* provides a test case for rethinking what World Literature is, how it travels, and how we study it. With its 'digital-like' form and celebration of affective labour, *Fifty Shades* encourages readers to publicise the novel by spreading fragments of its content through online social media networks as a form of unpaid labour. This 'spreading' of the novel compels us to reconsider World Literature in the light of digital media and fan participation.

Introduction

Much of the scholarship surrounding E. L. James's bestselling romance novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012) expresses a striking reluctance to analyse the novel as a literary text. Published in three volumes (*Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker*, and *Fifty Shades Freed*) spanning a total of 1,625 pages, the novel presents critics with the challenge of explicating a text that is so thick with content yet seems so thin in terms of its meaning. In a special issue of *Sexualities* on 'Reading the *Fifty Shades* "Phenomenon",' IQ Hunter (2013: 969) writes:

> After only ninety dreadful pages of the first book, I knew I was in trouble. I couldn't think of anything worth writing about it, let alone anything scholarly and original. . . . my excited anticipation [had been] deflated by a close up and personal encounter with a book far more engaging as a phenomenon than actually to read.

Hunter's comments are typical of existing research on *Fifty Shades of Grey* (henceforth *Fifty Shades*). Many scholars and cultural commentators give little weight to close readings of the novel and focus instead on considering *Fifty Shades* as a social phenomenon, examining the novel's larger significance for the publishing industry; the ethics of publishing fan fiction for commercial profit; reader reception; and what the novel reveals about what women want, do not want, and should not want.[1] In other words, many critics prefer to explore the social relations that connect the novel to readers and publishers, rather than analyse the formal qualities that characterise *Fifty Shades* as a literary text. Some of these critics also criticise *Fifty Shades*, or mention that it has been heavily criticised by others, for its 'bad writing.' In a feature article for *Newsweek*, Katie Roiphe (2012: 28) concludes that 'what [is] most alarming about the *Fifty Shades of Grey* phenomena [sic], what gives it its true edge of desperation, and end-of-the-world ambience, is that millions of otherwise intelligent women are willing to tolerate prose on this level.'[2] While hardly intending to do so, these critics give the impression that it is not worth paying close attention to the form of *Fifty Shades* because the novel is so badly written. The novel's repetitive plot, flat characters, and often painfully awkward choice of expression certainly tried this author's patience. Nevertheless, this article argues that attentiveness to literary form yields insights into the ways in which the novel's infamously 'bad' form has actually helped *Fifty Shades* to become a global social phenomenon.

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[1] See, for example, Jamison (2013); Shaw (2012); Jones (2014); Deller and Smith (2013); and van Reenen (2014).

[2] See also Jones (2014: 2–3); Deller, Harman, and Jones (2013: 860); and Hunter (2013: 971).

In fact, analysing the novel via close reading helps us to understand how and why *Fifty Shades* and other similar works of contemporary fiction are read so widely around the world. Circulation-oriented theories of World Literature often examine how literary texts travel through translation, and some scholars have focused in particular on how the formal qualities of a text might contribute to its being translated. Rebecca Walkowitz's 'born-translated' novel, for example, self-consciously calls out for its own translation, whereas David Damrosch's 'global' literature deliberately erases local cultural differences to facilitate the process of translation.[3] In a radical variation of this approach to World Literature, Franco Moretti calls for 'distant reading' – namely, the large-scale quantitative analysis of data – to discern how literary forms, rather than specific texts, travel across geographical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries.[4] The first part of this article, however, makes a case for close reading as a productive means of analysing how aesthetic form plays a crucial role in enabling *Fifty Shades* to transcend its original context of production. The notoriously poor quality of E. L. James's prose (repetitive plot, verbatim repetitions, simplistic temporality and narratorial voice, formal incoherence, and so on) enables readers to take the novel apart easily, and to disseminate or 'spread' fragments of its content online to other Internet users. The novel thus functions as an example of what Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green have called 'spreadable media' (2013). The second and third parts of the article build on this formal analysis to explore 1) how *Fifty Shades* dramatises the concept of affective labour through the romantic relationship between the two protagonists, and 2) how this romanticisation of affective labour sheds light on the role of fan labour in 'spreading' media content. The work that fans do in spreading word about *Fifty Shades* online represents an ambivalent example of participatory culture: fans contribute to E. L. James's commercial success by lovingly remixing the novel through online forums, discussions, parodies, and commentaries, yet they have not been given due credit for supporting *Fifty Shades*'s transformation from *Twilight* fan fiction to international bestseller.

In particular, *Fifty Shades* introduces a new digital dimension to Damrosch's (2003: 4) seminal definition of World Literature as 'literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin,' and which are 'actively present within a literary system beyond that of [their] original culture.' *Fifty Shades* circulates widely around the world via digital networks. This is not only because the e-book format offers a high degree of portability and privacy (Shaw 2012), although these are important factors. *Fifty Shades* was initially published online as the *Twilight* fan fiction story 'Master of the Universe' and then as a print-on-demand digital book, before being picked up for mass publication by Vintage

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[3] See Walkowitz (2015); and Damrosch (2003: 18).
[4] See Moretti (2005; 2013).

in 2012.[5] While James and her publishers claimed that she had significantly revised 'Master of the Universe' for publication as *Fifty Shades*, fan accounts of the novel's controversial publication history suggest otherwise (Brennan & Large 2014: 29–30).[6] *Fifty Shades* appears to be an almost identical reproduction of its online fan fiction precursor. These digital origins might explain why *Fifty Shades*'s stylistic form aligns so closely with that of digital media – even in the print version of the novel – but it is difficult to establish such a causal relationship without access to the author's drafts, reader comments, and online chapters of 'Master of the Universe,' which James took down so that she could publish the work commercially. James's removal of these online records limits our ability to trace the evolution of *Fifty Shades* from a digital text to a print novel that resembles a digital text. Nonetheless, the novel's 'digital-like' form encourages and enables readers to engage in a form of unpaid affective labour when they share short passages of text from the novel through online social media networks, even when this 'born-digital' text is translated into print. By applying the practice of close reading to a novel few would call 'literature,' I use *Fifty Shades* as a test case for revising our understanding of World Literature in light of digital media and fan participation.

From Nation to Social Network

As literary studies increasingly shifts its focus 'from nation to network' (C. Levine 2013), the global popularity of *Fifty Shades* draws our attention to digital media as a paradigmatic example of networked literary production and consumption. *Fifty Shades*'s infamously clunky prose actually makes it highly 'spreadable' (Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013) via digital social media networks such as fan forums, blogs, Twitter, and Facebook. The judgment of bad writing that detractors of *Fifty Shades* have levelled at the novel might be seen as a stylistic form that embodies the experience of reading digital texts. This 'digital-like' form, which is embedded even in the print version of *Fifty Shades*, encourages the reader to fragment the novel into bite-sized pieces for 'sharing' and discussing online, thereby facilitating the novel's circulation via social media.

    Fifty Shades looks like bad writing because of its ambivalent relationship with the nineteenth-century realist novel, to which it frequently alludes. Not only does *Fifty Shades* invoke the marriage plot in its depiction of the romance between Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele, it also cites canonical nineteenth-century texts and authors as a shorthand for presenting the female protagonist 'Ana' as a bookish young woman who miraculously wins the affection of a rich and handsome man, like a latter-day Jane Eyre. Christian begins his courtship of Ana by giving her a first edition copy of Thomas Hardy's

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[5] See Brennan and Large (2014) for an overview of *Fifty Shades*'s publication history.
[6] See also Litte (2012); and Boog (n. dat.).

Tess of the d'Urbervilles, which he knows is one of the 'classic British novel[s]' that Ana loves to read (James 2012a: 6). Christian's copy of *Tess* comes in three volumes, which mirror the number of volumes that make up *Fifty Shades*. In *Fifty Shades Freed*, the third volume of the novel, Ana's personified 'subconscious' busies herself with reading *The Complete Works of Charles Dickens* (James 2012c: 33, 49, 121) and *Jane Eyre* (James 2012c: 346), while her libidinous 'inner goddess' enjoys sex with Christian. Readers who are familiar with nineteenth-century novels, however, will quickly realise that *Fifty Shades* appears to lack the formal characteristics of complexity, coherence, and character development that literary scholars typically associate with nineteenth-century British realism.[7] Unlike Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* or Dickens's *Bleak House*, *Fifty Shades* shows a general lack of interest in '[w]hat connexion [there can] be' (Dickens 2003: 256) between events in the plot, and between the various people and places that appear in the novel.

The plot of *Fifty Shades* is extremely repetitive and monotonous. Christian and Ana undergo the same cycle repeatedly: Christian tries to dominate Ana, Ana rebels and they fight, Ana feels guilty and apologises for rebelling, and they make up by having steamy sex. The novel also includes a large amount of inconsequential detail about Ana's thoughts and actions, which adds to its tediousness. Ana's internal monologue reads like a series of diary entries describing nitty-gritty everyday activities that do not add meaningfully to the plot. For instance, in a scene that occurs close to the end of the first volume, Christian takes Ana out to an International House of Pancakes café for breakfast. They exchange innuendoes, the waitress is embarrassed by Christian's good looks (like all the other women in the novel), and they proceed to discuss their BDSM contract, which, 450 pages into the book, the two protagonists are still contesting. The scene comes to an end, and the IHOP café does not appear again in the rest of the novel. This repetitive and pointless nature of many of the novel's scenes means that the reader does not have to make an effort to remember what comes before, and to make connections between different parts of the text in order to understand what is going on.

Even on a syntactic level, *Fifty Shades* employs repetition to reduce the need for the reader to make connections. The novel is written entirely in the first-person from Ana's perspective, and her narration is solely set in the present. Time in the narrative therefore moves forward only in a linear direction, which makes narrative time (or 'plot') essentially coterminous with chronological time (or 'story'). Instead of using

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[7] Scholars of nineteenth-century realism have acknowledged that, while it is very difficult to formulate a clear-cut definition of realism's formal properties, it is possible to identify several characteristics that make up what Caroline Levine (2012: 84–85), following Amanda Claybaugh, calls the 'syndrome' of Victorian realism. See, for example, G. Levine (1981) on complexity; Williams (1974) on 'organic' coherence; and Moretti (1987) on the socialisation of the modern subject in the *bildungsroman*.

flashbacks, the novel literally repeats phrases and sentences from earlier parts of the text to indicate that Ana is thinking about the past:

> As I lie staring into the darkness, I think of all the times he warned me to stay away.
>
> *Anastasia, you should steer clear of me. I'm not the man for you.*
>
> *I don't do the girlfriend thing.*
>
> *I'm not a hearts and flowers kind of guy.*
>
> *I don't make love.*
>
> *This is all I know.* (James 2012a: 230)

> Immediately some of the things he's said spring into my mind.
>
> *I don't want to lose you . . .*
>
> *You've bewitched me . . .*
>
> *You've completely beguiled me . . .*
>
> *I'll miss you, too . . . more than you know . . .* (James 2012a: 398)

In both of these instances, the novel reproduces Christian's words verbatim, literally quoting itself to remind the reader of Christian's contradictory expressions of love for Ana. The novel uses this same technique to repeat information about the BDSM contract. The contract is printed in full on pages 165 to 175, and then parts of it reappear on pages 255 to 258 and 499 to 500, as Christian and Ana negotiate the contract's terms and conditions. Once again, this practice of verbatim reproduction minimises demands on the reader to hold the different parts of the narrative in his/her memory so as to articulate the relations between these parts. Reading instead becomes quick and effortless.

Lastly, *Fifty Shades*'s multiple literary allusions also contribute to the novel's lack of formal coherence. The references to Hardy's *Tess* in the first volume do little more than position Ana as a virginal young woman and Christian as a composite figure combining Alec d'Urberville's debauchery and Angel Clare's punishment of Tess for not living up to his ideals. Rather than engaging with the tragic rape of Hardy's heroine – Ana's response to *Tess* is summed up in the statement 'Damn, that woman was in the wrong place at the wrong time in the wrong century' (James 2012a: 21) – the novel invokes *Tess* rather perversely to celebrate its female protagonist's growing desire to be 'punished' sexually by a domineering man. Like many other postfeminist heroines, Ana exercises her autonomy by actively forsaking that autonomy, again and again.[8] Ana consistently obeys Christian's commands both in and outside of the bedroom. 'I do as I'm told,' she tells the reader repeatedly (James 2012a: 428). Unlike the nineteenth-century

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[8] For discussions of postfeminist media, see Gill (2007: 258–61); and Tasker and Negra (2007).

bildungsroman that focuses attention on a single, highly individuated protagonist who finds his/her place in the world (C. Levine 2012: 90), *Fifty Shades* presents a narrative of character regression instead of development, with Ana becoming more submissive with every iteration of the cycle (I will say more about this in the second section of the article on female affective labour). After approximately three-quarters of the first volume, the references to *Tess* disappear and are replaced by a plethora of literary references ranging from *Robinson Crusoe* (James 2012b: 47) and *The Little Prince* (James 2012b: 223) to *The Complete Works of Charles Dickens* (James 2012c: 33). These references have nothing in common besides functioning as a kind of name-dropping that supposedly demonstrates how cultured and intelligent Christian and Ana are. The novel thus thwarts attempts to read it as a palimpsestic rewriting of earlier literary texts, presenting the reader instead with a jumble of floating and fragmentary literary citations.

Fifty Shades thus comes across as a badly written novel because it flouts the expectations of formal cohesion that E. L. James's consistent employment of intertextuality raises. On the one hand, the novel makes frequent allusions to the tradition of nineteenth-century realism. On the other hand, the form of *Fifty Shades* does not match conventional critical perceptions of realism, which, as Elaine Freedgood (2019: ix) has recently argued, often imagine the 'Victorian novel' to be 'integrated, coherent, and conservative.'[9] Yet the novel also does not align itself with the avant-garde aesthetics of modernism, or the linguistic and epistemological concerns of postmodernism. What makes *Fifty Shades* different from both realist and non-realist forms of literature is its fragmentary form, which detractors of the novel have neglected to analyse in detail because of its association with 'bad writing.' While there are certainly suggestive parallels between Victorian serialised fiction and *Fifty Shades*'s genesis as serialised fan fiction online, the fragmentariness of *Fifty Shades* is of a different order. All serialised narratives are fragmentary insofar as they are consumed in parts, but *Fifty Shades* strikingly lacks what Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund (1991) have described as the Victorian serial's abiding concern with steady, continuous development over time. In this sense, despite its serialised nature, *Fifty Shades* is also very much unlike contemporary 'complex' television serials which, as Jason Mittell has argued, foreground development, unity, and craftsmanship. Mittell (2015) claims that 'complex TV' shows such as ABC's *Lost* (2004–2010) and HBO's *The Wire* (2002–2008) avoid giving explicit storytelling cues, thereby compelling viewers to pay close attention to how the story is told, and to piece together evidence in order to make sense of the story's enigma. Such TV narratives 'ask [viewers] to trust in the payoff that [they] will eventually arrive at a moment of complex but coherent comprehension' (Mittell 2015:

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[9] Freedgood (2019: xi) argues that, from the 1850s to the 1960s – before the nineteenth-century realist novel became institutionalised as a 'great' form of literature – the Victorian novel 'was not always imagined as formally coherent or as realistic in a good way.'

50). *Fifty Shades*, on the other hand, de-emphasises 'continuity and a sense of long-term memory,' and does not display a 'depth of references' or 'details that require the liberal use of pause and rewind' (Mittell 2010: 4). With its repetitive and episodic plot structure and small cast of characters, *Fifty Shades* more closely resembles earlier forms of 'non-complex' serialised television which, Mittell (2010: 4) argues, sought to 'create episodes that could be viewed in any order by a distracted viewer with only casual attention.'

In other words, the piecemeal quality of *Fifty Shades* encourages a speedy and fragmentary mode of reading that echoes not only how we used to watch television, but also the ways in which we read digital texts such as online news stories, tweets, Facebook posts, and YouTube videos. The novel in fact reproduces the experience of reading email and mobile phone text messages, by presenting the messages that Christian and Ana send to each other in a typographical format that mimics that of actual emails and text messages (**Figure 1**).
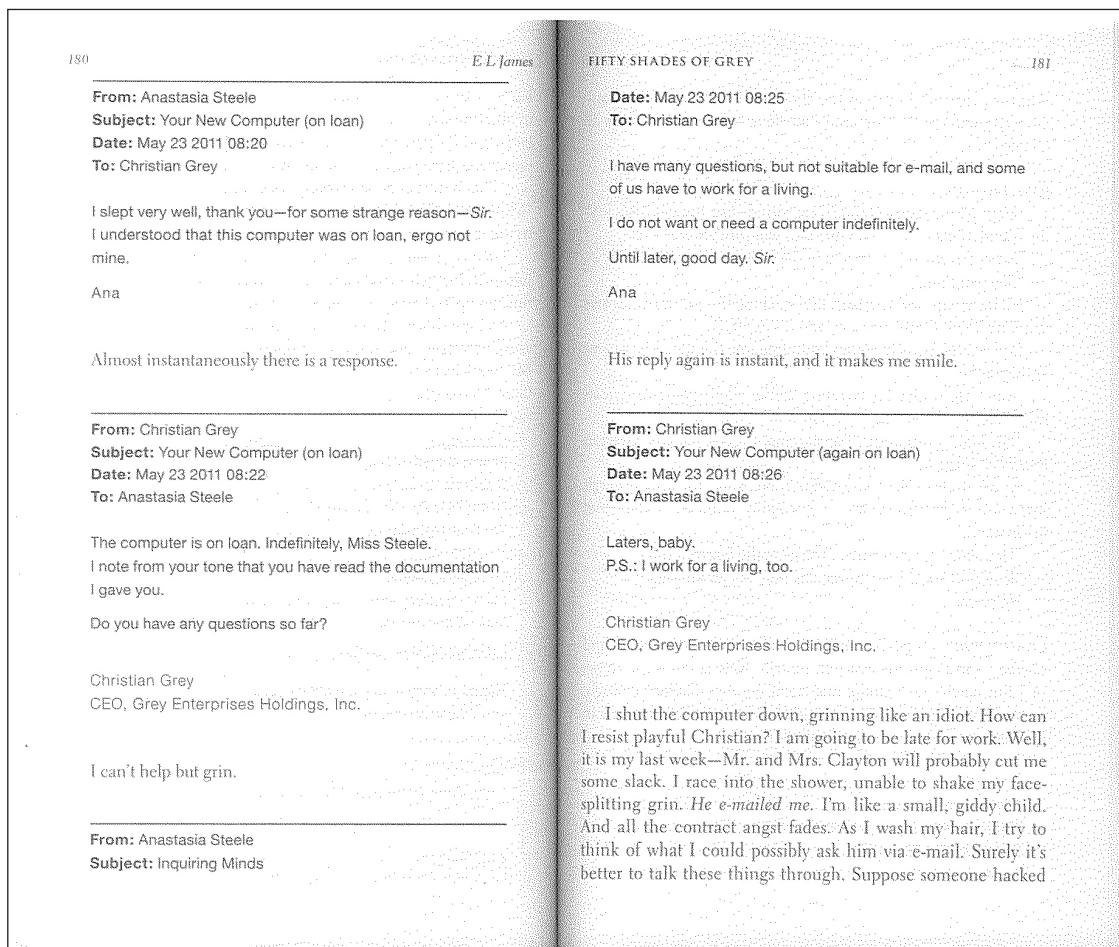

Figure 1: Christian and Ana discuss the BDSM contract via email (James 2012a: 180–81).

The novel presents what Christian and Ana see on their screens directly on the printed page. This sense of immediacy is especially prominent in parts of the novel where Christian and Ana send emails back and forth, and the emails are reproduced on the printed page in a continuous sequence. Moreover, these verbatim transcriptions of emails and text messages (as well as excerpts from the BDSM contract and even quotations from *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*) break the text up visually, thereby making it easy for the reader to skim the text quickly, and to even skip over sections to get to the sex scenes or other passages that seem more interesting to the reader (**Figure 2**).
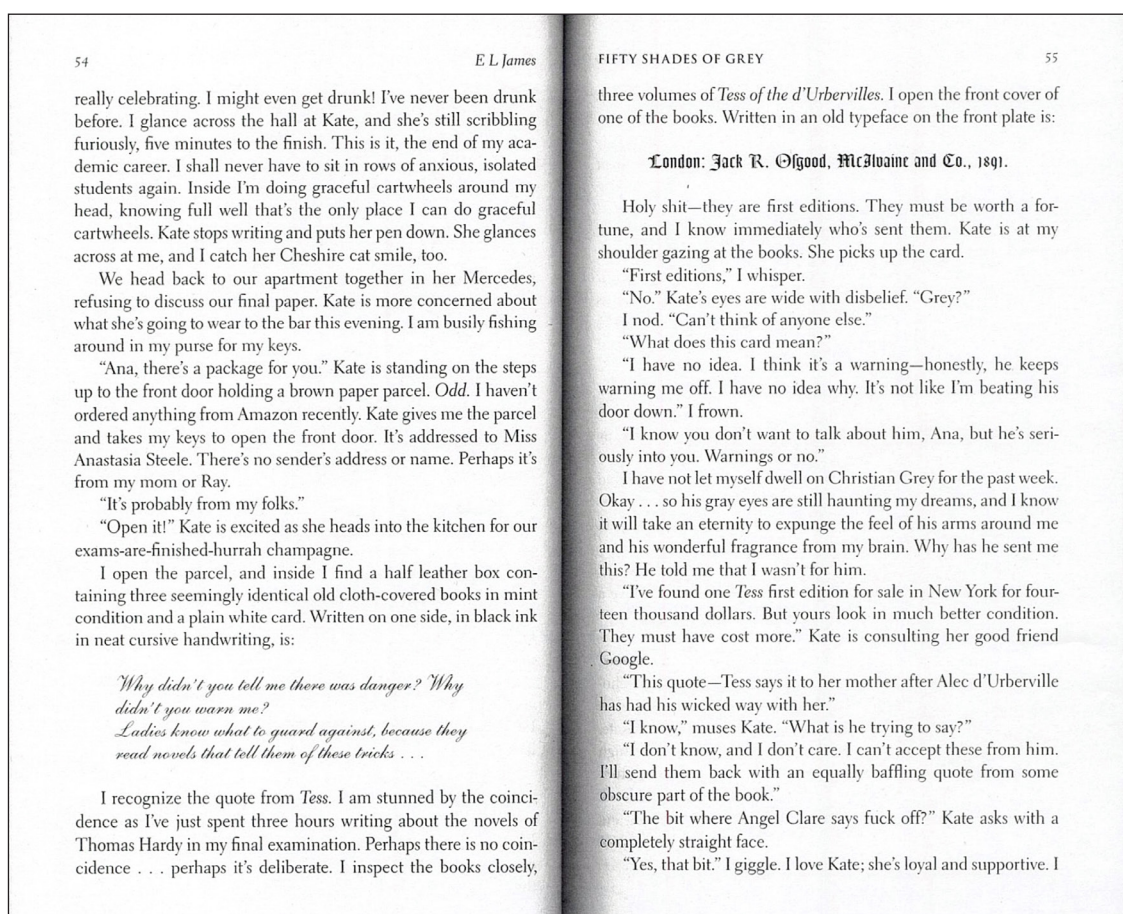

Figure 2: Christian's quotation of *Tess*, as well as the publication details of the book, visually break up the narrative into fragments (James 2012a: 54−55).

Repetition, inconsequential detail, narrative fragmentation, and the emails and text messages in *Fifty Shades* collectively invoke a mode of reading digital texts that Katherine Hayles (2012: 61) calls 'hyper reading.' Hyper reading is a form of superficial or 'surface reading' that is the opposite of close reading. Hayles (2007: 187−88) describes this opposition as the contrast between 'deep attention' and 'hyper attention':

Deep attention, the cognitive style traditionally associated with the humanities, is characterised by concentrating on a single object for long periods (say, a novel by Dickens), ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times. Hyper attention is characterised by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom. The contrast in the two cognitive modes may be captured in an image: picture a college sophomore deep in *Pride and Prejudice*, with her legs draped over an easy chair, oblivious to her ten-year-old brother sitting in front of a console, jamming on a joystick while he plays *Grand Theft Auto.*

It is not a coincidence that Hayles references nineteenth-century realist novels by Austen and Dickens as exemplary texts that require 'deep attention,' in contrast to *Fifty Shades*, whose ambivalent relation to realist conventions primes the reader to engage in 'hyper reading' instead. In his polemical article 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?', Nicholas Carr (2008) describes a similar opposition between deep reading and Internet reading in more explicitly spatial terms: 'My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.' Whereas formalist critics in recent years have proposed 'surface reading' as an alternative to historicist and theoretical approaches to literary criticism, the mode of 'surface reading' that Hayles and Carr describe completely rejects close reading, whether 'deep' or not.[10] This digitally-inflected mode of surface reading deploys techniques such as skimming and scanning, filtering by keywords, hyperlinking, and 'pecking' (pulling out a few items from a longer text) to engage in what James Sosnoski refers to as 'reader-directed, screen-based, computer-assisted reading' (qtd. in Hayles 2012: 61).

Rather than encouraging readers to take the time to make careful connections between the different parts of a text, surface reading compels readers to fragment texts in order to find the information they want as quickly as possible. Fragmentation is key to *Fifty Shades*'s widespread circulation via online social media. New media, in Lev Manovich's seminal theorisation, are inherently open to fragmentation. Digital

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[10] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus first introduced the concept of 'surface reading' as an alternative to the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in their introduction to the 2009 special issue of *Representations* on 'The Way We Read Now.' See also Love (2010); and Levine (2015). These forms of 'surface reading' are essentially modes of close reading that focus exclusively on tracking the development of formal patterns across the surface of the text. As such they have been criticised for privileging description over interpretation, and for creating a spurious antagonism between formal and contextual analysis. See Tanoukhi (2016: 1426–29); and Goodlad (2015: 268–94).

media texts are 'modular': in other words, they are composed of discrete units of information that can be combined into larger objects without losing their fundamental separateness (Manovich 2001: 30–31). Manovich (2001: 30) gives the example of a video clip inserted into a Microsoft Word document. Because of its modular nature, the video clip can be edited or removed without impinging on the surrounding written text. Likewise, in invoking surface reading, *Fifty Shades* invites the reader to treat the novel as if it were a Word document that can be fragmented into discrete units of information. These units can then be extracted and 'shared' online without affecting the overall architecture of the novel's plot and meaning. In *Spreadable Media*, Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2013: 198) emphasise 'portability' as one of several strategies for creating media content that is more likely to 'spread' online. Echoing Manovich's principles of digital media, Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013: 198) argue that, for media content to be 'spreadable,' online users should find it easy to pick up the content and insert it elsewhere (for example, in a Facebook post). Despite being a printed text, the form of *Fifty Shades* embodies this principle of modularity characteristic of digital media, thereby facilitating the novel's 'spread' via online social media networks, albeit in fragmented form. Compared to the nineteenth-century novels that *Fifty Shades* cites, and to more contemporary plot-driven forms of genre fiction, it is much easier to 'share' and discuss fragments of *Fifty Shades* online without having to connect the different elements in the text to make sense of it. Discussants of *Fifty Shades* do not have to worry about 'sharing' too little of the novel for fellow online users to understand what the novel is about. Nor do they have to worry about 'sharing' too much to the extent that they give the plot away and inadvertently spoil the pleasure of reading the novel for others. By 'sharing' fragments from the text and thereby spreading awareness of *Fifty Shades*, online users pique the interest of other users, and encourage them (intentionally or not) to read the novel so that they too can join in the conversation.

A brief look at online discussions of *Fifty Shades* demonstrates how the novel circulates through this practice of 'sharing' extracts. In response to the question 'What made you read *Fifty Shades of Grey*?' on the *Oh Fifty! A Fifty Shades Fansite* forum, a fan with the username 'Felicia' wrote that she bought all three volumes of the novel based on a single excerpt from the first book, which she had found online. There is also an entire thread in the forum in which fans list and discuss their favourite quotes from the novel. More recently, fans on Twitter shared quotes from the novel to build anticipation for the *Fifty Shades Freed* movie adaptation, which was released in February 2018. For example, a user named @Fiftys_Fitties marked Day 257 in a year-long countdown with a tweet asking fans what song they would put on Christian's

iPod. The tweet includes an extract from *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the first volume of the novel, presumably as a starting point for discussion (**Figure 3**).

Even critics of the novel engage in the same practice of fragmentation, extraction, and citation, but for the purpose of panning the novel for its poorly written prose. The *Honest Trailers* parody of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie on YouTube, for example, lampoons both adaptation and source material by listing several 'horrible lines from the book that thankfully didn't make it into the movie.' As Umberto Eco (1986: 197–98) writes in *Travels in Hyperreality*, a text's openness to fragmentation is crucial in determining its popularity:

Figure 3: Tweet by @Fiftys_Fitties.

> What are the requirements for transforming a book or movie into a cult object? The work must be loved, obviously, but this is not enough. It must provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world. . . . I think that in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole.

With its 'digital-like' stylistic form, *Fifty Shades* particularly invites fans and foes alike to dismember the novel and spread its fragments far and wide, thereby contributing to the novel's ubiquity in the transnational networks of online digital culture.

Loving Work: Fans and Affective Labour

Like all forms, the form of *Fifty Shades* has its 'affordances' (C. Levine 2015: 6–7), but form alone does not ensure that a text will circulate widely. *Fifty Shades* became popular worldwide not just because of its 'digital-like' form, but also because the romance between Christian and Ana resonated with the kind of labour that fans often engage in when showing affection for their favourite media texts. In *Spreadable Media*, Jenkins et al. (2013: 19–21) take issue with the metaphor of 'going viral' because of its denial of human agency in spreading content. While media producers can enhance
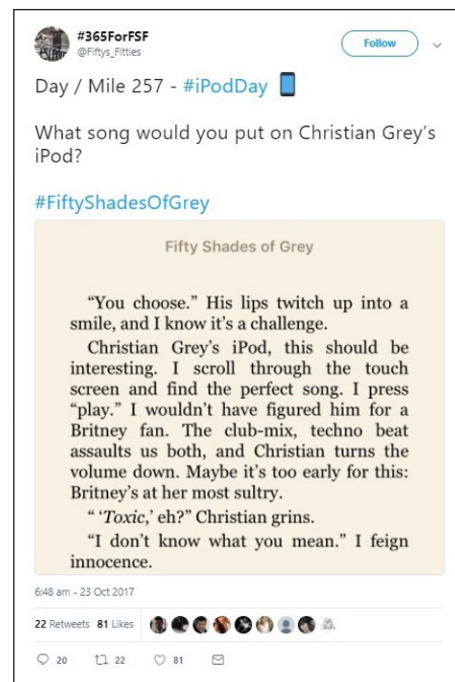
their content's potential for spreading, Jenkins et al. (2013: 196) argue that online users ultimately spread content because they want to do so. Fans, in particular, spread content out of love, whether it is love for specific personages (such as idols) or specific narratives (such as films, TV shows, and works of popular fiction). Fans of *Fifty Shades* performed this labour of spreading the novel online – and in doing so they made use of the novel's capacity for fragmentation – partly because the marriage plot in the novel idealises women's participation in affective labour, of which fan labour is a significant part. In celebrating affective labour in the context of post-Fordist capitalism, *Fifty Shades* effectively celebrates the fan labour that has made its production and widespread circulation possible. Reading *Fifty Shades* against the grain helps to illuminate the nature of fan engagement with the novel.

The conventional marriage plot of the nineteenth-century novel usually ends with the female protagonist subordinating herself to a man through marriage, in exchange for her freedom from waged labour in the domestic sphere. Nancy Armstrong (1987: 41–42) has famously argued that domestic fiction naturalises this 'sexual contract' by presenting this exchange as a matter of private, romantic relationships rather than a political and economic structure of power. Like its nineteenth-century precursors, *Fifty Shades* romanticises the sexual contract – quite literally – but also updates it to naturalise a highly exploitative relationship between capital and affective labour, which is now both waged and unwaged under the conditions of late capitalism. *Fifty Shades* appropriates the glamour of Christian and Ana's BDSM relationship to glorify not only Intimate Partner Violence, but also a particularly extreme form of capital's domination over labour.[11] Christian repeatedly invokes the idea of work in his romantic relationship with Ana, blurring the boundaries between sex/love in the private sphere and paid work in the public sphere. 'Do the work,' he commands Ana, ordering her to research BDSM practices on Wikipedia as if she were one of his many employees at Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc. (James 2012a: 186). When Ana refuses to work in his multinational corporation, Christian buys the publishing press that she works for, so that she ends up working for him anyway. Moreover, the BDSM contract that constitutes the crux of Christian and Ana's relationship bears an uncanny resemblance to an employment contract, with its stipulations about designated hours and conditions for dismissal from service. Christian and Ana thus represent the positions of dominant capital and submissive labour respectively. In this new version of the sexual contract, female

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[11] While Margot Weiss's 2011 study of a BDSM community in San Francisco reveals that the BDSM subculture often enacts existing institutionalised systems of domination in its role-play scenarios, it is open to debate whether 'eroticizing . . . social inequality' (Weiss 2011: 24) is equivalent to reproducing it. From the perspective of many BDSM practitioners, *Fifty Shades* grossly misrepresents BDSM relationships as abusive. See S. James (2012); and Smith (2015).

labour willingly subordinates itself to capital in exchange for both material wealth and success in the workplace. Christian not only showers Ana with expensive gifts; at the end of the novel, he makes her the owner of his publishing company.

Like the heroines of the nineteenth-century realist novel, Ana achieves upward socio-economic mobility precisely because she does not desire it. In fact, Ana attains success in both love and work because she actually enjoys subordinating herself to Christian/capital. In *Fifty Shades*'s rendering of the relation between capital and labour, the labour that Ana performs is doubly affective. Firstly, Ana engages in affective labour when she submits to Christian's will, thereby producing feelings of pleasure in Christian and reaffirming their exploitative relationship. Affective labour, according to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004: 108, 150), is 'labour that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion,' and that, in doing so, produces and maintains social relations.[12] Affective labour is a major component of the kinds of work carried out in the childcare, healthcare, hospitality, professional cleaning, and other service industries that focus on making people feel comfortable and happy. As the exploitative relationship between Christian and Ana demonstrates, this form of labour takes up all of the worker's time and penetrates all areas of the worker's life. In *The Soul at Work*, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi (2009) argues that, as post-Fordist capitalism comes to focus more on communicating mental states and feelings than on transforming physical matter, production becomes increasingly structured as a global network in which workers create, process, and transfer digital information. Workers cannot step back from this continuous flow of information for fear of becoming irrelevant (Berardi 2009). As a result, the worker must be prepared to receive commands from the network at any time, often through a mobile phone, which, for Berardi (2009: 89−90), is the quintessential digital device that makes this state of perpetual readiness possible. *Fifty Shades* dramatises (and idealises) this complete co-optation of the worker's time in the form of Christian stalking his Submissives. Christian, representing the interests of capital, gives Ana an array of IT gadgets (an Apple MacBook Pro laptop, a BlackBerry, and an iPad) so that he can track her whereabouts and contact her at any time he wishes. Despite complaining that '[she is] overwhelmed with technology' (James 2012b: 115), Ana happily accepts these gadgets. She willingly integrates herself into the digital network of production and its demand that she provide affective labour whenever and wherever Christian/capital needs it. Ana gladly subordinates herself in this way because she is affectively invested in her work of producing affect. Giving pleasure to Christian gives her pleasure. For example, when Ana has sex with Christian for the first time, she proclaims that '[she] will do anything

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[12] See also Hardt (1999); and Hardt and Negri (2000: 292−93).

he wants' (James 2012a: 113), which apparently includes having instantaneous orgasms at his command:

> 'You. Are. Mine. Come for me, baby,' he growls.
>
> His words are my undoing, tipping me over the precipice. (James 2012a: 121)

Seen in this light, Ana loving Christian becomes an allegory of 'loving one's work of loving.' Ana thus embodies what Kathi Weeks (2011: 69–70) calls the 'post-Fordist work ethic,' which drives workers in the new service-oriented global economy to devote 'not just the labour of the hand, but the labours of the head and the heart.'

Ana's affective investment of time and energy into her 'work' for Christian parallels that of the fans who spread media content from and about *Fifty Shades* online, not to mention the fans who gave feedback and helped to edit the work when James was writing it as 'Master of the Universe.' *Fifty Shades* thus celebrates the affective labour that has contributed to its success. Fans of *Fifty Shades* demonstrate their love for the novel not only by 'sharing' fragments extracted from it, but also by reworking these fragments to accommodate their particular interests, such as in the case of the Twitter user who 'shared' an extract to start a discussion about Christian's iPod playlist. This practice of 'textual poaching,' as Jenkins (2013: 3) puts it, is a labour of love that 'mak[es] meaning from materials others have characterised as trivial and worthless.' Even detractors of *Fifty Shades* engage in a kind of affective labour when they too participate in 'textual poaching,' albeit for the purpose of criticising the novel. In their study on *Fifty Shades* and 'snark fandom,' Sarah Harman and Bethan Jones (2013) reveal that 'anti-fans' of the novel invest just as much time and energy as fans do in reading and talking about the novel, but with a different objective in mind. For example, the '50shadesofWTF' anti-fan community on the blogging platform LiveJournal close-reads selected passages from *Fifty Shades* to mock the novel for its gross misogyny (Harman and Jones 2013: 957–61):

> **I employ an exceptional team, and I reward them well.**
>
> **KET:** (Grey): With my dick.
>
> **GEHAYI:** (Grey): And my riding crop.
>
> **KET:** (Grey): At the same time.
>
> **GEHAYI:** Do you suppose he ever gets them mixed up?
>
> **KET**: He starts whacking away at some poor underling with his penis, leaving mushroom-shaped bruises for days . . . (Ket Makura and Gehayi, qtd. in Harman and Jones 2013: 958)

In a twist on more straightforward fan communities, these anti-fans derive pleasure from 'sharing' extracts from the novel in order to satirise it. Although they dislike *Fifty Shades* intensely, these anti-fans too engage in affective labour in 'spreading' *Fifty Shades* via global online networks. Also, like their fan counterparts, they point to the convergence of affective labour and fan labour under post-Fordist capitalism, and to the implications of this convergence for how we approach World Literature as an object of study.

Digital Media, Fan Participation, and World Literature

The 'spreading' of *Fifty Shades* online by fans and anti-fans provides an opportunity for rethinking what World Literature is, how it travels, and how we study it. In a world increasingly connected by digital networks of communication, how do we define what counts as a 'source culture' or a 'receiving culture' (Damrosch 2003: 283)? Furthermore, what does it mean for a digital or 'digital-like' text to be 'actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture' (Damrosch 2003: 4)? *Fifty Shades* has travelled from its 'origin' in an online *Twilight* fan fiction community to other online social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, which cut across national boundaries and span wide geographical distances. *Fifty Shades*'s perambulations suggest that, in addition to examining how texts migrate from one geographical location to another, perhaps we should look at how texts are now produced and consumed in online social spaces that are divided along the lines of language use rather than national and territorial boundaries. *Fifty Shades* has been translated into many languages, and it certainly qualifies as a World Literature text in this regard. However, the novel's circulation in Anglophone online contexts suggests that a text can be 'worldly' even when it travels in a single language. A similar situation applies to the phenomenally popular Chinese Internet novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi* (*Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*). Even before the official English translation was released in December 2021, the novel and its multimedia adaptations had garnered many fans in the online Sinophone world. Texts such as *Fifty Shades* and *Mo Dao Zu Shi* might not win the Booker Prize or be included in the Norton Anthology of World Literature, but they deserve the attention of World Literature scholars nonetheless, and not simply as sociological objects of analysis.

Besides reconfiguring existing definitions of World Literature, *Fifty Shades* also prompts us to reconceptualise how World Literature moves around the world. The transmedia travels of *Fifty Shades* demonstrate that World Literature in the age of digital media circulates not only in the form of digital media adaptations – such as the video game adaptation of Dante's *Inferno* that Damrosch (2013) discusses in 'World Literature in a Postliterary Age' – although the movie adaptations of *Fifty Shades* certainly contribute to the hype. Neither does World Literature in the digital era necessarily circulate in the form of electronic literature that is 'born digital' with no printed counterpart, such

as the poem-videos created by Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries and discussed in Walkowitz's *Born Translated* (2015) and Jessica Pressman's chapter in Damrosch's *World Literature in Theory* (2014). As a novel that bears 'the mark of the digital' (Hayles 2008: 161), even the print edition of *Fifty Shades* travels through digital networks in the form of textual fragments. These fragments point back to the novel in its entirety (for instance, in the case of the fan who bought all three volumes after reading an excerpt online), but also point forward to readers 'remixing' the novel in fan discussions, critical commentaries, parodies, and so on. Furthermore, reader participation in 'spreading' these fragments of *Fifty Shades* on social media suggests that we might think about circulation in World Literature not only in terms of literary influence or book sales, but also in terms of online discussions and debates. When the first book of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy took the world by storm in 2012, the American comedy TV programme *Saturday Night Live* promptly lampooned both women readers of the novel and the online delivery company Amazon in a parody of an Amazon Mothers' Day advertisement (**Figure 4**).

Figure 4: *SNL* pokes fun at both Amazon and women readers of *Fifty Shades*.

'This Mothers' Day,' the voiceover intones, 'go to Amazon.com and get Mom what she really wants.' The comedy sketch was then uploaded onto YouTube a year later, where it has since been viewed more than 5.6 million times.[13] One of the top-rated user comments on the YouTube video laments that the user's mother had bought a Kindle simply in order to read the *Fifty Shades* trilogy: 'She eventually gave it [the Kindle] to me. The only books on it were all three *Fifty Shades* books >.>' Many of the people who talk about *Fifty Shades* online might not have read the novel in its entirety or at all, but they are still able to understand the jokes in the *Saturday Night Live* sketch, and to make further jokes about 'Mommy Porn.' *Fifty Shades* has travelled far and wide, but not in the ways that scholars of World Literature conventionally consider. The fact that

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[13] "Amazon Mothers' Day Ad," *YouTube*. URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFte46jVFOg&t=4s (last accessed 13 March 2023).

Fifty Shades has become part of a common vocabulary suggests that we need to rethink a text's 'activ[e] presen[ce]' in world literary systems (Damrosch 2003: 4) from the perspective of digital media and reader participation; in other words, what Jenkins, Mizuko Ito, and danah boyd (2016) call 'participatory culture in a networked era.'

This brings me to two final observations on how literary scholars might approach a text such as *Fifty Shades* as World Literature. Firstly, in the early years of World Literature's emergence as a field, its most prominent proponents called for scholars to examine not only source texts but also their permutations as they travel across geographical and cultural borders. Damrosch (2003: 283–92), for instance, foregrounded the transformative process of translation, while Moretti (2013: 50–59) argued that literary forms from core areas of the world literary system become hybrid when they make 'compromises' with local conditions in peripheral cultures. *Fifty Shades* and other similar texts with a strong online presence not only reaffirm the need for World Literature scholars to study both the source text and its transformations, but also reveal that source texts are increasingly being adapted to the needs, the interests, and even the political leanings of various transnational online constituencies. In the hands of the '50shadesofWTF' anti-fan community, seemingly romantic descriptions of Christian and Ana's relationship become tools for feminist critique. These adaptations of *Fifty Shades* open up new areas of research that go beyond territorial notions of cultural difference, translation (whether linguistic or cultural), and hybridisation.

Secondly, studying source texts and their permutations in an online context requires a careful approach to assessing fan labour, and especially to gauging how much power readers (broadly understood) actually have in producing World Literature. Digital social media enable readers to participate in selecting which works of amateur online fiction get picked up by major publishers, and which of these books go on to become international bestsellers. *Fifty Shades* would not have become the publishing sensation that it is today had it not been for fans discussing James's *Twilight* fan fiction online, as well as for readers spreading word about *Fifty Shades* after the novel was formally published. As Katy Shaw (2012) has observed, *Fifty Shades*'s success suggests that power in publishing is shifting away from editors and the literary elite to readers and grassroots communities. However, this increase in reader participation does not necessarily mean that digital social media have made readers genuinely empowered in producing World Literature. Fan participation in promoting *Fifty Shades* online serves not only fan interests, but also the interests of the global literary publishing industry. In the same way that Ana's affective labour is plugged into an incessant communication flow of emails, text messages, and phone calls, fan labour is integrated into the digital network of capitalist production; in this case, the production of World Literature. While many fans of *Fifty Shades* seem happy to do their 'work' of promoting the novel for free,

authors and the publishing industry benefit from their unpaid labour. Anne Jamison (2013: 224–25) points out that James often downplays the fan fiction community's contributions to the success of *Fifty Shades*, even though she 'benefited directly and tangibly from the feedback, encouragement, interaction, and publicity [her] readership offered.' For Christian Fuchs (2014: 64), this counts as exploitation even though it does not feel like it. Fuchs (2014: 56–57) criticises existing discussions of participatory culture for being too celebratory, arguing that '[a]n Internet that is dominated by corporations that accumulate capital by exploiting and commodifying users can in the theory of participatory democracy never be participatory.' Jenkins, Ito, and boyd (2016: 1) express similar reservations when they begin their recent reassessment of 'participatory culture' by asking: 'Does participation become exploitation when it takes place on commercial platforms where others are making money off our participation and where we often do not even own the culture we are producing?' Apart from the issue of Internet corporations such as Google and Facebook monetising users' private data, growing corporate interest in harnessing users' participation for economic gain (Jenkins, Ford, & Green 2013: 47–84) raises doubts about how much and what kind of power readers possess in participating in world literary production.

While it is useful to avoid championing reader participation as an end in itself, scholars of World Literature should also consider how the reading communities that have developed around *Fifty Shades* and other similar texts online might provide what Jenkins calls an 'alternative' to the digital network of capitalist production and other forms of social inequality. Jenkins recognises that niche communities today are often commercialised, and that they are seldom overtly resistant or oppositional (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd 2016: 16). Nonetheless, they represent alternatives in the ways in which they organise knowledge, structure social relations, or define their norms and values (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd 2016: 16). Janice Radway makes a similar argument in *Reading the Romance* (1991), where she examines the reading practices of a group of women in the small American town of Smithton. Although the women often bought and read romance novels, they were conscious that the novels did not adequately address some of their desires (Radway 1991: 49–50). Like the readers of romance novels interviewed in Radway's study, fans of *Fifty Shades* read the novel in ways that the author and publisher cannot fully control. While the 'spreading' of *Fifty Shades* has helped the publishing industry to market its product, it has also given rise to online communities of readers who problematize the status quo, such as the '50shadesofWTF' anti-fans and readers who criticise James for removing her fan fiction work from the public domain to profit from it.[14] These online reading communities demonstrate that, in

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[14] See Jones (2014: 2–4); and De Kosnik (2009: 118–24).

Jenkins' words, '[n]o matter how participatory culture is pulled towards dominant practices, it cannot close off space for other, less mainstream interests if it is going to remain truly participatory' (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd 2016: 21). Although these communities contribute to the 'spreading' of *Fifty Shades* in the service of the publishing industry, they simultaneously divert the flow of information in small ways away from the digital network of capitalist production towards the creation of social relations that refuse to participate in commercialising fan labour or degrading women's sexuality for profit. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, Berardi (2009: 217) argues that we need to deterritorialise our points of contact in the digital network of production, so as to break free from the network and form new connections and communities. Perhaps, in producing *Fifty Shades* as World Literature, readers are also subverting *Fifty Shades*'s exploitation of affective labour, and producing transnational forms of community that can effect change for a better world.

Acknowledgements

Competing Interests

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