



Transformative Works and Cultures

Volume 1 2008

***Transformative Works and Cultures* (TWC) is a Gold Open Access international peer-reviewed journal published by the Organization for Transformative Works.**

TWC publishes articles about popular media, fan communities, and transformative works, broadly conceived. We invite papers on all related topics, including but not limited to fan fiction, fan vids, mashups, machinima, film, TV, anime, comic books, video games, and any and all aspects of the communities of practice that surround them. TWC's aim is twofold: to provide a publishing outlet that welcomes fan-related topics, and to promote dialogue between the academic community and the fan community.

We encourage innovative works that situate these topics within contemporary culture via a variety of critical approaches, including but not limited to feminism, queer theory, critical race studies, political economy, ethnography, reception theory, literary criticism, film studies, and media studies. We also encourage authors to consider writing personal essays integrated with scholarship, hypertext articles, or other forms that embrace the technical possibilities of the Web and test the limits of the genre of academic writing.

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Read. Print. Enjoy.

--Erica L. Frank



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Transforming academic and fan cultures

TWC Editor

[0.1] Keywords—Fan studies; Open access; OTW; TWC; Web 2.0

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1. Introduction

[1.1] The field of fan studies has exploded within the last few years, and with the publication of this first issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* (TWC), we're pleased to be a part of it. We've seen a shift toward a more introspective acafan model of scholarship, with self-identified fan-scholars publishing work in a variety of venues. The expansion of Web 2.0 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0) and a wired Generation Next (<http://people-press.org/report/300/a-portrait-of-generation-next>) means that work on fan-related topics, particularly topics related to online interactivity, has immense relevance.

[1.2] TWC, the Organization for Transformative Works (<http://transformativeworks.org/>) (OTW)'s academic journal, aims to focus on this kind of fan-based interactivity. OTW, a nonprofit organization founded by fans as an advocacy group, also seeks to collect, archive, and contextualize fan works, and the academic journal grows out of OTW's desire to create a theoretical framework that explains and contextualizes fan artifacts. We think that discussion of fans and the derivative artworks they create are culturally meaningful, and the time has come for the creation of a venue to permit discussion and widen the playing field. We want to provide a place where the fan and the scholar come together—perhaps in the same person, perhaps not, but always with an eye to analyzing fans and their contributions to culture.

[1.3] The last 15 years have seen a disciplinary expansion. Early fan studies grew out of media studies and ethnography, but today, historians, folklorists, and literary scholars are just as likely to write about fans, bringing with them exciting new critical frameworks and different methodologies. We hope—as the first issue of TWC demonstrates—that the interdisciplinary scope of the journal establishes a space where scholars from different disciplines can meet and share their various approaches. It's also an invitation for others to see the breadth of the field, learn of its relevance to other areas of study, and add new ideas.

[1.4] In addition to providing a forum for essays, TWC, as an online-only journal, has the potential to be excitingly multimedia. Essays in this issue contain screen-caps, embedded videos, audio clips, and hyperlinks. Our reading of fair use (<http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/about/submissions#copyrightNotice>) means

that TWC is able to consider essays that other journals will not. We hope that this will inspire authors to write essays that wouldn't be publishable in other venues.

2. Open access

[2.1] It isn't just the ideas expressed in this first issue's essays, reviews, and interviews that excite us—although they do, with submissions from acafans, journalists, and creative writers that run the gamut from personal essay to deeply theorized academic writing. Fan culture has long struggled with issues surrounding copyright, generating many a heated discussion about the legality of derivative artworks such as fanfic. In addition, access by nonacademics to academic texts has been made unnecessarily difficult. We think it's important that knowledge not be locked away behind university subscriptions and password-protected access.

[2.2] TWC has therefore chosen to copyright under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>). Our commitment to open access (<http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/about/editorialPolicies#openAccessPolicy>) guarantees that the research TWC publishes will be available to all, including and especially the fan communities that are the subjects of many of the essays. TWC's copyright guarantees that the ideas presented in TWC are freely shareable: the content may be reposted anywhere with proper credit. To ensure that the content is as widely read as possible, TWC indexes through EBSCO (along with several other services) and files metadata with DOI (<http://www.doi.org/>) to make sure that the URLs to the essays will persist. In fact, we chose to use an open access system for our software as well: Open Journal Systems (<http://pkp.sfu.ca/?q=ojs>), which is part of the Public Knowledge Project.

3. Theory

[3.1] The peer-reviewed Theory section of TWC is traditionally academic. In this issue, the Theory section exhibits the range of content and theoretical approaches within current fan studies. De Kosnik's analysis of the current political landscape, Stein's contribution to genre theory, Kustritz's engagement with gender and queer theory, and Coppa's documentation of an important part of fan vidding history show how broadly fans and fan theories can and must be understood. Abigail De Kosnik's

EDITORIAL

"Participatory Democracy and Hillary Clinton's Marginalized Fandom" applies fan theoretical models to contemporary Democratic political behavior. She reads Obama supporters as a dominant fandom and explains the strong emotional responses among many Clinton voters through the lens of marginalized fandom. This essay demonstrates how fan theory can be utilized in other disciplinary arenas—here, applied to the political arena to explain patterns of behavior while calling for a critique that could strengthen participatory democracy.

[3.2] Louisa Ellen Stein's "'Emotions-Only' Versus 'Special People': Genre in Fan Discourse" uses the case study of *Roswell* and its fan discourses to stage an intervention in genre theory. By arguing for genre as a set of discursive threads that include not only the TV text but also production and fan authorship, Stein suggests that such an understanding allows for more differentiated readings of fan conversations. The essay looks at the complex responses of *Roswell* fans to the story lines and marketing strategies, and it suggests the importance of listening to fans' complex engagements with genre discourse.

[3.3] Anne Kustritz's "Painful Pleasures: Sacrifice, Consent, and the Resignification of BDSM Symbolism in *The Story of O* and *The Story of Obi*" uses a close reading of two short novels—one an erotic classic, the other an homage and fan classic—to explore the role of BDSM discourse and symbolism within general and fannish contexts. By focusing in particular on the feminist and queer inflections of the fan story, Kustritz suggests that BDSM in fan discourse offers a multidirectional interrogation of power and its erotic force within and outside of the narrative itself.

[3.4] Francesca Coppa's "Women, *Star Trek*, and the Early Development of Fannish Vidding" offers an historical overview of the beginnings of fannish vidding culture as well as an interpretive framework to understand fan vids. By tracing current fan vidding practices to an originary interpretive and identificatory place in the reception of *Star Trek*, Coppa locates fan vidding as a deeply feminist endeavor, one that melds the desiring body and the technological mind. Vids are fundamentally different from more contemporary user-generated content in the way the vids' creators engage critically and theoretically with the media text. Vids thus require a different analytic and interpretive approach, even as they partake in current remediation and remixing culture.

4. Praxis

[4.1] TWC's peer-reviewed Praxis section uses theoretical frameworks to make an important point about a specific text, fandom, or cultural event. TWC's first issue presents a wide range of topics: Tosenberger writes on classic TV fandom, Ashby film anime, Ford soap operas, and Arnzen horror and pedagogy. Madeline Ashby's "Ownership, Authority, and the Body: Does Antifanfic Sentiment Reflect Posthuman Anxiety?" uses

specific anime films as metaphor for the role of women's writing online. Ashby uses the image of the cyborg, literally and figuratively, to explore fan subjectivity, copyright concerns, and the bodies of and in texts as she offers a close reading of several anime texts and sketches them onto fannish responses. Michael A. Arnzen's "The Unlearning: Horror and Transformative Theory" offers a practical pedagogical piece that uses a particular classroom writing exercise revolving around horror texts to indicate the central importance of transformation in writing as well as in the emotional and intellectual responses to genre texts, and how these transformative responses ultimately become teaching tools.

[4.2] Catherine Tosenberger's "'The Epic Love Story of Sam and Dean': *Supernatural*, Queer Readings, and the Romance of Incestuous Fan Fiction" illustrates how close readings of fan fiction can serve as analysis of the show itself. By reading the fan fiction's preferred central incestuous pairing within the literary context of Gothic horror, Tosenberger concludes that far from countering the show's internal logic, such a reading expands and supports many of the show's internal plot points. She reads fan fiction with and against the show and the fandom to show how fan creativity can provide crucial interpretive and corrective moments for fans. And Sam Ford's "Soap Operas and the History of Fan Discussion" offers a historical account of fan discourses in soap opera fandom, showing the conceptual continuity between pre-Internet social networks and contemporary online community. Ford illustrates the relevance of historical accounts and argues that pre-Internet infrastructure is vital to understanding current discourses.

5. Symposium

[5.1] TWC's Symposium section was designed as a fluid category for fannish meta and personal essays. We want many voices to be heard, including nonacademic ones. Fan communities have been producing complex and insightful discussion for years. However, their publication in specialized zines, mailing lists, and blogs has meant that the content has too often been inaccessible and unknown to outsiders, meaning that academic study of fan texts and cultures has failed to take into account communities' discussion of their own activities.

[5.2] Symposium seeks to fill this gap by widening the audience for what fans call *meta*. The section's name is an homage to the Fanfic Symposium (<http://www.trickster.org/symposium/>), a Web site that archives media fans' essays about fandom. This section in particular provides a platform to bring nonacademic discussion into conversation with institutionally located scholarship on transformative works and cultures. Submissions on fans, texts, and communities don't have the institutional requirements—and limitations—of the peer-reviewed sections of TWC. This issue features three essays that analyze the conditions of production for meta discussion in media fandom, and we invite you to listen in

on an academic conference panel where acafans discuss some of the conflicts and contradictions in contemporary fan studies.

[5.3] In TWC's first issue, we think it's particularly relevant that the Symposium pieces focus on the role of fans and academics in fan culture and on the way recent changes in fan and academic spaces have affected fannish and scholarly discourses. Dana L. Bode's "And Now, a Word from the Amateurs" opens the conversation between fans, acafans, and academics with one journalist fan's personal exploration of conflict and conversation in online discourse. Rebecca Lucy Busker's "On Symposia: LiveJournal and the Shape of Fannish Discourse" focuses more specifically on fannish meta discourses and the particular ways LiveJournal's interface has shaped and affected style and content, the way it has changed fannish interaction, and the way fans theorize themselves. Cathy Cupitt's "Nothing but Net: When Cultures Collide" deals with similar issues from a more academic perspective as she looks at the changes digital media have wrought in fan and academic spheres and the ways they intersect. The final Symposium piece showcases the journal's multimedia component. In "Fan Labor Audio Feature Introduction," Bob Rehak frames and presents a recording of a workshop at Console-ing Passions 2008, which itself responds to the series of conversations about gender and fan studies held in Henry Jenkins's blog in summer 2007.

6. Interviews and reviews

[6.1] This issue of TWC features three interviews that showcase the national, disciplinary, thematic, and theoretical scope we envision. Henry Jenkins, cofounder and codirector of the MIT Comparative Media Studies Program and one of the most prolific and influential academics in fan studies, discusses his work, the future of fan studies, and the role of fans in contemporary media and academic discourses. Veruska Sabucco interviews one member of the Italian writing collective known as Wu Ming. Wu Ming 1 traces surprising similarities between this activist project and fan writing in terms of collective authorship, copyrights concerns, and popular culture. And the three members of the Audre Lorde of the Rings, an unofficial conglomeration of academics, artists, and activists who pay attention to the queered and racialized pleasures and pains of popular culture, talk about the relationship of their blog, Oh!Industry, to academia, fannishness, and informal knowledge production.

[6.2] The reviews in this issue focus on some recent academic books on fans, fan cultures, fan works, and their surrounding infrastructures. They include Cornel Sandvoss's *Fans* (reviewed by Eve Marie Taggart) and Rhiannon Bury's *Cyberspaces of Our Own* (Katarina Maria Hjärpe), both of which focus on fans and fan cultures; Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein's edited collection, *Teen Television* (Mary Dalton), with its interest in specific TV texts and their surrounding fandoms; and Paul Gillin's *The New Influencers* (Barna

William Donovan), which situates fan culture in the larger online framework of the blogosphere. We aim to provide reviews of recent books and other media targeted to both the academic and the fan audiences to extend the conversation on fan-relevant topics.

7. Conclusion

[7.1] TWC's first issue only hints at what may be possible with this forum. Readers interested in writing should consult TWC's submission guidelines (<http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/about/submissions#onlineSubmissions>). We also encourage readers to register: registered readers will get an e-mail when a new issue comes out, and it will also help us learn what our "circulation" is (<http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/user/register>).

[7.2] We want more fan engagement; we want essays that engage OTW from all sides; we want personal essays that muse about what it means to be a fan and a member of a fan community; we want to provide a home for writing that explores transformation and culture—in the more familiar realms of U.S. media-oriented fan culture and in other global cultural and subcultural locations. TWC is just one place for academics and fans to engage, but we want it to reflect the rich diversity of voices and the bedlam of lack of consensus. We hope that these essays will pique your interest and spark discussion; we also hope that readers will engage with the authors by using the Comment feature of the software to leave their remarks, so we can engage in dialogue.

8. Acknowledgments

[8.1] The following people worked on TWC No. 1 in an editorial capacity: Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (editors); Cole J. Banning, Alexis Lothian, and Julie Levin Russo (Symposium); and Deborah Kaplan, Mafalda Stasi, and Cynthia W. Walker (Review). Busse, Hellekson, Lothian, and Stasi also worked on the interviews.

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[8.3] TWC thanks the journal project's OTW board liaison, Francesca Coppa. OTW provides financial support and server space to TWC but is not involved in any way in the content of the journal, which is editorially independent.

[8.4] TWC thanks all its board members as well as the additional peer reviewers who provided service for TWC No. 1: Rebecca Lucy Busker, Rebecca Carlson, Ian Hunter, Craig Jacobsen, Rachel Maines, Joe Sanders, Helen Sheumaker, Sarah Toton, Rebecca Tushnet, and Shannon White.

Participatory democracy and Hillary Clinton's marginalized fandom

Abigail De Kosnik

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[0.1] Abstract—After the drawn-out, heated contest for the Democratic Party presidential nomination and Senator Obama's victory over Senator Clinton, a segment of Clinton's supporters are threatening to leave the party rather than fall in line behind the nominee. This essay argues that the battle between Clinton's and Obama's followers is best understood as a war between fan bases, with Obama enthusiasts constituting as the dominant fandom and Clinton voters occupying the position of marginalized fandom. Marginalized fandoms tend to blame the opposing fan base, intermediaries, and The Powers That Be for their fan campaigns' losses, and Clinton's fans are adhering to this pattern. However, the Clinton marginalized fandom's complaints can be regarded as valuable critiques that, if noted rather than dismissed, could greatly strengthen participatory democracy in the United States.

[0.2] Keywords—Barack Obama; Fan community; Hillary Rodham Clinton; Politics

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1. Introduction: The threat of schism

[1.1] Emotions run high among Democrats as of this writing. Today is July 24, 2008, and seven and a half weeks ago, the Democratic National Committee made a controversial ruling about how to seat the delegates from the Michigan and Florida primaries. The last of the state primaries took place in South Dakota and Montana, and Illinois Senator Barack Obama clinched the Democrats' nomination for president of the United States while New York Senator Hillary Clinton's run for the highest office came to an end. At the close of any two-person election, supporters of the victorious candidate are elated while supporters of the defeated candidate enter a state of mourning and melancholia. However, at present, numerous Clinton voters are also expressing deep anger and dissatisfaction with their party. Sentiments such as "Democrats for McCain," "I am no longer a Democrat," and "I will never vote for Obama" have appeared in thousands of posts on pro-Clinton political blogs such as Taylor Marsh (<http://www.taylormarsh.com/>), Savage Politics (<http://savagepolitics.com/>), No Quarter (<http://noquarterusa.net/blog/>), and Hillary Is 44 (<http://www.hillaryis44.com/>). In a year when Democrats expected to win the White House handily, thanks to the current Republican president's abysmal approval rating (28 percent, according to the May 28–June 1, 2008, *USA Today*/Gallup Poll), a schism threatens the Democratic Party. By the time of the general election, this moment of party division may be long healed. Today, however, a rift among Democrats exists.

[1.2] In this essay, I will examine Clinton's supporters as a fan base, and I will analyze their expressions of antipathy toward their own party as a case of marginalized fandom. Framing the Clinton-Obama rivalry as a war between two fan bases, with Obama's followers constituting a dominant fandom and Clinton's constituting

a marginalized fandom, allows us to interpret the deep emotional response of the Clinton backers to this week's events as more than just sour grapes, more than just resentment at being defeated, from which little or nothing can be learned. Fan culture studies does not dismiss the passions of affinity groups. Rather, it asks, what social, cultural, economic, and psychological structures inspire their strong feelings and motivate them to organize? How can their passions be read as evidence of, or commentary on, aspects of culture and society that have gone previously unnoticed or undertheorized?

2. Marginalized and dominant fandoms

[2.1] Each of us belongs to many dominant fandoms by virtue of the fact that cultural norms exist. Anyone who has ever been a fan of something that most people seem to dislike, are indifferent to, or simply know nothing about understands what it is to belong to a marginalized fandom. There is no inherent shame or honor in being part of a marginalized fandom, just as there is no intrinsic benefit or downside to being part of a dominant fandom. Sometimes it is a pleasure to keep a marginalized fandom a secret, to avoid explaining one's enjoyments to others and to cherish them in private, like hidden treasures. Sometimes great joy can be found in participating in a dominant fandom amidst an enormous crowd, in standing with hundreds or thousands of people partaking of the same wave of energy, the same outpouring of love for a group, individual, or event. Everyone who reaches fan-level excitement about activities or texts belongs to many dominant and marginalized fandoms simultaneously, with attachments to a variety of mainstream objects as well as to cult or avant-garde or underground or unusual or low-culture, degraded objects. A person's dominant fandom can turn into a marginalized fandom; for example, among moviegoers who had admired the *Star Wars* films, people who thought that *Star Wars* was possibly the greatest

movie franchise of all time went from dominant to marginalized with the release of episodes 1 and 2. And a marginalized fandom can turn into a dominant fandom: followers of little-known singers or bands can witness their beloved musical acts exploding onto the mainstream scene, with some fans feeling pleasure that R.E.M. or Radiohead finally got the recognition they deserve, while other fans bemoan the indie band's selling out.

[2.2] The defining characteristic of dominant fandoms, as opposed to marginalized fandoms, is not in fact numbers, but *power*. A fandom is not necessarily a dominant one because it consists of a certain number of participants; rather, it is because its object of investment holds and wields power. Power can mean control over state apparatuses, as in the case of the U.S. presidential elections, in which the fan base of the losing candidate, however large, is always a marginalized fandom because their party no longer controls the highest office: similar to Gore Democrats in 2000, if McCain Republicans lose the White House in 2008, they will be the marginalized fandom. Power can also mean a certain aura, of authority or legacy. An aura of this sort makes Yankees fans a dominant fandom despite the Yankees having lost the last two World Series in which they appeared. Conversely, supporters of the Diamondbacks and Marlins—victors in those World Series—were still marginalized fandoms after their teams became champions because sometimes even winning does not make a fan base a dominant fandom. Power can also come in the form of popularity or currency, a direct link to the zeitgeist of a certain historical moment, which often is decided and promulgated by the mass media (although the media may claim to only represent the "reality" of what is popular in the country at a given time). There may be nearly as many Americans living in rural areas as in urban centers, but the contemporary U.S. cultural commodity market appeals primarily to cosmopolitan city dwellers' taste cultures, rather than the preferences of religious, culturally conservative inhabitants of small towns or farmlands.

[2.3] Marginalized fandoms are not necessarily alternative, and dominant fandoms are not necessarily mainstream. Although many marginalized fandoms' objects of investment fall into categories of cult and underground or avant-garde texts, the marginalized fandom of heartland America would probably not apply any of those terms to their cultural preferences. In the case of Clinton and Obama's presidential runs, both have been considered alternative rather than mainstream candidates because neither is a white man, but both are also centrist in their political platforms, making them mainstream relative to candidates like Ron Paul, Dennis Kucinich, or Ralph Nader. Thus, whether a fandom supports an object, individual, or text that is mainstream, alternative, or a combination of both does not determine whether it is a dominant or marginalized fandom. Rather, as stated above, the line that divides the dominant fandoms from the marginalized fandoms is often decided

by how much power—political, historical, or cultural—is possessed by that fandom's object of interest.

[2.4] One must ask, then, what forces confer power on a given object, text, narrative, or individual. Often it is intermediaries and authorities who decide which objects, texts, individuals, teams, productions, or narratives will have power and which will not. Whether or not a fan base becomes a dominant or marginalized one is often beyond fans' direct control. The fact that individual consumers/viewers/spectators/voters must rely on the judgment and actions of intermediaries becomes particularly important in situations where two objects, texts, story lines, or individuals are in direct competition with one another. In such cases, the two opposing fandoms will each feel that "their" side deserves to win, and they will do everything they can think of (cheering wildly; donating money; buying tickets, albums, and special-edition DVDs; engaging in e-mail, telephone, or letter-writing campaigns; posting on various online message boards and blogs to support their favorite and attack the opponent) to help their side attain victory. But they will also anticipate, with dread or hope, that the intermediaries and authorities will have a great deal of influence in the question of which of the two rivals will triumph. During a period of competition between two fandoms and their objects, the feelings of antagonism of each fandom for the other can be extremely strong. This antipathy felt by one fan base toward another, and toward the rival object of fandom, has been called antifandom and fan-tagonism.

3. Fan wars

[3.1] Theodoropoulou (2007) argues that there are numerous cases of fandom, with sports fandoms being a prime example, in which the antifan does not exist outside the fan but "within the fan." These are

[3.2] cases where fandom is a precondition of anti-fandom...when for a fan anti-fandom is given and set. These are cases where two fan objects are clear-cut or traditional rivals, thus inviting fans to become anti-fans of the "rival" object of admiration...[U]nder such circumstances, a fan becomes an anti-fan of the object that "threatens" his/her own, and of that object's fans. Thus, when A and B are the opposing fandom objects, fans of A are anti-fans of B and of B's fans, and vice versa...[S]uch anti-fans emerge whenever binary oppositions are established between two fan objects. (316)

[3.3] Sports team rivalries are one clear-cut instance in which spectators' love for one side of a competition produces in them feelings of hate for the opposite side, but many other instances exist. Johnson (2007) discusses fan-tagonisms among viewers of a particular television show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN, 1997–2003), some of whom championed the program's plot twists and romantic pairings in a later season, while other *Buffy* fans mourned the passing of the narrative style and romances

that characterized the show in earlier seasons. The rivalry between two competing factions—be they sports teams, story lines, or character pairings on a television show—is neither felt nor fought only by the opposing teams, or by two sets of writers or producers who have different ideas for the television show's future. Theodoropoulou's and Johnson's works make it clear that fans also experience these rivalries at deep emotional and psychological levels.

[3.4] In such situations of conflict, fans of one side are antifans of the other side—that is, the enemies of their fandom. But the fans' efforts on behalf of their object of investment, though perhaps influencing the outcome (for example, encouraging more people to vote for a specific candidate or to watch an episode of a failing television program), are frequently outweighed by the decisions of any intermediaries (critics, referees, the press) who have the ability to influence the contest's results and, crucially, by the decisions of authorities, such as what fans call "TPTB" (The Powers That Be), which comprise network or studio executives, writers, producers, coaches, and commissioners. After a specific rivalry has been decided, when it is evident which fan base's desires were fulfilled, the marginalized fandom in particular usually has a great deal to say about the conduct and judgment of the intermediaries and TPTB. Many marginalized fandoms have the feeling that if the referees had not been blind, if the critics had not misunderstood what they were seeing, if the coaches had not made the wrong substitution at the wrong time, if the producers had any artistic integrity, if the writers had any sense of continuity and balance, if network executives had only grasped the artistic value and cultural significance of the low-rated television program, then the outcome that the marginalized fandom had longed for might have come to pass. On the other hand, dominant fandoms usually think that all the proceedings, including the actions taken by the intermediaries and TPTB, were more or less necessary and just. Dominant fans typically regard any irregularities as perhaps unfortunate but in the end of minor relevance to the results of the competition in which their side triumphed. The presidential primary and general elections, being among the longest, most visible, and most significant contests in U.S. society, fall into the category of competitive events that Theodoropoulou (2007) identifies as giving rise to antifandom within fandom, to a sense among each fan group that they are pitted in a struggle against another fan group or against many others.

4. Clinton versus Obama

[4.1] Polls in late 2007 showed Hillary Clinton to have a strong lead among contenders for the Democratic nomination, but her lead evaporated as the January 2008 primaries drew near, and it became apparent that Clinton would be the underdog in the elections. Immediately after her third-place finish in the Iowa caucuses, the first of the nomination contests, I read accounts of her "defeat" in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *L.A. Times*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and I immediately

recognized that backing Clinton's presidential run would mean joining a marginalized fandom. As a longtime Clinton supporter who assumed the press would give more or less equal coverage to each of the three leading Democratic candidates—Clinton, Obama, and Edwards—I was astonished by how quickly Clinton's entire candidacy had been written off. The press seemed to unanimously declare her run at the highest office ill advised and quickly over, declaring that Obama was polling much higher than Clinton in the next primary election state, New Hampshire. When Clinton won New Hampshire five days later, the articles that covered her victory emphasized not her comeback but Obama's inevitability as the Democratic candidate, as *New York Times* writer Adam Nagourney noted the day after the New Hampshire primary: "the Clinton campaign...is handcuffed by the aura that surrounds Mr. Obama...In Mr. Obama, Mrs. Clinton is facing an opponent who...at times this weekend seemed to be more of a movement than a candidate" ("Clinton Escapes to Fight Another Day," January 9, 2008). Some pundits, like *Time* magazine's Mark Halperin, pointed out how early the press had decided to favor Obama's campaign. On the night of the New Hampshire vote, Halperin said on *Charlie Rose*,

[4.2] I think what the press does, the filter of the press, in presidential politics, is hugely important...I have no doubt, in my mind, that the press corps favors Barack Obama, that the coverage is much more optimistic, enthusiastic. Arianna [Huffington] is right, it's a great story. But I'm for fairness in the process, and I think the press has an obligation to say, "Look at the coverage of Obama and of McCain compared to the coverage of their competitors, and I just don't think it's close to equal." (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QLsAel4gmM>)

[4.3] The feeling that intermediaries (in this case, mainstream news outlets) are somehow prejudiced against the object of one's fandom, and that they are unjustly using their power to ensure that this object is defeated, is a common sentiment in marginalized fandom. I began to visit the best-known political blogs with liberal leanings—*Daily Kos* (<http://www.dailykos.com/>), the *Huffington Post* (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/>)—and when I noted that the vast preponderance of bloggers and respondents on those sites were strongly pro-Obama and anti-Clinton, my conviction that Clinton's following constituted a marginalized fandom solidified. Political blogs, too, are intermediaries; political blogs can and often proudly do demonstrate favoritism toward certain institutions, policies, and people. What solidified my certainty about belonging to a marginalized fandom was the fact that in the next round of elections, Clinton won one state (the Nevada caucus) while Obama won the other (South Carolina), and still the mainstream media and the well-known liberal blogs tended to excoriate Clinton and laud Obama. Members of a marginalized fandom often

feel that although they are strong in numbers, they are unfairly ignored. In January 2008, although Clinton and Obama were virtually tied in national polls of eligible voters and the primary results at that time reflected how evenly split the electorate was between the candidates, television pundits, blog writers, and newspaper reporters seemed to have already decided that one was by far the better candidate.

5. Antiparty fervor

[5.1] On pro-Clinton political blogs, posters repeatedly called out the mainstream press and so-called progressive blogs for their clear-cut bias for Obama, but Clinton supporters' sharpest criticism was reserved for TPTB: the leadership of the Democratic Party, specifically the Democratic National Committee (DNC). Since the DNC's May 31 decision on seating Michigan and Florida's delegates to the present (a span of approximately 1 month), Clinton fans have steadily manifested their anger toward their party. Between June 1 and June 3, members of the Taylor Marsh Web site, ranked in the top 5,000 most-read blogs by Technorati (<http://es.technorati.com/blogs/www.taylormarsh.com>), posted approximately 12,000 comments, most expressing outrage over the Michigan/Florida ruling and many stating an intent to *not* cast a vote for the Democratic presidential candidate. Posted opinions included: "I am sad, angry and unable to ever vote for Obama," "If Hillary Clinton is denied the nomination the Democratic Party must be brought down," "Maybe these people should get copies of everyone who has changed to independent and congratulate them on their party unity," "If the Dem 'leadership' is so lame as to pass over the best candidate in my lifetime and appoint the least qualified and most problematic, then McCain it is!" On June 3, a political action committee called Puma (People United Means Action) PAC was launched. A main entry on the Puma PAC blog on June 18 states the argument for the PAC's existence:

[5.2] If Clinton had lost the primaries fair and square, many of us here would have accepted it, moved on, and supported Obama. If the media had displayed restraint and dignity in its coverage of the fine Democrats who competed, many more of us would never have become outraged in the first place. And if the DNC had not turned Florida and Michigan voters into half-persons, and had not flat-out **STOLEN** four delegates from Clinton to give to the Precious, another million or so of us would have accepted the situation and worked for the Democratic nominee. ("It's the Disenfranchisement, Stupid!," <http://blog.pumapac.org/>)

[5.3] The anger of the Clinton marginalized fandom has not gone unnoticed by the press. On June 7, an *ABC News* story by Jennifer Parker and Ed O'Keefe reported on Clinton's withdrawal from the race in "Clinton Concedes Nomination as Supporters Debate Loyalty,

Unity." Under the subheading, "Clinton Backers Angered as Party Tries to Unite," the article stated that

[5.4] some Clinton supporters believe their candidate was robbed of the nomination by flawed party rules that stripped Florida and Michigan of their votes early on, and allowed the 796 superdelegates to side with whichever candidate they choose. "I'm saddened because I just don't think [Obama] decisively won...It was the Supreme Court in 2000, and it was the superdelegates in 2008," [a Clinton voter] said, bitterly. (<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Vote2008/story?id=5014885>)

[5.5] On July 23, the *New York Times* reported on the efforts of the Denver Group, an organization dedicated to ensuring that Clinton's nomination is brought up for an official vote at the Democratic National Convention in Denver this August. The article quotes Denver Group cofounder Marc Rubin stating, "Contentious politics is not losing politics," and summarizes Rubin's and cofounder Heidi Li Feldman's position "that perceived forced unity imposed by party leadership is likely to alienate Clinton supporters and ultimately cost the eventual nominee the election" (Sarah Wheaton, "Clinton Supporters Try One More Tack," <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/07/23/clinton-supporters-try-one-more-tack/>). Also on July 23, CNN reported on PUMA (not affiliated with the aforementioned Puma PAC), an organization that formed in the wake of the May 31 DNC ruling on Michigan and Florida. The organization's name stands for "Party Unity My Ass," and that phrase, the CNN story states, is

[5.6] [n]ot exactly the slogan you want heading into the presidential nominating convention, but one being repeated online and in neighborhood bars by a group of disenchanted Democrats...Why are they angry?...Some of the PUMAs accuse Democratic leaders of rigging the primaries to favor Sen. Barack Obama, while others feel that he is not qualified to be the party nominee, let alone competent enough to lead the country. (Mark Preston, "PUMAs Stalking Obama," <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/07/23/preston.puma/>)

6. Unlikely friends and unexpected enemies

[6.1] For the moment, the Clinton fans who are antifans of the Democratic Party and Obama's nomination feel far more allied with other political marginalized fandoms—the supporters of defeated candidates Dennis Kucinich and Mike Huckabee, for instance—than they feel inclined to unite with their opponents in the Clinton-Obama fan base wars. One current perception among Clinton fans is that McCain's campaign has done a better job expressing sympathy for Clinton voters' wounded feelings than have Obama supporters, in part because McCain's backers now include members of Huckabee's marginalized fandom, and members of marginalized fandoms will always find common ground more quickly

with one another than they will find common ground with members of dominant fandoms. Such commonality seems to trump differences in ideology.

[6.2] The Republican nomination was decided months earlier than the Democratic race, and was also far less contested and controversial, so the various Republican candidate fandoms appear to have coalesced behind the party candidate with greater ease and speed than the Democratic fandoms are doing. Wrote one poster on the Puma PAC blog, Firebelle Puma, on June 19,

[6.3] The night after Hillary made her June 7th speech I went to McCain's site and signed up. The people there were so nice to the Hillary people... We were all hurting and they were so kind... One McCainiac said she sympathized. She had been a Huckabee supporter and after he dropped out she came around to McCain, but she knew how disappointing it was, etc...

[6.4] Then out of curiosity I went to Obama's site...MAN. It was like "Clockwork Orange." Nasty. They hated Hillary. The site was full of very nasty comments about her. I don't just mean criticism of her positions, etc. I mean downright mean-spirited personal nastiness. (<http://blog.pumapac.org/2008/06/18/thanks-for-nothing-senators/#comments>)

[6.5] This post illustrates an idea that frequently arose on pro-Clinton blogs in the weeks after the May 31 DNC meeting: that Clinton supporters' natural enemies are not Republicans but Clinton-hating Obama supporters.

7. Fandom and the dream of political participation

[7.1] The resentment that Clinton voters currently feel toward the Democratic Party and its nominee may not negatively impact Obama's chances of winning the November elections in any substantial way. Nevertheless, that there would be any resistance at all on any Democrats' part to the Democratic nominee at this stage in the election cycle seems absurd, given how opposed most Democrats are to the current Republican regime. I have argued above that the explanation for this apparent absurdity is marginalized fandom: Emotional investments and affective relationships seem to trump ideological commitments and long-standing party loyalties. Given the typical workings of marginalized fandoms, the aftermath of the Democratic primaries and nominating process—the party division threatened by some Clinton voters—is not only not absurd but eminently logical, and could have been predicted far in advance of the DNC's May 31 ruling.

[7.2] By framing both Clinton's and Obama's followings as fandoms and the rivalry between the two camps as a war between fan bases, I am endorsing the claim made by van Zoanen (2004) and others: Politics resembles entertainment. Both political events and media

texts produce stars, narratives, climactic incidents, supporting players, supplemental materials, and, among citizen-consumers, fans who form interpretive communities. In other words, I am not claiming that either the Clinton fans or the Obama fans are more correct in their parsing of the various scenes and stories that have constituted the long drama of the Democratic nomination process. Rather, I argue that the two groups of supporters interpret events according to very different evaluative criteria, just as the various camps of *Buffy* fans that Johnson (2007) describes interpreted all of the plot twists of the show's late seasons differently. To a great many ordinary citizen-consumers, political elections and all they entail, however much they claim to be "real" events, are media texts just as much as fictional and nonfictional (reality or documentary) television programs and films are media texts, and thus are available to be read and followed with the same fannish interest as all entertainment media.

[7.3] Fan wars are sometimes resolved, as happened in the wake of the Dean versus Kerry 2004 primary contests, in which Dean's marginalized fandom ultimately reconciled itself to the Democratic nominee despite suspicions that the media had unfairly amplified Dean's mistakes (especially "The Scream") and thereby handed Kerry crucial early victories in the nominating process. However, other fan wars are never resolved. Sometimes the hatred felt by the marginalized fandom for the dominant lingers, as does the loathing felt by the dominant fandom for the marginalized fandom, without the two camps reaching a consensus that permits them to reunite into one large fan base. Writes Johnson, concerning the online *Buffy* fan base wars, "Fans do not easily agree to disagree—differing opinions become co-present, competing interests struggling to define interpretative and evaluative consensus...[H]ostile interpretative stalemates [can] fragment online fan communities into splinter groups with 'their own strongholds...where they consolidate and preach to the choir'" (2007:288–90, citing Brooker 2002).

[7.4] If there are any questions about how Clinton supporters can possibly hold out against cries for party unity issued by DNC Chairperson Howard Dean, Obama, and even Clinton herself, one need only keep in mind that political supporters are fans and are therefore as capable as disappointed fans of being as intransigent and as insistent on segmentation and separation. In fan base wars that concern rival romantic pairings (such as *Buffy*/Angel vs. *Buffy*/Spike), it's clear that a number of disappointed members of the marginalized fandom (*Buffy*/Spike) turn against the text that they once loved. After the *Buffy*/Spike romance was foreclosed by the show's narrative, numerous *Buffy*/Spike fans became strongly antifannish about *Buffy*, "hating" on the show continuously on various message boards, with some going so far as to quit watching the series entirely. Likewise, for political fans, loyalty to a single politician's candidacy,

and the defeat of that candidate, can lead fans to reject the party outright or to tune out from politics until 2 or 4 years later, when another election cycle begins, at which point their preferred candidate may return or they may find a new candidate to back. In both entertainment and politics, the final stage of participating in a marginalized fandom can be the turning away from the initial object of investment, whether it be *Buffy* or the Democratic Party. In the end, some fans' investments in a particular story line, character, or candidate trumps their investment in the larger program or party.

8. Sentimental citizenship

[8.1] Is one lesson of this year's elections, then, that politics should not or must not be equivalent to entertainment, and that citizens who become interested in following elections should not or must not behave like fans? Has fandom turned out to pose a danger to democracy because voters are apparently not making decisions on the basis of ideological principles or party affiliation, but on the basis of their deep emotional fannish investments? The argument that democracy and high emotion can never be allowed to intertwine is at least as old as the Enlightenment. But in fact, the levels of commitment evident in the fannish behavior of voters this year are what a number of political theorists have long desired and anticipated. Political fandoms, and their use of digital tools for public debating and campaigning, can be regarded as the beginnings of the fulfillment of the promise of democracy.

[8.2] Voter participation in U.S. presidential elections was approximately 60 percent or better from 1952 through 1968 and has been declining since then; in 1996, participation fell below 50 percent (Garrick Utley, "Low voter turnout expected on Election Day," <http://archives.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/11/02/voter.turnout/index.html>). The cause of low turnout most often cited is voter apathy, but one political party has been seemingly less content to allow its members to remain indifferent than the other. Duncombe (2007) praises neoconservative Republicans for successfully disseminating propaganda—simple and compelling narratives and images—that has aroused Americans' emotions and enabled the Republican Party to hold onto the presidency and to further many items on its agenda with little opposition for the last 8 years. Progressives, Duncombe insists, must do the same if they hope to sway Americans to become politically involved:

[8.3] Progressives should have learned to build a politics that embraces the dreams of people and fashions spectacles which give these fantasies form—a politics that understands desire and speaks to the irrational; a politics that employs symbols and associations; a politics that tells good stories... Progressives, secular as well as religious, need to make peace with the less-than-rational nature of

politics. This will take some effort, for it means rethinking an entire tradition of political thought. (9)

[8.4] Gray (2007), citing George Marcus, also asserts that politics must speak to voters' emotions in order to prompt their participation:

[8.5] Marcus rebukes the common assertion that democracy is in danger, with entertainment and emotional appeal solely trivializing serious issues...[Marcus argues that] "emotion is required to invoke reason and to enable reason's conclusions to be enacted."...Consequently, Marcus calls for "a sentimental citizen," gifted with "affective intelligence," and he flips common assumptions to suggest that a wholly "rational," "cerebral" electorate is one unfit to govern. (78–79)

[8.6] The intensity of emotion displayed by political fandoms during this primary election season seems to answer the calls that Duncombe, Gray, and Marcus issue. Voters who engage with the election cycle via fannish protocols are the opposite of apathetic. They find ways to create intriguing narratives from the news events concerning their favorite candidates, and they circulate those narratives widely to fellow fans via blogs and other Web sites; they communicate with one another in the terms of desire and the irrational, in symbols and associations. In a sense, they are the "sentimental citizens" for which Marcus looks. Van Zoonen (2004) even more explicitly links political engagement with fandom:

[8.7] I would argue for the equivalence of fan practices and political practices...Fans have an intense individual investment in the text, they participate in strong communal discussions and deliberations about the qualities of the text, and they propose and discuss alternatives that would be implemented as well if only the fans could have their way. These are, in abstract terms, the customs that have been laid out as essential for democratic politics: information, discussion, and activism. (63)

[8.8] Emotions, then, should not be regarded as "a secondary component of politics, accepted for strategic reasons at best, but worrisome and undermining when taking center stage" (van Zoonen 2004:64); rather, van Zoonen (also drawing on Marcus) states, emotion in politics is "the key to good citizenship because emotional processes enable the use of reason" (64–65). Therefore, we should not look upon the strong reactions of Clinton's and Obama's supporters to each occurrence during the primary elections, including the latest sequence of events that has led some Clinton followers to break from the Democratic Party altogether, as a warning about how emotions can taint political judgment. Emotions prompt voter engagement, and according to Gray, Marcus, and van Zoonen, such emotion is a responsible and rational involvement in politics. What should be gleaned from Clinton's adamant following is not that the senator's fans

are "overly emotional" about her loss—a charge that would, in any case, run the risk of stereotyping women, a core constituency of Clinton's, as unfit to play a part in the public sphere as a result of their essentially sentimental, irrational nature. Their emotionality is a step in the desired direction for democracy—away from apathy and toward participation.

[8.9] What I hope to gain by adding the concept of dominant and marginalized fandoms to Theodoropoulou's and Johnson's theories of antifandom and fan-tagonism is an emphasis on the aftermath of fan base wars. Although antifandom and fan-tagonism make visible the dynamics of struggle between fan camps, they do not shed a great deal of light on what happens when the struggles are over. Fan base wars do not often end amicably, with both sides metaphorically shaking hands over a battle well fought. Even in sports and entertainment, rarely are these bitter clashes between two groups' opposed desires quickly forgotten. Rather, immediately after these contests, there is a question of what will be done with the marginalized group, whether they will be afforded respect or made to feel small, whether their perspectives and platforms will be recognized or ignored. In fan base rivalries concerning sports teams or media texts, the status of one group of fans as marginalized may not seem to have too much long-term significance. A television program may lose some viewers or a group of sports fans may rail bitterly against a league's incompetent referees, but the ethical cost of media producers or team owners ignoring the disappointment of marginalized fans is not evident. In politics, however—and this is the major difference between fan base wars that revolve around political issues rather than around entertainment events and productions—the potential cost to all Americans of wholly excluding marginalized fandoms' anger and criticisms is too high.

9. New media and participatory democracy

[9.1] Political fandoms are more than the fulfillment of the desire for a more invested, more emotionally attached electorate, which is the dream of sentimental citizenship advocated by Duncombe, Marcus, and others. Both dominant and marginalized fandoms are also the fulfillment of the desire for a more participatory democracy, one in which more individuals join in political discussion and willingly, even enthusiastically, take part in debates regarding what constitutes good government—a dialogue made possible by the ease and speed of Internet communication. Although vocal Clinton supporters may be gumming up the efforts of the Democrats to fight for the White House as a united front, their dissent elevates the concept of democracy.

[9.2] This marginalized fandom is using its online presence and power to insist that a democracy that is truly participatory does not consist only of participants' sameness and consensus but also their difference and multiplicity. If the Democratic Party leadership were to

have its way, if all of Clinton's supporters were to fall in line behind the new nominee, if Clinton voters' staunch objections to what they perceive to be imbalances and injustices that riddled the nomination process were to be ignored and disregarded, then the public narrative of the 2008 Democratic primary elections would be the result of what Jameson (1981) calls "strategies of containment," a censorship or suppression of the contradictions underlying historical events by the dominant powers, the victors of history. Blogs, message boards, icons, YouTube vids, and other digital tools of fandom currently permit Clinton backers to defy such containment. However long this defiance succeeds, that the organization of this marginalized perspective has been at all possible testifies to the possibilities of new technologies to make democracy more participatory and more inclusive because it gives more points of view greater weight and more widespread resonance than they could have hoped to achieve before the mid-1990s.

[9.3] A fandom is a collective. It brings together individuals who share common interests. Fandom facilitates discussions of its object, and it mobilizes support for that object. But since the mid-1990s, the power of collectives to recruit new members and to communicate information has been greatly enhanced by digital technologies. All of the fandoms I have alluded to are online fandoms, and although many fandoms have "live" or face-to-face components, it is difficult to think of a case of contemporary fan activity that exists completely apart from the Internet. Such cases exist, to be sure, but wholly offline fandoms are necessarily smaller, with fewer members and a smaller reach, than online fandoms. Hillary Clinton's fandom could not have voiced its complaints with as much strength, nor had them reported by the mainstream news media, without a significant presence on the Internet—significant in terms of the number of sites supportive of Clinton, the number of posts to those sites, and the number of registered members and views per day. Digital technologies are giving marginalized fandoms a greater chance than they ever had in the analog era to articulate their perspectives in force and in ways that allow them to be at least somewhat visible and noticed. Clinton's fandom is not the only political fan base that has used digital networks to its advantage during these elections; all the 2008 campaigns have used the Internet much more effectively than any past presidential campaigns. But new technologies are especially useful and important for fandoms after they have become marginalized, for without the World Wide Web, their perspectives, platforms, and critiques would be too easily lost, and their voices of dissent would be wholly absent from subsequent national conversations.

[9.4] The term *participatory democracy* was popularized by Ségolène Royal, a candidate in the French presidential elections last year. During the election season, Marc Crépon and Bernard Stiegler held a symposium investigating the seemingly redundant term

(how, Stiegler asks, can democracy be anything but participatory?) that was subsequently published as *De la démocratie participative: Fondements et limites* (On Participatory Democracy: Foundations and Limits) (2007). In his essay for the volume, "La démocratie en défaut" (Democracy in Default), Crépon posits that participatory democracy is not a new concept, but it lacked the technology required to make it a reality:

[9.5] If the idea of a democracy *more* participatory imposes itself in the current electoral campaign (simultaneously as one of the themes and as one of the means), it is in part because the idea is concurrent with...the technological means that offer new possibilities for participation, which have been dreamed of and desired *since always* by the idea of democracy...Neither this dream nor this desire date effectively from yesterday, and they have already been experimented with under diverse forms. But they were, until the present, handicapped by a *default of means* that limited the possibility of their being realized. (29–30; my translation)

[9.6] In other words, new technologies have opened up the possibility for the fulfillment of a greater range of the potentialities inherent in the idea of democracy itself. A more participatory democracy, facilitated by digital tools, is a democracy more fully realized.

[9.7] And by what operations do new technologies help democracy to overcome its defects? Crépon points to two defects currently apparent in democracy that a more participatory democracy can help to remedy: "a defect of power and a defect of hearing." Writes Crépon (2007),

[9.8] That which we dream of, a participatory democracy, is, first of all and above all, a giving back a bit of power to those who have none...This power is essentially that of speech—of a speech to which...the political elites are more and more deaf. This speech is not heard anymore except in its eruptions (protests, demonstrations, and so on), eruptions for which the political elites see no solution other than to minimize them...The project of a participatory democracy, as a consequence, cannot be disassociated from a new hearing of the mounting of these eruptions. (48–49; my translation)

[9.9] I propose that the marginalized fandom of Clinton serves as an example of the ways that digital technologies can be utilized for new types of speech. The speech of marginalized fandoms is speech that political elites (TPTB—the DNC's leaders, in the Clinton voters' case) would rather not hear but that must be at least acknowledged because marginalized fandoms now can use the power of the Internet to organize and to voice, en masse, their points of disagreement and their alternative perspectives. They can now create eruptions without physically gathering to demonstrate or protest—although plenty of Clinton supporters demonstrated at the DNC Rules and Bylaws Committee meeting on May 31. This

speech—the speech of the outnumbered or overpowered, the speech of the cult fandoms and the subcultures, the speech of the marginalized and unusual and underground communities, not the least of which are the poor, the ethnic, the children, the disabled, the LGBTQ members of society—has the power to disturb but also to enhance the mainstream, the dominant, the triumphant, the hegemonic social formations, the dominant fandoms, if only they are not only *acknowledged* but also *heard*, if only they are given the new hearing to which Crépon alludes.

[9.10] This is the lesson that can be learned from the strength of the dissent of the Clinton fandom to the Democratic nomination process: today, marginalized fandoms can make their speech heard in greater volume than could be done before the digital era, and in many cases, theirs will be a novel form of speech, one with different content than the speech of the dominant. That they can speak is not in itself enough, however; their speech deserves a different kind of hearing. A democracy—or a mediascape, or a society, for that matter—that determines its paths of action and maps its futures solely on the basis of counting the greatest number of votes, or of ratings, or of dollars, that only counts the opinions of those who win and never those who lose, is impoverished next to a democracy, mediascape, or society that would be capable of hearing its oppositional, outnumbered, overwhelmed marginalized groupings. Although a democracy that gives credence to its marginalized fandoms would run, as Crépon (2007) says, "the risk of a plurality with anarchic and explosive demands" (41), such a risk is warranted by the potential rewards of this new hearing. Marginalized fandoms of media texts, if given a new hearing, might have much to teach the media industries about the value and power of their underdeveloped and underpromoted properties, and such fandoms could point out various types of affective relationships between media consumers and products that could be cultivated. Similarly, marginalized fandoms of political candidates and causes might open up unconsidered territories the two parties might explore and could highlight crucial difficulties that the parties must overcome in order to achieve a more robust democracy. In other words, the complaints and concerns of marginalized fandoms can be regarded as more than bitter and pointless chatter in the ears of the powerful. Rather, they can be grasped as important critique—critique that is difficult for TPTB to hear but that is ignored at the expense of all parties.

10. Conclusion: The Clinton fandom's critique

[10.1] The Clinton fandom's critique aims at three primary targets. The first is the mainstream news media, which Clinton supporters accuse of consistently demonstrating bias toward Obama and of allowing sexism to taint its coverage of Clinton's campaign. The second is the DNC, which Clinton voters claim dishonored the

voters of Michigan and Florida when it failed to organize a revote in the two states, whose legislatures had scheduled their primaries early without the DNC's permission, and instead voted to seat Michigan and Florida's delegates with a half vote each and to award four of Clinton's delegates to Obama. To Clinton backers, the DNC's decision seemed to amount to a few party leaders ignoring the importance of a fair popular vote and determining the allocation of two states' delegates in such a way that favored one candidate over the other. The third target of the Clinton fandom's ire is the Clinton-bashing Obama fans, whose posts to liberal blogs and mainstream news sites seemed vicious in their attacks on Clinton.

[10.2] As the big story of the Obama-McCain contest plays out, and as journalists' interest in covering the anger of Clinton's supporters diminishes, the importance of the Clinton marginalized fandom's critique has yet to be considered. Media bias, sexism in American public discourse (particularly in journalism), voters' rights, and the question of a political party elite's power versus the power of individual Americans to choose their leaders—not to mention the matter of whether a standard of civil discourse can be established and maintained on the World Wide Web—are issues worthy of investigation and discussion. The history of 20th- and 21st-century American and British culture is in large part a history of marginal groups whose discoveries and worldviews were initially discounted and eventually adopted by the center: rock, punk, and hip-hop culture, queer culture, techie/geek culture, sci-fi/fantasy fandom, and comic book fandom are only a few examples of minor movements that have become major, or at least highly influential, forces in mainstream Anglo-American society. Marginalized fandoms articulate different perspectives than dominant fandoms and dominant culture; they express different investments, perceive different problems, and propose unusual solutions. If the Democratic Party and the United States as a whole are to improve how well they fulfill the promise of American democracy—if the concept of participatory democracy is to be realized, which it now can be, at least to a greater extent than ever before, as a result of the emergence of digital technologies—then the different speech of political marginalized fandoms must be given a new hearing. Rather than dismissing the impact of failed presidential campaigns that had managed to recruit enthusiastic followings, the electorate, and especially party leaders, must ask: what can be learned from the marginalized fandom of Ron Paul? Of Dennis Kucinich? Of Mike Huckabee? Of Hillary Clinton? What articulations and critiques emanating from these groups should not be missed? What perceptions and longings did these fans articulate, what frameworks did they pioneer that should be attended to, answered, and dealt with openly?

[10.3] The American Left has always been on the verge of schism. Jameson (1981) writes,

[10.4] it is precisely the intensity of social fragmentation...that has made it historically difficult to unify Left or "antisystemic" forces in any durable and effective organizational way. Ethnic groups, neighborhood movements, feminism, various "countercultural" or alternative life-style groups, rank-and-file labor dissidence, student movements, single-issue movements—all have in the United States seemed to project demands and strategies which were theoretically incompatible with each other and impossible to coordinate on any practical political basis. The privileged form in which the American Left can develop today must therefore necessarily be that of an *alliance politics*. (39)

[10.5] I have attempted to conceive of theoretically incompatible groupings in U.S. politics as fandoms. Fan theory has allowed me to account for the deep mistrust, resentment, and bitterness that can afflict the nodes that are expected to come together to form an alliance politics. Through the concepts of antifandom and marginalized fandom, I have aimed to make more understandable the motivations and desires of the Clinton supporters who threaten to break with the Democratic Party. What Jameson indicates in the passage above is more than the danger of postmodern society—the danger of endless fragmentation and splintering that can never truly coalesce or coagulate into unity behind a specific political program. Jameson also hints, as I have tried to do, at the hope of postmodernity, the proliferation of differences that will result in a richer liberalism, a society of greater dimensions, and a more fully realized democracy. Although it is almost impossible to know how the dissenting, distinct viewpoints, wishes, and wants of marginalized fandoms can and should be given a new hearing alongside the roar of the dominant fandoms, American democracy would be more complex, layered, and strong if these minor voices could be heard and in some way heeded.

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"Emotions-Only" versus "Special People": Genre in fan discourse

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[0.1] Abstract—This essay looks at genre as a complex set of discursive threads running unevenly through production, TV text, and fan reception. Through a case study of the reception of fan favorite *Roswell*, this essay interrogates the role of genre in spectatorship. In its mixing of teen and science fiction elements, *Roswell* trod upon contested generic spaces, eliciting strong reaction from its viewers. Connections between genre and gender came to the fore, as producer commentary linked science fiction with male audiences and teen romance with female audiences. Fans responded with analyses that greatly complicated and at times overtly rejected industrial suppositions regarding the gendered work of genre. Through these fan conversations, we can witness the complexity of genre as discursive thread moving through not only TV texts but also multivariant fan responses. I intend this essay to work at two levels. My analysis of fan responses to *Roswell* models the possibilities of a close study of genre discourse. At the same time, my case study probes the nature of genre in fan engagement, as genre discourses intersect with other fan concerns such as character identification, perceptions of textual quality, and questions of gender representation. While we cannot necessarily look to fan accounts for proof of how viewers engage with genre, they do tell us how fans frame their engagement with genre, how they incorporate genre into their performance of fannishness, and how they perform and thus enact genre itself as a shared cultural process.

[0.2] Keywords—Audience analysis; Fan analysis; Gender; Genre; Online fandom; TV

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[0.3] Anything but ordinary...a cosmic blend of high school angst and otherworldly intrigue.

—*Daily Variety*, as quoted on the *Roswell* season 2 DVDs

1. Introduction

[1.1] The current TV mediascape is replete with programs that profess to shake up familiar generic territory, combining diverse generic elements, from science fiction to teen romance, horror, family melodrama, the western, and film noir. Over the past decade, genre mixing has manifested as an industrial branding strategy for narrowcast networks like the WB, UPN, the CW, and ABC Family, with programs including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *Angel* (1999–2004), *Roswell* (1999–2002), *Smallville* (2001–present), *Veronica Mars* (2004–7), *Reaper* (2007–present), *Supernatural* (2005–present), and *Kyle XY* (2006–present). In turn, broadcast networks are following suit with programs such as *Heroes* (2006–present), *Journeymen* (2007), *Lost* (2004–present), and *Moonlight* (2007–8). And these are only the more obvious examples. We can see genre mixing in everything from *Days of Our Lives* (1965–present) to HBO's *The Wire* (2002–8). Such mixing is nothing new, but its prevalence in our contemporary media moment does speak to the centrality of genre as a force in both production and reception cultures.

[1.2] Over the past decade, media scholars such as Rick Altman (1999), Jason Mittell (2004), and James Naremore (2008) have sought to reinvigorate genre theory, transforming it from its formalist tradition of

scholarly categorization to a study of a dynamic cultural process. This essay builds on their work as it looks at genre as a complex set of intertwined discursive threads that run unevenly through production, media text, and fan reception. Through a case study of the reception of teen/fantasy fan favorite *Roswell*, this essay interrogates the role of genre in media spectatorship. In its mixing and remixing of teen and science fiction elements, *Roswell* trod on contested and impassioned generic spaces, eliciting strong reaction from its viewers. Connections between genre and gender came to the fore, as producer commentary linked science fiction with male audiences and teen romance with female audiences. Fans responded with analyses that greatly complicated and at times overtly rejected industrial suppositions regarding the gendered work of genre. Through these fan conversations, we can witness the complexity of genre discourses as they move through not only TV texts but also multivariant fan responses.

2. Genres: Pure or mixed? Category or discourse?

[2.1] Until recently, most theories of genre have considered genres as categories with discernible borders. Some scholars approach genres as inclusive systems of organization and categorization, so that a wide range of media texts could fall within the rubric of a given genre, provided each text meets certain criteria. Others develop

canonizations of ideal genre films, concentrating exclusively on films that are the purest or best example of their genre (note 1). More recently, media historians have begun to look at genre differently, considering genres as ideas or cultural categories, tracing industrial histories of genre mixing, and exploring the role of a range of players—from producers to audience—in the creation, definition, and circulation of genres. In his study of film noir, James Naremore (2008) posits noir as an idea that encompasses not only classic noir films themselves but also the metatexts that surround them, such as fashion and advertising. Along the same lines, Jason Mittell (2004) looks at televisual genre as a process of cultural categorization, created at the intersection of text and metatext, through audience, press, and producer discourse. Mittell argues that part of understanding genre as cultural category means decentering the initial televisual text as the focus of generic definition. He posits that genre categories are constituted by cultural discursive practices of definition, interpretation, and evaluation, suggesting that these practices "define genres, delimit their meanings, and posit their cultural value" (16). He thus considers genres as culturally constructed, constantly shifting categories that gather hollow "clusters" of meaning and association (17). This approach moves beyond simply analyzing a media text to also exploring components of the metatext, including producer, network, and audience discourse.

[2.2] Building on Mittell, I suggest that we not only decenter the media text as the site of genre work, but also decenter the importance of category, cultural or otherwise, in our understanding of genre. My research indicates that categorization is but one of many ways in which generic discourses circulate across media text and metatext. Producers and fans alike use generic codes to associate media texts, characters, and narratives, to draw on already established meanings, and to make texts personally meaningful. Furthermore, fan discourses reveal an understanding of generic meanings as naturally multiple and layered, with generic discourse used to associate and suggest expectations and meanings, as well as—or, in many cases, rather than—to categorize. Thus it is imperative that we look beyond genre as categorization in order to understand the essential and multidimensional role genre discourse plays in media production and reception.

[2.3] In this light, I suggest a reorientation: rather than look at genre as category, I consider genres as multilayered sets of discursive threads. These shifting, serial clusters of associated meaning (to repurpose Mittell's term) move through text and metatext, without necessarily deferring to a final purpose of categorization. Such a perspective enables us to see the multiple ways in which generic discourse plays out in our media culture. Indeed, the genre discourse generated by fan engagement with TV programs like *Roswell* reminds us that genre is not only a formalist tradition belonging to the history of

the academy and movie reviewers, but also a web of ideas and associations that links producers and viewers across media texts and metatexts. These generic webs are dynamically on display in our contemporary context of cultural convergence, where media fans can in turn produce and share their own texts replete with generic signifiers.

[2.4] For the remainder of this essay, I will turn to the case study of *Roswell* to look at how fans engaged generic discourse in response to the program's genre mixing. I have considered fan discussions on bulletin boards, program-dedicated Web sites, and larger sites such as Amazon.com (<http://www.amazon.com/>) and the Internet Movie Database (IMDb, <http://www.imdb.com/>). *Roswell* fans enact genre in multiple ways, sometimes making overt generic declarations, and sometimes drawing on genre more subtly. Specific modes of genre discourse are often shaped by fans' specific writing spaces and their respective audiences. At times, fans name genres directly, categorizing texts or viewers; at times, they label genres by association, connecting programs together based on perceived generic similarities. They also evoke the texture or themes of genre in their analyses and creative works, and in some instances, they self-reflexively consider the role of genre in industrial processes and in their own engagement. Finally, they use generic codes as points of identification with story and character, making fictional narratives and characters personally meaningful or resonant through processes of genre personalization.

[2.5] I intend this essay to work at two levels. My analysis of fan responses to *Roswell* models the possibilities of a close study of genre discourse. At the same time, my case study interrogates the nature of genre in fan engagement as genre discourses intersect with other fan concerns such as character identification, perceptions of textual quality, and questions of gender representation. For evidence of the complexity of genre discourse, I turn to the many instances of generic reference in fan conversations online. Matt Hills (2002) and Kurt Lancaster (2001) have both rightfully warned against taking fan reports of their own reception at face value, noting the important dimension of performance in fan utterances. Nevertheless, although fan accounts cannot necessarily be looked to for proof of how viewers engage with genre, they do tell us how fans frame their engagement with genre, how they incorporate genre into their performance of fannishness, and how they perform and thus enact genre itself as a shared cultural process.

3. Transgenericism and fan engagement: *Roswell* as case study

[3.1] *Roswell* self-consciously blends science fiction and teen romance as it tells the story of a group of alien teens and their friends living in Roswell, New Mexico, the site of the famous supposed 1947 UFO crash (note 2). Like its more famous WB companion, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Roswell* mixes teen and fantasy generic elements,

dwelling simultaneously on the mysteries of the universe and the characters' coming-of-age battles with feeling alienated, literally and metaphorically. The pilot synthesizes romance and science fiction, as alien teen Max heals human teen Liz's bullet wound. Max's actions force him to expose his alien identity to Liz, which then triggers the teen romance plot: as a result of Max's revelation, Liz and Max become romantically involved, and the aliens' secret soon spreads to a tight-knit teen community, within which blossoms multiple human/alien teen romances. Together, the new friends face fantastic adversity as they simultaneously struggle through the normal trials of adolescence. Through its combination of teen and fantasy, *Roswell* casts its main teen characters as star-crossed lovers, using fantasy to accentuate teen experience and metaphor to depict teen concerns. *Roswell* merges the ordinary with the exotic, depicting teen crushes as otherworldly loves and literalizing teen alienation in the plight of the alien teen. Thus, *Roswell* does not simply sew together science fiction and teen romance in a loose hybrid, but rather melds them, creating new meaning through metaphor, a generic mixing that I refer to as *transgenericism* (note 3).

[3.2] *Roswell's* transgenericism finds its place in a long history of genre mixing in film and in TV. According to film historians Rick Altman (1999) and Steve Neale (2000), genre mixing has been a consistent strategy throughout the history of American film production. In his seminal work, *Film/Genre* (1999), Altman challenges notions of genres as unified and singular, arguing that commercial considerations have historically ensured the mixing of generic codes within individual films. From this perspective, genre mixing functions as an industrial strategy designed to appeal to diverse audiences with varying generic interests. We can follow these industrial logics regarding genre deployment from film to television, albeit allowing for differences in medium specificity and industry formation. In its attempt to find an audience first on the struggling WB network and then on the equally struggling UPN network, *Roswell's* genre mixing can certainly be understood as stemming from a long-standing industrial tradition (note 4).

[3.3] Altman extends the industrial logics of viewer address to imagine the role of genre in the viewing experience. In a sense, he accepts the industrial rationale behind genre mixing, suggesting that viewing processes do indeed follow industrial expectations. As he presents it, studios incorporate various generic elements in hopes of attracting more than one core audience, and in turn, viewers choose what film to see on the basis of their affinity for a specific genre. Taking this trajectory even further, Altman posits that these separate audiences respond to a given film primarily from the generic framework that drew them in the first place. He envisions audience members separate in space but united in generic

orientation, with each viewer imagining a community of viewers that share his or her generic interpretation.

[3.4] Inasmuch as we can unearth engagement with genre from online fan discourse, fan accounts line up at most only partially with Altman's multifaceted yet monogeneric reception scenario. In recounting how they became fans of *Roswell*, some viewers said that they were originally attracted to it because of advertising that suggested that it was a science fiction show. Others said that they gave *Roswell* a try because of its affiliation with the teen genre, which they gathered from the position of its time slot (after teen soap operas *Dawson's Creek* and *Felicity*). Many fans indicated that they watched despite suggestions that *Roswell* might also have elements of a genre other than the one that raised their interest in the first place. "Tonight was great...I got together with some friends to watch *Dawson's Creek* & to check out the new series *Roswell*. I wasn't really expecting to like this show, mainly because it's about aliens, but surprisingly I loved it!" ("I really enjoyed it," IMDb user comments, October 6, 1999) (note 5). Specific generic preferences may differ, but the underlying reasoning remains the same: viewers say they chose *Roswell* on the basis of singular generic taste.

[3.5] These examples suggest that singular generic preference may influence what a viewer chooses to watch (fan accounts also highlight other factors such as favored actors, networks, or fandom growth). Yet this does not mean that singular generic preferences continue to play such a crucial role as viewers actually watch a media text. *Roswell* fan discourse offers a more nuanced scenario of genre in viewer engagement: in speaking of their appreciation of *Roswell*, some viewers lauded it not simply for its science fiction, but for its personalization of alien experience via teen generic elements, or for its hyperbolizing of teen issues via science fiction, as in the following examples from fans in IMDb user comments: "When *Roswell* first started being broadcast around 2000, I deliberately boycotted it, dismissing it as the usual Buffy/Dawson's Creep garb, but that it ain't. It takes the subject matter that was in every good *X-Files* ep—Aliens and flips the entire perspective" ("Better than *Buffy*—A diamond show—Too few seasons," March 14, 2004). "People afraid of the sci-fi part should know the aliens are just like humans no green skin or big eyes. They just simply can do things normal humans can't...The alien part of the show is what causes a lot of problems that are impossible to have on other teenage dramas, which is why it's unique" ("One of the best TV series, so buy it on DVD," June 23, 2004).

[3.6] These viewer assessments may hint at preference for one generic strain, but they do not necessarily discount the presence and import of other genres in the viewing experience. In an extension of this acceptance of generic multiplicity (and in contrast to Altman's [1999] hypotheses of genre-specific viewing), many *Roswell* viewers indicate that they do not favor one set of generic

codes over another at all, but rather appreciate all of *Roswell's* diverse generic codes as they function together. Indeed, viewers often explain their investment in *Roswell* as bound up in its use of multiple genres, as these IMDb user comments show: "The *Roswell* recipe is a unique combination of romance, teen angst and a dash of humor, but before becoming a clone of Dawson's Creek, is spiked with a full twist of good old-fashioned science fiction, and occasionally horror" ("Yay, *Roswell*!," May 20, 2002). "I love the way the show melds the alien aspect and human emotion" ("Intriguing Show," April 23, 2002). "*Roswell* is so intriguing, I can't wait to see the next episode every week. The lead characters are, of course, beautiful and their dilemma is genuine: she's a small town girl...he's an alien. But this all makes great tension. It's a wonderfully original show without becoming cheesy (an alien in high school?)" ("Try My So-Called Life meets X-Files," October 26, 1999).

[3.7] These reviews emphasize *Roswell's* mix of generic elements without singling out any one strain as more important than the others. Along these lines, much viewer discourse suggests that the potency of *Roswell's* transgeneric synthesis is an important part of its appeal.

[3.8] Even more critical reviews foregrounded *Roswell's* multigeneric appeal, lauding transgenericism as an ideal momentarily held and then lost. Some viewers expressed outrage over what they perceived as a misguided, ratings-driven increase in the science fiction quotient in *Roswell's* second season. Fans speculated about the cause of the perceived generic shift, blaming writers, producers, or the network at large for upsetting *Roswell's* ideal transgeneric balance. In entreating viewers not to watch the second season, one user on IMDb attributes *Roswell's* generic mistakes to its writers, whom the reviewer believes were reacting to the threat of cancellation by overemphasizing the show's science fiction elements: "The first season of *Roswell* was a magical experience. It was about love, about alienation, about self-discovery and learning to trust people. Unfortunately, when the show was faced with cancellation at the end of its first season, the writers took what was a mystical show and made it into a hackneyed and badly written science fiction rip off" ("Stick with the first season," February 14, 2002).

[3.9] Through a mix of thematic description and generic naming, this review blames *Roswell* writers for transforming the show from a program that focuses on synthesizing teen and science fiction themes (love, alienation, self-discovery, and learning trust) into a "badly written science fiction rip off." Thus, as did many others, this review mourns *Roswell's* fall from transgeneric grace, upholding transgenericism as an ideal, in opposition to the repetitiveness of genre, which is reduced to the morally problematic position of the rip-off. Although those involved in production may see individual genres as routes to specific audiences, many fans embrace generic mixing as a marker of quality and taste (note 6).

[3.10] But even with this celebrating of transgenericism, fans still use generic language to separate themselves from other fans and to separate their show from other shows. A close look at the generic discourse running through the *Roswell* fan discourse demonstrates how fans may be simultaneously invested in innovative reworking of some generic rules and the maintaining of others. Thus, overall, *Roswell* fan discourse presents a far less linear picture of genre engagement than that envisioned by Altman (1999). Instead of embracing only one genre, many fans celebrate *Roswell's* mixing of genres, separating the show and its viewers from other, monogeneric programs, which they portray as less innovative because of their fulfillment of singular generic expectations. Generic discourse becomes a means of defending televisual taste and investment that might otherwise be culturally devalued.

4. Genre with a mission: Fans as generic experts

[4.1] *Roswell* fans also used genre as a tool for influencing production, as a common language shared by fans and producers alike, and as an arena in which fans wielded expertise even beyond that of *Roswell's* producers. Fans framed their (multi)generic expertise as a corrective that could bolster program quality and ratings. Some warned against science fiction and/or teen romance's association with devalued, extreme fannishness (note 7); other fans embraced *Roswell's* science fiction elements, arguing that through its reworking of a rich tradition of science fiction, *Roswell* could transcend its presumed status as "just a teen show." *Roswell* fans thus used genre not only to negotiate between seemingly contradictory otherings of audience investment, but also to lobby for their program's creative and ratings success (note 8).

[4.2] Like those who critiqued the increase in science fiction in *Roswell's* second season, a vocal group of fans lamented the shift in focus from science fiction to relationships and romance in *Roswell's* third season. As they strategized about how to spread the *Roswell* word, some fans expressed concern that prejudgments based on generic preference (or generic dislike) would keep the program from gathering viewers. Looking closely at these discussions further complicates our understanding of the ways in which fans draw on and debate genre within the larger currents of fan concerns. These viewers did not celebrate transgenericism or mourn generic balance lost, but rather pointed to *Roswell's* genre mixing as a problem in itself. In turn, they mobilized generic discourse to help campaign for changes that they felt would aid *Roswell* in its pursuit of quality and rating, which many fans saw coming hand in hand. Driven by *Roswell's* precarious ratings position, fans framed themselves as crusaders for its popularity, and they drew on generic analyses as part of their arsenal.

[4.3] One such conversation opened with an extensive post by one fan of the program, M, who posited that "at the most simplistic level there are essentially two types of successful TV series," what she termed "Special People" and "Emotions-Only" ([note 9](#)). According to M's definition, Special People programs focus on talented individuals who face conflict from without, whereas Emotions-Only programs feature "normal" characters whose conflicts come from within themselves and from their relationships with each other. M suggested that *Roswell* started out as a Special People show and eventually strayed into Emotions-Only territory, and in so doing, it lost its resonance and in turn viewer and network support.

[4.4] In sharing her analysis with other fans, M entreated fans to apply pressure on the producers to make *Roswell* successful, to "fix" it so that it would attract an audience on its own merits. She argued that *Roswell* would be best served by a change in formula, specifically a return to the more compelling Special People approach from which it had unwisely departed. Positioning fans as wielders of (generic) expertise, M's words painted a picture of possible fan power over the official televisual text itself, continually reminding participants that her Special People campaign was not only intended to keep *Roswell* on the air but to affect the direction of the program itself.

[4.5] The ensuing discussion drew on generic discourse in a range of ways. Most obviously, the opening post clearly functioned to categorize; M established Special People and Emotions-Only as her own generic categories. Members of the *Roswell* fan community then discussed and debated the resonance of these two categories, drawing on a broad range of generic language. They frequently invoked direct generic naming, aligning Special People with science fiction and Emotions-Only with soap opera. They also drew on associative naming, listing *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003) and *Felicity* (1998–2002) as Emotions-Only shows and *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001) and *The X-Files* (1993–2002) as Special People shows. Beyond naming and categorizing, these analyses draw extensively on thematic and textural description to discuss subtle transitions in the show's purpose and resulting effectiveness. The following response to M's opening post discussed the generic shifts from season 1 to seasons 2 and 3 through a nuanced overview of the thematic and textural generic elements in each season:

[4.6] I loved how s1 [season 1] was written:

- Aliens feeling alienated because of their secret
- Once they let the human's friendship in, they all worked together as a "team"...
- Unconditional love by all to their prospective partners
- Sacrifices—would do this for each other

[4.7] Now I move on to S2 (shudders at the thought)

- The "team" lost the "togetherness"
- Evil aliens are amongst the "team" now
- Noble people, doing noble things, still
- We did get one eppie of friends helping friends, saving each other
- The "team" started questioning each other and themselves...

[4.8] We have s3:

- Not so perfect King of all things, rears ugly head
- Friendships still broke but might mend
- You try to love who you want but you don't feel it back
- A one night stand will haunt you for life

[4.9] There is a new member of the "team" or is there?

[4.10] There is no generic naming at all in this response, nor any apparent desire to clearly categorize. However, through textural and thematic generic description, the commenter traces out complex transitions from season to season, assumedly from Special People to Emotions-Only, or some combination of the two.

[4.11] Many participants in the Special People thread addressed the changes in Max's characterization over the series' run. Participants argued that because *Roswell* started out as a Special People show, Max was initially presented as a hero, but the later transition to Emotions-Only compromised his characterization. From this perspective, with the turn to Emotions-Only, Max began to make poor decisions (having unprotected sex with someone other than Liz, for one) and became a less compelling hero. According to these fans, these changes turned viewers away because the program had betrayed rules of good writing, transforming Max from a sympathetic hero into a character with whom fans could no longer identify:

[4.12] I've been having a discussion elsewhere with a bunch of other fanfic writers about where it all went wrong in S2. Our writer's discussion centered around motivation and character development. Max was introduced as this larger than life, heroic figure. He maintained that throughout S1 and for the first part of S2 as well. But what happened after that was almost total character destruction and there was NO set up for it...that is SLOPPY, SLOPPY writing...the fact of the matter is that Max is supposed to be the hero of the show. Now, admittedly heroes can and do fall. However, when they fall there are RULES that the writer is supposed to follow. Number one is that he cannot fall so far as to be unredeemable...The hero needs to be able to still be seen as the hero, no

matter what he's done...A Special People show *needs* a hero.

[4.13] From this perspective, the writers of *Roswell* ignored the necessary rules of a Special People show—what we could read as *generic* rules—that must be kept in place to hold viewer engagement; in the case of Max, they compromised the rule that a hero must remain redeemable by having him betray his commitment to Liz. Because the *Roswell* producers did not follow this generic rule, Max became a problematic central character. In making this argument, these fans drew on their authority as producers of generic texts in their own right—as fan fiction authors as well as adept media readers. Indeed, they presented themselves as more skilled than the official *Roswell* writers, whom they argued betrayed essential generic rules by tainting Max's heroism. Thus genre became a knowledge set that placed authority, if not power, in the hands of fans.

[4.14] M reiterated throughout the thread that her Special People theory was not intended for the pleasure of analysis itself, nor just to get others to agree with her, but rather as a call to action. She entreated fans to participate in her campaign, in which fans would communicate to the producers what (generic) changes needed to be executed to fix *Roswell*: "I think it is hugely important that not only is the show renewed but also that it is changed. Because a renewal without change is only a postponement of the inevitable cancellation."

[4.15] M urged fans to write letters to the network explaining why *Roswell* needed to shift to the Special People generic format. Through this carefully envisioned campaign, we can clearly see that these fans perceived genre as a tool they could use to potentially communicate with the producers and possibly effect change. Through genre they envisioned a viewer/text/producer network of which they were a part, and in which they had the possibility for influence. Whether or not this influence was real or imagined, fans saw genre as a thread running through fan, text, and producer discourse. In instances such as these, genre emerges as an arena in which fans consider themselves critical experts, be they arguing for generic mixing, the proper following of codes, or even the recognition of basic and essential generic categories.

5. Gender and genre

[5.1] Various associations of social identity underlie generic discourse, not least of which are questions of gender. As part of their deep engagement with characters and plot developments, fans of *Roswell* reformulated generic codes, at times critiquing the program's presentation of gendered generic roles. In part through the generic discourse evoked in these conversations, fans contributed to a conversation on gender roles in our shared cultural imagination. Looking closely at fan discussions of *Roswell* through the critical lens of genre illuminates crucial audience investments such as gender identification; conversely, discussions of gender in fan

conversations reveal the centrality of genre as shared repository for meaning making.

[5.2] Gender is an especially relevant subtext for the case of *Roswell* because the show brings together two highly gendered generic cultural sets: science fiction, with its association with male fans, and teen romance, with its commonplace association with young female viewers/consumers. Despite the instrumental involvement of women in science fiction media fandom from its inception, these gender/genre associations appear entrenched; indeed, they emerge repeatedly in press discourse regarding *Roswell*'s struggle for survival ([note 10](#)). However, fan engagements with gender and genre often venture into less expected directions, overtly or more subtly reworking gender/genre binaries.

[5.3] An October 16, 2000, *Entertainment Weekly* article by Craig Seymour entitled "Space Case" discussing rumors of the upcoming generic changes in *Roswell*'s second season demonstrates such entrenched notions connecting genre and gender. Seymour reports that generic changes in *Roswell* were being put into place with a specific intention: to draw more male viewers. According to the article, producers intended to make these changes despite their belief that in so doing, they ran the risk of alienating the program's many female viewers:

[5.4] To lure new viewers, *Roswell*'s producers plan to radically shake up the formula that earned it a vocal—if limited—cadre of fans last season. This includes shifting the focus away from the star-crossed romance...In short, "*Roswell*" characters will do less sighing, and more sci-fi-ing. But will these changes anger old fans of the series?...it's a risk the struggling "*Roswell*" is going to have to take, especially if the producers want to build upon their core female viewership. "Sci-fi appeals more to men," says Watson [research director at Media Initiative]. "But if the show does it well, they should be able to keep a lot of their female audience and get men to watch, too." (<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,85635,00.html>)

[5.5] Seymour here maintains established assumptions linking gender and genre, citing the research director who asserts/assumes that science fiction will appeal more to male viewers while the romance narratives (directly named as "star-crossed romance" and textually evoked with the wordplay on "sighing" and "sci-fi-ing") will appeal to the female viewers. This quote, however, also suggests the inverse—that female viewers might be turned off by the inclusion of science fiction and stop watching as a result. Such a vision of generic singularity echoes Altman's understanding of genre-based viewing as it could be applied to questions of gendered generic preference: men watch for their singular investment in science fiction, and women watch for their corresponding investment in romance.

[5.6] Although fans rarely discuss their opinions regarding the relationship between generic preference and gender as directly as do producers and the press, if we look closely, we can see that *Roswell* fan discourse greatly complicates any binary perception of generic reception, including gendered generic reception. Even discussions seeking to divide between fan-created categories—like Special People and Emotions-Only (which could, if painting with broad strokes, be read as a divide between science fiction and melodrama, and gendered accordingly)—still complicate generic and gender binaries. Simplified notions of gender/genre binaries do not fit easily within discussions that slide fluidly between issues of romance and science fiction, as does much of *Roswell* fan discourse.

[5.7] In its genre mixing, *Roswell* itself challenges traditional gendered generic roles as it undermines clear dichotomies by positioning aspiring scientist Liz as narrator and as controller of the gaze, while Max, as alien, is placed into the role of spectacle. These reworkings of gendered generic roles emerged as central to *Roswell* fans who were deeply invested in identifying with the program's characters. As part of what Nancy Baym (2000:71–72) calls "personalization," fans of *Roswell* embraced the possibility of identifying with the reworked gender roles of the main female characters. Fan discourse thus pushed further at the program's breakdown of gender/genre binaries, locating female characters even more fully in the science fiction plot. For example, the extended analyses by a subcommunity of *Roswell* fans devoted to "the science fiction of *Roswell*" stressed the "importance of Liz to *Roswell*'s alien mythology." This bulletin board thread grew to many hundreds of pages over the course of *Roswell*'s three seasons ([note 11](#)). An introductory post summarizes the position of this community:

[5.8] First—and foremost—the general consensus is that Liz is important to the alien mythology and the pod squad, and that there is more to the Liz/Max connection than a mere attraction (i.e., a crush). How she is important is where the fun comes in...Liz is also viewed—when the episodes are rewatched—as a critical element to moving the plot along. She is the one who often initiates the actions that help unravel the aliens' mythology...She is a leader that takes action when it is needed, and is the intellect that comes up with the plan. She could possibly be the equivalent to Max—whom we find out in *Destiny* is the former leader of his people...Could her intelligence mean that she has the potential to obtain some of the "powers" that the pod squad have?

[5.9] This thread argues that Liz is central not only to *Roswell*'s teen romance plot (referenced somewhat derogatorily through the thematic and textural vocabulary "mere attraction" and "crush") but also to its science fiction ("alien mythology") narrative arc. In establishing

this argument through textual analysis, the participants point to the ways in which Liz's characterization seems to push at both traditional gender and generic boundaries. They enumerate Liz's leadership qualities, initiative, and intellect, finally concluding that she could be "the equivalent" of alien king Max, both as a leader and as the possessor of "advanced powers"—that is, endowing her with the status of alien. However, although their speculations celebrate and even increase Liz's empowerment, they also reestablish a devalued perception of teen romance, celebrating Liz's move from teen/romance to the realm of science fiction.

[5.10] The introduction to this extensive discussion, authored by Z, introduces new readers to the subject of Liz's role in the alien mythology, aligning Liz's experience in *Roswell* with Joseph Campbell's hero's journey myth. Z uses Campbell's ideas to interpret the moment in which Liz is shot and Max heals her as Liz's "Call to Adventure." In so doing, Z inverts expected gendered generic roles, changing hero to heroine without mention of this change:

[5.11] The Hero's Journey is a series of stages that a heroine must go through during her adventure...In our case, we believe that Liz is in the process of the HJ. Following are the HJ stages with references of how it applies to Liz (which I added): 1. Call to Adventure—The heroine must first be forcibly drawn into the adventure, this occurs from a normal occurrence and not something strange or supernatural. Liz's healing after being shot would be such an event.

[5.12] Although the most obvious reading of *Roswell*'s opening would label Liz as victim in need of saving by hero Max, Z draws on Campbell to reorient the opening scene as the beginning of Liz's hero's journey, casting Liz rather than Max as the hero. Z's interpretation seems an especially striking application of Campbell's scenario, as Campbell's hero's journey offers a more obvious gender-bound role in which to cast Liz: the princess. But Z makes no mention of Liz as possible princess, nor is Max discussed as hero, giving consideration only to Liz's hero's journey. Such an analysis complicates established gender/genre associations, reconstituting traditional gendered generic roles such as the male hero and female victim/princess. These shifts may have been put into motion by *Roswell*'s own intervention in genre and gender divides, but examples of fan discourse, such as the "Liz's role in the science fiction mythology" thread, clearly take this project of genre and gender depolarization even further than does the original televisual text.

[5.13] When fans discuss the role of gender in industrial strategy, they rarely posit the singular assumptions of a linear relationship between gender and genre of the sort that industrial discourses address through direct naming (as in the *Entertainment Weekly* article quoted earlier). Fan discourse commenting directly on the

role of gender in production and reception paints a much more complex picture than one of traditional, one-to-one genre/gender associations. For example, in an essay posted to a personal Web page (October 16, 2001, <http://theddd.net/>), one fan suggests that producers cater to gendered audiences—but through gender-related narratives, not genre-specific content. According to this fan critique, *Roswell*'s third season appealed to male audiences by defending Max's morally questionable choice to have unprotected sex with someone other than Liz. This analysis presents a far more multifaceted picture than that painted by the producers in the *Entertainment Weekly* article (not to mention by Altman [1999]), one in which genre and gender discourses intersect and compound one another as points of viewer identification and engagement:

[5.14] October 16, 2001—The Day the Ratings Fell...

[5.15] Yes, Max and Liz are back in each other's arms, so what could the problem be? Actually, it seems pretty clear to me. *Roswell* lost some of its fans. Because the ratings indicate a growth in male demographics—and yet a decrease in overall viewers—this would indicate that *Roswell* lost mostly female fans...why would female fans NOT watch *Roswell*? Well maybe it's because despite a loud, long out cry of protest—Jason Katims went right ahead and kicked us all in the gut. Thank you Mr. Katims. I asked back then if perhaps you had miscalculated—on just how much distorted character behavior your diehard fans were willing to deal with—and it seems they've answered. Yep you insisted—baby real, sex real, Max's shallow, clueless, insensitive behavior left open to interpretation. And with that, just whom have you attracted? Male viewers! Not exactly what UPN ordered. But, I can understand why male viewers would find all this attractive. Essentially it is a metaphor (I know how you love that word!) for every male who has ever thoughtlessly slept with someone and then regretted it later. A metaphor for his ability to rationalize a roll in the hay in a way that makes him the victim! And now Max callously revises history, oh wait, *bravely admits* that he was attracted to one of his own! Way to go Max! Liz should just fall all over herself forgiving you in light of that brave, manly admission!

[5.16] Rather than considering whether *Roswell* has gone too far in the direction of romance or science fiction, this review critiques changes in Max's characterization within the intertwined romance and science fiction narrative (alluded to through textural and thematic description). The author posits that the shift in Max's characterization is due to the producer's wooing of the desired male audience. The review also argues that *Roswell*'s return to romance in season 3 (referenced through the textural/thematic descriptive "Max and Liz back in each other's arms") did not appease disillusioned

female viewers but rather pushed them further away by casting Max's infidelity as sympathetic, making him more appealing to male viewers but less so to female fans. This fan review thus stands in direct contrast to the industrial genre/gender hypothesis that associates men with science fiction and women with romance. Instead, the review is infused with a sense of genre as a vehicle for a social agenda on the part of media producers and as a dimension of fan resistance and critical interpretation. This review is an example of how gender and genre discourses intersect and inform fan responses even when fans are not directly talking about either. Both gender and genre emerge as crucial points of contestation in the relationship between media producer, text, and fan.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] Generic discourses house important nodes of meaning that fans care about deeply. The complexity of fan responses to generic offerings often exceeds industrial assumptions and academic theory alike. *Roswell* offers an example of the cultural weight brought to genre from both the media industries and interpretive contexts. Overall, *Roswell* fan discourse presents a relatively nonlinear picture of genre engagement. Instead of embracing only one genre, many fans celebrated *Roswell*'s mixing of genres, separating *Roswell* and its viewers from other, monogeneric programs, which they portrayed as less innovative because of their fulfillment of singular generic expectations. Generic discourse thus became a means of defending televisual taste and investment that might otherwise be culturally devalued. *Roswell* fans also used genre as a tool for influencing production, as a common language shared by fans and producers, and as an arena in which fans wielded expertise, even beyond that of *Roswell*'s producers. Fans of *Roswell* framed their (multi)generic expertise as a corrective that could bolster program quality and ratings. Furthermore, as part of their deep engagement with characters and plot developments, fans reformulated generic codes, at times critiquing or reworking the program's presentation of gendered generic roles. In part through the generic discourse evoked in these conversations, fans contributed to a conversation on gender roles in our shared cultural imagination.

[6.2] Fan generic discourse is elusive. If we simply look for instances where viewers name genre or overtly speak of the role played by genre in their viewing, we will only see one layer of generic audience discourse. Fan cultures online offer us a resource to gauge the more transitory, elusive modes of genre discourse. On mailing lists, bulletin boards, and Web sites, fans analyze, debate, and form communities around media. In so doing, they enact genre in many different ways; sometimes they define or describe generic codes, sometimes they question the role played by genre in viewing, and sometimes they associate generic texts with other generic texts or with broader generic concepts. These diverse threads of generic discourse connect networks, producers, and viewers in larger processes of cultural meaning making.

Over the decade since *Roswell's* debut, fan engagement online has become more visible; within this context, we can see genre in process—or rather, genre *as* process—as generic discourses form, reform, and intersect in the continual production of fan-created metatexts.

7. Acknowledgments

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8. Notes

1. Such canonizations were common in genre studies during the 1980s and the early 1990s in works such as Jane Feuer's *The Hollywood Musical* (1993) and Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres* (1981).

2. For a consideration of *Roswell* as a hybrid of the male melodrama and the woman's picture, see Miranda Banks (2004). Neil Badmington (2004) considers *Roswell's* reenvisioning of the alien/human divide. For teenage viewership of the *Roswell* teen aliens, see Richard Campbell and Caitlin Campbell (2001).

3. On transgenericism, see Louisa Ellen Stein (2005, 2006). Jason Mittell (2001:153–95) argues that genre mixing actually functions to affirm individual genres through parody. However, a close look at the *Roswell* text and fan engagement reveals that parody is only one dimension of genre mixing. The thematic core of programs such as *Roswell* can be found in the melding of diverse generic elements. On genre mixing, see also Henry Jenkins's discussion of *Beauty and the Beast* as a hybrid generic televisual text in *Textual Poachers* (1992:120–51), Mimi White (1985), and Janet Staiger (1997).

4. Medium specificity shapes genre discourse traditions, as enumerated by Mittell (2001:xi–xiii), among others. Discursive notions of genre in convergence, however, bring to the fore the transmedia dimensions of genre, and thus can be usefully informed by theories of genre in film and in television.

5. Throughout this essay, I excerpt online fan discussion. However, I do not provide direct citations of fan conversations or more informal publications; I have made this methodological choice out of concern for protecting the online fannish spaces and authors/reviewers. My approach follows the guide set out by Storm King (1996). For other analyses of the methodological ethics of the study of online discourse, see Nancy Baym (2000), Sharon Polancic Boehlefeld (1996), Amanda D. Lotz (2000), and Michele White (2005).

6. Steve Neale (2000:207–10) discusses the presence of negative perceptions of genre within academia itself and within the history of genre theory. For fan discourses

addressing issues of quality, see Petra Kuppers (2004), Matt Hills (2004), and Sue Brower (2004).

7. On negative perceptions of fandom and fan investment, see Matt Hills (2005).

8. Jenkins's case study of fan response to *Beauty in the Beast* offers another rich example of how genre and gender representation function as sites of struggle between fans and producers, especially in programs that mix diversely gendered generic elements (1992).

9. The thread discussion was called "Is *Roswell* a 'Special People' show?" and was posted in 2001 on <http://www.fanforum.com/>; it is no longer available.

10. For a discussion of the association of gendered textual address and social audience, see Annette Kuhn (1987). See also Jenkins's analysis of the intersection between gender, genre, and audience in his discussion of *Beauty and the Beast* (1992:120–51); and Baym's (2000) discussion of male and female audience address and gendered perceptions of soap opera viewers. As Jenkins points out, science fiction media fandoms have always had a fairly large female constituency. Science fiction media fan communities grew as outlets for female sci-fi enthusiasts who felt alienated from the male-oriented science fiction literature fandom (48).

11. The original "Is Liz More Important to the Aliens/Mythology than we are led to believe?" thread was posted on May 4, 2000, at <http://www.fanforum.com/>, and the discussion it spawned is archived at <http://thesmudge.com/shapeshifter/Roswell/>.

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Painful pleasures: Sacrifice, consent, and the resignification of BDSM symbolism in The Story of O and The Story of Obi

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[0.1] Abstract—This paper examines slash fan fiction's contributions to BDSM discourses and symbolism. BDSM is culturally delegitimated as a sexual pathology, and protest against it highlights broad concerns about sexual consent within patriarchy while also misdirecting unease about sexual coercion onto the ritualized and eroticized exchange of power rather than social systems of domination. Contrasting the BDSM classic *The Story of O* with *The Story of Obi*, a Star Wars–based slash rewrite, facilitates a conceptual separation between erotic domination and the historical and cultural contexts that give shape to individual enunciations of sexualized power exchange, particularly by shifting from a psychoanalytic paradigm to consideration of chivalric "suffering for love." By calling upon the extensive shared knowledge of fan readers and the symbolism attached to the sexual conjunction of two same-sexed bodies, authors of slash fan fiction produce a constantly proliferating array of BDSM representations that challenge the speciation of erotic domination as an inherently destructive, unidirectional deadlock. They thus create unique narrative and semiotic tools for rethinking erotic uses of power.

[0.2] Keywords—BDSM; Bondage; Chivalry; Erotic domination; Fan fiction; Informed consent; Masochism; Obi-Wan Kenobi; Qui-Gon Jinn; Sadism; Sexual binaries; Sexual coercion; Sexual consent; Sexual difference; Sexual slavery; Slash; *Star Wars*; *The Story of O*; Submission

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1. Introduction

[1.1] In phrasing reminiscent of her characterization of pornography as "a theatre of types, never of individuals" (1969:51), Susan Sontag reduces sadomasochism to the performance of blank, biologically driven roles, writing, "Sadomasochism has always been the furthest reach of the sexual experience: when sex becomes most purely sexual, that is, severed from personhood, from relationships, from love...the aim is ecstasy, the fantasy is death" (1974:105). Sontag's comments mirror a widespread cultural delegitimation of ritualized erotic domination, consolidated when psychoanalysts first defined BDSM practices and fantasies as immature and destructive sexual pathologies, not merely things people do but reflective of a separable psychological class or type (note 1). Despite the work of many sex-positive feminists and queer theorists, ethnographic evidence suggesting that BDSM is just one of many relatively banal sexual styles in average couples' erotic repertoires, and the increasing visibility of BDSM-influenced imagery in popular culture, grim pronouncements like Sontag's, linking BDSM to a dangerous loss of self and a compulsive spiral inevitably ending in death, remain common (Beckmann 2001). Although academic accounts have increasingly acknowledged the pleasurable aspects of power, several strands of psychoanalytic and feminist theory remain skeptical of the sanity and authenticity of desires directed toward pain, manipulation, degradation, humiliation, or lack of agency.

[1.2] Yet excesses of protest also symbolically sanitize normalized modes of sexuality by redirecting doubts about the validity and morality of sexual consent within a patriarchal, heteronormative society onto a villainized out-group. Contrasting *The Story of O*, which maintains a privileged position within BDSM communities and discourses, with *The Story of Obi*, a radical subcultural homoerotic rewrite, facilitates a conceptual separation between erotic domination and the historical and cultural contingencies of oppression that give shape to individual enunciations of that theme. By calling upon the extensive shared knowledge of fan readers and the symbolism attached to the sexual conjunction of two same-sexed bodies, authors of slash fan fiction produce a constantly proliferating array of BDSM representations that challenge the speciation of erotic domination as an inherently destructive, unidirectional deadlock and create unique narrative and semiotic tools for rethinking erotic uses of power.

2. Painful pleasures in text and context

[2.1] Critics of BDSM repeatedly characterize ritualized sexual power exchange as inherently dehumanizing and thus describe desires and behaviors that make up such exchange as dangerously self-abnegating, particularly for classes of people socialized toward self-sacrifice. However, rather than being a realm of primal sexuality loosed from the relational bonds and rules of society and emotion, BDSM practices, fantasies, and representations extract pleasure from hybrid natural-

cultural bodies by manipulating not only corporeal sensations, but also the constructed meanings through which individuals come to understand and know their own and others' bodies and desires. By strategically reversing or magnifying binaries of sex, gender, class, and virtue, BDSM may reflect upon, satirize, or amplify existing social hierarchies. In this vein, Jørgen Johansen (2004) argues that the Marquis de Sade's genre-defining works posed a limited subversive potential. If BDSM may be called a theater of types, those types are explicitly social and interpolate historically specific categories of people (Noyes 1997). Just as dominatrix fantasies depend upon a dominant patriarchal order for their taboo allure, a homeowner sexually disciplining his maid carried vastly different connotations in de Sade's aristocratic era than it does within the present capitalist order.

[2.2] Reliance upon preexisting systems of sexual hierarchy can make BDSM play nearly indistinguishable from dominant sexuality as prescribed by ideological and repressive apparatuses. Although role reversals also abound, the declaration that one is free to choose sexual abjection often appears suspect when the declarer is a member of a group socially and legally defined by sexual submission. In her consideration of pop star Madonna's published experimentation with a variety of exotic sexual practices throughout her career, theorist bell hooks connects BDSM with larger social restraints on heterosexual exchange. She writes,

[2.3] Concluding her declaration with the insistence that "the difference between abuse and S/M is the issue of responsibility," Madonna neatly deflects attention away from the real issue of "choice." To focus on choice rather than responsibility she would have had to acknowledge that within patriarchal culture, where male domination of women is promoted and male physical and sexual abuse of women is socially sanctioned, no open cultural climate exists to promote consensual heterosexual power play in any arena, including the sexual. Few women have the freedom to choose an S/M sexual practice in a heterosexual relationship. (1994:18)

[2.4] Until recent decades, the legal impossibility of marital rape (still considered an oxymoron in American military law), the invisibility of domestic abuse, the economic privations and social scorn associated with single life for women, and the numerous difficulties involved in divorce constructed legal marriage as a kind of compulsory male-dominant sadomasochistic lifestyle with no safe words and no end or "outside" to the scene. Thus, for some feminists like hooks, women's masochism and submission result not from rational choice or legitimate desire, but from socialization in a culture that values female passivity and denies the legitimacy of lifestyles other than reproductive patriarchal heteronormativity.

[2.5] Some theorists thus attribute desires and emotions that individuals experience as deeply personal and real to external forces that uniformly determine the lives of everyone interpolated within the category "woman," seeing them as the result of group membership rather than of unique identities and experiences. Yet demanding that the only truly "authentic" and thus believable desires bear absolutely no relation to any external or biological force also posits an impossibly privileged position beyond discourse, culture, and language, instigating a fruitless search for the Real. Skepticism about participants' consent to BDSM scenes and relationships thus mirrors larger debates over all subjects' ability to act in their own interests or effect change when their consciousness remains constantly enveloped, influenced, and determined by ideology, which acts even before birth. What circumstances might uncouple a demand for erotic pain and domination from the biological determinism associated with the female body and the ideological determinism of patriarchal brainwashing?

[2.6] Slash fan fiction's use of same-sex characters from previously published sources in a constantly proliferating array of erotic adventures enables and encourages unique representations of BDSM that prompt radical reevaluation of sexual domination's meaning and effects, especially for a largely female readership. In her article "That Was Then: This Is Now: Ex-changing the Phallus," Lynda Hart (1993) argues that under some circumstances, same-sex bodies complicate and deconstruct naturalized associations between physical openness, femininity, masochism, and submission. Although female/female slash reinforces Hart's conclusion that lesbian sexuality implies a type of power exchange at the root of BDSM that exceeds the phallic and a type of phallic power that exceeds the physical, male/male slash between two same-sexed and same-gendered characters challenges her reliance on the butch-femme dichotomy, disrupting the notion that BDSM must rely on the supposedly irresolvable polarity of either biological or performative sexual difference. Femslash, m/m slash, and het writing each offer different horizons of possibility for the representation of BDSM, and writing from each mode can offer valuable contributions to a project of rethinking and resignifying the sexual body. However, some critiques are more easily performed or only possible within certain modes. Lesbian sexuality can exclude, decenter, and denaturalize the phallic in particular ways that sexual representations featuring anatomical men cannot. Likewise, experimental heterosexual stories, particularly in scenarios of female penetrative access to male bodies, can level their own critiques of heteronormative assumptions about gender and agency. Each of these modes of storytelling offers singular and valuable tools for relearning how to think, speak, and enact sexual identities, fantasies, and behaviors. Thus, whereas stories featuring BDSM in heterosexual or femslash fan fiction may perform their

own important work, the erotic conjunction of two same-sexed male bodies in BDSM slash forces a unique reappraisal of those sexual destinies and action potentials associated with one or another set of genitals.

[2.7] In addition, even in its most brief, sexually oriented forms, fan fiction BDSM occurs between characters individuated by richly detailed psychological and interpersonal backstories and who exist within a particular cultural and historical context, not between blank social types in a privileged space outside law and society. Exploring the advantages of writing in relation to a preestablished canon in two self-published fan essays, Jane Mortimer (1997b) suggests that unlike original fiction, which expends considerable time establishing basics of characterization, fan fiction immediately capitalizes upon readers' depth of knowledge and sense of familiarity and intimacy with the minutiae of a particular fictional world and its inhabitants. Specifically with regard to erotic writing, Mortimer explains,

[2.8] What I'm talking about is a seamless, mergeless whole, in which no character can be substituted for another, no sex scene can happen at any place other than where it is, and where not only is the world of the story reflected in the sex scenes, we learn more about that world by watching these people do it—because we learn their reactions to that world in their reactions to each other. (1997a)

[2.9] Thus, a profoundly character-oriented sexuality, premised upon a continuity of meaning between sexual behavior and behavior in other situations, emerges from an interaction between the skillful machinations of fan authors and the background knowledge of fan readers. Even in BDSM, fan fiction characters resist complete reduction to man/woman, femme/butch, top/bottom, and master/slave binaries, not only because many characters' earned masculinity grants entrance into a paradoxical realm of both normalcy and individuality, but also because, even before the story's inception, these particular characters carry meaning for readers, and for other characters, that far exceeds interpolation within the constraints of those categories alone (Warner 2000). Because of a vast surplus of detail, in fan fiction sadomasochistic pleasures entail a much more personal, idiosyncratic purpose and origin than that sustained by the clash of two empty social types. Character choices thereby become attributable to individual particularity rather than group membership alone, inviting readers to enter into complicated webs of emotional and experiential recognition rather than merely assigning equivalence according to corresponding positions within social hierarchies.

[2.10] Further, a slash story's position as one among thousands of equally plausible relational patterns creates a clearer sense of choice than any singular story, whose narrative closure suggests that the characters' ends are inevitable and irrevocable. Although trends and tropes

certainly exist, forms of innovation and stylistic vogue change rapidly in Internet-facilitated exchanges, while few if any structures of representation span the entire fractured landscape of slash microcultures. Serving alternately as ideal, provocation, and horror, BDSM carries no fixed meaning within fan circles and contributes to larger fan discourses on the limits and meaning of equality, happiness, and power (note 2). As readers follow the rapidly expanding erotic adventures of any given pair of characters, they may read the same power struggles repeatedly resolved in a variety of genres, and although BDSM narratives may present the most vividly sexual negotiation of power, they are unlikely to always contain the most dystopian version of that negotiation that readers encounter. BDSM roles thus fail to define characters whose lives readers experience as multiple.

3. Suffering for love in *The Story of O(bi)*

[3.1] Fan author Lilith Sedai's slash fan fiction adaptation of a paradigmatic BDSM classic highlights some of the unique contributions produced and promoted by the use of previously published same-sex characters within the context of a fan writing community. *L'histoire d'O* (*The Story of O*), published under the pseudonym "Pauline Réage," may claim a place among the most well-known and influential BDSM stories, such as the literary works of the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. It is perhaps the most important erotic novel of the 20th century. First written as an erotic letter intended to regain her lover's waning interest, it was published in an expanded, novel-length version in June 1954, and it won the Prix des Deux Magots a year later (Bedell 2004). Sedai's highly acclaimed *Star Wars*-based rewrite, *L'histoire d'Obi* (*The Story of Obi*), also reaches novel length, coming in a bit longer than Réage's book, and when published (first on the Master_Apprentice mailing list, then on September 30, 2001, in the Master_Apprentice Web archive), it carried an NC-17 rating and warnings for BDSM content. Both stories chronicle a naive young person's initiation into sadomasochistic ritual. However, although sexualized violence and degradation lead Réage's O through an inevitable decline toward total negation and death, Sedai's use of a same-sex pairing and her characters' canon background from *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* as well as the Jedi Apprentice books (Lucas 1999; Watson 1999; Wolverton 1999) facilitates her renegotiation of BDSM's fatalistic reputation.

[3.2] *The Story of O* and *The Story of Obi* consistently question their protagonists' ability to actively choose to participate in BDSM practice, as ideological and repressive external forces undermine the credibility of their agency, although O and Obi repeatedly give their consent. The two protagonists' struggles to provide or withdraw consent, and thereby to exert control over the narrative and their own bodily reality, mark a site of key symbolic importance for considering the moral and legal

implications of BDSM and slash's contributions to that discourse. Both tales begin with an initial request for consent. When brought to the Roissy mansion by her lover for her initiation, O consents to accompany him inside and meekly agrees to each of his conditions for entrance. However, although O repeatedly offers her consent throughout the novel, she most often does so in complete ignorance of the acts she has sanctioned. Upon learning the full extent of her masters' plans, she often protests or attempts to escape, only to have her previously granted "blanket consent" and inability to physically resist flaunted before her by her captors. Her lover René explains his play with her consent in these lines:

[3.3] It's because it's easy for you to consent that I want from you what it will be impossible for you to consent to, even if you agree ahead of time, even if you say yes now and imagine yourself capable of submitting. You won't be able not to revolt. Your submission will be obtained in spite of you, not only for the inimitable pleasure that I and others will derive from it, but also that you will be made aware of what has been done to you. (Réage 1965:32)

[3.4] O's situation is extreme, because for organizational, ethical, and legal reasons, many BDSM communities advocate that practitioners follow a code known as "safe, sane, and consensual," which requires that all participants provide consent while of sound mind and after fully understanding the scope and risks of each activity to be undertaken (stein 2002). Although some practitioners favor edgier behaviors that other community members judge unsafe, including a kind of binding consent, most also require that participants have a safe word. Calling out the safe word decreases the intensity of activities or even immediately ends a scene, in effect permitting participants to withdraw their consent at any time. However, even in its most binding form, consent within BDSM practice must remain informed to meet legal and community limits. The concept of informed consent was codified in the Nuremberg Code (<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/references/nurcode.htm>) as a response to Holocaust atrocities and a prerequisite for doctors and researchers who use human subjects. It requires the absence of coercion and full disclosure of all pertinent information. Debates regarding the ethical place of deceit in research with human subjects consistently invoke the logical paradox of consent to a set of circumstances that participants do not or cannot fully understand. Throughout *The Story of O*, knowledge deliberately withheld by dominant characters renders O's uninformed consent virtually meaningless.

[3.5] Instead of affirming O's willing participation, her ritual pronouncement and withdrawal of consent serves as one of several narrative strategies that progressively dehumanize her. O's agreement to participate rests upon the assumption that she has a self with desires and a will that makes a difference and can impose its dictates on the

outside world through her words; as a performative statement, the act of giving consent assumes that voicing or withholding consent creates two different realities. By repeatedly requesting, receiving, and undermining her consent, O's masters demonstrate her complete lack of agency, flaunting her inability to either prevent or demand abuse. O never fully understands this paradox, although by the novel's close she begins to appreciate the extent of her masters' coercive force. When René and her new master, Sir Stephen, require O to help bring a new girl to Roissy, O begins to appreciate that she had exerted only illusory control over her life. "'You'll never get her to agree to go to Roissy,' O said. 'I won't? In that case,' René retorted, 'we'll force her to'" (Réage 1965:144). René's utterly nonchalant belief that he can force any woman into sexual slavery profoundly undermines O's consent to willingly enter that position. O begins to recognize her total lack of agency as she observes that it is impossible for the women inducted into Roissy to say "no," that their "no" only provides erotic delectation for their "owners."

[3.6] "After we've come back from the Midi," O said. "I'll take you, or René will."

[3.7] "To see what it's like, I wouldn't mind that," Jacqueline went on, "but only to see what it's like."

[3.8] "I'm sure that can be arranged," said O, though she was convinced of the contrary...once she was in, there would be enough valets, chains, and whips to teach Jacqueline to obey. (Réage 1965:175)

[3.9] Thus it becomes apparent that although O eagerly consents to all manner of punishment and degradation, she was never truly in a position to refuse any portion of these tortures.

[3.10] Like *The Story of O*, *The Story of Obi* presents a series of narrative complications surrounding the issue of consent. Lilith Sedai's retelling develops aspects of the canon relationship between the frequently slashed pair Obi-Wan Kenobi and Qui-Gon Jinn, characters from the Star Wars films and books. By setting *The Story of Obi* within the period of Obi-Wan's apprenticeship to the Jedi master Qui-Gon, Sedai immediately establishes an inherently unequal power distribution, one within which present legal opinion would consider sexual consent tenuous at best. Evidence from published Star Wars canon indicates that Jedi apprenticeship entails both a teaching relationship and a vow of absolute obedience by the apprentice, an institutionalized imbalance that delegitimizes sexual exchange between masters and apprentices even more than do most relationships between a minor and an adult "in a position of trust." Stories that pair the two vary between ignoring the problem completely, disregarding Qui-Gon's canonical death and allowing Obi-Wan to age and attain the fully adult title of Jedi knight, and dealing explicitly with the meaning of consent in such circumstances and the potential social, cultural, and legal ramifications such a couple might face

even a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away (note 3). Obi-Wan's ability to consent to a BDSM relationship with Qui-Gon therefore reflects and magnifies issues inherent in Obi-Wan's consent to any relationship with his master.

[3.11] *The Story of Obi* begins with an unusual deferral of consent to Obi-Wan. Although Sedai extrapolates from Star Wars canon to posit that only masters and knights may generally accept a mission from the Jedi Council, leaving apprentices bound to follow wherever their master leads, in this case the right to refuse a mission falls to Obi-Wan because of the assignment's special circumstances. As a hybrid diplomatic, spiritual, and warrior order, the Jedi in Star Wars canon perform a variety of tasks for the government of the interplanetary Republic, including peacekeeping, political negotiation, and covert operations. As the mission outlined by the Council in *The Story of Obi* requires Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon to go undercover as a slave and slaveholder in order to investigate whether a newly discovered planet is suitable for admittance into the Republic, the Council allows Obi-Wan to decline the necessary trials involved in assuming the slave role. Sedai explains the subterfuge as the result of two conflicting Republic laws, the right to religious freedom and a ban on slavery. The Riadans claim that their religious practices require a "humane" form of sexual slavery. After consenting to assume the role of Qui-Gon's personal slave for the duration of their mission to the planet Ria, Obi-Wan departs with Qui-Gon to investigate and weigh this claim (note 4).

[3.12] Although it takes a good portion of the book for a reader to discover all those forces that, from the very outset of her journey, undermined O's ability to consent, Sedai explicitly and clearly erases Obi-Wan's consent at its very pronouncement and even earlier, in the author's notes preceding the story itself, which state, "Obi-Wan neglects to pay careful attention to a briefing, agrees to accept an unusual mission assignment, and lets himself and Qui-Gon in for more trouble than either of them bargained for." Like O, Obi-Wan commits himself to a set of circumstances he does not fully grasp, although unlike O, he, having been inattentive, is solely responsible for his uninformed consent, and throughout the remainder of the story he retains the ability to meaningfully say "no." The paradox of Obi-Wan's story lies in his repeated expression of control over the narrative and over other characters, including his master, through his informed consent to greater and greater acts of sexual submission.

[3.13] Thereafter, as Obi-Wan adopts behaviors and attitudes required for a successful subterfuge, his long-repressed erotic love for Qui-Gon comes to the fore. Although he is acting as Qui-Gon's sexual slave for the purpose of inconspicuously gathering evidence, Obi-Wan's genuine emotional attachment colors the extent to which he adapts to his role. When circumstances require his public flogging for the infraction of looking a free man in the face, an act also forbidden to O, Qui-Gon falters at the brutality required by his role as a slave

master. Obi-Wan uses his consent to transform the face-saving violence into an expression of his trust in Qui-Gon to do him as little harm as possible, and thus also into a mark of his devotion. When another faux pas by Obi-Wan requires his branding, Qui-Gon flatly refuses, ready to forsake their mission and expose their deceit. Obi-Wan persists, again maintaining their duty to the Republic by giving his consent to wear the violent mark as a symbol of submission to his role as a Jedi and his love for Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon rightly concludes that Obi-Wan's consent constitutes a demand, hardly a passive bending to external demands.

[3.14] Obi-Wan squirmed his way free, just enough to turn his head to Qui-Gon, catching his Master's anguished eye. "Brand me. I beg your favor, my Master!"

[3.15] [...] "Would you, Master? Would you deny me the chance to wear your mark...in love?" Obi-Wan's eyes were bright with unshed tears.

[3.16] "Slaves have no rights." Qui-Gon felt the rage dissipating and his control along with it. He seized at the crumbling walls in desperation. "And you have no right to demand this of me." (Sedai 2001)

[3.17] In the face of Obi-Wan's demanding willingness to subsume himself both in the mission and in his adoration of Qui-Gon himself, the Jedi master relents. Unlike O, whose false consent merely serves to confirm her absolute powerlessness, Obi-Wan's consent masters his master and shapes reality for both of them.

[3.18] Not only does *The Story of Obi* demonstrate a wider range of potential BDSM subjectivities than is offered by *The Story of O*, but Sedai's interpretation also challenges the speciation of eroticized power exchange as the practice of a pathologized out-group. Obi-Wan's determination to transform his physical punishments into a proof of his devotion situates *The Story of Obi* within genre conventions that predate von Sacher-Masoch and the psychoanalytic construction of masochism. Arguing that before the late 19th century, literature portrayed a man's submission to his beloved's dictates as a normal stage of courtship, Carol Siegel suggests in *Male Masochism* (1995) that Victorian psychoanalysts pathologized male chivalric submission in the form of "suffering for love" as a way of consolidating masculinity against the threat of first-wave feminism. Rather than pathology, Siegel argues that the term *masochism* reflects a cultural stigma on male submission, suggesting that

[3.19] within the context provided by an overview of past representations of love, it would seem that the articulation of desires to fall down in worship at the feet of the beloved, to be teased, or even struck by her must be considered just idiosyncratic variations of the role of lover, of no

more diagnostic significance than desires to see her in a silk dress or to kiss her fingers. (1995:10)

[3.20] O likewise claims to accept her suffering as a proof of her love, reflecting after her first foray into Roissy, "She did not wish to die, but if torture was the price she had to pay to keep her lover's love, then she only hoped he was pleased that she had endured it" (Réage 1965:26). However, she has not made a conscious choice among alternatives; O's assertion that she endures trials to demonstrate the depths of her love functions as a rationalization by which she may delude herself that she has some control. That this is a delusion becomes increasingly clear as the man O supposedly loves so very powerfully takes a new lover and transfers O's ownership to a man she neither knows nor loves. Obi-Wan's sufferings may more readily align with the traditions outlined by Siegel; they constitute a deliberate sacrifice intended to demonstrate his worthiness to his beloved. Not only is Obi-Wan able to escape punishment by force or stealth (options available to him because of his status as a Jedi, not his status as a man), but unlike O, who repeatedly withdraws her consent when faced with the true nature of her condition, he never falters in his resolve; even while in pain Obi-Wan chooses to accept the price of proving his devotion.

[3.21] Furthermore, as Obi-Wan becomes more fully aware of and submissive to his love and desire for Qui-Gon, he also gains greater power through oneness with the Force, a mystical power in Star Wars mythology that is produced by every living thing and binds the universe together, and whose manipulation gives the Jedi their supernatural abilities. (The Force is described in ways reminiscent of some practices in Eastern spirituality.) By fully accepting himself, Obi-Wan masters the doubts and fears that lead to failure and evil in the films' canon, and therefore each act of submission, degradation, and humiliation suffered by Obi-Wan leads him deeper into the source of his power. Like Zen Buddhism (on which many martial arts films have been based), Jedi philosophy considers the self within the context of collective needs, and on a metaphorical level the supernatural abilities of the Jedi serve as a manifestation of what any individual with an enlightened purity of purpose may accomplish. Unlike O, who releases her "self" into the keeping of individual human masters, Obi-Wan releases his "self" into the will of the cosmos, a will that consists primarily of balance and compassion (note 5). Because Obi-Wan's individual love for Qui-Gon emanates from a larger cosmic compassion and awareness of the unity of all things, Obi-Wan overcomes physical torments by submitting himself to the will of the universe, personalized in the figure of his master.

[3.22] "You will not need the vise, Master," Obi-Wan spoke softly, walking demurely to take his accustomed place at Qui-Gon's left side, one pace back.

[3.23] "I know." Qui-Gon's voice was hollow, broken. He reached, taking a set of tongs in unsteady hands. [...]

[3.24] "You will have to lock him into the vise, immobilize him—"

[3.25] "No." Qui-Gon dropped the priest to the earthen floor with unceremonious contempt. [...]

[3.26] The slave—the padawan Kenobi [note 6]—lay perfectly still, unbound, as the first iron touched his skin, darting in with the grace and speed of an adder, to kiss the smooth white flesh and flick away. Obi-Wan merely inhaled slightly, a faint hiss of pain, unmoving. His Master threw the tongs and iron down, face shuttered, as he lifted the second iron. Corm could not help himself, creeping closer, watching Obi-Wan's still, peaceful face and serene eyes. Again the viper struck and recoiled. (Sedai 2001)

[3.27] Unlike O, who unknowingly consents to a piercing and branding and then later must be held down to receive them, Obi-Wan transcends pain through the strength of his personality, will, and resolve. Later, as the story progresses, Obi-Wan gives ever more potent evidence of his personal power: during an attempted rape, he defends himself from 30 armed men, and when he is anonymously sold in a slave auction, the story's ultimate scene of dehumanization and humiliation, Obi-Wan performs a Jedi kata reserved for seasoned masters of the art, a feat that requires transcendence not only of pain but of the physical plane of existence itself. His journey through sexual submission leads Obi-Wan nearer to the full actualization of his own desires and abilities, allowing him to complete his apprenticeship and realize his spiritual potential.

[3.28] In stark contrast, *The Story of O*'s title character finds herself increasingly empty of identity, desire, and purpose, which leads to her ultimate suicide; whereas Obi-Wan finds unity with everything in submission, O's submission unifies her with the alienated nothingness of oblivion. Although mentioned in passing, O's profession as a fashion photographer seems to provide less and less structure to her life, until she prioritizes René over her career by guiltily hiding her photos when he comes to visit (note 7). Unlike Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon, who share a professional duty and goal, O's lovers bind her to them only by their sadistic pleasure in her debasement, a pleasure that proves fickle as each deserts her in turn. Without any external goal or identity, O is progressively reduced to her role as a sexually open body, initially implied by the synergy between her name and the words *open* and *orgasm* (*ouvrez* and *orgasme* in French), as well as the shape of the female genitals. Unlike Obi-Wan, who ascends to superhuman status, O loses agency, and this loss reaches its pinnacle when, dressed as an owl and seated at a party, she is mistaken for a statue by the guests. Thus quite literally dehumanized, completely

lacking in any ability or desire to act in her own interest or preservation, and on the brink of abandonment by Sir Stephen, O asks to be allowed to kill herself. This is quite possibly the only time her consent brings about a change in reality. O's desire to completely negate her own existence rather than face life without the sadistic attentions of men ultimately not in love with her brings *The Story of O* to an abrupt end.

[3.29] *The Story of O* thereby culminates in the triumph of difference as the roles of master and slave exacerbate, magnify, and wholly polarize the relative positions of O and her master. Early on, O's first visit to Roissy unifies the meanings of the terms *slave*, *woman*, and *submissive* when she is told,

[3.30] You must never look any of us in the face. If the costume we wear in the evening—the one I am now wearing—leaves our sex exposed, it is not for the sake of convenience, for it would be just as convenient the other way, but for the sake of insolence, so that your eyes will be directed there upon it and nowhere else, so that you may learn that there resides your master. (Réage 1965:16)

[3.31] Paradoxically, O's meeting with a female "master" most profoundly reinforces women's anatomical and biological destiny as empty vessels within the narrative. Not of equal status with male masters in *The Story of O*, the female master trains female slaves for male pleasure and thus gains some limited personal autonomy. When O arrives in her keeping for branding and piercing according to Sir Stephen's wishes, the female master explains the work she performs:

[3.32] There was still a third reason for what she had done, which she explained to O. She was bent on proving to every girl who came into her house, and who was fated to live in a totally feminine universe, that her condition as a woman should not be minimized or denigrated by the fact that she was in contact only with other women, but that, on the contrary, it should be heightened and intensified. [...] Apart from the rings and the letters she would wear when she left, she would be returned to Sir Stephen more open, and more profoundly enslaved, than she had ever before thought possible. (Réage 1965:152–53)

[3.33] O's submission creates Sir Stephen's dominance, O's sexually open female body confirms Sir Stephen's masculine impenetrable wholeness, and finally O's descent into absolute nothingness validates her master's being. Sir Stephen may feel more alive through his ability to take women like O and make them want to die.

[3.34] Because *The Story of O* expresses conglomerated sex-gender-power polarities as absolutes and natural or essential parts of a person, imagining their reversal in the last pages of *The Story of O* may seem impossible. Examining *The Story of O* from a psychoanalytic

perspective, theorist Jessica Benjamin (1988) attributes all sexual domination, including normative patriarchy and formal BDSM ritual, to Oedipal forces. Therefore, her conclusions, stated in gender absolutes, require significant translation to accommodate the possibility and reality of nonheteronormative relationships and identities, but cast considerable light upon those polarities that govern the biologically determined world inhabited by O.

[3.35] Finally, the symbolization of male mastery through the penis emphasizes the difference between them and her. It signifies the male pronouncement of difference over sameness. Each act the master takes against the slave, O, is one that establishes his separateness, his difference from her—through his power to negate her. In the tension between the recognition of like humanity and negation of Otherness, the male represents the one-sided extreme. He is continually placing himself outside her by saying "I am not you." He is using her to establish his objective reality by imposing it on her. [...] The penis symbolizes the fact that, however interdependent the master and slave become, the master will always maintain the boundary—the rigidity, antagonism, and polarization of their respective parts. (Benjamin 1988:288)

[3.36] Benjamin thus explains BDSM in *The Story of O* as an irresolvable, unidirectional deadlock that must ultimately lead to total destruction of the submissive, either through abandonment or death, and frustration of the sadist, because broken and dehumanized partners cannot provide the recognition of mastery and presence that he craves. Benjamin summarizes and points toward some ultimate hope when she notes, "What finally leads the partners back to frustration is that each continues to deny one side of the self" (1988:293). Were reversal possible, were it possible for O to assert herself and her master to yield, Benjamin suggests that their relationship might not lead toward such a wholly dystopian end.

[3.37] Sedai's *The Story of Obi* presents evidence of far greater potential for wholeness. While Obi-Wan clearly exhibits paradoxical agency even at moments of extreme submission, thus preparing him to form a completely integrated self as Benjamin proposes, the greatest obstacle to the story's satisfactory conclusion lies in his master's spectacular disintegration under the pressure of performing his sadistic role. Although masters in *The Story of O* are never point-of-view characters and appear to have absolutely no moral, legal, or spiritual compunction regarding their treatment of the women they enslave, *The Story of Obi* shifts point of view between Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and several peripheral characters, thereby tracing the psychological journey of dominant characters as well. Although Obi-Wan glories in the freedom to both express his long-hidden love for Qui-Gon and perform his sworn duties as a Jedi (permitted by his role as a sexual slave), Qui-Gon finds irresolvable contradictions between his duty to investigate Ria's

slavery-based religion and his responsibility to protect his student from harm, especially the harm threatened by his own desires, made inappropriate by the difference in their legal statuses, Qui-Gon's position of authority over Obi-Wan, and Obi-Wan's trust in him. Thus as his role demands he take greater and greater liberties with Obi-Wan's body, Qui-Gon's growing attraction to his student and enjoyment of the situation disgust him as a Jedi and a teacher.

[3.38] Each degradation suffered by Obi-Wan, especially those perpetrated directly by Qui-Gon, batters Qui-Gon's sense of himself as a moral, self-contained, and largely asexual Jedi master and teacher. Qui-Gon interprets even Obi-Wan's own expressions of love and desire for his master's approval as proof of Qui-Gon's inability to provide proper psychological support and physical protection to his ward. Thus, after they have taken on the roles of slave and master, Qui-Gon construes Obi-Wan's moments of psychological and spiritual mastery as symptoms of his own failure. The branding in particular pushes Qui-Gon past his ability to cope.

[3.39] Qui-Gon nodded once, grimly, setting his teeth, and reached for the tongs. "What mark do you wish, Obi-Wan?" The words slurred between his closed teeth; Qui-Gon did not know if he could ever force his jaw to open again.

[3.40] "As you like, Master." Obi-Wan's soft, calm voice would have soothed him if anything could.

[3.41] Qui-Gon ran his fingers through the cold metal pieces in their wooden box on the anvil, extracting two inch-tall shapes, very similar ones. Set close together, they would form a stylized J. Very well. If Obi-Wan must be branded, then let it be a reinforcement of his identity. Let him be branded a Jedi. [...]

[3.42] Qui-Gon flung the second pair of tongs from him and lunged to kick the brazier, spraying coals in a wide arc across the earthen floor. He would not look at the burns he had placed on his padawan.

[3.43] Obi-Wan raised himself, examining the mark his Master had chosen to put on him. "Jinn," he whispered so softly that Qui-Gon was not sure Obi-Wan even knew he had spoken aloud. The low sound was filled with wonder and pleasure [note 8].

[3.44] Qui-Gon wept. (Sedai 2001)

[3.45] Unable to accept possessiveness or sexual enjoyment of vulnerability as part of his personality and unable to forgive himself for the pain inflicted upon Obi-Wan in the service of their mission, Qui-Gon immediately confesses his conduct in the most unflattering terms possible to the Jedi Council upon their return, a spectacular act of self-destruction swiftly followed by Qui-Gon's formal relinquishment of his Jedi identity, the

most central part of his sense of self. He does so symbolically by fleeing the Jedi temple, leaving behind his light saber, a potent symbol of adulthood and the completion of training according to Star Wars canon. Unlike the world inhabited by O, which lacks law, family, or any other social institutions that could constrain the power of the Roissy masters, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon answer to the Republic government and the Jedi Council for their actions.

[3.46] In "Master and Slave," Benjamin further theorizes her largely Hegelian argument that master and slave roles become self-defeating because only circularity and mutual recognition, not polarity, lead to satisfaction of either participant's needs. She writes,

[3.47] On the surface, the sadist wants the other's submission. But in addition, less obviously, the sadist may be hoping for a response he never got, the response of an intact person who assures him that his assertion of self is in fact not so destructive. If the relationship remains limited to the level of play, if the masochist gets up and walks away a free person, this deeper satisfaction is partly achieved. We might speculate that the expression of violence is a replay of the original thwarted impulse to discover the other person as an intact being who could respond and set limits at the same time. (1988:292)

[3.48] Because difference arises in *The Story of Obi* as a result of age and guild status rather than biology, to fulfill Benjamin's conditions *The Story of Obi* must then culminate in Obi-Wan's symbolic assumption of his free status as a Jedi adult, thereby asserting his ability to survive Qui-Gon's punishments, ferociousness, and abandonment. On this point *The Story of Obi* echoes other abandonments in Star Wars canon. As a child, Obi-Wan refused to accept Qui-Gon's initial rejection of his apprenticeship, and after finally accepting him, Qui-Gon later attempted to set Obi-Wan aside in favor of a new apprentice (Lucas 1999; Watson 1999; Wolverton 1999). In each instance, by remaining whole himself, Obi-Wan healed his fractured master.

[3.49] Obi-Wan assumes a responsibility associated with adult autonomy by accepting a mission to find and bring back Qui-Gon. In so doing Obi-Wan takes on Qui-Gon's dominant role, usurping his place by capturing and thus outwitting his former master. The reversal facilitates true satisfaction of the needs whose frustration left both men to suffer alone after their mission on Ria. Only by sexually submitting to his padawan can Qui-Gon become vulnerable enough to accept Obi-Wan's love, and only by accepting Qui-Gon's submission is Obi-Wan able to completely comprehend Qui-Gon's love for him. His earlier inability to do so had driven him to crave dramatic proofs like the flogging and brand. The couple's union manifests itself as a telepathic link, a common plot device across slash fandoms originating in *Star Trek's* canonical mind meld. Finally, through perfect telepathic

communication, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan surpass those unidirectional polarities imposed by their assumption of master and slave roles, entering the very sort of undifferentiated intermingling familiar from analyses of slash featuring radical equality (Jenkins 1992; Kustritz 2003; Lamb and Veith 1986; Woledge 2006) ([note 9](#)).

[3.50] A low scream was wrung from Qui-Gon's chest, and Obi-Wan hesitated, reaching along their bond for pain, but there was none, only a cascade of need and lust and love. It drowned him, overwhelming him—he was the giver, the needed, the beloved. His hips pumped frantically as he responded to that need, the giving and taking simultaneous and beautiful between them. [...]

[3.51] *Yours.* The joined voice was rich with the soft timbre of his Master, bright with his own ecstasy and optimism. No longer a question of mastery or ownership, only perfect sharing...and at last, peace. Obi-Wan sighed with contentment, nestling closer on Qui-Gon's chest, feeling his Master's strong fingers stroke his hair as together, they bid farewell to the cave of fear. ([note 10](#)) (Sedai 2001)

[3.52] In Sedai's slash rewrite of the unflinchingly brutal and nihilistic *Story of O*, same-sex bodies and a fully articulated world with continuity of characterization beyond the sexual replace grim representations of BDSM with images of circularity and hope.

4. Tools for sexual signification

[4.1] In the end, neither *The Story of O* nor *The Story of Obi* creates a truly consensual BDSM relationship for its title character, as even though Obi actively demands to participate in his punishments and branding, neither character professes enjoyment of pain or submission either in itself or as a means to achieve greater personal sexual satisfaction, as the term *masochist* implies. Rather, O and Obi suffer for love within the constraints of circumstance. *The Story of O* and Réage's autobiographical essay "A Girl in Love," according to Geraldine Bedell, argue that love itself has no other form than a destructive mania leading to death, because one partner in every couple experiences the emotion more acutely than the other and thus easily falls prey to a perilous desperation (Bedell 2004; Réage 1965). Yet characters in *The Story of Obi* struggle to reconcile sadomasochistic urges, appear to transcend BDSM binaries at the story's close, and lack familiarity with the roles they assume, suggesting that their previous relationships contained no hint of BDSM-tinged power exchange. A third point-of-view character in *The Story of Obi* thus observes, "Obi-Wan Kenobi...was a dangerous warrior. As such, he would bend his back willingly before one man only: his love-Master, his teacher. Before any other, he would probably die rather than submit" (Sedai 2001). O does die rather than submit to a third master. In both cases, masochism emerges as a response to particular situational

and interpersonal pressures, not as an enduring sexual pathology that the characters would feel compelled to fulfill in any relationship.

[4.2] However, as fantasy, *The Story of O* and *The Story of Obi* present readers with a "scene" they consent to participate in by choosing to read a scenario marked as containing BDSM. Both stories provide multiple points of entrance for imaginative or physical reenactment, transforming the narratives' coerced suffering into fodder for readers' "safe, sane, and consensual" play. Rather than because of any singular speciation or pathology, readers may gravitate toward O's or Obi's journey to experience taboo titillation, increased sexual intensity, novelty, intrapsychic or interpersonal extremes, or any number of roles or fetishes they find attractive either conceptually or in practice. By borrowing and recombining sexual and social elements, readers build their own hybrid scenes of sexual domination. The unique conjunction of same-sex erotics and the richly contextual lives of previously published characters combine in BDSM slash fan fiction to produce a new language for thinking about erotic power exchange. Placing fan-authored alternatives like *The Story of Obi* in public (cyber)space offers a broad potential readership access to valuable symbolic tools for thinking and enacting sex, relationships, and masochistic pleasure.

5. Acknowledgments

[5.1] I would like to thank the women (and the few men) of Master_Apprentice who create a rich fictional playground and enduring community in the face of adversity. I am indebted to my mentor and friend Robin Brown, who sustained this project for a decade, as well as to my committee, Jay Cook, Bambi Haggins, Tom Fricke, and June Howard, who challenged my thinking and pushed me toward a new framework.

6. Notes

1. The acronym or term *BDSM* is most often explained as standing for either "bondage, dominance, submission, and masochism" or "bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism." Because it is a shifting signifier subject to hidden, subcultural rules of usage, other meanings remain possible; for example, the "SM" of BDSM may also stand for "slave [and] master" in some situations.

2. In other work I deal at length with the question of narrative heterogeneity within slash writing, theorizing that slash is defined by multiplicity and ever-expanding variety, rather than by the ideology of any one story or trope. Thus, my interest here in same-sexed and same-gendered BDSM as enacted by Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon in a revision of *The Story of O* requires contextualization within a larger concern that no single case study represents slash writ large. Elsewhere I analyze slash representations of same-sexed but opposite-gendered BDSM, nonconsensual violence, and reciprocal egalitarianism while arguing that understanding slash at

the level of content requires the presence of numerous narrative and relational forms (Kustritz 2007).

3. Despite being in his early 20s, an age that American constituencies would recognize as adult, for most intents and purposes as an apprentice in the Jedi guild system Obi-Wan remains a legal minor.

4. Although characters may have been assuming alternate identities that allow them to contact hidden parts of the self or interact with a desired love object since the very inception of storytelling, many slash communities share a particular enunciation of that theme, whereby in the course of an undercover assignment or trade mission characters choose to have sex with each other to maintain their cover or fulfill foreign ritual obligations. After consenting to sex for the sake of some external goal, the characters often unearth hidden feelings that can range from debilitating shame and disgust to a joy leading to a mutually fulfilling and enduring relationship.

5. Plenty of material presents itself for a much more detailed reading specifically contrasting *The Story of O's* Catholic imagery with *The Story of Obi's* quasi-Buddhism, but that discussion far exceeds the purview of this inquiry.

6. *Padawan* refers to the rank of Jedi apprentice in Star Wars canon.

7. "The next day she took home with her the proofs of the shots she had made the day before, not really knowing whether she wanted, or did not want, to show them to her love, with whom she had a dinner date. She looked at them as she was putting on her make-up at the dressing table in her room, pausing to trace on the photographs with her finger the curve of an eyebrow, the suggestion of a smile. But when she heard the sound of the key in the front door, she slipped them into the drawer" (Réage 1965:63–64).

8. Jinn is Qui-Gon's last name; thus, Obi-Wan misinterprets Qui-Gon's mark as a personal rather than professional claim.

9. The literal mirroring of sexual acts also functions as an important symbol in male/male slash. In this case, Obi-Wan's sexual penetration of Qui-Gon completes their role reversal. A more fully articulated analysis of sexual symbolism in male/male slash may be found in Kustritz (2007).

10. *Star Wars: Episode V—The Empire Strikes Back* portrays the cave of fear as a place with a unique conjunction of mystical energies where a Jedi must face the fears and weaknesses that could lead to his or her own defection to the dark side of the Force. Emerging from the cave of fear represents one of many stages of spiritual mastery for a Jedi (Lucas et al. 1980).

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Women, Star Trek, and the early development of fannish vidding

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[0.1] Abstract—This paper argues that the practices and aesthetics of vidding were structured by the relationship of *Star Trek*'s female fans to that particular televisual text. *Star Trek* fandom was the crucible within which vidding developed because *Star Trek*'s narrative impelled female fans to take on two positions often framed as contradictory in mainstream culture: the desiring body, and the controlling voice of technology. To make a vid, to edit footage to subtext-revealing music, is to unite these positions: to put technology at the service of desire. Although the conflict between desire and control was particularly thematized in *Star Trek*, most famously through the divided character of Spock, the practices of vidding are now applied to other visual texts. This essay examines the early history of vidding and demonstrates, through the close reading of particular vids made for *Star Trek* and *Quantum Leap*, how vidding heals the wounds created by the displacement and fragmentation of women on television.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan vid; Gender; *Quantum Leap*; *Star Trek*

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1. Introduction: What is a vid?

[1.1] Vidding is a form of grassroots filmmaking in which clips from television shows and movies are set to music. The result is called a *vid* or a *songvid*. Unlike professional MTV-style music videos, in which footage is created to promote and popularize a piece of music, fannish vidders use music in order to comment on or analyze a set of preexisting visuals, to stage a reading, or occasionally to use the footage to tell new stories. In vidding, the fans are fans of the visual source, and music is used as an interpretive lens to help the viewer to see the source text differently. A vid is a visual essay that stages an argument, and thus it is more akin to arts criticism than to traditional music video. As Margie, a vidder, explained: "The thing I've never been able to explain to anyone not in [media] fandom (or to fans with absolutely no exposure to vids) is that where pro music videos are visuals that illustrate the music, songvids are music that tells the story of the visuals. They don't get that it's actually a completely different emphasis" (personal communication, October 24, 2006).

[1.2] Jake Coyle ([note 1](#)) makes this mistake in a recent news article, "The Best Fan-Made Music Videos on YouTube," in which he surveys the many "startling, worthy videos" made by fans, the best of which "make use of film in public domain or lifted from copyrighted material." Coyle's article, which was distributed by the Associated Press and widely linked across the Internet, begins, "Since the dawn of YouTube, fans have been melding their own amateur video with the music of their favorite bands." Coyle's underlying—and unquestioned—assumption is that the fans who make "fan-made music video" are fans of the audio source, that these fans edit footage to music because they like the bands. In this kind

of music video, the visuals serve the music; Coyle describes these videos as music "revisualized online."

[1.3] But the assumption that music videos are intended to illustrate music leads Coyle to misunderstand the only songvid he discusses, and perhaps not coincidentally, the only "startling, worthy" video on his list made by women: T. Jonesy and Killa's "Closer" (<http://www.imeem.com/francescacoppa/video/COjLJwKz>; 2003). Coyle describes "Closer" as "footage from 'Star Trek,' scratched and colored to roughly match the style of the original video"—that is, director Mark Romanek's notorious music video for Nine Inch Nails. Coyle grapples with "Closer," which he finds "weirder" than the other music videos he discusses, possibly because its footage is so evidently *not* engaged in the project of "revisualizing" its music. Coyle then suggests that T. Jonesy and Killa are using *Star Trek* to reimagine Mark Romanek's original video for the song, except that "Closer" doesn't have much to say about Romanek's footage. What "Closer" does have to say, it says about the character of Mr. Spock; in other words, both the Nine Inch Nails song and Romanek's video are used to provide new meaning to the source footage. Coyle ultimately admits this, noting that, "The song (which includes explicit lyrics) makes Spock look terrifying," but he doesn't seem to realize that this marks a shift from music criticism to media criticism.

[1.4] Vids like "Closer" come from a tradition of vid making significantly older than "the dawn of YouTube." In 2005, the year that YouTube was founded, media fans celebrated the 30th anniversary of vidding at Vividcon, an ongoing convention dedicated to vids. For those fans, the art of vidding begins with *Star Trek* and Spock. The Vividcon community traces its lineage back to Kandy Fong's *Star Trek* slide show, "What Do You Do With a Drunken Vulcan?" (1975). At the same time, much has

changed between that first slide show and today's vids. Vidding has expanded far beyond *Star Trek*: thousands of vids have been made analyzing popular source texts, and most television shows and movies have had at least one vid made about them. Vidding has also advanced technologically: vidders have worked with slide projectors, VCRs, and computers; they have used film stills, VHS tape, and DVD source footage; they have shown their work at conventions and distributed it through the mail and over the Internet in both downloadable and streaming forms. A computer-generated, rapidly cut, effects-laden vid made in 2008 and distributed on YouTube or Imeem might seem a far cry from the slide shows and early VCR vids that vidders claim as antecedents, but these works share an aesthetic tradition and an analytical impulse not immediately obvious to the outsider.

[1.5] It is therefore important, in this time of rapidly growing interest in DIY video, to document the history of this decades-old artistic tradition, especially as most popular media commentators fail to realize that most of the video hosted on YouTube wasn't made *for* YouTube. YouTube isn't a creative force; it's a distribution mechanism, and although it and other media platforms are enabling many subcultural art forms to be visible for the first time, the coherence of vidding as a tradition might be lost in a sea of user-generated content. There is also a danger that vidding's pre-YouTube culture—invisible, underground, female-dominated—might be ignored or written out of media history, much as the history of the novel was written to exclude the lady novelists Nathaniel Hawthorne so notoriously referred to as a "damned mob of scribbling women." In this essay, I begin to write a history of *vidding* women, not only to demonstrate broad continuities in vidding practice over the course of changing technologies, but also specifically to connect these practices and aesthetics back to their evolution out of *Star Trek*.

2. The problem of *Star Trek*: From Number One to first lady

[2.1] To trace the history of fannish vidding is to trace the emergence of a distinctively female visual aesthetic and critical approach. It is worth noting that 1975, the year that Kandy Fong made her first *Star Trek* slide shows, was also the year of Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Screen* (1975). Second-wave feminism had popularized ideas of female independence and sexual subjectivity, priming woman to take control of the camera, and many vids reverse, or at least complicate, traditional scopophilia of the kind Mulvey describes, casting men as objects of visual desire and addressing sexist problems in visual texts.

[2.2] Vidders locate the origin of this distinctive female filmmaking practice within *Star Trek* fandom. But why *Star Trek*? Thirty-five years after the first *Star Trek* conventions, 25 years after the first ethnographies of *Star*

Trek fan culture, it has become commonplace to locate a whole range of artistic practices in *Star Trek* without theorizing why it should be so. But making art is not just something Trekkies do, though science fiction and media fans are often discussed as if they were a race or a biological type. Rather, I would argue that vidding developed in response to *Star Trek* (and the figure of Spock in particular) for some very specific reasons.

[2.3] First, and most simply, the women who were fans of science fiction in general and *Star Trek* in particular had among them a high proportion of scientists, computer programmers, and mathematicians. As Melissa Dickinson (2006) notes, many *Star Trek* BNFs (big name fans) had advanced degrees in science and engineering: Jacqueline Lichtenberg (*Star Trek Lives!*) was a chemist; Judy Segal (head of the Star Trek Welcommittee) has a master's degree in botany; Joan Marie Verba (*Boldly Writing: A Trekker Fan and Zine History*, 1967–1987) has a bachelor's degree in physics, went to graduate school for astronomy, and worked as a computer programmer before becoming an editor and writer. Similarly, Mary Van Deusen, a vidder who was responsible for teaching scores of others to vid, has an undergraduate degree in physics, graduate degrees in mathematics and computer science, and a long career working for the research division of IBM. Other early vidders had similar scientific expertise, interests, or careers. These women were not afraid of technology: they knew how to program a VCR.

[2.4] But second—and this answer is related to the first—*Star Trek* contains within it a problem that many vids have attempted, literally or metaphorically, to solve: at the center of the text is a displaced woman. The original, failed *Star Trek* pilot "The Cage" (1964), written by Gene Roddenberry and featuring Jeffrey Hunter as Captain Christopher Pike, also introduced the captain's aloof, unemotional, and tactically brilliant second in command. This was not the famously logical Spock; rather, her name—fitting for such a mechanical woman—was "Number One." Although Spock was in the pilot, he was not the cool, highly rational Spock we know now. In fact, *Star Trek's* insistence on the *Enterprise's* first officer as an unemotional mind makes particular sense if the character is a woman: it is a 1960s picture of an unnatural—for which read: strong, highly rational, technologically minded—woman.

[2.5] As first officer, Number One fulfills the same role for Pike as Spock later does for Kirk. Not only is she the officer the captain relies on most, but she's also marked by her difference; in fact, as with Spock, there's a suggestion that her worth is part and parcel of her difference. In an early scene, Pike dismisses a female yeoman and then mutters to Number One, "I just can't get used to having a woman on the bridge." When Number One does an understandable double take, Pike quickly backpedals. "No offense, Lieutenant," he says. "You're different, of course" (figure 1).



Figure 1. Number One's double take in *Star Trek's* original pilot, "The Cage" (1964).

[2.6] As Majel Barrett plays it, Number's One's reaction to this declaration of difference is yet another double take, followed by a controlled flash of anger and then hurt; she is visibly not pleased that Captain Pike doesn't see her as a woman.



[The Cage \(excerpt\) - 1964](#)

Clip 1. Clip from *Star Trek's* original pilot, "The Cage" (1964), showing Number One's reaction to a remark of Captain Pike's.

[2.7] This theme is expounded upon throughout the rest of the episode, during which aliens kidnap Pike to press him into fathering a new human race. In service of this goal, the aliens offer him a variety of potential mates, including Number One, Yeoman Colt, and Vina, the sole survivor of a crashed scientific expedition. Vina is desperate to seduce Pike into being Adam to her Eve and furious at the arrival of female competition. Sizing up the statuesque (and sensibly dressed) Number One, Vina snorts, "They'd have more luck crossing him with a *computer*." Despite this insult to her womanhood and her humanity, Number One keeps her composure: "Well, shall we do a little time computation? There was a Vina

listed on that expedition as an *adult* crewman. Now, adding 18 years to your age *then*—"



[The Cage \(excerpt\) - 1964](#)

Clip 2. Clip from *Star Trek's* original pilot, "The Cage" (1964), with Number One being compared to a computer.

[2.8] Although the overly scientific syntax of "time computation" foreshadows Spock's irritating levels of precision, the fact that this is mathematics in the service of cattiness shows Roddenberry struggling to imagine that unimaginable creature of science fiction: a highly rational woman in a position of power. Forget Spock: Number One is *Star Trek's* truly divided soul, the show's real half-human, half-alien being.

[2.9] "The Cage" reveals Roddenberry's interest in women as both sexual subjects and objects. When *Star Trek* fans talk about "The Cage," it's often to note how surprisingly emotional Spock is; when Number One and Yeoman Colt are kidnapped, it is Spock who cries out, overcome with emotion, "The women!" But although this is probably the episode's most famous clip, it's easy to ignore how genuinely "The Cage" is about the women. At the episode's climax, when all the characters are brought together in the eponymous cage, the frame literally teems with women—more than we ever see again (figure 2).



Figure 2. Women in the climax of *Star Trek's* original pilot, "The Cage" (1964).

[2.10] From left to right (and in diminishing order of size), we have Number One, Yeoman Colt, and a dejected Vina. Even the alien with the giant head is female (male voices were overdubbed onto the bodies of made-up actresses). It is worth taking a moment to note the presence of four women together on a television screen, even if three of them (blonde, redhead, and brunette) are there to offer sexual variety to Captain Pike. The glass cage itself evokes a peepshow or striptease, rather than the zoo implied by the episode's title. But Pike is also behind glass and served up for our gaze—picked out, in fact, by his gold tunic while the women around him are dressed in shades of gray. Still, the women of "The Cage" are noticeably individual. Only one of them—Vina—is presented to us as a traditionally "seductive" woman of the kind later typical of *Star Trek* ([note 2](#)); the others have believably different assets and personalities.

[2.11] In fact, these assets are ruthlessly laid out for Pike (and us) by the aliens:

[2.12] The female you call Number One has the superior mind and would produce highly intelligent children. Although she seems to lack emotion, this is largely a pretense. She often has fantasies involving you... The other new arrival [Yeoman Colt] has considered you unreachable, but now is realizing this has changed. The factors in her favor are youth and strength, plus unusually strong female drives.

[2.13] This gloss of Number One's character—"highly intelligent," "seems to lack emotion"—marks her as the original of Spock. Moreover, the aliens tell us two things about Number One that many female fans also believe to be true of Spock, and perhaps more crucially of themselves: that her lack of emotion is largely a pretense, and that behind her controlled, professional demeanor lies a sexually desiring subject.

[2.14] "She often has fantasies involving you": in this, we can see not only the explanation for much Kirk/Spock slash (to the extent to which we believe that Spock, like Number One, secretly desires his captain) but also the origin of much of the imaginative fan fiction, fan art, and vids created by female engineers, physicists, and computer programmers. Among the stories "The Cage" tells is that of a desiring female subjectivity that—surprisingly—can coexist in the same body as strength, rationality, and the ability to add numbers. But this character, and the internal struggle she embodied on screen in the middle of the second-wave feminist movement, were eliminated from the second iteration of *Star Trek* ([note 3](#)), although actress Majel Barrett was not. Not only was she recast, but Roddenberry chose her for *his* mate. Reader, she married him! Thus did Number One become "the first lady of *Star Trek*."

[2.15] Mr. Spock is a ghost, the shadow of a missing woman. This visual substitution of the alien man for the rational woman is at the heart of much of the art produced in response to *Star Trek*, though it is among the least-discussed aspects of the show. Mr. Spock has been read in many ways—as Jewish, Asian, black, demonic, countercultural, even as Asperger's sufferer ([note 4](#))—but the original Spock shape in the *Star Trek* canon is female. Spock is a kind of visual marker, a scar indicating a series of conflicts meaningful to the scientifically minded, technologically oriented women likely to become vidders, especially in the early years of vidding.

[2.16] While Number One haunts *Star Trek* through the overdetermined figure of Spock, Majel Barrett Roddenberry was recast in two roles that exemplify the problematic way that women are typically represented in popular culture: Nurse Christine Chapel, whose primary characterological gestus is her embarrassing and hopeless public crush on Spock, and the disembodied voice of the *Enterprise*. It is hard not to see Barrett's transformation from Number One to Christine Chapel as a degradation on every level: role, status, and image.



Figures 3 and 4. Number One, the captain's equal, subduing an alien, in an image from *Star Trek's* original

pilot, "The Cage" (1964), turns into the vulnerable Nurse Chapel.

[2.17] In the above scene from "The Cage" (figure 3), Pike throws the captured alien toward Number One, who puts him into a headlock. She is framed as Pike's ally and partner: they're literally of the same height, and together they bracket the frame powerfully. Compare this to the image of Captain Kirk and ship's nurse Christine Chapel (figure 4). Here, burdened with a miniskirt, go-go boots, and a blowsy blonde hairdo, Barrett plays the damsel in distress, cowering behind Shatner's protective arm despite her obvious height and strength. Worse yet is her relationship to Spock, which Kathy E. Ferguson, Gilad Ashkenazi, and Wendy Schultz have characterized as "emotionally subordinate" (1997:216): arguably, she exists merely to pine.

[2.18] Barrett also plays the disembodied voice of the *Enterprise*. Scholars have already noted the camera's love of the *Enterprise* and the way that its gaze feminizes the ship. Daniel Bernardi writes persuasively about how the depiction of the *Enterprise* in the first *Star Trek* movie (1979) is similar to the representation of women in film as theorized by Mulvey: "Like the representations of women in Hollywood cinema, the *Enterprise* is a feminized figure eliciting scopophilic desire. The starship is literally a show-stopper, temporarily halting the progress of the story. 'She' is fragmented into parts by both the composition of the close-up shots and the design of the scaffolding" (Bernardi 1998:72) (note 5). As played by Barrett, the ship speaks in a human voice but has no human body; the voice of female authority has been detached from embodied, messy female physicality. To revisit Vina's remark in "The Cage" ("They'd have more luck crossing him with a *computer*"): the metaphor of the scientific, rational woman as machine has become literalized. Majel Barrett's (modified, metallic) voice is the voice of the all-knowing and powerful computer that controls the *Enterprise*.

[2.19] In these two guises—Nurse Chapel and the *Enterprise* computer—the displaced character of Number One serves as the model for two archetypal fan positions: the woman who embodies visible desire, and the disembodied but all-controlling voice. The former is often presented as a negative fan stereotype: the groupie, the stalker, the shrieking Beatlemaniac, the "Mary Sue" who dreams herself into the story, the girl with the embarrassing public crush on a movie star. The latter, I would argue, is the voice of the vidder: the woman behind the camera, slide projector, VCR, or computer, the technological woman who controls the machine. The disembodied voice is also the voice of the slash writer (who writes about bodies not her own) or the omniscient and controlling fan artist who takes control of the protagonists' images and bends them to her will. But most fan works seek to unite the analytical mind and the desiring body in order to create a total female subjectivity.

[2.20] Although vidding has now moved beyond *Star Trek*, the representational tensions at the show's heart have not gone away. Consequently, many vids still make overt or subtextual arguments about gender, and vids in a broad variety of fandoms engage issues of female representation, displacement, and marginalization in visual culture.

3. Seeing life from both sides: Kandy Fong's slide shows

[3.1] In 1975, Kandy Fong made what is arguably the first vid by constructing a slide show that set *Star Trek* images to music. Fong had access to footage left on *Trek*'s cutting room floor and, inspired by the Beatles video to "Strawberry Fields Forever," built a narrative around an original folk, or fannish folk song. As Fong (personal communication, October 14, 2006) explains:

[3.2] That Sept [1974], the longest running *Star Trek* fan club in the world—The United Federation of Phoenix—was formed. There I met my future husband, John Fong. He had shoeboxes full of pieces of film that were left over from when the episodes were edited. He purchased them from Lincoln Enterprises run by Majel Barrett/Roddenberry. We really needed something different to show at a club meeting. There was a popular folk song 'What do you do with a Drunken Vulcan' and I suggested that we pick out pieces of film that seemed to go with the song. Several of the club members & I used a cassette to record the song. John made the film pieces into slides so we could show it at a club meeting. I would follow the words along in a script & "click" the single projector at certain words. It was very popular.

[3.3] Fong took her slideshow to the Equicon/Filmcon convention chaired by Bjo Trimble in the spring of 1975. As Fong remembers it, "This was the only 'new' *Trek* since the show had ended & it had people lined up. We had a small room in the lower level & kept running it over-over." The success of "What Do You Do With a Drunken Vulcan?," as well as the explicit approval of Gene Roddenberry, who was already angling to make a *Star Trek* movie and knew that an energized fan base helped his case, encouraged Fong to make more and show them on the science fiction convention circuit. Fong remembers, "For several years, I would travel from Seattle to San Diego to Boston to Houston showing my shows. I would show the older stuff, then make sure there were 1 or 2 new ones at each con. I ended up with several hours of shows." Eventually, Fong moved to using two slide projectors so she could cut between her slides more rapidly, essentially making her edits live, incorporating her body as part of the filmmaking process. Later still, Fong began to videotape her results, partly because Roddenberry wanted copies and partly because Fong herself became interested in creating records of fannish art. "I hated going to a con and seeing something

great, but not being able to ever see it again," Fong explained, and she claims to be the first person to come up with the idea of a con tape: a videocassette documenting what was shown at a particular con. Con tapes caught on and are still made today, although they are now DVDs, often of premiering vids.

[3.4] Because Fong videotaped her work, we have some examples of these early slide shows. Like "What Do You With a Drunken Vulcan?," "Both Sides Now" (http://www.imeem.com/francescacoppa/video/BeNJi6_T; ca. 1980, taped 1986) is also a visual analysis of Spock. Although the song was written by Joni Mitchell and popularized by Judy Collins, Fong uses Leonard Nimoy's own 1968 version. Fong selects images that make it clear that the voice of the song is not Nimoy's but Spock's. Spock is reflecting on his own experiences, which we have shared with him through the narrative of *Star Trek*. Although the song is of its moment and the cutting is almost unbearably slow by contemporary standards, this early vid does two notable things: first, it creates an intertext between two of Leonard Nimoy's artworks, his acting and his singing; and second, it gives Spock a voice, and it's not the voice a casual viewer of *Star Trek* would expect, despite its being Nimoy's own voice.

[3.5] The first image of "Both Sides Now" (ca. 1980, taped 1986), which features a bearded Spock contemplating Captain Kirk's profile, signals one kind of doubleness: the image is from the doubly titled 1967 episode, "Mirror, Mirror," in which Kirk and some of his crew are swapped into a brutal parallel universe (figure 5).



Figure 5. Opening image from Kandy Fong's fan vid "Both Sides Now" (ca. 1980, taped 1986), taken from the *Star Trek* episode "Mirror, Mirror" (1967).

[3.6] The bearded Spock is the doppelganger version, and the image has become a pop culture cliché: if we see a normally clean-shaven character with a goatee, we know he's the evil version. But actual doppelgangers are only the most obvious form of double vision on display. In fact, Fong uses "Both Sides Now" to comment on the more intrinsic dividedness of Spock's character: his dual

nature as a half human, half alien caught between two different cultural and expressive traditions. As the only alien crew member aboard the *Enterprise*, Spock is frequently teased for his racial and philosophical differences in a way that would today probably qualify as workplace harassment, and we also know from his human mother that Spock was regarded as an alien "half-breed" on Vulcan as well.

[3.7] This otherness has made Spock a stand-in for many minority groups, but also, as I have argued above, a significant figure of identification for women. As a stand-in for Number One, and as the inheritor of her gendered problems as a strong, highly ranked woman in a male hierarchy, it can be argued that Spock sees "from both sides" of the gender divide. As Melissa Dickinson (2006:170) notes, "there are some clear reasons why women science fiction fans of the '60s and early '70s—many of whom held advanced science and engineering degrees—might have connected powerfully with *Star Trek* (and specifically with Spock) as an expression of their own alienation among peers." Consequently, the vid is fraught with gender slippage. "Both Sides Now" constructs an emotional inner voice for *Star Trek*'s most notorious unemotional character. But the fact that it is Leonard Nimoy's voice (from a track off his album, knowingly titled *The Way I Feel*) adds legitimacy to the idea that this interior monologue really could be Spock's, however laughable that might seem to someone reading the text superficially. The sung lyric tells us that the narrator has looked at both sides of "clouds" (which Fong interprets more or less literally; as someone whose job involves interplanetary flight, Spock has certainly seen both sides of clouds) as well as "love." Fong uses the phrase to unpack a series of significant images, including one where Spock is framed as looking both at Christine Chapel (a textual, if thwarted, love interest) and at James Kirk (a subtextual one).

[3.8] The sung assertion, "I've looked at love from both sides now," in Spock's own voice turns the subtextual homoerotics into text (figure 6).



Figure 6. Image from Kandy Fong's *Star Trek* fan vid, "Both Sides Now" (ca. 1980, taped 1986), illustrating the lyric, "I've looked at love from both sides now."

[3.9] It also makes us look at the footage differently. In the slide Fong uses with this lyric, Spock, at the far left, is part of the frame. He stands in for us, and like us, he is doing the looking: we are asked to see the famously logical Spock as a desiring subject. Looking back at him are Kirk and Chapel, and although Kirk is sitting and Chapel is standing, they're paralleled in the frame as blonds of analogous height. Fong's editing choice further asks us to question whether Spock's dual nature as half human, half alien (or perhaps we should say, both human and alien) might also imply his bisexuality. We are explicitly asked to consider whether Spock is attracted to both men and women, to read Spock's inner landscape as well as his outer appearance. Spock is, after all, a character whose primary gestus is rigid self-control, but who would imagine that the tall, deep-voiced, and dignified actor Leonard Nimoy had that much Joni Mitchell in him? If Nimoy has this voice inside him, why not Spock?

[3.10] Each image Fong selects can and should be subjected to this sort of analysis. To the extent to which we recognize these slides and can contextualize them within our broader knowledge of *Star Trek*, we may find the conjunction of music and image provocative. Fong asks us to reread the images she presents through the lens of the song, sometimes just for amusement purposes—for example, the lyric "But now old friends are acting strange" appears in conjunction with an overtly humorous image of Kirk and McCoy. But Fong also asks questions and makes various sorts of textual arguments. Given the lyric "It's love's illusions I recall," how are we to interpret this image (figure 7)?



Figure 7. Image from Kandy Fong's *Star Trek* fan vid, "Both Sides Now" (ca. 1980, taped 1986), illustrating the lyric, "It's love's illusions I recall."

[3.11] The episode "The Enterprise Incident" (1968) has Kirk and Spock conspiring to steal a cloaking device

from under the nose of a female Romulan commander (in red in figure 7). As part of the plan, Kirk feigns mental illness, fakes his own death, and has plastic surgery so he can go undercover as a Romulan. Spock, meanwhile, subtly romances the Romulan commander, who seems genuinely attracted to him and who offers him a post as her second in command, promising him that she, unlike the humans he currently works with, actually understands and appreciates him. So when Spock recalls "love's illusions," does he mean Kirk's trickery? His own? The Romulan commander's offer of love and respect, which he must turn down?

[3.12] This interpretive quality makes Fong's slide show a vid and marks her as the founder of the form. "Both Sides Now" is a visual essay in which music is used as an analytical tool and not a soundtrack. By using image and sound to stage the contrast between Nimoy's external appearance and inner voice, Fong teases out various kinds of "bothness" surrounding the text: human and alien, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, reason and emotion, control and desire. She has excavated the complexities of Spock's character, highlighting some of the key traits that have made him a popular figure of identification and desire.

4. You don't know what you've been a-missin': VCR vidding collectives

[4.1] No one is sure who was the first person to make a vid using VCRs, though likely candidates include *Trek* fans Kendra Hunter and Diana Barbour, who were making *Starsky and Hutch* vids as early as 1980. Kandy Fong says she saw "work done by others at IDICon in Houston." ("IDIC" stands for the Vulcan philosophy "Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations." IDICon was a popular annual slash convention held in Texas during the 1980s.) Other fans associated with VCR vidding also attended IDICons, such as the prolific and influential vidder Mary Van Deusen, known as MVD, whose work is discussed at length by Henry Jenkins in his chapter on vidding in *Textual Poachers* (1992). Many vidders attended the *Star Trek* Equicon/Filmcons. Other fan conventions also became important centers for vidding, particularly MediaWest*Con, hosted annually since 1981; ZebraCon or Zcon, hosted every other year since the 1970s; and Escapade, hosted annually since 1990. In any case, the videocassette recorder became commercially available in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and vidders began to create songvids using two VCRs, one for playing footage and one for recording it. Thousands of vids were made in this way over the two decades during which the VCR was the dominant home video technology.

[4.2] The process of making vids with two VCRs was arduous. The song needed to be timed with a stopwatch because a VCR's numerical counter rarely corresponded to actual time, or even any particular position of the footage on the tape. The clips had to be selected and measured in advance, and then the clips had to be played

on one VCR and recorded on the other in the exact order in which they were to appear. Vidders also had to grapple with rollback. As VCR users will remember, the tape rolled back a few frames or seconds when the button was pushed. Moreover, rollback wasn't standard from machine to machine, so vidders had to learn the idiosyncrasies of their particular equipment. Worst of all, in the early days of vidding, the audio track could only be imported once all the clips had been laid down on tape, so a vidder who wanted to edit to the beat or who wanted internal motion synchronized with the music had to be extremely meticulous.

[4.3] Because of technical difficulties and high cost—VCRs were expensive in the early 1980s, and editing VCRs could run into the thousands of dollars—vidders tended to work in collectives, which served as sites of technical and aesthetic mentoring. Working under such collective names as the California Crew, GloRo Productions, Bunnies From Hell, the Chicago Loop, and the Media Cannibals, these VCR vidders shared equipment, expenses, and expertise. Many still-practicing vidders learned to vid on two VCRs, and wherever vidders are

gathered, boastful horror stories of the "walking uphill, in the snow, both ways" variety abound. The VCR vids made in the 1980s and 1990s are in fact incredible technological achievements, but they are also important artifacts of female community: technologically minded and media-savvy women coming together to make themselves, and their perspectives, visible on screen.

[4.4] In 1990, three vidders known collectively as Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out, a subgroup of the California Crew, made a vid of themselves making a vid. This rare metavid, "Pressure," based on a Billy Joel song, is a unique record not only of the specific technological difficulties of VCR vidding but of the female fannish subculture within which vids were (and are) made. The vidders tape their entire process, which involves extensive setup and travel; one vidder drives to spend the weekend with the other two. We then watch them plan their vid: timing the song; figuring out its beats and crescendos, their hands waving like the air like orchestra conductors; fast-forwarding and rewinding VHS cassettes of the source show, *Quantum Leap*; and selecting, replaying, and measuring clips (figures 8–11).



Figures 8–11. Images from Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out's fan vid, "Pressure" (1990), showing the vidders creating a vid.

[4.5] VCR vidding requires a lot of planning, measuring, and mathematics to compensate for the imprecision of the technology. VCR vidders are *bricoleurs*, repurposing equipment that was never meant

to be used for filmmaking. In "Pressure," the vidders use stopwatches and calculators to plan their vid on paper. They then build the vid to the specs of their agreed-upon blueprint. The *Quantum Leap* vid that Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out make within "Pressure" isn't



actually put together until the end, where we see a long line of video cassettes, all cued up, with the selected clips ready to be laid down, in order. Among the last of the shots the vidders give us is one of snaking audio cables, plugged into the VCR (figures 12–15).



Figures 12–15. Images from Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out's fan vid, "Pressure" (1990), showing the technological requirements of vid making.

[4.6] If they've miscalculated on their timing, on the rollback, on anything, their clips will not be synchronized with the music, and the vid will fail. This is the vid's narrative climax—talk about pressure!

[4.7] If "man versus technology" is a clichéd theme, the story of woman versus technology is less well plumbed. "Pressure" makes it clear that tales of "vidding uphill, in the snow, both ways" are not hyperbole: these women filmmakers are actually making art with jerry-rigged equipment. But "Pressure" also tells a story of female teamwork and creativity, and the vidders take pains to explicitly foreground their collaboration, shooting footage that demonstrates them actively thinking and working together.

[4.8] In particular, we are given many scenes of the vidders in front of the television, though this is not a typical picture of women watching television. Instead,

they watch on fast-forward, stopwatches in hand, evaluating and measuring what they see. Both as filmmakers and as the stars of "Pressure," Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out are careful to perform both their judgment of footage and their process of negotiation and decision making. In one notable sequence, one vidder gives an avid thumbs-up to signal her approval of the clip on screen—a steamy kiss—while her partner seesaws her hand: she is not sold. At other points in the vid, we see the vidders performing their joint frustration or agreement by giving thumbs up or thumbs down to particular filmmaking decisions (figure 16).



Figure 16. Image from Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out's fan vid, "Pressure" (1990), showing the vidders making decisions about clips.

[4.9] But the vid stages not only the vidders' rational artistic judgment but also their pleasures and pains: the women eat, drink, laugh, get frustrated, doze off, collapse. At one memorable point, they stage their own visceral enjoyment of a love scene they're watching on screen. The vidders are explicitly framed for us both as judging, rational artists and as physical, desiring bodies enjoying themselves in community. This is not a stereotypical representation of women. "Pressure" depicts women working, thinking, judging, eating, and enjoying television together; they are also making art in the domestic sphere, among stacks of VHS cassettes and piles of fan fiction zines. There is a wholeness to their representation that evokes the hypothetical protagonists Virginia Woolf imagined in *A Room of One's Own* (1929): Chloe and Olivia, who work in a laboratory together and like each other. They are bodies and minds both, fully rounded women. The vidders have successfully reunited the desiring body and the analytical voice.

[4.10] Like Kandy Fong's "Both Sides Now," "Pressure" demonstrates that desiring subjectivity can coexist in the same body as the ability to make precise measurements. Whereas Fong's slide show evokes gender (and other) complexities in the multitude that is Spock, Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out do something rarer: they create their own complex self-representations. The primary vidder in the three-person team of Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out had studied film and was able to shoot live-action footage, but "Pressure" was made by the same process being documented within the vid: it was shot on video and edited together with stopwatches and VCRs. Few women have historically had the training or the equipment to create their own footage; as a result, telling stories with extant footage has been a way to surmount the bar that hinders women's entry into the expensive and traditionally male-dominated film world. As Abigail Derecho (July 26, 2007, Weblog conversation with Christian McCrea,

http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/07/gender_and_fan_culture_round_e.html) notes, although DIY and other forms of remix culture are now broadly popular, early remix genres have their origins in minority discourse; she argues that this creativity was a response to restriction and scarcity among women and blacks. It is also worth noting that editing was also one of the few historically female jobs in filmmaking, seen to be related to sewing (Ondaatje 2002), so it is perhaps unsurprising that vidding, an art form that happens entirely in the editing room, should be dominated by women.

[4.11] The live-action footage of "Pressure" is a rarity; most vids articulate their arguments by editing and remixing extant footage. It is worth examining one of Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out's more traditional songvids to see what they typically made with their stopwatches, calculators, and home recording equipment. "Oh, Boy!" (ca. 1990) is a *Quantum Leap* vid that takes advantage of the fact that protagonist Sam Beckett's eponymous catchword also happens to be a famous Buddy Holly song. Beckett, who time travels by leaping into other people's bodies, temporarily taking on their lives and their problems, greets every surprising development with "Oh, boy!" Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out take on the daunting task of synchronizing those utterances to Holly's sung vocal, and they succeed to a startling degree. The difficulty of doing that level of synchronization with two VCRs really has to be attempted to be appreciated. (Watch, too, the blonde woman shimmying in perfect time to the cymbal crashes between seconds :15 and :17.)



Oh, Boy! (excerpt) - Sterling Eidolan and The Odd Woman Out

Clip 3. Excerpt from Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out's fan vid, "Oh, Boy!" (ca. 1990).

[4.12] But "Oh, Boy!" is not merely a technical masterpiece. It also fulfills a critical/analytical function. Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out are not interested in all the moments wherein Sam Beckett shows surprise. Rather, they seem particularly interested in collecting and commenting on his encounters with women. Although Beckett occasionally leaps into a

female body, most plotlines feature Beckett leaping into, and therefore taking on, the problems of a male (and presumptively heterosexual) protagonist. Consequently, the show's weekly plotline tends to feature some sort of female love interest—but because Beckett is not in his own body, he is always in the odd position of being sexually mistaken for someone else: "Oh, boy!" As a result, Beckett is often portrayed as playing sexual defense, fending off the advances of women who, quite reasonably, mistake him for their boyfriends, lovers, and husbands.

[4.13] The vidders establish their critical interest in this erotic dynamic by opening with an extended scene, complete with original audio track, from the episode "Honeymoon Express" (1989). When he leaps, Beckett finds himself on a train to Niagara Falls with "his" newlywed—and sexually aggressive—wife, Diane. When Beckett tries to tell her he's not really her husband but actually a time-traveling physicist, Diane takes it as an invitation to sexual role-play (figure 17): "Oh, I like it. And I'm 'Lara,' the KGB's sexiest agent. I boarded the Orient Express with orders to seduce Sam Beckett, America's most famous astrophysicist...and have him fall madly in love with me and drive him crazy by refusing to sleep with him until he tells me how to make a hydrogen bomb. Tell me *your* fantasy."



Figure 17. A sexually aggressive Diana mistakes Beckett for her groom in Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out's fan vid, "Oh, Boy!" (ca. 1990), in a clip from a *Quantum Leap* episode, "Honeymoon Express" (1989).

[4.14] Beckett's response to this, of course: "Oh, boy..." Beckett spends the entire sequence on his back, staring up dazedly at the seductive Diane, who is stroking his chest and kissing him. Visually, Diane is on top for the entire sequence, which then leads into the vid proper, in which Sam is fondled, hugged, kissed, grabbed, and otherwise womanhandled. As in "Closer" and "Both Sides Now," Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out use the audio as an interpretive lens, essentially splitting the song's lyric phrases so that the expressions of sexual desire correlate with the shots of women, while "Oh, boy!" is turned into Beckett's gulp of a response. The women in the vid are constructed as desiring subjects with Sam Beckett as their object, and Buddy Holly's sexually confident, boastful subject position—"All of my love, all

of my kissin'/You don't know what you've been a-missin'"—is given to the women on screen. This kind of audiovisual transsexuality is particularly appropriate for a show like *Quantum Leap*, which is already, at least in part, about body swapping and various other forms of role-play, although *Quantum Leap* never fully explored the more subversive implications of its premise.

[4.15] "Oh, Boy!" also critically reworks another potentially negative feature of much mainstream television: what fans call the "Bimbo of the Week" phenomenon. Beckett, like most male television protagonists in this sort of show, gets to engage a new, narratively disposable woman each week. By editing years' worth of women into a single vid, the vidders alter the show's male-to-female ratio, swamping the male protagonist. The lyric is telling: You don't know what you've been a-missin'. What television is missing is women, plural; most television shows still give us a variety of male characters and "the girl." But here, these individual women from different episodes come to be seen as related, to share a common language and experience. Sterling Eidolan and the Odd Woman Out have also found a way, through editing, to depict the female audience of which they themselves are a part, creating representations of women not just as individuals (and worse, as individuals defined almost entirely as love interests) but as a desiring female collective, a community.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] Vidding is a form of collaborative critical thinking. While vidders make an infinite variety of arguments about the television shows and films they love—theorizing about characters, fleshing out relationships, emphasizing homoerotics, picking apart nuances of plot and theme—these arguments frequently articulate alternative perspectives, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality. Although there are as many different reasons to vid as there are vidders, and as many individual arguments as there are vids, vidding continues to be female dominated, and a high percentage of vids are still engaged in fleshing out marginalized female perspectives (note 6). Male/male slash vids, which are an expression and articulation of female sexuality both straight and queer, continue to be a significant and popular subgroup of vids (note 7), but we have seen more of what is called femslash or femmeslash, expressing overtly lesbian perspectives and desires (note 8). More recently, many in the vidding community have been talking about how better to engage the marginalized perspectives of characters of color, particularly female characters of color (note 9), and there is also a strong canon of metavids about vidding and the female fan community itself (note 10).

[5.2] All of these vids work to heal wounds created by the marginalization, displacement, and fragmentation of female characters like *Star Trek's* Number One, restoring

female subjectivity and community by editing together what was put asunder. To be a vidder is to work to reunite the disembodied voice and the desiring body, and to embark on this project is to be part of a distinctive and important tradition of female art.

6. Notes

1. Jake Coyle, "The Best Fan-Made Music Videos on YouTube," Associated Press, January 15, 2008. Also released as "Fans Make Own Music Videos on YouTube" (<http://www.sfonline.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2008/01/15/entertainment/e141923S01.DTL&hw=youtub e&sc=1000&sn=001>); and "Fan-Made Music Videos on YouTube Draw Admiration From The Boss No Less" (http://tv.yahoo.com/news_print?id=urn:newsml:cp.org:20080116:TV-55318043_ER:1).

2. Compare the women of "The Cage" to the future lineup of potential mates in "Mudd's Women" (1966; figure 18). Although the plot of "Mudd's Women" ultimately condemns men for falling in love with illusions rather than real women, the women of the reconfigured *Star Trek* are routinely presented as colorfully dressed (and often underdressed) sexual fantasies.



Figure 18. A lineup of women in *Star Trek* episode "Mudd's Women" (1966).

3. The story is that test audiences (Roddenberry was more specific and claimed it was female test audiences members) didn't like seeing a woman in such a position of authority. According to Jan Johnson-Smith, "the reactions ranged from resentment to disbelief" (2005:80).

4. Nimoy based Spock's Vulcan salute on a Jewish blessing, a fact not overlooked by Jewish fans. Spock's shiny hair and aptitude for math, science, and music draw from Asian stereotypes, and in the episode "City on the Edge of Forever" (1967), Kirk explains Spock's alien appearance by saying, "My friend is obviously Chinese." In a sketch for *In Living Color*, Louis Farrakhan eggs Spock on to revolt against the obvious racial discrimination that keeps him second in command (Bernardi 1998:2). Dr. McCoy refers to Spock's satanic

appearance at the end of "The Apple" (1967). In "The Way to Eden" (1969), Spock fits in with *Star Trek's* countercultural hippies and even brings his Vulcan harp to a jam session. "They regard themselves as aliens in their own worlds, a condition with which I am somewhat familiar," Spock notes wryly. In Barbara Jacobs's *Loving Mr. Spock: Understanding an Aloof Lover: Could It Be Asperger's?* (2004), Spock heads a list of "fictional characters who display characteristics of Asperger's syndrome." Jacobs doesn't particularly discuss Spock's character or give much evidence for this diagnosis. Instead, the back cover of her book merely claims: "Unnervingly clever, obsessively logical and infuriating to live with, but also disarmingly childlike—sound familiar?"

5. This continues to be true. The trailer for the forthcoming 2009 *Star Trek* movie (<http://startrekmovie.com/>) teases the viewer with glossy fragments of the *Enterprise* being built by workmen with torches and goggles. It is worth noting that the trailer contains not a single female face or voice.

6. See "Piece of Me" (http://www.imeem.com/obsessive24/video/T5faJelz/obsessive24_rp_pieceofme_music_video/; Britney Spears, obsessive24, 2008), "Too Drunk to Fuck" (http://www.imeem.com/luminosity/video/nQdIIZKn/luminosity_fg_too_drunk_art_video/); *Family Guy*, Luminosity, 2008), and "Hera Has Six Mommies" (<http://www.imeem.com/cyborganize/video/We-uVtZU/>; *Battlestar Galactica*, tallulah71, 2008) for three very different recent examples.

7. For example, "The Glass" (http://www.imeem.com/people/yeu2Jf/video/8ufGHXuT/thingswithwings_the_glass_art_video/; multifandom, thingswithwings, 2008) is a showcase for desire. Both male and female couples are represented, but the real female desire articulated by the vid is the desire to read genre television and film for its emotional arcs.

8. For example, "I'm Your Man" (http://www.imeem.com/charmax/video/dfMRQ5Sx/charmax_im_your_man_shortfilm_video/; multifandom, Charmax, 2008), made for the International Day of Femmeslash, or "Gloria" (http://www.imeem.com/sweetestdrain/video/sM2KMxj/sweetestdrain_tscg_gloria_art_video/; *Sarah Connor Chronicles*, sweetestdrain, 2008).

9. See, for instance, "Origin Stories" (http://www.imeem.com/giandujakiss/video/oyEplh88/gianduja_kiss_btvs_at_ostories_shortfilm_video/; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Gianduja Kiss, 2008), which reminds viewers that Spike the vampire's iconic leather trench coat was a trophy taken from a black slayer he killed, or "How Much for That Geisha in the Window?" (*Firefly*, lierduoma, 2008), which critiques Joss Whedon's representations of Asians in the Chinese-influenced world of *Firefly*.

10. See, for example, "Walking on the Ground" (http://www.imeem.com/flummery/video/FMuDoxKa/flummery_multi_walking_on_the_ground/; multifandom, Seah and Margie, 2005), which features excerpts from "Both Sides Now" and "Pressure" as well as many other famous vids; "I Put You There" (http://www.imeem.com/laurasha/video/7KsyVVRI/laurasha_btvs_iputyouthere/; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Laura Shapiro and lithium doll, 2006), "Us" (http://www.imeem.com/sublim/video/LQU2ToIY/lim_us/; multifandom, Lim, 2007), and "Destiny Calling" (http://www.imeem.com/people/Hi9xCTr/video/5enlw_Y6/over_40_vidders_represented_destiny_calling_a_tribute_to/; multifandom, counteragent, 2008).

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"The epic love story of Sam and Dean": Supernatural, queer readings, and the romance of incestuous fan fiction

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[0.1] Abstract—This article examines incestuous slash fan fiction produced for the CW television series *Supernatural*. I argue that "Wincest" fan fiction is best understood not as perverse, oppositional resistance to a heterosexual, nonincestuous show, but an expression of readings that are suggested and supported by the text itself. I examine the literary, cultural, and folkloric discourses of incest and queerness invoked by the series, paying special attention to Romanticism, the Gothic, and horror as underliers to those discourses, and how those genres inform both the series and the fan fiction. I discuss a number of Wincest stories in detail, focusing upon how these stories build upon thematic elements within the series. In conclusion, I argue that the most resistive aspect of Wincest fan fiction is that it gives the main characters a lasting happiness that the series eternally defers.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan fiction; Gender; *Supernatural*; TV

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1. Introduction

[1.1] On the surface, the television horror series *Supernatural* (2005–present) appears to be a testosterone-charged romp about two excessively good-looking brothers who, armed with phallic weaponry, roam the country in a '67 Chevy Impala hunting monsters from American folklore. However, according to many fans, the primary appeal of the series lies not in its macho trappings, but in the extraordinarily intense relationship between protagonists Sam and Dean Winchester. *Supernatural* fans have produced an enormous amount of fan fiction exploring the nature of that relationship, and a significant portion of that fan fiction speculates that the brothers' love for one another is far more than brotherly. In this essay, I will follow the lead of Sara Gwenllian Jones and argue that Sam/Dean slash fan fiction is best understood not as a perverse "resistance" to the show's presumed nonincestuous heteronormativity, but as "an actualization of latent textual elements" (2002:82). To that end, I will discuss the myriad ways in which *Supernatural* makes queer, incestuous readings available to viewers, and then examine how these available readings play out in specific fan-fictional texts.

[1.2] *Supernatural*'s pedigree gives some clues to its popularity among slash fans. The format of the show links it to classic male-male buddy series such as *Starsky and Hutch* and *The Professionals*, both of which have venerable slash fandoms. Moreover, *Supernatural* shares not only a thematic resemblance but an actor (Jensen Ackles) with its lead-in show, *Smallville*; Louisa Ellen Stein (2005) and Melanie E. S. Kohnen (2008) have written extensively on fans' queer readings of that series. In addition, *Supernatural* is a direct descendant of *The X-Files*: in addition to similar themes, structures, moods,

and styles, the two shows share many writing and production personnel. *Supernatural*'s most striking inheritance from *The X-Files* is its focus upon the intense relationship between its two main characters: as critic Whitney Cox (2006) remarks, *Supernatural* "is fueled past its failings almost entirely by the chemistry between the two principals, the boys who, like Mulder and Scully, generate enough sexual tension to power a small city" (note 1). The fact that Sam and Dean are brothers in no way detracts from the slashy vibe. In fact, as brothers, they are given a pass for displays of emotion that masculinity in our culture usually forbids, which intensifies the potential for queer readings. Executive story editor Sera Gamble described her conception of the show as "the epic love story of Sam and Dean" (Borsellino 2006); while she quickly avowed that her comment was made in jest to tease creator Eric Kripke, many fan writers consider her statement to be a perfectly accurate description of the show, and they use their own narratives to explore all the implications of the "epic love story." These fan-fictional narratives are known as Wincest (note 2).

[1.3] The majority of scholarship about slash is, understandably, grounded in audience and reception studies and focuses on fans' "appropriations" of presumably heteronormative material to tell the stories they wish to tell. Slash scholarship often celebrates slash's transgressive, subversive, resistive potential: slash resists the compulsory heterosexuality not only of a given source text, but also of the culture at large. This is not necessarily inaccurate: in a heteronormative culture, any depiction of queerness, by definition, resists cultural norms. However, not all source texts are created equally heteronormative; too strong a focus upon slash as a subversion of canon can mask consideration of the ways in which the canon itself

may make queer readings available. Alexander Doty (2000) explains, "To base queer readings only upon notions of audience and reception leaves you open to the kind of dismissive attitude that sees queer understandings of popular culture as being the result of 'wishful thinking' about a text or 'appropriation' of a text by a cultural and/or critical special interest group" (4).

[1.4] Jones (2002) applies Doty's arguments to the "special interest group" of slash fans of the television series *Xena: Warrior Princess* and concludes that slash fans are not so much resisting that show's text as articulating "latent textual elements" (82). Similarly, while Stein (2005) and Kohnen (2008) focus upon slash fans as an audience, they foreground fans as interpreters of, rather than interlopers in, texts. As Stein (2005), speaking of *Smallville*, puts it, "Rather than understanding *Smallville*'s queer meanings as distinctly separate from the program's overt narrative...fans see those meanings as deeply connected to *Smallville*'s broader thematic project" (20). *Supernatural* fans make very similar arguments about their show.

[1.5] Far from shying away from its queer, incestuous implications, *Supernatural* frequently calls attention to its own homoerotic energy; while the show's most overtly queer moments are those instances when Sam and Dean are taken for a couple, the show's "broader thematic project" of valorizing the brothers' Romantic, transgressive Otherness is profoundly queer, as I discuss below. Doty remarks, "I'd like to see queer discourses and practices as being less about co-opting and 'making' things queer...and more about discussing how things are, or might be understood as, queer" (2000:2). With this in mind, *Supernatural* slash writers' most significant subversion of the text is not that they make things queer, but that they make things *happy*—a consistent theme of *Supernatural* slash is that a romance between Sam and Dean will give them a measure of comfort and happiness that they are denied in the series.

[1.6] Given that a queer reading of *Supernatural* is necessarily an incestuous one—and that both queerness and incest bear a similarly conflicted relationship to normative sexuality—I will now turn to a discussion of the incest theme in Western thought and culture, and the manner in which *Supernatural* makes use of the theory and representation of incest.

2. The lore and language of incest

[2.1] Incest is certainly not a new theme in literature, folklore, or popular culture. While incest narratives are most often associated with Romantic and Gothic (historical and contemporary) works—which will be discussed in greater detail below—they are by no means limited to those particular strains of literature. In the West, cultural discourses of incest run headlong into discourses of romantic love, and the resulting tangle is endlessly fascinating to writers, artists, scientists, and thinkers. Whether we are looking at Plato or modern

genre romance novels, our constructs of romantic love emphasize oneness with the beloved: two becoming one, two halves of a whole, soulmates, my one and only, you complete me. Therein lies the rub: in this construct, incestuous unions become, arguably, the ne plus ultra of oneness, as lovers are united not simply in body and soul, but in blood. Therefore, it is unsurprising that 20th-century literary and cultural theorists consistently articulate incest as a key element in understandings of desire. Ellen Pollak (2003:5–17) provides an overview of constructions of incest in the work of Freud, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, and Foucault, among others; a leitmotif of these theoretical figurations of incest is that "normative sexuality is always inherently incestuous because all legitimate love objects are always already substitutes for the objects of incestuous longing" (Pollak 2003:15). Francisco Vaz da Silva (2007) argues further that this understanding of marriage and incest is not simply a theoretical or literary construct, but finds active expression in folklore and mythology. In these literary, folkloric, and theoretical models, heterosexual exogamous marriage—"normative sexuality"—functions as both a reproduction of and a replacement for incest. Although the construct of incest as both marginal or transgressive and central to understandings of desire incorporates both parent/child and sibling incest, it is important to note that these two forms carry significantly different levels of cultural disapprobation; sibling incest, because it lacks the automatic power differential and betrayal of trust of parent/child incest, is far more likely to be treated sympathetically in our cultural narratives. Sibling incest as a mirror and model for marriage was most explicitly documented by the Romantic writers, about whom more later.

[2.2] If marriage, then, can function as a mirror of incest, the reverse can also be true. If heterosexual exogamy is made possible by blocking incest, what happens when heterosexual exogamy is itself blocked? *Supernatural* cuts off all avenues for exogamous heterosexual marriage for Sam and Dean; both Kripke ([note 3](#)) and actor Jared Padalecki ([note 4](#)) have indicated that no long-term romantic prospects for the brothers are likely. While such blockage is certainly commonplace in serialized narratives, which don't want main characters bogged down in relationships that distract from the plot, *Supernatural* goes far beyond simple avoidance of long-term romance: all of Sam and Dean's serious romantic relationships with women are doomed to failure—and if Sam is involved, usually violent failure. The series begins by killing off Sam's girlfriend Jessica; Sam had never told her the truth about his life before college, and his silence left her vulnerable to demonic attack (1.1 "Pilot," 1.5 "Bloody Mary"). Dean has numerous one-night stands, but Cassie, Dean's only serious girlfriend, rejected him when he told her the real nature of his work (1.13 "Route 666"). Madison, the only woman Sam has slept with since Jessica's death, turns out to be a werewolf, and he must destroy her (2.17 "Heart") ([note 5](#)). Carmen, Dean's

perfect girlfriend, is merely a djinn-induced fantasy construct (2.20 "What Is and What Should Never Be"). And so on. As Pollak (2003) notes, while the theoretical discourses discussed earlier treat incest as central to cultural narratives of desire, they also conceptualize incest as "endlessly deferred...an ungraspable limit," because they understand incest as the fantasy referent for romantic attachment, and not as a lived practice (16)—even stories that overtly depict incest are understood as being more about symbolic relationships to general constructs of desire than about incestuous desire itself. However, *Supernatural*, by blocking Sam and Dean's chances for normative sexuality, enables incest to escape from the realm of the safely symbolic. Sam and Dean are unable to form romantic attachments to others, and therefore their love is locked in an eternal feedback loop, referring back only to itself. They don't have anyone but each other (and their father) to love, and since their father's death, they love none but each other. All others are expendable—Sam is even willing to kill Bobby, their surrogate father figure and only trusted friend, if doing so will save Dean. The intense, exclusive, excessive nature of their love is not only central to the plot, but also named by the creators, actors, critics, and fans as the show's primary strength. While this love is not necessarily romantic, our culture codes romantic love as similarly excessive, so the show makes it very easy to read Sam and Dean's excessive love as romantic (note 6).

[2.3] *Supernatural* sets up Sam and Dean as, to use a fannish term, the show's One True Pairing. Their love is the kind that can, within the context of the show, literally destroy the world (note 7). Fans remark upon the excessive nature of the brothers' attachment and cite it as one of the chief incitements to slash them. Setissma, a fan, explains, "They *don't* have a normal sibling relationship...They need each other, deeply and overwhelmingly, and I don't think they would ever be OK living separate lives. Hell, I don't think they'd be OK living as next door neighbors" (August 14, 2007, Live-Journal post). Sam and Dean's love is a zero-sum game: the only intensity of familial love that can make either fully happy entails a sacrifice of all long-term romantic heterosexual prospects. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the show consistently treats romantic and familial love as funhouse mirrors of one another. Henry Jenkins (2007) remarks that the monsters "represent unresolved emotional issues, often within the context of family life, and they are also external correlatives for the emotional drama taking place in the lives of the series' protagonists. Sam and Dean go out there looking for things that are strange and unfamiliar and they end up seeing themselves and their relationship more clearly."

[2.4] The series is deeply concerned with love, obsession, and obsessive love; the discourses of romantic and familial love are often so tangled within it that they are indistinguishable from one another in outcome and effect. Sam and Dean are far more likely to be taken for a

couple when their cases concern family conflict; it's as if the show has a particular ratio of romantic to familial attachment it needs to maintain, and if the case is using up the allotted quota of family, romance is channeled through the brothers. Sometimes this takes the form of eroticizing Sam and Dean's bodies, but just as often the show will posit, through other characters, that their attachment is more than brotherly.

3. Straights and queers, normals and "freaks"

[3.1] Sam and Dean's romantic involvement violates not only normative sexuality's imperative to exogamy, but also its compulsory heterosexuality. *Supernatural* directly engages the primary axis upon which queer theory operates: that of the normal versus the Other (note 8). This engagement is, of course, standard within the horror genre, as are many of the urban legends that furnish the show's stories. Horror media and folklore have a long history of equating their monsters with racial, gender, and, especially, sexual Others. Harry M. Benshoff argues that

[3.2] in the case of monster movies...the narrative elements themselves demand the depiction of alien "Otherness," which is often coded (at the site of production and/or reception) as lesbian, gay or otherwise queer...[H]orror stories and monster movies, perhaps more than any other genre, actively invoke queer readings because of their obvious metaphorical (non-realist) forms and narrative formats which disrupt the heterosexual status quo. (1997:6)

[3.3] *Supernatural* plays with this trope by making Sam and Dean as alienated from the normal as the monsters and demons they fight: here, the *heroes* are the Other (note 9). The brothers were raised on the road by their father, John, who was obsessed with finding the demon that murdered his wife. The life of an itinerant hunter of supernatural evil does not guarantee a steady income, and so the Winchester family survived—and continues to survive—by credit card fraud, petty theft, gambling, and pool hustling (note 10). While the show does romanticize the Winchesters as outlaw warriors, it is a self-aware romanticizing: one character pegs Dean's (and by extension, John's and Sam's) motivations for hunting, not inaccurately, as "vengeance and obsession—you're a stone's throw from being a serial killer" (3.06 "Red Sky at Morning"). Sam, who was only six months old when his mother died, always resented their precarious lives at the margins of society; at age 18, he rebels and leaves John and Dean to enroll at Stanford and try for a "normal" life. In the pilot episode, Dean shows up when Sam is about to graduate, seeking Sam's help in locating their missing father. Sam agrees to help Dean for the weekend, but insists upon returning to his normal life and his girlfriend, Jessica. However, when he returns, Jessica has been murdered by the demon in the same

manner as his mother. Now hell-bent on revenge, Sam rejoins Dean with the twin goals of finding their father and the demon.

[3.4] Jessica's murder marks the end of Sam's attempt at a normal life—and, moreover, shows how illusory that normality was. Sam had never told Jessica about his past and resolutely ignored his premonitions of her death—which causes him a great deal of guilt. His attempt to be normal, to cut himself off from what he knows about himself and the world, backfires spectacularly. Moreover, within the context of his family, his desire for normality—including, significantly, a long-term committed heterosexual relationship—is the transgression. It is only when Sam abandons normality, and the potential for long-term heterosexual attachment, that his relationship with Dean can be fully repaired; as the series progresses, it becomes clear that Dean—and, eventually, Sam—can only be happy if the other is with him at all times. The narrative trajectory of the entire first season is designed not only to force Sam to abandon his quest for normality, but also to come back to the world of the "freaks" to which he truly belongs—freaks like Dean, who fully embraces both the life and the label. Ironically, Sam is destined to become far more freakish than Dean—he is a psychic, chosen somehow by the yellow-eyed demon who murdered his mother. This makes him a freak among freaks, and Dean must protect him from other hunters, who fear his power.

4. Romanticism and the Gothic

[4.1] The celebration of the semicriminal life of tortured outcasts roaming the earth is nothing new; it hearkens back to Romanticism ([note 11](#)). Romanticism, and its sister, the Gothic, provide several other important tropes for both show and fan fiction, including the formal study of the folklore Sam and Dean track, a fascination with the otherworldly, and, most importantly, persistent discourses of both queerness and sympathetic sibling incest. It is no surprise that the series's most overtly Gothic episode, 2.11 "Playthings," also contains the most overt and extensive representation of Sam and Dean as queer, incestuous siblings; this episode will be discussed in greater detail below.

[4.2] Alan Richardson (2000) builds upon the theoretical model of marriage as replacement for incest to illuminate certain elements of Romantic poetry, and argues that "Romantic sibling incest is presented not as a perversion or accidental inversion of the normal sibling relation, but as an extension and intensification of it" (554). The bond forged between Sam and Dean when they were children on the road, with an unreliable, often-absent father, is the deepest and most profound relationship that they will ever have with anyone. As mentioned earlier, the most intense Sam/Dean moments—and the moments when they are mistaken for gay—often take place in episodes that concern family relationships, especially when those family relationships involve children.

Richardson (1985) remarks in another article that Romantic literature's sympathetic depiction of sibling love is linked to "the Romantic valorization of childhood": no future romantic attachment can compete with the intensity of siblings' early childhood love (739).

[4.3] The first episode of *Supernatural* sets the tone for the brothers' relationship: as fire consumes their house after Mary's murder, John shoves the infant Sam into 4-year-old Dean's arms and tells him to run; at the end of the episode, Dean again saves Sam from the demon fire that follows Jessica's murder. Later, the show relies upon flashbacks that directly comment upon Sam and Dean's present-day relationship. As the brothers' relationship becomes more intense in the present, we are afforded more glimpses of their past, which reflect our greater understanding of their bond. Episodes 1.18 "Something Wicked" and 3.8 "A Very Supernatural Christmas," both of which feature extended flashbacks, reflect the show's pattern of never lingering too much upon familial love, especially Sam and Dean's brotherly bond, without linking it to romantic love: both of these episodes feature Sam and Dean being read by other characters as a couple.

[4.4] If Romanticism contributes to a queer, incestuous reading of Sam and Dean's relationship, the related genre of the Gothic, which helped create modern horror, amplifies it. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) remarks that "the Gothic was the first novelistic form in England to have visible links to male homosexuality" (91); moreover, the Gothic is famously "preoccup[ied] with the possibilities of incest" (91). The Gothic discourse of incest is somewhat different from that of Romanticism, but is not entirely divorced from it; while Romantic sibling incest treats the intense bonds formed in childhood as the ultimate in romantic fulfillment, Gothic incest tends to be born out of the genre's "fascinated proscriptions of sexuality" (Sedgwick 1985:91) and obsession with claustrophobia.

[4.5] The episode 2.11 "Playthings," as mentioned earlier, is the most Gothic episode of the series, and, in keeping with the genre's concern with incest, it makes perfect sense that this episode contains the most significant instance of the brothers' being taken for a gay couple. Sam and Dean come to investigate, in Dean's words, "an old-school haunted house," an inn where mysterious deaths have been occurring. The old inn has all the Gothic accoutrements, up to and including dark corridors, mysterious servants, creepy (rather than adorably innocent) children, and, of course, a secret in the attic. The central mystery is a mirror of Sam and Dean's worst-case scenario: an elderly woman has spent her entire life magically keeping the vicious ghost of her dead sister at bay, but now she is paralyzed by a stroke and cannot control her sister anymore. Sam and Dean do what they can to rescue the inn's inhabitants, but in the end, it is the woman's sacrifice of herself that neutralizes the ghost. The end shot is of two little girls, the spirits of the sisters, playing together forever. Of course, this is a perfect echo

of the brothers' fears and desires, which will be made manifest in later episodes.

[4.6] In keeping with the general patterns of the show's depiction of love, since the case is so overtly about familial love—and an explicit analogy to Sam and Dean's own situation—"Playthings" contains some of the most eroticized brotherly interaction in the series. Upon their arrival, Sam and Dean are asked by the hotel owner if they are "antiquing," and when Dean agrees, she says, "Well, you just look the type. So, king-sized bed?" Sam quickly informs her that they're "just brothers," and Dean wants to know what she meant by "look the type." The scene ends with the arrival of the valet, who provides the punch line: "Let me guess: antiquers?" Once alone, Dean asks, "Why do these people assume we're gay?" Sam offhandedly replies, "Well, you are kind of butch; they probably think you're overcompensating."

[4.7] This scene both calls attention to and undercuts the show's performance of hypermasculinity; Sam's response locates their identification as queer in Dean's machismo, the performance of which is traditionally intended to fend off accusations of homosexuality. Sam is consistently presented as being more sensitive than Dean to matters of gender and cultural difference, and his response affirms this—and allows him to get a dig in at Dean, who often twits Sam for being less masculine than himself. Unusually, Dean pursues the issue; in 1.18 "Something Wicked" and 1.8 "Bugs," he simply laughed it off, even slapping Sam's ass and calling him "honey" in "Bugs." Perhaps he is more jocular there because the cases in those episodes involve conflict between fathers and sons—the brothers do not speak freely until there are no fathers present. There's also the fact that "Playthings," as a Gothic, is meant to be claustrophobic, and so the tighter focus forces the eroticism out into the open. In a later scene, Sam gets drunk and begs Dean to kill him if he starts turning evil; this begging involves stroking Dean's face and pulling him close. Dean shoves him off, but the camera—and Dean's eyes—linger upon Sam's body writhing drunkenly upon the bed.

[4.8] The end result of this tangle of romance and family, Romanticism and the Gothic, is an underlying dynamic of a love so all-consuming that even the other characters within the show recognize it as excessive. The Trickster, in 3.11 "Mystery Spot," remarks, "The way you two keep sacrificing yourselves for each other? Nothing good comes out of it!...Dean's your weakness. The bad guys know it too. It's gonna be the death of you, Sam." Sam and Dean's all-consuming devotion is of the kind, in our culture, usually reserved for romantic partners: Esorlehear, a fan, points out that, in Sam and Dean's case, "love that intense tends to read romantic whether it's intentional or not" (August 30, 2006, LiveJournal post). Indeed, many fans argue that their love is so excessive that sexual desire will not fundamentally alter their investment in each other. In the following section, I discuss fan-fictional responses that posit Sam and Dean's

romantic attachment as merely an "extension and intensification" of their already overwhelming love.

5. Rough safety, or, MacGuffins made us do it

[5.1] *Supernatural's* rich stew of generic tropes has given fan writers a huge variety of associative chains to draw from in order to tell their stories. Fans invoke discourses, symbols, and narratives not just from the show itself, but from all that the show references. It is to be expected that Wincest writers borrow elements of other representations of sibling incest; in contemporary popular culture, the most famous narratives of sibling incest—and sympathetic sibling incest at that—are the novels of V. C. Andrews. *Supernatural* fan writers have jokingly christened the series "Flowers in the Impala," a reference to Andrews's 1979 novel *Flowers in the Attic*. While Andrews's novels are overtly Gothic, they also incorporate many of the Romantic tropes identified by Richardson, including the profundity of bonds formed in childhood. Incest in Andrews's stories functions as a source of comfort despite societal disapprobation—in fact, the incest serves as a refuge from the irredeemably corrupt adult world. Though Sam and Dean never need deal with the condemnation of society at large in the way Andrews's incestuous lovers do, many fan writers repeat Andrews's move of treating consensual sibling incest as excusable, or at least not especially wrong, when considered in the context of all the other wrongs within the story world. But while the incest of Andrews's characters is contrasted with the crimes committed by the surrounding adults, Wincest considers incest in the context of the horrors not just experienced, but perpetrated, by Sam and Dean.

[5.2] Probably the single most common trope in Sam/Dean fan fiction is that it treats incest not as a uniquely horrible transgression, but in the context of all the other social norms the boys smash through in the course of the series—and the usual prohibitions against incest are found to be less compelling than prohibitions against violating those other norms. Sam and Dean need not fear further social isolation or marginalization; because they are consenting adults, the specter of child molestation is neutralized; and unless you're reading in very specific subgenres, there is no potential for genetically compromised offspring. Compared to their usual horrors, consensual adult incest—a victimless crime, unlike, say, living on stolen credit cards or killing possessed people—starts looking relatively tame.

[5.3] This contextualization extends to fans' use of folklore in Wincest narratives. *Supernatural* borrows the majority of its plots from folklore, and fans have incorporated folk narratives and beliefs from all over the world in their stories. However, despite the numerous instances of sibling incest in folklore, most Wincest does not invoke folkloric incest narratives. On the surface, this might seem surprising, but an examination of such

narratives indicates why *Supernatural* fan writers haven't made use of them. Folklore about incestuous siblings—such as numerous English and Scottish ballads in the Child collection—is likely to treat the siblings neutrally or sympathetically, and their relationship as tragic rather than monstrous, even in situations where both siblings enter into the incestuous relationship knowingly (Perry 2006; Syndergaard 1993; Twitchell 1987). However, most folkloric sibling incest narratives hinge upon the discovery of the incest by society at large and the punishment suffered by the incestuous siblings. The usual story is that the incest takes place between a brother-sister pair, who are discovered and punished when the sister becomes pregnant. As James Twitchell (1987), talking of folk ballads, remarks, "So the sister must die and the brother must mourn, or vice versa, not because of their illicit love, but because of the family's revulsion and the group stigma imposed by breaking the code" (63–64). Sam and Dean's social isolation, not to mention biology, does not lend itself to the type of tragic discovery-and-punishment story found in most folk narratives of incest. Especially after the death of their father, Sam and Dean are so far outside the realm of normal societal interaction that there is none to discover (note 12), and certainly none to punish. The threat of community expulsion that comes from the breaking of the incest taboo is simply not present for Sam and Dean, which means that the folkloric incest story cannot be imported wholesale. Since *Supernatural* fan writers do not have access to the consequences usually present in folk incest narratives, they have to invent their own climaxes.

[5.4] Therefore, fans, whether writing Wincest or not, often use folklore much as the show itself does: as a way of reflecting and commenting upon Sam and Dean's relationship. The series takes place within a supernatural universe, which means that fan writers can justify just about any situation, no matter how outlandish, with "it's magic!" The show deliberately avoids depicting the supernatural as consistent or unitary; *Supernatural* posits simply that folklore in its entirety is real, which means that fan writers can press into service folk narratives and beliefs from anywhere in the world, even those that may contradict previous canon information, and be perfectly canon compliant.

[5.5] Many Wincest narratives use folklore not just as a commentary on Sam and Dean's relationship, but as a catalyst for getting the boys to express their feelings for one another. "Fine Wonderful Things," by Balefully (October 3, 2007, LiveJournal post), has Sam and Dean investigating the ghost of New Mexico train robber Blackjack Ketchum; she makes some adjustments to the existing legend of Ketchum's ghost, depicting him, like the ghost in "Playthings," as motivated by a desire to be united in death with his brother. Blackjack's ghost mows down Dean, and Sam, after destroying it, rushes to Dean's side, resulting in the classic hurt/comfort scenario of cathartic sex. While any scary experience can be used as a

justification for cathartic sex, Balefully takes a cue from the show and carefully sets up the ghostly relationship as paralleling and foreshadowing Sam and Dean's own. In Rei C.'s "L'oiseau de feu" (July 14, 2007, LiveJournal post), the yellow-eyed demon sends Sam and Dean on a quest for the firebird, a creature of Russian folklore, to exchange for their father. The story weaves together a number of Slavic folk beliefs and narratives, and every encounter with a legendary being—Baba Yaga, a band of *vila*, a dragon—serves to illuminate Sam and Dean's relationship. The most significant of these beings is the *alkonost*, a divine bird not unlike the firebird they seek, which steals their memories for several days. During that time, Sam and Dean, not knowing who they are, act upon their feelings for each other and have sex; they wake up in bed together, all memories intact except for those of the last few days. Uncertain as to what actually happened, they spend the rest of the story dealing with the fallout, in addition to completing their quest. Eventually, Sam decides that he won't tear himself up over it any more:

[5.6] Dean, start to finish, the one thing that his life is wrapped up in, has always been wrapped up in. From the moment John put him in Dean's arms, he's been Dean's, and, just the same, Dean's been his. If they did have sex during those hours neither of them can remember, it's just another layer of everything they are. And if they didn't, if they do in the future, it'll be one more layer of belonging.

[5.7] The *alkonost* in "L'oiseau de feu" is not the only supernatural being that has caused Sam and Dean to have sex in fan fiction. The need to overcome the incest taboo means that Wincest contains numerous examples of the fan-fictional tale type commonly known as "aliens make them do it": replace "aliens" with "demons," "ghosts," "witches," "fairies," "mystical forces," "magic spells," "cursed amulets," "sex pollen," "cultists," and so on, and you've accounted for a large percentage of all Sam/Dean narratives. Magic spells are especially popular, as the motivations and effects of the spell are infinitely adjustable. In Lazy Daze's sweet and funny "I Wanna Hold You 'Til I Die" (March 17, 2008, LiveJournal post), Dean gets hit with a spell that causes him to lose his inhibitions concerning physical affection. It turns out he can't keep his hands off Sam, and cuddling leads to sex. When the spell wears off, Dean is deeply embarrassed, but Sam refuses to let him freak out: "I know you want me...and I'm telling you I want you, and you can't seriously give a shit that other people would say it's *wrong*, so just. Come back to bed." Here, Sam—it's usually Sam; he has the more finely tuned sense of "normal"—points out that Dean has never before cared about breaking social laws, and this transgression matters to no one but themselves.

[5.8] "Fuck or die," a subgenre of "aliens make them do it," tells a more urgent story; interestingly, the "or die" imperative often mitigates, at least partially, any horror or anxiety Sam or Dean may be feeling—they are willing to

murder innocents and go to hell for eternity to save each other, so incestuous sex is, comparatively speaking, a much lighter sentence. In Astolat's hilarious "Bad Blood" (2007a), Sam and Dean get sprayed with succubus blood, which means that they must have sex with someone within an hour, or die. Unfortunately, they are at least two hours from the nearest town. Dean initially refuses Sam and attempts to fuck a horse instead, to Sam's outrage ("Bestiality trumps incest!"). A farmer chases them away, and they are forced to go through with it—and wind up loving it. Dean puts up a token resistance afterward, more to assert his manliness than anything else, and the sequel, "Bad Company" (2007b), ends with them contentedly holding hands in the Impala. Lenore's stark "Factum Amoris" (2005) locks Sam and Dean in a trap designed to lure and keep those who have "never known the act of love" as a sacrifice to a forgotten agricultural divinity. Sam is able to leave if he wishes, but Dean is caught—though Dean is no virgin, he has never slept with anyone who loved him. Sam convinces Dean to have sex with him, which releases the trap. Afterward, Sam feels desperately guilty not for doing it, but for enjoying it: "Apparently in Sammy logic it was one thing to blow your brother to save his life, but another to get hard thinking about it afterwards." The story ends on an ambiguously hopeful note, as Dean reasons that making love to Sam is just helping him out, and that is "nothing he would ever be sorry for."

[5.9] Despite the popularity of using supernatural means to overcome Sam and Dean's resistance, incest in Wincest fan fiction does not usually function as a pure fetish; fans often write the incest taboo as just one more social norm that is ultimately irrelevant to the Winchester's lives. Unlike traditional (non-fan-fictional) incest narratives—folk, literary, and pornographic—in which the thrill (and the tragedy) lie in the transgression, Sam/Dean writers don't usually present the breaking of the taboo as titillation. Esorlehear expresses a common sentiment among Wincest writers: "The nastyhotwrongness of people who share blood having sex has never been a factor; brother pairings interest me because of the intense closeness possible" (September 5, 2007, LiveJournal post). In many Wincest stories, the incest taboo is the obstacle that Sam and Dean have to negotiate before their relationship can reach its full potential. And the payoff is not so much in the breaking of the taboo, but in the fulfillment—sexual and emotional—that comes afterward. Fans take the discourse of sibling incest in capital-R Romanticism and combine it with the discourse of love of the lowercase-r romance novel.

[5.10] This combination is, of course, not new in fan fiction; Catherine Driscoll (2006), Catherine Salmon and Donald Symons (2001), and Jones (2002) have all discussed the relationships of genre romance to fan fiction, with the latter two works focusing on slash. In contrast, Elizabeth Woledge (2006) has rightly questioned the privileging of genre romance in considerations of

slash, arguing that it is unnecessary to "recast homoeroticism into heterosexuality" (98); further, she argues that what she dubs "intimatopia"—homoerotic fiction whose "central defining feature is the exploration of intimacy" (99)—furnishes a better generic model for studying slash. Woledge describes intimatopia as stories in which "intimacy is normally established before sexual interaction and is always maintained after it" (106), a description that fits many Wincest narratives perfectly. However, it is worthwhile to note that Wincest slash—although not necessarily slash in general—often displays what scholar and romance novelist Jennifer Crusie Smith (1999) names as genre romance's overriding theme: belief in "an emotionally just universe" (56), where good people are rewarded with love. In canon, Sam and Dean live in a brutally unjust world, one that is hell-bent not only on ensuring that they can never lead normal lives, but on destroying them, and their love, personally. But Wincest gives Sam and Dean some small measure of "emotional justice" by allowing them to find romantic fulfillment with each other. Or, as Lazy Daze puts it at the end of "A Peacefulness Follows" (March 11, 2008, LiveJournal post), "This is where they've ended up, alive and together after everything they've clawed through. It gives Sam peace like nothing he's ever felt when he can slide into bed with Dean, kiss his sleep-warm skin and tangle their legs together, so why not? Why not. They deserve this."

[5.11] That Sam and Dean deserve better than their lot is foregrounded in Setissma's "Mile Zero" (June 26, 2007, LiveJournal post) and Sevenfists's "Life as We Know It" (April 30, 2007, LiveJournal post). The stories have near identical plots: after one of the brothers is badly injured, Sam and Dean hole up in a house and make a go at living a normal life; over the course of learning how to settle down, they realize the true depth of their feelings. "Mile Zero" is gentle, a slow retirement for Sam and Dean in Key West; the story is as much a love letter to the island as it is to Sam and Dean. Over the course of the story, Sam and Dean settle into the peaceful rhythm of life in the Keys, and when they finally kiss, it's almost an afterthought. The sex is presented as the last thing they needed to acknowledge before they could finally call someplace home: "He and Dean fit together, had been made to fit together, and it made sense, because there wasn't ever going to be room in his heart or head or life for anybody else." "Life as We Know It" is sharper, spikier, and angrier: Sam is recovering from a near-fatal injury, and Dean has continual nightmares of not saving Sam in time. It is after one of these nightmares that Sam kisses him—"terrifying, half-expected." All is not immediately sunshine and roses; Sam, frustrated with Dean's morning-after awkwardness and denial, snaps, "Well, this is all a little new to me, *assface*"—and Sam's use of the language of his usual brotherly exasperation breaks the tension. Dean can finally acknowledge that Sam is here, alive, and wants to be with Dean more than anything, and this realization is both "terrifying" and ultimately cathartic.

[5.12] In conclusion, *Supernatural*, through a productive entanglement of generic tropes, affective masculinity, and valorization of the marginalized "freaks," provides an ideal space for queer, incestuous readings. The most resistant, subversive element of much Wincest fic is therefore not its depiction of homoerotic incest, but its insistence on giving Sam and Dean the happiness and fulfillment that the show eternally defers. Killa's beautiful "Carry Me Over the Sky" (2006) describes this fulfillment as "the rough safety of letting himself go with the one person he could trust to put him back together." Wincest writers tell stories in which Sam and Dean carve out some joy for themselves—a joy that defies all codes of normative sexuality, but has a profound depth and intimacy that epitomizes ideals of romantic love.

6. Acknowledgments

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7. Notes

1. Dean and Sam compare themselves to Mulder and Scully in 2.07 "The Usual Suspects"; Dean, naturally, insists that Sam is Scully.

2. Although the term *Wincest*, as a portmanteau of "Winchester incest," could theoretically refer to any combination of the Winchesters (Sam, Dean, and their father John), in practice, the unmarked term almost always refers to Sam/Dean. Incest narratives that involve John are usually referred to as "John-cest" or "Daddycest," or simply by pairing (John/Dean, John/Sam). At a rough estimate, Wincest makes up slightly less than half of all *Supernatural* fan fiction.

3. In Michael Ausiello, "Supernatural exec: 'We won't be *One Tree Hill* with monsters!'" Ausiello Report, *TV Guide*, July 21, 2007 (<http://community.tvguide.com/blog-entry/TVGuide-Editors-Blog/Ausiello-Report/Supernatural-Exec-Wont/800019020>).

4. In an interview on *The CW Video* (<http://www.cwtv.com/cw-video/supernatural/short/?play=404-3489>).

5. In 2.11 "Playthings," Sam extracts a promise from Dean to destroy him if he ever turns evil (a promise Dean proves incapable of keeping—see note 7); the situation with Madison in episode 2.17 "Heart" forces Sam to consider the position in which he has placed Dean. In keeping with the show's practice of using the plot of each episode to illuminate the brothers' relationship, Sam's execution of Madison takes place offscreen, while the camera focuses upon Dean's anguished reaction to the gunshot.

6. Stein (2005), discussing *Smallville*, argues, "Where the homoerotic extends from the homosocial into the realm of hinted and suppressed sexuality, the homoromantic combines gendered generic discourses of male heroism with romantic structures, so that epic relationships between two males become readable as romantically charged" (14).

7. Though Sam's latent demonic powers may provide the horsepower for an apocalypse, the real danger comes from the fact that Sam and Dean are willing to do anything to save each other. In 2.14 "Born Under a Bad Sign," Dean proves that he is incapable of killing a Sam turned evil (luckily, Sam is just possessed); the possessing demon taunts Dean, "Are you that scared of being alone that you'd rather let [another character] die?" Dean is willing to do evil to keep Sam with him, and this willingness culminates in his selling his soul to bring Sam back from the dead: though Dean was horrified when his father sold his soul for Dean, he doesn't even hesitate to sell his own when Sam is involved. His statement that "What's dead should stay dead" (2.04 "Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things") does not, for Dean, apply to Sam. Sam is also willing to do evil for Dean's sake. In 1.12 "Faith," Sam brings a dying Dean to a faith healer who, though he himself doesn't know it, saves those brought to him by killing others in their place. Although Sam doesn't know the price paid for his brother's life at the time, this episode foreshadows his later development. By season 3, Sam has progressed to consorting with demons, a readiness to ritually sacrifice innocent victims, and murdering (what he thinks is) Bobby to rescue Dean. Fans have therefore, logically, predicted that if Sam ever turns evil for real, it will certainly be to save Dean.

8. *Supernatural*'s lead-in show, *Smallville*, similarly invokes the narrative of the queered Other, albeit through the genre of superhero fantasy rather than horror; see Stein (2005) and Kohnen (2008).

9. Unfortunately, especially for a series in which the heroes are gleefully queered Others, *Supernatural* does not have a good track record when dealing with more overt types of Otherness. Both openly gay characters have been killed off (although the second, Corbett in 3.13 "Ghostfacers," saved everyone by a heroic self-sacrifice). Black men fare even worse—of the five who have been on the show, only one has survived. The creators don't appear to know or care about the "dead minority" cliché, which has caused fans no small amount of frustration. And while the continual blockage of Sam and Dean's heterosexual relationships creates an intensely queer space, many fans express discomfort with the manner in which women are depicted on the show; see Borsellino (2007).

10. In Dean's case, possibly by prostitution as well—at least if one takes a comment by Ackles in *TV Week* seriously (<http://tvweek.ninemsn.com.au/article.aspx?id=385361>).

11. And not just that of the early 19th century. Kripke has stated that Sam and Dean are named for Sal and Dean in Kerouac's *On the Road*; of course, Sal, as an avatar of Kerouac, and Dean, of Neal Cassady, are not exactly models of normative heterosexuality. See Bill Keveney, "'Supernatural' is an eerie natural for WB," *USA Today*, August 17, 2005 (http://www.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2005-08-17-supernatural_x.htm).

12. Aside from Bobby, but he's not likely to care.

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Ownership, authority, and the body: Does antifanfic sentiment reflect posthuman anxiety?

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[0.1] Abstract—This essay examines three Japanese anime texts—*Ghost in the Shell*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and *Serial Experiments: Lain*—in order to discover metaphors for female fan practices online. In each of the three texts, women overthrow corporate, governmental, or paternal control over the body and gain the right to copy or reproduce it by fundamentally altering those bodies. These gestures are expressions of posthuman anxiety and "terminal identity." In addition, they involve confrontation with an uncanny double in some way. But how can they provide models for cyborg and fan subjectivity in an era in which bodily and textual reproduction, especially among females, is such a hotly contested issue? And how is the antifanfic backlash related to the phenomenon of the uncanny?

[0.2] Keywords—Anime; CLAMP; Cyborg theory; Doujinshi; Fandom; Fan fiction; *Ghost in the Shell*; Haraway; Manga; *Neon Genesis Evangelion*; *Serial Experiments: Lain*; Uncanny

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[0.3] *I am spacious, singing flesh, on which is grafted no one knows which I, more or less human, but alive because of transformation.*

—Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

1. Introduction

[1.1] Thanks to the Internet, mainstream media has slowly awakened to the existence of fan practices that were once relegated to convention halls and fanzines, such as fan fiction and fan art. Although most of the media attention remains playfully spiteful, a few copyright holders have spoken out vehemently against fanfic writers. Despite their small number, their complaints are many. Prose fiction authors like Robin Hobb and Lee Goldberg argue that fan fiction writers are stealing their original characters when writing their own stories. They frequently liken fan fiction and the violation of copyright and intellectual property law to physical theft, or to a physical—perhaps even sexual—assault on characters who feel like friends and family. These critiques surround fan involvement with and interpretation of ownership, authority, and the body.

[1.2] Issues surrounding bodies and their owners, creators, or authors, as well as the question of who holds the rights to them, frequently arise in cyberpunk science fiction. Films like *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix* feature plotlines wherein villainous characters—be they human, mechanical, or commercial—exploit the bodies and talents of posthuman characters like replicants and cyborgs on the basis of the precept that they own those bodies through authorship. In *Blade Runner*, genetic engineers Eldon Tyrell and J. F. Sebastian wrote or coded the replicants, maintaining control for themselves by shortening the replicants' life span (and shrinking the number of possible copies), thus limiting the autonomy of

their creations. Similarly, the sentient machines in *The Matrix* invert the paradigm by growing humans in tanks to power their expanding empire, then keeping them forever enclosed in uterine tanks. Japanese anime has similar stories of corporate rights holders exerting influence over the bodies they created: The main character of Mamoru Oshii's film *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) worries that once she quits her government job, her government-funded cyborg body and all the memories it has accumulated will be taken from her. In each of these cases, the authors assert private ownership and authorship of a specific body, thus exerting a frightening amount of control over their creations in a manner that impinges on their presumed humanity. "Unauthor-ized" use of this body becomes criminal.

[1.3] Of course, the writing of the body and the depiction of female subjectivity through writing has long been a tenet of feminism. Cixous exhorts women to "Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (1986:309). Donna Haraway (2002) later claimed writing as the premiere technology for cyborgs in her "ironic political myth" of a new feminist subjectivity based on affinity, rather than identity. The affinity-based communities Haraway describes have migrated online, often in the form of fandom circles (that is, a group of people who create manga, as opposed to a single author), whose crafts are frequently concerned with the body and who owns it, as well as the discovery of sexuality through depictions of that body. The goal of this paper is to compare these real and fictional notions of ownership and authorship and their impact on the body—both in the way

(predominantly female) fan fiction writers relate to real and virtual bodies, and in how bodies are portrayed in fictional works, specifically Japanese animation. Along the way, we shall see how the market for Japanese anime and manga has created a space for fans. This space includes their interpretation (and possible violation) of copyright and intellectual property law, as well as their rights to their readings of the text, and their practice of copying commercially licensed characters and settings. In what ways are the anxieties and ethical concerns surrounding the posthuman body and the postauthor fandom similar?

2. The posthuman body

[2.1] Examples of the posthuman body abound within popular culture narratives, and they have been a staple of science fiction. Whether rendered posthuman by genetic engineering, mechanical augmentation, or psychological advancement, these characters often form the crux of stories set in uncertain, dystopian futures. Japanese anime enjoys examining the cyborg body in particular. Theorist Toshiya Ueno says that "it is well-known that, especially in Japanese animation, women are figured in very specific ways, and the theme of the merging of women with technology is the most visible one. In much of Japanese animation, female characters are numerous and frequently supposed to possess special abilities of being more adjustable to machines and technologies" (2002:234).

[2.2] In her liberatory "Manifesto for Cyborgs," originally published in 1985, Haraway defines the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (2002:65). As she reminds us, the first creature to be referred to as a cyborg was a white lab rat from New York's Rockland State Hospital with an osmotic pump grafted to its tail. Since the 1950s, organic/synthetic composites have become more common in medicine: Surgeons can insert replacement hips, knees, or jaws; pacemakers assist the human heart with rhythm. Similarly, depictions of cyborgs and posthumans have increased in popular culture. And although Haraway (1995) writes of the female cyborg body as one that has gone beyond the limits of binarist thinking about gender, age, class, or ethnicity ([note 1](#)), other critics remain wary of the promise of cyborg life. In particular, Anne Balsamo notes that "as a cyborg, simultaneously discursive and material, the female body is the site at which we can witness the struggle between systems of social order." It has yet to go beyond the material, and thus it remains "identified by its reproductive responsibilities and sexual connections to men" (1996:39).

[2.3] These issues of cyborg reproduction, sexuality, and power are frequently played out in Japanese animation, or anime. Although the definition of anime is continually changing as non-Japanese cultures appropriate its tropes and traditions and as the technical production of the animation itself spans media and international borders,

the term *anime* most commonly refers to animation from Japan, in either cinematic or serial televised format, often with themes and content unexplored in Western cartoons intended for children. This is not to say that anime does not exist for Japanese children—it is as much a staple of their media diet as cartoons are for Western children. But in addition to programming targeted at children, the anime spectrum contains titles as broad in focus as the rest of live-action commercial television: comedies, dramas, and romances intended for a range of ages. Because anime appeals to adults as well as youths, and because both the gray area of fansubs (discussed later) and the for-profit licensed market for anime in English translation have increased, anime has become a more frequent subject of critical analysis. Like fan studies, anime criticism sits at the intersection of multiple fields: film theory, Asian studies, technical innovation, cultural studies, translation studies, media theory, economics, and design. Like fan studies specialists, anime critics often begin as connoisseurs of the art form. This paper attempts to connect both anime criticism and fan studies within the figure of the fan and the cyborg.

[2.4] *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–96), and *Serial Experiments: Lain* (1998) involve women who merge with technology at the bodily level and whose relationship with high technology—often dictated by fathers, male employers, or other patriarchal authorities—leads them to question whether their reproductive potential is a path to wholeness and humanity. These women are each aware of copies or clones of themselves, and all three must resolve the conflict of identity that meeting their uncanny, sometimes mechanized, double creates within them. The tensions at play in this conflict—reproduction, authority, and identity—closely mirror those in the discussion of original or canon texts and fan fiction. However, for now, we must further explore the three titles mentioned above.

[2.5] Of the three, Mamoru Oshii's 1995 film, *Ghost in the Shell*, is the one written about most frequently. Oshii adapted the story from a popular manga (graphic novel) by Masamune Shirow. Susan Napier describes the film as an "exploration of the possibilities of transcending individual and corporeal identity" (2001:104). It revolves around Motoko Kusanagi, a powerful female cyborg in the year 2029 who works for Section 9, a fictional antiterrorist organization within Japan's government. In the film, Kusanagi must track down an elusive hacker known as the Puppet Master. This quest occurs alongside Kusanagi's continuing ruminations regarding her existence as a cyborg, wherein she questions her personal uniqueness and that of her memories. When she does eventually find the Puppet Master, she discovers that he is not a human but a powerful sentient intelligence born on the Internet as part of an espionage program. The Puppet Master then asks her to merge with him so that they both might achieve a fuller sense of identity by reproducing their offspring into the Net. She agrees, then uploads and

shares her consciousness with the Puppet Master while a fragment of herself remains in her cybernetic shell. The film highlights this as an act of reproduction: Kusanagi's original cyborg body, once a powerful signifier of adult femininity with its assorted curves, is destroyed by her own government and replaced by a child-sized version that her partner buys on the black market.

[2.6] Critics vary on whether Kusanagi's decision to leave her body behind and join the Puppet Master is truly an act of cyborg feminism as described by Haraway, or whether the film undermines any potential radical message by surrendering to the metanarrative of heterosexual reproduction. Borrowing from Balsamo, Carl Silvio (1999) says that

[2.7] the evocation of this conventional trope of reproduction, the female body as the bearer of life, profoundly qualifies the subversive potential of the film's ending by transforming Kusanagi's radically re-coded and resistant cyborg body into a maternal body, a vehicle for the production of offspring. Because this final scene is entirely packaged within the familiar rhetoric of this trope, it is difficult for the audience not to think of Kusanagi as anything other than a "mother," a maternal figure whose role is ultimately synonymous with her corporeality.

[2.8] Conversely, Brian Ruh argues that "although [Kusanagi] was powerful, she was not powerful for herself, but rather a pawn of the government and bureaucracy. Kusanagi was confined by the technology of the body, but through the technology of the Puppet Master she is able to slip the shackles of her imprisonment" (2004:139). Christopher Bolton attempts to step outside these two positions, saying that "treating Kusanagi as a living subject clearly misses the ways in which her body will always fall inside quotation marks; she is a virtual or performed subject that is both unreal and more than real from the start. As a performed medium, anime must be approached not just as a generic category of social text but also on its own aesthetic terms" (2002:737).

[2.9] All of these arguments center on and attempt to define Kusanagi's relationship to the patriarchal forces at work in her life, specifically the forces that control her cyborg body. These exist on both the real and fictional realms. Bolton (2002) writes of Kusanagi in the context of Japanese puppet theatre, categorizing all anime characters as the puppets of their animator-puppet masters, whereas Silvio and Ruh focus on her treatment at the hands of her fictional employers and engineers, the men who pay and build her body "to perform work about which one has no choice" (Ruh 2004:138). However, although the aforementioned analyses of Kusanagi's body examine it as a cybernetic organism, none of them focuses on that body as a commercial property. Ruh's analysis comes closest, saying that although "Kusanagi 'inhabits' her body, it belongs to the government, thereby ensuring her obedience" (2004:137). He sees Kusanagi's rejection of

her body as a rejection of her government's control and observation.

[2.10] However, one of the film's more lyrical scenes may shed light on another interpretation. In the scene, Kusanagi sees a copy of herself in an office window. Napier describes this copy as "a presumably human woman who appears to be a double of Kusanagi herself" (2001:106). The scene is part of a long montage wherein Kusanagi tours her city. Her sudden recognition of her double occurs after she observes a group of mannequins in a shop window. Kusanagi only meets her double while literally window-shopping in a highly commercialized context. This scene highlights her body as a commodity that can be copied and sold for various purposes. Which is the original? Is Kusanagi's double a human, or simply another cyborg who has purchased a similar body and face? Who owns the right to that body and its image? Certainly not Kusanagi; the film repeatedly stresses that if Kusanagi loses her job or decides to quit, she will have to forfeit that body. In short, Kusanagi holds the right to neither her body nor its signifiers. She has no control over the meanings that intersect within it. Her only control over that body is to destroy or abandon it.

[2.11] Similarly, Rei Ayanami in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* can only enact a form of agency over her body by destroying herself. Like Kusanagi, Rei is conscious of her identity as a copy, although it is unclear within the series whether she knows who she is a clone of, or if she is indeed a clone of a human being (note 2). Like Kusanagi, Rei has a close relationship to technology. She is the pilot of a giant humanoid robot called the Evangelion. Her body is a particularly voluptuous vision of a 14-year-old girl's, and unlike any of the series' other human characters, she has blue hair and red eyes that signify her otherness. In addition, Rei claims that she is a "girl who doesn't bleed," hinting at a possible inability to reproduce. So although Rei cannot have her own children, she is fully conscious of her identity as one of a series that might be endlessly reproduced and for which there may be no true original.

[2.12] At several points throughout the series, Rei questions her humanity and her identity, often during moments when she has the opportunity to end her own life. During an intense interrogation sequence near the end of the series, Rei comments that she is happy only because she wants death: "I want despair. I want to disappear into nothingness. *But he won't let me disappear into nothingness*" (my emphasis). Here, the "he" is Gendo Ikari, commander of NERV, the organization for which Rei works as a pilot. The series makes clear that Gendo is a callous, unfeeling villain from the first episode, but his relationship with Rei seems particularly cruel: We learn that she may be a clone of his dead wife, and that his only interest in her is as a means for him to bring about the end of the world. Throughout the television series, Gendo seems to care for Rei's well-being (saving her life) or to be content with using her as a pawn (such as when he

nearly deploys an injured Rei to pilot the Evangelion, thereby causing his reluctant son to volunteer for the job). In each case, Gendo takes on the role of father, commander, employer, and possibly lover (he observes Rei naked and takes her on trips with him), all situations in which he maintains control and power. Moreover, Gendo is fully aware of Rei's status as a clone: After his wife's death, we see him leading a very young Rei around his workplace, and in a flashback, we learn that Gendo had wanted to name his daughter Rei, were his wife pregnant with a girl.

[2.13] Within the scope of the television series, we see Rei claim her agency very little. One of her fellow pilots even accuses her of being a "robot," a "wind-up doll," and an "unthinking, emotionless puppet" ([note 3](#)) who will blindly follow orders. However, the accusation is to some extent false. Rei frequently disobeys orders if given the chance to end her own life—at one point she even self-destructs her Evangelion to save the other pilots, despite direct orders not to. During one desperate attempt to defeat an enemy, Rei acknowledges her understanding that she is a clone, saying "If I die, I can be replaced." (Once cloned again, she says, "I think I am the third.")

[2.14] Similarly, during the *End of Evangelion* (1997) film, Rei disobeys Gendo's orders in order to assist the main character, Shinji. During a pivotal scene, Gendo reaches inside Rei's body with his bare hand—her body is in an advanced state of decay and her skin is permeable—to transmit an embryonic Angel into her, bring about the apocalypse, and rejoin his dead wife. Hearing Shinji's screams for help, Rei snaps Gendo's hand off at the wrist, joins with yet another Angel, and grows in size and power to help Shinji as Gendo shouts in pain and protest. She plainly informs him that she is "not a puppet [for him to control]," and also "not [like] him" ([note 4](#)).

[2.15] Like Kusanagi, Rei chooses her own path at the expense of her body, then gains a much stronger and more powerful—one might even say divine—body in exchange. She then uses her new form to assist Shinji and express her feelings to him. In defying Gendo, she becomes a hybrid who evolves beyond her simple clone double, a cyborg of sorts who carries multiple identities within one body. This body takes on different shapes and planes of existence throughout the film: Rei, a human-shaped Angel named Kaworu, Shinji's mother, a ghostly vision of Rei herself. Rei thus regains the right to copy her body by fundamentally changing the nature of that body and repurposing it. This reflects her growing ability to copy herself infinitely on a psychic or spiritual level and appear as a sort of ghost or harbinger of death for the other characters ([note 5](#)), a plot point that cyberpunk science fiction author William Gibson may have adapted and reversed for his novel *All Tomorrow's Parties* (1999), in which a holographic singer named Rei uses fabrication units to "print" multiple copies of herself into physical existence ([note 6](#)).

[2.16] Other authors have commented on Rei's unique posthuman subjectivity. Sharalyn Orbaugh mentions Rei's cloned status in the context of the series' other female characters: "Shinji's mother has been fused with the inorganic material of the EVA suit—as well as being cloned to produce Rei—and Ritsuko's mother has been fused with the MAGI computer system. It is noteworthy that, in every case, it is a woman whose complete intercorporation with the inorganic has produced the weapons powerful enough to resist the angels" (2002:442). Mariana Ortega also examines the phenomenon of Rei's intercorporation and bodily mergers during her analysis of *End of Evangelion*: "She also becomes a symbol of internalized sexuality, onanism, oedipal desire, and stagnation, a cipher for the refusal and/or inability to individuate sexually and physically, as well as the latent potential to do so" (2007:227). Like Bolton, Napier draws a parallel between animated characters and puppets, then cautions against reading too much liberation into the series' apocalyptic ending: "Even when we think we can control the reality around us, we are actually at its mercy, cartoon characters in the hands of the fates or the animators. The happy ending that we see is one ending but, as the series makes clear, it is only one of many possible endings" (2002:430). Napier's reading again highlights the theme of the double. This particular theme within the screenplay reflects the larger reality of the *Evangelion* franchise as a whole: It has existed as an animated television series, two feature films, two different graphic novel series, and multiple video games, and has since been rebuilt as a series of six films with new animation but the same director. Much like fan-created materials such as fan fiction, *doujinshi* (fan comics), or even hand-painted models, the canonical franchise has copied and reproduced Rei's image, which is under the protection of an official license and copyright. As a commercial property, Rei remains a clone, eternally and multiply doubled.

[2.17] In defining the cyborg, Haraway mentions both doubling and reproduction as key to cyborg identity, saying "cyborgs have more to do with regeneration and are suspicious of the reproductive matrix and most birthing... We require regeneration, not rebirth" (2002:100). She likens the cyborg to a salamander, which can regenerate after injury. She also privileges writing as an act of cyborg reproduction and resistance: "Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (2002:94). The third character we examine both doubles or regenerates herself and uses the technology of writing to take charge of her existence.

[2.18] The title character of *Serial Experiments: Lain* is a shy adolescent girl who slowly becomes more interested in a virtual world called "the Wired" when she receives e-mail from a classmate who recently committed suicide. When Lain uses this mysterious e-mail as an opportunity

to make friends, she learns that multiple versions of herself have appeared both on the Wired and in the "real" world. Lain's doubles have interacted with others, causing trouble. This is a classic example of the uncanny double (note 7). We learn that Lain has suppressed various parts of her personality that make a disturbing return to her via the Wired, forcing Lain to acknowledge the reality of her existence as a "goddess" of the Wired. After a discussion with her father about her true origins, Lain understands her power over the Wired. She uses her newfound strength and cleverness to overthrow an oppressive force within the Wired, but in claiming her power, she, like Kusanagi and Rei, must erase her physical body. Like Kusanagi, Lain achieves a ubiquitous, omniscient presence within the Wired. This new subjectivity affords her godlike powers of observation and control, and with her abilities, she can constantly watch over her friends and family, but at the expense of never joining them. In addition, she must destroy the memories that others have of her. Napier characterizes the movement thusly: "The erasure of memory is seen here ironically as comforting, a way to rewrite an unhappy history—much as Japanese textbooks have erased certain episodes of the Pacific War—but underneath the irony is a tragedy of a child's non-existence. The ubiquitous still shots of a nude Lain in fetal position surrounded by computer wires and components suggest her total takeover by the machine" (2002:432).

[2.19] As we have seen, all three of the women examined here must undergo a process of self-discovery that involves their confrontation with a kind of double—be it a factory-floor reproduction of a cyborg body, a clone, or an uncanny return of elements of the subconscious—that ends with their rejection of the physical body and new powers to rewrite their existence. Although the prospect of this double may seem frightening or demoralizing at first, each of them finds a way to transcend the control that their creators and employers have over the reproduction of that double. In Kusanagi's and Lain's cases, this occurs as the result of a deepening relationship with high technology. For Rei, it means an edit to her very genetic code, rather than the simple death of the physical body. In addition, this evolution involves a rejection of patriarchal control: They overthrow government, employer, and paternal authority over the body and the rights to its reproductions and copies by editing themselves as they see fit.

[2.20] Like Haraway's cyborgs, who are suspicious of traditional reproduction, these women have no apparent desire to give birth. Instead, they wish to alter their very selves while maintaining a kernel of identity. Although the titles frequently code them as mothers or goddesses, we never see their offspring. Instead, we meet their new, more empowered selves, who remain recognizable but different, often with the ability to be in multiple places at once, endlessly copied. Their subjectivity is now shared on their own terms rather than at the behest of authority

figures who claimed ownership and control based on creation. On the one hand, these stories can be read as a classic adolescent romance narrative—the characters go on quests to find their identity by separating from parental authority. But in these characters we might also find a metaphor for fan activities online, and an understanding of why some find those activities so troubling.

3. The postauthor fandom

[3.1] While defining postmodern anxieties regarding high technology, Scott Bukatman writes: "There has arisen a cultural crisis of visibility and control over a new electronically defined reality" (1993:1). Although he does not mention the Internet explicitly, his words resonate for the unique predicament introduced by the Internet regarding fandom, copyright, and authorship. In recent years, academics have paid greater attention to the phenomenon of fan-created materials like fan fiction, fan vids, and fan art. Self-proclaimed acafans—academics who also engage in fan practices or watch from afar—have ascribed various metaphors to these activities, some of which have to do with the unique embodiment of fictional characters in media. Some prose fiction authors simply request that fan fiction not be written using their characters; others seem untroubled by fan practices. The creators and license holders who claim to dislike fan crafts (and fan fiction in particular) also use embodied language when describing what they see as not just illegal, but also morally and ethically reprehensible, even harmful. Part of their critique is a clear indictment of what their (predominantly female) fans find arousing, and thus a criticism of their fans' sexuality and performativity online. This is another example of the female body intersecting with technology to create a discourse of authority, sexuality, and rebellion.

[3.2] Two prose fiction writers who have made their unfavorable opinions on the matter known are Robin Hobb and Lee Goldberg. Both of them use embodied, sexualized language to describe their stance on fan fiction and how it uses—or, to their way of thinking, abuses—characters. In a 2005 blog post that has since been taken down, fantasy author Hobb describes her disagreement with fan fiction as a battle between fan and author, wherein the fan misinterprets or attempts to fix what the author has done wrong. In addition, Hobb uses embodied language to describe what she sees as the inevitably sexual nature of fan fiction, as well as habits that she believes to be unhealthy.

[3.3] Every fan fiction I've read to date, based on my world or any other writer's world, had focused on changing the writer's careful work to suit the foible of the fan writer. Romances are invented, gender identities changed, fetishes indulged and endings are altered. It's not flattery. To me, it is the fan fiction writer saying, "Look, the original author really screwed up the story, so I'm going to fix it. Here is how it should have gone." At the extreme low

end of the spectrum, fan fiction becomes personal masturbation fantasy in which the fan reader is interacting with the writer's character. That isn't healthy for anyone. (<http://web.archive.org/web/20060614024610/http://www.robinhobb.com/rant.html>)

[3.4] She codes fan fiction as both perverse and insulting because it interferes with the author's original intent. This makes a moral claim on authority based on creation. In essence, Hobb has claimed parentage of her fiction, as though her characters were children that she did not wish to play with others whom she had not previously approved of. Taken to its logical conclusion, Hobb's preference would remove her work (and any fiction work) from the gaze of literary interpretation and criticism, which might threaten the work with analysis of subtext and other unintended meanings, just as fan fiction has been lauded as doing (note 8).

[3.5] Similarly, author Lee Goldberg's criticism of fan fiction seems largely to do with the alleged perversity of its writers and readers (note 9) and their interference with another author's characters, as well as fan fiction being a violation of copyright and intellectual property law. Goldberg actually pays very close attention to the fan fiction community online, tracking their movements and commenting on e-mails and comments to his own Web site. In response to one such e-mail, he writes in a 2007 blog entry:

[3.6] Call me crazy, but I think there are lots of ways you can discover and explore your sexuality without taking characters you didn't create or own, writing stories about them, and publishing them on the web without the author's permission. It's one thing to write fanfic for yourself to fantasize about or as a writing exercise, it's another when you publish and/or post the stories on the web without the original authors' consent.

[3.7] I believe it's theoretically possible that women will still discover that they are lesbians without writing and publishing/posting stories about Buffy and Xena exploring the joys of sapphic love together...and that men might continue to discover their gay selves without writing and publishing/posting stories about Harry Potter giving Ron blowjobs. (March 24, 2007, http://leegoldberg.typepad.com/a_writers_life/2007/03/hey_did_you_kno.html)

[3.8] Like Hobb, Goldberg focuses on the sexual fetishization of commercially licensed, fictional characters, as well as the lack of consent to use or creatively repurpose them. This thinking treats the characters as physical beings who can be stolen or kidnapped by perverse fan fiction writers for their own nefarious purposes. Thinking of characters (intellectual property) as embodied subjects (physical property) also comes up at a discussion at author John Scalzi's Web site

(<http://scalzi.com/whatever/>), where multiple posters analogized fictional characters and settings to Coca-Cola, then argued whether "sipping" or "making recipes based on" them was ethical ("Let's get transformative. Whatever," December 13, 2007, <http://scalzi.com/whatever/?p=203>).

[3.9] To think of a fictional character as analogous to an embodied subject, especially to an author's child, is nothing new. Sandra Gilbert says, "the patriarchal notion that the writer 'fathers' his text just as God fathered the world is and has been all-pervasive in Western literary civilization, so much so that, as Edward Said has shown, the metaphor is built into the very word, *author*, with which the writer, deity, and *pater familias* are identified" (1986:487).

[3.10] This very concept of "author-ity" allows power and control for the original creator—the parent—over the text, but fans frequently subvert this authority through their readings of the text. In their hands, fictional characters become rebellious children who escape and flout the author's parental authority. Or, to extend the metaphor into the realm of the posthuman, these characters become subject to what Isaac Asimov termed the "Frankenstein syndrome," or the fear that "any artificially created humanoid will necessarily turn against his creator at some point" (Kaplan 2004:11).

[3.11] Since Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novel from which Asimov's idea derives its name, science fiction narratives have continually examined this fear of rebellion. This fear is etched into the Western, Judeo-Christian tradition of literature: in *Blade Runner*, Tyrell recites verses from *Paradise Lost* when referring to the angry replicant Roy Beatty, automatically characterizing their relationship as that between a god and his flawed, subjugated, even evil creation. The fear and disgust expressed by Hobb, Goldberg, and other prose fiction authors about fan fiction is nothing more than another iteration of a deep-seated cultural assertion about the nature of authority, originality, and control, especially control over bodies. Like Frankenstein horrified by the creature's intelligence, cunning, and violence, these authors recoil from the sheer potential offered by their fictional creations, or as Michel Foucault put it, the "many infinite resources available for the creations of discourse" within "an author's fertility" (1986:155). Once their creatures escape into the wilderness of the Internet, encountering families of fans and participating in new languages, they may make an uncanny return of their own, changed from their travels into something the author no longer recognizes as her own creation. Here, the author's character may become what Judith Halberstam calls a "totalizing monster," a figure whose monstrosity "allows for a whole range of specific monstrosities," such as other sexualities, other desires, other ethnicities or classes or histories "to coalesce in the same form" (1995:29).

[3.12] Informed by the multiple perspectives available in the fan community, the author's original "property" becomes a posthuman subject unto itself, like Frankenstein's creature composed of disparate parts, "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (Hayles 1999:3). In short, the discursive field of fandom allows fictional characters to become cyborgs, creatures of what Haraway later called "'life itself,' with its temporalities embedded in communications enhancement and system redesign" (1997:14). This cyborgification of the fictional character means the separation of author and character, parent and child, as unsettling and uncanny as the posthuman fantasy of an ectogenetic fetus grown outside the womb, as in *The Matrix*. If the cyborg is, as Haraway said, "suspicious of most birthing," then fan practices can be read as cyborg reproduction via writing, not unlike the proliferation of multiple selves by Kusanagi, Rei, and Lain.

[3.13] This is not to say that fan reproductions occur without human sentiment or affection, nor are they always regarded with such skepticism or disgust. Japanese fan practices enjoy key differences from their English-language counterparts. Despite the rigor of Japanese copyright law, some fans engage in flagrant violations that—unlike the practices of most English-language fans online—actually earn them some money. Conventions like Comic Market allow doujinshi—fan-produced manga based on commercially licensed characters—artists to gather and sell their wares for profit. This practice is largely unheard of and even frowned on in English-language fandom, yet some of these doujinshi eventually arrive in the same bookstores as the canonical manga title. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the best known manga-ka, including the enormously successful manga circle, CLAMP, started in the gray area of doujinshi. Since their days as unlicensed artists remixing others' work, CLAMP's original manga titles have gone on to be animated. The former doujinshi artists' work is now so successful as to have its own doujinshi:

[3.14] During our conversation, I reached into my backpack to show her the three Clamp dojin titles I'd bought at K-Books. Her handlers—a few managers and a guy from legal—wincing and exchanged worried looks. But Ohkawa burst into a delighted laugh and then flipped through *Sakura Remix* and *Hacker Chobits*. "Any popular manga is going to have this treatment done," she told me. "It is by people who are truly in love with the work, and you have to respect that."

[3.15] So, I asked, is *Hacker Chobits* actually good for the real Chobits?

[3.16] She paused. "I think it's good because they are expressing love for the work. And, of course, we come from the doujinshi world, so I understand

this." Fans even sometimes send her their doujinshi, and what she admires about these works is the dedication and the innovation they show. "There is originality here. There are new stories. It's not a copy." (Daniel H. Pink, *Wired*, October 22, 2007, http://www.wired.com/techbiz/media/magazine/15-11/ff_manga)

[3.17] Although Ohkawa's position may not represent the feeling among manga-ka as a whole, and although her opinion seems to differ from that of her publishing and legal representatives, it does reflect a certain reality within the anime and manga market that allows for fan distribution. In fact, the market for U.S.-licensed anime in the 1980s and 1990s began with fans distributing VHS tapes among themselves, and attempts by anime studios and distributors to crack American markets relied largely on their involvement with these fans who had already engaged in a kind of copyright infringement.

[3.18] Fans used the introduction of the VCR to share raw, untranslated anime with others, as a slew of fantastic imagery and incomprehensible language bombarded audiences at the back of science fiction conventions. The birth of fan distribution followed, releasing anime shows for a vast underground network of fans throughout the country. By 1990, fans started to fansub—to translate and subtitle anime videos. Many fans started anime companies, becoming the industry leaders of today (Leonard 2005:282).

[3.19] This almost Harawayan blurring of boundaries between producer and consumer is key to what Napier identifies as important to anime fandom's appeal among Western audiences: "As Western thought turns away from Cartesian reality to embrace the uncertainties and flexibilities of a world with fewer and fewer master narratives, Japanese culture, with its tolerance of ambiguity and ephemerality, might be a particularly apt vehicle with which to confront the complexities of the current period" (2007:214). But where does this leave us? At what point do the concerns of the posthuman body and the postauthor fandom meet? In the age of the Internet, both issues involve the topography of cyberspace, "an erotic space, a space defined by the flow of desire and the circumvention of (the poaching upon) instrumental, capitalist, space" (Bukatman 1993:310). Moreover, they are linked to the discourse surrounding ownership, authorship, and the body, specifically the female body, which "is no abstract notion (as the battle for reproductive rights amply demonstrates) and is more evidently bound into a system of power relations" (Bukatman 1993:314). These power relations are frequently bound up in notions of authorship and property, both of which establish meaning by presupposing users, consumers, or participants who remain firmly planted on the other side of a discursively and legally produced but little-enforced "property line"—the line separating those who possess "author-ity" from those who do not. As Haraway says: "Only some of the necessary 'writers' have the semiotic

status of 'authors' for any text" because "property is the kind of relationality that poses as the-thing-in-itself, the commodity, the thing outside relationships, the thing that can be exhaustively measured, mapped, owned, appropriated, disposed" (1997:7–8).

[3.20] The intersection becomes clearest if we accept the body as a text, and, implicitly, the text as a body, for "a literary text is not only speech made quite literally embodied, but also power mysteriously made manifest, made flesh" (Gilbert 1986:488). The body is a discursive crossroads formed and coded by multiple authors and perspectives on both the real and figurative levels. Every child is a collaborative work whose (genetic) code was written by two individuals (and whose psychological programming is the product of an unknown number of contributors), and adults slowly take on the ability to "edit" speech, appearance, and mannerisms for various social contexts. The body and its associated values are similarly coded, interpreted, and otherwise made the subject and product of discourse. Cyberpunk fiction makes this reading of the body clear: The cyborgs that populate William Gibson's novels or Mamoru Oshii's films are able to rewrite their memories, modify their bodies, and treat themselves as works in progress. They are bodies of work that "are not slaves to master discourses but emerge at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context" (Halberstam and Livingston 1996:2).

[3.21] At these nodes are both the cyborgified characters of fan fiction and the cyborg authors who act as their puppet masters. If the body is a text that can be read, it can also be copied, interpreted, edited, and rewritten. This is the same for the fictional body, or the body that enacts fiction. The writing of the body and the self-discovery of the body through writing are phenomena that both Goldberg and Hobb (but especially Goldberg) criticize within fan fiction. Drawing on performance theory to develop a metaphor for fan practices, Francesca Coppa writes: "Fan fiction's concern with bodies is often perceived as a problem or flaw, but performance is predicated on the idea of bodies, rather than words, as the storytelling medium" (2006:229). The same may hold true for puppets, according to Bolton (2002). He uses voice, weight, and story to link puppets to animated characters—and the female cyborg Kusanagi in particular—via the tradition of Japanese puppet theater:

[3.22] But through analogy with the puppet theater, we can regard the words of the Puppet Master (itself a piece of code, a being of language) as a kind of *michiyuki* [lovers' suicide that brings transcendence], highlighting the power of words alone to bring about the pair's transformation. A moment after the Puppet Master finally finishes describing the merge, it is complete. Its speech has rewritten them both. (2002:764)

[3.23] This reading strongly resembles Haraway's hope for the cyborg to write herself into being and Haraway's claim that "writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs," and that cyborg politics is "a struggle for language" (2002:95). Bolton concludes his analogy by saying that viewing the cyborg Kusanagi requires a greater cyborgification of the viewer: "Unlike the live puppet theater, the animated language of Oshii's drama is so high tech that we require a prosthesis to see it, a projector, DVD player, or VCR...Every moment that we watch the artificial bodies of Oshii's celluloid cyborgs, the technologies of reproduction implicate us in the loop or the network of high-tech representation that is turning us into cyborgs ourselves" (2002:767).

[3.24] In short, fans of cyborgs do to some extent become cyborgs themselves. This is especially true of anime fans who rely on their Internet connections—both mechanical and interpersonal—to scavenge the wilderness for new texts and new products ([note 10](#)). Writing is their "pre-eminent technology" as they engage in translation, fansubbing, coding, and downloading. It is no less true for producers of fan fiction, who attempt to "mark the world" (to revisit Haraway's phrase) of the Internet not only through their bodies of prose but also through their participation in affinity-based communities. Online fandom has become a discursive field within which to discover and enjoy both the physical and the written body, as Cixous urged, although, as she so plainly pointed out: "Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don't like the true texts of women—female-sexed texts. That kind scares them" (1986:310). Online fandom is a place for new subjectivities, new bodies of work, and new bodies at play, in infinite diversity. Like Kusanagi, Rei, and Lain, these fans can and do disregard "author-ity" and continue copying, editing, and changing characters (and their bodies) to suit their pleasure and to stretch and define their freedom and potential within the Wired. But doing so requires the creation of another self, not merely an alias but an identity shaped by participation in community. Like Haraway's cyborg, this writer (who may not have the semiotic status of author) is unconcerned with origins or "author-ity" and focuses instead on the joys of inhabiting a shared textual/virtual/imaginary space with like-minded people. Rei Ayanami articulates this cyborg subjectivity best, though her words are startlingly relevant for a fictional character constantly reinterpreted by both fans and license holders: "I became myself by the instrumentality of the links and relationships between myself and others. I am formed by interaction with others. They create me as I create them."

[3.25] But as with all "ironic political myths" that use the cyborg as a key metaphor, this particular narrative of fandom must question whether the fan-cyborg's position is truly liberated. As Balsamo (1996) warns us regarding Haraway's cyborgs, fans cannot escape the materiality of the body or its associated politics. Success as fans does not mean material or financial success. It will not feed or

clothe anyone, and it does little to end war or disease or to otherwise ameliorate global suffering. Unlike Motoko Kusanagi, these cyborgs cannot stop crime. In fact, to choose cyborg subjectivity in this context is to choose an identity steeped in the potential for criminality, and an implicit splitting of the self into real and virtual personae.

[3.26] And yet, if the animated narratives above are any indication, this shift in identity and subjectivity is key to understanding humanity in "the present cultural moment, a moment that sees itself *as* science fiction" (Bukatman 1993:6). This is an era when bodies are endlessly observed and discussed, when state-sponsored surveillance is expected, and when bodies win prizes for most weight lost and least space taken up. Official political discourse strives to divorce the body from words like *torture* while simultaneously pushing tortured bodies into a place beyond words, and the female body is judged not only for sexual desirability and reproductive potential but also for the possible religious, ethical, and political meanings behind the textile signifiers of clothing (both the burka and the combat uniform). Thus, it is not surprising that legions of female fans all over the world rejoice in the rejection of the body by the likes of Japanese-animated women, and they find pleasure in the performance of new identities online in order to subvert the relatively unthreatening authority of a single author or even a faceless media corporation seemingly more concerned with digital piracy than the fictional lives of fictional characters. For if Kusanagi and Rei and Lain have done anything, it is to violate the copyright of their own existence, to become their own greatest fans, and copy, edit, and share themselves, as Ohkawa put it, out of "dedication," "innovation," and "love." This ability to change the self and claim new agency and fresh identity is the dream of the cyborg, the fan, and the human.

4. Notes

1. This is a theme throughout Haraway's manifesto (2002). She writes: "The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-Oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of a the powers of the parts into a higher unity" (67). Later, she notes: "The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, post-modern collective and personal self" (82). She also stresses the role of "affinity, not identity" as a new route to feminist activism across national and socioeconomic boundaries (73).

2. Various writers interpreted the series differently. Orbaugh (2002) states explicitly that Rei is a clone of Gendo's wife (and Shinji's mother), Yui, but Ortega (2007) says that Rei is a hybrid of Yui and an Angel named Lilith.

3. Here, it is worth noting the Japanese word for *doll* and *puppet* is the same: *ningyo*. The word uses the same root character as the word for *human*, *ningen*.

4. Please note that there are subtle differences between the subtitled translation and the English-language dialogue here. The English-language dialogue has been bracketed.

5. Throughout the series and the film, glowing or transparent visions of Rei appear to the other characters. Whether Rei manipulates these visions remains unclear. However, during *The End of Evangelion*, Rei appears to the others at the moment of death, often transforming into the one they love most. She does so both before and after defying Gendo and merging with an Angel named Lilith.

6. Gibson makes frequent reference to anime within his work: a character in *Idoru* wears a *Gunsmith Cats* watch, and the holographic singer Rei's last name is Toei, like the film company that produces anime like *Sailor Moon*. Rei Toei's character also seems to be adapted from Sharon Apple, the virtual idol in *Macross Plus*.

7. Here I am relying on Freud's 1919 essay on "The Uncanny," in which he describes the phenomenon of the double at length. Freud in turn relies on Schelling: "'Unheimlich' is the name for everything that ought to have remained...secret and hidden but has come to light" (2002:224).

8. See Willis (2006), Jenkins et al. (2006), and Jenkins with Campbell (2006).

9. Goldberg's Web site (<http://leegoldberg.typepad.com/>) has an entire tag devoted to fan fiction, and many of the entries concern what Goldberg finds odd about fan fiction sexually.

10. I use the verb *scavenge* here on purpose in reference to the scrap scavengers Takayuki Tatsumi (2006) mentions. Of particular note to the fan studies oeuvre is this quotation from the chapter on these so-called Apaches: "As soon as the existing standard of aesthetics collapses, the hypercapitalist imperative incorporates the weirdest into the most marketable, the most avant-garde, and the most beautiful" (156).

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The unlearning: Horror and transformative theory

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[0.1] Abstract—Building on the foundational concepts of transformative learning theory, I argue that horror fiction strongly encourages perspective transformation by challenging student assumptions about both genre writing and educational experience. I informally describe a specific creative writing class period focusing on the motif of the scream in diverse horror texts, and I illustrate how students learn to transform what they already bring to the classroom by employing a variety of particular in-class writing exercises and literary discussions. Among these, transformative writing exercises—such as the revision of an existing text by Stephen King—are highlighted as instructional techniques. As cautionary literature, horror especially dramatizes strategies of fight versus flight. I reveal how students can learn by transforming their knowledge through disorientation that is particular to reading and writing in the horror genre.

[0.2] Keywords—Adaptation; Adult learners; Brookfield; Classroom exercises; Creative writing; Fear and learning; Freewriting; Genre; Horror; King; Learning; McGonigal; Mezirow; Paradigm shift; Pedagogy; Revision; Rosenblatt; Scream; Student assumptions; Taboo; Teaching; Transformative learning; Undergraduate

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1. Introduction: Fear is never just itself

[1.1] The horror genre has many reasonable lessons to teach us, even though it is perhaps the literary genre most associated with irrationality. It is often construed around the emotional and physical responses it seeks to produce in its audience, from anxious fright to hair-raising chills, especially in the cinema, where aesthetic success is measured by the volume of spectator screams. The appeal of horror fiction and film lies in the ambivalent thrills associated with fear, suspense, and terror, no matter how significant its subtextual messages might be. Even when its practitioners mine the fields of philosophy, psychology, theology, and metaphysics in the deepest of intellectual ways, horror resists mastery by the intellect, privileges the emotional/physical response, and remains the primary venue for the literary expression of dread, anxiety, caution, shock, uncertainty, and the uncanny.

[1.2] One might wonder, then, what business horror fiction has in the college classroom. If the point of horror is to scare readers, what lessons can it possibly teach them? When does fear and shock serve a pedagogical function? Is it ethical to horrify students in the hopes of teaching them something?

[1.3] Most teachers in the language arts would address such questions the way they would any literary text. Horror stories document and illuminate the human condition across history and culture as much as any work of fiction. Horror lies at the very heritage of literature, from scary narratives in folklore and fairy tales to a long-standing tradition of fearful narration in a canon that includes Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, and a litany of other canonized authors who routinely appear in educational venues, from

children's libraries to course syllabi to doctoral dissertations. Horror tales have always made for compelling reading, and works in the genre remain some of the best-selling and closely cherished books of all time. But what also makes horror so valuable for teachers is its inherent power to transform the way students think. By staging failures of intellectual mastery, challenging norms, and transgressing social boundaries, horror has the potential to revise and the potency to reshape the way its readers think.

[1.4] It is difficult to read a horror story and not in some way be changed by it, adapting its lessons and knowledge into our worldview. For instance, some horror stories and films can quite literally document and illustrate strategies for survival by dramatizing how a character deals with a life-threatening antagonist (Pinedo 1997). When horror tales explore and speculate about the unknown, they often also teach us about what we *do* know, even if only to point out the limits of cultural knowledge. Indeed, the thrill of horror fiction may very well be a response to that liminal space between what we know and what we need to know, but haven't yet acquired. The genre's reliance on uncertainty, provocation, and surprise can generate active learning because it can provoke a reconsideration of one's assumptions about life, spirit, and reality. A classroom can provide a context for reframing the emotional affects of the genre and prompting critical reflection on how horror—and more broadly, literature—changes us. If one of the grand goals of a liberal education is to reevaluate one's deeply held assumptions, then the popular genre of horror can effectively be employed to prompt serious student reflection and cultivate the classroom as an arena

for emotional, perspectival, and ideological transformation.

[1.5] In this essay, I want to explore how teaching horror fiction and having students write horror stories can create an environment for transformative learning by showing how I have employed some of the tenets of transformative learning theory in my own classes. This pedagogy is a progressive approach to teaching that emerged from Jack Mezirow's influential study of adult learners, *Transformative Dimensions of Learning* (1991), which aspires to empower students by making them more conscious of "the assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings" (quoted in Schroeder 2005). At the center of transformative theory is a consideration of what students already know when they come to the classroom, and how educators are tasked to engage with their perspectives and previously held assumptions. Transformative educators seek not merely to add to a student's stockpile of knowledge (that is, assimilative learning), but also to revise and transform the knowledge and beliefs students rely on to process course content. The assumption behind transformative learning theory is that the reception of new knowledge often requires the subject to adjust their relationship to that new knowledge, rather than just to hammer it into preexisting structures (McGonigal 2005:2). Quite literally, the transformation theory of learning in praxis seeks to *change one's mind*, rather than just supplement a student's data bank with new information. At its best, transformative education is, as Lisa Baumgartner frames it, a process of learning that changes not only "*what we know...but how we know*" it (2001:16).

[1.6] However, the goal of transformative learning theory is not to force a student into adopting one way—especially not just the teacher's way—of seeing the world. Instead, teachers strive to raise a student's self-consciousness about their worldview and how they routinely process new information. The idea is to move away from instrumental or communicative knowledge into the realm of emancipatory knowledge that enhances student autonomy in the world (Cranton 2002:64). It "encourages learning through enhancing context awareness, critical reflection of assumptions, discourse and reflective action. It is not movement from a false belief to a true one but rather from an unexamined to a critically examined belief" (Mezirow 1999). Horror can instigate this movement by providing what transformative theorists term an *activating event* in a potent way, enabling a critical examination of assumptions as part of a larger process of learning and perspective transformation.

[1.7] To illustrate, I want to examine my own teaching in the context of a model of transformative teaching that I borrow from Kelly McGonigal's 2005 article, "Teaching for Transformation." In this essay, McGonigal boils down Mezirow's essential phases of transformation (1991:168–

69) into five primary components of a process that ultimately aims to generate a paradigm shift (or what Mezirow terms a "perspective transformation") in the adult learner:

- [1.8] 1. an *activating event* that exposes the limitations of a student's current knowledge/approach;
2. opportunities for the student to identify and *articulate the underlying assumptions* in the student's current knowledge/approach;
3. *critical self-reflection* as the student considers where these underlying assumptions come from, how these assumptions influenced or limited understanding;
4. *critical discourse* with other students and the instructor as the group examines alternative ideas and approaches;
5. opportunities to test and *apply new perspectives*. (emphasis added; McGonigal 2005:2)

[1.9] This pragmatic breakdown of the transformative process into five key phases is an excellent model for designing a unit of instruction. What is imperative in this model is the central role of the student in each phase—the teacher is more responsible for constructing a supportive environment that fosters intellectual openness and trust than they are in delivering content per se. But the environment cannot be too safe, too supportive, or it risks groupthink and conformity to already accepted ways of seeing. As McGonigal reminds us, "although student empowerment and support are important, an 'environment of challenge' is the central ingredient...students must have their assumptions and beliefs actively challenged...To be an agent of change, [teachers need to] provide both the catalyst and support necessary for transformative learning" (2005:4).

[1.10] Horror fiction can interestingly add to an "environment of challenge" within the safety of the campus classroom. Works of horror by student writers and famous authors alike can artfully be employed as activating events that trigger a reexamination in student thinking, through critical reflections, open discussions, and—via creative writing—applications that test new perspectives. In what follows, I want to share my own experiences in a particular creative writing course (a topics course in "Horror and Suspense Writing") that—although autobiographical and therefore subjective—well illustrates how horror material can catalyze and prompt perspective transformation among students and teacher alike.

2. Horror as a disorienting dilemma

[2.1] Transformation cannot transpire without the some discomfort and unease. McGonigal recommends that teachers "create a disorienting dilemma" as an

activating event to stimulate learning (2005:2). Such a dilemma, as Connie Schroeder has argued, "typically exposes a discrepancy between what a person has always assumed to be true and what has just been experienced, heard or read and may contribute to a readiness for change" (2005). In order to activate a paradigm shift, the teacher simply needs to, in McGonigal's words, "challenge what students believe. You can do this with a case study, quote, experiment, picture, demonstration, or story that does not fit [student] expectations. The goal is to confuse and intrigue students and thus increase their motivation to learn" (2005:2). Learning via confusion sounds counterintuitive to most teachers (if not potentially sadistic), but the notion she's espousing is that one must push students out of stasis so that they can reorient, adjust, and realign their thinking, given new knowledge. It is an inherently active form of learning achieved by disorientation.

[2.2] Horror breaks student expectations in numerous ways. Depending on the context, the mere presence of a horror story in a college classroom can be disorienting to some students, if only by virtue of its novelty as popular literature in the college curriculum. But even when students see it coming, asking them to intellectually grapple with an entertaining text in a critical way rather than to use it as a portal for escape and thrills may also provide the intrigue and motivation that McGonigal advocates.

[2.3] The defamiliarizing approach of much horror fiction inherently challenges assumptions, but the text itself need not be the only approach to an activating event and class activities can also challenge students to rethink their assumptions. I want to turn now to analyzing the activities of one specific class period I ran in February 2008 that illustrates how I have tried to use horror to activate transformation and foster critical reflection and discourse in the classroom. About halfway through the semester in my course in "Horror Writing and Suspense"—when students had already acclimated to analyzing horror literature in the classroom—I decided to try something new at the beginning of the hour that would shake them out of their routines. The plan for the class period was to focus on the concept of catharsis in horror literature and film, particularly through a focus on the role of screaming in the genre. They had read a story involving a scream (King's "The Man Who Loved Flowers") for homework, and I had planned a cluster of discussions and creative writing assignments involving the scream. So when I took roll at the beginning of the hour, I asked them to not simply mutter "present" when I called their name, but—unexpectedly—required them to scream at the top of their lungs.

[2.4] I got the idea from a Weblog called Coyotebanjo, run by Chris Smith, a music teacher at Texas Tech University who allows his students to "shout out" to the class at the top of the hour every Friday with any announcements, gripes, or comments (Smith 2008). His

"Friday shout-out" routine is a way of increasing participation and interactivity in his classroom. But I took the concept more literally than he intended, transforming it into what I termed a "scream out." And it paid off in unexpected ways.

[2.5] At first they timidly grunted, eyes on the door as if expecting an angry teacher or concerned student to rush in, and as I made my way down the roster, the screaming began to escalate. I laughed and teased and encouraged them to ignore their fears by hollering back at them like a drill sergeant: "Come on, belt it out! Rattle the windows! Make my blood curdle!" One student pounded the desk and growled like a caveman. A woman cried "Noooo!" as if leaping off a rooftop. The students laughed and enjoyed the exercise, hamming it up in good fun. But then one student—let's call her Flora, the quietest and most bashful girl in the class—surprised us all by erupting with a wail that would have put any cinematic scream queen instantly out of a job. We all froze and looked at her and then back at each other in utter surprise, trying to verify what we had witnessed. "I think she's been waiting to do that all term," I finally said, hoping to shatter the silence, and we continued to scream and laugh our way down the roster.

[2.6] Screaming in class is a simple example of what happens when the Dionysian aura of the horror genre enters the otherwise Apollonian hallways of academia. Students love this kind of disruption, this chance to rebel and act out, because it invokes a degree of social permissibility and the unknown potentiality that comes with it. Even outside of this particular horror class, I assign horror stories and employ similar strategies (like the "scream out") in contexts where one might not be conditioned to expect it, in order to tap into a sense that anything could happen, and to spark creativity and independent curiosity about the course content. And sometimes, students transform before my very eyes: the quiet one screams, the bored boys suddenly become interested, the passive student stirs to independent research, and those who never enjoyed reading suddenly develop an addiction to genre books. Even students who initially come to class with a strong loathing for the genre still find they enjoy the sheer novelty of horror in the classroom. It's popular entertainment, and that lends the promise of pleasure to the scholarly environment. But more importantly, I think, they learn from it, and they learn to rethink their assumptions about the arbitrary boundaries between stories taught in school and stories sold in commercial culture.

[2.7] For example, the opening scream exercise—although a bit juvenile and potentially upsetting to my colleagues down the hall—was a success because it asked students to rethink their assumptions about the passive and routine action of roll call. Screaming to be marked "present" had obviously—if not mandatorily—increased student participation; but Flora's surprising revelation also illustrates how an activating event can trigger a genuine transformation. Later that day, Flora revealed to us that

she had regularly worked at a haunted house attraction during Halloween season, where she'd cultivated her talent for screaming—and I encouraged her to tap into those experiences and "write what you know." From that point forward in the term, I noticed Flora became more vocal in literature discussions, was more critical of other students during workshops, and was more freely creative in her horror writing. I cannot say with conviction that this one liberating scream alone launched her into this trajectory, but it certainly gave her an unexpected means toward expressing herself that she probably would not have otherwise had. And it also changed the way the entire class thought about the hidden talents of the students in the seats beside them.

3. Approach and avoidance strategies

[3.1] Flora's banshee scream was unique, and—to tell the truth—not everyone in my class that day screamed as loudly as they could have. Some, in fact, tried to keep their voices as low as possible or covered their mouths to mute their shouting. It pays for a teacher to consider the reactions that students might have to an activating event because some students will respond habitually, rather than with critical awareness. Irvin Roth explains that adult learners generally employ habits that routinely begin in one of two directions when they are confronted with something new: "When they scan their experience for a cue to start a sequence of thought or behavior," he writes, "do they seek something to approach or something to avoid?" (1990:121) These two directions—approach and avoidance—explain the pathways of learning that students will take toward learning new information. But they can become habitual and fixed if the learner does not develop strategies for switching between the two directions in a well-modulated way, informed by experience. Thus, Roth explains, if one is too eager to always "approach" a problem, it can lead to "incaution"—and "too strong an approach style will lead to uncritical acceptance of any idea, research report or other academic product with a modicum (sometimes barely discernible) of credibility," whereas a "strong avoidance style" produces "an inability to accept new ideas" and "a strong inhibition against generating" new ones (1990:122). Teachers who can transform adult learners, Roth suggests, foster a critical-minded balance between the two directions by exercising various choices and comprehending them through a process of open reflection.

[3.2] Horror, with its cautionary tales, literally engages readers in narratives of approach and avoidance. Indeed, I find it fascinating that Roth uses the terms *approach* and *avoidance* to describe learning styles, because these are synonyms for the psychological responses to anxiety that we popularly refer to as fight versus flight. Fear, in other words, has a great deal to do with learning. Horror, as the genre of fear, overtly depicts characters engaging in fight and flight strategies—and it also often covertly attempts to engender these same strategies in the reader's response. Thus, horror fiction of

any kind can offer students a vicarious experience that might challenge their habitual learning style, to the degree that they identify with the choices a character makes, and to the degree that they feel their instincts toward approach and avoidance are contradicted by the emotions generated by the text.

[3.3] Prompting a student into reassessing their worldview can be a difficult enterprise, particularly because students are often already dependent on established habits of learning that have enabled them to succeed for years in the classroom. Moreover, perspective transformations can be, in Mezirow's words, "painful [because] they often call into question deeply held personal values and threaten our very sense of self" (1991:168). As a defense mechanism, some students adopt habits that feel safe (for example, always writing the same kind of arguments, always memorizing for the test) but that are ultimately unchallenging, leading to pathologies that inhibit actual learning. One of the challenges of teaching horror is to risk challenging students to move beyond their instinctive desire for safety and comfort, while at the same time constructing an environment that is the nonetheless safe and kind by offering "seasoned guidance and compassionate criticism" (McGonigal 2005:4) that sometimes requires "intuitive, holistic, and contextually based" assistance in a "mythical procedure during which a mentor guides students in a learning journey affected by the student's social environment" (Baumgartner 2001:17).

[3.4] Often, I employ creative and critical writing assignments that send students into making choices that might contradict their instincts. In the class when my students screamed out their name (as an activating event), we openly discussed the function of the scream as both an animal signal and a stock element of the horror genre. I shared Edvard Munch's expressionistic painting of "The Scream" with them and then led an open dialogue littered with probing "why" questions: "Why do actors scream in the movies? Why do people scream in the audience?" I wanted to reframe their guttural experience of the scream in intellectual ways, appealing to the aesthetic history of the genre. But to get them to really take these concepts in a critical direction, I tried to move them to consider strategies of approach and avoidance by imagining their own instinctive response to a brutal scene, by writing a creative response to a passage of writing I recited aloud.

[3.5] I read to the class from "Screams From Somewhere Else," an article from *Time Magazine* rather than a horror story, in which Roger Rosenblatt (1987) muses about the inhumane ways we often react to the sound of the human voice, screaming. Violent crimes can occur in a crowded city street, yet astoundingly, few will rush to aid a screaming victim. When a scream sounds out, he writes, "One has the choice to hear or not to hear; to detect location or not to detect location; to discover cause; to help or not to help. Along the many lines of choice, excuses and mistakes are possible, even

reasonable. One is left with oneself and the screams, like two opponents." Rosenblatt here uses the language of the fight or flight response to describe the way a scream tests civilization by forcing a choice. He recognizes the conflict between primitive instincts and the rational act of decision making. But in his conclusion, he suddenly shifts into a second-person direct address that levels civilized man to his animal instincts:

[3.6] You never know how you will react to a scream until you hear one. I can tell you how you will react at first. You will freeze. Your head will snap like an alarmed bird's and your eyes will swell, long before any practical choices begin to form between hiding under the bed and leaping to the rescue. You will freeze because you will recognize the sound. It comes from you; all the panic and the pain; all the screams of one's life, uttered and quashed, there in that dreadful eruption that has scattered the air. All yours. The scream that comes from somewhere else comes from you.

[3.7] After reading Rosenblatt's passage aloud to my class, I asked students to write from the point of view of a character who is walking down a street and then suddenly overhears a scream in a dark and foggy alleyway. "And then...What happens next?" I did not need to prompt them further; they all set to writing immediately, eager to thaw the "freeze"—the delayed response to the scream—that Rosenblatt had built up in their emotions and their imaginations. The decision to approach or avoid the scream was entirely their own. Like Rosenblatt, the moral judgment about the best course of action would be something they worked out through revising the scenario and bending it to their own ends. They had to react to what they heard in their imagination, and try to solve the problem of the scream, but I think the conditions of the classroom activity caused them to do so in a highly self-conscious and critical way.

[3.8] I polled a random sampling of students to read what they wrote aloud to the class because I knew that listening to each other's choices would "help people examine their assumptions and provide a structure for reflection on practice" (Cranton 2002:68). What I heard wasn't quite what I expected, however. In the first instance, a man tried to rescue a woman from being attacked by a Jack the Ripper figure in the dark alleyway, only to find he was being baited there on purpose to begin with, and was subsequently murdered; in another, a student wrote about the dark fog, revealing itself to be a revenant who had just committed murder in the alley. In yet another, a narrator witnesses a brutal act of murder, makes eye contact with the killer, and is then ultimately permitted to walk away. In each case, students both approached and avoided the source of the imaginary scream, but they responded with generative creativity, as well as surprise. What surprised me about this outcome was that the victim was not at the center of the story; the point-of-view character, engaged in a process of

discovery, dominated their focus. I took this as a sign that the writers were responding to the "you" that Rosenblatt had addressed them with. This "you" forced responsibility on the audience-as-writer—and it was simultaneously the viewpoint of a learner, engaged in inquiry, considering the validity of a battery of ethical and rational choices, seeking meaning in the shadows and creating it out of thin air.

4. Perspective transformation in horror narrative

[4.1] After this creative exercise, my students discussed (and would later adapt and revise) "The Man Who Loved Flowers," a short story by Stephen King (1978) that literally dramatizes not just the fight versus flight fear response, but more importantly the act of frame shifting so important to perspective transformation. The narrator describes a man in love, walking in the beautiful springtime city streets of the late 1960s, purchasing flowers for his romantic interest, the beautiful Norma. Only, when he finally meets a woman he believes to be Norma, but isn't, we discover that Norma has actually been dead for about a decade, and when the woman who is not Norma screams at his approach, he bashes her in the head with a hammer to put a stop to it, like he has so many others who frustrate him by both being and not being Norma. What makes this story fascinating is the way that King has withheld the truth and misdirected our attention away from the fact that the man is mentally disturbed, driven by a pathology we are forced to misread as being "crazy in love." Much as he does in his novel, *Misery* (1987), King transforms the conventions of the popular romance genre in interesting ways, but the status of the story as a horror story catches readers off-guard. In the classic trick ending of so much horror fiction, our perspective, too, has been tricked into a retrospective analysis that must account for the disorienting new details we are presented with in the tale's conclusion. One cannot comprehend this story, and its endgame shift in mode, from romance to horror, without accounting for the change in the protagonist's status from springtime lover to serial hammer murderer. As Mezirow puts it, "Our interpretations are fallible and often are predicated upon unreliable assumptions. Examining critically the justification for our interpretations and the meaning schemes and perspectives they express is the major imperative of modern adulthood" (1991:35). Horror fiction like King's forces us to reexamine our "meaning schemes" time and again in order to more fully understand both the fiction, and ourselves.

[4.2] While turning the conventions of both romance and horror fiction on their head, King at the same time literally shifts the entire frame of reference for his main character in a way that moves one step beyond most horror stories. Near the conclusion, King finally reveals the hammer killer's name: "His name was Love." Such a simple change—nominalizing the concept of love—cagily

renders the entire tale an allegory for the violent nature of passion and the obsession we attach to our objects of desire. Readers are forced to return to the beginning of the story to reread—or at the very least reinterpret—what they have already read, in order to seek meaning.

[4.3] One of my goals as a teacher of writing and literature is to get students to process their reactions to such paradigm shifts in an open forum. In class, I hand out discussion prompts to small groups that push students to raise and explore critical questions (which I define as "how" and "why" questions) about this story: (1) Describe how King plays off our expectations of romantic love in this story. What is the theme or lesson of this tale? (2) What point of view does King choose to tell this tale? Is it effective? Would the story work in another one? How so—or why not? (3) What do you think the narrator means by the statement on the last page, "His name was Love"?

[4.4] Obviously, these questions encourage critical discourse and analytical reading among students. For McGonigal (2005:3), focused group discussions are the most social forms of transformation and can lead to argument where students will have to explain and defend their viewpoint while being exposed to the views of others. I also allow my students to pursue answers in their journals as a sort of after-class critical reflection, which usually responds to things teacher and student alike have said about the text. In addition, research can expand the range of discourse in which students test and validate their learning. In the case of "Flowers," I asked students to consider how Rosenblatt's ideas might relate to King's story. Ultimately, by engaging my creative writing students in the same sort of dialogue they might get in, say, an American literature course, I am able to treat transformational learning as not only a solitary and a social process that applies to more than just the genre of horror stories, but also to the world outside the text, so that students can apply what they are learning to alternative contexts.

[4.5] This is common enough praxis in most English classes where any fiction is taught. But what made "The Man Who Loved Flowers" a particularly worthy tale to teach on this day in my horror writing course wasn't just the fact that a passage in the story deals with a scream. Despite its horrific affect, like all good works of literature, King's story also raises social issues and directly invites interpretation. The story rewards rereading, reinterpreting and critically reflecting. By overtly shifting its status to allegory in its final passages, the story literally shifts the paradigm of reading, and it also makes a claim to literary value that many horror stories do not usually, so overtly, make. Being exposed to that shift—being disoriented by King's trickery and caught off-guard by one's misreading—potentially transforms the way a student will read all horror, if not all literature, because from this point forward, all stories could be allegorical in nature. The existential lesson is

that one never knows what another person is thinking, and that the assumed rules surrounding an interpretive event are often not what they appear to be. Classroom discussion and student journal writing that focuses on the paradigm shifts at work in a tale invite active learning, but also work to promote a transformation of the student's approach to (or avoidance of) reading fiction while also asking them to remain alert for future shifts in context that a writer might unexpectedly make.

5. Ground shifting to epiphany

[5.1] The final phase of transformative learning that McGonigal (2005) describes is giving students the opportunity to test a new paradigm or apply a newly revised perspective. For Mezirow, the ability to apply what one learns is a necessary condition of transformation because it actualizes or realizes one's independent agency (Brookfield 2000:142). "Action on the new perspective," Baumgartner writes, "is imperative. In other words, not only *seeing*, but *living* the new perspective is necessary" (2001:17). If students can test their new perspective, it is empowering, sharing much with the emancipatory values of transformative works in general. Asking students to rewrite a story passage or revise a tale's ending are always options for a creative teacher to employ in this regard because they give students a chance to "live" the new perspective from inside the act of writing, rather than from outside the text as a reader. But McGonigal also encourages teachers to "return to the disorienting dilemma...and have students approach it with their new knowledge" (2005:4), and I find this tactic useful for teaching with horror fiction.

[5.2] I returned to "The Man Who Loved Flowers" in a follow-up class meeting by having students recap their thoughts about the story, but I also obliquely returned to the disorienting dilemma that the story posed through a surprising in-class writing exercise. In a freewriting session, I asked students to channel the stream of consciousness of a man who loves not flowers or even a woman, but tools, and is fixated on killing a woman with a treasured hammer. Here, the perspectival shift seemed obvious: I was inviting students to reproduce King's story as a fetishistic love relation with an object (tools), rather than a subject (a woman). Although I knew the students might be thinking about the tools allegorically this time, I still fully anticipated they would rely on the typical clichéd slasher narrative, with all the usual sexist power fantasies such stories employ.

[5.3] But I had an unexpected trick up my sleeve. As the class rapidly wrote, I waited until I felt the majority had completed a full page of text. Then I unexpectedly called out a new rule: "Stop what you're doing—midsentence—leaving a dash if you need to—and begin a new paragraph...Ready? You have just been writing the thoughts of a 5-year-boy playing with a toy hammer, whose mother has just entered the room and distracted him. Keep writing until the scene is over."

[5.4] Students tilted their heads. Some furrowed their eyebrows with confusion. Some leaned forward with intensity. Some giggled. The pens continued to scribble. Then one of the students in my class audibly moaned while he wrote. "Oh no. That just isn't right," he said to no one in particular. "Oh my god, that's just so wrong." I just smiled, not wanting to interrupt the creative flow of the class—but I noticed that the most vocal student was smiling, too, lasciviously.

[5.5] I was pleased that students responded to my prompting so viscerally. This exercise was a guided experiment in paradigm shift. I had asked them to slide out of the assumed point of view of the narrator, midprocess, into a new perspective—something they weren't anticipating because it wasn't part of the initial ground rules for the exercise. This was a simple exercise that in my view returned us to the disorienting dilemma of King's story via the live application of a last-minute narrative rule change similar to King's shifty ending, when we learn the lover is actually a hammer-wielding killer. Here they literally "lived" the authorship of the trick ending as writers, rather than receiving the trick ending as readers. Whether successful or not, this exercise in shifting the ground gave my students permission to break storytelling rules for unity and linearity in a way they had not anticipated, potentially transforming their thoughts about point of view and the ground rules of fiction—if not the constructed nature of identity—altogether.

[5.6] The goal of transformative learning may very well be embodied in the moaning utterances I overheard while students were writing about the hammer-killer-turned-child. I perceive these noises not as pain but as vocalized experiences of epiphany—and signs of a successful in-class writing exercise. But one never really knows.

[5.7] Curious about whether students were "living" their learning, shortly after midterms, I asked students enrolled in my Horror and Suspense Writing course to e-mail me a quick reflection in answer to the blatant question, "How has reading and writing horror changed your life?" Surprisingly, most students answered this question in a way that merged a new worldview with the active practice of creative writing. "I've found that things I would usually just shrug off as nothing cause me to start thinking instead," Flora wrote, before explaining how "a large, bubbling crack on the wall" of a classroom triggered a story idea about a crack into another dimension. Another student reported that "because of my class in horror fiction I see everyday aspects of life in different and twisted ways." Similarly, the student illustrated this change by describing a partially deflated helium balloon leftover from Valentine's Day, still "floating ominously around my room...I attach an evil entity to the movement." Another student wrote that the class "changed how I look at daily events...I pay attention to my own senses now...when we write about our fears,

we become more aware of possibilities. Overall I'm becoming more observant and open to new ideas." Another articulately reported, "A dozen 'what if' questions parade through my mind. Horror has opened my imagination to all the natural, and unnatural, images that find their way across my path. Horror forces me to ask questions concerning the possible and impossible. Horror has helped me regain the wonder in simplicity that I had as a child."

[5.8] Students reported seeing the potential for horror and the uncanny in everyday life—which in any other context might be understood as a paranoid worldview, but which here I perceive as pleasure in the imaginative play—and a positive outcome of the course. But what strikes me about these student reports is not simply that they feel more confident in imagining horrific scenarios, but that they are able to autonomously connect the fictive to the reality of their everyday lives, deriving meaning from images and concrete details that they otherwise would have ignored. In other words, they see the world differently—transformed.

[5.9] But the teacher cannot ultimately know whether such epiphanies are real or merely reported. In fact, there is a degree to which transformational learning is always irrational, sometimes spiritual, but always, ultimately, private. The transformative learner is caught in "a tension" between two layers: he "moves in and out of the cognitive and the intuitive, of the rational and the imaginative, of the subjective and the objective, or the personal and the social" on his journey toward change (Grabove 1997:95). Horror lies in this liminal space, in the tension between the figurative and the real, the conscious and the unconscious. It is sometimes disturbing to a horror writer, for example, to unearth a repressed desire or unconscious wish—but this is what horror fiction seeks to do, because most assumptions are unconscious. I tend to agree with Stephen Brookfield when he describes the discoveries we happen upon when we write and learn from horror in terms that sound like a disaster film: "No matter how much it might be described as an incremental process, transformative learning has for me connotations of an epiphanic, or apocalyptic, cognitive event—a shift in the tectonic plates of one's assumptive clusters" (2000:139). Although Brookfield's description is grandiose, it reflects the grand goals of any teacher, I think: to radically change student perspectives, particularly in regards to making a subject more conscious of the ideological forces that oppress and restrict them in their everyday lives. Transformative learning strategies like the methods I have been describing create potentials for the "epiphanic" in the everyday world of the classroom, just as a great horror novel can radically change the way a person thinks about everything from the world, the natural order, the boy next door, or even the infinite possibility of meaning behind any communicative act, from silence to scream.

[5.10] I have tried to show how elements of the horror genre are congruent with the process of transformative learning, and I have shared a handful of strategies for teaching that try to move students toward emancipatory knowledge and educational autonomy—clearly an ethical goal in the liberal arts. Those who argue that horror has no place in the hallways of academe may be guilty of uncritically focusing on the element of fear in the genre, or they may themselves fear its transgressive potency; they may be trying to avoid what good teachers otherwise instinctively understand how to approach. Fear is inherent to change, and it is only one component of what horror fiction offers a learner. We discredit our students by assuming that their first emotional response is all that fiction can mean for them, and we discredit our educators if we assume they cannot lead students into new ways of understanding and interpreting literature, no matter how scary it might be. As I have tried to show, a college classroom offers a safe harbor for posing dilemmas and other activating events that challenge students into thinking more critically about thrilling entertainment. All it takes is "unlearning"—that is, a process "of weaning oneself away from an uncritical adherence to ideas and beliefs...that are oversimplified, distorted by context, or just plain wrong" (Brookfield 1990:12). The horror genre ultimately holds great potential for changing the way our students see—and behave in—the scariest of fun houses: the world at large.

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Soap operas and the history of fan discussion

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[0.1] Abstract—For decades, fans of U.S. soap operas have formed social networks surrounding their shows, and they did so even before the concept entered the vernacular. Soap fans, who started on a geographically local scale and built their communities through grassroots efforts, have found a variety of venues to connect with one another over the past several decades. This study looks at the pre-Internet development of these social networks to show how that trajectory relates to the current online community of soap opera fans. Although several scholars have studied soap opera fandom, few have taken an historical approach at understanding the trajectory of soap fandom, a view especially necessary in an era where online social networks are at the center of audience studies and where cornerstone U.S. soap operas are struggling to retain relevance and audience. To fill this gap, I argue that understanding fan networks today requires looking back to previous methods of fan networking. Soaps' longevity (the youngest U.S. soap is more than 20 years old) and frequency (all U.S. daytime soaps are daily) make them crucial texts in demonstrating how the roots of fan social networks in a pre-Internet era helped shape that fandom's transition onto the Internet, and they also illustrate the continued evolution of these networks as fans move online.

[0.2] Keywords—Archiving; *As the World Turns*; Community; Discussion boards; Fan clubs; Fan communities; Fan proselytizers; Fandom; *General Hospital*; *Guiding Light*; Overcoded texts; *Passions*; Soap opera; *Soap Opera Digest*; *Soap Opera Weekly*; Social networking; *The Bold and the Beautiful*; *The Edge of Night*

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Recent interest in understanding fan culture from the popular press and scholars alike has been tied to questions about how digital culture is transforming our society. This rhetoric often looks at aspects of what is now known as Web 2.0 (that is, an interactive, not passive, Web) and the rise of social media as new social phenomena. These online social networks arise in what Yochai Benkler (2006) defines as a shift from an industrial information economy that defined the second half of the 19th century and all of the 20th century toward a networked information economy today, in which the process of cultural production has become decentralized. However, that shift cannot be defined in concrete terms, taking the technological determinist view that new technologies created new patterns of behavior that weren't previously part of a culture. As Benkler states, "Technology creates feasibility spaces for social practice" (2006:31). The technology is not useful if these social practices are not already prevalent.

[1.2] This essay examines the trajectory of soap opera fandom as a social network—or, rather, as a loosely connected series of networks—and argues that the shape that soap fandom has taken in a digital age is informed by the practices that existed in soap fandom culture in the pre-Internet era. Although much has been written about fan activity surrounding serialized television texts as well as the online activities of U.S. soap opera fan communities, there is a gap in the body of current literature in understanding how pre-Internet fan network

practices helped shape the ways that soap opera fans relate to one another online. This project seeks both to bridge that gap and to demonstrate how soap opera fandom provides an explicit case to understand how virtual communities must be examined within the context of what came before, with fans searching for new technologies to facilitate interaction and engagement with social practices. This study culminates with the argument that the early development of online soap opera fan communities cannot be seen as the end of that process because the dynamics of soap fandom networks continue to evolve.

2. The soap opera

[2.1] From slash fan vids surrounding the CW's *Supernatural* to elaborate theorizing about the mysteries surrounding an island on ABC's *Lost*, serialized storytelling has been shown to provide ongoing texts on which fan communities can build community through interpretation, speculation, and criticism. This serialized structure has a long narrative history, from oral tales of folk cultures to literary magazines and comic strips in the 19th century. Television as a commercial medium has accelerated the pace of serialization because the explicit goal of the advertising-based business model in the United States has been to bring audiences back to the network so the audiences can be sold to advertisers.

[2.2] Nowhere has that been made more explicit than in the U.S. soap opera. The genre, named after the soap companies that sponsored the content, was launched in the 1930s as short daily radio texts that focused on the

plights of a family in a drama centered on the ongoing development of an ensemble cast. The transition to television in the early 1950s eventually brought with it the expansion of the daily soap opera text to 30 minutes (in 1956), as soap operas brought on more characters and focused even more explicitly on the events in the daily lives of a core community and how decisions made by individual characters affected that community as a whole. The move to 1-hour shows in the 1970s and the doubling of soap opera cast sizes furthered an evolution that sees contemporary soap operas produce 260 hours of television per year through hour-long daily weekday texts with no off season.

[2.3] These shows attract an audience through the creation of an immersive story world defined by characteristics such as: a serial storytelling structure; a sense of long-term continuity built through years, even decades, of key characters who are featured daily or weekly; a deep character backlog that has developed over time; an ensemble cast of 30 or 40 characters who are featured on the show at any one time; and self-referential ties to events from a rich textual history. Further, these texts are defined by creative powers that are in constant flux: not only are hundreds of people employed to create soaps, but characters and story arcs will pass through various creative teams. Any U.S. soap opera that survives for decades will eventually see its creative team completely turn over.

[2.4] All of these factors combine to give these immersive story worlds a sense of permanence greater than that provided by the current creators of the show and by the individual fans ([note 1](#)). As with sports franchises, the professional wrestling world, and the superhero comic book universes of Marvel and DC, soap operas are known for their constant presence in the lives of fans. Like these other texts, soaps are immersive both in terms of depth (frequency of content) and range (the deep history of these narrative worlds).

[2.5] Although soap opera producers are of course responsible for turning out these daily texts, the power of soaps lies in the social nature through which they are read. Because of the depth and range of content for any particular U.S. soap opera, there is no way to master the content and meticulously map out the narrative world of these shows. Many episodes were never archived, especially early episodes of long-running shows that aired live, but even the youngest and shortest of the current soaps—CBS's *The Bold and the Beautiful* (1987–present)—would require viewing 130 hours of content each year for more than two decades if all the episodes were available. The ongoing vitality of these shows, then, is dependent on the relationships built around these daily texts and the collective intelligence the fan community provides each member in helping contextualize, explain, and understand how each day's new episode fits into the massive archive of official text.

3. Soap opera and fan discussion

[3.1] Soaps do not exist in a vacuum, and a show's daily texts can only be understood in the context of the decades-long dynamic networks of fans surrounding them. Instead of imagining the audience as a passive sea of eyeballs measured through impressions, this approach views soaps as the gathering place for these social networks. Soap operas are dynamic social texts that are created as much by the audiences that debate, critique, and interpret them as by the production team itself ([note 2](#)). Viewers often build on their own interpretations of the text through a collective attribution of meaning, an act that often becomes a strong motivation for continued viewing of the show. Conversations among family or friends while watching, post-"story" phone calls among friends, and conversations at the workplace add interpretive layers to each day's text. Although the larger and more organized public discussions afforded through online discussion boards today add new layers to these interpretive and community-building processes, these online practices have roots in the offline communities that preceded them.

[3.2] The creation of community begins with the text itself. Soaps have always had a correlation with the lives of their viewers. Soap operas invite viewers into a community where they get to know each member intimately. Most often, viewers are privy to the daily actions of people within that community, but not to the inner thoughts and motivations of characters (although voice-overs may be used, albeit rarely, to provide such information). The most common drama point on any U.S. soap opera is the moment before a scene cuts away, in which the viewer is invited to interpret the sincerity and motivations of characters by examining their facial expressions, leading to speculation about what the characters will say or do next. As Bernard Timberg puts it, the visuals of soap operas are designed to make viewers "feel somehow complicit in the ebb and flow of relationships and emotions" (1987:164).

[3.3] Because soap operas generally do not have one central character, viewers are given conflicts where the text does not clearly privilege either side. Viewers then spend as much (if not more) time watching characters recreate, react to, and debate events as they do watching new events occur. Further, because these characters age alongside the viewer, fans are able to see this community and its individual members evolve over time, along with changes in their own lives. Thus, while these shows build themselves off the performances of their ensemble casts, soap operas are, above all else, about Oakdale, or Llanview, or Salem—the communities these shows are set in.

[3.4] The degree of intimacy and connectedness of daily viewing may cause soap characters to feel somehow more "real" than those on other shows, and anecdotal evidence has always pointed to that being the case. For

example, one of my high school teachers recalled listening in horror one day as her mother described a bad situation that one of her friends was going through. Only later did my teacher realize that it wasn't a story about someone who lived on her mother's block but was instead about one of the Lowells on *As the World Turns* (1956–present). This sort of story is not unique: soap opera watchers have always discussed, often informally and in unobserved, unrecorded everyday conversations, the situations and characters. The lack of documentation about the power of social connectedness in soaps in these earlier days is unsurprising precisely because these discussions were casual and oral.

[3.5] Even as the channels through which fans can discuss soaps have changed, the personal interaction with family and friends about the text of the show that was at the heart of the social connections surrounding soap texts from the beginning of the genre has not (Rapping 2002). Because social connections around soaps were limited to these direct interpersonal relationships in the earliest days of the genre, soap opera characters may have seemed particularly localized, a personal possession of a small number of viewers who conversed about them, without a wider forum of discussion for these shows. I now turn to the ways in which networks of soap opera fans have interacted over time, moving chronologically from the earliest accounts of fan activity to the current, more visible networks of soap opera fans online.

4. Interacting with the show: Fan letters

[4.1] The earliest accounts of fan activity surrounding soap operas came from individual letter writers looking to voice their opinion to producers. Before soap opera fans started forming prevalent collective organizations, individuals or small groups were documented anecdotally in press accounts and actors' memoirs as being particularly passionate in their care and concern about the continuity and direction of characters on the show. Fan letters provided a way for small groups of fans or individuals to try and create a connection to the show itself, much as groups befriend, comment on, and link to official sources within the soap opera world in the Internet age.

[4.2] For *As the World Turns*, the famous incident that drove a significant amount of fan letters to the show involved what show historian Julie Poll has labeled "the first soap supercouple before the phrase was even coined" (1996:215): the relationship between Jeff Baker and Penny Hughes in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At the height of popularity for this couple, the actor who portrayed Jeff Baker opted to leave the show, and his character was abruptly killed in a car crash. Protest letters abounded, and the situation drew attention from a mainstream press that usually did not write about soaps. For instance, an August 1962 *Time* article on the death of Jeff Baker points out that the actor, Mark Rydell, had been "held to the show by salary and sentiment (\$50,000

and 5,000 fan letters a year)." A letter then appeared two weeks later in *Time* responding to the article, detailing how what the reader identifies as "our group" had "a reception on Penny and Jeff's wedding day," and group members were subsequently "suitably attired in black to watch *As the World Turns* on the day Jeff died" (note 3).

[4.3] The audience's backlash to Jeff's death has become part of soap—and television—lore. Even considering the hyperbole from the soap industry, this example demonstrates both how *As the World Turns* fans were invested in the fictional Oakdale community: they organized fannish rituals that correlated with community reactions to a wedding or death (ceremonial attendance and attire), and they sought to reach producers to try and affect the creative direction of the show (note 4). Similarly, *As the World Turns* actress Eileen Fulton provides anecdotes in her 1995 memoir about the regular mail she and the show would receive in the beginning of what has been to date almost 50 years playing the character of Lisa Miller; and Madeleine Edmondson and David Rounds note that CBS got "at least 35,000 letters" protesting the cancellation of some of its least popular daytime shows (1973:195).

[4.4] Above all else, the stories told about soap opera fan mail emphasize the potential power that communication with producers can give viewers. For instance, Fulton writes, "Most soap viewers don't realize how much power they have. Enough letters, telegrams, and phone calls can kill characters and story lines or turn a temporary part (like Lisa) into a long-term love affair" (1995:67). Peter Buckman notes that soap viewers have "a political sense of their own power, and its limitations. They know that it is on their loyalty that the programme makers rely—and yet...the older viewers at least are aware that they are not a strong enough market force to have a great influence on the producers" (1985:189).

[4.5] The idea that fandom can yield significant power when organized or directed toward a common goal is an important component of soap history. In fact, soap opera producers have often helped foster the notion that the soap opera primarily belongs to its fans through their marketing schemes, even as they resist or ignore many widespread viewer criticisms. However, because these floods of letters were generally not collective action, with little infrastructure in place for soap fans to organize themselves outside of their small network of fellow viewers, producers also often dismissed individual letters. In more recent times, evidence shows that fan mail is often only understood institutionally in broad, quantitative terms. In the late 1990s, for ABC's *General Hospital* (1963–present), fan mail was considered positive whenever the viewer did not directly threaten to quit watching. Elana Levine writes, "While the system in place to handle audience response is thorough and efficient, it does not really account for most viewers' perspectives...the actual words of audience members are only rarely seen by anyone higher in the chain of

command than a writer's assistant" (2007:146). So although fan letters provided a way for fans to try and connect directly with the show, it fell short of fans' needs, primarily because it was easier for producers to continue evoking a community of fans while having systems in place to ignore that implied fan ownership when dismissing the specific sentiments of individual fan letters.

5. Soap opera fan clubs

[5.1] With few ways to band together and a geographically dispersed community of fellow soap opera viewers, dedicated viewers of shows formed fan clubs, some with the intent of official affiliation with a soap. These fan clubs were the first attempt at moving beyond small, loosely affiliated fan networks that often were driven primarily by other relationships (family, friends, coworkers, classmates) and facilitated the development of a larger social network of fans explicitly centered around their common interest in these shows.

[5.2] Little information about the history of soap fan clubs is readily available, but soap historian William J. Reynolds has said the official *The Edge of Night* (1956–84) fan club started in 1971 (William J. Reynolds, personal correspondence, May 12, 2007). My correspondence with the current president of both the *As the World Turns* and the *Guiding Light* (radio 1937–1956; TV 1952–present) official fan clubs emphasized that little institutional history has been passed down, as my contact did not know much about the organization before she took it over in 1999 (Mindi Schulman, personal correspondence, December 19, 2006). However, no matter how long this "official" fan club has been in operation, evidence indicates that these fan clubs and their gatherings have attracted both collaboration from the soaps and significant membership.

[5.3] The current official *As the World Turns* fan club (<http://www.officialatwtfanclub.com/>) hosts an annual luncheon with various current and former cast members and provides members with pen pal lists and various documents about the current creative team behind the show, as well as the names and birthdays of current actors. The fan club also provides two resources to fans that echo the earliest powers that fans used: a list of people to contact in the press in reaction to soaps (<http://www.officialatwtfanclub.com/magazines.html>), and a list of contact information, including that of the executive producer, head writer, and contacts for both TeleNext and the senior vice president of CBS Daytime (<http://www.officialatwtfanclub.com/contact.html>), so interested fans can send praise or (more likely) complaints.

[5.4] That potential for organizing fans to more successfully influence the direction of the show has been an important drive for soap opera fan clubs, especially because individuals or small groups sending letters independently has proven inefficient in providing the kind

of interaction fans have wanted with shows. For instance, in a March 2006 letter that *As the World Turns* actor Ellen Dolan directed toward fans through the official fan club, Dolan pointed to the previous success of the soap's fans and the fan club in affecting decisions made by the show's leadership. In particular, Dolan mentioned that Trent Dawson, who for years played recurring character Henry Coleman, a fan favorite, was put on contract after the show's producers were impressed by his being cheered at a fan club annual event. Dolan explained her contentions with the way her character, Margo Hughes, had been written and called on fans to use their power to make a change. She writes:

[5.5] The character is being dismantled. These characters are your characters and I think valuable to the show. I need your support. I need you to help save Margo Hughes! I need you to write and ask for Margo back. I have attached a list of names and addresses for you to write to. Tell them how you feel about this character. Please guys, 'cus I love Margo and I want to keep giving her to you. Not to mention that my kid is only six, I've got many years to go. (March 2006, <http://www.tnmpphoto.com:3864/showthread.php?t=13390>)

[5.6] Dolan's rhetoric—telling the fans that "these characters are your characters"—emphasizes fan ownership. The conversation illuminated the fact that although The Powers That Be (the producers, known to fans as TPTB) may control the fate of the show, the actors believe that fans have some authority to demand changes in the text, especially if that fan effort can be collective.

[5.7] In short, fan clubs provided the organizing mechanism that allowed fans to act on a previous desire to create a larger social network, but these networks still required a central point—the fan club organizers—that had to facilitate, organize, and control the ways that fans related to one another and, to a degree, to the show the club was built around.

6. The soap opera press

[6.1] The soap opera press is another venue that has played an important role in soap fans' platform to voice opinions to both fellow viewers and show producers. Although these specialty magazines did not completely satisfy fan interest in providing a soapbox, so to speak, they provided the first forum for fans to write to fellow fans in a position with some degree of visibility and authority, branching beyond the informal letter writing of fan clubs into the legitimacy of the newsstand. Soaps were covered to some degree by *TV Guide* and similar publications, and particularly big events might warrant mention in magazines that covered culture more broadly, such as *Time*, but few venues existed where fans could publish their opinions about soaps in a forum that other fans—and industry powers—might read. Daytime TV, despite its visibility and popularity, was left out of most publications that focused on entertainment, even as prime-

time television programming was granted an increasing amount of attention from serious critics.

[6.2] This niche was filled by specialty magazines that focused on soaps, and these publications are now a staple of checkout lines in grocery stores. Whereas previous forms of fan communication involved private exchanges (local discussions, fan mail, and fan clubs) and most publications did not regularly report or include reader letters about soap operas, soap opera magazines provided a new forum that permitted the reception of soap operas to become texts themselves through official industry news, behind-the-scenes information, official columnists, fan letters, and polls.

[6.3] A variety of these specialized magazines started appearing at least by the late 1960s. They were published monthly and featured profiles of actors and polls. Their titles included *Afternoon TV*, *Daytime TV*, and *TV Dawn to Dusk* (note 5). By the early 1970s, more than 10 daytime television or soap opera magazine titles were being published, most through either Sterling Publications or Ideal Publications (Harrington and Bielby 1995:67). *Soap Opera Digest* (SOD) was launched in November 1975 as a monthly magazine; the publication became biweekly in 1979 and then weekly in 1997. In addition to publishing both official critiques from staff writers and fan perspectives on the various daytime serial dramas, SOD created an annual set of awards, similar to the daytime Emmy awards, for daytime serial dramas in 1977. In 2006, SOD and *Soap Opera Weekly* (SOW) were the 10th and 11th most popular weekly magazines on the newsstand, behind the various tabloids, *Woman's World*, and *TV Guide* (note 6).

[6.4] Today, only one major competitor to SOD and SOW remains in business: *Soaps in Depth* (SID), a weekly magazine published by Bauer Publishing. SID focuses on ABC soap operas one week and CBS soaps the next. The two versions (ABC and CBS) of SID are listed as the 53rd and 57th most popular magazines—overall, not weekly—on the newsstand (note 7). There have also been several other soap opera magazines, now defunct, in the past few decades. These magazines have a much higher readership than their subscriptions and newsstand sales indicate because many people flip through the issues while in the store without ever purchasing it, trying to find the few relevant pages about their particular soap.

[6.5] The soap opera press provides enough critical information for fans to consider it relevant, so these magazines still play a part in the modern interactions between audience members and the shows. Even though these weekly publications often lack critical engagement, the magazines have become forums for discussion precisely because there were so few places for soap fans to read about and communicate their views. Most importantly, these magazines fostered a sense of awareness of a larger community of soap opera fans, rather than considering fans as isolated clusters of

viewers. The communal critiquing of soaps was easier to discount by the industry when those activities primarily occurred on a local level, but the soap opera press started the process of legitimizing and validating this interaction by archiving it in print. By their polls and published letters, and by their appeal to a niche market, these publications played an important role in forming awareness of the need for and potentials of the formation of larger soap fan communities (note 8).

[6.6] Fan clubs did not completely satisfy fan needs because of their centralized nature, and the fan press was similarly incomplete in providing a platform for fan discussion. What fans gained in visibility, they lost in ceding even more control to institutionalized powers (in this case, the editorial control of the magazine) and in a lack of interactivity (the difficulty of sustaining true dialogue through a magazine that primarily only published one-time fan letters and reactions).

7. Soap opera discussion forums

[7.1] Online fan discussions share close ties with the history of interaction among fans and between fans and producers that I have just described. Online discussion groups have not replaced the lively debate fans have always had when watching a show or when discussing the show after the fact in telephone, workplace, or dinner conversations. Nor has the rise of online forums brought about the demise of fan clubs, letters written to a show's producers, or the soap opera press. Fans still participate in a number of these activities, resulting in the varied media mix that facilitates what Mizuki Ito calls a hypersocial environment, which she describes in relation to *Yu-Gi-Oh!* fan communities as "peer-to-peer ecologies of cultural production and exchange" among geographically local communities, online communities, and national meetings for fan communities (2007:91). Soap fandom, and the varied activities that comprise the soap opera fan experience, must be understood in this "hypersocial" environment rather than as a disconnected media viewing experience that removes fans from social interaction (note 9).

[7.2] Instead of replacing these older modes of conversation, online fan communities make more explicit and public the type of activities that fans have long engaged in while in small groups. The Internet created a space where the one-on-one interpersonal model of fan discussion that empowered soap opera viewing could take place on a wider scale. With a public forum for concentrated discussion, the Internet empowered fans by providing new ways to organize themselves to get the attention of TPTB. Further, the Internet's concentrated niche spaces that are nevertheless public gave fans unprecedented ability to create their own texts that are based on their reception of the show through public commentaries and discussions. Jennifer Hayward has called online discussion groups "a more collaborative

forum for soaps discussion" than was possible by previous modes of communication (2003:520).

[7.3] Fans also see these forums as providing extensions to the limits of previous modes of engagement: a more collective organization in disputing their dislike of particular story lines that may garner more attention than a letter-writing campaign; a more diverse conversation with other fans of the show, not limited to the more intimate social circles of previous generations; and a more critical engagement with the show than that permitted by the passive character of fan clubs. These forums provide a space for fans to create for themselves the critical responses to the show that they see the soap opera press as failing to provide.

[7.4] Soap operas operate as *overcoded narratives*, to use Robert C. Allen's (1985:84) term, in which the characters and their various relationships are given more possibilities than are necessary to tell the plot in order to drive deeper viewer interest. In online discussion forums, the power granted to the soap audience becomes evident in understanding and interpreting the spaces of the fictional town, the facial expressions of various characters, and the overwhelming amount of weekly dialogue. This function of the soap opera text is especially important in an Internet age, where members of fan communities spend their time between each day's text collectively unpacking the meaning of reams of information by discussing, criticizing, and theorizing (see Baym 2000). Through these activities, fans help bolster each others' support of the show, so that even if the show does not meet their expectations, fan discussion—even griping about and parodying the show—can actually help keep people with the program through a creative drought. Although small group interaction also had this component of daily social critique, the Internet provided the first mass forum where such discussions could take place in conjunction with the daily flow of the soap opera text. If the soap opera texts are overcoded, so too are fan responses, where every item is carefully and exhaustively analyzed for meaning.

[7.5] Another aspect of creative generation on the part of the fan community focuses on constructing a cohesive narrative space for the show. On *As the World Turns*, Oakdale is simultaneously considered a small town and the home of several major corporations. Paul Ryan's penthouse used to show a skyline view of a few very tall buildings in the middle of Oakdale, even while other residents complained about living in a town so small that they kept running into their enemies wherever they went. How can the town be both? By never definitively showing us the setting, the creative team requires viewers to conflate these various character comments and visual settings into a comprehensive Oakdale. Matt Hills defines these spaces implied but never shown as *hyperdiegesis*, "the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text," but which still tries to have some sort of

internal logic (2002:137). Although small budgets are one of the major reasons for the town being represented by a few living rooms and restaurants, these narrative gaps empower much of the fan energy surrounding immersive story worlds. Each episode must raise at least as many questions as it answers, and fans bring up issues of continuity and flesh out the space where these shows take place. Internet fan networks provide fans with the opportunity to decide these meetings in sync with the rhythm of the show's daily airing.

[7.6] This open-ended process of understanding and analyzing the text of the show fuels much discussion in the fan community, even as other elements of fan communication take place. For example, Nancy Baym found that only 16 percent of the postings in the fan community she studied in the 1990s were noninterpretive, and each of those threads often contained some interpretive responses, with 53 percent of the responses she studied focusing specifically on character motivation (2000:71–72). As part of this pervasive fact of interpreting, audience members will openly bring up their own histories to help explain characters' actions. If a character is raped or is the victim of domestic abuse, members of the fan community who have likewise been victims or who have known victims may have the courage to share their own stories, then use that information to evaluate why characters may act in certain, initially puzzling ways. This action further dissolves the boundaries between the viewer's world and the fictive world of the soap opera, even as it opens up the text, expanding it beyond its televisual scope.

[7.7] The text plays into this interpretive interest not just through overcoding but also through the ambiguity I discussed at the beginning of the essay. Because the soap opera does not provide answers but only visuals, fans are left to debate the meaning. These debates are particularly heated when they are about a love triangle, where a community may be divided on which couple is right for each other, or whether either couple is preferable at all. Producers and writers can help facilitate these types of discussions by providing scenarios in shades of gray, where situations do not clearly privilege one character's perspective or leave a particular character in the clear moral right. This strategy—providing information without a clear interpretive frame—permits fans more free play with the text. In particular, this gives large online fan communities substantial material to discuss, debate, and argue on a daily basis.

[7.8] Although certainly much fan interaction occurs on the Web, as a caveat, it is important to realize that many soap opera fans are probably not online today. Soap operas air on broadcast television, and the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that 98.2 percent of households had at least one television set in 2001. In 2003, 61.8 percent of American households were estimated to have a computer in the home, and 54.7 percent had Internet access in the home. Having a computer and Internet in the home was

least prevalent for Americans 65 and older, with 34.7 percent having a computer and 29.4 percent having Internet access (note 10). It's likely that these numbers have increased in the years since the data were gathered, but it's nevertheless clear that a great many people have access to both TVs and the Internet, and the latter provides an important platform for extending the social networks built around soaps. Many new soap viewers are joining discussion boards or spending time on soap opera Web sites each year, as the consistent introductions of first-time posters in fan forums emphasize.

[7.9] However, the ways in which soap opera fandom grew online—with daily discussion prioritized over long-form writing, a constant desire for dialogue with the show's creators, and constant collective organization for fan campaigns—can only be understood holistically when taking into account the pre-Internet modes of fan interaction that created the social practices for which the Internet provided "feasibility spaces," to return to Benkler's (2006) term. Likewise, soap fandom's arrival online cannot be seen as the culmination of but rather the next step in an ongoing evolution of the community to find the tools that best facilitate the ways fans want to interact with one another and with producers.

8. Conclusion: The continued evolution of soap fandom networks

[8.1] The Internet has changed greatly from the discussion groups of the 1990s to the variety of forums available today. During the period of Baym's (2000) study, for instance, online discussion groups were still in their infancy; a far wider diversity of soap fan communities can be found today. Now, discussion forums exist alongside a variety of soap news sites, blogs, podcasts, and video sharing sites, as well as other emerging sites of social networking for fan communities that reflect changing Internet technologies and cultural practices. Further, a much greater portion of the viewership has signed on in the past decade, even as a number of soap viewers have tuned out, as declining viewership numbers reveal.

[8.2] In a forthcoming research project, I identified seven primary ways that fans interact with the texts of shows, both online and offline: fan discussion, fan criticism, fan theory, fan performance, fan community building, fan proselytizing, and fan archiving. The Internet provides tools for each of these functions, serving these social practices accordingly—and in most cases on a larger scale than pre-Internet technologies afforded. However, the Internet did not rise to meet all the needs of the fan community simultaneously, but only as it became technically possible to port these social practices online from offline fan network behavior.

[8.3] From the Internet's earliest days, soap opera discussion forums provided the primary format for fans to move their daily discussions online on a mass scale, as

described earlier. This facilitation of daily conversation has been the focus of most previous scholarship about soap opera fandom online, and fan discussion forums have likewise become sites for community building, fan criticism, fan performance (through creative interpretations and cultivation of particular roles within the community), and fan proselytizing, especially when it comes to bringing new community members in.

[8.4] More recently, however, we have seen more explicit development of soap fan theorizing online, especially as popular, easy-to-use blogging technologies have been created that have permitted soap opera fans to write longer-form content in conjunction with fellow fans, scholars, and critics who are interested in engaging in discussions about larger issues facing the soap opera industry, outside of the daily rhythm of soap opera viewing. As the technology has become more prevalent in social practice, longtime fans, soap opera journalists, academics, and industry professionals have all launched platforms for this conversation, and an informal network has developed among these various sites, which reference one another, link to one another, and collaborate on projects. In addition, podcasts featuring in-depth discussion, criticism, and theory about the current state and future of soaps have become more popular, even as discussion forums continue to thrive and multiply.

[8.5] Likewise, in the past couple of years, soap opera fan archivists have been increasingly active in converting and uploading their VHS collections to YouTube and other video-sharing sites, a platform that takes the process of tape compiling and trading to a far broader audience. Soap opera production companies have not yet shut down fan use of their archival properties. Longtime fans are thus able to not only reminisce about the past, but to provide historical content that helps explain events happening on the contemporary show. When a prior character or event is mentioned, soap opera archivists will begin to post all the material they saved from that era, hoping that newer fans will seek it out and become more interested in these shows' pasts. As these practices intertwine with discussion groups and the soap opera blogosphere, these clips are often linked to and embedded in ongoing discussions, integrating these new online behaviors into existing and prevailing modes of online soap opera social networks.

[8.6] In addition to the rise of the soap opera blogosphere and online archiving has come a proliferation of online sites that provide coverage of soap operas, such as Soapdom (<http://www.soapdom.com/>), Soap Opera Network (<http://www.soapoperanetwork.com/>), and Soap Central (<http://www.soapcentral.com/>), which provide news and clips as well as social networking services such as polls and blog hosting. These sites have also become engrained in the daily routines of soap opera discussion. Fans on message boards scour these various sites and put the details together to provide a more cohesive, balanced, and comprehensive account of what is happening as it is

relevant to their community. As a result of these additional outlets for online information, today's soap fan communities have increasingly complex conversations about fans' autonomy and political influence on the shows they watch. Fans are looking at the show not only from their own perspective, but also from that of marketers, producers, networks, or actors. The fans also often take into account various economic and cultural factors that may explain why creative decisions were made for a show, such as a character leaving or a story line changing course. In dealing with a daily text, fans consider new production news, rumors, and spoilers—plus another day's text to fuel the conversation.

[8.7] Today's Internet permits a far different level of engagement than early soap fan communities did, and the activities of the fandom have shifted as these new technologies facilitate an increasing number of online fan practices that have their roots in pre-Internet fan practices. Contemporary soap fan culture reflects the daily discussion and speculative nature of soap viewing that has been a part of the fan experience since the beginning, when small, local networks of people talked about these shows at work, at home, or on the phone. The desire to communicate with producers that led to the genre of the fan letter exists more broadly today, with fans running soap fandom campaigns related to particular shows, couples, characters, or story lines. The broader fan organization that began with fan clubs has extended to the development of online soap discussion forums that use a variety of software tools, such as bulletin boards, forums, and blogs, to permit interactivity. The role of the soap opera press has expanded, with traditional soap magazines developing a more robust Web presence alongside online news sites and blog-driven criticism and theory that has blurred the lines between professional and fan and that has created more dialogue among soap creators, critics, academics, and viewers.

[8.8] For studies of soap opera fan networks in particular, a new wave of research is necessary to fully address the continuing evolution of fandom into an interactive Web 2.0 environment and to address not just how the contemporary network differs from those of the early Internet era, but also how the social practices described in previous scholarship manifest themselves today in light of these changes. More broadly, this study indicates the importance of addressing how contemporary fan networks are influenced by pre-Internet fan practices and early Internet behavior: the same behavior is being expressed differently, and on a different scale. An historical analysis need not be limited to genres with relatively lengthy histories, like soap operas. The shape of any current fandom reflects that genre's history and the previous modes of communication the fan community used.

9. Notes

1. New soap operas have been an increasingly unlikely venture as a result of dwindling ratings for U.S. daytime dramas. A show like NBC's *Passions* (1999–2008) never developed a sense of permanence despite having been on the air for almost a decade. Although this would have been a healthy run for a prime-time show, soap fans viewed *Passions* as "new" and "ephemeral" compared with the long-standing narratives of the other eight soaps currently on the air. *Passions'* run ended in the summer of 2008 after spending its last season on DirecTV.

2. The notion of the power of the reader is not new; see Barthes (1967). Although Roland Barthes focuses on the solitary reader's ability to "author" the text, the social connectivity of today's media landscape enables much more widespread meaning making from the audience.

3. Allison J. Waldman, "'World' Turns 50: 'Digital Comfort Food,'" *Television Week*, March 27, 2006, <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-143929027.html>. "Murder Necessitated," *Time*, August 24, 1962, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,896534,00.html>; Rydell went on to be an actor and director on other television shows and in films. Jean Hayes (from Oklahoma City), "Watchful waking," *Time*, September 7, 1962, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,870081-2,00.html>.

4. The year before, in February 1961, character Sarah Karr was killed on *The Edge of Night*. Reportedly as a result of intense viewer response to the death, the actress, Teal Ames, made a statement on the show to explain to fans that it was her decision to leave (William J. Reynolds, personal communication, May 12, 2007).

5. Thanks to soap historian William J. Reynolds (personal communication, May 12, 2007) for providing the names of some of these titles from the late 1960s from his collection.

6. This information was part of a media kit from *USA Today* highlighting the performance of *Sports Weekly* and listed ABC Fas-Fax from June 30, 2006, as its source. "Weekly Magazines," *USA Today*, http://www.usatoday.com/media_kit/sports_weekly/au_highest_in_newsstand_sales.htm. News Corp. bought the publication in 1989 and then launched a sister publication, *Soap Opera Weekly*. *SOD* and *SOW* were both sold to K-III in 1991, which then changed its name to Primedia. Source Interlink purchased both magazines in 2007. In 2006, *SOD* was listed with a total circulation of 527,925 readers, making it the 58th most popular newsstand magazine; *SOW* was listed as the 82nd most popular magazine, with a circulation of 239,704, according to "Top 100 ABC Magazines by Average Single Copy Sales," Magazine Publishers of America, http://www.magazine.org/consumer_marketing/circ_trends/18424.aspx. These numbers are from the first half of 2006. *SOD* was listed as having 345,640 subscribers and

182,285 newsstand single-copy sales, and *SOW* had 101,386 subscribers and 138,318 newsstand single-copy sales. According to the Millard Group, *SOD*'s subscribers (http://www.millard.com/wb/Primedia/prime_soapd.htm) are 83 percent female and 17 percent male with a median age of 50 and a median household income of \$38,000, and the Millard Group lists *SOW*'s subscribers (http://www.millard.com/wb/Primedia/prime_soapw.htm) as 84 percent female and 16 percent male with an average age of 50.

7. This information is also part of the *USA Today* media kit (note 6). An April 2006 press release noted 71,405 subscribers for *CBS Soaps in Depth* and 79,665 subscribers for *ABC Soaps in Depth*. In the first half of 2006, the ABC version was listed as having 272,672 verified weekly readers, with 60,760 verified subscribers and 211,912 newsstand sales, while the CBS version had 249,514 verified weekly readers, with 56,220 verified subscribers and 193,294 newsstand sales.

8. For more on the role of the soap opera press, see Harrington and Bielby (1995:72).

9. For a particularly good study of how three of these modes exist alongside one another during the early age of the Internet, and specifically the ways in which the soap press, fan clubs, and discussion boards differ in the way they construct communication across soap fan networks, see Bielby et al. (1999).

10. *Special Edition: 50th Anniversary of "Wonderful World of Color" TV*, U.S. Government Census Bureau, March 11, 2004, statistics from 2001 available at <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/2004/cb04-ffse04.pdf>. "Households with a computer and Internet access by selected characteristics: 2003," table A, *Computer and Internet use in the United States: 2003*, U.S. Government Census Bureau, October 2005, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/p23-208.pdf>.

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And now, a word from the amateurs

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1. Introduction

[1.1] In my online life, I wear four hats: professional writer, reader, fan fiction author, and academic. Although these diverse groups share a common interest in writing and communication, their differences sometimes lead to areas of conflict when they interact online—an increasingly common occurrence in the age of blogs. In this essay, I'll describe some ways and places I've seen these groups meet on the Internet, comfortably or uncomfortably, as their habits and practices mesh or clash.

[1.2] Within the online blogging environment, the rules of engagement for communication between professional and nonprofessional writers and readers are different depending on who the original poster is and where the online interaction is located—academic or fan or published novelist, publisher's Web site or LiveJournal or WordPress blog. Yet the similarity of the structure of blog post/comment in each location makes it difficult to agree on definitions for what behavior is appropriate, and in what context.

2. Netiquette, pro writers, and readers

[2.1] I've noticed the relatively new practice of blogging alter the relation of professional fiction writers with their readers. Although some writers have always met with readers at conventions, conferences, and book signings and through online discussion boards, most have traditionally been aware of their audience in the aggregate, through sales or circulation figures. Direct reader interaction for many professional fiction writers or journalists once was limited largely to fan mail and "letters to the editor" sections. Now, pro writers (or wannabe pro writers) are encouraged to create blogs for marketing and for staying connected with readers. Professional writers of fiction and nonfiction also use the Internet to blog about their writing process. Writers as well as other professional creators with interests as different as those of political columnist Gary Kamiya (http://dir.salon.com/topics/gary_kamiya/), fantasist Neil Gaiman (<http://journal.neilgaiman.com/>), TV producer Joe Mallozzi (<http://josephmallozzi.wordpress.com/>), and speculative fiction author Elizabeth Bear (<http://www.elizabethbear.com/>) are interacting with readers, viewers, and other writers through blogs.

[2.2] Further, the people who used to be defined as readers, viewers, or consumers are now critics, reviewers, and citizen-journalists in their own right, using the very same blogging platforms both to respond to the posts of others and to write their own posts. The sheer novelty of the online interaction for many, however, and the purely amateur nature of the reviews by readers who blog may result in confusion for both reader and pro writer. This is perhaps because until now, most writers have been used to the detached perspective of professional reviewers in newspapers and magazines, as opposed to the passionate opinions of their online fans. I have read blog posts from pro writers in which they snap at readers for comments that are perceived as too familiar, too disrespectful, or too proscriptive. I've seen pro writers use their own blogs as a way to mock or browbeat fans, like Donald Rumsfeld slapping down ignorant or aggressive journalists at a news conference.

[2.3] In readers' blogs, however, I've observed a developing point of netiquette: The author of the work under review should not show up as a commenter to answer criticism, explain his or her intentions, or engage detractors. The feeling among some amateur reviewers seems to be that the author got his or her shot at the topic in the book or original article—for which, furthermore, that author was paid—and the field of discussion should now be left to the readers. If the author does appear, it's almost seen as a Goliath stomping on the little guy. I've also seen bloggers in the LiveJournal blogosphere, which mixes features of discussion boards and blogs, move toward making a distinction between ranting in your journal or a community journal labeled as a "rant community" (okay), and taking your rants to other people's journals, whether pro or amateur, even if public (not okay), or to journals set up as multiuser communities (also not okay).

[2.4] Although much interaction is now taking place online, pro writers do still directly interact with readers at conferences, conventions, or book signings. These interactions have some distinct differences from online interactions because they are face to face. The real-time environment and crowded conditions at such events limit the kinds of conversations that can occur, compared with the relatively limitless and unbridled nature of online interaction. Perhaps people are briefer and more polite

face to face, or perhaps readers in a group environment feel more like the audience for a speech or a play, and not like parties in a direct, two-way conversation, as they may in the comments on a blog.

3. Fans and creators

[3.1] The difficult online interactions between professional and amateur writers/readers mentioned above may stem from the status that readers assign to pro writers, especially pro writers who are celebrities. For example, a viewer of *Stargate: Atlantis* who comments on a blog is not possessed of the same status level as the blogger when that blogger is show producer Joe Mallozzi. An anonymous reader of the *Sandman* graphic novels is not on the status level of Neil Gaiman. Yet the grassroots nature of the blogosphere, and its ease of use, invites discussion. When pro writers get offended at blunt comments, it might be because they are used to traditional print readers who in some way look up to them or keep their distance, in contrast to the outspoken denizens of the Internet. Blogs have changed readers' former status by giving them readily available platforms for making their opinions known. And when readers or viewers join an online discussion, the fact that participants are amateur posters, commenters, reviewers, researchers, or writers does not have to imply slipshod research or poor technique. All *amateur* means now is "unpaid."

[3.2] Amateur writing flourishes in fan communities, where writers create work that is, by definition and by convention, noncommercial—that is, unpublishable for money. When such writers communicate online with their readers, there are fewer of the status concerns mentioned above. These fanfic writers are also usually fanfic readers, and because there is no economic transaction involved, the relationship between writer and reader is more egalitarian than the relationship between a pro writer and his or her buying audience. Fanfic writers are writing to, and for, an amateur community to which they belong.

[3.3] Inside the world of online fandom, as opposed to the general political or cultural blogosphere, I have posted blog essays and book reviews. Creating discussion, rather than publishing with no expectation of reader interaction, was the whole point of these posts. They were amateur projects, not the kind of marketing veiled as interaction that is sometimes the point of pro writers' blogs. Because when I post I assume that we are all fans together, if the authors of the essays that I was reviewing appeared—to comment or to join the discussion—I wasn't alarmed. I did not feel that the original author had shown up in order to hijack the discussion, nor did I think that her perspective would be unwelcome or proscriptive. In a couple of cases, perhaps because these authors were used to the more distant stance that a pro writer or academic writer takes when reading journalistic reviews in a newspaper or magazine, authors e-mailed me to thank me for the reviews and the discussion. They explicitly stated

they did not intend to join in, but they appreciated knowing their work was being read and pondered.

4. Fans versus academics

[4.1] I've noticed that the discussions, critiques, and analyses that go on in fan communities have a peer-to-peer nature that reminds me of one form of academic discussion. Academic research and writing assumes that others with a well-informed background in the field will evaluate and criticize before, during, and after publication. When academics criticize each other's work, they are assumed to be on a level playing field in terms of qualifications. Although real and significant differences in status and expertise do exist among established researchers and scholars, the world of academic writing is based on the notion that whatever is written will be critiqued and evaluated by an audience of peers.

[4.2] But what happens when some of the fans in the freewheeling discussions that characterize media fandom are also academics? In watching various metadiscussions in fandom, I have been surprised at the hostility or wariness among some fans in the fan fiction community when faced with academics studying fandom, even when the academics are themselves fans, and not outside or commercial interlopers. I had assumed that fan culture is geek culture, and I had assumed that academia is geek culture too—but when the Organization for Transformative Works was formed, some fans took great pains to separate themselves from academics, who were judged to be controlling or elitist or both. I wondered at the reasons for this. It is possible that some fans simply feel so independent and fiercely protective of their identity as a proud, rebellious out-group or subculture that they automatically reject all self-appointed experts like academics. Also, some fans fear being studied—treated like lab rats or zoo animals by researchers who might not share their values or their sense of community spirit. It's also very possible that fans are used to being underground, while academia (and the mainstream news media that sometimes takes its cues from academia) seeks to drag them out into the light of day, where being noticed can mean being persecuted and labeled abnormal. Fans like feeling special and wild and fun. Being analyzed and summarized in research studies could be seen as tidying them up and applying rules to what is essentially a party. And I'm sure there are gender issues at work here too, which are beyond the scope of this essay, because the fan fiction community is so overwhelmingly female.

5. Interactions and expectations

[5.1] Besides the issue of the relative status of the participants, a major difficulty in online discussions is disagreement, or differing expectations, about the level of knowledge that should be assumed before discussion can begin. This is an area where journalism—which stresses the ability to evaluate information and separate fact from opinion, as well as skill at lurking and politely entering

subcultures—has been a big help to me in navigating online communication. Online discussion inside fandom feels like an endless cocktail party on a cruise ship without a home port. You can step off at a convenient dock, then step back on and rejoin the party any time. Because it's amateur and voluntary, there is no membership card or entry fee. Yet entrants bring their own expectations to the party, and these expectations can both help and hinder when discussions become deeper and more layered than their beginning level. It's extremely difficult to keep a discussion accessible to new members, yet rich and interesting enough for experts.

[5.2] For some bloggers, the solution is to set their own terms for discussion explicitly and up front. For example, antiracist blogger The Angry Black Woman (<http://theangryblackwoman.wordpress.com/>) includes a list of "required reading," made up of past posts, for people interested in joining the discussion. The posters on her blog do not want to conduct the same gateway discussions about racism with every newbie who shows up to comment. They assume, and require, a basic level of knowledge, as do some forums for fan discussion, although "clueless newbie" or racially insensitive comments can't always be avoided even when such a baseline of knowledge is set.

6. Bridging the gaps

[6.1] The Internet, which gives everyone with an opinion a bully pulpit, exalts the amateur, and it's this exaltation that has caused the kinds of changes in people's expectations about communication that I've discussed here. People blog and comment for many different purposes. Marketing, self-expression, arguing for arguing's sake, Socratic dialogue, and creativity jostle together in our online discussions. The "professional versus amateur" split, as well as the monopolistic access that pro writing elites had to traditional mass communication channels not available to their audiences, have been highlighted and changed by the Internet.

[6.2] Criticism of a published work at a distance is, as we've seen, very different than getting into a conversation, in person, with the author—online or face to face. Also, discussing something with your friend, a fellow reader, feels very different than reading a review or a criticism in the newspaper. We readers feel entitled to our opinions and our loves, and why shouldn't we? But are informed opinions, educated opinions, expert opinions, and academic opinions somehow better than just anybody's opinion?

[6.3] Fan fiction communities' valuation of their members' opinions was summed up hilariously and elegantly by the metaphor "Fandom is a karaoke bar" (<http://thedeadparrot.livejournal.com/386150.html>), in a post by thedeadparrot at LiveJournal. She made the point that inside fandom, we are all amateurs, like karaoke singers. When someone stands up to sing and does an awful job, politeness dictates that you don't boo or demand that the bar refund your cover charge because you were expecting professional entertainment. But the metaphor only works inside the fan world, where bloggers and reviewers need not hold the material they are reading to the standards required of a professional author.

[6.4] The Internet's platforms for blogging and commenting make it possible for people from wildly different communities with wildly differing etiquette to come together. As a journalist enjoying my fan communities, I sometimes feel as if I'm personally bridging a gap between academia and fandom on the one hand, and between fandom and the pro writers or producers of our fannish material on the other. This journal could become another way that groups separated by ideas, habits, academic disciplines, and geography can come together to communicate. I've found old-fashioned journalistic skills to be a great help, but all kinds of fans—academics and other writers and creators—will have something to contribute.

On symposia: LiveJournal and the shape of fannish discourse

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1. Introduction: A little history

[1.1] In June 1999, I fired up my Netscape Gold Composer and created a Web site called the Fanfic Symposium (<http://www.trickster.org/symposium/>), a site that proclaimed itself a repository for essays about all things fanfic. My motives for doing so were entirely selfish: I was myself an essayist in search of a venue.

[1.2] Participatory media fandom, defined as those fan activities and communities centered around the creation, consumption, and discussion of fannish product (including fan fiction, fan vids, fan art, and even detailed discussion of the source), has used a variety of media and technology to facilitate these activities and communities over its history. In 1999, fannish discussions were taking place in multiple venues, both online and offline. Mailing lists in particular were a popular choice in the fandoms I frequented. Services such as ONEList, eGroups, and later Yahoo Groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com/>) were emerging as a viable choice for those fans who wanted to start lists but did not have access to a server, although the days when every character or pairing had its own list, or even when individual fan writers had personal lists, were still around the corner. Lists remained fairly concentrated, with perhaps two or three discussion and/or fiction lists largely accounting for the discussion in a given fandom.

[1.3] These lists were good for many things, but longer, detailed, carefully organized essays were not among them. In addition, although lists to discuss issues and themes across multiple fandoms existed, they weren't always easy to find. Perhaps just as problematic was an implied and even overt hostility to critical discussion. Any nonpositive reaction to an individual story tended to be greeted with recriminations, and even a discussion of the problems of a particular theme or genre was likely to be shouted down as potentially silencing of fiction writers, and thus unacceptable.

[1.4] Several writers I knew had solved this problem by adding rant pages to their fiction sites, places where they might expound on various topics. However, because I wasn't producing anything in the way of fiction at the time, I didn't see how I could attract readers to such a site with only my essays. Then, a solution presented itself: a site where *anyone* could submit essays. Surely there were others like me out there, looking for a space to hold forth. And indeed there were. The remainder of 1999 saw 38 essays posted, and although things slowed down a bit after that, the site remained active for another 6 years.

[1.5] Why only 6 years? Perhaps the single most significant fannish change in the last 10 years was also the reason the Fanfic Symposium itself is no longer active ([note 1](#)): the move from mailing lists to LiveJournal (<http://www.livejournal.com/>), a combined blogging, discussion, and social networking site. The Symposium was born out of a desire for a space that allowed not only for longer explorations, but also for discussions of themes and issues that crossed fandoms. LiveJournal not only allows for those discussions, but in many ways actively promotes them. The kinds of discussions that once took place on the Symposium have become the norm in LiveJournal-based fandom, and have in some ways abstracted even further.

2. The center cannot hold: Fannish spaces

[2.1] The difference between mailing lists and LiveJournal as media for fannish discussion can best be understood in terms of focus. With the exception of author-centered lists (often used only for the posting of fiction, with perhaps the occasional discussion), mailing lists were organized around a particular topic. That topic might be as broad as "all things relating to this show" or as narrow as "fans in this region who want to talk about this pairing," and posts not on that topic were highly discouraged ([note 2](#)). Perhaps most crucially, with the exception of a few multifandom lists (including the early Virgule list and the Symposium offshoot, FCA-L, <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/fca-l/>), mailing lists tended to be focused tightly on specific fandoms. Different lists would often have members in common, but discussion bled from one list to another only rarely.

[2.2] LiveJournal, in contrast, is made up of many interconnected spaces, most of which are focused on individual people. On any given fan's LiveJournal, she herself is the topic, choosing what to discuss or not discuss. Even LiveJournal communities sometimes serve only as link repositories, taking a reader back to a poster's individual journal. The impact of this shift has been profound, and in many ways it has served to take the focus off the source and put it on the fan, and in turn, on fandom.

[2.3] One such impact has been an increasing awareness of multiple fandoms. When LiveJournal was just beginning to overtake mailing lists as a dominant medium, one of the purported benefits was customization of the fannish experience. Simply put, each fan could choose which LiveJournals she did or did not read, and

thus which other fans she did or did not read. However, this customization extends only to people, not to topics. Although LiveJournal does allow the creation of custom filters, a given journal can only be on the filter or not. No mechanism for filtering posts on a given topic exists. In concrete terms, a person who reads my journal for my posts about Batman must also see my posts about *Supernatural* (2005–present), at least for however long it takes her to scroll past them. And that assumes I keep my fandoms in discrete posts. Pressure not to spam one's friends list with multiple posts (not to mention just our own pressures on time and attention) encourages the posting of several topics in one post. Thus, if I watch *Doctor Who* (2005–present) and *The Middleman* (2008) in one night (something more and more likely the age of TiVo and torrents), I might very well comment on both in one post. The fan who wants to see my reaction to the new *Who* episode will thus at least run her eyes over names like Wendy Watson and Ida.

[2.4] As a result, fans have an increased peripheral, and sometimes even very specific, knowledge of other fandoms. Indeed, a popular meme that recurs every so often involves posting "what I know about fandoms I am not in." The results are sometimes humorous, but are also often fairly accurate. There was a time I could perhaps identify one song by *NSync if I heard it on the radio. And yet I knew the names of all the members, I could identify them by sight, and I even knew a few personal details.

[2.5] Perhaps more critically, awareness of controversies within fandoms has increased. In the days of mailing lists, awareness of the arguments on a given mailing list or across a fandom's mailing lists (such as the occasional rivalries between Sentinel fandom's slash-only fans and gen-only fans) might spread outside the fandom, but only to those who happened to know someone on the list. Moreover, because lists were focused on individual fandoms, it was highly unlikely that people would be discussing a Sentinel-fandom dust-up on a Highlander list. However contentious the argument became, the discussion (if not perhaps the personal fallout) tended to stay within the fandom itself.

[2.6] Again, LiveJournal has changed this. The near-inability to have a reading list that comprises only one fandom means that fannish discussion and contention (or *kerfuffles*) now often cross fandom lines, and people who have never seen so much as an episode of the show in question are not only aware of the discussion, but often involved as well. In addition, linking communities such as Metafandom (<http://community.livejournal.com/metafandom/>) and its predecessor, Metablog (<http://community.livejournal.com/metablog/>), which were formed in an attempt to bring some kind of centralization to fannish discussion, also contribute to this awareness. Certainly anyone reading Metafandom is already likely to be interested in multifandom discussions, particularly given the rise of fandom-specific links

collections (newsletters). However, the fan joining to follow discussions on critical feedback will also become aware of discussions about misogyny in fandom or depictions of religious issues in a source as well. This is to say nothing of communities like Fandom Wank (http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/), whose purpose is to present fannish kerfuffles to a broader audience for the purposes of mocking. Although Fandom Wank is now located on JournalFen, the majority of the incidents reported there occur on LiveJournal, and many of the fans who participate (or just read) Fandom Wank are also active on LiveJournal. The effects then often become cyclical: someone who belongs neither to Metafandom nor to Fandom Wank may well have some people on her friends list who do, and the likelihood of at least one person posting about the discussion is quite high. That fan may in turn post, thus spreading at least peripheral awareness of the discussion even further.

[2.7] To say that this change in the medium of fannish discussion has had an impact on the content of fannish discussion would be an understatement.

3. Meta, meta, who's got the meta?

[3.1] I would argue that one result of the increased awareness across fandoms has been a tendency to abstract not only to general issues common across fandoms, but to fannish behavior itself. As someone not involved in bandom, or even remotely knowledgeable about the bands themselves, I can't comment on, for example, a given band's tendency to engage in homoerotic behavior in concert. Thus, when a fan disparages this tendency, I can't engage in the discussion. However, once people on my friends list begin talking about it, I may find myself with things to say about how fans discuss sexual orientation, or how they react to criticism of a new fandom, or how this kerfuffle reminds me of something I was involved in.

[3.2] Thus, as various fans have observed, fandom in many ways now spends as much time talking about itself as it does talking about TV shows and movies and comics. And indeed, the levels of meta often seem to construct and reinforce each other. Metafandom by its very existence raises the level of meta, as one person's random post becomes the subject of more posts, which themselves prompt responses. In addition, as I argued in my own post, "Bakhtin vs. LJ" (<http://cereta.livejournal.com/340275.html>), the degree of abstraction is complicated by a tendency not to link back to the original post and instead to focus on more general issues. This practice can sometimes create levels of remove so extreme that the "poster zero" is left wondering how her post could possibly have prompted this.

[3.3] This is not to say that fandom-specific discussions aren't happening. Episode reactions, response to a particular story or vid, excitement for a season premiere, anxiety over cancellation: all of these things still occur. However, these too are likely to be abstracted to metaissues. A slew of joyful posts about a new episode

of *Supernatural* is followed with a post and ensuing discussion on whether negative comments to a post of "squee" are appropriate. Reactions to an episode of *Stargate: Atlantis* that has disturbing racial issues eventually becomes a discussion of how fans do and don't deal with racial issues.

[3.4] Indeed, the second example points to another critical impact LiveJournal has had on fannish discussion. Much as fannish discussion has abstracted to meta themes, it has also dug down into underlying issues, including questions of race, gender, sexual orientation and identity, religion, class, and other sociopolitical issues, not only as they manifest in a given show or comic, but as they manifest in fandom itself. Although such discussions certainly did occasionally take place on mailing lists, the constraints of topic would keep them focused on the reaction to an individual female character, or the lack of fiction about a given character of color. LiveJournal presents no such constraints, and indeed, the nature of the personal journal, with its mixture of fannish and personal, often fronts such topics. If the personal is political and the political personal, then a medium that by its nature mixes the personal with the fannish must contribute to increased awareness and discussion of the sociopolitical.

[3.5] I don't wish to overstate the case here: certainly increased awareness and discussion of racial issues in particular has been the result of strong effort by fans of color and their allies. However, LiveJournal's focus on people rather than topics, and in particular again the inability to filter by topic, has shaped this discussion and the reaction to it. Indeed, although this may more properly be the subject of its own essay, several recent discussions on racism and misogyny in sources and fandom itself demonstrate many of the discursive effects of LiveJournal: awareness of and participation in the discussions by those outside the fandom, rapid moves from discussion of the topic to discussion of the discussion itself, and a mixing of the personal and topical.

4. The more things change

[4.1] Fandom as I know it has changed dramatically in the nine years since the Fanfic Symposium was created, and many of these changes can be attributed at least in part to the shift from mailing lists to LiveJournal. The decentralization of discussion and the move to spaces focused on individuals rather than topics has shaped discussion, helped open and even normalize previously taboo fiction topics like RPS (real person slash, where the actors, not their characters, are the subjects) and incest, and encouraged diversity and experimentation in fan works of all kinds.

[4.2] At the same time, even some of the earliest columns on the Fanfic Symposium would not be out of place on Metafandom today. Topics like story warnings, "why we slash," and critical feedback to specific stories continue to be discussed, dissected, and disseminated, not only by newer fans who have never had these discussions, but among the fans who have had them many times. Fans on LiveJournal have demonstrated that inasmuch as our spaces shape us, we in turn shape our spaces, and that the more some things change, the more others remain the same.

5. Notes

[1.](#) Fairness compels me to say that it is not the *only* reason. Significant changes in my own life have certainly contributed. However, those changes merely added to the existing situation wherein keeping the site active required me to pursue essays by combing LiveJournal.

[2.](#) Indeed, Senad, a discussion list for Sentinel slash fans, required that any off-topic post include a snippet of Sentinel fiction to make it relevant. These snippets were called "ObSenads" (Obligatory Senad content).

Nothing but Net: When cultures collide

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[0.2] *There's no personal story to engage me. Knowledge and theory become disembodied words on the page and I lose connection. I want to linger in the world of experience, you know, feel it, taste it, sense it, live in it.*

—Ellis and Bochner, "Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography"

1. Discrimination and collaboration

[1.1] Originally I thought I might begin this discussion with "once upon a time..." as though it were a story. Something cohesive, but personal. This seemed a useful strategy, as my main interest in fan practices is in the ways we tell each other stories, and my understanding of ideas such as convergence culture is intrinsically intertwined with my immersion and participation in fannish metatext(s).

[1.2] However, the more I thought about it, the more problematic "once upon a time" became. "Once" really doesn't apply to the kinds of fan works we produce, which are never closed, never finished (Derecho 2006:64–65). Even worse, "once upon a time" implies that I'm outside the story, an author(ity) with no part to play in the narrative. This is not only untrue, but also counter to several of the cultural practices—known under the umbrella term of Web 2.0—I discuss in this essay, such as information sharing, participatory culture, and collective intelligence.

[1.3] Instead, I begin in medias res, in my classroom:

[1.4] "There aren't any good sources on nanomedicine," one of my students—let's call him Vlad—said to me last semester. "I looked but I couldn't find anything," Vlad complained, clutching the rolled-up first draft of his report in one hand, so that my penciled-in comments were concealed.

[1.5] I replied, "Where did you look? Did you try the university's academic databases?"

[1.6] Vlad broke eye contact with me, staring down at the carpet. "I tried Google Scholar," he said, "but all the good stuff was locked and I couldn't access it."

[1.7] I've called this paper "Nothing but Net" because of this trend; more and more often, the students who come through my classrooms start and end their research on the open Internet. Their first choices are Google and Wikipedia, and a lot of them refuse to be budged from that practice, no matter how much they're told that marks will be lost if they don't reference more widely or acknowledge these sites' lack of academic credibility.

[1.8] It's easy to write this trend off as laziness—it's quick and easy to do a search online, and there's no need to carry heavy books home from the library, or try to wade through turgid academic prose. But there are other explanations, and they are wrapped up with Web 2.0 and the way our attitudes toward information are changing. How many scholars, after all, now do a quick Web search on their topic to get an overview, before moving on to more specialized searches in academic databases? I certainly do, and it's a very useful strategy—I get a feel for the keywords and issues and what other critics have focused on, before getting into the nitty gritty of new papers and research. In addition, Web 2.0 topics change so quickly that print sources can't keep up—if they have an entry at all—so it is not unreasonable to begin a search on nanomedicine online, as my student Vlad did, in the expectation that it would be a similar kind of topic.

[1.9] Certainly, I would not accuse of laziness the colleagues who presented academic papers at a recent science fiction symposium I attended. Yet several of them referenced Wikipedia. The difference between their usage and Vlad's was one of discrimination—Vlad had explored no further; my colleagues were engaged with Wikipedia and other examples of Web 2.0 as one aspect of research among many, and they contextualized what they found.

[1.10] So what are the defining features of Web 2.0, other than newness and a need for approaching sites with discrimination? Wikipedia defines Web 2.0 as

[1.11] a trend in World Wide Web technology, and web design, a second generation of web-based communities and hosted services such as social-networking sites, wikis, blogs, and folksonomies, which aim to facilitate creativity, information sharing, collaboration, and sharing among users. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0)

[1.12] The words that jump out at me here are *creativity, information sharing, collaboration*. These are the ideals underpinning Web 2.0, and they are ideals that run counter to mainstream capitalist and academic cultures, which focus on objectivity, authority, individual responsibility, and profit. Already, then, this definition offers some insight into why students of the Web 2.0 era might be reluctant to go one-on-one with books: They can't ask a book questions (limited information sharing),

all the knowledge sharing is in one direction (no collaboration), there are no networking or technological shortcuts to accessing the most relevant information, and there are no alternative points of view hyperlinked or embedded in the text (little room for creativity).

[1.13] Of course, this change in culture has more implications than just students with ideas about research that don't mesh with the single-author book paradigm of the academy.

2. Media convergence

[2.1] The implications of Web 2.0 and what they might mean in terms of changing culture are the focus of Henry Jenkins's book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006). Jenkins argues that Web 2.0 is about a whole heap of different technologies and cultural practices converging online to create a new way of thinking about knowledge, work, and play. He defines convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences" (2), and he highlights three main aspects of this cultural shift: media convergence, participatory culture (such as fandom, which was an early adopter), and collective intelligence (2–3).

[2.2] There are many examples of how this convergence is playing out in fandom, but one that is useful to consider because of its easily traceable impact on fannish culture is the launch of FanLib, an archive for fan fiction, in May 2007.

[2.3] The idea behind FanLib was to offer free user accounts for fan writers and space to archive their stories—which is typical enough for a fanfic archive. However, FanLib sweetened the deal with promises of competitions and prizes related to the media franchises (<http://web.archive.org/web/20070618080730/http://biz.yahoo.com/bw/070510/20070510005297.html?v=1>).

[2.4] It seems like a ready match between corporate structure and participatory audience. However, there was a catch. Fanfic culture has traditionally tried to fly under corporate radar and is resistant to being controlled; for these reasons, it is also strongly anticapitalist about making money from fan works. FanLib, on the other hand, was not set up as a hobby but as a business planning to make money from advertising on the archive. In effect, FanLib's business plan was to use the archived fan works to create eyeballs it could sell to advertisers. This is actually pretty standard practice across social networking sites like LiveJournal. The difference is that traditionally fan archives have been run by fans and are usually ad-free, or at least not for profit, and this proposed corporatization of fan works didn't go down well. When fans looked more closely at the fine print, they liked the deal even less. FanLib was planning to raise the profile of fan works with franchise owners but offered no legal

protection to the fan writers and artists, who would be left carrying the can if there was a lawsuit.

[2.5] Even that, however, wasn't the biggest problem, as no one had previously indemnified fan works. The problem was that in many fandoms, fan fiction is predominantly written by women, for women, as part of a gift culture. Further, fandom in the blogosphere had just been involved in a wide-ranging discussion of feminism and fan fiction, thanks to the post "How Fanfiction Makes Us Poor" by Cupidsbow (<http://cupidsbow.livejournal.com/239587.html>, April 26, 2007).

[2.6] In light of this, fandom quickly noted that the FanLib board of directors was composed exclusively of men, and men who clearly didn't understand the etiquette of interacting in social networking sites. They came across as contemptuous, venal, sexist, and ignorant of the product they wanted to sell. The general fannish consensus was to boycott the FanLib archive.

[2.7] As an effect of the anger toward FanLib, Astolat suggested that fans needed "An Archive of One's Own" (<http://astolat.livejournal.com/150556.html>, May 17, 2007). This was the impetus for the creation of the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) (<http://transformativeworks.org/>), a fan-run nonprofit organization established to provide free services to fans, such as a fiction archive, and to advocate for fans who need assistance when convergence culture comes calling in the form of legal issues or the media. Its establishing board of directors were all fans, all women, all part of the online fannish gift culture.

[2.8] FanLib's story, however, did not have such a happy ending. By giving shallow lip service to how media convergence works—as a collaborative, open source, and participatory culture—without following through in practice, FanLib hobbled their chances of success. In July 2008, they announced that the site would be closing, and as of September 2008, it has closed (<http://www.fanlib.com/>).

[2.9] This example and its outcomes give a taste of convergence culture, but participatory audiences are about more than just corporations reaching out to fandom in an attempt to make money, or franchise creators endorsing fan products. Participatory audiences are like rhizomes—offshoots spring up everywhere, inspiring new critiques, celebrations, and creative works. The effects rarely start and stop with one or two texts, or even one or two authors. Rather, participatory cultures are involved in an ongoing textual conversation that intersects with and influences what's happening socially.

3. Participatory culture

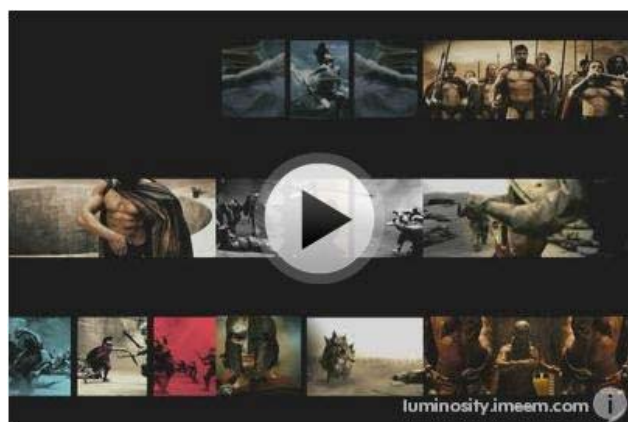
[3.1] It has often struck me that stories are the universal language of Web 2.0, and I think the importance of participatory audiences is the reason why. The giant

metanarrative of fan fiction is not unlike the interweaving strands of open source projects such as Wikipedia, or the memes of Anonymous (the self-adopted name of a loose coalition of Internet users organizing and acting anonymously, probably best known for protesting against Scientology) and social networking in general, all of which enable and value multiple points of view.

[3.2] So, let me tell you a story...

[3.3] Once upon a time, a graphic novel by Frank Miller was adapted into the movie *300*. While the movie was positioned firmly as a product of corporate entertainment, as an adaptation of an earlier work it was already a text with palimpsest-like qualities.

[3.4] Once upon a time, there was a vidder, Luminosity, who went to see *300*. Not happy with the misogyny and sexualized violence of the film, Luminosity replied with the songvid "Vogue." In her introduction, Luminosity wrote: "Considering the discussion going on right now, I believe that this is a vid whose time has come. Bite me, Frank Miller" (<http://sockkpuppett.livejournal.com/442646.html>, August 15, 2007).



[300 vogue - Luminosity](#)

Vid 1. Fan vid "Vogue" (2007) by Luminosity.

[3.5] Creation, adaptation, appropriation, and critique are, however, only part of this story. There's also the story about the story: In November 2007, *New York Magazine* published a double-page feature on Luminosity (<http://nymag.com/movies/features/videos/40622/>) and also ranked "Vogue" as the 15th funniest Web video of 2007 (<http://nymag.com/movies/features/videos/40663/>).

[3.6] And because this is Web 2.0 and the text is never closed, there is still more.

[3.7] With the rise in popularity of sites such as Imeem.com, many vidders who had previously password-locked their works had, by late 2007, released them more openly. As a result, vidding was growing in popularity, and a canon of widely recommended songvids was forming. The inclusion of vidding as a fandom in its own right in the LiveJournal recommendation community

crack_van in December was indicative of these changes. One of the songvids recommended was "Vogue" (http://community.livejournal.com/crack_van/2838975.html, December 14, 2007).

[3.8] Another indication that songvids had developed a recognizable canon was the popularity of Counteragent's meta songvid, "Destiny Calling" (<http://counteragent.livejournal.com/14447.html>, January 10, 2008), released for More Joy Day, which sampled other songvids, including Luminosity's "Vogue" and several others featured in the crack_van set.



[Destiny Calling: A tribute to vidding - Over 40+ vidders represented!](#)

Vid 2. Fan vid "Destiny Calling" (2008) by Counteragent.

[3.9] It is noteworthy that both Luminosity and the OTW are referenced in this fan work: Luminosity was one of the first people to ask the OTW for help, specifically in helping her hone her responses to the *New York Magazine* interview questions. In "Destiny Calling," "Vogue" and the *New York Magazine* article are visually referenced with the lyric "we may be famous," and the OTW's Web site is referenced with "get a little wiser." Counteragent's commentary is a snapshot of the fannish zeitgeist of that moment.

[3.10] "Destiny Calling" is not the end of this story, but it is a useful place to stop. A work like "Destiny Calling" cannot be easily read by someone unfamiliar with a version of the story I've just outlined, as it requires a large body of contextual knowledge; it samples the work of over 40 vidders, including Kandy Fong's famous Kirk/Spock slide show, plus it refers to the wider fannish metatext with screen captures that include a major vidding guide, YouTube, the OTW's Web site, and the *New York Magazine* interview. The songvid is firmly embedded in a context of creativity, shared information, and communal intelligence, and it offers an encapsulation of the story I've just outlined, side by side with several others happening at the same moment.

[3.11] What these kinds of fan works demonstrate is that a songvid can be a feminist discourse in addition to an ode to male beauty, or an expression of joy as well as a

snapshot of a subculture's politics; that a story can be critique, erotica, and/or history; and that one person can simultaneously be an author, academic, filmmaker, and fan. Jenkins suggests that when it comes to this kind of participatory culture, "rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands" (2006:3).

[3.12] These new rules mean that I, for instance, am part of this essay, part of this story, not only in the writing, but also in at least two other roles, one of which is as an establishing board member of the OTW. You may think it unusual to find me, your narrator, suddenly in this story—but this is exactly the point. Participatory culture has no edges; the fan, the retailer, the academic, the pro writer, the vidder, the company director—we are all entwined, often in one body, and the demarcation lines are blurry.

4. Collective intelligence

[4.1] *Collective intelligence can be seen as an alternative source of media power.*

—Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*

[4.2] I became involved in the OTW because I wanted to help protect and preserve the multivoiced metatext being created by fan culture. The OTW's projects are geared toward achieving this goal by creating a free fiction archive, an academic journal, a fan wiki, public relations help for fans who find themselves in the spotlight, and a legal advocacy service. At present, the OTW is a little over a year old, but there are already over 100 volunteers working for the various committees, and the organization is still growing.

[4.3] Producing communal resources through this kind of group collaboration, and more anonymous collaborative efforts such as Wikipedia, are central to both fandom and Web 2.0 more generally. The LiveJournal community Metafandom is a well-known fannish example: It has a team of information collectors, and it posts links to multiple items of diverse fannish interest every week. Both the creation of content and the effort in collecting links are voluntary and constantly changing, but they come together on Metafandom to present a combined information source that's larger than the sum of its parts. Wikis are probably the best-known example found more widely in Web 2.0 culture—they are, in fact, the epitome of collaborative effort, with all the positives and negatives that implies.

[4.4] And there are negatives, not only in the academic mantra of lack of credibility, but also in terms of how power is shifting as a result of convergence. The critiques of convergence culture tend to focus on such power shifts, because even as the theory attempts to negotiate the complexities of media practices, cross-platform corporate

stakeholding, grassroots creativity and activism, participatory culture, and collective intelligence, it has a tendency to mash these issues together. It's easy to lose sight of the fact that Web 2.0 is made up of many individual voices, creative works, philosophies, resistances, and cultures. As one of the chief proponents of convergence theory, Jenkins also has a tendency to frame his examples with the impact on corporations and their business enterprises, while much of online culture is still about free culture and has a divergent set of priorities.

[4.5] Critics such as Lawrence Lessig, who actually wrote the book on *Free Culture* (2004), see a grave danger in the trend toward convergence. This is largely due to corporate strategies directed at increasing control and closing down free culture, which can be broadly split into two related trends: a tightening and extension of copyright laws far beyond what was originally considered reasonable, and an increase in cross-media monopoly ownership.

[4.6] I don't want to go too far into copyright here, but it is worth mentioning that trying to avoid total monopolies of intellectual property (IP) ownership—which are bad for culture—has been a constant problem with copyright ever since it was established. Copyright expiration has been the traditional compromise that allows for individual ownership of IP without locking it away from the public domain in perpetuity. Convergence culture is actually making the tightening and concentration of corporate IP monopolies easier, because a property can be owned all along the cultural food chain by a single entity—the book, film, game, Web site, mobile phone, ISP, proprietary software, snack foods, platform, digital surround sound. Everything.

[4.7] I think my students, with their "nothing but Net" philosophy, are instinctively resisting this same trend toward monopoly control of information. Despite my frustrations, I have some sympathy with their instinct to resist. In light of the creativity and reflexivity currently available as part of Web 2.0, I too choose to resist the danger of monopoly control. I would prefer a world in which academic journals were open source and easily googleable, like the OTW's *Transformative Works and Cultures*, to a world in which much of the information and knowledge is locked up and available only to those who can afford it. I would prefer a world in which many voices, information sharing, and collaboration are valued and we all have a stake in creating our culture.

[4.8] Collective intelligence is the aspect of convergence culture that offers a useful method of resistance. As Net citizens who benefit from free culture, I think we all have a duty to speak and act in defense of these ideals, and our voices raised together have strength.

[4.9] Convergence culture's "once upon a time" is long since past—it's happening on Internet time, after all. However, the ending is still a long way off, and there are many choose-your-own adventures to be had along the

way. Right now, we are in the middle of the complication, and it's unclear how things will turn out. In fact, it isn't even clear who all the characters are yet; in convergence culture, today's corporate bad guy could just as easily be tomorrow's pseudonymous hero, and vice versa. But whatever directions convergence culture ends up taking, online fandom is going to be on the front lines, creating and consuming and fighting for it all.

[4.10] This is our story.

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Fan labor audio feature introduction

Bob Rehak

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[0.1] Keywords—Fan community; Fan fiction; Fan vid; Filking; Games; Gender

Rehak, Bob. 2008. Fan labor audio feature introduction. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 1.

<http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/62>.

[doi:10.3983/twc.2008.0062](https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2008.0062)

1. Introduction

[1.1] In summer 2007, Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Henry Jenkins invited more than 30 academic scholars and researchers to participate in a series of discussions about fandom, fan studies, and gender on his blog, *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* (<http://henryjenkins.org/>). The months that followed saw 22 rounds in which the participants—sorted into male/female pairings—exchanged ideas, explained positions, and compared perceptions, engaging in a wide-ranging debate in which some tensions and conflicts were eased as others grew in scope and complexity. Although these sparring matches produced some light (as well as a fair amount of smoke), perhaps their most important outcome was in bringing together a large group of fan scholars whose commitment to exploring the intersection of fandom, fan studies, gender, and power extended beyond the summer's experiment.

[1.2] In April 2008, five participants in the gender and fan culture series—Julie Levin Russo, Sam Ford, Suzanne Scott, Bob Rehak, and Louisa Ellen Stein—presented a workshop at the Console-ing Passions conference, hosted by the University of California, Santa Barbara (<http://filmandmedia.ucsb.edu/cptv/program.html>). Each of us spoke briefly about a current research interest or project based on a text or artifact that raises questions about creative media fandom in both its historical and contemporary dimensions. Our talks focused on gendered labor as it intersects multiple concerns: taxonomies of fan practice; shifting economic relations between consumers and producers; questions of legitimacy and legality; the impact of new technologies; and the increasing visibility in popular, industrial, and academic discourses of heretofore marginal(ized) fan communities. Specific topics included user-generated promotions of *The L Word*; surplus audiences in wrestling and soap operas; performance and power in Harry Potter wizard rock, or *wrock*; the blueprint movement in 1970s Star Trek fandom; and the discourses of distinction and canonization around vidding.

2. Goals

[2.1] The overarching goal of the workshop was to conduct a kind of postmortem on the summer's debates, highlighting certain structuring themes, tendencies, and absences, unpacking problematic motifs, and reflecting on both what went better or worse in the past, and where we might productively go in the future. In this spirit, we kept

our presentations short in order to leave the maximum time for audience discussion. We directed interested participants to more formal write-ups hosted on LiveJournal (<http://community.livejournal.com/fandebate/9600.html>). Our hopes were amply rewarded by an expansive conversation with enthusiastic and insightful contributions from both sides of the conference table.

[2.2] Some of the areas our workshop touched on included:

- [2.3] Acafan identities: constructions of "fanboy" and "fangirl" as they play out in our own work and professional relationships.
- Acafan ethics and responsibilities: protocols for doing fan studies (issues of attribution, citation, neglect of existing scholarship).
- Symptoms of mainstreaming: convergence culture and transmedia theory as the masculinization of fan studies.
- Divisions of power within academic institutions: bias, (in)visibility, promotion, and publishing.
- The impact of discursive space: differences between the environment of Jenkins's blog and its LiveJournal mirror, in terms of authority, community, and technology.
- Intersectionality: how gender issues intertwine with other dimensions of power (race, class, sexuality).

[2.4] The conference workshop aimed to open our dialogue to the community of fan scholars at Console-ing Passions, and we hope that sharing it will likewise open the discussion to a broader community beyond the event itself. We are pleased to offer an audio record here, to document and further inspire connections and conversations around this critical axis of fan-academic labor.

3. Presentations

[3.1] [Clip 1: Presentations](#) (40 minutes, 55 MB)—Audio clip of workshop presentations, held at the Console-ing Passions conference at the University of California, Santa Barbara, April 2008. The following voices are heard, in order: Julie Levin Russo (Brown University), Louisa Ellen Stein (San Diego State), Bob Rehak (Swarthmore College), Suzanne Scott (University of Southern California), Sam Ford (Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

4. Discussion

[4.1] [Clip 2: Discussion](#) (33 minutes, 46 MB)—Audio clip of discussion, held at the Console-ing Passions conference at the University of California, Santa Barbara, April 2008. The following voices are heard, in order: Alexis Lothian (University

of Southern California), Catherine Tosenberger (University of Winnipeg), Lindsay Brown (University of Florida), Andrea Wood (Georgia Institute of Technology), Conseula Francis (College of Charleston), Heather Hendershot (Queens College, City University of New York).

Interview with Henry Jenkins

TWC Editor

[0.1] Keywords—Academia; Acafan; Fan; Fan community; Fan studies

TWC Editor. 2008. Interview with Henry Jenkins. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 1. <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/61>.

[doi:10.3983/twc.2008.0061](https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2008.0061)

1. Introduction

[1.1] TWC conducted an e-mail interview with Henry Jenkins, whose crucial work, *Textual Poachers* (1992), resulted in the widespread reinterpretation of fan activity as a simultaneously critical and creative act. Jenkins's blog (<http://www.henryjenkins.org/>) has become a site not only of Jenkins's personal musings on media studies, but also a venue for dialogue. He regularly posts interviews, and he's also lent out his site for conversations between fans, as in the FanLib debate (http://henryjenkins.org/2007/05/transforming_fan_culture_into.html and http://henryjenkins.org/2007/05/chris_williams_respond_to_our.html), and between academics, as in the Gender and Fan Culture dialogues that paired male and female scholars (http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/05/when_fan_boys_and_fan_girls_me.html, mirrored on LiveJournal at <http://community.livejournal.com/fandebate>).

[1.2] Jenkins, himself an acafan, has broadened his studies of fan practice toward studying participatory culture more generally, including analyses of gaming and gamers, as his most recent works, *Convergence Culture* (2006), *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* (2006), and *The Wow Climax* (2007), demonstrate. He is the cofounder and codirector, with William Uricchio, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Comparative Media Studies Program and is the Peter de Florez Professor of Humanities. However, his longtime interest in fans and fan studies hasn't waned; he advised the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) during its creation, and he sits on the advisory board of TWC.

[1.3] Jenkins's current research interests include pedagogy and media literacy. He wrote a white paper entitled "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century" (http://www.digitallearning.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7B7E45C7E0-A3E0-4B89-AC9C-E807E1B0AE4E%7D/JENKINS_WHITE_PAPER.PDF) for the MacArthur Foundation, and in his blog, he notes that his goal is "making sure that every kid in America has the social skills and cultural competencies needed to participate in a networked society." In the interview below, he touches on concerns including gender and accessibility in fan studies; the uneasy relationship between media producer and active consumer; and the importance of diversity in dialogue, with fans, academics, and acafans all

coexisting—if not peacefully, then at least usefully, with forums provided that will permit the multiplicity of voices to be heard. We hope that TWC will be such a forum.

[1.4] *The following TWC editorial team members contributed to this interview: Kristina Busse, Karen Hellekson, Alexis Lothian, and Julie Levin Russo.*

2. Fans and fan studies

[2.1] **Q:** When you wrote *Textual Poachers*, fan studies wasn't even a recognized area of study, let alone a subdiscipline with its own academic journal. What do you think are the most important factors in the development of the field? How do you think these changes in fan studies are tied to technological shifts and changes in the industry? What does it mean for fans and fandom to have an organized academic presence?

[2.2] **HJ:** At the time I wrote *Textual Poachers*, fan studies would have been understood as part of a larger move within cultural studies to explore subcultures, readers, and audiences. I was working with John Fiske, who had been a key American advocate of this kind of ethnographic approach to understanding the agency and activity of media audiences. There was a growing body of research that was sympathetic to soap opera fans, say, but not much that was engaged with the worlds of science fiction, fantasy, horror, or action-adventure fans who have been central to my own work. There was clearly something in the air since Camille Bacon-Smith, Constance Penley, and I ended up writing about the fanzine community at about the same time, working independently with only limited contact with each other.

[2.3] These same factors produced a community of academic readers who were sympathetic to the work that we produced. There are many good histories of the emergence of fan studies as a field. I can't fully account for everything here. But as I see it, there has been a steady flow of fans into academic circles over the decade and a half since *Textual Poachers* and the other studies appeared. There had always been a higher than average number of fans among academics and librarians, and some of them felt empowered by the early work to focus more of their energies in this direction. There were fans who read the early research in undergraduate classes and saw a model for academic work that played to their strength and interests. And there were people who discovered fandom as graduate students and thus engaged

with this field as an interesting outgrowth of their other intellectual interests.

[2.4] The first books opened up a space; the next waves have done the work that has transformed fan studies from a topic to a field. And the rise of digital culture has demonstrated to a larger public that the kind of participatory culture that fandom embodies is not a fluke but may be a key influence on the future directions our culture is taking.

[2.5] Another factor must be acknowledged here—a similar pattern among reporters. When all of this began, I was being interviewed by reporters who were unfamiliar and often openly hostile to fandom. Now, most of the reporters who interview me for fan-related stories are themselves fans or have had some casual engagement with fandom. There are still negative stories being written, but by and large, there are really supportive stories emerging as fan academics are interviewed by fan journalists, thus providing a context for the other kinds of fans they are talking with for these stories. And as the media coverage shifts, as more people going through school are exposed to fan culture in their classes, and as the Internet makes fandom more visible, then fans are gaining much greater acceptance from friends and families.

[2.6] I realize not all fans agree that the presence of academics in their midst is a good thing. Some of this has to do with abuse by a small number of academics who didn't necessarily have the best interests of the community at heart. Some of this has to do with other issues they've had with academic life in the past. Some of it reflects the legitimate claim that fans have always theorized their own practices and that writing "meta" is as much part of fandom as writing fan fiction or editing vids, and academics have not always respected the meta written by nonacademic fans. As a community, academics doing fan studies work still have to make a greater effort to become part of the intellectual conversations within fan culture and to write work that speaks to and with nonacademic fans. We've spent so much time trying to shore up our academic credentials that we haven't always maintained our fan credentials.

[2.7] The keyword here is *conversation*: academic writing is part of an intellectual conversation, just as much as fan meta is. Academics and fans alike have a passion for thinking deeply and talking often about things they love. Sometimes they do so through separate channels. Ideally we'd also find ways to talk to each other, which is one reason why I am excited about this new journal—because it promises to be a meeting ground between fans, academics, and acafen.

3. Fan studies and convergence culture

[3.1] **Q:** Looking at your personal trajectory, you have moved from focusing on fans only to studying the relationship between producers and audiences. How does

this industry focus (for example, projects like MIT's Convergence Culture Consortium) affect fan research? What do you see as the responsibilities of individual academics and academic journals like TWC in this context?

[3.2] **HJ:** I wouldn't necessarily accept that characterization of my research. My core interest through the years has been in participatory culture, of which fan culture represents a central but certainly not the only focus. My early work on fan culture was written at a time when fandom was a highly distinctive and somewhat insular subculture, one with limited visibility to the outside world. The first goal was to try to provide a context for understanding this community, its traditions, and its cultural practices. But as fan studies has taken root and as the visibility of fan culture has increased, I've tried to gradually broaden the scope of this research to deal with other groups who are also taking media in their own hands and to try to understand the contexts in which participatory culture operates.

[3.3] Early on, work in fan studies got criticized by people who studied media industries as if we simply didn't understand the larger economic contexts in which fandom operates. The assumption seemed to be that if we expanded our focus to deal with media industries we would see that fans were (1) not that significant in the overall market, or (2) that fans were simply an outgrowth of the marketing efforts and not resistant readers, as we suggested. With *Convergence Culture*, I wanted to explore some of the shifts that have occurred in the media industry—changes that have made fans in particular and participatory culture in general absolutely central to the ways the industry thinks and operates. I wanted to provide an intellectual rationale for those within the media industries who were pushing for more fan-friendly policies and who were producing new kinds of content—transmedia storytelling, for example—that many fans, myself among them, enjoyed. And in doing so, I wanted to provide fans with the tools they would need to construct a compelling economic case for the value of their contributions, for the desirability of keeping their favorite shows on television, and for the reasonableness of their feedback on the programs they watched. It doesn't mean that economic arguments are the only ones that should concern us, but they speak with particular force within the media industries and they strengthen the hands of the fan community as it lobbies for its own interests with the Hollywood and broadcasting establishments.

[3.4] The work of the Convergence Culture Consortium (C3) should be understood in that context. One goal of the project is to get industry access for students who do want to go into the media industries and to also give them a new way of thinking about that work that might help further transform the industry. Another goal is to function as a consumer advocacy group, which helps the industry think through the changes that are taking place in the media landscape and offers alternative

ways of doing business that support audience participation. And a third goal is to produce materials—such as the blog or the podcast of the Futures of Entertainment conference—that help make the shifts in the industry more transparent to other academics, fans, and the general public.

[3.5] That said, my own work is now turning in another direction, with several recent essays trying to critique the kinds of consumer-producer relations that have emerged through Web 2.0. The FanLib flap was something of a turning point for me in that regard, as has been a growing appreciation of the ways some aspects of female fan culture are being left behind as fans are gaining greater access to media producers. My most recent essay deals with the ways that YouTube can be situated within a much larger history of participatory culture, and in particular, it tries to understand why some communities embrace the platform and why others have been more reluctant to do so. The point I want to raise is that a participatory culture is not necessarily a diverse culture, and we need to create mechanisms that embrace and promote diversity. YouTube offers such a vast array of materials that it is hard for many of us to see what is not there or to ask what mechanisms may block it from appearing. At the same time, I am trying to develop a deeper understanding of how gift economies work and how they relate to commodity cultures as another way of addressing concerns about "free labor" that have been raised around Web 2.0 companies. These are criticisms I am making within the media industry space as well as in academic or fan spaces, and they are once again an attempt to understand the conditions that give rise to participatory culture and to understand fandom in its larger contexts.

[3.6] In terms of the implications of this shift for TWC, I would argue that fan studies will gain greater power and influence if it connects to larger intellectual and political conversations. There is certainly space here and elsewhere for work that is only focused on fan cultures and that attempts to map its traditions of creative expression and social practice. But there also should be work that shows how fan culture is linked to shifts in the digital environment, in the ways industries work, in larger debates about gender and cultural diversity, in discussions of globalization, in arguments about education and media literacy, and in discussions of citizenship and civic media. I am hoping that TWC will be a big tent that supports all kinds of research into fan culture and cult media. Doing so will make fan studies more powerful within academic institutions and beyond. Doing so will ensure the greatest diversity of paradigms within fan studies. And doing so will increase the diversity of those participating in TWC, creating a space where male and female scholars can discuss commonalities and differences in their research and learn from each other.

4. Fans, media literacy, and OTW

[4.1] **Q:** You have often talked about fans as early adapters and adopters of technology. How do you connect OTW with your models of fans and convergence? Your recent work has focused on media literacy, specifically around young people. What role do you see fan cultures in general and OTW in particular as playing in relation to these concerns?

[4.2] **HJ:** During the two decades that I have been closely engaged with fans, fans have consistently been working on the cutting edge of new technologies—whether it is vidding, podcasting, engaging on social networks, or blogging at Live Journal. Fans often push against the limits of what existing tools can do. This is all the more significant because so much research on new media underestimates the contributions of women to the development of these platforms, and here we have a model where there is a very strong female presence and where fan women are helping each other learn and master emerging tools and practices.

[4.3] This is another one of those places where fan studies can contribute to a much larger conversation—in this case, about the process of technological change and the concern raised by the digital divide, or what I am calling the participation gap. The digital divide has to do with access to technologies; the participation gap has to do with access to social skills and cultural competencies that emerge from participating in the online world. Although our culture is becoming more participatory, some people are being locked out of participation, a trend that can foster greater economic, civic, and cultural inequalities.

[4.4] Fans have developed their own mechanisms to support not only learning to use tools but also feeling empowered to do so. Fandom has always been a space where experienced creators mentored newbies, and one could argue that the beta-reading process around fan fiction has been particularly effective at helping readers become writers and allowing new writers to develop confidence and competence and find their own expressive voice. As such, there are a growing number of learning researchers who are seeking to better understand processes of "informal learning"—that is, learning that occurs outside of formal education—who are turning their attention toward fan culture. Some fans have misunderstood these trends, suggesting that we are turning attention away from adult women and toward younger participants, but in fact, the best work in that direction is interested in the ecosystem that has emerged where fans—teen and adult—learn from each other and support each other's activities. Certainly educational researchers have the greatest interest in youth because this work can then carry over and influence what goes on within schools. But they will misunderstand fandom if they see it in age-stratified terms.

[4.5] In my own case, I am trying to take what fandom has taught me about the kinds of learning needed to support and expand a participatory culture and applying those insights to the development of materials for teaching media literacy. For a long time, media literacy was motivated by a deep suspicion of the media industries and often an antimedia perspective. I'm trying to develop an alternative model that, like fandom, has space for critical engagement but also has room for creative intervention. When fans encounter an aspect of a program they dislike, they often rewrite it or remake it rather than simply critique it. As such, fandom offers an alternative model for reading that could have a huge impact on the high school literature classroom, for example.

[4.6] I've been very pleased to be partnering with the Organization for Transformative Works as we've begun to develop these materials. Francesca Coppa and Laura Shapiro have been heading up an effort with other vidders to develop a series of short films that will be circulated as part of the materials being developed by Project New Media Literacies to help explain vidding as a particular form of participatory culture. These videos will have a place alongside those we've already produced on practices like cosplay, video podcasting, blogging, DJ culture, and the like, as resources that will support learning inside and outside of school.

[4.7] One side effect of this work may be that more young people will discover fandom, but that's a trend we've been seeing since the rise of Internet fandoms, and especially since the emergence of Harry Potter- and anime/manga-focused fandoms. But more generally, I think everyone might benefit from learning how to build a more playful and speculative relationship to the texts they read, from feeling empowered to take media in their own hands and coming to recognize a world where, as in fandom, all readers are assumed to be potential authors even if they haven't written anything yet.

5. OTW and TWC in a fannish context

[5.1] **Q:** You have been a strong supporter of OTW and TWC from their early days. How do you see them in relation to contemporary fan culture, media industry, and academia?

[5.2] **HJ:** As I mentioned earlier, the FanLib controversy was an eye-opener for me and for many other fans I know. Although Web 2.0 companies are taking their models from participatory culture, they are also fully responsive to the demands of consumer capitalism. The present moment is rich with possibilities as more people are producing their own media, as the networks and producers are learning to listen to some of their fans (albeit mostly of the male variety), and as fandom gains greater visibility in the culture. Yet as these changes occur, fandom is also more vulnerable to outside scrutiny, more exposed to corporate exploitation, and more open to legal action; fandom is also likely to be written out of the history of the participatory culture that it helped seed.

Legal organizations, such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation, have been quick to defend other geek communities and slow to defend the role of fan fiction online. Journalists often write about newer forms of remix culture without an understanding of their roots in the past—roots that include the history of female fan video production. And companies seek to move into the fan community and make money from their traditions without respecting the values of the existing participants. For those reasons, fans need to be better organized, to mobilize quickly, to develop alternative systems of distribution, and to develop intellectual and legal defenses of their practices.

[5.3] These seem to be the goals that the OTW and TWC have adopted for themselves. It's exciting to see so many fans rally together and apply their various personal and professional skills to constructing an infrastructure that can help support fandom into the 21st century. The group has a chance not simply to help protect what is most valuable about fan culture, but also to provide an alternative model for cultural politics that will inform larger public policy debates, such as those concerning intellectual property law and fair use or those concerning the relations between producers and consumers in the new economy. I know I am finding myself referencing the group in more and more contexts as what you are doing is connected with larger social and cultural shifts occurring all around us. I'm hopeful that the organization will be as inclusive as possible, that it doesn't become simply an enclave for academics and professionals, and that it maintains credibility across the fan community. No group can speak for all fans—fan communities are made to schism, and feuding is too often the norm. For OTW, reaching out to as many corners of fandom as possible will be important, as will be listening and learning from critics.

6. Gender, intersectionality, and fan studies

[6.1] **Q:** Academic and fannish debates (see the Gender and Fan Culture series and meta fandom [\[http://community.livejournal.com/metafandom\]](http://community.livejournal.com/metafandom) as examples) have pointed out the need for more conversations about gender, race, class, and other structural inequalities. How do you see your own work and that of OTW with regard to these concerns? How can we address these issues more successfully in the future?

[6.2] **HJ:** Many aspects of the gender and fan culture debate I hosted on my blog were illuminating to me. I learned things, both positive and negative, from both the male and female participants in that exchange. And it's forced me to reexamine the trajectory of my own work. Early on, my writing about fans was centrally concerned with gender and sexuality: As a male researcher, I wanted to respect the mostly female writing community I was discussing in *Textual Poachers*. I have always worked closely with female fans and academics who have deeply influenced every aspect of this work. I have also pushed

through projects like "Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking" (<http://web.mit.edu/cms/People/henry3/bonking.html>) to broaden the voices heard from fandom within the academic world and to let go of some of the academic and male privilege that might have surrounded my work.

[6.3] At the same time, I was aware that a growing number of younger female scholars have begun to do their own work on fan fiction writing, and doing so from a space much more intertwined with the life of the community than I could ever claim. And so I began to shift the focus of my own research onto other aspects of participatory culture and other corners of fandom. I wrote more about other aspects of fan culture and cult media that have also been part of my own life as a fan.

[6.4] I had assumed that *Convergence Culture* would mostly be read by people who knew *Textual Poachers*; I also created *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* to show the links between the two projects. But I underestimated the number of people who would come to my work through *Convergence Culture* without that prior background. Frankly, I never imagined the book selling anywhere near as many copies as it has. As a result, *Convergence Culture* did not deal as well as it should have with the diversity of the fan community. Female fans are certainly present, but gender theory is less central to this project than in my earlier writings. And the book is about participatory culture understood in its broadest terms rather than about the female-centered fan community that was the focus of *Textual Poachers*. I feel strongly that as the range of work in fan studies has expanded, we should not expect that every essay address every aspect of fan culture and that it is legitimate to do work that explores a range of different fan practices from a range of different theoretical perspectives.

[6.5] Yet what the gender and fan culture debate forced me to think about was that there might be a connection between my new emphasis on the relations between producers and consumers and the more male-heavy, less feminist-focused nature of my new work. I need to be concerned that one group of fans may be gaining visibility and influence while other groups are still being excluded and marginalized. My friend Tara McPherson has noted that in general, gender and race have dropped out of academic discussions of digital media, and we need to find ways to reintegrate them into this work. And so, rising to her challenge, I am working much harder now to try to reengage with issues of gender and sexuality through my work. As I note above, my most recent work is about the exclusions within participatory culture and about the unequal relations between

corporations and different kinds of fan communities. I am struggling to reconnect my work on participatory culture with the latest rounds of work in feminist scholarship. Fan scholars should try to acknowledge and address these questions of inequality and exclusion in their work. It's one reason why I speak so much right now about the participation gap and make the point again and again that a participatory culture is not necessarily a diverse or inclusive culture.

[6.6] Fandom is certainly not exempt from these concerns. For a long time, as a *Star Trek* fan, I was concerned that we spoke about "Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations," yet those attending conventions are overwhelming white. I now worry a lot about the generational segregation of fan communities. When my wife goes to Escapade, she hears lots of talk about the graying of fandom and sees far fewer fans who are not middle-aged; when I speak at a Harry Potter con, I am shocked by how young most of the fans are. What does this suggest about the social structures of fandom?

[6.7] Might something similar be going on with race, where we define what shows count as "fannish" according to a set of criteria that may marginalize or exclude minority participants at a time when the shows watched by most white Americans are rather different from those watched by most minority Americans? Interestingly, reality television has been the point of overlap racially, so it would be interesting to know more about how race operates in the fandoms around reality television. But in most cases, reality fandom is cut off from the fiction-focused fandoms.

[6.8] Incidentally, gender seems to operate differently within some of these fandoms: younger men and women are interacting more together through Harry Potter or anime fandom than was the case with the highly female-centered fan cultures I observed a decade ago.

[6.9] We need to be asking hard questions within the fan community about how we define our own borders and how different groups of fans interact. They are also questions we need to ask as academics about how we bridge between different scholarly communities that are studying related topics through different language and that may be breaking down along the lines of gender or race. I hope that OTW and TWC can extend the conversation we started on my blog and build connections to other such discussions taking place in and around fandom. But we are only going to achieve that goal if we embrace the broadest possible understanding of what constitutes fan culture and what models might motivate fan studies research.

Interview with Wu Ming

Veruska Sabucco

Milan, Italy

[0.1] Keyword—Collective authorship

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Wu Ming was born from the Luther Blissett project (<http://www.lutherblissett.net/>). In the years 1994 to 1999, this pan-European project saw hundreds of artists and performers under the collective name "Luther Blissett" at work to create high-impact fake mediatic events aimed at showing how gullible and shallow mainstream media are and to denounce the daily cranking out of attention-catching news. Luther Blissett's novel, *Q* (1999), is probably best known as one of the first copyleft publications in Italy.

[1.2] In January 2000, the Blissett project over, five writers joined forces under the collective name Wu Ming and started publishing books both collectively and singly. Books written by a single writer, such as *Stella del mattino* (Morning Star) (2008), are signed with the collective pen name, Wu Ming, followed by the number corresponding to the writer of the book, in this case, Wu Ming 4.

[1.3] The Wu Ming Foundation (<http://www.wumingfoundation.com/>) is more focused on literary production, but it follows in Blissett's footsteps: the books are released under a Creative Commons license (<http://creativecommons.org/>), and the writers hold a critical stance about copyright and its extensions. Blissett's and Wu Ming's books are available in a variety of formats at their Web site on their download page (<http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/downloads.shtml>).

[1.4] What follows is Veruska Sabucco's e-mail interview with Wu Ming 1.

[1.5] *The following TWC editorial staff member assisted in the interview: Mafalda Stasi.*

2. Interview

[2.1] **Q:** Let's start with the collective pen name, Wu Ming. On your Web page, you state that the media often portray Wu Ming negatively as a fictional entity used to hide your real names and identities—which, by the way, are well known. Pen names are not exactly a novelty in the publishing industry (or in the media industry, as you point out). In fandom, people rarely use their real names. Even Homer himself is suspected to be nothing more than a collective pen name. Where does this anonymous writer paranoia you find in the Italian media system come from?

[2.2] **WM1:** The paradoxical thing about these misrepresentations is that some of them are done in good faith. It may happen that even people who review our books quite favorably end up describing "Wu Ming" as "the name behind which the authors hide their identity." The fact that "Wu Ming" means "Anonymous" leads critics to think we are anonymous ourselves, even if they actually know our real names. It is an interesting case of knee-jerk opinion. And it's an interesting contradiction as well. Bands, groups, and collectives usually have collective names, but bands, groups, and collectives are few and far between in the realm of literature as we have known it. Collective literary writing is still seen as inappropriate by some well-placed conservatives. These conservatives are the big cheese both in academic circles and in the cultural supplements of daily papers. However, I'm not worried. I'm not even annoyed. We're just feigning irritation for the sake of, you know, rebel rhetoric. These people need someone to tell them that they're pompous and ignorant, and we duly render that service.

[2.3] **Q:** Does Wu Ming represent "the death of the author"? Are you saying that the name of the writer is not important because what's important are the multimedia narratives created by the multiple entities behind the same pen name? Where does this stance put Wu Ming in the ongoing battles over copyright?

[2.4] **WM1:** I'm not particularly interested in the debate on the death of the author. I don't bear any grudge against authors in and of themselves. We're authors ourselves. However, we believe that the author is overrated. There's too much bad rhetoric around the author. Some of those people are too full of themselves, and there's a whole system thriving on their being full of themselves, and on the public contemplating in awe their selfish attitude. Authors have no supernatural powers. Quite a few of them don't even have anything to say. Their only asset is that they know how not to say it. They have the language to say nothing at all and be praised about it. As for the copyright battle—it is no mystery that all our books are freely reproducible, they can be downloaded from our Web site, and people can distribute them in any way they please, as long as distribution remains free and they don't ask for any money. If they make money, we want a slice of the cake.

[2.5] **Q:** With your latest creation, *Manituana* (2007), you create a work that is complete by itself, but you encourage readers to join the fictional world by submitting fan fictions, fan videos, and music. You say

people can "work together on the creation of the *Manituana* world." On the one hand, you authorize and even ask for fan fiction: "In the months and years that follow, we will gladly receive, select, and publish the writings and fictions that you write when the fancy strikes you, as long as these live and breathe the world we are building." On the other, on your Web page, you will only publish a selection of the fan fiction you receive. What are the selection criteria—quality of writing? ethics? Aren't you afraid you are going to create a sort of fan works hierarchy, approved fan creators versus unapproved ones?

[2.6] **WM1:** As a matter of fact, so far we have published a little more than 99% of what we received. There were only two cases of stuff that was really, really badly written or performed. We wrote back and asked them to do some more work to improve the quality of their output. We didn't suggest them how to do that—there are really no guidelines. They reworked and resubmitted it, and in the end, we published new versions of their stuff. The only circumstance where we would use ethics as a criterion would be if our creations are hijacked to repackage and spread fascist/racist ideologies. In that case, our reaction would be violent. I can't think of another example of an unapproved creator. We always give second chances. Anyway, unapproved fan creators can always put their own stuff elsewhere on the Web. They're free to do what they want.

[2.7] **Q:** Your Web page/story is at the center of the wheel: everything refers to it, and it's a center-periphery communication, like TV or cinema. Would you like your fans to create horizontal webs of communication and creation that you know nothing about and that you cannot control?

[2.8] **WM1:** They already exist. For example, role-playing game communities play games that take inspiration from our works. They don't bother to contact us, and nine times out of ten, we're totally in the dark about it. That's good. Why know everything?

[2.9] **Q:** What about out-of-control, spiraling-outward fan fictions that contradict the Wu Ming philosophy? For example, what if someone posts racist fan fictions?

[2.10] **WM1:** If something like that happens, the most important thing will be: no one dare think that we're involved in such filth.

[2.11] **Q:** Fan fiction is often considered low-quality writing. It is true that much of it is actually badly written as well as technically poorly prepared, with misspellings and random punctuation. It is also true that it's not as much the quality of it as it is its meaning—the collective world building is a way of sharing powerful imaginary copyrighted creations and manipulating them. Fanon, unofficial fan-generated canon, is a consequence of this process, a consequence I assume Wu Ming is interested in. Would you take inspiration from characters created by

fan writers and use them? Work with them, write more short stories about them or explore situations presented in *Manituana* fan fictions? Again, what about the legal aspect of it?

[2.12] **WM1:** Yes, we would do it. It would be a pleasure. So far, it hasn't happened, but who knows? The legal aspect is not a problem. Because people can use our stuff as long as they don't make a profit, it would be the same the other way around. If we decided to make commercial use of anything, we'd stipulate a contract and share royalties with the creator or creators.

[2.13] **Q:** Overall, can *Manituana* and the new *Stella del mattino* (which is about Lawrence of Arabia) be considered to be in the genre of real people fiction—that is, fan fiction not about characters but about existing people?

[2.14] **WM1:** Well, there are also imaginary characters. In a recent essay, I have called the kind of books that are being written in Italy the New Italian Epic. It isn't a defined genre, and it isn't a movement either. I described it as an "electrostatic field" surrounding a number of literary works written in the past few years.

[2.15] **Q:** Overall, the New Italian Epic is an "electrostatic field" surrounding books by different writers that look very different but share, deep down, something in common. Creators use the literary means they deem "right" (regardless of genre, tone, or language) to reach their end. New Italian Epic is not a self-referential postmodernist tongue-in-cheek genre; writers make a stand. Other characteristics shared by New Italian Epic books and an in-depth analysis of the genre can be found in the essay "The New Italian Epic" in the online magazine *Carmilla* (<http://www.carmillaonline.com/archives/2008/04/002612.html>).

[2.16] **WM1:** The most famous book of this sort is *Gomorra* (2006; *Gomorrah*, English-language edition, 2007), by our friend Roberto Saviano, but we're talking about dozens of works that are changing the national literary landscape.

[2.17] **Q:** Let's talk about your introduction to *Convergence Culture* (2006), by Henry Jenkins. Jenkins is not exactly a celebrity here in Italy. How do you know him, and what was your role in having *Convergence Culture* translated?

[2.18] **WM1:** I ordered *Convergence Culture* a few days after it was published. I read it, got enthusiastic about it, and passed it on to my colleagues. We got in touch with Henry Jenkins, we corresponded for a while, and we started to popularize some of his concepts in the Italian blogosphere. Our friend Loredana Lipperini, who is a journalist, interviewed him. An Italian publisher got interested, Henry signed the contract, the publisher asked us to write the introduction.

[2.19] **Q:** In your introduction to *Convergence Culture*, you write, "In the best of possible worlds, this book being published would be like an earthquake in the Italian debate about the Internet and new communication technologies." Italian sociologist Alberto Abruzzese's books about what he calls the "culture industry" are very different in style from Jenkins's, but they offer a similar point of view on the subject. Still, the Italian debate about Internet or pop culture is confined. What is your take on it?

[2.20] **WM1:** Abruzzese wrote some excellent texts and some pamphlets with ideas that were disputable but interesting, but he is no acafan the way Henry is. Abruzzese is an academic, a semiologist, with all the consequences and connotations related to that. My take on the issue is that style and content can't be separated. You can't theorize one way and practice another. Henry's style is perfectly consistent with his position—indeed, his style is the very embodiment of those positions. While you're reading, you can feel that the author has been there, that he merged with the fan communities, that his observation is related to his being a participant. You can actually see the geeky kid that Henry once was—and in a way still is. His books are warm, even tender. He's truly, madly, deeply involved in the subjects he writes about, and yet he manages to maintain a critical distance. Only an acrobat can do that. Henry's texts have more potential to reach people who don't read theoretical texts, people who may not attend classes in media studies but who practice convergence every day. In Italy, there's still a wide gap

between the people who write theory and the people who indulge in the practice. Henry's works are a great inspiration for anyone wanting to be a bridge builder.

[2.21] **Q:** Fandom studies in Italy are sporadic. Most of the research is about manga and anime subculture, as in *La bambola e il robottone* (The Doll and the Mechanoid). Why do you think pop culture, in all its complexity, is still being ignored or disparaged? Do you think the situation is going to change shortly?

[2.22] **WM1:** Incredible as it may sound, after all these years, many Italian intellectuals still cling to Horkheimer and Adorno's overall condemnation of the culture industry. They don't realize that the culture industry as we know it is dying. They don't realize to what extent the Internet is changing the game. A few days ago I was listening to the radio, and an old writer whom I have always respected, Gianni Celati, was asked his opinion about the Internet. He started saying awfully stupid things, like "There is nothing meaningful on the Internet" and "The Internet reminds me of Stalin's Russia—there's the same dictatorship, the same control of language." It was blatantly clear that he didn't have the slightest clue what he was talking about. Most likely, he's never actually seen a Web page. He's completely Web 0.0, but he has an opinion—nay, he lays down the law. After hearing him on the radio, I don't respect him anymore. And you wonder why pop culture in its complexity is ignored or disparaged?

Interview with the Audre Lorde of the Rings

TWC Editor

[0.1] Keywords—Academia; Blog; Mashup

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1. Introduction: Labors of love

[1.1] TWC editor Alexis Lothian conducted an e-mail interview with Karen Tongson, Christine Balance, and Alexandra Vazquez, who are professors at University of Southern California, University of California–Irvine, and Princeton, respectively. All three are cultural studies scholars who take nonobjective feelings about objects of study seriously. For the past year, they have been blogging together at Oh! Industry (<http://www.ohindustry.com/>), celebrating the musical, televisual, and filmic soundtracks to intellectual and emotional lives lived inside the "machine" of the academy and among "domestic zones" of "living rooms, backyards, garages, in our cars, or even just between our headphones." With a motley group of allies in and out of academia, many of whom have contributed to Oh! Industry (O!I) and who share a perspective informed by U.S. women-of-color feminism, queer theory and activism, and a determination to "never run away from being serious about 'non-serious' things" and to "never hide [their] irreverence towards objects and industries that others take too seriously," they have formed an unofficial intellectual collective they call the Audre Lorde of the Rings (ALOTR).

[1.2] Together and separately, Tongson, Balance, and Vazquez's work on suburban diasporic communities and pop culture, both mainstream and marginal, shows that the critical and political value of fannishness extends well beyond the self-identified subcultural geek communities on which the body of intellectual work gathered under the heading of "fan studies" has tended to focus. They talked to us about the critical and political value of queered and racialized fannish affects, intellectual labor and performance in and out of the academy, and the articulation between academic institutions and online public spheres.

[1.3] *The following TWC editorial team members contributed to this interview: Alexis Lothian and Julie Levin Russo.*

2. Intersectional fan identities

[2.1] **Q:** In your project's mission statement (<http://www.ohindustry.com/2007/10/our-mission-our-industry.html/>), you term your intellectual collective the "Audre Lorde of the Rings" and yourselves hobbits. What is Oh! Industry, and why did this mashup of cultural references seem an apt way to describe it?

[2.2] **KT:** Well, I think the mission really captures what we feel O!I is about. To pull a couple of concepts

from the mission, the site is our idea of a "virtual slumber party," a coherent (at least sometimes) manifestation of the delicious chaos that ensues when we get together—all the food, all the hot topics (à la the Rosie O'Donnell-era *View*), all the music, all the memories we share, despite experiencing these cultural moments separately in our pasts, in different spaces and places throughout the world, and in the suburbs of the United States. CBB has, I think, a wonderful phrase to describe our shared Spanish and American postcolonial sensibilities: the 1898 axis.

[2.3] **CBB:** The 1898 axis is actually more of a collaborative term created by ATV and me during our shared graduate school times. After surviving years of ethnic studies training and (in our pasts) Bay Area living, we recognized the fraught position we occupied as Cuban and Filipino, respectively. Similar to hobbits, actually, the people and cultural forms we write about are often misunderstood as being lazy, lascivious, and mere merry-makers (for more examples, see political cartoons from the Spanish-American War era, google the term *Filipina*, watch Ry Cooder's *Buena Vista Social Club*, talk to any U.S. military personnel who has spent time in Olangapo—you get the picture). But rather than take the militant "internal colonialism" approach offered to us as undergraduates, we wanted to find an analytic that allowed us to reimagine the hobbitry as both a contemporary and historical condition. *1898 axis* then became a term that invoked a history of not only resistance (during the Spanish-American War) but also of collaboration among intellectuals, artists, and political deviants during that same era. What we often forget is that, even then, there were transnational forms of exchange between individuals (for example, the two Josés—Marti and Rizal), cultures, and nations. Though the hobbits are more familiarly known for their penchant for being provincial homebodies who prefer tending to their own, their story is, at the same time, one of travel, adventure, and an ethical quest to better the world.

[2.4] **KT:** What this means in terms of the lexicon we imagine sharing is that we spend a lot of our time playing with words and ideas to work out, simultaneously, the affinities and frustrations produced by these shared colonial legacies. In terms of what ALOTR itself actually refers to in its ideal sense—we were all especially frustrated about a bad professional encounter, and a particularly antifeminist one, and we channeled that anger into a conversation about old-school women-of-color feminism and about the lack of appreciation for collective endeavors in this profession. That immediately brought us to a mad-respect chatfest about Audre Lorde, then to *The*

Lord of the Rings and to the concept of a motley fellowship, of our motley crew (which included more than the three of us).

[2.5] As this idea of the ALOTR kept resurfacing in our conversations, we got to thinking about what the fellowship means, about what hobbitry means, and about how we all carry hobbitry in our hearts. The entire Fellowship of the Ring ultimately carries hobbitry in their hearts, regardless of their individual origins (as dwarf, elf, man, etc.). Hobbits are a simple lot who are pure of heart, and who love drink, food, and playing barefoot. But they also bear the tremendous burden of transporting the Ring and resisting its allure of power for the sake of power. What they don't have in physical strength or pulchritude they make up for with their tenacity in spirit and purity of heart. And I think we identified with Frodo's temptations as well as his burdens, understanding also how significant friendship is, first and foremost, during such arduous endeavors. We understand how easy it is (especially in the academy) to be tempted by the dark powers of the Ring—by the allure of power itself. But we hope and aspire constantly to thwart those darker elements: the covetousness, the useless skirmishes for control, the selfishness. Friendship, fellowship, mutual encouragement, are what make us happier as well as stronger doing what we do.

[2.6] **ATV:** Actually, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas once made a very compelling argument that Cubans were the true-to-life forces behind Tolkien's hobbits. Beyond what KT has already brilliantly spelled out, I think that the ALOTR helps to mark a woman-of-color feminism as it intersects with the experience of awkward nerdiness. It's part of what has made us unapologetic intellectuals. There's something of a Dungeons and Dragons substance beneath our exteriors we've never been able to quite shake. As such, we've needed to develop our own code language (like pig latin, patois, and Spanglish before it) to stave off the bullies we now face. Cubans and Pinoy have much in common, but one of our greatest shared talents is the imposition of nicknames on people and things with droll accuracy. So you might say, these discursive moves are just part of the ways we roll.

3. Pop culture's affective communities

[3.1] **Q:** What motivated the formation of Oh! Industry and the ALOTR? Who are you writing for and against?

[3.2] **KT:** O!I is what I like to describe as a "pop culture Web zine," or a digest of sorts. At least that's my official explanation for its function as a kind of e-repository for some of our other passions (and passionate labors) related to, but not necessarily valued or acknowledged in, the academy itself.

[3.3] **CBB:** The wordplay of the ALOTR pretty much falls in line with what the queer Pinoy scholar, Martin Manalansan, would call a swardspcak-easy approach to

language and popular culture that all three of us recognized we shared. Song or movie titles and characters can sometimes invoke a feeling, experience, or moment better than our own words. Part of this linguistic play is a type of improvisational and performative take on what Alex harkens back to in her vamp during the O!I mission as the "notes we've passed between each other." Part of it is an extension of the code-switching survival techniques we have developed both inside and outside the academy. And finally, part of it is about a certain affective relationship we've developed over time with objects, places, and people through the lingua franca of U.S. popular culture. As a scholar of popular cultural forms, I take seriously the social contexts in which these forms take shape and are consumed. Even more importantly, I recognize that our relationship to films, music, television, and popular figures holds the productive potential to change our way of looking at our world or even imagine new ones.

[3.4] **KT:** In some way, we were accomplishing some of our best, most "real" work during downtimes at conferences when we weren't presenting (or in the presence of) more ostensibly "polished" academic presentations, and instead having conversations about pop culture *and* big ideas. I guess we wanted to capture that sense of whimsy as well as naughtiness. Overall, I think we wanted a venue to get these ideas off our chests, or at least to try and figure out a space for our writing that would capture some of our more oblique, popular inspirations. And to acknowledge that these "oblique" forms are central to our intellectual process—not simply props or objects for the typical displays of mastery, ownership, and wankery in the academy and beyond.

[3.5] **ATV:** For me, O!I is a place where we're able to put a few things to words. It's that experience of listening to the same song over and over again, except that it happens outside of headphones and in good company. It's about working through a few questions that we wish would get asked of us. It is also the kind of disciplinary mechanism that you might want and need for writing.

[3.6] Alongside KT, I reiterate that O!I is an entity that sprung from finding family in the abjection of academia, rushed along by a few too many of its conferences. Its nascent rumblings could be traced to exchanging faces across the rooms of professional cocktail parties and to years of note-passing. I think it's worth noting that gravity first pulled our triumvirate together during the Experience Music Conference in 2005, an annual event that gathers journalists, academics, and performers together in Seattle. Being ladies in music scholarship is a very specific and difficult and discouraging and, of course, immensely pleasurable kind of experience. The interface between music and critics and criticism, and the snares to be found there, has been a formative site for the battle-scarred heart of O!I. I think the kinds of challenges presented by EMP—namely, the procedures by which we *had* to take ourselves more

seriously as music critics—provided the collective stuff behind our virtual reckoning. We had long been working through some fluster over ways of talking about music—the crazy-making kind that has certain folks making claims to and over things, and their fascinating ability to go unchallenged. The crazy-making was also due to our shared frustration over the lack of hospitality our work has found in certain venues—which is not only about being published in a book but also about being in the room. Together, we urgently needed a way to make productive use of all that frustration. O!I forces us to not spend energy on that anger, but to take said energy and do our own work.

4. Expanding fandom

[4.1] **Q:** Would you call Oh! Industry a fan site? How do you conceptualize your and your project's relationship to fan cultures?

[4.2] **KT:** I think in certain respects, O!I is a place for us to express some of our enthusiasms and fanaticisms. But I also think it serves as a venue for us to try other things out and on. To test-drive some of our passing fancies—songs of the moment, as well as of a lifetime. I have always been a believer and proponent in the critical labor of fandom. In fact, I've been teaching a course on "Fan Obsession, Imitation and Expertise" since graduate school, bringing together certain urtexts in philosophy and literature (Nietzsche on Wagner, Ruskin on Turner) and thinking about how these "boy" genealogies carry over into more contemporary incarnations while also being exploded or remade by queers/women/working/people of color. Our insistence on affect, deep engagement, investment in our objects (even if those affects are negative and off-putting), is also related to fandom. I always say I can't deal with works that refuse to feel it or somehow can't feel it. The object, especially the popular object, is not an end in and of itself.

[4.3] I guess overall, I wouldn't necessarily call O!I a fan site despite the fact that fandom is a leitmotif in all of our work. Instead, I hope we offer different variations on fandom, different models of affective and critical engagement.

[4.4] **CBB:** To pick up on KT's comments, I see my writing within O!I as part of a larger intellectual project that looks at affect and performance. Very often, this has meant looking at the affective charge of performers or live performances but I am also very much interested in looking at audience reception as an affective performance. Through our various modes of relating to live performance, recorded films and music, we develop not only an intimate relationship to these cultural objects but, also, a sphere of belonging with other audience members. I guess "fan culture" would be one way of articulating this collective counterpublic, but I wouldn't want the critical work and our range of emotional responses to get lost purely in the popular connotations of the word *fan*. At the same time, to echo KT's sentiments, I think we all

purposefully choose an unabashed tone and spirit of fandom in our writing and criticism. Unlike other scholarly writing, we precisely want to undo the shame about taking seriously these objects that invoke feelings and inspire our academic work.

[4.5] While other scholars seem rightly to worry about the blogosphere being a "taste-making" project, I myself would err on the side of viewing it as part of a larger trend toward democratization within today's new media and digital technologies. The larger corporations and companies whose hegemony we have been battling for a generation are now the ones struggling to keep up with the mobile criticism and ground-level publicity of blogs, fans, and audiences.

5. Copyright and citation

[5.1] **Q:** Like TWC, Oh! Industry appropriates images, videos, and other material that might be under copyright to illustrate its points. What is your view of the intellectual property concerns relevant to your work and to online publishing in general? What sort of license have you chosen for your writing?

[5.2] **KT:** I know one of the things motivating us, as CBB and ATV have alluded to, is using the O!I as a place to start naming (if not necessarily claiming ownership over) our archives. In that sense, the site serves as an informal record of our intellectual property—or not *our* property per se, but the intellectual property we are all squatting upon as academics. We use the citational ethics we've earnestly imbibed from the academy as a guide for not only how we cite others' works, but also for how we reference the popular music, TV, films that we write about. I think the three of us go out of our way to cite the inspirations for our conceptual leaps and turns, and even some of our slang. Not everyone in the academy or in the journo world is as careful, unfortunately, so we prefer to err on the side of excessive citationality.

[5.3] **CBB:** I wholly agree with KT here. We know a thing or two about the detrimental effects of not being cited properly, so we try our darnedest not to repeat such violence, and if we do make mistakes, we thankfully have such a brilliant readership that has caught them and let us know. In terms of our license in writing, I think that goes beyond just IP laws and into this nation's longer history of property—but I will leave that commentary for other writings.

[5.4] **ATV:** I think that's right. I'd also add that I think we're paranoid enough to not "infringe" upon property, but that's not to say we don't loiter. But you know, this can be a big problem for folks who work in other languages, on things from other countries. For example: I'm often not able to post the song tracks I want to talk about, especially the Cuban stuff, because they are not streamed, available on iTunes, etc. I could get into the complicated networks of rights and permissions here, which is especially fraught between Cuba and the United

States. It's a problem that has been going on for some time; it is always the unasked question. If you can't make an object available because it is illegal, or to do so would be against the law, how must you still talk about it? What are the creative and careful ways that you can talk about something? Describe it? Reference it?

6. Academia and the institution

[6.1] **Q:** Your blog takes something of a defiant tone toward the academic 'verse. How do you understand O!I's relationship to your institutional day jobs? Do you think it could or should be recognized as part of your professional work? Would you like to see academia's view of popular culture and fandom change?

[6.2] **ATV:** I think part of surviving and having a good time in the academy means that you have to let go of what is permissible in and to it—what it recognizes and what it finds recognizable. It is kind of liberating when you decide to just do your work, however out there you think it might be. Of course, there are material implications for doing so. Many women who have been doing their work (often when they do it brilliantly) have been denied promotion, a paycheck, a book deal. But to do otherwise—to not do one's work—is no way to live either. In terms of the writing itself, I don't think you would find much disparity between our popular and our academic voices. Some have had a hostile reaction to such blurring, but others have found some relief in it. It is such a tremendous honor when someone approaches us and speaks of finding a newfound sense of permissiveness by what we're trying to do.

[6.3] **CBB:** To put my back into that question, I think of our tone and demeanor as just as humorous as it is defiant—perhaps leaving the reader with that same feeling after watching a competition scene from *You Got Served* or after earnestly belting out Heart's "Never" in public (with or without the microphone). For me, O!I really allows us to create a space and continue a project of reparation. Although the reparative process was most

recently and eloquently named by Eve Sedgwick, I think we would all agree that women, people of color, and queers have been looking at life with reparative lenses for a long time now. Again, in a O!I swardspeak sort of way, Chaka Khan's "Through the Fire" best illustrates the deep contours of this mode of postcolonial and feminist survival. Simultaneously, in institutions and a society that understands minoritarian cultures through injury and suffering, the laughter and pleasures of these survival tales are often not allowed to be visible, let alone celebrated. So I guess O!I becomes not only a "take back the night" move but, also, a reminder that in the face of academe's seriousness, I still remember that it's a living, in that 1980s Ann Jillian and Sheryl Lee Ralph sitcom sort of way.

[6.4] **KT:** I agree with everything my sistahs say. Especially to any and all references to Ann Jillian and *It's a Living*. As I mentioned at the very beginning of our chat, O!I serves as a venue for some of our digressions. It also offers a kind of starter kit for each of us, I think. I know that I turn to writing pieces for O!I when I feel I really need to get something off my chest. To do something quickly. To express my interest and passion in something that it might take me longer to write about in a more "official" context. More than anything, O!I offers a place for us to say whatever we want to without worrying about whether or not it will "count." It's tremendously freeing and a great cure for writer's block to have a place to work ideas out, even if they're only seeds of ideas. Sometimes the ideas on O!I even end up more polished or thoughtful than when I sit down to write more officially, with the burden of formality and making it count hanging over me. All this said, doing a site like O!I also requires a lot of prep time and work. Time spent organizing the page, inviting guests, writing posts, etc. In that sense, I believe it should be recognized as part of our professional labor. And as for the latter part of the question, about academia's views toward pop culture and fandom, I can only say yes. I'd have to ramble on forever if I tried to explain why.

Teen television: Essays on programming and fandom, *edited by Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein*

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Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein, eds. *Teen television: Essays on programming and fandom*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008. \$35.00 (259p) ISBN 978-0-78643-589-0.

[1] *Teen Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom*, edited by Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein, is a timely anthology that offers multiple perspectives on the quickly evolving world of teen television. In the introduction, the editors define teen television as a fluid genre designated by "content, audience address, programming context, or demographics of reception (or any combination of these elements)" (4). They also argue that these programs are both "culturally transgressive yet commercial" (7) in ways that inform the content of the programs and the various responses of fans. It is this tension between the transgressive and the commercial, explored in a number of the chapters, that creates a unifying theme among the essays beyond the overarching categories of teens and television. Even though some key scholarly works on the influence of youth culture have been produced in the last 25 years, including at least one volume looking specifically at television, *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption and Identity* (Davis and Dickinson 2004), there is still much work to be done, and Ross and Stein make a strong contribution to the literature with *Teen Television*.

[2] There are 12 chapters in the volume, which are divided into three topic areas: part I—"The Industrial Context of Teen TV"; part II—"Teens on TV"; and part III—"Cultures of Reception." The book's general approach is to examine television programs in the larger contexts of modes of production, textual analysis linked to theoretical frameworks, and reception studies, which is both appropriate and useful. This type of critique is more expansive and persuasive than a collection focused solely on textual analysis, but the emphasis here on American television unifies the collection despite the various perspectives included. A number of these essays delve into several of these contexts at once to develop the complex relationships among programs, various cultural constructs, and fandom, revealing a great deal about female teen culture.

[3] In part I, Valerie Wee ("Teen Television and the WB Television Network"), Sharon Marie Ross ("Defining Teen Culture: The N Network"), and Ben Aslinger ("Rocking Prime Time: Gender, the WB, and Teen Culture") contribute chapters that discuss the emergence of the WB as the first "teen" network, the development of the N as a narrowcasting network, and the role of music as a component of teen television. Each of these essays offers a compelling look at the interplay between industry and audience and draws on larger themes that help designate and reinforce the genre, fluid though it may be. The section begins with an essay by Jeff Martin on the show *TV Teen Club*, which aired from 1949 to 1954. While "*TV Teen Club: Teen TV as Safe Harbor*" is an interesting read and offers some limited context for the later series, especially in terms of the use of music, the temporal gap between this show and the other programs addressed in the volume (which premiered in the 1990s and 2000s) makes it an uneven fit for the book.

[4] Probably because of the theoretical frameworks informing the analysis, the chapters in part II of the anthology are the most cohesive group in the collection and offer analytical tools and critical insights that the reader can use in thinking more broadly about other television programs and genres. Francesca Gamber's essay "*Riding the Third Wave: The Multiple Feminisms of Gilmore Girls*" is a particularly nuanced look at complex and competing discourses of second-wave and third-wave feminisms, and it should have broad applications beyond *Gilmore Girls* as a way of interrogating various media texts. Gamber says of the teen character in the series, "The immediate task facing Rory in the navigation of multiple feminist models is that of distinguishing herself from her mother," and the author's essay itself provides an artful navigation of multiple feminist models. At first I was confused about the inclusion of *Six Feet Under* in a volume on teen television, but Barbara Brickman's essay "*The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Fan: Consumption and Queer Inspiration in Six Feet Under*" is provocative, adding an interesting take on how a program that is not actively marketed to teens can still include the signifiers of teen television in ways that are central to the series. The other

three chapters in this section are Caralyn Bolte's "'Normal is the watchword': Exiling Cultural Anxieties and Redefining Desire from the Margins," Andrea Braithwaite's "'That girl of yours—she's pretty hardboiled, huh?': Detecting Feminism in *Veronica Mars*," and Sue Turnbull's "'They stole me': *The O.C.*, Masculinity, and the Strategies of Teen TV."

[5] Part III is the most problematic, and in some ways the most interesting, section in the volume: problematic because of the methodological challenges of conducting research using online fan sites, but interesting because of the insights these authors bring to their subjects and the expansive nature of the analysis. The final chapter in the book, Louisa Ellen Stein's "Pushing at the Margins: Teenage Angst in Teen TV and Audience Response," is more general in scope, but the other two essays look at specific series and fan responses. In "Fashion Sleuths and Aerie Girls: *Veronica Mars*' Fan Forums and Network Strategies of Fan Address," Jennifer Gillan provides a multilayered look at the way fans engage the series, interact in online communities, and express their fandom in the larger consumer culture inspired by the show. While this type of research is necessarily messy, it offers a necessary examination of the interplay among the text and various related texts and contexts to give the reader a sense of the dynamic and intertextual way fans experience *Veronica Mars*. Melanie E. S. Kohnen introduces a reconceptualization of televisual spectatorship in "The Adventures of a Repressed Farm Boy and the Billionaire Who Loves Him: Queer Spectatorship in *Smallville* Fandom." Her point is not simply that straight people "can and do see queerly," but that in certain contexts they "understand it as a

pleasurable, active, and communal way of seeing" (209). By examining the interplay between the series and fan site discussions, Kohnen makes a compelling case for expanding the range of spectatorial positions available to the viewers beyond the "straight" and "gay" binary that has marked previous conceptions (popular and scholarly) of television.

[6] *Teen Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom* is an excellent resource for media studies scholars and might make a good supplementary text in graduate seminars, particularly those that include a component on reception studies. It would have been useful for the collection to have addressed the viewing cultures of teen boys either across sections or in a chapter devoted to comparing teen television viewing between girls and boys. Although the focus of the anthology is specific and limited to a particular genre, there will be applications in these chapters for researchers working in all areas of television studies. Furthermore, these essays bring the previously underexplored area of teen television from margin to center. While other books have looked at teen culture broadly and some have looked specifically at the individual television series considered in these essays, this volume fills an important gap in the literature by looking specifically at American teen television programs and should be included in libraries supporting media studies programs.

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Fans: The mirror of consumption, by Cornel Sandvoss

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[0.1] Keywords—Camille Bacon-Smith; Deconstructionism; Fandom; Herbert Marcuse; Theodor Adorno

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Cornel Sandvoss. *Fans: The mirror of consumption*. Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2005. \$59.95 (198p) ISBN 978-0-74562-973-5.

[1] Fans are accustomed to being stereotyped, sometimes affectionately (*Galaxy Quest*), sometimes not (*Bimbos of the Death Sun*). In her well-known study *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1992), Camille Bacon-Smith inadvertently presented an image of the fan as an inadequate, highly neurotic personality. Most fans have at

some point witnessed the kind of neurotic behavior she describes, which gave her portrayal a depressing weight.

[2] Viewed through this lens, the early chapters of Cornel Sandvoss's *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* are a welcome antidote. Rather than presenting a definitive portrayal of The Fan, he argues that fandom is too varied for any such portrayal to be possible. In reference to Bacon-Smith's portrayal of fans, Sandvoss points out that she based her study on a narrow and specific segment of fandom. Despite the prevalent jokes about fans, this is not a representative sample of fandom. Sandvoss cites

numerous sources to prove that fans are a widely diverse group, found in every socioeconomic class and education level. We are not all the dysfunctional victims portrayed by Bacon-Smith; in fact, the majority of us are not.

[3] Sandvoss further bolsters this diversity by not limiting himself to fans of movies and television shows, on which much of fandom scholarship has focused. He demonstrates that sports and music fans demonstrate the same kinds of emotional involvement as television fans do, and they engage in the same kind of "fanalysis," interpreting the object of their fandom according to their own worldview. Sandvoss cites an especially amusing example of this when he quotes two fans of the Chelsea Football Club: one of them sees the team as the embodiment of success, while the other claims that the team has only ever been "almost successful" before sabotaging itself.

[4] Surprisingly, in his conclusion, Sandvoss expresses distress over the very lack of class boundaries he documents in fandom: "Fandom...further cements the *status quo* by undermining the role of class as a vector of social change." Many fans would argue that their hobby—by definition something they do for fun—should not be expected to be a vector of social change.

[5] The middle third of this study is probably the most interesting to the nonacademic with an interest in fandom. The first third is largely taken up with defining terms and surveying the territory, the final third with deconstructionist analysis, while the middle third has the most discussion about actual fans, their actual thoughts, and their actual activities. Interestingly, Sandvoss discusses fan jargon near his discussion of John Lennon fandom, but misses a jargon convention of that fandom: because Lennon's murderer was motivated by the fame he would acquire by killing someone famous, Lennon fans deprive him of his prize by referring to him only by his initials.

[6] It is in the final third of this book that its greatest weakness is the most glaring. Sandvoss imposes a political interpretation on fandom while acknowledging that the evidence for this interpretation is weak. In his conclusion, he actually says, "It is in the 'little breakages' between fan and object of fandom in the relationship, which leave fans disillusioned and sometimes disenfranchised, that fandom's progressive negative potential lies." Are fans to understand that when we are disappointed that our preferred "ships" do not get together, our dissatisfaction is contributing to eventual world revolution?

[7] Sandvoss seems eager to interpret fandom as a sort of suburban guerilla resistance, the disempowered consumer combating the powerful producers with fan fiction and performances rather than guns. He even describes slash writers in these terms: "The female fans in Bacon-Smith's study are not motivated predominantly by an aspiration for a utopian future. Rather, much as in the

case of actual guerilla fighters, their activity is a response to their everyday life struggles and deprivations and the lack of opportunity to counter these within the dominant power system." Slash fan fiction has been subjected to this subversive interpretation especially often, but given the frequency with which slash characters engage in monogamous, saccharine romances and even have weddings, one could just as easily interpret slash fiction as an attempt to "tame" homosexual behavior by bringing it into the patterns of traditional heterosexual relationships. In any case, Sandvoss acknowledges in several places that many fans accept the "hegemonic" interpretation of the characters offered by the owners and creators of the text, such as the implied disapproval of promiscuity in the depiction of the character Lucinda in *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990–2000). Sandvoss shows that fandom as ideological resistance is a simplistic interpretation. He admits that the many fans who do not interpret their chosen texts in a manner contrary to that intended by the creators "become themselves factors in maintaining the subsistence of the social *status quo*." Throughout the book, he goes in the same circle in different ways: proving that fans can be all sorts of people with all sorts of belief systems, then trying to shoehorn fannish activity into his ideas of civil disobedience. He reluctantly concludes by admitting that what fans themselves do and say does not bear out the political interpretation he prefers.

[8] Indeed, Sandvoss often has difficulty keeping his own ideology out of his analysis. That ideology is made clear by his frequent admiring references to critical theorists Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno. After mentioning the usurious prices sometimes paid by fans to ticket scalpers, he says,

[9] We may take comfort from the fact that this process of reclamation is not without its own pitfalls. It may be in the true spirit of Adam Smith's invisible hand of the market economy that tens of thousands of dollars will have ended up being pocketed by ticket touts... Yet the formation of such a black market economy is clearly not in the interest of the official institutions of the capitalist state.

[10] He takes for granted that the reader needs to be "comforted" after this mention of the black market's practical demonstration of the market principle.

[11] In another, especially glaring example, he explains that he interprets *Star Wars* as a David and Goliath story. He then expresses surprise that a member of the U.S. Army was partly inspired to enlist by his love of *Star Wars*. Sandvoss makes it clear that he is thinking of *Star Wars* in terms of a small, ragtag volunteer army of guerillas fighting against a huge, officially sanctioned, well-organized army of a powerful government. Sandvoss quotes this soldier as explaining that he sees himself as "the rebels fighting against an evil empire with an all-encompassing state and no tolerance for other lifestyles"

and valuing his "chance to fight against a tyrannical government and system." But Sandvoss still does not seem to see that to the soldier, the point is good versus evil, (comparatively) limited government versus the "all-encompassing state" found in today's China and the former USSR, and tolerance versus the lack of same found in Islamic fundamentalist states. Sandvoss still cannot shake his "David versus Goliath" interpretation. (He is British, and so may also be unaware of another factor: Despite being citizens of a superpower now, many Americans still identify themselves with their Revolutionary War ancestors, who were a ragtag guerilla army that defeated the well-organized soldiers of what was then the world's greatest power, England.) To his credit, however, after expressing his bafflement, he returns to his central point, that of the wide variety in fandom: "The point, again, is the possibility and actuality of such readings."

[12] Later, he quotes Adorno as saying that life is meaningless, and Sandvoss dismisses fannish creations as "an art or craft form which has nothing to say but the false illusion of a meaningful world." The idea that the world is meaningless is a bit heavy to be suddenly introduced into an analysis of fandom, and he does so without any acknowledgement that some readers might actually believe that the world is not, in fact, meaningless. He goes on to say that other fan scholars he has cited "cannot account for [fannish] enjoyment as being a meaningful engagement with otherness, and thus a premiss of social change if in fact it is self-reflective." This relies on the assumption that fandom *should* be "a premiss of social change." Admittedly, proving that it should would be outside the scope of this work, but once again, he is taking the reader's agreement with his personal stance on the proper purpose of fandom as a given. He is clearly writing for an academic audience, but is academia so homogenous? Do all academics believe that the world is meaningless and that hobbies ought to fuel social revolution?

[13] Unlike the works of Bacon-Smith or Henry Jenkins, this work is aimed primarily at an academic, not a popular, audience. Dense sentences such as "In other words, by interjecting the object world with our self-reflection, which in turn reflects and expresses the ego's libidinal basis, we counteract surplus repression" make this clear. There is some content that will be of interest to the nonacademic fan, such as the anecdotes of fannish behavior, or the story of how Batwoman and Batgirl were introduced during the 1950s in a less than successful ploy to neutralize the homoerotic perception of Batman and Robin. However, these nuggets of fannish lore are surrounded by postmodern analyses involving Marcuse's narcissism, one-dimensionality, polysemy, and the Frankfurt School, concepts with which many nonacademics will not be conversant.

[14] For the academic with an interest in fandom, this is an indispensable work, despite the author's unconvincing politicization of fandom. Sandvoss succeeds in his intention to "order some of the existing maps of fandom and set them in relation to a map of areas of fandom." His accomplishments more than adequately compensate for the obtrusion of his own ideology: for example, demonstrating that the same texts can be interpreted according to many different perspectives, thus not confining fandom to any particular philosophical stance; and his data showing that fans of sports teams and rock groups interact with their object of fandom much the same way as authors of media-based fandom do.

[15] For fans, we at least owe Sandvoss a debt of gratitude for striking a telling blow to the unflattering stereotypes of fandom.

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Cyberspaces of their own: Female fandoms online, by Rhiannon Bury

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[0.1] Keywords—Class; Fan fiction; Gender; Mailing list; TV

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Rhiannon Bury. *Cyberspaces of their own: Female fandoms online*. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2005. \$29.95 (242p) ISBN 978-0-82047-118-1.

[1] *Cyberspaces of Their Own* is an ambitious look at social structures in online fandom. The author has

studied two groups of female fans. The first is the David Duchovny Estrogen Brigade (DDEB), a women-only group of *X-Files* fans divided into three different mailing lists, whom Bury invited onto a mailing list specifically created for her research: the David Duchovny Estrogen

Brigade Research Project (DDEBRP). On this list, fans discussed the show, their experiences as (female) fans, and several other topics. Bury's research with this group started in 1996 and ended in 1997. The other group of fans is the Militant Ray Kowalski Separatists (MRKS), a group of *Due South* fans focused on the writing of slash fiction, that is to say, gay romance about the show's leading characters. Bury joined this list in 2002 and kept research going for 4 months.

[2] In the five chapters of her book, Bury examines these two groups of fans from different perspectives. The first chapter, exclusively about the DDEB members, examines the way these female fans interpret *The X-Files*, as well as how they see themselves as female fans in a non-female-centered, nonfannish world. The second chapter focuses on the MRKS members and their experience both with slash fiction and with real-life GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or otherwise "queer") issues. In the third and fourth chapters, the groups are taken together as Bury analyzes the ways these fans use language to position themselves as good writers and as polite fans. The final chapter discusses fandom as heterotopia, an alternative to the traditionally acknowledged spaces. This chapter takes into consideration both female spaces in history and online and the geographic heterotopia created by American fans submerging themselves into the Canadianness of *Due South*.

[3] The main problem with the book is nearly impossible to avoid when researching Internet phenomena: what happened in 1997 is already ancient history in Internet terms, and even 2002 is old news. When the author, in the final paragraph of the book, asks whether the LiveJournal blogosphere is the next destination for online fandom, the question is unintentionally amusing—in 2008, or even in 2005 when the book was published, the affirmative answer to that is so obvious to the savvy fan as to make the question trite.

[4] Keeping this in mind, however, and looking at the book primarily as a historical document, it has some very interesting interpretations. The main focus, as stated in the title, is on gender. Gender analysis of female fan spaces is nothing new, but Bury grounds her theories well in the specific situations she examines and reaches conclusions that are credible, though not necessarily groundbreaking. Her class analysis is of greater interest, as in chapters 3 and 4 she examines how her subjects position themselves in the bourgeois middle class through matters of taste. Nearly all her subjects have a college degree and work white- or pink-collar jobs. The author shows in detail how vital it is to them to appear intelligent, articulate, and polite. They put great weight on making their fellow fans feel comfortable, voicing any dissent in terms such as "I think" and "maybe" to soften the blow. E-mails are expressed in grammatical English, except in the case of typos or intentional, tongue-in-cheek dumbing down. The fans even gently correct their own

and other fans' typos. When they discuss their appreciation of the actors in their chosen shows, they express themselves in calm, moderate terms, with the exceptions again being tongue in cheek. Through these measures and others, they position themselves against other groups of fans, such as squealing teenyboppers (who show enthusiasm in an inappropriate way), fan fiction writers who care only for the "fun" and not for the quality of the final product, and fans who express themselves in an aggressive manner and engage in flame wars (online quarrels).

[5] Bury's analysis of this positioning provides fresh perspectives and is highly interesting, though it might have reached even better heights if the author had researched yet another group of fans with a different perspective. It's clear from the book that she knows where to find such derided groups, yet she seems to make no effort to engage with them. The impression received is that she is too pleased to be able to show civilization in the fandom jungle to want to risk this pleasant image by delving deeper into the wilderness. This gives the book an air of apology, perhaps based in the circumstance that the author, by her own admission, has a background in high culture and only started enjoying television a few years before starting her research. Whatever the reason, it is a pity, because if any part of female fandom can be said to have a voice, it's this section of white, well-educated thirtysomethings with good taste. The flammers and teenyboppers may fit the public image of insane fans, but a firsthand perspective is rare and would have added another dimension to the book. Even with this caveat, however, the chapters in question provide food for thought.

[6] Bury has previously presented part of her work as separate articles, which might be the reason why some elements do not seem to fit naturally into their context. Having the chapter on the DDEB's discussions of *The X-Files* followed by a chapter on the slash fiction writers of the MRKS invites her readers to make comparisons that the research doesn't support. While large parts of the DDEB chapter are devoted to the fans' view of the show, how their identity as women affects their viewing, and so forth, the MRKS chapter barely even mentions elements of *Due South* as a show. The subjects were asked why they liked slash fiction, what their relationship was to the GLBTQ movement, and similar questions, but not what about the show itself made them want to write slash. This is all the more remarkable because fans consider *Due South* to be exceptionally heavy with (intentional and unintentional) homoerotic subtext.

[7] Likewise, slash is the only form of fan art examined. Other forms of fan fiction, as well as drawings and computer graphics, are mentioned only in passing, while some creative methods of expression, such as fan videos, are not mentioned at all. The DDEB fans may or may not produce creative content—the question is raised in the questionnaire but never answered in the main text.

It's also noticeable that the questionnaire asks specifically if the fans write *slash* fiction, despite *The X-Files* being a show in which the main potential romance is heterosexual. This limitation on the spectrum of fan creativity wouldn't be a problem if slash were the primary focus of the book; because it's not, the lack of context becomes remarkable. Slash hangs in the air, unexplained by connections either to the show or to fannish forms of expression as a whole.

[8] The chapter on heterotopia provides some interesting views on what it means to create a space of one's own, with rules different from those of the main society. When the focus is on how interaction is changed by the limitations and freedoms of cyberspace, as well as how female-only or female-focused groups create their norms, the chapter serves its purpose well. The section on how *Due South* as a Canadian show has attracted American fans, and how they react to things Canadian within and outside the show, is more questionable—not in its content per se, but in its relevance. Perhaps it is, again, an example of how time has left Bury's research behind. In a time when the British Harry Potter series is one of the largest fandoms online, with several Japanese anime and manga series also well represented (and indeed, a large fandom for the Canadian TV series *Degrassi: The Next*

Generation), the fact that fans like a show from a different country seems less than remarkable. The rise of Internet downloads, legal or illegal, may also have affected the change in fandom structure—it is no longer rare for fans all over the globe to see the same show almost simultaneously and participate in fandom together. As well as noting the date of her research, I suspect that the author's stance here is affected by the fact that she herself is Canadian and is interested in outsiders' perspectives on her culture. It should also be acknowledged that the Canadian aspects of *Due South* are deliberately exotic, with its overly polite, red-clad Mountie traveling from the snowy north to urban Chicago. It is to Canada what *Crocodile Dundee* is to Australia, and thus is not entirely comparable to more mundane shows such as *Degrassi*.

[9] All in all, *Cyberspaces of Their Own* is a welcome contribution to the history of media fandom, though it tends to fall slightly between chairs—it provides more questions than answers to someone not yet familiar with various aspects of fandom, and it plays it a tad too safe for the fan scholar to find any revolutionary insights within it.

The new influencers: A marketer's guide to the new social media, by Paul Gillin

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Paul Gillin. *The new influencers: A marketer's guide to the new social media*. Sanger, CA: Quill Driver Books, 2007. \$25.00 (236p) ISBN 978-1-88495-665-2.

[1] There is unprecedented power in blogging, Paul Gillin argues in his book, *The New Influencers: A Marketer's Guide to the New Social Media*. Articulate and passionate bloggers can not only build cohesive communities with their words, but also influence policies, have an impact on companies and products, and even turn a tidy profit themselves if they're lucky. Although written with a focus on business and marketing in the world of social media, Gillin's book has fascinating implications for fan communities and media scholars as well.

[2] Today, the power of influence is in the hands of the audience, Gillin writes, especially in communities of opinion leaders termed the "new influencers." These new influencers, particularly bloggers—on whom most of the book is focused, aside from several brief chapters on

podcasting—have created a world of headaches for advertisers, marketers, and public relations practitioners. Quoting a great deal of recent research—both polls and interviews conducted by Gillin himself and industry surveys of online consumer behavior and attitudes—Gillin paints a picture of a vast consumer-information-oriented cyberlandscape where enthusiasts of everything from computers and cars to baking, traveling, gardening, pets, child care, and entertainment would rather turn to online bloggers and self-professed consumer advocates than to advertising, marketing campaigns, or any traditional forms of business communication that might hint at professional hucksterism. The time when audiences and customers could be influenced, manipulated, and swayed by expensive advertising and PR is gone, Gillin claims. The mainstream media are no longer the chief sources of information for the most committed enthusiasts and fans today. The Internet, online communities, blogs, and actively blogging new

influencers hold much more sway than the traditional media.

[3] The new influencers, in Gillin's analysis, are experts in some niche who set up their blogs to expound their opinions about their field. They become influencers when an online community sprouts up around their words, when enough of their peers recognize them as valuable opinion leaders. The new influencers can become so powerful, Gillin writes, that they can make or break innovative new technologies. Bloggers can help or seriously hurt new businesses by a simple review. The new influencers, in Gillin's reckoning, are akin to powerful restaurant or theater critics; they can either make stars with their reviews or utterly demolish a new product, an ad campaign, or an entire company. For smart marketers, the goal should no longer be the placement of big-budget advertising and PR campaigns in the traditional media, but getting on the good side of the new influencers. A positive mention and endorsement by a highly respected blogger may carry much more weight in many industries than the glitziest ads in magazines and television.

[4] Gillin's book is aimed at two main audiences. The aspiring blogger is one. The would-be new influencer is given pointers on how to set up and maintain a blog to build the biggest possible online following. The marketer attempting to sell across the new social media is the other. Gillin, overall, meets the needs of both kinds of reader fairly well.

[5] Skilled and influential bloggers not only can help others' businesses and products thrive, but also can earn quite a sizable income by simply keeping up a detailed daily blog. Entrepreneurs who have set up blogs have seen sizable increases in profits. Gillin illustrates this with the cases of a Savile Row tailor, a South African winemaker, a painter, and a toiletries maker who all saw their companies' profits shoot to six or seven figures after their blogs garnered an avid following.

[6] Clearly, these stories can light up dollar signs in the eyes of most readers. The book, in this sense, can be quite an enjoyable read for those who have considered blogging, yet might not have taken the first steps to enter cyberspace themselves. The overnight success stories are certain to make most readers go to their computers and start looking into establishing their own blog.

[7] It is good to see, however, that Gillin does qualify his success stories with several important disclaimers. For one, blockbuster overnight profits are hardly the rule in the blogosphere. But, most importantly, he also stresses over and over that blatant self-promotion and profiteering are usually frowned upon by the blog culture. In fact, it is amusing to see the book hinting that the entrepreneurial spirit of the blogosphere is something similar to a high-toned "gentlemen's business": if you're online, you're not supposed to act like you're *trying* to get rich. Most of the people he describes as turning windfall

profits from their blogs and podcasts seem to be folksy computer enthusiasts who were stunned by, almost *embarrassed* by, the staggering amounts of money they stumbled upon so shockingly quickly and without even really trying.

[8] Because there is money to be made online, Gillin also addresses the established businesses, the corporations, and the traditional marketing and advertising firms and discusses how they need to approach the world of the populist new influencers. In fact, this is where the book's implications become truly fascinating. Especially for those readers coming from the perspective of transformational culture, the conclusions to be drawn help illuminate the power of audiences and the ways the Internet provides an unprecedented opportunity to counter, challenge, and even influence large corporations, large ad agencies, marketing firms, and big media. The reason for this, actually, lies in the fact that the book is not written for the academic. Because the field of transformative works is founded on the acknowledgment of the power of the audience and its abilities to shape the content of the media, a book like *The New Influencers* carries a great deal of weight precisely because it is aimed at a lay audience. Gillin's book, in effect, moves beyond the theory building of the scholar and gives advice to the would-be blogger and the marketer. By speaking to these audiences, and especially in the advice it gives to the marketer, Gillin's work demonstrates that media professionals themselves have come to accept the powerful audience model of media-audience interaction. The audience's power to shape the content of the media is a given, as far as professional marketers are concerned. To make money, to thrive, to compete, the media professionals, the advertisers, and companies of any sort must no longer look at their customers as malleable, vulnerable targets. Audiences are not captive minds that can be manipulated, shaped, and brainwashed by the proper advertising slogan or the most potent visual images. Such keys to instant persuasion and audience manipulation, according to *The New Influencers*, do not exist. The media are at the mercy of their customers.

[9] This point is illustrated to the greatest effect in examples of companies that have run afoul of the values and expectations of bloggers. There is nothing that engenders more hostility in the blogosphere, Gillin writes, than the unalloyed shilling of products, PR spin, and the brazen manipulation of one's audience. In fact, he makes the case that companies will not succeed in pulling this off in today's world of outspoken, opinionated bloggers. What companies need to understand, Gillin advises, is that through the Internet, they are reaching a very skeptical and active audience. Marketers today are communicating with a highly media-savvy, often highly cynical generation that has learned to spot media manipulation. On the one hand, the book explains, it is true that the inhabitants of the cybercommunities of the

blogosphere are generally an attractive demographic for sellers—affluent, young, well educated. But on the other, this tech- and media-savvy group must also be handled very carefully by marketers. The blogosphere does not suffer opportunists and PR hacks. A key feature of these cybercommunities, Gillin explains, is their commitment to and uncompromising expectation of constant two-way communication, especially with people attempting to influence them. The blogosphere is an environment of constant feedback, discussion, and spirited debate. In turn, this expectation of open communication, Gillin advises, creates an expectation of transparency. Bloggers demand absolute self-effacing candor from organizations trying to persuade them or sell to them.

[10] In fact, the book's most fascinating anecdote is a detailed examination of Microsoft's move into the blogosphere. By the early 2000s, the company had a very serious PR problem. The government was prosecuting it for antitrust violations, and it had an image as a ruthless predator determined to drive all of its competitors out of business. The company appeared to be an example of Machiavellian corporate greed run amok. Microsoft was roundly despised by many customers and independent vendors, and especially by the open-source software community. Whereas corporations pursued by the government for their anticompetitive business practices have shut down communication with the public in the past (Gillin cites the cases of IBM and AT&T in the 1970s), Microsoft took a different—and ultimately very successful—tack.

[11] Microsoft set up a blog run by one of its employees, Robert Scoble. The blog not only presented the company's position in all the controversy, but also took feedback and criticism from the public at large. For months, in fact, Microsoft opened itself up to the vitriol of its critics. Moreover, Scoble, followed by scores of other employees over the years, was free to post critiques of Microsoft, its various products, and its business practices. Ultimately, the openness of the company was what allowed it to rehabilitate its public image. Scoble eventually became the most recognizable Microsoft employee outside of Bill Gates.

[12] Furthermore, Gillin illustrates his thesis on the power of the blog not only through his stories of successful small entrepreneurs and the large corporations that have learned to bend to the will of Internet culture, but through anecdotes of what can go wrong when the standards, rules, and sensibilities of the blogosphere are ignored. There are few things more dangerous to businesses, even the biggest of corporations, than the ire of an enraged, vengeful blogger.

[13] The book opens with the 2006 case of Vincent Ferrari and AOL. Having heard of AOL's high-pressure tactics in keeping customers from canceling accounts, Ferrari, an active blogger, recorded his attempt at closing

his own account. When he posted the audio file of a relentless, obnoxious sales rant attempting everything possible to keep him as a customer, AOL suffered a public humiliation of epic proportions. Ferrari's Internet server crashed several times under the load of hundreds of thousands of attempts at downloading the file. The popularity of Ferrari's blog, in fact, made him a feature story on other consumer-oriented blogs and Web pages. Eventually, to help drag AOL's reputation further through the mud, both the *New York Post* and the *New York Times* ran stories about the incident. CNBC and NBC both called Ferrari for phone interviews. He was also a guest on the *Today* show and *Nightline*. Eventually, AOL announced a complete overhaul of its business model as a result of the Ferrari incident.

[14] The blogosphere, as this case further illustrates, has become the main source of story ideas and leads for the traditional news media. Today, ever more reporters, Gillin argues, citing yet more survey data, try and catch wind of the latest currents of opinion, issues, concerns, rants, and complaints in the blogosphere for their stories. They are less likely to read press releases than to troll the blogs for the most discussed issues of the day.

[15] The implications this has for traditional theories of media behavior, agenda setting, and gatekeeping are significant. The very idea of an elite system of media agenda setters is passé. The traditional critical model of hegemonic media, controlled by a small group of insular gatekeepers who manipulate media messages for their own ends, is unrealistic. When news editors look to bloggers to decide what the day's agenda should be, how the day's headlines will read, the old-fashioned, one-way, quasi-conspiratorial view of the media that critical scholarship has always presented has become obsolete.

[16] Ultimately, even for those not interested in making their living off the Internet or managing the reputation of their own megacorporation, *The New Influencers* is a fascinating and useful book. It provides a very clear, concise, and accessible description of how the new social media are letting grassroots movements of enthusiasts and advocates exercise unprecedented control over both businesses and the traditional media. For fan communities, the implications should also be clear. If fans are knowledgeable enough about their favorite entertainment, if they can write passionately and articulately on what they care about, then they can find other like-minded enthusiasts through the blogosphere and build powerful communities. Moreover, the blogs are exerting even more influence over the mainstream media and policy makers than the Internet has ever done before. To fans of all types, especially those who want to reach the producers of their favorite programs, music, or bands or who want to influence the decisions made by cable or broadcast networks, Gillin's book will be of great interest and possibly quite inspirational.