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Special Issue Reprint

The Past, Present and Future of Fan-Fiction

Edited by
Lincoln Geraghty, Bertha Chin, Lori Morimoto and Bethan Jones

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Lincoln Geraghty

Lincoln Geraghty is Professor of Media Cultures in the School of Film, Media and Creative Technologies at the University of Portsmouth. Major publications include *Living with Star Trek: American Culture and the Star Trek Universe* (IB Tauris, 2007), *American Science Fiction Film and Television* (Berg, 2009) and *Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom and Collecting Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2014). He was editor of the multi-volume *Directory of World Cinema: American Hollywood* from Intellect Books (2011 & 2015), and his last collection, *Popular Media Cultures: Fans, Audiences and Paratexts*, was published by Palgrave in 2015. He is Section Board Member for *Humanities*, the online open access journal from MDPI, and series co-editor for Palgrave Fan Studies. He currently is editorial advisor for the *Journal of Popular Culture*, *Transformative Works and Culture*, the *Journal of Fandom Studies* and the *Journal of Popular Television*. His next edited collection, *Material Cultures and Collecting Practices across Global Fandom*, will be published by Palgrave.

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Bertha Chin is Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies, and Program Director for the Master of Communication at the Department of Communications and New Media, NUS Singapore. She has published extensively on transcultural fandom, anti-fandom and celebrity cultures. She is co-editor of *Crowdfunding the Future: Media Industries, Ethics and Digital Society* (Peter Lang, 2015) and *Eating Fandom* (Routledge, 2020). She is also co-Editor-in-Chief of *Popular Communication*.

Lori Morimoto

Lori Morimoto is Assistant Professor of Asian Studies at Temple University Japan—Kyoto. Her work on transcultural and transnational fandom has been published such journals as *Mechademia Second Arc*, *Transformative Works and Cultures, Participations*, and the *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*. She is an editorial advisor for Routledge Resources Online: Screen Studies and co-chair of the Fan and Audience Studies Special Interest Group of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies.

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Bethan Jones is a Research Associate in the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University where she is working on the Leverhulme-funded Synthetic Pasts project. She is also an Honorary Research Fellow at Amgueddfa Cymru Museum Wales, where she is working with the Jessie Knight collection. Her research interests include fandom, tattoos, gender and participatory cultures, and she has been published in *Transformative Works and Cultures, Television and New Media* and *Velvet Light Trap*, among others. Bethan is co-chair of the SCMS Fan and Audience Studies SIG, co-editor of the journal *Popular Communication* and co-editor of the collection *Participatory Culture Wars: Controversy, Conflict and Complicity in Fandom* (Iowa UP, 2025).

Preface

This collection explores the new and changing forms of fan fiction with a focus on the importance of new technologies, social platforms and global audiences. More than ever, the study of fan fiction, and the communities of fans who read and write it, is also about understanding new methods of storytelling in a digital world. Fan fiction is a cultural practice and has rapidly evolved in recent years, from a community-based form of social interaction to a globally recognized form of narrative world-building. Once a niche genre of writing, mainly shared within small communities to express emotional connections with popular media texts, fan fiction is now viewed as a means to create new content that extends and builds on those texts beyond national and industrial boundaries. Often, authors who have spent years building a readership within their small communities are finding new audiences and, as a result, are assuming a level of celebrity and renown that propels them into the world of professional publishing. The articles reprinted in this Special Issue use multiple methods and adopt multiple perspectives that position this important genre in new and critical contexts. The authors discuss the relationship between literary characters and the various ways fans have rewritten some of the classics, look at the increased monetization of the genre as more fans start to write their own stories for profit, analyze the cultural and transnational boundaries that fans cross by reading new stories translated from China, highlight the culture of podcast production surrounding fan fiction, and focus on the thin line between fiction and reality as some fans write stories about real people and convicted felons. All articles in this Special Issue advance the study of fan fiction, and thus offer scholars and students alike new ways of appreciating this long-established fan practice.

The guest editors would like to thank all the authors for their hard work and diligence in writing, editing and producing the final drafts of their work; responding to feedback; and being willing to go the extra mile to produce high-quality research. We also want to thank the roundtable participants who kindly offered their time and energy to engage with our questions and recognized the importance of the Special Issue in tackling some of the new and emerging issues impacting fan fiction and fandom studies more broadly. Most of all, this Special Issue was created to inspire new discussion in the field, encourage new scholars to express their expertise and provide a platform for the study of global fandom. As all the articles contained within argue, the digital world in which fan fiction now exists offers plenty of opportunities to redress the balance and show that the genre is now more mainstream than ever before.

Lincoln Geraghty, Bertha Chin, Lori Morimoto, and Bethan Jones
Guest Editors

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Editorial

Roundtable: The Past, Present and Future of Fan Fiction

Lincoln Geraghty [1,*], Bertha Chin [2,*], Lori Morimoto [3,*], Bethan Jones [4,*], Kristina Busse [5,*], Francesca Coppa [6,*], Kristine Michelle "Khursten" Santos [7,*] and Louisa Ellen Stein [8,*]

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Fanfiction as a cultural practice has rapidly evolved in recent years, from a community-based form of social interaction to a globally recognised form of narrative world-building. Once a niche genre of writing, shared mainly within small communities to express emotional connections with popular media texts, fanfiction is now viewed as a means to create new content that extends and builds on those texts beyond national and industrial boundaries.

Moving from notions of the mass audience to individual levels of fandom—and thus from the sociological to the psychological—early studies largely explored the psychological processes and motivations of female fans in the forms of pleasure, fantasy, and desire, as evidenced in key examples drawn from science fiction series such as Star Trek. By critically assessing notions of gender and sexuality in fan culture, these works highlighted the need to account for sexual desires and pleasures in fandom while illustrating the limitations of such approaches in their inability to conceptualise sustained and regular consumption practices. More recent work has recognised the increasing popularisation and professionalisation of the genre, where authors are able to reach a wider audience, create their own readership, and see fanfiction of their work emerging. Digital platforms and alternative forms of storytelling have helped to change what we might now consider fanfiction. It is not just about textual inspiration; celebrities and other personalities in the public eye have become the subject for fanfiction authors. Social media platforms, fanfiction websites, and other digital spaces for sharing content, such as YouTube and TikTok, have caused the genre to become an international phenomenon that crosses linguistic and cultural borders.

This Special Issue of Humanities seeks to explore the new and changing forms of fanfiction and consider the importance of new technologies, social platforms, and global audiences in creating new methods of storytelling in a digital world. By way of an introduction, we invited four leading experts in the field to discuss what they consider to be the key developments in the study of fanfiction and what important work remains to be done on this ever-evolving medium. We want to thank Kristina, Francesca, Louisa and Khursten for agreeing to be on this roundtable discussion on the past, present, and future of fanfiction.

About the Panel

Kristina Busse has a PhD in English from Tulane University and teaches in the Department of Philosophy at the University of South Alabama. As an independent scholar and media fan, Kristina is a former board member of the fan advocacy *group Organization for Transformative* Works (2016–2019) and cofounder and former editor of its online peer-reviewed academic journal *Transformative* Works and Culture (2008–2022). She is the author of *Framing Fan* Fiction (2017) as well as co-editor of *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the* Internet (2006), *Sherlock and Transmedia* Fandom (2012), and *The Fan Fiction Studies* Reader (2014). Her work on fan fiction and fan communities has appeared in numerous anthologies and journals, including *Cinema Journal*, *Camera Obscura*, and *Popular Communication*. She is currently co-authoring with Alexis Lothian *Fan Fantasies and the Politics of Desire*.

Francesca Coppa is a Professor of English and Film Studies at Muhlenberg College where she currently chairs the Department of English Literatures and Writing. A founding member of the Organization for Transformative Works and an architect of the Archive of Our Own, her books include *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age* (U. Michigan, 2017), which won the Prose Award for Best Book in Media and Cultural Studies, and *Vidding: A History* (U. Michigan, 2022), an open-source, multimedia history of fan music video.

Kristine Michelle "Khursten" Santos is the Executive Director of Ateneo Library of Women's Writing (ALiWW) and assistant professor in the Department of History and Japanese Studies Program at Ateneo de Manila University. Her research focuses on social, cultural, at times historical, and affective interventions that impact women's queer and transformative engagements with Asian media. Her studies examine a wide range of literacies related to comics production, fan networks, and Boys Love culture. She specialises in gender, cultural studies and history, and popular and fan cultures in Asia. Kristine has recently written on the transcultural flows of queer practices between East and Southeast Asia, self-published comics, and other developments within Philippine comic culture. Her recent publications include "Independent and safe panels for youths Queer comics in a time of Southeast Asian populism" in *Queer Southeast* Asia (2022) and "Queer Affective Literacies: Examining 'Rotten' Women's Literacies" in Japan (Critical Arts, 2020).

Louisa Ellen Stein is an associate professor of film and media culture at Middlebury College. Louisa is author of *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age* (University of Iowa Press, 2015) and co-editor of *A Tumblr Book: Platforms and Cultures* (University of Michigan Press, 2020), *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom* (McFarland, 2012) and Teen Television: Programming and Fandom (McFarland, 2008). Louisa's work explores audience engagement in transmedia culture, with emphasis on questions of cultural and digital contexts, gender, and generation. Louisa is also mother of two fans, and in her spare time she edits fan video and remix video.

Editors: We'd like to welcome and thank all of you for agreeing to participate in this roundtable on the past, present, and future of fan fiction. To begin with, could each of you situate yourself in relation to the subject and your particular interests?

Kristina: I am really excited about this roundtable with its focus on fan fiction, because I am by training and at heart a literary scholar. My focus has always been on the written medium rather than film or television and, as such, it is exciting that we finally seem to be at a point where we can look at fan fiction as literary texts rather than ancillary documents that allow us to study media and their fandoms more broadly. Even though fan fiction is often the most widespread, most visible, and most referenced of all fan works and fan activities, there exists surprisingly little research that looks at fan fiction as a literary text. More often, fan fiction is seen as one aspect of fannish engagement–albeit one that can easily be cited and referenced. As such, fan fiction most often has been read as collective fan interpretation, as evidence of interpretive communities, and as ways through which fans respond to their beloved source text. Fan fiction is used to corroborate fannish emotional responses to the source text, the socio-historical contexts, and fannish self-understanding.

So, my main focus at the moment is to return to studying fan fiction within the academic discipline of literary studies.

Francesca: I'm also a literary scholar as well as a performance studies scholar, and I've historically been interested in fanfiction as a female-dominated literary world beyond the marketplace. But lately I've been fascinated with the ways in which mainstream literary criticism has taken on fan-studies perspectives—Kristina, what you want to be happening is already happening, but more on the lit side than the fan studies side, I think! Fanfiction has reshaped the traditional literary landscape by providing a broadly-visible, alternative space for literary creation and criticism not only outside the market but also outside the university (that is, the not-for-profit world of formal literary study and creative writing workshops etc.) As the chair of an English department, I'm not supposed to say that's a good thing, but–(*shh, I think it's a good thing*.) I'm sure I can't be the only English major who stopped writing, discouraged, after reading perfect sentence after perfect sentence in a lit class. Fanfiction, by contrast, tends to incite creativity and participation, because if all of *these* people can do it, why not me? (This is really what I think is meant by "you have to read to write"—not only "you have to read the good stuff and be inspired by what great writing can be" but also "you have to read the wide variety of what gets published and realize that not every story is all that and a bag of chips") In recent years it has become obvious that fanfiction has given literary scholars new tools to think with, and we can now see fanfic studies' growing influence on both English department pedagogies and contemporary literary criticism.

Khursten: Similar to Kristina, I am stoked to be a part of this roundtable discussion on the state of fan-fiction. I am hoping to ground my participation in this discussion as a scholar who has examined Asian fan histories and culture and as a participant who has engaged in various iterations of fan expressions in Anglophone and Asian fan spaces for a great part of my life. My experience as a fan has enriched my research which has witnessed the way transformative fan literacies have broadened conservative notions of gender and its expressions. Fan fiction is a rich repository of these literacies that shows the infinite potential of reading, interpretation, and expression. It would be interesting to situate fanfiction in an ever-evolving media landscape that has given fans more tools for fan expression.

Louisa: Delighted to be part of this conversation as well, which I think is an important one! I'll build here on Khursten's point about fanfiction as part of an ever-evolving media landscape. This isn't to undermine the importance of looking at fan fiction from a literary perspective, but I do think it's vital that we consider the multiple forms that fan fiction takes in 2022, within multiple digital contexts and platform—be it Archive Of Our Own, Wattpad, AsianFanFics, show specific archives (yes, these still exist!) Twitter, Amino, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Tumblr, Webtoons, or (Budiarto et al. 2021). All of these spaces host fan fiction and fan fiction writer and reader community interactivity. I'd be interested to hear what sites folks in this conversation have their eyes on for developments in fan fiction? And what new patterns, genres, narrative structures, forms do you see emerging?

Editors: Starting with Kristina and Francesca's opening statements, you both create a seeming opposition between fan and literary studies. Can you all say a bit more about your approach to fan fiction and/as literature?

Kristina: From the 1990s through the 2010s, fan studies was most commonly studied and researched within the disciplines of media and new media studies, and, as a result, there exist few academic approaches that engage more traditional literary research approaches. Reader-focused models fell out of fashion in literary studies by the mid-late 1980s, but even when they were popular, they discussed the reader as a function of the texts they studied and analyzed rather than looking at how people were actually reading.

And it is at the very moment where reader response falls out of fashion in literature departments that television studies begins to move away from the psychoanalyzed film audiences that mostly were as imagined, intended, and ideal as the reader response readers

and begins looking at actual television viewers. Audience studies came out of cultural studies and took seriously the attempt to interview actual viewers in their homes and describe their reactions and interpretations. So, when Henry Jenkins writes *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins 1992), he does so with a cultural studies lens and while he cites some reader response theorists, his driving models are more indebted to Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and Stuart Hall (1991) than Wolfgang Iser (1974) and Stanley Fish (1980). And while he analyzes and categorizes fan fiction, much of the fan studies of the following decades looks at fan fiction as a function of television viewing and interpretation instead of literary texts in their own right.

[Kristina] And the one important academic work on literature that uses ethnographic research like we see in audience studies is Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (Radway 1984). And it is not incidental, I'd argue that it is genre fiction, in particular romance, that receives this treatment. Fan fiction, just like genre fiction, is seen less as a literary text in its own right and more as a cultural artifact that tells us something about the communities that write, share, and read the stories. And yet we all know that there are amazing short stories, novellas, and novels published every day that deserve to be studied both as examples of particular genres of writing and as literary artifacts!

Francesca: I think we're seeing a potentially fruitful collapse between fanfiction and other kinds of literary writing as fan studies forces people to challenge the various distinctions and definitions. While I am particularly sensitive to money as a factor which differentiates fan and professional work, when it comes to literary writing, market forces are not necessarily dispositive. So, I think literary studies and fanfic studies are heading for a merge. Critics like Rita Felski are now using affect theory and network theory to talk about literature in ways familiar to fanfiction fans: arguing that stories survive the proverbial test of time not simply because of their aesthetic qualities or the relevance of their themes, but because they are at the center of an affective network—or what we might call a fandom. To be fair, theatre scholars got there first: it doesn't matter how good a play is, if it's not picked up by directors who want to produce it (that is to say, *re*produce it), then it's a dead thing, a museum piece.

[Francesca] Similarly, books are kept alive by their fans (readers, critics, librarians, publishers, makers of "best of" lists, creators of syllabi) and their fandoms: all the adaptations, remixes, reboots, sequels, homages, and other kinds of fanfiction. (Everyone was teaching *Beowulf* again after Maria Dahvana Headley wrote both *The Mere Wife, a* contemporary novel retelling the story, and a hip-hop-ish translation of *Beowulf* itself, for instance. And of course, it was mostly Tolkien who argued that Beowulf was an important literary—as opposed to historic or linguistic—text in the first place; Tolkien was a Beowulf fan!) The idea of a network of textual works—an ecosystem, or in Gail De Kosnik's framing, an archive—also challenges the conventional hierarchy of a "great", "original" artwork and its "derivative" fanfiction (De Kosnik 2016); as any fan knows, no text is great until its fandom says it is, and some fan works or fanons forever change earlier works or even displace them. All these ideas are all now being discussed and used in mainstream contemporary literary criticism.

Louisa: While I absolutely agree with the value and necessity of considering fan fiction as (to borrow Kristina's words from above) "literary texts in their own right," as a media studies scholar, I'm especially aware of the evolving multimodal nature of what constitutes fan fiction. Indeed, I'd suggest that one of the key challenges that fan fiction studies scholars (and the field as a whole) must grapple with is the diversity of what fanfiction is in 2022. On top of that, there's the ephemerality of fan fiction forms that change so rapidly within various microcommunities on ever-shifting platforms.

Given this ever-expanding and shifting diversity of fan fiction forms, as scholars of fan fiction, we face the tricky problem of who chooses to write about what types of fan fiction and within what fields/for what audiences, what practices get heralded as worthy of scholarship to whom, and what works get canonized, and why. This challenge isn't new

though; fan scholars often write with insight into the communities they know, and this personal insight can lend nuance but also can limit the field of what they write about.

Francesca: In response to what Louisa said above: what I've personally grappled with is the tension between talking about fanfiction in terms of a network, an archive, a collective, an ecosystem (which is what I think is accurate, because it's difficult to impossible to read a single piece of fanfiction in isolation; fanfiction is a networked thing best read in batches which inform and explicate it so as to form something more than the sum of its parts) but also wanting not to lose fanfiction in the great sea of "crafts" rather than as named, credited, literary art. I mean, you really can't read a single poem in isolation either if you know anything about poetry, but we force students to do it all the time, and we credit—whomever. John Keats. T.S. Eliot. Marianne Moore. Danez Smith. I find Chuck Klosterman's (2016) essay, "Which Rock Star Will Historians of the Future Remember?" useful for thinking about canon formations; as he points out, marching music was once an incredibly varied field, and now it's all reduced to one guy: John Philip Sousa. Time, Klosterman argues, will inevitably narrow rock and roll to one or two artists who get studied in school: The Modern Lovers what, Adam Ant who? Franco Moretti's "The Slaughterhouse of Literature" (Moretti 2000) makes a similar argument about the minute percentage of Victorian literature even 19th century experts read; the Victorians were just too damn prolific.

Those of us in fanfiction studies experience a similar Slaughterhouse of Fic every day; you just can't read even the tiniest percentage of it. So, it is in that context that I've chosen to err on the side of naming artists and forming canons: we're fighting the tides of time anyway. (Blake's what? SGA who?) But as more fanfiction scholars emerge, and more fanfiction stories get written about in more contexts, things will shake out. Our sort of fanfiction is a pretty new literary form and we should expect most of it to be ephemeral–and that's okay, that doesn't make it bad or pointless. (We don't read most of what was on the bestseller lists of yore, either, and English Departments have changed radically in the last 20 years; we're just losing whole subfields on the undergraduate level. Who can afford classics, a medievalist, an 18th century specialist; there's just not the demand.) But, to go back to network theory and to paraphrase Felski, artworks have friends, and in fandom, rec lists, tweets, newsletter recs, podcast reviews, Fanlore pages, and academic articles are all part of the network that may or may not help a particular story get read or be seen as significant.

Editors: Louisa and Francesca are already hinting at the changes that fan fiction as a genre has seen over the decades and how these changes are connected to changing interfaces, generational zeitgeist, and size and types of fan communities. We'd like to hear more of your thoughts on the topic of generational divides and on the effects of ever-changing platforms?

Louisa: One of the challenges I think about a lot is the rapid generational shifts in perceptions of what fiction is, where it's found, who knows about it, what it means to young people, and generational tensions around who should be writing what fan fiction and for whom. Scholars writing about fan fiction see it as a longer tradition, and are aware of histories and developments in the form. But young people engaging with fan fiction come to it fresh, if influenced by the various forms and works that permeate digital culture. And the fan fiction that an 8-year-old might encounter online is very different from the fan fiction a 12 year old may encounter online, and both are likely quite different from the fan fiction writing cultures of adult fans. Not that there aren't intergenerational intersections, but experiences of fandom as a whole and fan fiction within it are quite diverse generationally in 2022.

As much as interfaces shape fan fiction trends, so do developing norms within specific communities, often delimited by generational usage and spurred on by microcommunities' particular feedback cultures. That is, what types of fan fiction achieve popularity and take off as new forms of fan fiction differ within particular microcommunities. Trends within narrative videos on the Chinese video-sharing site Bilibili created by Chinese video editors are significantly different from those within Wattpad fan fiction, or those within fan fiction

written within the National Novel Writing Month/Young Writers' Program (Nanowrimo), or those within crowdsourced twitter-fic where people build and share fic concepts tweet by tweet. There may be some overlap between these trends and the communities that deploy them, but we need to acknowledge them as distinct evolving forms. That's a rich if daunting scope for fan fiction studies present and future!

Kristina: Totally! I also think it's important to look at the way terminologies, trends, tropes, etc. differ not just between communities but also how important shifts occur over time. In fact, my co-author Alexis Lothian and I have been working on the history of slash fan fiction and when we drafted our proposal we realized that we're not just writing a history, but that effectively the term is already one of the past. Today's fanfic readers and writers rarely use the term and I doubt many under 30 would ever consider themselves slashers, as many of us older folks did in the 90s/early 00s. Or, to give another example about shifting norms and expectations, there were four more or less taboo subjects in many fan fiction communities in the nineties: underage, real people fiction, incest, and domestic discipline. Now three of those four mainstreamed in the early 2000s, heavily driven by Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings Real People Fiction fandoms. So, you'd suddenly encounter Cartercest (Aaron Carter/Nick Carter), which was the trifecta of taboo subjects, in regular channels rather than hidden away.
More recently, of course, new and different concerns have arisen, and it's worth looking at the way not only fan fiction changes but also fan discourses about fiction are changing. At the center of many of these current conversations lies the relationship between fiction and reality, which is a question that I feel almost every generation faces yet again, be it Plato wanting to banish the poets from his ideal Republic, Victorians wanting to encourage edifying literature only, or second wave feminists battling pornography as encouraging actual rape. Sadly, a lot of the conversations flatten a really complex subject when it becomes a simple binary that either posits a 1:1 correspondence or declares fiction to be utterly disconnected from reality. Fantasy plays a central role in literature in general and fan fiction in particular, and I'd argue that looking at the reality/fiction dichotomy through the lens of fantasy can usefully complicate questions of influence and potential harm.

Louisa: As a media studies scholar, I'm certainly aware of the overlap (if we can call it that) between media studies exploration of new forms of digital authorship and community and the emerging practices of fan fiction that unfold within those spaces. But from a media studies framework, these practices are not always understood as fan fiction or put in conversation with other traditions of fan fiction, past and present, and this is something fanfic researchers can offer to these literatures on digital media tools and uses, for example, the growing literature on TikTok, Instagram, and Webtoons. Plus, there is growing literature on fan authored narratives, for example, on Webtoons, that are perhaps not making the "fan studies" radar but really could and should be considered as such.

Kristina: I love how Louisa always returns to the way platforms and interfaces meaningfully matter, not only in terms of accessibility and dissemination, but also in the way they actively shape fiction. We wrote an essay together some years back on the way constraints (in source text, fan text, context but also medium) can engender creativity, and this relationship between form and content, between platform limitations and the types and forms of stories created in response to that. Back then, we looked at the character limits of USENET and mailing list messages, at drabble trees on multi-threaded social media like LiveJournal and text-based role-playing games where every character has their own (fictional) social media account.
With every new media platform, we see fan fiction being shaped by the technical affordances. Wattpad encouraged reading and writing on smart phones, which tended to create very short chapters and immediate publication. AO3 mostly followed traditional fan fiction archives, but its metadata and the central role of tags in the search engine has affected the way fans think about genres, tropes, pairings, and more. Twitter, Tumblr, and other interfaces become both content in media narratives (i.e., a fanfic told entirely in Twitter

texts or IM conversations or a mix of various forms of online textual interaction) or they can become the actual place of publication, which, obviously, affects the types of stories that can and will be created.
Finally, the conversations surrounding fan fiction, the fannish meta, recs, and analyses changes depending on where these conversations take place. LiveJournal was actually an outlier in the way it collapsed fiction, paratexts, and response/feedback/ commentary into the same spaces, often having them side by side in one post or crosslinked within the same platform. Between the rise of AO3 and the particular nature of Tumblr, Twitter, and Discord (among the many places where fans now congregate and communicate), the shared conversations, the prompts and gifts and other forms of fiction as social interaction and parts of ongoing conversations still exist, but it is much harder to follow it, both as fans, but even more so as researchers.

Francesca: Following up on these thoughts about platforms, it's been fascinating to see fanfiction culture move onto visual platforms like TikTok which are so much less anonymous (and less textual) than fanfiction internet culture has historically been. I have a student, Katherine Behling, who researches the ways TikTok users are integrating their lives as fanfiction readers (and less frequently, as fanfiction writers) into their existing TikTok personas; in a way, this is both a return to the kind of squeeful, in-person encounters that we used to see in the fannish convention space, and also a place that we've never been before in terms of embodiment and the performance of the self as a (squeeing and sometimes shamed or shameful) fan.
Kristina's 2007 article with Alexis Lothian and Robin Reid (Lothian et al. 2007) framed fanfiction fandom as a queer female space, but it was always an (apparently) disembodied and carefully pseudonymous one; my own work on vidding (Coppa 2022) talks about the way in which fans have historically worked to be the subject of the gaze/the one who looks rather than (as is more common for women) the object of the gaze/the one who is looked at. But now, with fans filming themselves giving enthusiastic fanfiction recs or sometimes performing their fannish shame (Behling (2022) discusses TikTok memes that purport to express fannish shame: e.g., "Would you rather drink a bucket of bleach, or show your parents your entire ao3 history?" or "Rap or I'll expose the fanfics you read") we are seeing new kinds of embodied fannish performance. This provides the opportunity for new kinds of fannish community, but also the potential for (or should I say, the risk of) anonymity collapse. Anonymity, or rather, pseudonymity, is something I value in fan culture, because I fear surveillance and agree with Peggy Phelan's (1993) assertion that "Visibility is a trap." So I'm simultaneously touched by and afraid for these fannish Tiktokers and the information they're giving to the world.

Khursten: I do agree with everyone thus far that the shapes of fan fiction are adapting and transforming along with the technological developments of various media platforms that have different points of access for people across the globe. While some of us easily imagine how different social media platforms are easily accessible to everyone, my exposure to fan communities faced with economic challenges have made me realize that particular platforms become increasingly central to fan fictions or communities because of low bandwidth consumption (such as Wattpad) or promotions with mobile service providers (e.g., unlimited access to Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok is free for a particular amount of days under specific providers). This limited access enabled many fan creators to work within their economic and technological limits. Seeing Francesca talk about TikTok reminds me of how the platform has been used by some Southeast Asian fans to merge local viral audio with edited fan clips creating interesting transnational fan fictions. The elaborate fan fiction videos in danmei fandom as mentioned by Louisa are also deeply immersive. There are also Social Media AUs seen on Twitter that was particularly popular during the pandemic within Asian fandoms (K-Pop and ThaiBL) that increasingly localized fan fictions and imaginations (e.g., Desi AU and Filo AU). In my ongoing research on these local fan fictions, I've noticed how these works empower queer expression in highly conservative countries.

Location-specific platforms, such as Pixiv in Japan or Naver and Postype in Korea or Weibo in China also offer a different fan experience and culture for their local audiences. These localized fan spaces have pushed global fans to widen their literacies for these platforms, languages, and cultures. Fan translations of fan fictions are also increasingly becoming commonplace and diverse across different languages. Wattpad, Ao3, and community forums become important spaces for these translated works. Collectively, these platforms provide very important contact zones for transcultural exchange within fandom.

Editors: We'd like you to speak a bit more about how fan fiction fandoms have or have not fully engaged with the internationalization of sources and fan creations. Furthermore, as we shift from a community model to one of contact zones, as Lori Morimoto and Chin (2017) have described them, what are ways in which we can acknowledge and give voice to those that often were ignored in earlier fan fiction and fan fiction studies.

Louisa: I find myself thinking frequently about the internationalization of fandom these days and what it means for fan studies more broadly and the studies of fan works more specifically. Or rather, fandom was always international, of course, but with increased access to international digital media, fan communities from different national and cultural contexts are becoming increasingly more aware of one another, and with more visible transcultural interaction and frictions. My own fan interests and involvements (and media viewing practices) have shifted to encompass anime, c-dramas, k-dramas, j-dramas, and kpop, and the fan works surrounding them, in part because of fandom visibility and in part because of access to these texts on streaming networks like Netflix Amazon Prime, Youtube, and Viki. I've been struggling with how to integrate my more recent transcultural fan experiences and consumptions into my own scholarship given the limits of my cultural knowledge.

I think the answers I'm finding are in collaboration and increased dialogue between scholars across national as well as disciplinary boundaries. One amazing (pre-pandemic) example of this type of collaboration was the Fan Studies Japan Tour organized by Lori Morimoto that I was lucky enough to participate in back in 2018. We wrote about our experiences and their value in a Transformative Works and Cultures piece here (https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/1975). Another more extensive example of the value of transcultural fan studies conversation is the more recent instances of the Fan Studies Network North America conference (of which I'm one of the organizers). Because we chose to go virtual with the pandemic, the conference has attracted a much wider set of scholars leading to valuable transcultural conversations that we hadn't had at previous in-person instances of the conference. I think it's vitally important that we intentionally and actively foster these collaborative transcultural fan studies conversations and experiences to mirror the transcultural evolutions of fandom.

Kristina: There has been a challenge from the very beginning of fan fiction studies (and fan studies in general) in that we all too often only study the things we know and love (or love to hate). And while I endeavor to move beyond my own fannish interests, I am most comfortable writing about fan fiction where I know the fandom well and about fandom spaces where I am an active participant. Yet this clearly raises several questions: (1) How should we select our research objects? (2) Should we purposefully study texts and fandoms we don't actively participate in? (3) Are we merely describing fannish popular subjects or should we actively focus on selecting previously ignored fannish interests?

As a English literature scholar, for example, I don't see myself studying non-English language fan fiction, though I know it is an under researched area. As a non-native English speaker, I am quite fascinated by the way fan fiction in English is immensely international in its authorship. (In fact, I have a special interest in podfic, and the percentage of nonnative speakers recording English podfic is surprisingly high, and I will write about that one of these days!) So, speaking realistically for myself, the one move I have been trying to make actively is focused less on expanding my object of study and more on critically engaging with my methodologies and theoretical frameworks. This means moving beyond the

well-trodden fan fiction studies texts in order to bring in insights from different disciplines and nonacademic writing. Expanding our critical approaches forces us to break open the hitherto established fan studies canon where a small number of people cited one another and effectively created a fairly narrowly focused idea of accepted knowledge.

Khursten: If fan fiction is an exploration of the infinite potential of various literature and media then I think there is room in welcoming the infinite ways of studying fan fictions from different communities all over the globe. An interesting example that highlighted this infinite potential is through fan fictions in relation to Boys Love culture which has its roots in Japan but has grown to develop fandoms and fan communities in the Philippines (Fermin 2013), China (Yang and Yanrui 2017), and Thailand (Baudinette 2019) which eventually contributed to the diversification of BL media in the world. We have also seen how fan fiction has empowered English-language learners in literacy studies (Black 2009; Sauro 2020), opened new avenues for postcolonial imaginations (De Kosnik 2019), and provided an interesting contact zone between different media cultures and fan communities across different ethnicities and languages (Nadkarni and Sivarajan 2020; Bauwens-Sugimoto 2021). These are just some that are distributed in English-language scholarship and there are many others that have been published in other languages. The burden to represent this foreign language scholarship could be shouldered by English-language fan studies scholars who have the skills to dialogue with these works. Within fanfic studies, embracing scholarship that focus on non-Anglophone fanfics or fanfic creators outside of "centers" of fan cultures can help decolonize the field. If fanfic studies can decentralize the imagination of fan fiction outside of the English language or outside of fan communities in the United States or Britain, there are opportunities to broaden and develop our understanding of fanworks. As mentioned earlier, this is already happening. The more these works are visible, the more we could expand our imaginations of how vast fanfiction could be.

Embracing this growing literature on fan fictions from diverse communities all over the world can help make Fanfiction Studies inclusive. As academics, I think we can help foster interest in this growing scholarship by dialoguing with these works, including them in our citations, inviting them in our panels, or by encouraging younger scholars from diverse backgrounds to capture their own diverse fan experiences and dialogue with different kinds of scholarship on fan fiction. For example, a Japanese Studies graduate student is currently looking into the transformations of Omegaverse in Japanese media, rooting their foundations on Kristina's work while also learning from Japanese fans and creators who have transformed aspects of this trope. This kind of transcultural dialogue in fan fiction scholarship helps raise the visibility of other forms of fan fictions, broaden how we imagine fan fiction practices and communities outside of Anglophone spaces, and embolden scholars from diverse backgrounds to contribute to the field.

Our largest hurdle in decolonizing the field also involves our own disciplines and institutions that may push specific perspectives that enforces this colonial hold on our scholarship on fanfics. This is a tough hurdle which hopefully can help us think of creative ways to respond against this colonial hold that could disempower our research.

Editors: Thank you for your comments that both delineate the field of fan fiction studies but also show the fertile intersections with other disciplines. What are your thoughts and hopes for the future of fan fiction?

Kristina: If there's any guesses (or maybe wishes?) I have for the future of fan fiction studies it is that we look at fan fiction less as an artifact that allows us to study source texts, fan communities, and online platforms and instead situates fan fiction as a particular form of literature. It connects fan fiction to its various literary ancestors and to various contemporary genres that may offer insight into structural, thematic, and aesthetic connections. These include traditional collective storytelling, mythologies, and classical transformative works as well as adaptations, genre fiction, and forms of writing that may be ephemeral, more personalized, and for smaller specific audiences. As such, we must look at fan fiction and its relationship to other literary texts, both premodern and modern literature and

contemporary fiction. We must study particular fan fiction genres and tropes as well as specific characteristics when looking at types of source texts. Finally, we must look at writing engagements within fan fiction communities and various approaches of studying and teaching fan fiction within different disciplines and methodological frameworks.

Khursten: In the next few years, I'm hoping to see diversification in fanfic studies, one that recognizes that there are various forms of fanfictions all over the globe, that contributors to Anglophone fanfiction come from all corners of the world, and that fanfiction has become increasingly multimodal on social media. This is already happening but I hope this diversity in fanfiction and fan cultures continues and become increasingly visible. As fanfiction finds new forms, I also hope that fanfic studies can capture these developments. These multimodal fanfictions are growing (and disappearing) quite quickly so the challenge is for fanfic studies to remain on the pulse of youth expression and fandom.

Louisa: I feel like/hope that we can see the near future of fan fiction studies in the current student papers and theses being shared online now; or perhaps we should consider those the present of fan fiction studies, rather than gatekeep to officially published works by more senior scholars. Fan fiction studies is growing (and needs to grow) to encompass close case studies of the diversity of forms that fan fiction now takes, from vtube narratives to twitter threads, from TikTok fan fiction readings to still thriving Buffy the Vampire Slayer archives, from POV reader insert "imagine" structures to the increasing visibility of and diversity of uses of Archive of Our Own (some not the intended uses!) and everything in between.

Francesca: I hope fanfiction stays small and literary and resists becoming mass culture storytelling even as our digital platforms seem to be encouraging that. By that I mean, I hope fanfiction keeps on being a grassroots world of personal artistic decisions and a site of connection and community between readers and writers (and readers who become writers, and writers who become readers) rather than a "broadcast" system that seeks a large, paying audience. Fanfiction writers who have gone pro still routinely return to fandom and fanfiction for that close writer-reader connection: that place where the author (pace Barthes (1977)) is not dead but is chatting happily with you (and where tomorrow they're the writer and you're the reader!) Writing alone, and then sending that text out to an audience (even a large one, even a profitable one) isn't the same. I've written about fanfiction as a form of performance, and performance nurtures both creators and audiences; it's about the bodies in the room. Performance also is difficult to commodify, and that's one of its strengths; from that point of view, the inability to create meaningful long-term canons of fanfiction stories is a plus and a sign of fanfiction's health and importance as a performance structure. It's responsive, it's for the people reading now; I feel like I would end by quoting Kristina's and Karen Hellekson's introduction to Fan Fiction and Fan Cultures in the Age of the Internet (Hellekson and Busse 2006), where they describe the day to day practices of fandom: "Somewhere in cyberspace, someone complains: 'I had a lousy day! Need some cheering up'. Soon after, a friend posts a story dedicating the piece: 'This is for you, hon'". This is the spirit of fanfic, to me, or as one of my favorite Tumblr posts puts it:

> "I love how internet best friends show each other how much they love each other by dedicating fan fiction to one another It's like 'Hey, You're a fantastic bestfriend, Here's two guys fucking in a kitchen" [sic]—emilyjanesturgess

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Article

Reading Serial Killer Fanfiction: What's Fannish about It?

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Abstract: We have come to a point where the field of fan studies must acknowledge darker, more pathologized and potentially more sinister forms of fandom than we have heretofore. Serial killer fandom is, simultaneously, one of the most visible and least-academically discussed form of fandom, despite a general recognition that certain serial killers are, undeniably, celebrities. Serial killer fanfic is relatively rare, but it certainly exists. In this article, I build on some of the work I have already done on Real Person Fiction, specifically importing the lenses of metalepsis and multimodality as well as the self-conscious intersection between fiction and reality, to look at an example of serial killer fanfic on three platforms—Ao3, Tumblr and Wattpad. The article asks what we can learn from applying a fan studies approach to this phenomenon. Is there anything uniquely problematic about serial killer fanfiction, or is it the same process as what so many already do as a mainstream cultural practice, hypothesizing and imagining the 'backstage' of famous serial killers, as we do with all other celebrities? I compare the 2019 film *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* which focuses on Bundy's private relationship with his long-time girlfriend, his circus-like televised murder trial and his eventual death sentence, with a selection of Ted Bundy fanfiction. Of course, the film does not call itself fanfiction (though several critics have considered it to glorify its subject). I will argue that the distinction between 'serial killer fanfiction' and authorized, industrialized and popular forms of serial killer media, actually, has very little to do with the content of the text, and is based on a complex network of assumptions regarding its author, context and modes of production and reception. If this is so, the questions we should ask of serial killer fanfic are, in fact, much broader questions regarding our cultural fascination with serial killer media, challenging the pathologization of a specific, feminine-coded and extremely stigmatized fannish practice.

Keywords: fanfiction; dark fandom; serial killers; Ted Bundy; pathologization

> In coverage of serial murder, the boundaries between fiction and real life were often blurred to the point of non-distinction. (Jenkins 1994, p. 223)
>
> This is a fanfiction not a news article. (queenofshit 2015)

1. Introduction

Early studies of fanfiction and fanfic community tended towards the celebratory (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992). The first wave of fan studies had a distinct mission: to redeem the category of media fan from stereotyping and pathologizing as well as to demonstrate that fandom was a supportive, creative and collaborative community of normally developed adults. This is understandable—fandom was very much stigmatized until well into the 2000s (Jenson 1992; Zubernis and Larsen 2012), with fanfiction a particularly scandalous category, associated the women, girls, the feminine, queerness and a whole host of stigma that goes along with such identities (hysteria, silly, irrational, immature, either oversexed or undersexed or somehow, simultaneously, both). However, it is now 2022. The figure of the 'fan' has been sufficiently mainstreamed—not to mention commercialized and utilized by the cultural industry—that no particular stigma remains attached to many forms of fandom. Rather, stigma and Other-ing have reattached themselves to select ways of being a fan (Scott 2019): largely, ways that are too feminized, such as loving pop-cultural products

associated with femininity, or writing fanfic in a way that is considered too immature or too emotionally-invested (and/or not commercially exploitable enough).

In any case, we have come to a point where the field can no longer ignore the forms and aspects of fandom that make us uncomfortable, for fear of attracting stigma. Several academics have already published on so-called 'toxic' fandoms: forms of fandom that involve bullying, sexism, racism and related issues (Pande 2018; Proctor and Kies 2018; Williams and Bennett 2021). I am, presently, researching a book on a serial killer fandom, simultaneously one of the most visible and least-academically discussed form of fandom, despite a general recognition that certain serial killers are, undeniably, celebrities (Schmid 2005; Gibson 2006; Haggerty 2009). Indeed, Schmid calls the serial killer the 'exemplary modern celebrity' (Schmid 2005, p. 15): where the quality of knownness has replaced that of merit, and the quality of "being oneself", the performance of a persona, takes primacy over the performance of specific actions. Serial killer fanfic is relatively rare, but it certainly exists. In this article, then, I want to build on some of the work I have already done on Real Person Fiction, specifically, by importing the lenses of metalepsis, and multimodality as well as the self-conscious intersection between fiction and reality, to look at an example of serial killer fanfic on three platforms—Ao3, Tumblr and Wattpad. I ask what we can learn by applying a fan studies approach to the phenomenon: is there anything uniquely problematic about serial killer fanfiction, or is it the same process as what so many already do as a mainstream cultural practice, hypothesizing and imagining the 'backstage' of famous serial killers, as we do with all other celebrities? Could it be both, or does each instance fall somewhere on a spectrum? As the stories I have selected focus on the 1970s serial killer Ted Bundy (see below for methodological choices), I will be comparing the recent film *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (Berlinger 2019), which focuses on Bundy's private relationship with his long-time girlfriend, his circus-like televised murder trial and his eventual death sentence. Of course, the film does not call itself fanfiction (though several critics have considered the director of *Extremely Wicked* and the camera's gaze to be rather enamored with their subject: see Wilkinson (2019) or Sims (2019)). Instead, it bids for the cultural capital of a serious psychological study, like most of the endless stream of real-life serial-killer-based stories in mainstream media. In fact, the question of how one defines 'fan' fiction—even excluding professional media output, and focusing solely on user generated content—is a large one. What, precisely, is the difference between a fan of a serial killer and someone who is interested in true crime? (see Barnes 2019). Where do you draw the line between a pathologized, problematized practice and one that—after Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*—is, literally, culturally respectable? What precisely is the 'fannish' quality of serial killer fanfic? I will argue that the distinction, actually, has very little to do with the content of the text, and is based on a complex network of assumptions regarding its author, context and modes of production and reception. If this is so, the questions we should demand of serial killer fanfic are not 'why does this exist? or 'why would people read and write this?', but in fact are much broader questions regarding our cultural fascination with serial killer media, challenging the pathologization of a specific, feminine-coded and extremely stigmatized fannish practice.

2. On RPF and How to Read It

First, I will review some of the pertinent work on real person fiction generally, notably the interplay between real-life material and the process of fictionalization. I will, then, recap some of the work on the professional mediatization of serial killers, with attention to Robinson's distinction between the processes that they term 'paraphrasis' and 'transrepropriation' (Robinson 2014). Robinson explains:

> Paraphrasis offers a model which considers both the artistic process as well as tangible source materials such as court documents, newspaper accounts, interviews, scholarly works, and photographs. Therefore, through the manipulation of multiple records an overtly fictive arrangement that creates distancing through name changes or apparent narrative shifts. Conversely, the term to describe the

> counter process to paraphrasis is transrepropriation, which takes into account the process of transformation, as well as the repurposing and appropriation of a narrative. In a transrepropriated work the fictive elements, covertly presented as truth are repurposed to the adaptor's vision, with a disregard for the actual person and the life events. This is problematic because works such as this offer the disclaimer: based on a true story, derived from, or inspired by, or the little used faction. (Robinson 2014, pp. 12–13)

We should observe, from the outset, that, whilst fans who write RPF are, typically, at pains to point out that their usage of real-life material is a narrative construct, professional media, whether in the form of films, documentaries or news reports, is not. Then, I will go on to look at three examples of serial killer fanfic, taken from Wattpad, AO3 and Tumblr, respectively. I selected these platforms, as they seemed to host the greatest volume of serial killer fanfic—which, still, represented a tiny fraction of the fanfic available on those sites. For example, AO3 hosts over 6 million stories (Archive of Our Own 2020), and only 11 are tagged 'serial killer—fandom', as of 10 December 2021. This is not an exclusive label—some are, rather, tagged with the name of the serial killer in question—but we should be in no doubt that serial killer fanfic is very niche. The most represented serial killer across the sites seems to be Ted Bundy—which is probably unsurprising, given the recent film, which starred Disney alumni Zac Efron as the serial killer—and the fact that Bundy has a particular celebrity status, due to his outrageous, self-orchestrated trial being the first to be broadcast live on national television. On AO3 and Wattpad, then, I selected the most popular stories featuring Bundy, discounting those stories on Wattpad that explicitly declared themselves 'not a fanfiction'. Now, as noted above, this distinction is, definitely, worthy of interrogation, but I considered it prudent to begin an exploration of serial killer fanfic with serial killer fanfic that self-professes to be so, especially when we are comparing it to cultural products that would certainly disassociate themselves from the label. Popularity is much harder to gauge on Tumblr, as it does not have the 'number of comments' and 'number of kudos' metrics that I used to select the fics from the other sites, but, interestingly, despite Tumblr's reputation amongst true crime aficionados for hosting some of the 'worst' serial killer fans, I found the serial killer fanfic here to be very sparse. I did, eventually, find a suitable text for analysis, which was selected because it was the most prominent self-professed fanfic in the search results featuring Ted Bundy as a character (though Tumblr's search algorithm remains, as ever, a mystery).

Previous work on RPF has tended to focus on what Hagen calls 'the flexibility of celebrity identity'. These arguments have tended to focus on justifying RPF as a legitimate and ethical form of postmodern creativity, understanding the celebrity persona as equally as a 'character', rather than purporting to represent the truth about a human being. This does not really apply in serial killer RPF—writers *know* that most fans consider their output illegitimate and unethical, since they constantly receive comments telling them so. In addition, they rarely spend any time justifying their practice, instead directing commentors not to read it, if they do not approve. There is an interesting divergence here, from other forms of fanfic, which, as I demonstrated in *Fanfiction and Author* (Fathallah 2017), have a tendency to bid for cultural legitimacy by associating themselves with culturally respectable norms of quality fiction and authorship, even as they, necessarily, transform, confront and evade those norms at the level of both form and content. Serial killer fanfic does no such thing—on the contrary, it seems to buck against these norms, which are evident both in wider culture and in fanfic communities. Ironic pennames like 'queenofshit' or 'sluttyfluffartist' (where the first two descriptors undermine the seriousness of the 'artist' tag) undermine a normative author function that signals a quality text. Claims that a text has been written because 'that shit's funny' (sluttyfluffartist), and short retorts that those who do not approve of the fic should just ignore it, rebuff the position of universalism associated with artistic merit. Serial killer fanfic does not want to be legitimate: it revels in its taboo position.

In their 2015 article "Real Body, Fake Person: Recontextualizing Celebrity Bodies in Fandom and Film," Melanie Piper 'examin[es] the similarities between the textual process of adapting real people to fictional characters on both the cinema screen and the computer' (Piper 2015). Piper argues that the fannish textual process of adapting real public figures to fictional contexts shares a common element with adapting public figures to the screen in the biopic: both work to recontextualize the public self of a celebrity, through the representation of a fictionalized or speculated private self.

I believe this is particularly true of serial killer fic. If we consider the recent film *Extremely Wicked,* which mixes real news footage related to Ted Bundy's trial with re-enacted court scenes and imagined intimate encounters from the murderer's private life with his long-time girlfriend Elizabeth Kloepfer, we can easily accommodate Piper's insight that 'the canonical source material [of RPF] is made up of textual fragments from the star image' (2.2), as fans select from all the material publicly available on a celebrity, to create their own text from which to interpret and extrapolate. It is a question, then, why girls who write serial killer fanfic are so intensely pathologized, whilst directors like Berlinger receive plaudits and awards. Which is not to say that *Extremely Wicked* was met with universal acclaim: multiple critics noted that the upbeat 70s soundtrack, the camera's obsession with Efron's face and the total minimization of Bundy's victims does more to glorify him than present any of the sociological or psychological insights serial killer films tend to claim as their cultural capital. As critic Alissa Wilkinson put it in a succinct review headline, 'The Ted Bundy movie starring Zac Efron sure does love Ted Bundy' (Wilkinson 2019). Granted, we could point to its source text—a personal narrative by Kloepfer, writing as Elizabeth Kendall (1981)—as necessitating a focus on the public sphere and away from the crimes of which she was unaware, but this does not explain the directorial and editorial choices:

> The camera constantly pulls in close to Efron's face, lingering on his portrayal of Bundy when he's most sympathetic and funny and kind, rather than dwelling on his truly brutal moments. You know he's evil, but the camera sure doesn't. (Wilkinson 2019)

However, of course, there is more to the definition of RPF than 'stories about a real person whom the author/director seems to admire'. Definition is a matter of fannish context and histories; of technological form and format; and of modes of expectation and reception. There is the matter of what Punday calls 'texture': a shared set of generic and cultural expectations that guides the way a reader engages with a text (Punday 2014). The texture of RPF is quite clear: everyone knows it is not 'really real'. The texture around biopics, dramas 'based on a true story', or whatever *Extremely Wicked* is supposed to be, is much vaguer.

I have written previously that RPF, which is largely online, ought to be analyzed through at least some of the lenses we apply to reading digital fiction, since the 'hypertextual, multimodal context of digital fiction allows for specific forms of metalepsis, which [. . .] we see at work in RPF in genre-specific ways' (Fathallah 2018, p. 569). Metalepsis is the self-conscious interplay between fiction and reality, construction of reality or interpretations. In its most simplistic form, consider an interjection from a television character or a novel's narrator that breaks the fourth wall—a moment of connection between author, reader and/or character that acknowledges their shared investment in the fictional construct of the story. Bell (2014) explains that 'metalepsis was originally defined by the narrative theorist Genette as any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by the diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse' (Genette [1972] 1980, pp. 234–35). In RPF, there is usually an intense self-consciousness about the construction of fiction: what Robinson would call paraphrasis. Sometimes, metalepsis, deliberately, flags up the differences between levels of reality or fiction, but we, also, observe in RPF a tendency towards what Ryan calls 'ontological metalepsis', which 'opens a passage between levels' of reality and, thus, 'result(s) in their interpenetration, or mutual contamination' (Ryan 2006, p. 207). In my previous study of RPF, I found this often. In my study of serial killer fanfic, I found it seldom—rather,

metaleptic shifting tended to operate between the story-world and the shared (real-world) interactions between the author and readers, setting the story at a further fictive remove. This was particularly true, as two the of the stories sampled involved a proxy character for the reader to imagine themselves into, whether via second person narration or the author's specific instruction. This relates to the fact that like most digital fiction, RPF is communal: it contains what I have, previously, called a 'top plot', the diegetic narrative, and a secondary plot, readable in the introduction, the author's notes and the author–comments exchanges: this is the story of how the story was written, as part of a broader community of interest. Sometimes, the plots spill into each other, as when an author responds to comment requests for a plot feature.

I have not sought permission to cite these texts. When fanfiction communities were more closed, more based on personal connections and less platform-based (see Kelley 2021), I used to endorse the practice of seeking permission for every quotation. Now, this is no longer practical—as authors are both more anonymous and harder to contact—and less ethically necessary, as fanfiction is more public. None of these texts were written in personal journals, but on highly public platforms. Kelley (2021) argues that we ought to approach fanfic research ethics from a situational perspective, proceeding with an attitude of goodwill and respect towards our participants, even where the material is challenging to us. Perhaps, especially, when the material is challenging to us. To that end, I approach these texts with no intention to pathologize their authors or commenters, but the same way I would approach any of the other innumerable, culturally legitimated texts regarding private serial killers: from an attitude of neutrality, with an additional awareness that these (feminized, stigmatized, bad-fannish texts) are pathologized, whilst those are not. Moreover, I have opted not to create a permanent archive of said texts: the reader may access them by following the bibliography, only whilst the authors have elected to make them freely available.

3. Findings

The most-read serial killer story on Wattpad, as of September 2021, was titled *Hell Beside You*, by author 2Krunk. It had 587 comments, 4400 reads, and 70 'votes'. The vast discrepancy between the number of comments and positive votes is due the fact that serial killer fanfic attracts disproportionately negative attention: the vast majority of comments on other fanfic are positive, due to an unspoken norm of simply moving on in silence, if one does not enjoy a story one can, after all, access for free (Kelley 2021, p. 61). This story was ongoing, standing at 35 chapters. Actually, all the stories in the sample were ongoing or left unfinished, which may suggest less of a communal drive towards completion than in more popular fandoms. The story is extensively tagged, with tags including 'fiction'; 'nonfiction'; 'historical'; 'serialkiller' and 'truecrime'. Immediately a tension is set up between 'fiction' and 'nonfiction', and the story utilizes a real photograph of Bundy, dressed in his usual smart suit, at his trial. This might, initially, seem like ontological metalepsis: the deliberate commixture of fact and fiction, but the author's note makes clear this explicit fictionalizing: 'most of this is not historically accurate'. More ambiguous is the author's posture towards the main character. The author's note opens with the declarative: '[this is] a Ted Bundy fanfic'. This is shortly followed with the note:

> (Understand that this is not to make Ted look good, and it's not to glorify him, it's simply just a story. Pls don't read this if you're the type to get triggered. Like, just don't.)

What does 'just a story' mean in this context? What does '*fan*fic' mean, if the author states an intention *not* to glorify or make the persona 'look good'? Of course, all kinds of fanfic can be critical of characters, of writing, of authors and of directors—but, equally, the act of writing implies an emotional attachment, an investment. Perhaps no greater an investment than directors like Berlinger have in their murderous subjects—perhaps, even less of one, considering the time and labor invested in writing and directing a feature-length biopic (plus, in Berlinger's case, an almost-simultaneous documentary on the same subject).

Perhaps, in our intensely mediated, industry-convergent, 'authenticity'-obsessed culture, the definition of fanfic is becoming, increasingly, blurred.

The premise of *Hell Beside You* is that the reader, who is also a serial killer, enters into a sexual and emotional relationship with Bundy, at the same time (fictional) investigators start to suspect him. The convention for fanfic, in which the reader inserts themselves into the role of a character, is for the author to use '(y/n)' [your name] as a pronoun, but 2Krunk pronounces this 'boring', and informs that reader that, therefore, the character will be named Alary Wilson, but 'ofc you read it however u want bb'. Note the texture being established: the rules of engagement with this text, in which the reader is free to insert themselves as the main character—or not, should they prefer. The endearment 'bb' (baby) establishes a convivial, conspiratorial relationship between author and reader, enhanced by the note that the story will 'start off a tad gruesome, but that's what you're here for, aren't you?'. There is no pretense of a moral stance—the investigative questioning and the sociological/psychological insights, which serial killer biopics propose to make (though they often do not), are eschewed. The story opens with a fictionalization of a scene at an unspecified 'lake', presumably Lake Sammamish, where Bundy abducted two women in 1974. The author informs us:

> In real life, there was a lot of people at this lake one day and Ted sat in his car eyeing all the girls, he ended up killing two that day and sat and watched police search for them. I'm going off of that right now. (2Krunk 2020)

Notably, though, whilst the story could include the name or image of the lake, or even a link to a view of it, it does not. This is not 'in real life', after all. In this story, the reader murders another young woman, her former friend, whilst unbeknownst her, Ted Bundy observes her. The perspective in the story switches constantly, between the reader and Bundy (and, later, other characters), highlighting the fiction of the reader's identification with the character that represents her. This form of metalepsis explicitly draws the reader in, sometimes via dramatic irony—the reader's character is unaware that 'Ted' was initially considering killing her. However:

> He thought of all those bad things he likes doing to women and thought of doing it to her. He could have easily done it, speaking that fact that he did bring a knife with him for that very reason, but he liked that she just killed another woman. So he decided he didn't want to. He found her intriguing. (2Krunk 2020)

This may tap a fantasy often attributed to serial killer fans—that despite fitting the serial killer's profile, they would be safe due to their special quality and ability to influence the murderer. However, my intention here is not to psychoanalyze the reader or author. It is, equally, plausible, given the frequency with which Bundy contemplates killing the reader's character, that 'you' are being depicted as rather foolish for indulging in this idea. Indeed, having initially found the reader's character interesting, Bundy immediately becomes annoyed with her expressions of regret, reflecting 'Maybe I'll end up killing her like I do every girl I meet' and imagining himself strangling her. The reader's character is repeatedly frightened by his abrupt changes in expression and action, just as was reported of the real Bundy and depicted in multiple biopics. Sometimes, the author seems to be explicitly mocking this notion, as they have the reader's character reflect on 'what he could do to me, but he has not yet', musing, 'I sure am something special huh?'

The reader's character goes on to commit further murders, both with Bundy and alone, throughout an increasingly tumultuous relationship. Though most of the events in the story are pure fiction, the author invokes several well-known factual touchstones, such as Bundy's car being a 'tan Volkswagen' and him keeping handcuffs in his car, evoking the 1970s via descriptions of fashion and technology. At other times, the author makes explicit metaleptic interjections into the story, commenting on the characters' behaviors and speech, describing them as 'they', rather than the first-person pronouns utilized in the top plot. Sometimes, the author addresses the reader directly in the notes, using the nickname 'killer' that Bundy uses for the reader's character in the story. In yet another metaleptic

complication, very occasionally, the author utilizes the 'I' pronoun of the reader's character, to make a self-conscious metaleptic interaction:

> I went and sat in the living room, waiting for Ted to come get me. I had butterflies in my stomach, and my palms were sweaty, knees weak and my arms were heavy. Sorry, I shouldn't be quoting futuristic references and breaking the fourth wall. (2Krunk 2020)

The 'futuristic reference' is a paraphrased reference to the 2002 song 'Lose Yourself' by the rap artist Eminem, which has become an internet meme often used in jokes and bait-and-switch stories to break the reader's immersion. The upshot of these effects is that whilst biopics frequently foreground the 'real' elements of their story, in a bid for authenticity and cultural capital (Robinson 2014, p. 156), RPF foregrounds the 'fiction'. Finally, the author seems, at times, to highlight the cultural illegitimacy of serial killer fanfic, parenthetically inserting descriptions of their own text such as '(I'm wheezing rn, sorry if it's too weird for u)' (2Krunk 2020). Online, the expression 'I'm wheezing' typically refers to uncontrolled laughter or another bodily expression of excess. The author, also, metatextually highlights the connections between serial killer fanfiction and culturally legitimate biopics, inserting a meme into their author's notes that shows an image of actor Zac Efron morphing into a real-life image of Bundy (see Figure 1). The progression is captioned 'when she leaves you on read', implying that an ordinary man may become a murderer in response to a text left unreplied. It is, thus, impossible to ignore the exchange between these texts.

Figure 1. 'When she leaves you on read'.

As observed, a much higher proportion of the reviews for this text were negative than is typical in fanfic. The majority of reviews (587 of 1017) were on the first chapter, demonstrating that most readers simply wanted to comment on its existence rather than its content. Most of these are along the lines of 'wtf is this' (caulifoluu 2021); 'this is is sick as fuck' (mattheosgirlfriendd 2021) or 'u need help. u need to be locked in a mental asylum for a very long time' (vestalwitch 2021). Some, explicitly, hark back to the pathologization of fandom that has now transferred onto certain fandoms specifically, appealing to the author to 'please, be fucking normal you absolute social reject' (kurtcobainscumart 2021). Others take explicit issue with what they perceive as the author's and readers' delusions: 'I honestly hope people genuinely wanting to read this know he'd rape and torture them and dump their bodies like everyone else's. Besties aren't special' followed by a skull emoji (michahoioii 2021). 'Besties' is current online slang for more-or-less anyone the writer is addressing, often used ironically to highlight the gap between the implication of 'best friendship' and the actual (lack of) relationship between writer and reader. Some comments draw explicit boundaries between the type of engagement with serial killer texts that is permissible or acceptable and that which is not:

> I'm taking a psychology class and we're learning about Ted Bundy because he was a serial killer and we're gonna look at brain scans and such so I thought it would be funny to search and I'm shocked that people write and read in a non-educational way about him. (potatoeduck 2021)

One might wonder why the shock, considering that the vast majority of writing about serial killers can hardly be called educational: the endless tabloid fodder, the pop-psych articles and the magazine 'shocking escapes'. However, most commenters are in agreement that serial killer narratives must be fictional, educational or both, to be acceptable, and they, consistently, deny that the story is 'fiction':

> 'This is fiction'. No it fucking isn't. He killed, tortured and raped countless women, his youngest was fucking twelve. (straight_f_student 2021)

The author and the readers who praise the text, consistently, make the same rebuttals: the story is fictional, no one is forcing the critical commenters to read it and they are free to read and write whatever they want. Naturally, once we move past the first chapter, the comments are more positive, mostly praising the quality of the writing and ignoring the issue of fiction all together. One point of particular interest is the readers' intermittent identification with the central character, who is sometimes referred to as 'she' and other times as 'we'. The metaleptic movement in and out of identification seems to be an explicit part of the texture, or rules of the story, that highlight its status us 'unreal'.

As noted, serial killer fanfic was surprisingly difficult to find on Tumblr. Perhaps it is hidden in tags known only to enthusiasts. One blog to which that the algorithm returned consistently (upon searching 'serial killer fanfic'), was the blog titled 'sluttyfluffartist', which incorporates the History Channel logo above its title on an all-black background (see Figure 2). The seriousness and claims to cultural capital of said logo are immediately parodied by the flippant tagline: 'I write fanfics of real historical figures because that shit's funny. Don't like it then leave homeboy' (sluttyfluffartist n.d.). Once again, the tension between fanfic and the real is established from the outset.

Figure 2. sluttyfluffartist header.

'Fluff', in fanfic terms, refers to fiction that is light-hearted and aims for sweetness, cuteness and/or an endearing quality, hardly the sort of content one would expect of serial killer fic. Yet this is what the short installments, which feature not only Ted Bundy but other murderers, such as Richard Ramirez and Jeffrey Dahmer, are comprised of. Given the total lack of focus on murder in these short episodes, which focus primarily on the juvenile and college days of said murderers (all simultaneously, and in the same town, apparently) and their interactions with a local girl named Kassidy, one has to wonder if, taken against the blog's stated intention to be 'funny', this is simply a form of trolling. Some displays of killer fandom are certainly trolling (see Rico 2015): to bid for attention, to aggrieve and annoy for the sake of provoking a reaction and to lay claim to a taboo position that fandom, in general, no longer occupies. Yet, there are some similarities with 'Hell Beside You', thematically: the introduction of a young female central character, who feels both romantically and defensively towards the serial killers. There is very little plot, to speak of, just episodic interactions that are supported by Tumblr's short text-post format: the characters play baseball, move moving boxes, visit each other's houses and have flirtatious interactions with the main female character. These posts tend to receive some likes (typically ten to eleven), but, unsurprisingly, I saw no reblogs. The blog intersperses these posts with images, memes and gifs relating to serial killers, as well as Nazis—though it, also, explicitly mocks neo-Nazis. I am reasonably confident that the whole blog is an act of provocation—theatrical trolling, perhaps. All in all, it is—perhaps deliberately—very difficult to make sense of, and, once again, requires us to stretch and interrogate the boundaries of what RPF actually is—indeed, what fanfiction is, in this complex, multimediated and endlessly metatetual and intertextual landscape.

> The top rated serial killer fanfic I found on Archive of Own was called 'Your Timing is Impeccable'. This is actually tagged as 'Historical American Criminals RPF', though I did find it by searching for serial killers. The author calls themself 'queenofshit', a name that again suggests deliberate trolling, though this is actually a coherently crafted story standing at 12,628 words as of October 2021. It is also tagged 'Ted Bundy/Reader', positioning it as another story whereby the reader is represented by a central character, and 'I'm Going to Hell', acknowledging and displaying the genre's taboo status. The author's note informs us that she is 'only a little sorry' for publishing this, and utilizes the same pre-emptive defences we see all over serial killer RPF: 'if you don't like it don't read it. Simple'. (queenofshit 2015)

This story is written in second-person: the central character is explicitly 'you'. As this is relatively unusual, in fanfic as in all fiction, there is something confronting and implicating about reading it. It is very difficult to refrain from imaging oneself as the

subject of sentences such as 'You shifted in your seat' or 'You glanced at him'. Him being, of course, Ted Bundy. This story is explicit about the reader's imaginative investment and participation, with the author reminding us:

> Like I said before, this will not be a 100% accurate retelling (of course), hell you could pretend this takes place in 2015 if you wanted to. I tried to write it so you could but still, some details might be off and if so please be gentle. This is a fanfiction not a news article. (queenofshit 2015)

There are several points of note here. The author's request that readers 'be gentle' seems rather at odds with the topic, and connects reader and author explicitly in a negotiation around this taboo story that—presumably—readers have sought out. A03 makes it easy to filter content at quite specific levels, whereas searching for serial killer fanfics on Wattpad turned up all sorts of material, most of which concerned purely fictional characters. We might expect that the texture is different here then—there is more of an unspoken agreement that readers and author want to share this material, specifically, reflected in the fact that most of the 92 comments are positive. Secondly, the statement 'this is a fanfiction not a news article', omitting the term 'real', foregrounds the fictionality of the narrative, which the reader is invited to partake in: 'you could pretend this takes places in 2015 if you wanted to'. Would this even qualify as paraphrasis? Finally, it is notable that the author posits a 'news article' as the, supposedly, factual counterpart of a story—most news articles about serial killers are a mélange of fact, exaggeration, speculation, rumor and inference, presented as fact through a similar process of transrepropration as biopics undertake. In an in-depth study of the social discursive construction of serial murder, Phillip Jenkins has shown that in 'in coverage of serial murder, the boundaries between fiction and real life were often blurred to the point of non-distinction' (Jenkins 1994, p. 223).

Again, the plot of this story concerns the reader's romantic liaisons with Bundy, who, intermittently, charms and causes her fear, though this time they are unaware that he is the murderer the news is presently reporting on. This was the real position of Bundy's long-time girlfriend Elizabeth Kloepfer, who wrote the memoir that *Extremely Wicked* is based on. The reader's identification with the 'you-character' is, thus, metaleptically complicated, as the real reader, of course, has the knowledge of hindsight. When 'your' friends warn 'you' that you had 'better be careful' as the missing girls 'look an awful lot like you':

> You shook your head at your friend's stupidity, Ted pulled you closer to him. (queenofshit 2015)

The metaleptic split intensifies as the author instructs us in chapter notes 'the reader is blissfully oblivious': we are, of course, the farthest thing from it. In this invitation, to implicate ourselves in the fantasy, we are instructed to set the story-world aside from our 'real', reading selves, even as the repletion of physical features, such as 'your fingers' or 'your eyebrows', locates us within the story. The dramatic irony intensifies, as the (fictional) reader discovers the (real) tools that the (real) Bundy used and stored in his car, as the (real) reader is, likely, already aware, including ski mask, crow bar and tire iron. Putting on the mask:

> You crept up behind him, and wrapped your hands around his waist. "I think you've been a bad boy, Theodore." Ted wasn't easily startled, not even close. He loved to sneak up on you, getting you every time, but you had never once scared him. But when he turned his head you were sure you'd almost scared him. His whole body tensed and his eyes widened.
>
> "Where'd . . . . What . . . ."
>
> You smiled, pulling away from him and hopping up on the counter.
>
> You laughed, "And the crow bar?"
>
> He moved his hands up your side, creeping under your shirt. "Every volkswagen owner has one". (queenofshit 2015)

As the fictional reader slowly becomes slightly more suspicious, their relationship becomes more tense despite becoming engaged, mirroring the narrative of Kloepfer's book and *Extremely Wicked*. If the reader has any knowledge of Kloepfer's narrative—which they likely do, given an existing interest in Bundy and the recent film, a further metaleptic split, thus, arises. These events really took place: Bundy was arrested, and maintained his innocence to his girlfriend, even as she, increasingly, suspected the weight of evidence against him. However, they did not happen to 'us'. In a way, then, this story puts the reader less in a position of empathy with a murderer than with a woman who was taken advantage of, tricked and manipulated into disbelieving the evidence in front of her own eyes. So, what makes it fanfiction? Specifically, what makes it *more fanfiction* than *Extremely Wicked*, which, likewise, contains several romantic and/or erotic sex scenes between Bundy and both Kloepfer and his later wife, Carol Boone? At the level of textual content, I would argue: nothing. It is, purely, the contexts of production that define the cultural status of the texts. One is communal, amateur, free, published in a fanfic archive, and tagged and discovered according to fandom conventions. The other bears the Foucauldian author-function of a filmic auteur, professional production values, requires a purchase or Netflix subscription and is sorted and promoted by industry algorithms and standards.

Even the comments on *Your Timing Is Impeccable* note the easy slide between cultural sanctioned texts and fanfic, describing their personalized experiences of media flow thus:

> So I was watching a documentary earlier this evening on Ted Bundy and you know he's was crazy. So my brain being how it is said "That's hot. I wonder if there's any good fancfiction [sic] on him. So now I've read yours and I love all but one chapter of it. (indigonightmare 2018)

And after a pause in updates:

> OMG YOUR [sic] BACK?!??!???!? I'm so glad!!!!!!! I was just watching a documentary and was like "man, I'm in the mood to re-read my favorite fan fiction of this monster." And was glad it's been updated!!!!!. (Pookiepook 2019)

The comments depict divergent routes to the story, based on divergent readings of the culturally legitimate documentary form. One considered the documentary 'hot'—the other considers Bundy a 'monster', yet already knew about and relished the story, demonstrating an easy movement back and forth between the texts.

4. Conclusions

In sum, then, it seems that the pathologization of serial killer fanfic has far less to do with its content than it does with its cultural position: feminized, amateur and free. If we wish to condemn it, to see it is a symptom of sickness or pathologization, we ought to, in the name of both fairness and rigor of analysis, apply exactly the same lens to all the endless professional texts on the backstage of serial killers: from tabloid speculation to Netflix hits. Which, indeed, some critics do. In fact, critics such as Robinson (2014), who consider the paraphrasic nature of these stories, which foreground the less problematic in contrast to biopics' obscuration of it, might say we should be *more* concerned about the professional products. These stories are certainly metaleptic, but the metalepsis operates more between the top plot and the secondary plot—the reader's investment in the fiction and their discussion with the author—than the 'real' world and a fictional one. We are, also, confronted with anomalies: forms of fanfic that barely seem like stories, more like trolling for provocation on blogs devoted to the same. Tragedy trolling is hardly new—in fact, it is an internet mainstay (kill all normies). Yet, serial killer fanfic is still depicted as something exceptionally shocking, some profoundly disturbing and unique symptom of contemporary culture (a strange perspective, given that serial killer fandom has existed at least since Victorian England), whilst the endless production of serial killer media goes unquestioned. The questions we need to ask are not 'why do girls write serial killer fanfic?' and 'what's wrong with them?', but 'why are serial killers the exemplary modern celebrity?' (Schmid 2005, p. 15). Moreover, 'should we be concerned about that?'

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Article

Reframing Monetization: Compensatory Practices and Generating a Hybrid Economy in Fanbinding Commissions

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Abstract: Monetization of fan-made crafts and texts remains a contentious issue in fandom. The existing literature documents fans' rejections of explicitly for-profit, authorized spaces for fanfiction publication, such as Kindle Worlds and FanLib, but tenuous acceptance of crafts and practitioners who demonstrate adherence to gift culture principles. Fanbinding—the practice of binding fanworks into codex form—brings to the fore concerns of author permission, intellectual copyright, and compensation for artistic labor prevalent in arguments regarding fanfiction monetization. Our research draws from survey data collected from thirty-one fanbinders and examines how they justify their decision-making on taking commissions through perceptions of acceptable fannish behavior and definitions of gift culture. We found that binders who do take commissions overall reject an explicitly for-profit enterprise and instead reinvest funds back into their craft, strengthening binders and commissioners' ability alike to contribute to the fandom gift economy. Here, binders offer a concentrated model for how to navigate competing concerns about fannish self-preservation, gift economy, and sustaining a costly craft, offering insights into how practitioners of other fancrafts might similarly navigate a third-space hybrid economy to justify compensation.

Keywords: fanbinding; bookbinding; fandom; compensation; gift culture; monetization; hybrid economy

1. Introduction

Monetization is a long-standing and contentious issue in fandom. Fans have historically rejected monetization in favor of a broadly defined "gift culture" that understands the exchange of fanworks as affective labor, motivated by love, interpersonal relationships, and not for profit. There are fan cultures, however, that welcome saleable fanworks, such as apparel to fill gaps in the market left by an official media enterprise. Fan opinions on monetized fanworks remain a tricky arena to navigate, but generally fans are receptive to compensatory practices that can arguably fall within the parameters of fandom gift culture.

Fanbinding, or the practice of binding fanfiction and other fan texts into physical books, provides a provocative locale for studying fandom compensatory practices because it brings to the fore several complexities related to fanwork monetization. Firstly, fanbinding requires high-cost tools and materials, and commissioning fanbound works to cover these costs alleviates the financial burden of an expensive fancraft hobby. Fan creators sell other fancrafts on online platforms with little to no backlash, in part due to the understanding that creating physical objects adds an extra expense compared to digitally circulated works (Jones 2014).

Secondly, fanbinders most often use fanfiction as their source material, which historically carries the largest stigma against monetization attempts, largely in part due to third-party corporate interference most often targeting this format. These take the form of FanLib and Kindle Worlds, which sought to sell fanfiction through licensing programs and pull-to-publish examples such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which replaced all copyrighted

material in the fanfiction *Master of the Universe* and published it as original fiction. While on the surface fanbinders appear to operate as a new third-party fanfiction publisher, fanbinding is distinctly a one-to-one fan-run practice.

Finally, binding fanfiction introduces ethical considerations regarding remixing existing fanworks. Fans often hold conflicting viewpoints related to fanfic authors' control over their own works versus the celebration of fandom's remix culture (Busse 2015). While fanbound works can be considered transformative works based off of other fanwork, fanbinders also face potential accusations of theft and profiting off another's work.

The commission-based practice of select fanbinders enacts Lessig's (2008) concept of a hybrid economy, which Noppe (2011) introduced as applicable to the practices of fandom gift economy. The hybrid economy is accessed through the binder's and commissioner's intent to contribute to the gift economy, even as that practice is supplemented by compensation. Drawing additionally from Turk's (2014) expansion of the gift economy to include labor as well as objects, this practice suggests that we can reconfigure money in the hybrid economy as compensation, or remuneration commensurate with labor and materials used, rather than monetization, or explicitly for-profit driven. Compensation generates new arenas of participation in gift culture by allowing participants without the skills or time to contribute to making fanworks and circulating gifted work.

This article examines the fanwork monetization debate through the lens of fanbinding, a fancraft with a newly formed community and developing community practices. Analyzing fanbinders' views on monetization and compensatory practices offers a unique opportunity to explore an established topic with the added factors of the hobby's high expense, increased ethical considerations, and sensitive source material relative to other fancrafts. Fanbinders offer a case study of how fanwork practitioners navigate compensation while accounting for the complications of author permission, intellectual copyright, artistic labor, and under what circumstances one might be able to compensate a binder for their work.

2. Fandom and Monetization: A Review

2.1. Fandom Gift Culture and Approaches to Compensation

Fan communities have an established history of creating works based on popular media sources. Fuller-Seeley (2018) describes fan practices of creating scrapbooks of articles, theater programs, and photos dating to the early nineteenth century. Throughout the twentieth century, fans also created and circulated fanzines containing commentary on the original content, fan discussions and news, and fanworks such as fanfiction and fanart (Coppa 2006). Today, fanworks and fan objects include nearly every visual and textual medium: texts, artworks, songs, videos (Jenkins 1992), prop replicas (Hills 2014), costumes or "cosplay" outfits (Scott 2014), customizable action figures (Godwin 2014), jewelry and knitting patterns (Jones 2014), and more. These fan-created objects fall into one of two categories: "mimetic," which are closely accurate to canonical depictions, and transformative (Hills 2014). Rehak (2018) explores the "complicated relationships between canonicity and creativity" in fan creation as some fans focus on creating objects that faithfully reflect canon material, such as Star Trek fans building replicas of the Starship Enterprise (Rehak 2018, p. 114). Others use canon as a starting point for transformative works that intervene in, disrupt, or outright reject the features of canon media, often explored in media like fanfiction.

Fandom is well-known for championing a gift economy over a commercial one in creating fanworks, and many scholars have discussed fans' definitions of gift culture and traditional fan practices within the gift economy (De Kosnik 2009; Hellekson 2009; Stanfill 2018; Hills 2002; Turk 2014). The gift economy is traditionally understood as a one-to-one exchange between fans within media-centered communities of gifts created out of love and without expectation of remuneration, but instead community affirmation (Turk 2014). In the fandom gift economy, fans can gain status by providing high quality fanworks to their communities. The understood rules of the gift economy dictate reciprocity in the

form of comments, feedback, or other works, though these customs have noticeably shifted towards unresponsiveness in recent years (Stanfill 2018).

In examining fanbinding, we further adopt Turk's (2014) expansion of the gift economy to include gifts of labor, such as content moderation, tag wrangling, and conference organizing, to name a few. Broadening the gift economy to include labor as well as objects and crafts introduces new pathways to consider compensatory practices for that labor.

The history and practices of fandom gift culture, as well as the evolving coexistence of fandom gift culture and compensatory practices for fanworks, are well-documented in the scholarly literature (De Kosnik 2009; Hellekson 2009; Stanfill 2018; Hills 2002; Santo 2018; Hellekson 2015; Dym and Fiesler 2018). While fan communities tend to favor a gift culture and create fanworks primarily for fun or through affective motivation for their communities, some fan creators increasingly seek and receive monetary compensation for the fanworks they produce. The methods of compensation vary and continue to evolve, but overall fan-driven monetization of fanworks remains largely small-scale and limited in scope and profit.

While fans have sold and continue to sell fanzines, fanart, and other fan-made objects alongside licensed merchandise at conventions (Jenkins 1992; Jones 2014; Fanlore 2020), the rising popularity of online marketplaces provides an easier and more economically viable option for fans to sell their objects on commerce sites. Online platforms like Etsy (http://www.etsy.com, accessed on 10 February 2022) have made it easier for fan creators to sell hand-crafted items, allowing some fan creators to develop their hobby or side-business into their primary stream of income (Santo 2018; Busse 2015). Etsy and comparable platforms, however, place the burden of creating, promoting, selling, and shipping the items on the fan creator (Jones 2014). Print-on-demand websites like Redbubble (https://redbubble.com, accessed on 10 February 2022) allow for fan creators to simply post a design and select which items—such as t-shirts, phone cases, and notebooks—they want the design available to print on. Redbubble manages the production and distribution of items sold on its platform in return for a percentage of the sale price, but fan creators do not set the prices or control these terms (Jones 2014). Other platforms like Ravelry (https://www.ravelry.com/, accessed on 10 February 2022) allow for fan creators to sell knitting patterns instead of a physical object (Cherry 2016).

Commodification of fandom has recently evolved to include subscription and influencer models on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and Twitch. These are particularly popular with cosplayers, who use social media platforms to cultivate a brand and draw in sponsorships and other paid opportunities such as modeling or convention appearances (Haborak 2020; Rouse and Salter 2021).

Some fan creators have adopted a donation model, relying on fans' enjoyment and recognition of their work for revenue through platforms such as Ko-fi (https://ko-fi.com/, accessed on 10 February 2022), Patreon (https://www.patreon.com/, accessed on 10 February 2022), or OnlyFans (https://onlyfans.com, accessed on 10 February 2022) (Rouse and Salter 2021; Dym and Fiesler 2018). Archive of Our Own (AO3), a popular fan-run fanwork archive, does not allow links to such donation accounts on their site but fan creators can still advertise their acceptance of donations on social media accounts (Murdock 2017). This compensatory model enables creators to freely circulate their works online while allowing for other fans to provide optional monetary support in return. These opt-in monetary donations provide another, if less popular, mode of affirmation, similar to feedback or comments in return for fanworks in fandom gift culture.

While fandom gift culture is often positioned as dichotomous to commercial economic practices (Jones 2014; Scott 2009; Stanfill 2018), these two economies have coexisted throughout fandom history in various iterations. Fans have adopted compensatory practices that receive little to no backlash from fan communities, such as the aforementioned fanwork presence in digital stores and donation-based payment models. Hills (2002) explores the contradiction between fans' "anti-commercial beliefs" and fan consumption that has always existed within fandom (Hills 2002, p. 29). Santo (2018) further argues that the fandom

gift economy is not entirely absent from fans selling their fanworks because "the terms of transaction are folded in with demonstrations of fannish affinity" and fan creators will often share design ideas and accept input on their creations (Santo 2018, p. 334). Although the end goal is to sell these objects, the creators are most often fans themselves, providing a shared community basis within the buyer-seller relationship absent in typical economic transactions. The inclusion of fanon concepts into fanworks further ties these creations to their fan communities because fanon is created collaboratively through fannish discussion and production (Goodman 2015).

With these collaborative features at play, fans are increasingly receptive to certain compensatory practices that fall within the dimensions of the gift economy. For example, fans accept monetary practices that fill gaps in the canonical offerings of an authorized market, where for-purchase fanworks offer items that reflect strictly fan-interpretations of source materials. Conversely, when fans participate in monetary transactions for fanworks, "they are not perceived as a form of purchasing but as a form of gifting" (De Kosnik 2009, p. 121; Hellekson 2009). The expansive definitions of fandom gift culture open the specifics of acceptable practices up to interpretation, and participants often locate gift culture in intent.

Even operating with a gift ethos, fans frequently receive some mode of monetary compensation for the fanworks they produce for fan communities, creating forms of money regulated by social conventions (Zelizer 2017). To account for the links and differences between a gift economy and a profit-driven commercial economy, Noppe (2011) posed a hybrid economic model for fan communities, which allows for gift culture and monetization to coexist by "straddl[ing] the commercial and sharing sphere without harming or erasing either". Noppe identifies a potential model for a fandom hybrid economy in open-source software:

> The best-known and most developed hybrid economy currently in existence is that of open-source software. In fact, one way to make the commodification of fan works easier to envision for all parties involved is to imagine fan work as a sort of "open source cultural good" (Hughes et al. 2007) that could be exchanged in a hybrid economy comparable to the hybrid economy surrounding open- source software.

She also provides the example of dōjinshi, or fan-made manga, in Japanese and other Asian fan communities as a successful execution of this economic model. While she notes that fandom overall may not be ready to implement such a model, citing fan concerns of corporate third-party intrusion, accusations of copyright infringement, and fears of damage to fandom culture, fan creators have started adopting practices in the last decade that align with the definition of a hybrid economy.

2.2. Debating Monetization

Despite the introduction of optional monetary return for fanworks, fans do not universally accept systematizing fanwork circulation and profit to third-party platforms. Fans and scholars alike continue to debate the ethics and potential consequences of monetizing aspects of fandom, and fanfiction remains the most contentious medium regarding monetary compensation for fanworks (Stanfill 2018; Jones 2014). While pre-internet fandom practices included fanfiction in for-purchase fanzines, fandom's migration to online environments resulted in widespread rejection of monetized fanfiction. Illustratively, in response to a user question regarding fandom's strict rejection of paying for fanfiction on the Dreamwidth community "Fail. Fandom. Anon." (FFA), an anonymous discussion forum, one respondent wrote:

> I hate it because of two reasons. (1) Because I think this has the potential to change fic-writing culture for the worse. It makes it less of a hobby, raises the stakes, and changes the spirit of the interaction between fic writers and readers. I want people in fandom to be peers, not customers and vendors. I don't want fandom to become commercialised. (2) Because as long as fic isn't making money,

> it's much less likely that copyright holders will slam down on us like a ton of bricks. If they see fans making profit off their work, there's a huge increase in the risk that action will be taken. I like fanfic too much to find that risk acceptable.
>
> (Anon 2016)

Fanfiction writers generally feel that their works should not be sold for profit even though the volume of fanworks and fan activity suggests a large potential market for fanfiction (De Kosnik 2009). Their hesitation stems from three concerns: an interest in preserving fandom gift culture and fandom practices (Hellekson 2015); a belief that fandom content would not be successful in traditional publishing practices (De Kosnik 2009); and a fear of copyright infringement lawsuits or content takedowns from copyright holders and online platforms (De Kosnik 2009; Hellekson 2009; Noppe 2011). Stanfill (2018) notes that this fear of legal censure has lessened somewhat in recent years, exemplified by the rarity of disclaimers attached to fanfics posted online, which was once standard practice.

These concerns of quality, community, and legality contribute to the contentious arena of fanfiction, compensation, and fanworks. Fans' hesitance to monetize fanfiction in particular raises provocative questions regarding fanbinding commissions. Fanbinders most often bind fanfiction, so their perspectives on monetizing fanworks provide insight into compensation, the gift economy with regards to fanfiction, and how changing attitudes may play out in other mediums.

Unlike other fancrafts, fanfiction has no pathway to monetization within acceptable limits of a gift culture. Jones (2014) discusses the cost of materials associated with physical fancrafts in comparison to digital works, which typically do not share that financial burden: "electrons are perceived as free, but creating a Harry Potter–themed scarf requires buying yarn and equipment" (Jones 2014, section 4.2). By providing free digital access where possible (e.g., posting fan art on social media) and selling only physical objects, often at cost, fan creators can monetize their crafts while still operating within a gift economy. In contrast, avenues for for-profit fanfiction have remained limited to publication through corporate third-parties, resulting in a net-loss to the fan communities as for-profit publication necessitates a takedown from freely available fandom archives (Jones 2014).

Fans' hesitance towards fanfiction monetization derives in part from long-standing concerns over copyright infringement, generated by early-2000s internet policing and purges of fanworks (Fanlore 2021). Continued resistance towards monetary compensation for fanfiction may also stem from disastrous third party attempts to circumvent fans' copyright infringement fears through licensing schemes. For example, in 2007 the platform FanLib created a commercial portal for fans to publish fanfiction based on popular movies and television shows in exchange for prizes, e-publication opportunities, and the attention of television production partners (Hellekson 2009; Jenkins 2007; Scott 2009). In 2013, Amazon created Kindle Worlds, which allowed fanfiction writers to publish their works for sale on Amazon's website for participating brands (Tushnet 2014). Both FanLib and Kindle Worlds operated by partnering with copyright holders of specific shows, movies, or books, and providing fan creators with licenses to post fanfiction based on those media sources. Both ventures garnered minimal support from original content creators, resulting in a limited list of fandoms for fanfic writers within the constraints of the licensing programs. Both platforms further constrained fan creators with content restrictions that varied for each media source (Tushnet 2014).

Fans repeatedly questioned FanLib's understanding of the fandom gift economy within the context of its closed circulation of platform fanworks, with Scott (2009) noting that the platform fundamentally misunderstood fan communities. Jenkins (2007) further explains that by posting fics to FanLib, fans relinquished their intellectual property (IP) rights to their fanworks. On their LiveJournal blog, fan writer astolat posted that, "the people behind fanlib . . . don't actually care about fanfic, the fanfic community, or anything except making money off content created entirely by other people and getting media attention" (Astolat 2007). The overwhelmingly negative fan response to FanLib precipitated its shutdown just over a year after it launched in 2008 (Hellekson 2009). Fans responded

similarly to Kindle Worlds a few years later. According to Fanlore.org, many fans felt that the platform tried "corrall[ing] [fans] into a controlled environment, something that for many fans, was the antithesis of writing fanfic" (Fanlore 2020). The platform shuttered in August 2018.

Fan writers can also seek publication through traditional means after "filing off the serial numbers," or removing identifiable copyrighted material from their fics to publish the story as original fiction (Jones 2014). Though arguably no longer fanfiction by definition, these works shared the creative constraints and access restrictions of fics submitted to FanLib and Kindle Worlds and often faced similar backlash from fan communities. All three publication avenues remove fanworks from fan-controlled spaces and return nothing of value, by the standards of the gift economy, to the fan communities that produced the works (Jones 2014).

One hallmark of the fandom gift economy is producing and circulating fanworks with no access restrictions. Turk (2014) characterizes fandom gifting as "not just one-to-one but one-to-many" (Turk 2014, section 3.1). Many creators reconcile this idea with compensatory practices by offering digital access to works freely while providing an option for fans to support them monetarily, often by providing links to donation accounts or online stores offering physical formats of the fanwork for purchase. Both approaches allow for creators to receive monetary support from other fans (one-to-one) without restricting access to any fanworks (one-to-many) by placing them behind a paywall, indicating that these creators prioritize community access to their fanworks over profit.

FanLib and Kindle Worlds misunderstood the basic tenets of fandom, spurring fan rejection of corporate intrusion on fanmade works. Hellekson (2015) notes that any attempts at monetization "must be initiated by and embedded within the fandom in question" instead of a third party (Hellekson 2015, p. 126). Monetization structures developed within a fan community allow participants to preserve the key aspects of fan culture and work within the fandom gift economy. In a hybrid economy, fandom's sharing economy can not only coexist with but benefit from a commercial economy. Lessig (2008) describes a possible hybrid economy as "a sharing economy that builds a commercial entity to better support its sharing aims," which closely resembles monetary practices in fandom (Lessig 2008, p. 177). Such a model, which reinvests remuneration into the fanwork practice, is pertinent to fanbinders, some of whom note that their costly hobby necessitates commissions to support their craft. Fanbinding provides a potential avenue for fanfic authors to sell physical objects of their work without publishing through traditional means and removing the fic from free circulation, thereby preserving the distinguishing characteristics of fic.

Fanbinding is situated at an intersection of handcraft and writing: the fanbound object incorporates an often-original typesetting of the fanfiction—the text of which is freely available online and generally not acceptable to sell for profit—with the handmade binding. Fanbinding commissions thus provide an opportunity to examine the evolving monetary practices in fandom with the added complexity of three extra factors. Fanbinding is an expensive hobby, and some binders cite compensation as a requisite to continue to purchase materials for their practice. Further complications arise in that fanbinders often are not the authors of the fics they bind, introducing ethical considerations regarding author permission and profiting off a product created using another's work. Finally, source material for fanbound works is most often fanfiction, which fans historically hold the strongest objection to monetizing. Fanbound works bind together, in a sense, complications of author permission, intellectual copyright, artistic labor, and under what circumstances one might be able to compensate a binder for their work, making it a compelling case study to examine trends in fandom monetization and how these three factors may distinguish binders' approaches to compensation in their practices.

3. Methodology

Fanbinding is the practice of binding fan works, particularly fan fiction, into codex form, and fanbinders practice their craft in a variety of ways: nearly all of the binders

typeset the fic text using various programs (e.g., Word, Affinity Publisher, or Adobe InDesign), and many employ hand-binding techniques to bind the final text block, though some use self-publishing services. Regardless of the methods, fanbinding is a time-, labor-, material-, and financially-intensive hobby (Buchsbaum 2022; Kennedy 2022). Many fanbound works are produced for personal use, at personal cost, and often as a gift for the fic author, though some fanbinders receive commissions for varying degrees of compensation.

Renegade Bindery is a global community of fanbinders of all experience levels and interests hosted on the chat communication app Discord. The server welcomes fanbinders from all age groups, requiring only that they are over eighteen years of age when they join. In June 2020, fanbinder ArmoredSuperHeavy founded the server to connect people and meet an increase in fanbinding activity and interest in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the summer of 2020, the server comprised approximately 30 members, which grew to over 100 by mid-autumn, and reached 400 members in the summer of 2021. As of May 2022, the server counted over 730 members.

The server offers a localized space for people to discuss and exchange fanbinding ideas, methodologies, and resources, as well as celebrate completed projects, participate in exchanges and challenges, attend fanbinding and fan-studies-related events, swap materials, make recommendations, and be in community together. In August 2020, members of the Bindery formed Renegade Publishing, a public-facing collective of fanbinders associated with the server listed on their Tumblr page. While Renegade Publishing members work independently to complete their projects, they may choose to incorporate the collective's printer's device alongside their own imprint. Renegade Publishing's site also offers a directory and denotes which binders accept commission requests; the page otherwise promotes completed projects by RP members and circulates resources.

Renegade Bindery itself is not a fandom: members share an interest and practice in a specific fancraft and fanbind materials from fandoms across media, including books, movies, television shows, podcasts, and table-top games. The fanbinders' wide range of ages, interests, motivations, and skill levels create a diverse community in the server. Most fanbinders are fans and involved in fandom to some degree as many primarily bind fanworks; others come to the server from another point of interest, such as bookbinding, and have little to no experience in fandom spaces (Buchsbaum 2022). Our previous research has explored fanbinders' motivations for pursuing a time and cost-intensive hobby; we found that fanbinders are "motivated to bind fic for a variety of reasons, including reducing screen time, the challenge and craft of book making, a desire to give book objects as gifts, and a desire to affirm the work of fic writers" (Buchsbaum 2022). We additionally found that while preservation is not a primary motivator for most binders, they understand it as a desirable effect of their work (Kennedy 2022; Buchsbaum 2022).

The emphasis on craft and community rather than specific fandoms or even fannish opinions makes Renegade Bindery hospitable to a range of opinions regarding fandom trends, such as monetization and fan craft. As we explored in our literature review, Renegade Bindery epitomizes how social norms may coalesce in fandom but no central authority persists: while the server locates many practitioners of the same craft, they all operate with different allowances towards commissions, compensation, and profit in their work.

The primary evidence for this study derives from survey responses collected from 31 bookbinders via Discord and Google form. We recruited participants by coordinating with the founder of Renegade Bindery, ArmoredSuperHeavy, to post an open call on the "general" channel that provided an overview of the project, how we planned to use the data, and who was eligible to participate. Participants were required to be 18 years or older but could have any level of fanbinding experience, and we encouraged server members with any range of opinion on monetization to participate. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects in this study, and participants chose whether their responses could be quoted or were for reference purposes only. This study was granted exempt status by the Stony Brook University IRB Office of Research Compliance.

Interested participants were added to a locked channel on the server where we posted a link to a Google form, which includes the study information and consent form as well as three series of questions about commissions, author permissions, and fandom monetization (Appendix A). We periodically posted the questions in the locked server to provide participants the time to think about their responses and remind participants to submit responses. Participants were welcome to respond to the questions in the chat as an opportunity to generate discussion, and 10 chose to do so, while the remaining 21 responded through the Google form. Participants were not required to respond to each question and in many cases did not. Each section had a varying average response rate: commissions (90.3%), author permissions (61.2%), and fandom monetization (58%). We account for the differences in response rate when reporting specific numbers and characterizing responses.

The resulting data underwent a content analysis by reading each qualitative response and identifying trends and outliers. We organized the data by each section of questions and grouped responses according to emerging themes. In the "Commissions" section, themes related to why respondents did or did not take commissions; concerns about compensation and funding; professionalization of a hobby; pressure to deliver; finding a variety of new fics; sustaining the gift economy; and the legal questions of purchasing in fandom. We also analyzed responses according to what circumstances respondents took commissions: for friends, through solicitation or request, or special occasion; we also analyzed responses based on how respondents calculated a price for their work.

In the "Author Permissions" section, we analyzed responses according to whether binders discussed personal copies versus commissioned copies. Trends of how binders approach permissions emerged for each category, including notions of the public domain, degrees of enforcement, and exceptions for permission. In the "Fandom Monetization" section, we analyzed responses according to themes of rejection of commercialization in fandom, the gray area of compensation, pro-compensation, perceptions of gift economy tied to a "traditional" mode of fandom, and the distinguishing characteristics of commissions in fanbinding.

In line with fan studies methodology, we made this paper available to participants to review their comments and ensure accurate interpretation of their meaning. As participants ranged in the means by which they wanted to be referred, we refer to binders with numeric IDs (FB for fanbinder) for consistency's sake and to respect their privacy.

4. Analysis

4.1. Compensation and Commissions

Approaches to fanbinding commissions offer insight into the role of compensation in fan craft and attitudes towards monetization in fan spaces. Of our thirty-one survey respondents, eleven said they do not take commissions, seven reported that it depends, four said they would but have not yet, seven said yes, and two did not respond to the question (Figure 1). Overall, approximately one-third of respondents said they were comfortable taking commissions in some manner, nearly equal to the number of respondents who did not take commissions at all. Where one might assume that those comfortable taking commissions automatically accept the role of monetization in fandom, their additional responses indicate a reticence to adopt any formalized for-profit model, such as those of Kindle Worlds and FanLib.

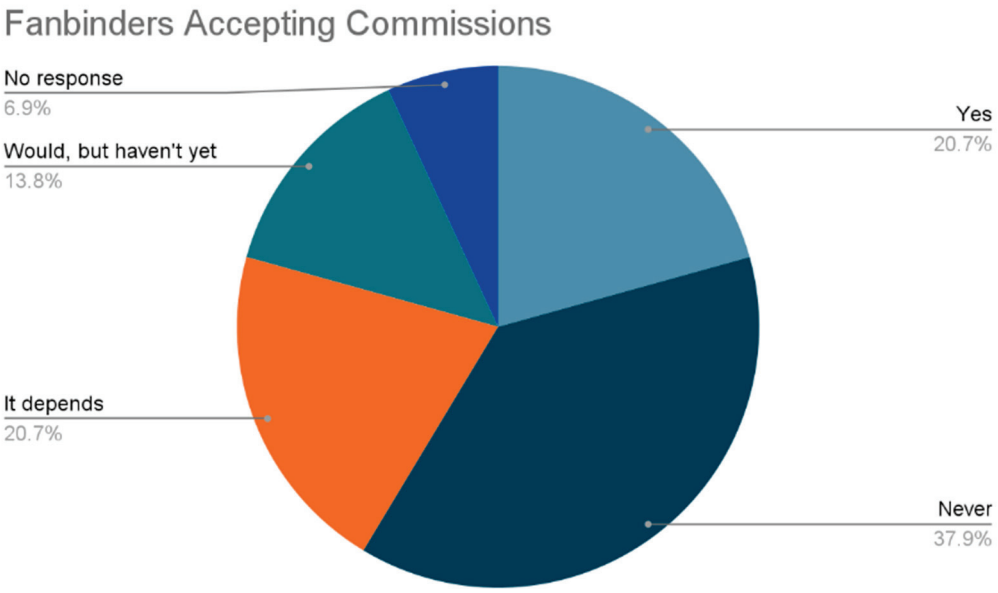

Figure 1. Fanbinders Accepting Commissions.

One of the primary distinctions between FanLib and KindleWorlds versus fanbinder commissions is the methods fanbinders use to receive commission requests, locating the exchange of fancraft for compensation in one-to-one interactions rather than mediated by a distant, impersonal platform that offer digitally published fanworks on a large scale. Of the respondents who currently take commissions, four noted they only take requests, either through direct ask or through the Renegade Publishing directory. One noted that they solicit commissions through Ko-Fi every few months. One only takes commissions for gifts or special occasions, and another noted that they take commissions exclusively for friends and family as presents because they enjoy gifting and rebuke the business aspects of circulating fanbound works. Each of these methods requires direct communication through established profiles rather than a third-party marketplace interface.

One respondent suggested a potential approach for receiving commissions that amounts to the closest example of a larger-scale commission-based operation from the survey data: this binder theorized offering commissions for fics they are currently binding or have already bound–essentially offering a pre-order to determine the print run for whichever fic they plan to typeset. This process would allow the binder "to make the things I would have made anyway, and anyone interested can join in on the journey" (FB-10). Rather than create a direct-to-order enterprise, however, this respondent's proposed system expands a single commission into slightly larger, but still relatively low volume, output of bound works.

These direct lines of communication allow binders and commissioners alike to ascertain one another's intent for commissions, a recurring concern among the respondents. One respondent understands commissions as "giving the commissioner a way they can contribute to fanbinding without the tools or skills themselves" by supporting the binder's practice (FB-31). Others perceive taking commissions as a means of expanding the genres or works they bind and read that they would not find on their own, thereby circulating fanworks in new arenas. Three respondents explicitly aligned taking commissions with participating in the fandom gift economy. One respondent accounted for this by offering fic authors a copy of the bound work and perceives commissions as allowing readers to "get more involved" with the gift economy as well (FB-10); another noted that they did not see the gift economy and fair compensation as mutually exclusive (FB-11); a third sees fanbinding as a means to motivate themselves to bind and preserve works they otherwise would not (FB-12). Here, binders who do take commissions, and even a few who do not, expressed the critical role of the intent to contribute to or show appreciation of a community

in taking commissions: "The further the monetization gets away from that idea and into the realm of profit just because something is popular, the more I'm going to question it" (FB-31). Evaluating that intent seems to be a one-to-one process, located in direct interactions with commissioners; the sterility of third-party platforms, which ostensibly exist to profit from fanworks, evacuates commissions of the gift economy potential that binders enact in their practices. The threshold of accepting or declining commissions is the intent of the requester and the binder—emphasizing creation of fanworks to share with the original fanartists or ficwriters and their fans over generating profit (Buchsbaum 2022).

For the binders who accept commissions, compensation drives fanwork production because it allows them to continue to bind and contribute fanworks to their communities: Four respondents mentioned extra funds as an incentive to help support the costs of the resource-intensive hobby. Those who do accept commissions do not abide by standardized pricing rules, however. The request-based system offers a small-scale mode of processing and confirming commissions, which is crucial both for binders' time and resources. Of the respondents who take commissions, four calculate the cost through materials, shipping, and labor (accounted through word count, complexity, and/or hours). One calculates the cost through materials, another through materials and shipping. In their responses, the binders expressed reluctance towards charging full price, more often acknowledging that they at best break even on these projects and are content with that plateau in favor of offering commissioners "the opportunity to hold a story they love in their hands in a physical form" (FB-12). Altogether, these motivations align with our previous findings that fanbinding is a labor-, time-, and resource-intensive hobby primarily driven by fannish love and enjoyment of the craft (Buchsbaum 2022; Kennedy 2022). Compensation enters the equation to directly support the practice, rather than financially sustain a larger for-profit enterprise, operating in Lessig's third-space hybrid economy, where compensation supports collective aims instead of profit.

While taking commissions serves as a small source of income invested back into the hobby for some respondents, many respondents who do not take commissions calculated that fair prices for their labor and materials render the objects prohibitively expensive for the people and communities for whom they matter. Many binders are uncomfortable with this cost barrier and refuse to charge for the bound works at all. That said, many of these binders still answered our query about how to price commissions: three said hypothetical commissions would cost materials and shipping, refusing to introduce profit into the commission system. One said that calculating the cost was insurmountable due to the value of their labor and that "in my philosophy, fandom is not for sale" (FB-22) Here, binders indicate that they can conceptualize the monetary cost of binding in terms of labor, materials, and shipping, but cannot translate certain philosophical beliefs about fandom into compensation.

This reluctance towards profit in hypothetical price points reflects these binders' attitudes towards not taking commissions at all: Eight (8) respondents mentioned hesitancy relating to the professionalization of their hobby and the quality of their work, including needing to further develop their skills before offering commissions (FB-9) and a dislike of "being beholden to other people's artistic sensibilities" (FB-1). Four binders specifically mentioned not wanting the pressure to deliver and not wanting the deadlines given stressful jobs. One binder in this camp wrote, "I fear that to take money into account would be to lessen my enjoyment of making these books, in addition to the added responsibilities regarding ensuring the books gets to where it needs, how to price them" (FB-7). Another echoed, "If I treated my hobby as a business transaction I'd feel more constrained or under pressure" which "takes all the fun out of it" (FB-14). Three respondents additionally mentioned variations of wanting to protect the gift economy. Although one respondent additionally noted that "I also believe in artisans charging a fair price for their art," the printing and materials costs alone are prohibitive, and gifting objects contributes to the fandom gift economy without burdening the recipient (FB-11). Here, binders who do not take commissions link the expectations of commissions and compensation with an

undesirable professionalization of their hobby that intrudes on the affective labor of the gift economy.

In rejecting commissions, five (5) binders expressed further concerns relating to the legality of printing fanfiction and the "legally grey area of fanfiction" in general, with one binder emphasizing that fanfiction "survives under fair use" (FB-5). These binders unanimously expressed hesitation with making money off of another person's work posted for free online, which itself is based on other person(s)' intellectual property. Another respondent wrote that fellow binders had been accused of "'piracy' and 'illegally printing' PDFs," introducing complications of gaining author permissions to the commissions process (FB-1). Moreover, these fanbinders expressed reluctance to offer their projects for sale or bind on commission because they do not feel they can properly credit authors in that way, which we explore further in the next section. Concerns regarding fanfiction's status under fair use persists in downstream fanwork production—for these binders, the degrees of separation gained from placing fanworks into new object forms do not negate the thorny consequences of copyright violation or personal insult.

Overall, the binders' emphasis on lack of professionalization, wariness of money as a beholdening factor in their practices, and concerns regarding fair use and author acknowledgement align with existing hesitancies regarding the systematization of fanwork production. This mixed reasoning demonstrates that reluctance towards compensation stems from a variety of principled and personal factors, rather than a cut-and-dry rebuke of profit in fandom spaces; simultaneously, those binders that do accept commissions offer insight into how fancraft practitioners might reconcile gift culture and compensation within a hybrid economy.

4.2. Permissions and Commissions

That fanbinders bind fanfiction and other fanworks most often created by others introduces additional complexity regarding potential monetization. Even when not receiving compensation for their craft, fanbinders grapple with ethical questions regarding author permissions. This concern aligns with existing fandom discussion regarding the extent of fan authors' control over their work once posted publicly online. Fandom "polices itself with regards to plagiarism," but more complex practices like remixes based on other fanworks, a category into which fanbinding possibly falls, rely on a shared understanding of "community norms, politeness, and respect," which vary considerably (Busse 2015). Similarly, fanbinders provided varied, and often contradictory, responses regarding author permission guidelines in their binding activities, coalescing into three distinct camps of thought.

The first group comprises fanbinders who believe that works posted publicly on the internet do not require author permissions. Some binders in this group likened binding a fanwork to using the download feature on Archive of Our Own (AO3) or printing out the fic to keep in a folder. Others arrived at this conclusion by arguing that fanbound books are transformative works and therefore do not require the original author's permission (FB 9, 10).

Fanbinders in the second group view acquiring author permissions as respectful and seek it if possible. In most cases, these fanbinders will still bind the work if they cannot get in touch with the author to receive permission. One fanbinder described their practices simply as "[a]sk the author, if they say yes, I bind. If unreachable, I'll bind" (FB-16). Oftentimes these fanbinders' permission-seeking is an effort to participate in the fandom gift culture by either offering the author a copy of the bound work or simply letting them know their work is appreciated.

In the third group, fanbinders view author permissions as essential and will not bind a work without it. Only a small percentage of respondents indicated that they would not bind a work even if they could not reach the author to receive permission. Sometimes these stricter guidelines derive from a fear of repercussions. As one fanbinder explains, "I definitely ask for written, dated consent just to cover my ass in case anything happens"

(FB-6). More often, fanbinders emphasize permission-seeking out of respect for the original fanwork author.

The majority of fanbinders shifted their position on these stances depending on the purpose of the binding, again demonstrating the centrality of intent in fandom etiquette. Out of the eighteen respondents who provided answers to this section of questions, fourteen of them indicated that their guidelines for permission-seeking change depending on how they categorize their projects: private personal books, publicly-shared personal books, or commissioned books.

For personal copies of fanbound works, seventeen of the eighteen respondents (94.4%) felt that such projects do not require author permissions. Eight of these respondents qualified their response depending on whether photos of the project would be shared publicly, with one noting, "If I'm planning to post about the work and make it identifiable, I'll ask for permission" (FB-8). Half of the respondents make no attempt to ask for permission for personal copies, reasoning that online works, and those posted on AO3 in particular, are publicly available and that the consumption format (i.e., through a screen or in print) is irrelevant:

> sites like ao3 provide a built-in download function for ebooks, and I see this as making an analog copy of digital creations, which exist in a less ephemeral medium. By posting on ao3, an author has implicitly given me permission to download, and I don't feel like printing is enough MORE that it requires permission (FB-1).

Another fanbinder in this group compared fanbinding to creating fanart based on someone else's fanfiction, pointing out that "fanartists don't ask for permission before drawing something for a fic" (FB-10). In addition to perceptions of fandom etiquette, some fanbinders do not seek permission for more personal reasons. For some, the idea of reaching out to a stranger to ask permission is too anxiety-inducing. For others, the volume of projects they work on would make permission-seeking for each one burdensome.

Generally, the remaining respondents view permission-seeking for personal copies as "a nice gesture" (FB-3) or "polite" (FB-2) but not a "moral imperative" (FB-1). Nearly all of the fanbinders who attempt to contact authors before binding do so in order to bind and mail a second copy for the author or show their appreciation for the fanfiction. In this way, binders can participate in traditional fandom gift culture practices by either returning a gift to the author or providing feedback on the original text (Buchsbaum 2022; Kennedy 2022). Orphaned works are viewed as the exception to most of these guidelines, with one fanbinder writing that "orphaned works are kind of like public domain: fair game" (FB-14).

Out of the eighteen respondents for the author permissions section of the survey, fifteen respondents shifted their guidelines in favor of permission-seeking when potential commissions were introduced (Figure 2). One fanbinder elaborates, "I don't feel like I need to ask permission to burn through money on behalf of someone's work. But if I was PROFITING off their work, it would be a completely different story" (FB-1). Of those fifteen fanbinders, thirteen reported stricter guidelines regarding author permissions when binding on commission, with one arguing that "if money changes hands, permission is essential" (FB-11). Three of the binders retain the same guidelines for personal copies and commissioned projects, and one binder specifically does not ask permission for commissioned work. Overall, respondents felt it important to receive author permission when binding on commission with varying amounts of leeway in certain circumstances. For example, two fanbinders again noted orphaned works as a common exception to their permission-seeking guidelines, and others extended this exception to any project where the author was unreachable.

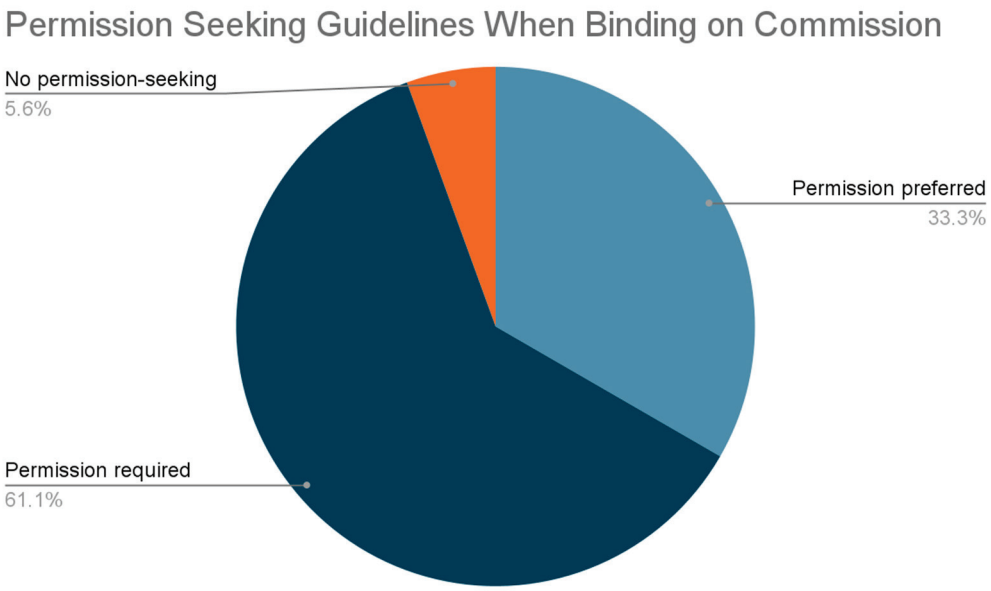

Figure 2. Permission Seeking Guidelines When Binding on Commission.

Practices regarding contacting authors when binding on commission also vary by fanbinder. Eight of the eighteen respondents have strict policies and make sure to receive permission from authors directly before accepting a commission. Another eight delegate permission-seeking to the commissioners and either require proof of permission or assume they received permission before commissioning the work. Three fanbinders noted an exception in cases where the commission is a gift for the author. Within those exceptions, the commissioners would need to "prove they're close enough friends of the author to be sending this gift" or the fanbinder would have to be "reasonably sure the commissioner wasn't lying" (FB-30, FB-10).

Permission-seeking also functions to clarify binder intent in commission-based projects. Five respondents indicated that they require permission, and even prefer to speak to the authors directly, for this reason. Although binding on commission implies profit, some binders only charge the cost of materials and shipping. One binder asks permission in order to clarify this pricing to the author, saying "I want to make it abundantly clear that I'm not profiting off their work" (FB-10). Of the binders that charge for labor in addition to materials and shipping, two of them said they reach out to authors to either "give some of the money to them or to a charity of their choice" or "give them the opportunity to say no, take a small cut, ask that that a portion be donated, etc" (FB-24, FB-16). One mentioned that if they could not contact an author, they would donate their cut of the profit to AO3 in support of fanworks.

Several of the fanbinders we surveyed indicated that their opinions on author permissions in fanbinding practices stemmed from their understanding of fandom culture. Although fandom gift culture models one-to-one and one-to-group gifting and reciprocation of objects and labor, respondents' definitions of fandom and acceptable fannish behavior vary widely, allowing them to arrive at opposing practices of gift culture. For example, some fanbinders who prefer to ask permission before binding do so because they see it as respectful and standard fandom practice. Yet other fanbinders reasoned that fanbound works based off of another fanwork fall within the boundaries of fandom practice and do not require additional consent as long as the original fanworks are credited. Though fanbinders hold varied opinions on this topic, they arrived at their conclusions via their understanding of acceptable fandom practices and traditions of fandom culture.

4.3. Reframing Monetization

Our third set of questions addressed the respondents' conception of gift culture and monetization as well as their experiences participating in compensation for other fanworks, which received seventeen responses. Even though the binders may have clear-cut practices—they do or do not accept commissions—we found that like attitudes towards author permissions, attitudes towards compensation were far more nuanced rather than fall along a simple yes-no axis, an allowance derived from their definitions of gift culture.

Many respondents cited gift culture as a reason to avoid accepting commissions; when asked to define "gift culture," seven of our seventeen responses included the word "love". Eleven of the seventeen responses to this question included key words relating to free or gratis, reciprocation, or an absence of money, and one respondent wrote that gift culture is "when creators make content for one another as part of an exchange or directly due to existing relationships" (FB-16). We can locate sources for these similar definitions in the environments from which the respondents learned about gift culture. Five gleaned the information from the public Tumblr and Dreamwidth posts of ArmoredSuperHeavy, the founder of Renegade Bindery, where they discuss their gift- and preservation-oriented motivations to bind fanworks, as well as the Renegade Bindery writ large, where conversation often notes the gratification of participating in gift culture. Likewise, seven respondents learned about gift culture through fandom participation osmosis. Two explicitly cited gift culture as a feature of "The Olden Days" and "the old times," referring to fandom mores in the late 1990s and early 2000s during the emergence of Web 2.0 that emphasized fanwork generation out of love rather than necessarily monetizing hobbies (FB-11, 13). Binders who do take commissions also align their practice with gift culture, however, as an allowance that draws on those same pre-existing relationships and creates objects in service of a fan's love of the material.

In addition to gift culture, fanbinders' understanding of fair use contextualizes their perspectives on monetization and compensation, and the specter of legality hovers over the monetization of works involving characters or settings not in the public domain. In response to the question "Does your opinion differ on each type of fan craft monetization (buying/selling, donations, third party platforms)," ten of the seventeen respondents characterized fanbinding commissions as in a legal gray area. The respondents drew a line between monetization—that is, explicitly for profit—and compensation, or paying at-cost for materials and shipping, which controls remuneration for the physical craft alone and not for working copyrighted intellectual property. One respondent specifically associated for-profit fanwork, particularly fanfic, with the potential destruction of fandom via takedowns, lawsuits, and similar ilk. Here, respondents who do not take commissions noted that they believed in fair compensation for artistic labor but perceived that compensation in conflict with fair use laws, not just gift culture. One binder countered, however, that "fandom is really weird in generally being okay with fanart sales but hypersensitive to people selling fic, which makes zero sense to me" (FB-4), expressing that fic writing is also a craft that merits compensation. At play in accepting and refusing commissions is the practical implementation of gift culture as a means of circulating objects without violating fair use, entering into the physical realm of crafted objects a safeguard developed from understandings of fanfiction's legal status online.

Respondents also balanced concerns about the hustle culture and crafts necessarily being available for profit alongside the moral and financial value of fair compensation (FB-1). While some respondents were reluctant to stifle the gift economy, perceiving any exchange of money as potentially threatening that affective-based circulation of creative works (FB-14), three others expressed degrees of comfort with compensation. One took no issue with "offsetting the cost of producing crafts, especially in the current economic situation" (FB-8), and these binders articulated that they cared more about the motivations behind commissioned creations rather than the actual exchange of funds. One respondent put it succinctly: "If you're putting time into creation, you deserve to be paid" (FB-16). A fourth noted that compensation sustains a hybrid gift economy:

> In total, someone paying for the materials and time for an artist to do a fancraft is giving that artist the means to contribute that craft to the community or show appreciation for that community. (FB-31)

Conceptualizing the exchange of objects for money as compensation rather than as necessarily monetization creates practical space for fanbinders to both affirm a gift economy and support their hobby in financially dire environments. Like freely-available digital art with hard-copy purchase options, bound fic offers fic readers and writers a means to obtain physical versions of works without engaging in traditional publishing avenues (which possibly necessitates filing-off-the-serial numbers) and without removing the digital copy from online circulation. The barriers to entry, however, remain time, skill, and cost; commissioning binders to create bound objects allows readers to support fanwork creation and participate in the gift economy, provided the binder creates an additional copy for the author.

This distinction between monetization and compensation allows us to accommodate the role of compensation in fancrafts. As long as that compensation returns objects into the fan communication circuit by producing further fanworks, then the compensation contributes to rather than detracts from the gift culture. In that sense, fanbinders who take commissions reconcile these initially incongruent ideas and practices to generate a hybrid economy. Moreover, whereas other monetized fancrafts are often mediated through non-fannish third-party enterprises, fanbinding commissions are located in one-to-one relationships between the fanbinder and fan consumer, eschewing the large-scale publishing agreements championed by platforms such as Kindle Worlds and FanLib and further affirming the community-centric circulation of objects.

5. Conclusions

Fanbinders who accept commissions distinguish themselves from large-scale third-party monetization in several ways: the binderies are low-volume operations with products made by fans for other fans. Personal interactions allow binders and commissioners alike to evaluate one another's intent and scope of compensation introduced in the fanbinding process. Binders explicitly reincorporate funds into their practice, either breaking even on materials and shipping or using compensation to fund their next project, whereas the use of third-party profit is opaque and not necessarily reincorporated into the fandom gift economy. Even when a fan sells an object to another fan, they still operate within the shared space of fandom. Whereas third-party platforms have no other intent besides profit, patently failing on fannish cultural grounds, fan creators and consumers can evaluate the role of compensation as progressive and productive in generating new fanworks, thereby philosophically incorporating it into their practices.

Fanbinders generally adhere to a traditional understanding of affectively-driven fandom gift culture; those who do take commissions similarly align themselves with the principles of gift culture. These binders' interest in fan-to-fan operations and insistence on compensation contributing to their craft locates their practice in a hybrid economy, where intent and reincorporation of funds into their practice align commissions more with gift culture than a for-profit enterprise. Fanbinding is a worthwhile case study regarding attitudes of gifting and monetization because its many factors relating to permission, profit, craft, and intent cohere rapidly. Future studies might employ book historical approaches to evaluate concerns regarding author permissions and reprints in the context of historic printing piracy and recirculation of "unauthorized" texts. Additional research may be undertaken to determine if and how transformative object making falls under fair use, potentially ameliorating persistent concerns of copyright infringement. Understanding how the hybrid economy accounts for the nuances in the definition and practice of gift culture poses opportunities for similar studies of other fancrafts and compensatory practices to evaluate how changing fannish attitudes increasingly accept compensation.

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Appendix A. Survey Questions

Section 0: Informed consent, participation, and consent to quotation form.

Section 1: General

1. How old are you (either exact or approximate is fine)?
2. How long have you been involved in fandom?
3. When did you begin fanbinding works?
4. How many fanbound works have you made?
5. When did you join Renegade Bindery?
6. How do you keep track of the works you bind? (e.g., spreadsheet, word doc, files, not at all)

Section 2: Commissions

7. Do you take fanbinding commissions?
8. Why or why not?
9. Under what circumstances do you take commissions? (Request, solicitation, special occasion, gift, etc.)?
10. How do you determine price for your commissioned works?
11. What factors do you consider?

Section 3: Author Permissions

12. In general, what guidelines do you follow regarding acquiring author permission for your fanbound copies?
13. For fanbinding commissions, do these guidelines change? Why or why not?
14. Will you bind a fic on commission without author permission?
15. If you don't take commissions, what are your thoughts on acquiring author permission in general?
16. If you do take commissions, do you require the commissioner to contact the author and obtain permission?

Section 4: Fandom & Monetization

17. What is your familiarity with gift culture in fandom?
18. How do you define fandom gift culture?
19. How have you learned about gift culture?
20. What is your familiarity with these types of monetization of fan crafts?
    a [Buying/selling fan crafts]
    b [Commissioning fan crafts]
    c [Accepting donations for fan crafts (ex. Ko-fi)]
    d [Third-party monetization of fan crafts (ex. FanLib)]
    e [Subscriber model (ex. YouTube channel for fandom-based content)]
21. What are your opinions on monetizing fan crafts?

22. Does your opinion differ on each type of fan craft monetization (buying/selling, commissions, donations, third-party platforms, subscriber model)? If so, why?
23. Have you ever purchased a fan craft? (If so, what?)
24. How do your feelings on fandom monetization contribute to your attitudes on fanbinding commissions?

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Article

Self-Insert Fanfiction as Digital Technology of the Self

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Abstract: Self-insert fanfiction is a long-established but still controversial mode of writing, even within the already marginalized genre of fanfiction. Moreover, many of the specific terms and practices used to describe this kind of writing have not been formally explored or theorized. We maintain that self-insert fanfiction can be understood as a digital technology of the self, building upon Foucauldian roots and extending into digital platforms and their affordances. We begin by making connections to the precedents established by "Mary Sue" characters, then continue by tracing the shifts from those conversations to more explicitly self-insert subgenres of the present day. Then, drawing on a survey of self-insert fanfiction conducted across four platforms (Ao3, FF.net, Tumblr, and Wattpad), we explore how such works can be discovered, read, and engaged with, and we offer specific observations about self-insert subgenres, as drawn from a selection of these works. Ultimately, we maintain, self-insert fanfiction expands the possibilities offered by other digital technologies of the self (avatars, blogging, etc.) by attempting to create a self that can be open to any reader who encounters it, although this expansion is not without its own limitations and drawbacks. We conclude by offering potential directions for further work in this area that fall beyond the scope of this initial exploration.

Keywords: fanfiction; self-insert; Mary Sue; Y/N; imagines; personal writing; technologies of the self; genre; genre conventions; digital platforms

1. Introduction

Although fanfiction tends to be shared among like-minded communities, reading and writing work in this tradition is often a highly personal experience at its heart. Part of the inclination toward the personal in fanfiction is certainly historical and stems from certain long-standing stigmas: despite greater recognition in contemporary public discourse, fanfiction is often still associated with criticisms of "bad" (i.e., amateurish or non-normative) writing, as well as an overt focus on sexual or other "wish fulfillment" content over actual storytelling and the supposedly self-stifling tendencies of its authors, who dedicate financially uncompensated time and craft to existing media properties instead of producing their own "original" work. Engaging with fanfiction on a personal basis—whether entirely independently, alongside trusted peers, or in spaces comprised of like-minded community members—can become one way of minimizing encounters with those continuing stigmas. However, the very decision to read and/or write fanfiction is also a personal choice that entails devoting one's own resources—time, labor, and energy—to the pursuit of personal tastes and enjoyment in non-commercial works: desires that are seen as unruly and unproductive in multiple ways by the standards of kyriarchal late-stage capitalism.

In this project, we turn to yet another, and often even more divisive, facet of the personal in such writing: as actualized in self-insert fanfiction. Here, we trace connections from the often-derided "Mary Sue" concept to more recent forms of fanfiction, such as "imagines", "Y/N", and "xReader" works. While the arguably avatar-like nature of Mary Sue characters and the self-serving focus of Mary Sue stories have long been sticking points

for their detractors, we observe how these same features are technically necessary and entirely fundamental to the appeal of these newer forms, which center fan-participants within the form of the text, not simply as part of the writing or even the reading of that text. In certain ways, we argue, self-insert fanfiction can function somewhat akin to what Foucault (1988) terms "technologies of the self": that is, as a means of expression and knowing that hinges upon "the interaction between oneself and others, particularly as mediated by writing of one's self" (p. 19).

We turn to this concept because we find self-insert fanfiction hinging upon a comparable move—using "self" as a device to facilitate particular, affectively-driven kinds of interaction—despite key differences in who that self is and what it is meant to accomplish. For one thing, the "self" in self-insert fanfiction is meant to be more of a palimpsest, open to readers too rather than signifying merely the author, as in Foucault's examples. In addition, the interactions that this device mediates are mainly those between that palimpsestuous, created self and the fan-author's versions of characters or personages from the original object of their focus, rather than primarily between the text's writer and its reader, as is again the case in Foucault's examples. Such key differences, and the types of narrative and writing that stem from them, enable the fan-authors and fan-readers of self-insert fanfiction to indulge in their own fondness, desire(s), and other affective experiences, in what might be seen as a particularly personal way.

In many ways, we envision this work as building upon Kristina Busse's (2016) assertation that Mary Sue characters and fanfiction are often positioned as "effectively oversharing the writer's personal [interests] without mediating and coding them properly" (p. 162). We are particularly interested in this idea of "mediating and coding" one's interests "properly." To us, Busse's framing of fandom communities' common issues with Mary Sues also suggests that there could be means of classifying such highly personal interests and presenting them to others "properly"—i.e., in some manner that seems correct or satisfactory to the community encountering them. We draw upon this possibility to suggest that self-insert fanfiction is one such means of "mediating and coding" (Busse 2016, p. 162) particular kinds of personal interest in a favorite text or character, such as the desire to interact with these characters directly or the desire to imagine participating in sexual encounters with them. Through its formal conventions, its characteristic narratives, and its communities' uses of specific "fantagging" practices (Price and Robinson 2021), we might say that self-insert fanfiction "codes" personal interests by forewarning audiences about what they will encounter in the work, and "mediates" such interests by offering an inhabitable narrative self that makes such encounters available to fan-readers, rather than limiting them to the fan-author.

In this work, we trace certain shifts—although they are not a teleological "evolution"—from Mary Sue characters to contemporary forms of self-insert fanfiction. Of course, we can only offer a partial perspective on a dynamic phenomenon that is still changing at the time of writing this paper. We also use the term "self-insert fanfiction" very broadly in this work, focusing more on the presence of *a* self within fanfiction texts, rather than focusing only on forms that feature either fan-authors or fan-readers more specifically. That is, while the term "reader-insert" certainly describes a particular writing practice, and "self-insert" can be used to distinguish between that practice and others, we envision the present work as providing more of a starting point from which further such theorizations can be built later.

Taking *Harry Potter* (HP) fanfiction as our primary example, given its relative visibility, extensive corpus, presence in multiple online spaces, and ongoing popularity, we investigate how self-insert subgenres such as "imagines", "Y/N" stories, and "xReader" fanfiction, facilitate interactions between a "self" and fictive others through the kinds of "mediating and coding" we have described above, building upon the problem spot that Busse (2016) observes (p. 162). By considering the formal, intentional presence of *a* self in such texts, we argue that—rather than fully blurring the boundaries between text and reader, or between personal desire and source canon—these subgenres first demarcate and then deliberately traverse such boundaries in ways that go beyond merely allowing the

reader to add subjectivity to the text. Instead, these highly personal kinds of fanfiction writing actively encourage and require it.

2. The Original Self-Insert? Remembering Mary Sue

However, discussing self-insert fanfiction also requires stepping back for a moment to consider "Mary Sues". Historically, this term has been understood to denote a new female character created by the fan-author: a character who is then made the central focus or driving force of a particular fanfiction text and whose interactions with the canon setting and characters tend to exemplify the fan-author's own personal interests, rather than fulfilling the narrative's actual need for an engaging story. Later, the term also came to denote particular kinds of fanfiction, a development that we will revisit shortly. Most importantly for our purposes in this paper, the following should be made clear: while "Mary Sue" is not fully synonymous with "self-insert", it has often been treated as if it were. To put this another way: while Mary Sue characters can be self-inserts, they are not always so, or are not so by default. Still, the two terms do evidence certain additional overlaps: both are particularly subjective approaches to writing fanfiction, and both have drawn criticism for their supposedly overly personal nature, even from others who also read and write fanfiction. Revisiting the concept of Mary Sues, then, offers both a useful starting point, as well as a basis of comparison for later discussions of self-insert fanfiction.

As early fan studies scholar Bacon-Smith (1991) documents, the term "Mary Sue" stems from a short, parodic work by *Star Trek* fan Paula Smith. Smith's ten-paragraph story responded to certain trends that she had observed in earlier *Star Trek* fanfiction by recounting the adventures of one Lieutenant Mary Sue, who is desired and admired by the male officers of the Enterprise, saves everyone during a mission gone awry, and eventually meets a dramatic demise to universal mourning (Bacon-Smith 1991, pp. 94–96). However, both Pat Pflieger (1999) and Ashley Barner (2011) also trace comparable traditions of self-invested writing all the way back to women's popular literature of the late eighteenth century. Barner in particular identifies the "close relationships between writer, character, and reader" (Barner 2011, p. 1) that characterized much of this writing tradition and its successors today; she notes that the largely female audience's ability to become "absorbed" in reading such works discomfited critics, who advocated against these texts and their associated reading practices in ways often mirrored by contemporary criticism. Still, from Bacon-Smith's (1991) foundational work through to the anti-Mary Sue fan initiatives, the Mary Sue "litmus tests", and even some scholarship still visible in the present day, Mary Sue characters are frequently described as being personal fantasies or wish-fulfillment devices on the part of the fan-authors who create them—particularly because these original female characters are often overly powerful, exaggeratedly knowledgeable, or "too" impactful within a story, compared to the canon characters with whom they feature alongside.

Barner (2011) sums up this line of thought thus: Mary Sue characters are often seen as "encroaching authorial self-insertions" that enter and "twist" the source canon to suit a particular fan-author's own ends (p. 11). This is a particularly strange criticism, Busse (2016) points out, when this kind of transformative reworking is really just one "variant of what defines most fan fiction, if not fiction: The ability of the writer to translate their own fears and hopes, disgusts, and desires" (p. 16) into fictional and shareable forms. Still, the virulence directed against Mary Sue characters, and the many value judgments that get caught up in this animus, mean that, at least in Busse's (2016) view, the term "has become all but useless as a descriptive or critical tool" (p. 160), given how it can refer to "a character, trope, developmental stage, writing style, and all too easy dismissal of female characters" (p. 160), depending on who is using the term and within what contexts this use occurs.

As Bonnstetter and Ott (2011) see it, this is essentially the objective of Mary Sue characters: "not to extend the meaning of the original author, but to author meaningful extensions of one's self" (p. 361) into a beloved narrative or a story-world. However, what actually constitutes such an extension of self might differ widely according to a particular fan-author's specific interests, experiences, and preferences. Bonnstetter and

Ott (2011), for instance, maintain that a Mary Sue character affords the fan-author who creates her a means of being "accepted and acknowledged, celebrated and loved" by fictional characters, to whom the fan-author extends this same sort of effect (p. 353). For Ika Willis (2006), however, this subjective extension of self-presence means acknowledging queer desires as well as the very existence of queerness (p. 155); meanwhile, Chander and Sunder (2007) contend that for fan-authors of color, idealizing or flattering self-inserts can offer a "partial antidote to a media that neglects or marginalizes certain groups" (p. 608). Elsewhere, Dreisinger (2017) also identifies disability as another axis of identity and lived experience that is often sidelined or erased by popular media but that can be revisited through Mary Sue characters, who thus become "powerful disruptive agents that challenge and resist narratives of compulsory able-bodiedness" (p. 2). As these critical readings of Mary Sue characters demonstrate, self-insertion into recognizable story-worlds alongside existing characters and narratives becomes "a powerful form of literally 'inhabiting texts' to respond to what can sometimes be painful subject-text relations" (Cho 2008, p. 106), and this potential offers a significantly different perspective from much of the early criticism of Mary Sue characters.

The other side of this coin, however, is that fan-readers bring their own stakes to these same works of fanfiction, particularly in the case of highly personalized examples such as Mary Sues, where these incoming interests and values may clash with those of the initial fan-author. Internalized misogyny and ableism, latent queerphobia, and overt racism can each play a part as well. Dawn Walls-Thumma (2019), for instance, documents the vitriol and "blanket condemnation" of all women characters as being Mary Sues that was endemic in early Tolkien fanfiction communities, leading to the founding of the Protectors of the Plot Continuum (PPC) initiative in 2002 and instigating the ongoing harassment of fan-authors across multiple fanfiction archives (p. 25). Indira Neill Hoch (2020) notes that today, similar accusations of Mary Sue-ness become particularly pointed regarding fan-authors writing original female characters (OFCs) of color, where any perceived move away from a default whiteness is often seen and treated as a threat (p. 109)—this even occurs in fanfiction for source texts such as videogames, where the character is already an avatar that is female-bodied and fully customizable prior to the fanfiction written about her. Here, Neill Hoch (2020) points out, the accusations of "bad" writing and Mary Sue characterization are in fact driven by a preference for whiteness. Multiple scholars also document how fan-readers have historically relied on their own genre knowledge and perceptions of the source text in order to identify supposed Mary Sue characters, whether "by physical description and by certain elements of plot" (Pflieger 1999, para. 6) or by "the exaggeration of [positive] traits to an unattainable ideal" (Chaney and Liebler 2006, p. 54). It is also worth noting here that fan-readers can perceive such characteristics in a fanfiction text where the fan-author merely writes a female character—either an original or a pre-existing one—in ways that those particular fan-readers did not expect or enjoy. These various disconnects between the fan-author and the fan-reader of Mary Sue fanfiction ultimately lead Beck and Herrling (2009) to compare Mary Sue characters with RPG avatars. In this kind of fanfiction and with these kinds of characters, Beck and Herrling (2009) maintain, the "game" of simulating one's own adventures within a beloved story-world is the main point (para. 2.5); however, most readers simply do not have the same investment in that highly personal and individualized "playthrough" of the source canon that the fan-author had when writing this new character.

Looking forward, though, it must be noted—as both Indira Neill Hoch (2020) and Elizabeth Minkel (2017) have also done—that the strict distinctions between different kinds of Mary Sues, or even between Mary Sues and other types of characters (particularly original characters [OCs] and original female characters [OFCs]) have broken down significantly since Bacon-Smith (1991), Pflieger (1999), and other early scholars first began documenting them. Likewise, as an increasing number of examples from popular culture writ large demonstrate, "Mary Sue" has also become what culture writer and acafan Stitch (2021) describes as a more generally used "pejorative to negatively describe a female character

that [the speaker or writer is] currently insulting. Despite attempts to reclaim the word in some fandom spaces, chances are that if someone calls a character a "Mary Sue", they really don't like the character they're talking about" (para. 3). In such conversations, this dislike may stem from the fact that "the character in question is not white" (Stitch 2021, para. 9), or the way that criticism using this term is often "chock-full of internalized misogyny" (Stitch 2021, para. 8)—or, particularly outside fandom spaces, the fact that the character in question may simply exhibit a power, skill, or interiority that certain audiences expect to see in male characters (Coggan 2016). In addition, as we observed while working on this project, contemporary fan-authors' own use of "Mary Sue" in tags and summaries is often connected to works that are more meta-commentary or sardonic and parodic fanfiction: that is, works more akin to a modern update of Paula Smith's short story featuring Lieutenant Mary Sue, rather than actual female characters created by fan-authors for traditional narrative purposes. This being said, we also concur with Busse's (2016) cautionary note about analyses that depend on assuming what fan-authors "intend" by writing what others may consider a Mary Sue character: analyses such as these are necessarily "fraught" with potential, and often highly gendered, misunderstandings and oversimplifications (p. 160).

Again, our intention in this section is not to say that all Mary Sues are self-inserts, whether intentional or otherwise: instead, we have revisited some of the existing literature and ongoing debates on this topic more to demonstrate how common that perception is, and to reveal how much it impacts related conversations. Mary Sue characters and stories have often been taken to reveal something highly personal about the individual interests and disruptive desires of the fan-authors who create them, often without further evidence save fan-readers' own perceptions of the text, and by extension, the fan-author creating it. Likewise, critics of Mary Sue characters and the stories featuring them tend to hold the view that "publishing such a 'private fantasy' is transgressive" (Barner 2011, p. 12), even in the already transgressive, highly personal, and at least partially private spaces of fanfiction. In reality, other factors—such as the unacknowledged expectation of characters' whiteness that Neill Hoch observes—also underlie and complicate that dislike, but still, the supposed and "unseemly" revelation of the fan-author's self via a Mary Sue character provides both a reason for such critiques, as well as a metaphorical coat-hook on which to hang them.

3. Insert Self, Part I: Terms and Conditions

3.1. (Digital) Technologies of the Self

When theorizing the kinds of writing that he would come to call "technologies of the self", Foucault (1988) articulates his driving interest as: "How had the subject been compelled to decipher himself in regard to what was forbidden?" (p. 17). That is, Foucault conceptualizes technologies of the self as describing the writing practices that result when subjects attempt to articulate personal ideas and information concerning impulses of the body, sexual desire, and similar taboos against the conventions of religious dogma and societal mores. For Foucault, then, technologies of the self are self-governing measures undertaken by individuals in order to effect certain "operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" (p. 17), typically through writing about themselves in confessional terms to trusted others. However, Foucault also stresses that—in its earliest forms, at least—this type of writing about one's own self also served as a means of knowing and caring for that self; scholars who have since picked up on the term tend to highlight this aspect more than that of self-governance.

This tendency to prioritize knowing or recognizing one's own self becomes particularly evident in theorizing regarding digital technologies of the self. Broadly speaking, this term encompasses the scope of the means and practices by which individuals construct and communicate details about their selves using digital technologies. As Abbas and Dervin (2009) note, for instance, technological offerings such as blogging, game avatars, and virtual worlds evidence important similarities to the confessional letters that Foucault focused on: in the same way, these technologies reveal a self that is not the actual subject, but instead, a curated version of that person, intended to interface with other people at one remove from

the actual body (pp. 1–3). However, for Abbas and Dervin (2009), one major difference that is made possible by digital technologies, as opposed to journaling or letter-writing, is that they "enable the individual's self/selves to emerge . . . [and] be worked upon" publicly (p. 2). That is, Abbas and Dervin point to the increased scope and visibility that is made possible by digital technologies of the self: such texts or depictions reach much larger, and often less pre-determined, audiences; they are also capable of undergoing change while still being visible, rather than being presented to only a select audience in a fully finalized, static form. Likewise, between personal devices, shared social platforms, and the affordances of each one, "the opportunities for staging and transforming the self/selves have become nearly limitless" (Abbas and Dervin 2009, p. 2); this, in turn, reconfigures certain forms of digital writing as technologies themselves, creating a cycle in which the "artifacts and practices of the self mutually shape each other" (Siles 2012, p. 409).

As mentioned earlier, we maintain that self-insert fanfiction functions as one such digitally-mobilized technology of the self. In the most foundational sense, of course, this claim is tied to the fact that this entire genre of fanfiction focuses on articulating and exploring highly personal desires that are explicitly attributable to the fan-author, the fan-reader, and/or both. However, we are also struck by the formal and structural ways that "self" actually becomes a means of accomplishing this expression.

3.2. Some Types of Self-Insert Fanfiction

As Elizabeth Minkel (2017) accurately observes, self-insert fanfiction encompasses a variety of types that often "work very differently in form and function" (para. 20). Minkel also discusses several of the same subgenres that we have focused on here, ranging from "fleshed-out second-person narrators to 'x Reader' stories that eschew identifying details, to 'imagines', short prompts that exist in a murky space between fiction and daydream fodder" (para. 20). However, at the time of writing this paper, we are not aware of any extant scholarship on these specific subgenres: The existing literature focuses specifically on Mary Sue characters and fanfiction or else touches on practices of self-insertion in fiction more generally. Part of our project here, then, also requires providing brief, limited, and almost-certain-to-change definitions of these various subgenres.

3.2.1. Imagines

First, "imagines" are short works of fanfiction, often consisting of mere descriptive passages that place the reader in proximity to a character or person associated with the fan-object, to the effect of "imagine meeting..." or "imagine dating..." that character or personage. Such passages might tell full stories, or they may simply describe scenarios without a traditional plot progression to structure them. As the community-authored resource Fanlore (n.d.) documents, "imagines" are more common on platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr, which support shorter forms of writing and enable fan-authors to pair visual elements with text, "such as a gif of the singer being named or an image associated with the fictional character: usually not a screenshot, but an edit or a manip that calls them or the scenario to mind" (para. 3). If using a gif, the fan-author may either create it or locate an existing one: if using an edited image or a "manip"—which is a fan-created "photo manipulation . . . depicting TV and movie characters in situations different from canon" by repurposing screenshots or promotional material (Fanlore n.d., para. 1)—then the fan-author will often make this, as well as writing the text.

3.2.2. xReader

Next, "xReader" describes a work of fanfiction where the protagonist is the reader, often being sexually or romantically paired with a canon character (this pairing being signified by the "x"). These "xReader" fanfiction texts are often written in the second person (i.e., "you"), and may vary in length, often depending on the platform of origin. While we use the "xReader" name here for clarity and ease of reference, this actually represents an entire constellation of slightly different forms, some of which are unique to specific

platforms, given different affordances and practices such as tagging. Other versions of "xReader" include "ReaderX", "Reader", "Canon X Reader", and "CanonXReader" (spelled without the spaces).

3.2.3. Y/N

Finally, "Y/N" is an acronym for "your name"; the fan-reader who sees this phrase is meant to mentally replace it with their own name as they read, thus actively working with the fanfiction text's own features to position themselves within that narrative. In this scenario, "Y/N waits outside" becomes, say, "Effie waits outside" or "Maria waits outside". As with "imagines", these "Y/N" fanfiction texts also tend to be shorter, and they are also found more often on micro-blogging or image-based platforms; they may also focus more on descriptions of scenarios than on providing traditional, plot-driven narratives.

3.2.4. A Brief Codicil

Broadly speaking, many of these subgenres are colloquially termed "reader-insert" fanfiction: that is, they are often understood to be highlighting the fan-reader as that self who is being positioned within their narratives, rather than the fan-author as that "self" (i.e., the common criticism that we have seen being levied against Mary Sues). Despite fan communities' use of such terms, though, in this project we purposefully turn to the even broader—and often interchangeable—term "self-insert fanfiction", and we do this for a number of reasons.

For one thing, there is slippage between the concepts of "reader-insert" and "self-insert" as described above (some of which we will explore later); for another, the term "self-insert" can foreground the self more generally, and also enables us to trace the connections between these subgenres and the Mary Sues of older tradition with greater ease. Future work, however, could certainly delve into exploring how the terms "reader-insert" and "self-insert" are used differently, as well as the specific types of transformative fanwork that each one describes and the overlap(s) between them.

3.3. Some Conventions of Self-Insert Fanfiction

While the specific types of self-insert fanfiction named above each have their own unique genre conventions—in fact, the most prominent ones are often signaled by a subgenre's name, e.g., "Imagines" and "Y/N"—one particular convention that most types hold in common is an interpellative use of second-person narration. The "you" might be implied, as in the case of "Imagines", or might be directly stated, as in the case of some "xReader" works, but the general practice builds upon existing traditions from both postmodern fiction and ergodic, or "playable", texts.

For its part, postmodern fiction may use second-person narration to extend what Irene Kacandes (1993), early on, calls an "irresistible invitation" to readers: one that attempts to "put the reader in the text" through the use of "you" as a signifier that only functions in the instant that it is uttered to interpellate the reader (pp. 139–40). In this light, the narrative use of the second person "produces an ontological hesitation between the virtual and the actual by constantly repositioning readers" (Herman 2002, p. 378) between the act(s) of reading the text and inhabiting it or, alternately, of experiencing the narrative and feeling that one is actually driving it. The English language's own idiosyncrasies further enrich this array of possibilities, since "you" as a grammatical form "homonymically references male and female, singular and plural addressees, but can also be used as a generalized pronoun replacing 'one'" (Bell and Ensslin 2018, p. 312). Likewise, ergodic texts, such as interactive fiction (IF) and hypertext fiction, encourage readers to participate in "constructing" a story by selecting from pre-set choices that will send them down various narrative paths. Using "you" to present and frame these choices helps "create the illusion of being present in a story-world . . . constructed by the reader in creative collaboration with the programmed text" (Bell and Ensslin 2018, p. 312).

However, despite the array of differences between these two approaches, it is also worth noting that both postmodern texts and most of their ergodic counterparts proceed along fully formed, predetermined routes once their readers have chosen to participate in them. Thus, the self being signified by the "you" of these genres is not fully synonymous with the highly personal and personalizable "you" of self-insert fanfiction.

Still, this is not to claim that self-insert fanfiction is some utopian ideal or fully democratic reading experience. Many Fanlore pages, archive forums, and other fandom spaces feature long discussions of how and why this particular form of fanfiction is particularly strange, upsetting, or disliked, and in particular spaces, this disquiet has become codified in specific rules. In its content guidelines, for instance, the fanfiction archive Fanfiction.net (FF.net) disallows "any form of interactive entry: choose your own adventure, second person/you-based, Q&As, etc." (Fanfiction.net (FF.net) [2005] 2008, para. 4). While self-insert fanfiction is not specifically designated here, terms such as "interactive" and "second person/you-based" can certainly describe that type of writing, even if that was not the initial intent of the rule. As a result, many users take this guideline as effectively a ban on publishing self-insert fanfiction to FF.net.

However, the slipperiness of defining what constitutes self-insert fanfiction continues, even here in the form of FF.net's content guidelines. For instance, archived conversations from an FF.net forum discussing the rule mentioned above point out many such ambiguities, and some even present fans' own versions of Busse's (2016) cautionary note about assuming writerly intent. We were particularly struck by one user asking whether the rule is banning "interactive fanfiction that put the reader as themselves into the story (which is weird and I can see why it would be banned on a family-friendly site), not the less-used second-person narrative style using 'you' for the main character in the narrative" (Rtarara 2013). While this user is comparing formal conventions (i.e., the interactivity and second-person language that is actually mentioned in the FF.net guidelines), their question ultimately frames each example in terms of whom it places "in" the story and how. For interactive fanfiction, what this user finds "weird" and worth banning about this type of fanfiction is the way that it lets a non-fictional self—here, the reader—intrude upon the fictional narrative. However, in terms of second-person language, what makes "you" potentially worth using—and perhaps risking or contesting FF.net's unevenly enforced guidelines—is the fact that. alternately, this "you" can signify a fictional self: "the main character in the narrative" presumably from the original media text, rather than the situation of the fan-reader intruding where their presence is not welcome on a "family-friendly site" (Rtarara 2013), a platform that also banned NC-17-rated adult content in 2002.

With these examples and observations in mind, we assert that subgenres of self-insert fanfiction are not always "performing a sense of self" in the ways that Bonnstetter and Ott (2011) consider to be happening with Mary Sue characters. However, we find that Bonnstetter and Ott's framing already echoes key ideas present in Foucault's (1988) "technologies of the self", particularly regarding how the author-self that is present in such a text is a conscious construction working to acknowledge, care for, and sometimes even govern the author-self creating it. Bonnstetter and Ott (2011), for instance, maintain that Mary Sue characters tend to mirror the fan-authors who create them and enable those fan-authors to seek validation, comfort, and consolation by inserting themselves among fictional characters and into fictional settings. (Issues with this framing, of course, include the way that Bonnstetter and Ott's argument assumes that Mary Sue characters in general are deliberate self-inserts, which we have already seen is not necessarily the case.) With the more contemporaneous self-insert fanfiction that we examine, however, Bonnstetter and Ott's almost-Foucauldian notion of "performing a sense of self" could also describe how these texts function, albeit with addendums.

With self-insert fanfiction, we find that "performing" a sense of self differs on three axes: first, intent (i.e., self-insert fanfiction is written, specifically and unambiguously, to let the fan-author and/or fan-reader "put . . . themselves into the story" (Rtarara 2013)); then, what we follow Busse's (2016) lead in calling "mediating and coding . . . properly" (p. 162).

"Coding" or categorizing "properly", we observe, entails using platform affordances and community "affordances-in-practice" (Costa 2018) to inform fan-readers that the text is a specific kind of self-insert fanfiction so that those who enjoy the subgenre can choose to engage, while those who do not have enough information to avoid it. This is often the purpose of using tags, summaries, formatting, and other paratextual appendages, and while it is not dissimilar from tagging in other fandom contexts, it becomes particularly important when the work being "coded" in this way caters to niche and widely criticized tastes.

Then, "mediating" or facilitating "properly" entails using formal conventions—such as those we have discussed in our brief summaries above of the "imagines", "Y/N", and "xReader" subgenres—to place this self within the narrative in specific, circumscribed ways, unlike the ways in which earlier Mary Sue characters and stories were often "identified" more by fan-readers' personal preferences, perceptions, and even biases.

Thus, with these important differences regarding intent and "mediating and coding . . . properly" (Busse 2016, p. 162) in mind, we now turn to a sample of self-insert fanfiction.

4. Insert Self, Part II: Imagine Going to Hogwarts

Given that this project is—we hope!—one early venture of many into the topic of self-insert fanfiction, we have focused here on fairly broad strokes that we believe future forays could adjust or rework as needed. Thus, we formulate our argument for the intentionality, coding, and mediating of self-insert fanfiction following an investigation of such texts, drawn from four highly popular sites: The Archive of our Own (Ao3), Fanfiction.net (FF.net), Wattpad, and Tumblr. The first three are fanfiction-focused reading platforms, while Tumblr is a social media site; however, we turn to these specific spaces regardless of that difference because, as fanfiction readers ourselves, we know that fan-authors and fan-readers engage with self-insert fanfiction substantially across all four platforms. Likewise, we envision this project more as setting out the starting points for continued dialog than as a truly deep delve into any one platform or subgenre—as has been done concerning Mary Sues on Wattpad (Binike 2018), for example—and we strive to avoid forcing any teleology onto the present co-existence of Mary Sues and self-insert fanfiction, despite their many areas of overlap and similarity.

4.1. A Brief Note on Our Methodology

Our approach to selecting and analyzing specific works of HP self-insert fanfiction has been heavily influenced by Milena Popova (2018) in their work, "Rewriting the Romance", a study of arranged marriage stories in slash fanfiction. After noting the prevalence of auto-ethnographic approaches in fanfiction scholarship, since most researchers in this area began as fans, Popova argues for certain merits to drawing from one's fannish experience: for one thing, searching for fanfiction using the tools and approaches that fans employ can help researchers to locate texts that might be particularly visible or popular (p. 6). In their case study, Popova reports using Ao3's own features to "search, sort and filter" fanfiction works of potential interest, before then "immers[ing] myself in [these texts]" using "a range of auto-ethnographic insights . . . my understanding of the technical features of the site . . . of the community's usage practices, and of dynamics and trends within the particular fandom, pairing and trope of interest" (p. 6). By using this combination of archival/technological savvy, fandom familiarity, and the application of fannish reading practices, Popova asserts, the stories that they ultimately selected for analysis in greater depth could be trusted as fairly accurate representations of popularity, impact, trends, and themes touching upon a specific trope and character pairing (pp. 6–7).

Popova also avoids providing complete URLs for the two specific fanfiction texts they analyze, correctly citing a need to protect individual fan-authors' privacy (p. 6). We concur with this need, as well as the observation elsewhere that fanworks, while technically accessible to anyone with an internet connection, do exist in "layered publics" (Busse and Hellekson 2012, pp. 38–39): that is, fans and fan communities tend to consider "a shared

fan space to be private, even when it is [technically] accessible and thus public" (Busse and Hellekson 2012, quoted in Busse 2018, p. 12). Thus, given the particularly personal and often polarizing nature of self-insert fanfiction, we have taken Popova's precautionary measure a step further and omitted fanfiction authors' pseudonyms from the following analysis, as well as the works' URLs.

Appendix A of this work outlines our approach to locating *Harry Potter* self-insert fanfiction in greater detail, but as the following subsections also demonstrate, we both drew from and somewhat modified Popova's approach here. Following their example, we also began with exploration and immersion, as informed by our own personal experience with certain fanfiction platforms and fanfiction-searching practices; later, we also then turned to the anonymization of the specific works that we will consider in more detail. However, similar to the community distinctions between particular flavors of "reader-insert" and "self-insert" texts, further research in this area will also need to grapple further with questions such as how to cite specific works of self-insert fanfiction, given their particularly personal nature. For now, though, given our focus on the aggregate or larger picture of this phenomenon, we are confident that the measures we employ here can provide at least a starting point.

4.2. Why Harry Potter, Given Ongoing Issues

As previously mentioned, we look to *Harry Potter* (HP) self-insert fanfiction for this project. This decision was made for four main reasons. First, there is an extensive corpus of HP fanfiction, available across multiple different platforms: as of writing this article, this corpus included 361,000 fanfiction texts on Ao3; 840,000 on FF.net; and tallies estimable in the millions for both Tumblr and Wattpad. These numbers offer rich possibilities for sampling, even among supposedly more niche genres such as self-insert fanfiction.

Second, there is the breadth of scholarship already available on both *Harry Potter* more generally and on HP fanfiction specifically, which provides an established foundation from which to build newer observations about specific subgenres. For example, in terms of Mary Sues and self-inserts alone, we might begin from work on queerness and narrative gaps (Willis 2006), readers' engagement with particular characters (Alderton 2014), or even just observations of how commonplace Mary Sue characters are in this particular body of fanfiction (Almagor 2006; Mackey and McClay 2008; Lehtonnen 2015).

Third, the historical arc of the HP fandom tends to coincide with certain well-mapped phenomena within the English-speaking fandoms of popular culture texts from the Global North, such as the Mary Sue characters discussed earlier. That is, the production of HP fanfiction spans both well-established and burgeoning trends in fanfiction, making comparisons between such practices possible within a single fandom.

Fourth and finally, HP fanfiction is usually easily accessible, both for us as researchers and also for anyone who might wish to build upon our work here. In the first place, both of us have read HP fanfiction fairly extensively, and Effie in particular has been researching it for years. Then in the second place, HP fanfiction's "canon", or definitive body of texts, is relatively more straightforward than, say, *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*, despite a growing number of transmedia add-ons to the 1997–2007 books by J.K. Rowling and the 2001–2011 HP films: this lowers certain barriers to entry for researchers.

Looking forward, however, it will also be interesting to see how the historical position of HP fanfiction continues to change, particularly as the books' own issues (entrenched racism, anti-Semitism, etc.), various transmedia properties' reiterations of such issues, and the author's consistent transphobia on social media alienate more and more readers with each year.

4.3. Locating and Reading HP Self-Insert Fanfiction

As previously mentioned, our approach to locating and selecting HP self-insert fanfiction for this analysis was adapted from the approach outlined by Popova (2018), who reports that they drew from fannish experience and "followed the path any fan new to a

fandom, trope or pairing may follow to find stories that are considered good or impactful by the community at large" (p. 6). On Ao3, the platform Popova's study focuses on, this approach entailed using the site's features "to search, sort and filter stories of interest" (p. 6). Popova describes using tags and sorting the results by the number of "kudos", which is the Ao3 platform's one-click, one-use feature intended "to let a creator know that you like their work" (Archive of Our Own (Ao3) n.d., "What are kudos?").

Informed by our own experience in locating fanfiction of different genres on different platforms, plus our own observations of self-insert fanfiction encountered during personal browsing, we decided to begin with specific keywords: "Y/N", "xReader", "Reader-Insert", "self-insert", "imagines", and "Mary Sue". (In some cases, we also queried slight variations, such as "reader" [i.e., instead of "reader-insert"] or "imagine" [i.e., without the pluralizing "s"] when the initial search did not yield the volume of results that we were expecting.) In many cases, we treated these terms like site tags—i.e., as navigational, classification, and indexical tools—and adapted our search according to the slightly different ways that each of our four target sites uses them. On Tumblr, for instance, tags are often "put to expressive rather than organizational purposes" (Stein 2018, p. 87) and are used "to create poetry, analysis, conversation, and even fiction" (p. 89). Meanwhile, on Ao3, tags become part of a "curated folksonomy" (Bullard 2014, as quoted in Price 2019, p. 2) that consists of "a combined self-tagging and automanual system" (Price 2019, p. 2) where users can choose from predefined site tags and/or create their own, which are later checked and possibly ratified by volunteer "tag wranglers." By contrast, other platforms often have simpler, more rigid, and less folksonomic tag systems. FF.net relies on more traditional querying methods and a far more limited, less expressive, and less fan-curated tagging system, while Wattpad offers sorting options/filters based on length, recent updates, WIPs versus completed stories, and ratings, among others.

We mention these differences in order to highlight how even an apparently straightforward functionality, such as tags and tagging, will often work differently on various platforms and, in the case of Tumblr, may also be leveraged by "fan-users" (Alberto 2020, para. 2.6) in ways that differ from the applications of those that developers consider a general userbase. Thus, for a project such as ours, locating self-insert fanfiction may sometimes be as simple as searching specific tags—if one knows the tags du jour to search for in the first place—but more often, also entails knowledge of what Elisabetta Costa (2018) calls "affordances-in-practices": that is, "the enactment of platform properties by specific users within [particular] social and cultural contexts" (p. 3651). Because they can be used in such vastly different ways according to users' different needs, Costa (2018) argues that a platform's features should be understood as relational and contextual, as well as technological; we found micro versions of this phenomenon at play in our searches across all four sites. Thus, we would add to Popova's (2018) methodology that a familiarity with fannish affordances-in-practice, as well as with a site's purely technical features, can be another important step in locating relevant fanfiction.

Adjusting and running these searches on each of our four selected platforms netted a wildly varying range of results (see Table 1). We provide a broad overview of our search process, organized by platform, in Appendix A; there, we also provide a listing of the self-insert HP fanfiction stories that received a close reading. Before we move on to our discussion(s), however, we must reiterate here that this data collection and analysis are by no means comprehensive. With such a wide scope regarding both fanfiction types and platforms, it would be difficult to make definitive, water-tight statements rather than broad observations—nor do we believe that we should aim for the latter anyway, as fanfiction and fan communities are constantly shifting and transforming. Instead, with these observations, we aim more to provide a more general, working overview, different aspects of which can then be taken up and expanded upon in future research.

Table 1. All results documented here stem from searches for *Harry Potter* self-insert fanfiction conducted in February and March 2022 using the term(s) below.

Platform	Imagine	Mary Sue	Reader (Insert)	Self-Insert	xReader/ReaderX	Y/N
Ao3	23 (imagine) 37 (imagines)	68	2713 (reader) 803 (r-insert)	382	10	13
FF.net	4217	1090	1	228	90	59
Tumblr	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Wattpad	7600+	496	1400+	126,000+	12,500+	12,300+

5. Insert Self, Part III: An Overview

Following the exploration and data collection stages outlined above, we now move into a discussion of certain traits that we found characterizing these particular subgenres of self-insert fanfiction, in a sample of HP fanfiction texts located across four large and largely fandom-populated platforms. Given that we have focused primarily on the fanfiction written for a single fandom—even if it is a very large and highly active one—we doubt that all the findings noted here will map exactly onto self-insert fanfiction produced within other fandoms but, again, we hope that this can provide at least a starting point for ongoing conversation.

We might summarize our thoughts here as follows: we found fan-authors "mediating and coding" (Busse 2016, p. 162) their writing and publishing of self-insert fanfiction in ways that exhibited cross-platform similarities of subgenre, as well as identifying some key, and often platform-specific, differences within these same shared subgenres.

5.1. First Primary Search: Imagines

As previously discussed, "imagines" are short fanfiction texts—often comprising more descriptive passages than a traditional narrative—that situate the reader in proximity to a character or real person associated with the fan-object, to the effect of "imagine [your] meeting..." or "imagine [yourself] dating..." that character or person. And, much as in the other subgenres of self-insert fanfiction that we outline here, the specifics of "imagines" seem to vary depending on the platform.

On Ao3, the keywords "Imagine" and "Imagines" yielded totally different results. We observed that the keyword "Imagines" (i.e., with the -s) was most often appended to collections of "one-shot" stories, many of which were originally posted on the authors' Tumblr accounts and were then "cross-posted" to Ao3 afterward. (Conversely, our searches on Ao3 using the keyword "Imagine" (i.e., without the -s) yielded stories that were more in line with the "Reader" keyword results on this platform; thus, we focused more on our "Imagines" results.) Some of these works were written in response to prompts received from other Tumblr users; others stemmed from prompt lists (see Section 6.1 for more on this topic). Many of these stories use first- or second-person narration, but as we observed with other self-insert subgenres, the majority featured a female character in a heterosexual relationship. The "Imagines" from Ao3 that we read in more depth for this project all fell into this pattern: collections of individual, sexually explicit texts, all focused on heterosexual relationships between a canon male character and a female self-insert character. Some of these collections are themed around a specific canon male character, while others explore scenarios with a variety of characters. Several of these collections also feature shared "kinks" (beyond fandom, these are non-normative sexual practices or desires often associated with BDSM; within fandom, the same applies and/or the term also denotes an "elaborate fannish framework . . . within which fans have engaged [in] sexual experiences, fantasies, and even politics" (Busse and Lothian 2017, p. 124)). Regarding kinks tagged and chosen to describe these collections, we noticed a predominance of "daddy kink", "innocence kink", and dom/sub (i.e., dominant/submissive) relationships.

The results on FF.net were inconclusive, given that this platform's search queries function more in the form of a traditional BOOLEAN search; that is, our query selected all results with the word "imagine" in either the title or story summary, which brings up works that use the term creatively or narratively, rather than only those that use it categorically. However, when we searched "imagine collection", this yielded far more relevant results, although we also realized that this would exclude stand-alone "imagines" or even collections that might not be described as such by the author. Most of the results obtained in this way specified that they are collections of "drabbles" (i.e., a short piece of fanfiction; today usually of fewer than 1000 words, but originally, of exactly 100 words) or "one-shots" (i.e., a fanfiction story that has only one chapter in its completed form, rather than having multiple chapters); we also noted that these results did not use the term "imagines" very often. We hypothesize that this is because "imagines" are a fairly recent fandom development, while FF.net is the oldest of the four platforms examined here, with the fewest updated search functions and the lowest level of multimedia support. In fact, of the few "collection" results that mentioned they were of "imagines", the author also stated that these stories had stemmed from Tumblr prompts and requests.

Tumblr and Wattpad both yielded significantly more results using the search keyword "imagines." On Tumblr, we found, "imagines" are predominantly written in the second person, using "Y/N" in place of a name for the self-insert character even when these texts are not specifically described as "Y/N" fanfiction; they are also largely focused on female characters in heterosexual relationships. Of the top ten results emerging from this search on Tumblr in March 2022, six were written in response to user-submitted prompts or "asks"; thus, the fan-author is writing at more of a distance from their story, as opposed to a story emerging from an idea that the fan-author themselves had. About 90% of the top results were also sexually explicit stories, interspersed with collections of pornographic gifs sans text. Additionally, pornographic gifs or static images are often attached to the "imagine" fanfiction texts themselves. The gifs typically did not include faces but were predominantly of white heterosexual couples engaged in sexual acts. While the static images were less explicit, they also seemed chosen specifically to enrich the fan-reader's experience, visually. In "subspace", for instance, the author has included a static image of a woman kneeling—the image only depicts the woman's body from the upper thigh to the knee—while in "Just Ours", the author includes a series of images depicting a female body in pink clothing. All of the top five stories paired the main character with one or more of the Marauders. Additionally, in terms of kink/fantasy, the majority of these stories featured similar interests (e.g., "daddy kink", "sub kink", "innocence kink", etc.); we even noticed a specific trend placing the male canon character in the therapist profession and the main female character as his patient, as seen in the story "Feels too right."

On Wattpad, "imagines" seem most commonly to be written in the first or second person; they are rarely in the third person. They are also much less explicit than those found on Tumblr and Ao3; we hypothesize that this is likely due to the younger age range of Wattpad users. For example, the story "***imagines*** ϟ **hatty potter**" includes four very short stories, each with a female main character; three out of four stories pair this character with a canon male character, but the fourth one pairs the reader-character with Hermione Granger in a same-sex relationship. Similarly, in the collection titled "IMAGINES | HARRY POTTER CAST X READER", there are several stories pairing the self-insert reader-character with a female canon character. Throughout this whole search process, same-sex relationships between the self-insert character and the canon character did not emerge often in the top results on any other platform, whereas Wattpad was the exception to this rule. Also interestingly, some of the results on Wattpad are actually merely lists of prompts with matching gifs pulled from the *Harry Potter* films; others are bullet-pointed "headcanons". This is similar to some trends we also noticed on Tumblr; that is, both platforms offer multimedia integration in ways that Ao3 and FF.net do not.

5.2. Second Primary Search: xReader

As noted earlier, xReader fanfiction (also known as ReaderX or even just Reader) features a self-insert protagonist who is sexually and/or romantically paired with a character from the source text. Our preliminary observations across these four platforms suggest that in some fanfiction communities, these terms are quite similar, while in other communities, they are vastly different. To test this, and in keeping with our earlier observation that "reader insert" often signifies a particular subset too, we looked for fanfiction texts classified as "xReader" as well as for those categorized as "Reader-Insert", in order to explore potential overlaps or differences.

On Ao3, the search keyword "xReader" yielded very few results; thus, we turned to the keyword "Reader" because it provided a much wider array of results. "Reader" fanfiction on Ao3 seems to function in a similar way to the "Y/N" fanfiction tag on FF.net and Wattpad; that is, these texts offer more descriptive detail of the "reader" character and, sometimes, there is even a complicated background contextualizing them. For example, in "The Potions Master's Apprentice", the "reader" character is described as a Muggleborn, Gryffindor, female character; however, within the text, the author uses the self-insert language of "(your name)", "(hair length)", and "(hair color)", to encourage the reader to place their own descriptors in these parts of the story. Meanwhile, in "Broken Silence", the author's summary provides context, including the fact that the character has been "expelled from an American school [and] relocated to Hogwarts." It is also worth noting that these two texts feature a relationship between the self-insert character and Severus Snape, as do the stories "Black Sheets" and "The Potions Master." Of the top five search results for "Reader" on Ao3, the only one that does not feature a relationship with Severus Snape is "I Hate You", which features a relationship with Draco Malfoy instead. This story also differs from the other four in that it appears to be written in response to a request that the fan-author received, rather than being of the fan-author's sole creation. All five of these stories are written in the second person, which is mostly consistent across all the "Reader" stories that we found on Ao3.

Stories tagged as "Reader-Insert" on Ao3 overlap quite widely with "Reader" stories on the same platform. Of the top five "Reader-Insert" stories, three are also found in the top five "Reader" stories (e.g., "I Hate You", "Black Sheets", and "The Potions Master's Apprentice"). However, the very top search result is a story entitled "the salt and the sea", which features an OFC (i.e., an original female character) but does not use any of the self-insert language that we have seen elsewhere; moreover, the author does not provide any insight as to why they have tagged this story as "Reader-Insert." The other new result appearing in the top five here is "Dear Professor–Snape x student!reader." Similar to the "Reader" stories discussed above, the author provides contextual information in the story summary and indicates that this was written in memory of Alan Rickman, who played the character Severus Snape in the HP films. The chapters alternate between the third-person point of view (POV) of Severus Snape and the second-person POV of the reader-character, who is not given a name: instead, the placeholder (. . .) is used to indicate that the reader should insert their own name for this character.

On FF.net, the "xReader" stories are quite similar to the other insert genres that we encountered on this platform; that is, they allow for some ambiguity so that the reader can place themselves in the story, with relatively little need to adjust for their own lived experience or bodily reality. Our results included a story where the reader is in a relationship with Fred and George Weasley, a student-professor relationship between the reader and Newt Scamander, and quite a few stories pairing the reader with Draco Malfoy. It is also worth noting that—despite the FF.net guideline banning second-person fanfiction, as discussed earlier—the more we explored this keyword, the more second-person fanfiction stories we found ("Newt Scamander X Reader", "Ravenclaw (Draco × Daughter-Reader × Father-Snape)", and more). This keyword also elicited a fair number of first-person stories. In "The both of us", the author seems to be attempting a gender-neutral character but slips into using she/her pronouns near the end of the story. In "I've Been a Bad Girl,

Professor Scamander", the gender of the character is indicated immediately, in the title. Another interesting text that emerged in these results is titled "From the Library of June Williams", although it actually features an OFC in a Marauders-era story. This story opens with a long author's note, in place of the first chapter, where they explain that this story was written when they were fifteen and that it reflected their desire to live out the life that they have given their OFC. Nearly a decade later, mid-pandemic, "stuck inside a childhood home with childhood books", they have decided to revisit and rewrite the original story in this form; although nothing immediately explains why this particular text came up when searching "xReader" on FF.net, it is possible that something unseen in the metadata is attributing it to this genre. In terms of "Reader-Insert", only one result appeared on FF.net, and this is not exactly the type of self-insert that we have seen across other genres. In "Power of the Elements", the first-person narrator is an eleven-year-old male child who is familiar with the HP story-world; after being admitted to Hogwarts (which he had previously thought was fictional), he is declared Morgan Le Fay's heir. In comparison to our other results here, this story functions more in the manner of a self-insert we might find on Ao3.

A significant number of the Tumblr "xReader" fanfiction results that we found originated from requests sent to the fan-authors who eventually wrote them; these requests are often quite specific, which does not allow for as much flexibility on the fan-author's part when writing the corresponding text. For example, we saw one Tumblr author being sent an anonymous ask that requested: "Maybe James or Sirius is the reader's older (by year) brother and they are really protective because of something that happened in the past. They could walk in on Remus and their sister kissing or something and they go all big brother on him. Maybe they both do because the other feels like a big brother to her as well." The subsequent story, titled "Remus gets caught Kissing James's Sister [R.L]" follows the precise plot described by this anonymous user. In other instances, though, there are fewer details included in the ask/request, which means the fan-author can include more of their own creative ideas or preferences. For instance, one fan-author received a request stating: "I was wondering if you could please write a fic with Draco and a gn!Crush? Maybe Draco wants to ask the reader to the yule ball and gets jealous when someone else tries to do the same(?)" The fan-author writes them a story in reply, titled "Are you Jealous?" but mentions in an author's note that they hope the story is "accurate to what [the anonymous user] wanted." Given that authors do not know any personal information about the fan-readers requesting such stories, we note that these fan-authors often tried to maintain a certain neutrality in the self-insert character and that they often did so quite effectively.

The Reader-Insert stories that we found on Tumblr were split evenly between those that emerged solely from the fan-author's imagination and those that resulted from fan-authors answering anonymous "asks", as described above. The story "tricks and charms", for example, was written for a writing event rather than in response to a request/prompt. In the prefacing material, the fan-author notes that the fan-reader should either pretend that the timeline of the story is contemporary (despite it featuring the Marauders) or else "pretend youtube [sic] existed back then". Similarly, in "My Dream Girl", the request specifies that the story should take place at a particular canon location, but the fan-author states: "I didn't want to write about [location . . .] so just pretend . . . " and situates the story in another place. Utilizing this keyword in our search here also brought up one of the only explicitly same-sex self-insert stories that we encountered. "Love Languages" is a story where the character is a male Ravenclaw student starting a relationship with James Potter. This story was written as a reply to the request: "James Potter falling for his sweet gay Ravenclaw tutor?" In almost all the other stories that we read, the self-insert character is assumed to be female or else is explicitly described as gender-neutral.

On Wattpad, there was a significant overlap between the search results for "xReader" and those for "Y/N". In fact, of the first five results listed for "xReader", two were also in the top five results of the "Y/N" search ("The Boy Who Loved" and "Her"). The top result for this keyword, however, is a text titled "Potter?||Draco Malfoy x Reader", which

has 23.5 million read counts and 808,000 votes. It comprises 157 chapters, including an epilogue, and tells the story of Harry Potter's sister, who has attended other schools before now transferring to Hogwarts. Elsewhere, with "Her", another text that comes up as a result of both "xReader" and "Y/N", the author's note states the reader will "go through the stages of like, love, lust, and loss with Harry and y/n as they venture through their years at Hogwarts." This statement seems to imply that "Y/N" is a character and not a holding space into which the fan-reader or fan-author inserts themselves; however, the story is told in the first person. Other search results that emerged here included story collections rather than single texts. These could be written in either the first person or the second person, but the top collections all feature "collections" of ficlets (i.e., very short fanfiction texts) with a heterosexual romance between the female self-insert character and an HP canon male character.

When searching "Reader-Insert" on Wattpad, the bulk of the top search results were collections of stories, similar to the aforementioned collections found with the "xReader" search term. The story titled "Different | dracomalfoy | " comes up as the second result and is one of the only ones that is not a story collection. Instead, this is a story that begins in the third year of school, and the character, y/n Potter, has transferred to Hogwarts from the American magic school, Ilvermorny. It is a story wherein the self-insert female character enters into a relationship with Draco Malfoy after being sorted into Slytherin, similar to the previously mentioned story, "Potter?". In another story, titled "Harry Potter x Reader–More Than Best Friends (First Year)", the author explicitly states that this is the "first part of a seven-part book of you and Harry". The story is written in the first person and alternates between the "Reader's Point of View" and "Harry's Point of View" (also written in the first person). Although the use of a first-person narrative in the reader's point-of-view sections allows for self-insertion, remaining within this perspective to explore Harry Potter's point of view could certainly create obstacles for continued self-insertion.

5.3. Third Primary Search: Y/N (Your Name)

As previously mentioned, Y/N fanfiction enables readers to place themselves directly within the story-world. The subgenre's name stems from the use of "Y/N" in places where the reader is meant to insert their own name, while specific Y/N fanfiction texts may also make other rhetorical or structural moves to open up places where readers can insert their own selves.

On Ao3, the use of "Y/N" is relatively consistent in several ways. The first is that most of the stories we came across were written in the first or second person, further encouraging readers to place themselves in the narrative—even when many of these texts also indicate that the author might be self-inserting as well. Of the five Y/N stories we ultimately read from Ao3 following our search query, one is in the first person, three are in the second person, and one is a list of bullet-pointed "headcanons" (i.e., a fan's own personal ideas or preferences regarding the original canon).

In "Wonderful Mischief", the author indicates in the story summary that it is a "very self-fulfilling" story, thus gesturing to the idea that they have written this story with themselves in mind. Written in the first person, this story's opening leans heavily on the sort of life the author might have known; the character's parents are Muggles (non-magical people) and the character references their headphones, a "house in the suburbs", and their parents' car. Similarly, "A Million Times Over" is a second-person-narrated, sexually explicit story where the Y/N character is in a heterosexual relationship with the secondary character Bill Weasley. In the author's notes, the author indicates that they have "been in love with Bill since [they were] 14/15"; we can assume, then, that there might be an overlap between the author's self and the self in the story. On the other hand, in "A Potions Storeroom Story—One-shot", the author has chosen to write in the second person and indicates in the summary that they are replying to an ask from Tumblr emerging from a list of dialog prompts that the author created; this story, then, is intended for readers to self-insert themselves, rather than the author. Another work, "NSFW/SFW Harry Potter

Headcanons", consists of three chapters of bullet-pointed headcanons (i.e., what the fan imagines these characters would do), all listed in the second person. A chapter apiece is dedicated to headcanons about Draco Malfoy, Fred Weasley, and the original character Lorenzo Berkshire (for more on this, see Section 6.2); even though other male characters are also tagged, and even though the author attempts to keep the Y/N character gender-neutral, slip-ups seem to reveal that this is a female self-insert in a heterosexual relationship with the male character featured in each chapter. The Fred Weasley chapter also switches from a second-person narrator to a first (i.e., "PDA (slaps your ass in public but only if you're okay with it, puts his hand on my thigh all the time, kisses me; mouth, cheek, forehead, or hand(s)"), thus perhaps unintentionally revealing that the author has been inserting themselves all along. Conversely, the final story we read in this subgenre on Ao3 was a "neutral!reader" story called "Sweet Dreams", which avoids identifying a specific gender or physical descriptors much more successfully; readers can mainly intimate that the Y/N character is of school age. The story also avoids any physical intimacy between the characters, aside from a touch on the face and a hug, perhaps signaling an attempt to leave "neutrality" open for asexual and aromantic readers as well. Looking at the range of "self" open for readers to engage with in these five stories, we find perhaps the most complete instantiation of that neutrality in this last text.

On Tumblr, "Y/N" fanfiction seems written primarily in the third person. These texts also tend to be significantly shorter, often only around one thousand words in length, and feature predominantly female Y/N characters. Aside from this gender identification, often implied via pronoun usage, Tumblr Y/N fanfiction texts are more careful than Ao3 Y/N fanfiction about keeping physical descriptors vague or nonexistent. We speculate that this is more common on Tumblr for two reasons: (1) the shortness of story length, and (2) the fact that many stories are written in response to reader requests, and, thus, are less likely to be influenced by the author. It is also worth noting that, for the most part, these Tumblr Y/N stories tend to be sexually explicit, and most of the ones that we located paired the Y/N character with a member of the Marauders (i.e., the Hogwarts generation before the HP narrative present: Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and James Potter), with Draco Malfoy, or with Severus Snape. Authors on Tumblr tended to provide either an abundance of information prior to the beginning of the story (i.e., content tags, summaries, and background information) or else no information at all. Many of these Y/N fanfiction texts also incorporated or linked away from the site to pornographic gifs depicting male bodies (that are visually similar to various HP characters) engaged in sexual acts with female bodies. Such gifs rarely included the adult performers' faces, which left some room for the readers' own imagination to fill in that blank, while also still specifying the participation of white, able-bodied figures (for more on this topic, see Sections 6.4 and 6.5 below).

Broadly speaking, then, we notice that Ao3 and Tumblr Y/N stories tend to use self-insert language for the character's name and then place more emphasis and effort on making the character's physicality neutral. On FF.net and Wattpad, however, we found that the authors tended to use self-insert language more broadly, creating a textual "self" that may seem like an even more explicitly blank slate for the readers to fill in themselves. For example, in "Look at Me: A Draco Malfoy x Reader Fanfiction" on FF.net, the author uses h/c (hair color) and e/c (eye color) throughout this third-person story to allow the reader to mentally input their own defining characteristics. Similarly, in "The Boy who Loved" on Wattpad, the Y/N character's mother is identified as being Y/Na (your nationality) and the story goes on to state that the Y/N character looks just like their mother, without specifying that physical appearance.

However, Y/N fanfiction authors on both FF.net and Wattpad were also more likely to set up an existing background for the Y/N character at the beginning of the story; this practice often functions in ways that foreclose some of the possibility that the in-text characteristics leave open. In the aforementioned story, "Look at Me", for example, the character is explicitly identified as a sixth-year Gryffindor, half-blooded, female character. Likewise, on Wattpad, the aforementioned "The Boy Who Loved" is the story of Y/N

Scamander, the grandchild of Newt and Tina Scamander (introduced in *Fantastic Beasts*), who is also identified as a third-year, Gryffindor, pureblooded, female character. Thus, while the trend of a female main character is common across all four of the platforms we examined, Wattpad and FF.net authors often provided so much additional detail before the actual text that—if these preliminaries are taken into account—these stories could actually exclude many readers from inserting themselves into the otherwise blank slate of the self-insert character right from the beginning of the text.

This leads to an interesting overlap between the original characters (i.e., OCs) and blank-slate characters on these platforms. For example, in "Medusa's Heir Book I: The Sorcerer's Stone", on FF.net, the author uses Y/N instead of a character name for the main character, but this character is explicitly identified as a "girl"; the author also shares that this character's "right eye was completely liquefied gold color while her left eye was a soul-piercing blue [. . .] her hair was also two different colors, her left side was a pastel pink while the right side was a pastel blue." Despite attempts to create a Y/N character into which readers can insert themselves, the stories on Wattpad and FF.net often end up featuring an OC rather than a self-insert, in ways that often mirror the characteristics that we have seen attributed to Mary Sue characters.

5.4. First Supplementary Search: Self-Insert

While our overall project has focused on "self-insert" as a sort of umbrella term for an entire subgenre of fanfiction, we have also shown how fanfiction communities often use that term to indicate a specific type: i.e., texts in which fan-authors envision themselves as the subject being inserted into the text, as opposed to "reader-insert" texts that welcome the fan-reader in to do so. While we have not delineated this distinction very sharply in the present work, given our focus on theorizing the presence of that broader umbrella first, we still ran keyword searches on "self-insert", to explore what stories would be found. When we ran the search, we immediately noticed the afore-mentioned distinction: unlike the "xReader", "Y/N", or "imagine" fanfiction texts that we have explored thus far, the works tagged "self-insert" tended to imply or even state explicitly that the self-insert character represents the work's author, and that they are not necessarily open to self-insertion by the work's reader. It is also fascinating that the results for this keyword were the most dissimilar across the four platforms.

On Ao3, the "self-insert" results revealed a trend wherein the story's author inserts themselves into the story as someone reborn into the HP universe; they are either reborn into an existing character or are a new character. In many of these texts, the story is told in the first person and the "reborn" main character is already intimately familiar with the Wizarding World as a fictional universe. In "Rose Petal Red", the main character dies in a car crash and is reborn as the twin sister of Ginny Weasley. She identifies herself, prior to her rebirth, as an American woman from the 21st century, identifiable by mentions of Google and iPhones; this main character also states that she has been to college, which makes her pre-rebirth age older than the school-age characters of the canon. From the author's notes and tags (e.g., the tag "EXTREMELY self-indulgent"), we can also infer that there are similarities between the main character and the author. This same trend (of a contemporary American college-aged woman) is seen in "Harry Potter and the Reluctant Rebirth." Interestingly, this story is the first in a series of five (so far), of which three are ranked in the top results for the "self-insert" keyword. Likewise, in "The Mudblood of Slytherin", the main character is once more an American college-aged woman, although, this time, the character is reborn as the younger sister of the canon character, Ted Tonks. Unlike the other stories, this one does not begin with the character's death but rather with her Sorting into Slytherin House in the 1970s. In the opening notes of "The Ghost of Privet Drive", the author states: "this is a grossly self-indulgent story [. . .] while this is a self-insert fix, I've changed a few modest details of my life for privacy purposes." This is a clear admission from the author that the self-insert main character is meant to be themselves. This is a trend that does not appear in our results for other self-insertion keywords and,

from this finding, we see further evidence for the way that, in many fandom communities, "self-insert" implies the insertion of the fan-author, rather than the fan-reader; thus, out of this distinction, there emerges a whole new trope.

On FF.net, the "self-insert" stories that we analyzed were also written in the first person and featured similar plots to those in the Ao3 results: somehow, the author ends up in the HP universe. On this platform, however, the authors often explicitly share that they are the self-inserted character in the story. For example, in one story's author's note, the author states, "this story is just basically about Sirius, with me thrown in as an OC", and that is the exact plot of the story, wherein Sirius Black develops a relationship with an original female character, who is a stand-in for the author. In the majority of these top search results, the authors insert themselves into the Wizarding World in an attempt to "fix" it. They often explain that they are dissatisfied with the decisions made by the author and want to remedy these "mistakes." For example, one author shares: "This story will go through what I would have done differently, knowing what I know from the books and from fanfiction". Ultimately, fanfiction is about rewriting an existing story-world to fix it, or engage in its fantasy, or explore unseen parts of that world. These authors, however, feel that there is a need for them to enter the story-world themselves, in order to effect such changes. In "self-insert with attitude", the author does not explain how they can enter the fictional universe but intimates that they have done so before. This is similar to the trend that we noticed on Ao3; in "What I Would Have Done", the main character dies in a train crash and wakes to find themself reborn into the fictional world as a new character at the moment when the book series begins; they have two sets of memories, their old ones from their non-magic life and their new ones, and they are already familiar with the story-world. Likewise, in "Cedric's New Life", the author shares that this is an attempt at writing a self-insert story *in media res*. This impulse of writing a modern character who is reborn into a bygone and sometimes fictionalized world would greatly benefit from further exploration and analysis, perhaps in comparison to practices such as the transmigration stories that are popular in Chinese web-based fiction.

On Tumblr, the "self-insert" keyword offered a mix of results, many of which we had seen in other search results (namely, the "xReader" results), as well as posts that were not fully narrative or were not in story form at all. Common examples of this second category included bulleted lists outlining specific scenarios, and how the different characters would react (i.e., "when you're on your period (as a trans guy)", "you watching a movie with . . . ", "a day with Draco Malfoy on Valentine's", etc.), as well as fanart where the fan artist has included themselves (and the fictional character(s)) in the piece. Of the story results, most include a self-insert main character and are either written in the first or second person. Surprisingly, given our results for the other keywords queried in this analysis, these Tumblr results were less sexually explicit, and, instead, tended to be more comedic or friendship-centric in nature. For example, in "A Special Friend, Part Two [Fred Weasley, George Weasley X Reader]", the plot is centered around a friendship between Fred Weasley, George Weasley, and the reader. In "Oh No . . . R.W. x F!reader", the main character's hickeys, a product of her relationship with Ron Weasley, are seen by his mother and the consequences are humorous.

On Wattpad, neither the keyword "self-insert" nor any variation of it yielded many results; this tag seems to be used sporadically and inconsistently on this platform. In fact, the bulk of the results on the first page was clearly marked as Drarry fanfiction (i.e., stories depicting Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter in a sexual and/or romantic relationship), and, similar to our Mary Sue results on this platform, there does not seem to be any indication as to why these stories would be selected when this keyword was searched. Some of the results were self-insert stories—many of which we have seen in searches with other keywords—but these are in the minority compared to the number of Drarry fanfiction results.

5.5. Second Supplementary Search: Mary Sue

Our analysis of the "Mary Sue" keyword results on these four platforms will be brief; we ran the search for comparison purposes, but then found that the bulk of the results was either extremely similar or irrelevant. On Ao3, most of the search results were identified by their authors as crack!fic (i.e., fanfiction that is intentionally silly or ridiculous),[1] parody, and/or satire. This is a trend that we saw across all four platforms where this keyword led to relevant search results. However, on Ao3, we made several interesting observations. First, in several of the top search results, the authors stated that their story was originally published on FF.net and that they had either reposted to Ao3 "for ease of find-y-ness", or else that they were rewriting the FF.net version of the story chapter-by-chapter and reposting it on Ao3. Second, in one of the top search results, the fan-author shared that they "wrote this fic as part of [their] Master's thesis on Mary Sues." These findings add additional layers of complexity to the questions we posed earlier on Mary Sues in particular, and on self-insert fanfiction more broadly.

On FF.net, the "Mary Sue" keyword also yielded search results that were mainly crack!fic, parody, or satire. In some cases, the authors presented their stories as attempts to "write a Mary Sue", while in others, the authors indicated that the original character in their story was a Mary Sue. On Tumblr, the Mary Sue keyword led mostly to fans' meta-commentaries on whether certain characters can be considered as Mary Sues in canon or whether certain characters were written as Mary Sues in fanfiction. Finally, on Wattpad, there were no commonalities or consistencies within the search results, aside from the stories being HP fanfiction. In fact, we could not find any clear indication as to why these results were selected using this keyword; none are tagged "Mary Sue", nor do they mention Mary Sues in the comments, notes, summaries, etc. However, many of these stories would likely fall under the Mary Sue umbrella (i.e., those with characters named Ember White or Ophelia Noble, for example), which leads us to suspect that, somewhere in the metadata, they have been tagged as Mary Sue fanfiction by their authors.

6. Observations and Discussion of Self-Insert Fanfiction

As outlined above, for this project, we located and read a sampling of Harry Potter self-insert fanfiction from multiple subgenres, across four platforms that are widely used for fannish writing: Ao3, FF.net, Tumblr, and Wattpad. While this analysis reveals a wide variety of ways that a "self" was made evident in such texts, we also did notice several broad similarities and recurring themes of interest.

The first is that self-insert fanfiction was "coded . . . properly" (Busse 2016, p. 162) by its fan-authors using various tags, "fantagging" practices (Price and Robinson 2021), and paratextual appendages that are already widely recognized across the platform in question in order to let readers know, immediately, precisely what kind of highly personal material they would encounter in the subsequent text. Likewise, the actual texts then "mediated" such highly personal interests "properly" (Busse 2016, p. 162) through their use of conventions specific to various types of self-insert fanfiction, including the implied second-person narrative of "imagine" fanfiction and the "insert your name here" constructions of "Y/N" fanfiction; these conventions outline specific, formalized means for the fan-author and/or fan-reader to "put . . . themselves into the story" (Rtarara 2013), rather than leaving such interests up for every fan-author and fan-reader to renegotiate in every new text. Here, we return to Busse's formulation, which was initially used to describe common fan gripes with Mary Sue characters, in order to stress how formality and convention constitute a major shift in self-insert fanfiction. Put differently, self-insert fanfiction tends to be more overt and explicit about its purpose(s), even when those purpose(s) may differ in terms of text, type of self-insert, and/or platform.

Other macro-observations that are worth noting include the fact that each of the platforms we surveyed had its own practices regarding textual perspective (i.e., whether the story was written in the first, second, or third person), paratextual material(s), such as author's notes, and so on. We also observed a significant amount of overlap between

various subgenres, as well as with works being tagged as both "xReader" and then also appearing in the search for "Imagines".

From these observations, we maintain again that any description of self-insert fanfiction is describing a form of writing that will rarely remain uniform, contained, or rigidly bounded. Likewise, the roles played by specific platforms cannot be overstated, and, much as we have seen Elisabetta Costa (2018) argue, understanding platform affordances—such as tags, in our case—is much improved by considering "the practices of usage within situated environments" (p. 3643). In other words, we reiterate that site tags, metadata, search results, etc., do not definitively define self-insert fanfiction or a specific subgenre of it, although they can be used for location purposes in the type of broad overview that we have offered here.

We also observed more specific trends during our skimming of the top results of each subgenre—upward of 100 fanfiction texts altogether—then, again, in our selection and close reading of five samples from each for the comparative survey above. In the following subsections, we expand upon some of these broad observations.

6.1. Community: Requests, Prompts, and Events

Across multiple platforms, we noticed that self-insert fanfiction works are often requested by a fan-author's followers and readers, or else are written for story exchanges and similar events: likewise, information identifying these points of origin is often included in paratexts, such as story summaries, author's notes, etc. This occurrence caught our notice because it highlights a certain community aspect to self-insert fanfiction: that is, despite the decidedly personal nature of this type of writing, its creation is often highly purposeful and such texts are produced on the understanding that specific people apart from the fan-author want to read them.

Requests, prompts, fanfiction-writing events, and fan-authors' paratexts regarding them were far more common on some platforms than others. For instance, Tumblr's self-insert fanfiction frequently seems to be written in response to "asks" (i.e., a user question that is submitted directly to a specific blog) and requests made by other Tumblr users. Likewise, many fan-authors writing self-insert fanfiction on this platform run their blogs as sites where anonymous users of the Tumblr community can submit their story idea or prompt through Tumblr features such as asks. FF.net had few such notes, while their counterparts on Ao3 are often identified as cross-platform postings and are attributed to requests received on Tumblr (also, see Section 6.2, *Conversations and Movement Among Platforms*). Meanwhile, on Wattpad, self-insert fanfiction often seems to be published in story collections; many of these collections accumulate works written in response to reader requests that are made to fan-authors, either by private messages or via a post on their profile's "Conversations" page. On Wattpad, many fan-authors also publish an opening "chapter" for their story collections that outlines how fan-readers can request stories (i.e., make sure to list the character's school year, House, blood status, etc.). Cross-posting is also common, as some Wattpad fan-authors also seem to be receiving requests from Tumblr and cross-posting their short works on both platforms (see Section 6.2 for more).

Beyond reader requests and formalized events, such as fanfiction exchanges, another element of community that we noted regarding self-insert fanfiction is the circulation of prompts, either as rebloggable lists (on Tumblr) or static lists (on Wattpad). There are a range of ways to create and use lists for writing prompts: fan-authors can create their own, fan-authors may poll blog followers for prompts of interest to add to such a list, which is then open for readers to request stories from, or a fanfiction-writing event can create its own list, with a prompt for each day of the week or month, to which event participants can then respond. (It is also of note here that writing prompt lists of this sort are not unique to self-insert fanfiction—both Effie and Maria, the authors, have seen them used extensively among broader writing and fandom communities on Tumblr.)

Some of the community elements that we observed here also dovetail with some of our later observations about the portrayal of self (see Sections 6.4 and 6.5, *Slipping Into and*

Out of Self-Insert and *Whiteness as Common Default*). That is, we noticed that some of these prompt options give authors a little more structure to follow (i.e., receiving a request for a specific, tailor-made story creates the need to try and match that particular reader's desires for the text) while others are more open-ended (i.e., receiving a prompt from a prompt list does not come with additional, preferred information). Likewise, since many of these community requests remain anonymous, the fan-author may not have much information about the requester, and so may try to write a self-insert fanfiction that is even broader than usual, in order to accommodate them: These circumstances or concerns may also be brought up in paratextual, introductory material. The preponderance of requests for fan-authors to write self-insert fanfiction for their readers and followers also indicates the presence of a specific fandom gift economy (Turk 2014), which we find particularly interesting because both the labor and the text being produced in such instances are so highly personal.

6.2. Conversations and Movement between Platforms

Our discussion thus far has noted that many subgenres of self-insert fanfiction take specific forms when written for and distributed on particular platforms, and also that the community element of writing and consuming these subgenres may entail circulating prompt lists and "cross-posting" the results. However, we also noted that several strands of self-insert fanfiction, its fan-authors, and its fan-readers navigate between various platforms while engaging with this kind of writing. For instance, readers might have sent fan-authors prompts on one platform, then the fan-authors have posted the finished work on another; or the same work might be cross-posted on two different platforms, to take advantage of the different reader communities and distribution practices on each one.

Some of the cross-platform conversations and movements that we observed included fan-readers and fan-users utilizing Tumblr's messages and other functions to circulate prompts, fanfiction texts referring the reader to one of the other three platforms (Ao3, FF.net, and Wattpad) as a distribution or archival space, or else transferring the work from its original home on FF.net to Ao3 as a "cleaned-up" and updated version. The three fanfiction reading platforms also often included notes indicating which platform where the text originated. Another movement that we observed affecting self-insert fanfiction in particular was between Wattpad and other social media platforms with younger user bases, most often TikTok,[2] which often had different practices altogether.[3]

6.3. Explicit Content and NSFW

Aside from works that were tagged or described using the appellation "Mary Sue", sexually explicit self-insert fanfiction was found predominantly on Ao3 and Tumblr: in fact, on Tumblr, around 90% of the works under the subgenres of "imagines" and "Y/N" fell into this category. On Ao3, these stories are also predominantly written in the second person and tended to feature a heterosexual female character paired with a canon male character. If the character was gender-neutral, as occurred in only about 10% of the stories that we surveyed, the work tended not to be explicit. On Tumblr, these explicit self-insert fanfiction works were also written predominantly in the second person across the subgenres; they, too, also tended to feature a heterosexual female character, although in this case, she is often paired with a/multiple Marauder(s), Draco Malfoy, or a(/both) Weasley twin(s). Given the nature of Tumblr as a micro-blogging platform, designed to support particular types of content, these self-insert examples were shorter, often under 2000 words in length. However, even on Ao3, much of the fanfiction tagged as belonging to the "Y/N" genre was short and consisted of one-shots or comprised shorter stories that are told in single installments; there are only a few exceptions where the story is multi-chaptered.

Additionally, on Tumblr, due to its nature as an image-based platform, many of these explicit stories were enhanced through the use of gifs, edits (edited images), and "manips" (photo-manipulated images, often superimposing the character's face onto another's body or in a new situation), all of which tended to evoke or match the story itself in some way.

While, at times, such images were taken from the *Harry Potter* films, more often they were not, and were, instead, reworked and re-contextualized from some other form of media: photoshoots, stock images, and even pornography. For those images that did stem from the films, those that featured the actors Daniel Radcliffe and/or Tom Felton (who portray Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy, respectively) seemed the most common, probably attesting to the popularity of both these characters and the fan-favorite (relation)ship, "Drarry". However, it seemed equally likely that these images should come from other sources, although presented in ways that either "fandom iconography" (Nielsen 2021, p. 208) and/or story context made it clear whom they were meant to be depicting. For instance, a significant number of these HP self-insert stories are set during the decades prior to the HP books' narrative present (i.e., the "Marauders era"), and so there is no film footage for the love-interest characters from this time period: thus, fan-authors may offer gifs, edits, and manips of models or actors from other films.

Beyond the settings, such differences may also be broken down according to the subgenre of self-insert stories. More specifically, "Imagines" seem predominantly to use gifs from the HP films; "xReader" stories are less likely to use images, but, when they do, they are often from the HP films; and reader-insert fanfiction offered a balance between using no images at all, or else using images from the films. As an obvious outlier, Y/N stories seemed to use explicit, body-focused gifs (i.e., the faces are not shown) pulled from live-action pornographic material; these images tend to feature white individuals in various explicit positions, although still being mindful of Tumblr's 2018 crackdown on pornographic images. Additionally, however, interspersed among the top results for Y/N on Tumblr are links to pornographic gifs/video clips on Twitter that feature male bodies similar to the HP characters; the faces of the individuals in the gifs are rarely shown, heightening the readers' ability to superimpose these visuals and their surface similarities to HP characters over the explicit narrative itself.

6.4. Slipping into and Out of Self-Insert

As we have already seen, many contemporary forms of self-insert fanfiction utilize formal conventions that leave a literal space for the reader within their narratives, such as the implied subject position that results from inserting one's own name to replace the "Y/N", or envisioning one's own self participating in the narrative, along the lines of "imagine [you were]…" However, our analysis of a select sample here also uncovered how, often, the fan-authors of these works also include physical descriptors that likely allude either to themselves or, alternatively, to their ideal selves. Often, these slippages occurred when the author described the Y/N character's hair ("long hair, "braided hair", "thick, tousled hair", or hair that another character can "[run] their fingers through"), or when providing the Y/N character's physique ("small frame", "bikini", "slim waist"). These descriptions of the character's hair and body immediately exclude those potential readers who do not have these hair types or body types. Similarly, as seen in the previous sections, the great majority of the top stories emerging from our keyword searches featured a cisgender, neurotypical, non-disabled, female main character engaged in a heterosexual relationship with a cisgender, neurotypical, non-disabled, male canon character. Thus, despite the effort to allow for fan-readers to fully insert themselves into the story, these characterizing details immediately exclude certain readers, if they are looking for truly blank-slate self-insert characters.

This impulse leads us to question whether self-insert fanfiction is driven by fantasy or by representation; our analysis has certainly indicated that it could be a mixture of both, depending on the genre, platform, and individual inclination. However, if even some of these stories do indeed emerge out of a type of wish-fulfillment, then, future research should consider the implications of heterosexual, cisgender, neurotypical, non-disabled, female, and white (see Section 6.5) characters being adopted as (or being assumed to be) the desired identity/fantasy by fan-authors. This could be an especially interesting facet to explore on a platform like Wattpad, thanks to its distinctly younger user demographic.

Simultaneously, we also observed even more distinct and deliberate attempts to keep self-insert characters neutral in works that the fan-author has written directly in response to an ask or request, i.e., on Tumblr (see Section 6.2, *Conversations and Movements Between Platforms*, above). In these cases, fan-authors were much less likely to include physical descriptors of the self-insert character when the ask or request did not specify additional details; however, in some cases, if the ask or request specified a detail (i.e., "nerdy Ravenclaw with glasses"), then the fan-author ensured that this detail was included in the subsequent story. From this finding, we speculate that fan-authors may be more able to delineate between own-self and story-self when responding to anonymous requests, where the impetus for the story has come from a subject beyond the author's own creativity. Conversely, we wonder if, when fan-authors are writing a story based on an idea that they themselves had or would like to experience, they are more likely to let parts of themselves slip into the story.

6.5. Whiteness as a Common Default

A final key observation for the present project builds on the previous point regarding the accidental insertion of specific selves, whether those of the fan-author or of an ideal(ized) self. We noted that one of the most common and recurring instances of slippage between potential selves concerns the self-insert character's implied whiteness. That is, we found that most fan-authors writing across these various subgenres seemed to try and keep their self-insert characters fairly neutral, steering away from overt descriptions of physical characteristics, so that fan-readers could then envision themselves in these scenarios without having to negotiate a position regarding whether the bodies or appearances being explicitly described were unlike their own. As we noted above, however, these attempts were not always fully realized, and fan-authors may unconsciously have included descriptions of specific hair types, body types, and more.

Whiteness becomes another such descriptor, the placement of which, within the formal structures of a self-insert subgenre (i.e., implicit or explicit second-person narration, the injunction to "imagine" a scenario, an unstated understanding that the reader's own name replaces the acronym "Y/N", etc.) can exclude particular readers, thus negating the main point of self-insert fanfiction entirely. We noted multiple examples of implied or explicit whiteness occurring across the sample of stories read for this project, including Y/N characters who have, respectively, a "white chest", a "face white as a sheet", "bright red cheeks", and certain hair types, among other identifying characteristics.

We highlight these instances, not to claim that they are always self-reflexive on the part of their fan-authors but, instead, to emphasize that self-insert fanfiction and its subgenres are not immune to the all-too-common, fandom-wide settings in which "the logics of whiteness structure the assumptions of both fans and scholars in these spaces" (Pande 2020, p. 4), exacerbating mainstream Western media's and society's assumptions of whiteness as a default (Dyer 1997) within smaller subcultural or even grassroots spaces. The long history of this trend, its overlooking of entire fan communities, and the various types of violence that it perpetuates (including those weaponized along the lines of self-insert characters; see Neill Hoch 2020; Stitch 2021) all make their recurrence in the subgenres we are studying here even more important to highlight, particularly when every single one of the stories that we found, slipping into racialized descriptions in this way, highlighted whiteness.

7. Some Concluding Thoughts and Future Directions

Our goal with this project has been to trace certain shifts in the development of self-insert fanfiction, including common threads from Mary Sue characters—particularly the way in which these were often understood and judged as authorial self-inserts, often based on fan-readers' own biases and preferences—to contemporary forms, including "imagines", "Y/N", and "xReader" fanfiction. To this end, we have offered a brief overview of Mary Sues, some definitions of specific self-insert types, and a discussion of findings drawn from

a survey of HP self-insert fanfiction. With these analyses, we hope to provide a starting point for further discussions of this subgenre.

We have also taken a Foucauldian approach to this topic, viewing self-insert fanfiction along the lines of fiction-mediated "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1988). However, rather than adopting Foucault's framework for personal, confessional, self-governing writing in its entirety, we also look to the possibilities inherent in digital technologies of the self, as theorized by Abbas and Dervin (2009), Siles (2012), and others, which often tend to stress knowledge of the self over the governance of the same. While we do find common threads between this concept and self-insert fanfiction, we also demonstrate how the umbrella term of self-insert fanfiction at least attempts to open up the "self" that is being created and is performing for the enjoyment of others besides its author. Moreover, this subgenre of fanfiction also avoids some of the criticisms often levied against earlier Mary Sue characters, by "mediating and coding" certain forms of particularly transgressive desire "properly" (Busse 2016, p. 162)—that is, in ways that can be recognized immediately and either engaged with or avoided, as desired.

Likewise, our preliminary survey of HP self-insert fanfiction across four platforms has led us to ask further questions that future work in this area could continue exploring and expanding upon. For instance, in HP fanfiction, at least, around 85% of the fanfiction texts we encountered in this subgenre involved a "het" (i.e., heterosexual or opposite-sex) pairing of a female self-insert character and male canon character, whether or not the story itself was sexually explicit: we found this to be a fascinating departure from the preponderance of slash (i.e., male/male, same-sex) pairings, particularly in sexually explicit fanfiction. Likewise, we imagine that future work could further explore whether the origin points of different self-insert fanfiction types also influenced their current characteristics. For instance, Fanlore (n.d.) documents how both "Y/N" and "imagines" seem to have begun on Twitter, even if they are now more common elsewhere. So, while platforms such as Wattpad and their multi-million-hit stories demonstrate an increase in the prevalence and acceptance of certain forms of self-insert fanfiction, these genres rarely began in these highly visible spaces, even though they may have developed specific conventions there. Another area of great potential for future study can be found in the multi-media compositions of self-insert fanfiction, which, in the case of HP fanfiction at least, may use green-screen effects and scenes spliced from the films to place the fan-creator's own body into the story-world (Sapuridis 2021).

We might articulate some of our other remaining questions as follows:

- What can we make of the slippage between self-insert writing as being primarily a reader-oriented fantasy and then as (potentially) a representation of the reader in what are often fantasy settings?
- What does a deeper delve into the "fantagging" (Price and Robinson 2021) of self-insert fanfiction reveal about this overarching practice, the subgenres within it, and those who engage with it?
- Why, as our preliminary sample here suggests, do the majority of self-insert fanfiction across subgenres, such as "imagines" and "Y/N" stories, feature female-identified characters in heterosexual relationships, as contrasted with the predominance of slash and queer relationships in other types of fanfiction?
- If this is true, how might this tendency dovetail with the nature of self-insert writing?

However, as mentioned in our introduction, our intent with this project is not to set out this recent shift toward purposeful, participatory self-insert fanfiction as an "evolution" of the Mary Sue: There are far too many shortcomings to that particular approach, most notably its risk of becoming the teleological argument that contemporary forms are better, more progressive, or more self-aware than their predecessors. This is both disingenuous and also risks reifying the particular stigmas surrounding certain forms of authorship, reading practices, and encodings of reader desire (Morrissey 2014). There is also the possibility of inadvertently holding fan-authored works to commercial or cultural standards that they

were simply never created to meet, and/or of equating standard writing conventions with value or meaning.

Considering self-insert fanfiction in terms of being a digital technology of the self, however, can also offer a means of understanding some of the backlash against it. Unlike the private confessional letters between only two people that Foucault deems the technologies of the self, digital technologies of the self are explicitly designed and are expected to reach much wider audiences, the majority of whom the author will not actually know personally and who, thus, lack certain frames of reference that Foucault's (1988) formulation presumes. To reapply Busse's (2016) terms here, we might point out that what such a text is "mediating and coding" (p. 162) and also how it is doing so become key aspects of these digital technologies of the self—here is where many divides originate, as those who author the texts and those who encounter them.

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Appendix A

In this appendix, we discuss our approach to locating HP self-insert fanfiction, and the HP self-insert fanfiction that we read over the course of this project, in greater detail.

Appendix A.1. Archive of Our Own (Ao3)

On Ao3, we followed the same process for all six keywords, with two specifications. First, the "xReader" keyword yielded no results, so we tried the word "Reader", which was a successful query. Second, when searching for Mary Sue fanfiction, we had the option of searching it as a keyword or as an established character within Ao3's system; we chose to search it as a keyword as that would be more in line with how the other keywords were queried.

1. Select the fandom tag "Harry Potter–J.K. Rowling".
2. Type the keyword into the "Other tags to include" search box from the right-hand "Sort and Filter" menu.
3. Narrow the search by excluding crossovers (via the "More Options" heading, under the subheading "Crossovers").
4. Narrow the search by specifying English-language texts only (via the "Language" drop-down option menu).
5. Sort the results by "kudos" (following Popova's (2018) suggestion that this can be one potentially helpful way of identifying stories' levels of popularity (p. 7): this recommendation did resonate with the search experience of the first author, who took on the bulk of this part of the project).
6. Closely read the top five results.

Using this method, we found the following fanfiction stories:

- **Imagine(s):** "Harry Potter One Shots (ONGOING)" (28,724 words), "Fred & George Weasley One Shots" (23,767 words), "DRACO MALFOY IMAGINES (Draco Malfoy x

Reader)" (6818 words), "Sirius Black One Shots" (18,391 words), "Draco Malfoy One Shots" (7524 words).

- **Mary Sue:** "Boredom is Deadly" (40,298 words), "Lord Hadrian James Potter Black (and 6 others) and the Senile Old Fool" (15,097 words), "Backstage [+podfic]" (8227 words), "Harry Potter and the New Neighbour" (146,738 words), "Harry Potter and the Power of the Coven" (31,987 words).
- **Reader-Insert:** "the salt and the sea" (209,789 words), "Dear Professor - Snape x student!reader" (51,657 words), "The Potion Master's Apprentice" (53,722 words), "Black Sheets" (51,570 words), "I Hate You" (2429 words).
- **Self-Insert:** "Rose Petal Red" (647,951 words), "Harry Potter and the Reluctant Rebirth" (72,060 words), "Fractured Fairytale" (104,795 words), "Harry Potter and Oh God, Not this Guy" (sequel to HP + RR, above) (64,606 words), "Harry Potter and the Best Doggo" (sequel to HP + RR above) (77,848 words), "The Ghost of Privet Drive" (235,847 words), "The Mudblood of Slytherin" (112,007 words).
- **xReader:** "The Potion Master's Apprentice" (53,722 words), "Broken Silence" (378,521 words), "Black Sheets" (51,570 words), "I Hate You" (2429 words), "The Potions Master: A Snape/Reader Fantasy" (17,404 words).
- **Y/N:** "Wonderful Mischief" (116,198 words), "A Potions Storeroom Story - Oneshot" (2168 words), "A Million Times Over" (2904 words), "NSFW/SFW Harry Potter Headcanons" (1516 words), "Sweet Dreams" (867 words).

Appendix A.2. FF.net

On FF.net, the search process for all six keywords was as follows:

1. Use the search bar on the homepage to search each keyword (the dropdown menu remains on the default option, "story").
2. Filter by "category" name "Harry Potter" in the right-hand menu.
3. Narrow the search by specifying the English language in the right-hand menu
4. Narrow the search by excluding crossovers (via "Options" and then "Type" in the main search box at top)
5. No opportunity is given to sort the results, beyond "relevance" and the work's most recent date of publication (which may include updates for multi-chapter words).
6. Closely read the top five results; selections were made manually, based on a confluence of publication date (a variety of older and newer works), story popularity (assessed based on the numbers of "faves", follows, and reviews), and most importantly, indications from each summary that these particular stories matched the desired subgenres, as we understood them.

Using this method, we found the following fanfiction stories:

- **Imagine(s):** N/A.
- **Mary Sue:** "Not another Mary Sue! Or is she?" (3775 words), "A Mary for Me" (1141 words), "Imperfect Mary Sue" (843 words), "Fudge's World" (2775 words), "Tom Felton and Mary Sue" (438 words).
- **Reader-Insert:** "Power of the Elements Book 1: Discovery" (34,418 words).
- **Self-Insert:** "What I Would Have Done - Self Insert" (24,628 words), "Paine's Grey" (10,714 words), "Cedric's New Life" (20,919 words), "Self insert with attitude" (4245 words), "A History of Disruption" (850 words).
- **xReader:** "The both of us - Fred x George x reader" (855 words), "I've Been a Bad Girl, Professor Scamander" (18,931 words), "From the Library of June Williams" (95,535 words), "Power of the Elements" (34,418 words), "Ravenclaw (Draco x Daughter-Reader x Father-Snape)" (25,686 words).
- **Y/N:** "Look at Me: A Draco Malfoy x Reader Fanfiction" (2580 words), "Sorry is Just a Word" (10,493 words), "Just a Potions Project" (16,257 words), "Medusa's Heir Book I: The Sorcerer's Stone" (20,151 words), "Fatherless" (35,587 words).

Appendix A.3. Tumblr

There are a number of ways to search Tumblr: by keyword, by tag, by blog name, etc. Moreover, tags on this platform are often "put to expressive rather than organizational purposes" (Stein 2018, p. 87) and are used "not only for organization but also to create poetry, analysis, conversation, and even fiction" (p. 89); this and similar fan practices must be navigated in order to locate the results. In spite of this, we chose to search the site via keywords as this was more likely to pull a wider array of results.

Here, our approach proceeded as follows:

1. Search each keyword in the main page search box, alongside 'Harry Potter' (i.e., "y/n Harry Potter", "xReader Harry Potter", etc.).
2. Leave the additional search options in default mode: "Top", "All time", and "All posts".

Using this method, we found the following fanfiction stories:

- **Imagine(s):** "Stolen Kiss" (~100 words), "Subspace" (~400 words), "A proper punishment" (~3600 words), "Just ours" (~2200 words), "Feels too right" (~1400 words).
- **Mary Sue:** N/A (most results were discussions or meta/fan analyses).
- **Reader-Insert:** "tricks and charms" (~1700 words), "Love Languages" (~850 words), "My Dream Girl" (~2500 words), "pick me" (~1600 words), "Promise | Young!Snape x Reader" (~6000 words).
- **Self-Insert:** "Tricks and charms" (~1700 words), "Whiskey kisses" (~1000 words), "Oh No . . . " (~700 words), "A special friend, part two" (~3200 words), "Relapse" (~700 words).
- **xReader:** ""Remus gets caught Kissing James's Sister (R.L]" (~1800 words), "Are You Jeal-ous?" (~600 words), "tricks and charms" (~1700 words), "Love Languages" (~800 words), "Like Me" (~5000 words).
- **Y/N:** "Corrupted//rl x reader" (~5700 words), "Angel bsf!james potter" (~1100 words), "Jealousy, jealousy" (~1100 words), "Girl friend" (~6800 words), "Doting" (~500 words).

Appendix A.4. Wattpad

For Wattpad, we must note that neither of us has extensive familiarity with this platform or the ways in which its users habitually locate fanfiction. Here, even more than on the other three sites, we were exploring our options.

The search process for all six keywords was as follows:

1. Use the search bar on the homepage to search each keyword along with the words "Harry Potter" (i.e., "y/n Harry Potter", "xReader Harry Potter", etc.)
2. Closely read the first several search results, unless it was clear that a particular result was irrelevant.

Interestingly, Wattpad provides reading times for each story, rather than word counts. A thread on the Wattpad subreddit speculates that the site calculates this reading time at 255 words per minute; if accurate, this would mean that a 1000-word story would take approximately 4 min to read, whereas a 5000-word story would take approximately 19.6 min to read. Using the above method, we found the following fanfiction stories:

- **Imagine(s):** "Imagines ↳ harry potter" (~15 min), "Imagines ↳ harry potter" (~8 min), "IMAGINES | HARRY POTTER CAST X READER" (~3 h), "IMAGINES ➵ Harry Potter" (~12 min), "Harry Potter imagines" (~5 h).
- **Mary Sue:** "Defending Heart" (~4 h), "Draco's Sister" (~46 min), "Mudblood | | Severus Snape x Reader | | " (~3 h), "Irresistible Fate" (~6 h), "LIMERENCE//James Potter" (~12 h).
- **Reader-Insert:** "Harry Potter Characters X Reader" (~8.5 h), "Different | dracomalfoy | " (~7 h), "Harry Potter x Reader - More Than Best Friends (First Year)" (~2.5 h), "harry potter oneshots" (~7 h), "Harry Potter Imagines/One Shots #wattys2017 #WattPride" (~15.5 h).

- **Self-Insert:** "A Walk in the Park (A Drarry FanFiction)" (~42 min), "Different | dracomalfoy | " (~7 h), "Let's Help Each Other (Drarry)" (~1.5 h), "Sworn Enemy | | Riddle and Potter" (~2 h), "Small Accidents, New Beginnings - Drarry" (~3 h).
- **xReader:** "Potter? | | Draco Malfoy x Reader" (~17 h), "The Boy who Loved (Harry Potter x Reader)" (~35 h), "Her (Harry Potter x Reader)" (~13 h), "Harry Potter x Reader - More Than Best Friends (First Year)" (~2.5 h), "Different | dracomalfoy | " (~7 h).
- **Y/N:** "The Boy who Loved (Harry Potter x Reader)" (~35 h), "Her (Harry Potter x Reader)" (~13 h), "Different | dracomalfoy | " (~7 h), "Harry Potter Imagines" (~2 h), "Fell in Love with Potter's Twin//Draco x Reader" (~2 h).

Notes

[1] In fandom terms, "crack" is a story or a story concept that is intentionally absurd or silly; it may refer to characters acting OOC (out of character), to a plot that would not happen in the source text, or to changes of this nature. The term probably originated from the American slang for cocaine, although it also shares some meaning with Irish "craic"/"the craic", which signifies enjoyable, entertaining, and often gossipy conversation.

[2] The fanfiction texts pulled from Wattpad for our project were predominantly "high-ranking" in certain tags, which we found meant that they had (to us) astronomically high rates of readership and engagement. For example, as of March 2022, the Y/N story "The Boy Who Loved" has been read 5.3 million times (compare this to the several thousand, if they are very high-ranking, for platforms such as Ao3 and FF.net). In the opening chapter "Author's Notes", the fan-author explained the whole background of the Y/N character, a list of all the main characters, a description of the fanfiction's setting, and some additional information (such as, "I'm keeping some of the characters that died in the books alive in this fanfic, because we don't need to be more depressed, do we?"); then, at the very end of this chapter, the fan-author shared their TikTok and Snapchat accounts. On their TikTok profile, the fan-author indicated that they were the author of "The Boy Who Loved"; the majority of their posts were connected to their fic. However, contrary to Wattpad, the author only had about 6300 followers on TikTok. Some of their posts were teaser trailers for upcoming chapters, while others visualized scenes from the fanfiction, mostly using scenes from the HP movies with overlaid text that the fan-author has added. This link between Wattpad and TikTok seemed to be quite common among highly read fanfiction texts on Wattpad. Another Y/N story, "Her", had been read 3 million times; its author also shared their TikTok account, which was largely focused on their writing, and on their Wattpad "About" page; this page also included Spotify playlists built for fan-readers to listen to while reading.

[3] Over the course of our research, we also turned up even more unique relationships, such as the original characters (OCs) from the highly popular HP fanfiction "Filthy" on Wattpad. "Filthy" follows a group of three OCs (Lorenzo Berkshire, mentioned earlier, Onyx de Loughrey, Lucille Granger), of whom the fan-author writes that the reader is meant to "be Lucille Granger." The story, and these three characters from it, are apparently so popular that they have gained a following on other platforms: fan-users on TikTok began creating fan accounts, manips, and gifs of these original characters, as well as scenes from the fic, which eventually trickled over onto other sites such as Ao3 and Tumblr, where these OCs have their own tags, character tags, and fan bases. Adding further cross-platform complications to this saga, Effie reports being unable to find Fanlore pages preserving any of this information (she plans to rectify that soon) and only traced out the details from a Reddit thread.

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Article

Examining Collaborative Fanfiction: New Practices in Hyperdiegesis and Poaching

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Abstract: This paper focuses on how collaborative fanfiction has taken on new practices to accommodate fans as they gather new spaces for online communication as well as desire a deeper sense of community. Collaborative subcultures involve large groups of fans who work together to create expansive world-building for their fanfictions, or even create new fandoms from scratch. In order to accommodate the vast amounts of ideas and stories that enter their communities, they have adapted hyperdiegetic narratives in order to write stories that are "believable" for a concept rather than adhere to a rigid canon. They also develop a culture of inter-fan poaching, which allows them to borrow an idea from another fan for their own stories, without the need for permission.

Keywords: fanfiction; hyperdiegesis; fandom; inter-fan poaching

1. Introduction

Fanfiction is often considered an individualistic enterprise. That is to say that when fans write fanfiction, they tend to emphasize their own desires and wishes rather than what others want. Fans often write by themselves and for themselves. In *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins 1992), Henry Jenkins writes that "fans tend to see themselves in highly individualistic terms, emphasizing their refusal to conform to 'mundane' social norms and the range of different interpretations circulating within their community" (p. 88).

While there have always been opportunities for fans to collaborate in fanfiction: fans who write a single fanfiction with close friends, write as a gift for another person, or take on a beta reader, it is a rare occurrence to see fans collaborating and connecting their fanfiction to another. However, in this article, I refer to collaborative fanfiction as a mass production, in which large groups of fans all create individual stories, chapters, or segments revolving around one concept. This collaborative fanfiction is often highly derivative, creating new casts of characters, settings, and plots.

Due to the migration of fandom to social media, fans have the opportunity to communicate on discussion boards and blogs such as Tumblr and Discord, thus opening up fanfiction writers to more collaborative experiences (Gray et al. 2017). The evolution of fandom has required fans to continually redefine what it means to be a fan and to reflect on how their experiences are shaped by personal and interpersonal dimensions. While fandom is still most commonly described as "an investment of effect and identity into an object" it is also defined by the relationship and community fans establish with each other (Lothian 2018, p. 373).

Though fans have had the opportunity to write collaborative fanfiction for several decades since the introduction of the internet, its rise in popularity over the last 10 years may represent a cultural shift towards investment and emotional connection from commercialized media to the investment and creation of fanworks. In recent years, it has become more common for large groups of fans, with no prior connection to each other, to co-create fanfiction that introduces new lore, characters, and settings to the original media. Together, fans share their ideas and "poach" off of each other to create expansive worlds and stories that are open to be enjoyed and added to by the public, thus creating a large, interconnected narrative.

What I call, "inter-fan poaching" represents the process by which fans share and borrow narrative elements from one another in order to create a more unified story. In order for a story to be cohesive, fans must often bypass certain formalities and social norms in order to continue the story. As fans collaborate on large projects, they can sometimes contradict each other and create inconsistencies within this narrative. They create an identity of unity and collaboration through their usage of social media and how they negotiate narrative differences and contributions with one another.

These collaborative fictions then create a new hyperdiegetic space in which contribution to the narrative is based on the possibility that "it could happen" in the narrative (Hills 2002, p. 137). They break the binary of typical canon/fanon thinking in fanfiction and invite each other to enjoy the benefits of semi-canonical structures alongside the personal freedom to write their individual desires.

In this article, I discuss how these collaborative fanfictions introduce these new methods of inter-fan poaching and how hyperdiegetic narratives challenge ideas about who "owns" a text and what makes up its core canon. I argue that collaborative fanfiction forgoes the notion that there can only be a sole authority who owns and creates the rules of a story and instead highlights new methods of collective transformation. That is to say, collaborative fanfiction allows writers to make room for each other in a story. They can share ideas freely or they create space for each other to explore new thoughts and ideas—even if those ideas do not always make sense together.

My case study on collaborative fanfiction explores *Gravity Falls* (2012) Transcendence AU: a series of interconnected fanfictions, art, and videos written by different fans, ongoing since 2014, that explores a semiautonomous narrative that needs not always rely on the characters, setting, or plot in *Gravity Falls*. By analyzing this fandom, my objective is to demonstrate that fans are creating new hyperdiegetic narratives in their fanfiction, which allow a simultaneous space for both personal creative fandom and community collaboration.

2. Methodology and Case Study

Gravity Falls follows Dipper (Jason Ritter) and Mabel (Kristen Schaal) as they spend the summer at their Great Uncle Stan's (Alex Hirsch) Mystery Shack, a tourist trap based around the supernatural. After finding a hidden book called Journal 3, the twins investigate their new surroundings, uncovering a variety of dangers, including the demon Bill Cipher (Alex Hirsch) who seeks to destroy their universe and tear their family apart. The creation of Transcendence AU began during the show's second season, specifically starting from episode 24 "Sock Opera", which aired on 8 September 2014. In the episode, Mabel decides to put on a sock puppet rock opera to impress a local puppeteer, but her show goes astray when Dipper's drive to uncover journal secrets leads him to become possessed by Bill Cipher.

On 17 September 2014, Tumblr user zoey-chu made the initial post that sparked a new fandom, encouraging fans to contribute to an ongoing fan-made narrative:

> "Imagine in a canon-divergent AU, a huge, grand sort of finale where the Pines prevent an Armageddon-scale disaster. but some shit still goes wrong, and while they may have prevented the worst from happening, a huge event essentially unleashes a wave of supernatural phenomena . . . And during the Pines' "final battle" before all this happens, Bill pretty much dies . . . Dipper is also in pretty bad shape, vulnerable enough for Bill to attempt a last-ditch possession in order to save himself. But it doesn't work . . . not quite. A part of Bill ends up fusing with Dipper, but his mind isn't overtaken. It seems like Dipper lucked out and retains his mind, but his body isn't so lucky. He becomes a spirit much like Bill was, only able to reside in mindscape/underworld/whatever you want to call it. The result is bittersweet. Dipper can no longer return to the life he once had . . . Another curious side-effect is that tiny bits of Bill's personality and habits are picked up by Dipper."

Within months, what started as the musing of an idea became a collaborative project involving the creation of original plot lines and characters by hundreds of contributors and thousands of readers. While Transcendence AU began its life as "traditional" fanfiction that explored the world and characters by diverging from the original story and exploring the characters in new situations or settings, it soon became unrecognizable as *Gravity Falls*, forging references or explorations of the cast and setting and instead focusing on fan-made characters and places. Transcendence AU displays a clear divide between itself and the *Gravity Falls* fandom, with the fans having kept careful online records of their own history and narrative. The group is relatively small, with around 4000 followers on Tumblr with roughly 50 of those members active at a time. The community sees itself having broken off from *Gravity Falls* and now existing as an entirely separate fandom.

As a member of the Transcendence AU (TAU) community, I have developed close relationships with other fans, some of whom have volunteered as participants for this research. I am aware of my identity as a fan, producer, and scholar within TAU and the insight given by my personal investment and relationships in the fandom.

My relationship with Transcendence AU served as the inspiration for this research. Particularly, I was interested in how my community negotiated the narrative within the AU. I often noticed, through Transcendence AU's Tumblr blog and Discord server, that there were moments of negotiation between its members when it came to determining what the narrative should look like, where there were points of contention, and how the community should create a simultaneous space for unity and disagreement. That is to say, the majority of my analysis is my observations as both a participant and a scholar.

My personal relationship with the community allowed me some transparency in my research for this article and the larger thesis it is taken from. This open communication allowed me to communicate directly with members about using their social media posts in this article and if they would like their screen names to be used in the paper. The transparency also made my methods and ethics clear to the community, explaining what I was researching and what the examples I chose were demonstrating. It allowed me to treat the community respectfully and created a level of trust between us.

My personal insight into the community provided some first-hand experiences with how collaborative fanfiction operates. While I have written fanfiction for Transcendence AU and have been involved in the community since 2017, I avoid using examples of my own experiences in this article. I wish to provide examples that I had no hand in creating and to show the community from a purely observational stance.

In order to demonstrate the creation of Transcendence AU, account for its history, and learn about the nature of participants as both fans and producers, I employed an analysis of social media such as Tumblr and Discord. I specifically looked for instances in which I noticed fans acknowledging that they had borrowed ideas from each other, or instances in which there was debate or confusion about a canonical idea within the story. I followed online dialogues with the intention of writing this article in early 2019, and continuing up until June of 2022, to ensure that all of my examples were the best or most recent I could find. I primarily used the Tumblr blog (transcendence-au) and two Discord servers (transcendence_au, TAU 18+) to gather examples of fans communicating with each other.

Though, as previously stated, much of my understanding of this community comes from being a fan myself, because of my position as a member of the community, I was able to rely on my own memories when it came to selecting examples for this article. I used these texts to observe how fans interacted with each other and the AU's content to create collaborative stories by observing how they responded to blog posts, asked questions, and archived their history. While I sorted through hundreds of fanfictions, blog posts, and chat logs, in order to be concise, I chose only the most relevant and applicable examples for this article.

I specifically chose Transcendence AU for its transparency. The community puts great effort into tracking new fanfictions/ideas, as well as openly discussing these new contributions with each other through social media. This allowed for easy access to the

group's history and the ability to track how these collaborative fanfictions are formed. I also analyzed and reflected on current fanfiction hosted on Archive of Our Own, under the tag *Alternate Universe-Transcendence (Gravity Falls)*, to observe how fans reference each other directly in the summaries or notes, or indirectly through contextual references, repeated characters, and ideas.

3. Defining Collaborative Fanfiction

While research on collaborative fanfiction has been done before, it has predominantly focused on pairs of authors (or a small group of close friends) working to create a single work, rather than a collection of cohesive works. Thomas (2007) details the experiences of two teenage girls who co-write fanfiction together. The discussion raises important considerations, such as how the girls edit each other's sections "that do not cohere with the plot and insert[s] other lines to foreshadow what she knows will later become important to the narrative" (p. 144). Thomas also details the importance of technology and how the girls are able to communicate through Instant Messenger and use technology to write and edit the same document.

However, this case study does not fully represent the shift that has entered the fanfiction community. The two girls discussed by Thomas had met online and were friends prior to co-writing their fanfiction. They also write in a role-play format, which are "narrative threads that act as a hybrid of fan fiction and online gaming" (Howard 2017) that primarily represent character dialogue and actions and are transmitted back and forth between participants. While role play itself is a form of fanfiction, it does not represent the collaborative nature I discuss in this article.

Rather, I believe that collaborative fanfiction is defined by having several stories, written by different authors, combine into a larger narrative. These fans treat each other as if they are in a writer's room of a popular television show. They must do their best to honor the previous "episodes" written by other members and work together to create a sense of cohesion between stories. Collaborative fanfictions could be best described as a spiral of recursive fanfiction (or fanfiction about fanfiction). As fans respond to and build off of each other's writing, a new narrative is built from their ongoing and open communication.

However, these fans might not always be in direct communication with each other about the plot or end goals of a narrative. Instead, they may use the same characters or conflicts to show that their stories are various interpretations of the same base concept. For this reason, I do not include co-authored stories or role play in the definition of collaborative fanfiction because they do not contain these individual stories or "episodes".

Booth (2015) outlines an example within the Inspector Spacetime community, in which fans created a *Doctor Who* parody (originally sourced from the TV show *Community*) and then worked together to create a new set of narratives, characters, and worlds that they treated like a piece of popular mass media. He notes that following the appearance of Inspector Spacetime, fans immediately took to Twitter to discuss the fake show and later to Tumblr and TV tropes where they collaborated on creating the episodes, characters, and cast of the show, all of which used *Doctor Who* as the inspiration. Fans later created fanfiction about the Inspector's adventures, solidifying many of the shared ideas between fans into fully fleshed-out narratives.

These collaborative fanfictions can take multiple forms such as headcanons, fanon interpretations, ships, crossovers, parodies, and alternate universes. Alternate Universe fanfiction commonly relies on collaborative fanfiction, as fans add new lore and characters to a world and often borrow from each other to create their own expansive fictional universe. Transcendence AU began its life as "traditional" fanfiction that explored the world and characters by diverging from the original story and exploring the characters in new situations or settings; it soon became unrecognizable as *Gravity Falls*, forging references or explorations of the cast and setting and instead focusing on fan-made characters and places. Transcendence AU displays a clear divide between itself and the *Gravity Falls* fandom, with the fans having kept careful online records of their own history and narrative.

The community sees itself as having broken off from *Gravity Falls* and now existing as an entirely separate fandom.

While popular Alternate Universes, such as Coffee Shop AUs, can become vast collaborative efforts, they do not always push the boundaries of becoming their own fandoms in the way "shared universes" do. Shared universes are series of fiction stories written by multiple authors in the same alternate universe (Fanlore 2021), and often contain their own unique rules and other identifiable traits that set them apart from other Alternate Universes.

Collaborative storytelling can also be found in more extreme incidences, where the fandom's media object is created by its own audience. These fans create individual fanfictions that contribute to or expand upon previous entries, thus fleshing out the world building as they go. That is to say, efforts of collaborative fanfiction are pushing the boundaries of what a fandom can be and what happens when media objects are usurped (or wholly created) by the fans themselves.

While collaborative fanfiction can take many forms and does not need to focus on fans creating expansive and original universes for their fandom, the ability for fans to explore a fictional world encourages free thinking and creativity. While multiple fans can collaborate on a canon-driven fanfiction, the ability to break away from canon and build a universe mainly from scratch opens up more opportunities for more fans to fill the gaps or create new ideas.

4. Hyperdiegetic Narratives

Canon, within traditional media fandom, is a source of structure that provides the set rules or ideals that fans accept or reject (Gonzalez 2016). Canon describes the preserved memory and legitimacy of a culture, and in the case of fandom, it refers to the source material: the original book, film, television show, comic, etc., on which fanworks are based. Canon creates a contrast between what is "non-canonical", or untrue in the source material (usually meaning fanworks), and what is considered "canonical", or true (De Kosnik 2016, p. 104). The acceptance of a canon is considered respectful to media producers, and the ability to follow it is a demonstration of superior knowledge (Gonzalez 2016). However, this binary thinking between canon and non-canon does not always translate to collaborative writing projects.

Collaborative fanfictions instead expand upon Matt Hills's concept of hyperdiegesis, or "a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic or extension" (Hills 2002, p. 137) by which fans touch upon the unexplored narratives within a canon. It allows for production practices such as discussion, speculation, and fanfiction within a media text's universe (Johnson 2017, p. 370). This imaginary space exists within all fandom and is vital to interactive and exploratory thinking with a text (Jones et al. 2018). This hyperdiegesis gives fans a sense of "reasonability" to focus around but also creates space for contradictory storytelling.

While created by the shared interpretations of many fans, a hyperdiegetic narrative acts in place of a canon. It is unstable, often contradicting itself due to the contrasting writing of a large number of its participants. In the same sense that the source material can present opportunities for contradiction or confusion, as Matt Hills describes with *Doctor Who* (Hills 2014), so too can fan-produced narratives. Hills writes: "Rather than allowing Doctor Who to function as a unified hyperdiegesis, or activating these sorts of fan readings, assorted multi-Doctor stories permit the fan market to buy into anniversary commemorations in a range of ways." (Hills 2014, p. 109) in order to explain how fans are able to balance concerns about timelines, actors' visible aging, and other continuity errors in episodes featuring multiple doctors.

This description of "could this happen" is in line with Hills's discussion of hyperdiegesis and the possibilities of that which is unseen in a narrative. Because a text cannot please everyone, Transcendence AU attempts to create a space in which all fans have opportunities to embrace the possibility and sense of cohesion in the narrative. A word was created

within the Transcendence AU fans' lexicon for this purpose—"squishy"—meaning that an event, character, or thing cannot be properly canonized within the cohesive narrative due to the number of overlapping ideas, such as dates within the narrative.

However, in order to be cohesive, there must be some indication of rules or themes. A post on the Tumblr blog, written by Mod R, reads, "Do not let the distinctions of "canon" and "fanon" stop you. The canon for this AU has always been nebulous and squishy. Aside from some core rules that shouldn't be broken, nothing is 'less canon' than anything else."

In Transcendence AU, it is expected that fans follow a very basic set of rules (Dipper Pines is the demon of this narrative, not Bill Cipher as in the source material; or that reincarnation is part of the story), and the rest is all true to canon, regardless of contradictions to previous works. This puts Transcendence AU, and fanfictions like it, in a position of being a narrative with a contradicting and changing canon.

Fans working around the idea of "believability" in their fanworks rather than truthfulness of the canon is a familiar concept to fandom. The freedom to ask "what if" and "why not" allows fans the ability to poach from each other, without being weighed down by the concerns of creating accidental contradictions. The hyperdiegetic narrative allows for exploration beyond the constraints of canon vs fanon thinking and allows fans to borrow, or "poach", from each other as they would from the source material in order to maintain an ongoing sense of community and legitimacy.

5. Inter-Fan Poaching

The ability to poach encourages a new form of fannish intertextuality where fanfiction and fanart can interact with, reference, and borrow from each other. Just as Jenkins suggests, fans can borrow "only what is pleasurable" from the media, so can they from each other. Texts do not exist in isolation from each other. The depth of knowledge and the complexity of interweaving fanfictions create an intertextual story in which fans must have some background knowledge about previous characters, plots, and creators in order to fully embrace the narrative.

Henry Jenkins defines fans as textual poachers who do not simply possess "borrowed remnants snatched from mass culture, but [rather] their own culture built from the semiotic raw materials the media provides" (Jenkins 2006, p. 49). Taken from Michel De Certeau's description of poaching as a raid on literary works to enjoy only pleasurable meanings and aspects, poaching is an ongoing struggle for ownership and control over the meaning of a text between fans and producers. There is no limitation that textual poaching can only be performed on a commercialized text but rather is an act that allows access to the means of cultural production: any and all culture is available for poaching.

It is typically considered plagiarism to borrow from another fan's works, such as plot details or original characters, without asking for direct permission (Fiesler 2008). The term "poaching" itself refers to stealing from the elite; therefore, fans should never steal from each other. However, collaborative communities forgo this idea in favor of sharing their ideas. They embrace a concept of inter-fan poaching: that fanworks can be poached in the same manner as with corporatized media. Paul Booth refers to this as "textual encroaching" (Booth 2013, p. 153), however, I argue that the word "encroach" suggests connotations of trespassing and violating consent. Rather, I propose the term inter-fan poaching to imply that the act is performed exclusively and willingly between groups of fans.

Fans in Transcendence AU explore continuations of each other's works, rewrite previously written scenes, or create original additions as they would for any other fandom. Just as Jenkins proposes, the act of poaching is "an impertinent raid on the literary preserve where fans take away only those things that are useful or pleasurable" (Jenkins 1992, p. 9). Fans do not have to poach every element of the narrative, just the parts they find interesting or think deserve to be further explored. No permission is needed to expand on an idea.

In terms of plot, one fan who goes by the username ToothPasteCanyon is noted as saying she "ripped off" another popular Transcendence AU fanfiction "Reverse, Rewind, Rewrite" by MaryPSue (Archive of Our Own) by borrowing the general plotline but flipping

the tone from being charming and heartfelt to angsty and violent. Her author's note on AO3 openly acknowledges that she has borrowed major concepts and ideas from another author, as well as the beta reader who helped her:

> "This work is based on the amazing Return, Rewind, Rewrite by MaryPSue. Go and read it here . . . Also a big thanks to StarlightSystem for helping me edit this story!"

In the Transcendence AU discord, ToothPasteCanyon also self-describes her fanfiction in the community Discord server as a rip-off, saying "I kinda rip off people's ideas [. . .] I'm standing on the shoulders of giants" and "I love ripping off [Reverse, Rewind, Rewrite]".

However, rather than be berated for her so-called "rip off," this was celebrated within the fandom and even popularized the idea of reusable plot lines that anyone can use without permission. Following in her path, several other fans began to "rip off" the same idea, borrowing the fanfictions' characters or general plot and adding their own original twists, thus pushing the narrative further.

Some fan-made creations are even considered synonymous with Transcendence AU; they are just as much a part of the narrative as the canonical characters are. For example, many fans referred to Henry, an original character who marries Mabel Pines (a canonical character from *Gravity Falls*) as an example of true "open use" within the community. He is an expected part of the story, as so many fans have written about or included his character within their own stories. This character was accepted into the canon simply because he was "first". His character was added by a fan relatively early on into the AU's creation, and thus became a staple within TAU with little contention.

Within Transcendence AU, original characters and ideas are readily accepted into the narrative so long as that character is not replacing or usurping another. Simply put, a rule of politeness is followed. It would be considered rude to destroy, kill, or alter another fan's original character, as it would also be rude to prohibit an original character from entering the story.

The ability to poach from each other allows fans the opportunity to create independent works that contribute towards a collaborative goal. Inter-fan poaching in these communities acts as a sign of respect, demonstrating that the creators' opinions and contributions have been appreciated and reified as part of the new text. Everything within the community is meant to be shared. It is a narrative that steals from itself.

6. Producing a New Canon

When fans create, there is often an ongoing "struggle for discursive dominance . . . over interpretation and evaluation" (Johnson 2017, p. 370) through which fans attempt to codify their beliefs about a text as the most important or prevalent "truth" in their community. Jenkins writes that fans may engage in heated debates surrounding interpretations of texts that all exist within a shared frame of reference about "what questions are worth asking and what moments provide acceptable evidence for these questions" (Jenkins 1992, p. 137). The most popular or approved interpretations or evidence are what lead fans to create what is traditionally called a fanon.

Derek Johnson refers to the process of competing through and comparing fanworks for the intention of creating the dominant narrative as "fantagonism" (Johnson 2017). This fantagonism can come at the cost of isolating or invalidating fans who do not belong to the majority of a fandom: white, middle-class, non-disabled Americans. Though fandom often intends to leave space for people of all cultures and identities to participate, the dominant interpretation of a text (even a fan-made text) can close off opportunities for critique, reexamination, or experimentation.

I do not mean to imply that all forms of fantagonism are meant to engender rifts between fans or stir up intentional controversy, rather the dominant interpretation often provides balance and structure to a story. In Transcendence AU, it is common for fans to communicate ideas with each other or ask questions about the "rules of their narrative". It is not uncommon for members to use the Discord server or the Transcendence AU Tumblr blog to ask questions about particular characters or plot events within the narrative. They

rely on dominant interpretations to create a sense of cohesion, so as to not drift so far away from what other traits the fans identify the AU with.

For example, user FreshMorningCoffee posted the question "Is there a specific year range that summoning demons is strictly prohibited?" in the Discord server. Other members of the community held an open discussion about their interpretations of the question at the answer:

> ToothPasteCanyon: I don't think we have specific eras when demons are banned! I imagine it's probably something always regulated but not always tightly cracked down on
>
> FreshMorningCoffee: I thought there were a few fics that implied it but wasn't quite sure
>
> RogueCHINCHILLA: I'd imagine a very large rise in regulation after California bit other than that its very up in the air
>
> ToothPasteCanyon: some people may have specific date ranges for sure!
>
> FreshMorningCoffee: Thank you! This really helps a lot
>
> Reynier: I do if it helps! According to my fic, in most of Europe summoning demons is banned from the early 2800s through the revolutions of 3148
>
> ToothPasteCanyon: !!!!!!!!! Oooo cool!

While some community members looked for previous fanfictions where an answer might be mentioned, thus following a dominant interpretation, others helped by suggesting ideas or theories based on what they have already read. While the answer was debated, it was not in a way that invited fans to disagree. The fans' belief in a "squishy" narrative takes the pressure off of creating a hard-set timeline and instead encourages fans to interpret the answer for themselves if they so choose.

Of course, some additions to the canon do not require debate or research. As previously stated, introducing original characters to the narrative is relatively easy, requiring only that a new fanfiction (or comic) be created to introduce that character. Since characters make up the heart of any fanfiction and also can be considered deeply important or personal to their creators, their integration into the universe is carried out with little debate.

7. Conclusions

Fanfiction practices have always relied on communal methods of creation. Brittany Kelley writes that "fanfiction communities more often depict an author who is never fully singular—always existing within complex, personally-engaged communities" (Kelley 2016, p. 53) in regard to the ways fans help each other through brainstorming and beta reading. However, this sense of author multiplicity is on the rise in current-day fandoms—being taken to extremes by fans who make their own media object and the fan works surrounding it. Collaborative fanfiction rejects the idea that "fans see themselves in highly individualistic terms" (Jenkins 1992, p. 88) and that authorship can only involve one creator with one linear story.

Fans working around the idea of "believability" in their fanworks rather than the truthfulness of the canon is a familiar concept to fandom (Hills 2002). Collaborative fanfictions take hyperdiegetic spaces to the extreme by being both fans and producers in those spaces. The freedom to ask "what if" and "why not" allows fans the ability to poach from each other, without being weighed down by the concerns of creating accidental contradictions.

Inter-fan poaching, in turn, works alongside hyperdiegetic narratives and celebrates the efforts and ideas that bring fans together. By passing new ideas back and forth without the social constraints of needing to ask permission to do so, they build rich worlds with interesting characters. While hyperdiegetic narratives make room for discussion and debate, inter-fan poaching provides a space for synergy that connects all story threads together.

By employing new practices of hyperdigetic narratives and inter-fan poaching, fans create new avenues for including each other in their story telling—be it through adopting their ideas into a fanfic or by making room to respectfully contradict each other.

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Article

Fanfiction, Self-Publishing, and the Materiality of the Book: A Fan Writer's Autoethnography

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Abstract: This interdisciplinary paper presents an autoethnography of an author who self-publishes her own fanfiction via print-on-demand (POD) services. It reflects upon the subject of fan writer as self-publisher, touching upon shifting notions of authorship, the format of the book, and literary practice, with implications for both fan studies and Library and Information Science (LIS). While its findings cannot be generalised to the wider fan community, the paper posits five reasons for this practice: (1) the desire to publish a work that is technically, if not necessarily creatively, unpublishable (due to copyright laws); (2) the physical presence of the book bestows 'thingness', physical legitimacy, and the power of traditional notions of authorship to one's work; (3) the materiality of the book and the pleasure afforded by its physical, tactile, and haptic qualities; (4) books can be collectible (fan) items; (5) self-published books can act as signifiers both of the self-as-author and one's creative journey. The paper recommends further study be conducted on a wider scale, engaging other self-publishing fanfiction authors in their own practice to test the conclusions presented here.

Keywords: fanfiction; autoethnography; self-publishing; materiality of the book; authorship; print-on-demand (POD); collecting

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, fanfiction has become virtually synonymous with the digital and ephemeral. Nevertheless, fan studies has only recently begun to acknowledge contemporary fanfiction in physical print formats, quite apart from the traditional fanzines popular before the mainstreaming of the internet. This has most strikingly taken the form of fanbinding, a previously niche fannish practice that has recently been gaining ground. While fanbinding is a significant harbinger of what I would term the renaissance of print fanfiction, current research (while still in its nascent stages) tends to focus on the reader, in their role as fan binder and *de facto* publisher of fanfiction in book form. We have not yet seen research into fanfiction that is printed via print-on-demand (POD) technologies; moreover, there has not yet been any examination of the author as the (self-)publisher of their own fanfiction.

This autoethnography has been approached from the lens of two disciplines: that of Library and Information Science (LIS)—which is concerned with questions of the book, copyright, and the publishing industry—and that of fan studies—which is concerned with fannish practice such as writing fanfiction[1]. While I am primarily an LIS scholar, the focus of my research is on the liminal spaces between these two disciplines, and this paper centres on two important aspects of my life—that of the fan writer and that of the bibliophile. While this is an autoethnography of a fan who publishes their own fanfiction, it is also an autoethnography of someone who loves and works with the book.

It is also, therefore, important to recognise that this work is foregrounded in the disciplines of both LIS and fan studies. I use the format of autoethnography, a research method that, while not employed often, is well-established in both LIS and fan studies. In writing this autoethnography, I have applied Kuhlthau's (1991) six-step Information Search Process (ISP) model as a framework, as recommended by Lawal and Bitso (2020), an approach that

has its basis in LIS. But I have also relied heavily on autoethnographical practice as laid out within fan studies, finding especial resonance with the work of Jeannette Monaco, Ross Garner, and Matt Hills. In particular, I follow Monaco's concept of autoethnography as 'memory work', on "the use of memory as a way of reflecting on personal and collective lived experience" (2010, p. 109). I also make use of Garner's longitudinal perspective, tracing the "*affective fluctuations* which form a normative part of long-term fan attachments" [original italics] (2018, p. 94). Similar works, such as that of Driessen and Jones (2016), track the (aca)fan's attachment to the fan object through an extended period, wherein affective fluctuations, from passion to ambivalence, even to hatred, are noted and reflected upon. Here, I chronicle not merely the affective fluctuations of my life as a fan from early childhood; I also chronicle the affective fluctuations of my relationship with the book. I reflect upon not only the fan object as extension of self, but the book as extension of self.

It is important to note the tension within fan studies regarding ethnography in general. There is the oft-laid charge that fan scholars are too close to the subject of their research to examine it objectively. To take a step back, we can look to Marcus and Fischer's (1999) seminal text, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, and what they term the "crisis of representation" within anthropology, a crisis that "arises from uncertainty about adequate means of describing social reality" (p. 8). This crisis has been born from the move of secure, totalising paradigms of thought to ones that cast doubt on whether social reality can be adequately represented through description, let alone adequately explained (p. 12). The researcher may be an outsider to a community/subject but cannot claim objectivity in representing it. This is a problem not merely of fan studies, of course, but of cultural studies as a whole.

The mythos of objectivity is especially contentious in fan studies because "*the researcher and the fan are often the same thing*" [original italics] (Evans and Stasi 2014, p. 14). Matt Hills (2002) extensively discusses this problem and how, in the face of the impossibility of 'true' objectivity, fan scholars (or aca-fans) strive for a critical, almost self-effacing, 'good' subjectivity of "self-suspension and radical hesitation" (p. xxii). "We are confronted by a moment," Hills notes, "where the subject cannot discursively and 'rationally' account for its own fan experience. . . The 'good' subjectivity imagined within fandom is. . . not a resolutely rational subjectivity. Rather, it is radically 'open'; 'bad' or denigrated subjectivity, in this case, is a passionless, hyper-rational, intellectualising subjectivity" (2002, p. xxii). This is problematic because it does not adequately represent the lived experience (subjectivities) of fans; it others fans and others the academy *to* fans.

Hills (2002), and later Evans and Stasi (2014), proposes a method of mitigating the effects of this hyper-rational, impoverished subjectivity within fan studies, and that method is self-reflexive autoethnography. Of course, autoethnography is not without its detractors, having faced a long list of criticisms over the decades, summarised by Ellis et al. (2011) as "being insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, and analytical, and too aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic" (p. 283). There are also accusations of narcissism and self-indulgence, even "public masturbation" (Sparkes 2002, p. 212). Such criticisms, however, fail to see the purpose of autoethnography, erroneously positioning "art and science at odds with each other, a condition that autoethnography seeks to correct. Autoethnography, as method, attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art" (Ellis et al. 2011, p. 283) by challenging the crisis of representation and accommodating "subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (p. 274).

Hills, with regard to autoethnography, is careful to note that "this kind of self-reporting cannot be assumed to be infallible or 'correct'" (2002, p. 52), but he also reminds us that it "asks the person undertaking it to question their self-account constantly, opening the 'subjective' and the intimately personal up to the cultural contexts in which it is formed and experienced" and "can open up the possibility of inscribing other explanations of the self; it can promote an acceptance of *the fragility and inadequacy of our claims to be able to 'explain' and 'justify' our own most intensely private or personal moments of fandom and media consumption*" [original italics] (2002, p. 43).

In light of this, I employ the recommendations of both Hills (2002, pp. 51–52) and Evans and Stasi (2014, pp. 14–16), using self-reflexive methods as far as I am able. This includes continuous self-reflexive questioning; acknowledgement of my own academic power in writing this work; attempting not to disguise my personal attachments through theory; and treating myself as equal to others.

I am also aware of Booth's criticism of autoethnography as potentially static and limiting, "constrained by a particular time and space, the temporal and spatial coordinates in which the researcher has undertaken the research" (Booth 2015, p. 107). In response to this, I have chosen not to focus my work on my present experiences as a fan and a bibliophile, but to harness Garner's (2018) longitudinal perspective by engaging in Monaco's (2010) 'memory work'. Far from limiting myself to a 'moment in time', my account begins in early childhood and works towards the present day. Thus, I am able to contextualise this work by recounting "former periods of. . . cultural situatedness within the constraints of social class, race, ethnic and gendered identities, thus enabling [me] to make sense of [my] present selves" (Monaco 2010, p. 110). Both Monaco and Garner are careful in their work to position themselves according to these myriad identities, ones accrued over their lifetimes and thus informative of their current positionality. Throughout this paper, I strive to document the same.

The wider goal of this paper is both to pose and to begin to answer the question: *Why do fans self-publish their fanfiction, specifically in book format?* As an interdisciplinary work, it also explores and challenges several key factors relevant to the fields of Library and Information Science (LIS) and fan studies, respectively. For LIS, these key factors are: (a) publishing–what alternative methods of publishing do fans employ outside of traditional structures, and what are their attitudes towards it; (b) copyright—what tensions exist between the self-publishing fan writer and copyright; (c) the book—what is the continued importance of its materiality in the (post-)digital age? For fan studies, the factors explored are: (a) the 'renaissance' of print fanfiction—how is fan writing moving back towards material productivity; (b) the monetisation of fanfiction—what relationship does self-published POD fanfiction have with neoliberal capitalist ideologies and the traditional gift economy of fanworks; (c) new trends in fanfiction—what insight can be gained into the fannish practice of self-publishing fanfiction, a practice that has not yet been discussed?

I do not claim to answer any of these questions completely here; as an autoethnography, it goes without saying that one lived experience cannot necessarily be generalised to a wider population. What I intend, however, is to pose these questions throughout and begin to answer them through my own memory work. It is also my hope that this work will be the prologue to a multilived autoethnography, where "one person's autoethnographic analysis can resonate with others' fan experiences" (Hills 2021, p. 152). By presenting and reflecting on my own practice, I hope to prompt other fans to explore their own similar practice and work towards fully answering the questions laid out above.

Lastly—as this is an autoethnography–let me introduce myself. I am at this time in my early forties, female, asexual, and mixed race white-Chinese. I was born into a working-class family, just south of Greater London, England (where I still live), in the early 1980s, although, like Jeannette Monaco, my family "'became' middle-class" (2010, p. 111), largely through the efforts of my father, who, when I was in my teens, pursued higher education in his early forties (he was the first in his family to do so). My experiences, therefore, reflect not only the liminal spaces I inhabit within academia, but also those I have been embedded in throughout my life—my mixed cultural and ethnic background, the social mobility and changed socio-economic status of my family over the years, and my sexuality (which I did not fully accept until my thirties). My father looms large in this work, if not tangibly then certainly spiritually—it was he who first encouraged my love of the book, and of storytelling, from a very young age. Without his influence, I would not have had cause to ever live through the experiences I write of here.

2. Childhood Fanfiction and the Codex

I gave myself a repetitive strain injury handwriting a 500-plus page novelisation of *Final Fantasy VII*.

I was about seventeen or eighteen at the time; it was an exam year, and I remember vividly the pain of writing my A-level exams later that summer, a pain that still flairs up now and then. This was the year I opened my first email account and built my first website (a fan site dedicated to Cantopop singer Cass Phang 彭羚). Yet, despite the imminent mainstreaming of the internet and my household finally obtaining a dial-up connection, this was still an era before fanfiction became so inherently, almost exclusively, synonymous with the digital.

I am handwriting this now, on a train, and trying to remember when I stopped handwriting fic before committing it to type. Even until well into the 2000s, I was handwriting my fics before typing them up and posting them to Fanfiction.net. And even now, I keep a notebook and pen by my bed at night so I can write scenes and dialogue as they come to me (my creative impulses are more active at night). I prize the pile of notebooks that are the fruits of these labours. They are treasure troves of metatextual narrative–commentary, notes to self, timelines, and plot strategies, frustrated meltdowns, and ballpoint pen sketches of my favourite characters. Unique and messy and un-mass-producible. The journey, the gestation, of so many stories, both finished and unfinished. Stories of characters that do not belong to me, but are of worlds that are indubitably mine, intimate and personal—and invisible to all but myself.

A voracious reader as a child, the format of the book was as familiar as it was comforting and also infinitely collectible. Despite money always being tight in my younger years, one thing my father always made sure my siblings and I had was books. My father was liberal in this regard, and looking back on it, this must have been a privilege that many others of my age and circumstances may not have had. Having all my *Ms. Wiz* books up on my shelf, one by one, with their magnificently colourful covers, was a source of great satisfaction to me. I knew every part of the book, without knowing what they were called–the blurb, the frontispiece, the colophon, the contents page, the illustrations. Books were magic; their format was the way stories were naturally and irreducibly configured. Later, I would unthinkingly reproduce the configuration of the codex in my own narrative works. During the eighties and early nineties, my fanfiction was wedded to it.

I began writing fiction at an early age. If my father instilled a love of books into me, he also instilled a love of storytelling. My siblings and I were treated each night to our teddy bears coming to life, where they would tell their own stories in their own words. My father would give each one a voice, and as I grew a little older, I would write down these stories for my siblings. From this 'original fiction', I would graduate to fanfiction, where I enjoyed 'scribbling in the margins' of my favourite franchises.

Here, the configuration of the book would become noticeable. I would repurpose notepads and barely used school exercise books to write my own spin-offs of Enid Blyton's *Malory Towers* series and *The Baby-Sitters Club* books, a new *Sailor Moon* tale, or real person fiction (RPF) of the 1960s band, the Mamas & the Papas. This was before I knew fandom was a 'thing'. I remember feeling embarrassed if a friend, visiting or staying over for the night, expressed an interest in reading them. Even then, the obsession, the passion, of this nameless thing I now know to be called 'fandom' was a source of inherent shame. It was 'sad' to like something *too* much, even more so something so terminally 'uncool'. Fandom as pathology (Jenson 1992) was the default perception in those days. I could not even trust my closest friends not to judge me for it. I could not trust them not to scoff at the fact that I prized fandom enough to dress my 'throw-away' writings as the 'real thing', as a book.

Yesterday, I went through my horde of old creative works, a stash I had not touched in twenty-odd years. I found those old exercise books. I had remembered them vaguely, peripherally, as formative of the adult writer I would become. What I had not remembered was the 'bookness' of them. I wrote blurbs and pull-quotes on the back (Figure 1). I wrote a contents table, and I numbered the pages (Figure 2). I drew illustrations, and

sometimes, I captioned them (Figure 3). I presented my fanfic as books; I mimicked the textual conventions of the source material. I mirrored what I had read; I replicated the format of the story, the written narrative, as I conceived and experienced it. I wondered at this long-forgotten facet of my past. I marvelled at how I would unwittingly come back to 'bookness', to the 'book as thing' (see Pressman 2020, chp. 3, for more on the book as thing) much, much later.

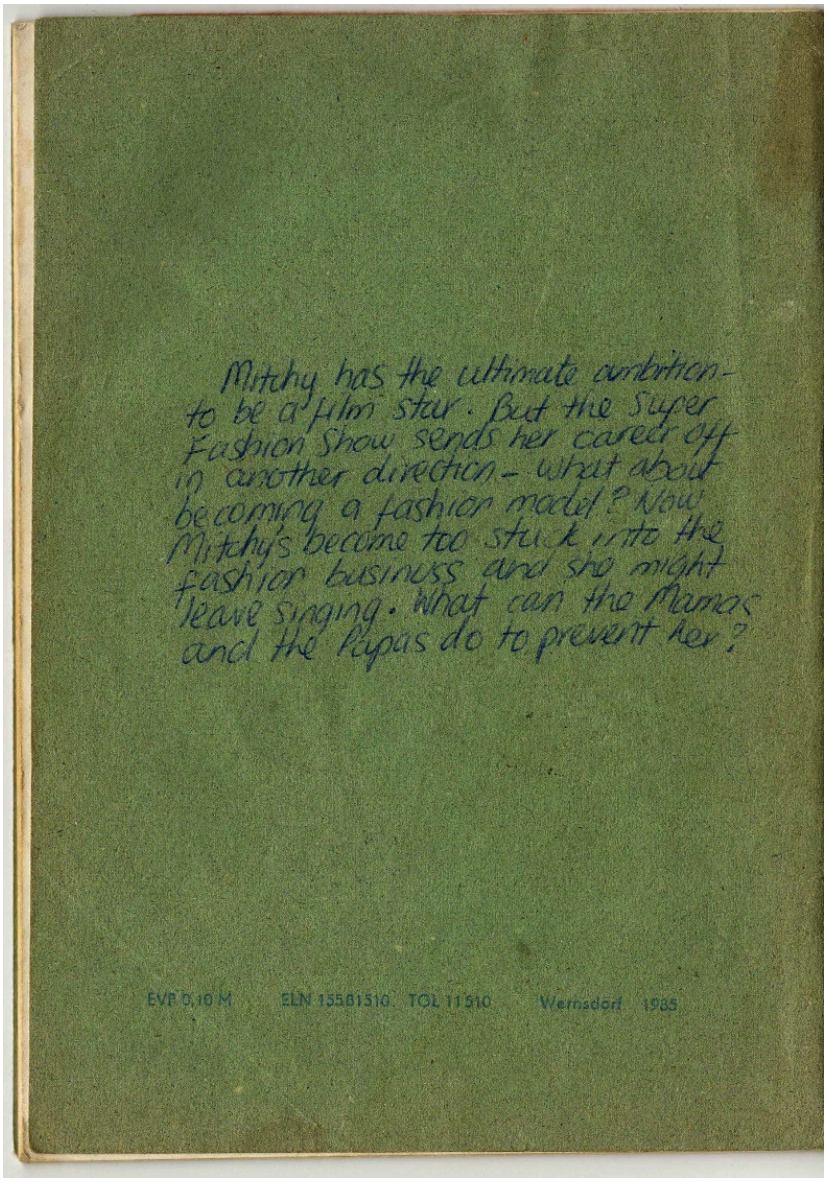
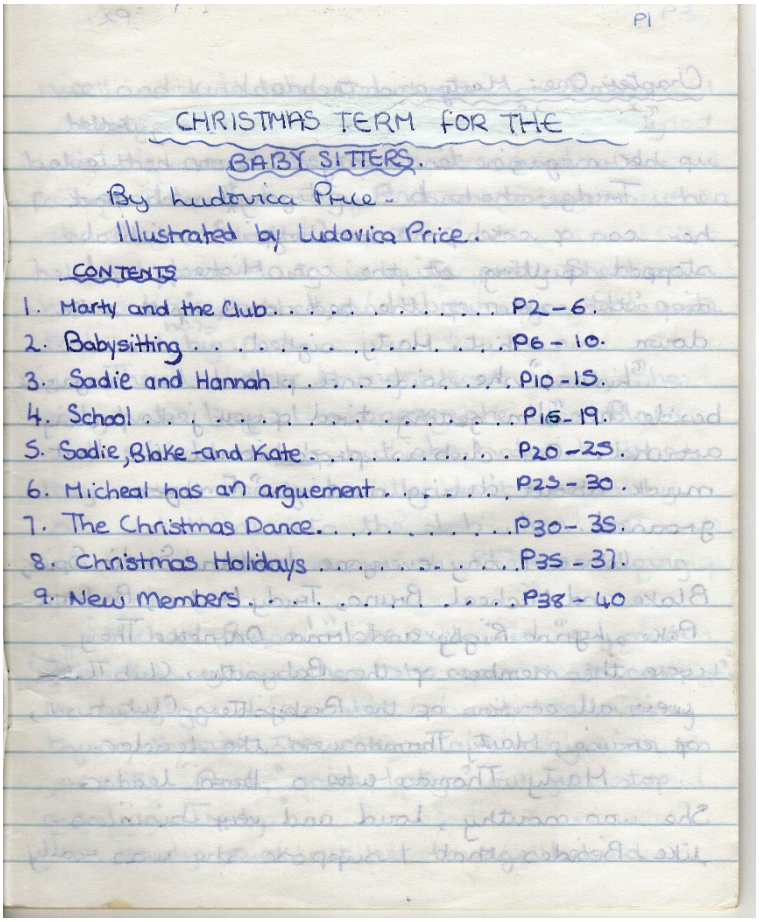


Figure 1. Blurb on the back of *Michelle and the Super Fashion Show*, a Mamas & Papas fanfiction written by the author, circa 1995.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CHRISTMAS TERM FOR THE BABY SITTERS.

By ludovica Price.

Illustrated by Ludovica Price.

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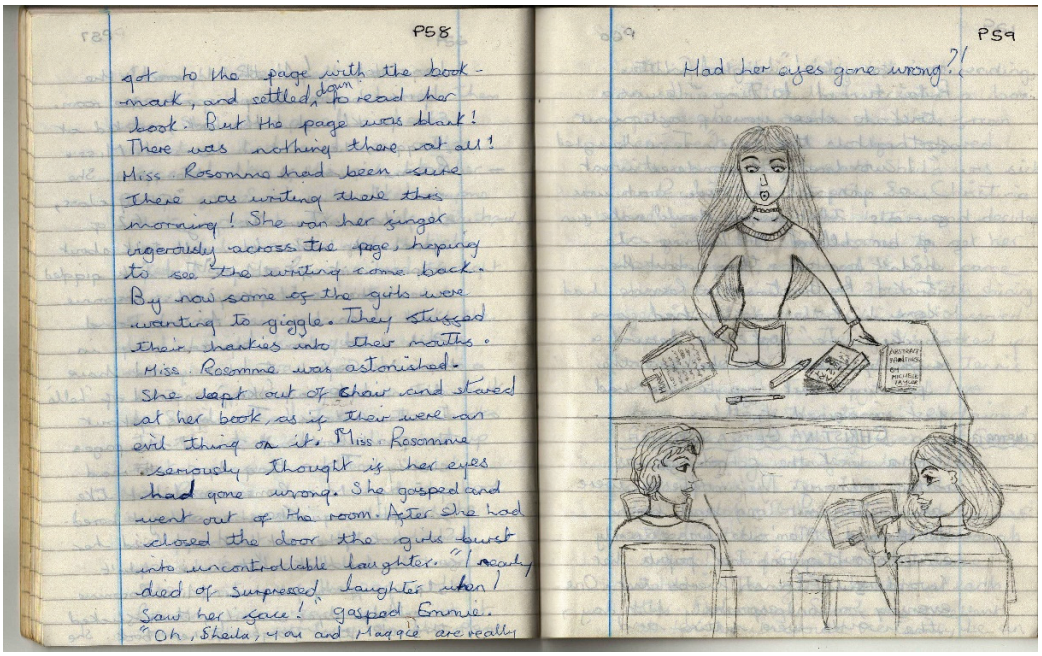
Figure 2. Contents page for *Christmas Term for the Baby Sitters*, a Baby-Sitters Club fanfiction written by the author, circa 1993.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got to the page with the book-mark, and settled down to read her book. But the page was blank! There was nothing there at all! Miss Rosemine had been sure there was writing there this morning! She ran her finger ingeniously across the page, hoping to see the writing come back. By now some of the girls were wanting to giggle. They stuffed their hankies into their mouths. Miss Rosemine was astonished. She leapt out of chair and stared at her book, as if there were an evil thing on it. Miss Rosemine seriously thought is her eyes had gone wrong. She gasped and went out of the room. After she had closed the door the girls burst into uncontrollable laughter. "I nearly died of suppressed laughter when I saw her face!" gasped Emmie. "Oh, Sheila, you and Maggie are really

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Had her eyes gone wrong?!

Figure 3. Captioned illustration from *Rita at St. Hilary's*, a Malory Towers spin-off fanfiction written by the author, circa 1992.

As a child, when asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, my answer would always be "I want to write books". In a household without a computer, yet filled with books, I understood this to mean an author of published fiction. The creative urge of a child is not governed by racialised or sexualised identities, but by simple truths—I wanted to be a writer simply for the joy of writing. I did not write because I was biracial or asexual—in fact, I had no conception of these constituent parts of my identity when I first innocently set my heart on being a published author. It was only as I grew older that writing became intertwined with my growing sense of being 'other', becoming not only an act of pleasure, but also a form of escape. I did not fit in either in or out of school and suffered othering due to my ethnicity, introverted personality, and my inability to conform to the sexual norms of my peers. Writing gave me the voice to express what I could not speak aloud, the page effectively becoming a canvas on which to safely explore who I was without fear of judgement or censure. Thus, writing developed from a mode of self-expression to also being a method of managing emotional distress and promoting self-worth. During my teenage years, dreams of publication promised a symbolic as well as actual means of surmounting the loneliness and inner turmoil I often felt growing up. Indeed, I would turn to writing often during mental health crises in later years. This is not unprecedented—from a psycho-social standpoint, the therapeutic benefits of creative and literary writing have long been known (see Pennebaker and Seagal 1999). Even writing for publication has been noted as a tool in the therapeutic process, with Gillam (2018, p. 113) citing several published authors whose publications have documented and made sense of their experiences, sharing them with others. This is a concept I will touch upon later.

Writing is one thing; self-publishing is another. While my writing was affected by my intersectional identity, I cannot say that self-publishing my work has been driven by any explicit therapeutic benefits, except perhaps to tangibly prove my own creative self-worth to myself. Not coincidentally, my urge to write has diminished since I started to become comfortable with my identity—in the past two and a half years I have barely written at all. My urge to self-publish books (mainly artbooks) has continued.

3. Going Digital

The first fanfic I remember typing up was that massive novelisation of *Final Fantasy VII*. I cannot remember exactly why I did so at the time, although I imagine it was because it seemed more polished, more finished. Typeface did not have the messiness inherent in handwriting; it did not have the strikethroughs and the added phrases and the scribbling in the margins. Soon, I would type up my manuscripts for other, more practical, reasons.

Fandom, as I now know it to be, was something I discovered around 1998. I discovered it accidentally, through fandom webrings and personal fan sites. I cannot remember exactly when I found Fanfiction.net, but it was a revelation to me. I had found my people, after thinking myself a species of one for the longest time. I made an account and started to post. I even used my own name as my penname. Back then, 'Ludi' was unusual enough to be considered a penname rather than a personal name. And privacy was a lot easier to maintain in a Google-less, Facebook-less world.

Suddenly, and rather unceremoniously, I had achieved my goal. I was now published. I had a readership. For the first time in my life, my voice was being heard. Like-minded fans appreciated my work, and thus, I gained recognition, reassurance, confidence, and a measure of self-worth. I had not even needed to go through the rigmarole of going through the publishing industry at all.

No wonder that at this time fanfiction became primarily a digital phenomenon, moving en masse from the physicality of the zine to the formless ether of the internet. Yet, despite the physical handicap of my RSI, I continued to write my fanfic by hand before typing up. I had already jettisoned the bookish format of my youth, mostly scribbling in notepads or on loose leaves, which better suited my needs. The computer in our house was a shared device, so I could not write on a computer freely. We had a laptop—a work laptop that had been given to my father when he was promoted after completing his Master's degree.

Sometimes, he allowed us to use it, but not often. Writing by hand was in better tune with the ebb and flow of my creative impulses anyway—when the urge hit, I would simply pick up a pen and a sheet of paper and write. When the family computer was free, I would prop up my manuscript on the desk beside me and transcribe it, bit by bit. I suspect that was the case for many fan writers at the time, who had minimal or restricted access to computers and the World Wide Web. But I was lucky that I had any sort of access; at that time, to publish one's words online to the world was a privilege. In many ways, it still is, depending on where in the world you live and what socio-economic demographic you inhabit. It was only later, in the early to mid-2000s, when I saved up to buy my own laptop (another privilege), that I slowly became more accustomed to writing fanfic digitally from scratch.

I must confess, however, that fanfiction still retained vestiges of the codex for me. Even if my manuscripts were now too chaotic, messy, and unpolished, I still kept them. If they were not already bound in notebooks, I would put them into folders or ring-binders. For a long time, while I still had space, I shelved them as I would normal books. They were—are—important to me. Like my personal diaries and journals, they instantiate a particular journey in my life–a creative one. To have that journey physically present was and is a counterpoint to the ephemeral nature of the digital sphere that encapsulates my publicly fannish life and outputs. In a moment, everything I have ever published on the internet could be deleted, made to disappear, without my consent or knowledge. But the physicality of the book, of the written word, the material markers of my fannish journey—they will remain.

4. All Is Vanity?

When I was in secondary school, a girl in my younger sister's class had her book, a fantasy novel, self-published. Even amongst us teenagers, there was the assumption that it probably was not very good, tainted by "the assumption that anyone who was good enough to get a publisher, would" (Bradley et al. 2009, n.p.). Subsidy publishers, more popularly known as vanity presses, were common throughout the twentieth century as a way to publish your book without going through the traditional publishing process—if the author was willing to offset the not-insubstantial costs of production. It is worth noting that self-publishing is not synonymous with the vanity press, the difference being that with self-publishing the writer does "all the work of writing, designing, and distributing a book, usually after contracting a printer to print it" (Laquintano 2018, p. 35), rather than the press itself. Self-publication has a long and venerable history (see Dworkin et al. 2012, for example); however, Laquintano also notes that "self-publishing was conflated with vanity publishing enough that…it is fair to conclude that in many cases self-publishing became tinged with the stigma that vanity presses helped produce" (2018, p. 35). It is because of this popular conflation that I choose not to treat the two modes of publication differently here. I had never been schooled in the concept of self-publication, but the prejudice inherent in having to pay to have your work published had already, somehow, been ingrained in me.

It is, of course, ingrained in all of us. Our culture is deeply wedded to the published author as a "venerated social identity" (Laquintano 2018, p. 39), to the sacralisation of first the manuscript and then the codex. The cultural axiom that the book is sacred and that the published author is consequently to be celebrated has been bolstered by the approbation of the publishing industry, an industry that wields an enormous amount of power and prestige, effectively censuring and therefore restricting amateur writing practice. The 'vanity stigma' has an indelible hold on the public consciousness—this stigma tells us that self-publishing writers are bad writers; they are the hapless victims of predatory publishers; they do not do their research into the publishing industry and how things *should* be done; they put out bad quality products. As Thurston (2020, p. 139) says: "[s]elf-publishing is conventionally assumed to be a last resort. Maybe the work is not good enough to interest somebody else in publishing it […] such reasons are considered to signify *a failure on the author's part*, a failure to get properly published [my italics]." Promulgating this stigma

has served the publishing industry well, perpetuating the myth that authors are not worth their salt unless they subject themselves to socially approved pathways to publication (and thus willingly join the capitalistic machine that the industry represents). Ideologically, economically, this prejudice aids corporate publishers in effectively gatekeeping who gets to publish, what gets published, and, of course, what will turn the most profit (Laquintano 2018, p. 40).

Technology has done much to break down this stigma and make a dent in the corporate publishing industry's stranglehold on literary dissemination. For my sister's classmate, cheap, digital-based, print self-publishing options had been less than a decade or so away, had she waited. During the 2000s, the self-publishing boom began when it allied with print-on-demand (POD) technologies that dramatically brought down the cost of book production. First, self-publishing houses such as AuthorHouse or Xlibris offered a route for frustrated authors, facing mainstream rejection, to publish, and for a much-diminished fee compared to earlier subsidy publishers (Dilevko and Dali 2006). Later, platforms such as Amazon and Lulu allowed anyone with the basic technical savvy to create a PDF of their manuscripts and print their work in book format. Ingram, which has served the self-publishing industry for several decades, now works with online POD services to distribute the work of independent publishers and writers on a global scale (Cutler 2015).

By this time, I had been self-publishing for quite a while—albeit online. There is a perception that online publication is still not truly publication in the strict sense, and I would argue that this is more so for literature on the periphery of the mainstream, such as erotic stories, queer literature, and, of course, fanfiction (which often encompasses both queer and erotic elements). Many of us fan authors are still conditioned to say "I posted my new fic today", or "I posted a new chapter", instead of "I *published* a new fic", or "I *published* a new chapter". Yet, what we are doing is publishing. We are *self*-publishing (in more ways than one, but I will come to that later). What is it about publishing writing online that makes it *lesser than*? This is still a question I grapple with, despite chafing against the prejudice of fanfic in general as *lesser than*. Why is publishing fanfiction considered *lesser than*?

Cutler (2015) frames traditional self-publication in terms of authors seeking to fulfil a dream "of seeing their books in the hands of readers and on the shelves of their local booksellers and libraries" (p. 84). This, no doubt, is still the case with many self-publishing authors today—authors who, like fanfic writers, take advantage of modern digital affordances which allow them to build readerships without ever having to publish through traditional systems, who have *no need* to dream of their stories finding distribution and an audience. In the early 1990s, Susan Stewart conceived of an author's community of readers as "a largely imaginary construction, an abstraction unavailable to any given author or reader at any given moment" (Stewart 1992, p. 21), but the internet has done much to demolish that construction, to contract the space between author and reader. Wattpad and Amazon are cases in point, where writers can build their own fanbase (Laquintano 2018, pp. 113, 128), sometimes numbering in the hundreds of thousands, the platforms themselves serving as a proving ground for a writer's work to potential publishers (Laquintano 2018, p. 105). However, fan writers have *no hope* of ever having their work traditionally published. Fanfiction, by its very nature, *cannot* be traditionally published. In appropriating already-existing intellectual properties, it is illegal to do so.

So, when I first learned of the online print-on-demand (POD) service Lulu and felt the urge to self-publish my fanfiction, it was a dangerous urge, precisely because of this illegality. At the time, in the mid-2000s, I was only peripherally aware of this. Now, I am acutely aware. I know I am risking potentially negative consequences in admitting that I am self-publishing print fanfiction. It does not matter that I receive no profit from doing so—on the one hand, Lulu most certainly is making a profit, and on the other, in publishing works that use existing intellectual properties, I am breaking Lulu's terms of service. I struggle with this not merely as an otherwise law-abiding and law-respecting citizen, but also because I work closely with books and copyright law (I am a librarian),

and the publication of my fic in print is fundamentally antithetical to my identity as an information professional. My professional identity puts me in a position of responsibility and privilege in relation to the patrons that I serve, and thus, on a moral level, I am put in the quandary of not being able to 'practice what I preach'. I am also aware that many fans may frown upon this practice—monetising or commodifying fanfiction is still deeply taboo within the fan community (Jones 2014; Coker 2017), and publishing and selling one's own fic, even if not for profit, can be seen as problematic.

These are confronting aspects of myself that I relate here with the aim of challenging what Monaco (2010) calls "defensive strategies" (p. 125) and the desire to conceal. While it is difficult for me to reconcile these parts of my professional and fannish practice and while I am discomfited by the fragility of this position, I am choosing to take the risk of negative consequences by speaking about this because I believe this practice has important insight to impart about the changing nature of authorship, the materiality of the book, and literary practice, particularly within fandom. In this, I also realise that I am potentially bringing unwanted attention to similar practices of other fans who may not wish to be scrutinised. I do not take this lightly, and again, as a scholar I am put in a tremendous position of power over other fans who engage in those similar practices, yet who may not wish for me to speak for them. Therefore, I choose not to reference the work or practice of other fans, but only my own.

5. Why (Did I) Self-Publish?

It was in 2008 that I first discovered Lulu. I had recently completed the first book in a trilogy called *House of Cards*, an alternate universe (AU) X-Men fanfiction. It was well-received by the small fan community I was in, and I was proud of it. For the first time in my life as a creative writer, I felt I had said what I had wanted to say with a piece of fiction. I had poured my heart and soul into it, and readers had responded well to this thing that I had made. It was fanfiction. To the outside world, it was any combination of low-brow, unoriginal, a waste of time, evidence of a pathology, deviant, erotic, trash. But, nevertheless, I wanted to (self-)publish it. Hence, I went through the motions of making my book appear like any other shelf-ready paperback—I formatted and typeset *House of Cards*; I added illustrations, created my own cover, uploaded the PDF file, and let the manufacturer take care of the rest. It is important to note that I did not put the book up for general sale. My only intention was to have a copy *for myself*, not for potential readers. I set the publication to private and the profits to USD 0. I bought a copy of my own fanfiction-as-book.

Why, if I already had a peripheral awareness that what I was doing was potentially illegal, did I still want to self-publish my fic?

Academia has little to nothing to say about why the fanfic author wants to self-publish in print. It is silent on why they desire their work to be instantiated in physical format. I have recently read the excellent works of Buchsbaum (2022) and Kennedy (2022), and while they give detailed and fascinating insight into why *readers* want to print and bind fanfiction, they do not give many clues as to why or how authors print and bind *their own* fanfiction.

Did I do it because I lacked a voice, because I wanted my voice to be heard? Was it because of my intersectional identity; did I feel a pressure, a responsibility for people like myself to be understood? Was it, as Gillam (2018, p. 113) advances, to use publication as a way to highlight trauma, to commiserate with others? Was it to find my book in the hands of readers, on the shelves of the bookstore and library? No. I had already found a readership; I had already had my voice heard. I was able to discuss my stories, my process, my inspiration freely with like-minded readers. I had even made close, meaningful, lasting friendships with some of them. By the time I decided to self-publish my fic, I had had all that for many years already. The traditional dream of the self-publishing author—to be seen, to be heard, to have their work disseminated—had already been accomplished for me. When I did publish, it was first for myself—for my book collection, for my own satisfaction.

It was first the aesthetic choice of a bibliophile, of someone who loved the book, who loved collecting them. I was less concerned with the concept of the book as art/craft, than with the culturally ingrained concept of the book as 'authentic' in its 'bookness'—that is, the book as a commodity that is published through traditional means and bought in a bookstore. My belief in the pre-eminence of the codex as the receptacle of the story outweighed the apparent shame and risk of self-publication, as well as the potential disapprobation of my fannish peers. Lulu gave me an opportunity I thought I would never get–a chance to *properly* self-publish, to publish something that looked, acted, and *felt* like a traditionally published book. If it was illegal, then I was banking on being a needle in a haystack that would never get caught.

However, within the fan community, I am far from being the only one who has the drive to collect print fanfiction. In the past, I had printed out fics from my favourite authors and bound them in folders—I was astonished when, much later, I saw the beautiful printouts and bindings other readers had created of their own favourite fics on Tumblr (Tumblr n.d.). They, too, had loved fic enough to turn it into something physical that they could *collect.* Just as with my old *Ms. Wiz* books, the satisfaction of having the complete collection and reading something physical was still very much a part of my life, even if a whole swathe of my favourite literature—fanfiction—was, for all intents and purposes, classed as 'digital only'. In printing them out, in adding them to my collection, I made them 'real', I made them 'mine'. Collecting is an act "grounded in personal means and memories, whereby the process allows and enriches one's personal sense of identity in the world" (Dillon 2019, p. 270), and it is intrinsic to the fan experience. Lincoln Geraghty (2014) signs off his book, *Cult Collectors*, with the earnest assertion that "to be a collector is to be a fan, and to be a fan is to build a collection of objects and memories that shows just what it means to be you" (p. 185). Fans print out, bind, and collect their favourite fics because those stories not only give them pleasure, but also evoke memories of a time and place in their fannish life. For the fan writer, for myself, this has a particular significance because formalising the words I wrote in physical form is an act of memorialising exactly "what it means to be me". It is a memento of my own artistic achievement, of my creative journey. In the act of self-publishing my work, I am essentially collecting *myself*.

Some might characterise the desire to own a book of one's own fan writing as fetishising that work. This is problematic because it presupposes that to want a physical instantiation of one's own work, outside of the traditional and socially approved structures of publication, is a fetishistic one. Is my desire to see my original fiction in print fetishistic? Does an established author fetishise their own work when they desire to own a published copy of it? Does the same hold for any creator? If we concede that it is natural that any creator should desire their work to be formalised and fixed in some physical, finished, and tangible form, then *why is it any different for fan writers*? If there is any fetishisation here, it is perhaps of the book itself–its materiality, its 'thereness', its presence, its irrevocability as the culturally designated final form of the writing process. As the dress is to the (hobbyist) fashion designer, as the Blu-Ray is to the (independent) film maker, so the book is to the (fan) writer.

6. The Problem with POD

"Autoethnography," Hills says, "seems to strike at the heart of contemporary neoliberal academic research" (2021, p. 144), and autoethnography within fan studies can challenge the idea of fandom as being enslaved and "reduced to corporate, neoliberal 'media time'" (Hills 2021, p. 149) by highlighting the rich, lived experiences of fans. Despite this, and despite all I have related here of my own experience, my fannish self is still inured to this corporate, neoliberal world. Self-publishing via POD is a particular site where my fannish self and neoliberalism clash, and which I address here.

Self-publishing fic via POD is an odd beast—where fanfiction has so often been viewed through the lens of art as resistance and dissent, POD fanfiction stands rather awkwardly. It is an irony not lost on me that while the practice of creating fanzines (and now fanbinding)

is deeply intertwined with the free DIY culture espoused by Lawrence Lessig (2004), POD fanfiction is inured in what might be considered its opposite—the neoliberal culture of modern late-stage capitalism. It is only through the service-oriented structures of mass production that POD has become available at all, part of the New Economy driven by the digital technologies that got my dad his first laptop and myself the means to drop the pen that gave me RSI and type up my manuscripts. The ability to self-publish with such ease turns the act of writing into an act of customer service: "The author acts as servant, server, and service provider," says McGurl (2016, p. 453), "and the reader as consumer, yes, but more precisely as *customer*" [original italics]. Though McGurl here is talking specifically of Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing arm, Lulu is also part of this post-industrial, neoliberal service economy, one of the many (self-)publishing outlets that implement the Ingram distribution platform, a service that is used even by large publishing houses to disseminate back catalogue publications (Cutler 2015). It is with unease that I recognise that I and other self-publishing fic writers who use POD are both servants (to our 'customers' or readers) and customers ourselves (of the publisher's services). I am in the position—potentially—of both exploiting and being exploited by the New Economy. McGurl insists that I, as writer and self-publisher, am fettered by the rules and whims of the service provider (pp. 455–56), yet also by the whims of my "reader as customer, a quasi deity around whose needs [. . . my] creative labor must revolve" (p. 457).

While naturally I am discomfited by the notion of being a cog in the proverbial machine, I would posit that this is a rather simplistic view with regard to writers of transformative works such as fanfiction or other works that are unlikely to ever see publication in their original form. Upon first self-publishing *House of Cards*, I did not do so with a wider readership than myself in mind, since I already had that readership. The physical book itself was equal parts work of art, memento, trophy, and simply something to hold. The service Lulu provided was a uniquely personal one, a service I could not, at the time, find elsewhere. In this scenario, I ponder who is the exploiter and the exploited, when I was merely serving myself.

Of course, I cannot escape being a part of the neoliberal machine that the POD service industry entails, especially now that I *am* serving a customer base (who, however, have read my fic already, and simply want a print copy to add to their collections). I have the double discomfort of being a part of the commodification equation, whilst simultaneously breaking licensing laws; while I subvert the system by making no profit, Lulu happily takes its cut, and the machine continues grinding, irrespective of whether I subvert it in futile ways or not. I am still part of the system.

There are ways to look at self-publishing platforms such as Kindle Direct Publishing and Lulu that assuage my discomfort. Their modes of publication stand in stark contrast to the corporate mega-publishers who shut out opportunities for small market or outsider literature. Di Leo (2014) lauds both small presses and digital publishing services in the same breath, claiming them as sites of "aesthetic resistance" and "editorial heterogeneity", where they can "provide unprecedented support and visibility to publications that might have otherwise gone unseen" (p. 233). Indeed, paradoxically, POD is a potential means of effectively dismantling the large corporate publishers by cutting off the source of their supply chain–the authors themselves. "So where can we look now for a reprieve from the machinations of the global corporate publishing machine?" asks Di Leo (2016, n.p.). "Oddly enough, it may be the very technologies that have opened up book production to the masses, namely ebook and POD technologies," which give authors "the ability to have absolute control over the products of and profits from their artistry."

Perhaps, this is a rather utopic vision. Millions of fringe authors such as myself, not publishing for profit or a wide readership, will not make much of a dent in the corporate publishing market. There would need to be a wide take-up of self-publishing platforms by well-established authors to affect that kind of change. But while this may be the case, sites such as Lulu have been taken up by authors and artists who exploit the cheap efficiency of POD in projects that are not driven by the desire for economic

benefit or mass readership. Zines (Kopecká 2020), experimental literature (Bajohr 2020), experimental art (Cetto 2021, pp. 31–32), and crowd-sourced charity fanzines (from the author's own collection) all use corporate-harnessed POD technologies to create works that resist, subvert, and sometimes outright criticise neoliberal capitalist ideologies. Yet, this does not happen in a vacuum of neutrality. Referring to zines, but also encompassing POD literature, Šima and Michela opine that while they "give space to marginalized voices, they are embedded in the dominant middle class milieu, because their creators benefit from privileged access to information and technologies, usually have relatively high social and cultural capital, and have high cultural and social competences and entrepreneurship" (Šima and Michela 2020, p. 18) —a point that finds particular resonance with me and my own experience as an individual with both professional and academic power. The dual roles I hold within the system as both exploiter and exploited is an uneasy conundrum, and POD-publishing fic can only hold up a crooked mirror to my inability to step outside of either role. As Bajohr notes, "Instead of simply avoiding new technologies and their entanglement with capitalism, experimental POD literature hyper-reflexively exploits even its own disappointment in the inability to be unaffected by this technology/art/capital nexus" (2020, p. 84). I agree. Situated midway between McGurl's pessimism and Di Leo's utopianism, I feel that POD literature sits in an uncomfortable relationship with the neoliberal logic that has made the affordable mass production of self-published literature so achievable—it cannot exist without it; yet, it often stands in opposition to that neoliberal logic, engaging in a quiet revolution where profit does not matter, where a customer is not sought, where art is produced for art's sake.

7. The Print Fanfiction Renaissance

I am reading Chelsea J. Murdock's paper on her experiences of fanfiction as self-publication.

I am struck by the similarity of our positions. We are both academics, we are both writers of fanfiction. We both experience tension between those roles. Murdock grapples with self-publication as the antithesis of academic publishing, as inherently insignificant, ephemeral, and online, as an important part of her life as a writer that she cannot reconcile with her scholarly self. She frames fanfic as "an integral part of the meaning-making process for members of fan communities" (2017, p. 53), whereas, for the purposes of this autoethnography and reflection at least, I am framing it as an integral part of the meaning-making process for (and of) *self*.

"As I designed the pages and edited my chapters," Murdock asks us, referring to her fanfic, "as I planned the release dates and prepared paratexts, was I "posting" and not "publishing"? Is this distinction only present because my works are hosted on online archives? Would this be different if my works were bound and could sit on your shelf?" (Murdock 2017, pp. 54–55).

This is exactly the question I have been posing to myself. Is there something inherently different between works that are digital and works that are physically bound? Is fanfic, is its context and its nature, bound to its format?

I want to push past this perception of fanfiction as fundamentally digital and online. I want to think outside the proverbial box of digital being the default format of fic. Murdock opines that if she wrote a fanzine, the perception of her fanfiction would be different, because it would be physical and tangible. But she fails to acknowledge the fact that for the great majority of the existence of fanfiction (as we conceptualise it today), fanzines *were* its default format. In fact, print fanfiction has a long and storied history, at least since the Sherlock Holmes parodies and pastiches that proliferated in the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, as so superbly summarised by Jamison (2013, pp. 43–45). These were largely privately printed and circulated, reproduced in periodicals such as the *Baker Street Journal* (which, interestingly, was early on threatened with copyright infringement by the Doyle estate—see Boström 2018, p. 258), or subjected to the venerable practice of 'filing the serial numbers off' for publication. Fanzines grew from this tradition, and Jacqueline Lichtenberg

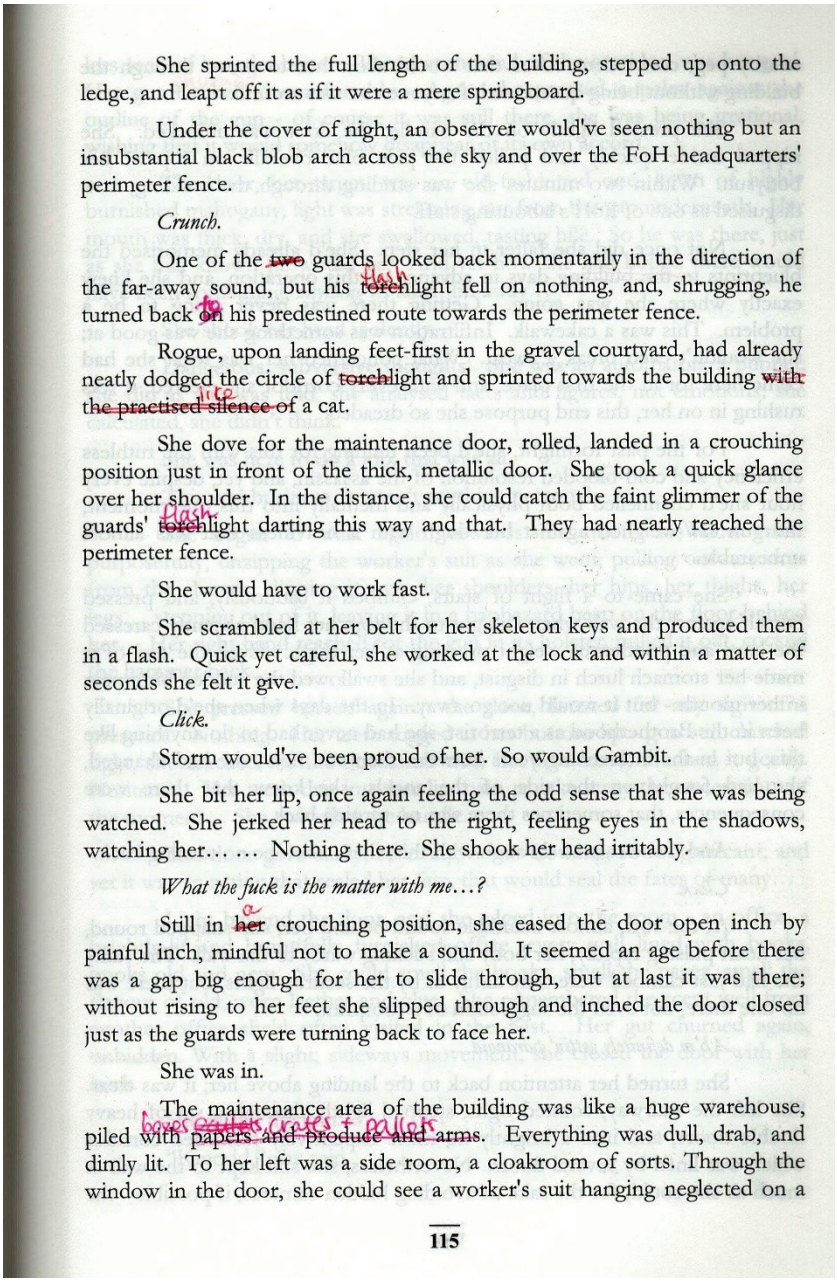
(2013) gives a wonderful retelling of the 'collating parties' she experienced in the 1970s, where groups of fans would raucously work side-by-side to put hundreds of zines together for distribution. Reading her chapter, the images of excited chatter punctuated by the shuffling of papers being proofread, of staplers thumping and boxes of printouts being dumped on the tables and floors, proliferate. Then, as now, much of fan endeavour was communal, collaborative, participatory. The fanzine, in many ways, was and is craftwork—collaborative craftwork—a hands-on DIY experience with the "rich semiotic potential of paper and binding" (Poletti 2020, p. 94). In Lichtenberg's case, physical collaboration afforded quick and cheap mass production. In other cases, fanzines were lovingly crafted, had high production value, and were expensive collector items.

What is different between this type of publication and the POD fanfiction I produce? It is not so much the loneliness of POD fanfiction production and the lack of collaboration and camaraderie that went into (and still goes into) the making of the fanzine. It is also the way in which I am physically divorced from the production of my own work. Fanzine creation is intimate and visceral. It is in many ways, as I have posited, a craft. It is tangible creation. It is a communion with the "unrepentantly analog contraptions of paper, ink, cardboard, and glue", with "books that have mass and odor, that fall into your hands when you ease them out of a bookcase and that make a *thump* when you put them down" (Houston 2016, p. XVI). Book creation via POD takes place behind the (computer) screen, behind the veil of an industrial manufacturing process you cannot see. This rupture between myself and the means of production gives the illusion of being a 'real' author, not the kind of author who writes a blog post, submits to a magazine, journal, or anthology or collaborates on a fanzine, but an author who sends her manuscript to a publisher with the lofty expectation that the unseen mechanics of production will transform her, chrysalis-like, into something special. Soon, she will be a published author, Laquintano's "venerated social identity", the vaunted figure who has the distinction of having *her own book* published in its own volume, in a format that looks like a traditionally published book should. POD makes the illusion real. I received my first print in the mail as I imagined any professional, well-established author would—with excitement, with pride that my story had been published at last.

As time passed, I discovered that my readership wanted to have their own copies of *House of Cards*. Since I had first published it in 2008, my now-battered print copy had become a work-in-progress, as dynamic and protean as digital fanfic is, a new draft wherein I had corrected typos, crossed out chunks of superfluous text, or made copious edits (Figure 4). So, I created a whole new edition of the now 'final version' of the manuscript, created PDFs of parts two and three of the now-complete trilogy, and sent copies out as gifts to friends. If any readers wanted physical copies, I finally braved making them public on Lulu, so that they could be purchased. I received no profit from them–the fannish gift economy (Jones 2014) demanded it. Buyers would only pay for shipping and cost of production.

About the same time, in 2015, I found out that other fanfic authors were doing the same thing as me. If you know where to look, print fanfiction can readily be found for purchase. Where I had thought perhaps only a handful of authors would be doing as I had done back in the late 2000s, there was actually a plethora of them. I decided to start collecting them (Figure 5). They were of varying quality. Some were poorly written and formatted; some were wonderful pieces of art in their own right. Some had ISBNs and were being sold for profit; some were clearly personal or collaborative projects that were meant to be shared only among a certain fanbase. For the most part, they are POD books and not hand-bound custom volumes. They are made to be produced cheaply and quickly to order. Bajohr (2020) notes the "material poverty" of the POD book, something that "emphasises the anonymousness of its concepts, and its problematization of authorship" (p.85). Bajohr focuses on POD as a tool for reproducing experimental literature, literature that is rooted in the digital and plays on the borders of art and the literary, that destabilises the traditional notion of the author. While Bajohr does not speak of fanfiction in his piece, his words are nevertheless apt descriptors for it. The author of fanfiction holds a problematic status, a shameful one, as someone who appropriates the work of others to write 'low-brow, deviant

trash'. As transformative works, as something that is 'made' rather than simply 'written' (as Murdock frames it), fanfiction is both literary and artistic, both experimental and ludic. Fans, as always, are using technology to play with fandom in creative ways. Fanfic authors are using POD to bring their stories to physical, tangible life. Interestingly, fanzines—once xeroxed, collated, and mailed out to fellow fans and/or sold on the convention circuit—are now being collaboratively put together and printed using POD. They do not look the way we remember fanzines—they have evolved into something slick and polished and perfectly typeset. While they do not immediately evoke the hands-on, DIY crafted volumes that Lichtenberg's 'collating parties' communally put together, their authors identify them as fanzines nonetheless.



She sprinted the full length of the building, stepped up onto the ledge, and leapt off it as if it were a mere springboard.

Under the cover of night, an observer would've seen nothing but an insubstantial black blob arch across the sky and over the FoH headquarters' perimeter fence.

Crunch.

One of the ~~two~~ guards looked back momentarily in the direction of the far-away sound, but his ~~torch~~flash light fell on nothing, and, shrugging, he turned back ~~on~~ to his predestined route towards the perimeter fence.

Rogue, upon landing feet-first in the gravel courtyard, had already neatly dodged the circle of ~~torch~~light and sprinted towards the building ~~with the practised silence of~~ like a cat.

She dove for the maintenance door, rolled, landed in a crouching position just in front of the thick, metallic door. She took a quick glance over her shoulder. In the distance, she could catch the faint glimmer of the guards' ~~torch~~flash light darting this way and that. They had nearly reached the perimeter fence.

She would have to work fast.

She scrambled at her belt for her skeleton keys and produced them in a flash. Quick yet careful, she worked at the lock and within a matter of seconds she felt it give.

Click.

Storm would've been proud of her. So would Gambit.

She bit her lip, once again feeling the odd sense that she was being watched. She jerked her head to the right, feeling eyes in the shadows, watching her… … Nothing there. She shook her head irritably.

What the fuck is the matter with me…?

Still in ~~her~~ a crouching position, she eased the door open inch by painful inch, mindful not to make a sound. It seemed an age before there was a gap big enough for her to slide through, but at last it was there; without rising to her feet she slipped through and inched the door closed just as the guards were turning back to face her.

She was in.

The maintenance area of the building was like a huge warehouse, piled with ~~papers and produce and arms~~ boxes, crates & pallets. Everything was dull, drab, and dimly lit. To her left was a side room, a cloakroom of sorts. Through the window in the door, she could see a worker's suit hanging neglected on a

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Figure 4. Handwritten edits on the 'first edition' of *House of Cards*.

Despite the 'material poverty' of POD (the thin film adhered to the cover of the original print of *House of Cards* has long been peeling off), it is fuelling a renaissance of fanfiction as an analogue format. It is giving fanfiction authors a chance to feel and touch and hold their

own work, to bear the physical fruits of their labour. It gives them a chance to also possess a memento of self, of their own artistic achievements.

Figure 5. A selection of volumes from the author's collection of POD-published fiction and fanzines.

8. The (Fanfic) Author as Self-Publisher

The central question of this thesis is a simple one: why do fans self-publish their fanfiction in book format?

Through the perspective of self and the memory work undertaken in this autoethnography, I propose five potential answers to this question.

First, on an entirely practical level, as a fanfiction writer, I know my writing will never be 'properly' published. As mentioned above, because of fanfiction's nature–using copyrighted characters and worlds—publication is out of the question, unless I 'file the serial numbers off', in the vein of *Fifty Shades of Gray* or the *Mortal Instruments* series. But the nature of my trilogy was so intertwined with the fantastical world of the X-Men that this was not a possibility without rewriting the story completely into something unrecognisable. The story was so personal to me that I could not envision it without its 'serial numbers'. If I wanted to physically hold my story, I could do it without changing the story into something it was not, without having to go through the mainstream publication route, without having to face the certainty it would be rejected. I could just make it myself.

Secondly, I harken back to the old fanfictions I wrote in those exercise books—newly found, I see now how influenced I was by the pre-eminence of the codex as the format which bestows 'thingness' upon the story. When I excitedly received my physical copy of *House of Cards*, it was suddenly, somehow, real. No longer simply an ephemeral collection of 1's and 0's on the fickle and fluid internet, my story was tangible and touchable, and its 'thingness' inaugurated it into the physical realm of 'the novel'. It only existed as a copy of one; it had no ISBN; it had no catalogue entry; it was not available in bookstores; it would never be seen by anyone but me. But it had been born into the physical world and it was on my shelf. It stood amongst other traditionally published books and looked just like them. It replicated the book as I had known and experienced it to this point. I had been privileged enough in my childhood to be able to afford books and to be inculcated into the systems of power and prestige they inhabit and represent. I cannot deny the influence that that power holds over me; indeed, that it holds over our culture at large. Despite Laquintano's contention that we are moving towards a writer-orientated society, as opposed to a reader-oriented society, we still live in a world where "authorship holds more power" than the reader (Laquintano 2018, p. 39); it is in the corporate presses' interests to keep it so. Having one's book published, even if it is only a single, lonely volume, gives

one power. It inaugurates the author into well-established systems of prestige. It also conveys a sense of immortality. In being published, my work was now fixed in time and space, and thus immortal, as long as I took care to take care of it. I knew how to take care of my books—I could not trust the internet to take care of my digital fiction for me. After all, who knows "how, in 500 years, surviving digital books will be accessed and made available" (Archer and Day 2017, p. 6). Material permanence is still valourised in a world belabouredly coming to grips with the dynamic, fluid, and impermanent internet.

Thirdly, the materiality of the book is still a powerful signifier of the self as reader/writer. The presence of the book itself codifies who we are as individuals (so many of the people I have Zoom calls or meetings with during the current COVID-19 pandemic sit in front of their bookshelves or choose virtual backgrounds with bookshelves. "The book's thingness—or thereness," says Jessica Pressman (2020, p. 63), "has become more desirable in the age of digitization, e-readers, and cloud-based storage libraries. Over the last millennium, the book's *thereness* allowed us to build bookish identities around our *nearness* to it." The fetishisation of the book is perhaps more noticeable in the digital age, but it is also tied to the sensual pleasures that the codex affords—the haptic feedback the body receives when touching the pages, leafing through them, or holding the weight of the book in one's hands. "In its three-dimensionality, the materiality of the book conveys supplementary sensual experiences that cannot be conveyed by digital files alone" (Thurmann-Jajes 2021, p. 411). The book is not merely signified by the format of its contents, but by its three-dimensional structure. A book is a collection of sheets of paper bound together between covers. This is an ontological fact. The 'thereness' of my book, on its shelf, signifies its 'thingness', its transmutation from an indefinable collection of words and sentences in some abstract ether, to a solid denizen of our material world.

Fourthly—and also relatedly—books are, or can be, collectible items. Much of fan practice is built upon the collection of fan objects—toys, figurines, comics, memorabilia, autographs, posters, and so on. All these are physical; but fanfiction, mostly born digital these days, is no exception. After all, I collected fanfic too, as do many other fans. I printed out my favourite ones and kept them together on my shelf. My own fanfiction was part of this ecosystem of fandom collectibles, and I wanted to add it to my physical collection of other fannish paraphernalia.

But—and this is my final point—collecting the accoutrements of fandom is also an act of collecting self. "[T]he memories inscribed onto each object in the collection are defined by certain experiences in the collector's life," says Lincoln Geraghty (2014, p. 181). This is perhaps especially so for the author of fanfiction. I cannot, of course, speak for all authors, but for myself my self-published fanfictions are objects which are defined by the memories and experiences within my own life. Despite the identity of the professional, published literary author becoming more diffuse in the digital age, where *everyone* can be a writer, the power of that status still has an indelible hold upon me. My childhood, my father bequeathing unto me the love of the book, of storytelling—they taught me to both revere and strive for that elusive status. In a childhood where I was often powerless, where I was often othered by my peers, the voice of the author was the only one I had. Writing became inextricably intertwined with my identity, with who I was and am.

In self-publishing my fanfiction, I am both author and collector of self.

9. Conclusions

Susan Stewart speaks of the "deliberate and artificial split" between the "book as meaning versus book as object; book as idea versus book as material" (Stewart 1992, p. 33). In a digital era where the book as material object has been so divorced from its content, particularly for outsider literature such as fanfiction, it would seem that this split has been made complete. Yet my own experience, related here, implies that the book as both meaning and as object is still a powerful concept. I am still drawn to instantiate my immaterial, digital writing ('meaning') in physical form ('object'). I still believe that fanfiction deserves

to be held and so do the many fan binders and printers who also instantiate and collect fic in book format.

While I can only speak to my own motivations for engaging in this practice–one admittedly "constructed", "drawn from memory" (Garner 2018, p. 104), and therefore necessarily fallible—what I nevertheless posit here may give some intimation as to why other authors of fanfiction might want to self-publish their own work. In terms of LIS, the fan writer as self-publisher challenges presuppositions about how people publish in the digital information society. Within the field, there is the wide assumption, not necessarily unreasonable, that fanfiction is inherently digital in form, too numerous, ephemeral, and low-quality to be worth collecting or preserving (Price and Robinson 2017); yet, fans are beginning to move their publishing practice from the strictly digital to the physical once more, some turning to POD services to achieve this and often flouting copyright laws in doing so. This points to the continued importance of the book even in communities whose practice is entrenched in digital spaces. It also reifies the notion that books as physical and collectible objects afford sensual pleasures that cannot be experienced through digital devices and screens. It might hearten the librarian to know that even in the heart of digital online communities, the book is not dead, although it is worth further investigating what this means for copyright law and its continued relevance in the future.

In terms of fan studies, along with fanbinding, fan self-publishing is also evidence of a significant move of fanfiction back into print formats—a renaissance of print fanfiction. This brings up questions around the contentious topic of the commodification and monetisation of fanworks, particularly fanfiction (see also Kennedy and Buchsbaum 2022 on this special issue). POD-published fic stands in a particularly awkward partnership with the neoliberal service economy, exemplified by sites such as Amazon and Lulu, in order to see publication realised. How this relationship will play out and how fan communities will respond to it in the future remains to be seen and studied. It is my hope that other authors and scholars explore this practice more in the future, engaging with other self-publishing fan writers, and investigating whether the phenomenon I describe here, based upon my own experience, is one that others share.

Overall, the self-publication of fanfiction by fan writers is a niche practice, but with the increasing accessibility of POD services, presumably it will continue to grow. This phenomenon has the potential to tell us more about the fan as author, as collector, and their relationship to their artistic self.

Lastly—this autoethnography should not be taken as complete. All autoethnographies, to some extent, are incomplete. Even as I write, my relationship with fandom changes as new writers take over the *X-Men* comics and my favourite characters evolve in ways that I am ambivalent to. So too does my relationship with the book, a format whose complexities I have learned to appreciate more as my professional responsibilities as a librarian have developed and matured. Memory work never really 'ends', and autoethnography should always "seek to keep its narrative open and invite further questions" (Monaco 2010, p. 134). What I write here can and should be interrogated; any defensive strategies I have subconsciously left unchallenged—strategies of concealment or reluctance to engage in introspection—should continue to be questioned, both by myself and the reader. What I hope is that this work helps to open up a dialogue, a doorway unto further 'multilived' autoethnographies (Hills 2021), where others can add their experiences, their *selves*, to the wider cultural narrative of the fan writer, the self-publisher, the bibliophile.

"We learn to see ourselves in books," says Jessica Pressman (2020, p. 32), "and to understand ourselves through interactions with them. We are interpellated into becoming selves and subjects through books." We are interpellated into becoming selves and subjects when we write them too, and when we print them, when we hold and look at them, it is into the mirror of self that we peer.

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Notes

[1] Throughout this paper, I will use the synonymous terms 'fanfiction', 'fanfic', and 'fic' interchangeably. The term itself refers to fiction written using characters and worlds from already existing fictional worlds or real-life people.

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Article

"It's All Bread, All the Way Down": *The Baby-Sitters Club Club* as Hyperfanfiction

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Abstract: In February 2016, co-hosts Jack Shepherd and Tanner Greenring launched their comedy podcast *The Baby-Sitters Club Club*. The "joke" at the center of the podcast was, of course, that two adult, cishet, white men were exhaustively recapping and dissecting a book series from the 1980s and 1990s that was predominantly popular with adolescent girls. What began as a podcast designed to poke fun at the co-hosts' serious "fannish" analysis of a nostalgic series of novels for girls, evolved into an elaborate string of "fan" theories, literary close readings, and (inter)textual expansion. Building on Paul Booth's discussion of hyperfans, this article theorizes the absurdist worldbuilding, mythology and character development, and intertextual play performed by the hosts of TBSCC as a form of hyperfanfiction.

Keywords: fanfiction; hyperfan; hyperfanfiction; gender; affirmational fandom; transformative fandom

1. Introduction

> "Claudia's wearing a bra now, and the way she talks, you would think that boys had just been invented."—Jack Shepherd's first official sign-off for *The Baby-Sitters Club Club* podcast (7 March 2016).
>
> "Baby nation, round off the corners of your bedroom, drown all of your dolls, call your Senator and demand your right to bear time, and do not forget even in these trying times to let Daddy love you as much as I do. Baby nation, remember the Delaneys, remember the Trip man, remember Boo-Boo, and take your dream horse through that maze. Claudia's wearing a bra now, and the way she talks, you would think that boys had just been invented."—Jack Shepherd's sign-off for the final podcast episode covering the main *Baby-sitters Club* book series (15 November 2018).

In February 2016, co-hosts Jack Shepherd and Tanner Greenring (both formerly of BuzzFeed) launched their comedy podcast *The Baby-Sitters Club Club*. The "joke" at the center of the podcast was, of course, that two adult, cishet, white men were exhaustively recapping and dissecting a book series from the 1980s and 1990s that was predominantly popular with adolescent girls. Reading and discussing one novel in Ann M. Martin's *The Baby-sitters Club* book series per week, *The Baby-Sitters Club Club* (hereafter *TBSCC*) ultimately ran over four years, comprehensively covering all 131 books in the original *Baby-sitters Club* series as well as all of its spin-off novel series[1] and ancillary products such as film and television adaptations and a 1996 interactive CD-ROM.

As the lengthy cumulative episode sign-off quoted above suggests, what began as a podcast designed to poke fun at the co-hosts' serious "fannish" analysis of a nostalgic series of novels for girls evolved into an elaborate string of absurdist "fan" theories, literary close readings, and (inter)textual expansion. The term "fan" is pointedly placed in quotation marks here not to imply that Shepherd and Greenring are not "real" fans. On the contrary, much of the podcast's content revels in the hosts' deep fannish investments in everything from Heidegger to the *Hellraiser* franchise, and it is emphasized throughout

early episodes that Shepherd encountered *The Baby-sitters Club* book series as an adolescent through a female cousin. Nor am I interested in litigating if Greenring and Shepherd's fan affect for *The Baby-sitters Club* book series is genuine or performative, or if or how that affective stance shifts over time. Like Bronies (adult male fans of *My Little Pony*) or podcaster predecessors *The Gilmore Guys* (two men watching and commenting on every episode of *The Gilmore Girls*) before them, the co-hosts of *TBSCC* unquestionably derive value and visibility from the gendered disconnect at the center of their podcast's premise, including coverage in high profile media outlets like *Vogue* (Ruiz 2020), but this doesn't mean they aren't legitimate "fans". Rather, I place "fan" in quotes here to gesture to the productive terminological and conceptual instability that a podcast like *TBSCC* provokes. Similar to arguments made elsewhere by Hills (2014) and Booth (2015) that particular modes of fannish production can productively complicate binary conceptions of fanworks as either "affirmational" or "transformative" in nature, the "fanfiction" created through *TBSCC* podcast is interesting for these liminal qualities, but also because it explicitly challenges the majority of dominant and enduring scholarly presumptions about the creation and consumption of fanfiction. Building on Paul Booth's discussion of hyperfans (Booth 2015, pp. 75–100), this article positions the absurdist worldbuilding, mythology and character development, and intertextual play performed by the hosts of *TBSCC* as a form of hyperfanfiction.

2. On Fan Podcasting and Forensic Fandom

Before delving into how *TBSCC* constitutes a form of fanfiction, much less hyperfanfiction, it is necessary to briefly address the particularities of the medium it is delivered through, namely a weekly fan recap or rewatch podcast. There are, of course, fanworks that are derived from sonic media objects (music fans, fans of podcasts, etc.), as well as aural forms of fanfiction such as audiofic or podfic, or "fan fiction that's performed verbally, recorded, edited, and then shared in audio format" (Riley 2020). Likewise, there is a long history of aural storytelling, from radio plays to popular podcasts like *Welcome to Night Vale* (Bottomley 2015) that inspire their own fan works such as fanfiction or fanart.

Because the components of *TBSCC* podcast that resemble fanfiction (e.g., the exploration of character backstories or alternate realities, worldbuilding and mythology development, and so on) are not derived from a pre-existing piece of *The Baby-sitters Club* fanfiction, nor is it the core component of the podcast, it is more generative to locate *TBSCC* in the growing genre of fan recap or rewatch podcasts. Recap culture is not a new phenomenon, as sites like *Television Without Pity* and *The A.V. Club* built their brands around fan-oriented content that was "partly television criticism, partly entertainment" (Falero 2016). However, as fan recap and rewatch (or, in this case, re-read) podcasts have proliferated, it is important to acknowledge that, more so than many other forms of fan production, the fan-producers of podcasts "become 'characters' themselves, with discernible tics and tastes as well as their own fans" (Diffrient 2010, p. 107). This is certainly the case with *TBSCC* podcast, as Shepherd and Greenring's heightened performance of their "odd couple" dynamic is baked into the podcast's description: "A big dumb idiot [Greenring] and his brilliant, charming friend [Shepherd, clearly writing the description] discuss the classic novels of Ann M. Martin in chronological order."

Indeed, while many (like myself) were initially drawn to *TBSCC* podcast through our own fannish nostalgia for *The Baby-sitters Club* book series, the members of "Baby Nation" (the collective self-identification for fans of *TBSCC* podcast) must ultimately also become fans of Shepherd and Greenring (their dynamic as friends, their propensity for high theory and masculinized geek culture references, and so on) in order to find full fannish pleasure in the podcast. Building on Lauren Savit's article on episodic TV podcasts as a form of fan labor, which closes with a call for further research on "the identity politics of the hosts and how that affects the dynamics of the relationship between fans of the source text, fans of the podcast, and the hosts" (Savit 2020), Megan Connor's experience of *TBSCC* podcast bears this tension out. She notes, "I felt, in the moment of listening, a deep territorial nostalgia

and unhappiness that two men had staked what Savit calls a 'proto-fannish authority' over a text so entwined with girls' feminine and feminist identity" (Connor 2022, pp. 85–86). Although my own initial kneejerk response to the podcast's "masculinist, albeit playful, perspective" (p. 85) echoed Connor's, I ultimately found that my fan nostalgia for the source material was augmented by Shepherd's belabored applications of theorists like Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes, as well as the litany of other geek culture references (ranging from tabletop games to deep cut *Star Wars* characters). Still, this gendered tension at the core of the podcast's premise, and its potentially polarizing effects, is vital to any consideration of the "fanfiction" generated through the podcast, and will be addressed in more detail below.

Like most television recap or rewatch podcasts, TBSCC developed recurring segments over time to structure the weekly novel recaps and analysis. Some of these segments, like the "Burn of the Week" (in which Shepherd and Greenring pick their favorite insult from the novel under discussion) were rooted firmly in the text. However, because *The Baby-sitters Club* novels were designed for an adolescent readership, were often thin on meaningful plot and character development, and at times notoriously/delightfully redundant (see: the obligatory and mostly unchanging exposition passage/chapter reintroducing the central characters and their roles in the club in almost every book in the series), there were clear textual limits to extensive close analysis of the novels' content without any creative expansion or absurdist "theorizing". This was compounded by the fact that podcasts, by design, offer a more "long-form space" for fan interpretation, and accordingly demands of audiences "a temporal commitment that far exceeds Twitter or other text-based digital media" (Florini 2019). This investment is rewarded, in the case of hypermythologized or mystery-oriented source material, by podcasts offering fan listeners a "sense of perusing through stacks of (sometimes vague or even conflicting) tomes of legend and lore" (Lynch 2018, p. 156).

In perhaps a parodic nod to similar recap podcasts with more mythologically dense or character-dynamic rich source materials, Shepherd strived in early episodes to perform literary criticism and analysis, playing up his role as the pedant scholar of the pair to Greenring's feigned disinterest. To offer just two early examples, in episode 5 of the podcast ("Dawn and the Impossible Three"), Shepherd reads deep religious symbolism into the difficult baby-sitting charges referenced in the novel's title, spiraling from a discussion of the holy trinity to the connection between the number 33 in numerology and flat earth theory. Likewise, in episode 3 ("The Truth About Stacey"), Shepherd makes a comically tortured conceptual leap from a fleeting textual reference to "Pauline's Fine Candy" to the "Pre-Frontal Cortex", or "the part of the brain that is involved in making sure you follow social conventions", noting "it's so fucking obvious" that the book is a rumination on and critique of the surveillance state.

Whether as a byproduct of the novels' relatively thin plotting, or as a satirical response to composing a "recap" podcast with minimal fodder for recapping, what started as mock "serious" and "scholarly" analysis of a decidedly unserious and delightfully straightforward text quickly evolved into a complex web of conspiracies and worldbuilding exercises that veered closer to the realm of fan theories and fanfiction than recaps. Over time, *TBSCC* self-consciously developed into a recap podcast for an imagined *Game of Thrones* style source text, with factions of living dolls, dinosaurs, sentient orbs, and soldiers with magnificent weapons all vying for control of the sleepy fictional town of Stoneybrook, Connecticut. As scholars like Tosenberger (2008) and Åström (2010) have noted of the television series *Supernatural*, seemingly subversive or outlandish fan readings (and the resulting production of fanfiction, from incest to male pregnancy) can often emerge structurally from the text's own narrative design. Similarly, the design of *The Baby-sitters Club* book series structurally supported many of the outlandish "theories" developed on *TBSCC* podcast, pointedly through its lack of development. To offer a specific example, "Amber Theory", or the notion that the fictional town of Stoneybrook is encased in amber, never allowing the girls to age or leave, emerged because the central characters of *The Baby-sitters Club* novels

spend the first 10 books in 7th grade and the subsequent 10 years and hundreds of novels perpetually stuck in the 8th grade. More generally, though, the lack of plot and character development throughout a given novel (or even over the whole series) and the demands of a weekly, hour-long, ad-supported podcast, created conditions that necessitated textual speculation and expansion.

In order to accomplish this, *TBSCC* created a conceptual bridge between fanfiction and forensic fandom. Mittell (2009) describes forensic fandom as being rooted in textual mystery and complexity, resulting in a narrative structure that "structurally encourages viewers to parse the show more than simply consume it" (p. 128). *TBSCC* podcast lovingly lampoons this "hyper-attentive mode of spectatorship" (Mittell 2009, p. 128) and accompanying fan "detective mentality, seeking out clues, charting patterns, and assembling evidence into narrative hypotheses and theories" (pp. 128–29) through the creation of absurdist theories. We can view this in one of two ways. First, we might read this forensic fan approach as a way of reconciling the aforementioned gender disconnect between the hosts and source material by approaching a decidedly feminine texts through a more affirmational (Obsession_inc 2009) or conventionally masculinized mode of engagement. Alternately, we might interpret the highly speculative form "forensic fandom" produced on *TBSCC* as mocking these male-dominated modes of engagement and embracing a more transformative and playful relationship to the source material.

To offer perhaps the most farcical example, in episode 41 ("Poor Mallory!"), Shepherd is in the midst of highlighting the novel's connection to Dickensian literature when Greenring interjects a close reading of his own:

> Shepherd: It's Dickensian in its scope, it brings in a vast array of new characters, many of whom are parodies and caricatures of, like, grotesque richness and opulence and cruelty. Like these characters Valerie and Rachel and someone called Nan White. Who's called Nan White?
>
> Greenring: Naan White. Guess what? Naan is a kind of bread, so is white.
>
> Shepherd: [snickers] Ok. That's what you captured there?
>
> Greenring: White bread. Naan bread. Maybe there's something there? I don't know.
>
> Shepherd: We both looked at Nan White, I wrote "Bleak House", you wrote "TWO KINDS OF BREAD!"
>
> Greenring: THIS LADY IS TWO KINDS OF BREAD, WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?!

Over the course of the episode, "Bread Theory" is born. Roughly 10 min later, Nan (Naan) White is mentioned again, with Greenring noting that the theory is "worth putting a pin in, at least". Five minutes later, Shepherd makes an offhand comment while discussing minor character Hannie Papadakis that "Papadum is a kind of bread", prompting a "Whoa!" from Greenring who notes that "This is shaping up into a thing. It's fresh, it's new, the yeast is still rising on this fan theory". Two minutes pass, and as discussion moves on to a minor character named Michael Hoffmeister, Shepherd deadpans "Do you want to google and see if Hoffmeister is some kind of a bread? Please don't", he immediately retracts as Greenring proclaims he's "deep into bread theory now" and promptly locates a bakery in Karlsruhe, Germany named Hofmeister-Brot.

Bread Theory would become a fan favorite recurring segment, generating both fan-made and official merchandise in the Wonder bread font and color story. By episode 48 ("Mary Anne Misses Logan"), both hosts were jokingly proclaiming that "It's all bread", or "Bread all the way down". On the same day that episode 41 of the podcast was released, an image was posted to the Baby Nation facebook group, the community hub for fans of the podcast, to commemorate the emergent theory: an instantly recognizable play on Agent Fox Mulder's iconic "I Want To Believe" poster from *The X-Files*, with the alien spaceship replaced with a loaf of bread (see: Figure 1). If absurdism is, at its core, "a conspicuous

discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality", and by extension, "the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary" (Nagel 1971, p. 718), this poster and Bread Theory more broadly can be viewed as emblematic of the podcast's absurdist approach to fan engagement. However, I would suggest it is precisely because so much of the podcast's humor is derived from parodying both affirmational (forensic fandom) and transformative (fanfiction) modes of fan engagement that it is worth exploring both the pleasures and potential disciplinary functions of this output.

Figure 1. Fanart posted to the "Baby Nation" facebook fan group, the same day that "Bread Theory" was introduced on the podcast.

3. *TBSCC* and/as Hyperfanfiction

In the 2016 trailer for *TBSCC* podcast, Shepherd invited potential listeners to "read along with us as we pick the strands out of this delicate tapestry that Ann M. Martin has woven for us, in order to weave a brand-new pattern of our very own". This description immediately brings to mind descriptions of fanfiction from within fan studies, and in particular Stanfill's (2015) framing of fan remixing practices and transformative works as "spinning yarn with borrowed cotton" (p. 131). With this said, the "fanfiction" produced within the *TBSCC* podcast contradicts many of the prevailing understandings and theorization of fanfiction as a practice. As Stanfill (2015) notes, understanding fan works like fanfiction as "spinning yarn" is "an aptly gendered metaphor for deeply feminized forms of labor" (p. 132). It is precisely because fanfiction has long been approached as a practice dominated by women writers and readers, and has further been theorized as "a literature of the subordinate" (De Kosnik 2006, p. 72) that there are immediate difficulties in framing what the white, cishet hosts of *TBSCC* are doing as fanfiction. Importantly, there are also longstanding issues with fan scholars presuming both the whiteness and straightness of fans generally (see: Wanzo 2015; Warner 2015; Pande 2018; Stanfill 2018; Woo 2018; Pande 2020), and fanfiction writers and readers specifically, frequently treating these identity markers as an unacknowledged "default" identity. The primary point I wish to make is that fanfiction has historically been understood as a practice dominated by those who self-identify as women, without erasing broader issues about the similar fannish privileges

that white straight women retain in these scholarly and cultural accounts of the gendered nature of fan engagement.

This difficulty in labelling the podcast's creative play as "fanfiction" is compounded by the hosts' forensic fandom approach to generating new stories from the source text, which overwhelmingly focuses more on crafting a denser mythology and worldbuilding than the character/character dynamic exploration that has historically driven and dominated fanfiction production. Accordingly, the analysis of the fannish narratives generated within *TBSCC* podcast offered below suggests a need for different theoretical approaches to fanworks that have a more tenuous relationship to the sorts of fan identities, communities, and practices that have historically been studied.

Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, Booth (2015) introduced the term "hyperfan" to address the "twinned representational parodies of fandom [that] have appeared in film and television in order to both generate more fandom and to attract non-fan audiences" (p. 75). Importantly, Booth argues that:

> "these twinned representations implicitly contrast dominant readings of 'bad' fandom (excessive, transformative, feminine) with dominant readings of 'good' fandom (appreciative, supportive, commercial) through a contrast between the two that attempts to discipline fandom into one particular identity". (pp. 75–76)

Because the content of *TBSCC* reflects both an awareness of these twinned representations and a persistent desire to mock both of these fannish poles, I would contend it is most productive to approach the textual expansion produced by the hosts as a form of hyperfanfiction. Whereas Booth's term is more focused on media representations of fans, and the disciplinary function they might serve, I would like to suggest through this analysis that these logics might be extended to performances of fannish textual expansion that exist outside fan communities of practice and have a more ambivalent relationship to a fan object. Although hyperfanfiction might serve a similar disciplinary function, it is important from the outset to distinguish it from trends that are more explicitly designed to shame predominantly feminized fan cultural practices such as writing and consuming fanfic and other transformative works. This notably includes instances when celebrities read homoerotic fanfiction featuring their character, or display slash fan art, on talk shows for the sole purpose of mockery (Jones 2014). The comedy that emerges from the hyperfanfiction produced by *TBSCC* in undoubtedly complex, and potentially disciplinary of both masculinized and feminized forms of fan engagement, but it is not meanspirited by design.

The analysis of three distinct examples of hyperfanfiction from *TBSCC* podcast below is designed to consider how understandings of fanfiction might be complicated if we examine more liminal (or even incidental or unintended) cases of fannish textual production. In many ways, the forms of fanfiction produced within *TBSCC* podcast are exemplary of longstanding theorizations of fanfiction that stress performance over text (Coppa 2006, p. 225), or approach fanfiction as "fragmentary ephemera" (Busse 2017, p. 148), albeit with an insular fan community of practice limited to the two hosts.

3.1. Case Study: Trackin' Jackie

"Trackin' Jackie" is typical of many of the recurring segments on *TBSCC* podcast that might be labelled as iterative forms of hyperfanfiction. Introduced in episode 21 ("Kristy and the Walking Disaster"), the podcast hosts begin as many fanfiction authors might: by using passing references in the text to riff on a minor character's potential backstory. In this case, the character in question is accident-prone baby-sitting charge Jackie Rodowsky, whom Shepherd and Greenring eventually decide "phases in and out of time". This passing remark would lead to an ongoing segment for almost all future appearances of Jackie Rodowsky in the novels, in which any time Jackie trips or knocks something over, he blips forward or backward in time, going on adventures and living whole lives before being ripped back to present day Stoneybrook and returned to his childhood body.

"Trackin' Jackie" was officially cemented as a recurring segment in episode 23 ("Jessi Ramsey, Pet-Sitter"), complete with an introductory audio sting of plucky sci-fi theremin

music and dialogue from the ABC television series *Lost* of protagonist Jack yelling "We have to go back, Kate! We have to go back!" This iconic bit of dialogue, drawn from the final moments of the notoriously complex and mystery-driven show's third season finale ("Through the Looking Glass"), is notable for the reveal that *Lost*'s narrative had shifted from a flashback to a flashforward structure. In addition to directly evoking the same time-bending logics that "Trackin' Jackie" was predicated on, aurally referencing one of the preeminent forensic fan objects of the past several decades also works to temper a feminized practice (fanfiction writing) with references to a masculinized text and mode of engagement.

This logic also extends to the fanfiction produced within the segment, which skewed towards stereotypically masculinized genres such as political thriller, action-adventure, and science fiction. For example, in the first full "Trackin' Jackie" segment, Shepherd and Greenring draw on context clues from the novel to inspire an alternate history in which Jackie lives an entire life, prevents the assassination to John F. Kennedy, and then blips back to his life in 1980s Stoneybrook only to realize that he is not in the utopic America he helped create. In future segments, Jackie would be reimagined as a stand-up comedian in gritty 1970s New York City (Episode 88: "Claudia Kishi: Live from WTSO!"), an explorer with the 1910 Terra Nova Expedition (Episode 29: "Welcome Back, Stacey!"), a colonizer of the moon (Episode 25: "Kristy and the Mother's Day Surprise") or the first astronaut to reach Mars in the year 2192 (Episode #58: "Keep Out Claudia"), and so on. In episode 38 ("Jessi's Baby-sitter"), Jackie even blips forward through time within the fanonical universe created by *TBSCC* podcasts hosts, encountering an apocalyptic version of Stoneybrook rich with references and inside jokes to the mythology created over the course of the podcast.

There are several ways in which we might approach "Trackin' Jackie" as an exercise in hyperfanfiction, or by offering a twinned representation of fan practices. Just as hyperfan representations can "obscure a more insidious representation of fandom, the one that more quietly and subtly depicts more 'proper' instantiations of fan activities" (Booth 2015, p. 76), "Trackin' Jackie" as a form of hyperfanfiction simultaneously revels in the desire to produce fanfiction and sidesteps its negative cultural associations through a masculinization of the practice. Though much fanfiction production centers on exploring underdeveloped minor characters, the centering of a minor male character as the epic protagonist in a book series dominated by female characters and skinning these exercises in more "appropriate" (read: culturally valued) genres safely creates a buffer between the segment and fanfiction writing as a practice. In this sense, we might position "Trackin' Jackie" and similar hyperfanfiction segments on *TBSCC* podcast as "both preserving and mocking" fanfiction writing as a practice, "in order to provide a more normal (i.e., disciplined) fan response" (Booth 2015, pp. 85–86). The mere fact that this functions as a recurring podcast segment serves to "discipline" the cultural production contained within it (e.g., this is typically a short, standalone[2] segment that is delivered late in an episode and mostly detached from the broader worldbuilding and mythologizing undertaken by the hosts). The segment is also disciplined (or rendered more "normative" and removed from the always already feminized associations of hyperfandom) by the lived identities of the hosts, and their conspicuous conceptual distancing from both the fan object ostensibly at the center of their podcast as well as fanfiction as a practice.

3.2. Case Study: A Time to Kilbourne

The most explicit (or, at the least, most conventional) example of fanfiction produced within *TBSCC* podcast emerged from a passing joke surrounding Shannon Kilbourne, a minor character from *The Baby-sitters Club* novels who served as an associate member and occasional baby-sitter. In episode 63 ("Jessi and the Awful Secret"), Shepherd notes that Shannon Kilbourne is introduced in book 11 ("Kristy and the Snobs") and then "just disappears until now". Greening corrects that she is mentioned in prior books, but "spoken about as a figure of legend", leading the hosts of *TBSCC* podcast to speculate in that "she is involved in some super-secret mission for the United States government" in order to

explain her infrequent appearances in the books. Shepard then admits: "Fun fact: I even wrote a short story called *A Time to Kilbourne* about that very possibility", leading to a long back and forth about how details from the novel under discussion points to the fact that Shannon is a "spook for the George H.W. Bush administration". Despite meeting four of the five definitional properties of fanfic outlined by Coppa (2017, pp. 2–14), these being 1. produced outside of the literary marketplace, 2. rewriting and transforming another story that is 3. owned by others, and 4. focused on a character rather than the storyworld, Shepherd's initial designation of *A Time to Kilbourne* as a "short story" rather than "fanfiction" is telling. The framing was not due to a lack of familiarity with practice, as the hosts mentioned the possibility of composing character-driven fanfiction in the very first episode ("Kristy's Great Idea"). This description is even more confounding when the "short story" is revealed to be only two paragraphs long, far more closely related to a "drabble" in fanfiction parlance.

A month after the first mention of *A Time to Kilbourne*, in episode 66 ("Dawn's Family Feud"), the topic of Shannon Kilbourne fanfiction comes up explicitly. After performing a close analysis of the character's appearance in the novel and how it connects back to her potential identity as a spy who's come in from the cold, Shepherd muses, "Do you think there's a Shannon Kilbourne standalone?", prompting Greenring to google and discover the character's tag on fanfiction archive AO3. As Shepherd loudly argues that he's composed the only such story, Greenring makes a noise of disgust, prompting Shepherd to narrate, "Tanner's making a face like he just saw something that really upset and hurt him". The offending content, it is revealed, was a description for a "charged" fanfiction story featuring Shannon, prompting snickers from both before Shepherd launches directly back into fannish analysis of the text and the subject is dropped.

This moment is exemplary of the sort of tension that is baked into the "hyperfan", and characterizes the podcast's distinct production of "hyperfanfiction" by extension, marked by two layers of presentation of fannish textual production: "one that the audience can mock and other that teaches the audience an appropriate manner of fannish behavior" (Booth 2015, pp. 93–94). The messaging that A03 fanfiction production is innately disturbing, while "short stories" that, although they might be rooted in the long history of fanfiction crossovers, actively distance the work of fanfiction from "feminized" practices through its generic framing as a spy thriller (or the evocation of Grisham 1989 courtroom drama via the title) remain "appropriate". Even with this point of differentiation, it is telling that it was only after *TBSCC* podcast had exhausted every single book in *The Baby-sitters Club* series and its spin-off series that *A Time to Kilbourne* was released as a special bonus episode on 7 June 2021. The hosts explicitly acknowledge this early in the episode, with Greenring noting that "Time has forced our hands and we are sort of being compelled to do this", gesturing to both the lack of any more canonical *Baby-sitters Club* content and the demands of the podcast's advertising partners to get an episode out. Shepherd plays off these pressures, suggesting that the episode represents the pair "going above and beyond" to "tie up loose ends". This dual framing concurrently positions the act of composing fanfiction as an embarrassing afterthought or necessary evil, and as a way for fans to transcend expectations of commitment to a text.

The brief reading that follows in many ways embraces the elements of podfic (a dramatic reading of a fanfiction story, complete with a generic spy thriller score and sound effects when appropriate), but also continues to play with conceptions of what "appropriate" fannish textual production might look like. *A Time to Kilbourne*, like all the hyperfanfiction produced within the podcast, mines comedy from the intersection of forensic fan approaches (exhaustive descriptions of Kilbourne's spy tech and weaponry) and the feminized banality of the source text (getting a call mid-mission for a baby-sitting job). So, although there are ample intertextual references to *The Baby-sitters Club* pepped throughout the fanfiction (e.g., the Bond-style villain of the piece is "The Phantom" of "Claudia and the Phantom Phone Calls", the repositioning of Claudia's genius older sister

Janine as an "M"-like figure, etc.), the fanfiction produced is not framed as an exercise in transformative textual production, but rather deeply affirmational textual exploration.

"This is the polar bears episode", Shepherd jokes, referencing a notorious mystery from the pilot of *Lost*. In this way, Shephard positions himself as both frustrated fan (wanting answers and ultimately composing his own via fanfiction) and all-knowing author. This emphasis on authorial intent, or the premise that *A Time to Kilbourne* is ultimately more an exercise in close textual analysis than fannish textual production, is reiterated throughout the episode. The episode description opened: "Five years ago, two men made a solemn promise: They would tell the story of Agent Associate Baby-Sitter Shannon Kilbourne the way Ann M. Martin always intended it to be told". Positioning themselves as "priests" or "avatars" who are merely relaying Martin's "wisdom" and story elements that are "deeply engrained in the text", the hosts of *TBSCC* develop a form of hyperfanfiction that exists between and pokes fun at both fannish textual reverence and resistance.

3.3. Case Study: Ann M. Martin and Her League of Extraordinary Ghostwriters

At its core, Booth presents "hyperfan" representations as an industrial strategy, provided to "discipline contemporary fandom into useable fan audiences" (Booth 2015, pp. 82–83). Accordingly, a major point of differentiation between industrial understandings and depictions of "normative" and "excessive" fandom hinges on a given fan's or fan practice's relationship to authorship and the authority it carries. Obsession_inc (2009) stresses authorial respect in their delineation between affirmational (industrially sanctioned) and transformative (unsanctioned) fan engagement, and Booth (2015) reiterates in his discussion of hyperfandom that more positive representations of "normative" fan identity tend to be marked by a "celebratory notion of the creator" (p. 96). In their production of hyperfanfiction focused on the primary author, ghostwriters, and publishing executives, the hosts of TBSCC podcast take a taxonomic approach in their depiction of fan/author relations, alternately mocking and celebrating the parasocial relationships that fans develop with content creators and executives.

Over time, the hosts' reverence for and mythology building around original series author Ann M. Martin, developed into a lengthy series of epithets that would open most episodes. For example, from episode 84 ("Kristy and Mr. Mom"), Shepherd opens the podcast by introducing their focus on the "classic novels" from: "Princeton's own Princess Annabelle Matthews Martin, sanctified, stormborn, Mother of Clocks and bane to bats, first of her name, last of her kind, last hope for humankind, and author of the great Sitter's Cycle". Because it would be too exhaustive to contextualize the origins of each of these distinct designations across dozens of novels and podcast episodes, it will suffice to say that these inside jokes all position Martin as a sort of deity and build mythology around her all-encompassing powers as an author. Likewise, the designation of "The Great Sitters Cycle" (perhaps meant to playfully evoke Wagner's Ring Cycle operas) elevates and canonizes the novels as high art.

Positioned on the opposite end of the spectrum to Martin was "The Leviathan". In a parody of the ways in which fans might direct blame for various creative decisions at "The Powers That Be", or industry executives, so that they can remain reverent of the creators behind their fan object, editorial director of the publisher for *The Baby-sitters Club* book series David Levithan was reimagined as a Lovecraftian horror "lurking in the shadowy basement of Scholastic" (episode 87, "Dawn and the School Spirit War"). Notably, David Levithan's first contact with *The Baby-sitters Club* novels came as "a 19-year-old intern working on the series, tasked with keeping a "bible" so that nothing would be mixed up or forgotten" (Doll 2012). This is noteworthy both because the presence of a "Bible" is typically reserved for fictional worlds with highly complex mythologies, and because this actively aligns "The Leviathan" with more canonical, affirmational, and forensic fan identities and practices. Within "The Leviathan" mythology, the "dusty tomes" of *The Baby-sitters Club* Bible are discussed by the podcast's hosts as alternately an object of desire and fear, as "seekers after this Bible know that everybody who has ever looked at it has

gone raving mad". The tension produced by the desire and danger to "peer into the maw of the Leviathan", narrativizes the "troubling binary" at the core of Booth's (2015) hyperfan theory, crafting a form of hyperfanfiction that mocks both fannish investment and immersion as well as more "disciplined" or knowledge-driven approaches (p. 77).

The hyperfanfiction surrounding Martin, "The Leviathan", and the most consistent ghostwriters for the original series and spin-off novels became such a recurring feature that it spawned official merchandise (see Figure 2) in the popular "&" t-shirt design aesthetic. Importantly, this design was originally conceived in 2001 by Amsterdam-based design studio Experimental Jetset as a piece of fan merchandise for the Beatles (e.g., "John&Paul&George&Ringo"), and has since become a staple of fan merchandise for a wide array of franchises and characters. This visualization of the podcast's author-centric exercises in hyperfanfiction understandably places Ann M. Martin at the top of the list, with The Leviathan occupying an appropriately shadowy presence in the "basement" of the line-up. Once *TBSCC* podcast moved into *The Baby-sitters Club* novels penned by Martin's "League of Extraordinary Ghostwriters" (discursively positioned as a sort of superhero team), a more taxonomic approach to depictions of fan/author relations emerged. Some were given epithets and backstories, others were only mentioned in passing. Although some, like "The Entity" (to describe the only co-authoring duo of the series), carried on the tradition of crafting vaguely fantastical or science fictional stories out of minimal information, the hosts most consistent and obsessive expressions of fan affect were reserved for frequent ghostwriter Peter Lerangis, also known as "Sweet Pete". These expressions of fandom can be read as both genuine (in the hosts' palpable delight when they arrive at a "Pete book") and performative (in the hosts' awkward sexualization of "Sweet Pete and his sweet sweet feet" and their repeated efforts to make contact over social media). It would be too easy to suggest that the hosts of TBSCC valorize and elevate "Sweet Pete" above other ghostwriters purely because he, too, is a white man deigning to devote time to a book series designed for young girls. Rather, because the hosts' discussions of Sweet Pete simultaneously veer the closest to hyperfandom of any of these instances of author-based hyperfanfiction and presents an outsized appreciation for more "normative" (e.g., masculinized) entries in the series, it is emblematic of how these "twinned" representations function.

Figure 2. Official Merchandise from *TBSCC* podcast featuring the hosts' ongoing fascination with author Ann M. Martin and the various ghostwriters of the series.

4. Conclusions: Strange Bedfellows

It is precisely because all of the aforementioned forays into "fanfiction" production "presents obvious parodies of contemporary fan activities" (Booth 2015, p. 76) that we can classify it as "hyperfanfiction". However, rather than twinned representations that contrast a feminized/transformative "hyperfan" and a more "normative"/masculinized depiction of affirmational or forensic fandom, *TBSCC* podcast frequently collapses these categories in their iterative and fragmentary fannish textual production. Although a case could certainly be made for this collapse serving a similar disciplinary function as the one described by Booth (2015), we can alternately read these instances of hyperfanfiction as lovingly poking fun at both the forensic and creative impulses of fan audiences equally. Regardless, it is difficult to disregard the gendered disconnect that sits at the heart of the podcast's appeal, as well as its performances of fan engagement. Because hyperfan representations ultimately strive to "discipline fan audiences into behaving like proper fans—and, in all of these cases, the proper fan is masculine and knowledgeable, not feminine and emotional" (Booth 2015, p. 94), it is impossible not to engage the similar biases that underpin hyperfanfiction as a practice.

After running through all content even peripherally related to *The Baby-sitters Club*, and dabbling in other nostalgic book series aimed at young women (like *Sweet Valley High*), Shepherd and Greenring ultimately pivoted to new content. The resulting podcast, *Strange Bedfellows*, which initially focused on romance novels but has since expanded to cover a variety of romance media, is similarly premised on the demographic disconnect between the fan object and the hosts. In the premiere episode of Strange Bedfellows, Greenring jokingly discusses the impetus behind this rebranding, noting that the pair decided "what we need to do is we need to invade a space that's not for us and make it our own in true straight, white man fashion". "Fully manspread", retorts Shepherd. Because so much of the humor produced within Shepherd and Greenring's podcasts is rooted in parody, as is Booth's theorization of hyperfandom, it is easy to write of these moments of comedy as self-aware, or even self-reflexive, rather than ultimately modelling an appropriate fan identity.

Some scholars have positioned podcasts as being particularly well equipped to "create enclaved networked spaces" where black and minority fans "can engage in fandom, free from the discomforts and hostilities that come from operating in normatively white fan spaces" (Florini 2019), and this is certainly the case. When approaching a "fan" podcast like *TBSCC*, however, it is necessary to grapple with its internal ambivalences, tensions, and contradictions. Just as Tiffe and Hoffmann (2017) have suggested that podcasts open up a rich space to interrogate beyond bodily presence to consider who is allowed to sonically "take up space" in culture (p. 116), *TBSCC* poses similar questions about who is allowed to "take up space" in fan discourses and practices. Although the ongoing exploration of fanfiction as a practice that centers minority voices and creators is vital, it is equally essential to consider when and how fanfiction as a mode of cultural production either replicates biases or inequities or actively alienates the very demographics it claims to champion. More liminal cases, such as the fannish cultural production forwarded by *TBSCC* podcast, challenge longstanding presumptions about the production and reception of fanfiction, and accordingly offer a uniquely rich space to consider fanfiction as a cultural practice and how it might shift when placed into dialogue with more historically forensic modes of fannish analysis.

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[1] Additional books in *The Baby-sitters Club* series covered by *TBSCC* podcast include canonical expansions on the main series, such as the *Super Specials* (15 books), *Mystery* (36 books) and *Super Mystery* (4 books) series, *Friends Forever* (12 books), *Portrait Collection* (6 books), and *Readers' Request* (3 books), as well as spin off series *The California Diaries* (15 books) and *Baby-sitter's Little Sister* (122 books).

[2] Although "standalone" can be used to describe a fanfiction story, the term is more likely to be attached to comic books, television episodes, or computer software than fannish media production.

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Article

Look Back in Angria (The Brontë Family Fandom)

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Abstract: Transhistorical accounts of fanfiction often refer to the Brontës' juvenilia, but such references are largely cursory even as they make a claim about the siblings' Angria and Gondal writings that needs more careful consideration. This essay offers a more thorough examination of what it means to claim "the Brontës wrote fanfic", analyzing their family- and site-specific mode of creative production and consumption in relation both to established definitions of contemporary fanfiction and to their own sources and environment. Archival research has enabled me to situate some of the Brontës' earliest texts in their original tiny, hand-produced format alongside the print periodicals and physical books that the young authors read and transformed. I analyze how the siblings' books mimic the multiplicity and flexibility of authorship modeled in their local newspaper and how their drawing, marginalia, and corrections accentuate the interactive nature of the printed book. Viewing the Brontë siblings as a family fandom enthusiastically devoted to the creation and appreciation of transformative works helps make visible a model of authorship they share with contemporary fanfiction: authorship not just as collaboration but as play and exchange among diverse materials, sources, activities, media, writers, and readers. Then, as now, this mode exists simultaneously with commercial authorship but is distinct from it, as the siblings recognized, altering their plots, practice, and presentation for their novels.

Keywords: fanfiction; juvenilia; The Brontës; Angria; Gondal; authorship; interactive media; print culture; hand-made books

1. Introduction

When the Brontë children took up toy soldiers, named them after famous military figures, and began acting out and then writing up their adventures, is this fanfiction? Can we call texts fanfiction that were written in the 1830s, long before the term "fan" let alone "fanfiction" or "fanfic" had been invented and before many of the media environments and technologies basic to contemporary fanfiction existed? According to Andy Sawyer, historian of science fiction culture and curator of the 2011 British Library exhibition "It's Science Fiction, but Not as You Know It", the answer is yes:

> The Brontës are well known authors with no apparent association with science fiction but their tiny manuscript books, held at the British Library, are one of the first examples of fan fiction, using favourite characters and settings in the same way as science fiction and fantasy fans now play in the detailed imaginary 'universes' of Star Trek or Harry Potter. (British Library 2011)

Sawyer is neither the first nor the last to make this claim. The Brontë juvenilia—stories that future novelists Charlotte, Emily, Anne, and their brother Branwell wrote over many years, known variously as the Glass Town, Angria, or Gondal sagas—has often been cited in popular accounts of fanfiction's history, especially as internet fanfiction gained in popularity and notoriety in the 2000s and 2010s. A 2009 Wichita Eagle article entitled "what my son and Charlotte Brontë have in common", for example, gave fanfiction as the answer to its title question (Brontë Blog 2009). Defenses of fanfiction became even more common in the wake of Twilight-fanfiction-turned-bestseller *Fifty Shades of Grey*. A 2013 post to the Quirk Books blog proclaimed that "Charlotte Brontë did a lot of things typical for teenagers:

made 'zines, wrote fan fiction, and had a Gothic phase" (Thornfield 2013); on a Seattle radio podcast in 2014, *Slate* editor Dan Kois mentioned the Brontës along with Superman and Spiderman crossover comics and Virgil's *Aneid* in the course of defining and defending fanfiction in the broadest transhistorical terms (Nicks and Scher 2014). Contributing to that trend, my own earlier work referred in passing to the Brontë juvenilia in a section called "A Prehistory of Fanfiction" and captioned an image of one of their hand-made books as "Duke of Wellington 'fanfiction'" to illustrate "The Look of Fanfiction 1800" (Jamison 2013).

Such gestures to the Brontës' early work as fanfiction, however, rarely if ever examine the actual claim being made or consider its implications. This is understandable in popular formats such as blogs, podcasts, or journalistic articles that make no claims to scholarship, but it is also true of my book *Fic*, which readers approach with different expectations. In keeping with other examples of my recent work, then, this essay addresses claims made briefly in a book written for a popular audience that has nonetheless also functioned as an academic text almost since its publication. Given that the Brontës' ubiquity on lists of historical fanfiction writers may be partly my responsibility, it is arguably also my responsibility to explain in more scholarly terms what I mean by that claim and to what extent I stand by it. Thus, in this essay, I explain what understanding the Brontë family as a fandom and its culture of collaborative authorship and interactive media as fanfiction can teach us about fanfiction, literary history, and the Brontës themselves.

To be clear, you would not need to be a fan studies or literature scholar to understand why these texts get called fanfiction. Like most fanfiction, the Angria sagas are fiction without being novels (though, like contemporary fanfiction, they do include some more stand-alone, novel-like stories). The body of work by the young(ish) Brontës is immense, heterogeneous, and encompasses multiple contradictory emphases and preferences in ways that can seem incoherent to readers expecting traditionally published and polished novels, but which would feel familiar to contemporary fanfic readers. On the other hand, the invented yet colonized African country of Angria, with its arcane political systems, intrigues, and wars, is sure to feel *un*familiar to anyone not well-versed in early nineteenth-century British parliamentary and colonial politics—that is to say, to most people currently alive. But then, like any fanfic text that delves into the politics of a complex world for an audience of other devotees, the Brontës wrote for other "fans" of period political and military campaigns (that is, for each other). So even Angria's sometimes off-putting complexity would feel familiar to any fanfiction reader who has stumbled into a half-a-million-word Lord of the Rings fic, for example, without ever having read a word about Middle Earth. By the same token, a seasoned fanfic reader of today would recognize key Angrian plot and character elements as well as the intra-fandom conflicts about them. For example, the Angria stories prominently feature coercive and clearly sexual affairs enmeshed in intricate worlds, wars, political systems, family structures, and even periodical literature. And, just as in fanfiction fandoms today, tensions often arose among the Brontë siblings about where best to place narrative emphasis among these diverse elements—conflicts analogous to though perhaps less heated than the acrimonious arguments that contemporary fandom refers to as both "wars" and "discourse". To further complicate matters, each Brontë sibling wrote under multiple pseudonyms and personae who would also argue amongst themselves using stories and plot twists as satirical weapons. Such self-aware, winking devices were once claimed by literary scholars for postmodern metafiction but in fact are frequently employed in the 1820s' and 1830s' periodical press the Brontë siblings were obsessed with. Such devices also often feature in contemporary fanfiction, as in "Fandom AU" (alternate universe) stories in which characters are written as fanfiction writers or artists themselves, often in their own fandom (meta-hilarity ensues). Indeed, one of the most "ficcish" elements of the Brontë writings is the centrality of play, from their earliest accounts of it well into adulthood, when Anne and Emily could spend days roleplaying their Gondal characters to help pass their time traveling (Moon 2020).

Such resonances and commonalities may need no academic training to identify, but they do require some familiarity with fanfiction as well as with these early Brontë texts.

And, despite the ubiquity of the Brontë juvenilia in defenses of fanfiction, these audiences do not always overlap (although, as I discuss in my conclusion, they do overlap more than many might think). Because fan studies and Brontë studies do not always overlap either, some sections of this essay will seem basic to one population or the other, so I have tried to label clearly to help readers find what they need. First, I give an overview of fan studies concerns about literary historical approaches to fanfiction, explaining why many scholars reject calling historical, literary, or commercially published texts fanfiction at all. Next, partly in response to some of these critiques, I take Francesca Coppa's popular and widely-disseminated definition of fanfiction and explain point by point the ways in which the Brontë siblings' early work qualifies as fanfiction by these well-known criteria. Sections that follow delve more deeply into the Brontë texts and contexts. Using archival material, I describe the workings of "the Brontë family fandom" in more detail, focusing especially on the texts' and siblings' relationships to literary, media, and material sources, to period publishing practices, and to each other. I explain what these relationships tell us about the famous siblings' understanding of authorship and how it changed and diverged. I consider what Charlotte, Emily, and Anne's later reception as authors can tell us about how literary historical trends and commercial publishing practices have shaped, and arguably deformed, our understanding of their work and Victorian authorship more broadly. By way of conclusion, I acknowledge a different sense of the phrase "Brontë family fandom" in the way my scholarly practice has overlapped with my own conflicted love of these writers—and close with an instance of contemporary fanfiction's active engagement with Angria and Gondal through beloved fanfiction writer AJ Hall's multivolume, multisource *Queen of Gondal* saga—which I also hereby recommend to any readers unfamiliar with contemporary fanfiction as both reference and initiation.

2. Fan Studies and Literary Studies

By training, I am a Victorianist and a comparatist, so comparing nineteenth-century texts to contemporary fanfiction is probably second nature to me. For better and worse, though, equally second nature is a somewhat polemical irony that led me to write things like "Shakespeare wrote fic for the Ur-Hamlet" in what turned out to be an influential book, and only several pages later to explain this was only partly true for a variety of literary historical reasons that turned out to be much less quotable. As many critics since have more earnestly and with much more scholarly precision explained, to say Shakespeare (for example) wrote fanfiction is not accurate given (for example) historically divergent conventions of authorship and conditions of literacy and material production. To such valid critiques, my first response has been, "yes, of course" and my second an essay about the term "fanfiction" in a transhistorical and literary theoretical context and why I still think there's a value in its "big tent" usage (Jamison 2018). I am not going to reproduce those arguments here, although much of what I say there would apply to the goings-on at Haworth parsonage.

I will say the following, however, about the broader argument that animates much of my ongoing work: Approaching fanfiction as a literary practice on a historical and procedural continuum with other literary undertakings should challenge our understanding of central categories—fanfiction, literature, media, authorship—without erasing them. At the same time, this mutual reinvestigation stands to illuminate the impacts of material, economic, and political influences on literary production whether amateur or commercial, all while restoring our active understanding of the diversity of authorship models that have coexisted in earlier eras as they do today. Considering literary history from the perspective of fanfiction highlights collaborative, heterogeneous, interactive, and derivative elements of authorship that the author-text taxonomies still dominant in publishing and scholarly discourses overlook or de-emphasize. Similarly, understanding certain fanfiction practices as longstanding elements of literary life potentially depathologizes a still disparaged and artificially excluded cultural form—and not just because special people called authors wrote fanfic. Rather, the fannish work they left, work that has been preserved in large part

because its writers were later recognized as authors, shows how the underlying practices and principles of what we now call fanfiction are, in historically and culturally distinct and contingent iterations, deeply ingrained in the history of reading and writing. I offer the present essay as an example, hopefully, of what might be gained in bridging the fan studies and literary studies divide to examine specific objects from both perspectives. However, since I considered critiques of this practice important enough to inspire a whole essay, I do not want to give them short shrift here and so will engage with several that came out after I would completed my work on that piece (Jamison 2018).

In understanding why hackles sometimes get raised when texts produced outside of contemporary fandom get called "fanfiction", it's important to understand not only that the definition of fanfiction is contentious, but that outside of fandom circles, the term is still most often used as a pejorative. That is, while referring to classic texts such as *The Inferno* and *Paradise Lost* as fanfiction is now commonplace, denigrating some cultural artifact or trend by calling it fanfiction remains more so. Even when there is clearly no derogatory intent, and even when the intent is defensive or laudatory, some fan studies scholars and fans argue against reading contemporary fan practice back into history or out into commercially published retellings or adaptations. If "it's all fanfiction", the designation collapses meaningful distinctions and elides historical conditions involving (for example) media, technology, and conceptions of intellectual property. Nor is it only the use of "fanfiction" in literary contexts that draws objections. Judith Fathallah, reviewing literary approaches to fanfiction in a whirlwind tour of disdain, takes issue with the rhetoric of literature per se and what she terms the "Modernist trap" of seeing texts as self-sufficient or divorced from social context (Fathallah 2017). To be clear, it has been a long time since Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* (Brooks and Warren 1938) and its strictures to read only "the text itself" held sway in literary studies scholarship, which has largely centered the social and historical for the past several decades at least. Similarly, "the author" has been soundly critiqued since structuralist Roland Barthes ("The Death of the Author") and semiotician Michel Foucault ("What is an Author?") published their influential essays in the 1960s. Jack Stillinger's 1991 *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* emphasized the multiple roles involved in textual creation and production, and since then, authorship studies has expanded to consider book history, material culture, and sociology as well as a far more culturally diverse frame of reference (Stillinger 1991). Despite all of this, however, the New Critical assumptions about textual autonomy and authorship that draw Fathallah's ire continue to be influential, especially in the classroom and the profession's organizational and indexical norms. Furthermore, Brooks and Warren were so dismissive of women writers and (relatedly) anything they understood as "sentiment" that it is not difficult to imagine what they would have thought about fanfiction. Given the continued latent influence of these outmoded ways of thinking, it's easy to see how reading literature from a fan studies perspective or vice versa can seem a condescending gesture of justification or legitimation, as if fanfiction is not itself sufficiently worthy of study on its own terms.

The process of reading fanfiction back into literary history also raises methodological concerns. As Cait Coker explains, while early studies of fanfiction tended to rely on ethnothgraphy rather than textual analysis, literary historical approaches to fan fiction are increasing but continue to face disciplinary challenges arising from "problems of definition (what 'is' fan fiction?) and genre (literature versus media)" and "prejudices of discipline arising from the conservative literary canon writ broadly and literary theory more beholden to 'the author' than to the circulation of the text" (Coker 2021) Similarly, while giving a "gentle push" directed at "English as a profession" to "embrace fandom as a legitimate area of inquiry", Alexandra Edwards recognizes the many pitfalls of such an undertaking, also citing "the tendency of literary scholarship to privilege the author as a singular figure". This continued centrality of the author (despite half a century of interventions) "obscures the varied ways that texts can be composed across networks" while "anachronisms, muddy timelines, and claims to historical specificity, and paternalistic attitudes toward women

readers" also raise concerns. Edwards cautions specifically against "the approach to fandom that sees it as a prop in the analysis of literary fame" and the anachronistic use of words such as 'fan' and 'fandom' in the analysis of early works (Edwards 2018). In outlining how scholars might better talk about "premodern fanfiction" ("premodern" in an academic context means roughly pre-1600), Anna Wilson insists that "we must first answer the question, 'What are the essential qualities of fan fiction, and which are transposable beyond its twentieth- and twenty-first century cultural contexts and can be applied to the literatures of other times and places?'" (Wilson 2021) Wilson too wants to get beyond what I call the "Virgil wrote fanfic" gesture (she calls it a cliché) to examine what such a proposition means and "what analyses it might generate", which, albeit for a different period, is also my goal here. Before that happens though, Wilson insists, fanfiction must be defined.

Does it? "Poetry" also has multiple contradictory definitions, but not every essay about a poem sees the need to define poetry as its first order of business. Does every discussion of fanfiction really need to make this critical gesture, by this point so ubiquitous it could itself be called a cliché? Thus far, apparently, yes. Fan studies is a relatively recent and interdisciplinary field that draws readers unfamiliar with many of its terms and objects of study. I have Victorianist colleagues who have never heard of fanfiction, much less read any. Then, too, like much in fandom, the definition of "fanfiction" (also known as "fanfic" or just "fic") is contentious. In common usage, as I've argued, the term emphasizes very different aspects of a phenomenon it nonetheless successfully designates (Jamison 2018). The definition Wilson offers is novel, precise and yet flexible enough to acknowledge this variability and contention within the term. Wilson proposes three axes corresponding to different understandings of fanfiction that would make sense for premodern texts: "poaching" (orientation towards textual authority, "poached" from Henry Jenkins); "transformation" (orientation towards the formal or literary); and "affect" (orientation towards, well, affect): that is, prioritizing the relationship of a given text to source, form, or feeling. I am echoing linguist Roman Jakobson's "orientation toward" phraseology from his influential "Linguistics and Poetics" (Jakobson 1960) in part because Wilson's "axes" recall the watershed in literary theory that Jakobson's metaphorical and metonymic "axes" in his 1956 paper "Two Aspects of Language" (Jakobson 2010) turned out to be. Indeed, Wilson's essay exhibits a near Structuralist insistence on consistent methodology, all while valorizing an entire field of inquiry, affect studies, that had little place in the approaches of this earlier generation of critics. Although Jakobson does identify an emotive function of language ("orientation toward the speaker"), it is the "orientation toward the message" as language and form rather than meaning or expression that he designates as "poetic" (1960). Wilson thus evokes a rigorously linguistic approach to literary studies and applies its rhetoric to include the affective elements it largely sidelined. While Wilson rejects the "Virgil wrote fanfic" gambit, she does understand its appeal: "Suggesting that august canonical authors like Dante wrote fan fiction may serve to puncture reverence for a literary canon that still dominates high school and university curricula; it could equally make an argument for fan fiction's place in that canon". Wilson's subtle evocation of Structuralism accomplishes something similar with relation to a still-influential critical canon. Old notions about the "squishiness" of feeling as a category of value and analysis persist despite the recent prominence of affect studies. In a later section, I discuss how the "enthusiasm" that characterized the Brontës' early work led it to be passed over when other of Charlotte's papers were being prepared for publication. When Wilson places affect on an equal "axis" with literary form, she also demonstrates how "fanfiction" approaches to literary studies can provide frameworks for including elements of literature that earlier critical methodologies excluded. To my mind, bridging the gap between literary history and fan studies through more focused and sustained analyses of, for example, fanfiction and Virgil (Basu 2016) fanfiction and Sydney (Simonova 2012), and fanfiction and Richardson (Havens 2019) demonstrate the value Wilson promises. The complexities and pitfalls of this rapprochement are worth navigating not least because failure to do so also comes

with costs. Again, despite the historical limitations of the term "fanfiction", failure to consider "fanficcish" elements of historical writing practices—such as the Brontë siblings imitating their favorite magazines, collectively developing favorite heroes into increasingly independent characters, infusing ongoing serialized stories with contemporary events—makes fanfiction seem weirder and literature more isolated, underscoring misleading prejudices about both.

3. The 5 + 1 of the Brontës' Angria Fanfic (or, Five Ways the Brontë Juvenilia Is Like Fanfiction and One Way It's Like a Different Kind of Fanfiction)

In this section, I purposefully make use of a popular, generalist definition of fanfiction—not one I've tailored to my topic here—to explain why I think the term is appropriate to the Angria sagas despite the anachronism. In *The Fanfiction Reader*, Francesca Coppa—who gestures towards Chaucer in the structure of her anthology but is largely concerned with contemporary texts—defines fanfiction by means of five criteria, plus one, playfully evoking the "5 + 1" fanfic genre, as she explains (Coppa 2017). These criteria are more or less (in the sense of some more, and some less) widely agreed upon, and the Brontë juvenilia meet them in a way that seems almost systematic.

One: "fanfiction is fiction created outside of a literary marketplace" (Coppa 2017) Check. The Brontës not only authored but hand-produced these texts for and with each other in ways that rendered them almost inaccessible to anyone else. As part of this first criterion, Coppa quotes fan studies pioneer Camille Bacon-Smith as stipulating that fanfiction was created for "'an insider audience trained to share in [fanfiction's] conventions" and generally stresses that work created outside the marketplace is free to do things that commercial work cannot. Charlotte internalized this principle so intensely she first abandoned and then repudiated her juvenilia entirely on her journey to commercial success.

Two: "fanfiction is work that rewrites or transforms other stories". Check, and the Brontës transformed not just stories by other people, but stories by each other (as contemporary fanfic also does, often by way of a remix challenge), and even by their own pseudonyms. Also, in working with their sources, it was not just stories that they were transforming, it was form and format (and sometimes, the physical source itself).

Three: "fanfiction is fiction that rewrites and transforms stories currently owned by others". Check. There's certainly a great deal of Byron and Scott in Angria, and probably Wordsworth in Gondal, as well as any number of books in the family library. The Brontës also go in a different direction with their sources, however, one that has only grown more prevalent in contemporary fandom: Real Person Fanfiction (RPF). The young Brontës base characters and their exploits on media accounts of the military celebrities their entire household followed with interest—the tin soldiers' conquest and subsequent colonization of Africa is thought to have been inspired by stories in *Blackwood's Magazine*, the source for so much of the juvenilia (Alexander 1994).

Four: "fanfiction is fiction written within and to the standards of a particular fannish community". Check. Howarth provides a community of like-minded writers and readers within which fan texts—the chronicles of Angria and Gondal—are created and shared. It continues to provide this community even when individual members are removed from the parsonage itself, as when the children attend school, or later teach it.

Five: "fanfiction is speculative about character rather than about the world". For this one, I would have to say, it depends on the fanfiction. The Brontës were speculative about both—but in the case of Angria, Charlotte, at least, is increasingly absorbed by character and romance, somewhat to her brother Branwell's distaste.

Plus One: Coppa's "+1" criterion, that "fanfiction is made for free, but not 'for nothing,'" highlights the relationship between amateur and commercial authorship that I discuss in a later section. My own "+1" here, however, is more caveat to Coppa's fifth criterion above and, by extension, a caveat about fan studies. In its approach to fanfiction, fan studies overwhelmingly centers Archive of Our Own (AO3), the fan-designed, fan-run, non-profit archive that Coppa co-founded. This also tends to be true of my own recent scholarship

and teaching.: like many of my colleagues, I find AO3's policies to be more transparent and its filtering and search features easier to use and teach as compared with other fanfiction sites and archives. However, as my students remind me every time I teach my fanfiction course, AO3 is not coextensive with fanfiction more broadly. Whole fanfiction communities and methodologies of writing that are primarily interested in things like plot, world, and, frankly, battles, may not always end up on Archive of Our Own because, in the opinion of some fanfic writers and readers with these interests, AO3 is "all shipping [romance] and sex". In some circles, the older archive Fanfiction.net is understood to be more hospitable to plot- and action-driven fanfic, whereas the site spacebattles.com tends to feature the kind of works its name suggests, as do many other smaller fandom-specific sites and message-boards. There's a perception, at least, that this plot/world/battle v. character/romance split is gendered, despite the many male-skewing fanfic authors who claim affective or therapeutic motivations for their writing and focus on character and/or romance or the many female-skewing authors who focus on world and plot. I bring this *perceived* split up here because a similar conflict arises in the Brontë family fandom. While the siblings all engaged enthusiastically in worldbuilding and political intrigue, Branwell was more taken with detailing battles, while Charlotte tended to use war more as a backdrop for character and romance. Not all fandom fractures follow this paradigm, of course: Emily and Anne eventually split off to create their own world which seemed more realistic to them and more mundane to their siblings.

With this partial caveat, Coppa's criteria for what constitutes fanfiction apply remarkably well across the many years and volumes of fiction set in the Glass Town, Angrian and, as far as we know, Gondal worlds (the Gondal prose texts were lost, though poems and references in journals remain). The application of these criteria also makes visible a key difference between considering the Brontës' amateur transformative works as fanfic and, say, works by Dante or Chaucer: the literary and media environment of the 1820s and 30s is much closer to the environment of the 1960s, when "fanfiction" (or "fan fiction") begins to be used in its present meaning, than to the 1310s or 1380s. In order for Coppa's first criterion to apply, for example, there needs to be a literary marketplace to be outside of, with the literacy rates and means of production and distribution that requires. This relative historical closeness to our own time would be less necessary for other criteria or other well-known definitions, such as Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson's "extensive, multi-authored works in process" (Busse 2017, p. 122). While all uses of the term "fan fiction" to refer to "work that rewrites or transforms other stories" written before the 1960s might be anachronistic, some are more anachronistic than others.

4. Angria and Gondal: The Sagas and Their Sources

4.1. The Brontës "Come to Fandom"

A ubiquitous element of fan studies and fandom narratives alike is the "coming to fandom" or "coming to fanfic" story, a pivotal moment in countless formal ethnographic studies and fan-authored critical writings known as "meta". All the fan writers I have invited to contribute essays or lectures in any forum over the years have wanted to include their own story of how they got their start in fanfiction. A strikingly similar impulse guides Charlotte Brontë's earliest account of her and her siblings' creative work. Charlotte's second earliest extant writing, dated 12 March 1829, introduces what she identifies as their major works: "our plays were established: Young Men, June 1826; Our Fellows, July 1827; The Islanders, December 1827. These are our major plays which are not secret". (Alexander and The Brontës 2010, p. 3) Although Charlotte at first suggests "their nature I need not write on paper, because I think I shall always remember them", she immediately goes on to describe them in more detail. The beginning of these "plays" is famously introduced as a momentous occasion: "Papa bought Branwell some soldiers at Leeds. When Papa came home it was night and we were in bed, so next morning Branwell came to our door with a box of soldiers. Emily and I jumped out of bed and I snatched up one and exclaimed, 'This is the Duke of Wellington! It shall be mine!'" (p. 3). Branwell also gives an origin story a

year later, in 1830, that differs in some respects as to the arrival of the various soldiers. But whenever their arrival, since that time, the Duke of Wellington and his various offspring and colleagues, some real and some more purely fictitious, would go on to populate the children's collectively imagined, enacted, and chronicled adventures, their islands, and eventually their cities and countries. The toy soldiers, furthermore, would double as initial audience, which determined the production scale (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The author's thumb next to an early edition of the Young Men's Magazine. Images are the author's photos taken with kind permission from The Bronte except as otherwise indicated.

Contemporary fanfiction is organized primarily by source, and this inspiration by a particular text or source (Star Trek or Sherlock Holmes, for example) tends to be what draws people to write and read fanfiction. The sentence "Charlotte wrote Duke of Wellington fanfic" indicates the Duke of Wellington as a primary inspiration for Charlotte, and in contemporary fandom, it would identify the story for readers who share that interest. The stories might also be called Military RPF (Real Person Fanfic) or, in keeping with this origin story, Toy Soldier fanfic, or Military RPF X Toy Soldier crossover fic, etc. In contemporary fandom, the source has largely supplanted the author's primary indexical role. However, just as the primacy of the author has oversimplified the many forces at play in textual production, the tendency to think of fanfic as being based only on one or two primary

sources oversimplifies a much more complex endeavor (an oversimplification the archive AO3's equally complex tagging system seeks to address). Just as early Sherlock Holmes stories sometimes mimicked elements of *The Strand Magazine*, or early Star Trek fandom took the form of encyclopedia entries, or today stories are told in the form of social media exchanges or even academic articles, the Brontës' rich media environment had an influence on their sagas equal or greater to that of the primary sources the famous journal entry initially claimed.

4.2. The Haworth Media Environment: Newspapers and Periodicals

If the Brontë juvenilia are to be considered as fan texts, fan writers will counsel that fan texts are best understood in the context of the source material. They are not for us (to the extent that we are non-fans); they are intended for the community that knows and understands their sources and should be judged and understood within that framework. However, despite clearly writing only for themselves (as, again, their painstakingly produced but near-illegible production format suggests), this small fandom was nonetheless eager to explain their contexts, histories, and procedures. In same early manuscript, Charlotte Brontë lays out a handy primer, minutely detailing the circumstances, media environment, and influences via which she and her siblings undertook collective authorship of their "plays". One of Charlotte's very first impulses in introducing herself as a writer is to describe the material site of reading and writing, including the material and textual inspirations, their origins and means of distribution to the household, and their place alongside other household activities. Those involved with the production of these materials are also known and introduced as actors with personalities—even before the advent of the inspiring toy soldiers was chronicled:

> Once Papa lent my sister Maria a book. It was an old geography and she wrote on its blank leaf, 'Papa lent me this book'. The book is an hundred and twenty years old. It is at this moment lying before me while I write this. I am in the kitchen of the parsonage house, Haworth. Tabby the servant is washing up after breakfast and Ann, my youngest sister (Maria was my eldest), is kneeling on a chair looking at some cakes which Tabby has been baking for us. Emily is in the parlour brushing it. Papa and Branwell are gone to Keighley. Aunt is up stairs in her room and I am sitting by the table writing this in the kitchin. Keighley is a small town four miles from here. Papa and Branwell are gone for the newspaper, the Leeds Intelligencer, a most excellent Tory news paper edited by Mr [Edwa]rd Wood [for] the proprietor Mr Hernaman. We take 2 and see three newspapers a week. We take the Leeds Intelligencer, party Tory, and the Leeds Mercury, Whig, edited by Mr Baines and his brother, son in law and his 2 sons, Edward and Talbot. We see the John Bull; it is a High Tory, very violent. Mr Driver lends us it, as likewise Blackwood's Magazine, the most able periodical there is. The editor is Mr Christopher North, an old man, 74 years of age. The 1st of April is his birthday. His company are Timothy Tickler, Morgan O'Doherty, Macrabin, Mordecai Mullion, Warrell, and James Hogg, a man of most extraordinary genius, a Scottish shepherd. Our plays were established: Young Men, June 1826; Our Fellows, July 1827; Islanders, December 1827. Those are our three great plays that are not kept secret. Emily's and my bed plays were established the 1st December 1827, the others March 1828. Bed plays mean secret plays. They are very nice ones. All our plays are very strange ones. (Alexander and The Brontës 2010, pp. 3–4)

For Charlotte Brontë, authorship begins with a book, with writing in a book, one that is passed down and remains part of the environment. In this case; the book has remained longer than its inscriber—their elder sibling Maria had died in 1825, her inscription surviving and continuing to keep its place in the writing and reading environment that was Haworth. If authorship begins with a book, however, that is not its only province. Writing happens in the kitchen with co-authors absorbed with various domestic tasks and others "gone" to procure more reading materials. Emily's journals similarly present the doings of

(for example) her father, her aunt in the kitchen, the Empresses of Gondal and Gaaldine, and Queen Victoria (whose coronation directly preceded similar events in Gondal), all on the same page and without any distinction among them (Barker 1995, p. 271). At Haworth, writing and reading are collective activities that exist alongside and on a continuum with other kinds of domestic work and domestic spaces, a parallel with contemporary fanfiction authors' notes detailing the conditions of work and family that may have interrupted or informed the fan text being disseminated.

In Charlotte's early manuscript, the people of Haworth and their doings are presented as being of a piece with media personalities and creators and *their* doings (or, in Emily's case, Queen Victoria's). At this point, the children *are* writing outside the literary marketplace, but they see it as part of their world and vice versa. It is not surprising that Charlotte's account of Haworth's media landscape leads seamlessly to her account of the siblings' own creators' origins. The *Leeds Intelligencer*, the "most excellent Tory newspaper" to which Charlotte gives prominent place, had directly established print media as a participatory space open to Brontës. A single issue of this newspaper—the January 29 edition, just a few months before this March 1829 manuscript—features letters to the editor by and about the children's father Patrick Brontë (Leeds Intelligencer 1829). A reader has written to challenge Patrick Brontë's previously published account of Catholic influence on early British Christianity, although the writer also defends Brontë as "a most upright, faithful, and conscientious priest" based on personal experience of his sermons and his parish. At issue is Brontë's claim, requoted in the letter, that 'the gospel light that first illumined the darkened minds of our forefathers emanated from the papal throne", to which the reader objects at lengths, citing various histories of Christianity in the British Isles in considerable detail. In "Mr. Brontë's Second Letter" (so entitled and printed alongside this response to his first), as an Irish native and member of the Church of England clergy, Patrick Brontë wants to set the record straight about his position in favor of the continued union of Church and State: "Should your invitation to answer me, have been duly attended to; have the goodness to place that answer and this letter in juxta-position . . . " The dispute's nationalist and anti-clerical underpinnings are hardly irrelevant to the Brontë siblings' future literary output: the attraction and repulsion of the Catholic Church is a central theme of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette.* More pertinent here, however, is the way this exchange presents media interactivity as an ordinary part of Haworth life: their home is a recognized cultural force; there's a clear precedent for family authorship, and print is a place for contestations among readers and writers. In this world, readers are part of the media they consume. Occupying multiple roles as writer, topic, and reader in a single text appears quite ordinary, of a piece with Maria's adding her name to the family geography.

The *Leeds Intelligencer* more broadly holds other lessons that the young authors seem to have internalized, among them that the Brontë family might comfortably share page space with "the discovery of the human skeleton at Wheatley, near Doncaster" and the account of the ensuing inquest; or, for that matter, with Thomas Love Peacock's "Touchandgo" (uncredited in the *Intelligencer*), a satirical verse inspired by "real life" rogue bankers that appeared under the boldface newspaper heading POETRY. This poem, first published in the *Globe and Traveler* (and credited only to the *Globe* in the Leeds paper), would ultimately go on to partially engender Peacock's 1831 novel *Crotchet Castle.* Though this fate could not be known to the Brontë children in 1829, they might well have recognized the character name "Touchandgo" in the later novel from this edition of a paper that so prominently featured their father. Regardless of their future awareness of this detail, the trajectory of the poem from newspaper to newspaper to novel underscores several pertinent features of the literary and media landscape the Brontë children grew up in and around. It exemplifies the heterogeneous and interactive authorial space that was this regional newspaper; the close relationship between high and low culture (Peacock had been a close friend of Percy Bysshe Shelley and other Romantics); and the porous relationship between and among poetry and prose, on the one hand, and fiction and "real persons", on the other. Peacock's poem was based on the banker Rowland Stephenson and his assistant, whose fraud and

theft led to the fall of a bank and whose escape to Savannah, Georgia, was by this point extremely well-known and had been much covered in the newspaper—thus the newspaper is both source and venue for poetry. Last but by no means least, the paper daily featured editors playing a large and active role in shaping newspapers and their contents, emerging as characters in their own right.

This single issue of a newspaper shows how the publications taken regularly at Haworth set the stage for the Brontë children's literary output specifically—even down to the lack of distinction in their journals among different kinds of information and contexts. It also demonstrates that the understanding of authorship and literary production they would have gained as regular readers of such papers was by no means peculiar to them. The *Leeds Intelligencer* and other papers like it should be recognized as highly interactive and multiply generative media that united many discourses and kinds of writing in a single space. When scholars such as Carol Bock and David Latané theorized "the birth of the Victorian author" from the Victorian periodical press archive, they did not evoke the *Intelligencer* specifically, but Bock did center her argument about authorship and the periodical press on the Brontës and their "coming-forward" as authors via their juvenilia's engagement with *Fraser's Magazine* (Bock 2001; Latané 1989). The *Intelligencer* also models an active and highly participatory readership. The paper was not a serialized affair, or course; it would be largely comprehensible to a visitor to the area who happened to pick up an issue. Yet, as a local paper, it is clearly aimed at a regular readership conversant in its environment and concerns. Such readers would be expected to check in and out and play catch-up if they missed some ongoing coverage of local issues and would furthermore be expected to pick and choose within a given edition in accordance with their interests, available time, access, etc. This "dip in/dip out" model of readership is far closer to the experience of reading fanfiction on the internet than that of reading even the most sprawling serialized nineteenth-century novel, where readers would need to follow along so as not to miss the thread of the story (although there are also many long, serialized fanfics that exceed this hypothetical sprawling three-decker novel in length).

The formats of the Brontë siblings' early self-publications respond not only to "audience" need (toy soldier-sized) but to this media environment. As producers as well as writers, the siblings modeled themselves and their books after beloved publications, taking on roles and invented personae to match the editorial and writerly personae they knew. Most famously, *Blackwoods' Magazine*, "the most able periodical there is", provided the format and source texts for many of the early Glass Town and Angrian texts (see Figures 2–5).

As it is for fanfiction writers today, the presence of an interactive media space as forum and model was a profound influence on the way the Brontës produced their sagas. In both eras, by allowing for a diversity of lengths, formats, modes, and focuses unavailable to the commercially published novel, these media spaces present an expanded and expansive field for fiction.

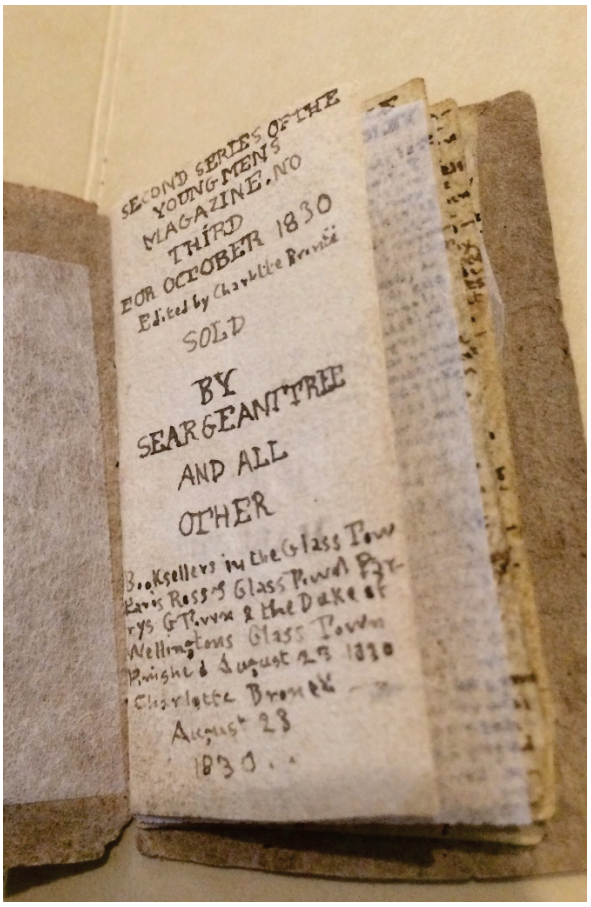


Figure 2. Title page of the October 1830 Young Men's Magazine pictured above.

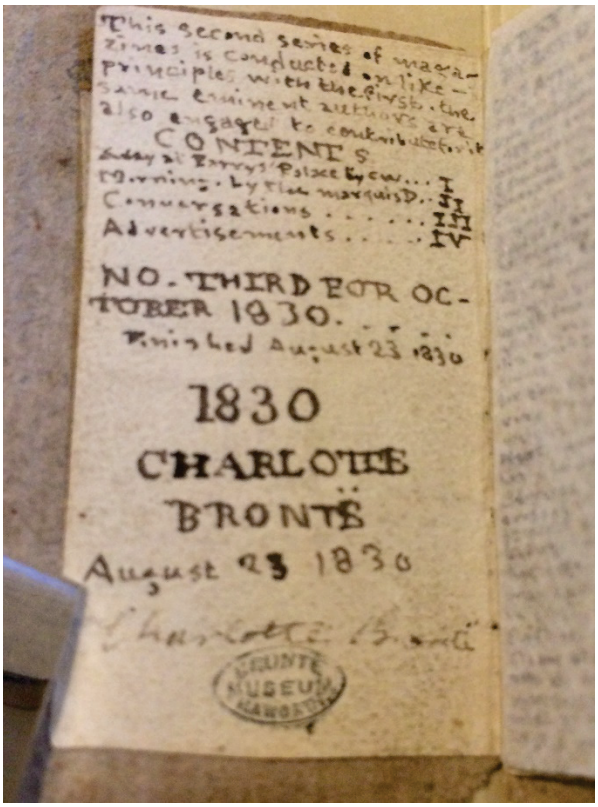
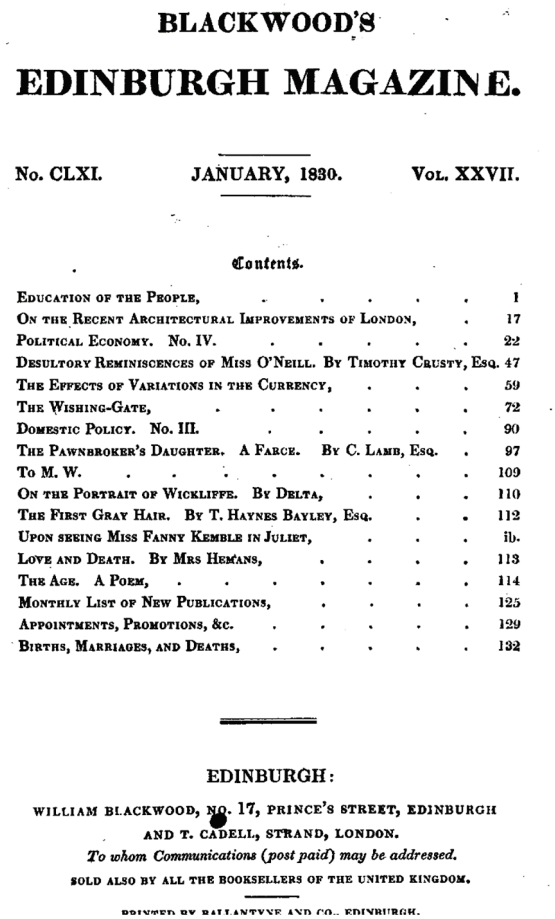


Figure 3. The table of contents of the October 1830 Young Men's Magazine.



BLACKWOOD'S

EDINBURGH MAGAZINE.

No. CLXI. JANUARY, 1830. Vol. XXVII.

Contents.

EDINBURGH:

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD, No. 17, PRINCE'S STREET, EDINBURGH
AND T. CADELL, STRAND, LONDON.
To whom Communications (post paid) may be addressed.
SOLD ALSO BY ALL THE BOOKSELLERS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM.

PRINTED BY BALLANTYNE AND CO., EDINBURGH.

Figure 4. *Blackwood's* Table of Contents. Available online: https://archive.org/details/sim_blackwoods-magazine_1830-01_27_161 (accessed on 18 August 2022). Public domain.

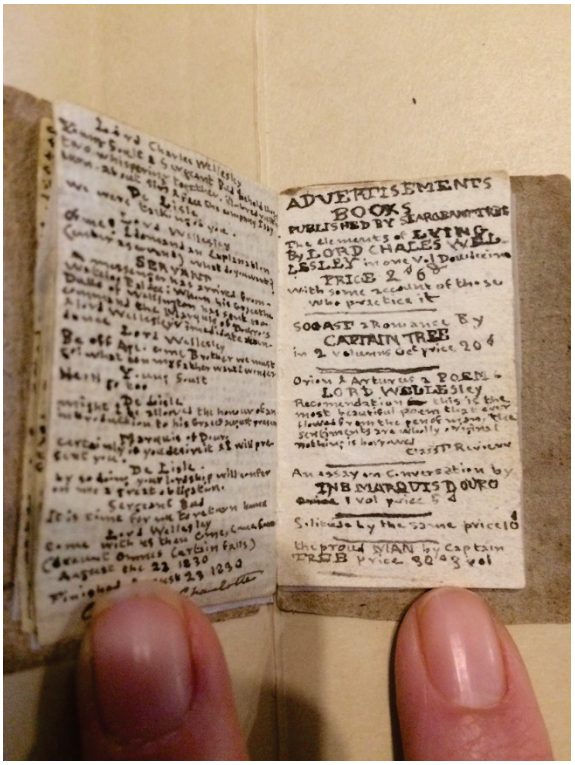


Figure 5. The Advertisements page of the Young Men's Magazine.

4.3. The Codex as Intergenerational Interactive Media

This interactive and familial relationship to media was hardly restricted to creating tiny new books or imitating journalistic media. The Brontë children were no passive consumers of books, either, a precedent Charlotte also establishes in her early description of Maria inscribing herself into the family geography. That the chronicle of the Brontë siblings' writing career begins by describing such an act is only appropriate—Emily will go on introduce her own later creation, Catherine Earnshaw—like poor Maria, already dead at the start of her story—by just such a device. We meet Catherine via the inscription of names, first on the wall of the eponymous house in *Wuthering Heights* marked "Catherine" and her various possible surnames, and then on a Bible: "It was a Testament, in lean type, and smelling dreadfully musty: a fly leaf bore the inscription 'Catherine Earnshaw, her book.'" The model of print books as interactive media was passed down to the children by the "one hundred and twenty year old" books in their schoolrooms, and this was far from unusual. Writing in family books was a common practice; readers, especially child readers, would be expected to leave their marks, as Pat Crain has discussed at length in her excellent *Reading Children* (Crain 2016). Andrew Stauffer's collaborative web archive Book Traces (n.d.) displays hundreds of digital images of such readerly traces left in nineteenth-century books. The notion of the codex as a one-way conduit to passive consumers is itself an anachronistic projection–first from the era in which books were common and paper was cheap and plentiful and then from the digital and internet eras by way of contrast to themselves. This misapprehension of the nature of books and their role in everyday lives sometimes leads scholars of the digital era to overestimate the passivity of the media environments that preceded their own. The Brontës suffered from no such delusions (see Figure 6).

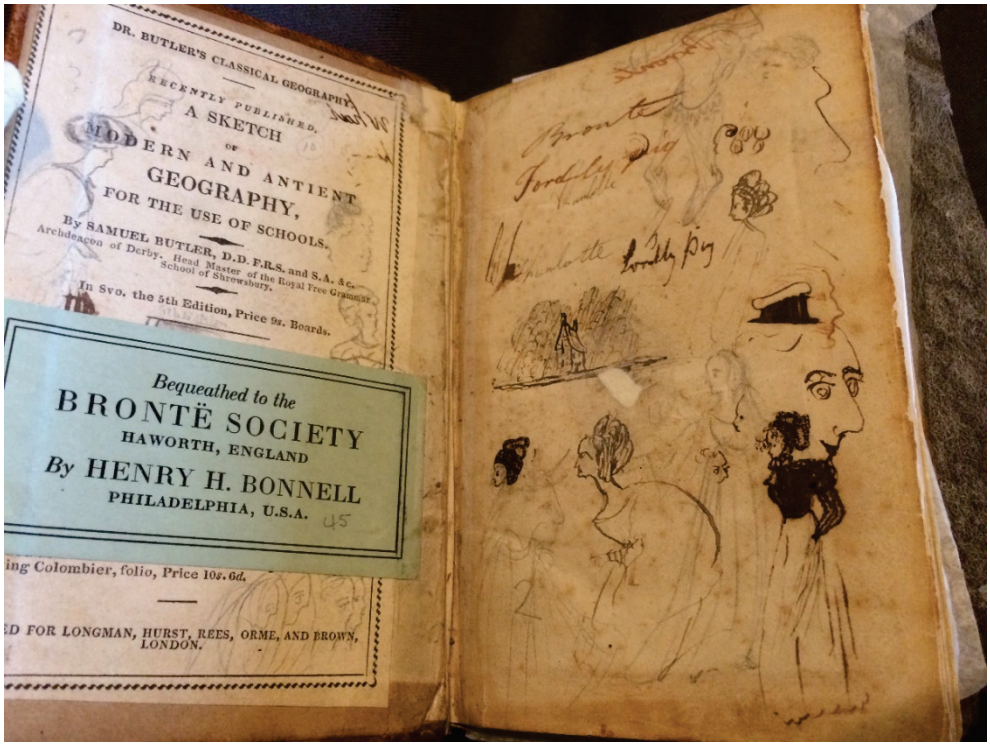


Figure 6. The Brontë family copy of Dr. Butler's *Classical Geography*.

4.3.1. Angria, Empire, and Geographies

The Brontë children learned by the example of the family library that books were for writing in, and thus grew up assuming any such real estate was to be considered as open to their contributions and authority. The Brontës appropriated and altered military history, geographies, maps, and their corresponding continents to the service of their imagination. This understanding of their world, media and otherwise, was clearly established by their

much loved and much altered geography book (albeit a more recent one than the one into which Maria inscribed herself).

It is well-known that Goldsmith's *Geography* provided the Brontë children with territory for their imaginations to run wild—in the margins and on the endpapers, and on a map of Africa (see Figures 7 and 8).

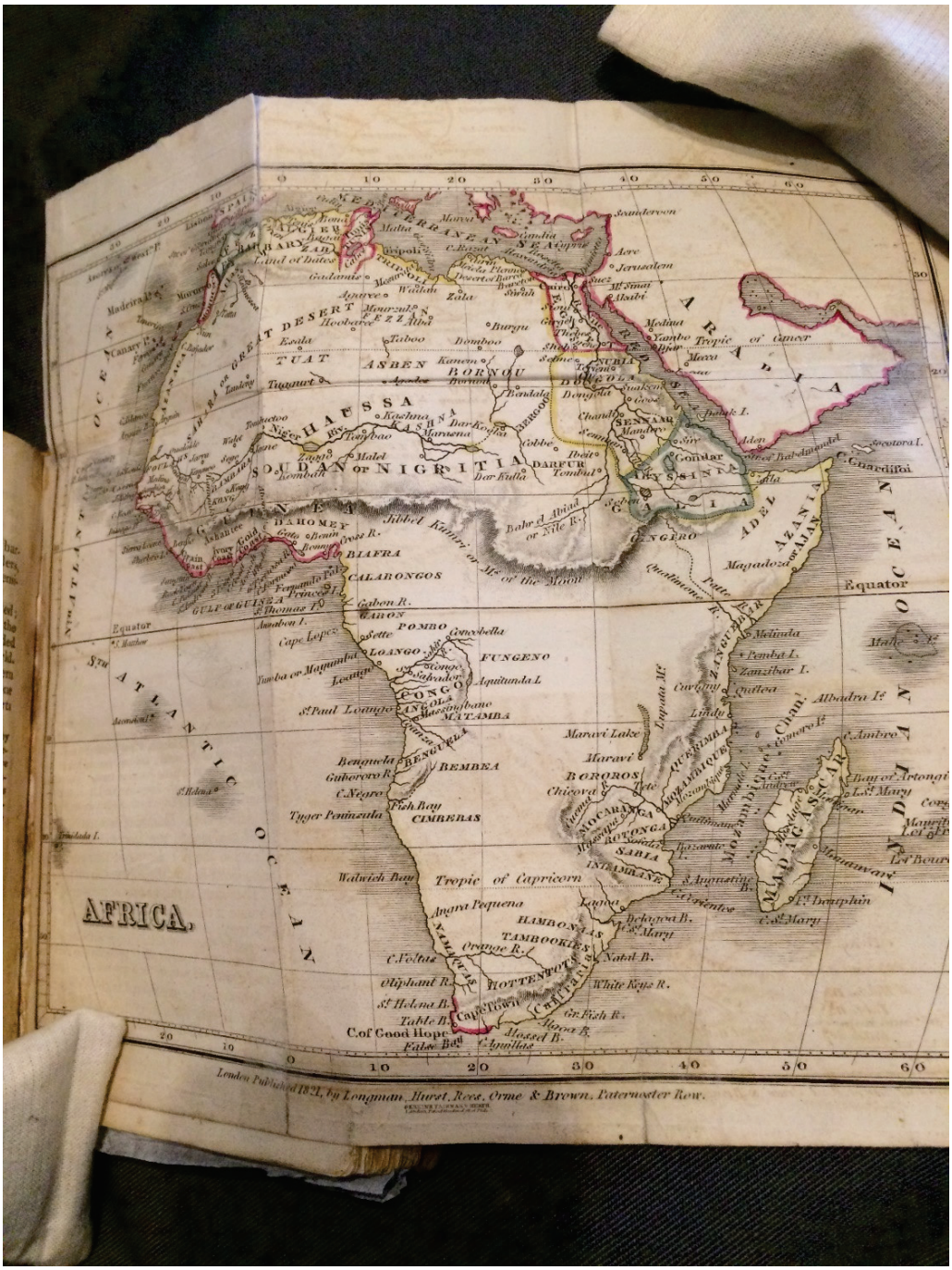


Figure 7. Map of Africa from the Brontë copy of Goldsmith's *Geography* (Rev. J. Goldsmith 1823).

Figure 8. Back of a foldout map of Europe from the Brontë copy of Goldsmith's *Geography*.

The texts' regulatory authority ended at the printed line—sometimes not even then, as Charlotte could be known to correct her grammar book and Emily added place names from her invented islands Gondal and Gaaldine (see Figure 9):

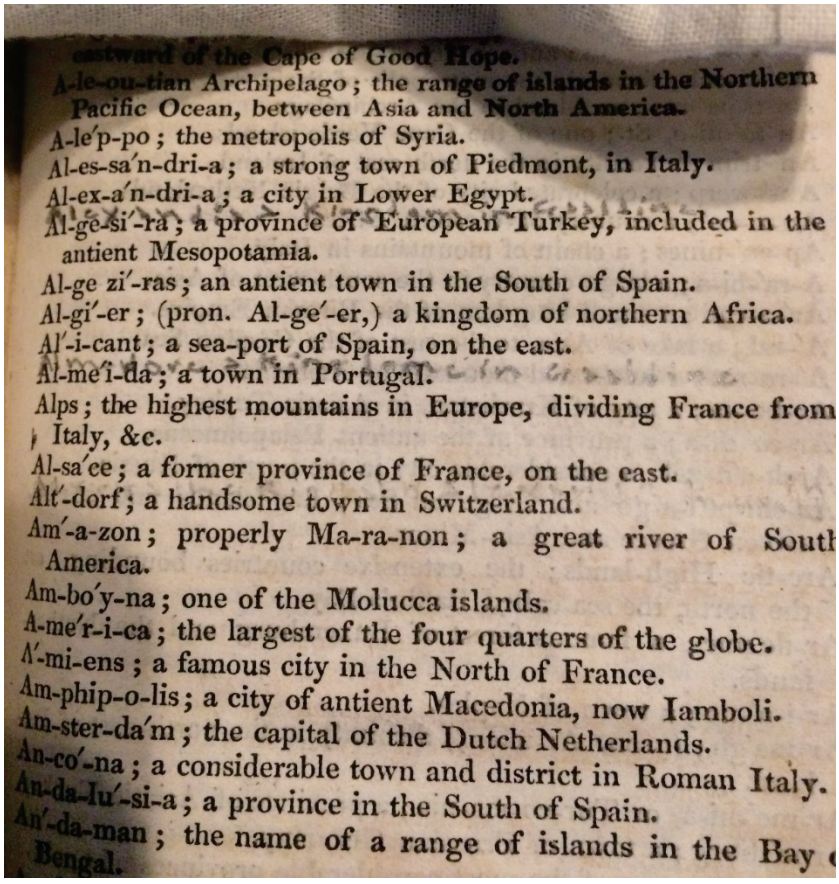

eastward of the Cape of Good Hope.
A-le-ou-tian Archipelago; the range of islands in the Northern Pacific Ocean, between Asia and North America.
A-le'p-po; the metropolis of Syria.
Al-es-sa'n-dri-a; a strong town of Piedmont, in Italy.
Al-ex-a'n-dri-a; a city in Lower Egypt.
Al-ge-si'-ra; a province of European Turkey, included in the antient Mesopotamia.
Al-ge zi'-ras; an antient town in the South of Spain.
Al-gi'-er; (pron. Al-ge'-er,) a kingdom of northern Africa.
Al'-i-cant; a sea-port of Spain, on the east.
Al-me'i-da; a town in Portugal.
Alps; the highest mountains in Europe, dividing France from Italy, &c.
Al-sa'ce; a former province of France, on the east.
Alt'-dorf; a handsome town in Switzerland.
Am'-a-zon; properly Ma-ra-non; a great river of South America.
Am-bo'y-na; one of the Molucca islands.
A-me'r-i-ca; the largest of the four quarters of the globe.
A'-mi-ens; a famous city in the North of France.
Am-phip-o-lis; a city of antient Macedonia, now Iamboli.
Am-ster-da'm; the capital of the Dutch Netherlands.
An-co'-na; a considerable town and district in Roman Italy.
An-da-lu'-si-a; a province in the South of Spain.
An'-da-man; the name of a range of islands in the Bay of Bengal.

Figure 9. Emily's additions on Gaaldine to the Goldsmith's *Geography* dictionary of proper names.

As Joetta Harty has shown in the context of a broader argument about childhood paracosms (detailed imagined worlds such as Angria and Gondal were not peculiar to the

Brontës), the Haworth geographies provide "striking evidence" of how period geography texts inspired children to world creation (Harty 2016, p. 99). Unfilled spaces on pages and maps alike were "blank" and could be filled with whatever the children chose, image or word, their imagination the only governing authority.

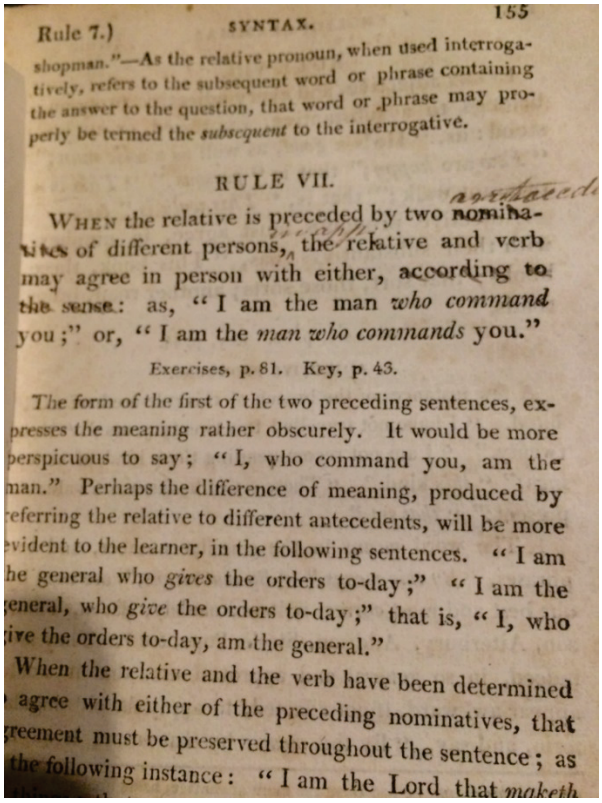
Of course, it is crucial to acknowledge that none of these were "blank books" in any sense, however much the children may have written in them. A more harmful influence and legacy is on display on these pages as well and shaped the way the Brontës imagined their colonial African country as decisively as any map. The Africa *Goldsmiths*' portrays is compelling and contradictory: it has been reduced to "barbarism" only by the "villainy" of slave traders, having previously been home to "several kingdoms and states eminent for arts and commerce". Its deserts, the textbook explains to the children of people who consider themselves to be an island race, are like "oceans", and its oases are like "islands". However, Africa is also, on the same page, "the country of monsters" and "predatory animals reigning undisturbed in the vast deserts of that continent", deserts that are then rendered by blank spaces on a map (Goldsmith 1823). By contrast, an older family geography presents the Irish, their father's heritage, as being "hardy" and "nimble", presumably, it explains, because of the "Moisture and Temperament of the Air" (Goldsmith and Goldsmith 1768). From their geographies, then, the Brontë children learned that the very air they breathed made them superior to Africans even as Africa was presented as a land of almost impossible imaginative potential. The invitation these books extended is apparent on their pages: Africa, map and imagined continent alike, were theirs to populate as they chose. It was at once a large blank space to be projected upon, a land of great kings and cultures laid low by Europe, and inherently barbarous, all at the same time. The nest of contradictions that is the Bronte siblings' adolescent and later young adult imagining of Glass Town and Angria bears direct relation to these much beloved and inhabited geographical textbooks. Along with their enthusiastic colonialism, the Bronte children imagined Africans who fought as respected foes and who, though vanquished by British military superiority (and the help of an island Genii, who much prefers the colonists), refuse to accept British rule and continue to rebel., One African character, Quashia Quamina, is given agency and voice, perhaps reflecting abolitionist texts and sympathies (Heywood 1989; Meyer 1996). As Zaina Ujayli points out, however, the African characters are never free of a mix of period Orientalist and anti-Black stereotypes, even at their most sympathetic, and the villainy of white characters is often portrayed in racialized terms (Ujayli 2020). Ujayli suggests that some of these contradictions may be reflections of the competing interests of Charlotte and Branwell, but they also reflect the conflicting ideologies of the time, as reflected in Goldsmith's self-contradicting account of Africa. Like so much fanfiction, the Brontës' Angrian tales reproduced the prejudices and systemic injustice encoded in their sources. An idealized account of fanfiction has it pushing back on institutionalized power structures, and it can, but it also, by its very nature, replicates these structures, sometimes inadvertently, but often enthusiastically. Both are certainly true of the Brontë texts.

4.3.2. Zamorna, Gender and Grammar

While these texts reproduce the political and racial dynamics of Empire—not entirely uncritically, but certainly not critically enough—these are not the only power dynamics that drive the sagas. Much of Charlotte's novelistic (or novella-istic) Angrian fiction focuses on the Byronically womanizing Zamorna and his adoring, pining, occasionally dying, and often indistinguishable lovers. In *The Spell,* Zamorna is taunted with having to bury his infant son in the arms of its mother, whom Zamorna had abandoned to pursue another woman, leaving his wife to die of a broken heart. Zamorna insists she knew he never stopped loving her despite his having left her for another; his interlocutor suggests he might find this wife equally attractive in her grave as he ever had in life. To be fair to Zamorna in this instance, the preface to the novella also identifies it as a spiteful embellishment written by his brother: "The Duke of Zamorna should not have excluded me, for the following pages have been the result of that exclusion! . . . here I fling him my revenge"

(Alexander and The Brontës 2010, p. 67). But then, part of the revenge is the mix of truth and fiction: "There are passages of truth here which will make him gnash his teeth with grating agony". In *Mina Laury*, the title character, we are told, "belonged to the Duke of Zamorna … She had but one idea, Zamorna, Zamorna! It had grown up with her, become part of her nature. Absence, coldness, total neglect for long periods together went for nothing. She could no more feel alienated from him than she could from herself" (Alexander and The Brontës 2010, p. 192). When she is assaulted by another man, Hartford, who with the cry "Nay, you shall not leave me, by heaven! I am stronger than you!" stops her from leaving and then "clasped her in his arms & kissed her furiously rather than fondly. Miss Laury did not struggle". (p. 196) He relents, and she ultimately explains she cannot marry him—not because he's just attacked her, but because her love for Zamorna is so great that even if she were to marry Hartford, at one look from Zamorna, she would "creep" back to his side "like a slave". Zamorna, hearing of this encounter, reacts badly if predictably: "What drivelling folly have you let into your head, sir, to dare to look at any thing that belonged to me? Frantic idiot!" (p. 204) Then, he calls for pistols and shoots his would-be rival. After this, Zamorna meets with Mina Laury and "offers" her Hartford as a husband. She is so horrified she faints and, after Zamorna has tested her faint to make sure it is genuine, when she wakes, he rewards her with the news that, after all, it was only a love test and he'd actually shot the attacker he'd just suggested she marry. She "shuddered", but, we are told, "so dark and profound are the mysteries of human nature" that "this bloody proof of her master's love brought her love more rapture than horror" (p. 216).

Charlotte was well-versed in Byron, as is fully obvious, but he was hardly the only source for such dynamics. Observe the grammar book that Charlotte corrected (see Figure 10).



Rule 7.) SYNTAX. 155

shopman."—As the relative pronoun, when used interrogatively, refers to the subsequent word or phrase containing the answer to the question, that word or phrase may properly be termed the *subsequent* to the interrogative.

RULE VII.

WHEN the relative is preceded by two nominatives of different persons, the relative and verb may agree in person with either, according to the sense: as, "I am the man *who command* you;" or, "I am the *man who commands* you."

Exercises, p. 81. Key, p. 43.

The form of the first of the two preceding sentences, expresses the meaning rather obscurely. It would be more perspicuous to say; "I, who command you, am the man." Perhaps the difference of meaning, produced by referring the relative to different antecedents, will be more evident to the learner, in the following sentences. "I am he general who *gives* the orders to-day;" "I am the general, who *give* the orders to-day;" that is, "I, who give the orders to-day, am the general."

When the relative and the verb have been determined agree with either of the preceding nominatives, that greement must be preserved throughout the sentence; as the following instance: "I am the Lord that *maketh*

Figure 10. *English Grammar* as annotated by Charlotte Brontë.

Charlotte corrects the grammar but leaves the examples umremarked: "I am the man who command you" or, "I am the man who commands you" or, "I, who command you, am the man". Perhaps so, the emendations seem to suggest, but Charlotte's is the hand who corrects *you!* Charlotte does not extend such power to her female characters like

Mina Laury; like many fanfiction writers, Charlotte talks back to her books *through the act of writing*, much more so than in what she represents. As Timothy Gao has argued, the omnipotent Genii are more than just figurative stand-ins for the young Brontës; they are an entire authorial mode, one that signals play and power both (Gao 2021). Throughout the juvenilia, Charlotte figures herself, again and again, *as* masculine authority, not in opposition to it. The Brontës' relationship to these instructional texts is an allegory of the book as interactive media, open to being inscribed and transformed but also inscribing ideology onto their participatory readers.

5. Angria Contra Publishing

The Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal sagas are not, of course, the Brontë siblings' only creative work. Charlotte published four novels; Anne two, Emily one, and the sisters also published a collection of poetry. Branwell's Angria works are the sum total of his fiction, and though he published poems in local and national newspapers, he published them under one of his Angrian pseudonyms, Northangerland. Although not all their published works met with success (the volume of poems sold only two copies), Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* and Emily's *Wuthering Heights* remain two of the most widely read and beloved novels. Charlotte, who outlived all her siblings, went on to become one of the most respected authors of her day. Anne, while outstripped by her sisters in fame then as now, has gained in popularity since feminist perspectives have highlighted her comparatively less compromising attitudes towards abusive men—perhaps most memorably in Kate Beaton's comic "Dude Watchin' with The Brontës", which the artist glosses as: "Anne why are you writing books about how alcoholic losers ruin people's lives? Do not you see that romanticizing douchey behavior is the proper literary convention in this family! *Honestly"* (Beaton n.d.). While they may now be collectively known as "The Brontës", the sisters are understood as separate authors with separate styles and identities, a separation which, as professional authors, they cultivated and insisted upon. Famously, Anne and Charlotte went to London to prove that the works of Currer, Acton, and Ellis Bell were written by separate persons (London 2019). Because of this success in publishing and their subsequent enduring fame, critical literature on the juvenilia has tended to understand the Angria and Gondal works as apprenticeship or practice for greater things. The later Charlotte, even later than the one who penned an essay known as "Farewell to Angria" as she embarked on her quest to become a published novelist, would likely be pleased to agree. While in "Farewell", Charlotte wrote that she needed to "quit for a time that burning clime where we have sojourned too long" because "the mind would cease from excitement & turn now to a cooler region", she still referred to herself as the author of "many books", by which she meant the Angria texts (Alexander and The Brontës 2010, p. 314). Later, however, she further distanced herself from Angria and contributed greatly to the myth of her own mystic, singular authorship (London 2019). Similar moves have been common among more contemporary writers who "got their start" in fanfiction and went on to repudiate or condescend to this earlier work as apprenticeship, often after having drawn heavily on it to launch their careers—much like Charlotte, whose stormy and coercive Mr. Rochester owes much to her earlier creation Zamorna. Charlotte, it should be noted, was the only one of the siblings who thought this repudiation necessary, and she went even further to construct her sister Emily's author-image, even to the extent of changing her poems, for the 1850 reissue of *Wuthering Heights* (Malfait and Demoor 2015). Emily continued to write in the Gondal universe after *Wuthering Heights* was published and stopped only with her death. For a time she kept separate notebooks for "Gondal poems" and for other verse, but a third notebook made no such distinction (Alexander and The Brontës 2010, p. xxviii). Fewer of Anne's poems exist, and only twenty-some are Gondal-related, but of these some were written as late as 1846. Christine Alexander argues that Anne kept more separation between Gondal and her life than did Emily, and that it was largely for Emily's sake that Anne kept the fantasy world alive—but that she did keep it alive is clear (Alexander and The Brontës 2010, p. XL). Branwell, for his part, neither quit Angria nor published other fiction. The youngest any of

the siblings left their collective creative enterprise was 23, and even by that time, Charlotte's Angria writings would already surpass in volume (though not size!) the entirety of her published novels.

The Web of Childhood, Fannie Elizabeth Ratchford's 1941 study of the Brontë juvenilia, contrasts the then already voluminous critical literature around the Brontës and their novels with the paucity of attention paid to the Angria and Gondal works. As Ratchford explains, Elizabeth Gaskell, the first and then still the most influential Brontë biographer, mentions receiving a "packet" containing some of these texts but largely left its contents undiscussed in her book. Clement Shorter, who purchased Charlotte's letters and papers—including the packet Gaskell mentioned—from her widower in 1894, published two volumes of her letters but "the [Angria] manuscripts as a whole he passed over as worthless", singling out only "A Tale in Ireland" as "'Perhaps the only juvenile fragment which is worth any-thing is also the only one in which she escapes from the Wellington enthusiasm'" (Ratchford 1941). Ratchford remarks somewhat drily that had Shorter read the material at any length, he would have known that Charlotte soon abandoned the Duke of Wellington for his son in their chronicles and suggests that in any case a "Byron enthusiasm" would be closer to the mark. As Ratchford acknowledges, it is not hard to discern at least one reason the juvenilia has received shorter shrift: "It would seem that neither Mrs. Gaskell nor Mr. Shorter was equal to the forbidding and apparently interminable task of reading in chronological order the hundreds of pages of microscopic hand printing which guarded the secret of Charlotte's childhood and early womanhood"—and in all fairness, it is a daunting task. From a fan studies perspective, though, Shorter's denigration of the manuscripts on the basis of "enthusiasm" and what would now be understood as fannishness, and the equation of value with the absence of such fannishness, strikes a familiar enough tone. Similarly, from a fanfiction writer perspective, a gatekeeping critic and editor who disdainfully dismisses an entire body of fannish writing as valueless without having read more than a small sample (if that) is likewise a familiar phenomenon—the kind that has traditionally led many fanfiction writers with professional ambitions to cover their fannish tracks. Shorter's dismissal of the Angria manuscripts as "juvenile" equally plays into the cultural denigration of the tastes and creations of young people, especially women.

Ratchford identifies one other likely factor for ignoring the manuscripts in favor of the letters: "Perhaps they found themselves unable to reconcile the contradictory revelations of letters and manuscripts and chose the more understandable one—the letters". In context, it is clear she means the more understandable *content* of the letters, but the same holds true at the generic level: letters are a recognizable and coherent genre in themselves, usually written by or perhaps to a single person. As a publishing category, collections of author letters were recognizable, acceptable, and marketable, tending to shore up the individual model of authorship even as they may include exchanges suggestive of collaboration. By contrast, whereas juvenilia have been understood to be youthful writings since the seventeenth century, the Brontë writings in particular challenge the notions of originality, individual authorship, and generic consistency on which the publishing industry has built its commercial and organizational models.

A fanfiction perspective provides a more generative approach to texts such as the Brontë's "juvenilia". Not that there is anything wrong with the term "juvenilia" per se, but it does suggest that the primary interest of the texts it references lies in insights about the more mature authors their writers would become. Juvenilia gains scholarly interest and literary credentials by authorial association. The Brontë siblings certainly came to know that what they were doing in their private writings was different from what the publishing world demanded of novels, although as I have argued, they had closely patterned their work on other contemporary models of authorship and publication. They transformed their work and praxis to become novelist authors—and Charlotte continued to transform it further after her siblings' deaths. While period reviews often responded to the Brontës' novels as "wild" and "untamed", the violence, sex, and politics in Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal make clear by comparison that this is far from the case. When these writers'

imaginations were beholden to no commercial interests or consistent generic conventions: no marriage plot; no gendered constraints on content; no public morals; no three volume format preferred by period publishers, they produced very different work than when they wrote for publication. Designed to be read by toys and to be illegible to almost everyone else, these sagas were created by the siblings for one another, sometimes by writing, sometimes by imaginative play or oral storytelling or illustration—an analogue transmedia extravaganza. Despite the vast quantity of the Angria material now available (for which we owe the tireless efforts of a handful of scholars and their patient eyes, most recently and extensively Christine Alexander), the writings remain largely inaccessible—if no longer illegible—to a readership for whom they were never intended: those who approach these heterogeneous texts through the lens of the singly authored published novels of their creators. If you are looking for "more like *Jane Eyre*", you are likely to be disappointed, because despite Angria being full of elements that look forward to *Jane Eyre,* the genre and conventions are entirely different. Like the historical referents of period newspapers and periodicals with their open acknowledgement of interruptions, discontinuities, strong-willed editors and multiple pseudonyms, fanfiction provides a different context and tradition for the reading and understanding of such fictions.

6. The Brontë Family Fandom Fandom

I am not only interested in thinking about the Brontës as fanfiction because I am invested in the theoretical questions such investigations can illuminate. In this paper, when I look at the young Brontës as a family fandom, I do so partly because I have been fascinated by Brontës since I faked sick in eighth grade to finish *Jane Eyre*. As a critic and reader, I am invested in finding new ways of approaching their work. When this essay examines the writing environment of Haworth parsonage as a complex exchange between different kinds of materials and activities, my perspective is informed by a number of interests, intellectual and affective, that were strong influences earlier in my writing process (like the Brontës' toy soldiers) but ended up being less central. An earlier draft had me working through assemblage theory as derived from the works by Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Bruno Latour, as I have discussed elsewhere with regard to fanworks. My thinking has also been influenced by Louisa Stein and Kristina Busse's account of how fanfiction authors "thrive on limitations of technological interface, genre, cultural intertext, and community" (Busse 2017, p. 121). Although I have at times been unsure how this distinguishes fic writers from other authors, my sojourn with the Brontës has me thinking that perhaps it is the thriving that sets them apart—although "thriving" is not a term often associated with the family, it seems to apply to their lives in writing and imagining Angria and Gondal. My argument here also has less traditional scholarly influences. It is shaped by what the curators of Haworth Parsonage have collected and exhibited: the museum makes its own case for the Parsonage's material influence on its author denizens. These exhibits were designed based on what is in the tiny manuscripts, letters, diaries, and other material objects they display and are certainly scholarly, but they also feel fannish—the museum's enthusiasm for its objects is palpable, filled with invitations to imagine beloved writers penning beloved texts within its walls for the predecessors of the toy soldiers displayed on a children's bed. This essay is also conditioned by my own complex love of the Brontës and the frisson of seeing the physical books they read and wrote in. I do not think that my enthusiasm for the Brotnes' tiny books, my distress at their textbooks' portrayal of Africa, or my perpetually irritated admiration for Charlotte, are incompatible with my scholarship. That the fannish and the scholarly need not be opposing categories is one of the founding principles of fan studies. And yet, early writers in the field nonetheless insisted that "acafans" be "fans first" as scholars were called upon to prioritize the fannish over the academic, affective attachment over adherence to disciplines founded on dispassionate analysis. While understandable, this insistence also underscored and reinscribed the very division the young field sought to bridge—one that amateur Brontë scholars and enthusiasts have been bridging for the better part of two centuries.

"The Brontë family fandom" might just as easily refer to the generations of fans and their collections, essays, blogs, adaptations, fanfiction, merchandise, societies, and pilgrimages like mine. Haworth Parsonage today is a fannish space—and, as I argue here, it always was. The Brontë children may not have understood themselves as writers of fanfiction, but they did understand themselves as an active community of readers, writers, and participants bound by shared and sometimes competing enthusiasms, engaged in a kind of serious play. They are hyper-aware of their surrounding media environment and model their tiny writing on its diverse elements. They were characters, writers, editors, printers, binders, and audiences for their work (not to mention omnipotent Genii). They intertwined real life and fantasy, real politics and invented; they satirized and contested with their sources and with one another. Call it what you will, this is, fundamentally, what fanfiction does.

And, two centuries later, this is still what is happening in the worlds they created, which have enjoyed a livelier existence in transformative works than in critical reception. In Antonia Forest's 1961 *Peter's Room,* other fictional children make up stories based on Angria and Gondal after having been assigned them in a school project and also spend several chapters arguing about whether the created worlds that absorb them were a triumph or a waste of time for their authors. Forest's engagement with these worlds in turn inspire another, far more extensive fictional treatment. Beloved fanfiction writer A. J. Hall, whose *Sherlock* fanfic I discussed in *Fic* and have taught for years, wrote a multivolume Queen of Gondal series for over ten years, matching her Brontë sources in convolutions, interruptions, intrigue, and complexity. Sources come and go (*Cabin Pressure*? *Life on Mars*? *Pride and Prejudice*?); minor characters show up as the center of a shorter story, disappear for many volumes, resurface back in the margins or not at all. Sherlock is a Crown Prince; Gondal and Gaaldine are in the Balkans; it is the late seventeenth century, as many well-researched details attest and a number of plot elements belie. As the author's note to a "genre fusion: Murder in Ruritania" advises, "in a choice between genre conventions and naturalism, genre conventions win hands down" and, this being Sherlock fanfiction, one of these genre conventions is that Sherlock and John are extremely gay for each other (Hall 2011–2012). The stories are available on the AO3 platform but also as carefully designed downloadable ebooks on the author's website. Many of the stories were written as gifts for other writers. Another writer contributed an epistolary chapter in verse, inspired directly by one of Emily Brontë's poems. The author website describes the saga as "a quasi-historical AU of the BBC Sherlock series set (more or less) in three fantasy kingdoms devised by the Brontë children" about a "supremely dysfunctional bunch of royals and their friends, enemies, lovers, haters and associates, set in the late seventeenth century in three fictional countries located in the Balkans but with weather, geography, geopolitics and culture arranged to suit the whims of plot and atmosphere" (Hall n.d.). The AO3 series note, in keeping with conventions of the site culture, includes some warnings and more specific information about genre and ethnicity:

> . . . readers should bear in mind that this saga contains the doings of a set of supremely dysfunctional more-or-less European Royal families steeped in the "divine right of kings" ideology of monarchy, filtered through an early nineteenth century Romantic/Gothick sensibility and then depicted using the freedom of expression afforded by the early twenty-first century internet.
>
> Furthermore, if the Greek myths contemplated it, some member of the Royal houses of Gondal, Angria or Gaaldine has probably put it into practice somewhere.
>
> Gentle reader, consider yourself advised accordingly. (Hall n.d.)

I, of course, am delighted. Nothing pleases me more than when fanfiction does my work for me. I wanted to argue that Angria, Gondal, and Gaaldine are fanfiction, and here they are.

7. Materials and Methods

Some of the materials referenced in this essay are archived at the Brontë Parsonage library and are available only by application and appointment. Images are the author's photos taken with kind permission from The Bronte Society.

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Article

Danmei and/as Fanfiction: Translations, Variations, and the Digital Semiosphere

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Abstract: Since the late 1990s, Chinese internet publishing has seen a surge in literary production in terms of danmei, which are webnovels that share many of the features of Anglophone fanfiction. Thanks in part to recent live-action adaptations, there has been an influx of new Western and Chinese diaspora readers of danmei. Juxtaposing these bodies of literature in English in particular enables us to examine the complexities of how danmei are newly circulating in the Anglophone world and have become available themselves for transformative work, as readers also write fanfiction based on danmei. This paper offers a comparative reading of the following three such texts, which explore trauma recovery through the arc of romance: *Tianya Ke*, a danmei novel by Priest; *Notebook No. 6* by magdaliny, a novella-length piece of fanfiction based on Marvel characters; and orange_crushed's *Strays*, a fanfiction based on the live-action drama that was, in turn, based on *Tianya Ke*. The space described by Lotman's semiosphere offers an additional model in which these texts reflect on one another; furthermore, along the porous digital border between fanfiction, danmei in translation, and fan novels based on danmei, readers and writers negotiate and vex contemporary culture.

Keywords: danmei; fanfiction; Chinese internet literature; webnovels; translation; comparative literature; fandom studies

1. Introduction

Since 1998, Chinese internet publishing has seen a surge in literary production in terms of danmei, male/male romantic webnovels, which first came to the mainland from Japan via Taiwan (Feng 2009, 2013; Yang and Xu 2016; Xu and Yang 2022). Danmei and fanfiction share many features, such as the following: primarily female-authored and read by female fans (Liu 2017), they are pseudonymous texts that are serially published, center queer romance and issues of queer sexuality, arise within a frequently non-professional community of writers, and rely on internet platforms to give underrepresented writers a voice. In China, these novels generally fit into already popular tropes, such as science fiction "revolution plus love" narratives (Ni 2018), police procedural, urban fantasy, wuxia, or xianxia. Since the pornography crackdown of 2014, followed by additional restrictions in 2021, their legal status remains murky at best, and more than one danmei author has been arrested and imprisoned (Yang and Xu 2016; mercyandmagic 2021). Despite this, as of 2019, the popular danmei site, Jinjiang Literature City (jjwxc.net), had 12.8 million registered users and 1.6 million contracted writers, and the website has published 29 million titles (Wu 2019). While not all, or even most, webnovels on JJWXC are danmei, they are frequently among the most popular VIP webnovels purchased and read, and Priest (whose work is the topic of this paper) is the top romance author on the site, authoring both heterosexual and queer romances.

In 2018, the danmei fandom began to gain popularity in the West thanks to a handful of popular critically well-regarded dangai, or live-action adaptations. Thanks to these series, there has been an influx of new Western and Chinese diaspora readers of danmei, mostly relying on translations, which are typically unofficial and created by fans. The first

highly successful adaptation was 2018's *Zhen Hun* or *Guardian*, based on a 2012 urban-fantasy danmei of the same title by Priest; followed by 2019's *Chen Qing Ling* or *The Untamed*, based on the 2015–2016 xianxia novel *Modao Zushi* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (MXTX); and, most recently, 2021's *Shen He Ling* or *Word of Honor*, based on Priest's (2010–2011) wuxia novel *Tianya Ke* or *Faraway Wanderers*. The breakthrough popularity of these three television dramas, internationally as well as in China, has brought attention and readership to the danmei on which they were based, and many Western and diaspora fans who may previously have only read Anglophone fanfiction[1] now find themselves navigating and negotiating a new subject position with regard to Chinese media, often acquiring cultural competencies in pursuit of this interest.

Juxtaposing these bodies of literature in English enables us to examine the complexities of how danmei are newly circulating in the Anglophone world and have become available themselves for transformative work, as international and Western fans in turn write fanfiction based on Chinese-language danmei. While both fanfiction and danmei are romances, that is not all they are. Their literary complexity and themes lend themselves to subtle analyses of psychology and power. Of particular interest are the ways in which danmei and fanfiction collect and encode important information not only about women's writing and queer literature, but how reader–writers negotiate and vex contemporary culture and politics in their telling and retelling of trauma narratives, transposing or translating the body of the (usually female) reader–writers onto the male character in a transformative act of appliqué.

With trauma as a common and crucial theme underlying fanfiction, Lucy Baker and I have argued elsewhere that fanfiction offers uniquely intimate literary examples of personal writing, and, in the case of "trauma texts"—autobiographical works that combine life writing and memoir with the political, social, and emotional context of the trauma—that use the extant canon to draw on personal experience and political contexts of media. The form of fanfic provides a unique space for literary exploration of trauma, including what Whitlock and Douglas (2015) call "the ethics of testimony and witnessing, the commodification of traumatic story, and politics of recognition." (Baker and Lowe 2020).

Both Western and Eastern media are rife with traumatized male characters, incapable of speaking to their suffering in canon, who are capably adopted by the writers who volunteer to tell their stories. Whitlock and Douglas also consider "the question of who gets to speak/write/inscribe autobiographically and how and where and why". For marginalized writers in imperialist and/or autocratic societies, in spite of whatever putative social advances they have been reassured, they may prefer to craft and share life writing using the veneer of telling another's story. The authors' own sublimated accounts of the rebelliously queer, disabled, or female body may be rendered as transformative works of fanfiction and/or danmei, saturated with tropes as reader–writers extroject themselves into relevant characters, figures able to manifest and display, hold, and contain, traumatic significance.

This paper considers the following three such narratives: *Tianya Ke*, a wuxia novel by Priest in which two martial artists with blood-soaked pasts must fight to see if they can now live in peace; *Notebook No. 6* by magdaliny, a novella-length investigation of political violence, trauma recovery, and the rebelliously queer disabled body, based on Marvel characters; and orange_crushed's *Strays*, a fanfiction based on Priest's characters from the 2021 live-action drama. These texts were selected because there has been little to no work in English on *Tianya Ke*, and because the two representative pieces of fanfiction particularly illuminate the work created by transformative writing speaking as trauma text.

Along the porous digital border between fanfiction novels, danmei in translation, and fan novels based on those danmei, how can we locate the reader–writer, so often the same person, to shed light on her process and solutions? As a researcher whose previous work has focused on Anglophone fanfiction, I came to this task with many fewer cultural competencies than I could have wished, and appreciate the reader's patience with this cross-cultural attempt, given the complexities of the genre and literary history. In conducting

such research, it seems to me that the received notions of subject and other become rapidly shifting novel targets amidst the upheaval of discursive positions. To recontextualize these so that anything useful or universal may be said about the reader–writer, it becomes necessary to read cross-cultural texts very closely.

It is unfortunately beyond the intention and purview of this paper to go very deeply into the historical and sociological contexts of BL culture and its gradual spread throughout Asia. However, of particular importance to note is the recent collection *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*, which offers a chapter specifically dealing with the cross-fertilization of Chinese danmei and Anglophone fanfiction (Xu and Yang 2022). The authors argue that "the danmei genre itself has functioned as a productive contact zone in which BL and slash [fanfiction] interact, as Chinese fans have appropriated useful elements from both genres" (Xu and Yang 2022). They go on to observe that "BL and slash [fanfiction] are generally assumed to have developed independently of each other in the 1970s, and thus far there has been very little comparative research of the two genres. . .[though] a 'world system' of women-oriented male homoerotic narratives seems to be emerging." This paper hopes to augment such comparative research with a study in the form of close reading.

While examining these three pieces specifically as trauma texts, the space described by Yuri Lotman's semiosphere may offer an additional model via which they reflect on one another. Lotman suggests that mutual untranslatability yields a valuable parsing of reality. The author creates ostensive characters, and the readers consume those characters—but what is being described, really, and for whom? One potential way to fix this point in space may be triangulating using precisely such a set of collocated texts: Sinophone, Anglophone, and those derived from both. Given the way such texts circulate and cross-pollinate digitally and transculturally, their juxtaposition may suggest points of rhyming and overlap.

2. Mapping the Jianghu

Originally published in China in 2010, *Tianya Ke* has had a recent spate of new readers, in spite of the fact that the novel has been removed from Jinjiang Literature City (as have most novels by Priest, possibly to have troublesome homosexual content edited out of them), and that its existing fan translations into English are multiple, uneven in quality, and not easy to locate or stitch together to make a complete, easily readable version.

A danmei novel in the wuxia style, *Tianya Ke*, is both an exemplar of these received, culturally embedded forms with their own tropes and historicity, and pushes against them. The story is told from the point of view of Zhou Zishu, founder and head of a spy organization called Tian Chuang (Heaven's Window, literally Skylight). After years of serving the emperor, Zhou Zishu becomes disgusted by court politics and the horrific deeds that he himself has carried out (told in a previous novel by Priest, *Qi Ye* or *Lord Seventh*, in which Zhou Zishu is a memorable minor character). To escape Tian Chuang, he elects a slow form of suicide variously translated as the Seven Nails, the Nails of Seven Orifices, or, more poetically, the Nails of Seven Apertures for Three Autumns, which will leave him with only three years to live, with his martial powers much reduced. Disguised as a beggar, he sets off to travel the jianghu, or martial world, with whatever time he has remaining.

Given the importance of the jianghu to the wuxia genre, it seems worthwhile to examine it more closely. The jianghu (whose characters literally mean "rivers and lakes") into which Zhou Zishu attempts to disappear is an unstable site familiar to both readers of classical Chinese literature and viewers of John Woo films, with a long cultural history. It is at once analogous to the medieval realm of knights' errantry, the Wild West, and gangster/Mafia narratives, and is also exactly like none of these—the jianghu is an actual cultural space in contemporary China, as well as an historical and metaphorical literary realm that is "both a fantasy fueled by the popular media and a social reality for the marginalized working-class men" (Cao 2012). Priest describes the jianghu with characteristic evasiveness as follows: "ambiguity was one of its staples. If the royal court was a battleground for fame and power, jianghu was a battleground between white and

black. Though some were unable to understand this, and took the title of a wandering hero too seriously even until they died." (Chapter 3; all subsequent references will refer to chapters by number.)

Filmmaker Jia Zhangke notes that rivers and lakes "implies an ocean of people. . .a visual picture of individual members being dissolved into and devoured by this *jianghu* world"(Chen et al. 2019) He continues as follows:

> "The *jianghu* subculture is a core value deeply rooted in Chinese culture, usually emerging when a society or community or country undergoes dramatic transformations, or when the social environment is riddled with crises. . .The *jianghu* subculture is. . .provides from the margins of society a distinctive perspective with which to examine and challenge the orthodox culture. [. . .] These people also experience intense emotions, often raw and visceral, whether among brothers, friends, or between lovers. In addition, people in *jianghu* also navigate a gray area of society and live, paradoxically, by using illicit or illegal means to defend justice, morals, or values."

In *Stateless Subjects*, Liu takes the concept of the jianghu as "an approximate equivalent for 'statelessness'. . .a public sphere unconnected to the sovereign power of the state." In reviewing Liu, Altenburger notes that "previous discussions of the notion of jianghu. . .tended to read it as an alternative, even otherworldly, sphere at the periphery of human society."(Altenburger 2012) These descriptions also highlight the jianghu's blurrily liminal state of existence, a coalescent quality that lends it perhaps most closely of all to comparison with the chivalric Arthurian realm, particularly those narratives (e.g., Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain*) that thrust the knight-errant out of cities and castles and into the forests of the possible, where he must roam unshaven and insane, without salt or bread, until he has recovered from his initial ostracizing narcissistic injury.

Zhou Zishu's injury is, by contrast, self-inflicted; moreover, he has embodied his trauma and his guilt and made them visible and literal by penetrating himself with the Seven Nails. This punishment seems a worthwhile exchange for him to be liberated from Tian Chuang, even at the cost of the martial arts abilities that define him. He appears pleased to receive the final nail, which we have already seen incapacitate one of his subordinates, a man hauled away, unable to stand on his own, as shown in the following excerpt: "He looked like he had come across the funniest tale, sickly pale complexion flushing faintly. With great delight, he turned to Duan Pengju, putting the nails into the latter's palms, 'Do it.' . . .Even [his] groans seemed to contain joy. [. . .] He walked out of the study, all the baggage over the years now light as feather. His silhouette seemed to flash for a moment, and he vanished without a trace" (1).

In addition to his all-but-undefeatable gongfu or quingong (as it is left untranslated in the text), Zhou Zishu's other defining feature is his spycraft, especially his ability to vanish in a crowd, hiding in plain sight. Priest tells us that he "was like a drop of water in a big ocean; the moment one lost sight of him, his existence would be impossible to be detected" (25). Zhou Zishu's absorption into the jianghu is his apotheosis as the consummate spy; furthermore, he is nameless, faceless, unknown, able to mingle in this current of anonymity and dissolve his boundaries, so troubling and troublesome, in the rivers and lakes, peaceably drinking himself to death.

While drinking and basking in the sun, however, he encounters Wen Kexing, who seems to be no more than an annoying dandy, as shown in the following excerpt: "Wen Kexing disguised himself too well; many times, even Zhou Zishu would mistake him for just an ordinary, talkative man" (46). From its gothic first chapters, *Tianya Ke* settles into a meandering narrative of life on the road, with adventures and fight scenes sprinkled through with Wen Kexing's overbearing attempts at seduction and Zhou Zishu's withering replies.

It is only gradually revealed that Wen Kexing is the ruthless master of Ghost Valley—once entered, no one can leave, not unlike the Window of Heaven. Ghost Valley's inhabitants are "a swarm of the wickedest venomous insects that had been sealed in a narrow, cramped container, where massacring one another was the only way to keep surviving.

[. . .] There were no morals, and no axioms; there was only the survival of the fittest" (46). As a collection of society's castoffs, too lawless to fit in elsewhere, Ghost Valley contrasts with the rigid-mannered hierarchy of the imperial court and its arm Tian Chuang.

Wen Kexing has chosen camouflage. He hides his trauma and his ruthless Ghost Valley identity beneath a smile, but his eyes are described as being almost reptilian, inhuman in their flatness, and his qi is so powerful he can make air slice like a sword with his bare hands. Immediately drawn to Zhou Zishu, despite his unattractive beggarly disguise, Wen Kexing essentially stalks him, even though Zhou Zishu tells him repeatedly (and unconvincingly) how irritating he finds this devotion, a not-uncommon trope in danmei. Thanks to their proximity, they become caught up together in a violent conflict that threatens to involve the entire jianghu.

One of the many pleasures of *Tianya Ke* is the realization that Zhou Zishu is a profoundly unreliable narrator, and nothing that he says can be taken at face value, which makes sense for a man of veils and masks, a poisoner, assassin, and wearer of disguises. In *Qi Ye*, he was mostly notable for, in addition to various heinous murders, his invisibility. However, to Wen Kexing, Zhou Zishu is preeminently visible, even when he protests that he would prefer to be left alone. His objections ring hollow, as he does nothing to get rid of him, as shown in the following excerpt:

> "*Even if I refuse, this person will tail me around anyway*, Zhou Zishu thought, *and if I agree he will pay for my food.* He accepted the request quite cheerfully. Wen Kexing led the way with the brightest face. Zhou Zishu did an internal introspection; back when he was a half-ghost flitting about the palace, wearing robes and doing murderous business in a mysterious place full of apricot blossoms[2], he might be brutal, but at least there was a grace to him as a cover. Since when had he become unabashedly shameless?". (15)

Against Zhou Zishu's exasperated tolerance of Wen Kexing, or at any rate his lazy unwillingness to be rid of him, Wen Kexing reads him as secretly yearning for companionship, and he provides what Zhou Zishu most needs, a worthy soulmate. The romance in the novel happens with excruciating slowness. At first, other than Wen Kexing's persistent flirtations and rhapsodic poeticizing, there's no romance to speak of, but with an inexorable accelerando, Zhou Zishu starts to take notice of Wen Kexing, despite himself, and, by the end, their mutual devotion is flagrant and inescapable, having made subtle advances on the reader in the same way it does on Zhou Zishu, gradually increasing until it is unavoidable that this is not merely a wuxia novel, one of "the pugilist world." Priest took a minor villain and gave him a redemption arc, but via an atypical romance, one made notable by the fact that the men express their love mostly via insults and brawls.

Zhou Zishu lets Wen Kexing in with glacial slowness, wondering if he is really "sincere" (51). For men such as them, sincerity has never been a virtue. They are talented at dissembling, relying on seeming nonthreatening so as to strike unprepared enemies. Midway through the book, Zhou Zishu finally removes his facial disguise and Wen Kexing, dazed by his appearance, can only manage, "Have I mentioned before that I like men?" (38). In another metaphor for concealment and disguise, Wen Kexing skillfully inserts himself into Zhou Zishu's bed, "like a cuckoo that had taken over a magpie's nest" (52). Even while most of their romantic activities take the form of quarreling, their continual bickering horrifies and embarrasses those around them, to whom their infatuation is evident.

In addition to depicting romantic love as combative, Priest also complicates the traditional danmei dynamic of *gong* and *shou*—popular sexual and romantic roles possibly analogous to seme/uke in BL, or perhaps adjacent to top/bottom in Anglophone fanfiction[3]. Chao argues that "using the terms of attacker and receiver in danmei narratives suggests sex positions and emotional relationships that work in a binary fashion" (Chao 2016, p. 67). However, while Zhou Zishu repeatedly and slightingly calls Wen Kexing *wife*, he winds up being the receptive partner in their single sex scene (Extra 1), though this may be due to his canonical laziness rather than anything else. While Wen Kexing is parental towards his young charge Gu Xiang, Zhou Zishu also has a found child in Zhang Chengling, so both

are equally parental figures (cf. shou partners who give birth in *shengziwen*, a subgenre of danmei roughly analogous to mpreg in Anglophone fanfiction) (Wu 2019). Slighter and physically weaker than Wen Kexing, Zhou Zishu is nonetheless formidable in a fight, increasingly so as the novel progresses, and is ultimately tasked with rescuing Wen Kexing in the novel's violent climax. Similarly, while Wen Kexing may be the physically more imposing partner, the household duties, such as cooking and marketing, are invariably relegated to him, and his complaints about this seem pro forma and perfunctory (see Figure 1). Troubling this dynamic is important to the project of Priest's writing, as is her upheaval of standard wuxia tropes.

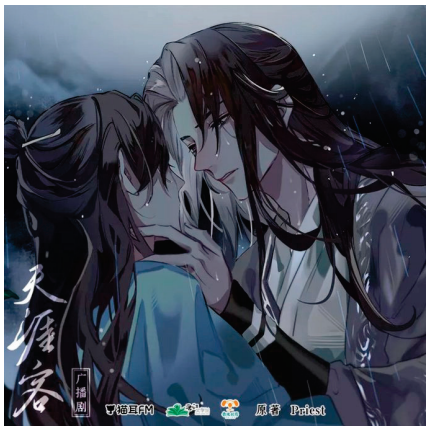


Figure 1. Official art for the *Tianya Ke* audio drama depicts an aestheticized Wen Kexing as gong and Zhou Zishu as shou, though in the novel their roles are often complicated.

Whatever role either plays in the relationship, their trauma (which arises from their own coerced horrific actions) turns out to be soluble in mutual beneficial acceptance, or the concept popularized by psychologist Carl Rogers as unconditional positive regard. Zhou Zishu's friend Jing Beiyuan states, "he has done those deeds that the heavens would strike him down for, but not one of them was committed out of selfish desires for his own ends" (Rogers 1951, p. 67). Wen Kexing similarly has committed unspeakable atrocities, but to survive Ghost Valley he could have done little else. In the process of self-recovery, Zhou Zishu remarks that "being a good person [is] really exhausting" (8), and he has found the only person in all of the jianghu who perhaps has done even worse, with a deeply concealed, desperate desire to exorcize it. Zhou Zishu's unreliable narration lets us know that their blood-soaked pasts make them perfect for each other, and that Zhou Zishu's repeated refusals do not really speak to what he deeply wants: recognition—for Wen Kexing to see through his disguises—acceptance, and ultimately, via that acceptance, redemption.

3. On the Mongolian Steppe

Viewers may be already familiar with James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes, a character from Marvel Comics who reappears in the Marvel Cinematic Universe films, first as Steve Rogers's World War II sidekick and, later, the brainwashed Soviet assassin known as the Winter Soldier. In the films, particularly *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Captain America: Civil War*, Bucky is depicted as marked equally by the torture that he has undergone and by the harm he has unwillingly inflicted. His trauma is inscribed indelibly on his body by the fact of his metal arm. Being a cyborgian memento mori of his unconsciously violent days, the arm is both injury/wound and the occasion/cause of wounding others. A great deal of fanfiction is devoted towards both describing his trauma, often with elaborate descriptions of the pain caused by the arm, and then rehabilitating him in a way that the films could not make space for, or whose narratives would not permit.

Bucky's notebook is canonical in *Captain America: Civil War*, seen by Steve Rogers, whose picture is stuck inside and bookmarked, as Bucky struggles to remember his former best friend and previous life (see Figure 2). Bucky's notebook becomes his memory device and the place where he can sort out the puzzle of himself, as if he were pieces dumped from a box, all chaos and unmatched edges.

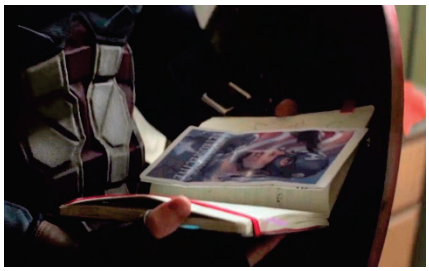


Figure 2. Steve Rogers, in costume as Captain America, finds Bucky's notebook.

Actor Sebastian Stan has claimed that, inside of Bucky's backpack, the safety of which he prioritizes even as he flees detection in *Civil War*, are even more notebooks, as follows (Stan 2016):

> "In his backpack there are a dozen notebooks that compose the scattered memories dating back to as far as he can remember which somewhat piece together a scattered life. In a similar way to Alzheimer's, he's written things down, for fear of losing his memory again. He was prepared, were something to happen, to walk away with nothing but that backpack, which is why it's the only thing he takes and knowing full well that not everything those pages contain is pretty."

Author magdaliny's series *Notebook No. 6* (magdaliny 2018) takes as its occasion the presumed existence of these notebooks, life writing meant to return him to his own agency. *Notebook No. 6* also gives the reader an overt cue in the metadata for the novella-length "The Interrogation" as the author has tagged the fic with "Unreliable Narrator," so we know up front that her Bucky, while directly dictating events into his notebook, is nonetheless not someone to be trusted, because his mind is the very thing that has been taken away from him. In recounting the story of Honi, the Circle Maker from the Talmud, Bucky adds, "I wish I'd only slept for seventy years. I wish I'd only been forgotten. There's things out there worse than dying, sweetheart. I'm one of them." For Bucky, the horror of his body committing acts over which he had no control was precisely that he was conscious of his actions the entire time. Bucky describes the conditions of his loss of self-possession as follows:

> "I was made of confusions and when I wasn't confused about real things I was seeing things that weren't. I was remembering missions but backwards and topsy-turvy. I was remembering people but not who they were to me. I was remembering Jew things but not that I was one, not exactly, and everything muddled-up on account of the goy years. Just information floating around inside me with no context."

Bucky's dissociation and depersonalization is so profound that he does not even understand himself as a body for most of the story. Like Zhou Zishu, he sets out to wander the world. He flees the scene at the end of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, after he has destroyed no small quantity of military equipment and nearly killed Steve Rogers (whom he flatly describes as his "mission," and fails to recognize, except fleetingly). Bucky is almost completely out of his mind when he starts his journey, so he wanders equally wildly, veering from Singapore to Jakarta, and then the Mongolian steppe. Here, again, we see the monomyth, that trope particularly found in medievalism, of the mad, grieving hero going into the wilderness, such as Nebuchadnezzar letting his beard grow and his clothes become tattered, until some transformative act renders him fit to rejoin humanity as one of their

own, as himself. Bucky writes, "I was more than half an animal still by the time I wandered out onto the steppes with no drive left in my head but north, stripping grains from grasses with my teeth and trying to decide if I was predator or prey." Similarly, "Around then all I knew was the animal time. [. . .] Animal time's when you figure out the difference between you and things that aren't you and why that distinction means anything at all when you're aiming to rebuild a person from spare parts." In distinguishing between "you and things that aren't you," Bucky eventually regains some grasp on his own subject position.

Magdaliny's descriptions of his physical deterioration are graphic and abject, mirroring his internal disarray. Once he is taken in and cared for, however improbably, by a family of female Mongolian horsewomen, he begins to return to himself, chronicled in his notebook. He writes the following:

> "Now I probably sound like every other white asshole going abroad to find themselves. Trouble with that kind of person is they who know they are and they just don't like it. . .if anything you could say I was trying to find a self. My self, I didn't have one of those yet, or at least not a sense of ownership, not something I felt I could grasp or describe or feel in my body. Not a solid thing at all. And anyway I'm not white, or I'm only white under the right conditions, or when it's convenient for other folks, in the way of my momma's people."

Crucial about magdaliny's Bucky is his non-canonical Jewishness, an identity that makes him both outsider/other and someone with deep roots, a heritage from which he can draw stories and strength of self, a connectedness that enables him to rediscover himself while literally lost in the world. Incantatory repeated phrases ("there's a story and it goes like this") are tells that place him back in telling his reinterpretation of his own life a midrash, in the same way that fanfiction itself can (Howell 2019)—but a version gaining authority and selfhood with every piece of past he sets down. He speaks about his previous notebooks and their primitive attempts at relating to/as a self, as follows:

> "I wasn't human and I wasn't not and there was a lot of weeks where that was true, where the boundaries were feathery and I was a proto-person [. . .] Back then I don't think there was anything in the whole world that could've made me feel better, could've sped up that process, coming to the place where I could—not understand I suppose but begin to get what understanding even was, what it felt like In the thing I was slowly figuring out wasn't an extension of a gun, a tool for conveying and converting calories into energy; a body, I mean. That was mine. Not mine because I'd killed it and dragged it back to my den for later. Mine because it was given to me."

The sentence in the middle is perhaps so tangled syntactically because it is Bucky trying to separate himself, to reconstitute an identity beyond being someone else's weapon. Like Zhou Zishu, with a second skin over his face, at this point Bucky is embodied only at a safe distance from himself.

Bucky's Ma is vividly alive in the story, a character who tells stories from the Talmud to him and his sister, as is Steve's mother, and this mention of her here as the one who gives him his body is a restorative act of inscription, as much as Oktyabr, the widow who takes him in and, along with her four daughters, nurses him back to physical health. The body of the mother alone is capable of restoring him to himself. Unlike Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing's romance, the romance between Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers can only take place offscreen. It is not itself redemptive; however, increasingly, in the notebook, Bucky addresses Steve directly and takes issue with him on various matters. Instead, it is through repeated connection with the feminine maternal that Bucky begins to recover. A passage near the end of the fic recalls the names that their immigrant mothers gave to him and to Steve: *Yankl* and *Stíofán*, before America assimilates them. They use these names with each other, as secrets, calling on the maternal in their most intimate moments.

Bucky's travels take him further, to the Mideast, and then to Eastern Europe, where he meets more characters who help him, including a young mutant girl, a barber, and a rabbi

and his congregation. As the events of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and then *Civil War* begin to unfold, Bucky sees the Avengers on a television in a bar, and his notebook begins to take on a more political tone. On historicity, and his being blamed for assassinations but not wartime killshots of "German boys," he puts it as follows:

> "Truth's a thing that's decided on and most of history's either a compromise or an agenda in the making. You can't measure it like weight or distance or time and you can't hold it up to the light and check for flaws. You got to crack it open to see what it's made of and then it's not truth anymore, not a story, just a big soggy heap of facts you can rearrange how you like. And you can't ever put it back again into the shell."

Freed from the constraints of commercial feature films, magdaliny is able to let Bucky set his own record straight, not only about the violence that he has committed for the sake of the empire, but also about being, as Bucky puts it, "a queer mutant Yid." Details from historical pre-war Brooklyn interweave with Bucky's queerness to give it verisimilitude, with canonical events interleaved with historical ones, such as the East Coast hurricane of 1938. Thorough readers in this fandom will also know that the neighborhood in which Steve and Bucky grew up was adjacent to a well-known gay community, therefore, this Bucky's accounts of dancing with and kissing men are not improbable (alwaysanoriginal 2020).

He has managed to keep his queer identity and desires a secret from Steve, or so he thinks. When Steve finally catches up to him, Bucky is horrified to have his intensely private notebook be the first thing that Steve touches, as shown in the following excerpt:

> "Holding the first notebook open with your thumb like it was a pulp you just couldn't shut. I wanted to die even after you closed it up and put it back. I could feel your fingerprints like it was my skin my bones my heart bruising up blue and purple under your hands. And that's when I saw you were in your uniform and I thought oh God oh Lord oh please I don't want to do this again oh please I wish you'd never found me and now I'll never get away. . ..[That] is what I thought as you opened your mouth and said: you know me? I sure as shit do, you son of a bitch. That always has been my problem."

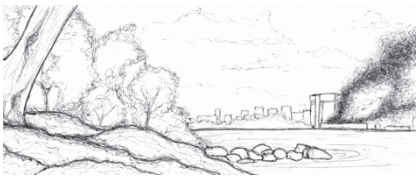
Bucky fantasizes about Steve throughout the fic, and yearns to be close to him, even as he is guarded around him. Their interactions are erotically charged, even when Steve later symbolically restores Bucky's notebook to him, stating the following: "you pulled out this notebook and handed it to me still warm from your body."

Thus begins the final, more intense, period of healing for Bucky, as Steve and he travel to the Afro-futurist paradise of *Black Panther*'s Wakanda to have Bucky's arm repaired, and once again he is housed with a female shepherd, Mowayndu. During this time, Bucky describes himself as a golem, but one that has taken on autonomy, as follows: "Knife's in my hand now and my hand belongs to me. I'll carve out everything they put in me or turn to dust trying. No more weapons. No more soldiers. No fucking more." He circles the notion that he has been a tool of others who has reattained his own personhood, and that Steve should do the same, stating the following: "They wake you up and they give you a name and they put a thing in your hands and that thing is you, they say. You're a gun. You're a fist. You're a shield. Sound familiar?" His stubborn old-fashioned insistence on *feeling* and *being*, as opposed to analysis or interpretation, gives the text a quality of fighting back, even against the reader. Bucky has for too long been a tool for others and refuses to be pinned in any one object position.

Magdaliny has illustrated her fic as images that are drawn as if through Bucky's eyes, so that the reader is seeing what he sees, possibly as sketches in his notebook, as follows: his sister as a young woman, ruins in Aleppo, a Wakandan rhino, and the shul in Ivano-Frankivsk. The exception to this viewpoint is a drawing of the banks of the Potomac, immediately following the events of *Winter Soldier*. Here, the landscape is empty of both Bucky and Steve Rogers (see Figure 3a,b). This absence portrays the crucial way in which romance is elided in, yet at the heart of, *Notebook No. 6*. As an object, Bucky cannot find

his subjectivity, except in Steve's absence. Being brainwashed to the point of insanity, he asserts the remnants of his agency and selfhood by rescuing Steve from the river and then leaving to start his journey to find what has been taken from him.

(**a**)



(**b**)

Figure 3. (**a**) The scene on the banks of the Potomac, after Bucky has rescued Steve from drowning in the river; (**b**) magdaliny's illustration for "The Interrogation," a landscape without either person.

Ultimately, in a novella both polyglot and polyvalent, magdaliny has brought many kinds of texts into collusion or collision—canonical, fictitious, religious, historic, visual—rousing questions as to what *agency* really means, as well as whether military or martial history may serve as metaphoric for other kinds of bodily trauma. Victims are stripped of agency when assault takes over either their body or mind, or both. We can read Bucky's physical violations—indeed, we are invited to read them—in his abjection and his victimization by powerful others, as a kind of sexual assault. In canon, Bucky is shirtless when he is "wiped." He is made to bite down on a rubber mouthguard and his calm, tacit assent to this procedure reads as eerie, uncanny, almost as troublesome as the violation itself (cf. sexual assault survivors universally describing their own compliance or freeze response). Consider in relation that Zhou Zishu's piercing nails, which either penetrate or create new orifices, are not an accidentally sexual punishment. In the political warp and weft of empire, how much agency did Zhou Zishu really have, barely out of boyhood when he started Tian Chuang? And what re-enactments are danmei and fanfiction readers experiencing through these texts when they presumably are not themselves retired assassins seeking to reconstitute their autonomy? Which kinds of agency do they have in their lives, and which do they lack?

Notebook No. 6 ends with Steve and Bucky's reunion, now told in third person through Steve's limited point of view—a switch only possible because Bucky now exists to be seen, to be interacted with *as* a person. The romance can finally become overt as Steve has read the notebooks, and embraces Bucky fully, knowing his worst secrets. Similarly perhaps to Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing hiding their affection through aggression, Bucky's love confession happens when he thoroughly upbraids Steve for his carelessness with himself, consistently putting himself into danger. For Steve, Bucky's own confession lay in the notebook. "You wrote me a love letter," Steve tells him, "You wrote me a goddamn novel; what did you think I was gonna do with it?"

> "Bucky," is all that Steve can seem to say, and then, helplessly, "*Yankl*", and Bucky's carefully composed expression crumbles as though he has been stabbed, soft, wounded, and shocked. "Come—c'mere," Steve says, "Please," and Bucky takes a step forward like he is winding up for a punch and practically crawls into Steve's arms. When Steve tucks his face into Bucky's neck, he can hear the machinery in his arm whirring tinnily away, whatever he has for muscles in there revving up high as he clutches Steve tighter and tighter, following his lead. Steve must be hurting Bucky with how hard he is hanging on. His own lungs are being crushed, but it feels like he is breathing for the first time in a year, all the same.

Even in this most intimate connection, violence remains (stabbed, punch, machinery whirring, being crushed) in an embrace that is physically painful because of their enhanced strength. The narrative, nonetheless, insists that two men can show tenderness to one another even after the horrors wrought upon their bodies by history.

4. *Shixiong* and Shidi

To consider an enriching complication, there are now on Archive of Our Own about 7500 pieces of fanfiction citing *Word of Honor* as a canonical source text or point of entry (with another 1800 or so directly referencing *Tianya Ke*). *Strays* is one such, a novella-length piece of fiction by orange_crushed that places Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing one degree over in an alternate universe, as the two struggle to escape Tian Chuang together, as its adherents and victims (orange_crushed 2021). In this case, Zhou Zishu's hunger for freedom is not something that he is able to identify in himself alone. It takes the presence of Wen Kexing to catalyze his need for liberation, and, this time, he is able to escape with Wen Kexing without the self-inflicted penance of the Seven Nails. The romance here *is* the redemptive arc, and is overtly sexual; moreover, romantic love is that which can sustain one through trials and bring one to eventual safety, as shown in the following excerpt: "What is it, if not standing together on whatever steady or shifting ground is at your feet? To stand fast if an earthquake comes, an army, an avalanche, a flood to wash the face of the world away: what is love, if not a strong tree to hold your body against, when the howling wind would whip you into the sky?"

Word of Honor, the live-action adaptation of *Tianya Ke*, tempers the erotic relationship between Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu by making them long-lost childhood friends who call each other *shixiong* and *shidi*, senior student and junior student—likely an attempt to weaken the danmei's queer content onscreen. *Strays* not only maintains this distinction, but leans into it as a common wuxia trope. Zhou Zishu is in charge of training students. Wen Kexing, a "teenaged runaway," begs for admission into Tian Chuang, and Zhou Zishu, in his mid-twenties, permits the vagrant boy to be an apprentice, despite his misgivings, drawn to his intelligence, martial abilities, and fiery determination. He sends him to live in a barn, to care for the animals, and work his way up gradually, as shown in the following excerpt:

> "The boy ought to hate him. He wouldn't begrudge Kexing if he did. He's been mucking stalls for half a year already, all through spring and summer, without the encouragement of a single lesson. . .his arrogance could practically be royal, but he works like a servant, and there's no evidence of squeamishness in the way he moves around the animals or cleans out his own scraped knuckles. He fights viciously and quotes elegant lines that an educated man like Zishu ought to know but couldn't recall from memory so easily. [. . .] Zishu has met kind people and cruel ones, but rarely seen such a disquieting mixture of both in the same jar. The only conclusion Zishu has come to is that Zishu should not think about him so much."

Among the other things that Zhou Zishu does not know about Wen Kexing is that he has managed to smuggle in his younger sister, for whom he cares in secret, until Zhou Zishu belatedly realizes that he has been feeding two people. This scene brings Zhou Zishu's begrudging affection for Wen Kexing to its first crisis, because a child cannot be allowed to stay with the trainees. In addition, with this crisis comes Zhou Zishu's first yearnings for freedom, as shown in the following excerpt:

> "What if, when the snow cleared, the world had been washed away? What if it were only him and Kexing and Kexing's feral little girl-child, left to wander through the scrubbed spring forests. To live free in the hills with no masters and no duties and no rules and no pasts at all, nothing but flowers and mushrooms and daylight. It rolls in him like a marble, that odd idea. When it reaches the top of his spine he shudders, and crushes the thought like a bug."

Wen Kexing and his sister may be the strays of the novella's title, but Zhou Zishu has also gone astray. He has no family, and Tian Chuang is a cruel replacement. At only twenty-five, there are already too many places in his mind where he cannot go and acts he has committed about which he cannot bear to think. And the violence continues. Zhou Zishu leaves for long months on missions, and, in one scene, assassinates a general after

forcing him to sign a false confession, an episode that tells the reader truths that Zhou Zishu, still an unreliable narrator, has not yet divined. Before he dies, the general ("curious, almost amused") says to Zhou Zishu, "Come and see me in hell when you're finished.. . .I'll want to know if you stayed this naïve all your life."

It is not naïveté that informs Zhou Zishu's loyalty, but only his failure to conceive of a way out. No one knows Tian Chuang as well as he, nor, therefore, the full extent of its reach, and the impossibility of leaving without taking the punishment of the Seven Nails, as shown in the following excerpt:

> "He answered his cousin's [the emperor's] call, stepped up hungrily to take his place in the machinery of the world, and became what he is today. A good hunter, a good killer. [. . .] But his life feels muddied now, like a puddle splashed through by a boot.. . .until he met Kexing he never dreamed such fool things about forests and solitude and peace, about being an idle, free man lying out to feel the wind. Sometimes when he looks at Kexing he thinks, insanely, we should run away. To what, to where, he doesn't know. His imagination fails him past that point."

Despite his not being able to envision a future, removing himself from the "machinery" of the emperor's avarice and ambition begins when he becomes romantically and sexually involved with Wen Kexing. Their love is at once doomed and inevitable, and laced through with the violence of their lives. When they first kiss, Wen Kexing, canonically a cannibal in Priest's danmei, bites Zhou Zishu's lip a little too hard, as shown in the following excerpt:

> ""It's nothing", he says, and lips at Kexing's fingers. "Come back". But Kexing runs his thumb along Zishu's mouth and it comes away pink with a thin little smear of blood. He looks dismayed. "So what?" Zishu says. Kexing can't think it would put him off. Zishu has seen his own leg opened to the bone."

Being inured to the abject horrors of the body and its injuries only extends to the self, of course, not the other. Wen Kexing is horrified that Zhou Zishu would take the Seven Nails to facilitate their escape into the jianghu, an escape that Zhou Zishu allows himself to dream of openly for the first time, as shown in the following excerpt:

> "All this time he thought himself outside the world, above it, beyond it. . . This world of lakes and rivers that they have been sent to mutilate and steal from. He thought himself apart from it entirely. He planned to die in service; for someone like him there was no point in seeking out the things other men wanted. But if he can love like other men do, then he must be just the same as they are. Just one warm hand looking for another."

Unrecognizable to himself after a life of killing, Zhou Zishu does not want a similar fate for Wen Kexing, who argues that "There's no trap you couldn't get out of if you wanted to. I know that much about you. . . If you'd fight for me, you can fight for yourself." The lovers separate, Wen Kexing in a fury. However, each on his own comes up with a mutually assured solution, relying on the other's innate violence (for which *Strays* offers various metaphors, such as: a hawk, a tiger, and a pair of wolves), and in the end the soulmates are reunited.

This narrative by orange_crushed interweaves novel and drama elements, but unhesitatingly explores the power differential of the shidi/shixiong relationship from the drama, while also complicating it in the same way that Priest's novel blurs the roles of shou/gong. The lovers must also take on a degree of bodily harm, not only to survive Tian Chuang, but to leave it, and healing comes only after their freedom. Once again, we see a fan writer approaching different elements with an eye towards leveraging those that underscore recovery. And ultimately, taken together, fanfiction and danmei—despite vastly differing genealogies and material culture—do not infrequently depict such isolated, traumatized individuals finding that recovery through the intimacy and mirroring of same-sex romance.

5. Conclusions

In *Tianya Ke*, Zhou Zishu's friend Jing Beiyuan, often given to philosophizing, makes an abstract speech about "equilibrium" in general, but actually very specifically about Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing, as follows:

> "Firstly, both sides have to be equally matched. There cannot be a stronger or weaker side, otherwise, the stronger party will devour the weaker one. Being equally matched alone won't do either—there is a possibility that two equally-matched sides will struggle to the death to produce a victor. There still have to be a few natural, or man-made barricades that must not be crossed…in order for such a perfect and elegant equilibrium to happen, various coincidences have to occur in tandem—in other words, the heavens have constructed it." (62)

The characters in all three of these pieces of fiction manage to find this equilibrium; however, as we have seen, it only comes after rediscovery and integration of the autonomous self. There can be no equality and no equilibrium when either partner is less than a person, still so marked by trauma and grief that they are not human. Humanity must be earned, an injury suffered, before the "heavens" (the narrative) can make a match between soulmates. In a statement that could have been uttered by any of these characters, Bucky writes, "Any sniper knows how to become just a thing that breathes and watches while everything else passes through them like their bones are hollow and whistling in the breeze, going to the place inside you that isn't a place at all." Similarly, in *Tianya Ke*, the following is written:

> "Zhou Zishu watched all of it, detached from everything as a habit. He didn't know how to view himself as a human—someone with emotions, with a sense of right and wrong. It was for his own self-preservation; as long as he acted without thinking, he wouldn't be driven to insanity. He was merely a pair of bloody hands on which the kingdom of Da Qing rested. Prosperity was like beautifully decorated sleeves, and his hands were forever hidden inside of them, making it difficult for people to really see him." (27)

These damaged men know the detached, depersonalized, empty places inside of themselves intimately. Their survival of the necropolitics has been made possible by their accepting nearly lethal damage to their bodies and minds. The necessary injury, however, *is* the extraction strategy, which is what pulls these characters out and rescues them from imperialism's death-grip on their agency. The Zhou Zishu of *Strays* thinks to himself, "It doesn't matter what they've been ordered to do. They can't go on like this." Wounded, but gradually freed into choice via a recovery narrative and a romance that recognizes them in their specificity and particularity, they are restored to the epistemic order of things.

I have placed these three texts in conversation because danmei and fanfiction alike have evolved and continue to evolve into forms that, at their most complex and compelling, challenge neoliberal and heteronormative Strictures and argue, if not plead, for deliverance and for personal autonomy within the matrix of all but unlivable constraints. While fandom studies has moved past its initial need to lionize all forms of fannish production as transformative, subversive, and emancipatory (when many of its creations in fact reinforce and reinscribe social norms), these texts, nonetheless, collect and encode important information about both women's writing and contemporary culture and politics and offer narratives crafted around the possibilities of liberation from social violence to the self—a construction that it is not difficult to imagine and one that might offer an important act of psychological soul-retrieval for the primarily female reader–writers of danmei and fanfiction.

I would also like to propose that the space described by Yuri Lotman's semiosphere offers an additional model via which these texts may reflect on one another. Per Lotman has stated the following:

> "The idea of the possibility for a single ideal language to serve as an optimal mechanism for the representation of reality is an illusion. […] The idea of an

> optimal model, consisting of a single perfect universal language, is replaced by the image of a structure equipped with a minimum of two or, rather, by an open number of diverse languages, each of which is reciprocally dependent on the other, due to the incapacity of each to express the world independently." (Lotman 2009)

Lotman's semiosphere is a human, cultural, phenomenological space in which new meaning can only be produced via the collision of signs jostling against one another. It is Lotman's "mutual untranslatability" that yields this valuable parsing of reality using languages to triangulate—a maneuver that we can approximate in the digital semiosphere with precisely this kind of collocated text: Chinese, English, and derived from both. Ibrus, Hartley, and Ojamaa have described such a textual plurality as being collaborative and polyvalent, claiming that "Instead of an objective and stable artefact, given once and for all and carrying constant meanings inserted into it. . .The source of creativity is located in group-forming culture instead of being the property, intellectual or otherwise, of an individual creator. [. . .] The appropriation of texts as the property of just one individual is a legal fiction, not a cultural fact" (Ibrus et al. 2021). Earlier, I described this movement as being similar to appliqué. In fact, it may be more profitably compared to quilting, where writers take pieces of a story, rearrange them in a presentation uniquely meaningful to them, and baste them down until such time as they may be needed by another author or set of readers.

Bucky says to himself angrily, of the notebooks, "can you even pretend it ain't him you been writing to all this time?" And the reader–writers of such romances, which take place in the boundaried interstices between trauma and recovery, can locate themselves in a similar subject position. Elsewhere, Lotman has said the following:

> "The semiosphere, the space of culture, is not something that acts according to mapped out and pre-calculated plans. It seethes like the sun; centers of activity boil up in different places, in the depth and on the surface, irradiating relatively peaceful areas with its immense energy. But unlike that of the sun, the energy of the semiosphere is the energy of information, the energy of Thought." (Lotman 1990)

Online texts mutate, proliferate, and speciate near the speed of thought, and they give information beyond what they seem to offer on their moving surfaces. Lotman's "metastructural space" barely contains what traverses it and what transgresses as it passes by; however, his project is ultimately uninterested in containment, rather only in the observation of motion, marking a Derridean trace of movement through. Nöth has said, writing of Lotman, that the notion of the boundary is vital in describing the semiosphere, as follows (Nöth 2015):

> "[The boundary] divides the territory of one's own, good and harmonious culture from its bad, chaotic, or even dangerous anti-culture. It is a frontier between an inner and an outer space. However, the boundary does not only separate, it also constitutes the semiosphere in its cultural individuality and identity. It secures the identity of the culture by creating an inner space whose boundary protects it from the influences alien to it."

The writer–reader of light novels, of danmei or fanfiction, may consider her activity slightingly, dismissively, as in fact the literary monde does, as it long has of *écriture féminine*. However, in the inner protected spaces where reader–writers of danmei and fanfiction flourish, such work is centered, rather than being treated as anti-cultural and alien; moreover, the boundary filters content differently in its permeability.

Of critical importance to all three novels is poetry. The unknown narrator of *Tianya Ke*, who flickers in and out of view, refers to poetry freely, almost as much so as Wen Kexing, who likes to deploy it as he presses his suit (and does so in *Strays* as well), whereas Zhou Zishu never makes literary references, though he recognizes them. He does, however, sing, with much emotion, as does Wen Kexing, and their songs function as a heightened form

of utterance, occupying a similar métier as in musical theater or opera, whether classical Chinese or Western, as an incantation to be resorted to when dialogue can no longer convey the intensity of emotion. Bucky has his myths and stories from the Talmud, and magdaliny has titled her fic after Li-Young Lee's poem "The Interrogation." These glimpses of poetic, musical, and mythological utterance point to the importance of distilled, compressed language as suggesting a solution to the situation of pain. The interrogation works both ways. The text interrogates the writer as much as the reader, and the language offers both an escape from strictly boundaried, rule-enforced hegemony into self-determination.

Elaine Scarry has observed that physical pain destroys language, and that "to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language. . .is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself." (Scarry 1985) When the characters in these texts instead reclaim language—when they speak, tell stories, sing, or, for that matter, fall in love—they give this linguistic permission back to the writer–reader as well. Danmei and/as fanfiction, taken together, deftly sketch an evasion of rigid hierarchical values, moving from traumatic restriction into a rich semiotic sphere of full dimensionality—one not only of *écriture féminine*, but also of deep *jouissance*, and something even more vivid and rich: a speaking-back to patriarchy and power, as vital now as ever.

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Notes

1 English is often viewed by fans as something of an official fanfiction language. Many fanfiction writers and readers prefer English, even when it is not their native language, and aver that it feels wrong to them to read fic generally, and pornography specifically, in their own language.

2 Flowers recur throughout the novel as a metaphor for freedom and autonomy. Even Zhou Zishu's nails are scented like plum blossoms, and the poetry, which various characters quote frequently, has to do with flowers, juxtaposed against their sometimes tragic fates.

3 These dynamics are far more complex than we have time to tease out here, but they may have less to do with sexual position or kink-inflected dominance/submission and more to do with power and relatedness, in both fanfiction and danmei cultures, and our research has not begun to do either concept justice. Xu and Yang note that "rather than an ideologically incorrect reproduction of heteronormativity, the seme/uke trope could actually serve as a tool to symbolically resolve the inherent power imbalance in a hierarchical society and to achieve equality through difference" (2022).

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