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A Work in Progress:

Auto-Ethnography, Subversive Discourse, and Fandom

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Senior Honors Thesis

Western Washington University

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Media is important. It informs us, constructs us, and is undeniably involved, whether consciously or unconsciously, in delivering and upholding messages about dominant social ideology. Throughout the history of media studies, scholars have accused media content of a range of evils, from dumbing down the masses to mollifying and controlling them. More recent research however, has turned away from content criticism and instead identifies the importance of the audience as active makers of media meaning. Audience scholars posit that the importance of media lies not with its embedded messages, but instead with what audiences choose to do with those messages. Perhaps the most remarkable example of modern audience-media interaction is that of fans who come together to form communities, or fandoms, around a mutual love of media. Media permeates the social lives of these fans, but does not control them. Indeed, their response to the objects of their fanaticism comes in the form of creative works, interior discourse, and sophisticated criticism. Within this writing I situate the study of fandom within my own personal and academic history. I then provide a review and critique of the claims made by existing fan studies theorists. Finally I will examine examples of politically minded fan discourse and share the results of interviews with members of fandom communities. Ultimately my goals for this paper are twofold—first, to use existing fan theory to reveal how participation in fandom culture and activities provides a space where fans can actively explore and subvert hegemonic patriarchal gendered norms in popular media; and second, to establish that this counter-hegemonic politicization is not an inherent aspect of fandom’s reworking of source texts, but is instead a learned product of continued participation within fan discourse communities

STUDYING THE SELF

So why do I study fans? The short answer is that I am studying myself. My own roots with the topic lie in a piece of fiction I authored in 2001 when I was ten years old. I had just fallen down the rabbit hole of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and, disappointed that there was no sequel¹, decided to take matters into my own hands and write the hobbit Samwise onto a rowboat which would unite the Fellowship in the Undying Lands. It was a masterpiece of modern literature which I surprisingly still possess. Although I had no word for it at the time, my three-page scribbling linked me with many thousands of others asking and answering similar "what ifs" to media of all kinds through the medium of fandom. My own fan fiction writing career never took off but, armed with internet access, I began consuming the fannish works of others in large quantity. Indeed, as I am now in my twenties, fandom has been a central aspect of my identity for the majority of my life. It has ignited friendships, taken up much of my free time, informed my politics, provided a venue to learn new skills, and changed the way I consume media.

Most recently, I have begun looking for ways to incorporate this fan identity into my academic identity. For the past three years I have been considering fandom as both a fan and a student of the social sciences by thinking critically of the practices in which I engage on a daily basis. I once had a professor tell me that "all subculture research is really me-search," meaning that scholars who turn an academic gaze onto a subculture to which they belong are uniquely equipped to provide insight into that community. Therefore I retrospectively look back on the past eleven years as unintentional long-term participant observation. As Busse and Hellekson

¹ Many come into fan practices this same way, as I will discuss in my analysis of my interview results.

(2006) assert, the only way to be a fan academic is to utilize fannish knowledge and values, specifically “that alternate and competing readings can and must coexist.” and apply an insider’s understandings to academic practices (10).

Like other scholars, I have found that previous academic accounts of fandom fail to paint a complete picture of the subculture. Like other fans, I know that it is never possible for a single voice to tell the entire story and acknowledge that I can only hope to add my voice to a growing body of scholastic fan discourse. Thus, I bring the biases of both a fan and an academic to my research. This manifests in an adoration of the topic and the fan community, yet also the critical distance of the academic gaze. In this way, my research as a fan academic is born from the same processes that drive fanwriters and fan artists; the combination of critical distance and emotional proximity to the subject matter that I have as an academic viewing fandom reflects the relationship fans have when viewing the media. The only difference between myself and these authors and artists is that my toolkit for fan participation does not come in the form of creative writing skills or artistic ability; it instead is a result of my education in cultural and media studies.

STUDYING THE MEDIA

Fandom’s position as a subject fit for academia is a relatively new sub-discipline within a long history of media scholarship and before an accurate understanding of fandom can be reached this history must be understood. Media in all forms has long been the subject of intense scrutiny for its dual role as both the conveyor of information and the enforcer of specific ideology. Media criticism has existed in an official capacity ever since printing presses and the

mass populations of Europe's industrializing cities facilitated the dissemination of information more quickly and freely. Some of the early critics, like Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis who were born from the culture and civilization tradition, were elites who warned that popular media, that is to say: media not proliferated by societal elites, would lead to an overall "dumbing down" of society and an undermining of traditional values. The fears of these elites were rooted in widespread social upheaval in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – increased urbanization resulted in a crowding of urban poor, the industrial revolution brought about mass production which changed the nature of consumption, and democratic uprisings that threatened the existing social structure. Faced with these fundamental changes, early media critics spurned anything that was a product of the "mass" culture, claiming only the aristocracy had the good taste to stave off anarchy.

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, media continued to develop and so too did new concerns about the emergence of technology like radio and television that brought media directly into the homes of consumers. This home invasion prompted the rise of the Frankfurt School and fears of a hypodermic model in which media serves the needs of the powerful and injects ideology into a mass population powerless to resist (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944). Still speaking with the privileged voices of social elitism, Frankfurt theorists, like Adorno and Horkheimer, argued that the media of popular culture are infected with a "sameness" which gives consumers an illusion of choice while in reality functioning as a control mechanism wherein "something is provided for all so that none may escape" (1944: 97). They argued that the so-called "art" or media that makes up modern popular culture is a calculated product of a culture industry which replaces innovation or imagination with a "prearranged

harmony [that] is a mockery of what had to be striven after in the great bourgeois works of art.” (99).

Early branches of media scholarship were most concerned with what they perceived as a failure of content. The Frankfurt School paints a picture of pop culture as heterogeneous low-brow entertainment meant to mollify the masses under a capitalist dominant ideology. This model of media presumes that the audience has no role in interpreting the media they consume and are merely passive recipients.

The alarmist view of the Frankfurt School fell under criticism as new schools of thought emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. Media theorists like Stuart Hall (1973), one of the founders of the Birmingham School, began to consider media in a more social context. Hall himself was a Jamaican immigrant and his contemporaries ushered in a diversification of the field once dominated by elites. This new breed of media scholar turned the focus of the discipline towards power, inequality, and audience reception. Rather than criticizing the content of media, Hall identified media as an ongoing process and a site of hegemonic struggle wherein the process of media production can only be completed by audience interpretation (Hall 1973). In this view, while the media may be encoded with certain ideology, it is up to specific audience members to then decode and understand the message based upon the individual's social positioning. It is from this tradition that modern audience studies, and thus fan studies, was born.

STUDYING THE FANS

Fans exist in many forms and have a long and varied history.² The word itself is a derivative of the word fanatic – literally meaning “a person with an obsessive interest in and enthusiasm for something” (Oxford English Dictionary). As participants in cultures based on consumption, few are unfamiliar with the word. Indeed the argument can be made that everyone is at least a casual fan of something— be it a sports team, a product, a musician, an author, a television show, or a movie. The term *fandom*, however, transcends casual discourse and is used to describe community based subcultures which organize themselves around the subjects of their fanaticism. Though the word was originally applied to sports and theater and can still be associated with these topics today, the specific branch of fandom I focus on in this writing is best known as media fandom. Media fandoms are amorphous yet distinct communities built around popular (though on occasion laughably unpopular) films, books, and television. Furthermore uses of the word “Fandom” itself can refer to one of two things: a collective group of people who participate in fan activities *or* a particular piece of media around which a fan community forms (e.g. “I am in the X-files fandom”).

Media fan groups are historically female, largely white and middle class, though the increasing globalization and accessibility of fandom through internet use has widened the demographic variety (Jenkins 1992). On the surface, media fans may appear a mindless hoard— a Frankfurt School nightmare— who are slaves to the media to which they pledge their allegiance. As with most surface level observations, further inquiry reveals that this is not the case. Rather, fans are an audience scholar’s dream, taking the traditionally passive role of *viewer*

² For more detailed information regarding the history of fandom see Jenkins (1992) and Coppa (2006)

and turning it into an active and productive role. Henry Jenkins, a predominant researcher of media fandom characterizes fandom with five distinct dimensions: “a particular mode of reception [characterized by emotional proximity and critical distance]; its role in encouraging viewer activism, its function as an interpretive community, its particular traditions of cultural production; and its status as an alternate social community” (Jenkins 1992, 2). Studies of media fandom reveal complex social organization built upon community, sophisticated critical analysis, and artistic pursuits in the form of visual arts (fan art), works of written fiction (fanfic), costume creation (cosplay), and video remixing (vidding).

Creative fanworks are born from a series of “what-if” moments. What if that side character was the main protagonist? What if the protagonist was a different sex? What if that scene had not cut away before we saw the end of that conversation? What if this story took place in eighteenth century Europe? What if it took place during a zombie apocalypse? Guided by questions like these, “fan stories negotiate among multiple interpretations of characters, dynamics, and events, often filling in scenes or thoughts that are absent in the source text” (Busse and Lothian 2008: 2). Fans repossess the objects of their fanaticism, dancing dangerously around copyright laws and bypassing restrictions placed on the source material by commercial incentive and advertising sway. The genres of their creative works range from asinine musings (“what if character A and character B went curtain shopping!”) to explicit erotica and everything in between. It is important to remember that fans ultimately write for other fans “who are intimately familiar with the source text and, quite often, the surrounding fandom and the discussions and stories it produces” (Busse and Lothian 2008: 2).³ Thus, understanding of typical

³ Creative fanworks, particularly fan fiction, can act as something akin to a cultural currency within fandom communities. Fan writers will often gift stories to friends or ask readers for prompt suggestions. Around holidays secret Santa style fiction exchanges are commonplace.

fannish discourse, including writing conventions and prominent tropes utilized in fanworks, serves as a marker for community membership.

Much of the theoretical framework for studying fandom comes out of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Theorists like John Fiske (1992), Camille Bacon-Smith (1992), Henry Jenkins (1992), and numerous others all released works attempting to situate and explain fandom within the existing body of media scholarship. Of the plethora of proposed theoretical models which emerged at this time, none were as prolific as Henry Jenkins' image of the textual poacher presented in his 1992 ethnographic book *Textual Poacher: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. In a direct rejection of ongoing stereotypes and Frankfurt School fears of fans who are either social dupes or mindless consumers, Jenkins' text perceives fans as "active producers and manipulators of meaning" (Jenkins 1992: 23). Jenkins creates the textual poacher by drawing upon French social critic Michel de Certeau's 1984 book *The Practice of Everyday Life* and his conceptualization of the reader. Certeau identifies a reader as someone who "wanders through an imposed system [the text]" yet "takes neither the position of the author nor an author's position" (1984: 169). Instead, Certeau's reader detaches text elements from their sources and recombines them into something previously unknown – a nomadic poacher who hunts for what they need without possessing the abilities (that of a writer) to produce meaning on their own. Certeau's work builds upon changing media theory; his reader is not a slave to embedded ideology and instead views texts actively. However this reader can only claim a pseudo-activity because it lacks the creative capacity of the writer.

Jenkins' remodeling of Certeau's work reunites the activities of reading and writing by suggesting that fan practices "blur the distinction" between the two roles (1992: 155). Media fans then, according to Jenkins, are "readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a

fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture" (Jenkins 1992, 23). The creative processes central to fandom participation (fan fiction, fan art, critiques, and videos), which fans use as the basis for their communities, push fans beyond Certeau's interpretive reader and into "active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings" (Jenkins 1992, 24). Both Certeau and Jenkins acknowledge the power of the media industry to perpetuate a specific dominant ideology within media texts. Additionally, they both recognize the potentiality of counter-hegemonic readings of these dominant texts. However, unlike Certeau's reader whose agency is still limited by the media's power "over his imagination," Jenkins' textual poacher turns the act of reading into an act of politically discursive writing (Certeau 1984: 176; Jenkins 1992: 23-25).

The textual poacher identity has since become a definitive marker that academics studying fandom use to explain why fans create. Even now, more than twenty years after the metaphor was first conceptualized, the image of the transgressive hero— a modern day Robin Hood who steals the best aspects of media from rich corporations and redistributes them for their own purposes— continues to be appealing to many fans. Indeed, Jenkins and various other subculture theorists of the time were quick to identify fandom as a subversive outlet for marginalized voices. Jenkins notes that, "like other popular readers, fans lack direct access to the means of commercial cultural production" enjoyed by official content creators (1992: 26). Fans cannot control the ideological messages encoded into the media they consume and have only limited (if any) voice with which to influence the entertainment industry itself. Because of this perceived subservient creator-consumer position, the remix-nature of fan activity is cast by these early fan theorists as inherently subversive or socially deviant. Fan creators skirt both the legal

lines of copyright and the social lines of acceptable subject matter. Some scholars of fan practice, like John Fiske, maintain that the alienation fans feel from the dominant structures is what ultimately necessitates fandom practice. Fiske argues that “the less a fan suffers from these structures of domination and subordination, the more likely he or she is to have developed a habitus⁴ that accords with that developed by the official culture” (1992: 36). By this definition, fans who do suffer from the hegemonic structures of domination and subordination are then forced to form communities of practice which do not align with the values of the dominant culture.

GENDER AND FANDOM

Concerned as they are with marginalized voices, fan scholars have often grounded their arguments in feminist theory. This approach is logical as ethnographies of fandom (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992) indicate women make up roughly ninety percent of media fandom.⁵ The relationship between women and media is particularly interesting due to the media’s powerful role in reinforcing stereotypical gender roles. Feminist critique of popular western media has accused the institution of supporting heteronormative patriarchal hegemony. Hegemony here refers to the process through which ideas, values, and opinions of a dominant group become accepted as the cultural norm thus characterizing the status quo as natural and reinforcing the supremacy of the dominant group. Feminist scholars have identified the media as

⁴ This refers to Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological concept regarding values and lifestyles of particular social groups that are acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life

⁵ This is not to say that men are not fans of the same shows books and movies. However, as we saw from Fiske, men “suffer less from structures of domination and subordination” that are present within media and are therefore less driven to produce creative works based on it.

a site of patriarchal hegemonic control wherein “gender role stereotyping in television and film normalize the dominant cultural values and customs that legitimate male domination of women” (Watkins and Emerson 2000, 152). Because women are so often raised and socialized in cultures saturated with patriarchal media, they grow up internalizing a marginalized status. Indeed as theorist Laura Mulvey suggested in 1975, the camera itself “presumes a male viewer” in the way it frames its subject (Watkins and Emerson 2000, 156). Women in media are the focus of tropes like the ever-popular panning body shot portraying them not as autonomous actors but instead as something only to be viewed. This “male gaze” constructs the very act of watching a movie or show as a male activity, and yet, in direct contradiction to this, women in the thousands participate in media fandom, making them some of the most dedicated and outspoken consumers of media.

A quick glimpse of the fandoms⁶ section of the predominant online fan writing archive, Archive of our Own (Ao3), reveals that the fandom with the highest collection of works is the Marvel Comics Universe with over 65,000 individual written fanworks as of April, 2014 (Ao3, 2014). This exposes an interesting disconnect between fan demographics and media demographics: though active fandom participants are overwhelmingly female, the media genres they choose to dedicate themselves to are predominantly masculine and action-oriented. Although initially these hyper-masculinized narratives do not seem naturally open to female appropriation, as seen from Jenkins and Fiske perhaps it is this very dissonance that creates counter-hegemonic appeal. According to Jenkins, torn between media that entertains them yet fails to adequately represent them, fandom women “engage freely in speculation that pushes

⁶ Remember that the word “Fandom” itself can refer to one of two things: a collective group of people who participate in fan activities *or* a particular piece of media around which a fan community forms.

aside the author's voice in favor of their own," thereby "colonizing these stories through their active interest in them" using fan practice to transform them into women's narratives (Jenkins 1992, 114-115). Indeed, much of the appeal of fandom revolves around this relationship between entertained consumer and critical distance. By "recognizing the text as imperfectly designed to facilitate their pleasures and requiring active rewriting to accommodate their interest" a fan is forced to strike a balance between personal experience and fictional narrative (Jenkins 1992, 115). This balance gives way to a "productive middle ground" wherein fans examine personal and hegemonic ideology leading to new insights about both the text and a fan's own lived experience (Jenkins 1992, 115).

This combination of feminist theory with the metaphor of the textual poacher presents a functionalist picture of fandom. The 1990s writings of fan theorists cast fan practice as an inherently political action. Under this model, fan creators create to fulfill a specific social function: in this case to subvert the patriarchal nature of the media industry. On one hand, it is easy to see truths in the claim of these fan theorists – fandom does concern itself largely with issues of gender. Widely read fan fiction genres include stories which realign narratives to focus more heavily on side characters (often female), alter the biological sex of a characters (genderswap⁷), or, perhaps most popular, alter the sexuality of characters (slash). Jenkins saw these writing practices as examples of women reclaiming "female experiences from the margins of male centered texts" and tearing down the limitations they see in media portrayal of traditional masculine or feminine roles (Jenkins 1992, 167). On the other hand, however, functionalist

⁷ I use this term here for lack of a better one. Though typically referring to an alteration in physical sex, the concept of genderswapping has evolved over the years with the increased voice transgendered and genderqueer peoples in fandom and perhaps fails to adequately represent all facets of gender and sexuality shifts in fan productions.

claims are dangerously essentialist and ignore the individuality and range of motivations for each fan.

Much of this essentialist functionalism can be attributed to the time period in which early fan theorists were writing. It is important to remember that Jenkins and Fiske were writing alongside a generation of scholars, like Hall of the Birmingham School, who were actively trying to alter the prevailing history of media scholarship by “theorizing subcultures, lowbrow reading practices, and the role of readers and audiences as active makers of meaning” instead of passive consumers (Parrish 2013: 2.4). In some ways, the story told by Jenkins’ textual poacher is reminiscent of that told less than a decade earlier by Janice Radway in her ethnographic study of romance novels *Reading the Romance*. In her study Radway investigates a community of women romance fans and comes to the conclusion that their fairly lowbrow reading materials “permit American women to adopt some of the changing attitudes about gender roles” and integrate them into their own married lives providing an “imaginary solution” to the real problem of patriarchy (1983: 76). As audience studies continued to develop, Radway’s insistence that romance readers were simply embryonic feminists who had potential to grow through guided political readings of their favored texts, fell under criticism by those like Ien Ang who saw Radway’s explanation as too functionalist. Ang noted that, since Radway’s entire “explanatory movement is directed towards the *ideological function* of pleasure,” recreational pleasure as such is removed from the equation and varied readings are disallowed (1988: 186).

Jenkins’ textual poacher shares a history with Radway’s embryonic feminist and thus shares elements of Ang’s criticism. By asserting that the women of fandom ultimately use their fan practice as a venue for deeper socio-political commentary, Jenkins turns away from the variety of fan experience and the recreational pleasure that drives many fans. Indeed, any attempt

at generalizing fan practice is subject to the social conditioning of the author or scholar who tries. Ongoing scholarship and scrutiny of such longstanding theory remind us “that textual poaching as a metaphor for fans arose at a particular critical moment and served a very specific set of needs in cultural and audience studies” and does not encompass the full reality of current fan practice (Parrish 2013: 2.5). Jenkins himself acknowledges that the metaphor was “tremendously convenient because it had resonance within the academy, particularly within a leftist academy that wants to identify things as guerilla semiotics, underground, resistant, and so forth” (1996, 266). Indeed, Fandom’s propensity for reworking and remaking popular texts to suit their own needs reflect in and of themselves a pluralistic view of the world rather than a functionalist one.

Multiple readings within fandom are celebrated and venerated, so to reduce their practice to one end goal is to reject the nature of the practice itself. The personal pleasure fans derive from creating, altering, and revisiting their favored pieces of media cannot be reduced to ideological function. Creative fanworks give fans an opportunity to enjoy artistic pursuits, elongate their relationship with their favorite media, and form friendships with other fans. Still, I do not deny the political capabilities of fandom. My own experience with the subculture has allowed me to view these subversive practices first hand. Fandom’s adherence to the power of multiple readings cultivates a postmodern worldview allowing participants to remain skeptical of encoded media ideologies. In this sense, fandom does hold power to explore and subvert patriarchal gendered norms and fans do consistently utilize this power by reworking gender in ways outside the cultural norm. Contrary to the image of the textual poacher however, I argue that this reworking of gender is not an inherently rebellious or political action. Rather, I contend that the act of fandom participation and the very structure of fandom itself promote interior

discourse which has the capacity to foster this counter-hegemonic politicization in fans. Authors and artists' initial forays into fandom are not the result of a need for sophisticated social, gendered, or political discourse. Instead, their concern with these topics is a learned product of continued participation and integration within a community of fans.⁸

FANNISH DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

Remember that at its core fandom is a social grouping. One person alone can be a fan, but fandom refers to a community “shaped through input from other fans and motivated, at least partially, by a desire for further interaction with a larger social and cultural community” (Jenkins 1992: 76). Because of this, discourse is central to the structure of fandom and fandom itself can be considered a discourse community. This significance has not escaped the notice of the early fan theorists. Fiske identifies “fan talk” as the “generation and circulation of certain meanings of the objects of fandom within a local community” (1992: 38). Talk between fans is what gives the community structure, history, and tradition. Fans watch their favorite shows together, collaborate on creative projects, give each other constructive feedback, and circulate criticism. Furthermore, this talk is crucial in the development of politically minded fan participants as “over time, the organization of experience in structures that can be communicated and shared develops into a worldview” (Bacon-Smith 1992: 292). The nature of this fannish discourse is constantly evolving and with it, the reality of fan practice. This can be illustrated by revisiting Fiske’s definition of fan talk and his emphasis on local communities. Indeed, Fiske concedes that fan

⁸ It is important to note that, while it is the focus of this paper, this political use of fandom is not limited to women and gendered minorities. Increasingly race and social class have become topics of fannish discourse to great effect.

talk is “limited by restricted communication” acknowledging that much of fandom’s early life was challenged by geographic dispersion (1992: 38).

A focus on geographic dispersion is another marker which dates the writings of early fan theorists and indicates a need to reevaluate fandom’s existing theoretical base. Jenkins’ nomadic textual poacher was conceptualized before technologies like the internet transformed the very structure of fandom itself. Indeed, pre-internet fandom and post-internet fandom were structured in very different ways. Participation in pre-internet fandom was conducted exclusively in physical spaces through large conventions and smaller local groups. The most mobile and abstract form of participation in pre-internet fandom was conducted through fan-produced magazines (“zines”) which circulated the creative outpouring of poetry, fiction, art, and songs from fan to fan. Fanzines were a very insular form of fan sharing. Their production was often costly to editors; contributors typically published under pseudonyms; and, despite the inclusion of editorial fan letters and critical essays within the published works, time between issues forced fan discourse into halting and disjointed streams. Moreover, lacking official channels of distribution, zine circulation relied on convention sales, word of mouth, or independent bootlegging within specific social groups and was often plagued by “unequal distribution, poor availability, and high prices of photocopies” (Bacon-Smith 1992: 210).

The forms of fan participation available prior to the widespread adoption of the internet in the mid-1990s required access to a variety of resources – be it the ability to travel to conventions, seek out and meet with like-minded fans in the same area, or subscribe to various mailing lists and zines. Because of this, the fan participants detailed in Bacon-Smith’s and Jenkins’ ethnographies were primarily older, educated individuals who had the time and the means to partake in such activities. Their participation in avenues of fandom was a privileged

position and, as Bacon-Smith notes, for many less privileged fans, participation meant that fans could maybe go to one or two conventions, “perhaps meet a few people over the years, join a club to receive a newsletter and in general function at a remove from intense social connectedness” afforded to better resourced fans (1992, 24). As such, the pre-internet fandom subculture had a strong emphasis on the “sub.” Fan activities were relegated to specific domains and often did not fully overlap with the day-to-day identities or politics of the participants.

The rise of the internet opened new avenues of fan participation and revolutionized fannish discourse in ways early fan theorists could never have anticipated. Conventions and localized clubs continued to operate but the distribution of creative fanworks was quickly digitalized. Fandom no longer has to rely on travel or postal services to perpetuate community when that community can be easily accessed within the home. Fans’ creative works now circulate via various online archives and blogging platforms such as Livejournal, Deviantart, Fanfiction.net, and Tumblr. Unlike with zines, there is no wait time between publication, distribution, and peer response to fanworks via these online platforms. New technology has, in effect, created a 24-hour responsive news cycle of fandom. These sites give the once nomadic fans a metaphorical home, a unified space where they can communicate with each other and participate in multiple fandoms at once. Where zines were devoted to specific topics, fanwork publication on personal blogs does not share that limitation and opens the floor for wider fan discourse. As members of fandom utilize the internet for both fan and non-fan activities, the lines that once separated the domains are blurred. Thus “individual journals become a mix of fannish and other topics about that fandom, thus including not only fiction, fan art, and commentary on the source text, abut also real-life (RL) rants on political discussion, and nonfannish musings”

(Busse and Hellekson 2006: loc 190-191). The new tools of fan participation created by the internet effectively unite the personal, the fannish, and the political.⁹

In addition to the aforementioned blogging platforms, used by fans but not created by them, the internet also gave fans the tools to produce their own community spaces online. Within fandom itself, tech-savvy fans have teamed up with fan historians, fan scholars, and fan lawyers to create official intra-fandom community resources like the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), “a nonprofit organization run by and for fans to provide access to and preserve the history of fanworks and fan cultures” (OTW, 2014). OTW hosts a myriad of projects within fandom. Most popularly, they are responsible for creating and running Archive of Our Own, the newest and most fan-friendly creative fanworks archive. Other projects of theirs include Fanlore, a wiki-style record of fan history; Legal Advocacy, a collection of resources to protect fans from commercial exploitation and legal challenge; and Transformative Works and Cultures, a peer reviewed academic journal for fan scholarship. (OTW, “Our Projects” 2014). These projects facilitate fan engagement and distinguish fandom as an active self-sufficient and self-governing community.

Perhaps most importantly, the internet enables younger media fans, who largely lacked the autonomy to participate in or even be aware of pre-internet fandom, to discover and join the fannish conversation. Unlike the older pre-internet fans who are able to draw out elements of media based on their own existing politics and social understandings, these younger digital fans

⁹ As the popular second-wave feminist saying goes: “the personal *is* political.” When I say post-internet fandom unites the personal, political, and fannish I do not mean to say these things did not interact before. Rather, I mean to say that the internet provides a space for fans to directly address these topics alongside more typically fannish musings. Participants of pre-internet fandom certainly had political opinions which may have manifested in their writing; however, because pre-internet fandom was more relegated to specific domains, explicitly non-fannish discussion of these topics was less prominent within the earlier groups.

grow up embedded in fandom and thus have their own world views shaped by fan practice over time. When this inflow youth is combined with the increased personal and political nature of fan blogs, the very core of fandom and fan discourse is fundamentally and irrevocably changed. While motivations for joining and participating in fandom still vary from fan to fan, the politics of fandom are now readily available, easy to access, and increasingly unavoidable. The ultimate result of these changes is an extension of Fiske's (1992) "fan talk" to include a broader range of interior fan discourse and heightened fan reflexivity. Fan fiction and fan art are now regularly supplemented by online conversation and informal essays in the form of blog posts discussing the political implications of media and fandom activities.¹⁰ In turn, these informal fannish musings reflect back into the art and fiction as fans begin to use these methods to make sense of the "real world" politics. Interestingly, posts by fans often reflect on the same issues addressed by early fan theorists, specifically topics such as dominant ideology and marginalized or gendered representation.

GENDER DISCOURSE WITHIN MODERN FANDOM

In light of the post-internet changes to the structure of fan discourse I would now like to reexamine the question of gender in fan productions. As we have seen, owing to the pervasiveness of the internet, members of fandom are now joined together more than ever. Lowered barriers to fandom access have created a more diverse fandom landscape where voices of the primarily white, educated, women identified by Jenkins are now supplemented by an increased visibility of racial and sexual/gendered minorities. The internet provides access to

¹⁰ This work of mine can be considered an extension of this trend.

resources (news, scholarly articles, lectures) that fans can use to educate themselves and others about favorite issues like feminism, the male gaze, gender representation, and minority inclusion. Additionally, the internet provides spaces, like blogs or OTW (Organization for Transformative Works) projects, where fans can then discuss politically charged subjects. Interior fan discourse spreads awareness within fandom and more and more fandom is serving as a gateway to expose youth to issues and ideas that they may not have encountered otherwise.

Over time, this awareness fosters more sophisticated media literacy. Once conscious of political issues, fans are quicker to identify problematic elements of the shows, books, and films that they love. It is unsurprising then that fans endeavor to make sense of these subjects in a uniquely fannish way. Rather than wading through dense articles filled with academic jargon, fans learn to frame topics using their existing fandom toolkits: media based fiction, art and criticism. Indeed more recent surveys of online fan communities have shown how “fanfic writers are often very familiar with current gender and queer theories and quite consciously use this theoretical framework when creating their fiction” (Busse and Hellekson 2006: loc 316-317). Fans who may have originally approached fanworks dealing with gender and sexuality, like genderswap and slash,¹¹ for pleasure and pure entertainment are increasingly becoming mindful of the ways in which these genres exist within a wider social context. The increased conversation is gradually changing the way fandom itself views these genres.

The genderswap fan fiction trope, for instance, appears in one of two forms: a narrative where the character temporarily changes sex or a narrative where the character has always been a different sex. Temporary-change fan fiction typically asks the question “What if character A was

¹¹ Remember, these genres were identified by Jenkins as containing elements which are inherently counter-hegemonic. (See page 11 of this work).

female for the day?” – the plot then typically follows a man becoming temporarily female sexed often as prelude to erotic scenes. While these fictions can address how “physical alteration brings [the male character] to consciousness of the experiences of women in a sexist society,” the narratives generally conclude when the character reverts back to their previous form with very little consequences (Busse and Lothian 2008, 4). Always-different fan fiction, on the other hand, asks what the fictional world would look like if a main character had always been alternatively-bodied. Imagining what Star Trek would be like if Captain Kirk had been a Jamie instead of a James, for instance, can highlight instances of sexism in the source material or represent a pushback against industry professionals who claim that female characters cannot figurehead a popular series.¹² While this trope is pervasive, recent fan conversations have highlighted how such fictions (particularly the temporary-change variety) may have an unintended result of perpetuating heteronormative patriarchy or cissexism. Continued scrutiny of these stories widen the fan conversation and open fandom space for an extension of this genre to better accommodate “queer and trans subcultural and activist discourses” lacking historical representation in both popular media and fandom (Busse and Lothian 2008, 16).

Besides fiction, fan conversations about gender and sexuality appear in places like fan art, video editing, and a newer style of short-form participation known as “headcanon.” A headcanon “is a fan's personal, idiosyncratic interpretation of canon, such as the backstory of a character, or the nature of relationships between characters. Headcanon may represent a teasing out of subtext present in the canon¹³, or it may directly contradict canon” (Fanlore “Headcanon”

¹² Interestingly genderswapping has been successfully accomplished by industry professionals. In 2004 a reboot of the 1978 show *Battlestar Galactica* changed the gender of the character Starbuck, a hotshot pilot, from man to woman. The announcement was met with criticism from (predominantly male) fans of the old show but eventually led to critical acclaim.

¹³ Canon here refers to what *actually* happened in the source material.

2014). Though the term has been around since 2007, the rise of the micro-blogging platform Tumblr has facilitated the wide circulation of short text-posts detailing a specific user's headcanon. Like long-form fan fiction, these headcanon posts can be silly side-musings ("Character A refuses to get out of bed on Tuesdays") but can also be the products and catalysts of in-depth gendered discourse ("This is how Character B, a non-binary gendered person, makes a place for themselves in this universe"¹⁴). As headcanons are circulated around fandom, fans can choose to adopt them into their own view of the source material – this adoption is often signified with the phrase "headcanon accepted" (Fanlore "Headcanon" 2014). The spread and embracing of headcanons are an important example of how even the smallest contributions to fan discourse can alter fandom's relationships with the source text.

The existing metaphor of a heroic feminist outlaw who poaches the best elements of imperfect texts and repurposes them is flawed. Looking at the evolution of fan practices, like genderswap expansion to include trans* issues or the spread of queer headcanon, a new trend makes itself known. Fans, who use such conventions are not *taking* from the text at all. Rather, they perceive gaps within it and are prying the text apart to demand that it make room for their own identities, desires, and politics. Fan practice "makes gaps in a text that the [dominant] cultural code attempts to render continuous" (Willis 2006: 2307-2308). The nature of these gaps and the extent to which the fan generated content is politically subversive vary based on the social positioning of each individual fan. How individuals respond to a text depends on "the codes [they use] to orient a text, and, crucially, whether these are prescribed in advance by dominant ideology" (Willis 2006: 2258-2259). A casual or new fan, never exposed to the fandom

¹⁴ Political headcanons often deal with queer representation in media. For instance, there are entire Tumblr blogs dedicated to compiling queer Harry Potter headcanons.

community and the critical reading contained therein, would therefore be more subject to encoded dominant ideology and may never see the gaps at all let alone the need to fill them. A long-time fandom participant however, whose social positioning has been altered by fandom regularly exposing them to a plurality of critical readings, may learn to become hyperaware of these fissures and the need to fill them with subversive material.

METHODOLOGY

Because fandom is so reliant on the power of multiple readings, and to avoid turning my own personal biases into yet another essentialist reading of fandom, I conducted a series of interviews with current fan participants (n=11) in hopes of better understanding the plurality of fan experience. More specifically I wanted to ascertain these fans' motivations for participation. Does my critique of the textual poacher metaphor and its claims about the gender politics of fandom hold true for others? Would the discourse trends I identified in light of technological advancement – the younger adoption of fan practice, an increase in interior educative conversation, and the ultimate culmination of fan politicization as a learned practice – come across in the experience of other fans? What new trends would make themselves known?

Eleven members of fandom communities were interviewed for this study. These participants were recruited through several means. Requests were sent out detailing the project and asking for participation on various social media sites where fandom has active communities including Reddit and Tumblr. Additionally, I contacted a number of fan authors directly via contact information provided in their author profiles on the fan-run fiction archive, Archive of Our Own (AO3). Generally my request for participation was received favorably; true to the

communal spirit of fandom, some of those who agreed to be interviewed also put me in contact with other fandom friends of theirs who may be interested. Demographically, the participants were relatively homogeneous. They ranged in age from 18-28 with a mean of 23.6. Only two participants were non-white, identifying as mixed-Asian descent. A significant majority identified as female (91%) with the one outlier identifying, in his own words, as a “Transmasculine/genderqueer male.” Sexual orientation showed the largest variety of responses. Two (18%) identified as heterosexual while, the majority participants identified as sexual minorities including homosexual (9%) , bisexual (36%), pansexual (18%), asexual (9%).

The majority of the interviews were conducted over web-based instant-messaging clients, with one exception of a video-chat due to disability needs of the participant. Prior to the interviews, all participants provided written consent. Additionally all participants were informed that their responses would be anonymous and all were given opportunity to design their own pseudonyms and preferred gender-pronouns. Each interview utilized a core set of fourteen main interview questions¹⁵, though follow-up questions were delivered based on the participant’s initial response. The length of the interviews varied from a shortest time of forty-five minutes to a longest of two hours.

RESULTS¹⁶

First, the participants were asked to define what fandom was to them. Every participant emphasized both community and media in their definitions. Some, like Ally, defined fandom

¹⁵ See Appendix I.

¹⁶ In my analysis of the results I try to privilege the voices of the interviewees over my own. As a result of this, there will be a large quantity of quotes. However, perhaps because so many of the participants are writers, I found

simply as a “group of people who share enthusiasm for a particular book, movie, TV show, game, or other type of media.” Others, like Jemma and Erin, noted that fandom includes “the fan art/fan fiction/fan writings produced” (Jemma) or “refers to the people who participate in the creation of metatextual supplementary media for a source media” (Erin). Like Jenkins and Fiske before him, one participant, Alex, even acknowledged the necessity for both admiration and critical distance from the source material stating that fandom happens when a “piece of media inspires or enrages fans to keep engaging with it” beyond the original material. The variety within these definitions indicates differing levels of fandom engagement. Though I did not ask participants to supply their education history to me, it was clear from their definitions that some (like Erin, who mentioned metatextual supplementary media) had previously considered fandom from an academic perspective.

As the interviews progressed, a number of trends emerged. The first of these was the age at which the participants began their fandom involvement; second, was an emphasis on constructive interior discourse; third, was a general acknowledgment of fandom as a powerful educative tool; and last, was the development of more sophisticated critical media literacy.

The subjects began their fandom involvement young, ranging from seven to fourteen years old, with an average starting age of just over ten. Their initial fan activities were either conducted alone or with a localized group of friends. Jemma and Erin note that their initial forays into fandom were a result of the desire to be part of the story. Jemma described her first fan fiction as a “typical 'insert-self-and-friends-into-story.'” Erin recalled wanting “to write

that their answers were eloquent and intelligent, but also extremely long. As a result I am left with many insightful responses that simply cannot fit into the body of this paper. I have made some of these longer quotes available to read in Appendix II.

[herself] into the story because [she] liked it that much.” Others initially began fan practices because they were ultimately unsatisfied with the unanswered questions at the ending of a particular piece of media and, “wanted to know more about the characters, what happened to them after the end, the characters that weren't in it, why not, etc.” (Beth). After their initial interest was sparked, the participants described discovering the community aspect of fandom online. Take this story from Kaylee as an example,

At first it was just realizing that there were AOL chatrooms exclusively devoted to discussion of X-Files episodes. Then I realized people were writing stories about my favorite characters as well, which was awesome. I think I posted my first fic at age 13 -- and I haven't changed my pseudonym since so all the embarrassing teenage stuff is still out there somewhere and easily linkable to me. But really, it was finding people who were just as excited about the show as I was, who were willing to spend hours discussing it. That was super exciting (Kaylee).

Kaylee's story speaks to the value of the internet in fandom life. She emphasizes first, the role the internet played in her discovery and subsequent publishing of fan fiction, and second, how it enabled valuable communication with other fans with similar interests. She notes that she authored her first fan fiction at the age of thirteen. Now twenty-eight, Kaylee has been an active fan online for fifteen years. Indeed, all of my interviewees actively participate in fandom online.

Participants regarded communication between fans as a very important tool both in informing their creative directions and how they perceive source media. When asked how they choose what to write or draw, many participants responded that their inspiration came from dialogue with other fans, both directly and indirectly. Erin noted that almost everything she writes comes directly from “some form of ‘what if someone wrote _____’ conversation” which could be both silly plots and more serious ones, like those asking “what if someone wrote fic

where the topic of homosexuality was dealt with accurately?" Amelia mentioned a more indirect situation wherein she found other fans' reaction to particular episode of her favorite show problematic:

There was a recent episode of Clone Wars which delved into the unhealthy romantic relationship between two characters (Anakin and Padme) in which he was shown to be jealous and controlling. A few fans reacted by siding with him and saying that it was her fault for having a friendship with another man/wearing a revealing dress, which of course I disagreed with. (Amelia)

As a result, she was inspired to write her own response (to the show and the fans) in the form of fan fiction. Like Amelia, Kaylee was also inspired to write fan fiction based indirectly on fannish discourse. Kaylee saw a piece of fan art depicting a female version of Captain Kirk from Star Trek and was inspired to write fan fiction exploring "how things would've been different if Kirk *didn't* have his insane amount of male privilege smoothing his path everywhere.¹⁷" This highlights the ways fans interact with artifacts made by other fans and use them as jumping-off points for their own creative involvement. Moreover, the responses reveal how participation in fandom (in these cases: conversing with other fans, reading episode reactions, and viewing fan art) inspires fans to use their creative works to comment on social issues.

The participants were all asked to speak about the genderswap trope specifically as an example of gender discourse within fandom. All interviewees were aware of the genre, some had written genderswap fan fiction before, and most had read fiction utilizing the trope. Their responses supported trends I observed within my own analysis of the genre, namely, a growing skepticism of the temporary-change subset of genderswap.¹⁸ Kaylee and Beth both professed to

¹⁷ Emphasis is Kaylee's own.

¹⁸ See paragraph on genderswap: page 20.

enjoy reading genderswap fan fiction; however, they made it clear that they preferred the variant where the swapped character was always differently bodied or acknowledges the reality of such a switch. Kaylee stated that she does not like genderswap “in the ‘this potion made me switch bodies!’ sort of way” and prefers stories “where they've always been born that way. Or born trans*.” Beth had a similar disappointed response to genderswap where the character switches biological sex and then switches back with little consequence. Such fiction leaves her wondering “what if the experience isn't so traumatic and crazy for [the character]? What if they actually want to stay the opposite gender?” (Beth). Such responses indicate fans’ willingness or desire to incorporate the realities of trans or other nonconforming sexual/gendered individuals into the existing genre. Alex, a transmasculine individual himself, responded to this trend,

I’ve seen significant trans headcanons in all of my current fandoms, whereas I can't imagine something like that happening in any of my fandoms from ~5-8 years ago... I think it has to do with growing trans visibility in the media and in fandom spaces - on tumblr, in particular, I know a ton of popular bloggers who are either out as trans or vocally supportive of trans people. The trans movement has picked up a lot of steam in recent years, and it seems to have swept fandom along with it, while trans fans have been coming of age and educating/normalizing trans issues to the wider fandom.

Alex’s response illustrates how fandom’s acceptance of gendered minorities is an ongoing process. He acknowledges that such topics were virtually absent in his early fandom experience but have since been normalized through outspoken individuals and fannish education.

When asked if they believe fan fiction and fan participation are valuable educational tools the interviewees responded enthusiastically and eloquently.¹⁹ Their answers stressed how fiction

¹⁹ See Appendix ii for a more complete range of responses to this question.

often facilitates greater understanding and how framing delicate issues with familiar characters can make them easier to relate to. Erin suggested that “critical discourse can be kind of intimidating and concepts are easier to understand if they're presented in a less academic way, like in fan fiction which someone already enjoys reading.” Amelia mentioned how in fan fiction “you can take a character people are already invested in who was (for example) male, and say ‘hey, this person is just as interesting if they identify as no gender at all,’” which can facilitate educative exposure to, and ultimately help normalize, deviant identities. Ally, for example, told an interesting story of how fan fiction ultimately enabled her own self-discovery,

I definitely see fan communities as potential teachers for gender/sexuality concepts. Especially for younger or more sheltered fans, fandom can expose them to things they didn't even know existed. (I'm like 90% sure I didn't realize people could be gay until I discovered slash fic.) And I think it helps people who may not be familiar or comfortable with certain ideas if they can see them in the context of a fandom they love. People who are discovering their own identities and coming out also get help from being part of a fandom. Even if their own self-representation is lacking, it can still give them a safe, creative outlet to work through their emotions. I definitely wrote a lot of fan fiction in high school that helped me deal with realizing I was bi.

Ally's story emphasizes how, for many fans, viewing creative fanworks may be their first experience with the idea of gender/sexuality variation. Fan fiction not only taught her that “gay” was a valid identity, but also helped her realize and come to terms with her own sexual identity.

Participants also noted that fandom contributed to their better overall media literacy. Erin recognized her own growth since she found fandom, observing that her “12-year-old self didn't have the critical capacity to be able to analyze how few female characters in leading roles there were on the TV,” but her present 23-year-old self sees just how “skewed” things are. Hannah

found that fandom has made her aware of some of her previously held prejudices. She reported that she is far more critical of media than she used to be and will “point things out to friends” or find herself gritting her teeth at the classist and racist things she hears coming out of her parents’ mouths (Hannah). Alex described how fandom has changed his entire perception of media.

Fandom has, maybe ironically, made me feel less like a passive consumer and more like a possible creator. It's encouraged me to see media as just stories told by other people, some of which are wrong and damaging, as opposed to being perfect and all-powerful. It's also opened my eyes to a lot of kinds of misrepresentation that I haven't experienced personally, such as racism and ableism, which I think is incredibly valuable.

Alex’s realization that commercial media, like fan works, are also “just stories,” is a key aspect of the fandom mindset. The value fandom places on multiple readings of texts can, overtime, translate into viewing the source texts themselves as just another reading rather than ultimate arbiters of truth. Such a change in perspective allows fans to view media, and embedded ideology, more critically.

DISCUSSION

All eleven participants in my interviews have been active members of online fandom for a good portion of their lives, the shortest time being a still significant seven years. From speaking with them I was able to listen first hand to them describe just how much they value their time in fandom and how that time has influenced their lives. When questioned about their motivations for fan participation, none mentioned that they sought this community as a venue for subversive practice. Indeed, they cited pleasure, escapism, a love of the source material, a drive to engage more actively with media, and their communities of friends as their primary motivators. Yet,

when questioned about such topics, most were able to speak articulately about the social and political implications of fandom. The fans cited fandom as their teacher on a whole range of subjects, from concrete skills like creative writing or artistic ability, to social issues like sexism, sexuality, racism, and ableism. I was told deeply personal stories of self-discovery, quests for representation, and a desire for acceptance and understanding. To me, this indicates how completely the personal and the political are interconnected in fan practice. To a populace heavily comprised of women and gendered minorities, these social issues *are* personal issues. Fans may not always use fandom to fulfill a political need to subvert dominant media ideologies, but fandom provides them a set of tools and a worldview with which they *can* deconstruct those dominant ideologies. Furthermore, the thoughtfulness and eloquence that the participants brought to their interviews is indicative of a community built upon self-analysis and reflexivity. By starting in fandom young and communicating with each other online, fans grow up able to theorize about themselves and their peers – to recognize, scrutinize, and work to correct issues within fandom itself.

LOOKING FORWARD

My writing here has primarily concerned itself with interior fan discourse and how it affects those involved with fan practice. The internet is a valuable tool in facilitating this interior conversation but, aided by this technology, more so now than ever fans are finding themselves able not just to engage in discourse with each other but also with the greater public. This provides fantastic opportunities for further research. Networking sites, like Twitter, are frequently used by celebrities and content creators to pass information to their fans, but they also

allow fans to reply and be heard. Communications technology is beginning to equalize the divide that once existed between content creators and their fans. Thus, content creators may become more directly accountable for their media and to their fanbases. Already, online fan campaigns have brought cancelled shows back to life and even revived characters that had been killed off. Furthermore, talented fan creators have the opportunity to gain devoted audiences of their own through fan participation and some even end up creating original commercial content of their own. How, if at all, will the professional world of media entertainment change when fans themselves become content creators? Will the industry allow fannish values to coexist with commercial needs? The future of this heightened fan-creator conversation is still uncharted territory but could represent expanded opportunities for fans to have a say in controlling official content themselves.

One aspect of creative fan works I have not considered here is the work in progress or “WIP.” WIP typically indicates a piece of fan fiction or fan art which is unfinished but has the promise of more to come. Ultimately, that is all I can say about my own work. What I have discussed here is one image and one point of view of a specific instance of fan history. This writing is limited and fandom is vast. Just as with all other creative fanworks, all fan scholarship is a WIP and no one reading of the topic can be privileged. In 1992 Jenkins' *Textual Poacher* filled a gap he perceived in existing fan studies; here and now I have attempted to fill my own gap. My own future scholarship will likely override this work and rightly so. Indeed, I hope someday to look back on this research like a fan looking back on their earliest pieces of fan fiction – with fond embarrassment. Research is a work in progress, theory is a work in progress, technology is a work in progress, and fandom itself is a work in progress. Technological developments and fannish discourse will continue to revolutionize the ways fans respond to the

media they love. The ongoing evolution of fandom will also change the way scholars, especially fan-scholars like myself, interact with and understand the communities. Fandom is changing people and people are changing fandom every day. This is the historical reality, ongoing present, and likely future of fan practice.

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Appendix I:

Presented here are the questions I developed for my interviews. The numbered questions are the fourteen standard questions asked to every participant. The bulleted sub-questions were employed, as needed, to draw out more in-depth answers.

1. What is your Gender? Age? Race? Sexuality?
2. How would you define fandom?
3. How did you get started in fandom?
 - At what age?
 - What were your earliest fandoms?
 - What initially drew you to fan practices?
4. What Fandoms do you consider yourself part of at the moment?
 - What draws you to this/these fandoms?
5. What is your typical involvement with fan practices?
 - Do you write/read fic ?
 - Participate on forums?
 - Run a blog on tumblr? Lj? DW?
 - Other?
6. What motivates you to read/write fan fiction?
 - What genres of fic do you generally read/write?
 - What draws you to these genres?
 - Have you ever written fic based off of or inspired by conversations you participated in or witnessed within the fan community?
 - Has your time in fandom ever changed the way you viewed a character? Which character? How was your perception of them changed?
7. Do you see yourself represented well in the media you consume?
 - Have you ever used fan fiction specifically to seek out better representations of self? Any notable examples?
8. How do you feel about cis-swap/genderswap/genderfuck fan fiction?

- How would you describe this genre?
 - What purpose do you think it serves?
9. Have you noticed a rise in the inclusion or visibility of trans* narratives within the fan community? How about the inclusion of more varied lgbtqia themed narratives such as those exploring asexual/nonbinary/genderqueer characters?
 10. Do you see fan fiction and other forms of fan participation as valuable tools for learning, understanding, and exploring these concepts? Why or why not?
 11. How, if at all, has your perception of gender in media changed since you began participating in fandom? What caused this change?
 - Do you find you are more informed about these topics than friends outside of fandom?
 - Are there other topics that you believe fandom has helped educate you about?
 - Do you have any particular skills that you believe fandom has helped you develop?
 12. Do you think shows with large fan audiences have an accurate understanding of their fans?
 - Can you think of any shows/showrunners/producers/content creators/cast members that you believe best understand their fan demographic? How is this understanding expressed?
 - Conversely can you think of any shows/showrunners/producers/content creators/cast members that you believe do not understand fan demographic? How do you know? Has this negatively impacted your relationship with them?
 13. Do you support fan creators who move into the professional content creating sphere? Any specific people you can think of?
 - Do you think the quality of media would go up if more fans turned professional?
 - What about diversity?
 14. Would you encourage or discourage people to become involved in fandom? Why?

Appendix II:

Extended responses to question 10.

Beth:

Media is very set in stone a lot of times, the creators make their content and that's it but the fans can explore other ideas and interpretations through fanfic which means that they can be introduced to alternative views of gender and sexuality they can start to question 'what does it mean to be asexual? can someone be bisexual and yet drawn to their same gender? how does someone who is genderqueer move through the world?' and those questions can be answered by people who know the answers and it gives the opportunity for those not fitting into a narrow worldview to express themselves and give voice to those experiences.

Alex:

I see fandom as positive firstly for trans, ace, and aro fans to explore their own identities. We tend to identify heavily with fictional characters, and it can be very comforting and affirming to cast those beloved fictional people in identities that mirror ours. I think because these issues tend to be isolating and othering and to be discussed only in terms of their weirdness/otherness in mainstream media, it's really emotionally satisfying to take a familiar character and say "he's like me!" Because that character is already humanized, not a caricature. And on the other hand I see more and more cisgender/allosexual/alloromantic fans choosing to explore marginalized identities in their stories and art, which is phenomenal (usually). It shows that the positives go beyond the people most directly affected by representation.

Jemma:

I think that's the main reason for the rise [of lgbtqia narratives]; people seeking to write characters in a way that represents themselves, and people wanting to read about beloved characters reimagined to represent them. I think that's the biggest draw. Another big draw, for people like me, is finding understanding. I like to think of myself as pretty knowledgeable when it comes to all the different genders/sexualities people decide to explore, but I can admit that I'm pretty novice at times. I'm often afraid I'll say something wrong or offend someone, so I end up asking lots of questions to avoid that. There's a lot I'm still learning. So fan fiction is sometimes a nice way for me to better understand, say, the difference between someone who's pansexual and someone who's bisexual. I can read and read and read all I like about the different orientations on Wikipedia or Google, but I've found that reading a story where a person is living a certain lifestyle makes it so much easier for me to understand. I've never been much for textbook/factual reading, so I find that I'm much more likely to learn about lgbqta lifestyle if I see it in practice in movies/TV/books/fan fiction as opposed to reading lengthy, boring articles on the subject matter.

Amelia:

People often find it easier to understand this sort of thing when introduced to it via a fictional character--it's easier to identify with a fictional character because you get so much insight into their thoughts/experiences, and because there's a story (action, romance, etc.) happening to them to keep you interested. And fan fiction is a particularly valuable tool--like with cis-swapping, you can take a character people are already invested in who was (for example) male, and say "hey, this person is just as interesting if they identify as no gender at all." Or if it's an OC or something, people are already interested in the universe. Most published media (and there isn't much of it) that touches on LGBTQIA subjects is marketed specifically at that demographic. Fan fiction has the advantage of quantity (especially when it comes to trans*, asexual, intersex, etc. narratives). People are more likely to come across it while browsing, and to see it as just another AU--in this fic, the character was a prince, in this fic, a high-school student, in this one, nonbinary--than as a "special, not aimed at the cishet reader" work sitting in the LGBT section of a bookstore.

