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Editorial

What's in a word?

TWC Editor

[0.1] Abstract—Editorial for TWC No. 34 (September 15, 2020).

[0.2] Keywords—Canon; Critical race theory; Fan studies; Transformative works

TWC Editor. 2020. "What's in a Word?" [editorial]. *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 34. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.2047.

1. What's in a word?

[1.1] When we ask academics in different areas to peer review a specific essay, we introduce ourselves as "editors of the peer-reviewed, open access fan studies journal *Transformative Works and Cultures,* supported by the fan advocacy nonprofit Organization for Transformative Works." This emphasizes that we are serious about academics, we value open access, and we are supported by a nonprofit rather than a major press or university. After all, if we are asking fellow academics to perform free labor, they ought to share our general values.

[1.2] However, particularly in the current environment, we are now questioning that self-description. The term "fan studies" feels too loaded and limiting. When the journal was launched in 2008, we chose to omit "fan studies" from the journal's title because we wanted to focus on "transformation," which we see as one important nexus of fannish activity. We wanted to be open to the widest possible range of work, not define in advance what authors' fields and commitments would be. And as a project of the Organization for Transformative Works, we wanted to echo and amplify the notion of transformation. Fan studies was then still emerging as a field, but what was clear to us was that the term acted as an umbrella under which scholars from all sorts of different fields could shelter and find common cause. Now we think our initial intuition of choosing a broader and less well-defined name might have been prescient.

[1.3] Fan studies has a racism problem—because how could it not? Racism permeates fandom culture just as it permeates all aspects of higher learning, which, for acafans, is a double whammy. Fan studies was initially created, to paraphrase Joanna Russ (1985), by white acafans, for white acafans, with love. Yet the events of the last few years, culminating in this particular historical moment, have driven home the fact that the field has been constructed to systematically exclude work that looks an awful lot like what fan studies is doing but doesn't tag it with this particular descriptor (Wanzo 2015). TWC, despite seeking to include diverse voices and perspectives, has undeniably been a part of that construction.

[1.4] Ironically, the field's foundational canon was shaped by scholars whose work would not be flagged as fan studies today. When works in the fan studies canon tell the story of audience studies and cultural studies connecting to create fan studies, they often start with Stuart Hall's "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse" (1973). But as fans know (literally better than anyone), determining what counts as canon is a process of selection, a political process rooted in power relations. Thus, while many of us have internalized 1990s-era queer interventions by theorists like Alexander Doty, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michael Warner, we didn't do the same for contemporaneous work that focused on people of color, like Jacqueline Bobo, Patricia Hill Collins, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. This has had undeniable consequences.

[1.5] White fandom scholars worked to establish a flourishing field that systematically fails to fully engage with decades' worth of scholarship in critical race studies, ethnic studies, and postcolonial studies and related fields, all of which could have meaningfully contributed to the field of fan studies. By ignoring texts written, read, and loved by readers and viewers and fans of color, the field fails to be comprehensive or inclusive in its theories and in its subject matter. As we built the new academic subfield of fan studies and established its organizational infrastructures, we helped create and maintain a canon lacking one of the central trajectories of theoretical inquiry.

[1.6] We've seen a lot of moves recently within fan studies and its infrastructures to decolonize fan studies, to undo the harm that is so clearly visible. After all, this dearth of work on race and ethnicities deprived our field of important theoretical interventions and prevented viewers and scholars of color from feeling hailed by the field of fan studies. Our 2019 special issue "Fans of Color, Fandoms of Color," edited by Abigail De Kosnik and andré carrington, was one such attempt. This special issue purposefully invited and included scholars and reviewers who rarely identified with or taught fan studies. Indeed, this special issue threw into sharp relief some of the practical consequences of three decades of being a nearly exclusively white field: even when scholars are doing things that fan studies does, they don't see their work as part of fan studies when nonwhite scholars are discussing nonwhite texts and audiences.

[1.7] How ought we address this? How can we make the umbrella of the field of fan studies bigger? How can intercessions outside the monolithic whiteness of fan studies best be drawn into scholarship involving transformations, communities, affect, and fans? We think we can make a symbolic small start by retiring the term "fan studies." *Transformative Works and Cultures*'s name already hints at a broader remit, but the notion of studies of transformative or derivative works may not limit itself quite so clearly to the racist prejudices we've continued to perpetuate. If it turns out that those who are now doing the hard work of reimagining a fan studies that does not center around whiteness remain committed to the term, then the term's connotations can change with that work. But as long as the connotation of "fan studies" implicitly excludes people of color, the field will close off important interventions.

[1.8] Scholars in this field, whatever it is known as, need to return to their research with an eye to finding, acknowledging, celebrating, and, yes, loving other roots, other approaches,

other arenas of fannish behavior. Whiteness must be directly confronted and addressed as a central feature of historically white fandom communities rather than an absence that remains omnipresent. We need to invite and welcome scholars who don't necessarily think of themselves as fan studies scholars yet whose work adds to and enriches conversations about audience, affect, fans, and transformation. We need to extend the fan studies imaginary.

[1.9] For *Transformative Works and Cultures,* this means that our new editorial board reaches beyond academics doing fan studies, and we will continue to actively solicit other points of view. Obviously this won't solve the field's racism, let alone fandom's and academia's racism. Certainly work critiquing the unbearable whiteness of the field's current canon is welcome and must be done; but so too must we meet people where they are, and we want to honor and invite the work being done by people of color that falls under the remit of transformation, whatever field is in play.

2. Theory

[2.1] Olivia Johnston Riley's "Podfic: Queer Structures of Sound" offers the first sustained look at the fannish pursuit of podfic, or fan fiction read aloud. Beyond issues of accessibility, podfic allows fans to engage creatively with some of their favorite texts, performing stories and sharing them with other fans. Riley focuses on the queer embodiment of voices and the intimacy of listening to other fans read often erotic scenarios, in what Riley describes as a "queer soundscape" (¶ 1.3). The issue of fannish embodiment also centers Charlie Ledbetter's "The Dysphoric Body Politic, or Seizing the Means of Imagination." Using personal experience as a transmasculine activist, Ledbetter reframes the escapist nature of fandom as a "reaction to untenable external circumstances," which thus can redefine "fan fiction [as] a political practice." In Ledbetter's words, "The lens of political dysphoria, adapted from critical transgender studies and used here to describe the dissonance between dominant political structures and desiring subjects, permits exploration of how fan fiction enables subjects to acknowledge oppressive political conditions, engage in coalitional rebellion, and reimagine societal structures for collective liberation" (¶ 0.1).

[2.2] Jennifer Duggan continues this focus on fan identities as she looks at the information writers share in paratextual material in "Who Writes Harry Potter Fan Fiction? Passionate Detachment, 'Zooming Out,' and Fan Fiction Paratexts on AO3." Limiting itself to one fandom and a specific subset of subjects, the study offers a look at a random sample of fans, studying not only their demographics but also the way they choose to present these aspects of their identities. Jessica Pruett's "Lesbian Fandom Remakes the Boy Band" likewise looks at a specific subset of fans, but unlike Duggan's synchronic look at Harry Potter fandom, Pruett studies aspects of lesbian music fandom diachronically. In particular, she looks at self-identified lesbian fans of One Direction and the way their political understanding is shaped by the history of lesbian music cultures.

3. Praxis

[3.1] Kira Deshler continues this study of the relationship between sexual identity and

fannish engagement in "Affective Investments, Queer Archives, and Lesbian Breakups on YouTube." In a study of video responses to two popular lesbian YouTube pairings, Deshler situates these videos at an intersection of queer futurity and melancholia. In a quickly changing historical context, these videos exhibit, generate, and negotiate the affect of queer archives. In "Examining the Fan Labor of Episodic TV Podcast Hosts," Lauren Savit looks at another form of fan-produced online videos, the TV podcast. Savit argues that this form of fan engagement allows her to "expand legible fan studies methodologies and apply them to the study of new and emerging fan practices and behaviors" (¶ 1.4). Sreya Mitra's "Discourses of Hindi Film Fandom and the Confluence of the Popular, the Public, and the Political" addresses the interaction between celebrities and fans, in particular the role played by particular platforms and curated interactions. Mitra discusses forms of negative fan behavior that have become "a fundamental reworking of the relationship between star and fan, which had been founded primarily on admiration and veneration" (¶ 0.1). Access and more direct interaction with celebrities thus allows fans to negatively disrupt fannish spaces, often merely to offend but sometimes as a specific political intervention.

[3.2] It used to be easy to organize the field of transformative works by fandom or fan expression. Two Praxis essays show how this structure is insufficient to contain the field's range of work. Eriko Yamato's "Self-Identification in Malaysian Cosplay" and Fiona Katie Haborak's "Identity, Curated Branding, and the Star Cosplayer's Pursuit of Instagram Fame" both discuss cosplay, but with different methodology and focus. Yamoto showcases the personal and political implication that the interview subjects reveal as they negotiate race, religion, and ethnicity as players discover and develop their identities via fannish performances. Haborak's cosplayers are less concerned with their own identities than they are with a "desire to achieve viral fame" (¶ 0.1) by curating their identities to garner followers. By focusing on the popularity of their performances and their own status as microcelebrities, these cosplayers understand and use various social media and convention platforms to consciously create and curate their brand.

4. Symposium

[4.1] Symposium essays allow for personal engagement and stylistic experimentation in ways other TWC sections often can't or won't, as Aya Esther Hayashi's "Reimagining Fan Studies in the Age of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter" and JSA Lowe's "Toward a Queered and/as Affective Theory of Fandom" highlight. Whereas Hayashi confronts the issue of racism in fan studies with a personal letter, Lowe engages the question of queer identities in fandom through a Wittgensteinian investigation. Both meld together style and substance, affect and argument to connect the personal and the political. In "Fan Fiction as a Valuable Literacy Practice," Stevie Leigh shows how fan fiction serves as an important tool for literacy both within and outside pedagogy and the classroom.

[4.2] The role of fans in relation to fannish objects is always an important field of study, as is demonstrated by Rivkah Groszman's "Revisiting Parasocial Theory in Fan Studies" and Janae Phillips and Katie Bowers's "Using Pop Culture Authentically." Groszman uses autoethnography to challenge a common distrust in fan studies regarding the concept of parasocial relations. Redefining the term as value neutral, she proposes ways the approach

may be usefully used, especially in regard to celebrity fandom. Phillips and Bowers, both from the Harry Potter Alliance, offer a look at fan potential and power in their comments on fan activism as practice. Cailean Alexander McBride's "The Fight for Creative Ownership in Franchise Fiction" addresses the power negotiation between fans and franchise owners over who controls the canon. Given the myriad authors and generations of fans, this issue can never be simply solved but will continue to become ever more complex, especially as the two groups are far from distinct.

5. Book review

[5.1] Kyra Hunting discusses Suzanne Scott's *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*. Describing the book as "an important contribution to the field for both fan and industry scholars" (¶ 7), Hunting lays out how Scott looks at gender biases in fan communities and industry engagement, and shows their interdependencies.

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Praxis

Podfic: Queer structures of sound

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[0.1] Abstract—Podfic is the fan practice of reading fan fiction aloud and sharing recordings with other fans. Podfic highlights how slash fan spaces are structurally queer, resulting in both pleasure and discomfort for various participants. The numerous identities involved in creating, sharing, and consuming podfic—that of the podficcer, the listener, and the characters in the stories—create layers of queer possibility. Podfic encourages the repetition of oblique lines of desire that refuse heteronormativity and immutable, binary gender. Listeners use podfic to build queer soundscapes, using the queer noise of podfic to drown out the dull normalcy of activities like commuting and household chores, and to create a sense of (queer, fannish) connection and community between themselves, the performer, and other listeners. Additionally, "not safe for work, don't play this out loud" warnings on podfic demonstrate how fans negotiate what is and is not appropriate for public spaces and nonprivate listening, particularly in regard to explicit queer sexuality. Podfic enhances and magnifies our understanding of how queerness appears and functions among fans, fan texts, and fan practices; it also reaffirms the diversity of genders at play in these fan spaces.

[0.2] Keywords—AO3; Gender; Sexuality

Riley, Olivia Johnston. 2020. "Podfic: Queer Structures of Sound." *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 34. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1933.

1. Introduction

[1.1] Yawning on the bus ride home from work, you put on your headphones and press play on the 24-megabyte (MB) file labeled "chapter one" that is saved to your phone. A gentle, ambiguously gendered voice begins to tell you a story. It is a story you have read before, but you are too tired to read it now; you just want to listen. The sound is unfiltered, with the low buzz of an air conditioner and occasional mew of a cat in the background of the recording. For these twenty minutes, you are not alone, stuck on public transportation—you are sharing an intimate, sonic space with someone you have never met but who loves this fictional world as much as you do. The voice in your ear shapes the familiar words in ways you could have not predicted; you catch jokes you missed before, and the tragic rising narrative hits even harder as you mirror the emotion in the reader's voice. The story's familiar characters—characters from your favorite television show, reimagined first through fan fiction and now through the sonification of that story—are falling in love, right before your ears, like they

were never allowed to on your TV screen. You keep listening as you arrive home, lingering at the door, the kitchen, doing mindless chores until the story comes to a close.

[1.2] This imaginary exercise has described one possible experience a fan may have when listening to podfic, gesturing to the emotional, interpersonal, and space-making aspects of the medium that will be explored in this discussion. Podfic is fan fiction read out loud—specifically, fan fiction that's performed verbally, recorded, edited, and then shared in audio format. It is also sometimes referred to as audiofic, though the "pod" prefix is more common. It can be thirty seconds long or thirty hours long. It is often performed by just one person, but it can be performed by a cast of people working together. Sometimes it has sound effects or music, and sometimes it's composed only of the performer's voice. Although some podfics are performed by the author of the story, many podficcers search out fic by others and then ask for that author's permission to record and share the story. Most podfic is shared on the sites Archive of Our Own (AO3), LiveJournal, Dreamwidth, and Twitter, usually as a linked file or series of files in mp3 (basic sound file) or m4b (specifically audiobook) format.

[1.3] Slash fic, stories that romantically pair two male characters (or two female characters, then usually referred to as "femslash"), remains the most popular genre of fan fiction today, and podfic reflects the dominance of slash. When podfic readers record slash fic they are, by definition, performing queer narratives. What role does this queerness play in the sonification of fan fic, and how does podfic in turn contribute to queer soundscapes? I argue that podfic highlights how (slash) fan spaces are structurally, delightfully, uncomfortably queer.

[1.4] Judith Butler (1990) locates possibility for subversion in the failure to repeat gender "correctly" according to hegemonic dictates. Similarly, Sara Ahmed (2006) finds it in the repetition of off-kilter, queered lines of desire that veer off from heteronormative paths. I argue that podfic imbricates all parties involved in a queer network of relations that displaces heteronormative ones, encouraging the performance of new, queered lines of desire and identification. This argument affirms a nuanced, generous understanding of queerness in fandom as rooted in opposition to normativity, not just as a quality found in bodies and same-gender attraction, though queer people and identities are naturally an essential part of this queer landscape. Podfic creates a space with so many genders and identities at play that lines of desire are by definition scrambled, and so following Ahmed's theory of queer dis/orientation, create queer potential. Fans make use of this queer potential in crafting queer soundscapes that allow them to make mundane tasks magical and feel a social connection to other fans, while also acting as a discomforting reminder that explicit queer sexuality is unwelcome in public spaces.

2. Literature review and methodology

[2.1] Downloadable sound is increasingly important to the internet landscape; in fact, a recent Pew Research Center (2019) survey determined that almost a third of Americans listen to podcasts. Aside from being popular, sonic mediums come with their own set of affordances and material histories, which must be considered in this investigation of podfic. Podfic shares a clear link to podcasting via its shared prefix; as podcasting grew in popularity

because of widespread access to relatively cheap, easy-to-use audio recording and editing equipment, so too did podficcing (Sterne et al. 2008). Unlike podcasts, podfic files are not transmitted via RSS or other regular internet feeds but are posted as download links on various fan sites (Bottomley 2015). Audiobooks, another auditory predecessor of podfic, share podfic's emphasis on fictional narrative and vocal performance as well as other qualities typical to all the audio mediums so far discussed, including portability and ease of access. The comparison of podfic to audiobooks is particularly important because in my investigation I ran across numerous instances of listeners explicitly comparing the podfic experience to that of an audiobook, while only one referenced podcasts in relation to these audio narratives; thus, we must take into account how fans theorize their own texts and experiences.

[2.2] I will refer to podficcers, the fans who create and share podfic, interchangeably as "readers" and "performers," with the latter term calling to mind notions of performativity and theater. Francesca Coppa has argued that fan fiction is "more a kind of theatre than a kind of prose," with its continual emphasis on bodies and the retelling of stories (2014, 219). Podfic literalizes the theater of fan fic through vocal performance. In addition to its theatrical connotations, "performativity" relates to the construction of gender. Butler's famous articulation of gender as "performative" is both linguistic and theatrical; this use of "performance" is not meant to indicate falsity but rather the necessity of endlessly repeating gender in order to create the effect of its subject (1990, 34).

[2.3] Nicholle Lamerichs mobilized Butler's work to investigate the performativity of cosplay (dressing up as a fictional character) and its role in constituting fan identity (2011, ¶ 3.1). Podfic shares cosplay's investment in the bodily performance of a character. As cosplayers must balance authenticity via accurate replication of a character's look with conveying their unique personality through creative differentiation (¶ 4.5), so too must podficcers navigate both how best to portray these characters authentically and how that performance will or will not resonate with their own identity. Consequently, podfic's "subversive confusion, and proliferation" of gender opportunities through character performance provides space for a queer kind of "gender trouble" (Butler 1990, 46).

[2.4] Bodies, identities, and sexuality have historically been central to fandom and fan scholarship. One of the earliest works in fan studies described fan fiction (specifically Kirk/Spock slash) as being "pornography written 100% by women for a 100% female readership" (Russ 2014). Although I take issue with Joanna Russ's erasure of many other genders from fan spaces, this formulation of fandom does offer some intriguing possibility in that its structure suggests inherent queerness, being based in the transmission of desire and pleasure between women. Later fan scholars, following this line of inquiry, agree that there is indeed something "queer, going on here" (Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007). Robin Anne Reid draws on Alexander Doty to consider queerness as "in opposition to normativity rather than homosexuality in opposition to heterosexuality," which in turn allows for "a wider and more complex discussion of practices in fan cultures and fan fiction" (2009, 480). At the same time, Reid emphasizes that this stance does not assume anything about the sexuality of fic readers or writers, nor does it assert that this "queerness is inherently connected to a progressive ideology" (472).

[2.5] Alexis Lothian, Kristina Busse, and Robin Anne Reid construct queer fan spaces as a place where "things happen that challenge the way gendered and sexual identities and practices are defined and policed into rigid categories" (2007, 109), positing slash fandom as "queer female space" (2007, 103). Darlene Rose Hampton articulates queerness in fandom by employing queer theorist Sara Ahmed's work, where queerness "refer[s] to something that is 'oblique or offline'" (2015, 161). I will further mobilize Ahmed's theory, conceptualizing queerness in the tradition of her and these fan scholars' work to be a constellation of practices and behaviors that move in directions oblique from straight paths, as an orientation towards queer objects. Vis-á-vis Ahmed, readers of podfic perform and construct a "line" (2006, 555), a medium, a practice that veers off in queer directions, and listeners extend that queered line through the act of listening and through reciprocation of positive affect via comments and kudos in support of this work. I will expand on this notion and that of queer female space, arguing that podfic fandom iteratively produces a queer, gender-inclusive space.

[2.6] This project examines the specific case of Hannibal podfic on AO3 and the subculture that has flourished around Will/Hannibal slash. Will and Hannibal are the main characters of the television show *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013–2015), and they constitute the central romantic pairing in the Hannibal fandom, where fans continue to post works about them with frequency despite the show's conclusion. *Hannibal* podfic is a useful subgenre to investigate because the fandom and its number of podfics is sizeable enough to produce useful conclusions from, but modest enough to make for an accessible sample size.

[2.7] Archive of Our Own is a fan fiction archive founded and run by fans as a safe repository for their works, where they could own their own servers and thus avoid being at the mercy of corporate site owners (Lothian 2012). Although podfic is shared in many places across the web, from personal fan sites to Twitter to Dreamwidth, AO3 represents the largest and most searchable collection of podfic available online. I will analyze the network of roles and connections constituted by the creation and sharing of podfic, looking beyond the limits of the podfic "text." Therefore, this discussion uses José Esteban Muñoz's (1996) concept of "ephemera *as* evidence," ephemera being "those things that remain after a performance" that can lend insight into queer "structures of feeling" (10, emphasis in original). The following sections analyze the ephemera of podfic—specifically, the performer's notes and listener's comments left on the stories—for insight into how readers frame their work and how listeners experience and react to it.

3. Voice, body, and gender

[3.1] Scholars such as Lisa Nakamura (2002) have debunked myths surrounding the supposed "freedom" from identity that online spaces provide, arguing that bodies do not disappear in digital spaces but rather have their identities digitally reinscribed. Kishonna Gray (2012) has analyzed how auditory interactions online can be particularly fraught for marginalized bodies who may face "linguistic profiling" (413) in hostile digital spaces. Therefore, the body does not disappear in digital fan works but instead remains salient, especially in podfic. In podfic, the voice pointedly reminds listeners of the bodies and identities behind the creation of fan works posted online.

[3.2] The voice conveys depth, inflections, and accents, which in turn indicate the wide variety of genders, sexualities, and nationalities held by these diverse performers. The body consistently reasserts itself in the realm of podfic: coughs, sniffs, and mouth sounds from the reader inevitably appear in podfic recordings. Readers tell listeners in their performer's notes that they had to put off recording for a while because they were recovering from a cold. A listener describes how listening to the podfic gave them physical sensations like goosebumps or warmth. At a most basic level, both reader and listener must navigate appropriate volume levels when recording or listening to podfic so that the story can be heard at a pleasant level, neither too quiet to hear nor so loud as to cause pain. Thus, listening to podfic and analyzing it requires paying particular attention to the interface of sound and body.

[3.3] Podfic renders several kinds of bodies salient in its production and reception, particularly the bodies of the reader(s), listener(s), and character(s). The performer of fic "endows the text with a body," and in so doing becomes a "mediating actor…in the relationship between reader and text…[that] in itself produces material and rhetorical meaning" (Have and Pedersen 2016, 79–80). At the same time, the characters the reader is performing already come with bodies, voices, and genders attached; fan readers "know the actors who play them, and we bring our memories of their physicality to the text, so the reader is precharged, preeroticized" (Coppa 2014, 229). This preeroticized experience is complicated, then, by the fact that podfic readers intercede in the space between listener and text, and further that readers cannot consistently or perfectly match all the genders and nationalities of the characters they are portraying. Consequently, readers act as a complex intermediary for the fan-consumer's desire for fictional characters and narratives, producing queer and sometimes uncomfortable effects.

[3.4] To chart some of these effects, we must first begin with gender. All sorts of genders are at work in podfic spaces, though women and those with feminine voices are predominant. Regardless of the performer's gender, all podfic readers are necessarily working within societal heterosexist standards of voice. Namely, women's voices in audio-spaces, because of the "intimacy of the medium and backward gender divides," have historically created discomfort in listeners of all genders (Copeland 2018, 213). Listeners and performers exist in "a society that polices and criticizes traditionally feminine vocal tonality," meaning that salient femininity can impact the listener's ability to let the sound of the reader's voice become transparent and fade into the background, to allow the story to filter through without the performer themselves becoming a distraction (Tiffe and Hoffman 2017, 116).

[3.5] We see this concern over gender raised repeatedly in comments and notes on podfic. One commenter said, "I thought it might be distracting to listen to this in a girl's voice but it's not at all and I'm enjoying it loads!" (user comment on Kess 2019). Another listener offered similar insight, saying, "Used to the voices of the actors, I never thought that I would enjoy Hannibal podfics. But you did such a great job" (user comment on dodificus 2018). A performer evidenced this concern from her side of podfic creation, noting that she was worried about how her "girly and prepubescent" voice "was gonna work out with an almost ALL MALE cast" (Aleandri 2018). Yet another performer noted that "I'm recording a prison fic, about two gay serial killers falling in love in my very high pitched female voice. It kinda [*sic*] a little ridiculous, but oh well. I'm doing it" (Rhast 2018a).

[3.6] This anxiety over gender mismatch between performer and character proliferates in podfic spaces for readers of all genders, and perhaps most of all for readers whose gender listeners find particularly opaque. In these cases, it's not uncommon to find listeners asking the reader if they're "a guy or a girl." These listeners are not necessarily hostile or openly biased against masculine or feminine voices, often offering compliments along with their inquiries. However, this recurring theme still prompts the question of why, when these fans find the performance compelling, they are so concerned with knowing the gender of the reader. One of Abigail De Kosnik's interviewees for her book-length investigation of fan archives "describes podfic as a physicalization of fan fiction, which she acknowledges some fans find distasteful or off-putting," gesturing to the prominence of the body and all its gendered characteristics as a source of listener discomfort (2016, 265). Specifically, I argue that the bodily intimacy and blatant sexuality of this sonic space raises concerns about queerness, particularly in regard to the listener's attraction to the characters/narrative being routed through and consequently attached to the reader's voice.

[3.7] Sound in auditory narratives "produces effects of intimacy" (Have and Pedersen 2016, 15). The podfic listener is in a highly emotionally charged space with the reader; one commenter noted that "I find this [listening to the podfic] more moving than reading it [the original textual fan fic]," gesturing to how the medium of sound affords greater affective connection (user comment on Kess 2019). This affect is particularly sexually/romantically charged due to the consistently sexual/romantic (and queer) nature of the stories. The queerness of podfic exists in the text itself, because the stories are about queer characters and relationships, and in the reader's literal performance of queerness in the act of reading these stories out loud. The reader of podfic performs everything from candlelit romantic dinner dates to highly explicit sex scenes, complete with moans and gasps, and sometimes even sound effects of kissing, licking, and other extremely intimate bodily noises.

[3.8] This combination of sonic intimacy and mismatches between the performed gender of the characters and the often-unknown gender of the performer can produce concern over potentially queer lines of desire drawn between the reader and the listener. Russ, twenty years ago, noted of her first experience with slash that she "got embarrassed (because, I think, the stuff was so female and my response to it so intense) and hid it away—in the closet, of all places!" (Russ 2014, 94). This female author felt embarrassed by slash fic precisely because of the overt femaleness of it—that is, the in-your-face queer possibility of being a woman who is sexually excited by the creative work of another woman. This is reinforced in a consequent author's note, in which Russ relayed an editor of her work saying that "readers fear their own interest in K/S will be interpreted as lesbian by friends and family" (2014, 95). This panicked reaction to queerness can be compounded by the intimacy of podfic's auditory medium as well as by the wide array of gender possibilities evoked in this fan space.

4. Queer structure of podfic relations

[4.1] The audio performances of podfic produce a queer network of relations between the performer, the text, and the listener. To begin with, the text itself is an actor in podfic. All the podfics examined for this article were explicitly queer in their content, featuring queer(ed)

characters, queer themes, romance, and often explicit sexuality. The characters in these podfics carry variously transformed and reimagined genders and sexualities. These podfics are palimpsests of many texts and authors, including the fan fic being read aloud, the source text the fan fic was inspired by, the contemporary fanon and fan community that shaped the fic's production, the various music and sound effects often used in these recordings, and the labor of all the creators who made these media. Further, through the reader's performance, listeners receive a unique interpretation of the fan fic being read, conveyed through the intonations and other subtleties that emphasize and elide various textual significances. This profusion of overlapping and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning impact how a listener understands a character's gender and sexuality, refusing the simplicity of heteronormative binaries.

[4.2] Further, the performer or performers bring their own sexuality and gender as well as other salient identity factors such as race, nationality, and age to their performance. Whether the reader identifies as trans, nonbinary, man, woman, or some intersection therein, the legibility of that identity to the listener will vary according to a variety of physical, social, and textual factors (for example, if the reader's voice is particularly "high" or "low," or if they refer to themselves using gendered pronouns in an author's note). Further, the reader then performs the various genders and sexualities of the podfic story's characters, which reflect a similarly multitudinous range of possibilities. Thus, the reader repeatedly performs theatricalized genders that rarely match their own, providing a Butlerian disruption to the performance of their own gender and veering off on a queered line of gender discordance.

[4.3] For example, a cis bisexual woman voicing Hannibal and Will can play briefly in a space of fictional, queer masculinity, and as she reads, she repeats this subtly queered line of mismatched identity. For some podfic readers, this may amount to nothing more than play, but for others this may be a space for self-discovery and exploration. In either case, the reader deviates from heterosexual, binary genders, however temporarily. Further, the inherent queerness of these stories means that even if podfic readers' gender and sexuality do match the characters they're portraying, this then becomes a shoring up of queer identities. For example, a trans man reading podfic about Will Graham depicted as a fellow trans man produces a doubly queer narrative that speaks the reader's own marginalized existence into the mainstream text and to the ears of fellow fans.

[4.4] Like the performer, the listener brings to the experience of podfic their own gender and sexuality. They may identify as bisexual, asexual, demisexual, lesbian, gay, straight, questioning—the possible positionalities are limitless. Further, they are differentially hailed by the story according to the mode of narrative. If the story is told in the third person, this listener may feel placed in a voyeuristic or fluid position, whereas a story told in first or second person might directly interpellate the listener into specific character roles or gender positions. For example, in a Will/Hannibal story told in the first person from Will's perspective, the listener becomes imbricated with not only that character's masculine gender but his desire for another man, placing the listener in a queerly desiring position. Butler (1997) investigates the subversive possibilities of purposefully misrecognizing and/or parodically inhabiting the hail of normative gender. Podfic structures reorient this, providing a space where listeners may be strangely, pleasurably, playfully, and repeatedly mishailed in

terms of gender and sexual identity, resulting in a productive confusion.

[4.5] These three roles—performer, text, and listener—interact along lines of interpretation and desire. All the participants share a romantic, sexual space that attaches fluctuating gender and sexual identities to their roles as reader and listener, which may or may not align at any given time with the reader or listener's own. This highlights the messy queer potential that fans enter into when they become part of this desire-filled narrative space, where the abundance of shifting gender positionalities and desire lines encourages unique formations of identity and sexuality that run obliquely to normative male/female heterosexual ones.

5. Pleasure and discomfort

[5.1] The execution of these queer tales frequently results in the fulfillment of narrative, and sometimes sexual, pleasure for the listener. Listeners frequently exhibit pleasure not just because of the sexy content of the stories but from the reader's particular performance of it. For example, one listener wrote, "I love your voice and this is my all time favorite Hannibal fic so the two together are sheer heaven for me!" (user comment on Caveat_Lector 2017). Similarly, another wrote, "I don't have the words for how much I fell under the spell of your voice, except to say that it felt like discovering the story all over again in a way I would never have thought possible" (user comment on Kess 2019). There are also a smaller number of more visceral, desiring comments along the lines of "So hot!" that indicate more explicit sexuality. Both these and the previous, tamer comments indicate that listeners of all kinds are getting pleasure from readers of similarly diverse genders and sexualities.

[5.2] Following Ahmed's orientations, this practice of podficcing repeats a queered, nonstraight path of desire that does not run parallel to traditional, clearly defined and binary gender lines. I argue, then, in line with Hampton (2015), that "slash fandom engages in queer performance when it restages scenarios in ways that undermine this consistency [of normative gender performance]" and "provide[s] fans with opportunities to perform an array of identities and behaviors that are off-line or oblique to straight orientations" (¶ 2.10). So, both slash fic and slash podfic in particular disrupt gender norms and create a space for fans to do and experience nonstraight things. This gender trouble and disoriented desire are encoded into the structure of podfic, which disallows in its palimpsest of overlapping identities (reader/listener/character) the possibility for uncomplicated heterosexuality.

[5.3] This space is one where queer possibility is always available, but that does not make it unequivocally or unproblematically queer, free of discomfort, or politically progressive. Readers describe how strange it is to read explicit sex scenes aloud, with the particular maleness and queerness of these Hannibal stories making performers feel the process can be embarrassing. Performers sometimes defuse this discomfort through humor, for example, through cheekily noting, "I hope you all enjoy me saying words like 'dick' and 'cock' out loud" (Rhast 2018a). It would appear that listeners must enjoy it, at least somewhat, because they continue to return to these stories. But the minimal number of comments explicitly linking the listener's experience of podfic to any sort of sexual/romantic gratification indicates that although they may enjoy listening to this reader's "porn," they, too, are uncomfortable with the intimacy of the medium.

[5.4] Further, we can see how these uncomfortable reactions to blatant sexuality and queerness can produce "straightening" effects (Ahmed 2006, 562). In both performer's notes and listener comments, many of these fans demonstrate an assumption that everyone involved in these conversations experiences an attraction to men, though the nature of this attraction is nebulous—it could be sexual, romantic, aesthetic or otherwise less literal. Similarly, these paratextual spaces often carry an assumption that the listeners are not men themselves. In combination, these vague but persistent assumptions have the potential to evacuate room for the queer men, nonbinary folks, and lesbians who my investigation showed are indeed present in Hannibal fandom, and tacitly reinforce the common and harmful misconception that slash fandom is made up of straight women lusting over gay men. However, these heteronormative assumptions are far from universal. Many podfic readers demonstrate awareness of gender diversity in the way they hail their imagined audience, and many podfic listeners offer support to variously non-woman-identified readers. Podfic spaces, then, are complex and contested ones.

6. Queer soundscapes

[6.1] In addition to the queer space produced in the lines between podfic's performers, texts, and listeners, podfic can queer the environment in which it's listened to. Podfic listeners create queer, fannish soundscapes when they listen to podfic, particularly in public. Scholars of mobile sonic media have previously theorized about how listening to individualized, portable sound narratives creates "a physical and cognitive bubble" that alters the listener's perception of the physical and social environment (Have and Pedersen 2016, 11–12). Personalized sound allows users to define their "experience of space" (Tussey 2018, 4, 11), to move through public settings in their own "pleasurable and privatised sound bubbles" (Bull 2007, 5). Ahmed and other queer scholars have studied how spaces are always already oriented, typically in straight directions, so that "some bodies feel in place, or at home, and not others" (2006, 563). Stacey Copeland (2018) argued that queer radio shows act "as a sonic space for the queering of societal soundscape[s]" (211). Therefore, people creating and listening to sound of their own choice, where and when they want to, is "an act of space making" wherein they remake the world around them, a practice with particular use for queering normative landscapes (Wargo 2018, 15).

[6.2] By listening to audio stories such as podfic, listeners very literally change their world; they block out external noise and replace it with a narrative performance of their choice, thus sonically creating a brand-new space (Wittkower 2011, 228). Commenters on podfic frequently share the activities they were performing while listening to the story—often dull, monotonous tasks such as commutes and chores. They further describe how listening to podfic made these boring necessities more exciting, interesting, and pleasurable, some going so far as to say they lengthened their commute or extended their household cleaning in order to keep listening. Whether sitting on the subway, browsing at the grocery store, or scrubbing down the bathroom, fans use podfic to make these mundane tasks more "magical," as one listener described the experience. This echoes Janice Radway's classic study of women romance novel readers, whose books constituted a temporary escape from demands on their time and body as wives and mothers, allowing them to "reserve a special space and time for themselves alone" (1983, 61). Podfic provides an escape from labor by imbuing tasks with a

sense of pleasure and leisure, an escape from the mundane through the magic of narrative, and an escape from heteronormative gender through queer stories and characters.

[6.3] This desire for a spatiotemporal separation of self from the gendered demands of others shares political space with queerness in its refusal of heteronormativity. When a listener uses podfic to escape the monotony of the bus ride home or cleaning the house, it is the magic of queer fandom that rescues the listener from these normative spaces. That it is queerness being introduced in this process is demonstrated by the previous discussion of how podfic is inherently queer, and this is further supported by the parallels between listening to podfic in public spaces and being queer in public. Drawing on audiobook literature, we can understand the podfic listener as "in some kind of disconnection with the social environment, experiencing it within a context not available to others in that environment" because of the narrative sound flowing around them (Wittkower 2011, 229). This description resonates with queer experiences, because queer folks navigate and experience social environments differently due to their non-normative identity and embodiment. The queer person or (to a less politically charged extent) the podfic listeners enveloped in a queer narrative experience the quotidian differently than those around them, and in manner imbricated with sexuality.

[6.4] This idyllic possibility of creating pleasurable queer soundscapes in dull, heteronormative spaces is matched by the fact that these queer, fannish, sexually explicit stories are expressly not welcome in those spaces. Podfic readers and listeners alike are highly aware of the fact that podfic is not meant to be played out loud in public, nonfannish spaces, where it would likely be actively misunderstood, disliked, and rebuked, much like queer behaviors in public spaces. Fan readers frequently frame their performances through this lens of being unacceptable or dangerous for public airing through the use of warnings, such as "WARNING: NSFW [not safe for work]. If you listen in public, then I really suggest listening with headphones, since there is sexy times in this chapter. I doubt friends, family, and/or co workers wanna hear smut read out loud" (Rhast 2018b). Similar warnings reference podfic being specifically not safe for work—as in, not appropriate for spaces of employment—as well as it not being safe to be played around children or elderly family members.

[6.5] The people the potential listener may encounter in these spaces are key to why podfic supposedly should not be played out loud there. For example, listeners who consume podfic on their commute home are jokingly cautioned to remember to mute the story if they are pulled over by the cops. In other cases, performers explain that they have to hold off recording for a while because their kids or grandparents are nearby and they cannot risk them overhearing their naughty, queer performance. Multiple women listeners said they had to be careful to turn off their podfic when their husband walked in, or only listen when he was not around. All these cases gesture to a wide suite of potential heteronormative concerns.

[6.6] Are these listeners cautious because these people (police, family, husbands) would disapprove of or dislike the queer content? Is podfic threatening to these people because it indicates that the listener (usually a woman, queer person, or other gender minority) is experiencing some level of queer or non-normative sexuality, a sexuality outside of straight

monogamy? Is it that these fans would simply be embarrassed to be caught listening to something so sexual, fannish, or weird? Whichever of these reasons is most salient for the individual listener, they all point to podfic as having dangerously non-normative qualities.

[6.7] Consequently, the spaces and people around which podfic listening must be carefully curtailed corresponds to those where sexuality—specifically queer sexuality—are particularly restricted, such as the place of work and family space. However, despite these warnings creating a general atmosphere of concern and need for privacy, fans still use podfic to shape their soundscapes as they please. For example, one fan shared the experience of "Listening to this chapter at work and felt absolutely filthy listening to Hannibal tell Will just what he'd like to do to him" (user comment on Rhast 2018a). Thus, the listener took pleasure in the conscious and potentially risky disruption of the nonqueer, nonsexy space of work.

[6.8] Finally, it is not just queerness, but (queer) connection invoked by podfic usage. Listeners, especially women and queer folks isolated through gendered labor and other forms of social seclusion, use podfic to produce a sense of company and community, of not being alone. Frances Dyson (2009) contends that sound is "the immersive medium par excellence," that "to hear is also to be touched, both physically and emotionally" (4). As one podficcer and fan, Annapods, explained to a journalist in regard to the draw of podfic, "it's the intimacy of it, the 'warm hug' of someone's voice" (Manente 2019). The act of podficcing implies an audience; for it to be shared creates a relationship, however temporary, between performer, listener, and narrative. Ergo, podfic allows users to forge various social, queer connections as the listener resides in the narrative space with the reader, with other potential listeners, and with the fictional characters they love.

7. Conclusion

[7.1] Podfic and the community around it expand upon and underscore the queer potential of fan works. The prominence of gender and consequent oblique lines of desire crisscrossing the rich tapestry of identities that form the podfic space make for a complicated, pleasurable, and sometimes uncomfortable palimpsest of queer potential. Through podfic, fans shape normative, boring environments into pleasurable queer soundscapes and create a sense of sociality between themselves and other fans, simultaneously cautious of how their queer sound is not welcome in public spaces.

[7.2] Queerness is an important but not singular feature of interest in podfic, and future studies of the medium could go in any number of directions, including podfic as (queer, digital) archive; fan labor in preserving these ephemeral sound files; concepts of ownership and possession in podficcing, especially regarding the community norm of asking the original fan fic author for permission to record their story; the podfic community and its self-meta about their texts and practices; podfic's educational value as a language learning tool (something explicitly mentioned in several comments viewed for this analysis); the intersection of podfic with geography, nationality, and ethnicity, especially regarding reader's accents; affect and emotion in and around podfic, potentially including a range of affects from pleasure to stress relief; and podfic and other remediated fan art forms and their relationship to disability and access. In any of those studies, however, gender and queerness

can and should be present as a formative component of podfic structures.

[7.3] The queer space of podfic is not an oasis or an uninterrupted zone of non-normativity; rather, it is a fluid space that encourages queerness in its shape. This queer shape is particularly visible in the realm of podfic but can be recognized in other fan spaces and fan works. So, although podfic is a relatively small community within larger fandom structures, it is useful as a magnifying tool. As a transformative work of a transformative work, podfic amplifies fandom's creative impulses while also foregrounding bodies and desire through voice, thus also amplifying queer potential. Consequently, I have worked to delineate the complex queerness that is already extant in the structures of many fan works and communities but is made especially visible—or rather, audible—via podfic.

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Theory

The dysphoric body politic, or Seizing the means of imagination

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[0.1] Abstract—Although escapism has been used pejoratively in describing fandom, it might be reframed as a reaction to untenable external circumstances. This reformulation of escapism is a starting point for examining how fan fiction is a political practice. In light of the political upheaval in the United States as well as the existential threat of climate change, this is a topical, even urgent, collective project for producing survivable conditions. Fan fiction uniquely diagnoses and imagines alternatives to oppressive political conditions. The lens of political dysphoria, adapted from critical transgender studies and used here to describe the dissonance between dominant political structures and desiring subjects, permits exploration of how fan fiction enables subjects to acknowledge oppressive political conditions, engage in coalitional rebellion, and reimagine societal structures for collective liberation.

[0.2] Keywords—Antioppression; Erotic; Escapism; Fan fiction; Political dysphoria; Transgender; Trauma

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1. Foreword: Fandom made me trans

[1.1] Well, that's a header to feed the conspiracy theorists. However, it's perhaps a bit overstated to claim that fandom made me trans, especially because that contains the assumption that trans represents a deviation from the norm. (I may be deviant, but I am certainly not a deviation.) Rather, fandom has been my friend and companion through my lifelong process of self-excavation. It has given me the conceptual tools for understanding myself and my power as an agent of change beyond traditional cultural categories. This is why I am addressing my fellow fans: to say that our art has visionary potential for this world.

[1.2] A little about me: I'm a transmasculine fan fiction reader and author. I'm also an antioppression activist. The inspiration for this article was my realization that the same processes by which I've come to understand myself as trans—and built efficacy in my

embodied knowledge—could help those in fandom understand their power as political agents.

[1.3] My first sense of gender dissonance did not originate in an innate knowledge that I was "born in the wrong body," which is unfortunately the dominant narrative of trans legitimacy. Rather, my explorations of self through fandom gave me a more expansive sense of what the self could be. Having read slash (or homoerotic) fan fiction since my tween years, part of me has identified with desire between men. While sexual desire doesn't entail a gender identity—as I know many cisgender women who fantasize about or as queer men—seeing myself in slash fiction did provide me with a conceptual space outside the tensions of my own ambivalent embodiment. It also offered a template of masculinity for me that was less toxic than the ones most visible in mass media. Taken together, the opportunity to explore my sexuality and experience a less threatening articulation of masculinity showed me the political power of escapist fiction. Escapism is not a departure from reality. Rather, escape decenters the hegemony of oppressive systems that announce themselves as real and creates space to imagine alternatives.

[1.4] I became conscious of my desire to explore transitioning at, of all places, my first Harry Potter fan convention. In 2009, having written my undergraduate thesis on slash fan fiction, I presented my findings at Azkatraz (portmanteau of "Azkaban" and "Alcatraz") in San Francisco. A lot of trans people enjoy costumes—for obvious reasons—so I decided to come dressed as Remus Lupin, Harry Potter's werewolf mentor. What I didn't know is that when you go to a convention in costume, you're considered a cosplayer and therefore addressed by the name and pronouns of your character. Imagine my surprise, as someone who wasn't fully conscious of their gendered self, at suddenly being addressed as Professor Lupin with he/him pronouns. It was euphoric—and terrifying. By the end of the convention, I was so overwhelmed with emotions I couldn't name that I asked a cosplayer friend how he could stand returning to the outside world. The convention accepted people as they came without question—whether as Severus Snape or an albino peacock—but the world would relentlessly contest any perceived transgression from the norm. He suggested that I make my own myth—construct a new world around the self I was discovering. I was so moved by this that I wrote my master's thesis on Harry Potter trans cosplay, and then began my journey with gender confirmation medicine. Over the years, this reassurance has blossomed into a more radical reimagining of myself and my relationship to society.

[1.5] My relationship to fandom fundamentally changed when I began to see myself as a man, specifically as a queer man. While as a slash reader this felt like living the dream, the slash fan fiction that had felt affirming as an adolescent suddenly made me feel extremely alienated. Male bodies were usually represented as cisgender and fetishized in their cisness, with phallocentricity as a common erotic fixation. Moreover, subgenres that acknowledged gender alterity, like gender-swap, often read as transphobic because they often "ignore how transgender people cope with issues that accompany transitions, such as gender dysphoria, the use of proper pronouns, or the mechanics of sexual activity after [gender confirmation surgery]" (Beazley 2016).

[1.6] There is an increasing prevalence of fan fiction that represents trans, nonbinary and

gender nonconforming bodies, or second-person fan fiction that attempts to avoid gendered representation altogether, but this is by far the exception. As I became aware of trans underrepresentation in fan fiction, I began to examine what needs I brought to fandom in the first place. I realized that the context in which I was approaching fan fiction as escapist literature had changed, and with it my desires as an author and reader.

[1.7] As I experienced the social and economic marginalization that is all too common for trans people—family rejection, discrimination, poverty—I realized that fan fiction was also mirroring transphobic societal structures. Or rather, that society is so transphobic that it would take more imaginative labor to produce credible escapist fiction for someone who is experiencing marginalization. Moreover, the fundamental structures that produce my marginalization—capitalism, the climate emergency, the destabilization of national democracies—are also making life more precarious for everyone. Perhaps other fans who, like me, have approached fandom as an alternative to their experiences of oppression are also feeling this desire for fan fiction that imagines viable alternatives.

2. Critical transgender theory

[2.1] Critical transgender theory provides the theoretical and methodological grounding for this article. According to Susan Stryker (2006), critical transgender theory is a postmodern, anti-oppression discipline

> [2.2] like other socially engaged interdisciplinary academic fields such as disability studies or critical race theory that investigate questions of embodied difference and analyze how such differences are transformed into social hierarchies—without ever losing sight of the fact that difference and hierarchy are never mere abstractions; they are systems of power that operate on actual bodies, capable of producing pain and pleasure, health and sickness, punishment and reward, life and death. (Stryker 2006, 3)

[2.3] At its core, critical transgender theory is interested in the construction of genders and the social hierarchies by which they are organized. As a politically engaged discipline, critical transgender theory examines the systems of power that produce these hierarchies in terms of both representational and material practices. As such, transgender studies is not simply an insider discourse for a minoritized group of people but examines the structures that create and reproduce oppressions based on bodily difference.

[2.4] Critical transgender theory offers fandom studies concepts for deconstructing its own embeddedness in cissexist and transphobic structures. This is valuable for improving trans representation and participation in fandom. However, I argue that it makes an additional contribution on the level of epistemology and praxis. By prioritizing the embodied knowledge of the individual over the orthodoxy of dominant political structures, critical transgender studies offers an epistemological lens by which anyone might identify structural oppression as it is processed in the body and imagine more desirable alternatives.

3. Autoethnography

[3.1] Autoethnography—which connects experiential knowledge to wider cultural phenomena—is a vital methodology in critical transgender studies because it disrupts the hegemonic epistemologies that claim universal and objective knowledge. This is particularly important when an individual speaking subject must challenge dominant assumptions. According to Stryker,

> [3.2] transgender studies considers the embodied experience of the speaking subject, who claims constantive knowledge of the referent topic, to be a proper —indeed essential—component of the analysis of transgender phenomena; experiential knowledge is as legitimate as other, supposedly more "objective" forms of knowledge, and is in fact necessary for understanding the political dynamics of the situation being analyzed. (Stryker 2006, 12)

[3.3] Critical transgender studies inflects autoethnography with embodied experience, and it is this experience that is necessary for comprehending the political dynamics of the subject matter.

[3.4] Using the "I" in this essay allows me to connect my experiential knowledge as a trans person to more structural political phenomena. I am the subject rather than the object of knowledge. At the same time, the embodied knowledge that produces my trans subjectivity has political implications for all political agents. The pathologization and medicalization of transness depoliticizes its fundamental insight—that the embodied knowledge of the individual can challenge the fundamental assumptions of dominantly constructed reality. The purpose of this article is to reveal how, in the context of political upheaval, this dissonance is a more universally felt experience, and to politicize the action of deliberately speaking in its interstices.

4. From gender dysphoria to political dysphoria

[4.1] The central analytic for this essay is political dysphoria. Political dysphoria develops from applying the concept of dysphoria—a dissonance between embodied knowledge and dominant accounts of reality—to the body politic.

[4.2] Gender dysphoria, as defined by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), is "distress that is caused by a discrepancy between a person's gender identity and that person's sex assigned at birth (and the associated gender role and/or primary and secondary sex characteristics)" (WPATH 2012). The problem is not the feelings of dissonance between one's gender and the one assigned at birth but rather feelings of distress that can arise from this. Examining gender dysphoria critically, it contains the assumption that someone has shifted from the purported rationality of cisgender selfhood to another form of knowing, an embodied epistemology. While this embodied epistemology can lead people to seek different forms of consonance with the gendered self—including hormone replacement therapy (HRT), surgery, and social changes—it can also shift one's location as a perceiving and knowing subject.

[4.3] For me, gender dysphoria legitimized my deeply felt sensations of dissonance, but over

time it provided a critical lens onto the structure of the society that in projecting a nonconsensual dominant account of reality gaslights people out of their own perceptions. Dysphoria not only gave me insight about the operations of oppression made intelligible by gender but also ultimately reached beyond it. For example, when I was a female academic, I felt that I needed to fight to be heard but didn't have the conceptual framework to describe my experiences. This made sense when, perceived as a man, I was suddenly given more conversational space than female colleagues. Moreover, I've always felt some unease about being in public, which mental health professionals assumed was irrational. However, when I (and countless other trans people) have been threatened in public bathrooms, I've became viscerally aware of the violence that polices public spaces. Finally, when I began to experience illegal employment discrimination in every job I've held since transitioning, I realized that first, the identity of worker requires legible gender and second, work as an ideological construct is not meritocratic but uses the threat of deprivation to produce heteronormative and cissexist compliance. This not only belied the virtue of hard work inculcated in me since childhood but also opened out to a more existential realization: the bottom line for survival is managing the climate crisis. With a limited carbon budget, work should be flexible and optional or at least be mobilized to ameliorate rather than exacerbate this emergency (Graeber 2018). Having experienced these multiple levels of oppression which threaten my basic survival, I realized that I could no longer afford the comfortable illusion that the dominant ideology matches my perceptions. In short, my experiences of gender dysphoria have made visible the dysphoria I have always felt as a political subject. It made sense that the world didn't make sense.

[4.4] While pervasively classified as a pathology, dysphoria can be a resource for understanding and imagining what kind of world might bring us fulfillment. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how, in the context of contemporary political upheaval, fans can become conscious of their own sense of dissonance—without having to experience the existential challenges through which I had to cultivate these insights. Once aware of dissonances, it's possible to construct visionary alternative in art. Transformative works could transform not just as reinterpretations of text but as the imaginative workshop for a transformed society.

[4.5] The first part of this essay has constructed a theory for political dysphoria through the intersection of affect and critical transgender theories in the field of fandom studies. The second part of this essay focuses on specific examples of political dysphoric affects in transformative works and how they can used to reimagine a more equitable social structure.

5. Three affects of political dysphoria

[5.1] The second part of this article identifies three affects of political dysphoria and explores how these might help fan creators name and resolve these dissonances through fiction. These three affects are (1) relief: naming dysphoric feelings, (2) rage: rebelling against conditions that produce dysphoric feelings, and (3) euphoria: imagining structures that inspire consonant feelings. These concepts are derived from my own experiences of gender dysphoria and the process of applying them to political activism.

[5.2] Shifting from the more theoretical methodology of the first section, this section focuses on the tangible changes that are possible when fiction is written through the lens of political dysphoria. To do this, I have selected three examples of fan works, each foregrounding one of the dysphoric affects. The stories traverse time, fandom, genre, and readership size and as such are not intended to be either representative or paragons of their categories. Rather, the choices are deeply personal. Each story has, in its own way, given me the resources to more fully understand my own internal and external dissonances. In reading them, I invite you to recall which stories have produced similar feelings for you and what kind of world they invite you to construct.

[5.3] The texts which are analyzed are *Can't Starve Us Out, Can't Make Us Run* by UneJolieOrdure (2017), "Ddiod Imi" by de_Clare (2016), and *The Flax Seed* by R. Schultz (2003).

6. Naming dysphoria and finding relief: *Can't Starve Us Out, Can't Make Us Run* by UneJolieOrdure

[6.1] It may seem counterintuitive, but darkfic, "fan fiction that deals with intentionally disturbing material, such as physical and emotional violence" (Fanlore n.d.), represents a form of escape for some.

[6.2] The irony of transition is that as we feel greater consonance within ourselves, we're likely to experience greater oppression. Like most people in nondominant communities, I'm also systematically gaslit out of my own perceptions of this oppression. For my own well-being, then, it is necessary to name this dissonance and seek validation. Because it takes for granted trauma and the circumstances that produce it, writing and consuming darkfic represents an escape into reality. Darkfic gets me. The experience of naming my trauma and having it acknowledged in fiction gives me a sense of consistency and therefore relief. The relief provided by darkfic is not limited to trans people but is for anyone whose traumatic experiences are not universally validated. One cultural implication of #metoo was shattering the shell of denial that had hitherto so seamlessly surrounded structural misogyny and normalized sexual assault. Reading and sharing one's narratives could provide relief if not from the oppression itself then from its denial.

[6.3] While fan fiction often does not address the realities of structural oppression, doing so in darkfic provides an opportunity for oppressed groups to represent their experiences and to invite recognition. One such story is UneJolieOrdure's alternate universe (AU) *Can't Starve Us Out, Can't Make Us Run,* an unfinished novel that sets *Game of Thrones* (2011–19) in the rural poverty of West Virginia.

[6.4] *Game of Thrones* is an HBO fantasy series set during the political collapse of a monarchy. The series has been critiqued for many reasons, among them for voyeuristic representations of sexual assault (Hughes 2015). I would also add the critique that while it's self-consciously allegorical, representing contemporary issues like the climate crisis and patriarchy, its solutions and narrative preoccupations are by and large elite. However, by changing the setting from mythical Westeros to rural West Virginia, *Can't Starve Us Out,*

Can't Make Us Run reverses the power dynamics of the source text, re-presenting these existential challenges as a struggle for survival by poor and marginalized people. The author's summary says:

> [6.5] Winter Holler is right on the border between West Virginia and Kentucky. Poor and isolated, its inhabitants do what they have to for survival. Between them, West Virginia's Ned Stark and Kentucky's own Bob Baratheon have built up a sweeping, lucrative methamphetamine empire from nothing, but it could be destined to fall with its founders if their sons don't get their heads out of their asses. A couple of modern-day Romeo-Juliet romances rise and fall. Theon Greyjoy loses some teeth and some dignity. Sansa knows better than to get in a pickup with a dirty cop. Robb thinks he can be the antihero of this story after all.
>
> [6.6] Otherwise known as "the hillbilly AU literally nobody asked me to write."

[6.7] This summary invites multiple points of entry for those seeking relief in fiction. Perhaps the closest to universal is the reality of precarity. Recalling Berlant's concept of cruel optimism (2011), Winter Holler dramatizes the contemporary "gut-level suspicion that hard work, thrift, and following the rules won't…guarantee a happy ending," (Hsu 2019). The feeling of precariousness, and its challenge to dominant meritocratic ideologies, is a dissonance with which unfortunately most of us can identify. While validating feelings of systemic disenfranchisement, the narrative also dramatizes the risks inherent in becoming fully conscious of oppression.

[6.8] In the HBO series, Jon Snow is represented as an honorable character surrounded by individuals with mercenary intentions. As an illegitimate son of a lord, he is excluded from the cultural institution of primogeniture and must cultivate his own role in his increasingly unstable society. In UneJolieOrdure's story, "Jon Stark" is recharacterized as a US army veteran experiencing untreated post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But Jon's battle isn't against soldiers (or snow zombies) but rather against the structures of his own society.

[6.9] When the caregivers of the Stark family are suddenly and violently murdered, Jon, now the eldest sibling of the Stark family, is honorably discharged from the Army to care for his new dependents. While his veteran's benefits provide a means of subsistence as he assumes responsibilities as guardian, the specter of his service in Afghanistan and Iraq haunts his new life.

[6.10] In chapter 9, "Dumb Ways to Die," Jon discloses his personal traumas to his younger sister Sansa.

> [6.11] "What's wrong, Jon?" He shrugged. He drained his beer. The response was clearly already on his tongue, but he wrestled with it anyway; it seemed to burn on the way out.
>
> [6.12]"I watched my friends die for no good reason. No good reason that I can think of, anyway."

> [6.13]Now, you'll notice that the title of this chapter is "Dumb Ways to Die." *Dumb* is a word which can (and does) mean *stupid,* but in our context, it can also mean *senseless, purposeless, or unnecessary.* Dying in a freak sandcastle accident is, for example, purposeless. A bunch of young men and women being blown up by roadside bombs in the middle of fighting a war that they don't even understand is senseless. Veterans offing themselves because nobody warned them about how sneaky PTSD can be is unnecessary.

[6.14] Jon's dialogue is laconic as he struggles to produce language to represent his experiences. The dearth of language could be attributed to many factors, but one perhaps is the struggle to articulate something that runs counter to political orthodoxy. The American Dream, which haunts the country as the phantasmagorical, though logically consequent "America First!," demands that individuals yoke "private fortune with that of the nation." (Berlant 1998, 4). To admit the failure of this ideology is to produce and inscribe into language the novel possibility that the American Dream is not only an illusion but a threat to one's well-being. In contrast to Jon's sparseness, his meaning is unpacked with a Lemony Snickett-esque whimsical narrative voice. It pauses on the multiple implications of "dumb," either a pejorative for unintelligent or that which falls outside of meaning and sense. In this text, "dumb" has the third meaning of unspeakable—or lacking the capacity to speak—of one's own perceptions and experiences.

[6.15] The risk of this disclosure is that the relief it brings from dysphoria is wholly subsumed by the overwhelming reality. Most avoid such disclosure—to themselves or others—because the consequences might literally be self-annihilation. Immediately following Jon's confession, he attempts suicide:

> [6.16] Later that night, Sansa awoke to an enormous cracking sound, followed by a heavy thud…The bedroom was dark, the bed mussed but abandoned; the only light came from the small attached bathroom. There, Jon was on the bathroom floor, slightly blue in the face, gasping for breath. There was an extension cord noose around his neck, which was tied to the shower rod, which had broken off of the wall and was lying on the floor in a pile of plaster, drywall, and crumpled shower curtain. Ygritte was standing over him in a huge, billowing t-shirt that read WILD WILLIE'S SPICIEST WINGS NORTH OF THE MASON-DIXON. Her white skin was heating up in red blotches as if she had been running for too long.
>
> [6.17]"You must be pretty fucking wasted if you thought that fucking thing was gonna hold your weight," she said through tightly gritted teeth.

[6.18] Jon's suicide attempt registers on apparently contradictory emotional levels. On the one hand, there is the disturbing representation of attempted self-harm in squalid circumstances where no spectator remains innocent. At the same time, there are jarring incongruities that provoke uncomfortable laughter: Jon lying on the bathroom floor with an improvised noose is juxtaposed with his fiancée Ygritte's outsized T-shirt and red-blotched skin. (Moreover, the flippant allusion to the Mason-Dixon Line—the historical boundary of

legal segregation—to advertise chicken wings provokes cringe-laughter.) The darkness and the humor converge when Ygritte derides Jon's unaccountably ignorant choice of shower curtain rod as gallows, echoing her catchphrase from the original series: *You know nothing, Jon Snow*. The dissonances between the dark and the humorous also provide a safe tone for approaching subject matter that could otherwise be too painful—to some extent, laughter neutralizes the power of the otherwise unspeakable. It also brings into relief the dissonances between the television series and its application to reality.

[6.19] As a dramatization of the dissonances that produce political dysphoria, Jon's narrative highlights how American political subjectivity requires the participation in systems that exacerbate one's own oppression. This then presupposes the disavowal of this participation and the constant psychological work of actively maintaining hegemonic narratives, no matter how preposterous. (In an Orwellian logic: Two plus two equals five.) Acknowledging these deeply felt realities holds the promise of relief from this psychological dissonance but may also literally prove unsurvivable. Approximately half of trans people attempt suicide, but these statistics cannot account for those who experience dysphoria in silence or isolation (Haas et al. 2014).

[6.20] Trans people too often have the impossible choice between maintaining the fiction of the binary gender system and the dire consequences of rejecting it. Acknowledging that one does not feel consonant with the gender category assigned at birth might lead to rejection by loved ones, legal discrimination, even murder. However, continuing to function within an inauthentic selfhood, which maintains the lie of a binary gender system, only contributes to one's oppression. This is a possibility within any position of oppression within the body politic. For example, if the only economic option in the deindustrialized Midwest is to work in an Amazon warehouse, it is emotionally costly to admit that one has no choice but to contribute to a wealth-hoarding global elite, even when automation means that scarcity is increasingly manufactured. However, naming this dysphoria is the only possible escape beyond the spiral of unsurvivable political conditions. Once one acknowledges these dissonances, it is then possible to reject them.

7. Rage, the crucible of transformation: "Ddiod Imi" by de_Clare (me)

[7.1] In 2015, I was invited to contribute to Shipwreck, an erotic fan fiction competition at Haight-Ashbury's The Booksmith, a niche literary retailer in San Francisco. Shipwreck is something of a blend between book club and crackfic writing competition and has recently published *Loose Lips* (2017), an anthology of previous winners.

[7.2] For the competition, the organizers select a book for all participants to read and each writer is randomly assigned a character for which they will write a piece of erotic fiction. Ironically, I was originally invited to write for A Song of Ice and Fire, but realizing that I would need to read several thousand pages in a very short time, I deferred to the next competition: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. To my chagrin, I was assigned the character of Bill the Lizard. Remember him? No? Exactly. Having read the novel and done some research, however, I realized that Bill might be read as a symbol of the oppressed underclass—a chimney sweep whom the local big man, The Dodo, orders to pull oversized

monster Alice through a chimney and subsequently comes to a tragic end. This was in the run-up to the 2016 election, and I was already uncomfortably aware of the connection between global oligarchy and street Nazis coming out of the woodwork. For this reason, I decided to write an explicit political polemic that explores the revolutionary potential of storytelling.

[7.3] My story is set during the 1839 Newport Rising, a Welsh democratic revolt that was violently suppressed by the English military. Following the rejection in Parliament of the Chartist People's Charter, which demanded universal suffrage and more equitable democratic systems, an estimated 10,000 sympathizers demonstrated in Newport, Wales. Military personnel opened fire on the crowds and the leaders were sentenced to hanging for high treason (O'Brien 1995). The story opens with a dramatization of the chaotic moments leading up to the slaughter:

> [7.4] "Break the tollhouse gate!—Rebekah—let your children possess the gate of those who oppress us!"
>
> [7.5] Mine owners slink into their pits, and the English priest who preaches obedient slaves hides in a pond.—Twenty thousand cascade as the black mountain of coal slurry that devoured Aberfan—the Republic of Social Justice is at hand!

[7.6] The toll house gates, the mines, and the English church all represent structures that have historically subjugated Welsh people under English imperialism. Toll houses charged extortionate fees for the use of roads, which led to the Rebecca Riots, a series of attacks by Welsh tenant farmers between 1839 and 1843 (Rees 2011). The riots get their name from the Biblical book of Genesis, where Rebekah calls for her people to "possess the gates of those who hate them" (Gn. 24:60). Interestingly, the farmers—mainly men—disguised themselves as women during the riots (Rees 2011). Attacking the toll houses is not unlike the strategic smashing of corporate bank windows during the Occupy protests.

[7.7] The "us" that is the collective speaking voice represents the sense of collective purpose in protests. The mountain of coal slurry refers, anachronistically but relevantly, to Aberfan, perhaps the most lethal disaster in coal mining history. In 1966, a mountain of coal slurry collapsed, instantly consuming the Welsh town of Aberfan and killing 134 people, mostly schoolchildren (Turner 1976). The mountain of coal creates its negative—a mountain of rage. Though no individual can stand up to the overwhelming force of occupation, the people united might collectively overwhelm it.

[7.8] Susan Stryker's foundational text for transgender theory (1994) uses the encounter between the creature and his creator from Mary Shelley's Frankenstein as a symbol for the rage felt by trans people as a result of overwhelmingly oppressive conditions: "Transgender rage is a queer fury, an emotional response to conditions in which it becomes imperative to take up, for the sake of one's own continued survival as a subject, a set of practices that precipitates one's exclusion from a naturalized order of existence that seeks to maintain itself as the only possible basis for being a subject" (254).

[7.9] Though explicated within often-detached theoretical vocabularies, transgender rage arises from a fundamental and neverending struggle for survival. The subjective survival as a legible transgender subject against the demand for legibility within binary gender is inextricable from their material consequences. Bluntly: trans people get murdered for being trans. This rage may feel all-consuming, but it is also the impetus for new possibilities: "By mobilizing gendered identities and rendering them provisional, open to strategic development and occupation, this rage enables the establishment of subjects in new modes, regulated by different codes of intelligibility…Through the operation of rage, the stigma itself becomes the source of transformative power" (Stryker 1994). The transformative power of transgender rage not only redefines gender but dismantles the structures that define them and makes possible the assemblage of new possibilities.

[7.10] The development of romantic relationships, or shipping, is a staple genre in fan fiction. Woledge sees utopian potential in this, as the dramatization of overcoming differences (2006). At the same time, shipping is perhaps the most visible site of rage in fan discourse, signaled by the ubiquity of shipping wars. Though shipping can present a site of goodnatured discussion, it can also escalate to flaming and vitriol over the legitimacy of different romantic relationships. While I can't wholly unpack this phenomenon, I suspect that it partially originates in fandom's primordial feeling of disappointment—even rage—that mass media consistently fails to meet our expectations or reflect our realities. Much of this rage then unfortunately runs in the direction of inertia—downhill, to those whose desires are less legitimized. This seeming contradiction—between rage and shipping—is more like a dialectical relationship, where rage is the crucible in which old structures are deconstructed and shipping represents the new assemblages tested therein.

[7.11] In "Ddiod Imi," the rage of political uprising is the occasion for the reconfiguration of class differences. After the failed uprising, two young chartist sympathizers—George, a transmasculine English-educated student, and Glyn, a working-class ironsmith—are imprisoned and awaiting hanging. Though they both participated in the revolt, their differing class positionalities cause conflict:

> [7.12] "And they call you educated," the ironworker scoffed, patting his pockets for phantom fags.
>
> [7.13] Ignoring him, the scholar paced. "Yes, and a fine waste that was. It's great to fill your head with liberal ideas, but try to implement them and they shoot at you."
>
> [7.14] Doffing his cap, the ironworker scratched his smoke-stained hair. "You think you're the first to conscript poor folk for the revolution? When I was a boy, I drenched an apron in cow's blood with the strikers—we raised the red flag for freedom. Then the English hanged an innocent boy like a side of veal."

[7.15] The principles of equality that motivated the revolt are belied in the inequalities within the movement. The scholar, who has benefited from English imperialism through elite education, is shocked that implementing the democratic ideals he has learned at university

has been met with hostility. The ironsmith, who has witnessed reprisals against the poor, sees the uprising as another failed elite power game.

[7.16] However, in their shared condition of captivity, narrative becomes a point from which they produce a shared understanding. The ironsmith recalls a tale he learned from his grandmother as a child:

> [7.17] In a county called Wonderland, which is very different from Wales, because animals could talk—but not so different because they'd usually talk down on ya—there was a poor chimney sweep named Bill, who happened to be a lizard—One sultry day, the officious White Rabbit said, "Sirrah, extrude this monster from my chimney." Now, lizards have the same reservation about monsters as you or me, but the rabbit was the queen's herald, so Bill obeyed with an, "at your service, guv'nor."
>
> [7.18] Bill doffed his cotton shirt and buffed it up the shaft—and that monster gave him such a kick with her boot-blacked heel that he shot into the sky. Higher and higher, past the tittering treetops, and a pigeon clucking about serpents, and he'd be nought but lizard soup on impact. But suddenly a petit fours inscribed with a neat, pink "Eat Me" buzzed past on sugar, gossamer wings. With one flick of his clever tongue, he plucked that sweetie from the sky and ate it like prayer. Bill's neck and legs distended, taffy-like, and he thought, "Cor, the bearded Lizard Jehovah ain't so big."
>
> [7.19] Bill grew so large, he sat amongst the stars, who sang: "You may wish upon a star—but you won't get very far." Yet still, Bill swelled until the stars sank iron-hot into his scales, and he straddled all that was—which was saddle-shaped, you know—GREAT YESI MAWR!"
>
> [7.20] Giddy from either drink or martyrdom, the heretofore wilting scholar, tiger-like, pinned Glyn to the dirt, straddling his chest, "So this is the divine design?" Handily reversing the pin, Glyn declared from his mount, "It's a new republic—workers on top!" then kissed George rough, with bitter aniseed breath, planting a scarlet flag in his throat.

[7.21] Bill's sudden growth spurt, with the new embodied sensations and experiences this makes available, illustrates the new possibilities for embodied subjectivity imagined in Stryker. It also becomes the occasion for the two men to meet as bodies in a way that was not possible from abstract positions of power. The Ironsmith and the Student become George and Glyn as they grapple in erotic power-exchange: "Taking no quarter, tearing cotton for no draw and quarter, George canvassed bare throatskin scrubbed clean as Whitsunday and Glyn's swollen finger joints strummed George's nub and fissure. Chord of diminished sigh and fall, tumbling down, down…"

[7.22] Their roughhousing transforms into kisses and genital play and, for those reading closely, George's "nub and fissure" signal nontraditional gender embodiment and Glyn's "swollen finger joints" suggest premature arthritis, though both invite multiple projections.

Their bodily subjectivities reveal complex, intersectional identities within their society, belying their heretofore simplistic arrangement within hegemonic class categories.

[7.23] Rage is a potent force. It rips the casing off of alienation, exposing its gears-and-guts and reconfiguring its circuits. The rage of shipping wars parallels the initial conflict between George and Glyn over power differences. However, through shared erotic actions—uprising, storytelling, sex—their differences are not necessarily transcended but become the impetus for more visionary changes to the world in which they inhabit. Telling the story actualizes the society in which they might experience each other more fully. Shipping becomes a radical practice, not necessarily for what we ship but for the context that makes certain forms of relating possible and the quality of these feelings.

[7.24] So far, we have discussed how the relief of naming dysphoria leads to a transformative rage. The final section explores how the collective project of expropriating and reconstructing oppressive structures produces euphoria, the synergistic moments in which consonance is possible.

8. The euphoric body politic: *The Flax Seed* by R. Schultz

[8.1] Our final narrative takes us both forward and back in time. *The Flax Seed* is a novel-length (or 132,415 kb-length, for those who remember those days) *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001) fan fiction work written by R. Schultz in 2003. The author's summary hooks the reader with an enticing contradiction:

> [8.2] When VOYAGER burst back into Federation space, it brought with it the lovely and unique Seven of Nine, once Tertiary Adjunct to Unimatrix Zero. It is now a quarter of a century later. Seven of Nine is still beautiful and still appears to be in her mid-twenties. She has freedom and wealth, lovers and beauty, an analytical mind and a super luminal grace when she walks. She lacks nothing except a reason to live. (Schultz 2003)

[8.3] Following a suicide attempt, Seven of Nine attends court-mandated psychotherapy with Deanna Troi, former ship's counselor from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–94). The story is a self-actualization narrative in which Seven of Nine acknowledges her own alienation from what should have defined success and happiness: wealth, traditional beauty, and sexual plenty. Milestones in her healing are the admission that women are her erotic center and, eventually, facing how her alienation has prevented her from experiencing authentic relationships. At the midpoint of the story, Seven decides to stop looking for a quick therapeutic fix and takes a radical departure from her previous life.

[8.4] As part of her therapy, Counselor Troi takes Seven to visit an autonomous women's collective:

> [8.5] She'd never been to the Women's House before. Once called the Winchester House, it was an awe-inspiring concoction of chaos and organization. Once more it was moving in its original direction of perpetual construction. The wife of a

> man named Colt thought the eternal building of the structure would assuage the ghosts of those slain by Colt's firearms. Now it was always being built on to because the women needed the enclosed and not-so-enclosed spaces.
>
> [8.6]…The house was built in a never-ending pattern of cells, much like some creatures that built their shells larger as they grew larger. Where the cells met was where you found things like doors that opened into walls, and stairs that went up to a solid ceiling.
>
> [8.7]Some rooms were made into homes, some stood empty, some were tiny nooks or large chambers with eight or twelve walls. There were many balconies, sun decks, air wells and women. Especially women.
>
> [8.8]Some young, some old, some with children, some obviously lesbian, even a few of the vanishingly few who could not tolerate new cloned parts. Two humans in shorts passed us, and I knew what Seven did. Each had a Cyborg leg. Seven about choked to see the two Cyborged females climb past us on the stairs.
>
> [8.9]The females of forty interstellar races met here. Some were naked, some were over- dressed, some lean, some fat, some lonely, some with lovers in hand. Battered wives came here, for no males were allowed. House computer also had on file abusive girlfriends and wives. This place was a refuge.

[8.10] The Women's House is based on the actual Winchester Mystery House in San Jose; California and Troi's description is accurate. The Winchester Mansion was constructed with the fortune of William Wirt Winchester, a Civil War arms manufacturer. After the death of her husband, Sarah Winchester believed she was being haunted by the ghosts of those who had been killed by her husband's firearms. She consulted a psychic medium, who said the ghosts wanted her to build onto her house by complex, and sometimes architecturally unsound, designs (May 1993). (This may have also been a nineteenth-century strategy for cultivating customer loyalty.) Ironically, spending became the means of assuaging a guilty conscience made wealthy by a fusing of militarism and capital. For this reason, the power of the story involves taking a structure created by capitalist inequalities (and the military-industrial complex) and instead using it as a system of feminist empowerment and collectivism. This parallels the possibility of self-consonance offered by naming and rejecting dysphoric conditions.

[8.11] Trans academic Bobby Noble (2012) describes his bodily changes not as a radical shift from one hermetic gender category into another but as "grafting."

> [8.12] This picture of transed bodies as grafted, where one materialization is haunted by the other, as opposed to crossing or exiting, also allows me to articulate the radical dependencies that these identities (lesbian and trans guy or, to update the lexicon, female masculinity and transsexual masculinity) have for me but also with each other historically (the invert + the lesbian + the transsexual). (253)

[8.13] Noble is searching for a metaphor to describe the apparent dissonance between his history and continuing identification as a lesbian with his embodied reality as a "transsexual man" with a queer female partner. This is relevant for trans people as we disrupt the temporal and ontological unity of liberal personhood—that one always and already inhabits a set constellation of gendered and sexual categories—as it exposes the ruptures and contradictions within identity categories and finds new forms of authenticity within the interstices. This is important for the political project of disrupting the universal subjectivity of whiteness and masculinity, which is the goal of Noble's embodied practices and selfhood but can also be applied to imagining new forms of political self and subjectivity. This move is anticipated in the move from bodies to text within the article: "This is the body not as foundation but as archive; this is the same chest, the same body, the same. Flesh I have always known, only now its text is totally different" (253).

[8.14] The move from body to text must be a considered one, as trans bodies are too often appropriated into cultural texts—sometimes to posit that our embodiments constitute the end of history. However, when considered within political programs that are attentive to the agency of trans people and the multivocality of the trans community, this can be a useful lens for imagining and repurposing the structures and systems of the body politic. The body as archive is (not incidentally) reminiscent of Abigail Derecho's foundational theoretical paradigm for transformative works, which posits an archival theory of literature. The text is not an original with derivations but rather is composed of the many artifacts within its archive (2006). In *The Flax Seed,* the archive represents a narrative strategy with political potential.

[8.15] "Haunting" in Schultz is particularly relevant as haunting represents the historical impetus for the mansion's construction. Perhaps the haunting might be read as pangs of guilt for participation in an unjust system and yet at the same time signifies the failure to acknowledge the source of this guilt and therefore to produce consonant solutions. The ghosts, whether real or a projection of an internal struggle, continued to haunt Sarah Winchester, who was continually building onto the mansion until her death. However, *The Flax Seed* links the haunting to its root causes in capitalism and patriarchy, with the mansion reshaped into an autonomous, intersectional space. The consonance of united cause and response is euphoric; it resolves the dilemma that produced the mansion. But euphoria is not a fixed point. The Women's House is constantly growing, "like some creatures that build their shells as they get larger"—it is a space that gives marginalized people the opportunity to actualize themselves. And so euphoria operates synergistically, urging one to greater opportunities for consonance.

[8.16] The consonance sought by the dysphoric body politic is sought through the relief of naming the dissonance and rage against the structures which produce it. The expropriation and repurposing of these structures is euphoria. As seen in Bobby Noble's concept of a "grafted body," euphoria is not the successful erasure of history nor the production of complete alterity. It is only legible and possible with reference to the past. Euphoria and dysphoria, therefore, might be understood dialectically, as a warning dissonance and sought-after consonance. The dysphoric journey is asymptotic.

9. Seizing the means of imagination

[9.1] At its core, this essay is a call to action. I've excavated my experiences as a trans person to give fandom the tools to deepen its own search for consonance. My goal has been to problematize the conventions by which fans represent and consume the idea of fulfillment. Our most common tropes leave intact the systems that produce the impulse to escape them. So how might we, as artists and readers, seek out this feeling of fulfillment in a practical sense?

[9.2] First, we must reject the idea of our powerlessness. We are accustomed to the compartmentalization of political imagination by elites, but elites have disproportionately manufactured the climate emergency and the destabilization of democracy. It is therefore up to the rest of us to take stock of our individual and collective scope of action. We must also reject the toxic ideas that art is not a political labor and that transformative works are not art. Art is what we make of it. Having sloughed off the disempowering ideologies which do not serve, it is possible to comprehend one's power.

[9.3] Second, we must create a dialogue between embodied knowledge and meaning. The three affects described under the heading of dysphoria—relief, rage, and euphoria—are heuristics pointing one toward greater embodied knowledge. However, affects are ethically neutral; for example, mass shooters most likely feel a combination of them. This is why affect must be informed by learning and listening. Naming my own feelings of dissonance became possible when I was able to make sense of my emotions by listening to other trans people and reading theory. I encourage everyone to become more educated about trans issues, and the theoretical texts named in this essay are already a good start. At the same time, one might personalize these feelings by identifying and learning more about one's own marginalized identities. Most of us share some intersection of oppression based on our bodies, by gender, size, race, class, disability, sexuality, or some other. Anti-oppression scholarship in any of these areas gives names for the dissonances already felt and processed by our bodies. They also provide frameworks for reevaluating fan fiction narratives for problematic patterns they can reproduce.

[9.4] Rage, for many of us, requires unlearning internalized and ubiquitous tone policing. Many of us learn preconscious anger suppression as part of gender socialization. Even more of us learn to direct our feelings of rage away from their sources, especially when their sources hold a monopoly on legal use of force. However, if we acknowledge our rage, this can motivate us to deconstruct its causes and point us toward new possibilities. I've acknowledged the rage I feel at mass media for the lack of progress it's made in justice discourse since my childhood. Seeing this, I'm motivated to write stories that fulfill my desire for greater equity. Perhaps other fans identify with this feeling and can reflect it in fiction. The conventions of our medium are not fatally compromised—rather, they dare us to dream bigger.

[9.5] Which brings me to euphoria. Euphoria is not a place of arrival, if such a place exists. Rather, euphoria represents moments in which the productions of rage inspire feelings of consonance. And these euphoric moments are so powerful that they produce momentum, a

desire for greater self-harmony. I had euphoric moments when I pursued gender confirmation care, but now this quality of euphoria comes through moments of collective transformation. This happens as an activist, but the vision for my activism comes from fiction. This is the crux of my argument—that fiction gives us a foretaste of what we're striving for. And fan fiction even more so because we are already engaged in the labor of reimagining and making new. Really imagining a transformed society may seem like an overwhelming responsibility, but it also gives us access to fulfillment that is otherwise impossible. When we seize the means of imagination, we widen the scope of fulfillment itself.

[9.6] Let's imagine a coffee shop AU fan fiction story through this lens. A worker's collective coffee shop is being illegally evicted from its rent-controlled commercial space because the landlord wants to sell to real estate developers. The workers are laden with student debts, have no safety nets, aren't eligible for unemployment, and are facing actual homelessness. They have no choice but to fight back. They unionize and join a living wage strike. The labor strike joins the student climate strikes and suddenly there's mass mobilization for a general strike. It's 2020, and the strike suddenly puts a massive social and economic overhaul on the political agenda. Ilhan Omar becomes the first female and Muslim US president, with a strong progressive mandate. Suddenly, the nation is mobilizing en masse for social and ecological justice: zero emissions, free university education, universal public health care, a universal basic income, and expropriative wealth redistribution. Tenants' rights are bolstered in every jurisdiction, so the coffee shop keeps its lease.

[9.7] Suddenly, it's as if a burden slips off—one that everyone had been carrying for so long that they'd assumed that it was a part of their bodies. But it had always been Other, a parasite that fed on their labors and grew fatter with their increasing insecurity. It slips off, wriggling and obscene as a leech. Suddenly, the vista of life opens to a spaciousness that had been unimaginable. Most of the workers quit the coffee shop to pursue what they'd always wanted—art, permaculture, service work in the global South, or just chilling out and taking a well-deserved opportunity to process the trauma that was Trump and late capitalism. Some stay at the coffee shop, realizing that without the coercion and devaluation of their labor, working with people and making latte art is actually fun. And this is all crystallized in the developing relationship of two queer coworkers. Under the old regime, they had a preconscious terror of acknowledging their feelings. Suddenly, they can name the old fears—discrimination, disinheritance, more precarity. And from their newfound place of security, they finally have cathartic queer sex. It starts with the formulaic one-two-three fingers, but as touches becomes playful, poignant, contemplative, there's a quality of embodied intimacy that is too new for words. But it's real. More real than anything they'd experienced before…

[9.8] It feels good to dream.

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Theory

Who writes Harry Potter fan fiction? Passionate detachment, "zooming out," and fan fiction paratexts on AO3

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Who reads and writes fan fiction—and why—has long been a central concern of fan studies. Indeed, many of the foundational works in the field of fan studies aim to answer this question. These early studies set a paradigm for our understanding of who makes up fan fiction–centered communities nearly thirty years ago; however, it is clear that the paradigm is now outdated. To my knowledge, there are no wide-scale academic studies of how fan fiction authors identify themselves in online profiles, authors' notes, and other self-descriptive texts, although some fans have produced statistics. Rather, our understandings of fan fiction–centered communities instead rest on our own embedded experiences as fans. While our experiences are valuable, recent work has made it clear that focusing solely on our embedded perspectives may exclude a number of voices, experiences, and viewpoints from scholarly work. This article presents the results of a qualitative study that examines how fan fiction authors described themselves in the paratexts of 1,939 Harry Potter fan fiction works posted to Archive of Our Own (AO3)—over 1 percent of the Harry Potter fan fiction posted to AO3 at the time of the study. It aims to indicate demographic trends within the Harry Potter fandom, identify groups of fans who may have been elided from fan studies' core discourse, discuss why who writes fan fiction matters, and uncover future areas of research concern.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Age; Gender; Location; Sexuality

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Who reads and writes fan fiction—and why—has long been a central concern of fan studies. Many of the foundational works in the field of fan studies aim to answer these questions, including Bacon-Smith's (1992) *Enterprising Women*, Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* ([1992] 2013), Penley's "Brownian Motion" (1991), and Russ's "Pornography by Women, for Women, with Love" ([1985] 2014). These early works depicted fan fiction to be the domain

of women—women who until recently have most commonly been depicted as white, straight, cisgender, middle-class, adult, and Anglophone (see, e.g., Busse and Lothian 2018; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Scott 2013; Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007; Stanfill 2011) (note 1). This understanding of who produces and consumes fan fiction has fundamentally influenced how we conceive of fan fiction itself, including its genres, structures, contexts, functions, and aims.

[1.2] Nonetheless, there has been increasing acknowledgement that this stereotypical female fan figure is, perhaps, outdated. As reading and writing fan fiction have become more mainstream, fandoms' demographics have shifted (Barnes 2015; Coppa 2006; Hellekson and Busse 2006), yet we know very little about who is reading and writing fan fiction online today. Researchers like Click et al. (2018) suggest that fan studies "has much to gain by looking at the vast amount of materials circulating freely online" (442), while Barnes (2015) argues that "there is a need for broader research that investigates the cultural demographics of fan fiction writers" (75). Indeed, fans' identities are of interest not only in and of themselves but also because fan fiction's content, modes of circulation, structures, communities, and sociopolitical functions are inflected by fans' locations and identities. The work that fan fiction does with popular texts, the networks surrounding it, and the systems of representation bound up in and bounding it are all inflected by who produces and consumes it, just as individuals, in turn, are affected by the fan fiction they read.

[1.3] This article presents the results of a wide-scale qualitative study of fans' demographic information, as shared in the paratexts of 1,939 Harry Potter fan fiction works posted to Archive of Our Own (AO3). While the study is limited to one fandom and one archive, it nonetheless broadens our understanding of who engages with fan fiction. The findings suggest, in particular, that the queerness of the Harry Potter fan community is more widespread and diverse than previously estimated and thus ought to be more widely acknowledged in future research.

2. Who reads and writes fan fiction? An overview of existing research

[2.1] Early American (note 2) studies of fan fiction focused on zine culture (e.g., Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins [1992] 2013; Penley 1991; Russ [1985] 2014; see also Coppa 2006) and "overwhelmingly focused on female fans, often suggesting that fan culture functioned as both a feminine and a feminist space" (Click and Scott 2018, 1) (note 3). Such studies implicitly or explicitly characterized fan fiction as composed and shared within communities of adult, cisgender, straight, "middle-class, educated, liberal, English-speaking, white North American women" (Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007, 104). The similarities between the women in these communities were implied to be perpetuated by the communities' invitation-only status (Hellekson and Busse 2006; Bacon-Smith 1992).

[2.2] However, fandom's shift online has challenged this stereotype. Not only have scholars admitted that "the initial focus on women as fans resulted in some hasty and easy generalizations" (Scott 2013, ixx) but reading and writing fan fiction have also become more mainstream activities (Barnes 2015, 74). As Hellekson and Busse (2006) have suggested, the digitalization of fan fiction has diversified and democratized fan fiction–centered

communities, making them more accessible to all fans despite their ages, financial means, ethnicities, nationalities, locations, linguistic knowledge, sexualities, and genders. Nonetheless, fan communities' preference for anonymity (Brennan 2014; Hellekson and Busse 2006), combined with the popularity of qualitative, self-referential methods in fan studies (Barnes 2015; Click et al. 2018; Hills 2012), have ensured that we know very little about who actually produces and consumes fan fiction today.

[2.3] Additionally, fandom's move online and the concomitant diversification of the fans participating in fan fiction communities have resulted in some shifts in these communities' priorities. These have included bottom-up moves to make slash fan fiction—fan fiction depicting homosexual relationships—less objectifying of homosexual men (Busse and Lothian 2014) and to make people of color more visible (Fowler 2019; Wanzo 2015). However, practices of gatekeeping have not entirely disappeared and can quickly "slip into toxicity…[and] transform communities into hostile spaces, especially for fans or characters that are traditionally Othered or marginalized" (Walton 2018, 239), leading to arguments, ostracism, and siloization (Hills 2002, 1). As Brennan (2014) and Walton (2018) have argued, marginalization within fandoms is very often a matter of degree—groups marginalized outside a given fan community may nonetheless be a majority within that community, and they may themselves exclude or malign others. As such, while fan fiction–centered online communities at times act as a space for cisgender women to explore a female heterosexuality that objectifies (gay) men (Brennan 2014; Zubernis and Larsen 2012), for others, it is a space in which fans can explore nonmajority perspectives and experiences (Brennan 2014; Brough and Shrestova 2012; Busse and Lothian 2018; Driscoll 2006; Duggan 2017a; Hampton 2015; Russo 2013, 2018; Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007; Willis 2006).

[2.4] Resultantly, there has been a marked increase in qualitative work examining the diversification of fandom since its move online, including work discussing who has been marginalized both within online fandoms and by fan studies. Hellekson and Busse (2006, 13), for example, have drawn attention to "ever-younger fans who previously would not have had access to fannish culture" and to those whose financial resources would not have stretched to allow them to take part in conventions or purchase zines. Along with a number of other scholars, they have also drawn attention to the increasing transnationalization of fandom (Chin and Morimoto 2013; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013; Morimoto 2018; Williams 2012) and, with it, increasing linguistic diversity within and across fan communities (Chin and Morimoto 2013; Duggan and Dahl 2019; Morimoto 2018). Scholars have also drawn limited attention to the varied sexualities and gender identities of fans (Brennan 2014; Busse and Lothian 2018; Driscoll 2006; MacDonald 2006; Russo 2013, 2018; Willis 2006), as well as their varied ethnic and racial identities (De Kosnik and carrington 2019; Fowler 2019; Gatson and Reid 2012; Stanfill 2011, 2018; Thomas 2019; Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016; Wanzo 2015). This research has brought the normative figure of the fan into question, but further research examining what traits can be considered (non)normative or majority/minority within various fan communities is required. More than anything else, these recent qualitative studies have made it clear that the idea that fans who produce and consume fan fiction are mostly ciswomen, white, straight, English-speaking and living in Anglophone-majority countries, middle-class, and higher educated

should be questioned.

[2.5] One of the fandoms that has been most noted by scholars to be concerned with social justice issues is the Harry Potter fandom. While the books themselves, despite their seeming celebration of difference and championing of diversity, problematically champion white, straight, and able bodies (Duggan 2019; Horne 2010; Pugh 2011; Pugh and Wallace 2006, 2008; Rana 2011; Thomas 2019), a majority of acafans have argued that the online fandom is a space in which reparative readings are emphasized and social justice championed (Duggan 2017a, 2019; Fowler 2019; Tosenberger 2008a, 2008b; Willis 2006)—and sometimes translated into real-world activism (Brough and Shresthova 2012; Hinck 2012; Jenkins 2012a; Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2012). Of course, groups do exist who insist upon the series' whiteness and heteronormativity, and discrimination against minority fans certainly occurs (Fowler 2019; Thomas 2019; Walton 2018); however, the Harry Potter fandom is nonetheless one in which queer subtexts are actualized (Duggan 2017b, 2019; Fowler 2019; MacDonald 2006; Tosenberger 2008a, 2008b; Willis 2006), in which critical race concerns are increasingly central (Gilliland 2016; Seymour 2018), and in which intersectional concerns are addressed (Fowler 2019). Due to the tensions that exist within the fandom and between the commercially produced texts and their fannish interpretations, the makeup of this fandom is particularly intriguing, but while it has been made clear through various studies that minorities are a real presence within the fandom (MacDonald 2006; Thomas 2019; Willis 2006), how Harry Potter fan fiction writers and readers identify remains a mystery.

3. Zooming out

[3.1] One theorist in particular shaped our understanding of how fan scholars should do fan studies: Henry Jenkins. He is credited with coining the term *acafan* to refer to academics who are themselves fans and who use their "subcultural knowledge" to inform their academic work (Jenkins, Rand, and Hellekson 2011). The term prioritizes the first-person, the immersive, the experiential, and the close because these are "presumed to combine scholarly practice with depth, detail and rigor of fan knowledge" (Hills 2012, 15; see also Geertz 1973; Love 2015) and to allow us to write in sympathy with our research subjects (Click et al. 2018; Jenkins [1992] 2013; Scott 2013). As such, (auto)ethnographic studies relying on "qualitative analysis and cultural immersion" (Click et al. 2018, 441) and small-scale case studies, in which the experiences of a group of fans are closely examined, are favored methodologies (Barnes 2015) (note 4).

[3.2] However, overreliance on such approaches has garnered some criticism. Notably, Hills (2002), Scott (2013), and Duffett (2013) have expressed concern that we acafans use the "imagined subjectivity of fandom" to romanticize fans' "'affect,' 'love,' or 'excessive positioning'" (Hills 2002, 15). This has resulted in a "rather dismaying short-sightedness" (Hills 2002, 15), making us "blind…to certain aspects of the community" (Click et al. 2018, 440). Critiques emphasize that normative tendencies in the field perpetuate our finding of our own "mirrors" (Bishop 1990) in fan cultures; as Wanzo (2015) notes, the citationality of the concept of acafandom often conceals the practices and methods subsumed by the concept. She and a number of other scholars (Click and Scott 2018; Hills 2002, 2012; Sandvoss 2005)

have noted that we tend to focus on fans who are like ourselves and on the aspects of fandom we find most exciting. This means that who researches fandom and who fans are become conflated and coconstitutive in research, misrepresenting the fannish landscape. As Hills (2012, 21) convincingly argues,

> [3.3] The mirroring of specific fan identities in scholar-fandom is…a skewed, distorting mirror which threatens to render specific fandoms automatically canonical…whilst also marginalizing a massive range of [fans,] media fandoms, and material cultures.

[3.4] The experiential weight of attachment is the price paid for our widespread acceptance of the tenets of acafandom. As Love (2015) has argued, "stabilizing methods—with their suggestion of a neutral or unbiased view—have been seen as a form of violence [from the point of view of late-twentieth- and early twenty-first-century humanities]; however, we might also understand these methods as implying respect for our objects, since their aim is to keep open the possibility that one might be surprised or proven wrong" (84). Because most fan scholarship to date has relied heavily "on subjective analysis, personal experience, small sample sizes, and analysis of specific fandoms[,]…there is a paucity of research that provides quantitative…analysis (Barnes 2015, 80) and wider-scale considerations of fandom. For Barnes (2015) and Click et al. (2018), mixed-methods approaches that bring together quantitative methods with "discourse and/or (para)textual analysis" (442) could minimize bias in future research.

[3.5] There are precedents in critical theory that allow us to reconsider the value of distance. Foucault (1980, 81–82) argues that finding and bringing attention to subjugated knowledges is the key task of criticism. Haraway (1988) suggests that we must not only acknowledge our own "limited location and situated knowledge" (583) but also champion what she terms *passionate detachment* from our objects of study, that is, the seeking of "perspective from those points of view which can never be known in advance" (583–85). For her, this "requires more than acknowledged and self-critical partiality" (585)—it requires our considering the ways in which we provisionally map boundaries onto our objects of study as we come to know them over time and our acknowledgment that these mapping practices can encourage us to maintain a static understanding of the object of study (595). Similarly, Love (2015) argues that "the humanities view of social scientific objectification fails to recognize…the important role of objectification in cultivating self-reflexivity" (87). Distanciation allows us "access to the object as something other than a reflection of our own values" (84).

[3.6] Recent critical work has reconsidered the value of distanced reading. For example, Sedgwick (2002) argues against a hermeneutics of suspicion (cf. Ricoeur 1970), which she terms *paranoid reading*, in favor of *reparative readings,* which undertake "a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks" and seek to "extract…sustenance from the objects of culture" (150–51). Warner (2012) highlights the value of *uncritical reading*—aesthetic rather than political readings. Best and Marcus (2009) term most critical reading practices undertaken today *symptomatic reading*—readings that look for "what is hidden, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter" (1)—and argue that we should instead consider the surfaces of texts, including the surface "as materiality" (9), "as the intricate

verbal structure of any…text" (10), "as the location of patterns that exist within and across texts" (11), and "as literal meaning" (12). Moretti (2000) advocates for *distant reading*, a move to a wider scale of analysis that allows us to observe the mechanics of cultural systems and to pinpoint what might require close considerations in future. Finally, Love (2010) supports reading that is "close but not deep," suggesting that we should experiment with methods from the sciences and social sciences, "including mapping, systems theory, the statistical analysis of genres, [and] evolutionary modeling" (373). She argues that the humanities would benefit from the widespread use of methods made visible through, for example, digital humanities, statistics, and "data mining" (382), as distance allows us to consider the larger picture. All of these critics emphasize how dominant methodologies championing the deep and close consideration of texts through a particular theoretical lens, while valid, have limited the scope of scholarship. They advocate for a renewed interest in experimentation, transdisciplinary borrowing, and distanciation in order to refresh and update disciplinary discourses while nonetheless drawing attention to the limitations and affordances of varied methodological approaches.

[3.7] These critiques impel us to consider the ways in which dominant ways of seeing in fan studies as a field may have limited our consideration of other perspectives in the past. We do not have adequate knowledge of the groups who exist in fan fiction–centered communities because we have been so focused on looking from a particular perspective and with a given set of scholarly tools, assuming that these tools are adequate (Barnes 2015; Hills 2012). Let me be perfectly clear: my arguments for distanciation, passionate detachment, and objectification are not arguments *against* immersion, experience, and closeness. The two are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, fan studies as a field can only benefit from including both. Close reading, small-scale case studies, and (auto)ethnography are valuable, but they are not enough on their own. Wider-scale, distanced studies complement these more entrenched approaches, allowing us to be surprised or proven wrong in our assumptions.

[3.8] In fan studies, recent critiques call for scholars to "push past comfortable topics and techniques to places that feel less familiar and less certain" (Click and Scott 2018, 3). This does not mean that closeness must be altogether abandoned; however, we must expand our approaches. As regards representational politics, distanced approaches will also allow us to "expand the range of familiar identity categories explored in the field" (Click and Scott 2018, 4), becoming more aware of our own biases as regards race, gender, sexuality, class, and age (Click et al. 2018, 439). As we move forward, we must also question the essentialism bound up in identity categories and, particularly in our qualitative work, emphasize intersectional analyses that consider the ways in which different aspects of identity intertwine (Crenshaw 1989, 1994; Columbia Law School 2017). Furthermore, when considering subjects such as gender, sexuality, age, location, ethnicity, and (trans)nationality, we must also consider local differences, including differences within and between (counter)publics, in expressing belonging and identity. Categories that are used in one locale may not translate well to others. Identity categories, "as cultural forms and lived experiences, flow in ways that are historically restricted both legally and practically" (Gatson and Reid 2012, ¶ 1.2).

4. Method

[4.1] The present study aims to identify, analyze, and discuss the identity markers used by Harry Potter fans on AO3 and linked sites, and thus to shed light on the makeup of the fandom, in response to repeated calls for wide-scale data from the fan studies community (Barnes 2015; Busse and Lothian 2018; Click et al. 2018; Hills 2012). AO3 was chosen as an ideal source of data because it has become an archive for Harry Potter fan fiction originally posted on various fan fiction sites that have since been closed (e.g., Silver Snitch, Unknowable Room) and profiles that have since been deleted (e.g., from LiveJournal, Fanfiction.net, Skyehawke), as well as hosting stories that were only ever posted on AO3. As such, AO3 represents a cross-section of Harry Potter fan fiction produced and shared by various factions within the fandom, and the data can be considered to represent wider trends in the fandom.

[4.2] The data recorded include fans' self-articulated sexes/genders, sexualities, ages, locations, nationalities, ethnicities, and linguistic competencies. These data were coded by inductively determined emergent themes and were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach. Data were only gathered from publicly available sources, including authors' notes, AO3 profiles, and any linked paratextual profiles such as Twitter, Tumblr, LiveJournal, Dreamwidth, and Fanfiction.net profiles.

[4.3] While broad categories emerging from previous research on fans were used to determine which data to gather, the present study did not precategorize data. Instead, data were coded according to inductively determined emergent themes. Further qualitative information is included when it provides additional insight. Codes that emerged as significant within the data set were as follows:

- [4.4]Gender: *female, male, trans, (gender)queer/-fluid/nonbinary, genderless*
- Pronouns: *she, he, they, she/they, he/they, she/he, she/they/he, pronounless*
- Sexuality: *queer/gay, lesbian, pan-/bisexual, polyamorous, asexual, demisexual, aromantic*
- Location: *Great Britain; Mainland Europe; Scandinavia, incl. Iceland and Greenland; Asia; South America and the Caribbean; North America; Oceania; Middle East*
- Age/life stage: *teenager/school-aged, studying at university/20s, middle-aged/working, retired/"old"*

[4.5] Data were coded in this manner to avoid eliding differences within the studied population and to respect how fans chose to describe themselves. Nonetheless, it is important that I acknowledge here that any attempt to codify large groups of fans will to some degree flatten differences within those groups (¶ 3.8, above). Moreover, although the data are presented numerically, it is important to note that they do not lend themselves to statistical analysis. This is both because some profiles are used by multiple individuals and because many fan fiction paratexts remained blank. As such, these data can only be considered to represent wider trends of identity and self-representation in the fandom.

[4.6] At the time this study was undertaken, there were between 178,976 (October 18, 2018) and 189,890 (January 23, 2019) Harry Potter fan fiction works available on AO3. These stories vary in length, ranging from 1,500 to over 3 million words, as well as in genre and

focus. A cross-section of all types of Harry Potter–tagged fan fiction works was used. To ensure that the data were randomly sampled, length was the sole organizing factor used. Stories between 1,500 and 5,000 words in length were randomly included in the analysis.

[4.7] The study analyzed the paratexts of 1,939 stories. This represents approximately 1 percent of the Harry Potter stories available on AO3 during the data collection period. As I only have reading competence in Danish, English, French, German, Norwegian, and Swedish, 136 stories written in languages including but not limited to Chinese, Greek, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Russian, and Turkish were excluded from the final data set. A further three texts were excluded as irrelevant, as they were not fan fiction but were instead other types of text, such as film reviews. In total, 1,800 stories and 1,959 AO3 profiles were analyzed.

[4.8] Because the data were collected on a story-by-story rather than a profile-by-profile basis, some user profiles were included more than once in the data set. These have not been collated but have rather been treated as separate entries, as the information provided in authors' notes, including which external profiles were linked, differed between stories.

5. Gender and sexuality results (n = 265)

[5.1] Of the 1,800 fan fiction items in the data set, 265 included data relating to gender and/or sexuality. Some of these items included information for more than one person, for example, if there were multiple authors or if the story was gifted to a named fellow fan whose AO3 profile was linked. Coded data are grouped into three main categories: gender, pronouns, and sexuality.

[5.2] In the theme *gender*, items were coded as female, male, trans, genderqueer/nonbinary, and genderless. Those coded *female* include those who referred to themselves using the nouns "female," "girl," "woman," or similar. Those coded *male* include those who referred to themselves as "guy," "boy," and similar. Those coded *trans* include those who referred to themselves as "trans," "transsexual," "transgender," "ftm," "mtf," and similar. Those coded *nonbinary* include those who referred to themselves as "queer" or "LGBT" in general (note 5), as well as those using terms such as "genderfluid," "genderqueer," "nonbinary," "intersex," "2s," and so forth. Finally, those coded *genderless* used terms like "genderless" or "cassgender." A total of 127 individuals provided information regarding gender. The results are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Gender

Gender	Number	(%) of total items re: gender
Female	64	50.39
Nonbinary	27	21.26

Male	17	13.39
Trans	14	11.02
Genderless	5	3.94

[5.3] *Pronouns* were considered separately from gender, as gender identity does not always directly correlate with preferred pronouns. The total number of items coded as pronouns was 127. Results are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Pronouns

Preferred Pronoun(s)	Number	(%) of total items re: pronouns
She	94	74.02
He	17	13.39
They	6	4.72
She/They	4	3.15
She/He/They	2	1.57
"Pronounless"	2	1.57
He/They	1	0.79
She/He	1	0.79

[5.4] Items included in the theme *sexuality* were divided into seven categories: *queer/gay*, including identities expressed as "queer," "gay," "LGBT," or a rainbow flag emoji; *lesbian*, including "lesbian" or "wlw"; *pan-/bisexual*; *polyamorous*; *asexual*, including "purposefully celibate"; *demisexual*; and *aromantic*. The total number of items coded under sexuality is 124. Nobody identified as "straight" or "heterosexual."

Table 3. Sexuality

Sexuality	Number	(%) of total items re: sexuality

Queer/Gay	43	34.68
Pan-/Bisexual	36	29.03
Asexual	17	13.71
Lesbian	11	8.87
Polyamorous	10	8.06
Demisexual	4	3.23
Aromantic	3	2.42

6. Location results (n = 496)

[6.1] The vast majority of fans' profiles focused on location rather than nationality. A small number of fans listed prior locations or dual nationalities. The locations listed below are fans' most recently provided locations.

Table 4. Location

Location	Number	(%) of total items re: location
North America	296	59.7
Great Britain	84	16.9
Mainland Europe	50	10.1
Oceania	31	6.3
Scandinavia, incl. Iceland, Greenland	14	2.8
Asia	11	2.2
South America & Caribbean	9	1.8
Middle East	1	0.2

[6.2] Although such information was not given by those in other locations, seven North American fans of color specified their ethnicity: two African Americans, one Asian Canadian, two Asian Americans, and two Latinx Americans. A further five fans explicitly identified themselves as white, four of whom were North American.

7. Age/life stage results (n = 277)

[7.1] The category age/life stage included four subcategories: teenager/school-aged, studying at university/20s, middle-aged/working, and retired/old. Some profiles listed ages or decades outright (e.g., 30s), while others made mention of school life or deadlines (e.g., finals), professions (e.g., librarian), or kinship-related age markers (e.g., grandparent). Fans were allocated to the most likely age category based on qualitative information included in their profiles.

Table 5. Age/Life Stage

Age/Life Stage Reported	Number	(%) of total items re: age/life stage
Teenager/School-aged	55	19.8
Studying at university/20s	157	56.7
Middle-aged/working	59	21.3
Retired/old	6	0.2

8. Discussion

[8.1] While only a small proportion of fan fiction paratexts provided information regarding the themes analyzed, the data, viewed as a whole, allow us to infer a great deal about Harry Potter fans' identities. They also suggest a number of areas in which future research would be valuable. Nonetheless, the overwhelming trend was secrecy, and this is a limitation to the study.

[8.2] There are myriad possible reasons that fans may elide personal information from paratexts. First, fans are known to be private (Brennan 2014; Hellekson and Busse 2006) and thus may be disinclined to share information about themselves in publicly accessible forums. Second, AO3 may not be a space in which fans choose to share personal information. More, the spaces in which fans share personal information may differ between diasporas, some of which may be less accessible to scholars working out of the global west due to linguistic or cultural barriers, as is true in this instance. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, fans may use silence to protect themselves from hate speech, threats, and violence from both within and without fandom.

9. Gender and sexuality discussion

[9.1] This study suggests that gender identity in the Harry Potter fandom is much more diverse that previously acknowledged. First and foremost, fans who considered themselves to be female were only a majority by a very slim margin: just 50.39 percent of those who reported their genders considered themselves to be female. Nevertheless, 74.02 percent preferred she/her(s) pronouns. We can therefore infer that between half and three-quarters of these fans consider themselves to be female. Genderless, nonbinary, and trans individuals made up the second-largest group in the data set, with 36.22 percent of those who reported their genders falling into these categories. Noncis individuals can therefore be inferred to be a much larger proportion of the fandom than previously acknowledged. However, it must be noted that those who reported themselves as being queer may have intended only to signal sexual nonnormativity. Finally, 13.39 percent of those reporting their gender identified as male.

[9.2] Gender is the most discussed aspect of identity in media fan studies (Click et al. 2018), particularly as regards fan fiction (Bauer 2012; Busse 2013; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Jenkins [1992] 2013). This is in part because, as Busse (2013) has argued, "gender discrimination occurs on the level of the fan, the fan activity, and the fannish investment… Female fan interests are much more readily mocked…as is fan fiction, an activity more commonly ascribed to females" (Busse 2013, 75). As such, the passionate defense of fan fiction and its authors and readers has become central to the feminist project of media fan studies (Click and Scott 2018). The drawback to this is that the stereotypical figure of the female author of fan fiction has also become entrenched.

[9.3] Because gender and sexuality are intimately interwoven categories (Butler 2004, 2011), they are here presented together. A key gender norm that exposes the interweaving of gender and sexuality is heteronormativity—our assumed attraction to the opposite gender within a rigid gender binary (Butler 2004, 2011). While fan studies has commonly considered fan fiction and its surrounding communities queer-positive, it has nonetheless often done so while assuming that most producers and consumers of slash are both female and heterosexual (Brennan 2014; Busse and Lothian 2018; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Jenkins [1992] 2013; MacDonald 2006; Zubernis and Larsen 2012).

[9.4] Dissenting voices within the field have recently drawn attention to the lack of attention paid to lesbians (Russo 2013, 2018), gay men (Brennan 2014), and trans and nonbinary individuals (Busse and Lothian 2018), who have received very little scholarly attention (note 6). Some therefore argue that scholars' emphasis of straight, cisgender female fantasy in studies of fan fiction shuts down the very real sociopolitical importance of slash to many of its readers and writers (see, e.g., Brennan 2014; Driscoll 2006; MacDonald 2006; Woledge 2005). These scholars have emphasized the importance of slash for making visible desires and identities elided from commercially published texts (MacDonald 2006; Duggan 2017a; Willis 2006), while others have argued that slash actualizes ever-present queer subtexts (Duggan 2017b, 2019; Fowler 2019; Tosenberger 2008a, 2008b; Willis 2006), "is inextricably linked to meaning[, desire,] and identity," and acts as "a place where lived identities are forged" (Brennan 2014, 376; see also MacDonald 2006; Russo 2013, 2018;

Willis 2006).

[9.5] While the majority of fan scholars argue that the fandom not only gives in to but actively celebrates the queerness that is stifled in the commercially published Harry Potter texts (Duggan 2019; Tosenberger 2008a, 2008b; Willis 2006), there has been limited discussion of the queerness of the fans themselves, with focus primarily given to queer reading and writing practices (Duggan 2017a, 2017b; Tosenberger 2008a, 2008b) and only a few scholars discussing the importance of these queer communities to queer people (Willis 2006). This study reveals that more attention ought to be paid to queer fans.

[9.6] The data presented here reveal a number of interesting points of tension. For example, while only half of those who reported their genders identified as female, nearly three-quarters used she/her(s) pronouns. There are several possible reasons for the difference between reported gender and reported pronoun. The first is that those who are cisgender and report their preferred pronouns may take it as given that these pronouns clearly imply a gender, that is, that she/her(s) clearly indicates ciswomanhood. The second is that nonbinary individuals may continue to use the pronoun associated with their assigned sex for a variety of reasons—one fan included in this study indicated that she used female pronouns "for my mother," for example, while another indicated that it was "for simplicity." It must be noted that such statements were most common in non-North American western contexts, such as Mainland Europe, and may be associated with cultural differences in the discourses surrounding gender and in the use of gendered pronouns between languages (e.g., French versus English), as a gender-neutral pronoun and its use are not necessarily as widely accepted elsewhere as they are in Anglophone contexts, and indeed, the acceptance, use, and frequency of use of pronouns such as "xy" and "they" varies across and between communities, generations, and countries even where English is spoken. More, use of pronouns may also be politically motivated, especially in the many contexts globally—and increasingly in many European countries—where nonheteronormativity is suppressed, policed, or even punishable by law (note 7). It may also be that there are discrepancies between fans' online profiles: a fan may not have updated "her" AO3 profile as recently as "their" Tumblr profile, for example. A fan's gender identity may have shifted over time, or there may have been changes in the norms of reporting gender within the fan community. Finally, the predominance of the pronoun "she" as compared to the self-reported female gender may relate to earlier paratextual norms within the fandom. A great number of the texts on AO3 were copied verbatim from fan communities active in the early 2000s, such as LiveJournal, when the genders of fellow fans appear to have been more commonly assumed to be female. As such, a great number of these fan fiction works' paratexts refer to fellow fans as "she."

[9.7] Although it has been theorized by the fan studies community that there are more men and nonbinary individuals reading and writing fan fiction than has been acknowledged (Busse and Lothian 2018), most nonetheless assume that women are still the clear majority. This study suggests that fans' gender diversity has been underestimated and underacknowledged in scholarly work (note 8). It must be acknowledged that it is possible the high proportion of noncis/trans [36.22 percent] fans may be due to a desire within these minority groups to make themselves visible, particularly in light of the limited number of

fans who clearly designated their genders in their fan fictions' paratexts. However, it can also be argued that noncis/trans fans and men are more likely to avoid reporting their genders for fear of ostracization and discrimination (cf. Brennan 2014; Hills 2002; Walton 2018). Nonetheless, the proportion is large enough to suggest that much more attention ought to be paid to these fans in future. Male fans [13.39 percent] also deserve more attention. Indeed, many of those who identified themselves as men did so by defining themselves in opposition to the normative figure of the middle-aged female fan. That they felt the need to make this discursive move demonstrates their clear understanding of themselves as a minority group in this community.

[9.8] Notably, not one person who provided information regarding sexuality described themselves as straight. There are several possible reasons for this. One is that straight womanhood may be the assumed default, as it is in much of the literature cited above and as it is clearly understood to be by the fans discussed above. While references to marriage and parenthood were not considered in this study to be indicative of a given gender or sexuality, fans who mentioned being married or having children may have expected to be read as straight women. Secondly, minority individuals may be more inclined to share personal information in order to make their population visible to the larger fannish community as part of a sociopolitical project. However, the opposite is also true: minority individuals may be less likely to articulate their identities for fear of ostracization or abuse (cf. Brennan 2014; Hills 2002; Walton 2018). Finally, given the queerness of fan fiction communities (e.g., Busse and Lothian 2018; Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007), it may not be as acceptable to label oneself "straight" as, for example, "bisexual," even if one is predominantly attracted to the opposite gender. It may, in fact, be the norm in these spaces to imagine oneself to be on a queer spectrum rather than heterosexual (cf. centreoftheselights 2013). All these possibilities merit further scholarly attention.

[9.9] It is also important to note that some fans referred to themselves differently on different platforms—for example, as lesbian women in one space and as queer and genderfluid in another. Where this occurred, the most recently updated label was used. Possible reasons for variations include that different platforms encourage different labelling practices; for example, Hellekson (2009) argues that the digital platforms used by media fans allow the "performance of gendered, alternative, queered identity" (116). These discrepancies also emphasize that identity categories shift over time and may be politically or socially influenced. Moreover, they emphasize the role that fannish "cultures of anonymity" (Brennan 2014, 363; Hellekson and Busse 2006) can play in identity experimentation. There is no guarantee that fans are who they present themselves to be. Indeed, fan spaces may constitute a key space in which fans are able to experiment with identities they do not or cannot embody in other spaces, to fulfill a fantasy, to experiment with cross-identification, to try on imagined future identities, or to experience aspects of their imagined selves that are foreclosed or impossible in their real lives. Nonetheless, the ways in which fans describe themselves may gesture toward concerns central to their fan communities.

[9.10] Overall, the findings of this study suggest that communities producing and consuming Harry Potter fan fiction are queerer than previously theorized, with between 20 percent and 40 percent of fans included in the data identifying themselves as noncis/trans and the clear

majority identifying themselves as nonstraight, although it must be acknowledged that heteronormativity is often marked by silence, as is likely the case here. Nonetheless, as various scholars have suggested (Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007; Willis 2006), fan fiction–related fan communities are queer spaces. I here think of *queer* in the larger sense of the word, as an unstable term defined mainly by its "resistance to regimes of the normal" (Warner 1993, xxvi) or "antinormative project" (Sommerville 2007, 187) rather than simply as an umbrella term encompassing all nonheteronormative/nonbinary individuals (187). The Harry Potter fandom is a clearly antinormative space—or queerly "oriented" and queerly "orienting" (Ahmed 2006)—in which nonheteronormative fan fiction is extremely popular (Duggan 2017a, 2017b, 2019; Tosenberger 2008a, 2008b; Willis 2006) and which has championed the rights of the queer community, for example, through the *Protego* campaign of the Harry Potter Alliance, which aimed to make trans lives safer (Click and Scott 2018, 3). As such, this particular fandom may not only appeal to queer individuals (i.e., LGBTQ+) but also may also encourage those who participate in it to consider their orientations both inside and outside fan spaces and to be more accepting of difference.

10. Location, nationality, and ethnicity discussion

[10.1] Location was the most openly discussed identity marker among Harry Potter fans on AO3, with almost one-third of the fan fiction paratexts analyzed addressing this theme. The data suggest that the majority of the Harry Potter fans using AO3 are western: 95.8 percent of those who reported a location came from Mainland Europe, North America, Oceania, Scandinavia, or Great Britain. Few fans outside of the so-called global west provided information about themselves. However, my linguistic abilities limited my access to nonwestern profiles, which likely skewed these data.

[10.2] Fans living in certain countries may elide location information because AO3 is a notably queer space not only due to the large number of stories posted there portraying queer relationships but also because it seems to be a space frequented by a number of people who identify as queer (see section 9). We must remember that in many countries, individuals face severe social and legal penalties—up to and including death—for displaying nonheteronormative desires or identities. Even in the west, homophobic hate violence continues to be a problem (see note 7). This may discourage some fans from identifying their locations. Moreover, we must keep in mind the concomitance of location—both spatial and temporal—and identity articulation: our locations shape the identities available to us, politically, imaginatively, and linguistically, through discourse.

[10.3] There are also cultural differences in sharing information. Even between the groups who shared their locations, there were notable differences. For example, Anglophones seemed not only more likely to share their home country but to share their home region or city, with the clear assumption that the other fans using AO3 would know where the Bronx, Northumberland, or the Pacific Northwest are, while those from other western countries were more likely to suggest their location by identifying a wider geographical area, such as Mediterranean Europe or Scandinavia. It is clear, then, that there are differences in how fans conceive their geographical or cultural belonging as it is mapped onto space, in addition to which different fannish diasporas may have different privacy norms relating to, among other

things, government oversight or societal conventions regarding information sharing. Furthermore, some fans who do not have English as a first language may not wish to share their locations or nationalities due to fear of linguicism or xenophobia in fandoms, like this one, that center on English-language cultural objects. And, of course, that fans of color receive abuse in fan fiction communities and that fan fiction can incite racial conflict is well documented (e.g., Fazekas 2014; Fowler 2019; Thomas 2019), while whiteness is often considered to be transparent (e.g., Dyer [1997] 2017), and may be a factor in the relative silence of fans regarding race/ethnicity.

[10.4] As regards ethnicity, it is of note that only seven fans of color identified their ethnicities and all of them lived in North America. Of these, six also identified themselves as queer. A further five fans identified themselves as white, four of whom also identified that they lived in North America, and four of whom identified as queer. Explicit reference to ethnicity thus appears to be more expected in the North American queer milieu than in the other communities using AO3. Further research into this phenomenon would be welcome.

[10.5] While a number of those who were living in North America, Oceania, and Great Britain (Anglophone majority countries) indicated that they were immigrants or refugees, this was very rarely the case for those who lived in other areas. This is not only intriguing in terms of the assumption of fans' whiteness (Gatson and Reid 2012; Stanfill 2011, 2018; Wanzo 2015) but also in terms of thinking through the complex relationships between ethnicity, location, and nationality and how (un)expected it may be in various places and communities to explicitly mark one's place of origin, current location, refugee/immigrant status, or ethnicity.

[10.6] Readers are likely aware that fans' whiteness has been assumed in fan studies and popular culture until quite recently. Indeed, Stanfill (2011) calls whiteness "the unmarked category (marking others), the unexamined category (subjecting others to examination), and the norm (making others insufficient), the cumulative effect of which is privilege (and disadvantage for others)" (¶ 2.4). Walton (2018) argues that many of the largest Harry Potter fan websites "marginalize or exclude…people of color or members of the LGBTQ community" (233). Discrimination within the fandom may be one reason ethnicity is rarely referenced. More, it is clear that only some people of color in specific locations feel it important or safe to identify themselves as nonwhite. Again, location-specific sociopolitical concerns and cultural variance are likely behind such differences, but further research is required.

[10.7] The complicated relationships between location, nationality, and ethnicity, as well as the varying norms of articulating these aspects of identity, underscore the importance of intersectional (Crenshaw 1989, 1994; Columbia Law School 2017) approaches to the experience of identity categories. The data make clear that fans' experiences of and with ethnicities, including their discursive relationships to ethnicity, race, and nationality, differ depending on fans' own locations, nationalities, and ethnicities and are likely inflected by their own politics, education, social circles, and intersecting identity categories, among other factors.

11. Age/life stage discussion

[11.1] This study found that the majority of Harry Potter fans on AO3 are young: over half of those who listed an age or life stage (56.7 percent) were at university or in their twenties, while one-fifth (19.8 percent) were school-aged, that is, children or teenagers. This is consistent with the data collected by centreoftheselights (2013), who found that 63 percent of fans using both AO3 and Tumblr were twenty-four or under. Moreover, a great number of those coded in the over-nineteen age categories of this analysis indicated that they had first entered organized fandom as children or teenagers under the age of eighteen, with one fan reporting that she began reading and writing fan fiction online at eight years old and another indicating that she and a friend first started sharing fan fiction at age six. This mirrors trends in acafans' self-reporting (e.g., Jenkins 2012b).

[11.2] Most fan scholars appear to feel that fan fiction is written and consumed by adults (Bacon-Smith 1992; MacDonald 2006), with insistence on fans' adulthood often seeking to undermine discourses that seek to define the fan as immature or "infantile" (Busse 2013). To the contrary, scholars who work in education and children's literature tend to consider readers and writers of fan fiction as adolescents (Black 2008; Bond and Michelson 2008; Tosenberger 2008a; Wikström and Olin-Scheller 2011). Problematizing the matter of age even further, Walton (2018) argues that "what scholarship does exist regarding Potter [fan fiction] readership is generally more focused on teens than children…If anything, children seem to be assumed but understudied presences within these online spaces" (235; see also Hunting 2019). Indeed, age is one of the most openly policed identity categories in fan fiction–centered communities, with many sites barring those under eighteen from entering (although it must be noted that such age policies are easily circumvented). AO3's general age policy is that anyone thirteen and older can open an account; however, this is mitigated by local factors, such as the recently passed GDPR legislation in Europe, which prevents most EEA citizens under sixteen from opening an account (https://archiveofourown.org/tos). Moreover, research focusing on younger participants is ethically fraught and could cause legal and social difficulties for younger fans and the sites on which they are active; getting the required informed consents from both child fans and their parents is nigh impossible, as child fans often participate in fan spaces in secret. Hunting (2019) therefore accurately describes children as "often overlooked" in fan studies research (94).

[11.3] A further factor in sites' age policies is discomfort with child sexuality. Fan fiction is often openly sexual, and many researchers are keen to consider readers and writers of these stories as at least adolescent, if not adult (Duggan 2017b). Western societies tend to be uncomfortable with child sexuality and seek to police it through laws and restricted access to information (Kincaid 1992, 1998; Levine 2002). Commercially published texts for young people rarely present desire "in a manner designed to titillate," and while erotic fiction may be written about adolescents, "such works are usually not considered to be *for* teenagers" (Kokkola 2017, 93–94). Queer sex, in particular, is traditionally associated with pain and shame in commercially published texts for young people (Crisp 2009; Duggan 2017a; Flanagan 2010; Kokkola 2013; Trites 1998). It is thus likely due not only to laws such as ages of consent but also to adult discomfort regarding child sexuality, a sense of societal duty to safeguard children against sex, and the fear of being associated with pedophilia (Duggan

2017b) that the ages of fans are so policed. As Kokkola (2017, 93) argues,

> [11.4] Investments in maintaining the idea that teenagers [and children] are not sexual beings seem to be part of the larger cultural project aimed at preserving the notion of childhood innocence. This notion, with its onus on adults to care for and protect children, has had positive social outcomes…[but] children can also be disempowered by the notion that they are innocent.

[11.5] As a result of the complexities of adults' relationships with child sexuality as well as of operating websites accessible in countries in which ages of consent may differ, many sites require that participants be above the legal age of consent in their local contexts. But what this means can be contradictory and confusing, not least because consent is a fraught subject and different age regulations often apply to the act of sex than to accessing explicitly sexual media. Moreover, legal and social categories of age rarely function as desired—in the United States, for example, only one in five teenagers remains a virgin by eighteen (Kokkola 2017, 93).

[11.6] Furthermore, while this study appears to suggest that most Harry Potter fans are young, these results do not necessarily indicate the true proportions of age groups within the fandom; older fans may simply be less inclined to share personal information openly online, as they may be more enculturated in the fannish norm of anonymity (Brennan 2014; Hellekson and Busse 2006). Further studies regarding possible correlations between fans' ages and fandoms and their willingness to share information online would be beneficial. Moreover, we may need to consider new, less essentializing approaches to discussions of age in fandom, bringing fan studies into direct dialogue with age studies to highlight "the social constructedness of age norms, to fight discrimination on the basis of age, and to foster intergenerational understanding and dialogue" (Joosen 2017, 80). We must consider the "various personal differences [that] affect the way in which people experience a given age" (80), including intersectional considerations, such as how race, class, gender, and sexuality inflect children's perceived innocence (Beauvais 2017; Bernstein 2011; Dyer 2017; Joosen 2017). Fandom is a space in which children defy age norms by making them apparent through "deviations" (Joosen 2017, 82), and is thus a fruitful space for the exploration of child sexuality as well as the ways in which age norms are performed within and across the different spaces of our lives. We ought also to consider "children's voices and texts not in comparison with adult-authored texts *per se*, but rather in conversation with other texts that share generic or thematic traits" (Beauvais 2017, 270), as well as the intergenerational relationships that reading and writing fan fiction may foster (Tosenberger 2014).

12. Conclusions

[12.1] It is difficult to categorize fans by their profiles, as profiles are fictions of a single moment and changeable. Online fandom is not only ephemeral but various sites' policies as well as local political and legal considerations limit the freedom with which fans can describe themselves. Ways of constructing the self vacillate, fashions and possibilities may vary between platforms and local contexts, and understandings of the self shift. Nonetheless, and although I must emphasize that the majority of fans on AO3 do not provide demographic

information in their profiles and authors' notes, the findings presented here indicate trends in Harry Potter fandom and have important implications for future research.

[12.2] The present study reminds us that we must use theory and method conscientiously, borrowing varied and transdisciplinary approaches, in order to ensure balance and limit bias in our depictions of media fandom—and varied approaches have varied affordances and limitations. Acafans' intimacy with specific fan communities has afforded us in-depth understandings of fandom, but this intimacy comes with the price of self-selection and a limited perspective. The experiential weight of attachment we carry blinkers us, and continually close considerations may prevent us from being pleasantly surprised by fandom. As Love (2015) argues, objectification and distanciation cultivate self-reflexivity. This study shows how varied approaches to data collection and analysis can complement each other and, in particular, how wide-scale studies can make apparent biases or stereotypes that go unremarked within the field. Nonetheless, further studies exploring various fandoms' demographics or using different data collection methods would be welcome complements to the present study, as there are notable gaps and silences in the profile data here analyzed.

[12.3] The study nevertheless demonstrates why thinking about who writes fan fiction is important; it undermines stereotypes and challenges us to reconsider our conceptions of fandom, and it highlights that the content and functions of fan fiction are anchored to fans' locations, identity categories, and sociopolitical concerns. The work fan fiction does with canonical texts in community networks using systems of representation is inflected by who is writing and reading the fan fiction. This study suggests that we can learn from this and other fandoms about how to define "community" in transnational, digital spaces; about child and adolescent sexuality; about how children and adults interact; about the balance between expression, identity, and secrecy in public depictions of the self; about writing as a tool for self-fashioning and for expressing nonnormative and intersectional identities; and about the different norms of expression between locations and (counter)publics. Both close and distanced follow-up studies will shed further light on the gaps and silences in our own research, highlighting the communities and aspects of fandom that have so far remained underresearched (cf. Hills 2017).

[12.4] This paper suggests that nonbinary and trans fans make up a much a larger proportion of Harry Potter fan fiction–centered communities than previously realized, although precise proportions are impossible to glean from these data. It emphasizes that this fandom may be queerer than previously acknowledged, as no fans in the data set explicitly identified as straight. While in some instances this may be due to fans' default assumption that they will be read as female and straight, we cannot assume this to be the case. As I argue above, there are multiple reasons that nonheteronormative individuals might also be silent (see also Duggan n.d.).

[12.5] The present study also indicates that fans in Harry Potter fandom vary in age. One key finding is that most fans appear to enter fandom as children or young adults. As children are often overlooked in discussions of fandom (cf. Hunting 2019; Walton 2018), further examinations of age and its relation to fandom, as well as how age affects fannish relationships and activities, would benefit the field.

[12.6] While the location data in this study were skewed by my limited linguistic competencies, there are some intriguing differences in fans' articulation of place. Notably, fans in Anglophone countries were more likely to provide precise location information, including the suburb, city, or region in which they live, while fans in other locales used larger geographic areas, such as "Mediterranean region," to express place-based identity. Moreover, expressions of ethnicity appear to be made mainly by queer North American fans, with slightly more fans of color than white fans providing this information. Further research into why would be welcome.

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14. Notes

1. While some early scholars, like Jenkins ([1992] 2013), do include occasional nods to "bisexual" and "lesbian" women in their work (191, 221), these brief mentions are often on the same page as formulations that categorize the majority of slashers as "middle-class straight women" (221).

2. A body of work on fan fiction and other transformative works in Asia also exists, for example, work examining the boys' love (BL) tradition. Research on slash and on BL tend to overlap in some places, one of which is the general tendency of scholars researching both slash and BL communities to assume that their research subjects are ciswomen.

3. While feminism is by far more credited than queer theory as having shaped fan studies, there has been some work done on the queerness of fandom (Busse and Lothian 2018; Hampton 2015; Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007; Russo 2018), and the influence of queer studies on fan studies has been limitedly acknowledged (Jenkins, Rand, and Hellekson 2011). Nonetheless, further discussions of how these two fields have positioned themselves, in tandem, against the normal and the normative, including as regards ways of doing scholarly work, are needed.

4. This intersects with more widespread changes to humanities and social science practice in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, including the rise of critical race, intersectional, postcolonial, trans, and queer studies. The scope of this paper does not allow a lengthy discussion of the heterogeneous influences on fan studies. See the previous issue of this journal on fan studies methodologies.

5. "Queer" and "LGBTQ" can signify many sexual/gendered identities. I have chosen to include them as signifying both nonnormative genders and nonnormative sexualities because of this openness of signification.

6. Although Busse and Lothian (2014) have acknowledged trans bodies within fan fiction,

and while they parenthetically mention trans and nonbinary fans here, their acknowledgment is brief and implies that these fans make up a small proportion of the fan community.

7. For example, Hungary and Romania have recently banned gender studies and discussing gender in schools, while Poland's increasing intolerance of LGBTQ+ individuals continues to make headlines around the world. See, for example, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights' recent report "A Long Way to Go for LGBTI Equality" (https://op.europa.eu/s/ocVE).

8. One exception is centreoftheselights' (2013) thorough survey of over 10,000 fans using both AO3 and Tumblr at that time. The majority of fans surveyed did not identify as heterosexual (38 percent identified as straight), while roughly 20 percent of respondents did not identify as female. Importantly, fans under thirty were less likely to identify as women or as straight than those over thirty. However, these data have not been widely acknowledged in academic work.

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Praxis

Lesbian fandom remakes the boy band

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[0.1] Abstract—Lesbians and other queer women are typically absent from theorizations of boy band fandom even though boy bands often have sizable lesbian fan bases. Lesbian fandom of the British–Irish boy band One Direction congregated primarily on Tumblr; this fandom constituted a queer community space that exposed the boy band as a site of lesbian erotic and creative energy. One manifestation of lesbian One Direction fandom was the drag king performance group known as Every Direction, which maintained an active Tumblr page in addition to performing live drag king renditions of popular One Direction songs. Interviews with the group's members, along with a content analysis of lesbian Tumblr fandom of One Direction, illuminate the significant creative output of this understudied fan community. This phenomenon is placed into conversation with the lesbian feminist–affiliated Women's Music Movement of the 1970s, which had a lasting impact on popular conceptions of lesbian musical preferences in the United States. I argue that lesbian One Direction fandom constitutes a contemporary queer political intervention that reworks lesbian feminist political tactics and priorities. This data acts as a record of the lesbian One Direction fan community that congregated on Tumblr during the band's heyday, as well as an intervention in scholarly theorizations of lesbian fans and fan practices.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan community; Lesbian feminism; One Direction; Queer fandom; Tumblr

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Shortly after creating a Tumblr entitled everydirectiondrag in late 2013, a group of drag kings called Every Direction posted a video of their first performance. When played, the video reveals a dimly lit stage framed by glittering, beaded curtains; the post's caption reveals this to be the Oakland bar known as the White Horse Inn, one of the oldest continuously running gay bars in the United States (Every Direction Drag 2013). Filmed in October 2013, the video depicts the group of drag king performers—defined by Del LaGrace Volcano and Jack Halberstam (1999) as those who make masculinity into an act—being welcomed onto the stage for the first time. One by one, the performers known as Ben Downthere, Robin Dick, Cherii Poppins, Jake Mioff, and 7 Minutes in Evan enter the frame, taking their places on the stage as Oakland's premiere drag king boi band: Every Direction.

[1.2] As the first notes of One Direction's infectious 2012 hit "I Would" begin to play, the bois line up and gently bop from side-to-side in matching cardigans and thick-rimmed glasses. Jake Mioff moves to the front of the stage, assuming the role of One Direction's Liam Payne while mouthing the song's opening lines: "Lately I found myself thinking / Been dreaming about you a lot / And up in my head I'm your boyfriend / But that's one thing you've already got." He pantomimes tears as his verses come to an end, and he returns to the group's lineup. Each boi takes his subsequent turn in the spotlight as the song progresses, with Robin Dick delivering Niall Horan's iconic line, in which a daydream about kissing the object of one's affection becomes a crushing return to the real world: "Reality ruined my life."

[1.3] The song culminates in a series of choruses, punctuated by an insistent set of questions: "Would he please you? / Would he kiss you? / Would he treat you like I would?" At this, the bois collectively lift their shirts to reveal stomachs painted with the letters L-O-V-E and a heart symbol, each moving closer toward the camera and into the audience as hands reach out to touch their exposed skin. After collectively freezing in place for the song's last verse, the bois return to life as the beat drops, leaping off the stage and into the crowd for a rousing final chorus wherein they jump, clap, and spin their way to a final formation that famed '80s boy band New Kids on the Block would have been proud of, with each boi striking a unique signature pose. No longer performance virgins, they exit the stage, and the clip ends with the sound of thundering applause. Subsequent posts reveal handmade signs that were held by fans in the audience that night (figure 1), along with an endorsement by Autostraddle, a popular website for lesbian, bisexual, and queer women.

Figure 1. Signs held by fans during an Every Direction performance at the White Horse Inn. Photograph from the Every Direction Tumblr page.

[1.4] That Every Direction's members are not only enthusiastic performers but also avid fans of One Direction (henceforth 1D) is evident from the content of their Tumblr. The group's Tumblr was active from October 2013 to February 2015; during that time, photographs, gifs,

and fan art featuring the boy band appeared on Every Direction's blog as frequently as posts promoting Every Direction's own performances. Every Direction also openly acknowledges the extent to which Tumblr fandom of 1D inspired their formation; many of the group's members began as 1D fans on Tumblr. Every Direction was particularly inspired by 1D's queer fandom on Tumblr, and the group's performances represent one of the most publicly visible manifestations of the thousands of lesbian fan works produced on the platform between 2012 and 2016.

[1.5] Tumblr's status as the primary digital home for 1D fandom, coupled with its massive popularity among LGBT youth, made it the central gathering place for many lesbian and queer fans of 1D. Furthermore, Tumblr's public structure familiarized a wide range of diverse fans—both queer identified and not—with queer reading practices and lesbian cultural spaces. I will analyze the crucial role that Tumblr played in fostering lesbian fandom of 1D, using lesbian rereadings and reimaginings of 1D circulated by fans on the platform to explore the many and varied manifestations of queer joy, obsession, and self-articulation that the platform enabled. In doing so, I show how lesbian 1D fandom both draws upon and resists lesbian feminist political legacies.

2. Methodology

[2.1] My data for this article consist of Tumblr posts related to 1D fandom and interviews with members of the drag king performance group Every Direction. From approximately June 2015 to October 2016, I engaged in observational research of 1D fandom on Tumblr, paying particularly close attention to lesbian and other queer women's 1D fandom. I received permission to reference the Tumblr posts that appear in this article. Although I refer throughout this article to lesbian 1D fandom, this is not a commentary on the sexual orientation of any of these Tumblr posts' authors, about whom no personal information was collected.

[2.2] As part of my research, I also interviewed four members of the drag king performance group Every Direction. I became aware of Every Direction during my observational research; the group was located in California's Bay Area, but at one point they also had active Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts. I was granted institutional review board approval for these interviews by the University of California–Irvine Office of Research in September 2016. All interviewees are adults, and an informed consent form disclosing the nature of my research was distributed before each interview. The interviewees were informed that their names would be used in future writing associated with these interviews because the group members' names had been publicly associated with Every Direction prior to my research. Every Direction's group members identify in a variety of ways; not all of them are lesbians, or women, as Jae Basiliere (2019) has noted is common for drag kings. Nevertheless, like Basiliere, I argue that the group is in conversation with lesbian culture regardless of the group members' individual sexual and gender identities.

3. One Direction's digital breakthrough

[3.1] Popular discourse often frames 1D as one of the pop music machine's most artificial products, in part because the group did not form organically. Rather, all its teenaged members auditioned as individual acts for the British singing competition show *The X-Factor,* and they were subsequently grouped together by judge Simon Cowell. Though the boys placed third in the singing competition, 1D was a hit with young women, who comprise a large portion of the show's audience demographic (Barnes 2010). Shortly after being voted off the show, the band was signed to Syco Records. Their first studio album, *Up All Night,* was released in early 2012 and became a massive global success, the first debut album by a British band to enter the US charts at number one (Fitzmaurice 2012). Buoyed by the huge amount of enthusiasm expressed by fans on social media, the boys embarked on their first headlining concert tour in the United Kingdom in late 2011. The group went on to release four more chart-topping studio albums, headline many more sold-out tours, and become the subject of a successful 2013 documentary by Morgan Spurlock (*One Direction: This Is Us*) before finally disbanding in 2016.

[3.2] Less visible to the public at large than the band's music, touring, and official merchandise was the vast, active fan base that took shape around them on various social media platforms, especially on Tumblr. Tumblr served as a primary hub for 1D's fans from early in the band's career, and the boy band's popularity on the platform remained high even as their broader public appeal began to wane from 2015 to 2016. There are many reasons why the platform was ideal for 1D fandom. As critics have pointed out, the boy band had a uniquely "chaotic" appeal (Tiffany 2016), with the boys wearing artfully mismatched outfits and engaging in light roughhousing. As a platform, Tumblr was uniquely suited to accommodate this chaos; its multimedia interface could allow fans to use a single platform to circulate videos, gifs, photos, and text-based posts about the band, and its infinite scrolling dash acted as a constant content generator for a worldwide fandom that was active 24/7 (Stein 2016).

[3.3] Although 1D's youthful antics certainly made them easily gif-able, I argue that the group's success on Tumblr had much more to do with the platform's ability to accommodate fans' particular needs and desires, particularly those of queer fans, than it did with the boys themselves. The avid use of Tumblr by 1D fans to not only consume but also create media for other fans helped 1D retain its popularity on the platform for more than a year into the group's hiatus. According to Tumblr's own metrics, 1D was the platform's second most reblogged band for the year 2015, and "Larry Stylinson"—the name given to the imaginary romantic relationship between Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson—was Tumblr's most reblogged ship (Falcone 2015). In 2016, a year into their hiatus, 1D was still Tumblr's third most popular fan fiction topic, as well as the third most popular band on the platform (Tiffany 2016).

[3.4] Directioners also valued Tumblr because they regarded it as a more private space than other social media. Fans' perception of Tumblr's status as the home for true 1D fans is tied to the anonymity that the platform offers its users. Unfettered by the judgment of their families and peers, who might mock their love for the band, fans took to Tumblr to express their unfiltered thoughts, opinions, and desires. In her analysis of the Larry Stylinson phenomenon, Daisy Asquith notes that many Directioners considered "Tumblr to be an

almost sacred space, in which the *Larry* fandom can be private" (2016, 87). This notion of privacy comes up often in fans' explanations of their preference for Tumblr; the inscrutable logic by which the platform operates is thought to keep out older siblings, parents, and anyone else who would mock Directioners' love for the band.

[3.5] Alexander Cho's (2018) work has shown that this privacy is particularly important to queer youth of color, many of whom prefer Tumblr over other, more public social media platforms such as Facebook. Ksenia Korobkova's study of identity formation in 1D fandom also emphasized Tumblr's relative privacy, with one of her informants praising the platform "for having a logic that is harder for adults to crack and thus less likely to be invaded by adults, unlike Facebook" (2014, 31). *Storyboard,* Tumblr's short-lived news blog, asserted that Directioners use the platform like "a kind of naively secret journal, a place to document it all, in company with other people who understand" (Bennett 2012).

[3.6] This language of privacy and no-adults-allowed policies recalls Jenny Garber and Angela McRobbie's seminal 1977 identification of girls' bedrooms as important subcultural spaces that often revolve around the consumption of popular culture. Tumblr's relative privacy from parents places it within this tradition and made it appealing to Directioners looking for a virtual home. For lesbian fans of 1D, such private spaces were especially important; like so many other LGBTQ youth from this period, they congregated on Tumblr. Several studies of young people's media preferences in the mid-2010s found that LGBTQ youth were more likely to use Tumblr regularly (Byron et al. 2019). As a result, Tumblr became an outlet for the expression of lesbian Directioners' queer identifications and desire, challenging the heteronormative depictions of girl-fans that have long characterized the writing about boy bands.

[3.7] Although there is little scholarly work on 1D fandom in particular, scholars working in the fields of fan studies and musicology have explored the relationship between queerness and girls' boy band fandom. Fan studies scholars have written extensively about "popslash," a subgenre of RPF (real person fiction, or fan fiction written about real people) focusing primarily on boy band members, that sprung up on writing-focused social media platforms such as LiveJournal during the early aughts. In her work on RPF and the performance of queerness on LiveJournal, Kristina Busse (2006, 216) analyzed the ways in which fans "write their RPS characters as addressing issues of identity construction and performativity, and in so doing, they deal with their own identities, relationships, and desires." Although the majority of 1D's fans opted for video- and audio-centric platforms like Tumblr over writing-oriented ones like LiveJournal, Directioners continued this tradition of using fan works to construct their own identities and communities.

[3.8] Musicologists have also addressed the queer potential of girls' boy band fandom. In her 2016 study of lesbian fans of male pop idols, scholar Barbara Brickman updated Garber and McRobbie's work by complicating heteronormative readings of "what girls do in their bedrooms" (2014, 447). She demonstrated how male pop idols in particular enable homoerotic interactions between female fans, drawing attention to "the fan's consumption of a sign of female masculinity and lesbian erotic potential in the figure of male pop star" (Brickman 2014, 444). The blurring of gender lines by 1D—the "girlish masculinity" (Wald

2002) so common to male pop idols— was marked by their youthful, androgynous appearance and boyish sartorial preferences, which gave them enormous lesbian aesthetic and erotic appeal. Tumblr's 1D fandom provided a multitude of digital evidence of how this lesbian aesthetic sensibility and "erotic potential" was incorporated into fans' processes of individual and collective identity formation, highlighting the boy band's relevance to both lesbian identified fans and a broader lesbian community. The group Every Direction is one such example, as they drew from both Tumblr-based 1D fandom and lesbian performance traditions to articulate a queer and lesbian interpretation of the boy band's appeal.

4. Feminist values, queer desires: The politics of lesbian fandom

[4.1] As a performance group, Every Direction follows in the well-established footsteps of the many drag kings that came before them. While they have never achieved the kind of fame or notoriety accorded to drag queens, drag kings have proliferated in urban hubs as both group and solo acts for decades, reaching their heyday in the 1990s. Groups of drag kings have also previously performed as boy bands; the Backdoor Boys, referenced by Jack Halberstam in his book *A Queer Time and Place* (2005), are one notable example. What Every Direction's unique performance aesthetic highlights is the fannish sincerity that characterizes lesbians' relationship to boy bands. The love and intimacy with which the routine is crafted, the evident earnestness with which it is acted out, reveal something beyond a desire for the boy band to be "taken back from the realm of popular culture and revealed as proper to the subcultural space" (Halberstam 2005, 178). Rather, Every Direction's performances and Tumblr presence highlight the limitations of the subculture versus popular culture binary.

[4.2] Instead of crafting a camp performance that attempts to extract boy bands from the realm of popular culture to insert them into a lesbian subcultural canon, Every Direction's performance of fandom brings the boy band into conversation with lesbian culture and identity, recalling the historical affinity that has existed for decades between lesbians and young, male heartthrobs from James Dean to Justin Bieber (Brickman 2014). Indeed, rather than existing as a kind of counterpoint to Directioners' love for the band, Every Direction's performance and Tumblr persona reveals that lesbian fandom is inseparable from the popular cultural realm. The group's Tumblr juxtaposes photographs of drag performances and posts from other queer 1D fans with photographs and gifs of the 1D boys singing, dancing, and horsing around, challenging the neat separation of subculture and popular culture that pervades academic discussions of lesbian fandom.

[4.3] This merging of lesbian subculture and mainstream popular culture does more than just challenge conventional wisdom about the boy band's heterosexual appeal. Lesbian 1D fandom also resists the exclusive association of lesbians with the subcultural. Brickman (2014) describes this phenomenon in her work on lesbian fandom of Morrissey, writing that although much academic writing recognizes lesbians as engaged fans of other forms of popular culture, lesbians are almost never identified as fans of popular music. Furthermore, when queer critics do discuss lesbian music fandom, "adoration of pop music becomes an unwelcome or less pressing concern than fandom directly tied to subcultural practices, feminist values, and identity politics" (Brickman 2014, 446).

[4.4] The notion that lesbians have a general preference for music with lesbian and queer subcultural affiliations can be traced back to the legacy of the Women's Music Movement of the 1970s. During this era, lesbian feminists attempted to create a musical genre and industry powered solely by women, hoping to give women an alternative to the male-driven popular music industry. Although early definitions of women's music often described it as music created by, for, and about women, such definitions failed to address the reality that women's music was specifically lesbian music. Although the movement was rife with internal conflict and ultimately failed to remain financially solvent, its impact on lesbian music is still felt today. The fusion of lesbian identity, politics, and musical genre that characterized the Women's Music Movement continues to shape assumptions about lesbian musicians and fans within the music industry, underscoring the belief that lesbian fandom primarily coheres around music that is both political and subcultural. Rather than generatively tracing a feminist lineage for contemporary lesbian and queer women's music listening practices, this exclusive association between lesbians and subcultural music often replicates lesbian feminist political prescriptivism, suggesting that lesbian fans of mainstream popular music have failed to achieve political purity.

[4.5] For the women involved in making and promoting women's music, it was important that listeners' reception of that music was shaped by the same lesbian feminist ideology that the movement espoused. Musicologist Jodie Taylor notes that early women's music was influenced by the stylings of folk music, which "was already imbued with leftist and egalitarian political themes, and less bound to the rigid gender roles ascribed to rock and pop" (2008, 41). Women's musicians also shared many folk musicians' desire to collapse the distinction between audience and performer, fan and celebrity (Frith 1996): the movement discouraged women from thinking of its most well-known performers as stars, and many lesbian feminist publications (Graetz 1982) suggested that the star–fan dynamic itself replicated the oppressive power dynamics inherent in heterosexual relationships. When viewed using this analysis of fandom's power dynamics, boy bands appear to be a particularly insidious method of channeling girls' energies toward boys, reinforcing their ultimate subservience in a gendered power dyad. However, this opposition to fandom and star-worship misses the ways in which the fan exercises a power of her own.

[4.6] Lesbian 1D fandom variously turned the boys of 1D into butch icons, lesbians in love, and fodder for queer-girl fantasies. Rather than indoctrinating girls into heteropatriarchal ways of relating to both men and one another, 1D fandom was an opportunity for lesbian fans to exert control over the text of the boy band, with fans often shaping it into something else entirely. In her essay "Sexing Elvis," Sue Wise (1990) analyzes a similar phenomenon in women's fandom of Elvis. During the 1970s, Wise says, the feminist party line was that "'Elvis' consisted of a social phenomenon and personal image which downgraded women by elevating the male macho hero to unprecedented heights" (336). Wise turns this interpretation on its head, suggesting that such feminist dismissals of Elvis fandom are actually rooted in male critics' interpretations of the phenomenon. Faced with masses of screaming, "out of control" women and girls at Elvis concerts, male music writers concluded that *Elvis* was the one in control. Wise wrote, "By turning Elvis from what in effect he was—an *object* of his fans—into a *subject,* the girls' behavior was de-threatened and controlled" (1990, 338). By reclaiming boy band fandom as a space where girls exercise control rather

than abandoning it, lesbian 1D fans resist misogynist interpretations of girls' fandom.

[4.7] Although lesbian 1D fandom retains some key elements of lesbian feminist politics and culture, this reinterpretation of the boy band phenomenon also has much in common with the poststructuralist analysis of gender, sexuality, and power that began to dominate lesbian and queer communities in the 1980s and 1990s. Sociologist Arlene Stein (1997) described how, spurred on by both the rise of poststructuralism in the American academy and the challenges to lesbian feminist political dogma posed by lesbians of color and trans women, many lesbians during this time period "shifted lesbian politics away from its focus upon the 'male threat' and toward a more diffuse notion of power and resistance" (215). While a separate "women's culture" was often framed as the solution to patriarchal mass culture by lesbian feminists seeking to empower women and build community, women of color had long pointed out that this same women's culture remained rooted in racism and misogyny.

[4.8] As the 1980s progressed, many lesbians embraced the notion that there was no such unproblematic space separate from popular culture, opening the door to more ironic and playful forms of cultural consumption. Lesbian 1D fandom shares the more diffuse conception of power that undergirded this shift. However, while this revised relationship to popular culture is a clear precursor to lesbian 1D fandom, this fandom also retains some critical elements of lesbian feminist culture and politics: a trenchant critique of heteropatriarchy in popular culture, the creation and circulation of lesbian media, and the establishment of an affirming lesbian and queer women's culture.

5. "I would": Creating lesbian culture on Tumblr

[5.1] Though queer women existed both within and alongside a larger 1D fan community that had a vast, powerful presence on Tumblr, little to nothing has been said about them in media coverage of the band's fan base. In the absence of mainstream recognition of their existence, queer women use Tumblr to cultivate fan communities through multiple practices, sharing queer-specific fan texts, artwork, and personal confessions that cannot circulate as easily on other social media platforms. Tumblr user jack-nought's post proclaiming, "one direction really is lesbian culture wow" (2017) is representative of an entire genre of lesbian 1D content production on Tumblr, in which users repeatedly assert the group's cultural significance for lesbians.

[5.2] Lesbian Directioners also frequently post images and videos that combine 1D's lyrics and/or music with visuals pulled from movies or music videos featuring queer women. One set of images, created by Tumblr user poweredbynew (2015), features photographs of two women kissing, limbs entwined, overlaid by lyrics from two popular 1D songs (figure 2). The pastel pink images, taken from the music video for pop singer Hayley Kiyoko's 2015 single "Cliff's Edge," are combined with the love-struck lyrics of 1D songs "Diana" and "Olivia," evoking the visual aesthetic of Jamie Babbit's lesbian camp classic film, *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999). Posts like these demonstrate the extent to which 1D fandom facilitated the formation of community and sexual identity for lesbian fans; through the consumption and remixing of these images and texts, lesbian fans were able to connect with each other and conceptualize their own identities.

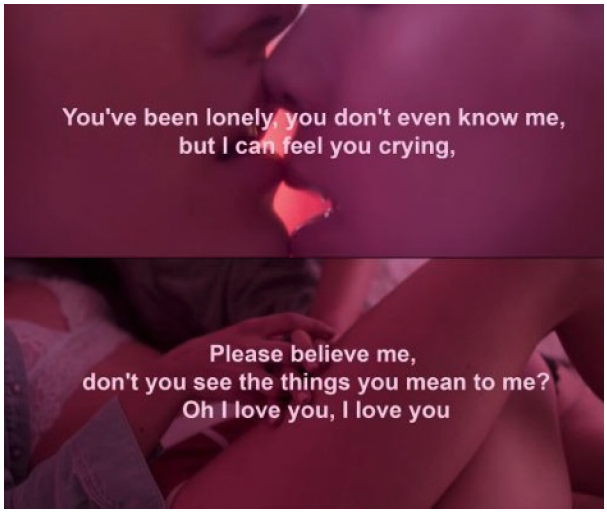

Figure 2. Stills from Hayley Kiyoko's music video for her single "Cliff's Edge," featuring lyrics from the 1D songs "Diana" and "Olivia." Post created by Tumblr user poweredbynew.

[5.3] In a similar post garnering more than 8,000 notes, Tumblr user jameswesleys (2015) remixes another music video of Kiyoko's—this time using the video for her song "Girls Like Girls"—and scores it with 1D's 2012 hit "I Would." The lesbionic potential of 1D's "I Would," a song that pledges the singer's everlasting love to an unavailable girl, is maximized through its pairing with Kiyoko's video, which tells the story of a teenage girl whose same-gender love interest has a boyfriend. This video remix gives concrete form to the mental gender-swapping that many lesbian fans engage in when singing along to 1D's supposedly heterosexual songs. The use of Kiyoko's visuals alongside 1D's songs and lyrics not only literalizes the lesbian potential of the boy band's work, but also explicitly carves out space within lesbian 1D fandom for queer women of color.

[5.4] Kiyoko, a multiracial Japanese-American lesbian, has spoken frankly about her sexuality since publicly coming out in 2015; dubbed "lesbian Jesus" by her fans, Kiyoko dedicated her 2018 Video Music Award for Push Artist of the Year to queer women of color (Nicolaou 2018). Kiyoko has directed all her own music videos since 2015's "Girls Like Girls," and stars in a majority of them as well. Many of these videos feature Kiyoko successfully romancing a woman, often another woman of color (see the music videos for "Sleepover," "Feelings," and "What I Need"). The music videos utilized in the aforementioned Tumblr posts, "Girls Like Girls" and "Cliff's Edge," subvert representational tropes common to depictions of lesbianism in music videos; the romantic exchanges they portray are neither hypersexualized nor stylized for the male gaze, and the women in them are depicted as desired and desiring sexual subjects. Posts like these redirect fans' attention from the boys themselves to the lesbian fantasies that the boy band enables.

[5.5] Another wildly popular genre of lesbian 1D content on Tumblr is Larry Stylinson "femslash": art and fan fiction that reimagines Styles and Tomlinson as two girls in love. Tumblr user twotalkaholics' "fem!larry" illustration (2014) features Styles and Tomlinson engaged in a passionate liplock, with Styles' iconic mane of hair cascading down her back and Tomlinson wearing a short black skirt (figure 3). Posts like this are common on Tumblr

both within and beyond 1D fandom; here the illustration highlights the band members' lesbian aesthetic appeal (marked by their androgynous appearance and boyish sartorial preferences) and disrupts the notion that it is exclusively straight girls who are invested in "shipping" Larry Stylinson. Instead of simply asserting that the Larry Stylinson phenomenon reveals the truth of Styles and Tomlinson's secret romantic relationship, fan works like twotalkaholics' fem!larry illustration frame "Larry" as a multipurpose fantasy, one that is flexible enough to accommodate a diverse fan base's wildly differing emotional needs and sexual desires. While much of the content produced by lesbian Directioners on Tumblr highlights the band's appeal for lesbians, femslash like this goes one step farther by imagining the boys *as* lesbians, literalizing the lesbian erotic potential found in so much of 1D's work.

Figure 3. Fan art created by Tumblr user twotalkaholics, depicting Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson as two girls kissing.

[5.6] The lesbian 1D fandom that coalesced on Tumblr helped to create, connect, and support an entire ecosystem of queer women writers and artists, from visual artists creating fan art, to fan fic writers, to alt-pop stars like Kiyoko. This network of lesbians and other queer women once again calls up the legacy of the Women's Music Movement. The women who were involved in this movement—as artists, listeners, and workers—were brought together under vastly different circumstances from those of lesbian Directioners; women's music was by, for, and about women, and the record labels created as part of this movement attempted to train and employ as many women as possible. However at odds with this legacy boy band fandom may seem, lesbian Directioners' use of Tumblr to form a creative subculture similarly fostered community support, the circulation of lesbians' creative work, and a critique of heteronormativity in the popular music industry.

[5.7] This millennial remixing of lesbian feminist political goals denaturalizes the supposed

heterosexuality of boy band fandom. Lesbian fans' ability to rework texts that are marketed as heterosexual and build community through these reappropriations casts doubt on the popular conception of boy bands as an exclusively heterosexual cultural phenomenon. Indeed, boy band fandom also gives heterosexually identified girls the opportunity to explore their sexuality and gender presentation.

[5.8] The widespread and prolific nature of lesbian 1D fandom on Tumblr influenced fans throughout the platform; because of Tumblr's open structure, *all* 1D fans were exposed to lesbian readings of the band. The platform's ability to circulate lesbian subcultural interpretations of the boy band so widely allowed lesbian fans to reshape 1D fandom on Tumblr writ large. This contact between lesbian- and nonlesbian-identified 1D fans again highlights the strategic similarities between women's music and lesbian 1D fandom on Tumblr. Within the context of the Women's Music Movement, many lesbian feminists saw women's music and the community surrounding it as a potential site for the political, sexual, and social transformation of nonlesbian-identified women. Ultimately, these lesbian rereadings of boy bands' performances exposed all 1D fans to queer readings of the boy band while also pushing back against the notion that only queer or lesbian-identified performers are appropriate subjects of lesbian fandom, desire, and creative energy.

6. Fandom and performance in every direction

[6.1] By embodying the queer joy of lesbian 1D fandom, Every Direction's performances extended the radical sense of possibility generated by the link between boy bands and Tumblr's queer feminist subcultures. My interviews with the group's members revealed these performances to be the product of a significant amount of fan labor, much of which was performed within digital fan communities. Though Shannon, who performed as the group's Niall Horan, says that her love for the boy band at first felt like a joke, interacting with other fans sparked a deeper interest in the band's queer potential. In our interview, she noted that having access to a community of fans who were dedicated to making the boy band's queer subtext visible inspired her to think more deeply about 1D's relevance to her own gender and sexual identity. When asked why Every Direction chose Tumblr as their primary social media platform, Shannon cited Tumblr's status as a major hub for 1D fandom, saying that she considered the platform to be 1D fandom's primary home.

[6.2] The group's recognition of Tumblr's dominance among fellow Directioners also meant that the bois turned to the platform to learn about the band, their characters, and fellow fans, highlighting Tumblr's status as the home of both 1D fandom and queer and lesbian fandoms more broadly. Tumblr posts such as jack-nought's simple declaration that 1D is lesbian culture and twotalkaholics' fem!larry illustration comprise one crucial way in which the boy band's queer potential becomes visible. When asked about the beginning of her interest in 1D, Shannon said, "as we got into it, you know, it's like we were listening to everything differently, suddenly like all of their songs had all of this amazing queer subtext, and then you get into the whole fandom aspect of it, and all of the Larry shipping, and then you realize that there's actually so much queer content to work with. And I think that definitely through Every Direction I became a much bigger fan of One Direction" (Shannon M., personal communication, October 11, 2016). Not only does Tumblr help to actively cultivate

such lesbian rereading practices, it also facilitates conversations among queer fans who are both consuming 1D's music and producing a variety of queer fan texts.

[6.3] For Cheryna, who performed as Every Direction's Zayn Malik, Tumblr served as an authoritative source of current, in-depth information about 1D. It is difficult to make sense of a performance group like Every Direction outside of the context of queer women's prolific engagement in 1D fan communities. Though the group's members were quick to emphasize their roots in the Bay Area's queer community, Every Direction was equally indebted to a lineage of fans, both queer and not, who used social media platforms like Tumblr to create and share their own interpretations of 1D's songs, videos, and group dynamics. Cheryna specifically named Tumblr as a crucial component of the character research that she undertook in preparation to perform as Malik, saying, "I would search the web or like Tumblr, just Tumble. I would just go on Tumblr and I would check out all of the things going on" (Cheryna G., personal communication, October 11, 2016). This use of the platform is evident in the group's Tumblr page, which features gifs of the 1D boys affectionately roughhousing alongside meticulous drag re-creations of official band photo shoots (figure 4) and promotional flyers for Every Direction's lone music video. Every Direction's queer reimaginings of the boy band's manufactured pop persona were enabled by Tumblr's exhaustive record of each 1D interview, music video, and photo shoot, the existence of which is a testament to fans' dedication to their role as the band's unofficial documentarians.

Figure 4. Re-creation of a One Direction photo shoot featuring the members of Every Direction. This photograph was posted to Every Direction's Tumblr page alongside the original One Direction photograph, along with the caption "OH yes this is gonna start happening. Prepare yourself!"

[6.4] Every Direction's performances also highlight the contemporary boy band's roots in Black male R&B groups of the 1980s and 1990s. Every Direction's preference for matching clothes and choreographed dance routines deviated from the mismatched clothing and

refusal to dance that were hallmarks of 1D's unique spin on the boy band phenomenon. The drag king group's adoption of these practices was a throwback to boy bands of the late 1990s, which were largely based upon Black male vocal groups like New Edition, Blackstreet, and Boyz II Men. These earlier boy bands, which were influenced by the emerging musical genre known as new jack swing (Harrison 2011, 17–19), all consisted of four to five members, used vocal harmonies, and frequently traded in romantic ballads. Additionally, each of these groups—and many of their contemporaries—wore matching or coordinated outfits, and performed tightly choreographed dance routines in their music videos and/or live shows. The white boy bands of the late 1990s, such as the Backstreet Boys and NSync, relied on the formula for success that was developed by these Black male vocal groups. The dance routines and matching outfits favored by Every Direction thus call back to these previous boy bands, which are all too often erased in discussions of the boy band phenomenon. While 1D attempted a rockist appeal to "authenticity" via their slightly scruffier appearance and lack of choreography, Every Direction's performances simultaneously drew attention to the racial history and queer appeal of the contemporary boy band. The performance group's multiracial tribute to 1D also gestured to the racial diversity within 1D fandom, which was seldom acknowledged in media coverage of the boy band's fan base.

[6.5] Every Direction's creative reworking of 1D both draws from and contributes to lesbian 1D fandom's expansive reimagining of what the boy band can be. Just as fem!larry unearths new, subtextual facets of the boy band's appeal in its literalization of 1D's lesbian potential, Every Direction's group members and performances give form to a queer, multiracial vision of the boy band. In my interview with Rachel, the group's Harry Styles, she described her preparations as a Black woman who was performing as one of the world's most famous white boys, saying, "I definitely watched music videos, I read a lot of articles, you know, followed on Twitter, watched the 1D movie a lot of times, and just tried to study things about his personality because obviously like, I'm black, I don't look like Harry. I can't get Harry's hair or anything like that, and so it was like, how can I exude his personality while performing so that people know who my character is?" (Rachel W., personal communication, October 11, 2016).

[6.6] Rachel's description of the labor that she did in preparing to perform as Harry Styles points to the wide range of lesbian aesthetics embodied by 1D. Rachel notes that Styles's look in particular is reliant on a "specific kind of rocker style" that she did not try to emulate, but she remained determined to "become him as a person" through physical mannerisms, intonation, and personality. In our discussion, Rachel emphasized the amount of work that her transformation into Styles represented, saying, "that took a lot of research in to how he talks, what he does, all of the jokes that he plays." Though Rachel does not identify with the white alt-rock masculinity that Styles embodied during the group's third and fourth album cycles, the research that she described doing allowed her to recognize their commonalities in speech, mannerisms, and demeanor as well as helped her to pinpoint the band's different aesthetic eras. Through her performance of fan labor—the act of rifling through the unwieldy number of articles, videos, and photographs that attempt to capture the essence of a performer—Rachel took on Styles's role within the group.

[6.7] For Every Direction's members, digital 1D fandom was closely related to the joy that the group took in reinterpreting the boy band's work. Rather than existing as a counterpoint to mainstream 1D fandom, Every Direction's performances drew energy from the boy band's massive global following. Rachel described being a member of Every Direction and engaging with digital 1D fandom as two key components of her own experience as a fan, saying, "to me the joy of 1D was just hanging out with my friends, trying to conjure up the essence of this boy band, and then also exploring some of the fandom." In addition to watching fan-made 1D music videos and keeping up on band-related gossip, Rachel described using online fan communities to find another 1D themed "boi band" in Minnesota.

[6.8] The group's connection to 1D fan communities was coupled with a rootedness in the Bay Area's lesbian and queer communities: Every Direction's Tumblr page advertises performances at the White Horse Inn, Oakland's oldest gay bar, and El Rio, a San Francisco gay bar and community space that was established in 1978. Every Direction also hosted and performed at a benefit show for Lyon-Martin Health Services, a community-based health clinic offering trans-inclusive health care to women. Initially founded in 1979 as a clinic for lesbians who had difficulty accessing adequate health care, Lyon-Martin now serves women of all sexualities and trans people of all genders. Every Direction's benefit night, which included 1D trivia, live performances, and a DJ, linked Lyon-Martin's queer and lesbian feminist mission with the 1D fan communities from which the group pulled inspiration. The group's connection to a queer politics that is both trans-inclusive and tied to lesbian feminist history speaks to the ways in which many lesbian Directioners negotiate and make sense of lesbian political histories.

7. Conclusion

[7.1] Though Every Direction (and their slightly more well-known boy band counterpart) ultimately broke up, the group lives on in its digital archive. Through their collective performances and individual statements, Every Direction's members continually reaffirmed the radical sense of possibility generated by this link between boy bands and Tumblr's queer feminist subcultures, whether it was through the lesbian boi band aesthetic that the group made visible or the queer joy that their performances engendered. In this sense, the group's work embodies one vision of the queer futurity that José Muñoz has described as "a backward glance that enacts a future vision" (2009, 4). Their insistence upon exposing the boy band as a site of affective investment and queer political energy challenges the pervasive relegation of lesbian art and performance to the realm of subcultural production, a phenomenon that imposes lesbian feminist political priorities on contemporary expressions of lesbian identity. The fantasy life that Every Direction's performances conjured—one in which the Bay Area's most famous boi band reigns supreme, and everyone in the club finds their dream girl by the end of the song—invoked a queer utopia that is too seldom seen, even if it only lives on in the hearts of the group's digital fangirls.

[7.2] Although Tumblr fandom of 1D may be in decline following the boy band's hiatus, the platform remains vital to queer and lesbian fan communities. The digital fan base that coalesced around Every Direction may not be seeing a new Tumblr post by the group anytime soon, but there are countless new pop cultural phenomena that will continue to

capture their attention and inspire them to create something of their own. Likewise, 1D's queer and lesbian fans still use Tumblr to critique and celebrate everything the boy band was, is, and could have been; their use of the platform to reinvent the object of their fandom continues to shape queer fan practices on Tumblr.

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Praxis

Affective investments, queer archives, and lesbian breakups on YouTube

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[0.1] Abstract—YouTube, as both a video-sharing platform and a social media platform, has become a dynamic space for the proliferation of queer female fandom, including lesbian YouTube couples, around which fans congregate. Two specific YouTube couples, Shannon and Cammie, and Kaelyn and Lucy, both broke up in summer 2016. Their breakups, and the subsequent breakup videos, were met with emotionally intense responses from their fans. To investigate how both fans and the couples themselves invest in these relationships, I conducted a discourse analysis of the language the YouTubers use to speak to their fans as well as the ways in which fans express their connection to these videos in the comments section. The distinct features of this fandom are the result of the affordances of YouTube as a platform, the intensity of queer fandom investments, and the particular liveliness of the fan object. Fan investment in these couples is connected to fans' own sense of (queer) futurity. At the same time, these videos now circulate as monuments of queer melancholia, viewed as they are through the lens of grief or nostalgia.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan studies; Lesbian fandom; Queer grief; Queer women; YouTube fandom

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1. Introduction

[1.1] In May 2016, while relaxing at my hotel in southern India, I had the following exchange with my friend Alissa on Facebook Messenger:

> [1.2] Me: Did u hear about Shannon and Cammie…
>
> Alissa: WHAT AVOUT THEM
>
> Me: …they broke up. like a week ago
>
> Alissa: OH MY GOD NOOO. There is no hope left in this world

[1.3] The conversation continued as Alissa expressed her disappointment about the breakup, later proclaiming, "I'm actually gonna cry." Shannon and Cammie were a real-life lesbian couple who became popular online after they began posting YouTube videos of themselves completing tag videos (note 1), answering fan questions, and detailing their life as a couple. They publicly announced their breakup in May 2016, and their breakup video was uploaded to YouTube on July 1 of the same year. As my conversation with Alissa illustrates, fans, particularly queer women fans like Alissa and me, were very upset by Shannon and Cammie's breakup, and we expressed our feelings in various forms online. The moment of their breakup was significant on its own, but then, two months later, another popular lesbian couple on YouTube announced their breakup as well. Kaelyn and Lucy, who had become popular as a long-distance couple who eventually moved in together, uploaded their breakup video on September 11, 2016. Both of these breakup videos elicited emotional and affective responses from fans, and, as I will illustrate, these responses traveled across videos and across the two YouTube channels.

[1.4] Though queer content of all kinds often evokes intense reactions from queer fans, queer content on YouTube often elicits even more personal investments from queer fans because this content is seen as closer to (if not synonymous with) reality. Thus, I argue, it is both the content and the form of these videos that produces such intense responses. To guide my research, I worked to answer three key questions. First, how do fans express their investment in these real-life lesbian YouTube couples? Second, what responses emerge when these relationships end and this affective investment is ruptured? And third, how do the couples themselves perform affective labor in order to live up to the fan investment in their relationship?

[1.5] To begin, it is important to understand both the history and the popularity these two couples achieved. Shannon and Cammie posted videos to the channel nowthisisliving, which was originally (and is once again) Shannon's personal channel. The channel had 674,000 subscribers, and 86 million channel views as of October 17, 2019. The first video Shannon and Cammie uploaded as a couple, called "Girlfriend Tag | LGBT," was posted on July 18, 2014. Their breakup video, which was uploaded almost two years later, was the channel's second most popular video, with 3 million views and 9,353 comments as of October 17, 2019. In total, 97 videos of them as a couple had been uploaded to the channel, amounting to hundreds of hours of footage.

[1.6] Kaelyn and Lucy's channel is called Kaelyn and Lucy, and their first video, entitled "July 2011," was uploaded on April 27, 2012. They uploaded 139 videos on the channel, many of which (like their first video) detailed their experiences reuniting after time apart, either in the United Kingdom or the United States. Their breakup video, uploaded more than four years after their first video, had amassed 1.2 million views and 4,375 comments as of October 17, 2019 (figure 1).

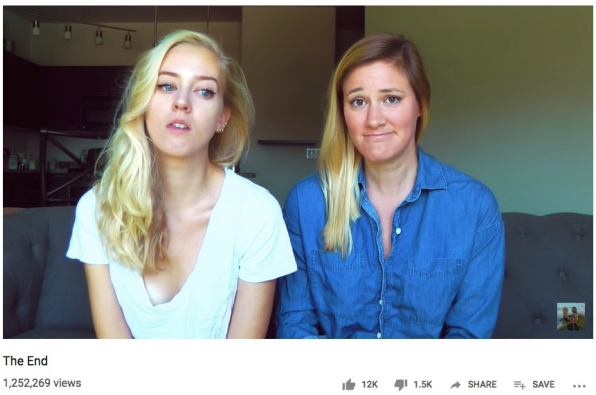

Figure 1. Screenshot from Kaelyn and Lucy's breakup video, entitled "The End" (2016).

[1.7] The fandoms surrounding both these couples expanded outside of YouTube, as fans created Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube pages dedicated to them. The couples themselves were also active on these social media platforms. Although the expansiveness of these fandoms was significant, I will be focusing specifically on YouTube comments because the videos themselves are at the center of these fandoms and the responses to them are the most immediate. YouTube comments can be posted and read before, during, and after the viewing of the videos themselves, thus constituting an essential component of YouTube as a social and communicative platform.

[1.8] To investigate the questions I have highlighted, I have performed a discourse analysis of the comments section of these videos as well as a brief analysis of the language of the breakup videos themselves. Though my analysis is focused on the breakup videos, I have also looked at the comments sections of four other videos from these couples that were uploaded before the breakup in order to investigate fan investment in the couples both before and after the breakups occurred. I reviewed the first 100 comments on each of the six videos, focusing on the comments that represented common sentiments among viewers. I then divided the comments into five distinct categories, which I will describe in sections two and three.

[1.9] Although the first hundred comments that show up below a YouTube video may not be wholly representative of every comment posted, the comments that show up first are the ones with the most likes (votes of approval) or responses, which indicates that these comments may represent a popular opinion among viewers. The comments I have pulled out as examples in this article were chosen for their representation of a common sentiment within each category, their number of likes, their clarity, and/or their brevity or succinctness. These comments have been anonymized to protect the privacy of users who might not want their comments—many of which are of a personal nature—to be published with their names attached.

[1.10] Throughout my analysis, I looked for the ways in which commenters performed and/or transmitted an affective response to these videos, and how that affect traveled throughout the YouTube platform. By this I mean the ways in which affective responses to one video or one couple did not simply stay put among a single video or channel—rather,

they would travel around/across various lesbian-centered content on YouTube.

[1.11] Much scholarly work has already been produced about the circulation of affect through online spaces. Jodi Dean's influential book *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (2010) is particularly relevant to this study. As Dean wrote, "Blogs, social networks, Twitter, YouTube: they produce and circulate affect as a binding technique" (95). I argue that it is fans' affective investment in such couples that makes watching their videos pleasurable, and that this investment is also what causes such strong reactions to their breakups. Dean also noted that each blog post, video, or tweet "accrues a tiny affective nugget" (2010, 95). I will illustrate how the affect that is tied to these couples' videos changes once the breakups occur.

[1.12] In this vein, I also draw from Sara Ahmed, who proposes the concept of "happy objects": objects that become tied to the promise of happiness. Ahmed wrote, "If objects provide a means for making us happy, then in directing ourselves toward this or that object, we are aiming somewhere else: toward a happiness that is presumed to follow" (2010, 26). I contend that these couples' YouTube videos initially circulated as happy objects, but for long-time viewers this happiness became detached from the videos after the couples broke up.

[1.13] We might think of the relationship that fans have to these videos after the couples have broken up as being what Rebecca Williams terms "post-object fandom" (2015). These videos only circulate as happy objects for fans if they continue to provide "ontological security." Williams, citing Anthony Giddens (1992), has argued "that ontological security offers an 'emotional inoculation against existential anxieties—a protection against future threats and dangers which allows the individual to sustain hope and courage in the face of whatever debilitating circumstances she or he might later confront'" (40; Williams 2015, 24). Williams argued that when a television series ends, fans go through a period of mourning in which they must confront this rupture in their ontological security and reevaluate their relationship to the fan object in question. This is the period when post-object fandom begins.

[1.14] One of the main differences between the ending of a television show and the real-life breakups of these couples is that while a series may live on in the minds of fans or in extratextual creations like fanfiction, these women literally live on—just not in the way fans would like them to. Thus, while fans may continue to watch these videos and write fanfiction or create fan art if they choose, the reality of the breakups is unavoidable, particularly when one views the comments section. In section 3 I will illustrate how fan responses to these breakups represent a unique example of post-object fandom, as fans negotiate their relationship to their chosen fan object through various responses in the comments section.

[1.15] Similar insights about mourning have been drawn from celebrity studies. Donald Horton and R. Richard Whol's (1956) concept of parasocial relationships—one-sided relationships that one might have with a celebrity or fictional character, for example—is central to this object of study. Joshua Meyrowitz (1994) identified among fans what he called "parasocial breakups," which have been shown to cause parasocial grief and intense emotional reactions (Sanderson and Cheong 2010; Eyal and Cohen 2006; Cohen 2003,

2004). Jocelyn DeGroot and Alex Leith ([2015] 2018) illustrated that parasocial breakups can be applied to the deaths of fictional television characters as well. In the case of YouTube couples, this breakup has a double meaning: first the real-life breakup of the couple, and then the parasocial breakup of the couple and their fans. The supposed intimacy between YouTubers and their fans and this double breakup thus affects how fans grieve this particular loss.

[1.16] Because the texts these fans are engaging with are the lives of real people, it may be useful here to draw from real person fiction (RPF) studies. Judith Fathallah (2017) writes about RPF as engaging in "metalepsis," which she describes as "self-conscious movement between actual and possible worlds" (2). Bronwen Thomas (2014) and Kristina Busse (2006) both note that RPF writers create stories about celebrities that supposedly reflect their real lives and personalities rather than taking their public performances at face value. This process occurs even more frequently on YouTube, where fans believe they are getting unfettered access to YouTubers' lives and thus can make accurate judgments about what is really going on (note 2). Fans often believe this because the form these videos frequently take—vlogs, or sit-down confessional videos—signify to viewers that these YouTubers are sharing their personal lives with fans. The style, content, and frequency at which these videos are uploaded engender a sense of intimacy between creators and fans. Because of these factors, however, the fan/YouTuber relationship may complicate this concept of parasocial relationships, as there is often more communication between YouTubers and their fans than there might be between more mainstream celebrities and their fans. We might then think of fan/YouTuber relationships as semiparasocial because the ability of YouTubers to directly address fans and even meet them in person complicates descriptions of these relationships as purely one-sided.

[1.17] Rather than conceptualizing YouTuber/fan relationships in terms of RPF, we might instead think of them in terms of microcelebrity and digital intimacy. Tobias Raun (2018) has written about the ways in which transgender microcelebrities on YouTube have capitalized on the idea of intimacy to create interactive fan communities, which in turn reconfigures intimacy as a currency. Raun argues that "micro-celebrities must signal accessibility, availability, presence, and connectedness—and maybe most importantly authenticity—all of which presuppose and rely on some form of intimacy" (2018, 100). This reliance on intimacy complicates the notion of parasociality that is underscored in the study of RPF because both fans and creators conceptualize the fan/YouTuber relationship differently than a typical fan/celebrity relationship. Within the YouTube community, sharing personal information with fans is the backbone of the fan/YouTuber relationship whereas for mainstream celebrities this type of sharing, though appreciated by fans, is not expected in the same fashion. This distinction is why I define YouTube as a liminal space, with content on the platform often blurring the lines between reality and fiction, as well the social and the parasocial. The way YouTubers and fans understand their relationship to one another will become apparent as I analyze the ways fans express their commitment to the couples and how the YouTubers themselves express their commitment to fans.

[1.18] In Williams's conception of post-object fandom, televisual fan-objects become archived either through the purchasing of box sets or, more contemporarily, through Netflix

or other streaming platforms. By contrast, YouTube serves as an immediate archive for videos, allowing users to save and rewatch content as they please. As Abigail De Kosnik has argued, "At present, each media commodity becomes, at the instant of its release, an archive to be plundered, an original to be memorized, copied, and manipulated—a starting point or springboard for receiver's creativity, rather than an end unto itself" (2016, 4). The archive of YouTube allows users to interact with videos on "fan time," which De Kosnik noted is "spent in repetition rather than in progression" (2016, 159). As Ann Cvetkovich (2003) illustrated, maintenance of an archive is particularly important for the queer community. Cvetkovich wrote about "the profoundly affective power of a useful archive, especially an archive of sexuality and gay and lesbian life, which must preserve and produce not just knowledge but *feeling*" (2003, 241, emphasis mine). I argue that it is the queer feelings depicted in these videos—namely, happiness and romantic love—that make them a powerful and affective archive for queer YouTube users in particular.

[1.19] These two lesbian couples do not exist on YouTube in a vacuum, of course, and there are many examples of queer feelings and queer love on the YouTube space more broadly. Namely, YouTube has become a productive space for the proliferation of videos depicting lesbian couples in television series from across the world. Individual users will create playlists or upload videos that include only the scenes relevant to the specific lesbian couple in question, often including English subtitles so that English-speaking viewers around the world can consume these lesbian storylines. As Stephanie M. Yeung argued, "YouTube, as de facto archive, has become a site for the preservation of and community building around global lesbian representations" (2014, 50).

[1.20] Thus, the videos of the two couples I am focusing on exist not only within the broader YouTube archive but also within an archive of global lesbian love. I call this archive the queer canon, and it is fans' knowledge of this canon that contributes to their reactions to each individual text. However, it is important to note that this queer canon is not in fact universal. This particular canon (note 3) of real-life YouTube couples is specifically a *white* queer canon—both the couples I am focusing on as well as the other lesbian couples mentioned in the comments are white and cisgender. Although there are queer women of color and queer trans women with significant presences on YouTube, the comments on these videos indicate that these women are often not considered within this canon. Perhaps they exist on the periphery of this canon or within alternative or subgeneric canons, but this particular question is beyond the scope of this article. Future research might investigate how other factors such as race, gender identity, and ability affect the formation of queer canons.

2. Before the breakup: Videos as happy objects

[2.1] To situate the breakup videos in the context within which they would have been received, I will begin by looking at comments that were posted on the pre-breakup videos while the couples were still together. During this period, the videos of the two couples were still being circulated as happy objects and were associated with queer love and happiness. I have separated the comments on these videos into two main categories: comments that focus on how cute the couples are, and comments that describe how inspirational the videos are. Table 1 illustrates comments in the first category.

Table 1. Examples of comments focusing on the cuteness of the couples.

Video	Viewer Comment (Date)	No. of Likes
Kaelyn and Lucy, "October 2012" (2012b)	i started screaming from cuteness overload (2014)	0
Kaelyn and Lucy, "The Girlfriend TAG!" (2012a)	I'm watching your videos all over again because you're stinkin adorable!!!!!!!!!! (2014)	7
nowthisisliving, "Our First Time" (2014b)	Rewatching the same videos on this channel over and over because there hasn't been a new video in two weeks and I need my cute lesbian couple fix. :P (2014)	2
nowthisisliving, "Our First Time" (2014b)	OMFG ITS BEEN 10 SECONDS INTO THIS VIDEO AND IM ALREADY DYING HKJSALHUIIDSAHDL WHY ARE THEY SO PRETTY AND CUTE (2015)	62

[2.2] The cuteness type of comment often contains exclamation points, emojis, or text in all caps, indicating an overwhelming investment in the cuteness of these couples. For many viewers, this investment in cuteness is aspirational; whatever warm feelings these videos may produce in viewers may also be connected to a sense of longing for this queer cuteness in their own lives. As two of these comments suggest, fans would also rewatch these videos when they needed their cute lesbian couple fix.

[2.3] Although comments exclaiming about the cuteness of couples are common across the broader genre of YouTube couples, the aforementioned cute lesbian fix comment indicates that these affective responses are reactions to not only their status as couples in love but also as *lesbian* couples in love. The second category, which I will discuss next, also supports this conjecture that many fans are responding specifically to the images of lesbian love that these couples represent. Though I cannot decisively know the sexual identity of these commenters, the large number of comments that focus on these couples' lesbian identities indicates that many of the commenters identify as lesbian or bisexual themselves.

[2.4] Comments in the second category, which describe the ways in which the videos have inspired the commenters (Table 2), indicate the importance of identity in these videos more clearly. The main emphasis of these types of comments is either that the videos have inspired the commenters to come out or further accept their own sexuality, or that the videos gave the commenters hope that they will someday find the happiness that these couples have.

Table 2. Examples of viewer comments on Shannon and Cammie's YouTube video "Our First Time" (nowthisisliving 2014b).

Date	Viewer Comment	No. of Likes

2014	Love you guys so much! I also live in Texas but my town isn't as cool with out couples like Dallas and Austin. Y'all are a big inspiration!	1
2015	I adore you ladies! I hope I will find a wonderful girl someday and we will live our lives openly and proudly, and have even 1/4 of the happiness you two have together!	1
2016	you guys inspired me to come out to my parents in November:)))	5
2016	you guys are a big inspiration to me. I am discovering that I like girls and you both just give me the advice I need to just tell myself I'm not making a big mistake by thinking this way. thank you so much for sharing your videos with us! you guys truly are amazing!!!	2

[2.5] A sense of futurity is important to the circulation of these pre-breakup videos as happy objects. Here I turn to Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim (2015), who used Ahmed's concept of happy objects to discuss the pinning practices of moms on Pinterest. They contended that "the practice of pinning happiness is posting and sharing content that points toward the possibility of happiness" (234). The videos of these lesbian couples may serve as such future-oriented happy objects for queer fans who may not see happy queer couples in their daily lives. Fans may orient themselves toward these objects as a form of identification, because identification itself often points toward the future. As Ahmed put it, "identification is the desire to take a place where one is not yet. As such, identification expands the space of the subject: it is a form of love that tells the subject what it could become in the intensity of its direction towards another (love as 'towardness')" (2004, 126). For lesbian and bisexual viewers, investment in these videos as happy objects may provide ontological security in a world saturated with precarity, particularly for LGBTQ people (Butler 2004). This precarity is underscored by the continued physical and/or emotional violence many LGBTQ people face, as well as the limited examples of queer happiness (romantic or otherwise) that are available to young queer people looking for models of queer stability. Taken together, the comments under these videos indicate the affective investment viewers have in these couples, and likely contributed to the intensity of reactions to the breakups that followed.

3. After the breakup: Loss of ontological security

[3.1] On May 11, 2016, Cammie Scott tweeted the following: "Shannon and I are no longer together. I love you guys endlessly but please understand we have to do what's best for ourselves right now [red heart emoji]." On July 1, 2016, the much-awaited breakup video, entitled "Why We Broke Up" (figure 2), was uploaded to the nowthisisliving channel. On September 11, 2016, after almost three months with no uploads, Kaelyn and Lucy uploaded their own breakup video, entitled "The End." Both of these videos, and the breakups of these two couples, elicited strong emotional responses from fans. For some fans, the close temporal proximity between these two breakups compounded the emotional devastation that they experienced. In addition, on May 18, 2016, it was officially confirmed (by Stevie on Twitter) that another popular lesbian YouTube couple, Ally Hills and Stevie Boebi, had broken up. They never made a breakup video, as they did not run a joint channel, so I will not be discussing their breakup in detail here. However, it is important to note that at least

some queer women fans would have had knowledge of all three of these couples. I will now turn to the responses viewers had to these breakups.

Figure 2. Screenshot from Shannon and Cammie's breakup video, "Why We Broke Up" (nowthisisliving 2016).

[3.2] According to Rebecca Williams, "a fan pure relationship may only be sustained while it offers ontological security and a sense of trust in the other party" (2015, 26). She cited Giddens, who described a pure relationship as "a social relation [that] is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another" (Giddens 1992, 58). Williams argued that when a fan's ontological security is ruptured through the loss of a fan object, the fan goes through a period of mourning. She described three possible responses a fan may exhibit in response to this loss: a reiteration discourse, a rejection discourse, or a renegotiation discourse. For my purposes, I will focus on the first two responses.

[3.3] The reiteration discourse involves a reiteration of the fans' self-reflexive and identify-affirming relationship to the text, whereas the rejection discourse occurs "when the ending of fan objects is perceived as violating the sense of ontological security that has previously been negotiated via fandom" (Williams 2015, 103). The renegotiation discourse—which is exemplified by fans who have a more moderate reaction to these endings and are able to move on—is not applicable in this case because fans who had this response were presumably less likely to comment on the videos. (I found very few comments that fit within this categorization.) Instead, I posit a fourth response viewers have had to these videos, which involves the viewers highlighting the intertextuality of their viewing practices on YouTube through an engagement with the white queer canon.

[3.4] First, Table 3 provides examples of fans who exemplify the reiteration discourse. In their comments, these fans highlighted how these videos have had a positive effect on their lives, and they thanked the couples for the services they have provided fans. Though comments like these were present on both the breakup videos, they were the least common type of response I found. Rather, comments representing the rejection discourse, as seen in Table 4, were far more common. These comments included some type of speculation about the breakup, often containing suggestions that one individual within the couple was primarily responsible for the breakup or judgments about how quickly one or both of the

women have moved on.

Table 3. Viewer comments expressing gratitude posted on Cammie and Shannon (nowthisisliving) and Kaelyn and Lucy videos after the couples' breakups.

Video	Viewer Comment (Date)	No. of Likes
Kaelyn and Lucy, "The End" (2016)	I feel so lucky to have been able to follow both of you through the last few years and you'll always be an inspiration to me. I wish you both happiness in the separate paths you might take. (2016)	1
Kaelyn and Lucy, "The End" (2016)	You two were the reason I considered the fact that I wasn't straight. i came across multiple videos if yours a couple years ago and kind of clicked in my brain that I wasn't straight. thank you so much for everything you've done for me (2016)	21
nowthisisliving, "Girlfriend Tag | LGBT" (2014a)	Although you guys are no longer together, these videos continue to inspire people all of the time. The reason my girlfriend and I started our channel was because we saw how much you helped and inspired so many gay people and we can only hope to do the same! You are both individually amazing and will always be :) (2016)	2

Table 4. Viewer comments expressing rejection posted on Cammie and Shannon (nowthisisliving) and Kaelyn and Lucy videos after the couples' breakups.

Video	Viewer Comment (Date)	No. of Likes
nowthisisliving, "Why We Broke Up" (2016)	reasons like this are bs. cammie wanted to find herself, yet she got into a new relationship a few months later? pls. (2017)	288
nowthisisliving, "Why We Broke Up" (2016)	So u guys broke up to work on personal growth individually…yet u guys r dating other people. Soooo, now I ask, what was missing in that relationship that now you've found in another person? (2017)	115
Kaelyn and Lucy, "The End" (2017)	3:07 is when you know that this decision was taken by Kaelyn and Kaelyn alone and for her happiness alone.	33
Kaelyn and Lucy, "The End" (2017)	I've watched this over and over again and each time I cry and get more mad at Kaelyn, she seems so indifferent while Lucy seems broken hearted. Now I find out Kaelyn has already moved on with someone else I'm just…I'm cant. (2017)	46

[3.5] For many of these commenters, their response to the rupture in ontological security that

these videos triggered was to lash out at the couples (or one individual within the couple) in order to rationalize this loss. The large number of these types of responses, as well as the high number of likes that many of these responses garnered, indicates that these sentiments were shared by many fans. These responses illustrate how the fans themselves had a personal and emotional stake in these relationships and felt they had knowledge of their inner workings.

[3.6] Responses such as these illustrate the ways in which YouTube acts as a liminal space that blurs the lines between fiction and reality. Although many commenters seem to view these videos as the unfiltered truth, most YouTube users are also aware of the editing process that these videos undergo. In addition, fan comments like these resist the categorization of these relationships as parasocial because many fans feel close to these YouTubers, and the YouTubers themselves often claim that they feel the same way.

[3.7] The last type of response that was prominent in the comments section were comments highlighting the context of these breakups as they relate other lesbian couples on YouTube. I call this the queer canon response, and I argue that this response arises among viewers who are familiar with the canon of white queer female YouTubers, and the canon of queer female media content more broadly. Knowledge of this canon gives each relationship more meaning because these in-the-know fans are aware of previous lesbian breakups, and the general precarity of queer female representations as evidenced by the Bury Your Gays trope. Though the Bury Your Gays trope normally applies to fiction (referring to the disproportionately large number of queer characters, and in particular queer women, who are killed on television and in films), this sense of precarity permeates the broader media landscape. Most of the comments that fell into this category appeared on Kaelyn and Lucy's video (Table 5) because their video was released after Shannon and Cammie's, but some viewers would make similar comments about Shannon and Cammie as it related to Stevie and Ally's breakup.

Table 5. Viewer comments referencing white queer female canon on Kaelyn and Lucy's break up video "The End" (2016).

Date	Viewer Comment	No. of Likes
2016	why is everyone breaking up?	215
2016	The apocalipse is ongoing, somebody better superglue Rose and Rosie together	1.6K
2016	rose, rosie, bria, and chrissy are all we have left	88
2016	ok 2016 haven't you done enough damage already, also plz don't touch rose and Rosie just leave peacefully	603

[3.8] As the comments referencing other couples suggest, the temporal proximity between these breakups created an anxiety within the broader lesbian YouTube fandom. Many commenters mentioned two other popular lesbian YouTube couples, Rose and Rosie and

Bria and Chrissy, both of whom were married couples and had between 800,000 and 900,000 subscribers as of October 17, 2019. These lesbian YouTubers are thus part of the white queer canon on YouTube, related to one another by virtue of their sexual orientation and the subsequent queer or lesbian content they produce. These comments highlight the intertextual viewing practices of queer women who watch YouTube, illustrating what Susan Driver calls the "queer possibilities of cultural literacy" (2007, 13). These comments also demonstrate the ways in which queer fan viewing practices are always underscored with precarity, causing some fans to hold on to these happy objects even more forcefully.

4. The language of breaking up

[4.1] Although some of the viewer comments may seem like extreme responses to these breakups, the language that the YouTubers themselves use within their videos illustrates that these couples were fully aware of the intense fan investment in their relationships. To illustrate the two-sided nature of this investment—from both the fans and the couples themselves—I have analyzed the ways in which these couples described their breakups to their fans. In this section, I use José Esteban Muñoz's concept of an "ethics of the self," which he draws from the work of Michel Foucault. Muñoz describes this concept as "a working on the self for others" which is performed as an outward-facing care of the self (1999, 144). I argue that these couples' performance of emotional labor on behalf of their fans represents this ethics of the self. As these women note in their videos, the potential pleasure/despair of the fans is always at the forefront of their minds when producing videos.

[4.2] The core message of these two videos is an acknowledgment of fans' feelings about the breakup. The couples discuss the many messages and letters they have received over the years from fans, illustrating their knowledge about the impact their videos may have had on fans' lives. The couples reiterate how appreciative they are of how long fans have been with them on their respective journeys. Lucy's message to fans, which I will quote here at length, indicates the responsibility these couples felt to their fans and the difficulty of sharing this news with them with the knowledge that it may be devastating to many.

> [4.3] We don't want you guys to [pause] stop believing in love because we didn't work out. I know over the years we've received literally thousands, hundreds of thousands, of messages from people saying that we're the reason they were able to come out to their parents or we're the reason that they're happy with themselves now or we're the reason that they believe in true love and that there is hope and um, there is hope, there's always hope. (Kaelyn and Lucy, "The End," 2017)

[4.4] Lucy's monologue illustrates that although there is a clear affective investment in these couples on the part of the fans, the couples themselves also had to perform significant emotional labor in order to uphold the idealized image that fans had of them. Clearly, these couples were aware that fans' ontological security was tied up in their relationships, and these videos were made with that fact in mind. Both videos end with what we might call a reiteration discourse, as discussed previously. Kaelyn ends the video by saying "we're still family," and Shannon and Cammie reassure their viewers that they still love each other. Both of these statements sound eerily similar to parents telling their kids they are getting a

divorce, which one viewer explicitly notes in the comments of Shannon and Cammie's video. Significantly, all of Shannon and Cammie's videos are still available on Shannon's channel. On the other hand, Kaelyn and Lucy's videos, which were initially left up for several years after their breakup, are now set to private. It is to this topic—the videos as an archive—that I will now turn.

5. Videos as an archive of feelings

[5.1] As mentioned previously, the continued accessibility of these videos is a significant aspect of this post-object fandom. Shannon and Cammie's videos are still available, even though Shannon now makes solo videos on nowthisisliving and Cammie has started her own channel. Kaelyn and Lucy's continued to be available for at least three years after their breakup (they were still public in late 2019), though they have now been made private. Lucy comments on the decision to keep the videos online in the breakup video itself, noting that "the videos on this channel for now are gonna remain public because they touched so many people." I cannot speculate on why these videos were eventually made private (likely by Lucy herself, as she took the most active role in filming and editing the videos and still has a presence on YouTube), nor do I know the exact date when they were taken down (luckily, some time after I finished writing this article). However, the fact that these videos remained online for several years is significant, despite their later disappearance illustrating the inherent precariousness of an archive such as YouTube. Additionally, a number of fan-made compilations of Kaelyn and Lucy are available on YouTube, including a two-part reupload of their breakup video with Spanish subtitles (MAG Subtítulos 2016a, 2016b). For at least some time these videos remained as an archive for fans to revisit whenever they chose, or alternatively as content for new fans to discover (note 4).

[5.2] However, instead of continuing to circulate online as happy objects, for many fans these videos took on a different association after the breakups. Instead of being associated with happiness and queer futurity, these videos instead became objects of melancholia, as fans revisit old videos that have taken on new connotations. To illustrate this phenomenon, I have gone back to pre-breakup videos and looked at comments that were posted after the breakups were made public. The vast majority of these comments expressed some type of grief (Table 6). Some of the comments were posted shortly after the breakup videos were uploaded, and others were posted up to two years after the breakups.

Table 6. Viewer comments expressing grief on Shannon (nowthisisliving) and Cammie videos several years after their original posting.

Video	Viewer Comment (Date)	No. of Likes
"Our First Time" (2014b)	hi i'm here to cry (2016)	1K
"Girlfriend Tag | LGBT" (2014a)	WHY DID THIS POP UP IN MY NOTIFICATIONS I'M CRYING (2016)	23

"Our First Time" (2014b)	I'm here in 2018. And I feel like crying because I want what they have. (2018)	2

[5.3] Although at the time of their upload date these were happy videos for most fans, for these commenters this happiness is now tinged with grief (Table 7). This rewatching, prompted either by the YouTube algorithm or fans' own desires to revisit these videos, indicates that the process of grieving for these relationships is not always linear, and it may come and go in waves depending on new feelings or new content that may arise after the fact. Similar comments appear on the breakup videos themselves, with viewers coming back to watch the videos months or years later, even though they know it's torture to do so.

Table 7. Rewatching viewer comments on the Shannon (nowthisisliving) and Cammie breakup video "Why We Broke Up" (2016) a year after its original posting.

Date	Viewer Comment	No. of Likes
2017	why am i doing this to myself	1.3K
2017	I watch this at least once a month to remind myself that love does not exist	19
2017	I love torturing myself	3

[5.4] These comments indicate that for some fans, there is an almost insurmountable urge to rewatch these videos, despite the fact that fans know it will hurt them to do so. This cycle is then cemented as a practice as viewers may scroll down and read about how other fans are engaging in the same rewatching. However, social media also may provide space for fans to express their grief over parasocial breakups in ways they might not feel comfortable doing elsewhere for fear of mockery. Didier Courbet and Marie-Pierre Fourquet-Courbet (2014) noted that social media offers fans the possibility of "self-managing their mourning" (284), allowing them to mourn at their own pace and in their own way. Continuing to interact with these videos may be one mechanism by which fans process these breakups.

[5.5] Their comments suggest that for some viewers rewatching these videos constitutes a cycle of melancholia, which as Freud suggested is a rejection of the proper form of mourning, which involves a gradual letting go of the lost object. Instead of accepting that these objects are lost, some fans continue to revisit the site of this loss. Some scholars, such as Muñoz (1999) and Ahmed (2004), have attempted to theorize melancholia in a new light. Ahmed described melancholia in this way: "Mourning enables gradual withdrawal from the object and hence denies the other through forgetting its trace. In contrast, melancholia is 'an enduring devotion on the part of the ego to the lost object' (Eng and Kazanjian 2003, 3)" (2004, 159).

[5.6] The viewing practices of these fans illustrate not only the devotion of queer fans to queer fan objects, but also the ways they engage with people and objects which may be difficult to understand for those outside these communities (note 5). These rewatching

practices indicate a refusal to accept the loss of a fan object, and exemplify the process of keeping the object alive despite its unavoidable death. For most fans these videos are no longer happy objects, but the videos clearly still have use for fans as melancholic objects. The changing meaning of these videos indicates that archives are not fixed entities, but rather have meanings that change as the conditions surrounding them evolve. These online video archives are living, as their comments accumulate and their meaning transforms from context to context, and from person to person. Nonetheless, the instability of these archives (as indicated by the disappearance of Kaelyn and Lucy's original videos) complicates the understanding of sites like YouTube as an entirely stable archival space, leaving much archival work in the (very capable) hands of fans.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] YouTube, though it has existed for over ten years now, is still an often misunderstood platform. Both the content uploaded to the site and the fandoms constituted around this content are unique to the platform. I argue that YouTube acts as a liminal space, with videos often straddling the boundary between reality and fiction and complicating notions of the celebrity. We must then conceptualize YouTube fan/creator relationships within this framework, keeping in mind the affective investment and emotional labor inherent in these relationships, which exist somewhere on the spectrum between social and parasocial.

[6.2] For (queer) fans of these lesbian YouTube couples, affective investment in these relationships provided them with a type of ontological security. The reality of these couples made this investment feel personal for many fans and likely contributed to the intensity of the grief the fans experienced after the breakups occurred. Fan investments in YouTubers, and in YouTube couples in particular, are distinct from fan investments in celebrities and/or celebrity relationships or in traditional fictional media such as television and film. For queer fans, these investments are exceedingly personal because viewing these videos may provide an alternative and even utopian vision of a queer future, one that is associated with happiness instead of grief. When the couples' breakups were finally made public, this happiness turned into melancholia—though for some fans, a sense of gratitude toward the creators still remained.

[6.3] Thus, these couples' videos, some of which still exist as queer archives of feeling, now circulate as monuments of melancholia rather than the happy objects they once were. Nonetheless, the possibility for these videos to continue circulating as happy objects still remains, particularly for newer fans who did not experience the breakup in real time. In addition, as I alluded to previously, some fans still remember the videos fondly, despite the conclusion of the relationships. Thus, the feelings that stick to the videos are not fixed and are susceptible to change over time. The digital footprints these two relationships have left are still visible, despite the stories of these women's lives having progressed past them. (I should add here that all of the women are still active on social media, with three out of four of them still posting YouTube videos.) The comments sections on these old videos may now act as a space for the public performance of melancholia, or alternatively as a less emotionally charged space for reminiscing.

[6.4] Finally, these lesbian-centered affective fan/object relationships reveal the unique nature of queer viewership in online contexts. The pockets of affect that circulate through and across lesbian videos on multiple channels illustrate the intertextuality and communal nature of queer female viewing practices, complicating frameworks of what constitutes a fandom or a coherent fan object. This intertextuality is defined by the existence of what I call the white queer canon, which is composed of texts related to one another by virtue of their queer content. In the future, researchers might address the ways in which factors like race, gender expression, and ability affect the formation of this queer canon. (Indeed, many of the most popular queer female media texts are centered around whiteness and femininity.) Overall, queer women's fandoms on YouTube are a fruitful topic for further research, as these communities have formed their own unique viewing, reading, and re-viewing practices that intersect with and contest the majoritarian public sphere in unexpected ways. YouTube, as a liminal space that complicates notions of the real, is a fitting platform for the enactment of such practices.

7. Notes

1. Tag videos on YouTube involve creators completing various tags, which include challenges, games, and Q&As. A popular tag amongst couples is "The Girlfriend/Boyfriend Tag," where couples answer a predetermined list of questions about their relationship. Sometimes YouTubers tag other YouTubers in their video, and challenge them to also complete the tag.

2. I should note here that there is also RPF written about many lesbian YouTube couples, and many YouTubers themselves are aware of this fan fiction and even at times read it in videos. Though we may consider YouTubers celebrities, behavior like this differentiates them from other more mainstream celebrities.

3. Within the televisual queer canon there is slightly more diversity, as some popular couples—Kat and Adena from *The Bold Type* (Freeform, 2017–present) and Root and Shaw from *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–2016)—are composed of one or two women of color. However, even within television the most popular couples—Clarke and Lexa from *The 100* (The CW, 2014–2020) and Kara and Lena from *Supergirl* (The CW, 2015–present)—are white.

4. Unfortunately, YouTube as an archive has other tenuous aspects: LGBT YouTubers continue to report that their videos are being demonetized or age-restricted by YouTube's algorithm (Farokhmanesh 2018; Romano 2019).

5. However, as I highlighted earlier, the couples themselves seemed to have an implicit understanding that fans might want to continue to engage with these videos despite their breakups.

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Praxis

Examining the fan labor of episodic TV podcast hosts

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[0.1] Abstract—In podcasting—an understudied site of fan engagement—hosts of episodic TV podcasts, who are self-professed fans of a particular television series, engage in their fandom through a particular form of fan labor: producing and hosting a weekly podcast. Hosting an episodic TV podcast is a form of digital fan labor situated within the online fan gift economy. The resulting subcultural celebrity status that the hosts attain is ultimately what drives them to continue podcasting, regardless of any financial incentives that may arise from hosting a successful podcast. Through interviews with the hosts of the *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004) podcast *Best of Friends* (2015–), Erin Mallory Long and Jamie Woodham, it becomes clear that by closely examining the different modes of fandoms that emerge from episodic TV podcasts, we can expand legible fan studies methodologies and apply them in the study of new and emerging fan practices and behaviors.

[0.2] Keywords—*Best of Friends;* Fans with fans; *Friends;* Gift economy; Subcultural celebrity

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1. Introduction

[1.1] The ubiquity of podcasting poses a dilemma for fan studies researchers. On the one hand, podcasting has been recognized in the field as an emergent technology, with scholars like Busse (2006) and Diffrient (2010) acknowledging that the unique attributes of podcasting enable a kind of online fan community. Similarly, Włodarczyk and Tyminka (2015) have recognized the potential that podcasts have as objects of fandom, using the popular *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012–) as one useful example. Yet, little scholarship exists that considers both the practice of podcasting itself as a kind of fan behavior and podcasts as objects of fandom simultaneously. This gap in the literature is evident when considering a particular genre within podcasting: the episodic TV podcast. These podcasts are dedicated to examining a particular television series by engaging with it through episode-by-episode analysis, one or two episodes at a time. This type of podcast not only demonstrates the convergence of old and new media technologies afforded through podcasting but also reveals how podcasting is "a good example of the way the divide between consumers and creators has become more complicated" (Busse 2006). While the phenomenon of episodic TV

podcasts is well reported in mainstream media and entertainment news outlets, to date it has been given less attention within the academy (note 1).

[1.2] Just a few of the seemingly countless examples of episodic TV podcasts include *Go Bayside* (2013–17), which analyzed episodes of *Saved by the Bell* (NBC 1989–93); *Out on the Lanai* (2014–2019), which delved into *The Golden Girls* (NBC 1985–92); and the *Best of Friends Podcast* (2015–2019), which takes *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004) as its source text for episodic analysis. In terms of both form and content, each of the aforementioned podcasts are nearly identical: one or two hosts frequently joined by one or more guests comedically discuss and debate plot, characters, the political economy of the production and reception of the episode, and finally, their affective responses to each episode. For the most part, these podcast series release episodes on a weekly basis, but their creative output often extends much further than their hosting and producing duties, including maintaining social media accounts on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and/or Instagram where they interact with their followers.

[1.3] In attempting to critically examine my own fandom of podcasts such as *Go Bayside, Out on the Lanai,* and especially the *Best of Friends Podcast,* I started to think about how fan studies scholars might apply established methodologies and theoretical frameworks to episodic TV podcasts, particularly given that they represent and engage with a number of different modes of fandom. The very existence of a television podcast signals a robust fan community for the podcast's original source text: the TV show. Additionally, as these podcasts grow in popularity, they develop fandoms of their own, creating even more specialized fandoms in the process. With the success of the episodic TV podcast, three distinct fan groups emerge: the fan-producers who create and host the episodic TV podcast; fans of the original source text who then also identify as fans of the podcast; and finally, people who were not fans of the original source material but still listen to and identify as fans of the podcast. While each group merits critical examination, the group that most clearly illustrates the unique form of fannish production and consumption that podcasts enable are the hosts. That is, individuals who have elected to enact their television fandom through the fan labor of producing an episodic TV podcast.

[1.4] In the following article I argue that the work of podcast hosts is part of a lineage of digital fan labor, rendering episodic TV podcasts as a kind of fannish object. At the same time, because these podcasts attract fans themselves, I contend that episodic TV podcasts are simultaneously fan objects, turning the hosts into subcultural celebrities within the larger fandom. As part of my analysis, I explore this slippage between being a fan of an episodic TV podcast as a text and being a fan of the hosts. In doing so I challenge previous understandings of fan hierarchies, be it the fantrepreneur or the Big Name Fan (BNF), further underscoring the unique fannish production and consumption practices of episodic TV podcasts. In the end, my hope is to demonstrate that by closely examining episodic TV podcasts as both a fannish object and a fan object, fan studies scholars can continue to expand legible fan studies methodologies and apply them to the study of new and emerging fan practices and behaviors.

2. Case study: The *Best of Friends Podcast*

[2.1] In order to examine how episodic TV podcasts are both fannish objects and fan objects, I conducted a case study of the *Best of Friends Podcast*. Launched on December 31, 2014, to coincide with Netflix's January 1, 2015, release of all ten seasons of *Friends* on the streaming platform, the *Best of Friends Podcast* (*BoF*) is a weekly podcast in which cohosts Jamie Woodham and Erin Mallory Long (note 2) analyze and examine two episodes of *Friends*. Although it has gone through various affiliations with podcast networks, currently I consider *BoF* to be an independent venture that relies on the fan labor of Woodham and Long, and in turn contributions from their fans.

[2.2] Each podcast episode (ranging from one to two hours in length) begins with a short audio clip from one of the *Friends* episodes that Woodham, Long, and the occasional guest will be discussing that week. Next, the *BoF* theme song plays—a cover of "I'll Be There for You," the *Friends* theme song sung by The Rembrandts—which is then followed by some opening banter from the hosts. The first segment proper is the "The Lightning Round," in which Woodham and Long respond to emails from the podcast fans, whom they refer to as the Friendlings. Woodham and Long's identities as *Friends* fans is even more apparent during the second half of the podcast, in which they discuss two episodes from the series in minute detail. Here, Woodham and Long not only recount major plot points and jokes but also discuss their affective responses to the episodes, while at the same time considering the writing, production, and reception of the episodes, both contemporaneously as well as when they initially aired. As television writers and producers themselves—positions I discuss at length later in this article—occasionally Woodham and Long will draw on their professional identities to offer story ideas that might make the episode work better. After a more freewheeling discussion of each episode, the hosts and the guest(s) pick their best friend of the episode, followed by rating it on a scale of 0 to 5, and finally suggesting alternative titles for each *Friends* episode. Similar to "The Lightning Round," each of these segments are rife with inside jokes between the hosts and the Friendlings (the special nickname the hosts gave to the fans) utilizing repeated catchphrases and showcasing the endearing and idiosyncratic behaviors of both Woodham and Long. That the podcast features not just any *Friends* fans but Woodham and Long specifically is where I decided to begin my research on episodic TV podcasts, looking purposely at how the hosts leveraged their positionalities as both industry insiders and *Friends* mega fans to create the podcast, resulting in *BoF*—and by extension Woodham and Long—garnering fans of their own.

[2.3] Upon reaching out to the hosts via email in February 2017 to inquire about potentially interviewing them for my project, I conducted an in-depth interview with Erin Mallory Long and Jamie Woodham on April 9, 2017, via Google Hangout, the audio of which I recorded and later transcribed. Additionally, Woodham and Long gave informed consent to my conducting and recording the interview and later reviewed the article and gave their permission to include all of the information and quotations contained herein. We spoke for approximately one hour about their experiences as the *Best of Friends Podcast* hosts, podcasting as a medium in general, the scope of *Friends* fandom, and the Friendlings. Although the interview was open-ended and I generally followed the flow of conversation, I prepared a list of interview questions ahead of time, which I have included at the end of this article as an Appendix.

[2.4] As is perhaps evident by my in-depth knowledge of *BoF,* I will pause here to disclose my dual *Friends* and *BoF* fandom. I am a self-identified Friendling, and although I am not the explicit object of study here, my own relationship to and fandom of Woodham and Long as the hosts of the *Best of Friends Podcast* and within the larger scope of *Friends* fandom is always implicitly present. Thus, while I will not be overtly conducting an autoethnography of my overlapping fandoms of *Friends* and *BoF,* I will be using autoethnography as "both process and product" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, 273) in order to manage and critically examine my own fandom of Woodham and Long. This was—and is—vitally important to me throughout the researching and writing phases of this article, including as part of my preparation and interview with Woodham and Long in order to examine their particular experiences with fandom.

[2.5] In addition to exploring how episodic TV podcasts are simultaneously fannish and fan objects in and of themselves, I also specifically chose *BoF* for my case study in order to fill a gap in the literature on fans of episodic television such as sitcoms, or texts that don't conform to cult, complex, or hypermythologized genre premises (note 3). In doing so, my analysis provides a space to broaden the kinds of fan communities that fan studies scholars tend to examine by demonstrating the ways in which the robust Friendling community is declaring their fandom of one of the most popular television sitcoms of the 1990s and early 2000s—if not ever. As self-identified *Friends* super fans, both Woodham and Long acknowledge that engaging with or enacting *Friends* fandom is a little bit more difficult than other kinds of media- or television-related fandoms. According to Woodham, *Friends* "lacks a certain degree of fandom because it's so popular and successful, which is a really weird Catch-22. It's almost too big to have any sort of true fandom because it would be easier to put together a club of people that don't like it than [those] who do," adding that unlike most science fiction or cult TV series with long entrenched, active fandoms, "there's inherently no mythology or background for the most part" when it comes to the *Friends* universe (Woodham and Long, personal interview, April 9, 2017).

[2.6] On the other hand, its ubiquity and popularity for the last twenty-five years has led some, like Long, to realize how much they are fans of the series. She told me: "so many people don't realize that they're fans [of *Friends*]. They think, 'Oh yeah, I've seen *Friends* before,' and then they realize, 'Oh no I've seen *every single episode,* like, eight times!' At least, that's what happened to me. I feel like I didn't realize that I *loved Friends* for a very long time, and then I was like, 'Oh! I think this is my favorite show. I think this is the show I watch *the most!*'" (Woodham and Long, personal interview, April 9, 2017). For Long, the post-object status of *Friends* enabled her to identify so strongly as a fan as a result of the long term availability and accessibility of the series. In her expansive study on the subject, Rebecca Williams (2015) identified post-object fandom as fandom of texts that are dormant, or as with the case of television texts, no longer producing new episodes. Yet in many instances, such as with *Friends* fandom in general and the *BoF* hosts in particular, Williams notes that "fan attachment will not necessarily end in the post-object period" (16). As part of an overall survey on post-object television fandom, Williams found that "while the show itself was of key importance, continued engagement with fellow fans was important for many respondents, with 60 percent continuing to discuss their fandom via social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr, and 27 percent discussing online on message boards

and fan forums" (42). Though her study did not account for podcast production or consumption as a kind of fan engagement, in the following section I argue that *BoF* is both a mode of continued engagement for *Friends* fans in the post-object period and a way for Woodham and Long to enact their fandom as a form of digital labor. Thus, I first identify episodic TV podcasts as a fannish object by establishing it as part of a lineage of digital fan labor before delving into the ways in which it is simultaneously a fan object as well.

3. Episodic TV podcasts as a form of digital fan labor

[3.1] Since podcasts are frequently omitted from lists of fan works, I demonstrate here that episodic TV podcasts are an example of digital fan labor, even as they engender unique fandoms of their own, because for many, producing and hosting a podcast is an online activity done apart from one's waged labor. Tiziana Terranova (2000) was one of the earliest scholars to theorize the ways in which online activity done beyond the scope of work, or earning a wage in exchange for one's labor, still constitutes a form of labor. Terranova's influential scholarship on digital labor is important because it recognizes how the digital economy, or labor done on and for the internet, is "labor we do not immediately recognize as such" (38). In other words, labor that does not arise out of "the economic needs of capital" but rather labor that enables the development and flow of knowledge, culture, and affect (38). For Terranova, the emergence of new digital technologies is what facilitated this type of nonwork labor, and the accessibility of podcasting production and consumption makes it an ideal site for such digital labor.

[3.2] However, other key cultural considerations within late capitalist societies also play a role in normalizing the prevalence of digital labor. Eileen R. Meehan (2000) argues that this kind of nonwork labor has always occurred within industrialized American society because leisure has become conflated with consumption, which in turn becomes another form of labor. She writes that leisure time is either spent outside the home in "the workplace of others," such as supermarkets, theme parks, sports arenas, movie theaters, and shopping malls, or in the home, but is "increasingly depend[ent] on mass-produced media" such as television and video games (77). As she summarizes it: "Leisure time spent working with media, then, becomes a necessary element of contemporary [late] capitalism" (78). That we are constantly engaged in labor during our nonwork time, particularly for the digital economy as it relates to media, should come as no surprise to those of us living in a postindustrial, late capitalist United States. Yet, it is also important to note the extent to which this labor can be understood as fannish behavior, which is perhaps not quite as obvious.

[3.3] The work of fan studies scholars such as Abigail De Kosnik (2013) and Tisha Turk (2014) articulates how fan practices are a form of labor situated directly within the realm of leisure. De Kosnik says that, most broadly, "fandom is a form of free labor," and that any sort of fan production constitutes a "category of work" (189). By categorizing fan practices as work within the scope of one's leisure time, De Kosnik also argues that by its very nature, fandom adds or creates exchange value (200). Yet according to De Kosnik, the majority of fans do not see it this way. As she is quick to note, most fans believe that instead of adding or creating exchange value, they simply add personal value through their labor (200), which

they are then more than happy to share online for free (202). For instance, Turk contributes further to De Kosnik's argument, detailing the specific ways that digital fan labor adds exchange value to objects beyond the realm of fan art, such as fanfic or fan vids, but is in fact rigorous and necessary "behind-the-scenes labor," (¶ 2.3). This labor is done by fans for fans, but for the most part is situated within the realm of leisure. Thus, fan studies scholars argue that it is vitally important to recognize this creative fan output as a form of labor that adds exchange value to objects—both material and ephemeral—that is then distributed and shared among an online fan community entirely for free.

[3.4] While neither De Kosnik (2013) nor Turk (2014) appear to be discussing podcasting as either a form of digital fan labor or an online fan community, I argue that the work that hosts of episodic TV podcasts do to produce their podcasts is indicative of the same kind of digital fan labor that is freely distributed and widely circulated within other online fan communities. Podcasts are also a useful example of fan labor because they are an example of "produsage culture," which is an "open feedback system where people, often amateurs, collaboratively produce, consume, and interact about and through content" (Markman 2011, 549). Thus, episodic TV podcasts and the fan communities of which they are a part and that they engender are precisely the kind of online fan communities that run on the forms of fan labor as described by both De Kosnik and Turk.

[3.5] Significantly, Woodham and Long work on *BoF* in their leisure time. Of course, this does not mean that producing, hosting, and distributing the podcast—not to mention interacting with the Friendlings through social media—is not a significant amount of labor. Between the two of them, the workload breaks down as follows: Long does most of the pre-production, including scheduling the podcast recording times and booking the guests, while Woodham is responsible for most of the post-production, including editing the episodes and pulling the audio clips, writing the show descriptions, and posting the episodes to iTunes (Woodham and Long, personal interview, April 9, 2017). Additionally, Long is responsible for maintaining the podcast's social media presence, and also was the one I corresponded with to schedule our interview. While both cohosts contribute equally during the recording of the podcast episodes, they each play a role as part of their hosting personas. Long usually plays the straight man to Woodham's comic foil. This even extends to how they interact with the Friendlings and/or guests during recordings: Long is usually responsible for keeping the episode on track, while Woodham often engages in recurring comedic bits throughout.

[3.6] That said, the tremendous amount of labor Woodham and Long put into producing, hosting, and distributing the podcast have ancillary benefits, despite the fact that there are "little to no financial benefits" for the hosts resulting directly from *BoF* (Woodham and Long, personal interview, April 9, 2017). According to Woodham, the show is self-sustaining, in that they have always been able to generate a small amount of income that covers the costs of operations, which for non-network affiliated podcasts generally includes hosting services and perhaps audio equipment. While *BoF* has not incorporated advertising into its episodes since early 2016 and thus does not rely on ad revenue, it has in the past utilized Patreon, an online crowdfunding platform where fans can contribute monthly donations to help offset the costs of producing the podcast. *BoF* has had as many as 108 monthly patrons, contributing approximately $1,300 annually. Thus, while this example

shows how the production and distribution of *BoF* are a part of the lineage of digital fan labor done during one's leisure time, that they are able to crowdfund through Patreon reveals that episodic TV podcasts are not exactly like other fannish objects.

4. Between a fan-professional and a professional fan

[4.1] Perhaps the biggest difference between episodic TV podcasts like *BoF* and other kinds of fan works is that its presence within a fan gift economy is a bit more complicated. According to De Kosnik (2013), the aforementioned gift economy is "one framework that affinity groups use to characterize their modes of exchange without pay" (202). Turk (2014) further explains that this is usually not a reciprocal or one-to-one exchange, but often a "circular" or "one-to-many" exchange, in which "some gifts are made for and presented to specific fans…[that] are typically made available not only to one individual but to the community as a whole" (¶ 3.1). While this is a useful explanation of *BoF,* which hosts and self-ascribed *Friends* fans Woodham and Long have made available to anyone who identifies as a *Friends* fan, it does not account for the previously mentioned Patreon account and the hosts' ability to raise money in order to produce and distribute the podcast. Similarly, as mentioned previously, both Woodham and Long are writers and comedians based in Los Angeles and are employed in the entertainment industries. While this does not detract from the labor of producing *BoF* or from their self-professed *Friends* fandom, it is vital to consider not only how their professional lives and their fan identities impact and inform one another but also how this separates the podcast from other fannish objects within the gift economy.

[4.2] In terms of their professional backgrounds, both Woodham and Long work in television: Woodham as a writer for the animated web series *Talking Tom and Friends* and Long as a producer for the E! network. Their positions from within the entertainment industries allow them to harness their talents as writers, comedians, and producers when hosting *BoF*. Their inside knowledge coupled with their industry connections and access to guests with similar comedic talents has been vital to the success of the podcast. This was also an important factor for Woodham and Long in even starting the podcast; they acknowledge that they were "in a good position [for hosting a podcast], both being writers and comedians in entertainment, so it wasn't weird for us to bring our own flavor and voice to something and have people respond to that positively because that's kind of the goal of all of the stuff we do. We were able to combine an aspect of what we do here in LA, with something we're also a fan of" (Woodham and Long, personal interview, April 9, 2017). In other words, the *BoF* hosts have married their professional identities as writer-producers with their fan identities, occupying both simultaneously.

[4.3] In this way, Woodham and Long have not only leveraged their professional skills to enact their fandom by producing and hosting *BoF* but also have gained fans of their own in the process. In the remainder of this section, I differentiate Woodham and Long from previous scholarship on the professionalization of fan labor, specifically the Big Name Fan (BNF) and the fantrepreneur. Significantly, both the post-object and mainstream status of *Friends* precludes Woodham and Long from either the BNF or the fantrepreneur designation. According to Suzanne Scott's (2019) analysis of the professionalization of fandom, "many

BNFs derive their status from the perceived 'quality' (e.g., professionalism) of their work, and invitations to become officially and promotionally affiliated with the object of their fandom are explicitly bound up with their *capacity* to professionalize" (146). According to this logic, because Woodham and Long have the abilities and insider knowledge to produce a well-received episodic TV podcast, they in turn might receive access to official *Friends* promotional channels, be it through Warner Bros. Television, the studio that produced and distributes the series, or Netflix, the streaming platform that they and most of the Friendlings use to consume the series alongside the podcast (note 4). While the post-object status of the series limits the extent to which there remain official promotional channels that Woodham and Long might gain access to, the hosts also recognize the freedom they have to produce the podcast in any way they see fit. By not entering into any kind of formal or compensatory relationship with either the studio or the primary platform that distributes *Friends,* Woodham and Long are able to host a podcast that accurately reflects their identities as fans but which also includes frequent and not unwarranted critiques of the series, or the context in which it was created. As Long put it, "I definitely think that if [Warner Bros. or Netflix] were sponsoring us, we would have to produce a very different show" (Woodham and Long, personal interview, April 9, 2017).

[4.4] Similarly, Scott's (2019) multipronged understanding of the fantrepreneur also doesn't quite capture how Woodham and Long are fusing their personal identities as *Friends* fans with their professional identities as writers and comedians. Most generally, Scott uses the term fantrepreneur to describe someone "who openly leverages or strategically adopts a fannish identity for their own professional advancement" (169). While I am not suggesting that there are no professional gains or opportunities for self-branding to be had through hosting an episodic TV podcast (quite the opposite is true), I am arguing that Woodham and Long's *Friends* fandom was not strategically adopted for these purposes, especially considering that the series is a widely syndicated sitcom. As Scott further delineates the meaning of fantrepreneurs, she notes that they "are adept at capitalizing on the mainstreaming of geek and fan culture, using their preexisting ties to various fan communities to build a network of collaborators and followers" (169). I contend Woodham and Long are doing just the opposite: instead of capitalizing on the mainstreaming of geek culture, they are creating a space for a more niche or specialized fandom of a mainstream, globally popular text.

[4.5] Thus, rather than identifying them as Big Name Fans (BNFs) or fantrepreneurs, I argue that as the hosts of an episodic TV podcast, Woodham and Long have become subcultural celebrities within *Friends* fandom because they were able to carve out a community of *Friends* fans by creating both a fannish and a fan object with their episodic TV podcast. They are able to achieve their subcultural celebrity statuses through hosting, producing, and distributing their podcast, which serves as a conduit between Woodham and Long and any number of fans within the community they generated through their fan labor. Additionally, the DIY nature of podcasting as an emerging media form facilitates a kind of "authentic presentation" (Symons 2017, 107) that further enables Woodham and Long to connect with members of the fan community of which they are both a part and one that they engendered. According to Matt Hills (2006), this kind of "niche-media reputation" is a viable way to not only achieve subcultural celebrity status but also helps to sustain it over a prolonged period

of time (106).

[4.6] A number of factors have contributed to Woodham and Long attaining subcultural celebrity status among the Friendlings, the niche *Friends* fan community that subscribes to their podcast (note 5). First and foremost is the continued production of *BoF,* which is in a second round of recapping and analyzing episodes following its initial completion of the series, as well as its spin-off series *Joey* (NBC, 2004–6). I identify the ongoing existence of the podcast and the continued interest in it as a "subculturally-valorized achievement" (Hills 2006, 115) continuously celebrated by the podcast's fans as something that has helped Woodham and Long actively achieve and maintain their subcultural celebrity statuses. It is significant, however, that this Friendling feedback loop further inculcates a sense of subcultural celebrity for *BoF* hosts. Media podcasts in general, and TV-related podcasts in particular, have a tendency to rearticulate relationships between fans, casual viewers, and the power of the entertainment industry that originally produced the TV series on which a podcast is based (Busse 2006). Put another way, though the podcast started off as a means for Woodham and Long to enact their long-standing *Friends* fandom and was further bolstered by their professional skills, that they themselves gained fans as a result of *BoF* is crucial to understanding episodic TV podcasts as fan objects. In the remainder of this article I examine the various types of fan interaction between the Friendlings and the podcast hosts, demonstrating the extent to which through their hosting duties they have become *Friends* fans with fans of their own.

5. Fans of *Friends* with fans of their own

[5.1] Perhaps the clearest example of the extent to which Woodham and Long have attracted fans of their own through the podcast is through their interactions with *BoF* listeners, whom the hosts refer to as the Friendlings. This is most apparent during The Lightning Round segment of the podcast, in which Woodham and Long read and answer fan email sent in by the aforementioned Friendlings. It is important to note that this segment is exemplary of the kind of fan practices the Friendlings have adopted in order to pay tribute to their fandom of *BoF* and by extension Woodham and Long themselves. For instance, the vast majority of the emails sent in by the Friendlings have emojis as subject lines, a suggestion Woodham and Long made offhandedly early in the podcast's run that is now tradition. Too, it has become something of a game between the hosts and the Friendlings during this segment, in which cohost Long must describe each emoji in the subject line before reading the email aloud. In discussing this practice during my interview, Long shared her initial surprise at how earnestly the Friendlings take their suggestions, saying: "Once the emoji-subject line thing started I was like, 'Wow, this is crazy!' I just said this [nonchalantly] and then it's a thing that happens" (Woodham and Long, personal interview, April 9, 2017). It is also important to note that the content of the emails generally consists of questions that ask Woodham and Long to draw upon their expertise as the *BoF* hosts and *Friends* fans as they ruminate on and ultimately discuss their answers, taking up the bulk of the segment. Lastly, these Friendling emails frequently refer to inside jokes or colloquialisms used by Woodham and Long, or reference prevalent themes from past podcast episodes. Altogether, this segment demonstrates the extent to which Woodham and Long have not only become subcultural celebrities within a certain sect of *Friends* fandom but also are hailed by the Friendlings as

Friends megafans.

[5.2] Here, the Friendlings project any knowledge they may have of the series onto *BoF* hosts, rendering themselves casual viewers who are less informed than Woodham and Long, regardless of whether this is actually true. The resulting dichotomy between Friendlings as theoretically subpar fans to Woodham and Long's proto-fannish authority should be read as a result of their subcultural celebrity status within the *Friends* fandom they have cultivated through the podcast rather than something the two of them ever stated outright. Although Woodham mentioned to me that when it comes to fandom of sitcoms, a genre which often lacks the ingrained mythology of a sci-fi or cult series, he and Long are "about as big of experts as you can be." I argue that this is symptomatic of the elevated subcultural celebrity status he and Long have achieved through their hosting duties of *BoF* and not something they consciously believed in December 2014 when the podcast began.

[5.3] Indeed, their subcultural celebrity status is something that Woodham and Long are continually negotiating with, even nearly five years and 189 episodes into hosting the podcast. As Long told me, "We started [the podcast] because we're fans of *Friends*, but I think our fandom of *Friends* has changed so much from doing this. And that has partly to do with having fans ourselves, [and] seeing what other people react to or what opinions we have about the show that other people respond to. We get comments that are more about our interactions than about anything we actually talk about [with regards to] *Friends*." Again, as evident by the content of the emails read aloud during "The Lightning Round," fans of *BoF* are quite fond of Woodham and Long's dynamic, one which is not only evident from listening to the podcast on a regular basis but one which they still maintained (whether intentionally or not) throughout my interview. Thus, I argue that it is not only the existence of the podcast or their *Friends* expertise on display during it that has helped them achieve subcultural celebrity status but also their ability to entertain beyond the scope of their *Friends* fandom.

[5.4] However, despite their goal of entertaining others through discussions of *Friends* and their fandom of the show, having fans of their own is something with which Woodham and Long are obviously still grappling. As I noted earlier, Long acknowledged that her and Woodham's fandom of *Friends* has changed as they have incorporated how listeners and Friendlings respond to the podcast into their production and recording of it. As evidenced by our conversation and the hundreds of hours I have spent listening to *BoF,* it is clear that while the hosts and the listeners share a common affinity for the show *Friends,* the fannish object Woodham and Long have created with *BoF* has also resulted in a fan community centered around the podcast as an object of fandom in and of itself. Comparing a December 2018 podcast episode dedicated to Woodham and Long's rewatch of the season one *Friends* episode "The One with the Butt" with the podcast episode from January 2015 during their original viewing reveals the extent to which the podcast has shifted from being a space for the hosts to engage with their fandom of *Friends* to a site where Woodham and Long engage with Friendlings' fandom of *BoF*. Not only was more than half of the more recent episode segment-free, mostly serving as a showcase for their personalities, but also when they did eventually delve into segments such as The Lightning Round in which they read an email aloud from a German Friendling, it was about a completely different episode than the one

Woodham and Long were scheduled to discuss. That the fan writing in was more interested in facilitating Woodham and Long bantering in a manner only tangentially related to *Friends* demonstrates how much the *BoF* fans are drawn to the hosts and their personas, even beyond Woodham and Long's *Friends* fandom. The fact that now a vital part of every podcast episode includes the Friendlings' enacting their fandom of *BoF* and the hosts—and rarely distinguishing between the two—is exemplary of the extent to which the *Best of Friends Podcast* is both a fannish object for Woodham and Long and a fan object of Woodham and Long. That a singular episodic TV podcast can engender such a consistent amount of fan activity demonstrates why studies such as these are important to the field of fan studies broadly, while also offering an example of how to incorporate a variety of established fan studies frameworks and ethnographic methodologies and apply them to emerging fan practices.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] The growth and continued popularity of the episodic TV podcast genre not only reveals a robust fandom for the podcast's source text (the original television series on which the podcast is based) but also reveals new and productive fandoms that merit further analyses, including the podcasts' hosts who demonstrate their fandom to the source text by creating and producing a podcast dedicated to it; podcast listeners who also identify as fans of the original source text; and listeners who do not identify at all as fans of the source text, but do identify as fans of the podcast, and by extension, the podcast hosts.

[6.2] In this article I have examined the first set of fans identified above, the podcast hosts, by conducting a case study of the *Best of Friends Podcast,* hosted by self-professed *Friends* super fans Erin Mallory Long and Jamie Woodham. In looking at how the podcast is both a fannish object fueled by the digital fan labor of the hosts, who as Hollywood insiders occupy a liminal space between fan and professional, I have also argued that *BoF* has become a fan object in and of itself. I conclude that this simultaneous status as both fannish object and fan object suggests that TV and media-related podcasts in general, and episodic TV podcasts in particular, represent a unique form of fannish production and consumption. It is my hope that fan studies scholars, myself included, can continue to examine the intricate fandoms surrounding episodic TV podcasts in order to learn even more about what they can tell us about contemporary television fandom.

[6.3] Some potential future avenues that research on episodic TV podcasts can take is to consider the identity politics of the hosts and how that affects the dynamics of the relationship between fans of the source text, fans of the podcast, and the hosts. For instance, *Gilmore Guys* started with the premise that two men (hosts Kevin T. Porter and Demi Adejuyigbe) watching *Gilmore Girls* would have a different experience of watching the series than the predominantly young and female audience of the source material, *Gilmore Girls*. Another example is *Out on the Lanai,* an episodic TV podcast dedicated to *The Golden Girls,* which is cohosted by Kerri Doherty and H. Alan Scott, an openly gay man whose personal fandom and experience of hosting the podcast speaks to the ways in which the series has been queered as it is recirculated and reinterpreted decades after going off the air (Patterson 2016). Lastly, future work might also be interested in examining the

accessibility that podcasting offers as a purely audio medium for disabled television fans, and how episodic TV podcasts may further empower marginalized television fans who are not usually considered in studies of television fandom. With the inclusion of episodic TV podcasts in analyses of fan practices, the possibilities are almost endless.

7. Appendix

[7.1] The following is the list of questions I used to help guide my interview with Jamie Woodham and Erin Mallory Long conducted on April 9, 2017.

1. What labor is involved in putting out this podcast every week, and how do you two break it down?

2. What costs are involved?

3. Do you get any material or affective benefits from doing the podcast?

4. Do you find that there are professional benefits with regards to the entertainment industry in doing the podcast, since you showcase your name and brand every week?

5. With this in mind, do you find the work/labor pleasurable? Do you still enjoy it?

6. Has anything surprised you about doing the podcast? Anything you were not anticipating?

7. Do you ever think about how much free advertising or labor you're doing for Netflix and Warner Bros? How do you feel about that? Do you have any concerns about playing unlicensed clips at the beginning of every episode?

8. Do you feel a kind of authority over *Friends* fandom now? Or television fandom in general? Do you feel affinity with podcast hosts for other TV shows?

9. I'm curious about the move away from the HeadGum Podcast Network; would you be willing to talk about what led to that decision and how the podcast has changed?

10. How do you feel now that although you're *Friends* fans engaged in a fan practice, a fandom has built up around *BoF* as a fan text?

11. Do you have a sense of how big the *BoF* audience is? Do you have a sense of the gender breakdown? How many people write in, or approximate download information?

12. Where do you see the podcast in relationship to other *Friends* fan practices?

13. How do you feel about all of the fan labor the Friendlings do for the podcast? For example, the Friendling who compiles the stats, or that it sounds like Friendlings provided you with *Joey* episodes?

14. How do you feel about podcasting as an emerging media industry? Is there any

professionalization to it happening that you see, whether it is through unionizing or developing a guild?

8. Notes

1. Besides the recent *Welcome to Nightvale* article cited previously, for earlier scholarship on television, podcasting, and fandom see also Tussey and Ellcessor (2015).

2. As of November 2019, the podcast has been on an extended hiatus, with no new episodes released since episode 189: "The One With Friendsgivings Past." Additionally, from December 31, 2014 to January 27, 2016 (Episode 57: "The One with Krista's Farewell") the podcast was also hosted by Krista Doyle. Doyle's relocation from Los Angeles, CA to Austin, TX for a job opportunity prompted her to leave the podcast. However, she still occasionally records episodes, and by all appearances maintains good relationships with both Woodham and Long. Although I do not discuss Doyle's fan labor or her subcultural celebrity status in this article, it is important to recognize both.

3. For work that specifically examines cult television, podcasting, and fandom, see Kompare (2011). In attempting to complicate the notion of television authorship, his study focused on showrunners of series like *Lost* (ABC, 2004–2010) and *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci-Fi Channel, 2004–2009) who adopted a fannish approach when podcasting about the television programs they created and/or executive produced.

4. Although at the time of my interview and writing Netflix was home to the streaming rights, as of May 2020 *Friends* is only available to stream cost-free for subscribers of HBO Max, a new streaming service from WarnerMedia.

5. While Woodham and Long did not disclose much in the way of audience data to me during our conversation, they did indicate that the number of downloads within the first three days of the podcast becoming available has remained consistent, which they believe is representative of the size of their fandom. Of course, podcast download numbers do not necessarily correlate directly to listeners, and despite the steady number, this does not necessarily indicate fandom.

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Praxis

Discourses of Hindi film fandom and the confluence of the popular, the public, and the political

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[0.1] Abstract—Indian fandom reconstituted as a more participatory culture with the emergence of online cyber communities in the late 1990s to early 2000s, a move accompanied by shifts in the Indian mediascape. With increasing synergy among film, television, and digital media, Bollywood stars were consequently remade as transmedia celebrities. Bollywood stars use digital media such as Twitter and Instagram for promotion and publicity, but such use has created a new type of Bollywood fan: the internet troll. As film personalities now actively engage with social media, incessantly tweeting and sharing pictures, the line has blurred between the reel and the real, the public and the private. Fans having perceived access to the private, off-screen personas of their film idols has further complicated both discourses of contemporary Bollywood stardom and fandom. Stars' and fan's engagement and interaction on social media reveals the so-called disrespectful troll to be not merely a more active participant but a fundamental reworking of the relationship between star and fan, which had been founded primarily on admiration and veneration. This reworking has provided a space for political mobilization in the Indian (online) public space offered by digital platforms and social networking sites.

[0.2] Keywords—Bollywood; Indian fandom; Internet trolls; Social media; Stardom

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1. Introduction

[1.1] On November 1, 2015, TV Today Network, a premier Indian television news network, organized a Twitter town hall meeting to commemorate the fiftieth birthday of Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan. Twitter users were encouraged to send Khan their questions with the hashtag #AskSRK. Speaking to noted journalist Rajdeep Sardesai, who was moderating the questions, the actor lamented the growing intolerance and current politically hostile environment in the country. He had been asked if he would return state awards as many notable writers, historians, and filmmakers had done to protest the recent killings of rationalists M. M. Kalburgi and Govind Pansare and the rising cow vigilante violence. In response, Khan remarked, "Yes, there is intolerance, there is growing intolerance…And this

is my biggest issue. Not being secular in this country is the worst kind of crime you can do as a patriot" (Chatterjee 2015). Though some online users commended him for taking a stand, for many it was tantamount to being anti-national, the comments seen as tarnishing the country's image. As Twitter users demanded a boycott of his upcoming film *Dilwale* (Elsa 2015), hardliner, right-wing politicians such as Yogi Adityanath denounced Khan as a traitor, even comparing him to Hafiz Saeed, the mastermind of the 2008 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks.

> [1.2] (@surajjainbunty) This time it is #BoycottDilwale . Let him understand the meaning of intolerant India. So that he will b careful nxt time
>
> [1.3] (@PRATIK007P) #BoycottDilwale…we will boycott dilwale and show you those who made you Shahrukh Khan can make you joker again…
>
> [1.4] (@malathik1129) He has taken a stand let him bear the brunt of our intolerance to his movies #BoycottDilwale

[1.5] As the online backlash soon escalated into violence, with incensed protestors burning the actor's effigies and disrupting the screenings of *Dilwale,* Khan tried to salvage the situation by issuing a statement that his comments were misconstrued: "I never said India is intolerant. When I was asked about it, I said I wouldn't like talking about it, but when they insisted, I had just said that the youth should concentrate on making this a secular, progressive country" (HT Correspondent 2015). As a Muslim superstar in a predominantly Hindu country, Khan's position is particularly vulnerable, with his minority status simultaneously marking him "both as the ideal citizen, and also as the Muslim 'Other,' bringing into question his allegiance and loyalty to the national imaginary" (Mitra 2020). With a Hindu wife and children inculcated in the tenets of both faiths, the actor's liberal demeanor "epitomizes an acceptable variant of 'Muslimness'…(and) also, facilitates the global imagining of contemporary India as a secular, modern nation-state" (Mitra 2020, 193). However, the hegemonic narrative of the vilified Muslim Other also underlines his vulnerability and tenuous sense of belonging.

[1.6] Though Shah Rukh Khan's religious affiliation makes him more susceptible to online trolling, he is not the only Bollywood star to face the ire of the Indian social media in recent times. Rather, it has become commonplace to castigate and censure celebrities on social networking sites such as Twitter and Instagram, thus reconfiguring them as vulnerable sites for the Bollywood star, particularly when it comes to political views and opinions. In the southern Indian states, particularly Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, regional politics have been traditionally dominated by actors like M. G. Ramachandran, Jayalalitha, N. T. Rama Rao, and Chiranjeevi, with their fan associations playing a crucial role in political mobilization (Srinivas 2000, 2009), Elsewhere Bollywood stars have largely been apolitical and conspicuous in their lack of political ambitions. They may lend their star power to election campaigning or occasionally may contest elections as a token political entity, but thereafter they will be absent from the governance process.

[1.7] Scholarship on Indian fandom has thus primarily focused on fan associations and their

role in political mobilization, particularly in south Indian cinema (Dickey 1993; Hardgrave 1975; Prasad 1998; Srinivas 2000, 2009). However, with the emergent dynamics of social media in contemporary Bollywood, it is imperative to revisit discourses on Indian fandom. Film personalities now actively engage with social media, incessantly tweeting and sharing pictures (Kumar 2019), blurring the line between the reel and the real, the public and the private. Fans having access to the private personas and off-screen avatars of their film idols has further complicated discourses of both contemporary Bollywood stardom and fandom. Through contemporary examples of both the stars' and their fans' engagement and interaction on social media, I argue that the disrespectful troll is not merely a more active participant but essentially a resignification of the erstwhile relationship between stars and fans, which had been founded primarily on admiration and veneration.

[1.8] Building on previous scholarship on Indian fandom (Punathambekar 2007, 2008; Srinivas 2000, 2009), I interrogate how the evolution of the *rasika*/rowdy dichotomy to the present-day troll reveals the changing norms of the Bollywood star–fan dynamics. Shifts in the discourse on stardom have reconfigured the star from a cinematic idol to a transmedia celebrity; consequently, the emergence of cyber culture has engendered a new kind of fan, the troll, who no longer conforms to the earlier norms of the star–fan relationship. I also underline the increasing political mobilization in the Indian (online) public space offered by digital platforms and social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Employing specific case studies (the beef ban and Salman Khan controversies), I illustrate how social media engagement has problematized discourses of Bollywood stardom, particularly with regards to the stars' vocalization of their political views, as well as engendered the new trollish fan.

2. Popular Indian cinema and fan culture

[2.1] "*Mughal-e-Azam* was one of the five main texts of my youth, and its star, Dilip Kumar, was my guide and pathfinder. He was not just my 'hero'…No. He was my guide through the complex world of human emotions; he opened certain paths and invited me to journey through them, to examine and cross-examine what I discovered *en route,* to dissect and analyze what I encountered" (Sardar 1998). As renowned writer and scholar Ziauddin Sardar's experience illustrates, the consumption of Hindi cinema is intrinsically linked to the popularity of its stars, with the latter functioning as the focal point of the cinematic experience. Neepa Majumdar, in her study of early Indian film stardom, pointed out, "Dominating the cinema at all levels, from the economic structuring of the film industry to the formulaic nuances of textual strategies, [stardom] has come to take over, almost exclusively, the function of product identification that genres have had in Hollywood cinema" (Majumdar 2009, 11). Consequently, the relationship between the star and the fan in popular Indian cinema was one of adulation and devotion.

[2.2] It is useful in this context to employ the Hindu devotional practice and tradition of *darsana*/*darshan* to understand star–fan dynamics. Rachel Dwyer described darsana as the process of "seeing"/"being seen": "when the devotee looks at the god's image through which, in turn, the god is understood to look back" (2008, 31). As Madhava Prasad has also discussed, "darsana refers to a relation of perception within the public traditions of Hindu

worship, especially in the temples, but also in public appearances of monarchs and other elevated figures" (1998, 75). The tradition of fans thronging the stars residences and film studios for an elusive glimpse of their (cinematic) idols is evocative of darsana. With the Hindi film star functioning as the focal point of the cinematic experience and revered as a divine entity, the fans' response is thus inevitably that of devotion and adulation. Joli Jenson remarked, "The fan is understood to be, at least implicitly, a result of celebrity…[and] is defined as a response to the star system" (1992, 9). In the context of popular Indian cinema, the star–fan relationship thus has been defined in terms of veneration and, consequently, hyperbolic excess—"excess, hyperbole and even obsession…Commitment and 'excessive' admiration are integral to [Indian] fandom" (Srinivas 2000, 305).

[2.3] Foundational scholarship on fandom in general has tended to perceive it in terms of excess; the fan is "consistently characterized…as a potential fanatic," and fandom is "seen as excessive, bordering on deranged, behavior," thereby distinguishing fans "from [the more reputable] patrons or aficionados or collectors" (Jenson 1992, 9). A similar distinction is also evident in discourses of Indian fandom, with a distinction between the cultured, civilized connoisseur, the *rasika,* and the uncouth, vulgar rowdy (Punathambekar 2007). Because popular Indian cinema is perceived as inherently lower class—pandering to the masses and consequently devoid of any positive attributes—its consumers and fans, by association, are also derided. The archetypal fans, with their rowdy behavior, are regarded as the antithesis of respectable, middle-class decorum and civility. As film critic Anupama Chopra described them, the Hindi film fan is "not content to sit passively in the dark…[but is] aggressive and voluble…a pleasing line of dialogue or a favorite or a favorite song elicits applause, whistles and sometimes even a shower of coins" (Chopra 2006).

[2.4] The hyperbolic nature of the rowdy Indian film fan is thus consequently circumscribed by diktats of class. S. V. Srinivas, employing the work of Vivek Dhareshwar and R. Srivatsan (1996), noted, "The rowdy or 'lumpen' is the subhuman 'other' of the globalizing, upper-caste middle-class 'citizen' and is invoked to explain 'all that the [middle-class] find disturbing in the social and political life of the nation.' [Thus,] the fan is a rowdy not only because he breaks the law in the course of his assertion or his association with 'criminalized' politics—the fan becomes a rowdy by overstepping the line which demarcates the legitimate, 'constructive,' permissible excess, and the illegitimate" (2000, 314).

[2.5] In his discussion of online fan communities of the Indian film music composer A. R. Rahman, Aswin Punathambekar argued for a more nuanced understanding of Indian fandom. The dominant discourses about fandom tended to perceive fans of popular Indian cinema as either *rasikas* (connoisseurs) or rowdies, subsequently categorizing fan activity as "devotional excess" or "political mobilization" (2008, 283). However, with the emergence of online cyber communities in the late 1990s to early 2000s, Indian fandom reconstituted as a more participatory culture. Situating fan practices within the context of the emergent cyber culture, Punathambekar argued that Indian fandom needed to be perceived "along a more expansive continuum of participatory culture by dismantling the binary of *fan-as-rowdy* versus *fan-as-rasika*" (2008, 284). Proposing the term "cinematic cyberpublics," he argued that "thinking through cinema's public-ness in terms of its convergence with new media and opening up the category of the 'fan' will be a first step towards radically revising our

understanding of fan culture surrounding Indian cinema" (2008, 296).

[2.6] However, the resignification of the Indian film fan is intrinsically tied to shifts in the discourse about Indian film stardom. The remaking of the Bollywood star as a transmedia celebrity—from cinematic idol to consummate brand—has been accompanied by the reshaping of the Bollywood fan—from adulation and veneration to censure and disapproval.

3. The star as brand and the fan as troll

[3.1] With the increasing synergy between film, television, and digital media, the Bollywood star is no longer perceived as merely a cinematic idol but rather as a transmedia celebrity, effortlessly straddling multiple media platforms and domains. For contemporary Bollywood stars, performing the varied roles of a film actor, television personality, and brand endorser, their social media presence is crucial to enhancing their visibility and consequently brand value. As Ashish Patil, the head of Y-Films, a subsidiary of Yash Raj Films, remarked, "We treat our actors/actresses as brands and social media like PR [public relations] and events is a very important medium for us…The success of a star as a brand on the online space rubs on the product" (Mehra and Banerjee 2015). Stars are increasingly managed by professional entertainment agencies, and social media networking sites have emerged as potent sites of image branding, promotion, and publicity.

[3.2] Whether it is teasers and promotional posters of upcoming films, behind-the-scenes images from magazine photo shoots and gym workouts, or photographs from intimate family dinners, social media visibility is now an integral aspect of Bollywood stardom. Atul Kasbekar, the owner of Bling Entertainment Solutions, a premier celebrity management company, emphasized the need for social media presence: "Stars need to constantly re-invent themselves in the modern era…Social media is an instant way of doing so, and it builds a totally different connect with the fans. We definitely factor in a star's popularity on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter while sealing an endorsement deal for him or her" (Mehra and Banerjee 2015). Kasbekar's comment about the star's popularity on social networking sites and its role in defining his/her net worth as a brand endorser speaks to Ruth Page's discussion of the construction of the star's identity and brand image as "a product to be consumed by others," and consequently "the audience as an aggregated fan base to be developed and maintained in order to achieve social or economic benefit" (2012, 182).

[3.3] The resignification of the Bollywood star as a brand has received further impetus with the increased penetration and expansion of digital media and technology in India. With "a growing mobile-equipped population" coupled with "increasing affordability of mobile data" (Kumar 2019, 237), the country has witnessed a staggering increase in online engagement, particularly with regards to social networking. As Neeraj Roy, the CEO of Hungama Digital Media Entertainment, pointed out, "In India, 25 percent of all internet usage is for social networking. With over 78 million Indians on Facebook, digital really opens an array of opportunities that will impact the way entertainment is marketed and consumed today" (quoted in Kanal 2013).

[3.4] Consequently, the presence of Bollywood celebrities on Twitter and Instagram has

facilitated the popularity and mainstream consumption of such social networking sites. As Steven Baker said, Twitter was launched in 2006, but the microblogging site "witnessed a huge traffic growth registering a 74 percent increase in India during one month in March 2009" (2013, 1052), a period that coincided with many Bollywood celebrities joining Twitter. In the data analytics compiled by Twitter in 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi emerged as the only non-Bollywood celebrity in the top ten most-followed Indians on the site (IANS 2015).

[3.5] Twitter's role in the celebrification of Indian public personalities was particularly evident in the case of Narendra Modi. As Joyojeet Pal has discussed, the microblogging site was crucial to Modi's "rebranding" (2015, 380). He transitioned himself from a sectarian politician vilified for his alleged role in the 2002 Gujarat riots to "a technology-savvy leader, aligned with the aspirations of a new Indian modernity" (Pal 2015, 378). Moreover, Modi's prioritizing of social media over traditional news outlets reaffirmed not only his image as a "global leader who speaks directly to his electorate" (Pal, Chandra, and Vydiswaran 2016) without any mediation, but also the role of social media as means of direct (and authentic) communication.

[3.6] Interestingly, as Neha Kumar has demonstrated, Indian social media users tend to perceive Twitter as a platform for celebrities and their fans "while Facebook and WhatsApp [are] regarded as more personal, allowing to 'connect' to friends, acquaintances, etc" (2019, 240). As Kumar further reiterated, "to be a contributor [on Twitter], one needed to have a fan base and a hefty social status," and consequently "to be a listener…[one] had to be a dedicated fan of one or more contributors" (2019, 244). For Bollywood stars, the brevity of social networking sites like Twitter and Instagram has offered a more convenient means of connecting with their fans while enhancing their visibility compared with Facebook. However, the popularity of Twitter and Instagram among Bollywood stars has also fundamentally reconfigured the dynamics of the star–fan relationship.

[3.7] Alice Marwick and dannah boyd (2011) have discussed in detail how "networked media is changing celebrity culture, the ways that people relate to celebrity images, how celebrities are produced, and how celebrity is practiced" (139). As Marwick and boyd further argued, the emergence of new media and social networking "has created a shift in traditional understanding of 'celebrity management' from a highly controlled and regulated institutional model to one in which performers and personalities actively address and interact with fans" (139–40), which has garnered "a sense of closeness and familiarity between themselves and their followers" (147). For Hindi film fans, already accustomed to venerating and idolizing their stars, social media offered the opportunity to connect with them in an intimate, personal manner.

[3.8] As celebrity management consultant Atul Kasbekar has pointed out, "What works in favour of a celebrity in online space is that he gets to reveal undisclosed facets of his personality to his fans. It can be his hobby, gym routine or a snap from a holiday, a fan gets to know a bit about the star directly without much assistance" (Mehra and Banerjee 2015). In a marked departure from previous years, where fans were allowed only restricted and mediated access (and information) through magazine and television interviews, or brief

interactions in formal, controlled environments like autograph signings, social networking sites like Twitter not only promised "direct communication between the star and the user, through a virtual form of online interaction" (Baker 2013, 1062) but also, allowed "the fan to feel noticed by the star" (Baker 2013, 1068). For the Bollywood fan, the online interaction often offered a sense of accessibility and consequently, reciprocation that was missing in previous star-fan interactions.

[3.9] The Bollywood star, in his/her contemporary avatar as a consummate brand and transmedia celebrity, is well aware of this new intimate dynamics of the star–fan relationship. Bollywood thespian Amitabh Bachchan, a prolific blogger and social media user, refers to his online fans as extended family, using the acronym "EF," and his fans comment enthusiastically on his posts and share fan art commemorating him. Twitter and Instagram are now replete with posts by Bollywood stars, which are often rather personal and intimate in nature. When superstar Akshay Kumar posted a video on Twitter of his "yearly father-daughter ritual" of flying kites on the Indian festival Makar Sankranti, fans responded by posting pictures not only of the actor with his daughter but also of their own celebrations on the festive occasion. When actor Emraan Hashmi tweeted about his eight-year-old son being cancer free, he received responses from both fellow Bollywood celebrities as well as fans. As actress Sonali Bendre documented her struggle with metastatic cancer on Twitter and Instagram, Deepika Padukone was posting about her own journey as a depression survivor.

[3.10] For Bollywood fans, the stars' participation on social media—and, consequently, their own engagement and responses—underlines the fans' inclusion into the privileged world of Bollywood stardom, from which they had been previously excluded. Baker, in his discussion of Bollywood stars' engagement with Twitter, equated social networking sites with the concept of *darshan:* "social networking has expanded in popularity as a contemporary form of auspicious viewing" (Baker 2013, 1046), and consequently, "the tangible experience of darshan takes place not in temple, but in the exchange of messages" (1050). However, as fandom scholars like Henry Jenkins have discussed, social media has essentially fostered a participatory culture (Jenkins 1992, 2006) "whereby communicative balance between producers and recipients was reworked, so that consumers were no longer passive but active in their co-construction of texts" (Page 2012, 182).

[3.11] In the Indian context, the shift in star-fan dynamics facilitated by social media engagement has consequently not only reframed Bollywood fan culture as more active and participatory but also engendered the rise of the disrespectful online troll, whose interactions with the star are no longer circumscribed by adulation and veneration. To understand this resignification of the star-fan relationship, particularly in the context of social media, it is crucial to refer to some of the literature on internet trolling. As Susan Herring and colleagues (2002) remarked, "trolling entails luring others into pointless and time-consuming discussions" (372). Though some online discourse has likened *troll* to the "fictional monster waiting under the bridge to snare innocent bystanders" (Herring et al. 2002, 372), the more evocative definition is "a kind of angling where a lure is dragged through the water to provoke a feeding frenzy amongst the fish" (Binns 2012, 547). The trolls' tendency is to be "subtly or blatantly offensive in order to create an argument…[and] to lure others into

useless circular discussion" (Binns 2012, 547) and thus, derive "pleasure in disrupting the social order out of anger, perversity or contempt" (Herring et al. 2002, 382). Gabriella Coleman has discussed at length how "there is a rich aesthetic tradition of spectacle and transgression at play with trolls, which includes the irreverent legacy of phreakers and the hacker underground" (2012, 101). Inevitably, this inherent "transgressive one-upmanship" (Philips 2012, 498) aspect of trolling coupled with the lack of accountability encourages and emboldens users to further engage in objectionable and offensive behavior.

[3.12] In a stark contrast to earlier norms and conventions of Hindi film fandom, where the star was venerated unconditionally, the contemporary Bollywood star is thus no longer shielded from censure and disapproval. As film journalist Mohar Basu (2015) has lamented, "Putting film actors on a pedestal has now become a ritual from the days of yore… infallibility is now restricted to only a handful of actors." With even A-list stars like Aamir Khan and Hrithik Roshan being mercilessly trolled on social networking sites, Bollywood stars are now "frequent victims of the Tweetizen's wrath" (Basu 2015). Even veteran actors like Rishi Kapoor chide Twitter users on their lack of respect and decorum, illustrating how the star-fan dynamics seem to have undergone a significant revision: fans no longer occupy a subordinate position but instead stake claims to a much more dominant role. According to Basu (2015), "attacking them [Bollywood stars] on social media gives Tweetizens a sense of sadistic pleasure because they get a feel of superiority when they think they were instrumental in making the mighty get on their knees."

[3.13] The rise of the disrespectful online troll, who eschews all presumptions of social civility, is intrinsically linked to the recent aggressive nature of the Indian online sphere, particularly with regard to political views and opinions. Investigative journalist Swati Chaturvedi has discussed at length how the digital armies of trolls play a crucial role in the dissemination and mobilization of contemporary political ideas, particularly right-wing ideologies (Chaturvedi 2016). These right-wing trolls, often referred to as "Internet Hindus," include "individuals across an entire spectrum of the Right, ranging from those who spout Hindu supremacist, anti-Muslim and/or anti-Christian views, to those who are socially liberal, but espouse right-wing approaches to economic policy" (Mohan 2015). Debarshi Dasgupta (2012) characterized them as "a specific group of people online who describe themselves as Hindu nationalists and who operate in well-organized groups to attack—in foul language—those perceived as liberal."

[3.14] The emergence of more divisive right-wing politics in the country has been accompanied by what author Chetan Bhagat describes as "chest-beating nationalism" (2012), devoid of any semblance of objectivity. Highly critical of any opposing views, the online troll perceives any disagreement as an affront not only to his own political beliefs but to the nation itself. Thus, for a troll any criticism translates into antinational behavior that deserves to be condemned and castigated severely. Chaturvedi describes these internet trolls as "persons who sow discord on the Internet by starting arguments or upsetting people by posting inflammatory comments and images. They are the goons of the online world…[who] are mostly anonymous" (2016, 5).

[3.15] The anonymity accorded by social media websites like Twitter and Instagram gives

users further license to abuse and insult celebrities. Social media scholars have pointed out how "the relative anonymity of the Internet releases some of the inhibitions of a civil society, resulting in flaming, harassment, and hate speech online" (Herring et al. 2002, 371), and serving not only as "a magnet for 'trolls,' whose main purpose is to disrupt and annoy" (Binns 2012, 547) but also helping to "normalize extreme behavior" (552). Actress Swara Bhaskar, a frequent target of trolls, remarked, "You can easily hide your real identity on Twitter. You're just a Twitter egg and doing things behind that anonymity. And I feel that invisibility is giving you the power to misbehave" (Press Trust of India 2017). Actress and television host Shruti Seth (@SethShruti), also a victim of online trolling, agreed: "They see social media as a platform where they can say whatever they want with impunity" (quoted in Someshwar 2015).

[3.16] On June 28, 2015, Seth criticized Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "#SelfieWithDaughter" campaign, in which he had urged Indian fathers to post selfies with their daughters on social media; she tweeted, "A selfie is not a device to bring about change Mr. PM. Try reform. #selfieobsessedPM" (Tweet now deleted). The response by the online trolls was swift and severe: she was reprimanded and chastised for her show of disrespect to the prime minister and her lack of patriotic fervor, and the abuse became increasingly personal, even targeted at her toddler daughter and husband, film director Danish Aslam. As her online detractors labeled her a prostitute and accused her of being antinational (by virtue of being married to Aslam, who is a Muslim), they underlined how the star-fan dynamics had drastically altered on social media. As Chetan Bhagat pointed out, "Since social media allows anonymity, their anger expresses itself as the worst personal abuse" (2012). In an interview discussing the controversy, Seth made a similar comment: "I challenge any of my detractors to come find me, stand in front of me and say the things they said. They won't. It is so much easier to hide behind a handle on Twitter" (quoted in Someshwar 2015).

[3.17] The anonymity offered by social networking sites like Twitter and Instagram allows online users to viciously troll the stars, particularly when the latter exhibit any political opinion or views that contradicts that of the trolls. The two case studies discussed here exemplify not only the resignificantion of the Bollywood star-fan relationship but also the changes engendered by social media—blurring the line between the real and reel personas of the stars as well as the emergence of the (new) trollish fan.

4. #BeefBan

[4.1] The Maharashtra state government's decision to ban cattle meat not only provoked controversy and contentious debates, particularly on social media sites, but also illustrated the limits to the stars' agency, particularly with regards to vocalizing their political views and opinions. In March 2015, the Maharashtra government received the presidential sanction for the proposed Maharashtra Animal Preservation (Amendment) Bill, legislation that imposed a blanket ban on all forms of cattle slaughter in the state. Though the Maharashtra Animal Preservation Act of 1976 had unequivocally prohibited the slaughter of cows, the new bill sought to extend the ban to also bulls, bullocks, and calves. With the exception of buffalo, the consumption and sale of all other forms of cattle meat was now a nonbailable offense with a hefty fine and five years' imprisonment.

[4.2] The bill, which had been passed by the BJP-Shiv Sena coalition in the state assembly in 1995, was seen as being largely politically motivated, reflecting the right-wing ideologies of both political outfits. Cow slaughter and consumption of beef has been historically a sensitive and controversial issue in India, with the majority Hindu population treating the cow with reverence. However, the decision to impose a blanket ban on not only slaughter but also the sale and consumption of beef in a state like Maharashtra, which also includes a significant percentage of Muslims and Christians, was criticized by many. As #BeefBan started trending on social media, users vehemently argued whether it was a question of Indian tradition or right-wing politics, with even Bollywood celebrities joining in the debate. Some joked and commented sarcastically, but others severely criticized the Maharashtra government's attempt to appease their voters.

> [4.3] Actor-director Farhan Akhtar (@FarOutAkhtar): So now in Maharashtra you can have a beef with someone but you can't have beef with someone. (March 2, 2015, 11:45 p.m.)
>
> [4.4] Actor and stand-up comic Vir Das (@thevirdas): Dear Govt. With beef, let's ban teeth. We can live on vegetable smoothies and this way your politicians can't make hate speeches anymore:-) (March 3, 2015, 12:04 a.m.)
>
> [4.5] Director Shirish Kunder (@ShirishKunder): Do not be surprised if the cows are given voting rights in the next election. #BeefBan (March 3, 2015, 6:00 a.m.)
>
> [4.6] Director Onir (@IamOnir): #BeefBan is a violation of human rights. The govt cannot dictate what I eat (March 3, 2015, 5:13 a.m.). Seems like the 'democratic' constitution of India does not guarantee diversity. #BeefBan is a sad reflection of that. (March 3, 2015, 5:17 a.m.)
>
> [4.7] Music director Vishal Dadlani (@VishalDadlani): It'd be amazing, if M'tra govt. showed the same urgency in tending to real problems such as water &power, as they have for the #BeefBan (March 3, 2015, 4:51 a.m.). Where farmers commit suicide daily &kids die hungry, they want to build a massive statue and ban beef! What a solution-oriented government! (March 3, 2015, 4:33 p.m.)

[4.8] Interestingly, very few of the current A-list Bollywood stars commented on the issue, clearly an attempt to avoid any unpleasant controversy. Some, like the 1990s popular actress Raveena Tandon (@TandonRaveena), were careful to clarify that they did not have any issue with the ban, but rather with the mandatory enforcement: "My only take on beef issue [is] that it should not be enforced, it should be optional…to eat or not to eat, is a personal choice" (March 3, 2015, 4:36 a.m.). However, it was not merely the sensitive nature of the topic, but also the fear of the vitriolic social media response that made many celebrities cautious. The Bollywood fan, in his new incarnation as the vicious troll, was unsparing of any transgression committed by the star, irrespective of its severity—a far cry from the cultured connoisseur, the *rasika,* or the fanatical devotee, the rowdy. As some of the recent controversies have illustrated, the Indian social media space has become a vulnerable site for

the Bollywood star, who is often trolled viciously and attacked mercilessly for voicing political views. The online skirmishes between the trolls and stars like Rishi Kapoor, Sonam Kapoor, and Sonakshi Sinha regarding the beef ban further illustrate the changing dynamics of the Bollywood star–fan dynamics.

[4.9] After a hiatus of five years, Hindi film veteran Rishi Kapoor (@chintskap), who had rejoined Twitter in February 2015, inadvertently angered the trolls with his criticism of the beef ban. The star, known for his romantic films in the 1970s, tweeted shortly after the announcement.

> [4.10] I am angry. Why do you equate food with religion?? I am a beef eating Hindu. Does that mean I am less God fearing than a non-eater? Think!! (March 15, 2015, 2:48 p.m.)
>
> [4.11] Aapko naheen khaana beef/pork mat khao. [If you don't want to eat beef/pork, don't eat.] Ultimately your Karma counts not fuckn dictates by bigots. Karo Apna kiddos. Karm achche hon bas! [Do what you want, but your deeds should be good!] (March 15, 2015, 2:52 p.m.)
>
> [4.12] Ye pandit maulvi sab chodo! Karo dil ki baat. Man ki baat. [Leave these priests and maulvis. Just listen to your heart.] Ban on food? Unheard of by idiots!!! Politics!! (March 15, 2015, 2:55 p.m.)

[4.13] Though there were many who agreed with the actor, as evident by the numerous "likes" (upvotes) and some who respectfully disagreed, the majority of responses were abusive in nature, with many questioning even his religious affiliation.

> [4.14] (@gauravmittal805) @chintskap one day you will eat your own mother's flesh and proudly leave it on karma to decide. Shame on you! (March 16, 2015, 12:49 p.m.)
>
> [4.15] (@ashu_tryambak) @chintskap "Beef eating Hindu". Sounds like a "rapist who claims to be feminist". (March 16, 2015, 10:08 a.m.)
>
> [4.16] (@ShobhitGosain) @chintskap your friends and fans may appreciate you for this. But sorry being Indian I would love to slap you for this! (March 16, 2015, 4:18 p.m.)
>
> [4.17] (@vbghia) @chintskap The 'only' difference is that you are "God fearing" and we non-eaters are "God loving"… jerk. (March 16, 2015, 12:46 p.m.)

[4.18] Kapoor initially attempted to explain himself—"Please don't get me wrong I do not advocate killing of animals I am against this shit of double standards of politicians to suit themselves" (March 15, 2015, 3:05 p.m.)—but as the taunts and abuse became more personal and vicious, he responded indignantly, "Knew this would go wrong!When did I say I have 'Gau Maas' [cow meat] and I kill cows? Yes, I eat beef where cattle are bred for food legally Not in India" (March 16, 2015, 11:48 a.m.). As the actor tweeted about how he was

"greatly hurt by wrong insinuations by some Hindu radicals and fundamentalists" (March 16, 2015, 11:57 a.m.), the controversy illustrated the precarious position of the Bollywood star.

[4.19] The transmedia nature of contemporary Hindi film stardom makes it necessary for the stars to maintain an active social media presence, but any transgression, particularly pertaining to politics, is met with a strong backlash from online trolls. For Kapoor, the only way to deal with disrespectful trolls was to block them, thus denying them access to his exclusive virtual space—"Have blocked abusive people. Idiots do not understand simple English but take pleasure in swearing at me. UNDERSTAND WHAT I AM SAYING" (March 18, 2015, 12:54 p.m.). As Kapoor went on a tirade of complaints, his tweets demonstrated anger at the trolls but also hurt and reproach at being "misunderstood" and having his faith questioned.

> [4.20] Didn't know you also have to interact with unintelligent stupid people. Maine koi Gunah naheen kiya coz [I did not commit any crime just because] I do not relate food with religion. (March 18, 2015, 1:48 p.m.)
>
> [4.21] Fed up fed up! When did I say cow slaughter or gau Maas khata hoon [that I eat cow meat]. Ye aapne socha aisa maine naheen kaha. Do waqt ki puja karta hoon main. [You all assumed that but I never said it. I pray twice a day.] (March 19, 2015, 3:29 p.m.)
>
> [4.22] Sab gaali aur khaffa ho gaye? Meri baat to sunte. Khair sabko block kar diya who abused me. [Everyone abused and got upset. But at least you should have listened to me! Anyway, I have blocked everyone who abused me.] Not fair to me Hindu Sabha!! Correct them Plz. (March 19, 2015, 3:34 p.m.)

[4.23] The controversy erupted again in September when the Maharashtra government banned the sale and consumption of all meat for four days during the Jain festival Paryushan, when the community observes a period of fasting. Commenting on the ban, Kapoor tweeted, "My take on bans!Practise your religion within the four walls of your house.Stop imposing your beliefs and wants on others. Live and let live" (September 10, 2015, 11:00 a.m.). He was soon embroiled in an online altercation with Twitter user Karna Ram (@Karnara_m), who wrote, "@chintskap Fools like Rishi kapoor eat beef; have a mini church at home &then call themselves a Hindu &comment on Hindu Saints. Sochna! [Think!]" (August 8, 2015, 6:15 a.m.). Facing a backlash from Twitter users, Kapoor became increasingly defensive —"What I do,eat,drink or pray is none of your business" (September 13, 2015, 5:23 a.m.)—trying to repeatedly reassert his religiosity—"There's a perception that I am anti-Hindu.Sad.I am a 'Proud' two time a day praying Hindu.But I respect other faiths too.I just say the truth!" (September 13, 2015, 5:32 a.m.). As the more genuine fans attempted to defend the beleaguered actor, Kapoor assured them, "Don't worry guys.You have to embarass these types of abusive idiots in front of the world.This is the only way. Let their heads hang in shame" (September 14, 2015, 1:13 p.m.). Thus, the virtual realm may become a site of conflict and confrontation between the star and the fan, particularly with regard to politics.

5. When Salman Khan broke the internet

[5.1] Bollywood superstar Salman Khan rarely voiced his political views on Twitter, instead preferring to use the social networking site to engage with his fans or promote his upcoming releases. Known as the industry's *enfant terrible,* Khan had been embroiled in multiple controversies, including his tumultuous relationship with actress Aishwarya Rai, illegal hunting of endangered animals, and his infamous 2002 drunk driving case where the inebriated actor drove his car into a bakery, killing one person and injuring four others who were sleeping on the pavement. He was subsequently charged with culpable homicide; he had claimed that his driver was behind the wheel, but this was later proven untrue. While he was out on bail after his May 2015 conviction in the drunk driving case, Khan kept a low profile despite the huge success of his 2015 film release, *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*. Then, in an unprecedented move, late Saturday night on July 25 to early Sunday morning on July 26 he took to Twitter to oppose the death sentence of Yakub Memon, a convicted collaborator in the 1993 Mumbai terrorist attacks, who was scheduled to be hanged on July 30.

[5.2] Yakub Memon, the brother of the bomb blasts' mastermind Tiger Memon, was arrested in 1994 and accused of providing financial and logistical support for the bombings, though he consistently claimed innocence. After a protracted legal battle, Yakub Memon was found guilty of the terrorism charges and sentenced to death. His conviction evoked mixed reactions, with many journalists, human rights activists, and even a former supreme court judge arguing that he was being made a convenient scapegoat for his brother's crimes (Bose 2015). The series of now-deleted tweets from Salman Khan (@BeingSalmanKhan) seemed to echo many of these dissenting voices (*The Quint* Staff 2015a). Labeling Tiger Memon a "lomdi" (fox) and "billi" (cat), he even asked Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to inform the Indian authorities of Tiger's whereabouts in case he was in Pakistan.

> [5.3] Brother is being hanged for tiger, Aarrre Whr is tiger? (July 25, 2015)
>
> Phasisi k phande pe chardne walla hai. Koi statement. Koi address. Kuch toh bolo k tum teh. Wah bhai ho toh aisa. Matlab. Ya khoob menan. [He is going to be hanged. Some statement. Some address. Say something that you were the one. Wow! One should have a brother like you. Wow, Memon!] (July 25, 2015)
>
> 1 innocent man killed is killing the humanity (July 25, 2015)
>
> Get tiger hang him. Parade him not his brother (July 25, 2015)
>
> Kidhar chupa hai tiger? Hey koi tiger nahi hai hai hai billi aur hum ek billi ko nahi pakad sakteh [Where is Tiger hiding? He is not a tiger, he is a cat and we can't even catch a cat] (July 25, 2015)
>
> Sharif Saab ek darkhaust hai k agar yeh aap k mulkh mein hai toh plz iktila kar deejiyeh. [Sharif Sir, I have a request that if Tiger is in your country, please inform us.] (July 25, 2015)
>
> been wanting to tweet Tis fr 3 days n was afraid to do so but it involves a man's n family. Don't hang brother hang the lomdi who ran away (July 25, 2015)

[5.4] There was some positive feedback, with many online users applauding Khan for his honesty and support of Yakub Memon, such as journalist Shivom Oza (@shivom_oza): "Tremendous respect for Salman for speaking out in support of Yakub Memon. The man does not deserve to be hanged. And yes—TIGER mat kaho" (July 25, 2015, 6:49 p.m.); and news anchor Manak Gupta (@manakgupta): "Hats off to @BeingSalmanKhan for openly challenging underworld Don Ibrahim and Tiger Memon. Has any other star ever had guts to do so" (July 26, 2015, 1:27 a.m.). However, the overwhelming response was criticism, anger, and ridicule.

> [5.5] (@RakehSinha01) Now Salman Khan is Super Supreme Court … his judgement is beyond the wisdom of all courts in India, he himself is a privileged accused!! (July 26, 2015, 2:01 a.m.)
>
> [5.6] (@SidExiled) @rahulroushan @BBCHindi instead of tiger &yakub why not their drivers should be hanged..? (July 26, 2015, 12:02 a.m.)
>
> [5.7] (@afoodnazi) Salman khan is drunk. (July 26, 2015, 8:12 a.m.) Oh wait, Salman khan is not drunk, his driver is. (July 26, 2015, 8:13 a.m.)
>
> [5.8] (@doctoratlarge) If Salman Khan is feeling so sorry for Yakub Memon, why doesn't he give some of his collection from Bajrangi Bhaijaan to his family? (July 26, 2015, 12:38 a.m.)
>
> [5.9] (@sachinbahad) Salman who himself made mockery of India's justice system, now has empathy for Yakub as well. Surprised? I'm not. (July 26, 2015, now deleted)
>
> [5.10] (@AnujazzZ) Freedom of speech aside, .@BeingSalmanKhan should stick to drunk texting exes at 2 am instead of tweeting abt national matters #SalmanKhan (July 26, 2015, 4:21 a.m.)
>
> [5.11] (@Yaaaaaayme) Salman Khan's story teaches two things that one should not touch after getting drunk. 1. Car key 2. Mobile phone #Salmanwithterrorist (July 26, 2015, 9:27 a.m.)

[5.12] As online users commented on the irony of the situation—Khan defending Memon's innocence when he himself had been found guilty—the actor was denounced for his antinational tweets. Kirit Somaiya (@KiritSomaiya), a BJP member of parliament from Mumbai, tweeted a demand that Khan apologize to the nation: "#SalmanKhan feels Court Guilty &#YakubMemon Nirdosh [innocent]? Salman ko terrorist Yakub ki chnta hai kintu lakho atank pidito ki shthiti ka kya!!! [Salman is worried about terrorist Yakub, but what about the state of the *lakhs* of terror victims!!!]" (July 26, 2015, 12:21 a.m.); "I will raise #SalmanKhan Twit issue in #Loksabha #Parliament-Salman Khan ne Desh ki Mafi magni chahiye [Salman should apologize to the country]" (July 26, 2015, 1:40 p.m.). Ashish Shelar (@ShelarAshish), Mumbai BJP president, even met the Maharashtra governor and submitted a letter requesting the cancellation of the actor's bail (Twitter, July 26, 2015, 5:30 a.m.); "Salman Khan is a convict. He wants no punishment to convicted Yaqoob. Salman Khan has

no respect for Honble SC &law. Bail shud b cancelled" (July 26, 2015, 5:05 a.m.). According to Uttar Pradesh BJP President Laxmikant Bajpai, Salman Khan's remarks were tantamount to "abetting terror" and "rubbing salt" on the wounds of those who had lost family members in the 1993 Mumbai blasts (Press Trust of India 2015). BJP politician Yogi Adityanath issued a statement accusing Khan of promoting terrorism: "A person who himself has been sentenced by a court and is out on interim bail opposes the hanging of a person responsible for a terror incident that claimed the lives of innocent people. This is promotion of terrorism" (Express News Service 2015). Ujjwal Nikam, the special public prosecutor for the Mumbai blasts case, who had insisted on death penalty for Memon, described the actor's statements as "objectionable" and "uncalled for" (Deshpande 2015). Accusing him of "trying to undermine the image of the Judiciary," Nikam demanded that Khan withdraw his tweets promptly.

[5.13] As incensed protestors burned Salman Khan in effigy and threatened to disrupt the screenings of *Bajrangi Bhaijaan,* the threats prompted the Mumbai police to deploy security outside the actor's house. After his own father, scriptwriter Salim Khan, had voiced disapproval—"Whatever Salman has written is ridiculous and meaningless. Salman is ignorant of the issue and people should not take him seriously" (Deshpande 2015)—the actor apologized and retracted his tweets. Seemingly contrite, he repeatedly emphasized that his tweets were not "anti-religious," and that he respected all faiths and had "complete faith" in the judiciary (*The Quint* Staff 2015b).

> [5.14] My dad called &said I should retract my tweets as they have the potential to create misunderstanding. I here by retract them. (July 26, 2015, 7:33 a.m.)
>
> I would like to unconditionally apologise for any misunderstanding I may have created unintentionally. (July 26, 2015, 7:33 a.m.)
>
> I had tweeted that Tiger Memon should hang for his crimes and I stand by it. What i also said is that Yakub Memon should not hang for him. (July 26, 2015, 7:32 a.m.)
>
> I have not said or implied that Yakub Memon is innocent. I have complete faith in the judicial system of our country. (July 26, 2015, 7:32 a.m.)

[5.15] As the controversy over Salman Khan's tweets demonstrates, a Bollywood star cannot afford to voice political views, particularly if they counter the majority stance. In Khan's case, his religious identity (Muslim) marked him as doubly vulnerable, bringing into question his patriotism and loyalty to the Indian nation-state. Though he is known for celebrating the Hindu festival Ganesh Chaturthi, thus attesting his subscription to the majoritarian (Hindu) values and ethos, Salman Khan's minority status, similar to fellow Muslim superstars like Shah Rukh Khan and Aamir Khan, also underlines the problematic discourses of citizenship and belonging for Indian Muslims.

[5.16] With divisive right-wing ideology often demarcating them as the perpetual outsider, reiterating the familiar rhetoric of the (unpatriotic) Indian Muslim's allegiance to neighboring Pakistan, Muslim celebrities and actors voicing their political opinions has become

untenable. Any attempt at being politically vocal or critical is invariably met with accusations of being a traitor and demands by online trolls to go to Pakistan, their rightful home (India Today Web Desk 2018). Thus, Muslim Bollywood stars, despite their popularity, mass appeal, and celebrity stature, occupy a position of vulnerability that is further exacerbated by the inherent vitriol of online trolling. Moreover, Bollywood stars are not expected to hold any political views, let alone express them on social media. As Journalist Suresh Mathew (2015) argued, "The reason for the uproar is the simple fact that Salman Khan is a Bollywood actor, and for our 'politically aware' masses—an actor is just that—an actor, who is paid to perform and entertain…No matter how popular they are, we hate it if they have an opinion, more so if it's political. Actors who are in the prime of their careers are supposed to be apolitical beings."

[5.17] With the popular expectation that neither Bollywood films nor their stars are explicitly political, any attempts to engage with such issues on social media are often met with disapproval and criticism. However, social media presence has become a requisite part of contemporary Bollywood stardom, so the line between the public and the political is being increasingly eroded.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] On February 19, 2019, the online portal *Cobrapost* issued a press release detailing the explosive findings of its latest sting operation, Operation Karaoke. Known for its investigative reporting and exposes, the nonprofit journalism website listed more than thirty Bollywood celebrities who had agreed to support political parties on social media in exchange for money.

[6.2] Posing as representatives of a fictitious public relations company, *Cobrapost* reporters had contacted actors, singers, choreographers, and television stars to negotiate deals and facilitate a positive image for certain political outfits ahead of the upcoming general elections in May 2019. Although most of the celebrities they contacted were lesser-known entities, the list did include some notable names such as Jackie Shroff, Vivek Oberoi, and Sonu Sood. Apart from a few exceptions such as Vidya Balan, Arshad Warsi, Raza Murad, and Saumya Tandon who refused outright, most of the celebrities readily agreed to post political content disguised as personal views on their social media accounts.

[6.3] Addressing a press conference, *Cobrapost* editor-in-chief Aniruddha Bahl disclosed how the stars agreed to "defend the government even on controversial issues such as rape and fatal accidents such as bridge collapses. They were even willing to sign a dummy contract for endorsement of products to disguise the real nature of the proxy political campaigning that they were willing to do" (Outlook Web Bureau 2019). As the stars brazenly discussed their endorsement fees for sharing their political views on social media, some even posted tweets to show their enthusiasm and willingness.

[6.4] Nick Muntean and Anne Helen Peterson (2009) have pointed out how "with so many mediated voices attempting to 'speak' the meaning of the star, the Twitter account emerges as the privileged channel to the star him/herself." It is evident that the Bollywood star is aware

of both the crucial significance and the power of social media. Actor Vivek Oberoi, responding to the *Cobrapost* reporters' suggestions, boasted of the "ripple effect" his message would create because of his large fan following on social media—"Saare platform milaakar apne kareeb 25–30 lakh direct followers hain aur unka jo retweet aur ripple effect aata hai wo kareeban do-dhai karod ke kareeban aata hai. Ten times aata hai…toh hum kar sakte hain…iski frequency kya hogi?" [I have 25–30 lakh direct followers in all platforms and their retweets make a ripple effect that goes to about 2–2.50 crore. About 10 times…so I can do that…what is its frequency?] (Bhatnagar 2019). Oberoi further reassured, "Aisa lagna nahi chahiye ki humein bola gaya hai likhne ke liye…lagna aisa chahiye ki hum khud hee likh rahe hain…lagna aisa chahiye ki hum genuinely bol rahe hain" [It should not look like that I have been asked to write that… ather, it should look like that I am writing it on my own…it should look like I am writing it genuinely].

[6.5] As questions are raised over the authenticity of the Bollywood stars' social media avatars, and consequently the opinions and views shared on these sites, it further complicates the issue. Social media has become an integral aspect of contemporary Bollywood stardom, often playing a crucial role in the dissemination of a star's image and consequently facilitating the transmedia character of his or her celebrity stature. With stars actively engaging with Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, the earlier distance between the star and the fan has consequently blurred, engendering new modes of engagement. Although historically star–fan dynamics in Hindi cinema were characterized by veneration and adoration, in recent years increasing emphasis has been placed on familiarity and accessibility—a shift that has invariably encouraged a more insolent and irreverent fan, the troll.

[6.6] As discourses of Hindi film stardom are reconfigured, with the contemporary Bollywood star functioning more as a transmedia celebrity who straddles the varied platforms of film, television, and new media, predominant notions of Hindi film fandom have also been significantly altered. As the stars become more accessible and familiar, particularly on social media platforms, fans no longer comprise merely the *rasika* and the rowdy but also the troll. Emboldened by the anonymity provided by the social media sites, the troll feels empowered to chastise and ridicule the star for any perceived transgressions in the virtual realm. Thus, in the context of the increasing politicization of the Indian online space, and particularly the emergence of right-wing politics, it becomes necessary to revisit discourses of popular film fandom culture and examine the phenomenon of the fan-as-troll.

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Praxis

Self-identification in Malaysian cosplay

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[0.1] Abstract—To examine cosplay (costume play) as performed by non-Japanese cosplayers, video interviews were conducted at five Japanese popular culture conventions in Malaysia. Analysis of descriptions made by 158 cosplayers reveals cosplay to function as a medium for the process of self-identification. Cosplay enables Malaysians to explore individual rather than collective identities and to experience fluidity and dilemma in self-identification as they translate fictional characters into their physical world. Although ethnicity seems not to prevail in their cosplay, it appears not to have totally vanished.

[0.2] Keywords—Costume play; Ethnicity; Fan conventions; Interviews; Japanese popular culture

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Malaysia is a Muslim country located in Southeast Asia, where English language and culture have been dominant since the country's period of British colonial rule and as a result of the implementation of official language policies. However, East Asian influence is markedly prevalent. This cultural influence results from both geographical location and the cultures of immigrants who have settled in the nation. Despite the fact that "most Islamist groups have a tradition of protesting or banning supposedly un-Islamic music and arts" (Müller 2015, 322), which is an issue in Malaysia, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese as well as English and American popular culture have become embedded in Malaysian everyday life.

[1.2] Cosplay (costume play) activity emerged in the early 2000s, notably at fan conventions relating to Japanese cultural commodities. As I have discussed elsewhere (Yamato 2016), most major Malaysian ACG (anime, comics, and game) fan conventions include cosplay activity. Besides their involvement in official stage competitions and fashion shows, cosplayers (people who engage in cosplay) have important roles at the convention sites as key participants in the convention and, collectively, as an unofficial attraction for other convention goers. Paidi, Akhir, and Ping (2014) describe cosplay activity in Malaysia as an empowering Malaysian subculture inspired by ACG of Japanese origin. Chan (2018) observes, however, that Malaysian cosplay activity is connoted with nerdy culture in much

the same way as other ACG subcultures and usually involves participation within safe spaces such as fan conventions and through online portals.

[1.3] According to previous research exploring cosplay activity as a new cultural phenomenon and fan subculture/culture in Japan and other countries, fan conventions are the social settings where cosplayers gather to display their costumes, participate in photo shoots, and engage in off-line social interaction with other cosplayers (e.g., Rahman, Liu, and Cheung 2012; Peirson-Smith 2013). While creative and educational aspects of cosplay activity have been recognized even outside Japan as fan culture and fashion culture (Chen 2012; Manifold 2009), Miyamato (2012) describes both how Japanese cosplayers constitute a community of practice and the aspirations of new cosplayers to become members of the community. Studies by Okabe (2012) and Matsuura and Okabe (2014) point to the usefulness of situated learning processes in the analysis of cosplay activity embedded in evolving communities. Social networking engagement in the cosplay community has been observed in some research as well (Bainbridge and Norris 2013; Chen 2007; Rahman, Liu, and Cheung 2012). Lamerichs (2013) has reported on the internationalization of the cosplay community at large through fan conventions and world cosplay competitions.

[1.4] Observing broader acceptance of cosplay, Yarimizu (2016) has reviewed the term *kosupure* (cosplay in Japanese) and points out that it is a multifaceted term in Japanese referring to the following activities: (1) dressing up as a fictional character originating from cultural commodities (e.g., anime, manga, games and films), (2) dressing up as workers who have specific uniforms (e.g., policeman; military personnel), and (3) dressing up for sex-related business (220, translated by author). *Kosupure,* according to the first definition provided above, involves a complete portrayal of the role of a fictional character by posing, acting, and/or dancing in addition to the act of dressing in costume to imitate the appearance of the character. This is a type of fan activity, and the other two types of cosplay are not. Most previous studies have examined cosplay as a cultural manifestation of a socially identifiable group of fans (fandom).

[1.5] Based on my informal observations at local Malaysian ACG fan conventions from 2010 to 2014, prior to designing this study, cosplay corresponding to the second definition has taken place to some extent (e.g., military cosplay and Lolita cosplay). Although sex-related business is officially banned in Malaysia, cosplayers there have dressed up as female game characters with skimpy costumes as apparent sex objects to promote products. The moral implications associated with this type of cosplay activity and at least one criminal case involving cosplayers have raised concerns for some conservative Malaysians. In October 2013, cosplay was negatively highlighted in the local Malaysian news because of the murder case of a fifteen-year-old girl. The girl was reported to have been sexually molested by a twenty-three-year-old male friend who had been working with her on their cosplay project for an upcoming cosplay competition (Borneo Post 2013). One experienced cosplayer claimed that his parents never understood what he had been doing, and all interviewed cosplayers said they needed time to convince their parents to endorse their participation as cosplayers in fan conventions (Yamato 2015, 748).

[1.6] In this context, this qualitative study, which captured visual manifestations and

interactions with cosplayers in action, was conducted at ACG fan conventions. On the premise of Bauman's (2004) notion of provisional "fluid identities," the study aims to further explore Malaysian cosplayers, analyzing the process of performing identities by focusing on how cosplayers represent themselves while engaging in their cosplay, especially at a convention, which is a public situation, since the identification process involves others who have multiple individual and collective identities (Buckingham 2008).

2. Identities in cosplay

[2.1] Cosplayers present a secondary product created on the basis of existing cultural commodities utilizing their own physical features. Rahman, Liu, and Cheung (2012) explain cosplay activity as "an identity marker" in their quasi-ethnographic study conducted in Hong Kong. They highlight cosplay's main concept—transforming an ordinary person into a character in an imaginary world—as temporarily changing self-identity, which contributes to the development of social skills. This idea of temporarily attached identities is in line with Jenkins's (1992) argument that in fan culture, "fans produce alternative identities" (214). In these discussions, however, the concept of identity seems to be at the surface level of who we are in contrast to our normal, legal, and social identifications associated with our given names and what is registered in our identification documents.

[2.2] Another ethnographic study by Peirson-Smith (2013) concerns aspects of multiple identities in applied social interaction theory. She discusses cosplay activities in Hong Kong, Beijing, and Tokyo from a fashion theory perspective. Her findings underline the importance of individuality manifested by the various motivations each cosplayer has while engaging in social processes in their cosplay community. She also points out that cosplayers openly exhibit a secret self, which is supposedly revealed only to individuals and intimates through their fanciful clothes. Her analysis illustrates a progressive aspect of cosplay activity that works as a catalyst for the individual identification process.

[2.3] Peirson-Smith (2013), Gn (2011), and Leng (2014) argue that cross-play, especially male to female cosplay, does not essentially reflect cosplayers' gender identity. Rather, it is related to their artistic expression and alternative interpretation of cultural commodities or texts. In the framework of fan studies, Lamerichs (2011) also points out that in reference to performative theory, cosplay is not the mere realization of fictional worlds. Cosplayers attempt to actualize a character and its significance from the context of the story from which that character originates, and at the same time they represent their own identities in their cosplay. Cosplay activity thus ambiguously involves both fictional and actual dimensions. Moreover, Mongan's (2015) heuristic essay prompted me to relate cosplay to everyday life. In her essay, she relates her journey of playing pretend from her childhood until the stage at which she became enchanted with cosplay. Cosplay could be described as an extraordinary act, considering that it is a part of nerdy culture, but in fact it could be seen as mirroring the act of dressing up for different occasions in ordinary life.

[2.4] In terms of theorizing identity and interculturality, Dervin (2013) posits that instead of identifying what someone's identity/identities is/are, we should examine the process by which people identify themselves. Dervin and Risager (2015, 7–8) propose crucial points

when researching identities and interculturality in order to avoid objectifying someone's identity, which are as follows: (1) searching identity markers, including gender, age, profession, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, and place/space, which indicate shifts, inconsistencies, and contradictions; and (2) examining identification strategies and unfolding the meanings in discourse, such as what is hidden, what is present in a speaker's discourse, and who is an interlocutor. By referring to their methodology, I reexamine self-identification as an ongoing process in cosplay and further address cosplayers' processes in portraying unreal two-dimensional characters in real life.

3. Hijab as identification in Malaysia

[3.1] Since ethnic and religious identification and their integration have been a crucial part of the national agenda and a prioritized issue in Malaysia, I also discuss hijab cosplay, referring to previous studies focusing on everyday fashion in Malaysia. *Hijab* is a word originating from Arabic, which can be roughly translated as "veil." Muslim women usually wear a headscarf as required by their faith, which instructs that women should not expose what are identified as the private parts of their bodies to anyone other than certain close family members. Thus, according to most interpretations of the Malaysian Islamic school of thought, the hands, face, and feet may be exposed in public, while the rest of an adult woman's body, including hair, arms, and legs, is to be clothed. According to Siraj (2011), however, hijab has been used as an element of identification among Muslim women with various social contextual meanings depending on the cultures and histories of Muslim communities, all of which have arisen from various interpretations of the Qur'an and other Islamic religious texts (717). Unlike in some Arabic countries in the Middle East, wearing a black veil and covering the face is not a common practice among Malaysian Muslim women. Hassan, Zaman, and Santosa (2015) have identified various ways that Malaysian Muslim women interpret Islamic teachings in relation to their appearance. They highlight that Malaysian Muslim women preserve their modesty in their working environments as well as in the social sphere while adapting to new fashion trends. Hassim, Nayan, and Ishak (2016) point out that the wearing of hijab is a modern movement among Malaysian Muslims. Regarding hijab in the cosplay scene, Indonesian scholar Rastati (2017) reports on an Islamic cosplay group which was established in 2014 and supports and promotes hijab cosplay outside of Indonesia, including in Malaysia.

4. Methods

[4.1] Applying the Heideggerian hermeneutic concept (Laverty 2003) from the phenomenological interview approach, I conducted fieldwork inside ACG fan convention sites. Both observations and interviews were conducted at each convention site where potential study participants would be in their roles as cosplayers in action, following the guidance that interviews should be "situated in a space that allows the participant to remain in the role that is consistent with the research focus" (Quinney, Dwyer, and Chapman 2016, 6). The video interviews were the main data collection method to gain profound insights into cosplayers' thoughts and feelings while wearing costumes, posing, and/or performing as fictional characters. Selecting video rather than audio recording was crucial to archive the

visual features of cosplayers and analyze the cosplayers who embodied fictional characters.

[4.2] Small- to medium-scale conventions held in different areas in Malaysia (Table 1) were selected for the fieldwork in order to establish trust with the convention organizers and participants as well as to secure suitable areas for the video interviews at noisy fan convention sites. Since the convention sites were considered public spaces, some cosplayers might not have felt comfortable with being interviewed, but the issues of interview space and interviewee roles were not compromised. The research team only recruited cosplayers on a voluntary basis and then obtained their participatory consent.

Table 1. Fieldwork Sites

Name of Convention (Abbreviation)	**Location of Convention**	**Description**	**Date of Fieldwork**	**No. of Cosplayers in the Video Interview**
COSWALK (CW)	Berjaya Megamall, Stage Area, Kuantan, Pahang	Regional small-scale cosplay event	15 March 2015	11
YUMECON (YC)	Mary Yek Grand Hall, i-CATS West Campus, Kuching, Sarawak	Regional small-scale ACG* event	30 and 31 May 2015	37
ANIMANGAKI (AMG)	Sunway Pyramid Convention Centre, Subang Jaya, Selangor	Established annual ACG convention since 2009 (13,000 participants)	29 and 30 August 2015	55
OTAFUSE (OF)	Suria Sabah, 6th Floor Exhibition Hall, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah	Established annual ACG convention since 2011	19 and 20 September 2015	38
Radical Anime Games Expo (RAGE)	The Shore Shopping Gallery, Malacca	Regional small scale ACG event	17 and 18 October 2015	28

*Anime, Comics (or Cosplay), and Games

[4.3] During the fieldwork, I, as the principal researcher, conducted observations of the cosplayers at the convention sites and held a supervisory position for the video interviews with the responsibilities of managing the sessions, obtaining signatures for consent forms, and collecting answers for a short questionnaire survey with video interview participants. An assistant who was fluent in English (the language medium of the fan conventions) and the Malay language (the official language of Malaysia and the native language of the major ethnic group in Malaysia) randomly approached budding cosplayers, requested their

participation in the research, and then conducted the video interviews at the particular space set up within each convention site.

[4.4] The participants read the guidelines before signing a consent form that informed them of the purpose of making the video recordings. The video interviews consisted of open-ended questions and included eight main questions regarding the cosplayed character, costume and props, and cosplay activity. Using a wireless microphone attached to a video camera, the assistant posed the prepared questions, interacted with cosplayers, and asked them to elaborate more when their responses were too simple or vague. The main language medium of the interviews was English; the assistant switched to Malay when interviewees seemed more comfortable using the Malay language. If there was a request to have the interview conducted in Mandarin, a translator was then assigned by selecting an acquaintance from among the cosplayers. The transcribed video interviews were verified later with a Malaysian native Mandarin speaker.

[4.5] In total, 169 cosplayers participated in the video interviews. There were ninety-six males and seventy-three females, all of whom were born between 1974 and 2000. At the time of the interviews, those who had student status (university/college students and secondary school students) totaled 109, while fifty-seven were working adults (three did not state their status). The majority age range was between eighteen and twenty-two years (52 percent), followed by the age group of twenty-three to twenty-eight years old (29 percent).

[4.6] All 169 transcripts were coded for analysis, but data for eleven underaged cosplayers were excluded because they did not provide their parent's consent, as required by the university's research ethics for informants aged below seventeen years old. For underaged cosplayers who came to the convention with their elder siblings, we requested the working adult siblings to sign the consent forms.

[4.7] All transcribed interview data were managed and coded in NVivo 10, a qualitative data management software application. Image files of the cosplayers were extracted from the video recordings and those of the characters they portrayed in cosplay were obtained online and stored in the same NVivo project file. The background information of each cosplayer —gender, ethnicity, date of birth, occupation/status, years of cosplay experience, and cosplay participation in the past two years—was also stored in the same project file.

[4.8] These data were referred to inductively during further analysis after the interview data had been coded into the following emergent subcategories of self-identification (note 1): (1) "Hiding who I am," (2) "What I am becoming," and (3) "What I become aware of." The findings of the first two categories are presented in Section 5 on "Experiencing self-identification" and the third one in Section 6, on "Fluid fan identities." Since this study specifically sought evidence of the individual self-identification of cosplayers while in costume beyond cosplay as a collective fan culture, it does not examine that identification from a static and normative view of identities. Nevertheless, ethnic identification, such as being Malay, Chinese, or Indian, prevails in Malaysian contexts as "most Malaysians consider themselves and other fellow Malaysians as members of certain ethnic groups" (Chin et al. 2015, 259) in both academic situations and individual everyday existence.

Ethnicity is mentioned only in the section discussing cross-gender cosplay (cross-play). The cross-play by Chinese and Malay cosplayers and hijab cosplay among female Malay cosplayers are not major practices among the 158 cosplayers who participated in the video interviews. These cases are highlighted as examples of intersecting identities, which play a part in the process of self-identification.

5. Experiencing self-identification

[5.1] Among the 158 cosplayers who voluntarily participated in the video interview, only nine cosplayers made statements that indicated hiding who they are when cosplaying at the convention. Of the nine cosplayers, three did not cover their faces and they made contradictory statements. One of them said "I want to tell the world that, it is okay *not being yourself* for a day or two [days]. *You can actually be someone else* through putting on costumes, and just *don't be yourself*" (AMG1–4, emphasis added) (note 2). The same cosplayer, in another moment of the interview, said "Cosplay is actually a really good thing and a great way to *express yourself*." Her first statement indicates that she perceived cosplay activity as escapism from her daily life. By putting on a fictional character's costume, technically, she could claim she was different from her normal day-to-day appearance. However, the phrase "express yourself" in the later part of the same interview indicates that her proposition is that she does not intend to be entirely someone else in cosplay. She had in fact modified the original fictional character's appearance to fit into her ideal attire as a Muslim female.

[5.2] Another cosplayer, who had just begun his cosplay, said, "[other people] do not recognize me. Uh, [when] I wore like this, I can do anything I want, and they don't know who I am" (AMG1–1). This teen cosplayer seemingly enjoys the playful aspect of cosplay without rationalizing why his cosplay character is his preferred one in his favorite anime story. Nevertheless, there are apparently alternative intentions for covering the face in cosplay. The novice teen cosplayer with sophisticated armor said "Armor can cover my body shape, [so I am] more confident to cosplay" (OF2–10). He did not consider "hiding who he is" as a reason for selecting the fully armored character. For him, hiding his physique allows him to get close to his ideal appearance as a cosplayer: taller and fitter. There was also a case of a teen cosplayer who did not want his parents to know about his cosplay activity. This sixteen-year-old cosplayer with a whole-body suit cosplaying in a group consisting of mostly working adults had cosplayed more than eleven times within the previous two years without his parents' knowledge. In the video interview, he stated "this character actually really suits me. His attitude, his behavior" (AMG2–11). Wishing to conceal their involvement in cosplay from their guardians or someone opposed to cosplay activities is the reason for hiding their face.

Figure 1. Novice teen cosplayer (OF2–10) as Pekka from *Clash of Clans,* Finnish video game, screen capture from the video recording taken at OTAFUSE, 2015.

[5.3] On the other hand, by embodying a fictional character using deviant costumes and makeup, thirty-eight cosplayers decisively stated that they expressed themselves through their cosplay. Descriptions of these thirty-eight cosplayers reveal that personality (twenty-six cosplayers), attitude (seven cosplayers), and appearance (five cosplayers) of characters overlapped those of the cosplayers. The following extract is an example illustrating a cosplayer's character reflecting their own personality:

> [5.4] This character is very patient…I found it's somehow like me…Umm, He is kind of, more introvert. He likes to do research, build magic stuff for his friends…Because I personally like to make [something] and do research on prop making and stuff. (AMG2–4)

[5.5] This twenty-two-year-old cosplayer had only two years of experience in cosplay, but he had actively participated in cosplay as many as eleven times or more in the previous two years. He claimed that he had discovered a suitable character for himself while playing a game. To him, in fact, the most significant part of cosplay is not about putting on a costume on the event day; it is about the cosplayer being purposefully engaged in prop making. When

he was working to render the two-dimensional character in three-dimensional form, parts of his own personality were gradually revealed. Another cosplayer with two years of cosplay experience, who was thirty-six years old, said "what you see right now, this is what I am" (YC1–6). He cosplayed a character from the comic books of his childhood and explained "I chose him because he's more like me. I just want to be like, you know, be there for everyone…I just can help anyone that I can." The character had been his hero for more than twenty years. This is not only a nostalgic memory of his childhood but also reflects his life process in becoming an adult while admiring the stature of his hero. The cosplay seems to be in support of this admiration.

Figure 2. Cosplayer (AMG2–4) as Morichika Rinnosuke from *Curiosities of Lotus Asia,* a series of side stories of *Touhou Project,* Japanese video game series, screen capture from the video recording taken at ANIMANGAKI, 2015.

[5.6] In line with studies conducted in other countries (Chen 2007; Manifold 2009; Peirson-Smith 2013; Rahman, Liu, and Cheung 2012), this study also finds that cosplayers reveal themselves through their cosplay activity. It is not clear which comes first: the planning of the cosplay activity or the discovery of themselves in the fictional characters. What can be seen is that the cosplay process is a mediation for the cosplayers in exploring themselves and their fictional characters beyond the consumption of cultural commodities. Additionally, I would say that only novice cosplayers perceive cosplay activity as mere escapism. Of the six cosplayers who clearly state that their intention was to be totally another person in cosplay, only one had three years' experience in cosplaying, and the others had less experience in terms of length of time as well as frequency in participation in cosplay activities. Four of these cosplayers were still eighteen or nineteen years of age. Cosplayers who considered that cosplay allows them to be themselves in the guise of a character are not the majority.

[5.7] Additionally, some cosplayers convey their message to other cosplayers to "be yourself" in cosplay, saying "Just express your needs, your creativity, and yourself" (AMG1–13); "I just say that, be yourself. Stay yourself" (OF1–1). Peirson-Smith (2013) refers to the fashion theory notion that claims cosplay allows a participant to perform the secret self publicly via dressing up in fanciful costumes. The finding of this study, however, suggests the notion that cosplay activity prompts a self-identification process that enables people to experience the acts of searching, revealing, and/or reflecting as well as a prolonged process of self-identification of "what I am becoming." Thus, cosplayers do not necessarily reveal an alternative or hidden part of themselves in their cosplay but are in the process of discovering themselves or becoming what they are.

6. Fluid fan identities

[6.1] This section discusses cosplayers who utilize their cosplay activity as a medium for precisely expressing their adoration toward a specific fictional character and a popular cultural commodity in a way that is also an act of self-expression. This aspect of cosplay has been identified in other studies (e.g., Rahman, Liu, and Cheung 2012), and fan studies have found this to be the core concept in the production of secondary fan products. Obviously, cosplay activity is one form of fan reproduction since the main driving force of the activity is the feeling of adoration toward a specific character as a fan. The majority of the Malaysian cosplayers contributing to this study express their adoration toward Japanese popular culture, while only six out of the 158 cosplayers claim they are not fans of Japanese popular culture. The fan base of Japanese popular culture is too wide-ranging to allow for an exhaustive description of fan attributes since Japanese popular culture consists of a variety of formats, genres, and products; however, in cosplay, the core notion appears to be "to engage in the process of self-identification." This may be seen in the apparent nonstatic nature of fan identities. The cosplayers also articulate what they become aware of, including awareness about their own distinctive qualities.

[6.2] Of the 158 cosplayers, sixty-three (39.9 percent) expressed their adoration for the fictional characters that appeared in anime or games. Only fourteen of the 158 cosplayed fictional characters from their childhood, which lends support to the notion that current popular culture rather than the culture of childhood memories tends to be translated into

cosplay activity. The cosplayer with four years' experience said "we as the cosplayer, cos[play] them [fictional characters] to express our love" (OF1–20). Her cosplayed character was released in 2015, and she was introduced to the product series by her friends, but she was the one who adored one character from the twelve characters involved in it. In principle, cosplayers did not cosplay characters they found repulsive. Other people realize a cosplayer's favorite character when they see their cosplay. In other words, by cosplaying, the cosplayers express themselves in admiration of their chosen fictional characters. Their admiration is in a state of flux as their consumption of products related to such fictional characters continues to evolve.

[6.3] Referring to the cosplayed character originating from a Japanese role-playing game, the cosplayer with eight years' experience said "Truthfully…I really love him because he's such a lovely man. But he has been misunderstood by people about how much he really loves his mother…" (YC2–18). He also explained his cosplay activity as follows:

> [6.4] When I see inspiring character, it makes me feel, well I want to be like them. And when I want to be like them, I want to be them in one event, where people look at me, as inspiring as how they look at the character itself. (YC2–18)

[6.5] His explanation depicts the nature of fan activities in that some people, as fans, extend their actions to express their feelings toward the products that inspire them beyond consumption as participatory fan culture (Jenkins 1992). Importantly, the inspiring character was not in fact singular. Throughout my observations, this cosplayer cosplayed different characters every time I saw him at the local conventions. As indicated in his use of the pronoun "them" as in "I want to be like them," more than just a few inspiring characters emerged from his consumption. His description of the cosplay further indicates ongoing aspects of his identification:

> [6.6] It's truly expanded you guys in many kinds of ways. And the best part about [cosplay] is that, when you expand, you show, you'd be different when you are in cosplay. It's not just about being yourself but being better. (YC2–18)

[6.7] The meaning of the expression "being better" was not elaborated, but this expression and "you'd be different" indicate that his progressive experiences made him aware of himself in cosplay. In fact, "being yourself" is not an easy task as we are not necessarily able to determine "who I am" since identification is fluid depending on contexts, such as being with others who have shared/unshared social, cultural, and biological features, values, histories, and interests (Buckingham 2008).

Figure 3. Experienced cosplayer (YC2–18) as Kadaj from *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children,* Japanese computer-animated film, screen capture from the video recording taken at YUMEKON, 2015.

[6.8] In fact, there are more cosplayers who merely mention their fondness for or relatedness with the fictional characters than those who expressly disclose their adoration and their own personal traits. Yet, cosplayers have opportunities to become aware of their adoration as well as their own personal traits while consuming popular cultural products, selecting a fictional

character for cosplaying, and translating the fictional character using their own physical appearance and performances. This process yields individual differences and similarities. As Peirson-Smith (2013) notes, cosplay activity offers the individual cosplayer a way of appreciating individuality more than commonality (collective characteristics), which is something that Malaysians have been taught to be sensitive about and respectful to. From the results of this study, it may be determined that this is an ongoing process in the development of cosplayers' awareness of self. The next two sections explore whether or not the cosplay activity yields only individuality by referring to intersecting identities.

7. Cross-play and gender twisting

[7.1] Cross-play generally refers to the act of cosplaying a gender and a character different from the cosplayer's own. Of the 158 cosplayers, twenty-seven female cosplayers (eighteen Chinese; seven Malays; two other ethnicities) cross-played. One of the cross-players portrayed a taciturn male character with coldhearted eyes wearing a long, formal blue suit and black-rimmed spectacles. She said, "I'm in love with this character. My friend told me that I suit this character. Um, the character is a bit, uh, sadist" (RAGE2–9; Malay). Most of these female cross-players expressed their fondness for male fictional characters. Another cross-player said "I think I feel it's like, it suits my personality quite well" (RAGE1–3; Chinese). Even though their cosplayed characters were of the opposite gender, eight of them refer to their personality when describing the character or explaining the reason why they cosplayed the character.

Figure 4. Cross-player (RAGE2–9) Saruhiko Fushimi, from *K-Project,* Japanese anime series, screen capture from the video recording taken at Radical Anime Games Expo, 2015.

[7.2] In these cross-play cases, self-expression in the cosplay was found to be beyond feelings of adoration toward an opposite gender character. A group of three cross-players who cosplayed different male characters from the same visual novel-style game targeting

female adults attempted to verbalize their cosplay principle: "You do feel like this is not you, then, don't do it. But do it for, I mean…you feel more, uh, how to say ah? Natural?" (RAGE1–5; Chinese). She also explained the reason why she selected the male character for her cosplay, saying, "I can relate to him." These female cross-players explore themselves when viewing anime or playing games and then select their cosplay characters. I did not observe any hesitation to cross-play among the female-to-male cross-players across ethnicities. They seemed to be confident and determined in what they were doing.

[7.3] Only seven male gender-twisting cosplayers were identified among the video interview participants. Five of these cosplayers explicitly stated that they cosplayed the "male version" or "gender-twisting version" of female characters. They were evidently indecisive about changing their appearance to look feminine even when selecting female source characters for themselves. All of them designed and made top attire, props, and accessories similar to the source characters, and used exactly the same hair color wig as the source characters, but they wore pants instead of miniskirts. One cosplayer said "maybe one day I will wear the skirt. Yeah. Maybe. Maybe. Depend on the situation. Because sometime you also know yourself well…uh, which character you are suitable to cosplay" (RAGE 2–6; Chinese). Although he could smile shyly and behave as the source character, he seemed apprehensive about exposing his bare legs.

[7.4] Showing heterosexual affection while viewing a visual image of an opposite gender character is very common. However, cross-playing and expressing heterosexual affection using our own body is extraordinary because our appearance and behavior are framed within our normative gender expectations. These male cosplayers possibly have encountered this dilemma, or they might doubt the normative gender view. The previously mentioned male cosplayer added the following statements: "[It's] hard to find the people like same anime. So…when other people [who] like this character [see me and say,] Oh! It's this character… Yeah, we can [be] a best friend" (RAGE2–6). His gender-twisting cosplay enables him to meet other fans of the same female character at convention sites packed with people who are mostly strangers to him. Cosplay activity functions socially in the cosplay community by portraying what cosplayers adore (Rahman, Liu, and Cheung 2012; Yarimizu 2016). This distorted version of cross-play functions to identify the normative gender of the cosplayer as male, as well as displaying him as a fan of a certain female character without deviating from the norm of collective gender identity.

[7.5] Additionally, the following is a case of male-to-female cross-play from the observation notes. One cosplayer, who refused to participate in the video interview, insisted that his cross-play is "a joke," and thus he is not suitable to be interviewed for formal research. In my observation, he was aware that his female military costume of miniskirt, high-soled boots, and long hair mismatched with his appearance as a medium-sized man with a manly face. Nevertheless, he freely mingled with other cosplayers at the convention. Though gender is not the initially intended identification in their cosplays, as pointed out in some studies (Peirson-Smith 2013; Gn 2011; Leng 2014), for the male-to-female cross-players, framing of normative gender could be matters of great concern.

8. Hijab cosplay

[8.1] In this section, hijab cosplay is highlighted through discussion of how the collective identities are negotiated in cosplay. Since determining religious differences was not a purpose of this study, the religion of each video interview participant was not documented. Nonetheless, twenty-five Muslim female cosplayers were easily identified since ethnic Malays are Muslims in Malaysia. Only nine of the twenty-five wore headscarves in their cosplay. Of these nine cosplayers, eight donned colored headscarves matching their source characters' hair color, while one wore a self-made helmet on top of her headscarf. There were also two cosplayers who styled their headscarves to resemble the original characters' hairstyles. One of them said:

> [8.2] I wanna show like, whoever you are, whatever you are, what kind of people you are, you can still cosplay because cosplay is basically what you love…Like me, there's supposed to be like shorts, and wig [for this character]. But I decide to make it long dress and hijab. Because, I want it that way. Because, uh, I like cosplay. So, I decide to cosplay, the way that I am. (AMG1–12)

[8.3] This cosplayer created her costume to look like the original game character by applying exactly the same color scheme and a similar cloth design and props: a bow, arrows, a quiver, and a small waist bag with a belt. She wore a pink headscarf instead of a pink wig, and the length of the sleeves and the skirt were made long enough to entirely cover her arms and legs. She also said, "Because you like that anime, you become that anime [character]; you like that game, you become that game [character]. You just like to portray how you love towards the things that you [love]" (AMG1–12). From this study, it could not be determined whether there were Muslim female cosplayers who compromised their practice of wearing a headscarf in order to perfectly portray an original source character in their cosplay or whether they actually did not wear a headscarf in daily life. However, hijab cosplay is an indication of a self-identification process in cosplay that involves not only individual personal identities but also intersecting multiple identities including a collective identity as a cosplay fan and Muslim. In Malaysia, some Muslim women do not wear a headscarf, and Hassim, Nayan, and Ishak (2016) state that "wearing the hijab remains an option and not an obligation for Malay women" (11). Thus, those who opted for hijab cosplay may have had some specific intention in their hijab cosplay other than their religious obligation.

[8.4] A few hijab cosplayers pointed out that being a hijab cosplayer was more challenging than being a nonhijab cosplayer. One of them said "Especially for headscarf-wearing cosplayer, do not be afraid. People would definitely bash us. But we need to be confident" (AMG2–23). Although cosplay activity became widely known in its currently established form in Japan, and cosplay activity was first popularized by non-Muslims, for cosplayers who wish to retain their Muslim identity or avoid compromising their religious beliefs, keeping their hijab in cosplay is crucial even though the fictional characters that Malaysians cosplay mostly originate from Japan. Another female Muslim cosplayer said:

> [8.5] Well, because I'm doing a hijab cosplay, so I want to portray that, in cosplay, you can do whatever you want. No matter who you are…I spent more [time] on hijab cosplay. And my dream is to cosplay hijab cosplay internationally. Maybe, uh, we can start in Europe, for instance. To show the world that hijab cosplay is,

it's something that you can pursue in. (AMG1–8)

[8.6] For this cosplayer, who had four years of experience, hijab cosplay and normal cosplay are separate entities, as she indicated by saying "I spent more [time] on hijab cosplay." Creating hijab cosplay means not only maintaining their Islamic faith but also conveying the message that we Muslim women do cosplay too; we love the characters like non-Muslims do. By doing hijab cosplay, these cosplayers did not intend to deviate from the existing cosplay community due to their religiosity. Rather, they were in the process of creating collective identification by calling for the inclusion of female Muslims in cosplay.

Figure 5. Hijab cosplayer (AMG1–8) as Yuuki Asuna, from *Sword Art Online,* Japanese anime series adapted from light novel series, screen capture from the video recording taken at AIMANGAKI, 2015.

[8.7] In this study, these hijab cosplayers were found mainly at one convention out of the five where we conducted the video interviews. This convention was held in the most urban area as compared to the others. This also implies that the hijab culture is not absolutely a tradition or obligation for Malaysian Muslim females, as underlined by Hassim, Nayan, and Ishak (2016) and Hassan, Zaman, and Santosa (2015). The hijab was integrated in the cosplay activity as part of their self-identification that intersected with their collective identification as cosplayers as well as Muslim women.

9. Conclusion

[9.1] Among cosplayers in Malaysia, the incorporation of Japanese popular fan culture is central to the realization of their cosplay. Besides embracing this fan culture as their own by representing fictional characters from worlds originally created by others, the cosplay provides opportunities for them to locally engage in the self-identification process. Self-identification is an interactive process that occurs in everyday life in both private and public contexts. Cosplay seems to be a unique phenomenon that only certain people become involved in; however, it enables us to visualize a phenomenon we encounter and incorporate it into our lives. That is the self-identification cosplayers encounter while consuming cultural commodities in private and socializing as cosplayers among fans as well as the general public. Our identities may be unidentifiable and unpredictable, but they are discoverable. We can also manipulate, build on, and realize our identities. These fluid identities, which consist of individual and collective elements, are illustrated by the cosplayers who participated in this study.

[9.2] In sum, cosplayers potentially explore at least three individual aspects of themselves besides that of being a cosplayer in the collective cosplay community. They see themselves as fans of certain fictional characters, as having personality traits and attitudes in common with fictional characters, or as being similar in appearance to particular fictional characters. Individual self-expression, portraying one's own personality and attitude, can also be performed in the presence of others. This identification involves our desire for either inclusion in a particular group or exclusion from the group. In this sense, I suggest that cosplay functions as a platform or at least provides opportunities not only to express the self but also to explore the fluid identities and dilemmas in existing normative identities and to discover the self. Cosplay activity is not just about the performing self in the fictional world but is also an identification process that occurs in the actual world in which the cosplayers live.

[9.3] Ethnicity appears not to be very important while cosplaying. However, with the everyday reality in Malaysia of national integration and ethnic relations as never-ending social and political issues, it is important to note that only one group of the many groups that were interviewed for this study was a multiethnic cosplay group. The hijab indicates religiosity as well as ethnicity in the Malaysian context since Malay cosplayers are officially Muslims in Malaysia. Therefore, ethnicity does matter for Malaysians in cosplay to some extent in the course of raising their voices for their inclusion in cosplaying.

[9.4] In order to more thoroughly explore Malaysian cosplay, the research should have

elicited more in-depth data from each cosplayer in the video interviews. However, despite this possible shortcoming, this study has shed some light on the self-identification process in the cosplay engaged in by the participating cosplayers, who usually perform their own identities, although not overtly, during the conventions. I propose that future studies on cosplay be extended to more interdisciplinary fields such as psychology, consumer economics, and the visual arts. I believe that the self-identification process is only one of many dimensions in cosplay and that cosplay is an integrated phenomenon reflecting our lives based on modern trends such as the technological developments with which young people are increasingly engaged.

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11. Notes

1. Some cosplayers had statements in two or three categories.

2. Each video interview participant is indicated by the following formula: [Abbreviation for the name of the convention where the video interview was conducted] [Day of the fieldwork at the convention]–[Number order of the video interview for the day]. For example, the formula AMG1–4 means that this participant was interviewed at the AMG, on the first day, and in the fourth video.

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Praxis

Identity, curated branding, and the star cosplayer's pursuit of Instagram fame

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[0.1] Abstract—In response to the digital landscape, the nature of cosplay, in which the cosplayer constructs an identity complementary to the character via costuming, has changed from a performative expression of fandom appreciation to a desire to achieve viral fame. As a signifier of popular culture, such so-called star cosplayers commodify their bodies to market a social identity through the curatorial process of displaying work on Instagram. A creative project, ".//wired: TRENDING," promotes the aesthetic value and function of cosplay while utilizing social media to create an identity brand for endorsement.

[0.2] Keywords—Creative praxis; Fandom; Identity brand; Influencer culture; Online culture; Online monetization; Social influencer; Social media

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Riffing off popular culture, the subculture of cosplay invokes a do-it-yourself practice invested in meticulous self-documentation (Hale 2014). Cosplayers congregate on social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook to post in-costume selfies or photography. This art form celebrates the crafter's design, be it a cardboard box manipulated into a suit of armor, a dress configured from shredded, discounted fabric purchased at a local craft store, or components purchased at a costume shop. As an expression of fandom adoration, a costume identifies a relationship between the fan and the character (Lamerichs 2014). This mystical world, wedding fantasy to reality, begs to be lovingly unraveled one thread at a time.

[1.2] As a subcultural phenomenon, the nature of cosplay has changed from a performative expression of fandom appreciation to an increased interest in viral fame. In order to adapt to the evolving technological landscape, cosplayers now gather on social media platforms as opposed to convention halls. No longer confined to the physical plane, this subculture thrives in a digital place. Obsession over celebrity culture invents a viable model of fame to be accessed through social media; this celebrity industry necessitates that people live for the

camera (Gamson 2011). Today, new media ensures the possibility that anyone can become a celebrity (Driessens 2013). Once a form of hobbyist expression to pass the time and pay homage to beloved fictional characters in popular culture, cosplay has since exploded, now trending on social media platforms while also increasingly visible in cultural journalism. With the personality presented on Instagram and the costume operating as a curated mask, a performance implies anticipated viral success. Cosplay pages on social media curate an impression of a cosplayer's reputation. In this emerging phenomenon, cosplayers use social media as a means of establishing an identity brand to become an influencer for monetary gain. Influencers behave as microcelebrities who sell their image to the digital public. Microcelebrities might be classified as online influencers who possess a vast, unspecified number of followers online (Eroglu and Köse 2019).

[1.3] Here I investigate how an identity comes to be constituted on social media while analyzing the effects of Instagram fame in the context of the cosplay community. Here, the term "identity" refers to a brand that a person sells: a version of the self curated through a selection of images showcasing a tailored life. I explore the performative nature of cosplay through the social media platform Instagram. Richard Dyer's star theory, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach, and Pierre Bourdieu's (2010) distinctions of taste, considered in tandem, make it clear that cosplay is a performative meaning-making process that displaces or produces multiple identities. Different threads of identity woven throughout social media and the performance of the cosplayer in public spaces create numerous personas, including the personality presented on Instagram and the costume introduced as a mask to suggest disparate versions of the self. An online persona demonstrates "mediated forms" of the self as negotiated in response to the viral texts (Marshall 2020, 89). In the digital age, the costumer can become a star cosplayer, with transmedia work focusing on their performativity through their use of Instagram.

[1.4] Aside from fostering a sense of community, cosplayers use social media to establish an identity brand. Engaging in an online charade, cosplayers use Instagram to accrue social capital. With the commercialized, visible self on Instagram, an attention economy demonstrates the frequency of social capital due to the "(online identity as a product) and popularity (measured by web metrics)" (Pedroni 2016, 113). I'll use the term "star cosplayer" here, a term from consumerism and celebrity culture, to create a cosplayer exemplar. This work is part of a transmedia experience, including a work of art that seeks to reveal the discoveries I discuss here (note 1). As a cosplayer, I find myself deeply invested in the questions this work poses and qualified to unpack the performativity behind cosplay.

[1.5] Can the meaning of cosplay change? How has cosplayers' adoption of Instagram changed it as a community? What are the motivations or goals of cosplayers online? How is success identified in a modern digital age?

2. On cosplay

[2.1] A June 1983 article by Noboyuki Takahashi features fans masquerading as anime and manga characters at a convention called Comiket (Hellekson 2018), describing what we now know as cosplay. As the word *kosupure,* the term appears in the magazine *My Anime*

(DiPiazza 2018). In the 1990s, Takahashi's portmanteau features in Japanese publication and media before accruing popularity in the Western sphere (Plunkett 2014). Since the 1990s, fandoms are no longer as marginalized as they once were; rather, they prosper as a phenomenon fostered throughout a multitude of careers and increasingly visible across media platforms. Today cosplayers continue to grace the halls of conventions and perform on stage. Cosplay occurs both inside and outside the convention scene; sometimes images are shared via online dissemination, blogs, or how-to tutorials scattered throughout the internet (Lamerichs 2014).

[2.2] Media fans passionately consume fan-made objects (Burgess and Jones 2018). Fandom exhibits a permanence within culture, having "survived and evolved for more than twenty-five years and has produced material artifacts of enduring interest to that community" (Jenkins 2012, 49). Fandom transforms characters and celebrities into commodities for consumption (Duchesne 2010). By analyzing stars and stardom, Richard Dyer (1998) suggests that societal perceptions and theories are apt to change through historical and cultural contexts. Similarly, the meaning of cosplay is apt to change over the course of its evolution. The cultural history of the cosplayer is not a static photograph but rather a moving picture. Cosplayers inject themselves into social media spheres to forge friendships and share their beloved designs.

[2.3] Relying as it does on participatory culture, cosplay encapsulates elements of costume design and encourages manipulation of the performer's body. Sometimes characterized by do-it-yourself methodology, cosplay marshals an intimate approach to produce a personalized piece. The costume can be self-produced, purchased, or a synthesis of homemade and preassembled parts (Winge 2006). Yet with its engagement in fandom practices, cosplay strives to be for everyone, so at its heart, it remains a social activity (Okabe 2012). Despite this, not all are made welcome: there are impositions due to accessibility, as well as perceived power hierarchies. Further, cosplayers tend to construct a cultural or social identity by paying tribute to images from mass culture (Jenkins 2012), which limits engagement from cosplayers who do not fit that mold. The wearer creates or dons a costume to mimic a character from anime, film, television, video games, or other media, but cosplay delves beyond the costume as wearers refine their performances to better embody the character.

[2.4] Akin to performance art, the cosplayer masquerades as a character from popular culture (Gn 2011). The audience responds to the cosplayer's assumed character and performance by proxy. Cosplay functions as a conduit for the cosplayer, as the wearer constructs a personality to complement the costume. In an appreciation of cosplay, Adam Savage (2016), special effects extraordinaire and cohost of *MythBusters* (2003–18), suggests that "the costumes are how we reveal ourselves to each other." Cosplay paints a picture. Beyond the convention's constraints, cosplay is further made visible on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter. Through active participation and facilitating inspiration, cosplayers build a community by slipping into artificial skins. For many fans, cosplay becomes a vehicle for individual expression.

3. The performative nature of cosplay

[3.1] By easing into a costume, the cosplayer engages in a prescriptive narrative. Through performance, meaning is found, made, and produced. The cosplayer's digital adaption attests to Erving Goffman's (1959) theories on impression management and self-presentation. Goffman defines performance as the participant's collective action in an interaction that then influences the interaction of the parties involved. Performance for Goffman alludes to the ongoing action of the individual while perceived by an audience of others marked as observers. A multitude of masks urge the cosplayer to adapt to the current scene. Facets of the self are devised, perhaps even invented on the spot. Depending on the surroundings, the individual tailors a conception of self. Impression management occurs when an individual is in the presence of other people; the individual weaves a masterful first impression based on the narrative that the person wishes to convey (Goffman 1959). In the company of fellow cosplayers, convention attendees, or a viral audience, the cosplayer's performance procures a lasting impression. There exists an exchange of goods and services in the community; in return, participants provide positive feedback. Sometimes spectators approach the cosplayer as if the cosplayer were literally the character. Verbal cues motivate the cosplayer to interact with enthusiastic spectators (Winge 2006).

[3.2] By wearing a costume in the convention space, the performer acts as either himself or herself or akin to the character (Lamerichs 2014). In this realm, a quest for meaning ensues; the cosplayer chooses meaning in this fantasy world where the design projects an image of how one wishes to behave. Every gesture maintains that the cosplayer's act is a language built on symbols. Cosplayers fuss over appearance to strive for the truest depiction of the character. To an extent, the cosplayer takes a mimetic stance (Scott 2015). A pose forms before the lens; in this moment, some cosplayers aspire to illusions of grandeur: a quest for fame and a hunger to capitalize on a hobby emerging as an industry. By donning a mask, the cosplayer assumes the role of the character emulated within the convention space. For a weekend or a few hours, the cosplayer's life transforms into a theatrical experience. The cosplayer becomes an actor portraying a role or conveying a prescribed story; this "is an old simile recently recruited by social psychology as a device for analyzing behavior" (Edgley and Turner 1975, 5).

[3.3] Cosplay hints at the numerous identities performed. A performative identity alludes to the identity of the cosplayer as a fragmented perception, which "means that cosplayers can both retain their own identity and intentionally negotiate a temporary identity" (Zubernis and Larsen 2018, 213). This temporary identity may be that of the character, the cosplayer's handle on Instagram, or the self in costume. The body in costume enables the cosplayer to explore performativity in a physical space (Duffett 2015). Dramaturgical theories describe how the actor adopts a role; the cosplayer's ongoing performance reveals how the actor masters the role or is more than the role assumed (Edgley and Turner 1975). As a social actor, the cosplayer assumes an identity brand as a role. García-Rapp (2017) alludes to Goffman's conception of interactions masquerading as a nuanced performance; self-branding stems "from the notion of everyday social interactions as (semi-)conscious performances" (121).

4. Instagram as a social media platform

[4.1] Could a younger generation of cosplayers be responsible for this fixation on new media? Social media is connected to youth practices such as blogging, and social networking "can be viewed as cultural resources which are used by young people as a way of performing and perhaps playing with their identity" (Willett 2008, 52). Undoubtedly social media has affected numerous individuals worldwide and plays an integral part in the formation of modern society (boyd 2014). Social media can offer validation, foster solidarity, build community, form networking rituals, or commodify a brand. The reciprocal nature of this digital network in which they are immersed tends to demand "connectivity, responsiveness, autonomy and inventiveness" to promote loyalty from the consumer (Moulier-Boutang 2011, 74). Aspiring to influencer status, social media users strive to acquire subscribers through posts that depict "a comfortability with making the self into a brand via online persona work" (Marshall 2020, 99). Users might engage in a search for personal meaning because social media offers a mode of self-expression where star cosplayers can creatively express personal brands. These platforms offer the incentive to commodify an identity as a brand. Consumption revolves around the integration of technology (Moulier-Boutang 2011). A result of navigating social media platforms is that social networking enables users "to piece together what they constitute as self-identity, and it is to be expected that this reflexive process will intensify the need for young people to develop a coherent sense of self (or not, by way of resistance) in order to participate in digital culture" (Robards and Bennett 2011, 312–13). How they behave online is guided by the norms or values imposed by the online community (Goffman 1966). Subcultural ideology enables youth cultures to perceive social circles that permit individuals to ascertain an identity, as opposed to the nameless individuals that compose a group (Thornton [1995] 2005). Social networks enable self-presentation and a negotiated construction of an individual identity (Papacharissi 2010). Users charmed by Instagram's allure are compelled to depict a curated version of an aesthetic through the compilation of images and videos.

[4.2] Larsen and Ryberg (2011) identify four prominent categories of social network sites: "personal and branding related features," "the social and contact enabling features," "entertainment," and "support and practical information" (19–20). Users can create an online empire through the construction of a brand that projects their image as reaching celebrity status. As Contractor and DeChurch (2014) note, possible motives to use social networks for large-scale influence include reciprocity, accountability, and affiliation. Reciprocity ensures that star cosplayers manage their social network pages. Accountability acknowledges them as personally responsible for account management. Affiliation implies that they operate within a sphere of influence. Self-marketing is made possible through manipulating an online platform. Influencer culture demonstrates how an identity becomes a marketed brand. The brand, in the context of the internet, might refer to a user's constructed consumer identity (Piety 2012).

[4.3] Creativity online is perceived as a collective act, yet one celebrated because of the individual (Moulier-Boutang 2011). Passion, cloaked as desire, becomes exploited "as a factor of efficiency in human activity deployed in an enterprise" (Moulier-Boutang 2011, 76). Instagram allows cosplayers to interact through persistent, obsessive self-documentation in an exchange of comments and likes. As an ephemeral phantom of the night, fame flourishes and fades along with modern public perceptions of digital celebrity (van de Rijt et

al. 2013). Although viral fame might be fleeting, Instagram encourages users to curate pictorial spaces for themselves. A single image captures a moment meant to captivate a widespread audience. Cosplayers' commodification can be witnessed through their Instagram use. In cosplay, the body enacts a theatrical performance to reproduce a character from popular culture. The digital, derived from networking and Instagram use, is consumed and thus transformed into social capital.

5. Social capital on Instagram

[5.1] How do we place value on a "like," and how is this relevant to what is known as social capital? (Faucher 2018). Social capital acts as a form of validation on Instagram. As a means of entrepreneurship, affluent influencers find it relatively easy to gain social capital as a result of their likability or popularity (Faucher 2018). Celebrity becomes a form of power postulated as economic profit (Driessens 2013).

[5.2] By attaching social capital to fandom, John Fiske (1992, 2010) applies Pierre Bourdieu's (2010) distinctions of taste. Bourdieu's theory frames celebrity as capital (Driessens 2013). Taste and capital are linked: as Bourdieu (2010) remarks, "Taste, for its part, a classification system constituted by the conditionings associated with a condition situated in a determinate position in the structure of different conditions, governs the relationship with objectified capital" (231). Taste governs what is revered. Fiske (2010) asserts that we thrive in a consumer society in which commodity has functional, cultural value. Star cosplayers accrue social capital as influencers wishing to monetize that identity. As popular culture aficionados, star cosplayers become active producers, as Fiske (1992) notes: "Fans, in particular, are active producers and users of such cultural capital and, at the level of fan organization, begin to reproduce equivalents of the formal institutions of official culture" (33). Fans of star cosplayers' work consume the images presented. Cultural and economic capital are mutually beneficial in the era of late capitalism, as these forms of capital strive "to produce social privilege and distinction" (31).

[5.3] Cosplay is a fan activity by which cosplayers derive social capital. As Paul Booth (2015) remarks, "Our clicks become capital" (1). Users consume through a tap, a message, or an emoji. Likes, comments, and followers perpetuate the star cosplayer's monetization. Media consumption is an ongoing process (Jenkins 2012). Consumption of social media provides a unique and immersive experience for cosplayers on Instagram; the screen becomes the public sphere that they habituate. Through media coverage of this hobby, the media's audience aspires to launch a lucrative career. Suzanne Scott (2015) suggests that the 2013 television show *Heroes of Cosplay* models this aspirational pursuit. Fan cultures within the United States often engage in a gendered commercialization in which "fan filmmakers and game modders have succeeded in transforming their fan works into commercial entities" (De Kosnik 2009, 120). This form of fan labor can result in an economic benefit by permitting the exchange of goods and services. Similarly, cosplayers can sell their images in exchange for the promise of economic and cultural capital. Social media saturation allows communal global access. Inspired by Fiske's development of fan cultural capital, Matt Hills (2002) welcomes deeper analysis of fan cultural capital. Hills probes the lack of fan symbolic capital which stems from Bourdieu's acknowledgment of symbolic capital and

Thorton's approach to subcultural capital as it is related to the murky confines of fame or a perceived reputation. Following Bourdieu, Hills notes that "fans play in the sense that they tacitly recognize the 'rules' of their fan culture, attempting to build up different types of fan skill, knowledge and distinction" (20).

[5.4] Driven by a proposed knowledge economy, so-called cognitive capitalism results in accrued "immaterial capital" as an influence of a viral network (Moulier-Boutang 2011, 50). The term "cognitive capitalism," responding as it does to third wave capitalism in a post-Fordist society, refers to "the virtualization of the economy"—that is to say, "the growing role of the immaterial and of services related to the production of that immaterial" (50). Information and knowledge are describable as an immaterial product stemming from cognitive capitalism. Cognitive capitalism emphasizes both knowledge and creativity (Sakai 2009). The immaterial stems from technology related to computers or new modes of media integrated into the digital (Moulier-Boutang 2011). In relation to Instagram, cosplayers interact with the algorithm by posting photos of their creative works, demonstrating their knowledge of the digital, which they use to devise an immaterial product. This networked influence within the subculture of cosplay queries subcultural capital.

[5.5] On subcultural capital, Sarah Thornton ([1995] 2005) draws from the work of Bourdieu, who "explores what he calls cultural capital or knowledge that is accumulated through upbringing and education which confers social status" (202). Valuable connections grant esteemed status, as is the case for star cosplayers who perform online to accrue a massive following. Thornton describes subcultural capital as granting status to someone on the basis of the regard everyone feels, thereby permitting the cultural hierarchy to pivot in response to taste as something that connotes class. As it is perceived online, subcultural capital demonstrates various relationships among like-minded individuals who share hobbies, interests, or social contexts, which in turn permit a support network and information exchange (Rafalow et al. 2019). As a result of analysis of both cultural and social capital, what is thought to be valuable to the culture that is being studied may thereby be perceived; indeed, it is difficult to assess the various forms of value across subcultures if these subcultures are divorced from contemporary society (Rafalow et al. 2019). In the context of cosplay subculture, celebrity emphasizes the personality and the individual perceived as qualities relevant to "the system of sharing" or a capitalized system (Marshall 2020, 98).

6. Star theory

[6.1] Social media services enable users to share self-made content in a realm where image and representation matter (boyd 2014), and technology promotes self-publishing as making content accessible to a broad audience—content in which everyday life is recorded in the anticipation of receiving attention (Gamson 2011). By self-publishing content with an eye to fame, star cosplayers emerge thanks to their understanding and manipulation of their subcultures. Richard Dyer's (1998, 2003) star theory explores the influence of celebrity today. In accordance with Dyer as well as scholars like Gamson and Turner, the star is a highly visible "public construction of a performer, made up of the diverse representations of that individual" (Ellcessor 2012, 48). Celebrity depicts a public identity as a projection of the self within the constraints of popular culture and fame (Marshall 2020). As a social fact, star

theory posits that celebrities or other influential figures are produced as a commodity for monetary gain (Dyer 2003). This ideology of the star as a codified text depicts a narrative of the star as a celebrity image to consume. As deified figures, stars come across as characters that project ambition; in addition, stars' deification is a motivation for pursuing fame (King 2010). Cosplayers on Instagram engage in an unfocused interaction with the star cosplayer that allows Instagram viewers to form an impression of the star that is based on what they see (Goffman 1966). Social networking thus places the fabricated identity of the star cosplayer on a pedestal. Further, thanks to the nature of internet fame, this variation of celebrity appears to be more accessible or attainable for the everyday person (Kurzman et al. 2007). Social media thus becomes a vehicle for opportunity as star cosplayers strive to become influencers. Influencers and internet celebrities achieve stardom, with a viral following exchanged for product endorsement.

[6.2] Dyer (2003) notes that stars embody our individual values, ideals, beliefs, and aspirations. For stardom to exist, certain social structures are in effect; according to Dyer (1998), this includes "a large-scale society (stars cannot know everyone, but everyone can know stars)" and "social mobility (anyone, in principle, may become a star)" (7). Dyer's (1998) notion of large-scale society might usefully be applied to the millions of Instagram users who consume a star's image. Upward mobility encourages the emergence, existence, and permeance of celebrities. Star economics promote capital and marketable investment. Celebrity culture is sold through the dissemination of images in either print or new media. Celebrity consumption involves the inclusion of a celebrity brand across media platforms. With social media operating as a cultural space, the celebrity as a spectacle transforms into a commodity object (Kerrigan et al. 2011). The audience's consumption of popular culture relies on the perception that the practice of celebrity is productive work (Kerrigan et al. 2011). An individual is illuminated as a star through advertisements, cinema, and popular culture (Dyer 2003). Both the celebrity's image and the cosplayer's image are sold for commerce or for validation. The iconic status of celebrity comprises "screen roles and obviously stage-managed public appearances, and also of images of the manufacture of that 'image' and of the real person who is the site or occasion of it" (Dyer 2003, 7). Celebrity appears as a system of low versus high forms of status (Kurzman et al. 2007).

[6.3] Upon achieving celebrity on Instagram, star cosplayers market their services, which include appearing as convention guests or MCs, sponsoring licensed brands, judging cosplay competitions, and modeling via commercial photography. Content creators and influencers use their technical skill set to promote certain advantages, like "entertainment, knowledge, self-reflexivity and motivation as well as inspiration for viewers' own lives and identities" (García-Rapp 2017, 121–22). Stardom presents a certain idea regarding how stars live (Dyer 1998). Thanks to ads and mass media's manipulation of the market, stardom can become grossly successful (Dyer 1998). Celebrity cosplayers attain success in part through self-advertisement, posting routine updates and keeping up with the digital buzz. They share a reciprocal relationship with the audience in which mediated power is circulated to fortify the celebrity's standing (Marshall 1997). Stars are simultaneously figures who cater to public demands and products of the celebrity phenomenon itself (Dyer 1998). Online influencers sell their brand through advertisement, networking, and modeling. As a form of creative labor, this task mirrors influencers' comprehension of how to best navigate the platform to

maximize performance (Cunningham and Craig 2019). What's popular and what's trending become future cosplay in the calculated anticipation of receiving likes, comments, or new followers. Using actress Felicity Day as a case study in an article about Twitter, Elizabeth Ellcessor (2012) identifies the modern star's engagement with social media to identify how the star can be read as an iconic image to not only "promote creative labors" (48) but also to use these sites to formulate "a star text of connection, authenticity and consistency" that appears to "be equally important to the functional relationship between funding and content" (65). As a fortified industry, popular culture presents "celebrities as signs" to make sense of them (Marshall 1997, 60).

[6.4] In addition, the star cosplayer creates a discrete identity in which the character is clearly separate from the cosplayer's private identity (Dyer 1998). This discrete identity resembles how cosplayers use Instagram to perpetuate a carefully cultivated online impression. They might hide their authentic selves under constructed identities. On the one hand, removed from the image-heavy technological influence of sites like Instagram, cosplayers embody fans who enjoy dressing up. But on the other hand, as a cultivated construction of commercial production, stars present themselves as something to aspire to. Celebrities behave as "human brands—their performances on- and offstage, off- and online, public or private, are marketing and branding exercises" (Centeno and Wang 2017, 133). In the instance of Kim Kardashian, the iconic Kardashian name carries status, which then evolves into a brand. Celebrities like Kim Kardashian endorse a product by humanizing the brand to encourage its purchase; the star thus embodies the ideal consumer, with the star becoming a "commodity vessel" (Centeno and Wang 2017, 133). The Kardashian family's self-branding and self-entrepreneurship stem from twenty-first-century reality television (Leppert 2015). In the same vein, star cosplayers devise a brand by constructing aliases in which the cosplayer's image is sold as a product.

7. The star cosplayer

[7.1] Unlike the Kardashians, who present curated versions of themselves as themselves, star cosplayers present curated versions of themselves as the characters they portray. On social media, cosplayers may engage in a charade of celebrity, with cosplayers enacting impersonations of impersonations. Star cosplayers, as performers preserving their image, paint themselves in a favorable light, their self-controlled interactions online ensuring an equally controlled perception (Goffman 1959). This highly curated version of the self is sold as a well-kept brand. Cosplayers are identified by their unique pseudonyms, thus adhering to the unwritten rule of social networking encouraging individuality (Langlois 2014). Social media accounts are thus manipulated to construct an image or a reputation. Posted text makes use of carefully selected hashtags, often chosen via complex algorithms, to ensure the most cross-coverage. Self-promotion and communication often occur through Instagram Stories in an amalgamation of Q&As, posts, and photographs. With Instagram as the setting, the stage of social media beckons the cosplayer to perform content that feeds into an impression that ideally will result in fame, thereby accessing the role of celebrity (Goffman 1959). In other words, star cosplayers give an impression of celebrity in order to acquire that status.

[7.2] In order to create that impression of celebrity, cosplayers seek to market themselves as a brand by navigating Instagram to construct celebrity-worthy content with trending hashtags, which they then attempt to monetize. Star cosplayers are preoccupied with follower and "like" counts. They seek out networking opportunities in exchange for compensation. Star cosplayers may make money by selling prints, encouraging fans to sign up for Patreon subscriptions, accepting Ko-fi donations (note 2), and so forth. A big following increases status and presence as the sheer magnitude of followers becomes an estimate of visibility; influencers prioritize engagement as a method to accrue gain exposure (Cotter 2018). Seeking prestige, star cosplayers gain social capital in hopes of monetizing their identity brand. Seeking influence, they strive to produce content. Indeed, by harnessing fan labor tactics and embracing their fannish passion, star cosplayers rely on advertisement via small-scale fan-networked circulation on Instagram (Busse 2015). Through value production, star cosplayers are responsible for distributing their art.

[7.3] Star cosplayers choose their pseudonyms as part of a marketing strategy, seeking an aesthetic that complements the personality they present on Instagram. This user name, which is used in all contexts across the social mediascape, shields cosplayers who do not want their public identity or legal name known. Social media users construct these identities "in an effort to increase the reach of the content they create, and other users are encouraged to 'subscribe' to their created content" (Lackey and Minta 2013, 450). Followers then refer to stars by their pseudonyms, further reinforcing the notion that these cosplayers behave according to a promoted brand that frames their identity. Esteemed names of star cosplayers include Leon Chiro (@LeonChiro) and Yaya Han (@YayaHan), who have reached high levels of Instagram stardom on the merits of their celebrated work.

[7.4] To accrue social and cultural capital—what Bertha Chin (2018) calls fan capital—star cosplayers commercialize themselves rather than presenting themselves as objects. Chin asserts that "a like or a share/retweet on social media can elevate the status of the fan within their fan community" (329). In the fan world, presence and influence matter; the sheer number of likes or followers elevates status by establishing someone as an authority figure. Star cosplayers' large followings imply that they have authority, which leads to these stars having real influence. Their social media presence in an environment where people are simultaneously watching and being watched indicates that any cosplayer can become a star (Gamson 2011). Judith Roof (2009) asserts that fame presents a temporary fix to insatiable, cultural addiction; fame is thus an invention that inflates ego and self-importance to motivated desire. Star cosplayers strive for the *idea* of fame: what it means, what it could entail.

[7.5] On Instagram, star cosplayers assume the role of social actor by performing for a potential audience through hashtags. Instagram influencers suggest that an algorithm increases the likelihood of receiving new followers by engaging with current followers; therefore, engagement warrants exposure (Cotter 2018). The audience connects with star cosplayers by liking or commenting on their images, apropos to scholar Aoife Monks's (2009) findings that "the costume is the spectator's means to access the actor's body, and is also a means for the actor to access the world of the performance" (20). The audience builds a relationship with the actor through the performance and the costume (Monks 2009). Star

cosplayers communicate to a virtual audience by posting photographs; the body markets a social identity by displaying work on Instagram.

[7.6] Embodiment regarding cosplay allows for cosplayers to rely on multiple bodies as a mode of performance (Lamerichs 2014). This individual, as a perceived performer, stages a performance to be viewed as assuming a type of role in which the individual aspires to evoke a favorable impression (Goffman 1959, 252). Using their bodies to create a brand, star cosplayers issue a mediated performance. As content creators, they professionalize their craft by choosing which images to circulate online. Responsible for promoting their identity as brand, star cosplayers undergo scrupulous self-presentation. Marketing a social identity on Instagram, star cosplayers target an audience comprising cosplayers, enthusiasts, and fandom.

[7.7] For star cosplayers, the persona is managed specifically for an online account, with behavior presented according to the persona's brand of influence. Cosplayers demonstrate their public self by posting photographs of themselves in and out of costume, as well as by providing online commentary. A post may be designed to facilitate conversation to inspire loyalty between follower and followed. Even brand loyalty can be demonstrated through the allure of star cosplayers who accrue feedback on Instagram (Burgess and Jones 2018). In posts, star cosplayers often cite the brand names of the accessories (e.g., contact lenses, wigs, cosmetics) incorporated into the costuming. Corporations might choose to support star cosplayers by helping them through systematic networking and sponsorship.

[7.8] As a form of capital, brand identity is described as "economic benefit for industry participants" that "is shaped by fans' demands to be recognized as a viable, desirable segment of the market, sold to effectively" (Gilbert 2017, 367). Cosplayers tacitly market their services through their social media accounts. Hand-sewn, commissioned, or purchased costumes are modeled in photo shoots, with professional-quality images disseminated online. By analyzing texts to reinvent popular culture, fans actively participate in fandom, including assessing how a cosplayer chooses to bring a character to life through costume. Social media cosplayers and their followers devise, à la Henry Jenkins (2012), a cultural and social identity by repurposing, or poaching, mass culture images. In accordance with cultural capital, social media engagement may be regarded as a type of "cultural consumption" that "entails an economic cost" (Bourdieu 2010, 116). A following becomes capital when the star cosplayer gains recognition, presence, and influence.

[7.9] Through empowerment and accessibility on Instagram, there is an increasing desire to monetize reputation; following becomes currency (Faucher 2018). The commodification of interaction produces social capital, inventing a platform for influencers by "converting their digital production of the self on social media into a profitable venture" (Faucher 2018, 36–7). Star cosplayers engage with a participatory audience establishing labor dynamics in which "an audience participates in creating the media that it consumes, it links audience dynamics and labor relations" (Mandiberg 2012, 7). With the self operating as the performed character of an elite cosplayer, the audience's analysis of the individual will either credit or discredit the star (Goffman 1959, 253).

[7.10] As a signifier of popular culture, the star cosplayer conveys a lifestyle: identity becomes a brand in this ever-evolving American dream, a quest for cultural capital. This networked identity influences the audience to worship the elite cosplayer, now deified as a celebrity. The individual expresses himself "to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain" (Goffman 1959, 6). The star cosplayer publishes Instagram stories, comments, and likes in order to become a charismatic figure. According to Bourdieu (2010), charm and charisma convey a type of power "certain people have, to impose their own self-image as the objective and collective image of their body and being; to persuade others, as in love or faith, to abdicate their generic power of objectification and delegate it to the person who should be its object" (208). Star cosplayers are thus like iconic performers: "They are recognizable by the merest signs and ciphers of their identity" (Duffett 2015, 214).

8. About the art

[8.1] Entitled "./wired: TRENDING," I have constructed an installation representative of my (multidisciplinary) research. Alongside the installation is wall text for spectatorship. In this artwork, I use a cosplayer's skill set to realize a symbolic interpretation of the star cosplayer. This piece demonstrates my impression of the cosplay community with the star cosplayer as an archetype. "./wired: TRENDING" conceptualizes the body in an electronic and a physical space. The mannequin's adornments suggest a performance that is built on aspirations to paint a narrative whereby fame is scintillating, vibrant, and idealized by capitalizing on an identity brand on Instagram.

9. Deconstruction of the artwork

[9.1] "./wired: TRENDING" promotes the aesthetic value and function of cosplay. On Instagram, everyone can become an actor or a model; celebrity is actively consumed. Each component relays a message to the spectator. As Goffman (1966) notes, "Every linguistic message carries some expressive information, namely, that the sender is sending messages" (14). This artwork interprets costume as a sign expressing a fan's social identity or aspirations in the digital age. Each post on the installation's Instagram account spews prose pertinent to its progression.

[9.2] To echo the star cosplayer's temporary presence on Instagram, the artwork's material accessibility is neither durable nor long. The mannequin performs by modeling the costume in the same vein that a star cosplayer might showcase his or her work. The dress form represents a body carrying weight and presence. Conventional norms dictate how the cosplayer behaves in public, be it in the digital realm or in the convention space. A body, however, alludes to the problematic nature of cosplay: endorsement rewards those who prescribe to conventional societal standards of beauty. The body's bizarre proportions, with an elongated neck, evoke a disconnect between the body and the head concerning materiality. The costume is a jarring yet colorful mash-up, providing visceral, visual cues for the audience to respond to.

[9.3] Perhaps the mannequin is hollow to echo a hollow pursuit; fame might promise emptiness, a lack of fulfillment (Roof 2009). Celebrity gives the body purpose; we twist perceptions to match what is seen on screen. Imagery and symbolism combat the meaningless, although they may themselves be meaningless. The installation suggests an allegory: in losing an identity, one is gained. Further, viewers, if they feel compelled, may undress the figure, with the undressing mimicking the unpacking of tiers of research. (This performative aspect differs from the star cosplayer's, where the audience may only appreciate from afar.) Detachable components represent the layers involved in the identity of this brand. Block letters on the mannequin incorporate phrases as a coded marketing rhetoric, suggesting social media's modality of choice, hashtags used to appeal to the consumer market.

[9.4] On a removable mask, stars for eyes, outlined in gold, literalize the metaphorical, with the mask representing "the conception we have formed of ourselves—the role we are striving to live up to…This mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be" (Goffman 1959, 19).

[9.5] Gold drips from the eye sockets. The empty gaze refers to the star cosplayer's self-awareness, with the cosplayer conscious of the depicted image. The mouth suggests a voice, with Instagram vocalizing the star's brand endorsement. Hand-painted dollar bills indicate our modern capitalistic society. The golden halo and wings signify the religiosity of celebrity iconography, demonstrating the compulsion to revere those who enter an ascribed status. This reverence, engrained as it is into our nature, makes us idolize, worship, *idealize*. There is a deep-rooted need to emulate what is potentially beyond one's reach; we search for a technological altar on which to worship.

[9.6] Yarn, fused to the undershirt, symbolizes the web of connectivity binding users to Instagram. Underneath, cables protrude, twisted into a warped spine. Fastened to the blazer, a spool of thread honors cosplay's craftiness. The mannequin is a synthetic, fabricated body. Each vest button hints at the utility of a smartphone's camera function. The blazer's ruffled collar and sleeves encourage a perception of elitism, suggestive in wedding the star cosplayer to celebrity culture. The cape testifies to the cosplayer's desire to embody an admired character, and its entrapped feathers represent the cosplayer's hunger to make it big. Interconnected wires snaking up the base of the skeleton suggest the star cosplayer's technological investment. Colorful DuPont cables cling to the stand, bleeding gold, to represent this obsession.

[9.7] Stripping the dress form reveals that the installation contains a magnitude of layers. The body is not bare; rather, the mannequin is a canvas. Self-branding assumes literal meaning; hand-painted hashtags accompany typed text, spelling out #buy #like #sell #follow #subscribe #comment #icon #cosplay #cosplayer #selfie. These phrases parallel the star cosplayer's systematic hashtags, which communicate to an audience. Miscellaneous magazine clippings with a ransom-note effect illustrate the use of anonymity in the cosplay community. Dramaturgical masks pinned to the dress form speak to the cosplayer's performativity.

[9.8] Developed film serves as a reference point. There exists an amateur DIY quality to the

photographs on the installation's Instagram feed, which contrasts with the professional-quality shoots of the star cosplayer. Each Polaroid capturing the installation refers to cosplayers' rigorous self-documentation. Held together by glue and raw determination, the art encourages spectator participation, just as cosplay is part of a participatory culture. At the installation's base is a functional battery pack that allows spectators to charge their devices, so long as they use the hashtag #cosicon to document the experience, creating a sense of entrapment, just as the star cosplayer falls into the well of endless self-promotion.

10. Instagram curation of "./wired: TRENDING"

[10.1] Rigorous self-documentation perpetuates a legacy for the artwork apropos a cosplayer's magnum opus. By using an Instagram account, @thecuratedidentity, to archive my artistic process, I demonstrate how a cosplayer might self-promote a star image. By providing routine progress updates, the archive reveals how social media consumption curates an individual experience. The digital archive, by hosting an exhibition of cosplay, commemorates a cosplayer's exploration of identity through selfie culture. Recording these thoughts demonstrates self-consciousness, for "self-documentation is a practice of self-creation and introspection, but also of self-idealization" (Langlois 2014, 121). Self-awareness parallels star cosplayers' attempts to brand themselves. Further, the archive desires permeance; it seeks to exist beyond this project's completion.

[10.2] By mirroring cosplay's performative nature as a creative outlet for self-expression, this installation offers an interpretation of the cosplay community that rests on the notion that the star cosplayer curates an experience that is based on a persona. Because the archive exists at a public site, users are welcome to communicate with the content. Indeed, the artwork's Instagram posts behave as an ongoing performance. Interested as I am in the influence of a networked identity, I aspire to manage impressions by controlling what is shown through my archive.

11. Conclusion

[11.1] My research on and spectatorship of cosplay led me to construct a transmedia work observing self-subcultural practice. In the digital age, the cosplayer can become a star cosplayer seduced by capitalistic pursuits. Through cultural attachments that inspire us to perform in a creative vein, we seek emotional gratification (Jenkins 2006). As a cosplayer, my personal values seeped into my artwork. To spin an appealing narrative, "./wired: TRENDING" highlights the importance of visual culture by crafting a platform to vocalize my thoughts regarding the cosplay subculture's relationship with social media.

[11.2] On Instagram, brand becomes identity. As social media has evolved, cosplayers tailor personalities complementary to their platforms. Influenced by celebrity, fame tempts its audience with a potential career. Influence on Instagram motivates the user to self-market various talents. My work investigates the pursuit of the star cosplayer navigating Instagram to achieve monetized fame. Immersed as they are in a capitalistic market, star cosplayers have discovered a way to brand themselves. This pursuit need not have negative

connotations, however; star cosplayers possess steadfast ambition, a hearty drive, and a creative work ethic.

[11.3] Cosplay demonstrates the power of fan-made cultural entities. Fan culture results in self-construction by navigating between a person's social identity and media interpretations (Bailey 2005, 49). Cosplay encourages self-expression in this profoundly personal, even sacred, act. The constructed identity, which brings us comfort, provides insights that help us understand why we—the cosplayer, the hobbyist, the influencer, the star, the fan—feel at ease behind a digital mask.

12. Notes

1. My project is an analysis of a viral cosplaying trend that posits cosplay work as a form of capital on Instagram. By no means is this an attempt to slander.

2. Patreon (https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1949) is a crowdfunding platform that allows users to pay a small fee to subscribe to an artist's page, under the premise that the artist will create more content. Most Patreon accounts provide special content to subscribers only. Ko-fi (https://ko-fi.com/) allows users to donate to another user, without the anticipation of receiving content in exchange.

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14. Appendix

Figure 1. The mannequin with and without its costume.

Figure 2. View of the installation from behind.

Figure 3. Closer view of the costume, revealing a lens poking through the vest.

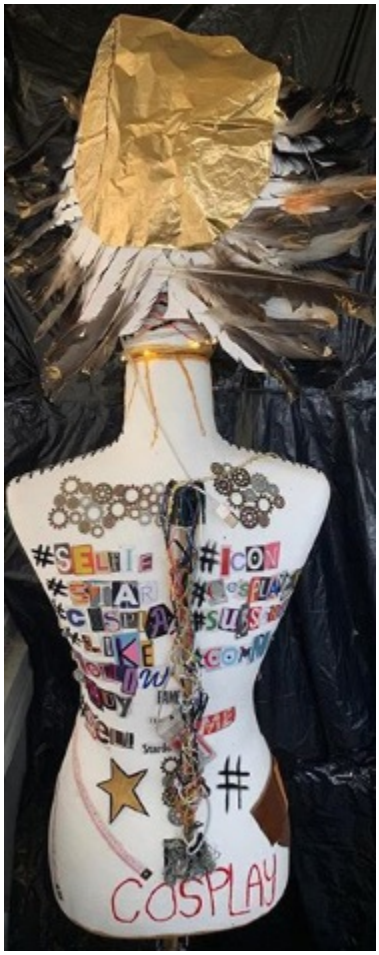


Figure 4. Without the costume.

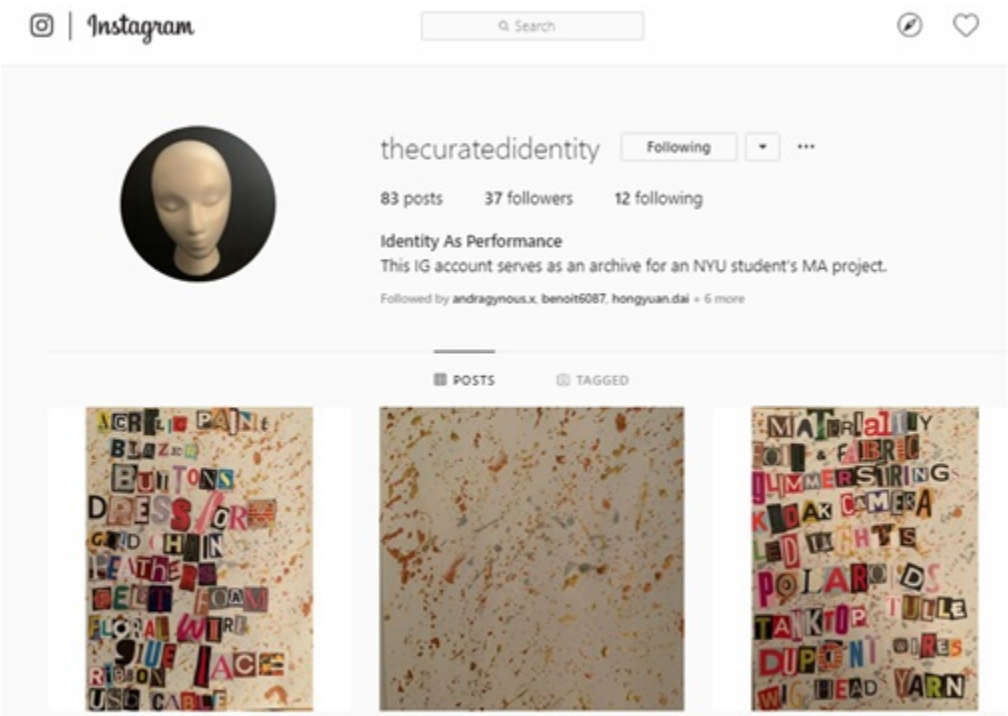


Figure 5. Screenshot demonstrating how ".//wired: TRENDING" was displayed on Instagram.

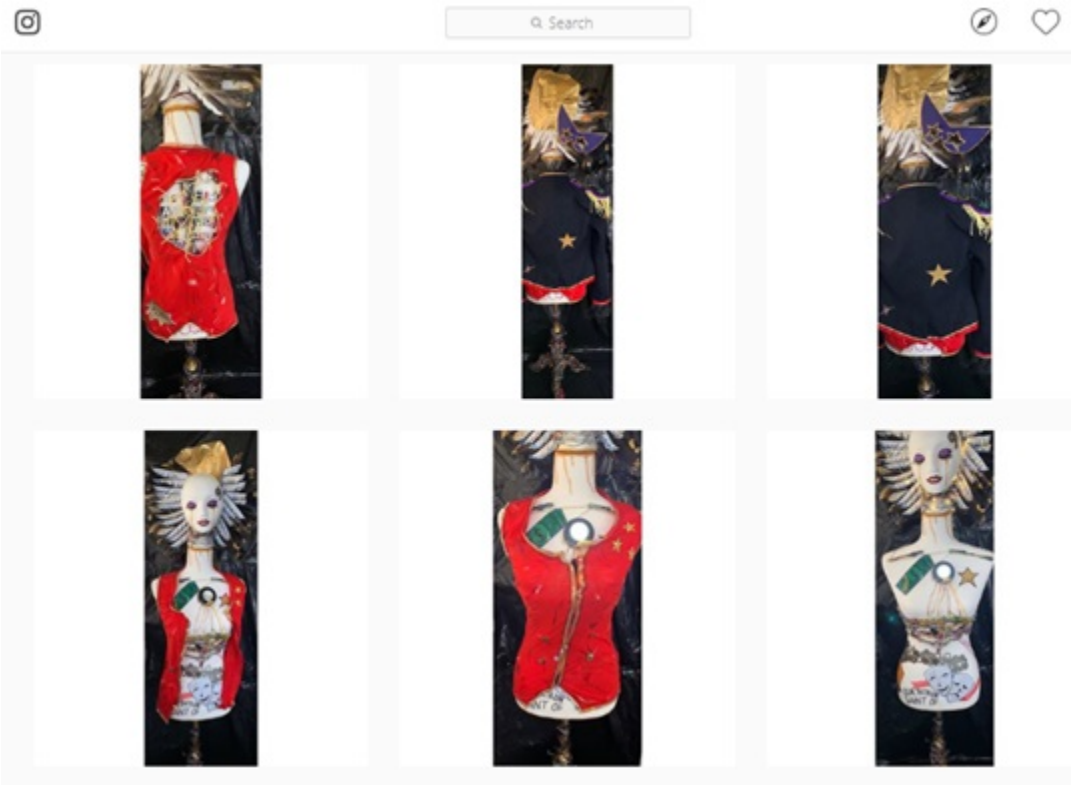


Figure 6. Mannequin, with and without the costume, suggesting layers of symbolic

interpretation.

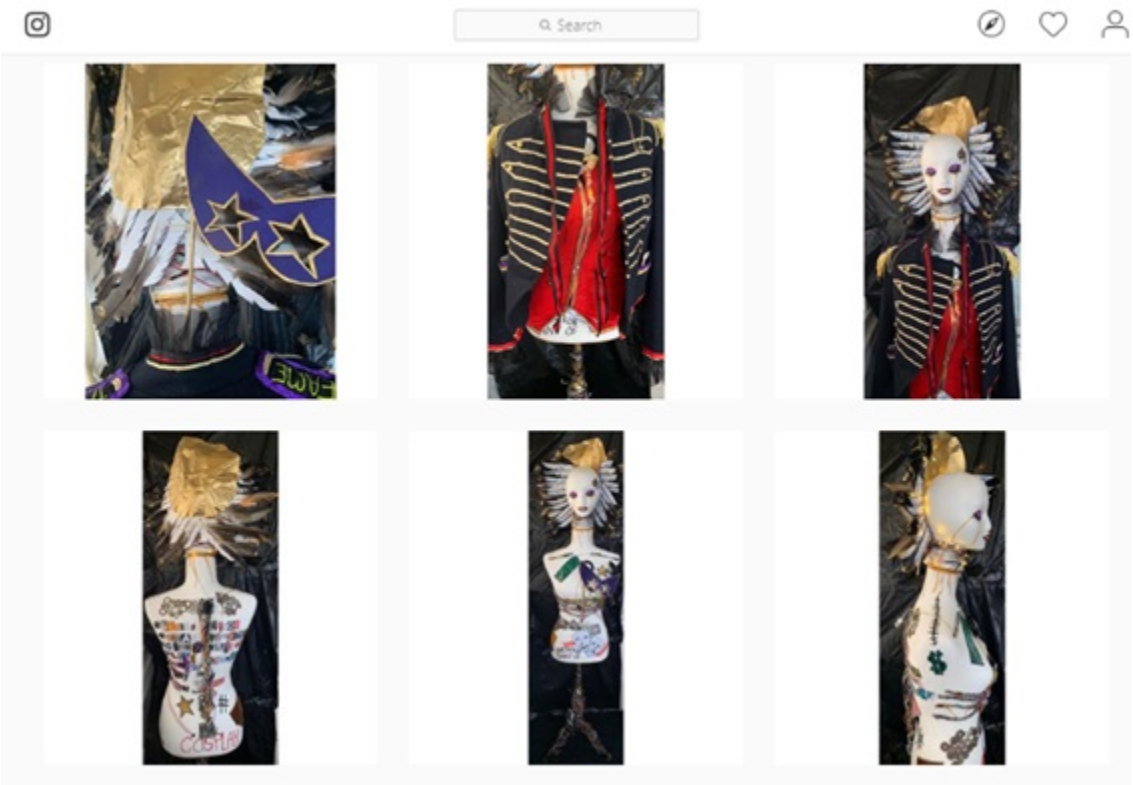


Figure 7. Scrolling through @thecuratedidentity to see the mannequin in various poses.

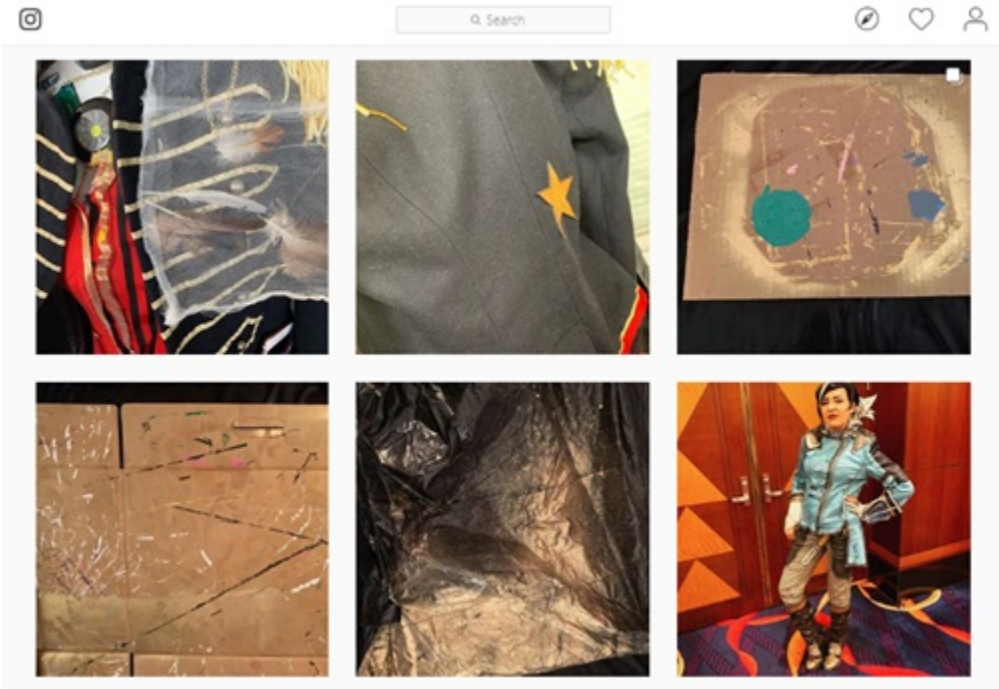


Figure 8. The hobbyist cosplayer responsible for constructing the piece, and the aftermath of creation.

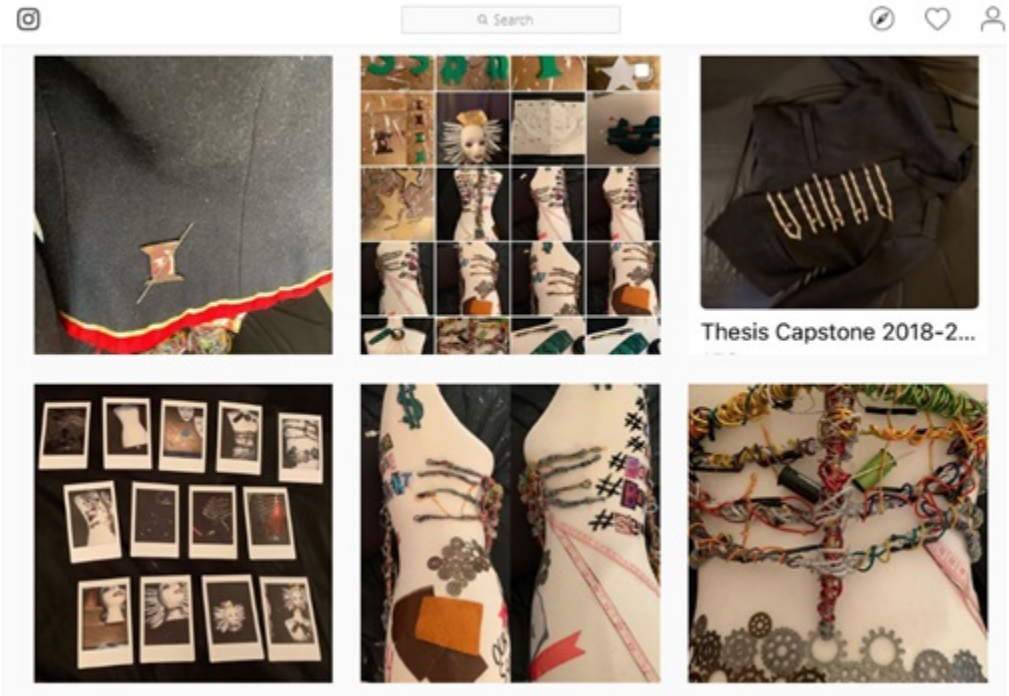


Figure 9. Insight into the self-documentation process.

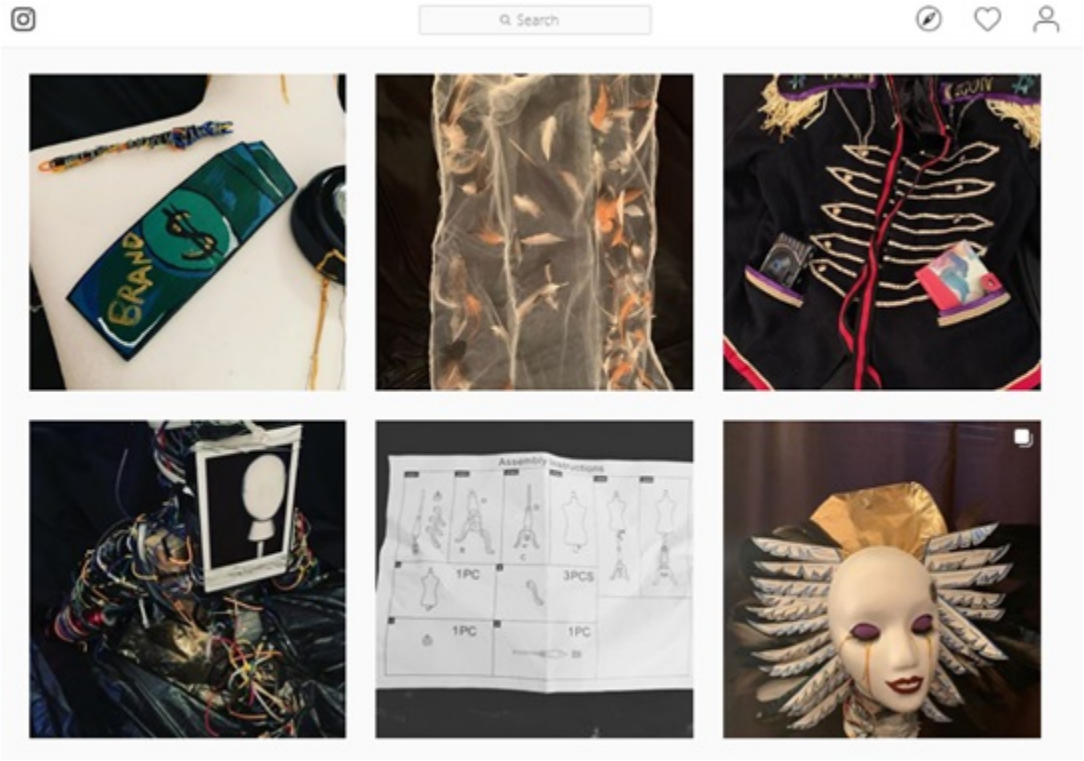


Figure 10. Construction depicting the staging of each component for photographic evidence.

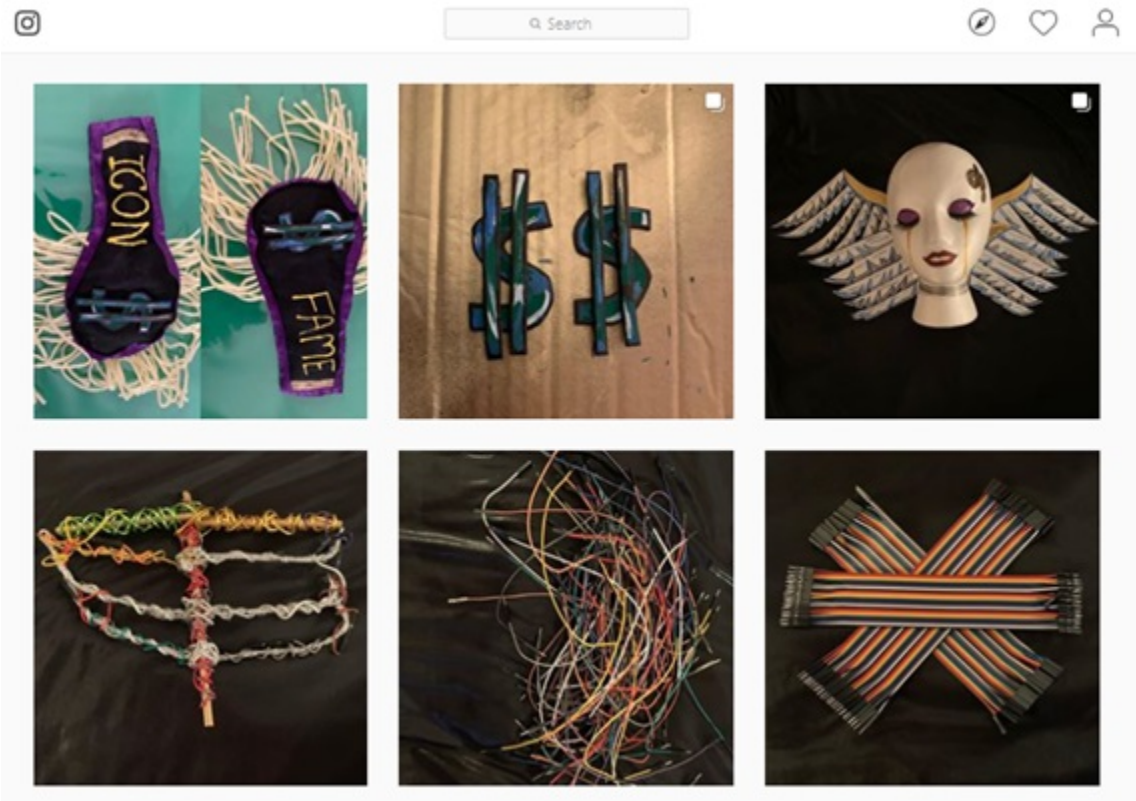
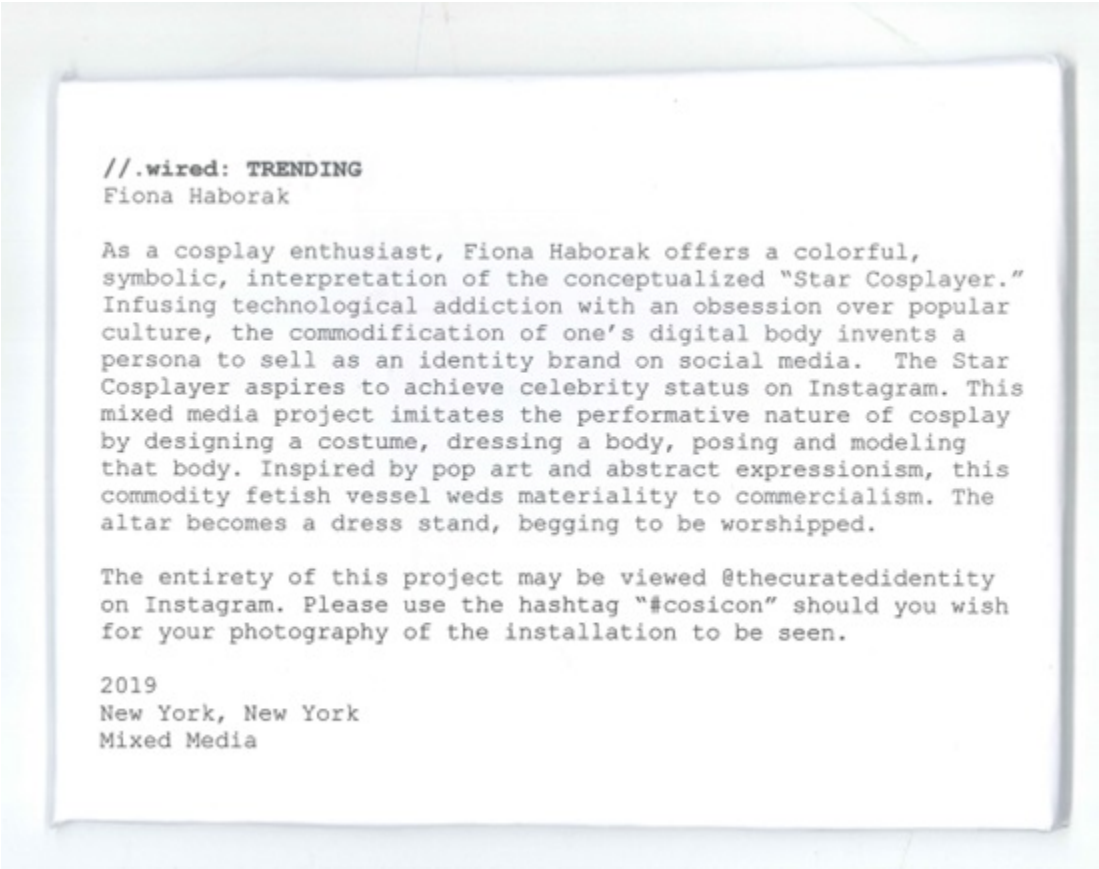


Figure 11. Construction of the rib cage and epaulets.



//.wired: TRENDING
Fiona Haborak

As a cosplay enthusiast, Fiona Haborak offers a colorful, symbolic, interpretation of the conceptualized "Star Cosplayer." Infusing technological addiction with an obsession over popular culture, the commodification of one's digital body invents a persona to sell as an identity brand on social media. The Star Cosplayer aspires to achieve celebrity status on Instagram. This mixed media project imitates the performative nature of cosplay by designing a costume, dressing a body, posing and modeling that body. Inspired by pop art and abstract expressionism, this commodity fetish vessel weds materiality to commercialism. The altar becomes a dress stand, begging to be worshipped.

The entirety of this project may be viewed @thecuratedidentity on Instagram. Please use the hashtag "#cosicon" should you wish for your photography of the installation to be seen.

2019
New York, New York
Mixed Media

Figure 12. The wall text as a reproduction.

Figure 13. Advertisement for ".//wired: TRENDING."

Figure 14. A mounted photo board showing the creation process.

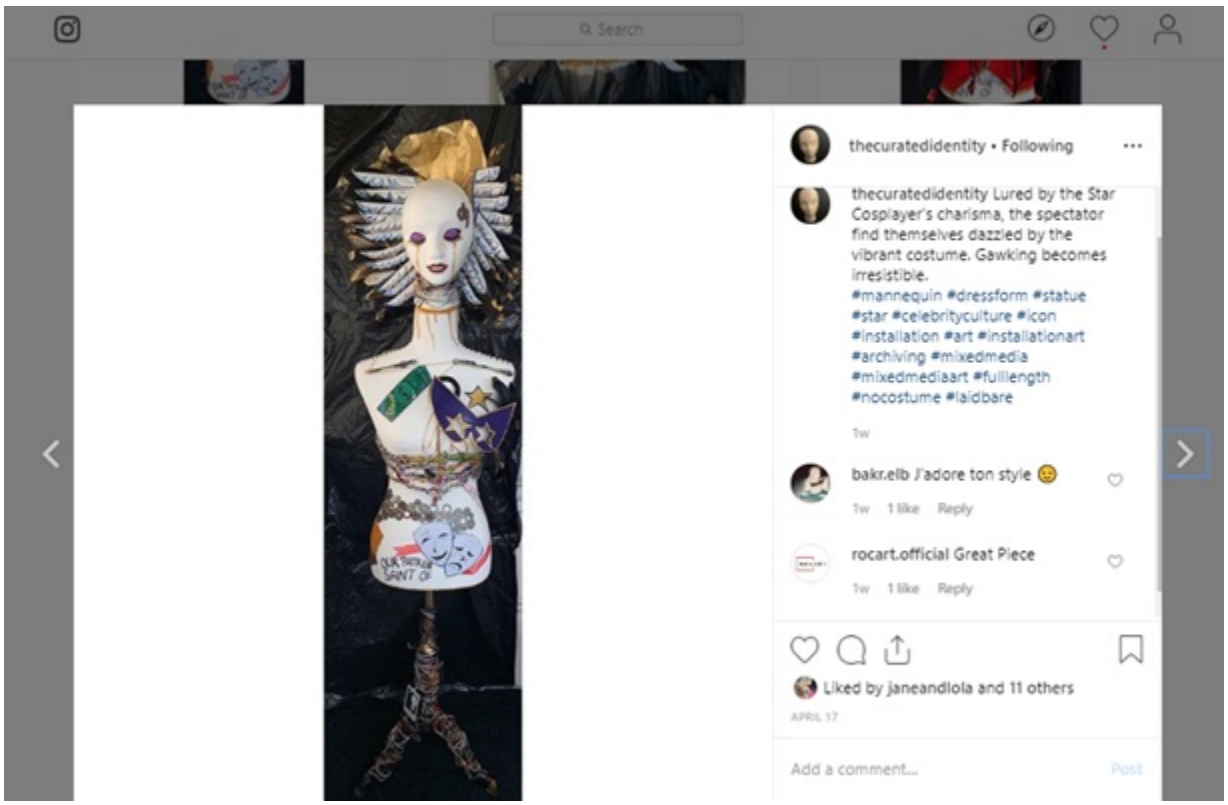


Figure 15. Instagram post for ".//wired: TRENDING."

Symposium

Reimagining fan studies in the age of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter

Aya Esther Hayashi

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[0.1] Abstract—We in the United States are living in the midst of two pandemics: Covid-19, which is affecting communities of color at an absurdly disproportionate rate, and a renewed spate of murders of Black people at the hands of police. They reveal the depths of racial inequity and injustice in our country. This is a crisis—a turning point where many of us are wondering what we can do better and how we can be better. For us in fan studies, will we finally face the white supremacy embedded in our discipline and take steps to become an antiracist discipline?

[0.2] Keyword—Antiracism

Hayashi, Aya Esther. 2020. "Reimagining Fan Studies in the Age of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter." *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 34. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.2029.

[1] What a year. We in the United States are living in the midst of two pandemics: Covid-19, which affects communities of color at an absurdly disproportionate rate, and a renewed spate of murders of Black people at the hands of police. They reveal the depths of racial inequity and injustice in our country. As we try to grapple with this moment, there are several overused words to describe it: the new normal, unprecedented, crisis. It's the last one that I'll explore more.

[2] The word *crisis* comes from ancient Greek *krisis,* which translates to "decide," a word with no positive or negative connotation. It was simply the moment where a decision or judgment was made—or, in late Middle English, the turning point in a disease where patients either recovered or died. It is only recently that the word took on a negative meaning—as in, for example, "the 2008 financial crisis."

[3] This premodern view gives me hope. This is a turning point, a moment of judgment where we have the chance to do better, to be better. This possibility has been explored elsewhere (Wright 2020), but I wonder how we can leverage this moment for the sake of our discipline.

[4] Cue: "Yo! Who the eff is this?" (Miranda 2015).

[5] My name is Aya Esther Hayashi. I am a Japanese American cis woman, musicologist, and fan studies scholar who escaped academia for the nonprofit theatre industry in New York City. I am the development manager for the People's Theatre Project (PTP), a Latina-led antiracist organization that creates ensemble-based theatre with and for immigrant communities to strengthen the movement for justice. All staff are required to take an antiracism workshop within six months of hire, and we frequently discuss how to dismantle racism with our work in arts education and theatre.

[6] The verb *reimagine* appears in many of our written materials because it reminds us that we are creative beings who can (re)imagine and (re)create. By sparking our collective creativity, we work to remake our world into a more just one. The concept of reimagining resonates with me on multiple levels: it is the common thread between my work and faith to why I pursued a fan studies topic in the traditional (read: white) discipline of music history.

[7] As noted already, fan studies has a whiteness problem (Phillips 2019). Actually, scratch that. Fan studies has a white supremacy problem. I define white supremacy as the ideology that assigns the highest value to white people's thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and actions, and ranks those of BIPOC (note 1) in rough descending order of yellow to Black. Fan studies is a white supremacist discipline, but I do not mean in overt ways like the KKK, racist hate crimes, or slurs; rather, I mean in the covert ways like tokenism, BIPOC erasure, supposed color blindness, "protecting" the fan, and not recognizing the difference between intent and impact.

[8] White supremacy manifests in fan studies when we apologetically write that race deserves to be written about, but we didn't have the space (Fiske 1992). White supremacy manifests in fan studies when we exclude BIPOC scholars from our critical genealogies (Wanzo 2015). White supremacy manifests in fan studies when BIPOC scholars are policed when calling out racism in fan art (Pande 2020) or when posting to Twitter (Nadkarni 2019). White supremacy manifests in fan studies when roundtables about race/racism are derailed when racism is wrapped up in other issues of inclusivity. White supremacy manifests in fan studies when it makes conflicts about race into interpersonal issues rather than focusing on the context and histories in which violence against BIPOC scholars is nurtured. White supremacy manifests in fan studies when BIPOC scholars choose not to submit to *Transformative Works and Cultures* or exit the discipline because they would have to choose between career advancement and calling out racism. White supremacy manifests in fan studies when I, an Asian American scholar, write this piece instead of a Black scholar.

[9] Fan studies' white supremacy does not exist in a vacuum. White supremacy is baked into academia. Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts continue to be thinly veiled tokenism, with departments hiring a BIPOC scholar and "seeing what they will do" to help the university become more diverse (note 2). Furthermore, whiteness is the unspoken norm in many corners of fandom; racism and white fragility manifest in spectacular ways (as in RaceFail '09, summarized at the Fanlore wiki at https://fanlore.org/wiki/RaceFail_%2709) or in a multitude of subtle ways (Pande 2020). The latter includes BIPOC fans who say that racism doesn't exist in fandom (i.e., internalized oppression). As acafans, we are guilty of diverting the conversation rather than addressing and rooting out the racism embedded in our field.

[10] I say "we" to include myself, to acknowledge my participation in upholding white supremacy. In my dissertation on musicking in media fandom, I noted but did not engage with the fact that everyone I interviewed was mostly white. Whiteness was the norm, and I did not challenge it. I sidestepped it. My bibliography featured predominantly white scholars. By my silence, I helped to uphold white supremacy in fan studies, musicology, and academia.

[11] Why did I remain silent, and thus complicit? In my music department, I felt constant pressure to justify my topic. As an interviewer, I hesitated to bring up the lack of diversity, even in the wizard rock community, which prides itself on its social activism. I needed my committee to find my work—and me—worthy of a degree. It was my fear and desire for approval that held me back. In fund-raising language, I was responding out of a deficit-based narrative: my default position was one that assumed my lack of power, resources, and ability to approach the issue of whiteness in the communities I was studying. This leads me to wonder what deficit narratives the fan studies community as a whole has also created and lived in.

[12] Fan studies is a weird discipline. It's simultaneously part of reception studies, anthropology, media and communication, queer studies, literature, theatre, and music, yet none of these things. Early in the first wave of fan studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, fan studies scholars challenged boundaries and value judgments. In some cases, we argued that academic research interests paralleled fannish passion. As time went on, we set up conferences and edited collections. We established specialized journals with double-blind peer review. We structured our ethnographies in a standard fashion, struggled with our own identities as fans and scholars, and sought to justify our work through the application of dense theoretical texts. Only recently has the discipline breached the hallowed grounds of the university press.

[13] We are trained to work all the time in graduate school and our early careers. Rest seems impossible in the face of the task of writing a dissertation or a book. We are taught to give our time as unremunerated service, and the adjunct teaching system steals our time while underpaying us. Journals profit from our labor and tell us to be satisfied with the publication credit alone (note 3), all while stadiums are built and administrative salaries skyrocket. It is an exhausting dance to copy academia's systems in order to obtain its tacit approval.

[14] When I first read Tom Phillips's post on the Fan Studies Network (FSN) blog about fan studies being a "discipline overrun with whiteness," I placed it in the above context, having no knowledge of the role that Rukmini Pande, Nicolle Lamerichs, Samira Nadkarni, and others played in the events leading up to it. Three months after the FSN post, Nadkarni published a response:

> [15] [The FSN statement] attempted to obscure the work Rukmini and I already did to make subversive racism evident while building off it…
>
> [16] Erasing the work is part of how whiteness forces us to reestablish a baseline. Erasing work is how work fails to proceed, is hampered at five minutes out the

> gate, and is then termed simply "too personal" for academic note. Erasing the work is how exhaustion or anger are framed as aggression too early in a set of responses that one side has been repeating for decades together while the other claims an innocent lack of awareness. Note that only one side gets to claim innocence in this and it isn't the side being harmed.
>
> [17] The statement begins by noting that a statement was made by a fan scholar on 8 February 2019, yet the scholar in question—Rukmini Pande—remains unnamed. No link is provided to her tweet itself, and no attribution offered to why this intervention by #FSN2019 was necessary. No mention is made of Nicolle's tweets or the responses in the aftermath, and no effort has been made to document the events in question…Our names are erased. Our work is erased…This deliberate act of erasure preserves whiteness and white feelings…
>
> [18] The statement goes on from there to refuse any culpability, locating those within the Fan Studies Network board as all precarious academics…As such, this statement shifts from erasing and dehistoricising the twitter events affecting a brown cis woman acafan in India (Rukmini) and documented by myself (also a brown cis woman scholar in India) to centring white precarity in the Global North. (Nadkarni 2019)

[19] White supremacy manifests in fan studies through vague statements by the FSN. At the risk of seeming like I am supporting FSN's precarity defense, I offer an idea that I have gleaned from my own antiracist learning: that white supremacy robs everyone, BIPOC and white people alike.

[20] My inclusion of white people might seem wrong because white supremacy benefits many of us, myself included. To be clear, I am not saying it harms us all in the same way. There is much more physical and emotional trauma inflicted on Black, brown, and Indigenous people. While I'm assuming the will to change is in you as it is in me, white supremacy keeps us trapped in a system that eats our time, starves us of community and resources, and paralyzes us from making change.

[21] BIPOC scholars have added burdens. In tokenistic fashion, these scholars are granted the opportunity to decenter whiteness and are told to be grateful for it. There is little community of like-minded BIPOC scholars to help bear the burden. Burnout is inevitable. Thus, in our collective fatigue, it is easier to mimic systems that we know and set up hierarchies of power and decision making that further uphold white supremacy in academia.

[22] Nothing I have said is new. Even now, a voice in my head asks me what I think I could possibly add to this conversation. Others have said these things better than I have, and no change has occurred. Even as I raise my voice in this space, I feel guilty that I have been so tardy to take up antiracist activism; I feel incapable of addressing the enormity of the task of dismantling racism. I fear that white scholars will use the idea that white supremacy robs us all as justification for the trauma they have caused BIPOC scholars. I fear that I have not gone far enough for the BIPOC scholars who spent time in dialogue with me on this issue.

[23] However, there is power in naming our fears. We must recognize the pernicious ways that the established system continually reminds us that we must do things according to the way it's always been done. My white colleagues must reflect on their complicity but also remember that the system works to rob them of the ability to be strong allies. In this moment of crisis, we have a decision to make. We can let things be as they have always been, or we can work to become an antiracist academic community.

[24] I do not have the answers, but I believe that we together have answers. PTP artistic director Zafi Dimitropoulou often talks about the collective genius in a room when she directs the PTP Company. Individuals carry their own trauma, but when they gather together and share their stories, they find healing, making art that stretches imaginations and ignites social change.

[25] Now I'm calling on the collective genius of the fan studies community. Let us bravely name the stories that have defined us for too long. What can we do to make TWC and other journals not just accessible but equitable? What practices can we introduce at conferences that don't tokenize BIPOC scholars? How can we make and reflect antiracism as a core value of our discipline? Building an equitable world requires us—we who have benefited, and continue to benefit, from white supremacy—to step up and change the system so our BIPOC colleagues can flourish. We must build a scene that reflects them and says that they belong too.

[26] At a meeting that I attended with members of NYC's Culture@3 collective (Pogrebin and Paulson 2020), a colleague noted three stages in becoming antiracist: learning, analysis, and strategy. Too often we get stuck in one phase or jump too quickly to a later phase. We must be willing to jump between the stages multiple times—for the rest of our lives. A couple of suggestions follow on how we could start this work.

[27] Let's reflect. How have we benefited from fan studies being the way it's always been? White supremacist narratives have a hold on our lives because we do not confront them with intention and because we let them exist in the subconscious and inform our actions without question. We must abandon our self-congratulatory tendencies to say we understand racism already because of the historical attention we have paid to issues of gender, sexuality, or transcultural studies. We must identify the things that trigger our defenses. Stop. Breathe. Listen to understand—not to make a counterargument—to the BIPOC scholars who have already done so much work, risking their careers and relationships to call out racism in fan studies. Select texts from the numerous antiracist reading lists out there. Attend an antiracism training (note 4). Repair relationships with BIPOC scholars whom we have harmed.

[28] Let's complicate the narratives we weave about fandom. I still find that many of us tend to fall back on arguments made in first wave fan studies, leaving whiteness in silence. Let's address the racial inequity in our past and present writing. Let's decolonize our teaching and bibliographies (Yanders 2019).

[29] Let's diversify editorial boards and conference planning committees. This requires white

scholars who believe that they have earned their places on these committees to step back. This requires other people to step up. Perhaps we can set up term lengths or another way of rotating who participates in these positions of power.

[30] Let's diversify who is published. Let's refuse to release issues where every author is white. This might mean making adjustments to the double-blind peer review process. As a scholar of color, I sometimes hesitate to identify myself in a peer-reviewed space because of the unspoken pressure to sound serious. But autoethnography is one of the beautiful features of work in fan studies. Young scholars of color should feel safe to insert themselves into their writing, even if it destabilizes the review process.

[31] Let's create alternative funding for conferences and journals, to transform these practices from unremunerated service activities to activities where labor is honored. Maybe this means we set up a fund to which we contribute a monthly membership fee, say $10 to $25 per month, with the funds used to support publication efforts and pay authors for their labor. Maybe funds can be used to allow young BIPOC scholars to attend conferences. Could we establish a nonprofit whose mission is to diversify our discipline? As a nonprofit fund raiser, I am willing to research options and use the resources and connections I've acquired to shift these dynamics.

[32] I recognize that doing any of these will require more free labor on our part. But how much stronger will we be if we name the practices needing change, collaborate with people to accomplish them, and delegate labor? I long to see fan studies become an antiracist space. This is a vision I am willing to work toward. Are you?

Notes

1. BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous, and people of color. This erm acknowledges the vastly different experiences that Black and Indigenous people have experienced, primarily in the United States, compared to other people of color.

2. These words were said to me in a postdoctoral fellowship interview in Texas in 2019. Before my most recent adjunct hire in 2016, I was told that they needed me because the adjunct staff was all white and male.

3. Case in point: when I coedited issue 4.2 of the *Journal of Fandom Studies* in 2016, we sent multiple emails to the publisher on behalf of our authors, simply asking that they be sent their complimentary copies of the work they created. Did they ever receive them? No. Did I pay for my own copies? Yes. Did I fail by letting the matter go even though we never had our request honored? Yes.

4. For those in the United States, I recommend the "Undoing Racism" workshop offered by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB).

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Symposium

Toward a queered and/as affective theory of fandom

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[0.1] Abstract—Wittgensteinian propositions are used to investigate whether there is some benefit from thinking about objects of fandom and their vectors via affect theory and queer theory as an inverse analytical approach: fandom as something that is not text specific but rather affect or even body specific.

[0.2] Keywords—Affect theory; Fandom studies; Queer theory

Lowe, JSA. 2020. "Toward a Queered and/as Affective Theory of Fandom." *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 34. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1959.

1. Introduction

[1.1] Literary theorist Michael Snediker (2016) has spoken of himself as possessing, while still young, "that extra sixth gay sense that couldn't not feel all the things that people without the sense just didn't notice, or took for granted, but mostly didn't think about…[things] by which they were not transfixed." Attaching to particular objects in a manner we call fannish offers similarly affectually poignant moments; they pierce and mark the self, as one is implicated by *things,* to use Snediker's word: objects existing in felt life. Before queer and/or fannish people manage to find each other, we often tend to find textual objects with and against which to resonate.

[1.2] That congruency seems unlikely to be a coincidence. In fact these attachments are intimately related, just as affect theory derives from/alongside theories of queerness, not least by virtue of being similarly concerned with the ontological production of embodiment and selfhood, identity, communities, and politically othered ways of perceiving and experiencing. The parallel genealogies of queer and affect theory may be traced through Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) through to Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Vol. 2* (1985), and, I would argue, Elaine Scarry, whose *Body in Pain* (1985) offers a theory of affect in its close examination of presence and embodiment, particularly as it describes the circumference of attention that both radiates outward from and feeds into a sense of self.

[1.3] Scholar-fans, then, may derive some benefit from thinking about objects of fandom and their carriers in this way: as affect seeking content from the world of things. We might consider this an inverse analytical approach: fandom not as something that is text specific

but affect specific or even body specific. The fan as a person—as any person—could be considered as acting as container or vessel for a physically incoherent, unstable, epiphenomenological set of affectual drives.

[1.4] I would therefore like to offer a series of theoretical claims in the form of axioms, in the style of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (1922). The *Tractatus* represents Wittgenstein's first and foundational attempt to anatomize the relationship between sensible reality, concepts, or mental formations about that reality, and the language we use to navigate between the two. Through this series of assertions, I gesture toward a situation vis-à-vis fannish states of being, and toward ways such states are au fond queer and inextricably felt.

2. Axioms

1.1. Queerness is everything that is the case.

[1.1.1] With respect to what we mean by what is *the case,* Lauren Berlant (2007) suggests, "The case represents a problem-event that has animated some kind of judgment. Any enigma could do—a symptom, a crime, a causal variable, a situation, a stranger, or any irritating obstacle to clarity. […] The case organizes publics, however fleeting" (663–64).

[1.1.2] By its being presented as an object for our inquiry, whatever is the case has self-selected as distinctive or as other. It offers itself for consideration by virtue of displaying a profile, rising as visible above the horizon, or having a difference in texture, standing out from a smooth, featureless background, like a piece of sand inside an oyster or a stone in a shoe; or by presenting itself to our sensorium as stellar and lovely, attracting the gaze with its to-be-looked-at-ness. These are the things that are our case; they are our instances of media, our creations, our signifiers of fannish feeling. I use the possessive pronoun as we lay claim to that which appears to us, in the sense of the Greek verb *phainetai*—to materialize in the way that a god or an angel appears out of nothingness.

[1.1.3] Those things that are the case are Snediker's (2016) queered *things*. These things occupy a fluid, fluctuating category of phenomena. They are items, quantities, social relations, and states of perception and/or existence. They might be, as Berlant (2011) notes, "a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene" (2), or "a scouring love… obsessive appetites, patriotism, a career, all kinds of things" (25). *Things* is probably as close as we can get to them. They are moving targets; they push away from description and from being pointed at directly, like magnets repelling one another. But for scholars preoccupied with fandoms and fannish attachments, we instantly recognize such "obsessive appetites," defined as they are by Lacanian excess—by unbounded, supererogatory jouissance.

1.2. That which is the case involves a body.

[1.2.1] Anything that is the case must perforce involve what is felt. We can see the Derridean trace of this feltness in the consistency with which analyses of fandom and fan works

introduce themselves with precisely such an autoethnographic origin story. Before we attempt to proceed in the first instance, we illuminate the case; we turn toward it; we locate our affectual interest within our own self, a body we know best (or at least a body we believe we know best—that is, we know it from a certain regular set of distances, ones that we tend to believe overlap completely with that self).

[1.2.2] Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (2010) quote theorist Bruno Latour when they note that, when approached as if soluble in affect, "the body becomes less about its nature as bounded substance…[and more] 'as an interface'" (11). The body's permeability to the case is queered, and its primary technology, its simulacrum of an operating system, is language, that conceptual techne that negotiates between world as reality and world as self.

1.3. Felt life is embodied.

[1.3.1] To say felt life is embodied is to say it is experienced from within or by having a body. Gregg and Seigworth (2010) describe affect by the fact of a body experiencing it: "Affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body…in those resonances that circulate about, between and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds" (1). Fandom is highly communicable, thanks to its being thusly embodied, and can be transmitted from person to person, as each fan encounters other carriers of affect who are seeking similar content.

1.4. A body is a dwelling.

[1.4.1] Heidegger (1971) argues, "Dwelling occurs as…preservation. To spare and preserve means: to take under our care, to look after in its presencing. What we take under our care must be kept safe.…Dwelling itself is always a staying with things" (151). What then does it mean to dwell in a body?

[1.4.2] Philosopher Bruce Janz (2017) retranslates this utterance as, "We dwell in a place when we are at peace in that place, when we exist there in freedom which leads us to spare and preserve that place. One dwells in a home, and one preserves and protects that home. It is also the place where, at least at the best of times, the facades are dropped. You can be yourself where you dwell. You don't have to put on a role for a particular occasion." How can we have peace and comfort in a body as a dwelling? Sara Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenology can help locate us here, both as fans and as researchers: "To be oriented is also to be oriented toward certain objects, those that help us find our way. These are the objects we recognize, such that when we face them, we know which way we are facing" (543). Once oriented, we know where to find home, an experience described by so many fans upon encountering either their beloved object or other people who share that love. I find it no accident that queer people, as they gather together in numbers, feel the same.

2.1. Feeling interpenetrates a body/embodiment and action/change.

[2.1.1] Theorist Brian Massumi (2002) states, "When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name…it moves as it feels, and it feels itself moving. Can we think a body

without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation?" He goes on to note, "Cultural theory…has tended to bracket [movement/sensation] and their unmediated connection" (1). Between being in a body that senses and being in a world that acts upon us and upon which we act comes what Massumi calls a conceptual displacement: affect. This is the displacement seeking solace and stability within the matrix of fandom.

2.2. The body negotiates perceptibility, perceived, perception, and perceiver.

[2.2.1] Massumi (2002) argues, "The charge of indeterminacy carried by a body is inseparable from it. […] But…far from regaining a concreteness, to think the body in movement thus means accepting the paradox that there is an incorporeal dimension of the body. Of it, but not it. Real, material, but incorporeal. Inseparable, coincident, but disjunct" (5). Can we, are we physically able to, conceive of fandom not as a set of static quantifiers or anything measurable but rather as something biologically living? Fandom might be a liquid or gel, undulating with continual activity, oozing meaning and significance from every cell, in its most basic aspect as human medium or go-between, an animate carrier of culture.

2.3. A fannish experience is both within and without a body.

[2.3.1] Berlant (2006): "What happens in this space of time helps to explain why exuberant attachments keep ticking…like a white noise machine that provides assurance that what seems like threat or static really is, after all, a rhythm people can enter into while they're dithering, tottering, bargaining, testing, or otherwise being worn out by the promises that they have attached to in this world" (23). Fandom as we have studied it and participated in it can be exhausting in its vitality and its quality of flaring up. As with any endeavor, we find both bodily relief and weariness in it.

3.1. A picture of feelings is a fandom.

[3.1.1] Continuing to riff on, not to say mangle, the *Tractatus:* Wittgenstein's "A logical picture of facts is a thought" (10) rendered fannish. Similarly, almost a corollary:

4.1. A fandom is a movement of objects with feelings.

[4.1.1] This is not the way we are used to defining or describing a fandom. We tend to focus on the spaces and/as groups: the objects, the practices. But what if what is essential appears invisible? What then?

5.1. A fandom is a function of elementary feelings.

[5.1.1] Psychologist Silvan Tomkins, often credited as the originator of affect theory, identified nine emotions over the course of his work; more recently, psychologist Marsha Linehan (2014) isolated eight. Most of us, when asked how we feel, will state our thoughts and beliefs in return, not what we are feeling. We will say, for example, "I feel attacked" or

"I feel that things are going well." Colloquially, we accept these as feeling statements, shorthand for biological epiphenomena such as cringing or smiling. It can be no accident that charts of feelings are often arrayed as spectra or wheels, often using primary colors to help differentiate between positive and dispositive feelings. We as fan-scholars may mentally taxonomize fans—as do fans themselves—into groups on the basis of media object, shared interest, or other visible common trait, because Western thought has, since Aristotle and Augustine, prioritized the visible; but affect is what moves us to organize. Elementary feelings—movement toward, movement away from—are what draw bodies into a space in the first place. Affect will seek content.

6.1. The general form of a feeling is the general form of a fandom.

[6.1.1] What if a feeling determines a fandom, not an object, a discursive practice, an individual or a community? What then? We might need to change every aspect of the way in which we discuss all four. Ideally, the consequences might include other approaches or insights besides new taxonomies or ways of organizing objects, fans, fandoms, and/as fannish behaviors or movements.

[6.1.2] Anna Wilson (2016) draws a connection between ancient literature and contemporary pieces of fan fiction by noting that fan fiction cultivates intimacy between the reader and the original source text or canon through a focus on affect: "Affective hermeneutics direct focus toward moments of high emotion in a text that stimulate equally strong feelings in the reader; these heighten a sense of empathy, connection, or intimacy" (¶ 2.4). Affect seeks content; we already have feelings, and we seek out the text we need to amplify them, or to assert them in language that explicates our own state of being and mirrors it back to us.

[6.1.3] Wilson (2016) notes that "fan fiction's primary focus on the emotional life of texts" results in fans' "seeking out certain kinds of emotional experiences" (¶ 2.5). We awaken every day into consciousness, made motile by our bodily drives: toward comfort and replenishment, away from discomfort and antagonism (or leaning into it, as another kind of need). Given tagging systems that enable us to sort our environment, we are metaphorically phototropic, moving toward fannish objects that describe and redefine our emotional biome. They offer an affectual outline within which we can color our state of being.

7.1. Whereof one cannot feel, thereof fandom must be silent.

[7.1.1] Or, to loop back around to the other magnetic pole of these axioms, another way of saying this might be:

[7.1.2] *Whereof one cannot fan, thereof queerness must be silent.*

[7.1.3] No object exists without fannish affect, without some degree or quality of feeling beyond base attentiveness or noticing. This is a more mysterious ontology than a falling tree's making no sound without someone to hear it. Without a body to have a feeling, without a feeling to affect a body, nothing can be the case.

[7.1.4] No object is queer in the absence of affect; by extension, attention and affect themselves fail to be queer. Anna Wilson points out that if everything is queer, nothing is (pers. comm.); and while we are playing with the concepts of queer theory, we must also keep in mind the realpolitik of queer bodies working to be recognized and protected amid an often violently inhospitable public. When Sedgwick writes about reparative texts in *Touching Feeling* (2003), the presumption is that there is a schism or a wrongness that can actually be repaired. Both fans who identify as queer and queer people who do not identify as fans often carry out this labor. Just as our ancestors moved stones into shapes like rings or walls—as they made their marks—so we continue this manipulation of our environment in words, code, emoji, pixels, edits, GIFs, and PNGs.

[7.1.5] Rather, then, than looking to fandom to be a photorealistic picture or image of a made thing, some set of attachments rendered tangible (visible, perceptible by a sensorium), a sort of still life containing both media objects and transformed objects—as well as a distinct entity we call a fan-participant doing labor, working to carry content back and forth between two kinds of objects—we might instead look to fandom and consider it as any of these things. These things are queered possibilities of substance: a membrane, a border, a location, a transitory site, a fluctuating scene; a dwelling, an occasion of feelings, an opportunity to feel, a queer feeling, an extension of a body, a group of bodies creating and inscribing their innermost feelings into physical space; a quantity of emotion, an unquantifiable but perceptible rainbow-like spectrum of emotion, a home.

3. Acknowledgments

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Symposium

Fan fiction as a valuable literacy practice

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[0.1] Abstract—The future of literacy requires an incorporation of the new texts that are emerging from the evolution of popular culture. Though curriculum reform is a complex task, the source material is readily available to educators in the form of fan fiction. Fan fiction is a valuable literacy practice and should be used in the classroom because it encourages creativity and literacy appreciation, promotes socialization, offers a platform for self-exploration, and motivates students to advance their writing skills.

[0.2] Keywords—Classroom; Fandom; Pedagogy; Pop culture; Students

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[1] With the rise of the digital age has come an increase in discourse about the relationship between technology and literacy. Scholars contend that the future of literacy requires an incorporation of "relevant technologies" and a consideration of "changing textual and media landscapes" (Bruce 1997, 304; Luke and Elkins 1998, 7). Though curriculum reform is a complex task, the source material may already be available to educators: adolescents and young adults have begun to generate new forms of literacy that reflect the emerging ideas and mediums of their time. Michele Knobel distinguishes these "new literacies" from conventional literacies by their participatory and collaborative natures. New literacies are also distinctly "less-published" than traditional forms of literature (2017, 37). These characteristics are familiar to those who regularly study and engage with fan communities because fan fiction is a prime example of a new literacy. This well-known fan practice is a creative product of remix culture in which fans create fictional stories that derive from preexisting elements of popular culture (Knobel 2017). However, the "less-published" aspect of fan fiction incites skepticism among some educators, leaving them hesitant about implementing it in the classroom. Teachers also express concerns about the unprofessional, misanthropic, and often sexual nature of the content. Additionally, they question the legality of producing and endorsing derivative works. Despite these concerns, education and media research show that fan fiction can be a valuable literacy practice because it encourages creativity and literacy appreciation, promotes socialization, offers a platform for self-exploration, and motivates students to advance their writing skills.

[2] In *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture,* John Storey (2014) debunks the common misconception that fandom is a phenomenon centered on consumption. He reminds

readers that "it is also about the production of texts made in response to the professional media texts of fandom" (127). The texts fans respond to include songs, movies, television shows, books, and celebrities themselves. In doing so, fans "attribute new values to existing stories" and "create new textual relationships" (Plate 2011, 17, 14). For this reason, the creation of fan fiction is a process that offers fans an opportunity to use their imagination to fill in the blanks of a source text (Lamerichs 2018). This practice is comparable to textual reinterpretation, critical analysis, and oppositional response, all practices that are commonly used in literacy curriculums. Additionally, Lamerichs notes that "derivative writing has a larger history and presence than fandom itself," one that began with reinterpretations of classic novels by Arthur Conan Doyle, Lewis Carroll, and Jane Austen (17). With the rise of derivative writing came an increase in literacy appreciation among mainstream readers (Landow 2006). In the same way, fan fiction has its proven potential to inspire an appreciation for literacy among fan communities.

[3] Another way fan fiction aligns with the goals of literacy education is through its shared value of social interaction among writers. Like many forms of modern remix literacy, fan fiction is largely produced and disseminated online on fan-run websites. These collective, online spaces are highly interactive and depend on a certain "generosity of spirit" that encourages resource sharing and remixing of others' original works: "Deep interactivity, openness to feedback, sharing of resources and expertise, and a will to collaborate" are central to the practice of fan fiction (Knobel 2017, 37, 43). Through the promotion of this "generative discourse," fan communities are introduced to the foundational literacy practices of reader feedback and peer review (Rosenblatt and Tushnet 2015; Black 2005).

[4] Fan fiction websites are also characterized by a sense of participatory equality that allows anyone to engage in the production of literature, regardless of social status or access to educational resources. In terms of accessibility, fan fiction is also unique because it offers amateur writers a predetermined audience with a guaranteed interest. Because its characters are most often derived from popular culture, writers are destined to inherit audiences already invested in their subject matter. In regard to these "wholly voluntary, non-paying audiences," Stephanie Burt (2017) claims that "no clearer path from new writers to potentially interested readers has existed in the history of civilization" (¶ 10). As a result, fan fiction is arguably more inclusive and more accessible than traditional literacy practices.

[5] Fan fiction also serves as a valuable literary practice because it has been proven to encourage self-exploration. Burt (2017) argues that for many individuals fan fiction provides a safe space to express "desires that could not be articulated, much less acted out" in real life (¶ 7). This is especially likely when the writer's source material is a celebrity or fictional character. In addition to the exploration of desire, fan fiction offers fans a platform to reflect on and ask questions about their personal experiences. Readers may do so by imagining themselves as one of the characters in a particular story. Similarly, writers may create characters based on an ideal version of themselves. In doing so, they create narratives that help them understand their own identities outside the fictional narrative. Betsy Rosenblatt and Rebecca Tushnet (2015) insist that the practice of fan fiction helps young women and girls, specifically, "to develop selfhood [and] emotional maturity" (386). Additionally, the participatory nature of the fan community ensures supportive feedback from other fans,

which encourages a continuation of self-exploration rarely found in the traditional literacy curriculum.

[6] Perhaps the most significant argument in favor of fan fiction as a valuable literacy practice is the fact that it provides fans with a unique opportunity to advance their writing skills. In his book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture,* Henry Jenkins (2013) recounts the experiences of fans who discovered their writing skills through the practice of fan fiction. For these fans, the participatory environment of the fan community offered encouragement and support "lacking from their interactions with other institutions" (280). Unlike the classroom, online fan sites provide "safe and unintimidating access to the many resources of [the] writing community" (Black 2005, 125). Their shared interest in the source text motivates both writers and readers to engage in constructive processes of editing and revision that improve the quality of the writer's work. This mediated process of peer review prepares new writers to produce professional work in the future (Burt 2017). Fan and writer Sarah D. says her experience as a fan fiction creator gave her the confidence to further her writing skills and advanced her vocabulary and critical thinking (quoted in Rosenblatt and Tushnet 2015, 394).

[7] Rebecca Black (2005) even offers evidence for fan fiction as a tool for English language learners in her article on the topic. This was the case for Nadja R., who said she had been motivated to improve her English skills by her interest in writing fan fiction. She attributed her success as a PhD student in English to her experience of reading fan fiction from an early age (Rosenplatt and Tushnet 2015, 398). Though Nadja's experience may be unique, the influence fan fiction can have on fans' writing abilities is not. Whether through passive or active influence, the practice of fan fiction motivates fans to further their literacy skills.

[8] Despite the potential contributions the practice of fan fiction might have in the literacy classroom, the issue of copyright infringement remains pervasive. Because fan fiction is a derivative form of literature that repurposes literary elements of other texts, it is reasonable to question the legality of its production and endorsement. Jenkins (2013) admits that fan fiction appropriates from raw materials, "celebrat[ing] creative use of already circulating discourses" (279). In doing so, the practice "challenges the media industry's claims to hold copyrights on popular narratives" (279). Based on Jenkins's assessment of the practice of fan fiction, it does seem to violate the general aim of copyright law. However, a closer look at US law regarding transformative works reveals that fan works are protected under the doctrine of fair use. According to this doctrine, even "substantial copying" of source texts is authorized when the new product is noncommercial and creates a "new meaning, message, or creative vision" (Rosenblatt and Tushnet 2015, 397). These requirements align with the majority of fan fiction works, granting them legal permission to be produced, analyzed, and used as a learning tool in literacy classrooms.

[9] Based on the research of education and media scholars, fan fiction has the potential to serve as a valuable literacy practice. Commercialized productions of fan fictions, such as the 2011 Twilight spinoff *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the 2019 One Direction–inspired film *After,* have tainted perceptions of fan fiction among educators (Burt 2017; Pham 2019). The unprofessional and highly sexualized connotations portrayed by the media discount the

ability of fan fiction to encourage creativity and literacy appreciation, promote socialization, offer a platform for self-exploration, and motivate students to advance their writing skills. For these reasons, Donna Alvermann and Margaret Hagood (2000) endorse the integration of fan fiction and literacy as a "timely project" (438). They suggest that implementing fan fiction into literacy curriculums will increase student engagement with literary materials and allow educators to better understand their students as literacy consumers and creators (445).

[10] Implementation may or may not include assigning fan fiction works as assigned readings; but at the most basic level, it would allow students to select works of fan fiction as texts for critical analysis and peer review. It might also include using the topic of fan fiction to lead discussions about copyright infringement and intellectual property rights. Allan Luke and John Elkins (1998) argue that technology-inspired literacy practices of this kind are more important than "mastery of a particular teaching method or knowledge of a particular research or curriculum" (4). Therefore, it is in the best interest of literacy educators, and their students in turn, to consider the practice of fan fiction as a valuable addition to literacy curriculums.

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Symposium

Revisiting parasocial theory in fan studies: Pathological or (path)illogical?

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[0.1] Abstract—Parasocial theory is not currently in favor within fan studies because it is seen as depicting fan behavior as pathological. However, an examination of the original text and its modern interpretations reveals the true, neutral image of fans that parasocial theory portrays, which allows it to be applied to fan communities and fan works. Accordingly, these applications are also discussed, with an emphasis on the K-pop industry, where the theory is particularly relevant.

[0.2] Keywords—Audience psychology; Celebrity studies; Fan communities; Fan fiction; K-pop

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1. Introduction

[1.1] A little over a year ago, I became a fan of a K-pop boy band called EXO. It turns out that there are, indeed, other popular K-pop boy groups besides BTS, although everyone and their brother doesn't seem to be aware of that. This includes my own brother, who drew me a beautiful picture of BTS' Jungkook for my birthday. Jungkook is the K-pop poster boy, but he's not my K-pop boy, as my brother was dismayed to learn.

[1.2] I believe that just as my love for K-pop and EXO has been misunderstood to be a love for BTS and Jungkook, parasocial theory has been misunderstood as depicting fan behavior as pathological. This has caused the theory to be largely dismissed within fan studies, which is a shame in my opinion, because I think it has newfound relevance as K-pop's popularity continues to grow worldwide.

[1.3] Accordingly, I'll aim to show how parasocial theory does have a place in fan studies and isn't outdated. Contrary to popular belief, it doesn't necessarily paint fan behavior in a negative light and can provide a new perspective on many modern fan studies topics.

2. A brief history of parasocial theory

[2.1] In 1956, Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl published "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance," where they first introduced the concept of parasocial interaction. They described a phenomenon where media users had the sensation of interacting reciprocally with media personalities, despite these experiences being very obviously one-sided.

[2.2] This single concept subsequently became a subfield of psychology and psychiatry, and academics began understanding parasocial interactions as relationships—long-term emotional attachments between viewers and their chosen media figure(s) (e.g. Brown 2015; Rubin and McHugh 1987). However, contemporary work argues that we must distinguish between parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions because they differ in key ways (Hartmann 2016).

[2.3] Parasocial interactions (PSI) are illusions where media users interpret on-screen images as people to whom they respond socially, and perceive this as a personal, reciprocal encounter. Meanwhile, parasocial relationships (PSR) involve media users forming an emotional connection with media figures by becoming familiar with their "mannerisms, behaviors…and other personal details" (Kurtin et al. 2019, 33). Basically, PSI are temporary illusions, while PSR are long-term attachments that form over time.

[2.4] Additionally, PSR don't depend on PSI to exist. According to Hartmann (2016), "a parasocial relationship can be experienced and also continues to exist even if the mediated other is not present" (132). Repeated parasocial interactions may result in a parasocial relationship, but PSR can also develop by simply observing, rather than feeling as though we're interacting with, the people on our screens. Since PSR are often separate from PSI and aren't illusory experiences, individuals can have parasocial relationships while being totally aware they're one-sided.

[2.5] This distinction is essential. Without it, it's easy to wrongly assume that parasocial relationships consist of repeated parasocial interactions. PSR could then be characterized as a series of successive illusions, which borders on the concept of delusion. This depicts fan behavior negatively and thus makes parasocial theory more prone to dismissal in fan studies.

3. Pathological? You sure?

[3.1] I can understand why some may find the ideas of parasocial theory off-putting. The one-sided nature of parasocial relationships and the resulting uneven dynamic between fan and persona may seem psychologically unhealthy. However, this view might change if we think of celebrities as service providers. This is especially relevant in the K-pop industry, where idols not only record albums and perform their songs on live TV but also constantly interact with fans through meet-and-greets, social media posts, livestreams, and regular concerts. Unlike Western artists, who drop an album and then seem to drop off the face of the earth (at least until the next one), most K-pop idols are active throughout the year, delivering a steady stream of content to their fans.

[3.2] Interactions between service providers and receivers are often not equally important to

both parties. For instance, if I, as a barista, knew a regular customer's overly complicated order off by heart, it might make them feel special, but I'm just hoping for a nice tip. In the same way, if Jungkook holds an adoring fan's hand for a nanosecond at a fan meet, it might make their year, but he's just hoping they'll buy BTS' next album. Neither one of these interactions, while one-sided, denotes delusion, so why is the second one frowned upon while the first one isn't?

[3.3] Parasocial theory has also been criticized because it belongs to the field of audience psychology, which has traditionally painted a negative picture of fandom by failing to differentiate between normal fan activities and behaviors and pathological attachments to media personalities (Duffett 2014, 6). However, Horton and Wohl's original text explicitly states that for the vast majority of people, parasocial relationships simply serve to complement a normal, healthy social life. The authors also specified that parasocial relationships are generally not pathological, except in two specific circumstances. Either the PSR must become a substitute for all real-life social relationships, or it must "proceed in absolute defiance of objective reality" (¶ 8.1), meaning that the subject considers the relationship real and two-sided, and expects reciprocity from the media figure (Hartmann 2016).

[3.4] Nevertheless, this issue gets a little muddy when we consider Horton and Wohl's ([1956] 2006) hypothesis in the same article: "the para-social can properly be called compensatory, inasmuch as it provides the socially and psychologically isolated with a chance to enjoy the elixir of sociability" (¶ 7.5). This could be interpreted as suggesting that isolated individuals use PSR to compensate for their lack of authentic connections, which resembles the first criterion of pathological parasocial relationships. Joli Jenson (1992, 17) asserts that this interpretation reflects negatively on fandom and perpetuates the idea that people become fans because they are "psychologically needy" and want to make up for the reciprocal relationships they don't have.

[3.5] However, later psychological research "did not find simple and direct links between… potential social deficits of users and parasocial relationship intensity" (Hartmann 2016, 135). Rather, research found that social skills facilitate the development of PSR because they develop similarly to real-life relationships. Specifically, studies found that socially adept people who desire intimate real-life (romantic or platonic) relationships but are anxious about being emotionally vulnerable with others may be particularly motivated to develop PSR (Cole and Leets 1999; Cohen 2004; Greenwood and Long 2011). But these studies didn't find that people use parasocial relationships to avoid the anxiety of forming real-life relationships. Like me, they may instead enjoy both their parasocial and reciprocal relationships and find a healthy balance between the two.

[3.6] Horton and Wohl's ([1956] 2006) original text is primarily an essay expressing their ideas and opinions—not a research report. Although the authors do provide examples from popular media to illustrate their points, they don't cite many other academics and their ideas don't seem to be based on many specific psychological studies. Later research in this field (some of which is cited in this essay) formally tests Horton and Wohl's assertions and shows that some must be modified, either because they're no longer accurate several decades later

or because they never were in the first place. It's important to take into account these modern adjustments when evaluating parasocial theory's attitude towards fandom and its relevance within fan studies, because much of the modern theory reflects more favorably on fans and fandoms.

4. PSR and community

[4.1] PSR can help with loneliness, and not just because you feel your parasocial buddy is keeping you company. In their essay "Fan Cultures and Fan Communities," Kristina Busse and Jonathan Gray (2011) discuss the ideas of Matt Hills and Cornel Sandvoss concerning the psychology of individual fans consuming fandom media. Hills argues that although this media may be consumed individually, it's also communal because many fans share in the enjoyment of its consumption. This makes the experience more meaningful and may help fans feel more connected to one another. Furthermore, according to Sandvoss, fans who are physically alone when consuming this media may not feel alone because they create "an imaginary space [for themselves] that is shared with others" (quoted in Busse and Gray, 434). The individual fan imagines other fans who are also enjoying this media. They have the impression of interacting with the fandom, even if they aren't actually communicating with anyone. In this way, they're experiencing a parasocial connection with both the media persona and other fans (Busse and Gray 2011).

[4.2] I've definitely experienced this. While reading fan fiction or consuming media featuring EXO, I've wondered how many other people have enjoyed it before me and how many will continue to do so after me. The communal aspect of this media makes it more special, and I feel an abstract connection to the anonymous members of my fandom. Sharing the same bank of knowledge with other fans makes me feel like a full-fledged member of the community.

[4.3] Second, PSR can foster real community. It's always easier to connect with others when you have something in common. In the case of fandom, that common ground can be the media figure(s) with whom you and other fans have a parasocial relationship. It's as if you all have a mutual friend, or even many friends. This may be especially helpful for the subset of people mentioned earlier, who want to create real relationships with others but are anxious about it.

[4.4] I personally don't interact with other people in my fandom on the internet, mainly because I have a friend who's also a fan, so I'll discuss EXO with her. We became closer once I got into them because we had even more to enjoy together. People having parasocial relationships often think about their media persona and construct links between the persona and themselves. They might compare their personality with the persona's and look for similarities, or imagine what it would be like to be friends with the persona (Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm 2006). My friend and I have had many such conversations and it has helped us bond further. Likewise, many internet fan forums will post discussion threads about these topics, where fans can provide their input and recreate this bonding experience virtually. These interactions may lead fans to explore other common interests and the relationship can grow into a true friendship.

[4.5] Parasocial theory therefore provides a new explanation of why fan communities are so appealing and beneficial to fans, whether they actively engage with other fandom members or simply consider themselves part of the community.

5. You didn't think I would forget fan fiction, did you?

[5.1] Applying parasocial theory to fan fiction yields some intriguing insights. The common behavior in parasocial relationships where consumers "try to understand a persona's goals, attitudes [and] utterances" (Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm 2006, 297) may lend itself to the widespread fandom practice of shipping. Fans, fueled by their perceived knowledge of the interpersonal dynamics between personae, support a theoretical romantic pairing between two personalities, usually from the same media source. Whether or not they think these relationships are real, fans often express their love of a particular pairing by reading and writing romantic fan fiction featuring the persona(e).

[5.2] I believe this hypothesis is especially relevant to the K-pop industry because idols usually keep their romantic relationships secret from the general public. Idol dating is considered scandalous among Korean fans, and a dating scandal could ruin an idol's career. Fans therefore don't usually get to see their favorite idols in any real romantic context, and may be especially motivated to fill in these blanks through romantic fan fiction.

[5.3] Why else are these stories so enjoyable for fans to read? Well, fans experiencing a PSR will learn about the persona and form a subjective mental representation of their identity (Klimmt, Hartmann and Schramm 2006). Accurate characterizations in fan fiction can therefore create a vivid reading experience for fans. They're already familiar with the persona's physical appearance, voice, personality and mannerisms, so they can experience narratives as if they were watching a performance in their minds (Coppa 2014). Additionally, readers may be more invested in the story, and therefore more entertained, if they have a parasocial bond with the protagonist(s) because "PSR strongly affect the formation of positive or negative dispositions towards media characters and, consequently, the experienced level of suspense" (Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm 2006, 294). Furthermore, this style of fan fiction may provoke a stronger emotional response in readers because their PSR with the protagonist(s) makes them more empathetic towards them. Research has found that "observers of a romantic episode in a love [story] may acquire the same flowery condition that the personae exhibit…[and therefore] mood contagion phenomena…are conceivable" (299).

[5.4] Parasocial theory can also explain why slash fiction is so popular among boy band fans such as myself. The reader may have a PSR with both protagonists because they're both members of the boy band, and so a story where two members fall in love with each other would create a doubly entertaining and emotionally satisfying experience for the reader, compared to het fan fiction featuring only one boy band member as a love interest. In my experience, K-pop idols are often more physically affectionate with one another on-camera than members of Western groups such as One Direction or Fifth Harmony. The discrepancy could be a product of the Korean idol training system, which is a very effective bonding device, or Western-Eastern cultural differences. It may also simply be fan-service, which is

highly emphasized in K-pop. I believe that constantly seeing group members showing affection to one another not only further encourages shipping within a group but also gives K-pop fan fiction authors a lot of material they can use to make their writing richer and more realistic. Furthermore, as in my case, readers may find slash fictions comforting not only because they're fond of the protagonists but also because the characters' mutual physical affection is very familiar.

[5.5] From the perspective of parasocial theory, works of fan fiction take advantage of the parasocial bond that readers already feel toward one or more of the characters. They then build on this connection through fans' intimate experience of being privy to the characters' fictional thoughts, emotions, and personal life and use it to make readers care deeply about their well-being and experience an intense emotional response to the story.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] Parasocial theory, particularly the modern, scientifically tested version of Horton and Wohl's ([1956] 2006) original framework, is potentially quite relevant to fan studies and to analyses of K-pop fandom in particular. The K-pop industry is sustained by the strong, one-sided emotional connections that fans form with idols, which may very well be parasocial relationships but are not necessarily negative. This piece only briefly touches upon the various ways that Horton and Wohl's theory can be applied to popular fan studies topics, and there's still so much to discuss and learn. I hope future research secures a place for parasocial theory within fan studies, just as I found a spot for Jungkook on my bedroom wall.

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Symposium

Using pop culture authentically

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Harry Potter Alliance

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[0.1] Abstract—Fan activism continues to broaden in use as an organizing method, but care must be given to ensure campaigns are authentic and not pandering. Understanding of source material, mapping of fan communities and major players, and structuring of narrative can help to achieve a more effective, authentic fan activism campaign.

[0.2] Keywords—Campaigns; Fan activism; Organizing

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1. Introduction

[1.1] In the last few years, fan activism has become more widely utilized than ever before. *Supernatural* (2005–) fan group Wayward Daughters, organized by fans Riley Keshner and Betty Days, and later gathering support and participation from show actresses Kim Rhodes and Briana Buckmaster, sought to highlight the comparative lack of consistent women characters on the show and was so successful it spawned a spinoff pilot, *Wayward Sisters*. Color of Change successfully lobbied Disney to reedit Princess Tiana in *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018) after first looks showed the princess had been all but whitewashed. The Movement for Black Lives organized #WakandatheVote to register voters at *Black Panther* (2018) screenings.

[1.2] What makes a fan activism campaign most effective? Fan activism is all about connecting action to story, but it's not enough to brand a campaign with pop culture references. Just like any other community, fans don't enjoy feeling pandered to; a strong fan activism campaign builds an authentic connection to the beloved story, one that shows an understanding of the material and engagement with core fans. By being intentional about how connections are built with source material, understanding how and where to recruit fans, and selecting a campaign structure that serves the story, organizers can build an authentic fan activism campaign that puts them in a position for greater buy-in and, hopefully, success.

2. Connecting with source materials

[2.1] Fans are experts. When approaching source material, it's important to understand what references are mainstream enough to be widely understood even by casual consumers—think Hogwarts houses or Imperial stormtroopers—and which are important to the deeper fandom community, like ships (relationships between characters, canon or not) or droid theories. Being able to balance mainstream clarity with deep cuts that show understanding of the in-group is critical for effectively communicating with different subsets of fans. An organization with a large base likely does not want to alienate or confuse its followers by using deep cuts to talk generally about a fandom campaign, but a deeper reference here and there signals to core fans that the organization is part of the in-group. For example, a Harry Potter campaign might use a Hogwarts house pride message but include a reference to Ravenclaw's bronze versus silver (it is bronze in the books but changed to silver in the films, a fact many Ravenclaw fans are still annoyed about). In this way, a campaign can effectively communicate its purpose to a broad audience while maintaining buy-in from core fans who are mostly likely to be a campaign's movers and shakers.

[2.2] This kind of balance in understanding not only earns a campaign fandom credibility but will also help build a solid connection between the themes of the source material and the goals for social change. Sometimes a broader understanding of a material may make a good connection at first glance but begin to fall apart when put under the scrutiny of fans; for example, a casual viewer may think the Fantastic Beasts films are the perfect connection to addressing the climate crisis, but the more deeply this material is examined the more it becomes clear that there's less to work with than imagined, as the magical creatures in question serve as more of a device for other themes. In such a case, a Fantastic Beasts climate campaign might capture some initial attention from a broad audience and even some more hardcore fans but fail to hold long-term organizing power with those fans. Plus, on a practical level for organizers, the stronger the connection, the easier their job becomes. Some stories are just better suited than others to talk about particular social topics (in the case of the climate crisis, Doctor Who is likely a better fit). In short, don't try to make a connection where there isn't one, or a campaign begins to feel contrived.

[2.3] That said, the key truly is balance, as not enough mainstream understanding and current fandom energy will result in a campaign too niche to mobilize both fans and casual viewers. *The Lord of the Rings* has broad cultural understanding, but there's little current activity in its fan base, or at least not enough to harness for widespread action. If a more niche campaign is the goal, success can certainly be found with a more dormant fandom—fans of *Firefly* (2002–3) often engage in charity projects with the Browncoats, for example—but generally speaking, something with lots of current activity that an average person would recognize and remember is most ideal. That said, media outside of an organizer's immediate circle of understanding should not be overlooked—organizers should talk to people of varying age groups and cultural bubbles to better understand fandom communities they may not be personally familiar with.

3. Finding and engaging with fans

[3.1] Fan networks are vast and usually go far beyond the original creator and distributors. While it's unlikely that a campaign will ever engage every corner of fandom, a campaign will feel more true to the fandom if at least some of the community is engaged with it. To better understand the community an organization wants to work with and begin to recruit fans, consider the spaces where fans can meet them on their own turf:

- [3.2] Online: What are some of the top fan websites, YouTube channels, and podcasts for the fandom? Who are the fan creators they are featuring? Often a well-known fan creator can be just as influential in a campaign as an official representative, creator, or star.
- IRL: What fan conventions exist for that fandom? Who are their guests, workshop leaders, and vendors? What other IRL spaces (themed shops and bars, memorable fandom landmarks, or theme parks) exist for this story? Could campaign actions be hosted at these already important spaces?
- In action: Fans doing good is not a new idea! What projects or campaigns has the community already done? What organizations exist already that could be mentors or partners?
- Adjacent: Are there fan bases that the intended audience overlaps with? For example, many fans of Doctor Who are also fans of *Sherlock* (2010–17). Promoting in *Sherlock* communities may snag some Doctor Who fans.
- Official: The author, publisher, cast, crew, studio, and rights holders are important influencers, but they are not what makes a fandom energetic or authentic. A strong understanding of the fandom's relationship to official representatives helps avoid blunders that may signal to fans an outsider or incomplete knowledge of the community. For example, some actors are more complimentary of and beloved by fans than others. Tessa Thompson, a bisexual actress of color who has spoken openly about wishing her character Valkyrie was represented as bisexual on screen, would be a good choice for Marvel, while Scarlett Johansson, who has made several statements indicating her lack of understanding of the importance of representation, would not.

4. Structuring fan activism campaigns

[4.1] In the last decade of fan activism organizing, three primary types of campaigns have emerged: Accountability to Story, Values, and Immersive. In Accountability to Story, fans organize to ask creators and distributors of a story to answer to the same values the story portrays. This is extremely common in campaigns for better representation of diversity (Wayward Sisters, Color of Change's *Ralph Breaks the Internet* campaign, #StarWarsRepMatters, and racebending) and was the base of the Harry Potter Alliance's Not in Harry's Name campaign, which successfully pressured Warner Brothers to change its Harry Potter chocolate sourcing to fair trade or UTZ certified.

[4.2] In a Values campaign, fans are asked to fight for the values portrayed in the story. #WakandatheVote was a Values campaign, as was The 100 Charity Project asking fans of the show *The 100* (2014–) to complete charitable acts as a community. Harry Potter Alliance campaigns, like Protego for trans rights and Accio Books for literacy access, are often Values campaigns.

[4.3] In an Immersive campaign, direct parallels are drawn between the events of the story and real-world events. Because it requires a nuanced understanding of the source material, this is often the most challenging type of fan activism campaign to successfully manage. Harry Potter Alliance campaigns like Odds in Our Favor, which enlisted Hunger Games fans into districts of real-world examples of economic inequity, and Stop the Snatchers, which directly compared Harry Potter's Muggle-born-capturing Snatchers to Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE), are examples of this kind of campaign in action.

[4.4] Does an organizer need to become a superfan of a piece of media in order to run a successful fan activism campaign? Not necessarily, though it certainly helps to at least watch or read the source material they want to work with. A more realistic solution for long-term use is to recruit superfans with an interest in social change to help bridge gaps in knowledge and understanding. Just as an organization may hire consultants to help with marketing, a fandom consultant can provide expertise in building narrative and navigating the fandom community.

[4.5] As with any good story, a campaign should begin by setting the scene: Where are we in the source material? Is the rebellion strong, or are we on the brink of disaster? Have we just discovered Voldemort is back, or are we at the bitter camping part? Are we just stepping into the TARDIS, or are we battling the Daleks for Earth?

[4.6] This setting of the stage will be important in drawing the connection the campaign wants to make to its source material. What emotional cue from the story is it utilizing, or what point of the plot is being replicated, by fans or by the people we want to stop, in our own world? Fan activism is often about providing fans with a script for action that they are more familiar with than traditional organizing. Where they are placed in the narrative will cue them for what action needs to be taken, so choices and communication are important here.

[4.7] Once the stage is set, it's time for a values statement: Why should fans care about this? What is it about this subject that, if their favorite heroes were here now, would send them into action? Why should they, as fans of this story, care about this real-world goal? When a values statement is clear, a call to action can quickly follow: here's what fans need to do about it.

[4.8] Fan activism is a powerful tool for organizing, and one that is continuing to broaden its reach across many different organizing scenarios. In order for that reach to continue to see success, it's critical to remember that the essential root of this methodology is engaging with fans in a way that is authentic to their community and experience. By thinking carefully about source materials, engaging with key fandom leaders and groups from the beginning, and conceptualizing a structure for the campaign that best serves the narrative at hand, fan activism campaigns can be highly effective organizing strategies. For the best results, fandom and fans should be treated as they are: true partners in change making.

Symposium

The fight for creative ownership in franchise fiction

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[0.1] Abstract—So-called franchise fiction, such as texts set in the Doctor Who, Star Trek, and Star Wars universes, as well as newer iterations based on video games, has an obvious and enduring appeal, most notably from a commercial perspective, with public recognition and built-in audiences. Creative practitioners, who are often fans themselves, embrace the opportunity to deepen the lore and possibilities of the property, as well as to make an original contribution to something they are invested in. However, there are some downsides, particularly issues surrounding the maintenance and expansion of an established canon and the management of fans who feel a protective and curatorial sense of ownership.

[0.2] Keywords—Doctor Who; Fanagement; Fandom; Steven Moffat

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1. "Always read the comments": Fans and creators of franchise fictions

[1.1] In "The Doctor Falls," the 2017 penultimate episode that Steven Moffat wrote during his tenure as showrunner of BBC TV show *Doctor Who* (1963–1989, 2005–present), he has the central character of the Doctor (Peter Capaldi) proclaim: "Always read the comments because one day there'll be an army of them." This is more than merely a smart and snappy line, although it certainly is that. Moffat is reaching out to acknowledge the audience itself, perhaps even engage in dialogue with them. It is an acknowledgment that a relationship exists between creator and fan—a dependent one, at that. (We could also perhaps read it on an even more metatextual level as a word of advice, perhaps even warning, from an outgoing showrunner to his incoming replacement, Chris Chibnall.) In this essay, I seek to explore the precise nature of that dialogue and its inherent tensions and apparent benefits, as well as discuss how it can complicate and enhance the modern writing process. In doing so, I hope to expose a phenomenon that lies at the heart of modern franchise fictions—an ever-present—and intensifying—tussle for proprietary ownership and custodianship of these creative properties.

2. Defining franchise fictions

[2.1] Put in its simplest form, franchise fictions are creative properties, almost exclusively in

the SF/fantasy genres, that have seen various iterations of the core concept over the years as production teams tinker with and alter the core creative premise of the property, offering fresh (and sometimes conflicting) interpretations of the source material. The franchise part of the description undoubtedly comes from the Star Trek franchise, which has seen several distinct but connected creative iterations over the years, each with its own production team and creative ethos while still operating under the overarching banner of the core property. The analogy has since spread to other creative properties that operate in a similar fashion.

[2.2] However, there is a secondary but significant distinction to be made in the sense that many of the most high-profile franchises have suffered "wilderness periods," where the property was no longer in active production and any ongoing sense of the property's narrative fell to the fans, in the form of fan fiction, fan art, fanzines, and even full-blown fan productions. These wilderness periods can often add to the richness and diversity of the core property and demonstrate its resilience to networks and studios on the lookout for robust and successful creative content. But it can also cause potential problems for both creators and fans once professional production recommences.

3. Wilderness periods and disputed consecration

[3.1] The division between the creators of franchise fictions and those who consume them had once been highly demarcated and distinct but had become increasingly porous and permeable by the time the Doctor Who franchise's wilderness period came to an end in 2005. By way of an example, we can look at the revived show's first two showrunners, Russell T. Davies and Steven Moffat, who possessed convincing credentials as both fans and professional content producers. Both had parallel careers as successful television creatives outside of fandom and it was their reputations and expertise in those roles that positioned them to revive and continue the show.

[3.2] The fan credentials of Davies and Moffat were not unimportant, however, and these credentials were certainly significant in how these showrunners were positioned in terms of engagement with legacy fandoms. Matt Hills points out that for genre shows (such as *Doctor Who*), an assertion of auteurism can lend the property legitimacy (2002, 133). Thanks to wilderness years and active fan participation, these are constituencies that it is no longer wise to ignore or ridicule in the way that they might once have been. As Hills observes, "fan consumers are no longer viewed as eccentric irritants, but rather as loyal consumers to be created, where possible, or otherwise to be courted" (2002, 36).

[3.3] The writer or showrunner (categories that often but do not necessarily overlap) must engage in something of a balancing act, trying to ensure that she does not alienate the casual viewer who is no more invested in this show than any other while maintaining and ideally deepening fan interest in the program. Jim Collins identifies the emergence of "coalition audiences" coming from a number of different backgrounds, and with different needs and outlooks, to be serviced by amalgamated "marketing strategy parallels" (1992, 342). Serving these overlapping but distinct audiences is a significant and emerging challenge for creators and coordinators of franchise fictions and one that we might understand by way of two concepts raised by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

[3.4] The first concept is consecration. Bourdieusian consecration is the processes by which a cultural product is accorded legitimation within the cultural field itself (Bourdieu 1996, 224). However, the cultural shifts identified by Hills above mean that the nature of artistic consecration, in this sense, has undergone alteration. Whereas Gene Roddenberry (Star Trek) or any of the many producers of Doctor Who properties could gain their legitimacy from the networks who employed them as well as recognized cultural authorities such as newspaper reviewers and interviewers, the content producers who succeeded them in these properties would also have to derive their artistic consecration at least partly from the fans themselves.

[3.5] The second concept is hysteresis. *Doctor Who's* wilderness period, essentially from 1989 to 2005 with the brief blip of a made-for-TV movie in 1996, also coincided with a period of burgeoning hysteresis, which is described (by Cheryl Hardy after Bourdieu) as technology outstripping traditional creative and economic practices, within the cultural field of broadcasting itself (2014). It was one that allowed the property to survive the termination of official production, but it also dramatically and irrevocably altered the terms in which both fans and creators could engage with it. This is, of course, an ongoing and continuing process, particularly with the advent of digital and streaming technologies, and it would mark the beginning of an ongoing tension between creators and fans.

4. (Re)making history: Managing the canon

[4.1] One of the fundamental creative challenges associated with the writing of franchise fictions is the sheer volume of backstory or canon that they can accrue, particularly in the case of long-lived franchise properties. Any ongoing narrative of any length will accrete backstory or in-world history that will ultimately become unwieldy and often contradictory. Canonical details can either be forgotten or ignored by creative teams who find them inconvenient or creatively constricting.

[4.2] This is an area where the writer could find herself coming directly into conflict with a fandom that considers itself the custodian of such archival material and will take a dim view of it being ignored or contradicted. How the lead writer/showrunner in any particularly long-lived property deals with this issue can be one of the primary flashpoints for creator/fan conflict. What these debates amount to is an increasing complexity in juggling a master narrative that has become unwieldy. Davies's successor as showrunner, Steven Moffat, took the opportunity on the eve of the show's fiftieth anniversary, in the episode "Night of the Doctor," to streamline the show's canon and render the sheer critical mass of the show's accrued canonicity into a manageable and coherent narrative. His "impossible girl" story arc culminated in having the character of Clara (played by Jenna Coleman) leap into the Doctor's timeline, subtly rewriting the show's entire fifty-year history—keeping it intact but with an inbuilt ambiguity that would free writers from the constraints of an absolute adherence to past continuity while still rendering it available to be called upon in the future. Paul Booth observes that Clara becomes "a connective tissue that both highlights and liberates the show's own history" (2014, 207). And Hills notes that the move essentially means that the "expertise accumulated by sectors of fandom is opened to a radical destabilization, even while the long-established fan wishes for coherent continuity are catered for" (2015, 367). He also notes in another essay that Moffat took the opportunity to

indulge in some transmedia "fanagement" to coordinate the various, and perhaps conflicting, audience expectations around the anniversary milestone (2014, 110) by offering the webisodes "Night of the Doctor" and the more humorous "The Six-ish Doctors."

[4.3] These are quite complex transactions. In "Night of the Doctor," Moffat namechecks the events and characters from the Big Finish audio adventures, essentially canonizing narratives that had previously remained in the realm of fan fiction, integrating them into the main narrative, while simultaneously rendering that entire narrative ambiguous, as described above. This could be seen purely as fan service, a little gift to fandom on the occasion of the anniversary, but it is possible to also view it as a concession or even a distraction from a more aggressive act of reclaiming the show's canon for the creators and wresting its ownership away from the curator/fans who had maintained and preserved it during the wilderness years of nonproduction.

5. Fantagonisms: A growing disconnect between creators and fans?

[5.1] Seen in this light, it's possible to argue that there is an inbuilt tension between fans and creators, with, on the one hand, a fan resentment about the creators' privileged position in furthering the official narrative and, on the other, an ambivalence from creators toward the fans who, as we've seen, are now an integral part of their coalition audience. In his book *The Writer's Tale* Davies highlights the ongoing division between fan and creator in a discussion of online criticism: "Creating something is not a democracy. The people have no say. The artist does. It doesn't matter what people witter on about; they and their response comes after. They're not there for the creation" (Davies and Cook 2010, 104).

[5.2] That online fan criticism can spill over into personal attack and adversely affect the morale and confidence of creatives is something, Davies says, that makes him furious. It's a sentiment echoed by Moffat in a YouTube interview: "I have to say to all of the writers and directors who come onto the show, you do not go on social media, you will not go there because I don't want you upset." However, it's worth noting that in the same interview, Moffat expresses regret at this state of affairs. "We're supposed to be out among our audience," he laments. "Talking to our audience but if you have that poison [online fan invective], then you can't with a good conscience suggest that people do that" (2018).

[5.3] And so, we see a secondary, although no less pressing, challenge facing writers of franchise and wilderness fictions beyond the mere ongoing production of complex and ever-unfolding texts, to borrow Tulloch and Alvarado's memorable term (1983). As well as not inconsiderable creative responsibilities, showrunners and executives must also balance a personal identity of being fans that gives them the legitimacy of their position while maintaining a nominal distance from fandom in order to protect their creatives from online attack. However, the importance of coalition audiences and the necessity of the fan consecration of authorial legitimacy means that creatives cannot just ignore the fan community as they could perhaps in the past. It's now necessary to keep as positive a relationship as possible.

[5.4] And so we have a situation where the traditional fan role as curators of canon is

undermined as that canon is either rewritten or rendered so ambiguous that its centrality to an appreciation of the property is called into question while studios simultaneously place stringent restrictions on the manner in which fans can appreciate and engage with the movies/shows that they love. A recent example is the case of the copyright holders of Star Trek seeking judicial intervention to restrict the activities of the producers of fan production *Axanar* (Burt 2017).

6. Conclusion: A shared creative space?

[6.1] Many of the most beloved franchise fictions—Doctor Who, Star Trek, Star Wars—have their origins in the predigital age of media production. But production, public consumption, and fan activity have changed profoundly in that time. No longer do fans have to resort to mimeo-copied fanzines or letter campaigns; they can now interact directly with production teams via social media or parody them in fan-made videos. The internecine debates that used to take place between fans and creators are fully visible to the public at large now—and can negatively influence the success and social perception of the property. This has led creators to withdraw from direct fan engagement and resort instead to the kind of fanagement discussed above. This naturally adds a further layer of complication to the matter of writing and running franchise fictions and it will undoubtedly be incumbent upon future creators to develop strategies to cope with this ongoing challenge. It seems increasingly likely as creative technologies evolve that these tensions are only going to increase and that these strategies will require the utilization of a shared creative space where practitioners and fans can negotiate mutually beneficial and productive participatory relationships.

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Book review

Fake geek girls: Fandom, gender, and the convergence culture industry, by Suzanne Scott

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Suzanne Scott. *Fake geek girls: Fandom, gender, and the convergence culture industry.* New York: New York University Press, 2019, paperback, $30 (304p) ISBN 978-1479879571.

[1] Suzanne Scott's *Fake Geek Girls* is a timely and necessary extension of work on the relationship between fans and the industry through a feminist media studies lens. *Fake Geek Girls* uses the memetic trope of an inauthentic, highly gendered geek or fan to explore not how gendered fan boundaries are policed within fandoms, arguably the more obvious approach, but instead how the ways in which the industry engages, elevates, and sanctions fans privileges some groups of fans and fan behaviors over others. Scott writes transparently about her investments in fandom, her spiritual alignment with the concept of acafan, and her deep commitment to feminist approaches to fan studies. The feminist potential of fandom, she argues, may be squelched as the industry pays greater attention to fandom. Scott argues that despite the historical significance of female fans within both fandoms and fan studies, the way in which the industry positions and privileges affirmational fans and the male fans who fit within this paradigm can serve to push female fans to the margins. Her book looks at a number of sites of industry/fan connectivity—from fictionalized representations of fans to fan contests to celebrity fans—to consider what she calls the "convergence culture industry," (7) the context in which the industry has conditionally embraced some fans and excluded others. Methodologically this book also effectively demonstrates how important it is for fan scholars to study the contexts within which fans operate. Scott centers her analysis on media texts and industry discourse, with only a small number of sections looking at everyday fans or fan works.

[2] Scott's introduction contemplates how the mainstreaming of fandom has been treated as a threat by some fans, a threat that too frequently is blamed on women and minorities who are painted incorrectly as interlopers. She considers the role of nostalgia and a kind of spreadable misogyny underlying movements to "Make Fandom Great Again" (17) by

excluding certain fans. However, Scott ultimately centers her argument on the impact the industry makes in these debates through industry efforts to shape fans to meet their needs. In this chapter she coins the term "convergence culture industry" (7) —a clever and surprising combining of Henry Jenkins and the work of Adorno and Horkheimer—and calls for a deeper investigation into the impact of industry structures on fandom.

[3] Chapter 1 continues this concern with mainstreaming but focuses more substantively on Scott's contention that expanding the definition of fans can destabilize the underlying foundations of fan studies, most notably what she sees as an essential relationship between feminist media and fan studies. Scott engages key debates around the expanding subjects of fandom studies and the growing critiques of the concept of acafandom. She argues that much like the media industry, fan studies is in danger of similarly marginalizing female fans and transformative works. More explicitly, she posits the risk of a postfeminist fandom studies that depoliticizes essential parts of fandom, aligning fan studies too closely with industry norms. Scott pivotally engages with central dichotomies in fan studies and provides an argument linking transformative fandom with female fans and affirmational fandom with masculinity, a heuristic that much of the rest of the book depends on. The bulk of her subsequent chapters focus on the myriad ways in which the convergence culture industry prioritizes and proposes ideal fans and fan behavior. This ideal, Scott suggests, is primarily affirmational and focuses on an enunciative fandom that values encyclopedic knowledge over critique. Using a number of examples, Scott demonstrates that industry imperatives tend to favor the fanboy both for demographic and strategic reasons.

[4] Chapters 2 and 3 consider how representational tropes, both in traditional media and online, frame fandom in what she considers androcentric ways. In chapter 2 she notes that the fanboy, neatly aligned with the valuable young male demographic, has been represented more frequently and more positively than female fans. She explores a number of media texts to consider how the ways in which male fans are depicted may create a sense of entitlement or privilege among this subset of fandom. Chapter 3 considers how this entitlement has escalated preexisting gendered gatekeeping in fandoms. Here she coins the term "spreadable misogyny" (76), drawing on Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green's work on spreadable media (2013). Spreadable misogyny, she argues, allows some nerd subcultures to both validate their own victimhood and to attack women, who are treated as an external threat. She considers how this form of misogyny may be mimetic through an analysis of the idiot girl meme and fake geek girl discourse. Scott finds that hostility to women within fandom is not only apparent but that it draws on key value systems within fandom, like authenticity. She explains how this perception of fangirls as fake geek girls places female fans in untenable positions in which they are constantly having to prove themselves. While she explores instances in which women push back with their own memetic content, she also demonstrates that these negative discourses are pervasive.

[5] Chapters 4 and 5 look more closely at how industry-specific behaviors engage fans in managed ways, which she calls fanagement. In these chapters Scott only not demonstrates how fan behaviors have become measurable and potentially even monetizable by the industry but also how the creation of official industry opportunities, seen by some to legitimize fandom, often are designed to exclude a number of fans and fan behaviors. In

Chapter 4 she demonstrates how efforts to shape fan discourse through twitter hashtagging privilege enunciative fandom. Enunciative fandom is further privileged in projects like *The Talking Dead* (2011–) which elevate the image of a fanboy even while curating and limiting the types of allowable fan discourse, often at the expense of female fans. Even initiatives that ostensibly solicit genres of fan work associated with transformative work, like fan fiction or fan vids, are designed to exclude the kind of critical, interpretive, and sometimes erotic work that are part of these genres. Using the examples of FanLib, Kindle Words, and a number of tool kits for fan video content, Scott demonstrates that supposed collaborationist approaches to industry/fan projects are designed using terms and conditions in ways that preclude the types of fan content most associated with female fans. Chapter 5 further builds on the analysis of Chris Hardwick's *Talking Dead* by contemplating the idea of professionalization of fandom, particularly through the figures of the fanboy auteur and fantrepreneur. Situating these examples around long-standing debates around the appropriateness of monetizing fan work, Scott looks at how the industry has embraced the professionalized fan in ways that more community-based fandoms are wary of. Scott provides ample examples of ways male producers are able to use their fandom to argue for authenticity with viewers and to use their discourses with fans (as a fan) to shape narratives around a text. While she addresses mold-breaking cases, like Felicia Day's success leveraging her fan identity and Orlando Jones's fully immersed self-identification as a fangirl, she argues that in most cases the dynamic of producer/fan engagement and the slippage between these identities favor men, particularly in more official roles as the fanboy (or fangirl) auteur helming major cult media texts. She further considers how this concept can be extended to the idea of fantrepreneur who similarly use their fan identities as a brand but not necessarily as frequently in the auspices of the media industry as fanboy auteurs do.

[6] Scott's final chapter considers the ways in which the industry has made space for or engaged the geek girl. Her examples here primarily focus on fan merchandise and fashion and looks at Pinterest and Her Universe as spaces that bring fangirls into conversation with the convergence culture industry. Drawing on Hebdige's work, she looks at how both Pinterest and Her Universe create potential spaces for creativity and criticism through fashion and performativity, while also being limited by their privileging of highly gendered topics and images. Scott connects the possibility of gender-bending crossplay in Her Universe to her final example, the highly critical and transformative project The Hawkeye Initiative, which replaces hypersexualized comic book images of women with Hawkeye in the same pose. While this chapter was intriguing and rightfully demonstrates the need to consider how fangirls are spoken to and make space for themselves in the convergence culture industry's models of fandom, it was also the one chapter I felt needed more elucidation. While earlier arguments in the book were bolstered by plentiful examples of androcentric fandom in action, Scott's discussion of Pinterest and Her Universe focused more on the potential these spaces had for women rather than the ways in which they've been productively used. It is notable that her most detailed example in this chapter, The Hawkeye Initiative, is fully transformative and very much outside of the industry. This left me wanting a clearer sense of how these examples help us better understand the phenomena focused on in the rest of the book.

[7] Scott's book is an important contribution to the field for both fan and industry scholars.

Fake Geek Girls speaks powerfully to the complex ways in which the industry transforms and is being transformed by fandom. It also, crucially, updates our understanding of industry/fan dynamics to better grapple with contemporary technological and social contexts. However, the book also contains gaps that call for further scholarly debate, particularly regarding its underlying focus on two imagined categories of fans. Scott is relatively transparent about some of these gaps. She is particularly forthright about the need for a more intersectional analysis of gender and race in fandom. This is an important qualification, but one that I was left wishing she had tackled more deeply herself, given her discussion of figures like Yvette Nicole Brown and Orlando Jones. Scott should be credited for her choice to make her writing process transparent by explaining her choice to foreground androcentric fandom, but her frequent references to key issues of race left me wanting a more integrated consideration. Scott is also quite explicit about her own perspective as a fan and fan scholar and her intentional privileging of one form of fandom (feminist, critical, and often transformative) and fan scholarship over other possibilities in this book, sometimes to the exclusion of others. While this worked well as a polemic, it left me troubled at times where I felt the complex ways in which industry-sanctioned fan behavior interacted with other forms of fan behaviors, or could welcome important groups of people marginalized by existing fandoms, were not explored.

[8] Scott's linking of certain types of industry-sanctioned fandom to men/masculinity and other practices to women is important, but the gendered affirmational versus transformational binary of fan practices also warrants greater exploration and future research. Scott's examples included work by women like Felicia Day, E. L. Jones and Lauren Faust, female content creators who have thrived in this androcrentic paradigm. Further, with female-targeted shows like *Pretty Little Liars* (2010–17) engaging in the kinds of Twitter tagging practices discussed in the book and long-standing histories of affirmational female fan practices like letter writing, further investigation is needed to explore whether or not the affirmational/transformational spectrum is as clearly gendered as it is being treated here. However, no text is ever complete, and the ways in which Scott's book elicits these questions for the future is, in and of itself, a strength. There is no question that the industry is engaging fandom in increasingly strategic ways and no question that the gendered boundary-policing endemic to internet culture is a significant and toxic element of today's digital fan cultures. *Fake Geek Girls* deftly pulls these two themes together and provides a clearer understanding of how industry imperatives may be creating fan hierarchies that disadvantage and marginalize women while breeding an attitude toward proper fandom that can turn hostile toward the women who are, and always have been, a central part of fan culture.

Reference

Jenkins, Henry, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green. 2013. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York: New York University Press.