

“STILL NOT AS GAY AS TWILIGHT”: Postmodern Affect, Nostalgia, and Queer *Twilight* Renaissance during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Stephenie Meyer's (2005) *Twilight* is a paranormal, young adult series chronicling the love story between 17-year-old high schooler, Bella Swan, and 104-year-old vampire, Edward Cullen. Despite *Twilight's* blatant heterosexual canon, the franchise was met with widespread homophobic backlash and was seen as girly, uncool and, hence, 'gay'. Over ten years have passed since its release, yet thousands of former and new fans are unashamedly reclaiming the saga online. Widely known as "The *Twilight* Renaissance", this unapologetic comeback (with a particular surge in popularity during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic) is particularly prominent in online queer communities. Intertwining Raymond Williams' (1977) structure of feelings and Frederic Jameson's (1991) cognitive mapping, this article argues that this collective queer affect is inseparable from the neoliberal and advanced capitalist pandemic context in which it inhabits. The *Twilight* Renaissance is conceptualized as an exemplar of Butt and Millner-Larsen's (2018) queer commons, wherein queer Twihards construct a space or, in this case, fandom, in attempts to revive and repair a historically homophobic narrative. This queer comeback directly responds to the stress and uncertainties that accompany the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS

Affect, queer, *Twilight*, pandemic, postmodernism

Stephenie Meyer's (2005) *Twilight* is a young adult gothic romance series chronicling the love story between a cis-gendered, heterosexual adolescent female, Bella Swan, and a cis-gendered, heterosexual vampire, Edward Cullen. The saga garnered an immense fanbase, particularly because the readership was primarily teenage girls. As the *Twilight* novels and respective film adaptations were released from 2005 to 2012, however, the public reception of the saga faced a homophobic backlash. Although blatant heterosexuality is canon in *Twilight*, meaning that heterosexual relations are the official narrative in the story, the saga generated a colossal moral panic and homophobic rhetoric. Die-hard fans of *Twilight*—or, Twihards—were met with an extreme degree of unpopularity that was inherently characterized by homophobic undertones (Bernard 2017; McFarland 2013a). This anti-*Twilight* backlash transpired across social discourse, especially online meme culture. According to “Know Your Meme,” a website that catalogues viral internet memes, one of the most prominent anti-*Twilight* memes was the “Still Not as Gay as *Twilight*” meme (2011). This popularized understanding of gayness echoed homophobic connotations of “gay” being cringey, shameful and, hence, uncool (McFarland 2013a). *Twilight* was publicly branded as gay and Twihards were shamed by association.

You cannot, however, kill the undead. Against the backdrop of this mass homophobic shaming in the early 2000s, there has been a resurgence of the *Twilight* fandom across social media spaces, including Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook. Former and new fans have belatedly and unapologetically reclaimed the saga over a decade later on countless online platforms. It is widely known as the *Twilight* Renaissance (Dishmon 2018; Peterson 2019; Silva 2019). Interestingly, despite years of homophobic vilification, the *Twilight* Renaissance has been particularly prominent in online queer communities. Not only do a significant portion of these *Twilight* Renaissance fans identify as a part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and others (LGBTQ+) community, but many of the original characters in the series have been coded as queer by mass *Twilight* Renaissance members (Dishmon 2018; Silva 2019). Despite Meyer's (2005) aggressive heteronormativity, there has been a resurgent interest in ‘gayifying’ *Twilight* as a core pillar of the online *Twilight* Renaissance phenomenon. This queer comeback largely emerged in 2018 and is still prominent over a decade later in the early 2020s—with a remarkable surge at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

How, then, did *Twilight* become the queer comfort food of the COVID-19 pandemic? This paper explores the manifestations of queer collective affect during the pandemic through the *Twilight* Renaissance. This paper traces queer affective

representations by situating the *Twilight* Renaissance in the COVID-19 pandemic state. Intertwining Raymond Williams' (1977) "structure of feelings" and Frederic Jameson's (1991) "cognitive mapping," I argue that this collective queer affect is inseparable from the advanced capitalist pandemic context that it inhabits. I then conceptualize the *Twilight* Renaissance as an exemplar of Butt and Millner-Larsen's (2018) "queer commons," wherein queer Twihards construct a space or in this case, fandom, in an attempt to revive and repair a historically homophobic narrative. Finally, I explore the ways in which this queer comeback is uniquely representative of a queer coping mechanism that directly responds to the stress and uncertainties that accompany the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Girls who Love Boys that Sparkle

From 2005 to 2008, Stephenie Meyer released the best-selling *Twilight* saga. Consisting of four novels—*Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, and *Breaking Dawn*—the saga follows Bella Swan, an awkward and plain high schooler living in the gloomy town of Forks. Bella falls in love with and eventually marries Edward Cullen, an old school chivalrous vampire who is part of the Cullen vampire clan. Following the vast success of the novels, this gothic romance series was released in five film installments from 2008 to 2012, starring Bella (played by Kristen Stewart) and Edward (played by Robert Pattinson).

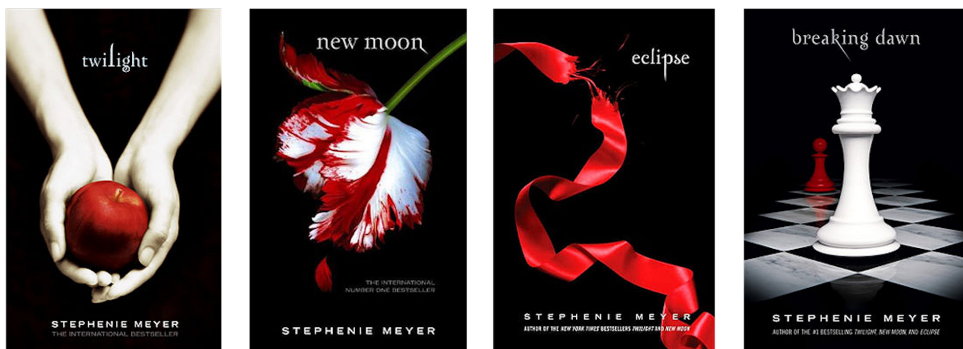


Figure 1. *Twilight* novels (Pinterest, n.d.)

Much has been written about the saga's implied metanarratives, such as Christian ideals, heteronormativity, chastity, eternal matrimony, patriarchal safety, nuclear family values, and so forth. Blatant mentions of conservative Christianity are peppered throughout the series, including the forbidden fruit imagery on the *Twilight* book cover, as well as the metaphorical representation of the impossible lovers as a lion and a lamb: "And so the lion fell in love with the lamb" (Meyer



Figure 2. Bella and Edward in the first *Twilight* film (Hardwick 2008)

2005, 274). Meyer’s focus on religious purity and virtue can be traced throughout the series and is most evident in Edward’s refusal to sleep with Bella prior to marriage, despite temptation. Flegg (2020) highlights that “Meyer’s use of Christian language (the language of white, Anglo-Saxon capitalism) reflects the way Edward and Bella view each other as holy” (19). The vampires in Meyer’s *Twilight* universe embody Christ-like qualities, such as Edward’s sparkling skin when exposed to the sun. These religious metanarratives largely draw from Meyer’s Mormon faith, which transform into values that the saga puts forth (NíFhlainn 2019; Wisker 2013). Against this backdrop of the saga’s heteronormative, Christian metanarratives, queer readers might find themselves in a space that does not represent or resonate with their experiences.

Edward’s biblical pose (Weitz, 2009)



Faggpires, Wimps, and Vampires, Oh My! The *Twilight* Moral Panic

The ‘feminization’ of vampirism and, in particular, Meyer’s portrayal of vampires as sparkly, non-violent vegetarians who politely feed on animal blood rather than human blood sparked the *Twilight* hatred flame (Bernard 2017; Sarah Z 2021; Thomas, 2017). Edward Cullen was ridiculed for ‘feminizing’ conventional characterizations of vampirism such as the violent, monstrous traits that vampires have historically upheld. Edward Cullen and, by association Robert Pattinson, disrupted and feminized the traditional vampire figure and was hence publicly seen as wimpy and gay. Edward Cullen, with his romantic gestures, sensitive charm and coiffed hair, was branded as a *faggpire*—a f*ggot and a vampire (Urban Dictionary 2010; Slang Define, n.d.). This homophobic anti-*Twilight* hatred flooded internet culture and was predominantly disseminated through memes. Despite Meyer’s strict heterosexual canon and Robert Pattinson’s cis-gender heterosexual identity, these memes proffered the implication that Edward Cullen and Robert Pattinson were closeted queer individuals. For instance, one meme depicts Edward Cullen perched in a tree and reads: “Edward Cullen is pale because there's no light in the closet” (Tanpuk 2010). One of the most memorable anti-*Twilight* memes is the “Still Not as Gay as *Twilight*” (2011) meme series, which dismissed homoerotic imagery and same-sex activity as incapable of ever being as gay as *Twilight*.



Figure 4. Collection of "Still not as Gay as Twilight" memes (2011)

The fact that the majority of *Twilight* fans were overwhelmingly adolescent women (Bode 2010) cannot be ignored. The invalidation and shaming of things that teenage girls enjoy is not a unique social phenomenon. As McFarland (2013a) notes, the aforesaid meme was “likely an expression of a largely male, adolescent population attempting to distance themselves from a text principally associated with femininity [and] has...more to do with a socialized contempt for all things feminine in nature” (24–25). One fan who read the books as a preteen girl recounts how her unapologetic love for the series rapidly faded into a secretive adoration due to her fear of public shaming: “Then 2010 hit and it was suddenly uncool to like *Twilight*. I think the series deserves to be critiqued but without making female fans feel guilty for enjoying it, which seems to have happened frequently when the movies came out” (Andrea as cited in Singer 2020, para. 5). Another fan similarly recounts her experience with the anti-*Twilight* backlash:

I was one of those girls who, when *Twilight* and its movies were all the rage, was in the target demographic for those things. I read the books, saw the movies with my friends, and yet to daringly say that I liked *Twilight* was something I would have never done. I was terrified of feeling judged, when as an adolescent girl I was already worried about 24/7, so to add in being publicly open about liking something that I knew would lead to hate and criticism, I kept my mouth shut. I’ve grown up now, and I know better than to care what people think of me, but when you’re a 12-year-old girl it’s harder to know that. (Martinez 2020, para. 5)

While the dismissal of fandoms is certainly not a new phenomenon, it is worth highlighting the gendered nature of this dismissal. Unlike their male counterparts, young female fans are habitually pathologized for their displays of hysteric adoration towards particular fandoms (Anderson 2012; Šesek & Pušnik 2014). According to Dare-Edwards (2018), “[n]ot only are fangirls considered to be controlled by their emotions, but their emotions are consistently devalued as trivial” (118).

Due to Edward Cullen’s perfect and chivalrous nature along with his exclusively fixated attention towards Bella, Flegg (2020) pinpoints that the *Twilight* saga represents “a fantasy of the women’s intimate public” (19) because it taps into young women’s desire. Recounting her teenage love for *Twilight*, Singer (2020) describes her specific attachment to this fantasy-formation: “Was it simply that the books captured my greatest sexual fantasy at the time, which was lying fully dressed next to a man—also fully dressed—and receiving compliments? (This fantasy holds up.)” (para. 7). In a similar fashion, another former fan asks, “What young woman doesn’t want some hot, eternally young man to be devoted to her

like no one else?” (Kristina as cited in Singer, 2020, para. 20). The dismissal of female fandoms, then, is implicitly married to a widespread discomfort with female expression of desire. With a refreshing twist, however, *Twilight* refuses to be staked despite years of homophobic anti-*Twilight* shaming during the early 2000s.

Fandom Resuscitation: The *Twilight* Renaissance is Here and Queer

Over ten years have passed since the release of *Twilight* and yet thousands of new *Twilight* memes, blogs and posts amass on social media websites. Former and new fans are unashamedly reclaiming the *Twilight* saga online. This revival began trending on various social media websites in 2018 and has continued through the early 2020s, with a particular surge in popularity during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Widely known as the *Twilight* Renaissance, fans are resurfacing to unapologetically celebrate their love for the saga in ways that they may have previously been shamed or unable to (Dishmon 2018; Krishna 2018; Peterson 2019; Radulovic 2018). A focal pillar of this comeback is queer. Many queer fans within the *Twilight* Renaissance are ‘gayifying’ *Twilight*. In the early 2020s, *Twilight* is gay—but this time, in a good way.

One factor that may have kindled the onset of the *Twilight* Renaissance is when Kristen Stewart, the actress who played Bella in the *Twilight* film adaptations, publicly came out as bisexual in 2017 (Michelson 2017). The *Twilight* Renaissance could also be sustained by former fans resisting years of anti-*Twilight* shame with the realization that the mass anti-*Twilight* rhetoric was merely misplaced misogyny that essentially vilified the interests and desires of young women (Donaldson 2018; Peterson 2019). Another variable that might explain the fandom’s heightened activity during the pandemic is Stephenie Meyer’s release of a fifth installment to the novels. As the pandemic was burgeoning, Meyer released *Midnight Sun* (2020) in August 2020, which narrates the entirety of the original *Twilight* novel—but this time, from Edward’s point of view.

Many others argue that fans have returned to *Twilight* because of the unintentional humour, campy aesthetics and theatricality (Freedman 2020; McFarland 2013b). What was formerly vilified and shamed is now being embraced for its humorous elements. In other words, it’s so bad, it’s good. Despite the potential appeal of cringe culture, this reasoning does not definitively explain the distinct queer component that is inherent to the *Twilight* Renaissance.

What was once shamed for being too soft and gay is now being celebrated by countless queer Twilight fans. Largely on social media websites such as Tumblr, many queer Twihards have established their reclaimed presence through countless memes, posts, and blogs. Many of these posts ‘queerify’ Twilight by coding heterosexual characters as queer and by ‘shipping’ them—that is, romantically pairing—in queer ways with other characters.

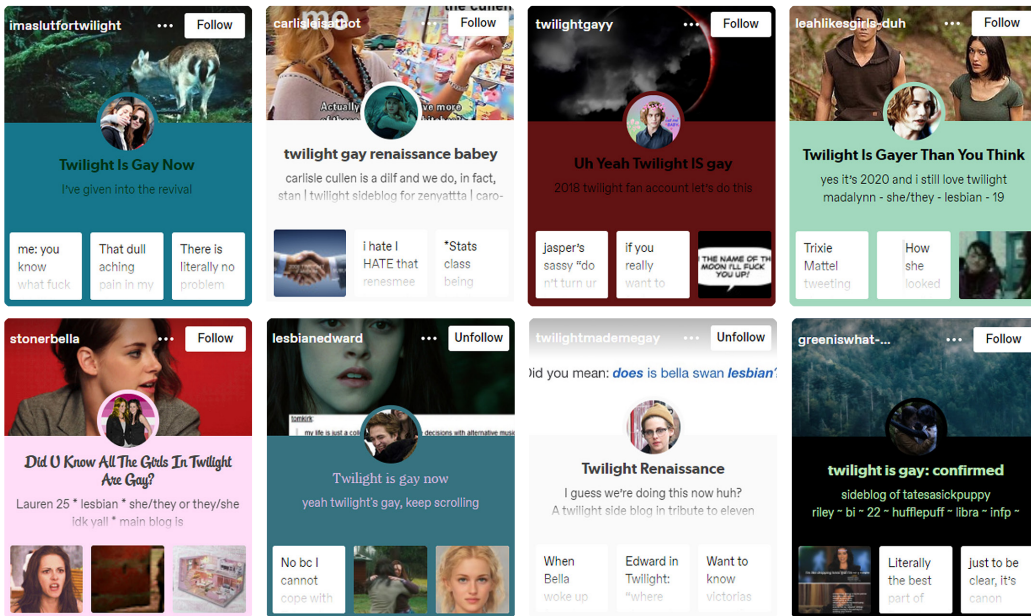


Figure 6. An assortment of queer *Twilight* renaissance blogs on Tumblr (carlisathot; greeniswhatgoodletsgo; imaslutfortwilight; leahlikesgirls-duh; lesbianedward; stonerbella; twilightgay; twilightmademegay)

As many have noted, the vampire figure has traditionally been associated with queerness, particularly due to its associations with deviant sexualities, forbidden or unnatural desire, existing on the fringes of society, ‘passing’ as a human, and so forth (Auerbach 1995; Dyer 2002; Vincent 2015). *Twilight* has similarly been linked to queerness. For instance, McFarland (2013a, 2013b, 2016) highlights the ways in which *Twilight* vampires—particularly Edward Cullen—disrupt heteronormative gender roles by rejecting conventional understandings of vampiric masculinity. By injecting chivalry, safety, and softness into Edward Cullen’s character, Meyer unintentionally carves space for the vampiric queer in *Twilight*.

As Silva (2019) masterfully summarizes:

Historically, vampires have been meant to represent people within the queer community as a way to demonize and discourage any sort of “deviant” sexual activity, so it’s no wonder a large part of the members within the Twilight Renaissance identify as part of the LGBTQ community. Similar to the fact that many people were shamed for liking Twilight, many people at the same time felt ashamed of their sexuality and were forced into keeping it repressed. In this new era, however, people are able to express their love for Twilight AND their sexuality freely and without guilt. (para. 2)

Queer readings of heterosexual literature are not a recent phenomenon. In her book *NASA/Trek*, Constance Penley (1997) emphasizes the longer tradition of queer fanfiction in popular culture fandoms and the ways in which fandoms persistently invent new ways of injecting queerness into their consumption of non-queer literature and film. Queer *Twilight* fanfiction is similarly not a recent phenomenon that suddenly arose as a result of the *Twilight* Renaissance. Reading, writing, and engaging with *Twilight* slash fiction was an incredibly commonplace practice in the early 2000s. Slash fiction, which refers to a subgenre of fanfiction involving the romantic or sexual relationship of same-sex characters, has been described as a safe, affirming, and low-risk space that has particular utility for young queer individuals who wish to 'try on' various identities, sexualities, and scenarios through their favourite characters (Floegel 2020). At the time, queer pairings on websites such as www.fanfiction.net and www.twilighted.net were extremely prevalent in online fanfiction communities. By creating virtual spaces for themselves in *Twilight* fanfiction, queer fans were able to resist heteronormative metanarratives through their construction and consumption of queer *Twilight* fanfiction (McFarland 2013a). As Dreisinger (2019) notes, “[t]hrough their slash pairings, fans are free to explore the emotional and sexual possibilities of their favourite characters, constructing and developing their identity alongside their queerships” (100). Nevertheless, against the backdrop of homophobic anti-*Twilight* shaming during the early 2000s, openly engaging in these queer readings of *Twilight* outside of the fanbase was quite embarrassing. Juxtaposing queer readings within the fandom during the early 2000s versus the *Twilight* Renaissance unveils vastly differing experiences. Queer readings of *Twilight* in the early 2000s were certainly nothing to brag about, whereas queer readings of *Twilight* during the ongoing Renaissance is unapologetic and celebrated. In both instances, “both fans and ‘haters’ alike, straight and non-straight, participate in queer readings of the *Twilight* text” (McFarland 2013b, 70).

Looking Forward, Looking Back: The *Twilight* Renaissance as Postmodern Affect

Much has been written on postmodern vampirism as an echo of the socio-political and material context that it is situated in. In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson (1991) describes postmodernism as a movement that takes place after the 1970s and is heavily driven by late capitalist mass consumption. Within the circumstance of our current late capitalist context, Meyer’s conception of vampires can be classified as a postmodern pastiche of traditional vampirism. Jameson (1988) defines *pastiche* as something that imitates (but differs from) traditional representation for the sole purpose of deflated mimicry devoid of socio-historical or political commentary—comparable to a ‘blank’ or ‘empty’ parody lacking any further meaning. In contrast to conventional vampires that were seen as a monstrous and dangerous Other, Meyer shifts from typical portrayals of demonic and threatening vampirism and opts for a tamer and more modern portrayal of vampires (Hughes 2011; Karanović 2012; Sanna 2013). On a superficial level, the *Twilight* vampires are non-threatening vegetarians, they blend into humanity as friendly beings, they drive cars, they attend high school, and they contribute to society. In essence, Meyer ‘re-mixes’ (Jameson, 1988) traditional vampirism with popular culture, forming an entirely new pastiche that may seem more appealing and more relatable to contemporary mass culture.

As a subversion of traditional vampirism, Meyer’s vampires embody compelling qualities reflective of a neoliberal ideology largely associated with free-market capitalism and self-interested economic growth. Kathryn Kane (2010) emphasizes that the Cullen vampires are the embodiment of the American late-stage capitalist dream. Rather than transgressing boundaries, the Cullen vampire clan represents the ideal neoliberal collective because they assimilate into wider society, contribute to the gears of capitalism, and are materially successful. The Cullen clan is compliant and proper. It does not disrupt the very foundation upon which conventional normality is fabricated. As such, *Twilight* is well-aligned with capitalist prescriptions of consumption and personal gain. Flegg (2020) pinpoints *Twilight* as the “great late-capitalism vampire novel” (17)—and not without reason. In *Twilight*, the heroine pursues Edward until she becomes a vampire herself, hereby mirroring capitalist portrayals of romance as a consumptive process for the purpose of profitable gain. To add, Bella’s process of consumption is highly individualized. Meyer puts forth an implied message to readers: Bella must accept

the mundanity and ordinariness of her human world or independently alleviate her anxieties by risking her life in pursuit of being a vampire like the Cullen family (Thury 2021). Bella's journey of attaining vampiric transformation draws from a particular set of responsabilizing neoliberal ideals. In fact, Celia Jameson and Julia Dane (2014) identify the *Twilight* series as representative of the "contemporary pressure in neoliberal societies to work toward self-transformation for the purpose of self-actualization" (247).

This analysis becomes clearer when we contrast the social positionality between Bella and the Cullen vampires. Bella is not particularly wealthy, nor is she conventionally attractive. While Bella presents as quite shy and mundane, the Cullen vampires personify wealth, beauty, and privilege. As modern vampires, they are highly educated, white, and affluent. They inhabit a large and stylish home and are surrounded by vast material comfort. They own multiple luxury cars, they have countless university degrees due to their immortality, and they have unlimited heaps of money. Bella not only wants to be *with them* as Edward Cullen's romantic interest, but she also wants to be *like them* as a vampire herself. One can certainly begin to draw links between her desires to become a vampire and class-based desires for material comfort. As the neoliberal subject, Bella represents collective anxieties and precarities that are, through her persistent self-actualization, eventually transformed into privilege. Finally becoming a vampire and a part of the Cullen family, Bella unlocks her passage toward capitalist achievement, material comfort, and eternal perfection. At the end of the *Twilight* series, she finally secures successful absorption within the dominant class positionality by becoming a vampire.

Bella's eventual vampirism can be interpreted as a site of salvation from advanced capitalist undoing. As Sorcha Ní Fhlainn (2019) writes, Bella becoming a vampire suggests an "escape from the mundane, away from increased impossibilities placed on the young who dream to experience the opportunities to which only the older generation have access" (228). It is no accident that Erika James' erotic romance novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), which was initially developed as a *Twilight* erotic fanfiction series, characterizes Edward as a billionaire CEO and turns Bella into an ordinary university student merely trying to get by. The parallels of desiring material comfort, as personified by the heroine's central love interest, are discernible in both *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* and speaks to the larger yearning for security within late-capitalism. I maintain that this affective desire to reap the security that the Cullen clan possesses speaks to Lauren Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism," wherein neoliberal subjects develop an attachment or hope towards something largely unattainable, ultimately rendering their desire as problematic. According to Berlant (2011), these attachments to "a cluster of

promises” (23) include the false fantasies of success, happiness, and profit that are entrenched in the scarcity-driven crisis of late capitalist sensibility. In this sense, subjects attach significance to a particular “object of desire” (23) under the false assumption that the object will lead to fulfillment. This affective relationship is eminently present in Bella’s attachment to vampirism and, by extension, the neoliberal benefits that accompany vampirism including material comfort, vast wealth, endless consumption without risk, physical advantage and beauty, and so forth. In a cruelly optimistic way and much to Bella’s dissatisfaction, Edward denies Bella access to what she believes will be the embodiment of her happiness: vampirism. It is not until the end of the saga when Bella nearly dies that Edward finally transforms Bella into a vampire, giving her access to her vampiric object of desire (Meyer 2008). The *Twilight* saga is hence dually prescriptive of irresistible and largely impossible capitalist gains (Flegg 2020).

As a representation of contemporary times, what does the emergence of the *Twilight* Renaissance tell us about the fandom’s shared affect? Williams (1977) coined the notion “structure of feelings” to depict the ways in which affective elements—which often transpire across conventions of art, literary texts, and film—are directly informed by the particular set of societal conditions within that specific time and place. In other words, Williams’ (1977) structure of feeling concept marries the affective landscape of our lived conditions with art, literature, and popular culture. For Williams (1977), the shifting moods and tones available through art and literature can pinpoint the broader, shared feelings that encapsulate the socio-historical context that they inhabit: “forms and conventions in art and literature [can be seen] as inalienable elements of a social material process” (133). For Williams (1977), transitional affective states within society can be understood through three registers in structures of feelings: *dominant* which are largely hegemonic and mainstream, *residual* which predate and somewhat influence dominant cultures, and *emergent* which constitute new cultural practices that materialize in society. Williams (1977) was most interested in how structure of feelings could map out emergent cultures. In extrapolating Williams’ (1977) conception, the *Twilight* Renaissance can be read as a symptom of an emergent counterculture that disrupts the previously-dominant misogynistic and homophobic structure of feeling, of which the anti-*Twilight* hatred of the early 2000s is a symptom. As an emergent disruption, this digital *Twilight* revival resists that hegemonic narrative by queerifying a residual artifact: the *Twilight* saga. This

emergent community, then, represents collective feelings of discontentment with and resistance of the dominant shaming that initially defined the *Twilight* hatred. I argue that this emerging queer resistance mirrors the collective desire to persevere against *Twilight's* heteronormativity. For queer fans, queerifying the *Twilight* universe is arguably much more satisfying than submitting to the implied traditionalist and heteronormative values manifest in the dominant structure of feeling that can be read off the saga's surface.

Jameson's (1991) concept of *cognitive mapping* similarly functions as a way for postmodern subjects to represent their experiences within late capitalism. For Jameson (1991), the heart of cognitive mapping is "nothing but a code word for 'class consciousness'" (418). As Koc (2017) argues, "cognitive mapping can also be understood as the mapping of an affective space produced by late capitalist culture" (57). Jonathan Flatley (2009) expands Jameson's cognitive mapping beyond cognition to account for the emotional experiences one may have with modernity. Flatley (2009) conceptualizes these experiences as "affective mapping" and locates affect as a site of shared political experiences within certain spatial environments.

If, as Deleuze and Guattari (1994) state, "art is the language of sensations" (176), then we must account for the socio-political and economic contexts that these sensations inhabit. Here, I employ an expansive definition of art to contain fandoms, including the *Twilight* Renaissance. In this way, mapping the *Twilight* Renaissance simultaneously illuminates collective anxieties towards the precarious nature of our current late capitalist state, as well as a shared need to grapple with ongoing neoliberal despair that is heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. In a cruelly optimistic way, the *Twilight* Renaissance unearths a shared desire for escapism from the mundanity of capitalist life. The attainment of social and material wealth, as defined by transforming into a vampire, becomes rather significant when we account for the precarity of today's generation which is chiefly defined by financial instability, increasingly exploitative and uncertain employment, and widening gaps between the wealthy and the unwealthy (Neilson 2015; Twenge 2017).

Put simply, art—and I argue, fandoms—exists within the tensions between affect and socio-political context. The *Twilight* Renaissance both affectively claps back at capitalist precarity while highlighting the collective need to cope with the salient consequences of late-stage capitalism. Finally, in its conception, the *Twilight* Renaissance rewrites formerly alienating narratives that vilified the fandom in order to create a sense of unashamed queer belonging.

Longing for Belonging: The *Twilight* Renaissance as Queer Commons

Since a significant portion of *Twilight* Renaissance fans identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community, it is no surprise that queerness is a central pillar of the *Twilight* Renaissance. As lesbian YouTuber STRANGE ÆONS notes, “if you’ve been having fun with the *Twilight* Renaissance lately, you’re probably a gay twenty-something” (2021, 30:40 minutes). Upon closer examination of queer *Twilight* Renaissance content, particularly blogs on Tumblr, one will notice that there is a theme of queer ownership that goes beyond coding characters as queer or ‘shipping’ them in queer ways with other characters (i.e., romantically pairing them). There is an apparent queer occupancy of the saga within the *Twilight* Renaissance wherein queer fans brand *Twilight* as ‘a gays only event’, ‘gay property’, and ‘for the gays now’.

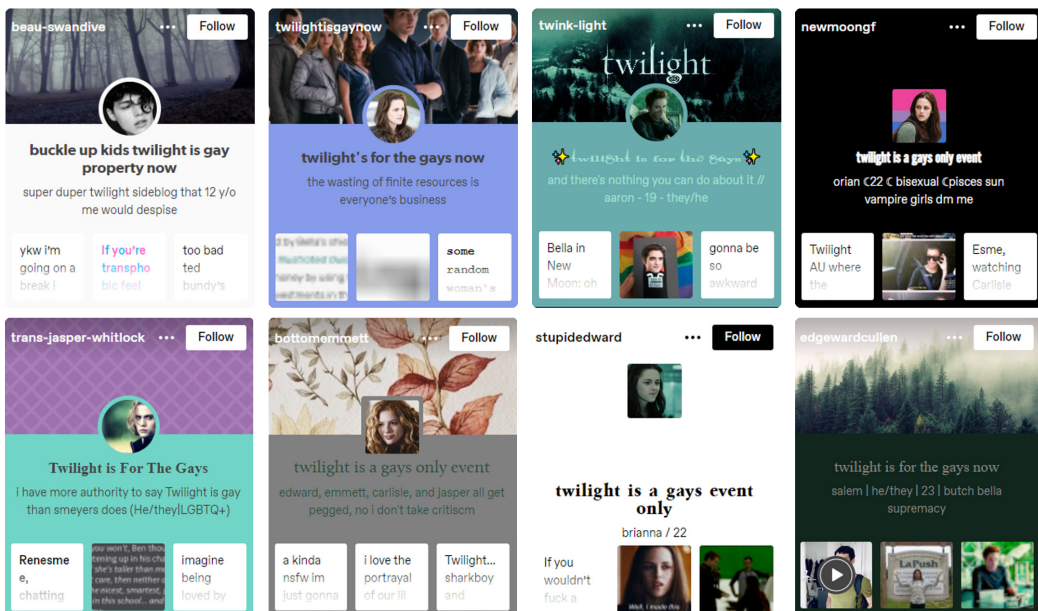


Figure 7. A display of queer ownership is seen among various *Twilight* renaissance blogs on Tumblr (beau-swandive; bottomemmett; edgewardcullen; newmoongf; stupidedward; trans-jasper-whitlock; twilightisgaynow; twink-light)

According to Millner-Larsen and Butt (2018), “queer commons” can be defined as queer efforts to form queer spaces that protect and sustain queer ways of existing which may otherwise face heteronormative marginalization by mainstream society. The authors pinpoint these practices of ‘queer commoning’ as “ameliorative responses not only to the failures of mainstream LGBT politics but also to twenty-first-century austerity and gentrification” (401). The precarities and anxieties of late-stage capitalism provoke reactionary responses of queer commoning because they offer a sense of belonging that queer individuals may otherwise be denied. However, queer commoning is not only about “envisioning new models of public, collective, or common ownership. It is also, importantly, about transforming the modes of social reproduction on which such mechanisms depend” (Millner-Larsen & Butt 2018, 409). The queer commons are not merely contemporary spaces for queer existence and queer regeneration, but they are also forward-looking and eager to construct more sustainable, caring and dependable queer futures.

Bearing this in mind, I argue that the rise of the *Twilight* Renaissance is a form of queer commoning. Recalling Williams’ (1977) notion of dominant structures of feeling, queer fans of the *Twilight* Renaissance are carving their own space within the fandom as a form of counterpublic—or, as Williams (1977) would call it, a symptom of an emergent culture—against the normative anti-*Twilight* hatred of the early 2000s.

How, then, can we understand collective affect within this queer commoning of the *Twilight* Renaissance? Eric Stanley (2018) marries queer commons-forming initiatives and collective public feelings to inform his concept of “affective commons.” Stanley’s (2018) conceptualization of affective commons draws from Marx’s notion of communes or common spaces, which are primarily identified as a process of coming together. Jean-Luc Nancy (2010) expands on this distinction of communes: “the affective commons, as commune, is the coming together of singularities and exceptions, toward a queer future, and against what disciplines us to love our oppressors while awaiting a freedom that never comes” (Stanley 2018, 503). Here, Stanley (2018) is interested in how collective affect informs queer spaces and, conversely, how collective affect reflects queer collective life and queer structures of feelings.

The *Twilight* Renaissance also speaks to the collective desire to create a sense of belonging. In a 2016 interview, Fredric Jameson stated that postmodern art—and I would argue fandoms—is subject to a specific brand of nostalgia that does not simply romanticize the past, but yearns for a past that is “constructed in the image

we require” (Cevasco 2016). Perhaps this notion of nostalgia—quasi-romanticized and vital—speaks to how members of the *Twilight* Renaissance have constructed a community based on their desire for queer belonging within the saga.

Figure 8. (twilightbutwithlesbians 2020)



The *Twilight* Renaissance as queer affective commons can signify the collective need for reclamation and reparation against the backdrop of exclusion and anti-*Twilight* shaming. Eve Sedgwick (2003) maintains that practicing reparative reading allows the reader to extract “sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (150–151). In spite of Meyer’s intentional heteronormative writing, reading

queerness into literary content such as *Twilight* can not only construct a space where queer fans can unapologetically be queer, but also act as a reparative survival tactic. This is especially relevant for queer *Twi*hards that may not have had access to representative content that was explicitly queer in the early 2000s. As per Sedgwick’s (2003) tradition of reparative reading, the *Twilight* Renaissance offers a more hopeful, fun, and representative interpretation of *Twilight*. Former queer fans that were previously shamed are now engaging in a reparative reading of the series through their queerification of the *Twilight* Renaissance. As Claire Francis (2019) puts it:

Anyone between the ages of 18 and 35 is so hyperaware of all things *Twilight* that it’s a universal inside joke, and that level of familiarity with a text lets us reinvent it, reimagine it, reinvigorate it, on a monumental scale. The *Twilight* Renaissance, as the *Twilight* meme frenzy on the Internet has been named, has us reinterpreting the text we’ve already read, making Edward as virgin-y or snail-obsessed, and Bella as bookish or as butch as we want, reveling in *Twilight*’s ludicrousness rather than ridiculing it. We’re rewriting “problematic” relationships; we’re making Bella in love with Rosalie or Alice and making Jacob and Edward bros rather than antagonists. We’re representing ourselves, making Leah a lesbian or treating Bella’s trauma seriously. (para. 17)

It is readily apparent that the fandom has the productive potential to create a more hopeful and inclusive reading for queer fans to finally consume *Twilight* without shame.

The *Twilight* Renaissance as the Queer Comfort Food of the COVID-19 pandemic

For many, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a threat not just to physical and mental health, but also to livelihoods and financial stability. The fact that the *Twilight* Renaissance surged during COVID-19 reveals a collective need to cope with these pandemic-triggered anxieties and uncertainties. Some fans returned to the original *Twilight* series as a balm during a time of global health emergency. Tumblr user a-holy-trinity (2020) states, “And yes I’m currently using *Twilight* to cope with a pandemic.” Many fans acknowledge using the *Twilight* Renaissance as a coping mechanism, especially with Stephenie Meyer’s release of the next installment of the series, *Midnight Sun*, in August 2020. Another user, lina.230125 (2020), notes, “I also jumped head first back into the *Twilight* Renaissance by reading *Midnight Sun*” in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 9. (Orb1ting-1 2020)

For YouTuber Ashley Faith (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic generated a need for escape to a time when things were simpler. For her, engaging in *Twilight* served that exact purpose. Upon the release of *Midnight Sun* in 2020, thousands of fans stood in line at their local bookstores to purchase a copy for themselves—mask on and sanitizer ready. Had this novel been released over a decade ago during the *Twilight* moral panic, standing in line to purchase a book from the *Twilight* saga would have been embarrassing. However, for many fans, purchasing *Midnight Sun* and escaping into its 600+ pages during the pandemic was shamelessly comforting. One fan highlights the feelings of nostalgia that the new release has generated, noting that “*Midnight Sun* is my most anticipated book of the year—I’m looking forward to a very nostalgic trip back to

Forks” (Milka as cited in Singer, 2020, para. 31). Another fan depicts the importance of the saga during the COVID-19 pandemic: “[*Twilight*] is a secure place to be, even for only a few hours. Maybe that’s why reading *Midnight Sun* has become more and more appealing. In a world where so much is uncertain, it

feels safe to fall back into the well-known universe of vampires and werewolves” (Marisa as cited in Singer, 2020, para. 37). An anonymous user on www.reddit.com expresses the comforting role that *Twilight* is playing in their life during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Now I'm 26 and have all the time in the world in this quarantine, so I watched the movies again and fell in love with it again. I finished *Breaking Dawn Pt. 2* today and cried haha. I honestly don't care if it's trendy to hate it. I know people pick it apart and say it's not written well, and the movies are cheesy, and they nit-pick every little thing, but eh... it's nostalgic to me. It kind of took me to a "happy place" with all the sadness going on in the world and in my personal life. (Anonymous user, 2020, para. 2–3)

Another fan responds, “Same. It's getting me through COVID” (Anonymous user, 2020, para. 11). Familiarity, safety, nostalgia. These are all sought-after feelings amidst endless waves of pandemic uncertainty.

Nostalgia is an important element of postmodernism, particularly the affective thirst for escapism and a general longing for the past (Denzin 1991; Hutcheon 2003). Recalling Jameson (1988), his concept of pastiche is an example of this postmodern nostalgia because it serves to reinvent or imitate a traditional representation, which then “seeks to reawaken a sense of the past associated with those objects” (19). Extrapolating this analysis, the *Twilight* Renaissance serves as a form of pastiche and, hence, an object of nostalgia as well. Various authors have noted the therapeutic efficacy of nostalgia as a primary tool for coping during isolation, fearful as well as stressful, threatening, and uncertain times (Fiorito & Routledge 2020; Gammon & Ramshaw 2020; Sedikides & Wildschut 2018). Yeung (2020) found that stressors and anxieties related to COVID-19 did, in fact, trigger collective nostalgia. Many people turned to nostalgic outlets as a way to cope with the pandemic, whether it was by revisiting familiar movies, returning to a well-loved song or album, re-reading old novels, or otherwise (Johnson 2020; MRC Data 2020; Yohannes 2020). During times of great stress, nostalgia offers routine and predictability.

While trauma and overwhelming stress can blur one's sense of futurity, nostalgia can act as a transitional object or, rather, an emotional pacifier that reminds us of a previous time that we successfully lived through. It helps us recall a clear ‘before and after’ in order to sustain us as we face feelings of pandemic uncertainty. As Susan Whitbourne (2012) points out, “[e]motionally connecting with your

younger self helps you maintain a sense of continuity over time” (para. 6). For many members of the *Twilight* Renaissance, engaging in the fandom may serve as a nostalgic continuity tool that facilitates coping through pandemic-triggered stress and anxiety. As Evan Mantler (2021) puts it, “[i]n 2020, you’ll discover that leaning into your interests is not only a coping mechanism, but a long-term happiness strategy. You’re going to be really excited about the *Twilight* Renaissance and laugh at so many memes” (para. 23).

Coping with COVID-19 through the *Twilight* Renaissance is also a form of care—whether that be self care, emotional care, mental health care, or otherwise. As one *Twilight* Renaissance member puts it, “reclaiming *Twilight* is mental health care” (reclaimingt看light, n.d.). Not only is coping through the *Twilight* Renaissance a form of care, but it is also collective care. Collectivity and community undoubtedly become critical during times of social limitation such as the COVID-19 pandemic’s social distancing and isolation protocols. Where the pandemic’s social distancing restrictions enforced a sense of asociality upon our collective experiences, the *Twilight* Renaissance helped fill that social gap. All one requires is a steady internet connection.

You are now Leaving the *Twilight* Renaissance

My interest in this essay stems from a desire to better understand the affective nature of the *Twilight* Renaissance at this specific point in time, with a particular focus on reparative readings and queer coping during the COVID-19 pandemic. The affective theorization of the *Twilight* Renaissance is worthy of several books, so by no means is this conceptualization of the fandom satiating or exhaustive.

I close this essay with some final ruminative thoughts. Earlier, I discussed the ways in which both fans and haters alike were engaging in queer readings of *Twilight*—whether that be as a homophobic public backlash against the series in the early 2000s or as the fandom’s queerification of the saga through the *Twilight* Renaissance of the early 2020s. While the former queer reading expresses repressive and shaming qualities, the latter queer reading acts as a reparative coping strategy. Further research may wish to explore the interplay between nostalgic coping and cruel optimism. Because *Twilight* echoes tenets of late capitalist advancement, consumption, and material comfort, romanticizing these promises of capitalist comfort through the process of nostalgic coping—particularly during an uncertain and precarious pandemic context—is not at all unproblematic.

Ultimately, as Nina Auerbach (1995) poignantly puts it, “every generation creates and embraces its own [vampire]” (vii). Unveiling the socio-historical significance of each generation’s vampire and locating it as reflective of a particular collective affect, then, becomes an interesting task. Throughout this essay, I have argued that the *Twilight* Renaissance is animated by a collective effort towards a queer reparative reading of the series. *Twilight* was and still is gay.

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