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The Herd and the Neighsayers: Exploring Anxieties and Transgressive Expressions in Brony  
Fanfiction

*I don't think Hasbro could have shut down the fandom even if they wanted to.*

- Alex Irpan, "My Soul is Pony-Scarred for Life Because of You," *Sorta Insightful*
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In October of 2010, children's toy company Hasbro released their latest reboot of *My Little Pony* animated media, this iteration titled: "*My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*." In the series, bookish main character Twilight Sparkle moves to Ponyville to practice the magic she's learned from her teacher, Princess Celestia. More importantly, she must travel to the small town to learn the values and importance of friendship. Once there, she meets five other ponies, each one representing the traits of a true friend: Applejack is honest, Fluttershy is kind, Pinkie Pie is funny, Rarity is generous, and Rainbow Dash is loyal. Twilight writes weekly to Princess Celestia about the life lessons she gleans from her time with the other ponies, becoming, as popular culture scholar Bill Ellis puts it, a "practical ethnographer," who focuses on "drawing lessons from them [the other ponies] that apply to the human world of the show's audience" (299). Shockingly, *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* appealed to an entirely different audience than the young girls that Hasbro had expected from their pretty pastel marketing. What started as a group of young men on anonymous imageboard website 4chan making an ironic jab at the ridiculousness of children's animated media quickly formed a surprisingly genuine community of adult male *My Little Pony* fans. They called themselves Bronies, a combination of

the words “Bro” and “pony.” Despite being “associated in the public imagination with sexual perversion and antisocial behavior,” anthropologist Theo Peck-Suzuki argues, a lot of the Brony music, animations, fanfictions, and artwork that came out of the community were simply enthusiastic, if unconventional, ways of creating individual and communal meaning (Introduction). Fanfiction in particular, according to Peck-Suzuki, was a means for Bronies to reevaluate their relationships to others in the fandom and to the *My Little Pony* television show as a whole. The act of writing, reading, and commenting on fanfiction was a communal art, one that was somehow both highly enjoyable and sharply critical.

**In reading the two Brony fanfictions “Intellectual Property” and “Rainbow Factory” in conversation, fears of alienation, exclusion, and persecution are countered with those of escape, community, and meaningful creation. Here I argue that these binaries mirrored the character of most Brony works, and, for that matter, the community as a whole. By both acknowledging and critiquing societal norms surrounding daily life under capitalism, gender, and online communication, the two pieces of fanfiction come to represent the vital role that transgressive media played in the formation and creation of alternative Brony identities.**

**Despite initially appearing very disparate works, fanfictions “Intellectual Property” and “Rainbow Factory” are tied together by a distinctly “Brony” belief in the importance of preserving individuality and celebrating difference in the face of persecution and alienation from society’s “haters.”** Both fanfictions were written after the release of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, with “Intellectual Property” created in 2019, and the first copy of “Rainbow Factory” dating back to 2011. “Intellectual Property” follows female lawyer Elaine, who is approached by the endearingly nerdy scientist Dr. David Purcell at her practice in Los

Angeles (Mike). Purcell explains that he has found a way to communicate with the *Friendship Is Magic* ponies, who are in desperate need of help, and Elaine reluctantly allows herself to be transported to the fantasy land of Equestria (Mike). Dr. Purcell, who is determined to keep the *My Little Pony* world from fading into oblivion, triumphs by working with Elaine and Hasbro to strike a deal that culminates in the production of more episodes of the television show (Mike). The fanfiction ends with a party that celebrates the cooperation between the pony and human worlds (Mike). Despite Elaine's initial doubt and even revulsion towards Dr. Purcell and the fantasy world that he represents, she finds herself ultimately won over by the "magic" and "miracles" that he is able to share with her (Mike). In fact, this parallel to the familiar Brony struggle for outside acceptance was not lost on the fandom. Dr. Purcell's difference was what allowed him the opportunity to save all of ponykind, and the bravery that he displayed in standing up for what he believed in didn't go unappreciated in the Brony community.

Furthermore, the narrative of "Rainbow Factory" builds on the anxieties over conformity that form the foundation of "Intellectual Property." However, instead of leaning into the fantasy of escaping into a more favorable alternate reality, "Rainbow Factory" depicts an exaggerated version of the "real world." In a way, it answers the question of what it would feel like if Elaine wasn't won over by Dr. Purcell. What would happen if someone rejected everything you stood for? In "Rainbow Factory," pegasus Scootaloo fails her flight exam and is sent to the "Rainbow Factory," a plant run by Rainbow Dash herself (Dawn). There, ponies are killed for their rainbow colors, and their murders supposedly help power Equestria (Dawn). Scootaloo attempts to escape, and even seemingly succeeds with the help of some of her friends, but unfortunately it is revealed that it was all a trap (Dawn). There is no way out of the factory, and Scootaloo is sacrificed (Dawn). This dark retelling set in the land of a children's show made it something of a

classic horror tale in the Brony fandom, and it garnered even more popularity with the rise of the “creepypasta” or “grimdark” horror stories proliferating the internet at the time. However, more than simply representing the social anxieties of the Brony fandom, or mirroring calls for community and friendship, both “Intellectual Property” and “Rainbow Factory” embody a transgressive rejection of societal norms. Though rebellion against the “mainstream” through fanfiction is not a new idea, the areas of society that Bronies chose to criticize and the ways that they chose to do so *were* revolutionary.

**One such area that Bronies scrutinized was capitalism, and they did so through the innately anti-capitalist medium of fanfiction.** With the growth of online fanfiction in the early twenty-first century, a host of passionate readers and writers were suddenly and easily able to come together to share alternative stories of their favorite books, movies, and television shows. Perhaps the most unexpected development within these communities was the emergence of a distinctly transgressive anti-capitalist spirit. Drawing upon the work of fandom studies author Layanne Malluhi, we are able to trace the deep ties between capitalism (and anti-capitalism) and fandom and fan culture itself (5). Fanfiction occupies the unique position in which it draws heavily on materials from huge corporations, but its transgressive stories and communities actively separate themselves from the values and norms of capitalist systems (Malluhi 24). To add further complexity to her claims, Malluhi cites Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson’s ideas on postmodern cultural production, acknowledging that fanfiction is inherently tied to the large companies and culture of consumerism that produce the media that inspire it. However, she claims, fanfiction is capable of taking these traces of capitalism and flipping them upside-down. Malluhi explains,

Fanfiction is transgressive, because it is a communal anti-capitalism...there is a form of de-commodification taking place in the authors' appropriation of the characters of a book/movie/television show and recreating them as if they owned them...fanfiction dispossesses corporations and/or individuals of their intellectual property...(24)

Additionally, fanfiction displays its transgressive and anti-capitalist nature through its relative accessibility: it is free to access with an internet connection and a device, and any attempts to sell or commodify the creative works are highly frowned upon (Malluhi 25). At the core of fanfiction itself is an argument that while the products of mass media can be engaging, to truly do right by one's favorite works is to fight against the exploitative systems that create them.

In reading and writing fanfiction, within the Brony fandom or outside of it, one becomes part of a transgressive, anti-capitalist *community*. Historian Laura Robertson further contributes to Malluhi's argument when she describes fandoms as "participatory cultures...insistent on making meaning from materials others have characterized as trivial and 'worthless'" (27-28). There is an unshakable focus in fanfiction on the collective: pieces are written *by* the collective, *for* the collective. Despite any kind of pushback from those outside of fanfiction communities, the "participatory culture" of the medium continues "making meaning." Indeed, both "Rainbow Factory" and "Intellectual Property" are very much built on Malluhi and Robertson's claims that fanfiction is not only transgressive in its content, but also in its very nature. Fanfiction allows and has allowed countless communities, including the Brony fandom, the freedom to navigate their communal criticisms of capitalism through the aforementioned lens of alienation anxieties and non-normative identity formation. *Especially* given the transformation of Hasbro's intellectual property in "Rainbow Factory," fanfiction's communal efforts to fight greedy and

stifling systems of exploitation reflect the alternative spirit that is at the core of the work's arguments.

**“Rainbow Factory” is a disarming work in many respects, but it manages to utilize its gory shock to highlight the real horror of a failed rebellion in a late-stage capitalist hellscape, an idea that directly criticizes the norms and daily life of the predominantly capitalism-oriented society that Bronies lived and functioned in.** In the story, Rainbow Dash becomes a murderous Mr. Monopoly, and her terrifying factory speaks to a critique of the dullness and loss of individualism and expression in normative society under capitalism. In the fanfiction, anxieties surrounding the complete helplessness and culture of judgement in our society are expressed through the persecution and organized murder of innocent sources of individuality, or “color.” At the beginning of “Rainbow Factory,” the structure itself is shrouded in mystery; it isn’t completely clear what happens there, but many ponies pick up on its disturbingly dark nature. To be part of the Rainbow Factory, the story goes, one has to get used to “sacrificing any life outside those black walls. Workers are...twisted and disturbed, too damaged to ever bring themselves to talk about it” (Dawn). By describing the factory as an all-consuming mode of production, one that completely overshadows any other aspect of someone’s life, “Rainbow Factory” lays the groundwork for its further transgressive takes. Most notably, these anti-capitalist claims are solidified in the evil monologue performed for the failed flight test pegasus by none other than Rainbow Dash, the famously talented flier in *Friendship Is Magic*. Dash describes the systemized murder of pegasus for their colors as being “such a beautiful idea, such a wonderfully horrible idea. It worked so well; we could create exponentially more rainbows, of better quality” (Dawn). Through this text, Bronies asked what becomes of those who live in a world in which difference means death.

In many ways, “Rainbow Factory” uses the Brony experience to question the societal systems that allow for the exploitation and symbolic killing of the valuable qualities that make people special. Even if these elements aren’t always considered “optimal” by the social standard, “Rainbow Factory” argues, that doesn’t make anyone less deserving of happiness and the freedom to live how they want to. Acceptance of non-normative identities is crucial, and the fanfiction speaks directly to arguments in favor of the protection and even celebration of difference.

**Not only does Brony fanfiction criticize the societal expectations of productivity and identity in late-stage capitalism, it also questions normative notions of gender and masculinity too. Thus, the Brony fandom became a kind of shared, “transgressive” space.**

Historian and educator Samuel Miller argues that Brony conventions and communities were places to experiment with different expressions and experiences of masculinity (335). The fandom, he expands, became a “prime example of neo-sincerity, a movement that takes ironic statements and art and incorporates them as a transgressive message with sincere intentions” (Miller 335). To take a vested interest in the anthropomorphic ponies of a television show primarily marketed towards young girls was highly suspicious to much of mainstream society, especially given the substantial lengths that Bronies went to to find and connect with each other. It takes no more than a few clicks on the Internet to find examples of the scrutinization of the “strange” gathering of young men at a Brony convention, or a statement of disgust at the “effeminate” behavior of Bronies. As Miller puts it, “Bronies present a conundrum to conventional understandings of masculinity, especially in the United States and other parts of the West” (328). Bronies did not fit within the specific and unreasonable Western expectations of

how a “man” should act, and they directly challenged what interests were perceived as acceptable and expected for them to engage with.

With this said, it’s important to address the fact that a lot of the stigma surrounding Bronies deals with the sexualization of the ponies that the young male fans incorporated into their digital expressions. Although sexualization does not play a role in “Intellectual Property” or “Rainbow Factory,” it is nearly unavoidable when scouring the archives of Brony fanfiction. However, former Brony Jenny Nicholson argues in her YouTube video “The Last Bronycon: a fandom autopsy” that many Bronies resorted to sexualizing the ponies because it was the only way that they knew how to express their genuine affection for the fictional female characters (“The Last Bronycon: a fandom autopsy”). These societal anxieties and pressures influenced the ways that Bronies thought (and wrote) about the characters in *My Little Pony*, which led to an internal struggle over the appropriate way to appreciate the female ponies. With this said, the uniquely accepting Brony community allowed a lot of Bronies to embrace their authentic love for the ponies, and create spaces and communities where this kind of affection could be expressed without judgement. This inclusive fantasy is no better expressed than in a few lines of dialogue in “Intellectual Property” directly following Dr. Purcell and Elaine’s success in preserving the magical land of Equestria. Of course, it is the unlikely hero of the story, Dr. Purcell, who most celebrates the “new friendship between...two worlds [pony and human]” (Mike). To a lot of Bronies, joining the community meant rejecting traditional notions of masculinity, and focusing instead on the formation of alternative identities and connections in accepting spaces.

**“Intellectual Property,” the story of a “watery and assuming” man who makes a great discovery and convinces an incredulous and judgemental lawyer that they can join**

the world of *My Little Pony*, becomes the tale of a non-normative individual capable of overcoming society's pressures and emerging victorious into a world of fantastic escapism (Mike). The quirky Dr. Purcell, far from the hyper-masculine hero of most fictional stories, builds on the familiar transgressive Brony subversion of society's expectations of the "ideal man." Purcell, in pushing against the confines of a judgemental society, becomes a visionary of a new world of magic and community. However, he cannot triumph without hardship: society, represented through Elaine, expresses doubt at the kind of magical difference that men like Dr. Purcell embody, and she at times outright questions his masculinity and sanity. From Elaine and Purcell's first encounter, it's clear that she underestimates him. She says, after holding out a hand to shake, "Come in, Mr. Purcell, and have a seat" (Mike). He replies, "blinking and blushing," "Doctor Purcell...I...I'm sorry" (Mike). After this awkward correction, he winces, flinches, and then shakes Elaine's hand (Mike). She describes his handshake as being "every bit as watery and unassuming as Elaine [she] had thought it would be" (Mike). Not only is Elaine skeptical, to say the least, of Dr. Purcell himself, but she finds everything that he stands for to be ridiculous. When Purcell introduces his idea of interdimensional travel into the *My Little Pony* world, Elaine screeches, "Magic?...No, that...that's for kids with British accents, horn-rimmed glasses, and impossibly tousled hair" (Mike). Through Elaine's dismissal of Dr. Purcell as being nothing more than a nervous, absurd nerd, "Intellectual Property" creates a kind of "persecution parallel" to the Brony experience itself. Returning to Miller's ideas on preconceived notions about the Brony fandom, he writes that people "belittle the fandom...they cannot understand how adult men find enjoyment in a show teeming with glitter, rainbows, and pastel ponies" (329). However, to Bronies, the colors of the "pastel ponies" of *Friendship Is Magic* were never questioned. They simply existed in their fantasy world without judgement, animated

embodiments of the joy that an extra sprinkle of color could bring. Unfortunately, just like Elaine, who couldn't fathom that magic had a place outside of fantasy, people outside the Brony community weren't able to wrap their heads around the challenges to gender norms that Bronies presented through their alternative interests.

And yet, "Intellectual Property" satisfies its readers with a happy ending, one in which Elaine is no longer the cold and judgemental character that she once was. Notably, she is able to marvel at the beauty of the fantastical world that Dr. Purcell reveals to her. Despite his appearance and Elaine's preconceived notions about him, Purcell's genuine personality, intellect, and belief in the magic of friendship make him the unlikely hero of this piece of Brony fanfiction. After the deal with Hasbro, Elaine gazes at the "miracle" that is her coexistence with magical pony Twilight Sparkle, and at one point she even utters the words, "All right, all right! I stand corrected! There's more to you than just the show" (Mike). These, of course, are not-so-subtle references to what would be an ideal reaction to the expression of a Brony's interests, even if they weren't typical of "men" their age. "Intellectual Property" crafts a narrative that builds on fears of alienation and isolation, but it ends with Dr. Purcell's "geeky" charm and transgressive embodiment of alternative masculinity pulling through to prove that there is more to him than what meets the eye.

**Thus far, we've explored the ways that "Rainbow Factory" and "Intellectual Property" challenge societal norms through their transgressive themes, whether those themes surround individuality and anti-capitalism, or negotiations of gender expression and judgement. However, in order to situate and synthesize the two pieces of fanfiction, it's crucial to consider the highly transgressive websites that they sprang from. Sites outside of the mainstream like Friendship is Magic Fiction (FIMFiction), Equestria Daily, and 4chan were**

vital points of connection for Bronies, and these “different” websites facilitated the circulation of a lot of fanfiction, including “Intellectual Property” and “Rainbow Factory.” It is significant that, despite their contrasting genres, the two share the *exact same* mode of expression. Oftentimes, the establishment of these websites, specifically the ones directly pertaining to Bronies, were formed to avoid exclusion and alienation, and create communities that valued dedication and support. Looking at FIMFiction, the website that “Intellectual Property” was posted on, community building is at the core of the site’s mission. In response to a question asking what FIMFiction was on their Q&A page, the site’s administrator responded that it’s a “community gathering place for fans of FiM, and a pillar of the fandom in general” (knighty). Many places on the internet were not safe spaces for Bronies, so finding a sphere in which they could interact without judgement was rare and wonderful. With this said, it’s important to acknowledge that Bronies themselves did occasionally create spaces that were unsafe for others. Given that they gathered on “questionable” websites like 4chan, where often more malicious communities form and connect, the Brony community was also involved in kinds of “harmful” transgression. While searching for cute *My Little Pony* fanart, children often ended up on sites like 4chan unwittingly, and the Brony fandom was thus embroiled in debates over whether or not creating “not safe for work” content surrounding children’s media was acceptable.

Nevertheless, the centrality of community in Brony fanfiction circles and the online character of the stories that they read further allowed Bronies to connect, with many of them forming discussion groups that would passionately share their thoughts and feelings on the fictions. In these online communities, characters and storylines were not finished when the writing was. Given the nature of the discussions, they were effectively limited to Bronies, thus creating insulated and increasingly targeted communities of MLP fans that felt comfortable

enough in their identities and opinions to contribute to conversations about topics deemed “strange” by social standards. This is clearly highlighted in a “community-centric,” as described by the moderators, MLP Lounge Reddit discussion comparing “Rainbow Factory” to another incredibly successful Brony horror fanfic, “Cupcakes.” In “Cupcakes,” characteristically cheerful Pinkie Pie is transformed into a sadistic killer that tricks Rainbow Dash into coming over to bake cupcakes, only for Pinkie to violently murder, dismember, and bake Dash into the “treats” (Jones). Both “Rainbow Factory” and “Cupcakes” are considered “grimdark,” a word circulated in writing communities as a shortened version of the phrase “grim darkness.” Although the two share a similar violent nature, “Cupcakes” was generally regarded in Brony circles as being a horrifying and nonsensical depiction of pointless cruelty. Although some Bronies enjoyed the story simply for its shock value, a lot of them insisted that it be removed from popular fanfiction sites. With this said, a snippet of the conversation comparing the two on the MLP Lounge thread is as follows:

DELETED: *Rainbow Factory...was thrilling and suspenseful. It even had a poignant message about what happens to a society that begins to treat certain members as “useless”, and the violence actually serves to illustrate that message. It's grimdark, but it does it well...When I finished Cupcakes, I wanted to take a shower, and then throw up, and then take a shower again. When I finished Rainbow Factory, I got that “holy shit that's awesome” feeling that I get whenever I read a really gritty story...*

BIOHAZARDBUNNY: *Personally, it [Rainbow Factory] appealed to my fear of unnatural eyes/gazes. The image of those hate-filled eyes boring into me*

*frightened me...But no, i didn't get Cupcakes from it...On the plus side, it inspired me to write this: <http://www.fimfiction.net/story/13111/Beautiful-Eyes>.*

The kind of creation and discussion of incredibly specific content for communities with shared interests, visible in the conversation above, was a new development of the digital age, and one that Bronies fully took advantage of.

**Moreover, the online sphere provided Bronies with the opportunity to connect with people from across the world, which led to the formation of decidedly unique communities.**

In their article “Bronies Learning English in the Digital Wild,” Liudmila Shafirova and Daniel Cassany study writing and translating processes in the Brony fandom, and they explore the ways that the community came together to create translations of episodes of the show and provide feedback on pieces of fanfiction (132). By interviewing and analyzing the stories of six Bronies, Shafirova was able to take a closer look at the varied experiences of communication in the fandom, describing discussions over fanfiction in particular as a “social character...organized along participative and collaborative lines, with positive feedback, constructive criticism, and encouraging comments by voluntary proofreaders from within the fan community” (128). A distinctive element of the Brony fandom, its hyper-focus on community building, was possible only through the utilization and creation of websites viewed by mainstream society as “concerning” or “different.” However, despite any judgement from “haters” or “trolls,” Bronies found that an online sphere allowed them the space to express themselves freely, and connect with other like-minded individuals.

**Of course, with the age of the internet came unique social and digital anxieties, and just by visiting or existing on these sites Bronies actively challenged societal norms. Both of my primary sources encapsulate the kinds of interactions between alienation anxieties,**

**escapism, and alternative identity formation characteristic of the websites that they were published on, especially since the tight-knit communities on those sites encouraged a collaborative and *deliberately* transgressive community.** Indeed, the fanfiction posted on these websites opened up opportunities for Bronies to take full advantage of the freedom and anonymity that came with such digital means of communication and connection. Bonded by a fierce common interest, Bronies chose to channel their exclusionary and persecutory anxieties into a reclamation and creation of websites and spaces that flipped societal notions of community-building on its head. Online, Bronies were able to control exactly how they wanted to be perceived, which allowed them a great deal of creative freedom in the ways that they crafted their digital identities. Drawing again on the points made by scholar Bill Ellis in his Brony research, he argues that,

The partially anonymizing nature of Internet communication, in which participants identify themselves through a selfselected “handle” or pseudonym, is a powerful enabler of community formation, especially communities formed in reaction to their perceived “otherness” in their own social worlds...(299)

Thinking back to our analysis of Layanne Malluhi’s research as well, it becomes clear that simply by engaging with these online fanfiction and discussion communities, Bronies were participating in acts of transgression, acts that they seemed to be fully aware of and even embraced.

As if developing Malluhi’s claims a step further, Ellis contextualizes these transgressive Brony fanfictions within the larger social world, focusing on the fact that the Brony community was able to apply the themes of their writing on anthropomorphic ponies to the outside social sphere (299). Indeed, the Brony memes and in-jokes that became part and parcel to these digital

communities were “both a defensive mechanism and a rallying cry for fans reveling in the odd rebellious thrill of it all” (Ellis 301). In figure 1, Ellis uses the example of a Brony meme created, jokingly, in response to the “haters” (302). Despite its self-deprecating humor, the meme also reflects the unique ways in which the Brony community was able to acknowledge and even claim the insults directed at them. The meme seems to suggest the idea that, “You can say whatever you want to me. In fact, I might even agree with you just to see your face!” By



Figure 1. “A Response to the ‘Haters.’”

developing “uncomfortable” ideas in many capacities, but especially through forms of digital written expression like fanfictions or meme captions, Bronies owned their transgression.

Returning to “Intellectual Property” and “Rainbow Factory,” it becomes obvious that their content alone was not the only aspect of the stories that pushed boundaries: the places that they were published to and communities that they circulated within were decidedly transgressive.

Brony websites allowed their visitors to develop, create, and write their own identities, while acknowledging that the world “outside” of these sites would not take as kindly to them.

Much like Twilight Sparkle when she traveled to the magical world of Ponyville for the first time in search of friendship and connection, and then again when she wrote about the problems that she saw in her world, and *again* when she found a community that mattered to her, in many ways so too did the Brony fandom. They also created fantasies and formed friendships while finding opportunities to criticize the “outside” world while they were at it. Like Sparkle scribbling another letter to Princess Celestia detailing what she had learned that week, the Bronies authored their own observations of the world around them through fanfictions like “Intellectual Property” and the “Rainbow Factory.” By drawing on anxieties over alienation, persecution, and judgement to fuel stories of alternative creation and identity formation, the Brony fandom channeled their experiences into the publication of truly transgressive writing. Most notably in the two fanfictions above, Bronies questioned the oppressive societal norms built into their daily lives under capitalism, expectations of gender expression, and “acceptable” ways to function in the digital age. But...what have these challenges to our society’s systems and unspoken rules taught us? Why does studying Brony fanfiction *matter*? I’m willing to argue that these published works demand that we take a closer look at the material that we are so often told to glance away from. Brony fanfiction subverts expectations and generalizations about its community by forcing its readers to consider the roles that they occupy within society, and pushing them to digest the fact that accepting transgressive ways of thinking and being isn’t always a bad thing. Although one doesn’t have to “join the herd,” we, at the very least, owe them the right to *be* heard.

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