SQUEE FROM THE MARGINS: INVESTIGATING THE OPERATIONS OF RACIAL/CULTURAL/ETHNIC IDENTITY IN MEDIA FANDOM

by

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ABSTRACT

Fan studies’ foundational texts established media or participatory fandom as an area of interest for scholars due to its potential to overturn stereotypes about fans as unquestioning consumers of popular cultural texts. Media fandom’s transformational interactions with these texts—most notably through fanfiction but also expanding to other fanwork—was seen as especially significant as these spaces were dominated by women (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992; Russ 1985; Penley 1992; Lamb and Veith 1986). The discipline has expanded in its scope since then and the idea of the ‘fan-as-resistant’ has been queried on various grounds (Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005; J. A. Gray, Harrington, and Sandvoss 2007; D. Johnson 2007; Jenkins 2006a). Nevertheless, a strong utopic strain remains evident in theoretical discussions of fanwork in particular, especially that which explicitly queers source texts. This is based, once again, on demographic data that indicates that a significant number of participants in these spaces identify as queer women. Such transformational fanwork is seen to function in an intertextual and communitarian matrix, which is self-reflexive and progressive in its politics (Busse and Hellekson 2006; Busse, Lothian, and Reid 2007; Hellekson 2009a; Coppa 2008; Larsen and Zubernis 2012b; Coppa 2014; Stein 2015).

What remains absent in these examinations is any sustained examination of the racial make-up of these communities, both in terms of participants and in the choices of characters and texts that form the focus of media fandom’s transformational activities. My thesis builds from Rebecca Wanzo’s (2015) critical intervention in fan studies, wherein she maintains that the continued and glaring absence of race as an aspect of analysis in fan studies is not due just to oversight but because it “troubles” some of its most foundational assumptions regarding its subversive potential and inclusive ethos.

This dissertation explores the ramifications of such ‘trouble,’ in line with Sara Ahmed’s (2010) conceptualisation of being a “feminist killjoy.” What does it mean to be
a ‘fandom killjoy’ with regard to being the subject of and reacting to, racism in fandom spaces? How do conceptions of shared pleasure and intertextual communities interface with these dynamics? These are some of my key questions. I will use data from my respondent interviews with non-white fans from all over the globe, as well as examination of specific practices such as racebending in order to go some way in answering them.

It is my contention that ‘whiteness’ has been an unarticulated yet core structuring mechanism both within fan studies and in media fandom communities that actively works to elide, erase and excuse its operations. My thesis will systematically deconstruct these ‘truisms.’ I will interrogate the ways in which such communities are seen to ‘work,’ using the respondent data from my interviews to interrupt the accepted accounts of media fandom history, as well as their contemporary functioning.

My key theoretical argument is positioning media fandom as a postcolonial cyberspace. This allows me to interrogate the operations, flows, interruptions and re-inscriptions of representational power within fan spaces without falling back onto simplistic ideas of resistance and co-optation. It also enables me to approach the complex identities of my non-white interview respondents with appropriate nuance. I argue that because the racial identity of media fans is seen as something additional to, rather constitutive of, their experiences in media fandom spaces, a serious consideration of its effects on generalised fan studies frameworks continues to be deferred. This thesis aims to end that deferral and highlight the ways in which the choice of inclusive methodological and theoretical frameworks allow for a much more nuanced discussion of the operations of contemporary media fandom communities.
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## INTRODUCTION

“**But what if it’s not about Race?**”—ANCIENT FANDOM PROVERB  

## Rebuilding Maps: Outline of Chapters

### AUTHOR NOTES: A DISCUSSION OF METHODOLOGY

**Overview of Methodologies in Fan Studies**  
**The Research Process: Locating Myself**  
**Data Collection and Analysis**

### CHAPTER 1: DIAL ME UP, SCOTTY: HISTORIES OF MEDIA FANDOMS AS PLATFORMS

**For ‘Women’s’ Online Identity**

**Offline Traces, Online Strategies: Media Fandom Networking Pathways**  
**Locating Media Fandom within Early Cybercultural Topographies**  
**The Possibilities and Pitfalls of Foundational Cyberfeminist Theorisations**  
**Tracking Online Media Fandom**

**I Was There Too! Diversifying Media Fandom History**

**Tracking Discontent: Controversies as Points of Coalition Building**

**Building Squee: Highlighting Diversity in Fandom Infrastructure**

“**I just needed other people to fangirl with me!**” Anime and Manga

**Fandoms as Cross-cultural Pathways to Media Fandom**

**Conclusion**

### CHAPTER 2: GLOBAL CITIZENS, NETWORKED IDENTITIES:

**Online Media Fandom as a Postcolonial Cyberspace**

**Scoping the Field: Theorising Online Identity Today**

**Can You Log In? Boundary Crossings in the Network Society**

**Diversity in the Network: Differential Algorithms of Cybercultural Identity**

**The Case for Postcolonial Theory**
INTERSECTIONS WITH POPULAR CULTURAL STUDIES, POSTCOLONIAL AUDIENCES, AND FAN STUDIES

MEDIA FANDOM AS A POSTCOLONIAL CYBERSPACE 114
FIGURING OUT THE ‘FAN’: A HISTORY OF PARTS 114
DIFFERENT STROKES: CONCEPTUALISING FAN DIVERSITY 118
MEDIUM MATTERS: USAGE OF FANNISH PLATFORMS 123
ZOOMING IN, ZOOMING OUT: THEORISING ‘GLOBAL’ FANDOM 131
CONCLUSION 137

CHAPTER 3: POSTCOLONIAL PRAXIS: FANDOM ACTIVISM

IDENTITY NEGOTIATION AND TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES 139
THE POLITICS OF FANDOM ACTIVISM 143
“AANG AIN’T WHITE!” FANDOM ACTIVISM AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY, REPRESENTATION AND AUTHENTICITY 149
FAN IDENTITY ARTICULATIONS: THE CASE FOR DIFFERENTIAL AUTHENTICITIES 155
STRATEGIC ASSEMBLAGES: FAN OF COLOUR 160
AN INTERRUPTION OF REGULAR PROGRAMMING: META, HEADCANONS AND RACEBENDING 167
THE CURIOUS CASE OF NEWT SCAMANDER 174
CONCLUSION 184

CHAPTER 4: RECALIBRATION NECESSARY, MR. SPOCK:

RACE AND THE DYNAMICS OF MEDIA FANDOM 186

RACE IN FANDOM STUDIES TODAY 187
GLITCH RACISM: FANDOM ALGORITHMS AND RACIAL IDENTITY 194
ALGORITHM ONE: FANFICTION COMMUNITIES AS INTERTEXTUAL 197
ALGORITHM TWO: FANFICTION AND IDEAS OF SUBVERSION 205
ALGORITHM THREE: RACIAL IDENTITY AND FANWORK VERSUS CANON 212
ALGORITHM FOUR: SAFE SPACES FOR WHOM? FANDOM AND ESCAPISM 216
Algorithm Five: “Can you please stop cluttering up the tag?”

Racial Identity and Digital Fandom Infrastructure 223

Conclusion 230

Chapter 5: How Is That Sexy? An Examination of

The Fanfiction Kinkmeme 231

Ask not what is porn, but what are porn studies?

The Construction of a Scholarly Field 236

Foundational Texts/Trends 236

Ideas of Authenticity 241

Pornography and Racial Identity 243

Online Platforms: The Internet is For Porn 245

Querying Pornography 249

Dirty Looks/Dirty Books: Theorisations Around the Romance Novel 251

Producing Genres: Textual Romance/Erotica/Pornography 251

The EmBodyed Pleasures Of Reading 254

Diversity in Reading Positions: Gender, Sexuality and Racial Identity 258

Come on! How is that a kink? Kinkmemes and Constructions of Desire 265

Implications of Fluid Identity Positions Within Fanfiction Communities 265

Have you thought this through? Fan engagements with Kink 271

Anonymity and Kinkmemes 275

Bed-sharing is such a kink of mine! Differential Modes of Fannish Kink 278

Infinite Variety in Infinite Combinations? Limitations of Fannish Kink 288

Conclusion 292

Conclusion 294

Bibliography 302

Appendix 344

Interview Schedule: 344
TABLE OF FIGURES:

Figure 1.1: Malala Yousafzai (left) and Michelle Obama (right) hold up #BringBackOurGirls signs

("Bring Back Our Girls: Michelle Obama and Malala Yousafzai support campaign for return of kidnapped Nigeria schoolgirls" The Independent, May 8th 2014) ............................................................... 96

Figure 1.2: Level of Participation in Fandom Debates Sorted by Geographical Location ........ 134

Figure 1.3: Level of Participation in Fandom Debates Sorted by Racial/Cultural/Ethnic Identity 135

Figure 2.1: Racebent Hermione Fanart 1 by Bactii, Tumblr 2015 ........................................ 175

Figure 2.2: Racebent Hermione Fanart 2 by Debelle39, Tumblr 2014 ............................... 175

Figure 2.3: Nathan Stewart-Jarrett as Newt Scamander by alterocentrist, Tumblr 2013......... 177

Figure 3.1: An Example of a Kink_Bingo Card .................................................................. 273

Figure 3.2: Example of Prompt and Response from KinkMeme ........................................ 282

Figure 3.3: Example of Prompt and Response from KinkMeme ........................................ 282
Introduction

I’m just really active in the fandom.

What the fuck is ‘the fandom’?

—Fangirl, Rainbow Rowell

The quote I begin my dissertation with is taken from a passage in Rainbow Rowell’s 2013 novel Fangirl, in which the protagonist, Cather “Cath” Avery’s navigation of online spaces as a popular fanfiction writer intersects with her ‘real’ life in various ways. For instance, in the passage the above quote is taken from, Cath defends, amongst other things, her ‘unnatural’ interest in the fictional character of Simon Snow, and the charge of having no ‘real’ friends as opposed to those on the Internet—encapsulating both her attitude to popular cultural media texts and her participation in the online communities that facilitate such interactions. To anyone familiar with the popular rhetoric around online media or participatory fan communities, these are quite well worn accusations, coalescing around the ideas of over-investment in the ‘frivolous’ and social maladjustment stemming from a lack of ‘real world’ engagement.

However within this same moment it also seems like the image of the more generalised ‘fan’ has gone through a reclamation of sorts in the last decade. Spurred by the sprawling success of popular culture conventions like the annual San Diego Comic Con, and with dedicated ‘nerdy’ audiences propelling media companies like Marvel and DC comics into international powerhouses, multinational media corporations now vie with each other to woo these same audiences. Often this takes the form of encouraging fan practices once seen firmly as ‘weird’ or ‘deviant’ such as cosplay, fanart and in some cases, even fanfiction. While the monetisation of fan practices and the manipulation of
these dedicated viewers is nothing new, the advent of social media and has meant a new level of mainstreaming and attendant hypervisibility for media fan cultures. Once famously characterised as subcultural “poachers” by Henry Jenkins (1992), who drew on Michel de Certeau (1984) fans today seem, at least on the surface, to be more mainstream than ever before. However, as I will expand on in a moment, which fans are considered the most valued remains enmeshed in a complex matrix of identity markers, most notably those of race, gender and sexuality.

It is in this conflicted moment, where the lenses through which fan communities and their participants are viewed are simultaneously refracted from multiple angles, that I would like to focus on the last question posed to Cath by her interlocutor, that is, “What the f*** is ‘the fandom?’” At first glance it seems like a relatively easy question to answer in the context of this dissertation, and one that I have started off multiple presentations with in the course of my dissertation. Media or Participatory Fandom is a term used to refer to loosely interlinked interpretive communities, constituted mainly of women (spanning a wide range of demographics in terms of age, sexuality, economic status, and, national, cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds), formed around various popular cultural texts (Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002; Busse and Hellekson 2006). While the roots of these communities lie in Science Fiction (SF) conventions located in the U.S.A and U.K., their dominant medium today is various internet-enabled platforms. These enable the production and circulation of fanworks including fanfiction, fanart, meta-commentary and fan-videos.

Further, these communities are marked by a high degree of interactivity and intertextuality, both between participants and increasingly with source texts, their authors and associated celebrities. Most significantly, their most distinguishing feature has been identified as their engagement in transformative activities, wherein the source texts are repurposed in some way to produce fanworks. These activities are frequently framed as
resistant and subversive, particularly those that concern the genre of slash fanwork, that is, in which two male characters are paired together in a romantic or erotic relationship (Lamb and Veith 1986; Bacon-Smith 1992; Penley 1992).

This is also a commonly referenced framework to approach ‘the fandom’ within the field of fan studies, which has grown increasingly prolific over the last two decades. As the interest in fans and audiences of popular cultural media texts has exploded, so to has the amount of scholarship being published around their activities. Functioning as it does in the modern neoliberal academic ecosystem, at the interstices of more established university departments, fan studies remains a thoroughly interdisciplinary field. As such, it draws from extremely different methodological and disciplinary traditions, ranging from feminist and gender studies, to literary and cultural studies, to communication and media studies, to sociology and anthropology. Such diversity is both productive of nuanced scholarship but can also lend itself to a repetition of theorisation due to a lack of crossover (Hellekson 2009b). It is however possible to examine what trends dominate the field, and what blind spots continue to affect it.

The initial wave of fan studies scholars were invested primarily in reclaiming the image of the fan from the stereotype of being uncritical consumers of ‘low’ popular culture (Penley 1991; Jenkins 1992). John Fiske (1992) was especially influential in laying the foundations of theoretical frameworks that conceptualised (white) fans as niche audiences that engaged in complex processes of meaning-making with regard to popular cultural texts, an activity that had traditionally been seen to be the domain of “high culture.” This was rooted specifically in concerns of both gender and age with Fiske mobilising Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) conceptualisations of taste as linked specifically to access to capital. For Fiske the shortcomings of Bordieu’s analytical model were the omission of axes of identity apart from class and also a consideration of “forms of ‘popular cultural capital’ produced by subordinate social formations” that could also be
powerful for those particular sections of society. Fiske further maintained that, “Fandom offers ways of filling cultural lack and provides the social prestige and self-esteem that go with cultural capital” (33). Ironically, though Fiske notes the absence of race as an axis of identity within this model he laments that he has “not found studies of non-white fandom” (32).

This first wave’s overemphasis on the ‘active’ and resistant nature of media fans has been critiqued to some extent since then, and it has sometimes been dubbed the “Fandom is Beautiful” stage of fan studies. These critiques have taken various forms with Matt Hills (2002) cautioning against repetitive moral dualisms—fans versus producers, fans versus academics, active audiences versus passive consumers—while calling for more situated analyses of fan activity. In response some scholars have focussed their attention on modes of fandom activity that are less invested in resistant meaning-making such as sports fandom, cult collectors and fan tourism patterns (Crawford 2004; Alden 2007; Brooker 2007; Bloom 2002; Sobchack 2007); while others have examined the ways in which transmedia narrative strategies—that is the leveraging of multiple platforms, including digital and internet-enabled ones by content creators—are increasingly co-opting fan labour (Jenkins 2006a; Hagen and Wasko 2000; De Kosnik 2009; Scott 2009).

Yet others have focussed on fans as amateur producers for profit, who manage to leverage their popularity within fan circles to launch their own careers. The most famous of these efforts is of course E.L. James’ publishing of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012), which was originally a work of fanfiction based on Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* (2005-08) series. However, there have been numerous other examples, with fans monetising their creative work in the form of podcasts, fanart, fan comics, fan movies etc. (Williamson 2005; Anelli 2008; Philippe 2011; Flegel and Roth 2016). Most recently the tension between
such pro-fans and original copyright holders has resulted in a lawsuit brought by Paramount studios against the producers of the Star Trek fan-film Axanar.¹

Nevertheless despite these developments, there remains a strong focus on the figure of the ‘fangirl,’ much like that of Cath. This can be traced from the foundational texts of Joanna Russ (1985), Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana Veith (1986) and Constance Penley (1991), who were all heavily invested in the particular ways ‘women’ fans engaged with popular cultural texts. This thread of theorisation has remained influential and there has been a sustained effort to ground the analysis of media fandom communities in what can be seen as broadly feminist methodologies focussing on gender and sexuality as key axes of interrogation. Even as the above-mentioned critiques—broadly considered the second wave of fan studies (though of course all such divisions are highly subjective)—have argued for a broadening of conceptualisations of significant fan activity beyond transformative and active audiences, some scholars fear the sidelining, once again, of women fans who are seen to be more marginal to discussions of monetiseable fan activity (Stanfill 2013). Louisa Stein’s introduction to Millennial Fandom (2015) reiterates these ideas while situating her own study, observing that,

Issues of gender and sexuality are key to fan traditions of media production, including understandings of fan fiction as pornography written by and for women, the ever-evolving traditions of slash fan fiction as queer critique, and fan vidding as a forum for unmasking gender tropes in popular media. However, these female-centric fan communities and fan authorship traditions have been predominantly perceived as cult practices with only minority participation. It seems to me that a third wave of fandom studies could potentially insist on the presence and centrality of these dimensions of fandom as beyond niche and beyond cult. Furthermore, as corporate media producers modify notions of the fan and fandom to meet their needs, gender and sexuality become central points of conflict, affecting whom commercial media producers will address and acknowledge as their audiences.² (11)

¹ The Star Trek franchise has had a long history of turning a blind-eye to fan films with even a degree of collaboration between ‘pro’ and ‘amateur’ production. In the case of Axanar however a crowdfunding campaign raised over one million dollars for the film which has prompted Paramount to file the lawsuit and issue new guidelines about what is permissible in fan films (Perton 2016).

² Fanfiction can take many forms and can be classified in a variety of ways. The majority of scholarship around fanfiction so far has focussed on that around written around various relationship pairings
Stein’s analysis, while accurate in many aspects, also points to the ways in which this tradition of theorisation has enabled and perpetuated significant erasures in conceptualisations of “fangirls” like Cath. In my earlier description of fan communities I placed in parenthesis the specific descriptors of ‘fangirls’ including disparities in gender identity, racial, ethnic and cultural identity, nationality, able-bodiedness and age. I did this both in order to complicate my own declaration of what these participants ‘look like’ but also to reflect on the ways in these specific identity markers are repeatedly footnoted in the broader field of fan studies itself in order to focus on the ‘more important’ nodes of gender and sexuality.

What remains unacknowledged in most papers, presentations, keynotes, books or edited collections on media fan communities is that when ‘the fandom’ or ‘fangirls’ are discussed the referents of these terms remain U.S.A or U.K-centric popular media texts and white, cisgender, middle-class women located in the U.S or U.K. In Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse’s highly influential *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (2006) for instance, there is no specific examination of racial/ethnic or cultural identity in online fandom spaces. In another significant anthology—*Fan Culture: Theory/ Practice* (Larsen and Zubernis 2012a)—only one essay references tensions around race in fandom spaces, framing it as an exceptional case (Coker 2012). Even a more contemporary publication, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Fan Cultures* (Duits, Zwaan, and Reijnders 2014), has only one essay explicitly on racial issues with Steve Redhead (2014) discussing racism in (non transformative) football fandoms. Further, while Transformative Works and Cultures, the journal that is currently one of the
most established platform for disseminating critical work in the field, did host a specific issue of race in fandom in 2011, the only article that referenced western media fandom communities (Stanfill 2011) did not focus on non-white fans within those spaces.

Relatedly, even though there is an increasing acknowledgment of the fact that fan communities are now global, the material ramifications of this development is rarely acknowledged. While there has been some recent work on transnational and transcultural fandoms (Chin and Morimoto 2013) these are invariably located as outside of “the fandom” and usually somewhat ‘othered’ due to unfamiliarity with the source texts. As one scholar in the field (that I leave anonymous) once told me, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to present about a fandom everyone already knew about?” In another instance a Brazilian fan scholar noted, “I’m so tired of being on the ‘Brazilian panel’ at conferences, instead of being included within Fan Studies tracks.” Any discussion of transnational and transcultural fandom then seems to circulate around fan cultures that are demonstrably outside the dominant paradigm that grants certain texts and fandoms canonicity, either by geographic location or language. Examples of these areas include studies of Korean pop (K-Pop), Japanese manga (comics) and anime (animation), and Bollywood (Madrid-Morales and Lovric 2015; Newitz 1994; Punathambekar 2007). In some cases where the source texts are the same, fans from non-U.S.A and U.K. locations are differentiated from “the fandom” by language-use, such as Larisa Mikhaylova’s study of Russian Star Trek (2009) fandom.

This is not to say that this lack has gone unnoticed. In his study, Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction (2016), André M. Carrington dwells on the ways in which despite there being, “a generation of cultural criticism published about the ways in which popular texts resonate with the interests of attentive, actively engaged fans and academic researchers concerned with gender, sexuality, class, national identities, and changing technologies” (1), it has failed to provide the tools for dealing with the
effects of racial identity, particularly Blackness, within the genre. More particularly, Rebecca Wanzo’s (2015) significant intervention into the genealogy of fan studies as a field, points to the glaring whiteness of its bibliographies and the excision of the theoretical apparatuses and academic histories that do take into account the influence of race on the experience and interpretation of popular culture. Wanzo’s focus is specifically on African American cultures and the rich tradition of criticism that has resulted around popular music, film, and television but the critique holds as strongly for other apparatuses that foreground racial, ethnic and cultural identity along with gender and sexuality. Wanzo observes that this excision and erasure is grounded not only in a failure to ‘see’ race and specifically whiteness as a racialised identity as opposed to a universal one, but also underlines the fact that, “One of the reasons race may be neglected is because it troubles some of the claims—and desires—at the heart of fan studies scholars and their scholarship” (1.4). Kristen Warner, another scholar working on African American fandoms points out, “The stark reality is that the only people who are allowed to be visible within fandom and imagined to be fans by the media industries are White men and women” (2015, 33; my emphasis). It is also key to note that both these critiques reference Fiske’s lament of not being able to find non-white fandoms, and point out that such continued oversight in both media industries and fan studies is not coincidental but rather a matter of institutionalised erasure where some fans, both men and women, are simply not imaginable as fans.

This ‘failure’ is a crucial point and forms the impetus behind much of my own work. In this dissertation, following on from Wanzo’s intervention, I wish to ‘trouble’ some of fan studies’ foundational ideas, histories and recurring theoretical paradigms, specifically

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3 It must be said here that ‘whiteness’ as a monolithic category or default, has been complicated by numerous theorists (Frankenberg 1997; Lipsitz 2006; Nakayama and Krizek 1995; Roediger 1999; Roediger 2006) and this applies to fandom participants as well. However as Spivak (1990) has theorised, identity positions are often articulated ‘strategically’ by minority groups in order to gain visibility. I will be interrogating the complex historical interstices of racialised identity categories further in chapters two and three.
by bringing issues of racial, ethnic and cultural identity into direct conversation with them. By doing so I will demonstrate how there are markedly different experiences and forms of “the fandom” and “the fangirl” that interrupt and disrupt dominant ideas of what occurs in such fan spaces.

I’d also like to highlight Stein’s comment on the importance of fanfiction as pornography and in particular, the related “ever-evolving traditions of slash fanfiction” (11). Work on slash writing communities has dominated the field from its foundational texts and has, perhaps inadvertently, lead to its elevation over other types of fanfiction (Russ 1985; Lamb and Veith 1986; Penley 1992). Subsequent fan studies projects, when focussing on fanfiction, have also had a pervasive focus on slash writing, seeing it as a largely unique space. The fascination of such communities seems to stem from the apparent disjuncture between who these fans are (initially seen as heterosexual (white) women but now seen as increasingly queer identified (white) women) and what they ship in terms of character pairings. This fascination has had the effect of sectioning off genres of fan activity and lead to trends of fanwork being seen in isolation, rather than as a continuum with many fans moving between these spaces, especially with current, more fluid media platforms at work. It is to disrupt this model that I have also allowed my analysis to move between these different genres and spaces throughout this dissertation, most particularly in my discussion of fanfiction in chapters four and five.

Primarily then I will examine these fan spaces as a continuum, with attention to what extent they hold up as liberatory, progressive and inclusive when all the aforementioned aspects of identity are given equal weight. In this process I also directly critique an additional rhetorical strategy that is increasingly common in the field, in which there is an acknowledgement of the diversity of participants (in a footnote or an aside), which is followed up by a simultaneous disavowal or deflection of the need to actually engage with these issues. This deflection or disavowal can only continue to function in a
space where racial and ethnic identity is somehow seen as ‘additional’ to gender and sexuality. This is not a unique theoretical insistence, being one that has also plagued disciplines like feminism and queer studies on an institutional level (Hooks 1982; Carby 1996; Thomlison 2012; Moreton-Robinson 2000; E. P. Johnson 2001; Ford 2010). The discomfort or ‘trouble’ that is introduced by an insistence on foregrounding race in the functioning of fan communities and by extension fan studies has obviously been a concern of mine throughout my research. However, a regrettable (but fortuitous for my thesis perhaps) recent event within my fandom communities brought these issues into focus in an extremely pointed way. I include an account of it here, in my introduction, because I feel that it brings together the main threads of my overarching arguments particularly well.

“But what if it’s not about Race?”—Ancient fandom proverb

The release of the latest iteration of the influential science fiction/fantasy (SF/F) Star Wars franchise, The Force Awakens (2015), caused a great deal of excitement for fans across the world. The film was extremely successful across the spectrum—in terms of box office receipts, with critics, and media fandom communities. The movie was praised in particular for the way in which it (re)deployed the familiar narratives of the original series but broadened their meanings by placing unexpected individuals within those roles. Particularly the roles of Rey (Daisy Ridley), Finn (John Boyega) and Poe Dameron (Oscar Isaac) played on established archetypes—The Chosen One, The Conflicted Hero, The Hot-shot Pilot—but due to their particular individual identities, forced a reconsideration of how these story arcs usually play out when given to white male actors (Lane 2016). Indeed only one new main character role was given to a white male actor, the antagonist Kylo Ren (Adam Driver).
This was largely seen as cause for celebration, particularly amongst media fan communities that have seen increasing support for diverse casts that disrupt societal manifestations of sexism and racism. In terms of the fanwork produced, the characters of Finn and Poe initially generated a significant amount of attention and traction, as the chemistry between the two actors had a predictable effect on fans who gravitate towards the genre of slash. What was a departure from historical trends (wherein fans have tended to gravitate to conventionally attractive white male actors) was that John Boyega is of Nigerian-British descent while Oscar Isaac is from Guatemala.

For some non-white slash fans in particular this was a sign that fandom had finally found the ‘right’ combination of plot, character type and chemistry that had so far remained elusive over fifty-odd years of documented slash writing. While non-white characters have occasionally been placed in secondary pairings that might garner some amount of fanwork, particularly fanfiction, they have never been the focus of those ships that have generated fandom juggernauts that spawn thousands of works like those from television shows like *Supernatural* (2005-present) or movies like those in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU).

However, as some time went by, the fandom saw a sharp drop off in the works around the pairing, with another one coming to the forefront, one that paired Kylo Ren with a side character who had only a few lines in the movie, General Hux (Domnhall Gleeson.) The pairing is, at the time of writing this introduction, the juggernaut pairing in the fandom, with fanfiction writers having invented most of Hux’s personality from scratch, adhering around popular fandom tropes. This development was paired with the fact that the major het ship (fandom parlance for heterosexual) had formed around the characters of Kylo Ren and Rey, once again cutting out Finn, who canonically had a narrative arc that placed them in a close relationship.
These trends were set out in graphical form on a popular fandom blog run by a fan, destination-toast, who occasionally analyses at the number of fanworks being written on the popular archival fansite, Archiveofourown.org (AO3). The post was an extremely disheartening one for many non-white fans (and allies) who pointed out that an insidious pattern seen in fandom after fandom—that of the sidelining and erasure of non-white characters—was being played out all over again. What made this repetition more significant, was that this time it was occurring in relation to a source text that, for once, had placed those characters in roles of prominence. The fact that this time fandom writers had decided to pick out a character that had not only very few lines, but also had participated in large-scale genocide and been depicted with distinctly Nazi-style imagery within the film, added fuel to the outrage (destinationtoast, Tumblr 2016).

In response to this, a fan (whose name I will retract for reasons of privacy but who has been a long-time participant in fan spaces and holds considerable cultural capital in them) wrote a piece of meta-analysis, termed simply meta within fandom parlance, about such trends in fandom. A particular focus of the meta was slash ships, as that formed the focus of the original statistical analysis. In it she argued against the role of internalised racism on the part of fanwriters in this erasure. Instead, she blamed those fans who, according to her, made the writing of non-white characters a “joyless” experience; and further one which was “framed in fear.” These fans, she argued, discouraged fanwriters from exploring the pairing by raising the bogeyman of racism with regard to the use of particular tropes in conjunction with the identities of Poe and Finn as Latino and Black men respectively.

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4 While I am using the Chicago, Author-date citation system (16th ed) throughout this thesis I have modified it slightly when quoting from fan-blogs in order to indicate their source more precisely. As a significant part of my thesis will be examining the effects of the move between different fandom platforms, I think it is important for me to indicate their sources more precisely.
In essence, the piece argued that it was such “policing” that was turning people off writing “fun” stories about the characters and that such “activism” was therefore ruining everyone’s enjoyment of the fannish space. The piece ended with a “call for civility” in fan spaces, laid out a specific history of the creation of the AO3 and the allied Organisation of Transformative Works (OTW) as a “safe space” for fanwriters, especially those who wrote slash fanfiction, to enjoy themselves while pushing the boundaries of “acceptable” erotic writing.5

Some fans reacted positively to this framing but for those who have long been concerned about ideas of representation and diversity in fanwork, it was extremely alienating and dehumanising (“Your Vagina is a Bigot; My Vagina is a Saint – Fanlore” 2016). I would have to agree with the latter group, not just in terms of the language and arguments used by the post, but also in its rewriting of a common fandom history that completely erased the multiple instances in which non-white fans have attempted to point out the deep racism evident in fandom’s treatment of chromatic characters. It is true, however, that the post’s version is a history that has been validated and reinscribed many times over, including within fan studies. This is not to say that there is no truth in this valourising narrative of the creation of these subcultural spaces, but rather to contest the dismissal of critiques of the same as a new phenomenon by fans who simply want to “score points” in order to “appear progressive.” This, in my opinion, is a gross misreading of the current dynamics at play in media fandom spaces.

5 The Organisation of Transformative Works is a fan-run and fan-funded non-profit organisation that is engaged in various activities that promote a better understanding of media fandom communities as well as hosting one of the largest archives of fanwork (unsupported by advertisement revenue) the Archiveofourown.org. Established in 2007, its mission statement states that, “We are proactive and innovative in protecting and defending our work from commercial exploitation and legal challenge. We preserve our fannish economy, values, and creative expression by protecting and nurturing our fellow fans, our work, our commentary, our history, and our identity while providing the broadest possible access to fannish activity for all fans” (“About Archive of Our Own” 2016).

It also hosts Fanlore.org, a historical wiki-archive that records various fandom events and offers incorporation of other online fanfiction archives that might be closing down. Additionally it runs various legal advocacy efforts on behalf of fans with regard to transformative fanwork.
The post’s framing of what “the fandom” is and has been is however rather useful to me as it encapsulates my primary argument in this dissertation, that is, that whiteness has remained the unexamined structuring force within discussions of the workings of media fandom communities up to the current moment. As I have elucidated earlier, Wanzo’s (2015) argument illuminates one aspect of this structured exclusion by examining the erasure of those fans, fan practices, and academic analyses that identified themselves as specifically African American from the fan studies canon. Building from that position, I posit that the unexamined yet assumed whiteness of media fan spaces has allowed for successive theorisations about their workings to have now solidified into accepted histories. This positioning now forces any consideration of racial dynamics within those spaces to be considered as something additional to, rather than constitutive of, media fan identity. Since the activities of (white) women interested in reworking popular cultural texts have been the target of societal scorn (like Cath once again), the project for the reclamation of their practices has constructed as a very particular narrative around the ways in which fan communities engage with ‘difference’ and how fanworks engage with bodies and sexualities in particular.

In this theoretical construction, any discussion of race then becomes an exception, an interruption, and a bringer of ‘fandom drama.’ It also, inevitably, prompts rhetorical strategies that acknowledge that while of course racism within fandom communities plays some part in such trends, they are clearly more affected by the depictions of such characters in the source media. Another strategy is to place the blame of such historical erasures on structural racism in society itself that such communities merely mirror. This, of course, is in direct opposition to the very sustained strand of theorisation that sees these spaces as very much resistant and subversive in their exploration of queer identities vis-à-vis the equally socially dominant notion of enforced heteronormativity.
This contradictory stance remains at the heart of most conceptualisations of fandom communities, particularly queer-coded ones, where theorisations of ‘safe spaces’ rarely account for the erasures and silences they perpetuate, despite having participants point out repeatedly that those are damaging (Lackner et al. 2006; Busse 2006). Further, given how often fandom is framed around these perceptions of pleasure for its community, the absence of analysis with regard to how complicated the evocation of that pleasure can be for erased or marginalised fans is glaring. These conceptualisations then rarely account for those fans who have never been granted access to this safety or those who have to toe the dominant narrative line to be granted access or be welcomed. It is here that I wish to draw on Sara Ahmed’s (2010) concept of the “feminist killjoy” which is also bound up deeply in the ideas of disruptions of shared pleasure and happiness. Ahmed posits powerfully that,

To be unseated by the table of happiness might be to threaten not simply that table, but what gathers around it, what gathers on it. When you are unseated, you can even get in the way of those who are seated, those who want more than anything to keep their seats. To threaten the loss of the seat can be to kill the joy of the seated. How well we recognise the figure of the feminist killjoy! How she makes sense! Let’s take the figure of the feminist killjoy seriously. One feminist project could be to give the killjoy back her voice. (para 9)

This formulation of what is at stake, as it were, in the maintenance of “the table of happiness” is remarkably prescient when applied to fandom spaces as well. My dissertation is primarily structured around the question of what it means to be a “fandom killjoy,” for one’s pleasure to be threatening to the invocation of a broadly inclusive, women-centric and queer-coded community. I posit that to be a “fandom killjoy” as a non-white fan is a deeply alienating experience, as it involves either the internalised acceptance that certain pleasures and explorations are simply unavailable to one, or to be identified as an individual that consistently ‘brings drama’ to fan spaces. This is an extremely fraught process and one that animates my entire project.
Additionally, in my discussions of the meta-analysis on Twitter, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, an assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania who has been a long-time participant in fan spaces, noted extremely presciently, “How can fandoms know how many fans of color there are if most of us have been passing for decades? The answer is that they have no idea” (Thomas 2016). My theorisations draw on this notion of passing as well, as non-white fans have, as Thomas points out, often passed in and out of fandom spaces while being assumed white until proven otherwise. This assumption structures not just fandom communities but, as I have made clear, fan studies as well.

In order to interrupt this particular entrenched narrative this dissertation has to follow multiple tracks, both in terms of re-examining the history of such spaces as well as interrogating their contemporary workings. As Thomas also pointed out to me in our brief conversation about the controversial piece referenced above—as yet another attempt to reframe media fandom spaces as being ‘invaded’ by ‘social justice warriors’—part of the dismantling of these assumptions has to be a ‘filling in’ of lost or simply ignored histories of participation. This is precisely the other animating impulse of this project—an active tracing of these narratives, wherein non-white fans have been present in, contributed to, and critiqued these spaces, only to be repeatedly glossed over. I will buttress this contention with data and personal narratives drawn from one-on-one interviews, conducted with a total of thirty-nine fans that identify broadly, as ‘fans of colour,’ though their interpretations of that term vary widely, located in a nine countries. My aim in doing so is to highlight how these narratives show that media fandom spaces have always been demographically diverse, though certain mechanisms in their functioning, particularly on internet-mediated platforms have led to an elision of this

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6 The term “social justice warrior” is generally used derogatorily, to refer to someone who is overtly ‘politically correct’ in matters pertaining to socially progressive causes. Social Justice Warriors are often seen to be policing free speech and imposing dogmatic and codified interpretations of various strands of identity politics.
identity. This has resulted in their presence, once declared, being seen as an exception. Thomas’ notion of ‘passing’ influences my theorisations on much of this, and I argue that the uptick in discussions of racism in fan spaces and fanworks is not as influenced by an increase in number of these fans, as it is by their increasing confidence in claiming these identities and building communities around them.

This is not to say that my arguments lead me in a completely oppositional direction. I continue to maintain that media fandom spaces do function as online spaces wherein creative and transformational activities around popular cultural media texts allow for significant critical interventions into hegemonic narratives about gender, sexuality, race, religion, and disability, amongst other axes of identity. Nonetheless, these interventions are far from linear or uncontested, resulting in messy interactions that cannot be neatly mapped out onto theorisations of subversion, resistance, and co-option, particularly as they are currently articulated within the discipline. The silence around such fissures is particularly ironic as fandom spaces themselves have never been more vociferous in debating them, even as these debates disrupt, sometimes acrimoniously, ‘normal’ fandom practices that are posited to accrue around pleasure and mutual enjoyment. As I have maintained before, these “fandom killjoys,” are frequently accused of ‘bringing drama’ into fandom spaces. It is this spirit of disruption that I wish to incorporate into my own work, so as to animate broader, more inclusive and more critical theoretical paradigms within fan studies so as to truly reflect the dynamic nature of online media fan communities today.

**Rebuilding Maps: Outline of Chapters**

The organisation of this dissertation accrues around a successive querying of the configurations of media fandom communities—historical, methodological, and
structural—with each query based on a questioning or broadening of current theorisations about their functioning. In my first chapter, I examine the historical roots of media fandom communities, with a focus on the moment of their transition to internet-mediated platforms. Although fandom participants continue to interact in both offline and online ways, it is undeniable that the majority of fan activity is structured by online interactions in some way. The influence of this shift has so far been examined in terms of it leading to an explosion of fan activity in the 1980’s and 1990’s by allowing for greater connectivity across geographical distances as well as easier hosting and sharing of fanworks (Busse and Hellekson 2006; Booth 2010). What has not been examined in enough detail so far, is the ways in which this move online was affected in specifically gendered and racialised ways.

This chapter will use both cyberfeminist and postcolonial theorists to analyse the ways in which the cybercultural terrain for women (and specifically non-white women) has functioned, and how investment in fandom communities has affected this navigation (Haraway 1991; Sandoval 1994; Stone 1996; Wajcman 2007). Far from the non-gendered and non-racialised domain that was first envisaged by cyberculture theorists such as Michael Benedikt (1991) and Howard Rheingold (1993), the Internet and its associated technologies emerged as uniquely challenging terrains to negotiate, with feminist, queer and postcolonial critics raising questions around issues of resource allocation that dictate hierarchies of use and ease of access, their potential for encouraging escapism from ‘real life’, the ghettoization of queer/alternative spaces and questions of (dis)embodiment, etc. (Baudrillard 1983; Robins and Webster 1999; Fernández 1999; Franklin 2006; Nayar 2008). The movement of women online is attributed to, amongst other factors, easier graphical interfaces being designed and so removing the need for complicated coding and specialised technical knowledge (Cherny and Weise 1996; Compaine 2001). This is certainly a significant factor, but when looked at in terms of media fandom participants,
who have historically been quite comfortable with technology, this question needs to be
examined in context with more than these generalised ideas.

Cyberspace was a terrain that was far from easily navigable for women in the
beginning of the Internet age, but the reasons for the gender gap in the “digital divide” as
it was termed are further complicated when the activity of subcultural groups like media
fandom are taken into consideration. For instance, Nina Wakeford (1997), in her
examination of the online activities of women in the early 1990’s registers their initial
difficulties in navigating these spaces. Wakeford goes on to examine some of the
explicitly feminist websites that sprang up as a response to this characterisation of
cyberspace. Despite such efforts, Janelle Brown’s (2000) tracking of these sites found
that such ‘catch- all’ feminist websites did not succeed. Brown’s analysis is significant
because it registers, though ironically does not see as meaningful, the success of
Mightybigtv.com (a website devoted to the discussion of television shows) on a self-
identified women-centred network. This is a clear indication that the close offline
communities that had formed around discussions of television shows such as Star Trek
(1966-69) and The Man from U.N.C.L.E (1964-68) had found an online forum (Derecho
2008).

These were well-established fandoms in their own right before the advent of the
Internet, but were significantly affected by it. Susan Clerc (1996) for instance theorises
that women fans, despite being comfortable with the medium, did not engage with the
Internet until enough of their fan circles moved online. This highlights an important
feature mediating women’s presence online; that of community. My examination of this
move will deploy the ideas of cyberfeminist theories such as Donna Haraway’s (1991)
“Cyborg Manifesto”, and perhaps more crucially, Chêla Sandoval’s (1994) subsequent
complication of that paradigm. I will discuss both the centrality of community building
or “weaving” to these conceptualisations of women’s potential uses of the Internet as well
as Sandoval’s concomitant early insistence that ‘women’ was not a universal category, even within cyberspace. These theoretical interventions will allow me to discuss how media fandom practices influenced the establishment of participant women’s identities online in a nuanced and intersectional manner (Crenshaw 1991; Bobo 1995; hooks 1996; Rodríguez 2003). In the analysis of my interviews with non-white fans in particular, I wish to show how these engagements straddled multiple aspects of their identity, not limited to gender and sexuality. Since my respondents are also drawn from multiple countries, this also gives me the opportunity to examine the ways in which fandom communities have gone global in material ways and how these different entry points have inflected individual pathways into fandom spaces.

These aspects of the functioning of fandom communities are essential to explore because they provide a unique snapshot of the ways in which such communicative technologies have been used by those individuals who have historically been subject to the most hostility within such spaces. While these narratives are all too frequently dominated by discussions of harassment, silencing, and outright violence, fandom participants often report it to be a space which facilitated the formation of not only personal connections and broader community formation, but also the honing of technological skills like coding and website management. While there has been some discussion of fans’ leveraging of technology in academic work on fandom, this has usually taken the form of analyses of fan-vidding and building archival sites (Coppa 2008; Lothian 2013). What has not been examined, so far, is what the deployment of these somewhat specialised skills means for conceptualisations of “networked women,” and

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7 I refer to intersectionality in the light of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1991) powerful formulation of the complex layering of discrimination that Black women in particular have historically faced. This formulation has been adopted across disciplines to underline the need for multifaceted approaches to analyses of various issues that take into account race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and disability amongst other aspects of identity.
specifically non-white women, who are almost entirely absent from scholarly work in the area of early cyberfeminist studies.

I will track these activities through the personal accounts of my respondents in order to (re)insert their presence in fandom historical accounts that have, so far, had no space for them. Additionally, building from a discursive analysis of my interviews I will also explore the ramifications of non-white fan participation in English-language anime and manga fandoms. Scholarship on the non-Asian fans of the genre in these spaces has so far concentrated on them as undifferentiatedly ‘American’, but, as my research will demonstrate, there are multiple possible identities within this categorisation including diasporic and immigrant individuals. The activities of these individuals within media fandom spaces have so far not been recorded. My focus then will be on the deployment of digital skills by these individuals in the context of translating media in other languages so as to facilitate fannish exchange. While the labour of fandom participants in building media fan communities has often been mentioned in histories of fandom, this chapter will take a specific look at individual experiences of such work.

My second chapter moves from examining these differential entry-pathways to my central conceptual positioning in this dissertation—the theorisation of contemporary online media fandom as a postcolonial cyberspace. My primary aim in doing so is to take on Wanzo’s (2015) challenge as referenced earlier, and show the ways in which using theoretical apparatuses that require a consideration of multiple axes of identity are productive of more nuanced analyses of media fandom communities. Here I build on Sandoval’s (1994) early intervention, also referenced in my first chapter, to argue that postcolonial theory is uniquely equipped to analyse the complex and shifting identity positions and power relations at work within media fandom’s communicative platforms as well its individual transnational and transcultural exchanges. The adoption of a postcolonial cybercultural theoretical approach has several effects. Firstly, it forces a
(re)examination of these communities in terms of their relationship to media objects (that are produced under the conditions that can be termed neo/colonial); secondly, it foregrounds the importance of their demographic makeup; and thirdly, it puts a spotlight on the unevenness of internet-mediated platforms themselves as related to geopolitical positioning.

Interestingly, my decision to employ a postcolonial theoretical lens in my analysis of media fandom communities was one that I made with a lot of trepidation. Looking back, this hesitation is puzzling, especially since my research training has always been influenced by this school of thought. Part of the reason for this vacillation is the fact that postcolonial theory as a discipline has been slow to analyse the functioning of cyberspace (Fernández 1999; Nayar 2008; Shah 2015). Additionally, it has also shied away from a critical engagement with popular culture as a whole and this gap has been commented on frequently (Hall 1998; Featherstone 2005; Kato 2007). This lack could perhaps be explained by its traditional focus on “high culture,” or conversely, its suspicion of popular culture as “inauthentic” (Devadas and Prentice 2011). However, because of the discipline’s preoccupation with the operations, and possible interruptions, of representational power, it provides a powerful set of tools for fan studies scholars to interrogate the ways in which such power circulates within media fandom communities.

It is within these gaps, or rather areas of possibility, that I make my case for the positioning of media fandom communities as postcolonial cybercultural spaces. This framing is particularly productive when these communities are examined as transnational and transcultural interpretative spaces that interact with hegemonic popular cultural texts produced by the Global North. Crucially, these texts are seen to have distinctly neo-colonial and neo-imperialist effects on global audiences. Indeed, the process of fashioning ‘global audiences’ has itself been driven by the forces of neoliberal capitalism and globalisation. Operationalising these conceptual tools has allowed me to ground my
discussion of media fandom spaces within a larger consideration of what this global mediascape implies with regard to the circulation of neo-imperialist representational power.

In such a scenario, the possibilities of resistance or “talking back” to structures of representational power, in this case popular cultural texts that are circulated in ever increasingly “smooth”—to borrow Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s (2001) term—media and informational flows, become of more interest than ever before. Hardt and Negri’s analysis of the functioning of imperialism in a modern context is, of course, quite complex. What I’d like to draw from it at this stage is an understanding of the ways in which multinational entertainment corporations extend the operations of neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism in the interests of the Global North, and how these operations have also superseded purely centre-periphery models. That is to say, popular cultural texts produced by entertainment conglomerates often perpetuate hegemonic notions of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, history, and so on, but their effects are now dispersed along lines of interpretation that cannot be mapped directly onto national borders. These systems of domination operate not only on populations that would be termed ‘postcolonial’ in a traditional sense—let us say the release of Disney films in India—but also on groups of individuals, who may be diasporic or immigrant or otherwise liminal, currently located within the boundaries of the neo-colonial state who are also subject to them. That is not to say that these national borders are now unimportant, but that postcolonial audiences for these texts are more diverse and mobile than previously conceptualised.

As audiences and interpretative communities that have been repeatedly framed as active, self-reflexive and engaged, media fandom communities offer an opportunity to interrogate how contemporary media texts that circulate in a neoliberal, globalised economy are received and interpreted. By using a postcolonial cybercultural critique, I
demonstrate how this negotiation is a fraught and messy one, not conducive to easy formulations of subversion and resistance. This critical lens will also allow me to conceptualise the overlapping aspects of non-white fan identities without constructing artificial and simplistic boundaries along national borders. Once again, I will utilise my interview data to show how differing demographics engage (or not) with issues of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity within fandom spaces.

Additionally, building on my arguments in chapter one, I hypothesise that part of the reason that there is a seeming increase in the level of engagement with issues around fan identity is a question of medium. That is to say, that patterns of platform usage, especially the move to more dialogic spaces like Tumblr from more closed-off communities on mailing lists and sites like Livejournal has increased the likelihood of dominant fannish interpretations of texts (that often centre around whiteness) to be challenged and critiqued. Finally, I will interrogate the idea of ‘global’ fandom with a focus on how a postcolonial cybercultural framework forces a reconsideration of fan identity and levels of participation that does not limit itself to nationalistic borders. If media fandom communities today are truly ‘global,’ then analyses of them can no longer elide the specificities of demographics they survey, as this very often leads to assumptions about these spaces based on very homogenous sample sizes.

My third chapter extends this consideration of fandom as a postcolonial cyberspace with a consideration of praxis, that is, by examining the material ways in which non-white fans are negotiating the spaces outlined in the first two chapters, at the current moment. Building from my arguments in chapter two, this theorisation is contextualised in today’s complex global mediasphere. Specifically, it will take into account the very intricate ways in which privilege and whiteness still structure the most influential media industries based in the Global North but whose reception is complicated by various local factors. The issue of what makes for authentic representations of marginalised communities within Western
English-language media is an extremely fraught one and it is not my intention to elevate any one mode of how ideas of representation may map onto complex matrices of identity that often overlap.

Nevertheless, it is equally undeniable that within Western media industries, the issue of pushing for better roles for non-white actors, better projects that centre diverse storylines and promoting more creators from non-white communities is being discussed more than ever, both within and outside fandom. Fans and media commentators now routinely use social media channels to highlight repeated patterns of discrimination and erasure. For instance, when the Academy Award nominations were announced in January 2016, it was revealed that no non-white actors had been nominated in any category for the second year running. To bring attention to this bias, some fans, who were also users of the microblogging site twitter, coined the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite as a spontaneous protest. The protest went viral, even leading to the Academy announcing changes to its voting system (Feinberg 2016). There are also examples of such creative fan-based activism and praxis within the context of media fandom, coalescing around efforts to make space for different interpretations of texts and media that are almost always centred on white characters. It is important to note here that this critique functions with regard to both the source texts and the dominant fan texts that are produced and circulated around them.

I frame this discussion around three axes. Firstly, I analyse the workings of fan activism and the ways it is currently being conceptualised in fan studies, paying specific attention to the ways in which intersectionality is still absent in these discussions. Secondly, I theorise the negotiation between notions of authenticity and representation within popular cultural texts and their reception by non-white fans, utilising the theoretical framework introduced by John Jackson (2005). For Jackson, the relationship between individuals and their racialised identity is productively framed not by a
prescriptive “authenticity” that implies a validating authority, but by a flexible, self-reflexive constitutive process that he terms “racial sincerity.” I find this to be a particularly useful framework to use while theorising the articulations of individual identity within media fandom, as it allows for a much-needed level of nuance when approaching such complex and non-linear negotiations. And finally, I analyse the distinctly postcolonial fannish practice of “racebending” that is increasingly visible on fannish platforms like Tumblr.\footnote{Racebending is a term used to describe when characters that are described as being of one particular race or ethnicity are recast with those of another. This can be a form of whitewashing but is increasingly seen within fandom spaces as a resistant practice wherein non-white characters are placed in central roles that have invariably been written explicitly for white characters or given to white actors. This is a practice most seen in visual forms of fanwork such as fanart.}

With regard to fan activism in particular, there has been a steadily increasing interest on this category in recent years (Earl and Kimport 2009; Brough and Shresthova 2012; Mukherjee 2011; Cochran 2012). These theorists have broadly chosen to frame this as a relatively new development, considering the operations of fan-focussed non-profit organisations like the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), as well as individual campaigns run by celebrities such as Misha Collins and John Green to raise funds for philanthropic causes or to raise awareness around issues such as cyber bullying and harassment (Jenkins 2012; Stein 2015; Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik 2016). These theorisations conceptualise fans as promoters of “civic action” of various kinds, drawing from ideas of fan spaces as committed to progressive societal values and action. Fans are often seen as altruistic in their efforts to make the world a better place, relying on specific fan practices such as building community ties, crafting art and memes and witty popular culture-based commentary and boosting calls to action within established networks. There is also a focus on how these activities can be creative and ‘fun’ rather than the ‘doom and gloom’ that other serious campaigns involve. In my examination of these practices I will point to the dangers of such an approach, wherein particularities of
complex situations and problems are often glossed over to allow for more ‘fun’ approach these issues. Relatedly, I will examine how fans-as-activists are not a particularly new conceptualisation when it comes to non-white fans, who have historically been asked to back projects that centre non-white lead characters and focus on specific communities as very much a political project. Once again, Wanzo’s (2015) mediations on African American fandom in particular will lead into my examination of how fans negotiate ideas of authenticity.

While notions of authenticity remain highly suspect in academic discourse, with notions of biological essentialism, gatekeeping and reification of culturally conservative identities on highly suspect markers being rightfully critiqued, it is also true that the brunt of institutional discrimination continues to be faced by those who continue to be subject to these markers. I draw on Stuart Hall’s (1996) notion of “a politics of representation” to discuss the complex ways in which fans who are invested in seeing ‘themselves’ in popular media texts and fan spaces attempt to negotiate the faultiness of these ideas, while also making space for multiple interpretations of canonical texts that privilege whiteness. By “faultiness” I mean something akin to Hall’s notion of the slipperiness and contingency with which all notions of ‘good’ representation of any marginalised racial, ethnic or cultural identity must contend.

The dialogic nature of fan spaces has been seen to facilitate the interrogation of identity in multiple ways, primarily around gender and sexuality. I wish to interrogate this assumption in two ways—firstly, by showing that these examinations have remained largely uninflected by issues of racial and ethnic identity in popular fandoms, and secondly, how these same traditions are facilitating a multifaceted approach to issues of representation especially with regard to transformative fanworks. As I have outlined earlier, Jackson’s notions of racial “sincerity” versus “authenticity” inform my conceptualisation on how the relationships of fans to popular cultural texts function in
terms of imperfect but powerful resonances. These relationships, I argue, cannot be framed in simplistic terms as fans consistently question and reinterpret these texts, leading to a multiplicity of authenticities rather than any monolithic construction. My primary case study to demonstrate this process will be, as mentioned earlier, the practice of racebending. Through analyses of individual case-studies and fan interviews, I will establish this practice as distinctly postcolonial in nature, as fans consciously ‘make space’ for differential interpretations of source texts, while also critiquing derivative fanworks that perpetuate erasures around issues of racial/cultural/ethnic identity.

My fourth and fifth chapters work in concert to outline my theorisations around perhaps the most studied aspect of fan culture within media fan communities—that of fanfiction. In the fourth chapter, I begin by considering the ways in which these communities have been seen to function, both in terms their communitarian structures as well as in their digital infrastructure, that is, how fanworks are created, archived and shared within these structures. I organise my critique through a technosocial neologism that, as I will demonstrate, incorporates both these aspects—I term them “fandom algorithms.” In this I draw primarily from Lisa Nakamura’s (2013) theorisation of the workings of racism within digital spaces, which she terms as “glitch racism.” For Nakamura, such discussions only occur when there is a specific controversy around an episode of overt discrimination, therefore marking the occurrence off from ‘normal’ behaviour. This distracts attention from the fact that racial identity often structures that very same ‘normality’ in a fundamental fashion. This framing also contributes to the idea that racism in digital spaces is a corruption of an otherwise functioning platform, an error or “glitch” that can be addressed by coding changes. Additionally, this allows participants in these spaces to deflect individual responsibility for these events by characterising it as an error endemic to the system.
Using a similar framework, I propose a flipping of the dominant view of the operation of racism within fandom communities. As I have discussed in chapter one, one of the only ways in which I was able to track the specific actions, and indeed presence, of non-white fans within fandom spaces historically, was to pay attention to points of dissent where a certain controversy was discussed. As with the process explicated above, this has had the effect of terming ‘normal’ fandom operations as ‘corrupted’ by certain racist actions and events. This has the effect of eliding the ways in which media fandom structures actively work to uphold the status quo of whiteness as default. To demonstrate this I will consider certain foundational aspects of fandom scholars’ theorisations about how media fandom communities work. These include—fanfiction communities as intertextual interpretative matrices (Pugh 2005; Busse, Lothian, and Reid 2007; Busse and Gray 2011); fanfiction and ideas of subversion and co-optation (Derecho 2006; B. Thomas 2011; Scodari 2003; Scodari 2012; L. Baker 2016); fanfiction’s relationship to canon (Coppa 2006b; Jamison 2013; Pande and Nadkarni 2013); fandom and escapism (Baym 2000; V. L. D. Robertson 2013; Chin 2010; Larsen and Zubernis 2012b); and finally the structures dictating fanwork archiving and organisation (Lothian 2013).

In each case, I approach these structures as fandom algorithms, which underpin many of the theorisations around media fandom communities as conceptualised to be neutral and adaptable to all characters, texts, and pairings equally. Any error or “glitch” is then seen to be an isolated event which can be corrected, rather than as a crucial operation of the structure as intended. I posit that by focussing on these events, not as errors, but as evidence of media fandom’s foundational operations allows a broad-based critique of the same, as opposed to than the rather ad-hoc approach that has characterised commentary on the issue so far. Further, this approach also allows me to destabilise the rhetorical strategy that allows fandom participants to deflect the responsibility for these consistent trends of marginalisation and prejudice in fanwork, as effects of a larger
institutional system for which they hold almost no responsibility. To demonstrate the workings of these algorithms, I use both case studies and respondent interviews to show how participation in ‘universal’ fandom mechanisms that are seen to be generative of shared pleasure and community often force non-white fans into the position of being “fandom killjoys.”

My fifth chapter follows on from this to zoom in, as it were, to the specific category of fannish “kink” in the context of the kinkmeme, a space where individual fans participate by leaving particular prompts for stories they would like to read and other fans fulfil them. These communities are very often anonymised (Wall 2010; Ellison 2013). As Stein’s (2015) formulation at the beginning of this introduction also underlines, the writing of fanfiction, most often slash, has primarily been theorised around ideas of romance and/or pornography written by women for women but as somewhat unencumbered by the (hetero)sexist and patriarchal expectations that structure these texts when commercially produced (Lamb and Veith 1986; Russ 1985; Penley 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992; Derecho 2006; Woledge 2006). This has been complicated further as more knowledge about the queer identities of participants has been gathered (Lackner, Lucas, and Reid 2006; Coppa 2006; Melannen, Dreamwidth 2010; Centrumlumina, Tumblr 2013).

However, what these discussions have not taken into account fully, is how the larger fields of porn studies and romance novel studies themselves have failed to acknowledge how they intersect, and in doing so have shored up assumptions about pornography versus romance as oppositional, fundamentally different genres. This process has also led to similar assumptions about their consumers, particularly in the case of ‘women,’ regarding the uses these texts are put to, and by whom. My detailed survey of both disciplines traces the workings of these assumptions, including their engagements with the role played by racial identity in the construction of how desire ‘works.’ Unsurprisingly, there is a paucity
of work in this area of intersection, with most analyses rotating once again around the axes of gender and sexuality.

Additionally, the assumptions around the participants of these spaces remain structured around specific correlations of gender and sexuality, that is, heterosexual women view and consume heterosexual pornography and romance, lesbian women consume similarly tailored material etc. I will demonstrate how these assumptions are open to significant slippages and therefore demand a reworking that allows for much greater fluidity. It is in this context that I place my analysis of fanfiction, with a focus on the notion of “kink” in particular regarding the rather unique space it occupies within the space, blurring the lines between ideas of the romantic and pornographic.

Specifically, I wish to interrogate current conceptualisations around how ‘women’ use these texts by including the recorded knowledge of the diverse gender and sexual identities of participants in fanfiction communities. While slash fanfiction has taken up the most space in academic theorisation about such writing, I argue that the genres of slash, femslash, and het are not watertight compartments and that a significant number of trends reflect across these spaces. Many fanwriters and readers can and do switch between all of these genres, while also exploring other non-normative relationship structures such as polyamory, as well as specific tropes that don’t map well onto established divides, such as genderswitching. While a large part of my arguments are in conversation with theorisations on slash writing, this is more in order to challenge the dominant theorisations of the field, rather than from a desire to mark it off from the rest of the fannish universe. My specific frame of reference will be the kinkmeme, a space that offers a unique perspective in respect to the slippages that I have so far considered.

I will now reflect on the methodological basis of this dissertation and locate myself within it. It is my aim for this project to be a historical, theoretical, and methodological challenge to established ‘truisms’ of fan studies. I believe that it is vital to interrogate and
expand these theoretical foundations, so as to reflect and engage more critically with the dynamics of contemporary media fandom communities.
Overview of Methodologies in Fan Studies

This project has inevitably been influenced by my own particular research background and has drawn from both cultural and literary studies as well as being grounded in postcolonial studies. This variety fits in quite well with the field, as it is a thoroughly interdisciplinary one. Fan studies has seen the use of a wide range of methodological strategies, drawing from anthropology (Bacon-Smith 1992), literary studies (Pugh 2005), cultural and media studies (Jenkins 1992) and psychoanalysis (Penley 1992). This has resulted in a welcome diversity of analytical frameworks and methodological approaches that have highlighted different aspects of fan communities under scholarly consideration. At the same time, this has approach has also led to some persistent blind spots.

In their review of methodology in fan studies, Adrienne Evans and Mafalda Stasi (2014) note that cultural and media studies as a discipline has always been marked by a suspicion of categorisation and definitions, instead, “emphasizing flexibility and fluidity with the aim of proceeding as a bricolage collective of methods, theories, ideas and concepts” (8). This has certainly been my own experience as I was encouraged to explore as many research directions as I could and allow my findings to lead me towards appropriate methodologies and theoretical frameworks. This is also in line with scholars like Christine Hine (2000) and Jeanette Monaco (2010) who advocate an open-ended, adaptive and multi-sited approach to social research methods. As Hine points out, “When we set out to research social interactions we cannot specify in advance just what form
those interactions will take, nor how we will be able to participate in or observe them” (2).

Another popular methodological choice for fan studies has been that of ethnography, though as Evans and Stasi (2014) point out, it has not been specifically identified as such in many accounts (Hills 2005). This hesitation can perhaps be traced to its identification with the operations of colonialism (Said 1978) and its implications for the relationship between the researcher and the fan community. Concerning the latter, fan scholars have argued that ethnography often necessitates taking an ‘outsider’ perspective on the workings of a community which also places the researcher in a position of interpretative power over it (Busse and Hellekson 2012; Freund and Fielding 2013). The relationship between researcher and fan community has been a sometimes fraught one as the position of ‘unbiased’ ethnographer can be seen to produce work,

[...] de-emphasizing the researcher’s fan positioning and potentially colonizing the fan. Meanwhile, in fan communities themselves, ‘academic’ positions have often been heavily managed and policed, where fans have reacted with concern about the possibility of being studied from the ‘outside. (Evans and Stasi 2014, 11)

I will go on to explicate the strategies that fans scholars have adopted to deal with these critiques in a moment, but at this point I would also like to interrogate the idea of “colonizing the fan” itself from my particular position as non-white scholar, and further, from a specifically postcolonial theoretical positioning. The framing of media fandom communities as subcultural and ‘powerless’ vis-à-vis the producers of popular media texts has also allowed for their unproblematic slotting into a vulnerable site/space that can be exploited by a researcher for their own benefit. This usage of specifically decolonial/postcolonial critiques of disciplines like anthropology and practices like ethnography to characterise the workings of communities dominated by white women fans who continue to hold considerable institutional privilege compared to the non-white
fans within those same spaces, has had some very troubling effects. For example, in my examination of fan activism in chapter three, I demonstrate that fan campaigns that do not keep these intersections of identity in mind, often reinscribe neo-colonial power differentials in the name of philanthropic activities. This is possible because the constructions of “fan-as-marginalised” in contemporary fan studies rarely goes beyond considerations of gender and sexuality. As Evans and Stasi (2014) also note,

Fan communities can resemble political constituencies in their structure, activities and emotions (van Zoonen 2004), but the potential for politicised fan activism needs to be realised in a specific situated context. For example, the increasing attention to fannish charitable enterprises such as the Harry Potter Alliance, which tackles a range of ‘social problems’ with the motto ‘the weapon we have is love’, suggesting an individualised, depoliticised neoliberal approach to structural injustice. (18-19)

It is my contention as well that this is a positioning that needs much more nuance, especially when the operations of race/racism are being interrogated within such subcultural, queer-identified spaces. In the course of my own research for this project, I have had significant difficulty when approaching incidents of overt and covert racism within these spaces. How does my position as a researcher, with its ethical responsibilities towards the spaces and participants I study, intersect with my research responsibilities towards highlighting power differentials between them? This is a difficult question, as was illustrated by my experiences while working on a co-authored paper on racial dynamics in fandoms that have accrued around queer female characters. As I had provided specific examples of problematic fanart, which showed clear indications of racist and colonialist underpinnings, my co-author and I received significant pushback from multiple peer reviewers who were uncomfortable with such specificity. Their contention, that I also saw the significance of, concerned the ways in which this framing would highlight only certain individuals, perhaps opening them up to repercussions far beyond what was warranted for their production of problematic fanart in an online setting.
My co-author and I ultimately did decide to remove those specific references, as the paper was not concerned primarily with fanart, however this process does illustrate how the more troubling instances of recorded prejudice within fandom spaces are rarely discussed. Whose ‘safe spaces’ do these considerations then privilege? And what patterns of erasure and deferment are encoded into these practices? Within this dissertation as well, I have only referred to patterns of racism, without identifying specific events. This has been a compromise between the competing needs of individual privacy but one that I acknowledge continues in some way to elide the fact that specific controversies, actions and discussions that are highly inflected with racism continue to be an everyday reality for non-white fans. This will be an issue that will continue to pose an ethical challenge to fan studies as a discipline and one that needs considerably more deliberation within the field.

To return to my discussion of the methodological discussions that have occurred within the discipline, the position of distanced researcher has been significantly complicated by successive scholars. Henry Jenkins has used the term “aca-fan” to acknowledge his dual identity, and also as an acknowledgement of his implication within the affective investments he was researching. He maintains on his blog that,

The goal of my work has been to bridge the gap between these two worlds. I take it as a personal challenge to find a way to break cultural theory out of the academic bookstore ghetto and open up a larger space to talk about the media that matters to us from a consumer’s point of view. (Jenkins 2016)

It must be noted here that the “us” in this constructions remains highly generalised without an acknowledgment of the multiple intersections of identity that may be under consideration under that rubric. Continuing on this trajectory, Matt Hills (2002) questioned the ways in which fan accounts were presented as largely uncontested fact by early fan studies researchers. For Hills, one of the results of these scholars’ early focus
on pushing back against negative stereotypes of fans was that, ironically, their activities were framed almost dispassionately without recognising the biases and attachments that still might inform them. He observed that,

[...] given the fan’s articulate nature, and immersion in the text concerned, the move to ethnography seems strangely unquestionable, as if it is somehow grounded in the fan’s (supposedly) pre-existent form of audience knowledge and interpretive skill...Fandom is largely reduced to mental and discursive activity occurring without passion, without feeling, without an experience of (perhaps involuntary) self-transformation. (66)

To interrupt this process, Hills proposed that fan accounts be more thoroughly scrutinized in order to interrogate the “moments of failures within narratives of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, and [their] repetitions or privileged narrative constructions which are concerned with communal (or subcultural) justification in the face of ‘external’ hostility” (66). He also proposed that a self-reflexive autoenthographic exercise be performed where the academic fan’s “tastes, values, attachments and investments” (72) could be analysed under the same rubric.

To expand on this approach, autoethnographers are asked to leverage methodological tools, research data and existing literature to analyse cultural experiences/events, while also considering how other participants may experience those same incidents. In this paradigm the use of personal experience and reflection is encouraged in order to elucidate aspects of larger cultural events. Strategies employed to achieve these ends include the measuring of personal experience with published research (Ronai 1995), conducting interviews of participants (Tillmann-Healy 2001; Foster 2008), while also analysing germane cultural objects (Boylorn 2008; Denzin 2006). It is easy to see then why this methodology would be an attractive one for fan scholars, many of whom are committed to blurring the researcher/subject divide.
In a slightly different positioning to Hills, Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (2012) also encourage an embrace of multiple positionalities by the fan scholar so as to “treat the academic and fannish parts as equally important” (24). There has been some discussion of whether the loyalties of the scholar must be split so evenly, as this positioning might also serve to paper over power differentials within fan communities (Chin 2010). As I have also registered, this splitting could also serve to de-emphasise historical tensions around race, ethnicity, religion, class, and national identity amongst others. It also must be noted that there has been disagreement between scholars in the field about the ways in which such ‘implication’ is read in terms of gender. That is, as Rhiannon Bury (2011) has observed, it is much less fraught for (white) male scholars to acknowledge their positions as “compromised” by their investments in popular media texts than it has been for (white) women. Nevertheless autoethnography has emerged as a particularly popular methodological choice for fan scholars (Couldry 2007; Pearson 2007; Jenkins 2007). Jeanette Monaco (2010) observes that though this methodological choice has often being termed “self-indulgent,”

In drawing attention to the scholar-fan’s vulnerabilities that are often silenced in published accounts of fandom, autoethnographic writing complicates realist conventions of representation and the ways in which textual strategies construct the authorial voice in relation to the ‘other’. I argue for autoethnography’s advantages by exploring some of the ethical challenges of conducting fan-audience research and by making explicit rather than implicit the ways in which locations of identity and emotional registers inform research choices and processes. (1)

Autoethnography is clearly a very powerful tool to chart the complex positionalities that fan researchers must negotiate during their research. It is indeed a methodological choice that I have made myself. However, it also must be acknowledged that its confessional space can, and has, worked towards the disavowal of certain other power differentials between fan and researcher and indeed amongst fans themselves. I refer of course to the ways in which the operations of racial identity within such spaces.
To refer back to my introduction, I have already commented on the ways in which race, when mentioned at all within fan studies scholarship, is also disavowed or deferred in the same breath. The rhetorical strategy of maintaining that of course race is an essential axis of identity to be considered, but never with the same urgency as sexuality and gender is employed quite frequently in the introductions of anthologies, papers and conference presentations. There is also sometimes an acknowledgment of the lack of attention to racial identity in a particular piece of research, which is then explained by a personal implication within whiteness. Of course, this fails to acknowledge ‘whiteness’ itself as a racialised identity with specific effects (Frankenberg 1993; Hill 1997; Dyer 1997). I draw on Sara Ahmed’s (2004) analysis of what she terms to be a “politics of declaration” wherein such declarations of culpability/implication within axes of privilege function as a tactic of deferral. As she notes,

These statements function as claims to performativity rather than as performatives, whereby the declaration of whiteness is assumed to put in place the conditions in which racism can be transcended, or at the very least reduced in its power. Any presumption that such statements are forms of political action would be an overestimation of the power of saying, and even a performance of the very privilege that such statements claim they undo. The declarative mode, as a way of doing something, involves a fantasy of transcendence in which ‘what’ is transcended is the very thing ‘admitted to’ in the declaration: so, to put it simply, if we admit to being bad, then we show that we are good. (54)

This rhetorical strategy of deferment then also plays a key role in situating racial identity as a rubric of analysis whose specific effects can be isolated to extraordinary incidents. This is something that I try and disrupt throughout my dissertation but particularly within the first chapter where I trace how the histories of non-white participation in fandom spaces is only made visible as a series of controversies, eliding their material contributions to fandom spaces both online and offline. It is within these considerations that I place my own research position and choices of methodology.
The Research Process: Locating Myself

I read this dissertation and inevitably see a lot of my own journey, both personal and academic, reflected back at me. My own autoethnographic reflection therefore must take into account the ways in which my initial research proposal had also fallen prey to the trap of retreading the ‘truisms’ of fan studies, locating the effects of racialised identity as relevant to only certain aspects of fandom interaction. This initial framing is a product of the fact that my own awareness of the deep racialisation of media fan spaces/fanworks formed extremely gradually, even while I engaged with these spaces within a critical academic framework and personal experience that had trained me to be alert to structural societal hierarchies, especially within popular cultural texts.

Today this hesitation seems almost incomprehensible, but I recognise that it was rooted in the awareness that such an acknowledgement, without the attendant deferral onto larger societal influences, would mean that I would have to definitively give up my claim to ‘belonging’ unproblematically in fan spaces. This would be not out of any pretensions of academic elitism, but through final recognition of their structural rejection of all aspects of my aca-fannish identity. To contrast this to the more generalised anxiety around this split in fan studies scholarship, my discomfort was not caused by some inherent incompatibility between my academic and fan identity, but rather the acknowledgement of my equal alienation from both.

To expand on this, online media fandom communities gave me a way of interacting on the Internet that, as a young girl from a small town in India in the 2000’s, felt almost revolutionary. It was in these spaces that I could geek out with ‘fellow fans’ and not be particularly judged about my Western popular cultural obsessions. My introduction to fanfiction was similarly eye-opening, as I could interrogate my own notions of gender and sexuality in ways that were not a topic of discussion in my home. For an extremely
long time, I didn’t feel the need to bring my own particularly Indian forms of fandom into these spaces, as my engagement with them was on different terms, compartmentalised neatly in my head as ‘not suitable.’ Fandom also taught me digital skills—how to navigate the various byways of the Internet even as I struggled to access those spaces on painfully slow dialup and then broadband connections.

Nonetheless, I can recognise now that my participation in these spaces remained at a remove. I ‘passed.’ As someone fluent in the ‘language’ of media fandom, both in terms of English and in terms of popular cultural knowledge, there was no reason for me to ‘other’ myself. Although of course, this was not how I framed it to myself. There was simply no need for me to identify myself as anyone but a ‘fangirl.’ It was only very gradually, through the recognition that there were other people within these same spaces who were talking about their identities and how it impacted their fandom experiences that I realized that I could in fact stop curating my own quite so selectively. It was through flashpoint events like RaceFail ’09 and then the move to dialogic platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr that I saw, for the first time, non-white fans unapologetically boosting characters and stories that were important to them. I also observed how these activities pushed back on my own internalized assumptions about which narratives were important, and which characters were ‘naturally’ the most popular foci of fanwork. Therefore, when I maintain that whiteness is a structuring mechanism of fan studies and fan communities, this conclusion has been arrived at through both my research data analyses, as well as a self-reflexive questioning of my own unconscious biases.

Finally it was my interviews for this dissertation, at first only meant to inform one chapter, which definitively opened up my theoretical horizons as yet more non-white fans recounted journeys much like mine. Again and again, these narratives registered the surprise of recognising that others like them existed in fandom spaces, as well as the alienation that came from attempting to talk about issues of erasure and being dismissed.
That is not to say any one coherent thread of experience emerged through these interviews. Indeed, considering the diversity of identities within my respondent pool, which I will lay out more explicitly in a moment, it was comforting to see a very wide range of responses to my questions. As Ahmed (2010) cogently points out,

Writing about whiteness as a non-white person (a ‘non’ that is named differently, or transformed into positive content differently, depending on where I am, who I am with, what I do) is not writing about something that is ‘outside’ the structure of my ordinary experience, even my sense of ‘life as usual’, shaped as it is by the comings and goings of different bodies. And so writing about whiteness is difficult, and I have always been reluctant to do it. The difficulty may come in part from a sense that the project of making whiteness visible only makes sense from the point of view of those for whom it is invisible. (1)

I would add to this that that writing about non-whiteness also places a unique burden on the researcher, because it almost enforces a process of simplification and essentialism in order to be ‘coherent’ in its critique. As can be seen in my structuring of my interview schedule (Appendix), I was keen to facilitate an adequately inclusive data-gathering instrument in order to reflect the very many facets of identity that my respondents might wish to record. By making it as open-ended and respondent-led as I could, I managed to get a truly staggering level of nuance and specificity in markers. I also foregrounded the limitations of categories such as “non-white,” “fan of color/colour,” and indeed “racial identity” itself. Nonetheless, as I will discuss in chapter three, while I have done my utmost to reflect the ‘messiness’ of such engagements by choosing appropriate theoretical structures that are concerned with the non-linearity of such engagements, at times the strictures of academic writing and presentation have meant that some simplification has been unavoidable. This is seen most explicitly in Figure 1.3 (in chapter three) that was simply unreadable when all the twenty-five different self-classifications were included. The process whereby I had to come up with ‘broader’ categories such as “Asian American,” that not all my respondents had chosen for
themselves, in order to make them legible in a representative figure, is emblematic of the difficulties of such research. It is nevertheless, a very necessary complication to explore further.

Finally, my decision to conduct a “virtual ethnography” (Hine 2000) in order to gather data grew out of both a need to be reflective of current exchanges in media fandom, as well as maximise my outreach to non-white fans engaging in these spaces in a globalised, neoliberal mediascape. Virtual ethnographies are also highly popular methodological choices in fan studies with the move of these communities to online, digital platforms (Brooker 2007; Bury 2005; Busse and Hellekson 2006; Chin 2010; Lopez 2012). I used qualitative data from my interviews, as well as collated fan postings from a variety of digital platforms such as Livejournal, Tumblr and Twitter. This multi-sited approach allowed me to place my respondent interviews in the correct historical and communitarian context, taking into account the effects of changes in medium and the differential ways fan usages of those platforms have affected non-white fans. One of my key contentions in this dissertation is that internet-enabled platforms are not neutral channels that can be discounted as mediating influences. By using a postcolonial cybercultural critique my aim is to highlight how the move to more dialogic platforms has had a significant impact on the ways in which intra-fandom conflict around the category of race has been framed and discussed (Fernández 1999; Nayar 2008; Shah 2015).

Data Collection and Analysis

Throughout this dissertation I draw upon primary data in the form of personally gathered fan interviews and theorise my findings using the above cited scholars on postcolonial cybercultural theory, as I will explicate in greater detail in chapters two and
three. I also examine the effects and experiences of marginality stemming from identification with minority racial/ethnic/cultural and religious identities in fan communities that have so far been shown to skew white, cisgender, middle-class American. In order to recruit respondents I circulated a call for respondents through fan platforms like Livejournal, Tumblr and Twitter, through personal fan networks and signal boosting by acafan accounts. Since I was looking for specific fan identities that were relatively harder to locate, I used a mixed methods sampling combining both snowball and purposive sampling (Noy 2008; Sadler et al. 2010; Auerswald et al. 2004; Tongco 2007).

To articulate my scope more precisely, I interviewed with fans who identify as having engaged with fanwork in some way (not limited to producing it). I left the door open for participants to talk to me about non-U.S.A. and non-anglophone-based material, and many mentioned engaging with anime and manga, K-pop, Bollywood films etc., pointing to how multilingual fans can and do engage with multiple media sources and fan spaces. However, in this study their experiences of marginalisation concern mostly English-language based media (mostly produced in the U.S.A/U.K and in English) and their transnational fan communities. In the first stage, pilot testing indicated respondents would prefer to give written answers to initial questions as the issues being broached were complex and they needed time to reflect on them. There was also a second stage, where, based on initial responses follow-ups were conducted via Skype if additional data was required. Most of my questions, including those that asked for demographic descriptors, were open-ended as I wanted to see what terms my participants used to identify themselves and which aspects of their identity they felt were most important.

In total, I conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty-nine respondents, located in nine countries. The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 43, with most identifying as using she/her pronouns—two clarified that they were genderqueer, one
identified as intersex, and another as cisgender male. In terms of sexuality, twenty-three respondents identified as queer in some form, ranging from asexual to demisexual. In terms of socio-economic background, a majority of the respondents characterised themselves as middle-class, though some qualified that as being dependant on parental support. Most interestingly, in terms of racial/cultural and ethnic identity, the data reflected twenty-five different self-classifications. The primary markers of such self-classification varied from single nationality (Indian/Singaporean) to hyphenated nationality (Chinese-American) to racial/ethnic categories (Latina/Black) to skin color (brown) to local/indigenous terms outside traditional classification (Hapa⁹). A number of respondents also identified as mixed-race individuals and as immigrants. A majority of the respondents were at least bilingual. In terms of religion, while most respondents indicated they were non-practicing, those that mentioned a religious identity went on to correlate their experiences within fandom to that aspect quite strongly.

In terms of interview coding and analysis I utilised the coding software NVIVO by QSR International to look for initial patterns before using narrative analysis to examine the data thus generated. While coding, I discovered a disturbing pattern that ironically highlighted the very issues I would be discussing regarding the racism underlying seemingly neutral digital infrastructure in chapter four. To outline the incident briefly, while searching my data for synonyms to look for any similarities across interview responses, I realised that the automatic synonyms for the word “white” were “innocent,” “pure,” and “clean.” No such associations were present for any other colour. As I wrote to NVIVO in my complaint about the same,

The word ‘white’ has certainly been historically associated with all the above words. However, as has been pointed out by numerous researchers, this a racist pattern of word use which leads to the automatic association of criminality and

⁹ A Hawaiian term that today connotes mixed-race parentage. Originally part of ‘Hapa-haole’ which was a derogatory term referring to people of Hawaiian and White parentage.
deviance with people of colour. For the NVIVO algorithm to use it as a matter of course encourages this continuing association in academic research which can have very damaging consequences. (Pande 2015, email correspondence)

While NVIVO’s response to my complaint was disappointing—they eschewed any direct culpability for the word associations—it was a valuable lesson early on in my coding process to be highly attuned to the ways seemingly neutral tools of analysis were also highly loaded by institutional discrimination.

In terms of analysing my data further, I found the most suitable methodology to be that of Narrative Analysis (Connelly and Clandinin 2000; Riessman 2002; Alvermann 2014). This choice was influenced by the ways in which my respondents chose to communicate their journeys through fandom spaces, crafting highly individual ‘storied’ trajectories. This also fits in with a long historical tradition of fan spaces wherein fans will often tell and re-tell stories about certain incidents, communities, stories and controversies that were memorable in some way. If the history of media fandom is, as I say elsewhere in this dissertation as well, nothing but the stories that fans tell each other, then it becomes extremely important to pay attention to which narratives gain primacy and become integrated into ‘official’ histories that circulate in academia. By granting primacy to the stories and experiences of those fans whose entry-paths into these spaces were inflected by their somewhat ‘othered’ positions, I have aimed to question and interrupt official histories. A useful reflection on this process is Ruthellen Josselson’s “Narrative Research: Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing Story” (2011), in which she maintains that “people live and/or understand their lives in storied forms” and further that these stories, “are played out in context of other stories that may include societies, cultures, families, or other intersecting plotlines in a person's life” (224). This is a valuable framework to consider the ways in which fans recall their experiences of media fandom communities, and how these stories work together to form patterns of activity and interpretation. This is not to impose some external structuring impulse on
these very different narratives but rather seek out their points of convergence and divergence. As Josselson also points out,

The stories that people tell about their lives represent their meaning making [...] Most generally, narrative research is an interpretive enterprise consisting of the joint subjectivities of researcher and participants subjected to a conceptual framework. It aims to explore and conceptualize human experience as it is represented in textual form. Grounded in hermeneutics, phenomenology, ethnography, and literary analysis, narrative researcheschews methodological orthodoxy in favour of doing what is necessary to capture the lived experience of people in terms of their own meaning making and to theorize about it insightful ways. (225)

Following this, it has been my goal throughout this dissertation to reflect the diversity of my respondents’ narratives around issues of representation, escapism, self-identification and discursive framings of their experiences. I have balanced Hills’ (2002) caution to not take fan talk as direct “evidence” of fan experience by foregrounding the ways in which fan accounts often clash and disagree with each other but also highlighting where they interrupt more dominant histories of fan cultures. In conclusion, by privileging multivocality over any one singular thread of easily-mapped analysis I have endeavoured to be adequately reflective of the complex operations of race/racism within contemporary fan communities.
Chapter 1
Dial Me Up, Scotty: Histories of Media Fandoms
As Platforms for ‘Women’s’ Online Identity

**Chapter Summary:**

In this chapter I discuss the documented histories of media fandom, and its theorisation within fan studies, within the context of historical cybercultural discourses. While these initial discourses did see cyberspace as both a gendered and racialised site, I argue that subsequent analyses failed to explore those theorisations. Media fandom functions as a useful lens to examine these debates as it is a cybercultural sphere which has mediated the online activities for a significant number of ‘women.’ I begin by briefly outlining the impulses that shaped media fandom activities in its offline form that also influenced this differential trajectory, before moving onto an examination of the discursive constructions of cyberspace that would mediate their move online. I examine the ways in which foundational texts about the possibilities of cyberspace both extended and foreclosed the operations of axes of identity such as gender and racial identity within it. This will allow me to demonstrate how these larger discourses shaped both the functioning of media fandom spaces and their theorisation within fan studies, extending to their recorded histories. I ‘interrupt’ these histories by (re)inserting accounts from non-white fandom participants of their early experiences. I also examine certain historical ‘flashpoints’ that forced a public consideration of theses issues and functioned as points of coalition building for marginalised participants.

Finally, drawing from my respondents’ narratives about their media fandom entry pathways, I trace the operations of anime and manga fandoms. This intervention complicates theorisations that see these communities as having a completely different historical/cultural trajectory to English-language fandoms. My analysis of the practice of scanlation will demonstrate that these texts functioned as important pathways for non-white fans. Further, they facilitated not just the technical aspects of fandom activity that have so far been included in its histories—such as the making of fan videos and fan magazines—but activities that reflect on a diversity of racial/cultural/ethnic identities.
Ideas of what constitutes ‘community’ continue to change as technological innovations mould the ways in which individuals choose to communicate, build, and destroy networks, and find points of resonance and affinity along differential lines of interests and identities. Broadly, however, theorists have argued that when a group forms around a common symbolic structure it comes to constitute a “culture area” of its own, which is not limited by anything other than the limits of communication (Strauss 1986; Sahlins 1976; Weber 1947; Lacan 1977; Derrida 1978 to name a few). The influential cyberfeminist theorist Allucqué Rosanne Stone (1996) also draws on Anslem Strauss’ formulation, deeming it to apply particularly well to virtual systems. She notes,

> We may say that every group develops its own system of significant symbols which are held in common by its members and around which group activities are organised. Insofar as the members act toward and with reference to each other, they take each other’s perspectives toward their own actions and thus interpret and assess that activity in communal terms. Group membership is thus a symbolic, not a physical, matter, and the symbols which arise during the life of the group are, in turn, internalized by the members and affect their individual acts. (Strauss, quoted in Stone 87)

Stone extends and underlines the significance of this argument when talking about cyberspace\(^\text{10}\), saying,

> The constitution and evolution of special worlds, the form and structure of community as expressed spatially in architecture and proxemics, need not be dependent on distribution in a physical space the arrangement of which acquires ontic status, but instead could as validly be based upon symbolic exchanges of which proximity is merely a secondary effect. (87)

\(^{10}\) The term cyberspace has been variously used to refer to both computer-mediated-communication systems and virtual environments, since its popularisation by William Gibson in his novel *Neuromancer* (1984). There is no universally accepted definition, but in line with (Morningstar and Farmer 1991), I use the term to refer to the communicative ‘space’ that has been facilitated by the usage of a large variety of internet-mediated technologies. In my view, tethering the term to any specific combination of technological devices is a largely semantic distinction and does not facilitate an inclusive formulation that adequately reflects the usage of such technology today. In this dissertation, the communicative and creative exchanges that occur within the cyberspace thus defined are termed to be ‘cybercultural’ in line with Stone’s (1996) definition referenced above.
Media fandom has been seen as an example of a community based around symbolic exchange, as community members are bound by a certain central interest, but adopt different signifiers to concentrate their creative and fannish energies around. However, it is also important to pay attention to the points of disjuncture and difference in such communities. While the histories of media fandom remain largely anecdotal, it is vital to make their frameworks as broad and inclusive as possible. As I have argued in my introduction, to elevate one particular narrative about the establishment and development of these communities is to invisibilise the experiences of participants who have taken varying entry pathways but have nonetheless contributed to their present forms. It is often maintained that media fandom is nothing but the stories that fans tell each other, but as these communities continue to gain mainstream attention it is necessary to supplement and interrupt well-established narratives of their activities so as not to promote a one-note or monochromatic view of these spaces. This is one such effort. I will move from a brief examination of the offline workings of two of the earliest media fandoms that formed around the U.S.A-based television shows *The Man from U.N.C.L.E* (1964-68) and *Star Trek*\(^{11}\) (1966-69) to tracing the ways in which these types of communities moved online, taking into account narratives from my interviewees who also participated in these spaces.\(^{12}\)

In this chapter this discussion is contextualised within historical cyberfeminist theorisations about what the advent of “technosocial age,” as declared by Stone (1996),

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\(^{12}\) Other early English-language media fandoms that had a ‘zine (amateur fan magazine) culture of note include the television shows *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-79), *The Professionals* (1977-83) and *Blake’s 7* (1977-81). The latter two shows were U.K. based while *Starsky and Hutch* was produced in the U.S.A.
might mean for women users in particular. I have found this a useful lens as media fandom offers a unique case study in tracking the ways these theorisations were both prescient and limiting in their frameworks, particularly when it came to considering the importance of ‘non-serious’ usage of these spaces. Further, while these frameworks did make room for considerations of axes of identity apart from gender, these were not adequately addressed within the first wave of studies on actual Internet usage, and this is reflected in my analyses as well. I will demonstrate how ‘default’ assumptions about the make-up of early online media fandom communities had specific effects that actively worked to invisibilise the role of racial identity in these spaces, rather than this being a matter of oversight. My re-historicisation of these narratives will foreground the ways in which fandom communities also incorporated the overlapping identities and activities of non-white fans within them. This will in turn lead me to the positioning of their contemporary forms as an example of postcolonial cyberspaces in chapter two, wherein I will analyse the ramifications of that theorisation in terms of ‘global’ media fandom considering issues of medium, demographics and changes in platform usage.

**Offline Traces, Online Strategies: Media Fandom Networking Pathways**

I begin by tracing two of media fandom’s pre-internet forms so as to examine the impulses that drove their formation and as well as the strategies that enabled them, as women-centric communities, to navigate, with some success, the cybercultural spaces that were seen to be distinctly unwelcoming to them. My first case study is *Star Trek*, the iconic Science Fiction (SF), action-adventure series created by Gene Roddenberry in 1966. Fan activity was extremely prolific around the original series with conventions
attracting thousands of participants; additionally, at this time cultural conceptions about these popular cultural fans began to form, including that of the over invested ‘nerd.’

*Star Trek* was also, unsurprisingly, the site of the foundational studies of media fandom especially as women fans began to become more visible in the physical spaces of conventions (Lamb and Veith 1986; Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992). These scholars observed a distinctly gendered split from older SF fandoms and what formed around *Star Trek*, even though ostensibly they were the same genre. The ‘new’ fans, mostly women, were seen to be careless of tradition, coming to the genre from a television series rather than the written word, and were unwelcome in general SF conventions. They were also, broadly, seen to be much more interested in plot and character than on the technical aspects of SF (P. T. Smith 1984; Coppa 2006b; Vettel-Becker 2014). This was also the time of the shift from ‘hard’ SF that was more concerned with technology and mechanics, to the ‘New Wave’, which was more psychological and experimental in nature.

The original *Star Trek* television series only lasted three seasons (and had to be saved by a letter writing campaign after its second season), but nevertheless spawned a fandom that exists to this day. The entire franchise now consists of multiple action series, an animated series, and eleven movies, each addition bringing with it a fresh burst of fandom activity, as new fans discover it for the first time and older fans eagerly search for fresh material. The template of such activities was, in part, laid by Roddenberry’s unique leveraging of fan energies around the show. Cynthia Walker (2013), in her study...

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13 The “Get A Life” sketch on the U.S.A.-based television show Saturday Night Live starring William Shatner, aired on 20th December, 1986. Its depiction of *Star Trek* fans or ‘trekkies,’ as they were referred to, as ‘socially maladjusted losers’ was foundational in the establishment of the stereotype of fans as uncritical consumers who could not differentiate fantasy from reality. The sketch has also become apocryphal within English-language fan studies as a societal script to interrupt and query. An example of the stereotype deployed uncritically can be seen in the fan documentary *Trekkies* (Nygard 1999).

14 As with all generic divisions there is little consensus over what works fit into the ‘New Wave’ but it is broadly argued that the charge was led by the popular U.S.A.-based SF magazine *New Worlds* when Michael Moorcock took over as editor in 1964 (James 1994; Luckhurst 2005; Roberts 2005).

15 The “Save Star Trek!” campaign, headed by Bjo Trimble and her husband John, ran between 1967-68 when the NBC network was rumoured to be on the verge of cancelling the show. The network received an estimated 116,000 letters in support of the show and there were also demonstrations at colleges like Caltech Berkeley and MIT (Marsfelder 2013).
of *The Man From U.N.C.L.E* fandom has noted the effect of this, as she terms it, “benign neglect,” (12) wherein Roddenberry ignored fans producing fanart and fanfiction around the show. She argues that this had far-reaching effects past *Star Trek* itself and energised (women) fan audiences of other cult shows to take up similar activities, thus laying the foundations of media fandom itself.

Indeed, the fan activity that would come to define media fandom started almost immediately as the show began to air, but these were usually isolated forays for the creator’s sole enjoyment, perhaps shared with a few close friends. The discovery that this ‘trivial’ pursuit could be shared more broadly was often spurred on (pre-internet) by published documentation of fan activity. One such book that features in successive narratives is *Star Trek Lives!* (1975), a chronicling of early media fandom activity—including the letter-writing campaign, conventions, cosplay and fanfiction—by ‘super fans’ Jacqueline Lichtenberg, Sondra Marshak and Joan Winston.

While media fandom historians have noted the importance of this book, its effects are also vibrantly documented in recorded accounts of influential fans such as Nancy Kippax. Her recollections show the affective impact of the knowledge of *existing* fan communities on those individuals who were more isolated.

My sister, Bev Volker, and I slid into *Star Trek* fandom, like so many fans of the day, on the coattails of *Star Trek Lives!* Previously, David Gerrold had written two illuminating non-fiction paperbacks on the budding Star Trek phenomenon—*The World of Star Trek* and *The Making of Star Trek*. Many isolated fans found these books in their local stores and suddenly realized that they were not alone. Nor were they crazy, as some of their family members and friends thought. But yes, there was still a stigma attached to being a “Trekkie”. Then along came another book, *Star Trek Lives!* by three ladies who were already known to many of the earliest fans who were connecting by mail, by phone, and probably even by Pony Express. Clearly, this was “the” book, which defined so much of what fandom was and what it could be. […]

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16 Nancy Kippax was a well-known fan who was active in media fandoms both before and after the migration to online platforms. She documented her early experiences in these spaces, spanning the 1970s and 1980s in the form of journal entries on Livejournal.com in 2007 in an effort to preserve some of that history. They are archived on the fan archival site, Fanlore.org, which is affiliated to the Organisation of Transformative Works (OTW).
Sharing fantasies was nothing new to us, as was obsession. Despite the somewhat large gap in our ages, Bev and I had grown up closer than most sisters and had played “make-believe” about TV characters since childhood. [...] But the difference with our Trek obsession was that, thanks to that ubiquitous Star Trek Lives! (1975) and its chapter on fan fiction, we were actually writing down our made-up stories. We figured we would be able to write as well as those other people. We completed two stories, with a third well on the way to being finished, plus the first chapter of our very long soap opera, and decided that we might as well print them ourselves. (“Reminisce With Me/Entering Star Trek Fandom - Fanlore” 2008)

The influence of Star Trek Lives! is reflected in my own interviews as well. One fan, who is forty-six years old, recounts,

It all revolves around Star Trek. While I did not attend conventions (I wanted to, but I was young and had no money), I devoured books ABOUT Star Trek including Star Trek Lives!, which had chapters about both conventions AND fanfic, as well as metadiscussion. This would be around junior high school—the mid-seventies. I began writing fanfic at that point. My first encounter with convention fandom happened at random at a bookstore, where I met several people who spoke a language I understood. I also worked with someone (both substitute teachers) who wrote fanfic and attended Blake's 7 conventions. I went with her to my first convention after meeting with that group. (Anonymous Respondent 18, Interview with Author 2015; my emphasis)

Significantly, the fan recounts that the specific chapter on fanfiction was the point at which she discovered that her interpretation of Kirk and Spock’s relationship as possibly romantic was not a fluke or personal quirk, but one shared by others. The validation that this sharing of experience and importantly, interpretation, brought remains at the core of how most of my own interviewees recount their discovery of online media fandom up to the present. How these notions of shared community and interpretation have evolved remains one of my central concerns.

This pattern is also seen in the fandom that formed around The Man from U.N.C.L.E (1964-68), a spy drama that followed the exploits of two international men of mystery, Napoleon Solo (Robert Vaughn), and Illya Kuryakin (David McCallum). Though it did not make quite the impact that Star Trek did on popular culture, Walker maintains that the series in many ways paved the way for Star Trek, using many of the same tropes including wisecracking leading men, international unity in the face of a shared danger
and the use of futuristic devices. It also had a very active fandom around it, one that also continues to exist to this day, recently revived by a reboot of the franchise with a new movie in 2015. It is interesting to note, however, that though many fans (including Walker) recount having written fanfiction around the show even before *Star Trek* started being televised, it was only when fans who had already learnt the ‘tricks of the trade,’ as it were, from the latter fandom decided to expand their horizons that these efforts became anything more than individual essays into the unknown. This is noted in other studies of the fandom as well.

When the *Star Trek* media fans took up *U.N.C.L.E.* fandom, they changed its character. Before 1975, the only *U.N.C.L.E.* fan who wrote *U.N.C.L.E.* fiction was David McDaniel; everyone else collected facts and props as if they were postage stamps. Afterwards, the new fans, mostly women who thought of fandom in terms of the characters they could write stories about, developed the *U.N.C.L.E.* universe with new adventures for Napoleon and particularly Illya. (Smith 1984, 39)

This shift is indicative of two things; firstly, the fact that women fans were necessary for the ‘work’ of media fandom community building, and that their entrance into the fandom significantly changed its character and secondly, that the *Star Trek* phenomenon was certainly not a fluke. Once made aware of a community revolving around symbolic exchanges (as discussed earlier) fans were eager to continue the process and used the skills learnt by their earlier experiences to expand the range and scope of their activities. This desire to reach out to like-minded individuals and, more importantly, the flexibility demonstrated by this shift continues to be one of the defining characteristics of media fandom. Most importantly, this flexibility extended not only to the subject matter (the willingness to explore different fandoms) but also to the medium by which media fandom activity was to be carried out. It was at this point that a new frontier was about to open up—that of the Internet—and media fandom’s reaction to that would define
its future, and more importantly mediate cyberspace for a significant percentage of women.

Both the *Star Trek* and *U.N.C.L.E* fans discussed above were quite skilled at manipulating technology, as evidenced by studies that document their production of fan magazines or ‘zines and fan videos (Verba 2003; Coppa 2008). It could be theorised therefore that that they would be more capable of adapting to new technologies for multiple purposes. What factors mediated their actual activities when media fandom communities shifted to internet-mediated platforms hence becomes more interesting. My discussion of these factors will be contextualised within a broader consideration of how early cyberspace was theorised for women and the ways in which media fandom in particular intersected with these ideas.

**Locating Media Fandom within Early Cybercultural Topographies**

While discussions of contemporary media fandom remain sited in various locales—tourism sites, fan conventions, cosplay competitions, zine archives—its dominant medium remains that of internet-mediated platforms. The shift from offline to online activities for media fandom therefore makes for an interesting case study in the larger consideration of women’s online identities, a narrative that is most often framed in terms of fear, harassment and bullying. Not a day goes by it seems without some new report detailing the extremely negatively gendered experiences that women face on various social media and other cyberspace platforms. Researchers have pointed to a consistent trend in the cyberbullying and harassment faced by women in almost every aspect of their networked lives from dating sites to video game discussion boards to sites like Facebook and Twitter (Megarry 2014; Henry and Powell 2014; Fox and Tang 2014; Cote 2015).
This can be extremely alienating and the cause of much distress, as recently documented by two U.S.A.-based sports journalists, Sarah Spain and Julie DiCaro. On April 25, 2016, the women were featured in a video posted by website JustNotSports.com where men read out a selection of the invective they receive on Twitter on a daily basis (JustNotSports 2016). The explicitness and violence was startling and the video went viral, only to provoke a fresh storm of abuse. In the same month, the corporation Microsoft launched “Tay,” an AI Twitter bot (Artificial Intelligence based active profile) that was designed to have the face and mannerisms of a teenage girl and pick up behaviours from interactions with other users online. Needless to say it was a disaster, with Tay being bombarded with sexual harassment and taught to defend dictators like Hitler (Vincent 2016). Commenting on the case, Laurie Penny in the New Statesman questioned the trend of artificial intelligences from Apple’s assistant Siri to Tay being gendered, noting,

Right now, as we’re anticipating the creation of AIs to serve our intimate needs, organise our diaries and care for us, and to do it all for free and without complaint, it’s easy to see how many designers might be more comfortable with those entities having the voices and faces of women. (2016, para 4)

In such a scenario, where girls are also seen to lag behind boys in specialising in STEM (Science Technology Engineering Mathematics) fields and being discouraged to take up technical subjects in school, it seems like the online gender gap seems set to continue (Legewie and DiPrete 2012; Stearns et al. 2016).

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17 There are some nation-specific variations in the numbers of women researchers in these fields. In March 2014, the United Nations Institute for Statistics (UIS) tracked these differences. Amy Otchet, Head of Data Outreach, Advocacy and Publications noted, “Just 28% of the world’s researchers are women. While a growing number of women are enrolling in university, many opt out at the highest levels required for a research career. But a closer look at the data reveals some surprising exceptions. For example, in Bolivia, women account for 63% researchers, compared to France with a rate of 26% or Ethiopia at 13%” (para 1). A consistent trend across regions was the lack of women researchers in senior positions (Unesco Institute of Statistics 2014).
It is within these histories of fear and unequal access that the online histories of media fandom appear to have a slightly different trajectory. While also very vulnerable to harassment and trolling, these fan communities were also spaces within which technical skills and networking practices were actively encouraged. In these spaces, women who were perhaps slightly more technologically proficient than others were motivated to hone those skills in an effort to find others with similar interests around popular cultural texts. I will now locate these activities within the broader theoretical field of early cyberfeminist theorisation.

**The Possibilities and Pitfalls of Foundational Cyberfeminist Theorisations**

While the “social turn” of the Internet is now its primary focus with researchers, this took some time to take hold and was in fact predicted and pioneered by cyberfeminist theorists. Foundational scholars like Allucqué Rosanne Stone and Donna Haraway moved away from dominant techno-centric discourses, instead choosing to focus on the effect technology had on individuals as social beings and underlined the importance of seeing them in an almost semiotic relationship. As Judy Wajcman (2007) points out,

Over the last two decades, feminist writing within the field of STS (Science and Technology Studies) has theorised the relationship between gender and technology as one of mutual shaping. A shared idea in this tradition is that technological innovation is itself shaped by the social circumstances within which it takes place. Crucially, the notion that technology is simply the product of rational technical imperatives has been dislodged. Objects and artefacts are no longer seen as separate from society, but as part of the social fabric that holds society together; they are never merely technical or social. Rather, the broad social shaping or constructivist approach treats technology as a sociotechnical product—a seamless web or network combining artefacts, people, organisations, cultural meanings and knowledge (Bijker et al., 1987; Hackett et al., 2008; Law and Hassard, 1999; MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999). It follows that technological change is a contingent and
heterogeneous process in which technology and society are mutually constituted. (293)

This tradition of scholarship has drawn, in large part, from Haraway’s foundational essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1991) as a response to her call to action for feminist scholars to intervene in these domains in order to “set the terms for the politics of technoscience.” In reaction to the rhetoric of essentialist feminisms that saw technology as something inherently hostile to women, Haraway exhorted the nascent field of cyberfeminism to “transform the despised metaphors of both organic and technological vision to foreground specific positioning, multiple mediation, partial perspective and therefore a possible allegory for antiracist feminist science and political knowledge” (308). Haraway’s cyborg with its blurring of boundaries between the technological and the natural, between fixed gender identities, bodily materialities, and essentialist feminist discourses has been engaged with on various grounds ranging from Marxist materialist critique, to charges of being written in impenetrable prose, to its ableist biases (Ebert 1996; Orr 2012; Kafer 2013). The virality of the construct has also led to its translation into various contexts, sometimes through an erasure of its specifically gendered critique altogether (Kunzru 1997).

However it is Haraway’s (partial) gesture to cyberspace’s also already racialised aspect that I wish to highlight, as it has received significantly less attention. For instance, her usage of the figure of the ‘Trickster,’ drawn from Native American myth, has largely been taken up unproblematically by other white cyberfeminist scholars such as Stone.

Stone’s (1996) declaration of the dawn of the “technosocial age” for instance is framed in the following terms.

I am suggesting a venture not into the heart of nature to seek redemption but rather into the heart of ‘technology’ in search of nature. And not nature as object, place or
In this formulation, the specificity of the Trickster is dissolved into a free-floating metaphor for ambiguity, shape-shifting and the permeability of identities. This practice of cultural appropriation towards the service of theoretical metaphor has not been unique to cyberfeminism, but is certainly indicative of the ways in which the specificity of experience of non-white and non-Western cultures are often considered only in such terms in the cybercultural domain. This is also seen in the usage of terms such as ‘frontiers’ and ‘digital natives’ that also are commonplace in much of early, and indeed more contemporary, theorisations around internet-mediated platforms. I will further interrogate the implications of this structuring in my second chapter but at this point I will highlight, using Chicana postcolonial-cyberfeminist Chéla Sandoval’s intervention, how Haraway’s mobilisation was not wholly unaware of these more complex intersections of identity.

It is Haraway’s attention to the possibilities of a specifically antiracist feminist grounding to the cyborg that has been largely missed by white cyberfeminists that is the focus of Sandoval’s vital mediation. Her essay, “Re-entering Cyberspace” (1994) reframes the manifesto to show how Haraway’s theorisation—such as oppositional “weaving” as coalition-building strategies versus corporate “networking”—drew on ideas that were being articulated specifically by non-white feminists within U.S.A. academia at the time.

She maintains that,

It is no accident that Haraway defines, names and weaves the skills necessary to cyborgology through the techniques and terminologies of US third world cultural forms, from Native American concepts of “trickster” and “coyote” being (199), to “mestizaje” or the category “women of colour” itself, until the body of the feminist
Sandoval traces the development of Haraway’s thought to the point where she makes explicit that the “we” in the cyborg manifesto needed to be much more carefully articulated so as to not to make the mistake of reinscribing the elision of difference that had been a cornerstone of much of the utopic literature on the possibilities of cyberspace until that point. Instead Haraway asked whether it would not be more accurate to imagine “a family of figures” who could “populate our imaginations” of “postcolonial, postmodern worlds that would not be quite as imperializing in terms of a single figuration of identity” (quoted in Sandoval 84). Indeed it is precisely this thread of theorisation that I will pick up in my positioning of media fandom as a postcolonial cyberspace in my next chapter.

However, at the time, despite Sandoval’s intervention and Haraway’s awareness of the differential axes of identity that would continue to be salient in cybercultural spaces, there was a distinct lack of attention to the ways in which racial, cultural, ethnic, religious and national identity structured these engagements along with gender and sexuality. This is now changing gradually, as I will detail in chapter two, but through the 1990’s, theorisation about identity on internet-mediated platforms continued to focus on the possibilities of tinkering and play within cyberspaces and the possibilities of immersive Virtual Reality (VR) environments. Sherry Turkle’s (1995) examination of cross-gender “performances” in Multi User Domains (MUDs) was in this tradition and subsequently continues to have an impact particularly on video game studies (Murphy 2004; Nitsche 2008; Christoph, Dorothée, and Peter 2009; Trepte and Reinecke 2010).

However, as Internet usage has evolved it has become clear that these environments remain only part of the story, with more sustained and stable identity performances such as those found on blogs and other social media platforms having perhaps more relevance
to a broader spectrum of users (Senft 2008; Marwick 2013). For example, the spikes in popularity of Massive Multi Player Games (MMPGs) that work on Virtual Reality (VR) interfaces are often touted as revolutionary and pointing to radical changes in the way people interact online.¹⁸ For example, in 2006, the viral success of the game “Second Life” which allowed the construction of “avatars” and the possibility of living parallel lives sometimes completely divorced from ‘real life’ existence generated a great deal of excitement but is now barely remembered. As Clay Shirky (2006) pointed out in response to the hype around the game. “If, in 1993, you’d studied mailing lists, or USENET, or IRC, you’d have a better grasp of online community today than if you’d spent a lot of time in LambdaMOO or Cyberion City” (para 9).¹⁹ As I will expand on in a moment, it is precisely on the former platforms that media fan communities took hold.

It is within these particular historical contexts and theoretical discourses that the first studies of how women were navigating these spaces took place, and pointed to an already hostile terrain. In the mid-nineties Nina Wakeford (1997) could point to a perceptible, if still marginal, presence of women on the Internet despite them being seen as a minority of users who had to face “a cultural dominance of masculinity in on-line spaces—newsgroups, discussion lists, and real time textual exchange—particularly in linguistic styles and conventions” (52). Tracing the attempts of self-styled “networked women”, “geekgirls”, “NerdGrrls”, and “grrrlls” to create a distinctly feminist presence on the Internet, Wakeford emphasised the importance of network building and community as an integral part of women’s activity online.²⁰ The grrrlls on the web were

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¹⁸ In 2008, the viral success of the game “Second Life” sparked a lot of commentary, particularly with regard to a player’s divorce due to his online “affair” with another user. For more details see Daily Mail article “Revealed: The ‘other woman’ in Second Life divorce” (Daily Mail 2008).  
¹⁹ Both LambdaMOO and Cyberion City were variations on MUD’s or Multi-User Domains, which allowed for multiple people to enter in virtual domains and play text-based games that allowed for considerable identity play. For more information see Turkle (1995).  
²⁰ The roots of this nomenclature was based in practical considerations as a strategy for not showing up as hits on search engines when the keyword “girl” was used.
avowedly feminist, hoping to resist a predicted “corporate intensification of initiatives toward a ‘woman’s Internet market’” (57).

They did not quite succeed in this aim. In 2000, Janelle Brown, had to ask, “What happened to the women’s web?” Tracking the fate of the sites that had filled Wakeford with optimism, she established that an increase of women Internet users had not had a proportionally positive effect on them. In fact in most cases, the radical potential of these spaces had largely been dissolved into more commercial interests. She declared,

Five years into the evolution of the ‘Woman’s Web’, most of these original sites are suffering. Candice Carpenter, the most visible face of women’s online publishing, has departed her seat as CEO of iVillage; Women.com has lost much of its original editorial team and is being kept aloft primarily because of a savvy merger with the Hearst women’s magazine empire […] Cybergrrl is mostly forgotten […] In the face of these departures and an increasing emphasis on the bottom line, the content on the sites is consequently becoming more and more mainstream. (para 4)

Brown’s analysis pointed most clearly to the impossibility of creating “catch-all” sites for women saying, “Those looking for smart content should not, perhaps, be looking at general interest women’s sites to find it—just as men would never look to GQ or TheMan.com to stimulate their own intellectual hungers” (para 30). Further, the article also underlined that while a “women’s web” was perhaps not something that had been sustainable, what users did want to use these platforms for was communication. According to Carpenter, “The Web has changed things for a lot of women—I think a lot of the strongest online communities that I know of are run by, and are the ideas of, women […] That’s a huge, huge contribution to the Web” (para 28).

It is my contention that in following a rather strict definition of ‘worthwhile’ content and online activity, Brown, and other cyberfeminist scholars, were overlooking some other interesting developments. For instance, even within her overview of successful sites with women-oriented content and user bases she reviews what she terms “alternative”
sites under the umbrella of ChickClick.com—“Scarleteen.com, a no-holds-barred sex advice site for teenage girls; Technodyke.com for young lesbians; and WomenCount.com, a feminist political site that encouraged women to vote” (para 20). In the same breath, she is dismissive of the second most popular site on the network, one called MightyBigTV.com, which was an “unapologetic daily synopsis of the trashiest TV on the planet” (para 21). The workings of online media fandom can be seen within these narratives, but its mix of popular culture and ‘non-serious’ activity meant that it was largely overlooked at the time.

**Tracking Online Media Fandom:**

*“Fandom was always on USENET, you understand?”*

Susan Clerc (1996) traces the beginnings of the phenomenon of fandom as I do by charting its move from offline activities—letterzines, newsletters, zines—to its current online form. Clerc identifies this move as driven by the labour of women in particular maintaining that,

Media fandom wouldn’t exist without women because more women than men do the communication work necessary to forge and sustain community. The public impression that males dominate fan activities is largely a result of outsiders’ emphasis of *Star Trek* fandom, which does seem to consist of more males than females. (218)

Her claim about the demographics about *Star Trek* fandom is something I would obviously dispute, but her analysis also points to an early gendering of media fandom spaces in particular and the ways in which these community affiliations were mediating factors in women using internet-mediated spaces. The article presents a snapshot of the transition from smaller communities necessarily limited by issues of distance and
logistics, concerning actually exchanging material like zines, to fandom’s current form. Clerc points out that,

[…] fan women, though mechanically proficient and technologically savvy compare to the mainstream population, suffer from the same societal attitudes about gender and technology as everyone else. Women are also at an economic disadvantage: with less disposable income, they are not as likely as men to experiment with modems and software they aren’t familiar with. [For] Fan women there is very little benefit to Net access unless their friends have it. When that critical mass is reached and it becomes beneficial to go online, fan women will likely turn to go other female fans as an informal support network. (219)

Thus she validates my earlier point about women (even those who were already positioned to make greater use of the Internet’s resources due to their comfort with technology) being motivated to establish a presence online due to their fannish interests.

This presence was in varied forms and was documented in studies such as Nancy Baym’s (2000) seminal analysis of the USENET21 newsgroup rec.arts.tv.soaps which records the activities of soap opera fans who were mostly women. Baym observes that this group was one of the oldest on the USENET network and saw a very high level of engagement, also buttressing my arguments about where a kind of “women’s web” was taking shape. This is also in direct opposition to Wakeford’s contention that women were linguistically disadvantaged on forums like newsgroups, again pointing to how ‘non-serious’ usages of these spaces were being overlooked. Baym’s respondents were divided into heavy and light users, including lurkers (individuals who read posts but do not participate directly), but interestingly those that did participate structured their online identities with close correlation to their offline ones. This was in stark contrast to other

21 One of the oldest computer network communication systems, it was invented in 1979 in Duke University by Jim Ellis and Tom Truscott, ten years before the advent of the Internet. It could be accessed by a certain number of gateways and newsgroups were formed around various topics of interest including SF. Discussions took place in response threads to a discussion post of interest. (Lueg and Fisher 2003)
studies that stressed the possibilities of identity play facilitated by anonymity. Baym speculates that this trend was due to both structural and communitarian reasons.

The use of real names in r.a.t.s. is partially attributable to the systems used by these participants to read and write to the group. Most people access r.a.t.s. through work-related accounts that identify them using their real names. The preference for real names is normative as well as structural. Participants on r.a.t.s. actively discourage anonymity. Although some take on nicknames, most who use nicknames also promulgate their real names within the same messages. [...] In general, then, r.a.t.s. has an aversion to anonymity in identity construction, an aversion likely rooted in the demands of soap opera discussion. The use of real names helps to create a trusting environment in which the type of personal disclosure so important to collaborative soap interpretation can be voiced. (148)

This linkage of trust to personal disclosure is interesting as it is seen in context of the discussion of soap operas more generally being met with certain degree of scorn. While the stigma of over-investment in the ‘trivial’ is something that seems common to most fan communities, it has also been seen to lead to a greater degree of anonymity, or at least pseudonymised identity, especially in media fandom spaces concerned with the creation of fanworks. It can be further hypothesised that the discouragement of anonymity in the soap opera forum also buttressed its rather homogenous—white, American and financially secure—nature. That is to say, the disclosure of personal identifying information would be much more highly fraught for those users who might feel that this information would ‘other’ them further in a demonstrably homogenous space. As I have also detailed in my introduction, the ability to ‘pass’ in online spaces is one that has been leveraged by both myself and my respondents at various times within media fandom spaces for very similar reasons.

Baym’s analysis mostly considers data collected in 1992 but also revisits the newsgroup six years later in 1998 after greater access to these spaces had been granted due to the advent of multiple Internet Service Providers (ISPs). The tensions in the group that arose with this broadening are documented as a generational one, with newer,
younger users being seen as not attentive enough to community norms and established
etiquette, while older users being accused of gatekeeping and cliquish behaviour. While
not reflected in Baym’s analysis (the whiteness of these spaces is acknowledged at one
point but not explored further as constitutive of them) the mechanisms that work to
maintain the status quo of such spaces, expressed in yearning for a ‘better, more civilised
time’ are often heavily coded in discomfort with the disruptive effect of racialised
difference. I will explore the ramifications of this further in chapter two — for now, I will
direct my attention to how the ‘default’ whiteness of cybercultural spaces has been
perpetuated by the structuring of such academic analyses.

In contrast to Baym, Clerc (1996) maintains that media fandom activity in the same
time period saw a bias towards mailing lists as opposed to “high-profile Usenet
newsgroups” where interaction was less oriented towards status generation and more
towards communication. She notes,

> Although some newsgroups manage to gain to attain a sense of community, mailing
lists are more likely to do so because of the way they are set up. […] Perhaps more
importantly you have to come out of the fan closet to join a mailing list: you can’t
pretend you are only casually interested in The X Files when there are fifty
messages about in your mailbox every morning. (221)

When interviewed about her move to online modes of fandom activity, my earlier
cited respondent talked about first using USENET newsgroups that were organized into
‘hierarchies’ subject-wise—for example sci.biology and sci.physcis would be grouped
under the same broad heading sci.

She recalled,

> I dated a computer programmer starting in 1989 (married him in 1991). By ‘93, I
accessed them through various “gateways”. And by the end of that year, I was
accessing them directly. Fandom groups were EVERYWHERE, in both the rec.arts
hierarchy, and the alt. hierarchy. Some were for discussion of the media (rec.arts.sf.written, rec.arts.startrek and spin-offs) some were for community—rec.arts.sf.fandom, for example. Others, usually in the alt.hierarchy, were for fanfiction—alt.startrek.creative, alt.startrek.creative.adult, among others.  
(Anonymous Respondent 18, Interview with Author 2015)

She also recollected the shift from newsgroups to mailing lists and when queried as to the reason, cited both convenience and security. She noted, “Mailing lists were more direct, and posting was easier, especially with the moderated groups. USENETs were vulnerable to trolls.” This experience does mirror Clerc’s analysis. When asked about her personal motivation to seek online modes of interaction, the respondent simply states, “I was not very tech savvy at first, but husband helped. Fandom was always on Usenet, you understand” (2015; my emphasis). This last statement is very interesting to me as it expresses the idea that the move and adaptation of media fandom to online modes of communication was a step taken with alacrity (at least its initial move) and that women, after getting over their hesitation with newer technology, did participate in newsgroups and then in mailing lists in large numbers.22

Rhiannon Bury’s A Cyberspace of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online (2005) is a study of two other fandoms active the 1990’s, based around the television shows The X Files (1993-2002) and Due South (1994-1999). She also notes the usage of mailing lists for fandom activity, positing these spaces were functioning as “heterotopias,” drawing on Michel Foucault (1986). For Bury, these spaces were potentially radical in “their reworking of normative spatial practices and relations” (18), functioning as they did in uneasy negotiations with ideas of public and private divides in an online context. Bury’s attention to axes of identity beyond gender is noted in her analysis of the operations of class, sexuality and nationality within these communities but stops short of considering

22 Walker (2013) also records the first The Man from U.N.C.L.E mailing list as coming into existence in 1995. It was originally housed at uncle.org and then moved to Onelist, which eventually became yahoogroups.com.
the role of racial identity. Finally, Francesca Coppa’s chapter on the history of media fandom in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (2006a) also charts a bit of a whistle-stop tour across these narratives (as it has a lot of ground to cover), underlining the technical proficiency that fans exhibited in creating the *infrastructure* of media fandom spaces.

What is stressed in these analyses is the labour performed by women fans to create and maintain these spaces within collaborative communitarian norms that promoted a sense of ‘belonging.’ Particularly valued as a result are qualities that promote ‘getting along’ including politeness and non-confrontational styles of communication around potential controversies. That is not to say that these early spaces did not have their share of discord, but ‘official’ histories have tended to gloss over them, perhaps in an effort to showcase successful women-centric alternatives to a cyberspace otherwise dominated by male narratives. To return to Coppa’s overview, as a chronicle that has become a frequently cited resource, it must be noted that it (as has my analysis so far as well) focused primarily on fandoms that formed around U.S.A. and U.K. television shows. It is also a particularly intimate portrait of early online fandom activities, listing particularly important archival sites, mailing lists and prominent fans that influenced these communities through the 1990’s and early 2000’s.

These documentations of early media fandom activity are extremely important as these contributions are often erased or forgotten. However, such documentations inevitably lead to some erasures of their own. For instance, while Coppa registers the presence of fandoms that formed around Japanese anime (animation) and manga (comic books) media texts, these are not given the same weight, possibly due to her unfamiliarity with them.23 Also, crucially, a differentiation is made between “Western” English-

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23 Anime (animation) and manga (comic books) are identified most often as Japanese popular cultural forms that have a unique stylised art style. The two genres and their fandoms are highly interrelated as manga comics are often adapted into anime form. However manga and anime using similar styles
speaking fans and Japanese fans, eliding completely the presence of those participants who were diasporic, immigrants, or otherwise placed in-between such identifications. The specific activities of fans past the point of the splintering of fan activity from large Western-media centric archives is also not examined in detail, seen possibly as less indicative of technical skill as interfaces became somewhat easier to navigate. Indeed all considerations of specific fan labour in establishing these communities and facilitating their growth is not given any attention.

It is these histories that I now attempt to (re)insert into the dominant narratives that I have detailed so far. My discussion will draw on the varied entry pathways recalled by my interviewees, highlighting the importance of manga and anime fandoms as within the development of contemporary global media fandom, rather than as the somewhat othered space they occupy in ‘official’ histories. I also stress the importance of the fact that my interviews indicate that fans have engaged in technical activities such as building fan sites themselves, as well as creating fanworks at various times.

It is not my intention to elevate this kind of activity over other types of fandom participation like lurking, but to point to the material ways in which non-white fans have contributed to these spaces. This tracing will contribute to my overarching argument throughout this dissertation, that non-white fans have been part of the ‘infrastructure’ of fandom spaces from their inception. This is an argument I underline repeatedly, as the erasure of this historical presence also contributes to the idea that critiques of these spaces around the axes of racial identity in particular (as was seen in the The Force Awakens meta-commentary referenced in the introduction) are a new phenomenon. In chapters two and three I will outline some of the reasons that these critiques are now gaining more

are also produced in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Korea (Lunning 2006). These texts became popular with U.S.A-based readers in the mid-1990’s. I will explore the implications of this cross-cultural exchange in more detail in a later section of this chapter.
visibility, but at this point I wish to highlight the diversity that has *always* been present within fandom’s origin stories.

I wish to argue here that the consistent trend in theorisation that positions the ‘fangirl’ itself as a marginal identity leads to some problematic assumptions about the operations of privilege within media fan spaces. Stemming from Henry Jenkins’ (1992) foundational idea of the “fan as poacher,” this line of thought continues to invisibilise the specific hierarchies at play within them to concentrate on their potential as spaces of subversive reclamations of texts by (largely undifferentiated) women fans. That is not to say conflict within them has not been a subject of discussion, but this has mainly been framed in terms of fans seeking legitimacy or as a kind of respectability politics (Alters 2007; Larsen and Zubernis 2012b; Stanfill 2013).

These analytical frames have left the marginal positioning of the ‘fangirl’ largely undisturbed. To clarify, I am not arguing against the idea that female fans have historically been seen as hysterical, irrational, and unimportant to producers of popular cultural texts, or against the idea that media fandom spaces have functioned as alternative networks within male-dominated geek cultures. But this line of theorisation is increasingly leading to arguments that maintain that the very act of identifying as a fan somehow makes white cisgender women participants in these spaces less privileged on an institutional level, or less culpable for holding and perpetuating ideas rooted in racism. It is in the light of these troubling narratives that I argue that it is necessary to re-evaluate and expand historical documentations of these spaces.

**I was there too! Diversifying Media Fandom History**
To collect evidence of historical online media fandom activity is a fraught task in any context, but particularly difficult once generalised accounts must be abandoned. Fandoms ebb and flow quicker than they can be recorded, and what is considered a major hub of activity in one particular year may be abandoned in a matter of months. Fanworks as records are vulnerable to the feelings of individual creators who may delete them or to the vagaries of hosting sites, which may go out of business or be taken over by bigger corporations. Moral panics and censorship have also been instrumental in erasing fanworks that offend mainstream sensibilities, particularly around slash fanfiction. In this context it is extremely difficult to craft any one linear narrative of specifically non-white fan participation in these spaces.

As I gestured to in my introduction, the default assumption of whiteness in these spaces, though never made explicit, meant that for the most part fans that came from other racial/cultural/ethnic backgrounds were hesitant to mark themselves off by labelling themselves in such ways. Further, since these identities are not a monolith and are inflected greatly by individual fan experiences it is difficult to describe or analyse them without falling into the trap of essentialising discourses. I will further interpolate attitudes around terms like “Fan of Colour” and the complexities of their usage in my third chapter, but at this point I will concentrate on highlighting certain moments in fandom history that inform their current deployment.

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24 One such event, known in fandom lore as ‘Strikethrough’ in which hundreds of Livejournal accounts and communities were charged with pornography and purged by the website administrators, was one of the contributing factors that gave impetus for the creation of the fan-run Organisation of Transformative Works (OTW) which established the Archive Of Our Own (AO3) a centralised archiving website that has remained central to fan studies theorisation since 2009 (“Strikethrough and Boldthrough - Fanlore 2007” 2016).
Generalised histories of fandom are also crafted in part to show these spaces as largely homogenous in terms of community norms and codes of interaction. As Bury (2005) stressed, “niceness” was (and continues to be) a valued trait and “abrasive” personalities who brought conflict into such spaces were generally considered troublemakers (67). While there has been a history of conflict in those spaces around many issues, these are generally classified as “wanks”—fan parlance for skirmishes that are seen to be motivated by petty concerns—and mostly not included in academic analyses. There have been some exceptions to this with some scholars considering communities that are dedicated to the chronicling of such conflicts as evidence of their self-reflexivity (Dunlap and Wolf 2010). Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis (2012b) have also observed that, “Fandom wank focused inwards creates a constant interrogation of our own fannish practices and their broader implications” (141).

It is also in the chronicling of these conflicts that a thread of sustained critique of the treatment of non-white characters in popular cultural texts by fandom can be found. Taken individually, each of these discussions have arisen from specific circumstances or triggering events, each unique to a particular fan community. This is also how these events have so far been considered within fan studies as well, on the occasions they have been registered (Scodari 2012; Velazquez 2013). However, if identified as a pattern of critique, it becomes increasingly difficult to deny that this is an issue that remains consistent across both genres and generations of fan activity.

My overview here is then something of a jigsaw puzzle of fandom controversies and is open to the charge of skipping across genres and platforms of fan activity. I would maintain, however, that this jigsaw is vital to piece together, and that it functions as a conversation that by necessity has had to occur in fits and starts. This is due to the fact that it is only in these flashpoint situations when fandom spaces are asked to confront their privileges and biases in concrete ways. This inevitably leads to a regurgitation of the
same arguments that come up as newer entrants into these spaces struggle to come to terms with them. To conceptualise these conversations as a historical legacy of critique, on par with other histories of fandom such as those chronicling the progress of specific fan practices such as zine-making, cosplay, and fanwork itself, is to acknowledge that these flashpoints are not isolated, unique events but function as a powerful countercurrent to dominant theorisations about fan spaces.

For Te, a fan who has been active in fandom from the mid-1990’s, the default whiteness of online fannish spaces starting from mailing lists onwards is something that has always had an impact on her navigation of them. As a prolific and well-known fan writer who has also been routinely vocal about her specific background, she recounts her early experiences saying,

Back in the nineties, it just wasn’t that weird for fen of color to have each other on their chat buddy lists—mostly AOL back then—even when they were only tangentially involved in each other's fandoms. And, you know, every once in a while, out of the blue, you’d get a message— “TE! TE! I FOUND ANOTHER ONE!” “HOLY SHIT WHERE? WHO?” “HER NAME IS [X]! SHE'S FROM TRINIDAD! SHE LIKES VAMPCHRON AND WISEGUY! I THINK SHE LIVES NEAR TUCSON!” “FUCK! I'VE HEARD OF BOTH OF THOSE FANDOMS! WE'RE LIKE SISTERS!” -- and so on. (Interview with Author 2015)

This also carried over into offline experiences with fannish events where even as she was routinely explicit about her racial identity, her presence in these ‘inclusive’ spaces was seen as an interruption to the norm.

When I had a bit more disposable income—and a lot more physical health—I would go to conventions from time to time. I was always treated very well there, and there were never *overt* instances of racism/prejudice, but I lost count of the sheer number of times when people—obviously well-meaning people—would do this: “Oh! *Oh*! *You're* Te? *Really*? But I *never* imagined you'd be *Black*!” Complete with double-take. And fluttery blinks. And hand-on-the-bosom. And so on. AND SO ON.
AND. FUCKING. SO ON.  
Sometimes? They would go ON.  
“I always imagined you White! And small! And really rather Goth!”  
You would not BELIEVE how many people said those words to me, in just that way. At different cons, in different states. (Interview with Author 2015)

It is not difficult to see how this kind of reaction would be replicated across fannish spaces and implicitly discourage fans who already saw themselves as ‘othered’ from speaking out about issues of race and racism within spaces that did function, up to a point at least, as places of fannish synergy. In terms of her more public writing, Te also posted about the issue in her Livejournal in 2006, discussing specifically the treatment of characters of colour in juggernaut fandoms and the importance of the informal network of non-white fans she had managed to build:

We knew who we were. We knew what we were doing, what we were writing, what we were watching. And, periodically, we would find each other. Just to—well, to bask in being of-color together. Is that disturbing? No, strike that, I don’t actually care if you find it disturbing. It’s the truth, and it was—*is*—necessary. Because there’s a difference between *having* cool characters of color and having *fannish* cool characters of color. There’s an objective difference—yes, even now, Virginia—between the way we as fans (*especially* slash fans) treat characters of color. Why, in some respects... In some respects, it’s as if these admittedly awesome characters of color simply aren’t on the same *shows*. Alternately, it’s as if these characters only exist on those parts of the show that we, as fans, are not capable of being fannish about. (Te, Livejournal 2006)

This recognition—that even when media that fanwriters gravitated towards did have well written non-white characters that fit fannish archetypes, those characters failed to gain the same traction in fannish spaces—continues to remain largely unacknowledged when popular character/pairing trends in fanwork are discussed. It is a thread that I will pick up again in my specific analysis of media fandom’s structures in chapters four and five, but here I would like to highlight it as something that has been a sustained topic of debate in fan spaces, but nonetheless continues to remain footnoted in fan studies.
Te’s accounts also gesture to the ways in which there had to be enough points of recognition between non-white fans for notions of solidarity to begin to be expressed. This mirrors the narratives of the genesis of media fandom spaces that I have outlined earlier, in which women fans of Star Trek found both community and validation when their activities were recorded and disseminated. The ways in which non-white fans have found lines of affinity between each other continue to be conflicted and yet the powerful effect of finding others like them within media fandom communities is clearly a key aspect of their experiences.

Te’s post prompted responses from some white fans who claimed their reluctance to write non-white characters was underscored by an uncertainty about getting them ‘right’ and inadvertently causing offence. This rhetorical tactic is not new to discussion around writing the ‘other’ as will be seen in the next controversy I track, but when articulated within media fan spaces, which see considerable and sustained intensity around deconstructing canonical character traits, motivations, emotions and sexualities, it seems especially jarring. WitchWillow, another non-white fan, articulated this frustration:

I’ve been ranting all through this entry and I just realized what bothers me about this. That poster and everyone like her who doesn’t write characters of color—is crossing the street. If you’re someone of color you know what I’m talking about. You’re walking down the street and a white woman notices you, and clings to her purse a little tighter, or crosses the street. If you’re a black man you see it all the time, men and women who either suddenly get submissive or overly aggressive, just in body language, until you pass on by.

She crossed the street. She sits there and talks about knowing black people and not being racist and having respect and not wanting to get things wrong. But she crossed the street. She made an assumption. A fear based assumption. She made the assumption that people of color would hurt. her. She made the assumption that we are people to be scared of and that we need to be pacified and it’s easier not to engage at all. She’s part of a unique community, a group of people who share writing love and show love and character love, but despite all that - one of us, or a character from that show comes walking down the street and she grabbed her purse and crossed to the streetlight and hoped for the best.

I am offended. I’m hurt and offended and nothing is going to make that go away. (WitchWillow, Livejournal 2006; my emphasis)
What I’d like to highlight in both the above responses is the specificity of the arguments being advanced in them. WitchWillow and Te’s posted narratives record the “hurt” of them buying into what media fan spaces are overtly characterised as both inside these communities and in the academic literature about them—progressive, inclusive and subversive—and then realising that those qualities remain reserved for only certain characters. This emotional reaction comes not from the perspective of outsiders but as long-time participants and contributors to these spaces. I stress this aspect because even ten years later a startlingly similar line of reasoning is seen in the conversation around The Force Awakens, only this time people who do speak up against these patterns are framed as “bullies” who just want to “seem progressive.” The fact that the same arguments are being repeated ten years later is indicative that this is an endemic problem.

These conversations continued to surface in such sporadic bursts, but in 2009, a controversy now broadly referred to as RaceFail ’09 brought them to the forefront once again, this time including professional writers as well. The flashpoint was triggered when popular Science Fiction and Fantasy (SF/F) author, Elizabeth Bear, wrote a blog entry on her Livejournal on the subject of “writing the other”—she was lauded by her fans and peers for tackling the issue in a sensitive manner (Matociquala 2009). However, one fan, Avalon’s Willow, responded slightly differently, taking off from Bear’s own novel Blood and Iron (2006). Her “Open Letter to Elizabeth Bear” was a brutal juxtaposition of what Bear advocated in her post, and how she had actually chosen to “write the other” in her work (Willow, Livejournal 2009). Bear initially responded to Willow accepting her critique, but soon some of her other fans and fellow authors jumped in to the debate, implying that is was merely a “failure to read correctly” on the part of Willow and other critics. This is of course a familiar rhetorical tactic used to suppress such critique and the subsequent heated exchanges marked a flashpoint that went on to prompt hundreds of
posts by both fans of colour and allies, as well as those who were resistant to the ideas put forth by them. The latter also included a discouragingly large number of professional SF/F writers and publishers.25

RaceFail ’09 was important for a number of reasons, but in terms of my argument it is significant because it marked the first time in online fandom’s history when SF/F’s racist and imperialist characterisations were debated in a forum where authors and editors of SF/F magazines and journals had to engage with those questions and that alliances between non-white fans were made across forums as platforms. These particular aspects of the interactions sparked off as a result of the controversy are also reflected in other discussions of the event. As N.K. Jemisin, a Black writer whose first book The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms was published in 2010 reflected in a blogpost,

Since RaceFail I’ve been to lots of conventions and readings, chatted with other authors/editors/publishers on mailing lists and in person, and I’ve started to notice changes that I attribute to RaceFail fallout. First the personal: I suspect the increased awareness of the SFF zeitgeist re race issues has helped The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms get more attention, since it’s an epic fantasy written by a writer of color, with a protagonist of color. Can’t complain about that. Also, I’ve seen a number of conventions dedicate panels and programming tracks (or in some cases the whole con) to discussing race, and trying to attract more fans of color. […]

And back to the personal: I feel more comfortable being myself now than ever before, after more than 20 years as a fan and aspiring writer in this field. Used to be I was the only brown face in the room at most SFF events and gatherings; used to be even I thought this was normal, and that I was some kind of rarity — even though practically every other person of color I know, including family and significant others, was a fan of SFF in some form. (One of the most powerful moments for me in RaceFail was when the participating fans of color decided to do a very informal roll call, and illustrated just how non-rare we were.) Used to be I ground my teeth but kept silent when hearing fellow fans say asinine, bigoted things, because the whole room seemed to agree with them and I didn’t feel safe or brave enough to raise an objection. Used to be I fended off half a dozen hands reaching out to touch my hair on my way through every dealers’ room. Used to be I considered SFF events work — necessary for the sake of my writing career, something to be grimly endured, not enjoyed. For fun I went elsewhere. And it used to be very noticeable that I could at least broach the subject of race in every other aspect of my life — academia, the counseling psych field, political

25 Due to the large number of posts that were prompted by the controversy it is not possible to reproduce them all here but a number of commentators made round-up posts to link and record commentary, see Somerville 2009.
activism of course, literature/art in general — but not in SFF. The conversations would simply shut down, often thanks to respected personages/fans who would emphatically declare that there was no racism in the genre outside of a few unimportant loudmouths, and no need to discuss race since there was no racism, so let’s move on to something interesting like quantum physics. (Jemisin 2010; my emphasis)

While Jemisin’s discussion about the larger publishing scene is interesting, I wish to highlight the sense of community she and other non-white fans found during the controversy. The “roll call” was in a sense a validation of identity and of presence in these spaces where once again the presumed whiteness had operated so powerfully as to lead Jemisin to dismiss all evidence to the contrary. RaceFail ’09 is then seen as a watershed moment in discussions of race in fannish spaces because it broke a silence around the topic and established networks that would also influence discussions in the future (Klink 2010).

In my next chapter I will track the effects that it had on my own interviewees in context of my arguments about fandom as a specifically postcolonial cyberspace as it has moved towards more dialogic platforms. But here, I wish to contextualise it historically as another moment where media fandom spaces were forced to confront their erasures. In doing so it also provided an opportunity for non-white fans to find points of coalition-building and perhaps a corroboration that their concerns were shared by others and were as valid as other social issues that seemed to concern these women-dominated online spaces. I will pick up on some specific historically situated conversations about race in fanfiction in my later chapters but at this stage I’d like to move on to tracing some of the other pathways that non-white fans have taken into fan spaces so as not to construct them as always only in an ‘othered’ space as that also elevates a singular narrative about their activities.
While interviewing my respondents, one of my first questions was about how they discovered online fandom and how their first navigations of these spaces proceeded. This was in order to contextualise their responses, as I was interviewing fans from a broad range of age groups who were placed in different geographical areas and I was curious as to see what patterns, if any, came up in terms of first fandoms. It was also to discover what kinds of activities these fans were engaged in, whether members primarily lurked (as I did) or participated directly. Of my thirty-nine respondents, twenty-five gave me specific details about their age when they first discovered these spaces and the fandoms in which they participated. The range of discovery of fandom for these participants falls quite neatly into the historical time period that I have concentrated on so far, from 1995-2006. Additionally, while Baym, Bury and Coppa generally describe slightly older demographics, especially regarding those participants who were contributing to the infrastructure of fandom, my respondents’ mean age at entering this space is 15 (the oldest being in their thirties and the youngest being nine years old). When looking at how teenage use of Internet technologies was being theorised within the nascent field of cybercultural studies in that same period it generally focused, once again, on panics about their effects on young minds. Issues being considered included Internet addiction, skewed usage of these spaces in terms of gender, and the vulnerability of young users to predatory behaviour by strangers (Young 1998; La Ferle et al 2000; Burgess-Proctor et al 2009).

The first examinations of specifically raced encounters for adolescents with internet-based media would only come with danah boyd’s (2011) important study on the “white flight” to Facebook from MySpace where each space was described by participants in highly racially coded language. It is quite interesting in this context to examine what non-white participants were doing with the truncated time and resources
that were available to them at a point when the availability of Internet connectivity was still somewhat of a luxury. As one respondent recalls, “Back then it was modems and I got into trouble for tying up the phone line, so I would sneak on at night (2-3 am) and save the pages of as much fic as I could so I could read it in my own time!” (Anonymous Respondent 17, Interview with Author 2015). Another respondent recounts,

My first experience with fandom was when I was in elementary school, and my brother brought home Final Fantasy 8 games to play. I’d watch him play, but since he was in college, he was only home for the weekends, so I was usually left hanging with where the story was going to go. I did have access to the internet, so I searched for Final Fantasy 8 and stumbled onto fanfiction (mostly slash). I read it and was super confused (hadn’t had sex ed yet, didn’t know gay people existed or what the word meant exactly), but I found I really enjoyed reading fanfiction. I eventually stumbled onto fanfiction.net and basically went there any time there was a new show or game I was interested in to see if there was fanfiction. (Anonymous Respondent 6, Interview with Author 2015)

This is not a unique story within media fandom discovery narratives, with many analyses also recounting how explicit fanfiction of all genres has been part of many young women’s exploration of their own identities (Black 2008; Tosenberger 2008a; Day 2014). It is however indicative of a diversity of participants within that narrative which has largely gone unexamined. Additionally, a lot of the skills required to navigate these spaces appear to have been self-taught, both in terms of issues of privacy as well as technical knowledge that enabled fans to build fansites. While going through responses I was struck by the number of my respondents who casually mentioned making individual websites, as this kind of activity is invariably seen as the domain of either male users or, in terms of media fandom spaces, as those set up by white women fans.

For instance, a fan identifying as Bangladeshi-Malaysian, who has moved between multiple locations, chronicles her beginnings with music fandom, specifically the bands Aqua and Savage Garden,
So I started with Aqua, making a fan website for them in 1998. It might have been one of their first. I then got into Savage Garden fandom that same year, which has a rich fanfiction culture, and became the most prolific Savage Garden fanfic writer in the fandom. The official BBS (Bulletin Board Site) had a fanfic subform, so I was often on those BBSes while also talking to other fans on the various websites and subforums and newsletters and such. I even participated in a number of large fandom projects, including care packages and a World Record-breaking attempt to translate Crash and Burn in as many languages as possible. Along the way, if I really liked a media object, I would make a fansite for it. TV shows, radio shows, that sorta thing. That was a lot of Livejournal posts and fanfic and regular chatting on AIM with a bunch of queer fans roughly my age mostly from the US. (Located in Malaysia at the time) (Creatrix Tiara, Interview with Author 2015)

Another respondent who discovered fanfiction through professional wrestling fandom recalls that,

I’ve always been comfortable writing so it didn’t take long to move on to writing and posting to fiction message boards. I built a little Geocities fansite—totally taught myself HTML. Then I started up a fiction archive and nurtured it into a fairly big fandom resource. The site ran for five+ years. (Anonymous Respondent 12, Interview with Author 2015)

And again, this time in the context of Japanese anime fandoms, a participant disclosed,

I was pretty young but was very enthusiastic over them; for Akazukin Cha Cha I wrote a lot of fic and became one of the more well-known authors in the fandom, and for Ruoroni Kenshin I read a lot of fic and wrote a few (fic-writing was more intimidating here, as it attracted a more mature audience and there were so many good writers in the fandom). For both, I set up fansites and bought a lot of merchandise. (Anonymous Respondent 13, Interview with Author 2015)

These anecdotes paint a picture of active young adolescents who were engaging with media fan communities and contributing to their infrastructure in material ways,

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26 Akazukin Cha Cha (1994-95) and Ruoroni Kenshin (1996-98) were both Japanese manga series’ which were adapted into anime shows.
becoming well known and prolific fan creators, creating archival sites and networking with young fans in other countries as well. This is a vital part of the ‘story’ of media fan communities that often gets glossed over as they are constructed primarily around Western English-language media texts that then go on to assume a homogenous fanbase, particularly before the advent of international streaming services that have now caused a slight shift in terms of conceptualising audiences. In such narratives, as I have pointed out before, the role of cross-cultural media texts like that of manga and anime are given less attention. It is to these that I now turn my focus.

“I just needed other people to fangirl with me!” Anime and Manga

Fandoms as Cross-cultural Pathways to Media Fandom

My emphasis in this section is a result of my interviewees repeatedly bringing up both manga and anime as formative in their discovery of media fandom spaces. While it is not within the scope of this chapter to give an exhaustive account of manga and anime fandoms, I wish to pick up a particular trajectory of their development that has not been explored adequately so far in either scholarship that has focussed on these genres or in more general media fandom studies. That is to say, the repeated emphasis on such texts as first fandoms for my respondents can certainly partly be traced to the “anime boom” that caught the attention of school-going adolescents in the U.S.A. during the 1990’s. But it also clearly functioned as a particular pathway for many non-white fans both through internet-mediated platforms and English-language media fandom spaces.

In broader popular cultural studies, the popularity of these texts with a U.S.A audience has been theorised mainly in terms of their attraction to readers who were largely assumed to be white. When other identities have been considered, these are still subsumed
under a dominant U.S.A.-centric identification. In one influential analysis, Annalee Newitz (1994) postulated that,

> When Americans are anime otaku... [a]s much as they may dislike or avoid American culture—and even if they are from Asian racial backgrounds—they are still Americans, and they are rejecting their national culture in favour of another national culture. (10-11) 

I strongly disagree with this assessment of the relationship that Asian Americans have to anime and manga texts, especially as these texts were not sourced from only Japan at the time, with respondents referring to Chinese and Korean texts as well. Japanese texts have however received the most attention in academia. The popularity of these texts has been theorised in terms of their “exoticness” in terms of their depiction of Japan as a highly futuristic landscape that David Morley and Kevin Robins (1995) termed “techno-orientalism,” as well as the role that U.S.A. and U.K. SF/F texts played in using Japanese iconography to signify as desirable otherness (Clements 1995). In the same frame, their lack of overt markers of “Japaneseness” has been seen to facilitate their crossover (Newitz 1994; Allison 2000; Napier 2000). This line of thought, that anime and manga texts are somehow unmarked by race, continues to have repercussions, most recently seen in the casting of Scarlett Johansson in the upcoming Hollywood live-action adaptation of the iconic Japanese anime series, Ghost In The Shell. As Emily Yoshida (2016) reflects, for Japanese Americans the relationship to anime and manga texts was decidedly not the same experience that Newitz proposed:

For us, anime is something from our country, or our parents’ country, that was cool enough for white kids to get into just as fervently. We couldn’t see ourselves in Hollywood’s shows and movies, but we could claim anime as our own, and see ourselves in its wild sci-fi imaginings and cathartic transformation sequences. Of course, I use the words “see ourselves” loosely. 
I was born in Japan, but raised by my Caucasian mother in America. She had an appreciation for Japanese art and culture, and raised me on some very basic Japanese. But I remember her looking askance at anime, especially as it started to
rise in popularity in the states in the early ‘90s. “Those big eyes? That crazy hair? They don’t look Japanese at all!” (Of course, the average anime character does look unmistakably Japanese, but in the same way a rococo painting in a gilded frame looks unmistakably French.)

I knew I was supposed to be suspicious of anime, but as I grew into adolescence I found myself almost involuntarily drawn toward it. Not only did it have the seductive qualities of the forbidden, the lurid, the trashy — it was also one of the only pop cultural connections I had to a culture I had largely been severed from at birth. (para 16-17)

It is not my intention here to focus on the contentious racialised visual aspect of these texts, but to establish that they were important to young media fans in my study in distinctly different ways than what has been privileged in analyses thus far. In many cases they provided a touchstone, not just to ‘home’ cultures but also as a base on which to build friendships as well as broader fan communities. The ways in which these communities took shape and mediated the experience of a fair number of media fandom participants has remained footnoted in most generalised overviews. I contend that this has been a mistake as it is in their functioning that more specific information about the roots of contemporary fandom can be found. For instance the complex relationship diaspora subjects have with popular cultural texts from their “home countries” has been the subject of much analysis in terms of postcolonial critiques of Bollywood (Gopinath 2000; Bhattacharya 2004; Punathambekar 2005; Rao 2007). It is this space of liminality, of in-between-ness, that I will build on in order to argue for media fandom as a postcolonial cyberspace in the rest of this dissertation.

One of the ways to trace the specific activities of non-white fans, like my respondents, in these spaces is to focus on the practice of scanlation. The term scanlation refers to process whereby manga texts were made available in English (for free) to fans who did not speak Japanese/Chinese/Korean. The neologism gestures to an informal yet complex system in which manga comics would be purchased by fans residing in the country of their origin, then scanned, uploaded, translated, re-edited and hosted by groups of fans that had formed for that express purpose. The related practice of fan-subbing made
anime films available with English subtitles but that required greater bandwidth than was available easily in the time period that is my focus.

Scanlation was a key mechanism that facilitated the popularity of manga, particularly as it bridged the gap between demand for these texts and the slow pace and unpredictability of official translations. The first projects are tracked to having started as early as 1996 with the manga *Ranma 1/2* being translated, but the practice gained steam between 1999-2001 (Rampant 2009). These fan groups generally used Internet Relay Chat (IRC) platforms to disseminate their projects to maximise limited bandwidth and in many cases evolved to become highly efficient and prolific. Eventually, splinter groups formed catering to specific genres of manga and aggregator sites sprang up that hosted multiple projects from a variety of sources.27

Scanlation practices have so far been examined in terms of ethical considerations, privacy concerns, and the relationship between fans and producers in light of more stringent copyright laws and manga publishers cracking down to a greater extent on such activity (H. K. Lee 2009; Nowlin 2010; Liaw 2011; Manovich, Douglass, and Huber 2011). These are mostly generalised overviews, however, and it is surprisingly difficult to find actual demographic data for these groups. This can partly be traced to the use of online pseudonyms and perhaps researchers being careful to protect the identities of those fans who could be seen to be engaging in illegal activity. It is also due to rapid turnover of staff within groups with not much interest in standardised record-keeping.

One archival-cum-historical project is the “Inside Scanlation” website which incorporates interviews with project heads as well as profiles of groups that gained prominence but once again there is little mention of specific identities. However, in line

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27 There are a dizzying variety of genres and sub-genres of manga texts available and though prescriptively labelled there is a great deal of crossover in terms of readership. For the purposes of this chapter the genres most often identified are Shounen, which are comics aimed at young boys and Shoujo, which are aimed at young girls. More niche genres like Yuri, featuring lesbian relationships, and Yaoi or BL (Boys Love), featuring gay relationships, are also relevant. For a more in-depth discussion see Bryce and Davis (2010).
with my own interviews and broader trends in the availability of genres, it can be theorised that a large number of young women were involved in these practices. It can also be speculated that while there were certainly some participants involved who had no personal connections to the specific cultural contexts of these texts but knew enough Japanese, Chinese, and Korean to source the scans and translate them, there were also a significant number of participants from those specific national/cultural/ethnic backgrounds as well.

The profile of one group on “Inside Scanlation,” called “Shoujo Magic,” provides some clues. The description of the group stresses that it was a very successful one, created in 2002 by a young girl known as chry18 who initially scanned and uploaded manga pages for a friend who hadn’t managed to finish a manga before she “returned to Australia” (para 3). While it is not made clear where the friend was leaving from, it seems probable that this was Japan, considering chry18 at first only uploaded scans of Japanese manga without translating them. In the process Chry18 met another like-minded manga lover, Siana, and the group was born. Shoujo Magic would grow to one of the more prolific scanlation groups active between 2002-2009.

Their popularity is seen to be as a result of their high quality of work but also their choice of texts:

Although manga translations and scanlations had been around many years before ShoujoMagic, most manga available online were shounen series like Dragonball, Ranma ½, and Love Hina. Shoujo series were sparse and elusive, and only a few groups, such as Certhy and MangaArt, scanlated shoujo manga at all. ShoujoMagic was the first major group to cater to women and became a smash hit in the budding scanlation scene. (“ShoujoMagic-Inside Scanlation” 2015, para 10)

This focus on genres that catered to women readers also encapsulated those of Yaoi or BL (Boys Love) that featured erotic and romantic relationships between male
characters. It is interesting that while the cross-cultural popularity of Yaoi has attracted some attention, the actual process whereby these texts were made available to women readers, which necessitated collaborative practices such as scanlation has been largely skimmed over.

For instance, when Mark McLelland (2009) examines both Japanese and English-language websites that feature explicit Yaoi material, his focus is on the implications of the circulation of such material in terms of the legal status of pornography in different cultural contexts. While he notes some differences in terms of how the English-language sites position their enjoyment of the genre, the differentiation is purely one of language rather than one of identity. However, as I have maintained, for many of my respondents, anime and manga (including a lot of Yaoi) was their first entry point into media fandom spaces. Further, their participation in these specific internet-mediated spaces made a perceptible impact on them. The implications of such activity, in the context of an academic discourse that even today sees it as a sphere dominated by male-centered scanlation groups, are then even more significant.

One respondent (a Chinese-American fan) buttresses this hypothesis in her detailing of her experiences of participating in scanlation groups from 2002-2005. She too observes that the projects that focussed on the genres of Yaoi or BL were predominantly led by women. I quote her recollections in detail as it spans many of the issues that I wish to highlight:

I was into anime and manga from a young age, having been exposed to it by cousins etc., but it took searching for Sailor Moon on the Internet back in the mid 90’s to realize there was a thing called fandom. I read a lot of terrible fic, often crossed over with a billion other series I didn’t know much about, made a fan site that I’m sure no one ever visited, etc. I can’t really remember a reaction to it because it felt natural to read fic for whatever reason, but did I ever get a shock when I innocently opened a Ranma 1/2 fic and it ended up being a m/m/m fic! And that is how I discovered slash (though I grew up calling it yaoi or bl and only switched over to slash after moving into western fandoms).
I dabbled in translating manga for MangaProject, if you remember that! I loved that site—it took me 20+ minutes to download a single scanlated chapter, but somehow my sister and I read entire 30 volume series that way. Chinese translations were always available way earlier than the scanlated ones, so I’d download them from IRC and use those to translate. I translated some *Slamdunk, Hanakimi, Gokusen, Antique Bakery* etc., mostly because I just needed other people to fangirl with me! This spanned high school and college for me. (Anonymous Respondent 9, Interview with Author 2015)

For this fan, then, the need for sharing and building fan interest around particular texts that were meaningful to her led to participation in cybercultural spaces that drew on her particular identity. It is also noteworthy that the ‘language’ of media fandom for her has also remained enmeshed in code-switching depending in what context the discussion is being framed. The importance of code-switching in fandom, whereby multilingual fans simultaneously access and participate in multiple fan spaces has so far not taken up much consideration in fan studies. For instance, within the discipline, the category of transnational fan studies often implies a demarcation by language-use—K-Pop or Bollywood movies. The possibility of fans simultaneously participating in both English-language spaces and these ‘othered’ fandoms has remained unrecognised. For example, in the above interview excerpt, the fan recounts reading queer m/m fanfiction in manga fandoms and classifying it as “yaoi” and then “switching” to the term “slash” when participating in “western fandoms.” This does not imply however that switch was only in one direction. Rather, it indicates that the fan was able to move between presumably separate fan spaces both linguistically and culturally.

Nor was this a particularly isolated phenomenon as I found when I asked her to expand on her specific experiences of the demographics of the scanlation groups she was involved with and whether there were any patterns about which manga titles were taken up by them in terms of gender and racial/cultural/ethnic background. She observed,

I felt like there were a decent number of people who had just taken a bunch of Japanese [lessons], also a lot of Asia-based people.
I translated some stuff for the Manga Project whose founder was male, I think. But I mostly did shoujo/bl so that were all women (as far as I knew).

In terms of specifically Chinese language manga translation she recalled that,

If it was translating from Chinese, pretty much everyone I can recall was ethnic Chinese. Maybe they were from Taiwan or Singapore or Chinese American, but still. (Anonymous Respondent 9, Interview with Author 2015)

While it is not within the scope of this chapter to embark on a detailed analysis of the scanlation scene, I wish to highlight the fact that these spaces were extremely heterogeneous in their composition.

At a time when adolescent usage of the Internet was continually framed in terms of obsession, addiction, and predatory behaviour and when young women in particular were seen to be vulnerable in such environments, it is notable that this space saw cross-cultural collaboration and highly skilled manipulation of language, translation, graphical skills, as well as website and webchat administration. Further, these fannish spaces allowed for explorations around various axes of identity, in addition to gender and sexuality, that my respondents clearly were shaped by to a significant extent. It is perhaps also telling that while fanwork produced around English-language media texts produced in the U.S.A. and U.K. have been consistently examined around their mobilisations of gender and sexuality, fanwork produced by fans located in those same geographical locations around anime and manga texts, have been framed in terms of their implications for literacy (Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 2003; Black 2005; Black 2008).

Conclusion

It is clear then that even where the narratives of specifically racialised experiences of media fandom communities could have been the focus of fandom histories, they remain
somewhat othered and left out of the ambit of what ‘the fandom’ is generally recognized
to constitute. Through my archival and anecdotal reconstruction I have demonstrated that
the ‘assumed whiteness’ of media fandom spaces can only remain stable when this
assumption is repeatedly shored up through invisibilising and erasing both specific
criticisms of and contributions to these spaces by non-white fans. While the theoretical
frameworks that influenced the early conceptualisations of cybercultural spaces certainly
encouraged such ‘colourblindness’ they cannot be held solely to blame for researchers’
own blind spots in these areas. I want to underline here that it is has been the structuring
force of whiteness in such ‘default’ modes of analyses that has constructed these spaces
as both homogenous in their make-up as well as uncomplicatedly progressive and un-
inflected by issues such as racism.

I will continue to argue throughout this dissertation that a consideration of such
aspects in analyses of fanwork does not only become salient when talking about fandom’s
specific treatment of non-white characters (though that certainly brings these issues to the
forefront). Rather it must be taken as a constitutive element in our theorisations of all
aspects of media fandom culture, be they histories (both in terms of absence or presence),
contemporary operations of these communities, or the conceptualisations of pleasure
within fanwork. In the next chapter I will build on this historical evidence to propose
more broad-based theoretical models that will encourage inclusive frameworks.
Specifically I will talk about contemporary media fandom communities as an example of
postcolonial cyberspaces.
Chapter 2
Global Citizens, Networked Identities:
Online Media Fandom as a Postcolonial Cyberspace

Chapter Summary:

Wanzo’s (2015) call for diversifying the critical genealogies of fan studies as a discipline has presciently pointed out that it is the ‘whiteness’ of its foundational theoretical apparatuses that continue to make race a “ubiquitous absence” in the field. Building from my previous chapter’s mapping of the historical intertwining of cybercultural discourses and media fandom activities, I state my case for contemporary online fandom communities to be theorised as an example of a postcolonial cyberspace—an alternative, inclusive framework. I locate this theoretical positioning within a broader consideration of how issues of identity and global citizenship are articulated in both contemporary cybercultural and fan studies. Global fan communities today are analysed within the frame of transcultural fandom. Such analyses are key to broadening the field to incorporate the differential functioning of fan cultures not located within the U.S.A and U.K. However, a unilateral focus on these framings strengthens the assumption that attention to differential experiences/pathways of fandom are only relevant to ‘other’ fan communities, thus continuing to elide the existing diverse demographics of traditional media fandom.

A postcolonial cybercultural approach allows me to discuss the multiple identities of my respondents and their contentious relationships to Western media texts that form the focus of traditionally defined media fan communities, without collapsing into simplistic ideas about resistance, subversion, and co-optation. A key component in my argument will be an examination of the effects of changes in fandom platform-usage, towards more dialogic models. I posit that this move that has helped non-white fans engage with these issues more openly and has allowed the expansion of networks that I have already traced. I also discuss the usage of these spaces as consciousness-raising platforms and lay out possible lines of future theorisations of online media fandom communities.
As I have already demonstrated, trends in early cybercultural studies encouraged researchers to gloss over the differential implications for non-white and non-Western identities when analysing the operations of internet-mediated platforms. However, as knowledge about how such axes of identity are articulated in these spaces has grown, it has demanded an expansion of these frameworks, incorporating more inclusive theoretical apparatuses. It is undeniable that this is an extremely complex area of research, with intersections of gender and sexuality interacting with shifting and slippery notions of racial, cultural, ethnic and national identities. However, it is equally undeniable that some of the most intriguing innovations and interactions that are unfolding in online forums at the moment are happening around these very loci.

For instance, phenomena like #BlackTwitter, are demonstrating how online dialogic and discursive communities can and do form around diverse articulations of individual identity to impactful political/personal effects. To expand on the phenomenon briefly, #BlackTwitter has come to designate a loosely structured, U.S.A-centric discursive community on the microblogging platform Twitter, that facilitates a digitally networked discussion of everything from police brutality, to electoral issues, to Beyoncé’s 2016 hit album *Lemonade*, from a specifically non-white and non-mainstream viewpoint (Brock 2012; Sharma 2012; Florini 2014). Black users leverage Twitter’s organisational and filtering devices known as hashtags—like #WorldCup2014 to indicate a sporting event—to designate tweets about a topic as entering into a public conversation around it. As Sarah Florini (2014) points out, these users construct their identities linguistically and performatively and so are flexible in their individual articulations even

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28 Hashtags are often used to bring attention to various issues as Twitter highlights topics that are being discussed by large numbers of people in the form of “trending topics.” As I will expand on in a moment, this is sometimes referred to as “hashtag activism” in which social activists and ordinary users try to raise the profile of certain issues. This can be a powerful tool for spreading information but has also been seen as encouraging of “slacktivism” wherein individuals express support for various issues on digital platforms but do not take any further action (Christensen 2011; Morozov 2009).
as they base them on a racialised identifier. That is to say, as a politicised discursive community #BlackTwitter does not collapse these identities into an essentialist monolith. These formulations function in complex ways, and very often visibilise the inherently problematic nature of codifying diverse racial/cultural/ethnic/religious/nationalistic identities under such an umbrella term, yet also show how certain affinities and solidarities can be constructed across these boundaries. While it is difficult for researchers dealing with these spaces to encapsulate such a diversity of engagements, it is my contention that with the help of theoretical frameworks that require consideration of multiple aspects of identity, more nuanced analyses are indeed possible.

This is also my approach to contemporary online media fandom communities, which are now, more than ever, having to deal with discussions of these issues. These are also incredibly complex interactions to theorise, as constructs of global media texts interact with localised issues (not just in terms of geography but also community groupings) in ways that cannot be parsed simplistically. At any given moment on my Tumblr dashboard fans are engaged in interrogating their own biases, arguing about notions of representation, finding new ways of engaging with source texts, and organising around certain social justice issues. What is key to my discussions of these engagements is the recognition that they are happening within the act of squeeing over the latest James Bond movie. To try and posit these as somehow entirely separate spheres of fan

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29 Tumblr.com is the blogging platform that is currently the most popular for Western media fandom purposes, along with Twitter.com and various archival sites to host fanwork like Wattpad.com and Archiveofown.org. Tumblr’s primary display interface is called a ‘dashboard,’ which allows users to read various uploads—meta-essays, fanfiction, fanart—that the people they follow have posted or re-posted from other users. In Tumblr parlance such reposting activity is called reblogging. Tumblr’s format encourages image-heavy content and short textual posts, though of course there are exceptions. Each reblog also allows users to add individual text or images as commentary, critique or extension of the original content. The dashboard orders entries chronologically and allows users to scroll up and down in order to read their feeds. Since links and individual posts are quite easily lost in this format, fanwork is often hosted elsewhere—such as on the aforementioned archival sites—and linked on individual blogs. For further discussion on the structure of the website see Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014.

30 The word ‘squee’ designates an exclamation of delight and/or excitement over an event, usually one that is related to popular culture. It is quite gendered in inflection and is sometimes used pejoratively against girl/women fans.
activity, as some theorists have done when talking about notions of fan activism (that I will interrogate in chapter three), is to miss the interlinked rhetorical strategies, that position these spaces as progressive and inclusive while also eliding consistent patterns of erasure.

Scoping the Field: Theorising Online Identity Today

Can you log in? Boundary Crossings in the Network Society

The differences between the conceptualisations of online identity today versus those that I have discussed so far have, in my opinion, shifted more in terms of platforms than in broader orientation. As I have argued, cyberfeminist theorists in many ways predicted the “social turn” in the usage of internet-mediated-platforms. With the advent of social media in particular, this has become the primary mode of theorisation about both what individuals do online and by extension what they are in terms of their curated online identities. Scholars are currently examining these activities in myriad ways, spanning a wide range of issues from microcelebrity practices where individuals leverage their online personas to sell everything from baby products to cars, to social movements, to concerns about online privacy (Senft 2008; MacDonald 2013; Marwick 2013; Carpenter, Steeves, and Abzarian 2014).

Manuel Castells’ (2009) influential theorisation of this turn, dubbing the contemporary moment as the age of “mass self communication,” underlines the ways in which cybertural networks order global informational flows as part of what he terms as today’s global “network society.” While cautioning against utopian framings of the functioning of such a society, Castells nonetheless argues that, “the process of formation
and exercise of power relationships is decisively transformed in the new organisational and technological context derived from the rise of global digital networks of communication as the fundamental symbol-processing system of our time” (4). Castells frames his arguments in the context of contemporary large-scale social movements that have succeeded in attracting attention within global informational networks such as Twitter, through the use of hashtags and other such strategies. For him the key question governing the success of such movements, lies in how to reach “the global from the local, through networking with other localities—how to ‘grassroot’ the space of flows” (52).

This process is of course heavily implicated in the question of how these informational flows are organised and controlled by a nexus of both corporate and nationalistic interests. To explicate the main problematics of this formulation I will briefly consider the case of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. The campaign started in April 2014, when two hundred and seventy six Nigerian schoolgirls were kidnapped by the militant organisation Boko Haram from their school in the town of Chibok. The campaign went viral and was successful in capturing the attention of the world and as can be seen in the images below, gained some very high-profile backers.

Figure 1.1: Malala Yousafzai (left) and Michelle Obama (right) hold up #bringbackourgirls signs (“Bring Back Our Girls: Michelle Obama and Malala Yousafzai support campaign for return of kidnapped Nigeria schoolgirls” The Independent, May 8th 2014)
However despite such attention, the campaign passed from public memory quite quickly and two years later, many of the girls are still missing and few of the approximately 6.1 million people who engaged with the controversy online have followed up on the issue. This has been parsed as an example of “slacktivism;” in which people express their interest in a social justice issue in a superficial manner before moving on to another one (Morozov 2009; Christensen 2011). However, it is also important to note that a large part of the attention that the event received was inflected by racism, Islamophobia and imperialism (Chiluwa and Ifukor 2015; Maxfield 2015). The framing of the hashtag, putting emphasis on an empathetic connection to the plight of the schoolgirls and a possibly ‘global’ feminist solidarity remained largely unfulfilled in the face of the operations of these other interstices of identity. These operations must also be seen in relation to the strategies of Western governments in particular who often use humanitarian issues to justify their military interventions—in pursuit of decidedly non-humanitarian ends—in developing economies (Gibbs 1997; Arat-Koc 2002; Cairo 2006). This aspect of cybercultural theorisation also has a direct relationship to fan studies, which I will examine in more detail in my discussion of fan activism in chapter three. But here, I would like to underline how such interactions are never uninflected by identities around issues of race, gender, religion, nationality etc.

I contend that the way the controversy unfolded also shows how particular cybercultural spaces function as both platforms and interpretative frames that cannot be called anything other than ‘global’ with all the fraught connotations of that term. That is, it encompasses the workings of globalisation, neoliberal capitalism and neo-imperialism as well as utopic ideas of cosmopolitanism and international solidarity. The competing imperatives that shape cybercultural studies today then are often a matter of whether these terrains are theorised as functioning as uneven mediating influences on interactions within them, or as relatively smooth conduits for the same. For instance, while Castells’
theorisations call attention to the ways in which cybercultural terrains are increasingly sites of governmental regulatory interventions, his optimism about the potential transformative effect of these networks on power relations is rooted in a belief in their innovative newness. When viewed through the lens of postcolonial studies however, these new networks are seen to continue to be ordered by historically rooted global power structures oriented by the forces of neo-colonisation in the interests of the Global North, even in cases where their humanitarian potentiality is foregrounded.

M.I. Franklin’s (2006) analysis of the internet-mediated interactions of individuals hailing from the South Pacific islands region offers a useful theoretical framework to consider these complex and competing influences. Franklin discusses the “two tales” of the Internet; the first one being situated in the world of high finance, and privileging the “technoeconomic intermingling of corporate investment and government geostrategic agendas.” This vision of the future sees a,

[...] political and sociocultural commitment to a particular vision of digitally integrated communications that rest on proprietary computer codes and other jealously guarded keys to a whole set of “global solutions”- solutions that are being sold not only to non-interneted societies and their “knowledge workers,” but also to publics much closer to home. The second tale is that of non-commercial interpersonal communication that relies upon easy, affordable access to computers and telephone lines, relatively “low-tech” hardware and software configurations, and viable transmission pathways for different technoeconomic political and geographical situations. This internet’s cyberspaces are where people talk—write about their everyday lives, confront political and social issues of the day, muse on their (mutual) hopes and fears in what are spontaneous, negotiated sorts of intercultural and intracultural exchange. (2-3)

Franklin acknowledges that these tales have always been intertwined with the steady privatisation of communication networks. This has placed the onus of providing “easy, affordable access,” to such networks to non-elite users firmly in the hands of multinational corporations. This intermingling of corporate and nationalistic imperialism has also been identified as a new form of “empire” by the influential scholars Michael
Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001). I will take up their theorisations in more detail in the next section but their identification of the global multinational conglomerates as the new imperial nodes of power is also relevant here. For Franklin too, it is important to realise that technological networks that are hailed as an entirely new and revolutionary communicative innovations, in fact “overlay older ones put in place by the British Empire a hundred years ago and then developed by post-World War II military-based satellite communications. The ensuing skewing in “global” coverage continues today” (23).

In addition to this structural bias, I would like to call attention to another way in which these two tales are intertwining. With the advent of social media platforms, particularly public-facing ones like Twitter and Tumblr, the communicative aspect of cyberspace is now considered its most powerful. Indeed there has been a tendency to consider the use of digital spaces and tools (social media in particular) the common denominator in various protest movements and consciousness raising campaigns across a vast variety of countries and contexts from the Arab Spring in the Middle East to the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong (Shirky 2008; Joyce 2010; Castells 2010; Skinner 2011; Juris 2012). While I agree with the broad consensus that the Internet has enabled the creation of alternative public spheres, which have allowed members of marginalised groups to participate more strongly in public debates over issues that affect them, there is also a danger of this celebratory discourse eliding crucial power differentials that persist. For instance, social media, lauded for its use by ordinary users, has now been operationalised (in some cases I would argue even weaponised) by an array of elite figures from powerful individuals like Donald Trump (Trump 2009) to military organisations like the Israeli Defence Force (IDF 2009).
Diversity in the Network: Differential Algorithms of
Cybercultural Identity

To pick up once again on Sandoval’s (1994) “Re-entering Cyberspace” that I referenced in my first chapter, her critiques of the almost post-racial push in examinations of the potentialities and pitfalls of the Internet continue to ring true. Sandoval argued, quite radically for the time, that it was not the advent of the digital that would result in ‘revolutionary’ outcomes, but the use of those technologies from specific perspectives. She noted,

[…] theorists of globalization engage with the introduction of an oppositional “cyborg” politics as if these politics have emerged with the advent of electronic technology and transnational capital alone, and not as a requirement of consciousness in opposition developed under previous forms of domination…. Indeed, if cyborg consciousness is to be considered as anything other than that which replicates the now dominant global world order, then cyborg consciousness must be developed out of a set of technologies that together comprise what I call the methodology of the oppressed, a methodology that can provide the guides for survival and resistance under first world transnational cultural conditions. (76-77)

For Sandoval, the identity of the cyborg was always already raced and gendered and would have to engage with a transnational (cyber)space that continued to be structured by those dynamics. As I have argued however, Sandoval’s intervention failed to be taken into account adequately by later scholars. In 2007, Martha Nell Smith recalled,

When I first started attending humanities computing conferences in the mid-1990s, I was struck by how many of the presentations remarked, either explicitly or implicitly, that concerns that had taken over so much academic work in literature—of gender, race, class, sexuality—were irrelevant to humanities computing. […] The codes always work, and the principles always apply, whatever one’s personal identity or social group (or so many seemed to believe). It was as if these matters of objective and hard science provided an oasis for folks who do not want to clutter sharp, disciplined, methodical philosophy with considerations of the gender-, race- and class-determined facts of life. After all, in the wake of the sixties, the
humanities in general and their standings in particular had suffered, according to some, from being feminized by these things. Humanities computing seemed to offer a space free from all this messiness and a return to objective questions of representation. (4)

In addition to scholars who wanted to retreat from the “messiness” of identity articulation, there were those who instead fell into oppositional modes of theorisation arguing either for the Internet as a utopian construct, free from institutional prejudice (Benedikt 1991; Rheingold 1993), or those who saw this as pure escapism (Robins and Webster 1999). This splitting of the ‘virtual world’ and the ‘real world,’ both by those who saw the Internet and associated technologies as emancipatory forces and those who saw them as coercive ones, have persisted in a number of ways.

Today, younger generations, often very awkwardly lumped into the tag of ‘millennials,’ are mocked for their dependence on electronic devices and the Internet is often blamed for lowering attention spans and encouraging a culture of react-first-analyse-later. As Lisa Nakamura (2002) points out, this makes for annoyingly split analyses that go too far in either direction. She argues,

There is no doubt that the Internet is a “socially transformative” force; what seems to be at issue here is rather the specific nature of that ongoing transformation as well as its particular object. Rather than adopting a utopian or pessimistic view in which the Internet is viewed as either a vector for progressive change in the classical liberal tradition or as the purveyor of crude and simplistic “stereotypical cultural narratives,” it seems crucial to first narrow the focus a bit and examine the specific means by which identities are deployed in cyberspace. Currently, “popular attitudes toward the Internet tend to be maddeningly bipolar—either the Net changes everything or the Net changes nothing” (Heilmann 138). Of course, the truth lies between these two poles: the Net changes some things. (xiii)

So what does it change? Nakamura’s emphasis on the “specific means by which identities are deployed in cyberspace” points the way forward and is highly influential in my own work. Academic theorisation about what it means to be non-white and non-Western on the Internet is (thankfully) more varied than when Nakamura dryly noted that
she need not have rushed out her first book on the subject in 2002 because she feared that someone might pre-empt it. However, certain trends persist within this body of work—the ‘othering’ of such activity outside the U.S.A, a persistence of national identity as primary identifier—that I will now trace in order to position my case for postcolonial cybercultural frameworks to be adopted when examining transnational and transcultural online communities.

Firstly, there is a distinct bias towards research located in the U.S.A. To name just a few studies, while danah boyd (2011) researched the “ghettoization” of MySpace and the “white flight” to Facebook, Lynette Kvasny and C. Frank Igwe (2008) examined African American blogging around HIV/AIDS in the Black community, while Lena Karlsson (2006) explored identity formation in Asian American blogs. As Jessie Daniels (2012) noted in a review of the field, there has been a consensus formed that,

People use the Internet to both form and reaffirm individual racial identity and seek out communities based on race and racial understandings of the world (Byrne, 2008a, 2008b; Everett, 2004, 2008; Nakamura and Chow-White, 2011). Castells notes that there is a constant struggle between globalization and identity (1997: 1). This tension plays out in the global connectedness the web facilitates, which simultaneously scaffolds identity and community within and among multiple diasporas. (698)

While there is no doubt that the above consensus is accurate, it does tend to focus on particular diasporic groups and formulations of identity, therein inadvertently restricting the analysis of how racial/cultural/ethnic identity is formulated online to particular forums and confined to intra-community interactions. To reference just a few studies, E.N. Ignacio’s (2006) study of Filipino diasporas draws from conversations on the Usenet newsgroup soc.culture.filipino, while R. Mitra and R. Gajjala’s (Mitra and Gajjala 2008) source is soc.culture.indian, gesturing towards very particular research areas being surveyed. I have already referenced Franklin’s (2006) work on diasporas
drawing on the South Pacific Island region. Even when not working on diasporic online communities, researchers have tended to remain anchored to nationality as a primary identity marker and geographical limitation in their studies (A. Fung 2006; Abidin 2013). This is perhaps a natural outcome of the conditions imposed on such research with time and access being in short supply, but that does leave us with certain gaps.

One of these gaps is the understanding that even when individuals engage in online activities that do not have anything to do with their racial/cultural/ethnic identity, they have to continue to negotiate with that identity in some way, whether by omission or commission. The ‘neutral’ Internet user is still presumed to be straight, white, male and located in the Global North, and any deviation from that is marked off as a niche site to be considered in a specific section of edited anthologies. For instance, it is highly unlikely that the users studied in the two Usenet studies referenced above did not engage with other newsgroups according to their interests in video games or films or television—perhaps even in the newsgroups that formed my focus in chapter one and that were studied by Baym (2000) and Bury (2005). However, in those ‘neutral’ spaces it is assumed that the other aspects of their identity are subsumed. While individuals often use the Internet to seek out “communities based on race and racial understandings of the world” (Daniels 2012; 698), they do not just switch off that understanding when it comes to other aspects of their online identities. As I have argued, what differs is their willingness to mark themselves off in those ‘neutral spaces’ as this usually brings a higher degree of visibility and differential treatment by other users.

The question seems almost too vast to comprehend—How can we talk about the roles racial/cultural/ethnic identity play in structuring power relations and dialogue in a cybercultural and transnational context? This question clearly has very different answers in different contexts, but I believe that it is necessary to begin to try and seek those out. Most importantly it is vital for all Internet community researchers, no matter what their
object of study—be it mommy bloggers or reddit forums—to make explicit the multiple aspects of their respondents’ identity so that no research can fall back on the rhetorical strategy of assuming a default. It is also vital that researchers discuss these categories as markers of identity without falling into the trap of essentialism, that is, of ignoring the complex lived relations that each individual experiences vis-à-vis their specific ethnic, cultural, and racial context.

Part of the answer to these questions is finding theoretical models that encompass this complexity. As I have gestured to earlier, I believe that postcolonial cybercultural theory is uniquely positioned to engage with these multiple challenges as a theoretical paradigm that has always had to grapple with the dualistic nature of the Internet. While historically used in cultural and literary studies, postcolonial perspectives in theorising aspects of cyberculture are vital in order to centre its embedded inequalities. Postcolonial digital theory has had to balance the liberatory potential of the Internet with the reality of it being inextricably linked to neo/colonialism/imperialism, neoliberal capitalism, language use, and technology that functions within global networks to retain the status quo in favour of the Global North. That this is a still somewhat unexplored field is both surprising and unsurprising as Maria Fernández (1999) reflected,

Postcolonial studies has been concerned primarily with European imperialism and its effects: the construction of European master discourses, resistance, identity, representation, agency, gender, and migration, among other issues. By contrast, in the 1980s and early 1990s electronic media theory was primarily concerned with establishing the electronic as a valid and even dominant field of practice. Many theorists were knowingly or unknowingly doing public relations work for digital corporations. This often involved representing electronic technologies, especially the computer, as either value-free or inherently liberatory. Some theorists proposed a utopian universalism built on the concept of electronic connectivity: anyone in the world had only to be connected to be “free.” (59)

The convergence between postcolonial studies and cybercultural studies should have been an inevitable one, especially for scholars interested in identity and community,
but due to the inherent biases in both fields there is still a significant gap in terms of postcolonial work in areas like the digital humanities. When Tara McPherson asked, “Why are the Digital Humanities So White?” in (2012), she highlighted how considerations of specific identities continue to disturb uncomplicated notions of a democratised cyberspace.

The challenge has since been taken up since then with scholars from postcolonial backgrounds interrogating these very concerns, particularly around the axes of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality by organising digital workshopping discussions like #TransformDH and #DHPoco (Cong-Huyen 2013). These theorists have also made significant critiques of the high level of privilege necessary for the effects of these issues to be seen as unnecessary or overtly implicated in identity politics (Koh 2012; Lothian and Phillips 2013). Amongst the most salient work has been Nishant Shah’s (2015) examination of how institutionalised structures of societal discrimination in an Indian context (such as caste, class and language) are further entrenched in the digital realm in the context of YouTube videos even when their queerness is foregrounded. Lisa Nakamura (2012) discusses race, gender and sexuality in the rhetoric of gaming, which even while it critiques racist and sexist behaviour, encourages participants to see it within the structure of the gaming universe and not as something enacted by individuals. This splitting of critiques of structural discrimination versus the culpability of individual participants is also something that is seen in media fandom spaces, as I will discuss in the context of fan activism in chapter three and patterns of fandom community formation and fanwork production in chapters four and five.

Following on from these critiques, I argue that postcolonial cybercultural theory is particularly useful to researchers of these spaces because its theoretical requirements force us to recognise the unevenness and uneasiness of the virtual landscape that cyber-denizens must traverse. This is no longer simply a question of access to digital spaces,
though those issues are far from unresolved, but also a question of representation and experience within them. I wish to use these strands of theorisation in my analysis of media fandom spaces, which I posit are extremely well positioned to help gain insight into the very complex questions that have been raised here. In the next section, I trace how postcolonial criticism—with its focus on the ways in which representational power structures geospatial relationships both in historical and contemporary contexts—gives us powerful tools to effect critiques of media fandom communities. As I conceptualise media fandom as a series of transnational spaces in which complex discussions about identity and representation are taking place, this theoretical approach has been especially productive.

The case for Postcolonial Theory

*Intersections with Popular Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Audiences,*

*and Fan Studies*

The decision to engage a postcolonial theoretical lens in my analysis of media fandom communities was something that I came to only gradually. Part of this hesitation was certainly due to the fact that postcolonial cybercultural theory had not been used in fan studies before. Nevertheless, looking back, my indecision still seems puzzling especially since my research training was highly influenced by this school of thought. On further consideration however, perhaps this hesitation was also informed by the biases in both fields, as postcolonial theory has been somewhat circumscribed in the subjects that it has taken up for consideration, mostly focusing on literary and cultural studies and historical analyses. However, that does not mean that it cannot be a highly useful
framework for other fields. As I have already argued, the introduction of postcolonial frameworks to the field of cybercultural studies has resulted in some extremely useful interventions, though there is still much to be accomplished. In the case of fan studies as well, postcolonial theory can have productive engagements with the analysis of popular cultural texts. Finally, the consideration of possible postcolonial audiences of such texts also opens up diverse possibilities for research.

I highlight these last two vectors because it is in their intersections that I wish to make a case for the positioning of media fandom communities as postcolonial cybercultural spaces. I find this framing to be productive especially when these interlinked communal formations are seen as transnational and transcultural interpretative spaces that must interact with hegemonic popular cultural texts produced by the Global North. These source texts of fannish activity can then be seen to have distinctly neo-colonial and neo-imperialist effects on global audiences. Indeed, this framing also makes visible ‘global audiences’ that have themselves been structured through the forces of neoliberal capitalism and globalisation. This framing additionally offers a powerful and flexible theoretical grounding for analysing the possibilities of resistance or ‘talking back’ to structures of representational power. This has of course always been an area of great interest to fan scholars. But, framed within a postcolonial framework, it demands a much sharper consideration of the power dynamics—encapsulating racial/cultural/ethnic identity, gender, sexuality, and nationality—that these popular cultural texts deal in and circulate via ever increasingly “smooth” (to borrow Hardt and Negri’s (2001) term) media and informational flows.

These resonances are also crucial to explore, as postcolonial theory has had a deep historical interest in tracing the ways in which power, especially representational power, is circulated, interrupted, and re-circulated by the operationalisation of dominant cultural logics that continue to function past points of assumed resistance and co-optation. Though
articulated at different points of time and to different ends, the central problematics that have animated the interrogations of theorists and writers such as Edward Said (1978, 1983, 1993), Chinua Achebe (1958, 1977), Gayati Chakravorty Spivak (1987, 1988), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong′o (1986) have remained the negotiation of complex questions about what actions can be parsed as decolonising the mind and to what extent that is even possible. Postcolonial theory therefore is concerned broadly with building tools to confront the continuing realities of representational power as wielded by the Global North and disseminated through variable means, whether cultural, economic or geopolitical. These tools have taken various forms—deconstructing simplistic notions around centre-periphery models, guarding against re-animations of patterns of essentialism that seek to fix identities within post/neo-colonial cultural conditions, and tracing the dialectical relations between colonizer and colonized to see them as mutually constituted.

Additionally, to see these figurations as tools (or as Spivak sees them—problems) and not solutions is crucial to the project. At the core of these negotiation remains the fact that ‘representation’ is never a straightforward project. As Spivak (1990) asserts, “It is not a solution, the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking for them; this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem” (63). As I will expand on in both this chapter and the following one, the “politics of representation” (Hall 1997) is something that fan communities negotiate with on an ongoing basis and both the ‘tools’ crafted in these processes as well as the erasures perpetuated within these spaces, can be productively analysed within a postcolonial framework.

However, with the advent of globalisation studies it has been somewhat tempting for some to dismiss these postcolonial “problems” as circumscribed by their traditional focus on historical and literary studies. Yet, as Revathi Krishnaswamy (2002) points out, both schools of thought have engaged with largely the same issues—imperialism,
capitalism, modernity—over the last couple of decades, though they have different
disciplinary origin points. Both are also concerned with how differential power relations
continue to map out between various geopolitical locations. According to
Krishnamswamy, their differences have more to do with their traditional focal points than
their actual operationalisations which have concerned attempts to “dislocate Western
modernity” from its theoretical centrality. She argues that both fields have,

[...] frequently focused on various forms of economic, political, social, and cultural
flows that exceed the boundaries of the nation-state and operate in a
deterritorialized or transnational fashion. Through these accounts, postcolonial
theory has emphasized the cultural basis of history (the cultural constructedness of
history as well as the archival value of cultural productions) while globalization
theory, in turn, has highlighted the cultural basis of the economic (the economic
value of cultural productions as well as the cultural production of economic value).
(106-7)

Clearly there is a lot of crossover between these fields of study and certainly no
postcolonial critique written today can fail to grapple with the effects of globalisation.
Simon Gikhandi’s essay, “Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality” (2001),
interrogated the enmeshing of these two strands of discourse as well, pointing out that the
use of terms such as “hybridity” and “cultural transition” by globalisation scholars came
“directly from the grammar book of postcolonial theory” (627). Gikhandi’s main concern
in the essay is to critique the more glowing conceptions of globalisation mobilised by
scholars such as Arjun Appadurai and Homi Bhabha, maintaining that it is perhaps too
soon to declare the demolition of the nation state as, “while we live in a world defined by
cultural and economic flows across formally entrenched national boundaries, the world
continues to be divided, in stark terms, between its “developed” and “underdeveloped”
sectors” (628-9).
Another conceptualisation of the circulation of power in this new global world order that has gained prominence is Hardt and Negri’s notion of “empire” that I have referenced earlier as well. Sketched out in their influential book, Empire (2001), they contend that,

Empire is materializing before our very eyes. Over the past several decades, as colonial regimes were overthrown and then precipitously after the Soviet barriers to the capitalist world market finally collapsed, we have witnessed an irresistible and irreversible globalization of economic and cultural exchanges. Along with the global market and the global circuits of production has emerged a global order, a new logic and structure of rule — in short, a new form of sovereignty. Empire is the political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world. (p. xi)

This is not a redeployment of earlier forms of imperialism, in fact they declare quite daringly that “imperialism is over,” but a new form of sovereignty that is “composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. This new global form of sovereignty is what we call Empire” (vii). These supranational organisms referred to are multinational corporations that, according to Hardt and Negri, transcend the power of individual nation states. As Tony Schirato and Jen Webb (2003) note, this conception of empire is globalisation. Hardt and Negri argue further that while postcolonial theory is useful for historical analysis, “it is entirely insufficient for theorising contemporary global power.” (146)

This seems a rather harsh assessment. As I argued in the previous section, it is certainly true that the operations of multinational corporations are becoming more and more instrumental in geopolitical positioning, encompassing everything from massive international trade agreements like the recently passed Trans Pacific Partnership to military interventions in Syria. However, these operations are still very much linked to the operations of powerful nation states, particularly the U.S.A. Susan Marks (2002) argues for the continued relevance of postcolonial theory pointing out that, “with deterриториализация comes reterritorialization, in the sense that old dichotomies shape the
operations of the new more complex systems of domination” (464). Multiple scholars have noted that despite Hardt and Negri’s dismissal, the lines of inequality between rich and poor, developed and developing countries remain entrenched in much the same configurations as those put into place by the operations of colonial power (S. Marks 2002; Bartolovich 2003; Parry 2003; Ahluwalia 2004).

Despite these points of disagreement, a crucial component of their analysis that does inform my work is an understanding of the ways in which multinational corporations extend the operations of neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism in the interests of the Global North. And additionally, how these mechanisms have also superseded purely centre-periphery models. That is to say, popular cultural texts produced by such sprawling multinational entertainment _empires_ have always perpetuated broadly conservative notions of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, and history. However, in the contemporary scenario their effects are now dispersed along lines of interpretation that cannot be mapped directly onto national borders. I argue that these “complex systems of domination,” referencing S. Marks (2002) once again, now operate not only on populations that would be termed postcolonial in a traditional sense—Disney films being tailored specifically for release in India—but also on individuals and loosely linked communities, who may be diasporic or immigrant or otherwise liminal, currently located within the boundaries of the neo-colonial state that are also subject to them. I am not trying to argue here that national borders are now unimportant, but that postcolonial audiences for these texts have a greater degree of diversity and mobility than previously conceptualised.

The matter of the dearth of postcolonial critique of non-literary popular culture texts is also relevant here. Stuart Hall (Hall 1998) commented early on that, “Popular culture today is of significance for postcolonial studies as it is the terrain of struggle between a dominant capitalist force that seeks ‘constantly to disorganise and reorganise [it]... within
a more inclusive range of dominant forms’ and ‘points of resistance’ to this” (447).

Despite this, the predilection of scholars to view popular cultural texts with suspicion has been commented on with regularity (Featherstone 2005; Kato 2007). Examining the field in 2011, Vijay Devadas and Chris Prentice assert that, “popular culture is one of those neglected domains of enquiry for postcolonial studies, in comparison to elite cultural formations or practices” (687). There has also been a tendency to elevate folk forms of cultural production as ‘authentic’ representations of subaltern resistance in comparison to more ‘compromised’ popular cultural texts. Chris Bongie (2008) also comments on this tendency asking that while,

Legitimate custodians of a traditional past […] or subaltern adepts in the ethical practices of freedom […] might be presumed to have better and more ‘authentic’ things to do with their time than watch Roseanne or read Annie John. In the failed dialogue between Roseanne and Kincaid, where are the ‘real’ people situated, presuming ‘they’ even exist? (283)

This predisposition has also spilled into a non-consideration of the role of postcolonial audiences. Graham Huggan (2012) builds on Bongie’s argument to stress the importance of paying attention to audiences other than readers in postcolonial arenas. He argues that,

One of the most effective means of exposing this ideological faultiness, and exploring the commonness assumptions that flow from them, is a sustained attention to reception. For reception returns us to the vexed question of value, and the often eclipsed politics of cultural and critical evaluation, that have for too long remained concealed within the field of postcolonial studies.” (xv-xvi)

It is this ideological “faultiness” that I am concerned with in my work on media fandom communities. As audiences and interpretative communities that have been repeatedly framed as active, self-reflexive, and engaged, they offer an opportunity to interrogate how contemporary media texts that circulate in a neoliberal, globalised
economy are received and how they are interpreted. It is Bethan Benwell, James Procter and Gemma Robinson’s (2012) consideration of postcolonial audiences that brings the most synergy to my proposed framework when they argue that such analyses could result in,

[...] localised readings, aspirational readings, parallel reading, judicial readings, public and private readings, misreadings, communal readings, contrary readings, resistant readings and new technologies of reading [...] (drawing on Certeau 1984) acts of reading can be conceived both inside and outside the structures of empire: as imperialising practice (the colonising “despoiler” of text) and anti-imperial action (the tactical, marginalised “poacher” of text). (4)

It is this last idea, that of tactical “poaching,” that therefore brings these postcolonial possibilities into serendipitous alignment with Henry Jenkins’ (1992) foundational conception of media fandom spaces. It is these very possibilities that I will explore in my analysis of these transnational, transcultural spaces.

Media fandom communities operate within and are affected by the forces of commodity and neoliberal capitalism, cultural imperialism (as most of the texts are U.S.A. and U.K. based) and global cybercultural communicative frameworks. These are transnational and transcultural communities engaged in the consumption, interpretation and repurposing of hegemonic popular cultural texts constantly negotiating not just issues of gender and sexuality (which has been the focus of most of fan studies so far) but also issues of racial, cultural, ethnic and religious identity. By using a postcolonial cybercultural critique I will show how this negotiation is a fraught and messy one, not conducive to easy formulations of subversion and resistance. This critical lens will also allow me to conceptualise the overlapping aspects of non-white fan identities without constructing artificial and simplistic boundaries along national borders.

Too often in academic discussion about fan communities, the specific effects of the Internet as a medium is left out of the analyses undertaken, as if it were a neutral space
where access (in the form of a broadband connection) is the only hurdle. When it is talked about it is mainly in terms of its role in connecting individual fans and fan communities. There is also a lack of attention in the way that the specific platforms that have been used by fans have influenced the discussion of contentious issues like racism within both the popular cultural texts themselves and the fanworks produced. Once present on the Internet, further possible differences between individual fans and the differences in how they navigate these same networks have remained under-examined. These are some of the issues that I will tackle in the next section.

Media Fandom as a Postcolonial Cyberspace

**Figuring out the ‘fan’: A history of parts**

As I have discussed in my introduction, a cursory scan of the international popular cultural scene today seems to signal that there has been no better time than the current moment to be a generalised ‘fan.’ Entertainment companies seem increasingly eager to embrace once reviled productions of fannishness, from cosplay and fanart contests to fanfiction on Kindle Worlds.31 As interest in the topic grows, ideas about fannish identity, spaces, and productions are becoming increasingly complex both within and outside of fan studies. At this moment it is important to keep in mind that the referents of those terms have also shifted quite a bit from when the first wave of fan scholars conceptualised them (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002). As my examination of these spaces

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31 Kindle Worlds was a platform launched by the internet-commerce giant Amazon. It incentivised fanfiction authors to publish their fanwork on the platform around certain popular cultural texts whose creators formally gave permission for such activity. It was pitched as a way of fanwriters being able to monetise their work, with a portion of the revenue going to Amazon as well. It was not a huge success, as various issues of copyright, age requirements and limits imposed on sexually explicit writing made it an unattractive option for many fans. For more on the issues see Morrissey (2013) and Tushnet (2014).
in chapter one also shows, these were initially examined as almost underground, subcultural practices framed in secrecy. In contrast to this, fan interactions with popular cultural media texts through fanworks today have a high level of visibility in mainstream popular culture. Stereotypical representations of fans in those texts (and the surrounding mediasphere) as irrational and deluded still persist, particularly in the case of female media fans producing erotic fanwork. However these fan communities and their labour are also increasingly seen as valuable to producers as entertainment companies often seek to build (often exploitative) relationships with them (De Kosnik 2012; Booth 2015).

It is also significant to note that scholarship on fandom has contributed to this mainstreaming of fans and fanworks, working to undermine unflattering stereotypes by stressing their subversive potential and self-reflexivity. Nonetheless, as I will continue to argue throughout this dissertation, this interruption has remained partial, allowing certain assumptions to stand unquestioned. Due to a consistent lack of attention to the specific demographic makeup of these communities, as reflected in chapter one of this thesis, scholars have also contributed to significant erasures and biases in their representation. Today this is supplemented by newer models of distribution, driven by globalisation and the rise in the use of the Internet, that have affected both the spread of media texts and the functioning and make-up of media fan communities around the world. While these communities have always been multi-racial/ethnic/cultural, and today are also transnational and transcultural, fan studies has not engaged critically with those dynamics.

To clarify further: the foundational studies of media fandom communities saw them as comprised of mainly heterosexual, cisgender, white, middle class, American women (Russ 1985; Lamb and Veith 1986; Penley 1991). Crucially, as I have pointed out, the whiteness of these demographics was never made explicit. In some cases this assumption led to skewed conclusions about fan motivations for participating in certain types of
transformative fanwork production and consumption. For instance Catherine Salmon and Donald Symons (2001), in a much-critiqued analysis, speculated that writers of slash fanfiction viewed these characters in highly reductionist and gender essentialist ways. This was based primarily on the assumption that the women writing this fanfiction were heterosexual. This view has since been challenged in scholarship (Busse et al 2007; Lackner et al 2006), and recent fandom surveys (Melannen, Dreamwidth 2010; Centrumlumina, Tumblr 2013) also support the idea of media fandom as a queer space. However, these challenges have remained limited to fans’ sexual and gender identities, leaving the assumed, that is, white and U.S.A-centric, racial/cultural and ethnic makeup of these communities in place.

In doing so, I have argued that dominant theoretical formulations that frame media fandom spaces as progressive and fan repurposing of popular cultural texts as inherently subversive, have had limited critical engagement with the fact that not all fans are on an equal playing field. While conflict within fan spaces has received some attention, this has concentrated mainly on the gendered ways in which fan practices are policed (Busse 2013a; J. A. Gray 2005). What is notably absent in mainstream media fan studies is an engagement with, or even an acknowledgement of, the varied demographics of English-language fan communities formed around the media texts that are most commonly encountered in fan studies readers or conferences. As Rebecca Wanzo’s (2015) vital intervention into the discipline makes clear, the place of race in fan studies is largely one of elision and deferment. This deferment is further structured into the discipline in its genealogies and theoretical biases. In chapter four I will analyse these structural biases on a micro-level, through my examination of their functioning with regard to fanwork communities themselves. In this chapter, my focus is on expanding the theoretical possibilities available to fandom scholars on a macro-level demonstrating how inclusive frameworks enable more nuanced analyses on fan identity.
It is my position then that in most cases, fans of television shows like *Supernatural* or move franchises like *Star Trek* are examined as just that—fans—undifferentiated by any other aspect of their identity except for gender and perhaps a reference to their sexuality. This rhetorical practice allows readers to ‘default’ to the norm, which remains white, middle-class, cisgender and American. What remains unexamined is that media fandom spaces, theorised as inclusive and liberatory, are not immune to hierarchies structured by privilege accruing to income, class, racial, ethnic and cultural identity, disability, etc. Ironically, this lags behind discussions within actual fan spaces where these debates have never been more energetically pursued. The critiques of these intra-fandom dynamics range from commenting on the problematics of cosplayers using Blackface/Yellowface and other appropriative behaviour to pointing out when fanfiction authors use racist stereotypes.

There have also been theoretical framings that conceptualise the ‘fan’ itself as a marginalised identity that I have already gestured to in chapter one. For instance, Mel Stanfill (2011) argues that (white) male fans of Star Trek in a sense “(mis)do whiteness” by showing extreme attachment (behaviour often coded as feminine) to fictional texts (3.6). The societal scorn that is directed at these individuals marks out the “fan” as inherently deviant in terms of acceptable codes of behaviour and also marks a loss of cultural power to these individuals. For Stanfill, this discursive production of the effeminate, over-attached white male fan then displaces similar activities by white women and non-white individuals even further away from nodes of cultural power. I have reservations about this position, as I will also unpack further in chapter four when I tackle the workings of fandom infrastructure in more detail, but here I would like to underline that such constructions do not take into account the considerable privilege that white fans (both men and women) hold in intra-fandom spaces. Further I maintain, that while their popular cultural attachments certainly do mark them out for some societal scorn, this
cannot be equated to the institutionalised discrimination that affects non-white fans negatively in these shared spaces. As I continue to argue in my examination of fandom communities, the operations of racialised power dynamics do very much continue to hold even within spaces that are being increasingly coded as queer.

I would like to avoid hierarchical judgment calls about ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ fans, but rather interrogate how transnational fan communities negotiate extremely messy real-world structures of power that do not just go away within ‘safe spaces.’ I contend that this discussion must question the use of nationalistic boundaries to limit studies of identity performance within fandom spaces, as this division does not hold up in the face of media fandom practices. I am not proposing that the categories I discuss here are absolute either; identity (as performative) is based on shifting markers and none of these can be construed as singular, absolute measure of coherent definition. As such, it is important that we as researchers maximise the flexibility of our own theoretical structures so as to not construct boundaries where there are none.

**Different Strokes: Conceptualising fan diversity**

Media fandom has consistently been theorised as a resistant force, starting of course with Jenkins’ (1992) view of participants as “textual poachers.” This framework has most often appeared in work on slash fanfiction but also on fanvids and other transformative fanwork (Russ 1985; Lamb and Veith 1986; Coppa 2008). The activities of these communities have been framed in largely celebratory ways particularly in terms of how fanwriters rework texts to expand their scope. Increasingly, fans-as-activists are also being theorised as an engaged audience that can be recruited in various ways to band together behind different social causes, from raising awareness about HIV to the Darfur
conflict in Sudan (Jenkins 2012; Hinck 2012). I will interrogate the specific power
dynamics at play here in chapter three and four, but broadly these developments also
frame media fans as politically progressive and invested in various social justice causes.
This framing is very often in direct contrast to those spaces that are dominated by (white)
male fans, who, it is argued, often resist texts that push for more diverse representation
in terms of gender and sexuality, and more recently, racial identity.\(^\text{32}\) I maintain that these
binary divisions are quite simplistic and do not take into account the rather large slippage
of identity between fanboy/girl. For one, the non-white fanboy and fangirl are entirely
absent from these analytical frames.\(^\text{33}\) Additionally, as Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto
(2013) argue, this tends to set up a dichotomy between good and bad fan practices (97).
This has a twofold effect: on the one hand “bad” fan practices that are seen to be rooted
in considerations “pleasure” are excluded entirely from analysis, while problematic
features of “good” fan practices remain unexamined (98).

Consequently, what remains under-theorised is the manner in which identity
articulation within these fannish communities affects notions of subversiveness and
resistance. One of the primary queries that motivates my own work is the question of
what occurs when fan repurposing is subversive in one context (interrupting
heteronormative canons) but coercive in another (reinforcing racial power structures)? In
the context of a networked world that opens up new communicative possibilities even as
it extends the hegemonic workings of capitalist globalisation, issues of racial, cultural,

\(^{32}\) The most recent case of such demarcation can be seen in the Paul Feig directed remake of the
iconic SF/F film *Ghostbusters* (1984) starring an all-female cast. The film was the target of a concerted
campaign to discredit it even before its release by mainly white male fans of the original film. This was
analysed as stemming from misogyny towards women “encroaching” on traditionally male-coded nerd
spaces (D. Sims 2016; Dvorak 2016; Preza 2016). However, after a successful opening at the box office in
July 2016, its only African American star, Leslie Jones, was the target of a barrage of racially coded abuse.
This singling out, along with the silence from her white co-stars and vocal white feminist commentators
highlights the need for intersectional approaches to such controversies (Lasha 2016).

\(^{33}\) I use the terms fanboy and fangirl in its colloquial form, to designate individuals interested in, and
identifying as, fans of particular popular cultural texts.
ethnic and religious identity matter more rather than less, and this extends to how fan communities receive, consume and repurpose media.

Within the larger field of fan studies, work that has considered racial, cultural and ethnic identity as a vector of analysis is found mainly in sports and gaming fandoms (Redhead 2014; Sanderson 2010; Leonard 2003; Everett 2005). Additionally, scholars have recently produced some excellent considerations of specifically African American women fans of television shows like *Scandal* (2012-present) and *Empire* (2015-present) in context with evolving theorisations about connected audiences—considering how practices like live-tweeting build a networked viewing experience. This has also been linked to the operations of digital communities such as #BlackTwitter (Everett 2015; Erigha 2015; Warner 2014; Warner 2015a; Warner 2015b).

In the specific case of media fan scholarship there have been some attempts to engage with the diversity of media fan communities but mostly in a transcultural/transnational framework that has chosen nationalistic frames of identity as a starting point. I have already discussed the operations of anime and manga fandoms in this context in chapter one. As an additional example, Korean pop or K-pop is a hugely powerful, non-U.S.A transcultural fan phenomenon that has garnered quite a bit of scholarly attention. However, most studies have chosen to frame their analyses as discrete nationalities interacting with a source culture. Examples of specific fan demographics surveyed have included Indonesian and Israeli fans (Jung and Shim, n.d.; Lyan and Levkowitz 2015). While these studies are all extremely useful, they do tend to compartmentalise what is a transnational and transcultural phenomenon mediated by Internet technologies and so eminently porous and “spreadable” (Jenkins et al 2013). Indeed, this point is also made by Dani Madrid-Morales and Bruno Lovric (2015), who have chosen a language-based model (Spanish) of fan engagement rather than one based on nationality to engage with K-pop fandom across Spain and Latin America. Chin and
Morimoto’s (2013) work on transcultural Asian fandoms is also an important contribution to this area.

Anne Kustritz (2015) echoes some of my concerns about scholarly practices perpetuating certain erasures in the context of European transcultural fandoms:

The term *fan*...mediates between local and international media and audiences; it encapsulates a broad range of diverse activities, histories, and practices, which become invisible by attending only to English-language fan spaces, or by assuming that because conversations there take place in English, the participants all come from Anglophone countries. Likewise, European fandoms illuminate many of the pitfalls, and much of the unevenness and uneasiness, that accompany globalization of media and globalization of fan identity and community. (3.1)

Kustritz identifies two key themes that I would like to open up to further exploration. Firstly, the question of language and, more pertinent to the current argument, the assumptions made about the participants in English-language fandom spaces is something that fandom scholars must keep in mind. A failure to do so in effect *makes* invisible the diversity of fan demographics. Secondly, she is accurate in terming the global fannish media landscape as an uneven and uneasy one and in naming globalisation as one of its key driving forces. It is also true that terming it a ‘global’ mediascape obfuscates the fact that it is dominated by U.S.A.-produced texts.

I would like to further interrogate the cause of this unease, however, and link it to the growing influence of U.S.A.-centred neo-imperialism on the global mediascape. Indeed, it would be almost impossible to ignore this influence when examining the effects of global media flows controlled by largely U.S.A.-based conglomerates. This is also a vital aspect to consider in light of Hardt and Negri’s (2001) aforementioned analysis regarding the operations of imperial nodes of power that are longer restricted to the actions of specific nation states, but intertwined with the operations of multinational companies. Pointing out that Hollywood films have portrayed world events in ways
sympathetic to U.S.A. state interests is not a new observation, but it is important for that link to be stressed in this context (Koppes and Black 1990; T. Shaw 2002; K. Lee 2008). For instance, when the email communications of the entertainment behemoth Sony Entertainment were recently hacked and released to the public by Wikileaks, one of the most discussed revelations concerned the level of collusion between the company and the U.S.A. government (Thielman 2015). Given this scenario, it becomes very interesting indeed to see what kind of pushback, if any, these texts receive in fan communities often lauded for their self-reflexivity.

It is not my intention here to propose an overly deterministic model of fan consumption in the face of such massive geopolitical forces. Fan scholars have contended repeatedly with the question of how fan activities can be subversive within a neoliberal capitalist consumer culture. In their consideration of fan activism, Melissa M. Brough and Sangita Shershtova (2012), quoting Roopali Mukherjee (2011), posit that, “Commodity activism… complicates our understanding of resistance, forcing us to consider ‘civic politics in the neoliberal era’ as possibly ‘enabled by, and nurtured within, modes of consumer citizenship’”(4.7). Likewise, by incorporating an awareness of how neo-imperialism also influences both the texts that media fandom engages with and how those engagements proceed, fan studies can further complicate ideas of subversion and resistance. This calls for a broadening of scope in two important ways, firstly in our conception and knowledge of who media fans are, and secondly, in the theoretical lenses we consider for analyses.

There were a number of intriguing research vectors that emerged from the analysis of my respondent interviews, to sketch out, to echo Kustritz (2015), the “uneasy and uneven” (3.1) relationship that non-white fans have to the media texts that they engage with in a transformative framework. Interestingly, this relationship encompasses both the interactions that individual fans had with larger fan discussions on issues like
representations (or lack thereof) of minority cultures in source texts and fanworks, as well as the various mediums within which these interactions took place. It is the latter that I will take up first as I think the question of medium is a vital aspect of online fan culture that has not been addressed adequately.

Medium matters: Usage of fannish platforms

To riff off (in true transformative style) a favourite Austen quote, it is a truth universally acknowledged that the move of media fandom communities to the Internet changed everything. This has been examined in terms of the Internet connecting media fandom participants, allowing unprecedented community building and sharing of fanworks as well as platform specific examinations (Busse and Hellekson 2006; Booth 2010). However, scholarship has not gone on to interrogate the effects of it as a medium that influences participants’ experiences in markedly different ways. My interviews reveal that changes in platform have had significant effects on the ways in which media fandom debates its own norms and practices.

In the last fifteen years of recorded activity, online fandom communities have moved (broadly) from platforms like mailing lists and USENET groups (ONElist, eGroups, Yahoo Groups etc.) that I discussed in my first chapter, to journaling sites (Livejournal.com/Dreamwidth.org) and standalone archival websites of individual fandoms or groups of fandoms to host fanwork, to the current preferred platforms of Twitter and Tumblr, along with broad-based archive sites for hosting fanwork (Archiveofourown.org, Wattpad.com). Fandom interactions on all these platforms have differed according to current norms and practices and newer participants often brought change. However the platforms themselves also mediated these interactions, allowing for
greater or lesser autonomy, connectivity, and exposure to different ideas. I have already examined some of the effects of the usage of USENET and mailing lists for fan interactions, mainly in terms of their assumptions about membership and expectations around participant interactions in chapter one. Rebecca Lucy Busker (2008) buttresses my own observations in the case of mailing lists—that they exercised a greater degree over the ‘tone’ of interactions—commenting that,

[...] although lists to discuss issues and themes across multiple fandoms existed, they weren’t always easy to find. Perhaps just as problematic was an implied and even overt hostility to critical discussion. Any non positive reaction to an individual story tended to be greeted with recriminations, and even a discussion of the problems of a particular theme or genre was likely to be shouted down. (1.3)

It is not difficult to see how this hostility to critical discussion and insularity of focus would have manifested in case participants wished to discuss potentially “non positive” aspects of a source text such as racism. Indeed, such policing, both in terms of content (responses like “this is not an appropriate topic for discussion here”) and in terms of tone (rules like “please keep this list friendly and supportive”) have been recalled by respondents who participated in such spaces. As one interviewee recounted,

Eventually? I found the mailing lists. Not long after *that*, I grew *profoundly* pissed-off with how much censorship was on the main XF [The X-Files (1993-2002)] mailing lists at the time and made my *own* goddamned mailing lists. (Te, Interview with Author 2015)

This is not to maintain that these arguments have not continued to come up in other online forums, but to highlight the fact that the capacity for enforcement of these etiquettes was greater in mailing lists with few administrators in charge.

The increasing popularity of journaling sites over mailing lists allowed fans to curate their experiences to a greater extent by choosing other journals to connect to, as
well as to create their own space in which to host fanworks, meta discussions, or more personal posts. Busker (2008) again notes that these sites made fandom more “porous”, allowing for individual fans to be more aware of events in other fandoms even though they might not participate in them. This mix of the personal and the political led to more strongly felt opinions being expressed and circulated, contributing to a watershed moment in fandom history in terms of discussing racial dynamics: RaceFail ‘09.

I have already discussed the events of RaceFail ‘09 in some detail in chapter one so will not recount them again, but would rather like to discuss the specific influence that the medium—that of Livejournal—had on the way the controversy unfolded. While the impact of RaceFail ’09 has been discussed in terms of how it changed the conversations and awareness about race in SF/F spaces, the centrality of the journal format in these interactions has been overlooked (Klink 2010). I posit that whereas on platforms like mailing lists the moderators would likely have shut down such ‘off-topic’ discussion quite quickly, the journal format allowed fans to frame their responses to the issues at hand in their own spaces, while also connecting to other like-minded individuals.

Again, the examples of specific fandom criticism that I have chosen to focus on in my previous chapter were also hosted on journaling sites and the transformative moment of recognising other non-white fans as present and active in fan spaces was one of the most productive outcomes of the entire incident. Busker (2008) argues that the journal format was influential because, “in many ways it has served to take the focus off the source and put it on the fan, and in turn, on fandom” (2.2). While I would argue that the source text remained very much in focus in the context of RaceFail ‘09, the foregrounding of fan identity as it intersected with issues of racial, cultural and ethnic representation was facilitated by the journal platform in unique ways.

Keeping this mind when formulating the initial questionnaire for my research, I attempted to track the effects of Racefail ‘09 in my questions and a number of the
respondents did mention it as something that had impacted their modes of interaction within fandom:

I think Racefail was huge for everyone who was fannish on LJ at the time, and even for years after. That’s when I really started looking at my own ways of thinking and at the ways fandom interacted with fans of color and characters of color. I started looking through provided links on critical race theory and the prejudices against COC [Characters of Color]. I owe a lot to fans of color who took a lot of shit back then. (Silent-parts, Interview with Author 2015)

Racefail made it imperative to engage more, I think. It also has a lot to do with a fact that in ‘09, I was no longer a fanbaby insecure about my age or talking about ‘reverse racism’ (no, I really said it once), and neither was I uncertain talking about my location now that I knew there were many others like me. (Swatkat, Interview with Author, 2015; my emphasis)

The emphasised portion of the above response also parallels the “roll call” of non-white fans that was such a powerful moment for author N.K. Jemisin in chapter one. Indeed, there was a consistent thread of registering the confidence felt by non-white fans through these moments of recognition and connection.

While RaceFail ‘09 was clearly a tipping point, when asked about the perceived rise in levels of fannish discourse around issues of privilege associated with racial identity and other axes of marginalisation, respondents consistently identified fandom’s move to even more dialogic platforms like Twitter and Tumblr as an accelerant. These platforms clearly offer greater visibility, both in terms of a willingness of individual fans to claim a non-white identity within a fannish space and, in doing so, find others who share or understand their experiences. As one respondent noted,

I don’t know if this is related at all, but I didn’t come across many FOC until I started engaging in tumblr and twitter! I’ve found that in many of my fandoms, most of the people who were active were white, especially on LJ and dreamwidth. It wasn’t until I got a twitter account that I came across so many FOC, and maybe it’s bad to say this, but I was very surprised to see how many were in fandom. I knew that I was one, and logically there would be more just based on the sheer size
of fandom, but it’s different when you actually come across them in another space! (Lquacker, Interview with Author 2015)

In all these instances it is clear that the discovery of others like me was an important one in terms of articulating a differential fannish identity. It is also clear that the presumed default representation of fans that I have stressed in chapter one remains a powerful influence even on media fandom participants themselves, even if “logically” it does not hold up to interrogation.

Other respondents have noted that it was only once they realised that there was an audience, even a small one, for transformative works based on texts like Bollywood movies that they felt encouraged to engage with those texts in fannish ways. This is also a vital aspect of the ways in which the structuring power of whiteness in fandom affects fannish engagements with non-white characters that is often overlooked. When communitarian aspects of fanwork are discussed, this is usually framed around the ‘love of the thing’ and the expectation of appreciation from a fannish community. But the effects of a consistent sidelining of certain characters across fandoms—always dismissed on a case-to-case basis—on individual fans’ ability to create fanwork has been less discussed. I will examine this aspect in more detail in chapter four, but wish to highlight it as a thread of interest in my interviews at this point.

The second aspect, concerning the broad dissemination of, and therefore access to, discussions problematising source texts is also linked to the ease with which Tumblr posts can be reblogged. Tumblr’s format is also one that is most suited to visual media—gifsets, photosets, fanart 34—and this has influenced usage and impact. Respondents reflected on

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34 Gif (Graphic Interchange Format) are compressed image files that allow short amount of video to loop endlessly. Fans often clip favourite scenes from television shows, movies and other video-based media and put them together to form gifsets that showcase a particular narrative. This can be sourced from either one particular text or character, or be a remix of several sources. A photoset is a collection of images put together for a similar purpose.
the ways such fan critiques often functioned as consciousness-raising, leading them to consider more nuanced understandings of the texts under consideration.

I actually think Tumblr is a great medium for promoting the idea of diversity in media, especially for someone who is a little less verbal like me. The art and picture sets on Tumblr help celebrate shows and movies that have interesting characters of color, and they can also be used to critique media that doesn’t do a good job with diversity. (Talitha78, Interview with Author 2015)

Tumblr, for sure. Twitter’s character limit is really a downer. As mentioned previously, Tumblr’s also the first platform where I started getting really interested in social issues thanks to the vast number of posts and pages dedicated to them, and the commentary (reasonable or not) that’s tagged onto them. It’s just a lot more conducive for longer discourse, which is something that Twitter will never be able to do. (Minyan, Interview with Author 2015)

This is not to say that Tumblr as a platform is viewed as unproblematic, with respondents identifying issues around usage stemming from both its platform-specific quirks and its usage by users. One issue that Tumblr was critiqued for was its lack of privacy control as there is no way of limiting access to specific posts. It is possible to make an entire Tumblr account private but that limits the amount of engagement that is possible and in counterproductive to fannish activity. Moreover, as a flip side to the visual aspect of the platform praised in the above quote, some respondents were also unhappy that this inhibited the circulation of longer, more nuanced arguments on complicated issues.

In terms of problems with individual usage, respondents were uncomfortable with the instances where misleading information was amplified due to a lack of fact checking. It is also important to note that individual respondents did register their frustrations with aspects of fannish discussions of racial identity that could be essentialist or simplistic. However, while these frustrations were expressed strongly there was an equally strong consensus that this engagement, however flawed, was a better scenario than has was seen on earlier platforms facilitated by fannish structures that were much more uncomfortable
with intra-community criticism. One respondent’s comment encapsulated both these threads,

Racefail made things visible, in a certain way. For all the problems with OTT SJW-ing in fan spaces, it is no longer okay to say, “oh, I just don’t identify with characters of colour!” Racefail made it possible to engage with the racial faultlines in fandom and the structural problems that lead to white-centric fandoms. 35 Tumblr engagement with race can be over the top to a point of absurdity, but I’d rather have that than no engagement at all. (Anonymous Respondent 10, Interview with Author 2015)

I find this observation to be perceptive of the ways in which fandom’s historical engagement with issues of race, through events like RaceFail ’09 have interacted with changes in platform. In light of this, I maintain that the increased visibility of these discussions is not a result of the activities of only newer fans who disregard fandom etiquette and conventions (though of course generational shifts play a part). Rather, I argue that it is the critiques of always present non-white fans that have found more conducive platforms and communities of like-minded individuals to amplify their historical concerns. While other Tumblr-based studies of fandom have also highlighted a trend of fans engaging with social issues in concentrated way, they have not engaged with this as a historical movement as well (Hillman et al 2014).

The quote cited above is also useful to highlight the messy nature of these interactions that nonetheless work to underline structural problems that have long plagued fandom spaces. The respondent registers that not all the rhetoric around racial issues in fandom is something universally agreed upon by the multitude of non-white fans in these spaces. But she also, in the same moment, highlights the very dehumanising ways in which these issues have been treated historically in what have been characterised as

35 The term “OTT-SJW-ing” is parsed to mean Over The Top—Social Justice Warrior-ing. The phrase SJW or Social Justice Warrior is a derogatory reference to individuals who are vocal about social issues in online spaces. While online fandom spaces are generally seen as receptive to socially liberal opinions, some vocal individuals are seen to be too extreme in their views.
inherently progressive and liberal communities. It is important to note that only through a consistent, strident form of critique have some changes in behavioural norms in this regard been effected. This is a point I wish to highlight because there is a significant amount of gaslighting that occurs in fan spaces where individual non-white fans are assured that their criticisms are based on imagined slights and ahistorical considerations of fandom behaviour.

One fan, identified as snackiepotato, commented on what she perceived as a lack of contact between fandoms and individual fans on Livejournal, citing the creation of “individual echo chambers” (Interview with Author 2015) that then validated their own preconceived opinions. This term has also been used to describe Tumblr fan communities, where certain types of ghettoization can occur around ideas of essentialism, language use, cultural hierarchies, and fanwars. An example of the simultaneous nature of Tumblr as an echo chamber and interruptable is that of a fan-made gifset that imagined an Indian “Wizarding School”, a fan expansion of the Harry Potter universe. The gifset repurposed material from Bollywood films and the accompanying description leaned heavily on exoticising stereotypes like “enchanted saris that shift colours sporadically” and the presence of a magical mango tree (asheathes, Tumblr 2015). This gifset was extremely popular and received more than thirty thousand notes, demonstrating the echo chamber effect where simplistic ideas of diversity are amplified. However, the wide circulation of the gifset also resulted in criticism by some Indian fans who used it as a springboard to discuss issues like the effects of British imperialism on the development of Indian magic (postmodernpottercompendium, Tumblr 2015).

Clearly then, the degree of interruptability of a circulating idea is seen to be greater on more dialogic platforms like Tumblr and Twitter. Twitter was identified by respondents as a more personal space than Tumblr, as access can be controlled through privacy settings and sensitive discussions can be carried out without the attendant anxiety
of being in an easily permeable space. In most cases fans reported using both Tumblr and Twitter, simultaneously leveraging each platform’s strengths. In the above example for instance, the initial discussion about the problematic aspects of the gifset took place on Twitter before moving on to Tumblr (Swatkat, Interview with Author, 2015). The use of locked platforms to discuss problematic aspects of fan culture also underlines the fact that fandom spaces continue to be hostile to these debates.

**Zooming in, zooming out: Theorising ‘global’ fandom**

As is clear from the above discussions there is a great deal of complexity in these interactions that can easily be flattened if not approached from flexible and inclusive theoretical frameworks. In line with my arguments earlier on in this chapter, I posit that a productive way of theorising this increasing multivocality is in terms of postcolonial cybercultural theory. As I have already established, it is as a theoretical paradigm that has had to grapple with both the liberatory potential of the Internet, as well as the reality of it being inextricably linked to neo-colonialism, as capitalism, language use, and technology function within global networks with the aim of retaining the status quo in favour of the Global North (Fernández 1999; Nayar 2008). While traditionally used in historical, cultural and literary studies, postcolonial perspectives in theorising cyberculture are vital in order to centre its embedded inequalities. As Nishant Shah (2015) warns,

Narratives of empowerment, of visibility, and of finding presence within the digital domain flood academic discourse as well as policy and practice that is geared towards getting the disenfranchised visibility in the digital networks. So strident is this narrative, so persuasive in its promises, that it becomes the dominant mode of analysing cultural products, even in the face of evidence and experience that shows that different intersections of historic disadvantage like gender, sexuality, class, caste, religion, language, location, etc. get reconfigured as gating factors to effective presence and voice on the social web. (5.1)
As I have argued, some of these same rhetorics continue to inform the frameworks of fan studies where media fan communities are repeatedly framed as uncomplicatedly oppositional. In this context postcolonial theory is a productive theoretical apparatus as one of its cornerstones has always been the negotiation of shifting centres and flows of power within such uneven, even hostile terrains. Pramod Nayar (2008), for instance, argues that multimodal interactive digital spaces can be “postcolonialised” if they are used with a view to significant political purposes wherein heterogeneity, contestability, and contingency produce these spaces as polyphonic and open-ended.

The synergies between these ideas are quite obvious to trace as the qualities of heterogeneity, contestability and contingency do clearly inform the dynamics of online fan communities. Postcolonial critiques have often taken the form of ‘talking back’ to discourses of power, interrupting canonical framings of knowledge and history. The fan critiques cited enable non-white fans to ‘interrupt’ both hegemonic popular cultural texts and fanworks that reify privileged racial and cultural representations. Taking these dynamics into account, I posit that online media fan communities can be theorised as postcolonial cybercultural spaces. To clarify, postcolonial spaces are not unproblematic, reciprocal or equal fields of debate but do acknowledge the complex ways in which individuals negotiate global flows of media and information. For instance, to return to the example of the “Indian wizarding school” referenced earlier, while the original gifset was interrupted and critiqued, that critique did not get equal circulation. The burden of education inevitably rests on the postcolonial or minority subject, and interrupting this dominant discourse can still lead to being penalised or tone-policing. Therefore, to frame fandom spaces in this way is not to (re)signify them as inherently subversive, but rather demand more nuance from our analyses.

This has multiple effects. For one, it forces fan scholars to take seriously our usage of descriptors like “global,” “globalised,” and “international” when speaking about both
the circulation of media texts and fan communities. It is not enough to acknowledge that national boundaries are being superseded in both contexts, but also important to engage with what aspects of fan identity remain unmentioned and therefore invisible in our work. Postcolonial theory stresses the value of “glocal” (R. Robertson 1992) perspectives when discussing the effects of informational flows, pointing out that there is often a reciprocal process whereby the meaning of media texts are influenced by both local and global contexts. When analysed from this perspective, the ways in which fans work both to deconstruct and to reify aspects of global media texts produced by multinational corporations, informed by their local circumstances—racial/cultural and ethnic identities, religion, class, disability—would broaden the scope of fan studies.

This broadening was demonstrated in my own research as I will now demonstrate. Part of my analysis interrogated respondents’ levels of public engagement in discussions about racial identity in fandom spaces. The sample was split evenly in terms of fans with medium and high levels of engagement and those with low levels. Figure 1.2 shows the distribution of respondents in terms of geographical location, while figure 1.3 shows the distribution of respondents according to racial/cultural/ethnic identity. Both figures are sorted by levels of public engagement in fandom.
(Figure 1.2: Level of Participation in Fandom debates sorted by Geographical Location)
(Figure 1.3: Level of Participation in Fandom Debates sorted by Racial/Cultural/Ethnic Identity)
As can be seen in these charts, there initially seemed to be a predominance of people with high and medium levels of engagement located in the U.S.A. in this sample. While this might be seen to indicate the merits of concentrating on only the geographical area of the U.S.A. in such studies, when the distribution is examined in terms of racial/cultural and ethnic identity as shown in Figure 1.3, it is possible to come to a much more nuanced idea of who is engaged in these conversations and to what extent. This also allows further interrogation into the reasons for lower engagement with these issues. Respondents have identified personal reasons (wanting to avoid confrontation, not feeling qualified to speak) as well as fear of reprisal and alienation from larger fandom communities. Additionally in Figure 1.3, due to constraints in terms of visualisation I had to place individuals into simplified categories such as ‘Asian American’ whereas in terms of self-identifiers my respondents were much more specific with twenty-five specific racial, cultural, ethnic and religious markers used. This figure then in a sense, encapsulates the struggle of trying to deal with these complex identity articulations within an academic frame.

Therefore, while studies that concern themselves with nationalistic markers of influence have important stories to tell, we also need to expand our frames of reference so as not to construct boundaries where there are none. Using a postcolonial frame of analysis would also allow for more flexible and nuanced idea of what individual racial/cultural and ethnic affinities might look like and how they might operate, foregrounding their slippery and shifting nature as markers. Conversely, the examination of these terms in only one national context leaves us open to the danger of reifying them. For instance, one fan attempted to undercut the highly positive critical reception of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) as a feminist movie by critiquing it on the basis of non-white representation. This, however, was based on U.S.A.-centric ideas of race and sparked angry reactions by non-North American fans that pointed out that there were actually
three non-white women—Zoe Kravitz, Courtney Eaton, and Megan Gale—in the movie. Further, the fact that Eaton and Gale are biracial Maori women had critical resonances in a film set in a post-apocalyptic Australia (fangirljeanne, Tumblr 2015). An Australian respondent also echoed this sense of frustration in a broader context noting, “The US-dominated discussions of racial identity and representation are particularly frustrating because it does not always speak to my context and it can be really simplistic” (Anonymous Respondent 17, Interview with Author, 2015).

**Conclusion**

As previously stated, it is not my intention to set up a hierarchy of authenticity regarding either the representations of marginalised racial/ethnic/cultural/religious identities in media texts or the ways they are discussed in fandom spaces. It is, in fact, vital to my argument that these interactions be seen as messy, overlapping, and problematic. However, media fandom communities have been repeatedly analysed as safe spaces, built on principles of gift-giving and shared passions for media texts, and billed as progressive in their politics (Coppa 2014; Jenkins 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik 2016). Part of this depiction has developed out of the need to reclaim the image of fans as uncritical consumers, and has been facilitated by scholars with roots in these communities who have been careful not to feed into stereotypes. This is not to say that those characterisations of fan spaces are inaccurate but perhaps the time has come to talk about how media fandom spaces are also spaces of contention and of conflict along specific lines of rupture. I posit that it is precisely by discomfiting ourselves and expanding our frameworks conceptually, geographically, and theoretically that fan studies will be able engage with fan cultures that are already ‘global’ in all the utopic and dystopic potential of that word. In the next chapter I will examine how the postcolonial frameworks that I have shown to be suited
to analysing fan spaces, platforms and intra-community discussions also inform the activities of non-white fans in terms of praxis. To that end I will examine how non-white fans are negotiating issues of identity, authenticity, activism, and representation within contemporary media fandom spaces.
Chapter 3
Postcolonial Praxis: Fandom Activism, Identity Negotiation and Transformative Practices

Chapter Summary:
This chapter will examine some of the ways in which non-white fans negotiate with inhospitable fandom spaces. As I have argued, the socially progressive ethos of media fandom communities is a thread that has been repeatedly emphasised in fan studies. One of the more studied contemporary trajectories within this focus area has been the conceptualisation of the fan-as-activist. Such grassroots activism has been identified as a possible new sphere for young people to engage in civic action. As I have traced in the last chapter, however, these global networks have significant unevenness, which is also reflected in contemporary media fandom spaces. I argue therefore that these theorisations of fans as participants in civic action have so far neglected to examine how interstices of identity (apart from gender and sexuality) affect these efforts. In light of this, I consider contemporary theorisations of fan activism in order to highlight certain repeated blind spots. Concomitantly, I stress the necessity for these patterns to be recognised and analysed in turn.

To this end, I examine instances of fan activism that have foregrounded diversity in fan identity—such as the campaign around *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-08). This campaign is especially crucial because it reflects the complexity of factors that affect how fans articulate these multifaceted identities. In order to deal with this complexity I draw my frame of theorisation from John Jackson’s conceptualisation of racial sincerity versus authenticity. Within this frame it is also vital to examine the ways in which non-white fans approach labels such as “Fans Of Colour,” and so I analyse my respondents’ responses with regard to the connotations of the term in a globalised world. Finally, I examine the interconnected practices of fan-meta, headcanons and racebending in light of Edward Said’s formulation of contrapuntal reading to continue my arguments about media fandom spaces as postcolonial cyberspaces.
Through the previous two chapters I have discussed the sporadic nature of conversations concerning racial identity in media fandom, due to the structuring influences of white privilege both in terms of the platforms it has chosen and in its mechanics of community formation. I have also posited that the perceived rise in levels of engagement around these issues has been partly influenced by changes in those platforms. Through this discussion I have both located my theorisation of these fandom formulations as postcolonial cyberspaces and also maintained that these negotiations must be characterised as messy, overlapping, and problematic.

I will now examine these interactions in more detail, focussing in particular on how fan spaces debate (or refuse to debate) the ways that popular cultural media texts and fan texts tackle complex issues like identity, representation and authenticity. This conversation is a crucial one at the current moment, as multinational media conglomerates become increasingly sensitive to concepts of social justice activism, often using them as buzzwords. This is partly due to the increasing visibility of diverse audience demographics for these texts that include women, non-white and queer fans (and those at the interstices of these identities). As a result of this, there is an increasing amount of cultural capital being associated with the projection of being socially progressive, though there is considerably less care being taken in terms of any follow through on these promises.

36 U.S.A.-based television shows like Glee (2009-2015), Teen Wolf (2011-present) and The 100 (2014-present), amongst others, have consistently promoted the inclusion of queer and/or non-white characters in their narratives. The resulting fan-investments in particular character-arcs and storylines are then often leveraged for shock value and the resulting outrage is dismissed as ‘over-reaction.’ For example, in The 100, Lexa (Alycia Debnam-Carter) and Clarke Griffin (Kass Morgan) were part of a highly popular queer couple referred to as ‘Clexa,’ whose relationship was built up as significant in the show’s third season but ended with a ‘shocking’ twist when Lexa was killed. Since this was only the latest event in a long history of queer characters being killed on-screen, many fans were understandably upset at the way the narrative ended (Roth 2016). The scale of the backlash was considerable and often parsed as “fan entitlement” as imposed on the creator’s own visions. I will examine the problematic nature of this construction further in this chapter.
As an example, in 2014, the movie studios associated with both Marvel and DC comics greenlit movies around female superheros—*Captain Marvel* and *Wonder Woman*. Marvel also announced a solo project for *Black Panther*, which will be their first movie centred on a non-white superhero, and is slated for a 2018 release. While encouraging, these developments often represent a case of window dressing instead of concrete change, and have rarely translated into quantifiable differences in terms of hiring policies or overall output of texts (D. Hunt and Ramon 2015). These discrepancies have also begun to be highlighted through social media campaigns such as when the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite went viral in the wake of the Academy Award Nominations announced on January 14, 2016. The hashtag mobilised the anger that many viewers felt at the fact that, for the second year in a row, not a single non-white actor had been nominated for an individual award. This was also reflected in the nominations for the other major categories, including Best Film. The results of the criticism were immediate as Cheryl Boone Isaacs (the Academy’s first African American and third woman president) announced that the body would take action to diversify its voter base. The eventual dilution of the initiative is perhaps emblematic of the struggle to combat institutional racism in Hollywood, but social media was effective in its consciousness-raising activities around the issue (Feinberg 2016).

The viral power of these campaigns are, in part, due to the actions of non-white fans who are, as I have argued through this dissertation, finding more confidence in articulating their concerns around representation in popular media. The increasing vocality of fans about issues relating to various axes of identity—race, gender, sexuality, disability, religion etc.—has prompted varying reactions. Some commentators disapprove of such “fan entitlement” on the grounds that it results in creators being bullied about potentially controversial storylines. Devin Faraci, a popular film critic, has been the most recent to frame the issue in this way in a blogpost entitled “Fandom is broken” (2016). In
it Faraci argues that this kind of “entitlement” is damaging to the creative process as it treats the crafting of stories as solely dependant on the wishes of the audience. He laments,

These fans are treating stories like ordering at a restaurant—hold the pickles, please, and can I substitute kale for the lettuce? But that isn’t how art works, and that shouldn’t be how art lovers react to art. They shouldn’t be bringing a bucket of paint to the museum to take out some of the blue from those Picassos, you know?

For Faraci, and commentators like him, the problem with fandom’s engagement with creators in the age of social media is that this kind of criticism is led by populist opinion which has the potential to escalate into violent threats. While Faraci’s overarching argument certainly holds weight, his analysis seems to lump all criticism of media texts and creators together, regardless of its source. In this frame, there is no differentiation made between the vitriol directed towards films like Ghostbusters (2016) by primarily white, male fans (discussed earlier), and the section of fans of Disney’s Frozen (2013) movie who have been advocating that its main character, Elsa, become the company’s first openly queer character in the upcoming sequel (E. Hunt 2016).

As numerous rebuttals to Faraci’s post also pointed out, this is a dangerous false equivalency (Mason 2016; Pulliam-Moore 2016). There is, after all, a difference between the sense of entitlement towards popular cultural texts exercised by individuals who have always seen their view of the world being reflected in them; and those who have rarely, if ever, been catered to in any way by popular media industries. The increasing vocality of criticism then must be examined on a case-to-case basis. The various defences of fandom referenced above in large part applauded the ability of certain parts of fandom (mostly media fandom) to organise around socially progressive causes, referencing the idea of the fan-as-activist that I will unpack in the next section. In the same vein of criticality however, I contend that such defences of media fandom communities based on
this progressive view of them as interested in social justice issues do not encapsulate the full complexity of the matter either. That is to say, ‘fan activism,’ even when mobilised towards ostensibly liberal causes—such as representations of queerness—is often still predominantly focussed on white characters. I will explore the implications of these intersections of power in more detail in the next section.

The Politics of Fandom Activism

Problematising contemporary theoretical frameworks

The current theorisation of fan activism must be placed in context with multiple power dynamics that operate within these audiences. I have referred earlier to the growing literature that considers fans-as-activists as engaged audiences who leverage their personal networks in order to boost support for particular causes. This has been framed within a history of fans organising support for various issues connected to the popular cultural texts they love, dating back to when a struggling Star Trek (1966-69) was supported through a letter-writing campaign (Lichtenberg et al 1975). Historically these campaigns have focussed on the survival of those franchises, or in some cases have centred on bringing back particular favourite characters, like in the case of Dr. Daniel Jackson (played by Michael Shanks) on the television show Stargate-SG 1 (1997-2007). There have also been more socially conscious campaigns, coalescing around various charitable fundraising efforts such as the annual “Can’t Stop the Serenity” events that are organised in many locations around the world by fans of the Joss Whedon-produced television show Firefly (2002-03) and subsequent movie, Serenity (2005).  

37 The abrupt cancellation of the original television series Firefly (2002-03) on the U.S.A-based Fox network initially also led to fan campaigns that advocated for a continuation. These campaigns did
histories have also informed research on recent successful philanthropic actor-led campaigns that have raised awareness and funds around issues such as bullying (Cochran 2012; Stein 2015; Kligler-Vilenchik 2016).

What is a relatively new development within this trajectory is a growing interest in fandom spaces as potential sites of organisation, where fans are motivated to put their support behind various socially progressive causes without being overtly associated with any one political ideology. This was seen in Henry Jenkins’ (2012) examination of the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), a U.S.A.-based non-profit organisation, which he described as “a sustained effort to mobilise a network of fans of J. K. Rowling’s fantasy books around an array of different issues and concerns, ranging from human rights in Africa to rights to equal marriage, from labor rights to media concentration and net neutrality.” (1.9) Jenkins’ discussion foregrounds the possibility for fan spaces to prompt and sustain “civic action” by harnessing the power of particular narrative universes. The founder of the HPA, Andrew Slack, articulates this strategy as one of “cultural acupuncture” which encapsulates,

[…] finding where the psychological energy is in the culture, and moving that energy towards creating a healthier world…We activists may not have the same money as Nike and McDonald’s but we have a message that actually means something…What we do not have is the luxury of keeping the issues we cover seemingly boring, technocratic, and inaccessible. With cultural acupuncture, we will usher in an era of activism that is fun, imaginative, and sexy, yet truly effective. (4.6, quoted in Jenkins 2012)

While the work the HPA does is undoubtedly productive of some positive effects, the framing of such civic engagement as “fun” and “sexy” is questionable, especially in

eventually contribute to the production of a standalone movie, Serenity (2005). Fans of the franchise also began to organise screenings of the movie in order to raise money for the charity Equality Now in 2006. This has now become an annual event held at various locations worldwide. In 2015 the event was held in forty-five countries and raised over ninety-six thousand dollars for Equality Now and a range of other charities (“The History of Can’t Stop the Serenity” 2011).
regards to issues like the Darfur crisis\textsuperscript{38} (one of the issues with which the HPA has engaged). This kind of approach, where complex situations are mapped onto simplistic good versus evil narrative paradigms can also lead to dangerous outcomes, especially when local realities are ignored for a ‘bigger picture.’ This happens most frequently when good intentioned actions are pursued in countries located in Africa, where deeply parochial and colonialist stereotypes still influence their perception, particularly in the Global North. I have already discussed the effects of these attitudes at the interstices of global network societies in the last chapter. This aspect is developed further in Trish Salah’s (2014) examination of imperialist Western feminism in activist fandoms, such as the one’s associated with Whedon described above, with regard to Muslim women.

Another egregious example of this was seen when the organisation Invisible Children (IC) sought to bring the world’s attention to the fate of Ugandan child soldiers through the release of the video now widely known as “Kony 2012.” The video, which was released on March 5, 2012, highlighted the activities of a local warlord, Joseph Kony (Invisible Children 2012). It went viral, garnering millions of views and causing a global outcry. While this would make it, by Slack’s formulation, “truly effective,” it was also the target to a significant amount of critique from Ugandan scholars, journalists and activists. These critiques pointed out that the video, rather than foregrounding the complexity of the situation, was mobilising age-old, racist and colonial stereotypes about Africa as an undifferentiated continent full of war and savagery (Kagumire 2012; Mamdani 2012; Mengetsu 2012). Teju Cole, a Nigerian-American writer, also pointed out that the video was the epitome of what he termed the “White Saviour Industrial Complex” which concentrates on a particular “inhumane” event without reflecting on the ways that event is informed by histories of colonial and neo-colonial interference by

\textsuperscript{38} The Darfur region, located in western Sudan, has been in the grip of civil war since 2003. At one point described by the United Nations as the “world’s worst humanitarian crisis,” the conflict has claimed thousands of lives and has displaced millions more. For more information see (Flint and Waal 2005).
Western nations. In essence, he argued that the “The white saviour supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening” (2012, para 2).

Interestingly, Invisible Children was one of the organisations, along with HPA, which was examined as an example of successful fan-based activism in an article included in a special journal issue of Transformative Works and Cultures. The piece, which was written before the release of the video, was based on interviews of members of the organisation and was largely hopeful in tone, noting,

In the context of prevalent discourses about youth disengagement, organizations like the HPA and IC provide encouraging contrasts, pointing to the ways in which many young people in fact devote significant amounts of their time, money, and energy to social causes they strongly believe in, while doing so within environments of passion and belonging. (Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2012, 6.7)

In an addendum to the article after the release of the video, and in response to the criticism it received, they further speculated that,

At least some of the critique around Kony 2012, we argue, can be read as a policing of the boundaries of social action, and what it should look and feel like. Many of these critiques claimed that social advocacy should be left to experts—to politicians, to “serious” NGOs, to erudites. Although some of the criticism was undoubtedly unique to Invisible Children, fan activism, which calls for a different genre of activism that is playful, imaginative, social, and fun, may encounter similar critiques in the future. Kony 2012 thus powerfully exemplifies the power of fan activism while presenting a cautionary tale about some of the harsh reactions with which it may be met. (Kligler-Vilenchik et al 2012, 7.5)

I would argue that the “harsh” reactions that the video prompted were quite well-founded and indeed the roots of the disjunct are identified by Cole’s critique. While “playful, imaginative, social, and fun” styles of activism may well have a place in modern conceptualisations of civic action, they were wholly incongruous in this case and informed by incredible amounts of privilege. Indeed, this problem is gestured to in the
original article (though not developed in the addendum) where the authors acknowledge that the majority of the members of both organisations came from privileged racial and socio-economic backgrounds.

I propose that this complexity of power relations is also a critical aspect to be considered when reading the multiple defences of fandom that responded to Faraci’s rather simplistic piece. These defences, much like the threads of theorisation I have traced above, celebrated the resistance of media fandom in particular, seeing it as a response to the domination of popular cultural media texts by mainly white, heterosexual male creators. While true to a certain extent, it must also be noted that a lot of the most vocal protests still concern white characters. I have already discussed the outrage that ensued when the character of Lexa in the CW television show The 100 (2014–present) was killed off in a depressing continuation of the expendability of lesbian characters. The event was condemned roundly and deservedly got a huge amount of fan backlash (Roth 2012). However, as some non-white fans of the show pointed out, the same fanbase had been ignoring the hugely racialised violence that was a staple of the narrative from its inception. It is necessary to pay attention to these patterns of prioritisation so as to identify which characters are consistently valued over others within fandom spaces, even when issues of social justice are highlighted.

Additionally while the scholars quoted above tend to frame this relationship between consumption, activism, and fandom as a relatively new one, this does not hold quite true across the board. Rebecca Wanzo (2015) points to the fact that a focus on non-white fans (in her case African American fans in the U.S.A. but the argument holds true for other demographic groups as well) complicates long held assumptions about fan behaviour, particularly around notions like alterity and “outsider” status. Particularly, consumer activism has long been a tradition in Black fandom spaces in the U.S.A. As she points out,
Economic power has often been a large part of black consumption and resistance to various forms of popular culture. Activists call for boycotts of negative representations and suggest that African Americans need to support or reject certain performers or films. So-called black buying power produced both separate movie theaters and race films in the early 20th century, and many of these films would model racial uplift and produce an income for black entrepreneurs and performers as migrating African Americans had more time for leisure (Stewart 2005; Caddoo 2014; Field 2015). The Black Power movement would usher in an increased interest in works that challenged stereotypical representations of African Americans, and racially conscious African Americans would be encouraged to see, watch, and listen to more radical black cultural productions. For African Americans, consumerism can be an act of resistance in itself, because, as legal scholar Regina Austin (1994) has argued, black shopping and selling are often read as deviant. (2.15)

It is essential, then, to examine cases of fan critique and media campaigns in which there is a foregrounding of such inequalities and their attendant complex intersections around race, gender, class, and sexuality, amongst other axes of identity. That is, campaigns like #OscarsSoWhite, that do not position fans as largely non-political or acting out of purely philanthropic reasons. The above example of fandom as something “demanded” of African American communities as a means of carving out a space for themselves in mainstream media also shows the historical roots of the ways in which media fan communities engage with these issues today.

In the age of the twenty-four hour news cycle it is clearly becoming a matter of brand positioning for entertainment companies to be seen as attentive to concerns of audiences around issues like racism, sexism, and homophobia. This is not to say big budget productions produced in this atmosphere are any less likely to contain discriminatory stereotypes, but social media today allows for criticism of them to reach a greater audience and have more of a potential impact on box office performance. It is these dynamics that I will explore further in the next section.
“Aang ain’t White!” Fandom Activism and the Politics of Identity, Representation and Authenticity

One of the first such cases to make a large-scale impact on fannish spaces sparked off in 2008 when fans of the animated series Avatar: The Last Airbender (2005-08) came together to protest the whitewashed casting of its live-action adaptation. Tracking the growth of the campaign, Lori Kido Lopez (2012) notes that it began with some of the original artists of the show starting an anonymous Livejournal community around the slogan “Aang ain’t White!” This grew into a letter-writing campaign, which was ignored but prompted two fans to found a separate site (and corresponding Livejournal community) called Racebending.com.39 It is not my intention to restate the details of that campaign, but instead to examine how some of the issues it raised continue to inform fandom debates around notions of identity, diversity, representation, and authenticity. I will also track how the term “racebending” itself has grown beyond this usage to signify a powerful fan practice often used to interrupt dominant narratives about what forms certain stories and characters must take in order to be successful.

Racebending.com did not appear in a vacuum, but within an environment of growing willingness to talk about aspects of fan identity not limited to gender and sexuality. I have already commented on the ways in which specific platforms have influenced the dissemination of such discussions and Anna Van Someren and Sangita Shresthova (2010) support this argument in their description of one of the founders of Racebending.com, Lorraine Sammy, as a “quiet observer” of Racefail ’09 on Livejournal.

39 The term racebending has had various uses that I will explore later in this chapter but in the context of this campaign it was also a play on an aspect of worldbuilding of the television show itself. In the narrative, certain individuals have the gift of manipulating the elements of air, wind, water and fire. This manipulation is termed as the practice of “bending,” each ability being expressed as a concatenation—airbending, waterbending, earthbending etc.
Sammy contends that those debates, as well as the people she encountered in those spaces, “raised her awareness of racism within fantasy spaces and its impact on everyday life” (para 4).

The aims that Racebending.com articulated during its first campaign (that are now carried on through platforms such as Tumblr and in panels at fan conventions) has been to “advocate for underrepresented groups in entertainment media…dedicated to furthering equal opportunities in Hollywood and beyond” (“About Us” 2011, para 1). Their activity since the campaign concentrating on Avatar has revolved primarily around drawing attention to the casting choices of big U.S.A-based studios, particularly when they cast white actors to play non-white characters.

While this advocacy fulfils a vital function, Lopez (2012) points out that the initial campaign also prompts complex questions about what constitutes a character or actor’s “true” racial/ethnic/cultural identity. In the case of Avatar, for instance, the source text was set in a mythologised land and the character designs drew from a range of Asian and Indigenous cultures. Lopez points out that,

[…] we must consider how this discourse contributes to an essentialized or fixed notion of Asia. Not only do these images suggest that an escalating pile of artifacts can be used to ascertain what is really Asian and what is not, as if Asian identities cannot exist outside of these artifacts, but we are to use this evidence to match a racialized body to this perfect image of Asianess. This becomes somewhat difficult given that the show seemingly appropriates and mixes cultural artifacts from a wide range of Asian cultures, none of which could be accurately represented by any single actor. Moreover, who and what constitutes ‘Asia’ is also a debatable topic, given that the geographical, racial and cultural boundaries surrounding what we might consider ‘Asia’ are shifting and contextually constructed (Chuh, 2003; Ono, 1995). The demand for an Asian actor to play the role of Aang also assumes that identity and representation can be collapsed within an actor’s body, when representation is always a mediation and our identities can rarely be straightforwardly mapped out without any complexity or shading. (435)

This critique identifies the central difficulty that haunts any such discussion of what constitutes an ‘authentic’ representation of any particular identity, whether sexual,
gendered, racial, cultural, or all of the above at once. As Lopez points out, the arguments about the “Asian-ness” of the original text must rely on an ossification of identity that accepts the melding of entirely disparate cultural markers into a common narrative universe. The “matching” of an appropriate racialised body to this universe (itself the production of a white creative team) does lead to complex questions about what visibilised racial signifiers would be valued most in such a scenario.

However, it also must be noted that these debates are not being conducted in a space where both white and non-white bodies are subjected to the same modes of racialisation. As reflected in the debate about the casting of Scarlett Johansson in *Ghost In The Shell* referenced in chapter one, the ‘slipperiness’ of racialised markers is only ever mobilised in defence of white actors getting cast in ‘universal’ roles. In stark contrast, this consideration is almost never granted to non-white actors. This is proven by the high level of backlash received by those who take up supposedly neutral roles—Idris Elba as the demigod Heimdal in *Thor* (2011) and John Boyega as a stormtrooper in *The Force Awakens* (2016) to name only two instances.

These debates are not a new phenomenon by any means. Discussions of the politics of representation following the “cultural turn” and the “discursive turn,” particularly around marginalised subjects, have been taken up repeatedly in disciplines ranging from feminist and postcolonial studies to queer theory (Hull et al 1982; hooks 1984; Trinh 1989; Gates 1993; Morris 1994; Mohanty 1984; Puar 2007). While these theorisations cover a hugely complex range of ideas, a shared concern has coalesced around how these regimes of representation, or signifying practices that structure how we ‘see’ the world, function through exclusion and boundary policing, even when employed in the service of oppositional politics to oppressive systems of governance.

Of these, Stuart Hall’s (1996) examination of “black” cultural representation in the U.K. remains foundational. In “New Ethnicities,” he mapped the ways in which the term
was coined as “a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalisation in Britain and came to provide the organising category of a new politics of resistance, among groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities” (442). To Hall, this politics of resistance, initially formed around a double-pronged push for access to representational space for Black artists as well as a contestation of their marginal position, then morphed into a new phase. He posited that this was a shift from, “the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself,” which signalled an “end to the innocent notion of the essential black subject” (444). This was in effect a call to end the claims of “authenticity” for any sort of cultural production, not as a sign of defeat, but as an acknowledgment of the vast heterogeneity that made up any racial or ethnic category and their inherent slipperiness. For Hall, to be involved in a politics of representation was to be “plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism” (445).

Almost twenty years on, while the notion of authenticity remains (rightfully) suspect in critical discourse around representation, it is equally clear that it continues to mediate (in one form or another) any text’s relationship to the cultural signifiers it engages with in its narrative. This remains especially true for popular cultural texts with great power to influence narratives about already marginalised individuals. With the growth of social media platforms and blogging practices it has become increasingly common to find these texts being interrogated by those individuals themselves, often mobilising the language of authenticity with all its problematic associations. This is also the case in fandom communities.

However, it is also clear that, while a certain amount of boundary policing and essentialist discourse is present in these critiques, the dialogic nature of fannish spaces ensure that Hall’s description of a critical politics as a “maelstrom” of debate also remains
relevant to any theorisation that is attempted. To refer back to the example of the Indian wizarding school I cited in chapter two, both versions of how Indian magic might function drew from regimes of representation and authenticity, while also showing how those concepts are, in Hall’s words, “continuously contingent.”

In terms of bodies being raced ‘correctly,’ it is also crucial to remember that these classifications have a specific (often violent) history perpetuated under the guise of scientific endeavour. The ‘science of race’ is one such legacy of scientific classification, especially the sexological accounts of sexuality in the 18th century (Somerville 2000). In 1774, for instance, Edward Long—a planter residing in Jamaica—posited that individuals of African descent were a lower order of humanity, probably “a different species of the same Genus (356).” Charles Linnaeus’ General System of Nature (1735) was the first to propose a classification system based on skin colour “types” to which additional personality traits were ascribed in later editions. Rutledge M. Dennis (1995) argues that while these texts were all influential in scripting “race” as we know it today, it was with Darwin’s evolutionary theories, published in 1859, that this line of thought found a new legitimacy. He notes,

Though Darwin (1859) focused primarily on the biological evolution of animal species and almost never addressed the cultural or social consequences of this evolution for humans, others like Herbert Spencer (1874), who first coined the phrase “survival of the fittest,” reasoned that Darwinist principles were intended to buttress the case that biological evolution could be equally applicable to human societies. (244)

As Nikki Sullivan (2003) points out, drawing on Michel Foucault (1980), the popularisation of these beliefs led to increasing concerns about racial “purity” and had effects like the banning of interracial marriages and also influenced the rise of eugenics. Foucault has also identified the troubled linkages between the (western) scientific need to create the concept of race—linking it to “blood” and the need to ensure its “purity”—
and the very basis of the formalised categories of gender and sexuality. These scientific discourses were also drawn on to justify historical abuses like slavery by sociologists like Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner in the U.S.A. who were associated with the school of thought now known as Social Darwinism (Hofstadter 1944). Their effects can also be seen in the subsequent justifications of atrocities perpetrated in Nazi Germany and in the policies of Apartheid in South Africa (Bergman 1999; Weikart 2004; Dubow 1992; Giliomee 2003). It is also important to note that while no longer overt in their operations, such lines of reasoning still hold power, as can be seen in the publication of such pseudo-scientific works such as Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994), which attempted to reintroduce links between race and intellectual ability.

Therefore, to insist that any particular combination of markers based on physical appearance or hereditary traits is ‘authentic’ with regard to a particular racial, ethnic or cultural identity comes dangerously close to replicating and reifying these same violent classifications. Lopez’s (2012) concerns around the discursive construction of racial identity in fan spaces also follow this logic. Nevertheless, it is equally clear that while racial identity as a comprehensible category cannot be defined on any single or absolute biological level, the idea that it is a biological attribute remains highly prevalent and discrimination on the basis of perceived racial identity remains as entrenched as ever in every aspect of our lives.

This is also applicable to the influence of white privilege when it comes to the texts that form the focus of media fandom communities. As I have already argued, the reality of the casting practices of U.S.A-based movie and television studios are certainly influenced by such biases. However, the elevation of white male protagonists over all others *within* fan spaces is also very much part of that same continuum. The fan practices under consideration in this chapter must then be seen as attempting to articulate
differential modes of resistance in these particular contexts. These modes of resistance are messy and when framed in casual speech sometimes seem to reify dangerous ideas of ‘authenticity,’ yet in practice can also be seen to be produce (or hold the potential of producing) multiple authenticities.

**Fan Identity Articulations: The Case for Differential Authenticities**

One of the ways in which to approach these multiple authenticities is through John Jackson’s (2005) influential conceptual framing of what he terms “racial sincerity” which is articulated as functioning differently from “racial authenticity.” Jackson’s theorisation maps out the ways in which individuals continually rearticulate their relationships to their raced identity both on their own and as part of a community, and grew out of his anthropological studies in the area of Harlem, New York. Subsequent scholars have built on these theoretical apparatuses in differing contexts, using them to situate enquiries into racial identity as a dynamic and mutable component in arenas of cultural production where performativity is foregrounded. These include topics as diverse as hip-hop music and fashion, to examinations of high-profile public figures such as Michelle Obama (Warikoo 2007; Harrison 2008; Fraley 2009; Saucier 2011; White 2011).

Jackson’s formulation is predicated on the problematics of negotiating the shifting shoals of identity politics that remain central to civil rights movements even as they are increasingly decried as essentialist and failed in some parts of academia. He observes, that often “race is seen as the restrictive script we use to authenticate some versions of blackness, whiteness, brownness, yellowness, and redness while simultaneously prohibiting others.” (13)
Marginalised groups that work to highlight the role of racialisation in institutional discrimination against them do not specifically advocate for essentialist and prescriptive modes of identity but it is undeniable that this strategy is a sharp double-edged sword to wield. In the case of media fandom, debates about ‘authentic’ casting or aspects of storytelling often devolve into essentialising discourses that come uncomfortably close to replicating the very oppressive structures they aim to resist. For instance, the pushback against the appropriation of the bindi by white celebrities often uses the argument that it is not just a cosmetic ornament but has sacred significance within Hindu traditions. As Nirmal Puwar (2002) also argues, it is certainly true that the Orientalist underpinnings of “multicultural” fashion are very much the reason that such ethnic markers are only seen as new and edgy choices when worn by white celebrities. Conversely, when worn by non-white individuals, they function as dangerously othering mechanisms. However it is also true that the rhetoric surrounding the debate often (unwittingly) draws on the language mobilised by the Hindu upper caste right-wing (in India and abroad) to create a ‘pure’ and ossified ‘true’ Hinduism that is used against historically oppressed groups. This is not to argue that intra-community conflict about the meanings and ownership of certain cultural artefacts invalidates their authenticities, but rather to underline their contingent nature.

Jackson articulates this conflict as one that oscillates around the idea of agency. He argues that authenticity “presupposes a relation between subjects (who authenticate) and objects (dumb, mute, and inorganic) that are interpreted and analysed from the outside, because they cannot simply speak for themselves” (14). In contrast, sincerity sets up a different paradigm entirely.

A mere object could never be sincere, even if it is authentic. Sincerity is a trait of the object’s maker, or maybe even its authenticator, but never the object itself, at least not as we commonly use the term. Instead, sincerity presumes a liaison
between subjects—not some external adjudicator and a lifeless scroll. Questions of sincerity imply social interlocutors who presume one another’s humanity, interiority and subjectivity. It is a subject-subject interaction, not the subject-object model that authenticity presumes—and to which critiques of authenticity implicitly reduce every racial exchange. (14)

Sincerity, then, is always an exchange of meaning rather than an imposition. Jackson’s framework offers one way of evaluating how texts that deal with representations of marginalised communities and individuals (specifically in terms of racial scripts but also how those scripts interact with gender, sexuality, religion etc.) work and what reactions they generate. To simply dismiss these reactions as boundary policing and inherently flawed is to lose a vital interactional component, especially within fandom communities that build their own relationships with texts that they acknowledge are flawed but still offer a ‘sincere’ articulation of their social realities. Again as Jackson maintains,

To talk exclusively in terms of racial authenticity is to risk ossifying race into a simple subject-object equation, reducing people to little more than objects of racial discourse, characters in racial scripts, dismissing race as only and exclusively the primary cause of social domination and death. […] Racial sincerity is an attempt to apply this “something-elseness” to race, to explain the reasons it can feel so obvious, natural, real and even liberating to walk around with purportedly racial selves crammed up inside of us and serving as invisible links to other people. (15)

For Jackson, it is important to understand that people’s affinities to racial scripts do not automatically fence them into essentialist positions, but offer ways of sharing common experiences (especially in cases of marginalisation) as well as disparate ones that lead to the production of further sincerities. He also stresses that by allowing for sincerity as a model of interactional racial productions and relations, the contingency and ephemeral nature of all such performances is underlined.

He argues,
Sincerity highlights the ever-fleeting “liveness” of everyday racial performances that cannot be completely captured by authenticating meditations of any kind. Where authenticity lauds content, sincerity privileges intent—an interiorised intent that decentralises the racial seer (and the racial script), allowing for the possibility of performative ad-libbing and inevitable acceptance of trust amid uncertainty as the only solution to interpersonal ambiguity. With sincerity as a model, one still does not see into the other, one still does not know if one can trust the other’s performances (a partiality and steely eyed skepticism it shares with authenticity discourse); however, one recognises that people are not simply racial objects (to be verified from without) but racial subjects with an interiority that is never completely and unquestionably clear. Racial subjects demand a mutual granting of autonomy and interiorised validity that outstrips authenticity’s imperfect operationalisations. (17-18)

Jackson’s formulation then injects a vitality and “lived-ness” to concerns about how racial signifiers function, both between individuals and communities but also how popular cultural texts can be seen to operate. In terms of fandom communities, the idea of sincerity also encapsulates the emotional and interactional element that is contained in fan reactions (both positive and negative) to particular texts. These reactions can be parsed both in terms of fan activism and also in more specific practices that produce individual fanworks. Sincerity as an analytic category allows for the examination of how imperfect texts are simultaneously loved and critiqued by an engaged audience that is also articulating and rearticulating their own raced, gendered and sexualised selves in response to the various societal scripts around them.

To return to the campaign around Avatar: The Last Airbender using this formulation, it is possible to see how such sincerity operated to establish its rhetorical and consciousness raising strategies. In opposition to Lopez’s (2012) analysis I would argue that it was not that participants in the campaign believed that the text represented an undifferentiated ‘Asian’ body, but rather recognised (and mobilised against) specific racist casting practices of Hollywood studios. Similarly, the signifiers of ‘Asian-ness’ of the text were underlined through comparisons to real world artefacts and cultural practices
in the pursuit of a specific goal. The collective identity in this case was not just based around fans’ own racial, ethnic, or cultural identity, but also around their identity as fans of the series. Racebending.com makes a point of underlining the demographic diversity of their supporters by stating that, “7 out of 10 Racebending.com supporters are NOT of Asian descent. People from many different ethnic groups felt strongly opposed to the film’s casting decisions” (“Demographics of Racebending.com Supporters” 2010). On the same page, the website cites a survey of supporters showing that sixty percent of the respondents identified themselves as white. This is an important point as it shows the possibility of such campaigns forging intersectional solidarity around social justice issues while keeping the voices of those primarily affected by such inequalities at the forefront. This is also seen in the other campaigns that Racebending.com continues to run, as well as in their boosting of similarly themed educational and activist posts from other sources on their Tumblr blog.

This aspect of constructed and expressed solidarity amongst fans who might come from different racial/cultural/ethnic backgrounds but wish to engage and support strategic consciousness raising critique across popular cultural texts was also reflected in my interview data as already mentioned. As one respondent notes,

Most of the events that have moved me to engage have been directly related to anti-blackness since Latinos are simply not represented in media. But I think it’s important to non-black poc to speak up and show solidarity with black people and black fans. (Silent_parts, Interview with Author 2015)

Reactions like this reflect a broader concern for issues of diversity and representation that do not necessarily match-up to respondents’ own specific identities, yet are informed by a shared experience of marginalisation and misrepresentation within white-character-centric fandom texts and communities. This is not to say that frustrations
about the perceived level of engagement with different issues were not also expressed. For instance one respondent felt,

Discussion of race in fandom tends to center around black and maybe Latin@ issues and characters; Asian and Asian-American issues are mostly invisible (Mako Mori is an exception). When they do pop up, I’m sometimes kind of uncomfortable with the tack they take, because they sometimes seem to involve non-Asians making sweeping statements about Asian culture that lack nuance, and then sometimes mashing Asian-Americans (who have complex and widely varying negotiations between the two halves of their identity) into that mold. (Anonymous Respondent 7, Interview with Author 2015)

This kind of discomfort is important to register as it shows that these alliances and resonances are not uncomplicatedly felt or expressed. While one of the aims of my project is to show how non-white fans articulate strategies to talk about how media fandom spaces remain unsafe and unwelcoming in many ways, it is not my intention to project these strategies as all encompassing. Broadly however, a sense of solidarity was expressed in interviews around signal boosting critiques even as the U.S.A-centricity of such discussions was repeatedly underlined.

**Strategic assemblages: Fan Of Colour**

Another question that arises here is whether a further consolidation of identity can be observed in these cases. That is, do fans in this kind of discursive space also self-identity or ally themselves with specific labels such as “Fan of Colour.” Recently, there seems to have been a rise in circulation of such terms within fandom spaces and so this trend merits further investigation. The problems inherent in such a nomenclature stem,

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40 Mako Mori, played by Japanese actress Rinko Kikuchi, was the lead character of *Pacific Rim* (2013). The film was a SF/F action thriller directed by Guillermo Del Toro. The unusual choice of casting a Japanese actress in the lead role of a major English-language film was also discussed in fandom spaces, particularly as the narrative did not focus on a romantic angle for her character.
again, from its U.S.A.-centricity, something that respondents from other countries repeatedly flagged as frustrating.

This issue is not something that is limited to fandom spaces. The ways in which the U.S.A.-centric language and theorisation of activism around queerness, gender, and race has been enforced on the rest of the world is echoed in other aspects of creative industries, including the globalised literary landscape. One example of this linguistic didacticism and its effects is seen in the writing of Vajra Chandrasekera, a Sri Lankan SF/F writer. He talks about his disorientation at becoming a ‘person of colour’ “overnight” by being published in the U.S.A. marketplace. His experience of being online before and after this explicit racial marking also feeds into my theorisation about the ways in which the Internet is decidedly not neutral. He notes,

I’ve been online in some shape or form for twenty years, but never as myself, never under my real name and identity like this; back in the day it was normal to use pseudonyms, and by the time that convention changed I’d settled into habits. All this—<all-encompassing gesture>—came about because I wanted to publish as myself, under my real name. And when I started to publish in US markets, this “of colour” thing started to become a thing. The very first time I heard the phrase “person of colour” online (fortunately, this was before it was applied to me), I thought it was some sort of slur. This is, as far as I can tell, a common reaction for many non-Americans who encounter the phrase for the first time: a raised eyebrow and a “you called me a what now?” (Chandrasekera 2015, para 7)

The “raised eyebrow” is well taken, and indeed, in my examination of the fandom usage of the term “Fan Of Colour” quite a few of the respondents raised theirs as well, which I will consider in more detail in a moment. I am, however, also interested in how Chandrasekera’s online experience remained outside of ‘identity politics’ only as long as he remained unmarked under a pseudonym that was disassociated from his “real name and identity.” This resonates with media fandom spaces as well, in which non-white fans have often ‘passed’ until a point where they have felt confident enough to declare themselves in some way. What would have happened if he had identified himself in those
spaces? As has been established, most online interactions cannot but be coloured (pun intended.)

For Chandrasekera, the usage of the term ‘People Of Color’ outside of the U.S.A makes little sense because its power is contextualised within specific histories of marginalisation. Outside of that however, the term becomes a “pure statement of American cultural hegemony” (para 10). Despite this declaration, he does go on to admit that he does not have any answers to this conundrum either. After all, to remain unmarked is not to remain outside the global discourses of power that effect how his fiction is read and marketed. And the power of the marketplace in SF/F specifically still rests in the U.S.A., whose influence on publishing success both in terms of generating sales and garnering critical recognition remains significant.

I argue then that Chandrasekera was already interpolated in those discourses even before he consciously “became” a ‘person of colour’ and will have to continue to navigate around that identity construct in one form or the other. The forces of neo-imperialism and globalisation thus combine to enforce the very language through which any resistance can be articulated. This same conflict is also seen around the term “Fan of Colour” in my interview data. When asked about their opinion of the term respondents gave a variety of responses. Some respondents recognised the potential usefulness of the term but also pointed out its limitations—making all non-white fans appear to be a homogenous mass.

It’s good as an umbrella. It shouldn’t be allowed to erase that there are significant differences in the interests and needs of specific ethnic and race groups within the “of colour” community. What I look for and need from fandom as a Black American fan aren’t going to be the same as a Latinx American fan, or South Asian British fan, and I wouldn’t want people to think that, for instance, writing about one character of color is sufficient for all of us to feel represented. (Anonymous Respondent 3, Interview with Author 2015)
Others however interpreted it as way of marking themselves out in a space that is still often presumed or defaulted to as white-centric. This was interpreted to have both positive and negative repercussions.

I think it tends to go 50/50... i usually go by fan but sometimes there are moments when i remember that i am a fan of color and it’s not the same experience, if that makes sense? i guess i really wish i could just see myself as a fan but i feel like that erases a pretty significant part of my identity. (Arzoensis, Interview with Author 2015)

I like it, I guess. I am not actively making myself invisible anymore, like I did years ago. I am a fan and I am several minorities in one. (Snackiepotato, Interview with Author 2015)

In an intriguing variation on that theme, some respondents saw its usage as reifying the idea that fandom is somehow *essentially* for white people with non-white fans forever figuring as outliers and exceptions. This was something that they objected to strongly, reaffirming their right to fannish spaces.

I use it when talking to other fans of color, or fans of... non traditional sexual orientation (?). I guess we using it mockingly among ourselves, a badge of “other” honor? I don’t like seeing fandom as a whole use the term because it just reiterates the idea that you can’t just be a “fan” if you’re not white. (Anonymous Respondent 12, Interview with Author 2015)

Weird. On one hand, it’s like... why are we getting singled out again? Are white people the default for “fan” then? But on the other, if it gives our opinion on issues more legitimacy, then I’m all for that. (Mian, Interview with Author 2015)

This was a set of responses I was intrigued by, as they highlight the difficulties of articulating the experience of being marginalised in such spaces without perpetuating those very same othering mechanisms. My respondents therefore struggled with the ways in which these terms provide tools that both “legitimise” their experiences and also mark them off from the fandom mainstream.
On a slightly different note, for some respondents the term brought up considerations of identity as primarily outside fandom spaces. These respondents chose to articulate them as separate (though allied) aspects.

I don’t use the terms Fan of Color or Person of Color/POC. I strongly dislike the term POC, but I accept that others identify that way, so I can respect the use in that context. When I talk about my identity, I’ll say I’m a person of mixed heritage. I’ve recently discovered the Hawaiian term “hapa” for mixed. For representation in media, I am more likely to say “other than European ancestry” or “other than ‘white’” (in quotes). (Butterflydreaming, Interview with Author 2015)

I’ve never used it, though I wouldn’t mind, but I think People of Colour is more widely-known, and if I were describing myself I’d say Person of Colour who is a Fan. However, I can see the benefit of Fan of Color—it makes being a POC intrinsic to being a fan, and also the phrasing has a double-reading that you are a fan of the idea of diversity. (Anonymous Respondent 10, Interview with Author 2015)

I don’t tend to use it, but I don’t object to it. I guess I’m more likely to think of myself as a woman of color (who happens to be a fan) rather than a fan of color, if that makes sense. (Anonymous Respondent 7, Interview with Author 2015)

The above responses point to a high degree of complexity in the way these labels are being thought through within fan spaces and how they might be expressed differently in different environments. Jackson’s emphasis on the interactional and contextual element of racial sincerity rings especially true for this set of responses as respondents are clearly very aware of the various layers of historical meaning that have accrued in such labels as well as what they might signify in the future.

In the same vein, others spoke of the usage of the term as “strategic” which is something that ties into my earlier argument about non-white fans using rhetorical strategies to form loose, contingent and informal alliances in order to help make a larger point or support a particular popular cultural text without that translating into a formal identification. They also spoke of it as a tool to find other non-white fans and as a signal to identify that they share common ground in terms of their engagement with fannish spaces. Some examples of such responses are,
I feel like I’d identify with this term differently with different people. I’d never call myself that here (in Mumbai), but abroad I used it while talking to other fans of colour. (hena, Interview with Author 2015)

I don’t use it except for strategic circumstances, for the sake of simplicity or solidarity. (Swatkat, Interview with Author 2015)

I don’t like it and I would prefer not to use it for myself, but there have been occasions where I’ve had to (as solidarity, as identifier.) (Anonymous Respondent 13, Interview with Author 2015)

I feel it’s a shorthand and useful way to describe a group of people, especially in heavily US-dominated, English-language discourse. It does have the effect of linking you to other non-white fans and makes it easier to search for more racially diverse media. (Anonymous Respondent 17, Interview with Author 2015)

One respondent, interestingly, articulated their discomfort with such a term being applied to fandom spaces and activities at all,

I don’t use it myself, but I also don’t know if I would use “fan” as an identity, either. I think of fandom as something I do and participate in, rather than being something I /am/. Woman of color’s origin is very much rooted in radical activism, so I would also not associate fandom with a radical political identity. (Lurrel, Interview with Author 2015)

I would like to build on this response in the context of a point raised in chapter two—the extension of the identifier of “fan” to indicate a marginalised identity. I have argued that this trend is seen repeatedly when theorising the ways in which fans deviate from prescribed societal norms through their passionate engagement with media objects. These theorisations have usually coalesced around the concept of transgressive pleasure, especially with regard to erotic fanworks in the context of media fandom. But as these theorisations have generally only paid attention to how these transgressions operate around the axes of gender and sexuality, the effects of the racialisations of these spaces have remained unexamined. My disquiet with characterising media fandom participants as inherently marginalised stems from this disjunct. As I have argued in this chapter
(while discussing sweeping defences of media fandom spaces in the context of “fan entitlement”), without an intersectional analytical frame these analyses remain alienating for many non-white fans.

Finally there were some respondents who wholeheartedly embraced the term precisely because in their view it is something self-crafted, drawing from a radical political legacy.

I love the term ‘fan of color.’ I like *most* of the labels that we’ve come up with for ourselves, actually. I like *labels*—they tend to make things easier, just in terms of the gross ‘who the hell are we, anyway?’ definitions. (Te, Interview with Author 2015)

As this selection of quotes shows there is a considerable difference of opinion around such labels. Most significant to me is their mobilisation strategically and as a way of connection. The focus on these labels as a shorthand, and their use as contingent rather than as some kind of rallying cry is, I think, crucial to the ways in which non-white fans negotiate the fannishness demanded of them in various contexts. These demands can take different forms, sometimes as a demand to stay silent in spaces which are dismissive or transparently hostile to discussion of these issues, or conversely as a demand to become spokespersons or educators or sole creators of more diverse content. One respondent talked of the double-edged sword the latter style of labelling can be:

I feel like there’s a marked difference in treatment that I get when people call me out for whitewashing/racism and I mention that I’m a woman of colour and yes this was a conscious choice. Which. It squicks me out. It feels like a box that simultaneously places on me the burden of speaking for all of my group, lifts me above (sort of) being attacked for problematic stuff in fics and yet also limits/overwhelmingly shapes how I can talk about a race/ethnicity issue. So not overfond of it. (tobermortansass, Interview with Author 2015)

This simultaneous use of and discomfort around the labelling of racial/cultural/ethnic identity in fandom spaces is therefore indicative of the fraught
nature of these negotiations and the erasures that they sometimes effect. However, within my recorded responses there is also a repeated conviction that these strategies are still required as methods for finding like-minded fans or signal-boosting critique or pushback to fandom juggernauts that are inevitably focussed on white characters. The reservations expressed by respondents further point to an acknowledgment of the difficulties surrounding notions of authenticity, especially with regard to media representations of racial/ethnic/cultural identity.

Apart from campaigns around casting and critiques of specific media texts or intra-fandom practices, non-white fans also engage creatively with texts that do not have space for them. While much has been written on the subversive power of fanworks that engage with gender identities and queer sexualities (particularly in the case of slash fanworks), there is a relative silence around the ways in which fans attempt to interrupt other aspects of hegemonic media texts, particularly those of race. I will now examine some of these creative practices—specifically meta, headcanons and racebending—in order to show how the operations of “sincerity” affect these individual negotiations. These productions often operate at the interstices of what is considered ‘official’ fanwork and therefore are often overlooked.

An Interruption of Regular Programming: Meta, Headcanons and Racebending

One of the more under theorised parts of fan production has been the form of the meta-essay, simply referred to as meta in fandom spaces. This is slightly odd because the meta-essay itself has been a mainstay of fan production for many years, though its status has remained contentious. For instance, the decision to allow it to be hosted on the Archiveofourown.org fanwork archival website in 2013 sparked off a considerable
amount of debate, with some fans claiming that it would “clog up” space that should be for purely fictional productions (“OTW Board Response to Concerns about the Meta Decision” 2013). A notoriously hard category to define, the Organisation of Transformative Works (OTW), in the same post, termed meta to be “nonfictional fanworks in all media” (para 2). The definition therefore also included not just textual productions but also meta-essays in the shape of fan videos etc.

While it is a slippery term, meta has most commonly been used to describe fanworks that comment on issues within a specific media text, fandom or indeed on a cross-fandom phenomenon. These can be in the form of critiques around issues of gender and sexuality, information pertaining to world building, character studies, or even meditations on particular relationships (in the canon or popular in fanworks). Meta, especially that which is produced from a critical standpoint, is also sometimes classified as “wank,” a derogatory term referring to material considered as written to support a grudge or to start a fanwar. Meta pieces can be extremely influential within fandom spaces, often leading to the popularisation of a particular characterisation or aspect of world building, leading to a blurring of any strict fiction/non fiction divide.

This enmeshing of fiction and non-fiction, critique and narrative is also influenced by the digital nature of its circulation and by changes in platform. It is useful here to refer to Paul Booth’s (2009) term “narractiviy” which he defines as “the process by which communal interactive action constructs and develops a coherent narrative database” (373). Booth’s analysis is focussed on the operations of fan-wikis (websites designed to host communal content creation) maintained by fans of television shows, which are more structured platforms than the more scattered meta-essays I reference here. It is important to note, however, that the process whereby fans use these digital forums and their inherent interactive nature to both “parse apart and reform back together an already extant media text’s narrative” can also be seen in the more informal and dispersed circulation of meta-
arguments (2009, 373). What is of particular interest to me is the ways in which non-white fans “parse apart” the media texts and fanworks that erase them, working within and against the various authenticities pertaining to minority racial/cultural/ethnic/religious identities.

I would also like to bring in the notion of the headcanon here, which is often marked off from meta in fan discourse but shares several common features. It is my argument that it too works within this framework of meta-narrativity. Headcanons are, as the term suggests, any interpretations of a character or aspect of world building in a text by an individual fan that does not have a concrete canonical basis. While the practice of coming up with headcanons has been the bedrock of fandom activity—what is fanfiction other than the extension of such imaginings—more recently the practice of sharing them has become more common, mostly due to the Tumblr format which encourages informal, short-form writing that can gain a large audience. Headcanons are usually formed when information is scarce about a particular character and often take the form of imagining a backstory encompassing everything from parental influences to sexual encounters. However, they also do usually draw from some kind of textual evidence like meta-essays and while usually more informal and less concerned with proving a point than the former, also inform creative fanworks, again slipping in between the fiction/non-fiction divide.

As a result of these traits, as well as the fact that they can be written quickly and do not have any particular stylistic requirements, I argue that headcanons are also increasingly a way for fans to enlarge the meta-text of fandom itself, especially in aspects that are under-represented in other forms of fanwork like fanfiction. This is seen particularly in headcanons concerning the possible sexualities and gender identities for characters beyond the cisgender hetero/homo/bisexuality spectrum. One of my respondents, a young Muslim-Canadian fan, recounted the way that headcanons allowed
her to negotiate between her fannishness and her religious identity, two aspects that are very often seen in opposition to each other.

I didn’t, until last year, feel comfortable bringing my religion into any fandom I was a part of. Last year I wrote “Imagine a Muslim Witch” which opened up a whole new avenue for me where I felt safe talking about the intersectionality of race, religion, and fandom. It’s weird, because I’d been following people who’d done that for years, but none of them were Muslims with a strong presence as Muslims.

Then, because a lot of the fandoms I was most involved in had a huge LGBTQ perspective (shipping and representation of Other Than Straight), I felt like I’d be attacked for being involved in anything that was ‘against my religion’ by people who saw me as a hypocrite, a liar, perverted, or weak. It’s still complicated. I ignore the exceedingly rare anon hate I get and decide to like what I like through reblogging and perhaps commenting in the tags where I can easily be ignored. It’s rare that I say anything that's specifically from my perspective as a Muslim WOC, and rare that it’s a post in itself unconnected to a graphic, edit, or series of comments. (Anonymous Respondent 14, Interview with Author, 2015)

This response is striking in several ways. Firstly, the headcanon referred to is a specific imaginative intervention that attempts to negotiate a space for a different set of cultural relations within the canonical anglo-christian traditions of Hogwarts. Despite J.K. Rowlings’ inclusion of some non-white characters in the original text, such as Padma and Parvati Patil, these remain entirely divorced from their individual cultural contexts. In opposition to this, the headcanon is explicitly ‘out-of-place’ in Hogwarts, dwelling on how a Muslim witch might come to an agreement with the house elves about getting food during Ramadan. By showing this to be an individual negotiation—not something that would be considered by the school itself—the headcanon shows itself as self-consciously othered even as it engages with the storyworld, The narrative’s mono-cultural ethos is therefore shown to be explicitly discriminatory. 42 These kinds of imaginative interruptions of normative anglo-centric storyworlds are unusual to find in larger pieces

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41 The original post has now been deleted but it remains available as it was reblogged widely. However, I am not linking to it specifically within my dissertation citations because of the deletion.

42 Ramadan is the ninth month in the Muslim calendar. It is observed as a holy time and dedicated to prayer and fasting.
of fanfiction, perhaps because the kinds of otherness they introduce are not as appealing to fan readerships.

Conversely, the response also shows how other interstices of identity (particularly queer sexualities) might be a source of conflict for such fans. Again Jackson’s idea of “sincerity” seems apt here, as the respondent is continually renegotiating between the scripts that govern her raced and religious identity without either disregarding their potentialities or rejecting their limitations. Headcanons as imaginative ‘safe spaces’ for non-white fans to explore the various interstices of identity therefore merit further investigation. This is an especially vital aspect, as they are also increasingly used to adapt and showcase the practice of racebending, a form of creative pushback that, in my view, displays the intermingling of aspects of both the meta and headcanon to create a new form of creative and critical fanwork.

Racebending has a complex history, both within and outside fandom. Commenting on this practice, Sarah N. Gaston and Robin Anne Reid (2012) refer to Mica Pollack’s (2004) formulation of it as a “a strategy of questioning the validity of race categories to describe human diversity even while keeping race categories strategically available for the analysis of local and national racial inequalities” (2.3). Within fandom, they observe that it refers to a casting choice wherein a role with a particular racial identity (or ethnicity) ascribed to it is given to a performer not of that race/ethnicity without changing the actual script, or when a role’s race/ethnicity is changed (reflected in scripting details) to match that of a chosen actor. For Gaston and Reid, although this use of racebending may refer to a situation in which an actor of colour performs an originally white character, it also, “has a more negative connotation wherein a character of color—indeed, often an actual person—has their race/ethnicity changed, and then that character/role is portrayed by a white actor.” (2.3)
While it is certainly possible for the term to be used both ways, an observation of fandom practice, following the establishment of Racebending.com in particular, seems to have shifted the term to the former definition, not just referring to official casting decisions but also the practice whereby fans come up with dream-casts, or, in the case of texts already in filmic form, re-casts so as to make them more diverse. A similar practice (often intersecting) is genderbending, that is, casting that puts more women into popular texts (L. Baker 2016). While genderbending is a very popular practice within fanfiction, racebending is more common in visual media like fanart, and more particularly to the Tumblr platform, photosets and gif-sets. Gif-sets are made up of file types called gifs (graphic interchange format) that allow for a few seconds of video footage to be looped indefinitely. This allows for a new style of narrative to be deployed in which fans ‘poach’ footage from various sources to build stories. These can be in the form of credit montages that ‘introduce’ various characters in their reimagined forms or can contain exposition about the world building of a particular reimagined universe in the form of a gif-fic. Commenting on their use, Nistasha Perez (2013) observes that the gif-fic is a form of fanwork that usually contains a symmetrical number of gifs so as to maximise the tumblr format. She notes that, “The number is enough to tell snippets of the story… With a limited number of gifs, exposition and set up are often set explained in an attached author’s note or left to the reader’s imaginations” (152).

This deliberate interruption and reformulation of what specific characters are supposed to look like is a very powerful tool used to undercut the default reading process whereby a character is assumed to be white, even in the face of considerable textual evidence to the contrary. This is only reinforced when the descriptions of a character are more ambiguous. For instance, when the first film of the Hunger Games trilogy (adapted from Suzzane Collins’ book series of the same name) was filmed in 2012 and Amandla Stenberg was cast as the character of Rue, the reaction of some fans followed this same
logic of having ‘assumed’ whiteness. These fans unleashed a barrage of tweets following their first viewing of the film that were shockingly vitriolic in terms of their racism. A repeated refrain was the “unbelievable” fact that an “innocent” young girl (as Rue is described in the text) could be played by a Black actress (Holmes 2012). In actual fact, Rue’s description in the book suggests that she is unambiguously raced as non-white, which shows how powerfully the assumption of whiteness in popular cultural texts operates. This example also shows, once again, how the assumed subversiveness of fan spaces (even media fan spaces) must never be left un-interrogated. The Hunger Games is, after all, a text that is led by a woman character (also somewhat whitewashed) and its narrative foregrounds resistance to an oppressive social order. It could be assumed, therefore, that its fans would be welcoming of more diversity in the supporting cast that would only build on the text’s clear metaphors dealing with institutionalised and racialised injustice (Pharr et al. 2012; Heit 2015). The fact that this did not happen, and that the appearance of Rue on screen caused such a degree of backlash, shows how deeply issues of race, especially Blackness, still mediate such spaces.

It is in this context that I posit that the practice of racebending, in which characters (both those ambiguously described in textual form as well those who are canonically white) are deliberately rendered by fans in full and varying colour, becomes a political act of resistance and a ‘talking back’ to powerful discourses that coercively dictate what kinds of narratives in Western popular cultural texts are allowable for non-white characters. While fan practices that inject queer sexualities into ostensibly straight texts have been central to examinations of media fan spaces from the inception of fan studies, there has been a ringing silence around other resistant practices. It should also be noted

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43 As an additional note on the text, the lead character of the series, Katniss Everdeen, was ambiguously described in the text as having “olive” skin. This prompted charges of whitewashing when the role was given to the white American actress, Jenifer Lawrence. Indeed Racebending.com was also active in this instance, writing to the production house Lionsgate detailing their concerns (Seltzer 2011).
that racebending, in most cases, also takes into account other interstices of identity, including queer sexualities that are often erased in the most popular white-character centric pairings. I will now expand on this practice through the curious case of the *Harry Potter* fandom, and in particular the character of Newt Scamander.

**The Curious Case of Newt Scamander**

It is well documented that the *Harry Potter* franchise spawned one of the most widespread and powerful media fan communities on the Internet (S. Brown 2007; Tosenberger 2008a; Schwabach 2009; Black and Steinkuehler 2009). Indeed these communities are credited with shaping the way that online media fandom functions in foundational ways as a whole generation of fans came of age while negotiating their online identities. *Harry Potter* fans continue to argue over plot points and produce fanwork on newer platforms, thus keeping the fandom very much alive.

One of the issues that has continued to concern fans is the lack of racial diversity in the books and associated movies of the franchise. While J.K. Rowling’s use of “blood purity” as a metaphor for racism is clear, it is disassociated from real world racial power dynamics through the casting of white actors (Horne 2010). This has also been questioned by fans themselves, especially with regard to the replacement of Jennifer Smith (a Black actress) who initially played the character of Lavender Brown, with Jessie Cave (a white actress) at the same time the character was given an extended role (Velazquez 2013). In the realm of fanwork, there has also been a small but sustained popularisation of racebending the main characters of the books, particularly that of Hermione Granger.\(^44\) Two examples of such fanart are seen below.

\(^{44}\) These take inspiration from the fact that Hermione is never explicitly described as white in the books, with her defining features being her teeth and her untameable, frizzy hair.
(Figure 2.1: Racebent Hermione Fanart 1 by Bactii, Tumblr 2015)

(Figure 2.2: Racebent Hermione Fanart 2 by Debellle39, Tumblr 2014)
Writing about the phenomenon Alanna Bennet, a biracial fan, notes that,

As a biracial girl growing up in a very white city, I found myself especially attaching to the allegory of *Harry Potter*’s blood politics. In middle school, when I was confronting that there were people out there who’d call me “n****r,” I thought back to Hermione being called “mudblood” and harassed by teacher and students alike. I related to her deeply, but like with so much of what I watched and read, I couldn’t see myself in Hermione […] In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, Hermione is introduced with a description of her bushy brown hair and her large teeth. There’s nothing there to indicate she didn’t look just like me, yet I always pictured a white face under that bushy head. I always pictured her not-me.  

She recalls that this experience only changed when she was introduced to racebent versions of Hermione. It was then that she finally found, “For the first time, I was seeing Hermione’s subtext brought out into text… It was beautiful, it made sense” (para 18-19). It seems clear in these engagements that what fans are expressing is their approximations of a non-white Hermione. This is clearly not a process of authentication because there is no material reality to authenticate their headcanons against. Rather they are motivated by a *sincerity* that the magical universe they invest heavily in *should* be a diverse one. As Jackson (2005) underlines, “sincerity privileges intent” (17), and in this case the intent is not sourced from Rowling’s rather circumscribed worldview, but rather the intent of fan imaginings that refuse to accept a canonical authenticity that leaves them out completely.

Similarly, when *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, the newest filmic iteration of the franchise was announced in 2013, it was greeted with great excitement. As Rowling was deeply involved in the project, unlike her limited participation in the filming of the original *Harry Potter* movies, some fans thought that this might mean that

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45 The recent casting of Noma Dumezweni, a Black actress, to play the role of Hermione in the play *Harry Potter and The Cursed Child* (touted as the eighth part of the *Harry Potter* saga) has prompted some backlash but also saw Rowling maintain that Hermione’s racial identity was never specified in canon (Hooton 2015). Despite Rowling’s willingness to put her weight behind the subversive casting, it is quite clear that the character was originally written as white and Rowling certainly never commented on the casting of Emma Watson to play the role in the filmic versions. However, the incident does point to the ways in which racebending is being practiced both within and outside fandom spaces.
a more diverse cast of characters could be in the offing. The film project was to star the character of Newt Scamander, a magical biologist who is a wholly new character and so theoretically open to any interpretation with regard to his race, sexuality etc. The announcement of the project led to a frenzy of speculation in the mainstream press regarding the casting of the character. It is interesting to note that it was predominately white male characters linked to the role, including Nicholas Hoult, Tom Hiddleston and Benedict Cumberbatch (A. Sims 2013; Erlikh 2013).

Within fandom spaces, in September 2013 Racebending.com issued a call for “Headcanons” for Newt that would pre-emptively imagine the character as non-white.

Dear fandom that is more artistically talented than me, please make .gif sets of Newt Scamander, a recent Hufflepuff graduate and black Brit from the Ministry of Magic Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. He’s assigned across the pond to New York to investigate a case of magical sewer alligators and gets brought into the fold of the Harlem Renaissance movement.

JK Rowling: I dare you to demand that WB cast an actor of color for Newt Scamander. (“Headcanon Newt Scamander,” Tumblr 2013)

The call was answered by numerous fanartists and gifset makers. One example:

(Figure 2.3: Nathan Stewart-Jarrett as Newt Scamander by alterocentrist, Tumblr 2013)
This post was one of the first and was reblogged with additional commentary as other fans jumped at the chance to craft mini narratives about what a story about a non-white wizard suddenly thrust into the U.S.A of the 1920s might encompass.

Somehow his hair is perfect for an adventurous, nerdy wizard, chasing magical creatures through the back alleys of New York, wearing a weird mix of Muggle clothing and wizard robes in a half-assed attempt to blend in. “Trust me, I’m an expert!” he says, chasing a chimera down the sewers, wielding a knobby stick. (meariver, Tumblr 2013)

This communal layering of fanart with commentary-narrative has long been observed in media fan communities but in a Tumblr format has the potential to be shared much more easily. This operationalisation of fan practices so far seen as rather neutral and personal—the very idea of headcanon seems to imply a particularity of a single imagination—into a potential tool for interrupting normative interpretive paradigms within fandom spaces that reinforce white privilege is thus potentially an extremely powerful political act.

A further buttressing of canonical material in support of a non-white Newt Scamander was discovered in a mention in Rowling’s additional short snippets that she published to the fan site Pottermore.com in 2014. In a newspaper report, written by journalist Rita Skeeter, Newt’s grandson, Rolf Scamander is described as “swarthy” (“Dumbledore’s Army Reunites” 2014). This new information was eagerly seized upon and prompted a series of meta-essays on the potential implications of that term. One such meditation, backed with citations, pointed out that the word’s etymology indicated a dark-skinned individual and that it had been used in English literature as racially coded. The fan also analysed the text as written by Rita Skeeter, an unsavoury individual who did not comment on any other character’s physical appearance.
Taking into account this evidence, the post concluded,

By having Rita Skeeter unnecessarily mention Rolf’s skin color using a semi-pejorative term, Rita’s established persona as a skeevy, exploitative journalist adds weight to the argument that the description of Rolf is racially coded […] TL;DR: Rita Skeeter is an exploitative journalist who isn’t above using outdated language to link a person’s skin color to his character and Rolf Scamander is definitely a POC and so is Newt Scamander (because if Rolf is canonically POC then why wouldn’t you take the opportunity to have Newt Scamander be a POC as well and cast Nathan Stewart-Jarrett in Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them?). (singelisilverslippers, Tumblr 2014)

Thus the intermingling of meta-essays and headcanons can be seen in support of a racebent characterisation that not only argues for a further diversity in potential casting decisions but pre-emptively ‘makes space’ for such characters in fantasy narratives like the Harry Potter universe by drawing support from an (inhospitable) canon. It must be said that these fanworks were being created with the knowledge that in all likelihood the role would still be given to a white actor. In fact, I would argue that this almost-certainty gave these fans more urgency in showing how their claim to the canon was as legitimate as the more mainstream websites who continued to include only white actors in speculated line-ups for the cast.

Once in circulation, these visually arresting pieces of fanart, gifsets and gif-fics provided a powerful alternative to those fans who might not have had thought about these aspects of the text, building support behind the idea. By doing so they were also laying the groundwork for potential criticism of the official casting choice. When Eddie Redmayne was eventually announced as Newt Scamander in November 2015, there was an immediate and significant pushback against yet another all-white cast. So much so that both the executive producer of the movie, David Heyman, and Rowling had to respond to the criticism. They did so disappointingly, Heyman claiming that the movie would include non-white characters in an “organic way”, which most probably indicates they
will be background characters, and Rowling issuing vague assurances that there would be non-white characters at some point in the proposed three part series (Hibberd 2015). This has led to further disappointment amongst fans who had, for perhaps the first time, been able to imagine a magical universe that included them. As one respondent put it,

It started very innocuously—but as I spent more time in fandom, I realised there were many ways in which characters were being raced, even if the canon text didn’t see them that way. That was a wonderful moment—somehow, I’d never really considered racebending, even though postcolonialism has made a huge impact on my life—so racebending was something I learnt in fandom. (hena, Interview with Author 2015)

There are multiple ways of engaging theoretically with these creative practices but as pointed out by the respondent above, the synergy in these acts of fandom praxis indicates a return to my earlier framing of these fandom spaces as postcolonial cybercultural arenas. These acts of ‘laying claim’ to canonical texts that fashion restrictive narrative universes is, in my opinion distinctly contrapuntal, drawing on Said’s conceptualisation of the term. In Culture and Imperialism (1993) Said proposed the idea of “contrapuntal reading” in response to criticism that his theorisations around the operations of imperialism foreclosed any possibility of resistance. This idea was drawn from Western classical music in which, according to Said, the counterpoint section allowed for various themes to play off one another with only provisional priority being given to any one in turn. A contrapuntal reading is one that is engaged in uncovering the “submerged but crucial presence of empire in canonical texts” (93, Said quoted in Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 1999). For Said, in “practical terms…the point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending out reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded” (1993, 66-7).

As Geeta Chowdhry points out,
It is possible that Said’s elaborations on contrapuntal reading could be interpreted by some as a plea for an incipient liberal or postmodern plurality in which multiple voices jostle for space, and no voice is privileged. Such an interpretation of contrapuntality would be missing the point. Said’s plea for a contrapuntal reading is not to valorise plurality, rather it is a plea for ‘worlding’ the texts, institutions and practices, for historicising them, for interrogating their sociality and materiality, for paying attention to the hierarchies and the power-knowledge nexus embedded in them, and for recuperating a ‘non-coercive and nondominating knowledge.’ (Chowdhry 2007, 105)

Contrapuntal reading is then theorised as an act of (re)reading, of making space for narratives and subjectivities that have no room in canonical texts specifically around lines of historical ‘fact.’ However, this is not to frame it as uncomplicatedly resistant either as the lines of interpretation must take into account both processes—of imperialism and decolonisation—and register the continual interplay between both in texts produced in contemporary neoliberal conditions.

Racebending, I therefore argue, is contrapuntal in that it extends the meta-text of fandom both in terms of the canonical texts that force out the possibility of a non-white Newt Scamander entirely, as well as dominant fandom practices that reinforce those exclusions. Further, the Tumblr format where these posts are hosted allows for the possibility of their wide circulation, with individual fans adding on further meta-texts leading to a polyphonic engagement with the original critique. By inviting/allowing for multiple versions of what a “black Brit wizard” might look like these posts also attempt to engage with the same authenticity/sincerity dynamic that I have already discussed in some detail.

The process of historicisation is crucial here as well. To refer back to Heyman’s defence of the casting of an all-white group of actors for the film, he argued that this casting was based on “historical accuracy” as the time period of the movie (New York in the 1920’s) was one of racial segregation. This is also a well-worn strategy of those who
wish to defend the overwhelming whiteness of Hollywood productions. Ironically, these claims are based on a violent and systematic erasure of non-white peoples from histories where they were very much present. These erasures are affected firstly on an institutional level, with educational curriculums in the U.S.A. glossing over the presence and contributions of marginalised individuals (Jacobs 2006; Leahey 2010; T. Taylor and Guyver 2012). The effects of these erasures are then compounded by Hollywood’s whitewashing of these narratives in the popular cultural sphere (Toplin 1996; Vera and Gordon 2003). In the case of Heyman’s comments, they fall flat on two fronts—not only was 1920’s New York historically diverse and multicultural, with segregation affecting some arenas but not others, the very idea of insisting on historical accuracy in a film that will also deal with mythical creatures like unicorns is rather suspect (Gatewood 1990; Frazier and Margai 2010).

This clash, between competing and legitimised histories, is also seen in Rowling’s (2016) series of expansion pieces about the magical universe of *Harry Potter* entitled *History of Magic in North America*, that are set in the U.S.A. In this case historical accuracy is clearly not a concern as Rowling has appropriated many concepts from Native American cultural history without paying attention or respect to how this mythologises and distorts living cultures. As Dr. Adrienne K, a Native-American scholar-blogger, points out, this has extremely harmful effects.

But we’re not magical creatures, we’re contemporary peoples who are still here, and still practice our spiritual traditions, traditions that are not akin to a completely imaginary wizarding world (as badass as that wizarding world is). In a fact I quote often on this blog, it wasn’t until 1978 that we as Native peoples were even legally allowed to practice our religious beliefs or possess sacred objects like eagle feathers. Up until that point, there was a coordinated effort through assimilation policies, missionary systems, and cultural genocide to stamp out these traditions, and with them, our existence as Indigenous peoples. We’ve fought and worked incredibly hard to maintain these practices and pass them on.

So I get worried thinking about the message it sends to have “indigenous magic” suddenly be associated with the *Harry Potter* brand and world. Because the other
piece I deal with on this blog is the constant commodification of our spiritual practices too. There is an entire industry of plastic shamans selling ceremonies, or places like Urban Outfitters selling “smudge kits” and fake eagle feathers. As someone who owns a genuine time-turner, I know that marketing around Harry Potter is a billion dollar enterprise, and so I get nervous thinking about the marketing piece. American fans are going to be super stoked at the existence of a wizarding school on this side of the pond, and I’m sure will want to snatch up anything related to it—which I really hope doesn’t include Native-inspired anything. (2015, para 7-8)

I have quoted this response at length because it points to the very real imperialising power of popular cultural narratives as they are being engaged with in the contemporary moment, which have effects on individuals both within and outside geographical nodes of imperial power through the operations of neoliberal capitalism. As I have continued to argue, these effects are being seen within fandom communities—Dr Adrienne identifies herself first and foremost as a Potter fan in the above post—and therefore practices like racebending become even more critical to how fans are engaging with these hegemonic discourses, interrupting such whitewashed and appropriative reimaginings of history and popular narrative through their interventions.

However, it must be pointed out that racebending is also a fraught enterprise because its oppositional stance often provokes critique from participants in larger fandom spaces who are content to embrace the ‘metaphors’ of racism and extend them unproblematically in their own fanworks without engaging in a consideration of the real world discrimination they parallel and reflect. Some fans contend that boosting such posts have, in some cases, become a way of fandom to engage with the need for diversity in fanworks in a surface fashion without truly engaging with the characters of colour who are already present in the narratives in any concrete manner. To refer back once again to the The Force Awakens controversy that I have used as a cornerstone of my argument throughout this thesis, the popularity of racebending must be seen as happening in the same space as the almost inevitable sidelining of characters of colour regardless of their
prominence in the source texts. I do not wish to diminish the power of racebending as a practice but it must not be seen as functioning as some kind of proof of the progressiveness of media fandom spaces in the light of other microagressions faced by non-white fans that I will examine in more detail in the next chapter.

Lastly, the colourism that can be seen in fan-casting practices, where lighter-skinned actors are often seen as more popular and attractive, should also be kept in mind when examining these patterns within white-centric fan spaces. The operation of colourism and anti-blackness within broadly defined non-white communities, located both inside the U.S.A and other multicultural societies, operates in diverse and complex ways intersecting with the axes of gender and sexuality as well. These intra-community lines of discrimination are also enmeshed in the workings of neo-colonialism across South Asian countries like India and African nations like Kenya which support booming industries around skin lightening products (Banks 1999; Hunter 2007; Peregrino et al. 2011; Del Giudice and Yves 2002; Belk et al 2008; Glenn 2008)

**Conclusion**

It has been my aim through this analysis to trace the multiple strategies that non-white fans employ in order to engage in fannish spaces that are not always friendly to them or their concerns. This is not to treat these communities or individuals as a monolith but rather to try and tease out some common threads from both my respondent data as well as larger trends being observed in fannish spaces. My analysis has focussed on the more successful of the interventions of non-white fans in fannish spaces but it must be underlined that these efforts remain circumscribed by the overwhelming focus on white characters as the subject of fanworks, particularly fanfiction. Media fandom remains an inhospitable space for non-white characters, which inevitably get sidelined and erased
even on the rare occasions that they have significant roles in canonical texts. Fans who would like better representation, or push back against the dominant view that media fandom spaces are subversive and liberatory by default because of their willingness to explore queer sexualities inevitably face a backlash or are told continually to ‘write it themselves.’ My respondents pointed out the alienation that such statements effected, framing the exploration of white characters as the default or something ‘natural’ and putting the burden of writing all other characters onto fans who marked themselves off in some way. The fact that this alienation is described as being productive of a loneliness (the seeming antithesis of what fandom participation is imagined to be) also points to the difference in experiences that are often glossed over in affirmative accounts of fannish activity.

In my next chapter I turn to an analysis of the structure and functioning of fanwork communities, drawing from their historical theorisations as communitarian spaces that are self-reflexive and responsive to intertextual exchanges. I will trace how a consideration of racial identity effects these theorisations and develop my own conceptual framing of the “fandom algorithm” as one way of analysing these operations. My central argument remains that contemporary theorisations about how media fandom communities work and produce fanfiction are fundamentally stymied due to their failure to address whiteness as a racialised identity. These approaches then, in effect, neutralise the whiteness of the texts they examine and therefore mark any considerations of the operation of racial identity as always already in an ‘othered’ space.
Chapter 4
Recalibration Necessary, Mr. Spock:
Race and the Dynamics of Media Fandom

Chapter Summary:

So far I have considered the ways in which a postcolonial cybercultural framework facilitates more flexible and inclusive analyses about media fandom participants. In this chapter I will focus explicitly on the place of racial identity in contemporary theorisations around the workings of fan communities, particularly how it ‘disturbs’ progressive orientations. Much of the theorisation around the subversiveness of these spaces has revolved around certain ‘truisms’ concerning their communitarian ethos, their liberal politics and their resistant fanworks as produced by ‘women.’ I wish to highlight that these theorisations have so far failed to engage with axes of identity apart from gender and sexuality. Since much of this theorisation has concerned the genre of slash fanfiction (writing that pairs two cisgender male characters) I will be considering this aspect in some detail. However, since I maintain that fan interactions cut across such genres I will position this critique in that context, also considering the workings of race in het (pairing cisgender male and female characters) and femslash (pairing two cisgender female characters) spaces.

I will here expand on my repeated contention—that whiteness is a structuring force in media fandom interactions—by examining what I term to be ‘fandom algorithms.’ By this neologism I gesture to the apparatuses of fandom—both in terms of communitarian etiquettes and technical structures such as tagging and archiving—that are considered to be neutral and supportive to all characters and fans equally. In this formulation, the problems that have historically been faced by non-white fans in these spaces are seen to be reflective of larger societal trends that fandom spaces merely mirror. I draw from Lisa Nakamura’s (2013) conceptualisation of “glitch racism” to expand on these ideas. I argue that to see these algorithms as structured by whiteness is to reframe their workings as non-neutral, and so interrupt the framing of racial identity in fandom spaces as something additional to existing models rather than constitutive of them.
In this chapter, I will examine how race and racial identity have figured (or failed to figure) in broad-based theoretical considerations of how media fan communities function. In doing so I wish to highlight, following Wanzo’s (2015) perceptive intervention, that these considerations have not just failed to take account of the effect of racial identity due to oversight or lack of awareness. In fact, I posit that these formulations have had to purposely ‘set aside’ race as an influencing factor so that they may continue to remain stable. In this formulation, as I have argued before, racial identity becomes an additional element that may be overlooked or footnoted, an exception to the rule in the otherwise progressive liberal spaces of fandom. In order to disrupt this assumption, I have already argued in chapter one that non-white fans have always been present in these spaces, even as recorded histories have had no place for them. In chapter two and three I have built my case for contemporary media fandom communities to be seen as an example of a postcolonial cyberspace. In this chapter I will investigate how both the presence and the actions of such fans has always discomfited foundational ideas about media fandom, which include—fandom as an interpretive community, the structuring of intra-community conflict, the relationship of fanwork relationships to canon and the function of fanwriting in narrative universes. I will begin by considering how racial identity has been theorised to operate in these contexts up to the present moment.

Race in Fandom Studies Today

The place of racial identity in fandom studies at the contemporary moment is at once the topic of considerable discussion and considerable silence. At this point I want to return to the issues that I stressed in my introduction to this dissertation, regarding the ways in which the role of whiteness as a structuring force in media fandom, as it is most commonly conceived of today, is repeatedly footnoted in favour of the ‘more relevant’
issues of gender and sexuality. But that is not to say that the importance of studying racial identity as an influencing factor in these communities has not been acknowledged. As I have observed, this absence was noted as early as Fiske’s (1992) highly influential study of fans and their affective economies and continues to be registered as troubling in overviews, anthologies, and keynotes. In their survey of the field nearly twenty years later, Kristina Busse and Jonathan Gray (2011) still must urge:

Fan studies has proven a powerful lens through which we can examine the practices of power through media transmission and reception in the West, so let us use fan studies to examine similar processes internationally. Let us also use fan studies to examine minority racial and ethnic communities within the West. If the middleclass white American posting comments about an American network drama on Television without Pity is rapidly becoming the hegemonically normative fan in some accounts of fandom, a global and racially sensitive fan studies could further help to destabilize this odd norm, returning fan studies’ focus to issues of power.46

As I have noted in chapter two, this call has been partly answered in the growing focus on transnational fandoms where the source text is non-Western and often in languages other than English (Punathambekar 2007; McLelland 2009; Chin and Morimoto 2013; Lyan and Levkowitz 2015; Madrid-Morales and Lovric 2015; Kustritz 2015). This is very valuable work, but such work once again displaces the workings of racial identity as the most relevant and ‘obvious’ to something other than traditional media fandom, which can continue to tread largely familiar theoretical pathways. Because of their status as minorities within Western media fandoms, non-white fans are then seen to interrupt normative operations of such structures only in specific contexts when they

46 ‘Television Without Pity’ began in the late-90’s, originally focusing on the U.S.A.-based show Dawson’s Creek (1998-2003). It was renamed as ‘Mighty Big TV,’ when its scope expanded—the same site that was dismissed by Brown (2000) as insignificant to women’s online identities, that I referenced in chapter one. As a popular blogging site that focused on sarcastic reviews of popular U.S.A.-based television shows (though this was sometimes expanded) it also encouraged fans to participate in related forums. Its style was hugely influential in the way television shows are now covered online and its closure in 2014 was commented on by several large media commentary sites (Lyons 2014; J. Reid 2014).
make themselves visible. What I mean by this assertion is that race is only seen to be a relevant factor for theorisations about Western fandom communities when it is seen to be specifically interpolated by the presence of a ‘significant’ character or issue that foregrounds explicitly the operations of non-white racial identity. In this construction, because whiteness is not considered a racialised identity with specific effects, its operations on fandom structures can be presented as normative.

I would like to tease this out further with an example of how such theoretical whitewashing as I term it, proceeds. For instance, in such an atmosphere, scholars who are interested in the fandom around the critically acclaimed and cult hit television show Hannibal (2012-2015) are free to concentrate their analysis on its operationalisation of ‘universal’ tropes regarding horror, monstrosity, and cannibalism, without needing to acknowledge the fact of their deep racialisation. The show’s acclaimed manipulation of extremely charged queer subtext between the focal characters of Hannibal Lecter (Mads Mikkelsen) and Will Graham (Hugh Dancy) has been reflected in a devoted base of fanwriters who have used this scaffolding to generate a great deal of fanfiction that also explore the taboo intermingling of pathology, murder, and desire.

This has understandably been generative of considerably scholarly interest around the same themes prompting a standalone conference and at least one edited collection in production. What has not been registered so far in this interest is any acknowledgment of the fact that Hannibal’s whiteness is at the heart of the narrative’s ability to aestheticise the aforementioned taboos. So far, any discussion of race in Hannibal has revolved around the position and role of tertiary non-white characters within the narrative—such as Beverly Katz (Hetienne Park) and Jack Crawford (Laurence Fishburne)—instead of considering the whiteness that is necessary for the entire conceit of the show, and further, the fandom, to function in the first place (mayatalksfemedia, Tumblr 2014; Park 2014).
What I wish to highlight here is that in examining the fanwork around *Hannibal* as grounded in the exploration of ‘universal’ horror tropes, these discussions inevitably elide the fact that these tropes very specifically white, their subversiveness only *evident* under such conditions. To frame my argument in slightly different terms, *Hannibal* fandom’s subversiveness depends on the ways in which white crime and white evil are considered almost inherently worthy of exploration and nuance in a way that is simply not available for non-white characters in similar moulds. To put it bluntly, Black and Brown cannibalism cannot be aestheticised tropes that may be explored in exquisitely detailed cinematography because they have already been operationalized against entire populations, rendering them *monstrous* to significantly different ends; namely imperialism and conquest (Berglund 1999; Martel 2006; Brantlinger 2011; Forbes 2011). That is not to say that these tropes and their attractiveness are not still a worthy object of study, but to allow their whiteness to operate without being named as such allows race to be considered as an additional and incidental layer to any analysis, rather than a factor at its very core.

My reason for dwelling on this aspect in some detail is to underline the contribution of this theoretical structuring to the continually deferred place of racial identity in the field of fan studies as a disciplinary field. This is not something unique to fandom studies of course, as the effects of positioning whiteness as the (unsaid) default has also haunted feminism and queer studies (Carby 1996; E. P. Johnson 2001; Ford 2010; Thomlison 2012). Perhaps it is no coincidence then that the field, which draws much of its theoretical strength from both of these disciplines, is similarly discomfited. However, as fan studies makes efforts to fill in this gap, it is also necessary to examine what biased structures have informed its explorations of issues of power, subversion, and related axes of interpretation. This is vital so as not to reinscribe their operations and once again relegate
racial identity as something to be included in special issues or individual sections in anthologies, allowing the rest of the field to remain unaffected.

So far, there has been no sustained or book-length consideration of the role of racial identity in media fandom spaces, but I would like to consider the shorter interventions that have brought attention to this gap. I have already noted the power of Wanzo’s (2015) critique of the field, which points to several ways in which the specific relationships that African American audiences have had with popular media have much to contribute to current models of fan studies. The gap in genealogy that Wanzo points to is also seen in the differentiation between the field of television studies, which has seen some considerations of specific viewership demographics, such as Black audiences in edited collections such as Watching While Black (Smith-Shomade 2013), and the field of media fan studies which conceives of the individual fan in a more directly participatory model. Additionally, while scholars have repeatedly examined the politics of racial identity in the practices of viewing and reading popular media, these studies have once again not located these individuals as participatory fans (Bobo 1995; hooks 1996; Rodríguez 2003; H. Gray 2004; H. Gray 2005). Recently, there has been some development in this area with Kirsten Warner’s (2014; 2015a; 2015b) studies on Black women fan/audiences in the context of reality television as well as shows such as the Shonda Rimes-produced Scandal (2014–present). Warner does not concentrate on participatory activities like the creation of fanworks, but her observations concerning the strategies Black women audiences employ while articulating their affect and pleasure in these texts are nonetheless crucial interventions in the ways these are more broadly conceived.

When the specific field of media fandom studies is considered, as I have noted before, the studies on non-white fandom are mostly structured as discrete categories concerned with non-U.S.A/U.K based media texts such as the Bollywood, Anime and Korean Pop (K-Pop) industries (Madrid-Morales and Lovric 2015; Newitz 1994;
Punathambekar 2007). I have already discussed the intersections of these concerns with formulations of fandom activism in chapter three, but would like to register studies such as Lopez (2012) here as well. Once again, broader theorisations about the functioning of fandom activism were only nuanced with a discussion of racial identity when it was explicitly foregrounded by the text, in this case, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. This was also seen in the special issue on Race and Ethnicity in Fandom (2011) of the journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* (one of the leading journals in the field). The issue contained only one essay, by Mel Stanfill (2011), which considered the role of racial identity in Western media fandom spaces.

Within the essay, Stanfill comments on the racial dynamics of media fandom communities, in particular the ways which fan stereotypes around excessive attachment and feminisation can lead to a loss of societal power for white male fans (stemming from infamous sketches like “Get a Life” which aired in 1986 on the U.S.A. comedy show Friday Night Live, in which William Shatner ridiculed *Star Trek* fans). For Stanfill this loss of power results from these fans “misdo[ing] whiteness,” that is, performing white male heterosexuality incorrectly by aligning themselves to distinctly non-normative modes of consuming popular culture. In this context, Stanfill argues, media fandom activities are then even more charged for white women and fans of colour who are further removed from the ideal positioning—masculinised heteronormativity—that society deems acceptable. In effect, this argument positions the fan itself as a marginalised identity.

As I have stated earlier, my discomfort with this formulation stems from the positioning of the white-fan-as-disempowered in terms of the operations of institutionalised discrimination, which elides their retention of considerable privilege within those structures. For instance, this has led to the almost complete erasure of the position of non-white male fans within the power structures that delineate fandom. How
do charges of feminisation and over-attachment function with regard to stereotypes around Black masculinity (over-aggression) and Asian American masculinity (desexualisation), to name just a few exceptions? While this has been considered in terms of similar gendered and racialised stereotypes around the “geek” and the “nerd” in terms of technocultural access, current fan studies theoretical models leave no room for these “outliers” and whiteness is once again reinscribed as the norm (Eglash 2002).

Robin Anne Reid’s (2012) call for further diversification also underlines the whiteness of fan studies’ genealogy. She notes that in the aftermath of Racefail ’09,

As an aca-fan, I can point to numerous posts, challenges, fiction writing festivals, and carnivals that do anti-racist work. The lack of intersectional scholarship that moves beyond the default “white” fan or, in some cases, “the woman fan” to consider multiple axes of identities in fan studies is clear.” (183)

I would like to discuss this framing in more detail; while I agree that this kind of fanwork exists and is important, it also sums up the difficult position in which non-white fans that do point out the problematic aspects of fandom spaces find themselves. That is, their fanwork is automatically classified as “anti-racist work” which again limits its audience and marks it off as something that is concerned with social justice politics rather than pleasure. This may seem an odd distinction to make, since so much of fandom explicitly declares its progressive politics, but nonetheless, it is one that is raised repeatedly as vocal non-white fans are asked to stop spoiling everyone’s fun with their ‘activism.’ I will take this thread up in more detail when I discuss my respondents’ discussion of the place and meaning of escapism in their fandom experience later on in this chapter. However, I would like to note here that *any* fanwork that focuses on non-white characters is often classified automatically into the category “duty-fic” (to recall once again the anecdote about *The Force Awakens* in my introduction). This has the effect of further reinforcing the idea that the only way these characters could possibly be the
focus of fanwork is in the context of a special interest festival in which individuals take part to feel good about themselves.

I must make mention here of the very recent work by Dominique D. Johnson (2015), who discusses the misogynoir and anti-blackness present in the *The Walking Dead* (2010-present) fandom around the character of Michonne (Danai Gurari). Commenting specifically on the ways in which science fiction fan communities interact with both the archetypes and narratives that non-white characters signify, she notes,

Representationally, we see POC [People of Colour] as stock, archetypal figures whose primary purpose is to either forward the story arcs of white protagonists or as comic relief. This sidelining of POC stories and perspectives can be reflected in SF community practices that emerge as suppressive, oppressive politics. As such, these spaces have routinely been deemed hostile to POC who attempt to participate and engage in the imaginative worldmaking processes that are central to fandom’s informal philosophy of communal creation as a key tenet of SF’s ethos. (266)

In the next section, I wish to expand specifically on the ways in which the “imaginative worldmaking processes” that have been conceived of as central to media fandom productivity are, as Johnson also maintains, far from neutral.

**Glitch Racism: Fandom Algorithms and Racial Identity**

Lisa Nakamura (2013) coined the term “glitch racism” to tackle the question of why racism in online spaces is felt to be endemic to the technological platform itself, leading to strictures such as “never read the comments” on online articles and blog posts. A common framing to explain this phenomenon is that the anonymity and freedom allowed by such platforms encourages people who otherwise lead ‘normal’ lives to express their worst impulses, also known as the “Greater Internet Fuckwad Theory.” In this
postulation, Nakamura points out, racism is seen to be a glitch in the system that otherwise should work to promote greater connectivity. She argues,

Racism is regarded within Internet culture as spam, noise, and trash: as a digital artifact, in the purely technical sense: when we see big blocky pixels in our VR worlds, feature phones, or throttled “streaming” videos that stutter or refuse to stream, we are forcibly reminded of the network’s limits—it’s material.

[...] In other words, everyday online racism is a “glitch” or malfunction of a network designed to broadcast a signal, a signal that is highjacked or polluted by the pirate racist. (para 2)

Nakamura points out that this construction allows Internet users to see the operation of racism in online spaces as something outside their control and indeed as something on the outside of themselves. While Nakamura is discussing the more overt examples of online racism, I find this a very useful construction on which to base my own technosocial neologism—the fandom algorithm.

By using this phrase, I refer to the structures that are seen to order the workings of media fandom, both in terms of communitarian etiquettes and technical strategies that involve fannish digital infrastructure like archiving fanworks and organisational strategies such as tagging. Fandom algorithms are therefore aligned to both the “the imaginative worldmaking processes that are central to fandom’s informal philosophy of communal creation” (266), that Johnson references above, as well as the digital building blocks that are common to many fandom spaces. I have already examined the ways in which these digital environments that are considered to be neutral have affected the ways in which fandom digital histories have been recorded in chapter one and how changes in these platforms in a more dialogic direction have promoted discussion of issues of racial identity in chapters two and three. In this chapter I would like to examine how other digital structures in fandom work to at once foreground and dismiss the uneven treatment of non-white characters.
Much like the theoretical strategies that I have outlined in the previous section, these apparatuses are seen to operate independently and without bias towards any particular individual fan or character. Any racism that in seen to interrupt their workings is then seen in the form of a “glitch,” an interruption of a system that otherwise works smoothly towards promoting the formation of safe spaces, the exchange of material and non-material fannish squee, the pushback against hegemonic canon and the lessening of friction between opposed groups. Another effect of this formulation is to see the roots of these glitches, when they occur, as part of a larger systemic malfunction that fandom participants cannot influence. This allows for troubling patterns of behaviour to be deflected outwards onto flawed popular cultural texts or onto individuals who act in bad faith against fandom etiquettes, allowing the core liberal nature of media fandom spaces to operate without questioning.

To interrupt this process of deflection and deferral Nakmura asks, “What if, in the spirit of media archaeology, we understood online racism not as a glitch but as part of the signal? What if we paid attention to racist comments with the same intensity that we do the rest of the content?” (para 2). In the spirit of these queries, each of the categories I will take up now—fanfiction communities as functioning intertextually, fanwork and the possibilities of subversion, the relationship of fanwork to canon, fandom and the uses of escapism, and the digital organising structures of fandom—contribute to my theoretical framework, as examples of ‘fandom algorithms.’ In the following analysis it will be my goal to pay attention to all the times that racial identity has caused the algorithms of fandom to “glitch.” What do these repeated moments of failure to reach the promised potentialities of media fandom culture with regard to non-white fans and characters tell us about this technosocial environment? It is my argument that they reveal not the interruption of the signal, but the flaws in the signal itself.
Algorithm One: Fanfiction Communities as Intertextual

The foundational texts of media fandom laid the groundwork for seeing fans and particularly media fans as part of interpretive communities that worked to expand a restrictive canon in various ways, most notably in the form of slash fanfiction (Russ 1985; Lamb and Veith 1986; Bacon-Smith 1992; Penley 1992). Jenkins’ (1992) formulation was perhaps the most influential with his location of such fans in a fundamentally disempowered position with regard to the producers of such texts and his emphasis on the communitarian aspect of such interventions. He noted,

Fan culture finds that utopian dimension within popular culture a site for constructing an alternative culture. Its society is responsive to the needs that draw its members to commercial entertainment, most especially the desire for affiliation, friendship, community. (282)

This formulation has been questioned since then, most notably by Matt Hills (2002) and Cornel Sandvoss (2005), who point to the importance of also paying attention to the fan as individual, with changing positions and investments in texts. Jenkins has also shifted his focus from more subcultural forms of media fandom to the ways in which such practices are now also seen in more mainstream avenues (Jenkins 2006a; Jenkins 2006b; Jenkins et al 2013). There has also been some interrogation around the concept of anti-fans, who are motivated by an intense dislike for a text so as to diversify models of attachment that privilege love for a source text as a primary motivating factor (J. A. Gray 2005; Alters 2007). Further, the conflicts within fan communities that do organise around Jenkin’s initial ideas of affiliation and friendship have also come under scrutiny, mainly in terms of levels of appropriate attachment and intra-fan policing of behaviour (Larsen and Zubernis 2012b; Stanfill 2013; Busse 2013a; B. Jones 2015). This can be seen in line
with the larger pushback against the first wave of fan studies that Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington (2007) termed the “fandom is beautiful” phase.

However, in terms of fanwork itself, particularly fanfiction, the need for an audience and a community has remained a touchstone, even when conflicts are investigated, as has the impulse to foreground fanfiction as intertextual, in dialogue with both canon and the other fantexts that have been created in relationship to it. I have already traced some of these interactions in my discussion of the role of meta-essay and headcanon within fan spaces in chapter three, but here I would like to expand that consideration outside the specific practice of racebending. Sheenagh Pugh (2005) identifies this intertextuality as key to the analysis of fanfiction, commenting that fanfiction functions within a “complicit audience” who is highly attuned to cues that do not need to be spelt out explicitly. Interestingly, Pugh also identifies the importance of archetypes within fan writing noting that, “The human need for heroes and archetypes does not go away, but their faces change with time, and one avatar takes the place of another” (219). This attraction of fan communities to certain types of characters is something that I will also take up in more detail in a moment.

When Busse and Gray (2011) comment on what makes media fandom communities different from other groupings that have also come under the umbrella of fandom through the mainstreaming of such activities, they also cite this highly communitarian frame as a distinguishing feature.

[… ] all these texts and conversations create a fannish space so that fan texts also tend to be intertextual with the fan community in which they are produced and circulated. In a way, they can be seen to respond to all the other texts, all the interpretations and debates. As the internet in particular allows fans to share their work and communicate with one another easily, creative fans often tend to be part of a community. Thus, fans engage in an emotionally invested negotiation not only with the source text they analyze, criticize, and expand, but also with their fan community and its discourses. (435-36)
This intertextuality is also foregrounded in these analyses to point to the need to see fanfiction and its different iterations in their own specific contexts (Busse and Lothian 2009). This need is partly rooted in an effort to head off, in a sense, the sensationalising of more explicit genres of fanfiction that often then trigger moral panic in the cycles of response-and-defence that I have discussed before. The discourses that circulate in fan communities are indeed a specific context that fanfiction must be placed within, but my contention here is that to characterise these as always shifting, reactive to criticism and uncertain is also to facilitate the elision of which power differentials continue to operate through these shifts. If fandom is an intertextual community, then which texts cause a shift in characterisation and in focus, and produce the most impact within these communities must also be examined.

I will take up the case of the character of Steve Rogers or Captain America in the MCU as an illustrative example. Introduced in Captain America: The First Avenger (2011), he goes through a period of stasis and is reintroduced to the world seventy years later in The Avengers (2012) followed by Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014). He has also appeared in The Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015) and most recently in Captain America: Civil War (2016). His discomfort with the modern world has been the topic of several jokes in these movies, and his initial characterisation in fanfiction was driven by this canonical inference. In these fan-texts Steve Rogers was seen to be discomfited and confused by a variety of things, most notably technology, the presence of out and proud queer individuals, and the position of power that white women and people of colour now occupied in U.S.A. society.

Unsurprisingly, this was not an iteration that many fans of the character agreed with and this prompted highly researched meta-essays that pointed to the ways in which his background and upbringing disrupted these stereotypes. These essays pointed to the diverse societal structure of New York through the 1930’s and 40’s, Rogers’ identity as
physically disabled for much of his life, the probability that he was involved in subcultural queer communities, and the presence of groups that advocated for a wide range of social issues—including the labour union movement—that would also have exercised an effect on him. They also pointed to the fact that he led a desegregated unit in the events of the first *Captain America* film as evidence of his comfort with non-white individuals. The depth of these meta-essays gained a large readership and also had an effect on the kinds of fanfiction narratives surrounding the character (Misra 2014). In fact, the popularisation of these tropes was so successful that it even prompted parody in the Livejournal community failfandomanon, where, as the name implies, various issues in fandom are discussed under conditions of anonymity. In a response to a post that called for “Plots You’re tired of in Fanfic” one anon commentator responded with the following summary.

Steve and Bucky share an apartment. They are poor, so poor. The temperature is mentioned at least once (either too hot or too cold). The fact that they live in Queer Brooklyn and know queerness exists is mentioned. Some extra with an Irish or Italian name or veeeery occasionally a Jewish name is mentioned in passing. No other groups lived in New York in this time. It is a fact. If the person has an accent and just came over and only Steve in all of New York is ever kind to them, even better. If Steve gets beat up trying to defend them from Racists, even better than that. Steve gets beat up in an alley defending at least one marginalized person. Steve is also listed as defending women in bars. Bucky does not work in underpaid alley and bar defense. Bucky works by the docks. Underpaid. But always by the docks. Forever the docks. Brooklyn is 99% docks. Bucky works for Steve. Steve was and/or is sick. Steve is so incredibly good despite his sickness. Bucky cannot take his goodness. They say at least one movie catchphrase: ‘pal’, or ‘to the end of the line,’ but probably ‘punk.’ Punk. Punk. Punk. This is a queer phrase, did you know? Bucky maybe dates a girl or seven; who she is and whether they in fact know anyone else in the world is irrelevant. She is maybe a lesbian anyway which we all saw coming because this is Queer Brooklyn. Steve perhaps pines for Bucky but mostly Steve is Good. Bucky thinks about how he is going to afford the rent with all this Depression and also Steve’s sickness.

Porn. (fail-fandomanon, Livejournal 2014)

This, rather hilarious, deconstruction is illustrative of the kinds of intertextuality that Busse and Gray (2011) also highlight, where trends in characterisation often go through shifts in response to criticism, discussion, and research to become new fandom
staples. As Sulagna Misra (2014) concludes in her overview of this trend, “Seeking out these real figures, sorting out these historical details, and mapping progressive politics lends a special aspect to being part of the Captain America fandom—a better understanding of the past through the tangible connection of Steve Rogers” (para 16). This does not stop in terms of historical research but it also seen in fanfiction that places Rogers in the contemporary moment, as is evident in the next excerpt. For instance, one fanwriter uses the point-of-view of a publicist called Eva (an original character) who is hired for Rogers and comes in with the same assumptions listed above.

Worst case scenario, maybe Steve Rogers had come out of the ice with certain old-timey values intact—your standard-issue racist grandpa, only hot. Still, Eva could do damage control. She’d built her name on it. Her first week at the firm, a congressman had drunkenly crashed his car into a funeral procession for a local war hero, and she’d gotten him out of the news cycle and into rehab so fast, her boss’s head had spun. If Rogers turned out to be religiously intolerant or homophobic or prone to condescending remarks about women, if he needed constant coaching to adjust to the modern world, well, Eva could deal with it from atop her giant pile of money. She would explain Twitter every day if she needed to. (idiopath-fic-smile, Tumblr 2015)

Of course the text goes on to overturn all these assumptions ending up with Eva quitting her job in frustration because Rogers is too radical for the contemporary U.S.A. public to handle. This fits in very well with what is seen as the most progressive aspect of fan communities, namely their transformative and reparative actions. As Gavia Baker-Whitelaw (2014) also notes, “Along with adventure stories and erotica and short fics where Steve figures out how to work the Internet, fans have gone to the trouble of researching WWII-era gay culture and minor New York artists to slot into their fanfics, often forcing modern-era characters to confront their own prejudices” (para 16).

While there is certainly an element in radicalism in interrupting simplistic views of history, I would argue that this trend of rewriting is also indicative of quite a conservative element in fan communities, especially when it is seen in context with what treatment
other characters, especially those that occupy actual real-world marginalised identities, receive. In their choice of Rogers as the focal point through which modern-era characters “confront their own prejudices” as opposed to characters like Sam Wilson or Nick Fury (both African American), fanwriters are then side-stepping some of the most burning issues in contemporary U.S.A. society, such as Black Lives Matter.\footnote{Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a contemporary political organisation in the U.S.A that is engaged in protesting and raising awareness about racial discrimination against African Americans in various societal spheres, most notably with regard to police brutality. The organisation started off in the form of a hashtag on the microblogging site Twitter in 2013, to protest against the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the unprovoked shooting of Trayvon Martin, a Black teenage boy in Florida. It broadened to protest more broadly against police shootings of unarmed Black men in 2014, with the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson and Eric Garner in New York City. It is also important to note that the movement has a significant amount of queer activists involved, which include the founding members—Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza (E. Bradford Sue and Harris 2016; Garza 2016).}

It is perhaps not a surprise then that the most common situation that Rogers is placed to show his progressiveness in fanfiction texts is in his championing of equal rights for queer individuals in the U.S.A. This is not to say that the queer rights movement does not have relevance to non-white communities, but that placing Rogers at the forefront of that conflict allows fanwriters to avoid any intersection of identities that often troubles that movement. For instance, non-white queer activists in the U.S.A. have been very vocal about how the priorities of the queer rights movement has shifted towards the right to marriage through the influence of more wealthy white cisgender gay and lesbian campaigners, as opposed to the problems of police violence, homelessness, and incarceration that affect queer communities of colour disproportionately (Hutchinson 2000; Bérubé 2001; Puar 2007).

When commenting on this phenomenon a respondent remarked that it paralleled the recent movie, Stonewall (2015), that I have mentioned before. In the movie, the historical fact that the famous riots, that many see as the starting point of the contemporary queer rights movement in the U.S.A., were led by trans women of colour is erased in favour of a completely fictional white cisgender gay male character (Barnes...
2015; Ginelle 2015). The movie was rightfully criticised for this erasure, but the director Roland Emmerich, who is gay, was adamant that the only way of getting viewers to identify with the event was to give them an ‘everyman’ point-of-view character, which of course translated primarily to cisgender male whiteness. He also maintained that it was a “white event” (Reynolds 2016).

While fanwriters’ iteration of Rogers’ history is a much more detailed and nuanced leveraging of historical fact and character narrative, their almost exclusive positioning of his character as the only one deeply conscious of social justice issues aligns itself to the same logic. I posit then that the repeated framing of Rogers as disenfranchised and occupying a complicated identity with regard to his queerness, allows fanwriters to critique one aspect of their contemporary social reality while sidelining others that might discomfit them. This strategy has also been remarked on by non-white fans in these spaces who question why it is always Rogers and not Wilson who seems to be exclusively interested in showing his support to these events. They argue that logically it would be the latter character who would be more affected by the endless news cycles about crackdowns on Black activists protesting against police violence and other issues. These fans also draw on canonical evidence to support this characterisation:

Considering Sam Wilson’s extensive comicbook history as a civil rights activist, I’m gonna need more headcanons about him combatting antiblackness, police brutality and microaggressions. Like, please give me long in depth meta about Sam participating in rallies and protests, discussing #BlackLivesMatter in press conferences & raising awareness about the discrimination he and other black LGBT+ members face. Don’t get me wrong: headcanons about Steve participating in social justice are well and good, but I get a little tired that there’s more meta/headcanons/etc. of the white male hero battling racism or leading protests against antiblack police brutality than there is of Sam, who’s a literal hardcore civil rights activist in the comics. (Or that there’s an undeniable undertone that it’s somehow more noble or awesome that the white guy is doing the bare minimum, but that’s for another post) Basically what I’m saying is: More Activist/SJW!Sam Wilson would be nice. (russianspacegeckosexparty, Tumblr 2015)
Another fan takes a more broad-based view of the issue, seeing it as a fandom-wide phenomenon but once again remarking on the centrality of Rogers as a figure onto which all socially progressive issues are projected almost exclusively:

i’ve said this before and i’ll say it again: tumblr has a weird obsession with tossing random fictional characters/historical figures into random contemporary political issues by their ankles and deciding that said character/person would totally be an uber progressive and make the right choices and support their argument with painstaking research and like i get it? to a certain extent? fiction at least has been used as a tool to contextualize political issues for a billion years and whatever, it’s fun to sit around and talk about how Steve Rogers is totally a gay socialist and Bruce Wayne is totally a socialist too and Bucky Barnes is a Jew, and also gay what makes me uncomfortable is that a) tumblr treats these posts as if they’re valid and in-depth political statements even though they’re inevitably more about how great a character/historical figure is than the issue itself, leading to some weird and honestly cringeworthy leaps like, idk, the word feminazi is bad because Steve Rogers thinks its bad as opposed to it just being an awful word? as well as turning every political debate into a fandom squabble and b) an overwhelming amount of character/historical figure tumblr decides to bring up in these scenarios are white dudes! i hate to bring him up for the third time because i luff him but Steve gets put on a pedestal for just about EVERY political issue while Sam Wilson is lucky if he gets like, a scant mention about joining a Black Lives Matter march. (theseerasures, Tumblr 2015)

The contrast in the reception of these two lines of meta-commentary is indicative of the discrepancies in fandom’s focus on social justice issues. While in the case of Rogers there have been multiple, highly detailed, incredibly popular pieces of fanfiction written to buttress and expand on his position as a subversive figure, there has been almost no writing around Sam Wilson that has been as either as prolific or widely acclaimed.

48 My estimation of the popularity of works on the popular archival site AO3, is based on the number of positive votes (kudos) received by them. The MCU fandom is a large one with Steve Rogers (61876 fics) and Tony Stark (50973 fics) emerging as the primary focus characters and the pairings of Steve Rogers/Bucky Barnes (19623 fics) and Steve Rogers/Tony Stark (12754 fics) being the most popular. This data was collected on July 5, 2015. As I will discuss in more detail a little further on in the chapter, the statistics from the site can be complicated by the tagging of characters in work that does not feature them in any detail. Even so, no non-white character appears in the top ten standalone characters or pairings listed on the archive. The pairing of Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson, which makes up the bulk of the writing in which Wilson has a primary role only has 1493 fics listed, outstripped even by the het pairing (generally not as popular on the site) of
Indeed, Wilson is most often marginalised in these narratives, if he is present at all. As has been demonstrated by the glowing accounts of the power of fandom’s research capacity and willingness to dig beneath the surface of presented narratives, this discrepancy cannot be explained by a lack of knowledge about contemporary issues, canonical support or likeability of individual characters.

As I have argued before, if fandom communities are to be seen to be intertextual and reactive, then which texts, and which character revisionings gain traction and have an effect on fanwork also must be examined. Without an intersectional lens it is quite easy to see the translation of the hinted-at elements in Rogers’ character as a subversive piece of reclaiming, but seen in context with the centring of his whiteness it becomes a much more complex act of both upending and reinscribing power hierarchies.

**Algorithm Two: Fanfiction and Ideas of Subversion**

The identification of fanfiction as a resistant form of writing has remained a contested one, nowhere more so than when scholars have concentrated on the genre of slash (which pairs two cisgender male characters together), which has attracted the most attention thus far in fan studies. That is not to say more broad-based theoretical models have not been proposed. In their influential collection, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in The Age of the Internet* (2006), Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson showcased several theories about how fanfiction functions, with a repeated emphasis on its value due to its affiliation with women’s writing practices and its potential to disrupt canonical hierarchies. Abigail Derecho (2006) proposed a reading of fanfiction as “archontic literature” allying it with a “technique used for making social and cultural criticisms”

Steve Rogers and Darcy Lewis, a pairing that is based on no canonical evidence at all considering the characters have never met.
used by “minority groups and women” (61). For Derecho, this writing was subversive regardless of its content because its creators were women and its plenitude meant a constant destabilisation of meaning. She concluded, “Fan fiction is philosophically opposed to hierarchy, property, and the dominance of one variant of a series over another variant. Fan fiction is an ethical practice” (77). Coppa (2006) drew from ideas of theatre to theorise fanfiction’s emphasis on bodies and repetition of plot to show how reiterations of similar actions could still bring pleasure. She also linked the value of such writing to the fact that it was primarily written by women. Catherine Driscoll (2006) commented on the intermingling of romance and pornography within fanfiction, something that I will examine in more detail in my next chapter.

This largely celebratory position has been complicated by scholars since then who have pointed to problematics of ascribing such utopic forms of resistance to fanwriters and readers and caution against as the tendency, as Brownen Thomas (2011) terms it, “to highlight and celebrate only those interpretative abilities that are shared by critic and fan alike” (5). Despite this, there has continued to be visible hierarchy in the kinds of fanfiction that have been taken up for specific study. That is to say, even as scholarly work on fanfiction has diversified in terms of theoretical approaches and texts, most of the discussions regarding the place of subversion within it have continued to take place with reference to slash.

As I will explore in more detail in my next chapter, this has been partially motivated by the seemingly unique disruption of correlations between who the women who were interested in the genre were, and what pairing they were interested in. Following this, further research has been conducted along the lines of both examining the content of such writing and the constitution of the communities producing it. Conclusions about the subversiveness of the content, for instance, has proceeded along the lines of it sometimes reinforcing heteronormative structures, both in terms of narrative tropes that encourage
traditional iterations of nuclear-family domesticity as well as the erasure of women characters (Hunting 2012; Scodari 2003; Scodari 2012).

Some scholars have also questioned how fanfiction that experiments with different body structures like “M-preg” (male pregnancy) both disrupts and reinscribes essentialist notions (Åström 2010). Slash fanfiction has also had a long history of negotiation with biological imperatives, moving from tropes like “sex pollen,” in which individual consent is highly compromised for short periods of time, to the most recent evolution of these ideas in the form of A/B/O (Alpha/Beta/Omega) universe structures. Within the latter, individuals (mostly concentrating on white cisgender men) are classified along highly essentialist positions that dictate their societal roles, stemming from assumptions about their sexual roles. As with all fannish tropes, fanwriters will sometimes disrupt these roles or question their effects on individuals but will as often allow them to play out ‘straight up’ in what has been analysed as a negotiation with issues of rape culture, consent and sexual fantasy (Busse 2013b).

Criticisms around slash have come most stridently from those that see the domination of male-embodied narratives, both within fandom spaces and in fan studies, as a sign of the continuing patriarchal discourse around which narratives are considered interesting and subversive. This has sometimes taken its backing from the identification of the majority of writers in these spaces as heterosexual women and so leading to a fetishisation of gay male sexuality (Scodari 2003). Similarly, pushbacks to this position have pointed to the high number of queer women in these spaces which to some scholars is indicative that the texts are in a much more complex negotiation with queerness, homosociality, identity, and identification that correlative models allow (Busse et al; Lackner et al; Tosenberger 2008). Lucy Baker (2016) discusses these issues in her examination of the ways in which fanworks often regender characters, and maintains that
despite slash communities being made of queer women, the ways in which women characters are written still hold meaning. She notes,

In fanworks, which can create relationships and characterization out of the least representation, the charge of female erasure has greater sway. There is the contention that the woman writer as a presence in her own work undoes the absence of women in her work (Lackner et al. 2006; Russ 1985). This does not address what Diaz describes as the mirror problem: ‘If you want to make a human being a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves’ (Stetler 2009). The authorial presence, the audience presence, does not negate the wider lack of reflection and representation within the text, even when the audience can and will identify with the Other whose representation is made clear. Fanwork takes its place alongside and with the wider media and is subject to the same critiques. (27-28)

Baker’s analysis does not take into account the operations of racial identity in the regendering of characters, which complicates ideas about how lines of identification may function, but her point about the effects of the erasure of (generally white) women characters can be seen to extend to considerations of characters of colour as well.

This has also been seen the case for the genre of femslash which has been almost disregarded completely in larger theorisations about fanfiction communities. As I will explore in more depth in my last chapter, whereas the disruption of normative models of identification that was seen to function with presumed (white) heterosexual women interested in male embodied queerness caused slash fanfiction to be analysed with special attention, since the (white) women interested in femslash were automatically assumed to be queer themselves, this was seen to be a less significant. This imbalance has continued even through the acknowledgement that slash writers and readers have a significant number of queer-identified (white) women amongst them. The question about why these queer-identified women would choose male-embodied sexualities to explore in their writing is now theorised along the ideas of the male body offering greater ‘freedom’ for such women. These arguments contend that writing queer male bodies facilitates the
distancing of women writers from the effects of misogyny and rape culture in a way that writing about female characters does not allow. In terms of more explicitly sexual writing, it is argued that erotic fantasy projected onto a body that is wholly ‘other’ frees imagined experience, allowing for heightened physical responses that are unmoored from actual experience (A, Rachel 2015). As I argue, along with Swati Moitra in our forthcoming discussion of femslash,

While all these arguments each have some validity they continue to remain stable only when a singular axis of difference is considered— that of gender. The almost total domination of white male bodies forming the focus of well over sixty years of documented male slash writing (drawing primarily from English-language media texts) points to the fact that some male bodies are clearly too much ‘the other’ to form the object of fantasy or escape. (Pande and Moitra 2017, 2.4)

Clearly then, models about what constitutes subversive writing and/or marginalised communities need to be inclusive of other aspects of identity apart from gender and sexuality. This would lead to more nuanced criticisms of fanfiction as practice and community than those that oppose its utopic framings on the basis that fanwriters and readers often pursue familiar narratives and return to well-worn tropes, rather than upending these structures (Gray et al 2007; Thomas 2011).

That is to say, when fanfiction is critiqued for its reliance on tropes and archetypes this analysis misses the fact that these tropes are also heavily invested in whiteness. As Pugh (2005) argues, fanfiction’s affinity for tropes and archetypes is a feature of the genre, as these familiar narratives are then made available to a broader range of characters. In this context then it is also crucial to also pay attention to which characters are summarily refused a place in these same tropes/narratives/archetypes. Further, to refer back to my argument about the Hannibal fandom, just as racial identity is elided when the taboos around cannibalism are discussed, it also rarely inflects notions about what constitutes heteronormativity, heteropatriarchy or ‘boring’ narrative choices. I will
explore this aspect further in the next chapter in specific relationship to the construction of the fannish notion of kink, but as Black feminist scholars have articulated, what constitutes ideas of ‘forbidden love’ or romance itself (and therefore any disruptions thereof) is very often heavily coded. Kathryn Perry (1995) points out in the context of interracial love,

Interracial love has a complex relationship with romance, being in a sense still forbidden love, even if it is no longer prohibited. Unlike romance, this forbidden love promises no guiding fantasy of integrating sexuality into a socially sanctioned relationship. (173)

I cite the above critique particularly because the significance of interracial heterosexual relationships is often dismissed in media fandom communities. The reasons cited vary but often canonical heterosexual relationships in particular are seen to be playing into heteronormative scripts. As Perry charts out, this is a script that is rarely available to anyone except white men and women in Western media. The operations of these lines of reasoning can be traced in the case of the fandom that formed around the Star Trek (2009) movie that rebooted the iconic franchise after a gap of some years. There was understandably much excitement in the lead up to the movie, both in larger fandom spaces as well as within fandom communities whose history is bound up with the initial run of the show in the 1970’s—as I have discussed in chapter one—and whose slash fanwriting practices around the characters of James T. Kirk and Spock have formed the bedrock of media fandom studies. The film was successful and the chemistry between the characters of Kirk (Chris Pine) and Spock (Zachary Quinto) rapidly made them into a fandom juggernaut.

However, the reboot also paired the character of Nyota Uhura (Zoe Saldana) with Spock in a romantic relationship, which led to some amount of friction within fanwriting spaces. Uhura was, of course, played by Nichelle Nicholls in the original series, a path-
breaking role for African American women on television which continues to resonate today (Carrington 2016). However, for many slash writers her canonical presence as Spock’s romantic interest in the modern iteration was jarring; this was reflected in fanfiction as well as meta-essays that was scornful of her role and accused the script of reducing her to the status of a “just a love interest.” This trend was criticised by many Black women fans who pointed out that for the canon to pair Uhura with one of the film’s heroes was in fact a very unusual and subversive act, as Black women are seldom depicted as romantic leads (Scodari 2012). For media fandom spaces to attempt to erase that, often in extremely toxic ways that drew from racist stereotypes, and then frame these efforts as a way of furthering queer representation is obviously a highly dubious and effectively racist position (peri_peteia, Livejournal 2009).

This conflict has often been parsed as part of fandom ‘ship wars’ which routinely erupt between individual fans who are attached to different pairings for any number of reasons (Chin 2010; Souza et al. 2014; Bothe 2014). As I will argue in my next chapter, as opposed to dominant theorisations that split fandom activity into the genres of slash, het, and femslash, fans will often move between these positionalities and participate in different spaces at different times. It is also true that for some others, slash or het or femslash pairings hold a particular attraction, and they seek those dynamics across media. For scholars who pay more attention to the latter, the friction between the Kirk/Spock and Spock/Uhura ‘camps’ can be explained by a conflict in what fans need from texts, with Kirk and Spock’s potential queer relationship taking precedence over Uhura’s role, however pathbreaking. While I agree with the contention that individual fans may be

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49 Spock has sometimes been seen as occupying a complicated racial/ethnic identity in the narrative of Star Trek as he is positioned as half-human and half-Vulcan and has been the target of xenophobic discrimination from both societies. This was complicated further in the original series as he was played by a Jewish actor, Leonard Nimoy. However, as theorists have pointed out, SF narratives often deal with racism in metaphorical terms but allow these debates to play out on primarily white-coded bodies (Delany 2000; Hopkinson 2004). These metaphors then often collapse when brought into conversation with racialised bodies as was the case when Star Trek itself attempted to deal with Native American issues in episodes like “The Paradise Syndrome.” Fandom texts also often play out these same dynamics.
attracted to particular dynamics without necessarily being motivated by racist impulses, when fandom patterns are examined both within and across genres they are seen to be unavoidably repetitive in favour of white characters being elevated. Building from this context, I will now examine how considerations of racial identity complicate existing theorisations about the relationship between fanwork and canon, character archetype and narrative.

**Algorithm Three: Racial Identity and Fanwork versus Canon**

One of the key influences in media fandom has been the ways in which media fans are seen to expand on and question the limits of the canon of various popular cultural media texts. This conflicted relationship, where fans are simultaneously drawn to such texts and frustrated by their limitations, has long been identified as the motivator for the production of fanworks, particularly fanfiction (Jenkins 1992; Fiske 1992; Booth 2010; Jamison 2013). This is a complex negotiation because there are multiple factors that might make a popular cultural text inhospitable to certain fans depending on their entry points into its narrative universe. Again, the expansion that has most interested fan scholars has been around the axes of gender and sexuality where fanfiction is seen to expand the possibilities of such structures that are limited by the demands of the market to follow heterosexist scripts. Coppa’s (2006) influential formulation is relevant here when she argues, “because fan fiction is an amateur production accountable to no market forces, it allows for radical reimaginings: plots, themes, and endings that would never be permitted on network television” (237). Jamison also identifies this tension when she notes that,

Driven by an engagement with commercial culture but free from that culture’s market constraints, fanfiction can experiment with the popular—with no need for
backers, no need to sell the product before its been realised, and with the luxury of an audience that is already eager to see its works. (2013, 23)

This oppositional positioning, between the media creators that attempt to exert control over their products and the fans who wish to experiment with such material remains at the heart of most defences of media fan communities and has informed a lot of scholarly examination around the issue of copyright and fair use issues (Tushnet 2007; De Kosnik 2009; Busse and Gray 2011). The mainstreaming of media fan cultures has led to some reconsideration of these power structures, as content creators become steadily more attuned to the ways in which these subcultures function. For instance, scholars have discussed the ways in which social media platforms like Twitter have allowed a much greater level of interaction between writers, actors, and fans (Scott 2009; Chin 2015; Stein 2015). In some cases, actors also take an active part in debates about the characters they play, including their potential relationships. As Bertha Chin (2015) points out in her discussion of the fraught relationship between actor Orlando Jones and the Supernatural fandom, these exchanges are not always smooth, indicating uneven power differentials within these new transmedia environments.

Another intertwined aspect of this greater accessibility between fans and producers is the ways in which popular cultural texts themselves have shifted in terms of plot and narrative. Even though an overwhelming number of popular cultural texts produced in the media industries based in the U.S.A and U.K. remain concentrated on white heterosexual male protagonists, there has been some diversification in the roles that are available to white women and non-white actors. And while still mostly heteronormative, the scope of allowable relationships between these characters has also expanded. Where once the queer subtext between characters (the basis of the popularity of slash and femslash pairings within fanwork) was discussed only within subcultural spaces, today these possibilities are often teased at by producers themselves. This teasing is in some
cases looked at with suspicion by fan communities, who see it as mode of “queerbaiting” (Fathallah 2014) in which the potential for such relationships is never actually realised, but nonetheless these storylines are no longer completely invisibilised in popular cultural texts.

So far these shifts have influenced fan studies to re-examine the relationship between producers and audiences in relation to the monetisation of fan practices and the exploitation of fan labour by these multinational entertainment conglomerates (Scott 2009; De Kosnik 2012; Flegel and Roth 2014). What has been less examined are the effects of this change on the kinds of fanworks being produced and on the critical commentary around such trends. In effect, fans who have been articulating their frustrations with the ways in which race in particular is handled in those space—as I have mapped out in my previous chapters—now have an increasingly strong position from which to debate these issues. As I have argued, this is not a new phenomenon and the visibility of current debates has been heightened by changes in platform for fan activity. However, as seen in the controversy around The Force Awakens, the expansion of roles traditionally given only to white male actors in terms of affinity to fannish archetypes, are forcing a greater recognition of the patterns of erasure within fandom. This is a somewhat new situation as fan communities have traditionally been seen to be ahead of the curve in the ways in which such representation has functioned.

I wish to reposition this debate on the ways in which these changing texts reflect on the oft-cited plenitude of possibility within fanfiction communities. Whereas the interaction between fan-text and media text has mostly been examined in terms of it being productive of an almost incomprehensible and limitless multiplicity, I posit that the expanding roles for non-white characters within such much-maligned canons are key in bringing into focus the limits of those imaginative exchanges. This is not an attempt to prop up these deeply flawed texts themselves but rather point to the fact that it is only
when non-white characters have been given a level of primacy in canon that has allowed debates about their sidelining to be articulated within fandom spaces with any degree of confidence. This experience has been a jarring one for many non-white fans who have bought in to the counter-cultural ethos of fandom spaces. In one Tumblr post entitled “The Moment you realized Fandom was racist”, a fan shared their experience and called on others to contribute to the conversation as well:

So, what was the show that made you realize how racist fandom was? We all have that one show/movie/book that made us realize that this “geek haven” we thought was for everyone really wasn’t. Mine was Young Justice.50 Now, I’d read a lot of fanfic before YJ (mostly white slash, and I never thought too much about it) I was still becoming comfortable with my sexuality, so slash was pretty comforting for me. I read a lot of Merlin/Arthur, but I noticed that there wasn’t that much fic for Gwen or her brother Elyan.51 I pushed it out of my mind. Then Young Justice happened and with it, Kaldur’ahm. And he was EVERYTHING fic writers loved. He was strong and compassionate, had an interesting backstory, had a difficult love life, etc… I was expecting TONS of fic for this guy, he was great! But Kaldur didn’t really get a lot (or any) appreciation compared to the rest of the cast. He was judged harshly […] And the more I looked into this instance, and others in ther fandoms, the more upsetting it became. Those same patterns were repeated in EVERY fandom regarding black characters. That was my wake up call. What was yours? (mikeymagee, Tumblr 2016)

This narrative is a common one and is reflected in my respondent interviews as well, pointing to the process whereby a space that, through the functioning of its fandom algorithms, does continue to project itself as a diverse and inclusive one—a geek haven—explicitly in opposition to more mainstream spaces which are more overtly inflected by the white machismo of geek culture. The above post is also a documentation of the unease

50 Young Justice (2010-13) is an animated television series that was broadcast on Cartoon Network in the U.S.A. It was a series that followed the lives of several teenaged superheroes affiliated to the DC comics universe including the character of Aqualad or Kaldur’ahm who is referenced here.

51 The series referenced here is the BBC show Merlin (2008-12). The fandom around the show was a prolific one with most fanwork concentrating around the characters of Arthur (Bradley Cooper) and Merlin (Colin Morgan). The character of Guinevere was played by Angel Coulby and that of her brother Elyan was played by Adetomiwa Edun, both Black English actors.
that many participants feel when attempting to articulate their discomfort with white queer relationships being elevated in fan spaces, because of their own queer identities, which marginalise them in many other aspects of their lives.

I wish to highlight this process particularly because it points to the fact that rather than these criticisms being articulated by fans who oppose slash or femslash practices due to their homophobia or their attachment to specific characters or pairings—the most common ways of framing such fan-antagonisms—these positions are generally arrived at after an extended period of experiencing repeated patterns of erasure. This is not then an easy or un-conflicted process and is usually only brought to the forefront once such fans can look to the canonical primacy of a non-white character to support their claims that such characters also deserve to be centred in fanwork, especially fanfiction. This is in direct opposition to the ways in which fanfiction is sometimes seen to be un-moored from a restrictive canon, in fact very often in glorious opposition to it. As Baker (2016) also points out, some of the strongest arguments about the power of fanworks has been their ability to “create relationships and characterization out of the least representation” (27). Conversely then, their repeated inability to create representations and characterisations out of even well fleshed-out characters that play on recognisable fandom archetypes, such as those mentioned by Pugh (2005) as at the core of the production of fanfiction, must be conceived of not as a “glitch” in the system but as part of its very structure.

*Algorithm Four: Safe Spaces for Whom? Fandom and Escapism*

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, while fan studies has increasingly complicated simplistic assumptions about the lack of conflict within fan spaces, these conceptualisations have focussed on specific communities and fandoms arising from
conditions that are unique to those situations. For instance, Chin (2010) comments on the
difficulty of gauging notions of ‘power’ in fanfiction writing communities in particular
because of the continually shifting hierarchies noting that,

[...] while a fan may be celebrated for her contributions to fan fiction fandom, for
instance, she may not be as popular within another group of fans who subscribe to
a different interpretation of the text, not because she lacks the skills or dedication
in producing a quality piece of fiction, but because her interpretation of the text is
deemed unacceptable by those vying for power and authority to represent fandom.
(77)

In this conceptualisation of fandom, the various loosely interlinked communities
attached to various combinations of character and pairing allegiances may fall in and out
of favour depending on the priorities of a particular subset of fans. This is also linked to
the idea of fanfiction-as-plenitude that I have dwelt on earlier in this chapter. In such
plenitude, it is assumed that a particular character or narrative are being neglected in one
context will be redressed in another fandom or another fandom community. This is
reflected in communal fandom etiquettes that encourage non-confrontation and tolerance,
encapsulated in axioms like ‘Ship And Let Ship’ (SALS) and ‘Your Kink Is Not My Kink,
And That’s Ok’ (YKINMK). I will tackle the specific connotations of the latter
formulation in my next chapter but here I will interrogate the assumptions that underpin
these general ‘truisms’ as universally applicable.

On one level, the ‘common sense’ of these axioms is clear and they seem to be quite
straightforward strategies for individuals to follow. However, it is also clear that these
directives also encourage individuals to look at fan spaces ahistorically and relegate
repeated patterns of erasure of non-white characters as something that is the effect of
external forces—the vagaries of individual fan choices, the popularity of anti-heroes, the
effect of certain popular pieces of fanfiction, the attachment of fans to archetypes—rather
than the actions and encouragement for such erasure found within fan spaces. As fans of
colour have argued repeatedly, while all of these individual issues may be true of specific cases, they cannot be seen to disqualify every combination of character-type, trope combination, and narrative that works for a majority of fandom (as evidenced by the output in fanwork), except when the focus is a non-white character. An example of this kind of analysis is when another fan examined the treatment of the character of Cisco Ramon, played by Latino actor Carlos Valdes, in the fandom of the popular superhero U.S.A-based television show *The Flash* (2014-present). The post breaks down the number of works of fanfiction (on AO3) that Ramon features in in any capacity and finds the number to be quite low. This is puzzling as the poster points out:

A fast talking, funny geek with super powers and family issues is fandom crack. He should be the little black dress of this fandom. He HAS been in other forms in other fandoms. How different is Cisco from a Willow Rosenberg, or a Charlie Eppes, or a Newton Geiszler, or a Tony Stark, or a Fox Mulder, or even a Felicity Smoak?\(^52\) The fandom math just doesn’t add up. What’s going on? And I think…cannot help, but think…that despite a racially diverse cast with a canon interracial couple, there are hundreds more Barry/Leonard stories than Barry/Iris, even though Leonard is now on another show and Iris and Barry are literally married on another Earth. Essays keep crossing my dash and I keep wanting to say ‘not in my fandom’, but yeah, today I have to stand up and say ‘yes, my fandom’. Yes, it’s happening here. (dragonmuse, Tumblr 2016)

The case of *The Flash* fandom, then, seems to be a distillation of the issues that I have been discussing through this chapter, including the erasure that seems to result even when the canon of the popular cultural text itself offers plenty of options for diverse characters occupying familiar fandom archetypes. If non-white characters are still getting sidelined in terms of fanwork produced within such a scenario, then it becomes clear that the seemingly value-neutral axioms, or fandom algorithms, that I have traced through this chapter are far from neutral and in fact actively prevent any changes from taking place

\(^{52}\) All the enumerated characters are popular figures in fanwork and are based on the popular archetype as sketched out. Willow Rosenberg is from *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), Charlie Eppes from *Numb3rs* (2005-2010), Newton Geiszler from *Pacific Rim* (2013), Tony Stark from the Marvel comics and cinematic universe, Fox Mulder from *The X-Files* (1993-2002), and Felicity Smoak from *Arrow* (2012-present).
within fandom structures. Conversely, such axioms encourage the belief that the consistent sidelining of characters of colour should not be identified as racist as that injects uncomfortable ‘real world politics’ into purely subjective choices about fictional narratives. In such a scenario, the unspoken (and sometimes articulated) advice for those fans who are uncomfortable with such patterns is to find another fandom space, rather than make the existant one ‘full of drama.’

However, as I have demonstrated through this chapter, unless those fans are content with their fanworks being less popular and classified as “duty-fic” or as produced in the pursuit of a “special interest” festival, irrespective of which text they choose to devote their fannish energies to, they will be mostly be unable to find a fannish space that centres their characters of choice. There are some exceptions to this rule of course—Korra and Asami Sato from the animated television series The Legend of Korra (2012-14) and Magnus Bane and Alec Lightwood from the fantasy television series Shadowhunters (2016-present) are both the main pairings in their fandoms—but as has been evidenced by the above examples, these are few and far between. As I have argued this point in public spaces, I have very often been presented with evidence of non-white characters gaining some secondary traction in certain fandoms (though still vastly underrepresented proportionately). In response, I would point out that by ascribing this presence as some kind of proof of fandom’s progressiveness in this area is also to tacitly cede that such secondary status is the best that fans of these characters can, and more crucially, should aspire to.

Much as Thomas (2011) observes that scholars of fandom have often looked for and highlighted “those interpretative abilities that are shared by critic and fan alike,” (5) I am aware that my arguments in this dissertation may seem to be falling prey to the reverse of that impulse. That is, as motivated by fandom’s failure to live up to progressive ideals that have been imposed upon it. What I aim to have demonstrated however, is that
these ideals are also very much circulated informally within media fandom spaces and the disappointment in their limitations is felt most keenly by participants who have contributed to their formation and continued robustness. There is also a certain level of hypocrisy in these positions as white fans that join protests against whitewashing when effected by media industries such as Hollywood, seem to turn around and embrace those same practices within fandom spaces.

This intervention has also been a necessary one in the context of media fandom’s increasing positioning in the mainstream as a safe haven for fans of popular cultural texts who are sidelined by more mainstream interests that are attempting to monetise these spaces. At the present moment it is inevitable that phenomena like Gamergate, which has seen women gamers being targeted by mainly white cisgender male gamers for daring to encroach into their spaces with a critical stance, will remain the focus of much of the writing around experiences of discrimination in fandom spaces (Salter and Blodgett 2012; Chess and Shaw 2015). Nonetheless, it is my position that it is equally important to highlight the patterns of erasure and discrimination that continue to structure even ‘liberal’ spaces within these formations. This is because it is to these spaces that fans in marginalised positions have often turned to in expectation of their identities being recognised, valued and explored. Their experiences then must complicate significantly any generalised ideas of how pleasure and escapism may function within them.

This point was evident in the differing responses of my respondents to the question about whether they chose to curtail their engagement with issues of racial/cultural/ethnic and religious identity due to fandom being an ‘escapist space.’ Once again following Wanzo’s (2015) assertion that the same practices show distinctly different features than previously theorised when analysed in terms of non-white fans, I proposed the question in order to see what kinds of escapism, if any, was available to them. This was also a question prompted by the repeated justification that fannish spaces avoid questions of
racial identity and discrimination because they are ‘too fraught’ to be engaged with in arenas that are meant to be for ‘fun and enjoyment.’ While some respondents were able to ‘switch off’ from these concerns, for others the ability to escape into imaginary world was very much predicated on those spaces remaining somewhat sensitive to their concerns.

As some responses showed,

Some aspects of fandom—fanfic, podfic and fanart—are purely escapes for me, and I’m careful about what creators and what fandoms I will consume for entertainment, in order to avoid stereotypical or problematic presentations. (Anonymous Respondent 3, Interview with Author 2015)

I think that fandom is partially an escape for me in that I’m 99% certain that the characters I read about (especially in RPF) are definitely not as nice as we wish they were. But at the same time my personal engagement in fandom has been to try to involve some aspects of racial or ethnic identity—it doesn’t always work/I don't always go there, but I do try. (Arzoensis, Interview with Author 2015)

Fandom is a safe space for me, both to think about things creatively (let’s talk about characters from Gekkan Shoujo Nozaki-kun if they were mapped onto Howl’s Moving Castle!) and academically (what constitutes emotional abuse, and are we misinterpreting it as romantic tension + poor communication when in fact it is an unhealthy relationship?). BUT—and this is a big but—that safe space goes away when I get too upset with the source media to enjoy playing in its sandbox, so to speak. (Jedi-seagull, Interview with Author 2015)

Fandom’s usually an escape for me because there are a good number of women of color in fandom but sometimes the way hockey itself interacts with race (such as blackface or Hawks fans wearing headdresses) does upset me.53 (Anonymous Respondent 15, Interview with Author 2015)

The enjoyment of fannish spaces clearly is a lot more contingent and precarious for some fans rather than others. Additionally, the fact that for a lot of respondents the escape relies not on switching off, but on finding like-minded fans, not just in terms of fannish texts, but in terms of not being able to discuss problematic aspects of fandom’s safe spaces.

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53 The references in this response are to the fandom around the U.S.A.-based ice-hockey league, the National Hockey League. The specific team referred to is the Chicago Blackhawks who have a logo depicting a Native American chieftain. Blackhawks fans will often wear imitation headdresses or carry fake tomahawks to games to signal their team identity.
is also telling. One respondent’s answer (which I quote at length for its perspicacity) perhaps sums it up best, spanning the spectrum of what ‘escape’ might mean from the personal—trying to deal with marginalisation and exoticisation in fan spaces—to the various, sometimes contradictory strategies that are required in order to keep enjoying fandom spaces, even as they inevitably remain under threat:

Sometimes, my escapism—my way of pretending that fandom is MUCH better than the rest of the world, as opposed to just *marginally* better *most* of the time—is to give people a chance to fuck up *where I can’t see them*.

Of course, this does not always work.

As we know, fancreatures are humans, and humans are products of prejudiced cultures, and fail happens. And happens. And happens some more.

Sometimes? There are other kinds of escapism.

The best kind, I think, comes from shows like *Elementary*, which *is* a fucking unicorn, in that it’s a show which rings the cherries in terms of racial/ethnic/cultural/sexual/gender representation—and handling that representation *well*—and which has a fandom that is, while small and quiet, deeply appreciative of the quality it brings to Western media.

Wallowing in that canon and fandom is an excellent way to pretend that everything is beautiful and nothing hurts.

Other kinds of escapism... well, for a long while? Part of what kept me in certain *parts* of the DCU *was* the overwhelming cishet-White-male-ness of those parts. When there was diversity? For the most part, fandom was adding it ourselves. Which, on the one hand? That’s fucked-up! But on the other hand, DC is terrible even for a western comics company. The worst of the *worst*. You give them a Black male? He's a dead man. You give them a White woman? She's going to get raped and/or depowered and/or murdered. You give them a woman of color? She's going to get whitewashed and/or depowered and/or murdered and/or removed from continuity. You give them a man of some other non-White race or ethnicity? He's going to be whitewashed *before* he's depowered and/or murdered and/or removed from continuity.

They? Suck BALLS.

It’s just safer playing with the white boys and racebending and transbending and queering things up and so on and so forth -- at least you have a fair chance of those White boys surviving.

On a similar level, when you've got mostly White boys running around? Less chance of ignorant fancreatures doing ignorant shit ignorantly.

I will *never* forget what it was like to be a part of Smallville fandom, to be a nerdy *Black* girl in Smallville fandom and have onscreen—at last!—a wee little nerdy Black boy (Pete Ross) with a snarky mouth full of pop culture references and woobie insecurities and all those things that ALWAYS get given to the White boys in teen shows...

... only to have fancreature after fancreature write him as a ‘gangsta’ stereotype. Despite him being raised in Kansas farm country.

By a motherfucking *judge*.
It’s been thirteen years and that vein is *still* throbbing in my forehead.\(^{54}\) (Te, Interview with Author, 2015)

**Algorithm Five: “Can you please stop cluttering up the tag?” Racial Identity and Digital Fandom Infrastructure**

So far I have discussed the more affective functioning of fandom algorithms that facilitate the continued projection of media fandom spaces as generally liberal and progressive in their politics, except for isolated “glitches.” This is also reflected in the informal arguments circulated within these spaces that it is unfair to target them for such racist trends because their participants are largely powerless to effect change. It is also argued that castigating participants, who are already marginalised in terms of their gender and often their sexuality, for their choices in the realm of popular culture where they retreat to ‘escape’ is an ineffective way to create the stimulus for change. In my arguments so far, I have combated these assertions by highlighting the ways in which these choices and freedoms are very heavily contingent on axes of identity apart from gender and sexuality. It is also not useful to frame these criticisms as ‘activism for change’ as that construction places any fanwork that does deal with non-white characters as automatically motivated by a desire to ‘score social justice points,’ rather than as participating in a communal fandom exchange of pleasure.

In this section I will examine the functioning of fandom algorithms in the form of more material digital infrastructure. As I have argued in the previous section, seemingly neutral and universal axioms regarding fandom etiquette often reinforce the status quo in

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\(^{54}\) *Smallville* (2001-2011) was a long running U.S.A.-based television show following the youth of Clark Kent or Superman. It spawned a very large slash-dominated fandom around the pairing of the characters of Clark Kent (Tom Welling) and his friend-turned-arch-nemesis Lex Luthor (Michael Rosenbaum). The character referenced above was Pete Ross (Sam Jones III) who was Clark’s best friend on the show.
such spaces. These axioms also extend to advice around usage of digital fandom infrastructure, which is often lauded for its organisational capacity that is reactive to specific needs of participants. It is then posited that a correct usage of such infrastructure allows for a successful curation of fandom experience. Busse and Gray (2011) note this usage, stressing fan creativity within it.

[…] fans use wiki software, blogging platforms such as LiveJournal.com, or bookmarking sites like Delicious.com in very specific ways: Livejournal.com, for example, was never intended to serve as a story archive, yet many fans developed specific workarounds such as newsletters, announcement communities, and particular tagging and bookmarking systems to customize the site for their particular use. (434-35)

Alexis Lothian (Lothian 2013) also notes the specific politics of such fan archival activity highlighting how the establishment of standalone fan advocate organisations like the Organisation of Transformative Works (OTW) and its affiliated influential fanworks archival website—ArchiveOfOurOwn.com (AO3)—has affected questions of the conservation of subcultural digital ephemera. Further, the rise of Tumblr as a platform for fannish activity has also led to changes in the way fandom digital infrastructure functions, as I have already discussed in chapter three. While there are certainly other platforms that also host fanworks such as Wattpad.com, Fanfiction.net and sites for non-English language fandom specific fanworks, I have concentrated on Tumblr and AO3 here as the two platforms that have formed the basis of much of contemporary fan studies research.

The parallel processes whereby racial identity is both a structuring force while also being invisibilised in the workings of digital environments has been the object of study for several scholars in the field of Internet studies and digital humanities. This has spanned the process of erasing the material labour and contributions of non-white innovators of such technologies, as well as the ways in which aspects of their interfaces and internal algorithms are structured by “whiteness as default” (Sinclair 2004; Taborn
Anna Everett (2002) has pointed to the uncomfortable implications of the naming structures in the DOS programming language that designated “master” and “slave” disks, while Nakamura (2002) has discussed the ways in which drop-down-and-click menus are often used to categorise “race” as a knowable and discrete category. I will also discuss the effects of such digital categorisation in my next chapter in terms of the classification of cyber-pornography.

Apart from these examples, the operation of racial identity in the digital structures of internet-enabled platforms is also sometimes felt as an exception when it is named as such and when it enters into spaces read as neutral but in actuality where whiteness has been centred. These operations are largely parsed in rhetorical structures that query ‘Why are you bringing race into this?’ as if this is an additive and further, disruptive, aspect of experience in what was up until then a ‘universal’ one. For example, the popular home-sharing service, AirBnB, which encourages individuals to rent out their extra rooms or apartments to other users based on a ‘sharing economy’, has recently come under criticism for the differential experience that Black users have consistently reported. While the ‘trust system,’ which is based on both landlords and guests rating each other, is seen to operate in an unbiased way, racial prejudice is clearly seen to structure its usage as ‘individual preference’ is given the ultimate say in how guests are approved (Vedantam 2016). In this context, it is also vital to see how these structures affect the usage of subcultural, digital ephemera in media fandom spaces as well. I will be examining these operations specifically with regard to the ways in which fanwork is accessed, tagged and archived and how the whiteness that structures these interactions becomes inescapably foregrounded even for users who might wish to curate and filter their experiences according to fandom axioms/algorithms.

In the cases of both Tumblr and more fanwork-focussed archival websites like AO3 that focus on fanfiction, tagging a piece of content is geared towards finding an audience
for it. While fanwork is usually created for free, within a “gift economy” it is also created within an expectation of appreciative feedback and the accrual of positive social capital (Fiske 1992; Hellekson 2009a; Scott 2009). Both platforms allow the use of free-form tags, which means that any combination of words or letters can be used as a description. It must be noted here that Tumblr’s frequently tweaked search algorithms, which order such tagged content, make definitive judgements about their functioning difficult and frequently out-dated. Nonetheless, in most cases fan-creators tag their content according to the source text it is based on, the characters that feature in it and the pairings on which it is focused. Further tags are sometimes used as warnings for specific aspects of the fanwork but these are more subjective.55

The AO3 has a more structured tagging etiquette, and volunteer fans, called tag-wranglers, classify free-form tags as general tags if they reach a certain level of usage. The site also encourages the classification of fanwork by the media text or texts on which it is based, as well as the specific characters and pairings. Warnings are optional, although certain ones such as those that signal issues of consent are classified as “Archive Warnings.” If a user chooses specifically not to warn for such content, this information is also listed. Fanwriters often use the “Additional Tags” section to write free-form descriptions of the content or use the “Author Notes” sections to list any additional information that they would like readers to know.

In terms of access to filtering options, Tumblr does not have a specific structure that allows users to block out content but there have been additional add-on programs created by other uses, such as Tumblr-Savior, that allow specific content, if tagged, to be blacklisted. The AO3 also does not have specific options to filter out pairings or characters within fanworks listed, though this can be achieved through creative use of the

55 I will discuss the specific debates around the usage of warnings further in chapter five.
general search feature. In this case as well, individual users have come up with add-ons specific to the site that allow for more targeted filtering but these are not part of the site itself.

It could be speculated then that such tagging would allow users to select only the content they wish to see, allowing for the smooth operation of fandom axioms such as ‘Ship And Let Ship.’ However, in practice, these tagging structures often foreground the level of erasure that non-white characters undergo within such communal spaces. Within the AO3 for instance, there is no way of indicating which pairings are the focus of the fic and which ones are merely referred to in the background. This has led to consistent complaints from fans of femslash pairings, which are often included in a tokenistic fashion in pieces of fanfiction that are mostly focussed on juggernaut male slash pairings. While this may be combated to some extent by these fans choosing specific fandoms where there is a primacy of women characters in fanwork, such a strategy is generally not available to fans of non-white characters even when they have a primary role to play in the source texts.56

While this may then be parsed as an inevitable reflection of the influences that I have discussed so far in this chapter, I also wish to draw attention to the ways in which this structural visibilisation has specific effects. To take up the example of the character of Sam Wilson from the MCU once again, the search results of his name on both Tumblr and the AO3 are illustrative of these effects. I implicate my own experience here as both a fan and a fan-scholar in order to reflect on my own position in this debate. On Tumblr, tags are often used to start conversations or find content and like-minded fans of specific characters or pairings. As someone who has been a long-time participant in fan spaces and is experienced in the functioning of fandom algorithms, both axiomatic and digital, I

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56 I have explored the specific operations of the racial dynamics of femslash fandoms in my co-written paper “Yes! The Evil Queen is Latina. The Racial Dynamics of Femslash Fandoms” (Pande and Moitra, forthcoming 2017).
expected to be able to curate my experience accordingly, as a fan of Sam Wilson and as someone who has read extensively within slash fandoms. However, as I explored the terrain available to me from these two positionalities, I gradually came to realise that most of the time set aside with the (habitual) expectation of enjoying content about the character was instead an exercise in frustration. Far from a stress-free experience, I spent this time scrolling through fanwork, meta-essays and headcanons that had Wilson feature almost exclusively in a supportive and secondary role to white characters such as Steve Rogers. His positioning within the canon as a counsellor for U.S.A. war veterans (being one himself) was also leveraged for the benefit the white characters around him, reminding one suspiciously of the “mammy” stereotype that haunts Black characters in particular.\(^{57}\)

On AO3, my curation of content proceeded along this secondary status as well. There was little point in searching for content by character tag as I was faced with thousands of works of fanfiction that a quick scan revealed would not feature Wilson in any meaningful way. I then moved on to the specific pairing tag of Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson, as it seemed to be around that ‘ship’ that most of the fanwork around him was being created. In the process of attempting these combinations, I could not help but be shocked by the fact that (as reflected in the tagging structures made visible to me) there were more fanfics focussing on the pairing of Steve Rogers and Darcy Lewis (a heterosexual pairing of two characters that have never even met in the MCU canon) than on any pairing involving Wilson.

To analyse my shock in more context, I had no expectation of Wilson becoming a juggernaut character or his relationship with Rogers even coming close to the massive

\(^{57}\) The “mammy” is a racialised stereotype that portrays Black characters, and especially Black women, as desexualised caregivers that has its roots in U.S.A. slavery (Brown Givens and Monahan 2005; Woodard and Mastin 2005). I will discuss the various the ways in which such stereotypes influence the creation and reception of non-white characters in fandom spaces in further detail in chapter five.
popularity of his relationship with either Bucky Barnes (19623 fanfics) or Tony Stark (12754 fanfics). However, considering my knowledge that the AO3 has a statistical bias towards hosting fanfiction focussed on male character relationships, to have Wilson not be generative of more material than even that of het pairing around characters who had never even met, was unbelievable and yet with the figures before me, uncontestable.

This quantified proof of the systematic erasure of Wilson’s character was all the more jarring in the intertextual communal spaces of fandom where ideas of social justice were being debated vigorously and entertainment companies like Marvel and DC were being castigated for their failures to put non-white characters in leading roles in their franchises. As for options on how to deal with this erasure, I realised that there was no tagging or filtering strategy on Tumblr that I could deploy because the “Sam Wilson” tag itself was almost never had any content about him as a primary character. It was clear therefore that if I wanted to attempt to engage with that part of fandom at all, I could not avoid the seemingly endless parade of stereotypes and microaggressions that made up most of the content around him. The option of following specific creators that I knew to be ‘safe’ was an option but that cut me off from the larger fannish ecosystem surrounding the MCU movies. On AO3, while the possibility of filtering was slightly more easily achieved, the evidence of just how undervalued the character was in a fandom that kept parroting sentiments like ‘everyone loves Sam Wilson,’ was a continual “glitch” in my fandom experience. It was at this point that I came to the realisation that, to reference Nakamura once again, the problem was not the noise in the signal that I could somehow tune out, the problem was the signal itself.

I have framed this experience in immediate terms rather than in the form of a distanced case study both to implicate myself in its workings but also to show how these interactions are personal to those fans I have referenced throughout this dissertation and to many of my respondents. The workings of the fandom algorithms that I have
formulated in this chapter particularly work on the personal investments and expectations that media fandom spaces have encouraged and the resulting glitches must then be seen to have equally personal costs.

**Conclusion**

My aim in this chapter was to broaden the debates around the ‘truisms’ that have so far structured examinations of the functioning of fan communities by bringing them into explicit conversation with notions of racial identity. Through my coinage of the term “fandom algorithms” I wish to encapsulate both the affective and technical structures that are seen to be largely neutral in their functioning within these spaces. However, as I have argued, these in fact work towards preserving the status quo of media fandom communities as progressive and liberal in direct opposition to mainstream fandom spaces that are more overtly structured by white heterosexual masculinity. Through an interrogation of the specific effects of considerations of racial identity on intertextual communitarian interpretive spaces, the place of subversion in fanwork, the relationship of fanwork to canon, the formulation of ‘safe spaces’ and finally the structuring of digital fandom infrastructure, I have shown how each of these categories cannot stand as universal or unstructured by the workings of white privilege as a core element in their functioning. In my last chapter I will zoom in, as it were, to examine the fanfiction kinkmeme as a microcosm that disrupts linear notions of fan activity, also contextualising this discussion with considerations of racial identity.
Chapter 5

How is that Sexy?

An Examination of the Fanfiction Kinkmeme

Chapter Summary:

In this chapter, I wish to examine the practice of fanfiction in the context of the fanfiction kinkmeme. Fanfiction has so far been broadly theorised as a form of democratised writing with specific connotations about what ‘women’ desire. Theorisation has oscillated between highlighting its affiliations with the genres of romance and/or pornography but as less ‘encumbered’ by the (hetero)sexist and patriarchal baggage of these mainstream productions. One aspect that has been neglected in these framings is the way in which the larger fields of romance and pornographic studies have themselves developed almost entirely separately. This has had the effect of shoring up certain assumptions about their respective audiences regarding both their demographics as well as their usage of texts. My survey of both disciplines will trace the effects of these assumptions with regard to ‘women’ especially. My aim in doing so is to argue that both fields have been structured around largely un-interrogated correlations between participants’ gender and sexuality and their choice of such media. I will explore the ramifications of the slippages that have resulted, using the recorded knowledge of the diverse demographics of media fandom communities. I will also consider the role of racial identity in these theorisations. I posit that these considerations demand a reworking of the analytical frames used in theorisations of ‘women’s’ desire with much greater fluidity being permitted within them.

In order to demonstrate this fluidity I will analyse the fashioning and continual reworking of the category of ‘kink’ in media fandom spaces. I posit that fanfiction communities, across genres, are spaces wherein formulations both about the users and uses of pornographic/romantic texts may be questioned. And further, that the space of the fanfiction kinkmeme functions as a useful microcosm for these exchanges. To this end, I will interrogate the potential of the category of fannish kink and examine it in the context of its dissolution of (some) assumptions about readers/writers/viewers of affective material.
As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the scope of fan studies continues to expand rapidly as newer relationships are being mapped between media fan communities and the producers/marketers of popular cultural texts. Researchers are increasingly considering the repercussions of working more closely with industry partners and the ethical implications of such collaborations even as notions of ‘legitimate’ fan activity are being interrogated (Scott 2009; Larsen and Zubernis 2012b; De Kosnik 2012; L. Bennett, Chin, and Jones 2016). This has meant an increasing focus on more public fannish behaviour such as fan conventions, cosplay, the ramifications of transmedia convergence between fans, actors and producers, and ideas of fan tourism (Porter 2004; Brooker 2007; Alden 2007; Booth and Kelly 2013; Duchesne 2010). At the same time this mainstreaming of fan activity has meant that fanworks that have traditionally been seen as more covert subcultural practices, such as fanfiction, are more in the public eye than ever before. This can be seen in attempts to monetise it, both by fanwriters and corporations, from the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* to the establishment of platforms like Kindle Worlds.58

This ‘discovery’ of the more outré genres of fanfiction—mainly slash—has also led to many instances of mainstream news outlets confronting actors and creators with racy excerpts in order to garner clickbait responses.59 These instances are now generative of their own cycles of reaction and critique. Inevitably, celebrities or mainstream commentators will be belittling or derogatory about such practices, leading to fan scholars producing defences of them by working to highlight their engagement with gender and sexuality in particular. At this point in my dissertation, it is hopefully obvious what aspect

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58 E.L. James’ highly successful trilogy started out as a work of fanfiction based off Stephanie Meyers’ *Twilight* franchise. Kindle Worlds was an attempt by the online retailer Amazon to incentivise fanwriters to use their platform to publish fanfiction (K. E. Morrissey 2013).

59 This has been seen repeatedly in fandoms like the BBC production of *Sherlock* (2010-present) and the *X-Men* movie franchise where actors and producers have been asked to comment repeatedly on explicit fanfiction and fanart (Romano 2013; Wilken 2015).
of these engagements provokes my discomfort. I do not wish to detract from the importance of defending fans against repeated critiques that reduce fanwork to only such sensationalised exchanges, but rather to underline that these defences in turn inevitably minimise troubling intra-fandom dynamics, most notably around racial identity. As I will demonstrate, the academic framing of fanfiction has almost exclusively proceeded along the axes of sexuality and gender with race remaining consistently sidelined. This is particularly true for the studies that have gained canonical status in the field whose white-centric theoretical models continue to dominate contemporary theorising. These theoretical models in turn have their roots in pornography and romance novel studies—two fields that have also been critiqued on the same issues of erasure or sidelining of racial dynamics.

It is in this context that my arguments in this chapter will be framed. I wish to approach the practice of fanfiction from all three main vectors at once—gender, sexuality and race—in order to push against some of its foundational tenets and popularised truisms. As there is a lot of ground to cover between these three loci, I will be splitting my analysis, but I wish to see these threads in conversation with each other. In this chapter, I will consider fanfiction’s relationship to the mainstream genres of pornography and romance, highlighting how it functions in a liminal space, not just in terms of its content, but also in terms of participants in these spaces. As I also pointed out in my last chapter, the genre of slash fanfiction has been the focus of most of the academic theorisation around how fanwriting functions, and therefore, a lot of my own work must engage with those arguments. I maintain however that these generic divisions—het, male slash, femslash—are not watertight compartments and that continuing to conceptualise these spaces as completely different in their functioning has led to blinkered conclusions about how the fannish ecosystem functions today, with many fans moving between these positionalities.
The analysis of fanfiction (particularly slash) itself as a genre of pornography is not new, with numerous theorists having framed their analyses of it within that interpretive rubric (Penley 1992; Kustritz 2003; Driscoll 2006). Others have argued that this emphasis on its explicitness is misleading and that it also draws significantly from the “scripts” of romance novels for narrative structures and generic expectations (Bacon-Smith 1992; Woledge 2006). Another thing to be considered is that initially, when slash fanfiction was talked about as pornography, it was seen as more egalitarian and based on notions of intimacy rather than the more extreme examples of market-produced, image-based pornographic material. This has been complicated somewhat since then, with theorists considering genres that do delve into more edgy sexual content, but the romance versus pornography disciplinary split remains in evidence (Issakson 2009; Reid 2009; Flegel and Roth 2010).

What these discussions have failed to take into account adequately therefore is how the larger fields of pornography studies and romance novel studies themselves have failed to acknowledge how they intersect, and in doing so have shored up assumptions about pornography versus romance as oppositional, fundamentally different genres. This process has also led to similar assumptions about their consumers, particularly in the case of women, in terms of what uses these texts are put to and by whom. The place of erotica as a genre that draws from both fields and yet paradoxically maintains that it is not either, is also relevant here and will be examined.

In my analysis, I argue that the divisions between pornography, erotica, and romance novels (especially as the latter have become more explicit in their content), do not really stand up to scrutiny; and in ignoring them, work on ‘pornography for women’ limits itself. I follow on from Catherine Driscoll (2006) who also positions fanfiction as one example of text-based pornography/romance that shows this blurring between categories. However, rather than seeing fanfiction as unique, I will contextualise it within
already existing trends in genres of women’s reading and writing. I will also consider the relationships between different genres of fanfiction itself. Further, I wish to disrupt ideas that split fanfiction’s focus areas between ‘vanilla’ and ‘hardcore’ when it comes to considering its explicitness with regard to sexual material. Through a study of kinkmemes—which may be defined as interactive fanfiction writing communities usually hosted on sites like Livejournal and Dreamwidth—I will examine how these communities produce notions of ‘kink’ that encapsulate both the aforementioned categorisations within their continuum.

It is also my intent to show how both pornography studies and studies of the romance novel make certain assumptions about the composition of their audiences. In the case of the former, the focus and subject matter of a vast amount of pornography studies has proceeded, ironically, along gendered lines even when there is a declared intention for the field to be feminist. This has been productive of a split where filmic and visual pornography remains a primary focus and the textual is an afterthought. Concerning the latter, romance novel scholars have covered a great deal of ground in their analyses, rescuing the genre from early condemnation as simply escapist and productive of false consciousness. However, the use of these texts by women for sexual arousal and stimulation, especially in light of their growing explicitness, remains rare. As mentioned above, the genre of erotica that does draw explicitly on both fields is also of concern to me, primarily because it remains woefully under theorised and disconnected from a larger consideration of the texts that circulate among women for sexual purposes.

Finally, while the “effects model”—which directly linked the depiction of certain acts in pornographic material to actual behaviour of viewers—has been critiqued, the mostly assumed correlation between the depicted sexuality in such material and the gender identity and sexual orientation of its audiences has remained largely unquestioned (Gauntlett 1998; Barker and Petley 2002; Boyle 2000). In the case of fanfiction,
successive surveys conducted on the community that reads and writes such material have shown that this correlation is not necessarily a valid one. This implies that producers and consumers of such material are a lot more fluid than research on more conventional examples may suggest (Melannen, Dreamwidth 2010; Centrumlumina, Tumblr 2013). Analyses on slash fanfiction readers have indeed already led to such a reconsideration, most notably by Penley (1992). Ironically, however, her analysis of the identificatory positions that female readers may occupy when reading about male homosexual acts in the context of slash fanfiction draws on dated ideas about the sexuality of such readers (that they are predominantly heterosexual), and therefore leads to skewed conclusions. I will now trace some salient threads of theorisation in pornography studies regarding its foundational focus on filmic texts, its relation to authenticity and the assumed correlations between viewers’ gender and sexual identities, its engagement with racial identity, the effects of the advent of Internet platforms, and the rise of queer pornography.

Ask not what is porn, but what are porn studies?

The construction of a scholarly field

Foundational Texts/Trends

While scholars have repeatedly examined the permeability of the boundaries between the ‘pornographic’ and other media, the field of pornography studies has itself been productive of a set of assumptions and generic agreement that delimit the field (Kendrick 1987; McNair 1996). Regardless of sweeping statements of the inclusivity of theoretical frameworks, the field of pornography studies depends on a certain consensus as to what the term ‘pornography’ signifies. Further, that consensus operates on multiple
levels—from constructing a university undergraduate course, to putting together an edited anthology, to organising a conference. As the field has grown, and it has grown exponentially, key texts that have gained pre-eminence in syllabi are also shaping influences. In pointing to regulatory frameworks in a larger societal context, such as the apparatus of legal strictures and governmental censorship, it should not be forgotten that an academic field is also shaped by regulatory mechanisms and produces and reifies its own generic assumptions and expectations. I do not propose this as a specific criticism of the field as all discourses, especially in institutional settings such as academia, are subject to reification. Rather, I attempt to map out how different strands of theorisation around the category of pornographic material—specifically its relationship to women as consumers, subjects and as objects—has proceeded and what areas it has not addressed. It is within those gaps that I propose to position certain genres of fanfiction, both in terms of content and in the context of its audiences.

What is pornographic is contingent on differential notions of audiences, aesthetics, economic considerations and material conditions. While initial analysis revolved around a range of material, primarily textual in nature (Marcus 1966; Sontag 1967; Carter 1978), the defining movement of the field, that I would argue established the trajectory for pornography studies as a whole, were the ‘porn wars’ in feminist thought—a debate that took place in the 1980-90’s.

My focus here is not on the feminist critiques of pornographic material in North America led by feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon in the 1970-80’s, that also resulted in their uneasy alliance with a conservative legal system.60 These

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60 Dworkin and MacKinnon were clear about what they considered to be pornographic material. This specificity is hardly surprising since they were working towards constructing legal frameworks that would ban pornography altogether. Yet, their definition remains dependent on subjective terms and a simplistic effects model. It reads, “We define pornography as the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and words that also includes (i) women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities; or (ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy humiliation or pain; or (iii) women are presented as sexual objects experiencing sexual pleasure in rape, incest or other sexual assault; or (iv) women are presented as sexual objects tied up, cut up or mutilated or bruised or

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do, however, still resound in any conversation about the field (West 1987; MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997), having deeply influenced which pornographic material would remain in focus for scholars, partly due to their legal actions.

There has been an enormous amount of examination of the problematics of their position, and many “pro-porn” collections were published in response (Vance 1984; Alderfer and Ellis 1986; Segal and McIntosh 1992; Gibson and Gibson 1993). While it is not within the scope of this chapter to detail the rebuttals to Dworkin and MacKinnon’s stance that these texts proposed, it is worth noting that they directly challenged the highly subjective nature of the terms used, as well as the erasure of the possibility of fantasy in these exchanges. While Dworkin and MacKinnon include both “pictures” and “words” in their definition—and Dworkin (1974) wrote a scathing article on Pauline Réage’s classic erotic tale, *Story of O* (1954)—it is interesting to note that their work was used in prosecution primarily directed at visual pornography.\(^61\)

Therefore, while their particular definition has been rigorously deconstructed, what has remained a lasting legacy is the concentration of academic discourse on the medium and forms on which it focused. By this, I mean visually grounded pornography, mostly films, but also magazines like *Playboy* and *Hustler* and now on visual pornography hosted on Internet platforms. This has been partly a matter of necessity as the pushback against conservative efforts at censorship was a matter of urgency. However, this focus has caused several other issues. When there has been a broader consideration of what the

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\(^61\) The most famous case was the 1992 judgment of the Canadian Supreme Court that used both MacKinnon and Dworkin’s work in the ‘R vs Butler’ case, more commonly known as the Butler case. In the judgment, the court ruled that the obscenity law could be used to prosecute against pornography. The first target of the amended law was the lesbian magazine *Bad Attitude* in 1993. The case is seen as an exemplar of how anti-pornography laws, ostensibly drafted to protect women, instead caused harm to marginalised communities (Cossman 1997).
category of pornography could mean, these examinations have taken the form of examining the larger issue of the hypersexualisation of modern media—what has been termed as the “pornographication” of culture (McNair 1996). What has been notably absent is a consideration of the genre of textual pornography, to be precise, sexually explicit novels and other erotic prose written by women. This omission is puzzling, especially in light of how far and wide the net of pornography studies has been cast, examining everything from reality television to talk shows to advertisements (Paasonen et al 2007).

Upon closer consideration of the seminal works that have shaped the debate since the porn wars, a definite focus on the visual form emerges. A notable exception to this is Ann Snitow’s essay on the genre of Harlequin romance novels, “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different” (1979). While Snitow doesn’t have a high regard for the genre itself, characterising it as “unrealistic, distorted and flat” (143), she does propose a rather radical idea—the positioning of traditionally non-explicit material as explicitly pornographic. 62 While Snitow’s particular analysis of how the Harlequin romances functioned vis-à-vis their readers is obviously dated, I am primarily interested in her acknowledgement that these texts were written unequivocally to “elicit sexual excitation” (156). As I will elucidate in my review of romance novel criticism, this idea has not been explored further, even as the overt sexually explicit content contained in them has only grown since then. The connected genre of erotica has also been ignored.

In the book widely considered to have launched ‘porn studies’ as an academic field—Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible (1989)—Linda Williams admits that her focus on the visual and “hardcore” examples of it are motivated

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62 This is not to say that Snitow thinks the rather chaste and always deferred passages about heterosexual intercourse in the Harlequin romances of the 1970s are in any way representative of a “healthy” female sexuality. However, she does consider the entire text of the romance novel as contributing to a “sexually charged atmosphere that bathes the Harlequin heroine [that] is essentially pornographic” (154).
by a combination of “practical, theoretical, and political reasons” (6), rather than any belief that they form any sort of consistent characteristics that may delimit the genre. She also points out that with changes in mass-market romantic fiction, efforts of women directors like Candida Royalle and the emergence of lesbian pornography that celebrated sadomasochistic fantasy, “these pat polar oppositions of a soft, tender, non-explicit women’s erotica and a hard, cruel, graphic phallic pornography have begun to break down” (6). Additionally, while Williams admitted in the 1999 edition of Hard Core that her shying away from other genres, particularly LGBT pornography, was unnecessary, her original stated reasons for doing so remain interesting. She explained,

First, as a heterosexual woman I do not feel that I should be the first one to address questions raised by a body of films not aimed primarily at me. […] It is thus precisely because heterosexual pornography has begun to address me that I may very well be its ideal reader. Conversely, because lesbian and gay pornography do not address me personally, their initial mapping as genres properly belongs to those who can read them better. (7)

There are several key assumptions at work here that continue to be present in scholarship on pornography. Williams draws clear connections between her identity as a heterosexual cisgender woman and the type of pornographic film that she feels that she is qualified to analyse. Even though she admits that she is not precisely the intended audience for much of the heterosexual material that is her subject either, the overlap in the sex acts depicted and her own sexual preferences are enough for her to “presume” to embark on the exercise. This correlation between the sex acts depicted in a pornographic text and the sexual and gender identity of the imagined audience is a tenuous one however, and something that I aim to interrogate.

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63 Williams does retract this position somewhat later on in her work, observing that her conceptualization of niche audiences was not flexible enough to account for their heterogeneity. Nonetheless, this structuring continues to be seen in contemporary pornography studies as well.
Ideas of Authenticity

The late 1990’s and early 2000’s saw a veritable explosion in the field with scholars attempting more situated and nuanced analyses of different genres of (still visual) pornography. These studies split along axes of sexual identity such as that envisaged by Williams in *Hard Core*—gay male scholars analysed gay pornography, lesbian scholars analysed lesbian pornography etc. The former have analysed gay pornography in a variety of ways. Primarily, they explored its political role in making gay sexuality visible and so, validating it in an often homophobic cultural environment, thus playing a crucial role in the formation of gay male identity itself (Bronski 1984; Waugh 1985; Dyer 1994; Fejes 2002). Another aspect that has been interrogated significantly has been the types of bodies that are presented as desirable within these texts (Harris 1997; Duggan and McCreary 2004; Padva 2002). Scholars have also critiqued the constructions of contested notions of masculinity and desire that intersect with race (R. Fung 1991; Hamamoto 2000). Interestingly, while the importance of such pornography to the formation of cisgender gay male identity and subjectivity has been theorised in academic circles, there is little anxiety registered around notions of authenticity vis-à-vis the performers in the videos (in fact ‘straight hunks’ are often a selling point of certain videos). Furthermore, scholars remain unconcerned with questioning the gender and sexual identity of viewers of such material.64

64 There has been some interest in the phenomenon of heterosexual women watching gay pornography, but this is framed as an exceptional case and further fluidity in such audiences has not been considered (L. U. Marks 1996).
In contrast to this, the anxieties around lesbian visual pornography have been manifold as the phenomenon of pornographic material featuring “ersatz lesbian sex” or “girl-on-girl” action, produced explicitly for heterosexual male audiences, has complicated notions of the representation of ‘true’ lesbian desire. The issues of the commodification and fetishisation of lesbian sexuality in a larger heterosexist male oriented culture continue to haunt writing on lesbian visual pornography, with the figure of the “butch lesbian” emerging as an early marker of ‘authentic’ lesbian sex, at least in visual media. For instance, in her review of trends in lesbian pornographic film, Heather Butler (2004) maintains that,

[…] the butch authenticates lesbian pornography, even if only superficially […] She is the certificate of authenticity in lesbian pornography for lesbians; she turns the screen into a potentially safe space for the visual representation of lesbian desire; and she inspires trust in her lesbian viewers. (169)

The idea that most commercially available lesbian pornography does not feature ‘real lesbians’ is a well-established critique and there have been repeated attempts to produce a distinct aesthetic of filmed pornography in opposition to such mainstream productions (Smyth 1990; Bensinger 1992; Ryberg 2012).65

It is important to locate this need for markers of ‘authenticity’ within the specific political movements (both within feminist discourse and outside it) of the 1980’s and 1990’s, as well in terms of a larger resistance to the co-optation of lesbian sexuality as a prop to male heterosexual pleasure. However, this anxiety also points to the slippages that I have so far explored, whenever strict correlations between sexual and gender identity

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65 At this point, I would also like to point to the lack of attention that lesbian-produced textual pornography has received. For instance, even while On Our Backs occupies a seminal position in any discussion of the development of lesbian pornography, Susie Bright’s work on textual pornography is largely ignored in favour of her films. As I will analyse later on in this chapter, Bright’s contention that it was lesbian pornographic writing that in large part motivated her to produce more experimental explicit material aimed at a general category of ‘women,’ without that label signifying only heterosexual women, was a radical step that has been overlooked in the study of both pornography and romance novel studies.
and the consumption of sexually explicit media are put into place. In line with Jane Juffer (1998) who warns against the tendency of criticism on sexually explicit material to fall into either wildly celebratory or condemnatory positions—either hunting for ‘good’ transgressions or ‘bad’ hegemonic structures—I do not intend to position these slippages as always productive of positive outcomes, but rather interrogate the dialogic and dialectical relationships they expose between categories presumed to be entirely separate.

**Pornography and Racial Identity**

The splitting between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ pornographic texts is even more charged when it comes to the theorisation around the role of racial identity within pornographic visual texts. This has been a fraught engagement, interrupting the habitual mapping along heterosexual and homosexual axes of interpretation and identification as traced in the previous section. To recall once again the ‘science of racism,’ which I have already discussed in chapter three with regard to creation of the category of race itself, it is also vital to trace its effects in the ways in which racialised bodies are also sexualised. In fact, as numerous theorists have argued, racialisation is always already sexualised (S. B. Somerville 2000; Barnard 2004; E. P. Johnson 2001). This racialisation has proceeded on differential lines across bodies and effects individuals in varying ways. As Jennifer C. Nash (2014) reflects on Patricia Hill Collins’ (Collins 1990) seminal work on the representation of Black female sexuality, this is a complex process, often drawing together altogether oppositional imagery. She notes,

For Collins, images of deviant black maternity (the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare queen) and of an excessive black female libido (the jezebel, the hoochie, the video ho) present black female sexuality as uncontrollable, even as they point to different sites of sexual excess. For example, if the mammy is masculine,
effectively feminizing (and possibly queering) her male children, the jezebel is excessively desirous and hyper-reproductive. Even though these images are, in some ways, at odds, the underlying ideological consistency is that both contain an excessive performance of gender and sexuality, which endangers the viability of the state, the heteronormative family, and conventional gender roles. (82)

This hypersexualisation is not limited to heterosexual pornography, as Kobena Mercer (1994) points to in his analysis of Robert Mapplethorpe’s fetishised homoerotic images of Black male bodies. Similar processes can also be seen in the images of the hypersexual yet submissive Asian woman versus the desexualised Asian man, the exotic Indian body with its secretive sexual knowledge enshrined in the Kamasutra, and so forth (Hansen et al 1989; Uchida 1998; Capinho 2006). The effects of these ossified images can, of course, be traced everywhere in the mainstream mediascape, but perhaps nowhere are these stereotypes as visibilised and in a sense naturalised as within filmic pornography. I use the word naturalised because these depictions are placed within a space that in a sense foregrounds the inherently problematic nature of human sexuality itself, thus making it difficult to make specific critiques.

A central question for those scholars who wish to critically engage with the racialised tropes that structure such texts is whether this structuring factor forecloses the possibility of pleasure for their non-white/male/heterosexual viewers. If the answer is yes, then this position becomes uncomfortably allied to the conservative anti-pornography arguments that disproportionately targeted marginalised communities through their censorship (Cossman 1997). Relatedly, the question of viewers who are not white has rarely formed a focus for pornography studies, especially where it concerns women. As Nash also recounts in her experiences of studying the depiction of Black women in pornography,

My interest in how black women are depicted in pornography is often heard—or misheard—as an interest in how black women are violated by pornography. These
experiences of being misheard prompted me to wonder if a black feminist project on pornography could articulate a theoretical and political stance that avoided a condemnation of the racism imagined to underpin racialized pornography. What would it mean to read racialized pornography not for evidence of the wounds it inflicts on black women’s flesh, but for moments of racialized excitement, for instances of surprising pleasures in racialization, and for hyperbolic performances of race that poke fun at the very project of race? (14-15) These are extremely charged questions and not something that this admittedly short review has space to answer. However, they do point towards research directions that push towards possible pornographic representative practices that allow non-white bodies the same breadth of sexual possibility as are granted to white bodies. Once again, I resist the categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ here as those are highly suspect in these formulations. Nonetheless, texts can certainly work towards destabilising and interrogating historically charged tropes in line with Nash’s conceptualisation of “surprising pleasures.” This is also a concern that is increasingly forming the focus for researchers with the explosive advent of the more amateur Do-It-Yourself (DIY) pornographic cultures that have been facilitated by internet-enabled platforms.

Online Platforms: The Internet is For Porn

The growing importance of Internet technologies in the production, dissemination and access to sexually explicit material, or porn 2.0 as it is sometimes called, remains focussed on visual media (Attwood 2010). Researchers have concentrated on newer production avenues being used by women producers in particular, from women-run websites, to the work of cam girls, to the production of queer porn (Magnet 2007; Russo 2007; deGenevieve 2007). The move online has also meant an explosion of amateur-produced films, with DIY aesthetics and indie stylistics getting more and more popular (Attwood 2007). To go in search of visual pornography on the Internet today is to be confronted by a literal “pornocopia”, to recall Laurence O’Toole's (1998) formulation.
This diversity extends from the types of bodies being filmed, to the sexual acts, sexualities and gender identities being represented and framed as sexually arousing. However, as Jennifer Moorman (2010) points out, simply the availability of diverse visual pornographies does not mean the lack of regulation by a hierarchy of allowable desires. She argues, “Online architecture, visual language and address often endorse a dominant view of sex and gender identity, particular positions from which to see and understand the online environment.” (155)

In such a scenario, the ways in which access to these pornographic texts is organised becomes key. Currently, the most popular visual pornographic sites are those that provide access to a range of films in a multi-tiered fashion, sourcing clips from a variety of sites and allowing users to view them for free, while also providing paid services like chat rooms and Youtube-style channels where performers upload videos which are restricted to site members. When ranked by traffic, these aggregator sites come up within the top 100 most-visited sites on the Internet, demonstrating their popularity and reach.66 In her review of popular pornography sites in 2009, Moorman found that,

[...] some kinds of “lesbian” and “bisexual” pornography, typically focussed on the display of women’s bodies, are grouped with straight pornography, while gay male pornography and bisexual pornography that includes guy-on-guy action are generally not included at all, or they are segregated to other categories. (155-156)

My own review of the current top-ranked sites confirmed some of Moorman’s findings, but also revealed some interesting slippages. For example, XHamster.com (ranked 56) features three drop-down options that then order other categories. These are “Straight,” “Gay” and “Transsexual.” “Lesbian” videos remain enmeshed within the problematics of the “Straight” tag as outlined earlier. The videos under the “Transsexual”

66 All usage data was estimated by Alexa.com, a commonly used aggregator of Internet traffic. The data was collected on 6/6/2014 and rechecked at intervals of three months until 6/6/2015. The sites being cited have remained in the same popularity bracket for that period of time.
tag signal a similar fetishisation of trans sexuality and there are no transmen or other male-identifying individuals present in the categorised videos. Interestingly, however, under the “Straight” tag, the category of “Bisexual” is also included (it is excluded from the other two categories) and features a mix of cisgender performers. A randomised sampling showed an equal presence of men and women, which differs from Moorman’s findings. The presence (and high rating) of videos featuring women who detail cisgender male crossdressing fantasies and sexual encounters with gay men also pose questions about the presumed ‘straight’ viewership of this category. Additionally, the site Xxxx.net (ranked 103) hosts pornographic stories as well as videos. The stories are written by users and are usually in a first-person style. While there seems to be a dominance of male-identified writers, the tag of “written by women” also has a significant number of entries. This co-existence of both textual and filmic pornography is interesting to me, especially on a top ranked website.

In the light of my review, therefore, while I agree with critics who see mainstream visual pornography websites as ordered by hierarchical, normalising binaries that for the most part engage with alternative sexualities, racial and gender identities largely in a fetishistic manner, there is also more nuance to this narrative (Patterson 2004). One complicating factor is that these websites are used by a diverse range of people, both as producers and as viewers. The rating and commenting of members on videos influence their overall rank and so opens up the possibility of non-normative performances gaining visibility, as can be seen in my above observation of the videos in the “Bisexual”

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67 Pornographyhub.com (ranked 79) has two overarching categories, “Straight” and “Gay.” Again, “Lesbian” videos are subsumed within the “Straight” tag and feature markers of “girl on girl” sex. The “Bisexual” category once again features the same variety of cisgender performers as in Xhamster.com. There are no specific identifiers for trans performers in either “Gay” or “Straight” sections. Notably, both Pornographyhub.com and XHamster.com feature sections that proclaim to have videos “For Women,” though the specificities of how these are identified remain unclear. On both websites, this section has an array of videos displayed, featuring a range of labelled sex acts from self-identified “vanilla” or “erotic” heterosexual couples, perhaps signalling a more intimate aesthetic, to strap-ons being used between heterosexual couples as well as lesbian couples. Videos featuring cisgender gay male performers or trans performers do not feature in this category.
category. And while the subsuming of “Lesbian” videos under the larger umbrella of “Straight” pornography continues to be problematic, the comments and ratings on those videos show them being viewed by self-identified straight men and lesbian women. Are those women to be condemned for enjoying ‘obviously’ fake performances, or seen as hopelessly co-opted due to their taste in explicit material?

The slipperiness of markers signifying authenticity versus ‘fake’ performances is also seen when Moorman argues that,

While some recent girl-on-girl pornography includes markers of lesbian authenticity such as strap-ons, dirty talk and rough sex, it does not appeal to a sense of community or shared experience through visual and verbal cues such as the figure of the butch, the word “dyke,” or practices such as fisting. (159)

However, my own review of material indicates that practices such as fisting now do appear in the videos categorised under the “Lesbian” tag. Clearly then, we cannot take such community-based cues as absolute or not open to change, or indeed co-optation. Further, we must also interrogate the universalisation of such community cues. Considerations of access, as aggregator websites host a large amount of free material, must also play a part in analysing how such material interfaces with users regardless of its intended audience.

It is with these aspects in mind that I move on to my final category—visual “queer porn.” Facilitated by the Internet, it is a space wherein both performers and producers aim to destabilise the normative categories I have discussed so far. While I am once again wary of privileging one genre of explicit material over another, with ‘subversiveness’ as the only marker of value, this genre does show some of the possibilities of usually fetishised bodies regaining some agency.
Queerying Pornography

Self-identified “Queer Porn” sites position themselves explicitly against the websites described above. These sites are avowedly political, as can be seen by their mission statements, aiming to deconstruct categories that order most aggregator sites:

Begun in 2002 as NoFauxxx.Com, Indie Pornography Revolution was home to a true subcultural shift in sexuality—a deeply needed home for “ladies, artists, and queers” to make the subversive smut they wanted to see in the world. (“Indie Porn Revolution” 2014)

QueerPornography.TV is proud modern sluts, trans guys, trans ladies, genderqueers, cisgendered folks, fags, dykes, tops, bottoms, switches, sadomasochists, perverts, activists, punks, and artists at their kinkiest, raunchiest, filthiest, rawest, most passionate, radical, and real. Their alluring personalities and outrageous performances embody the contradictions inherent in Queer Identity and Queer Desire: they are nasty and romantic, glamorous and natural, creative and spontaneous, personal and political. (“QueerPorn.TV—TROUBLEfilms” 2014)

Queer porn, like lesbian or dyke pornography, depends on the production and maintenance of authenticity to ground its subversive ethos. The difference between it and mainstream visual pornography is not so much in the acts depicted, but the assurance that the performers in the videos are ‘genuinely’ enjoying themselves and the videos themselves are produced in an ethical manner. The sense of community projected is as important as its perception of the fluidity between rigorously defined categories. Moorman’s interview of Courtney Trouble, webmistress of NoFauxxx.com, touches upon this last aspect. For Trouble,

Everything is so fluid, and it all gets lost in the creation to consumption translation anyway—why label it? I also work under the understanding that people do not watch pornography that matches their sexual orientation. (For example, dykes don’t only watch “dyke pornography,” heterosexuals don’t only watch heterosexual pornography). (165)
Moorman does not pursue this thread of discussion but does point to lack of categorisation that is a feature of videos on queer porn websites and the implications of that refusal to label in the manner of larger aggregator sites. Since the writing of the article, Trouble has gone on to establish connections with a number of other queer pornography sites like FTMfucker.com, transgrrrls.com and Lesbiancurves.com.

There is also an aggregator website called Queerporntube.com that functions in much the same manner as the aggregator sites that I have described earlier—providing links to free pornography clips from a number of sources and encouraging people to upload their own. This site also follows the convention of categories that Trouble had objected to in the interview quoted above. Significantly, however, these organisational categories do not use slurs in their terminology and are respectful of the people and sex acts they represent, perhaps showing how such an organisation is not always productive of the hierarchicalisation of desire that the mainstream sites mentioned before produce. Some of the categories include “Sex With A Storyline,” “Lesbian,” “Trans Gay Male,” “Gender Queer,” “Hetero Non-Normative,” “People of Color,” and “Consensual Non-Consent.” It must be noted, however, that if taken without the context that the queer pornography community insists it provides, some of these terms by themselves can be problematic and fetishising.

For instance, NoFauxxx.com’s refusal for their models to be racially marked was seen by Moorman as a pushback against the excessive exoticisation of certain communities by mainstream visual pornography. The category of “People of Colour” might be seen to be working against that, except that within the particular context of the queer pornography community, potential viewers have some reassurance that it is a category used productively to represent those individuals in non-fetishistic ways. This is admittedly not a fool-proof set of standards and does produce a certain amount of judgement on non-white performers that do choose to participate in more mainstream
sites. People habitually use labels to order their experiences, sometimes productively, and while the context of queer pornography certainly allows for a subversive reappraisal of dominant categories, the constant dialectic between mainstream and underground movements, and the possibility of people being present in both simultaneously, must not be overlooked. It is this, as well as Trouble’s quite radical insight into the non-correlation of between what visual pornographies depict and the gender and sexual identities of their audiences that I wish to take forward as I turn to the field of romance novels scholarship.

Dirty Looks/Dirty Books: Theorisations around the Romance Novel

All books can be indecent books,
Though recent books are bolder,
For filth (I’m glad to say) is in,
The mind of the beholder.
—Smut, Tom Lehrer

Producing Genres: Textual Romance/Erotica/Pornography

A notable deviation from the focus on filmic pornography is Jane Juffer’s At Home With Pornography (1998) in which she considers a wide range of materials including self-identified feminist pornography, couples pornography, lingerie advertisements, romance novels, as well as the genre of erotica. In her work, Juffer attempted to move away from the “tired binary” (2) of the pro and anti-pornography debates that had so dominated the field. Her location of the distinctions between pornography/erotica/romance novels as not grounded in any concrete set of identifiable
characteristics, but rather driven by notions of aesthetics as well as questions about
access, is something that I particularly wish to underline. Juffer points out that the
association of the ‘pornographic’ with dangers of censorship and governmental regulation
is something that publishers are highly aware of, and therefore the positioning of explicit
material is often one dictated by economic strategies to maximise visibility, while still
remaining within normative standards of ‘decency,’ especially when displayed in public
spaces like bookshops.

Juffer’s assessment of the literary erotica of the period—such the Susie Bright
edited *Herotica* (1988)—as self-consciously distancing itself from the “falsity” of
mainstream visual pornography’s ideas about women’s sexuality shows how claims of
representing ‘authenticity’ were complex within the textual sphere as well. These
emerged from contemporary debates about women’s sexuality and sexual pleasure and
the privileging of certain sets of aesthetic principles, such as “the valorization of the
clitoral orgasm, the emphasis on the naturalness of female sexuality, and the
reconciliation of fantasy and reality, all of which worked to differentiate erotica from
pornography” (73). This differentiation also simultaneously worked against the genre of
the popular romance novel, which was seen to be hegemonic and regressive in its
representations of (heterosexual) women’s lives and desires. This positioning, however,
was not only a matter of political values, but was also influenced by economic concerns.
For instance, the claim of the *Herotica* series (edited by Bright) as ‘literary’ was crucial
to its survival. It allowed the series to move from a small indie publisher (Down There
Press), to a ‘respectable’ publishing house (Plume) and marketed accordingly.

Juffer notes that while the initial manifesto of the series declared that, “The most
obvious feature of women’s erotic writing is the nature of the woman's arousal. Her path
to orgasm, her anticipation, are front and centre in each story” (quoted in Juffer, 125), the
second volume included depictions of a wide range of sexual fantasies, encompassing
heterosexual, gay, and lesbian scenarios. The series was still aimed explicitly at ‘women,’ but there was a move away from correlating that to any one stable sexual identity. This move is again a radical one, and Juffer does remark on it, pointing out that the series did,

Push at the boundaries of what constitutes women’s erotica by expanding the sexual roles women characters are seen to occupy; yet the stories are said to nevertheless constitute a particular female language. Thus, even though Herotica is still characterized by a claim to establish a particular relationship between critic and reader, aesthetic discourse here intersects with discourses of difference, such as race, class, body type, age, and sexual preference, that undercut the attempt to tie a specific way of writing to women as a homogeneous category. (127)

Unfortunately, Juffer does not pursue this trajectory further, going on to focus on the British erotica series, Black Lace, which was a more mainstream and self-proclaimed heterosexual series that did not interrupt conventional formulations of the ‘woman reader.’ Indeed, there is a surprising scarcity of critical consideration of these and other volumes of erotica that were published at around the same time, perhaps because their overt positioning as literary did succeed, removing them from the purview of both pornography and romance novel studies.

I would argue that this omission is quite significant, in light of the fact that these volumes were specifically linked not just to broad feminist political concerns, but also to the actual practice of women exploring sexual pleasure in an embodied fashion, that is, explicitly tied to masturbation discourses. Juffer traces this connection from early collections of women’s fantasies like Nancy Friday’s My Secret Garden (1973). She argues,

Women’s erotica did not gain the status of a literary genre by proving its ability to exist in a realm of disinterested contemplation. Rather, women’s erotica is a genre meriting literary status precisely because of its grounding in the practice of masturbation. (95-96)
Juffer’s refusal to let the ‘literary,’ or, indeed, the ‘popular,’ deter her from viewing the material produced by both Herotica and the Black Lace series as used explicitly for women’s sexual pleasure is something I will take forward in this chapter.

The practice of publishing collections of, as Juffer terms it, “identity erotica” (128) gradually moved towards more general framings of sexual fantasy, and Bright herself moved on to edit Best American Erotica in 1998. However, the influence of these more explicit collections were felt in the larger industry, with mass paperback romance novel publishers like Harlequin and Mills and Boon commissioning series that were advertised as significantly steamier than those previously published. I would like to link back to Snitow’s (1979) contention here that the popular romance novel was always functioning as a pornographic text, so the introduction of explicitness was not really a change in their function, so to speak, but rather a response to the evolving ways in which women approached their bodies and sexual pleasure. If pornography studies has shown a consistent privileging of the filmic medium over print, romance novel studies have largely ignored the usage of these texts by women for sexual pleasure, adding to the—romance is for the mind, pornography is for the body—split.

**The EmBodied Pleasures Of Reading**

Written material as pornography is often positioned, as Laura Kipnis (1996) did, as “pornography of the past” (viii), before the accessibility of visual media improved. Even in spaces where one might expect a deeper examination of this generic assumption, that is, work devoted to women’s consumption of pornography as this has historically been seen to be, it remains under-examined. For instance, in the introduction to The Feminist Porn Book (Taormino 2012), the importance of women’s erotic writing, particularly in
light of E.L. James’ controversial success with *Fifty Shades Of Grey* (2012), is noted as extremely significant. However, the book itself goes on to focus exclusively on filmed pornography. Nevertheless, even a cursory glance at the circulation of romance novels/erotica shows that there has only been an increase in this sector over the years, even before the spectacular success of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. With the advent of e-readers, it has become even easier for sexually explicit novels to be downloaded and accessed. As Cassie Murdoch (2012) notes,

> Whether you like your sex scenes all loaded down with romance and HEA (Happily Ever After), which many of these stories have plenty of, or whether you prefer dirty whorish sex with no lurve involved, you can soak it up via your Kindle or iPad free from the judging eyes of your fellow subway riders or soccer practice watchers. As Brenda Knight of erotica publisher Cleis Press said, e-readers “are the ultimate brown paper wrapper.” (para 3)

As the above quote underlines, the range of sexually explicit writing available to women readers at the current moment is immense. In light of this, the insistence that the fact that this writing is positioned within a larger narrative or story structure means that it somehow loses its pornographic function is puzzling. This is not adopt the oversimplified position once more that ‘women read’ and ‘men watch’ because such generalisations have long been proven false. Yet, surely there is room within this paradigm to acknowledge that ‘women also read’ in order to experience sexual arousal. In my own experience, conversations around romance novels with my peers while growing up and through college life certainly took into account aspects of the narrative involved, but the primary ‘rating,’ as it were, was assigned according to the ‘hotness’ of the sex scenes.

While research on the romance novel has certainly diversified since the early attacks on them as perpetuating sexist ideologies on an unaware mass of readers (Millett 1968; Firestone 1970; Greer 1970), the notions of the pleasure to be found in reading
them has largely followed (white) heterosexist conventions and singular reader-identity models (Sonnet 1999). The pleasure to be found by readers with regard to romance novels has been most commonly conceptualised in the mode of escapist fantasy from their dreary day-to-day lives (Radway 1984) or dealing with the issues (straight and mostly white) women face in complex ways to offer reconciliation strategies based on the temporary and symbolic (Modleski 1982). The foundational power of both Janice Radway and Tania Modleski has been such that these positions have persisted in most research on the subject. Research on the romance novel has moved towards more situated analyses in recent years, working against the idea that there is no differentiation among the various texts available (Ramsdell 2012; Fletcher 2016).68

What remains scarce is any examination of the embodied pleasures that readers may gain from the romance novel. Most analyses of the sexual aspect of the narratives inevitably shift into considerations of how the erotic scenes play out in traditional scripted ways that reinforce dominant patriarchal notions about women’s sexuality, coding female sexual responses as passive and reactive to aggressive male desire.

For instance, in their examination of sixteen “erotic novels” published in the late 1980’s and 1990’s, G. Genevieve Patthey-Chavez, Lindsay Clare and Madeleine Youmans (1996) declare that,

As texts of desire they provide women with a means to claim their right to pleasure; at the same time, that discursive conquest of pleasure is secretive, masked by the

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68 Research that has concentrated on the variation of material available within genres has also happened within pornography research. In their 15/03/2017 8:41:00 AMexamination of gay viewers of visual pornography, Simon Corneu and Emily van der Meulen observed how viewers in their sample group categorised visual pornographic texts as “vanilla,” “hardcore,” “raunch,” “amateur,” as well as several other categories. This is interesting because it points to an assumption in a lot of research that all visual pornography functions in similar ways, as well as, of course, the assumption that there is only one kind of pornographic material that is used by viewers. This bias can be seen in Feona Attwood’s 2005 review of literature pertaining to the ways in which qualitative analyses have approached the category of the use of “sexually explicit materials.” While the title of the paper hints at the broadening of the category of the pornographic, it is apparent that the overwhelming focus is on visual media.
history of romances as a collection of somewhat fanciful but chaste love stories, disguised by the very marginality of the romance as women’s reading and, finally, buried in pages and pages of story—as a kind of camouflage. It is not entirely easy to find sex scenes in romance novels; they have to be read in their entirety before they yield their erotic content. (80)

In analyses such as these, the pornographic content of the novels are seen as distinct from the narrative and something that is hard to find. Thinking back to my recollection of reading such texts, it is difficult not to feel humour at the contention that the sex scenes are hard to find! This would not be so once the books have been read a few times, I suspect. Other examinations of the erotic novel, while conceding that they are far more explicit and experimental than before, are more concerned with their participation in post-feminist discourses. As Esther Sonnet’s (1999) examination of the Black Lace series shows,

The new ‘post-feminist’ sexuality therefore is a marker of the continued disenfranchisement of a female sexual self, a split so profound that it can be commodified and offered for consumption on the same terms that feminist analysis has criticized male pornography for its alienated view of human sexuality. Further, the ‘pleasure’ of a female self as a sexual self bent solely on sexual gratification is not without its ‘danger’ in reducing female selfhood. (180)

As can be seen from the above analyses, the sexual pleasure of female characters in romance novels is almost never evaluated in terms of any affective, bodily response that it may produce in their readers, and any ‘pleasure’ they afford is implicated in larger considerations of capitalist commodifications of female sexuality. It is not my intention to declare that romance novels do not play on and reify traditional gender roles and have a sometimes troubled relationship with the depiction of the ‘modern woman.’ Nor do I claim that women readers of such texts do not have to negotiate with these issues, both in their everyday lives and within the stories themselves. However, as I shall explore below, readers also bring complex reading identity positions to texts and use them in different
ways, including for sexual arousal. Further, these analyses fail to account for models of sexual arousal and pleasure that might incorporate narrative and explicitness, without either taking precedence. In my examination of the phenomenon of the fanfiction kinkmeme, I find this idea quite explicitly foregrounded, with fan notions of ‘kink’ incorporating both explicit sex as well as narrative tropes.

**Diversity in Reading Positions: Gender, Sexuality and Racial Identity**

While research on young readers has indicated that girls tend to adopt multiple reading positions in texts, not always correlated to their gender and sexual identity (Fetterley 1978; C. Bradford 2008; Honeyman 2013; W. E. Jones 2014), this possibility has remained largely unexplored when investigating how women may read romance novels. Laura Kinsale in her essay, “The Androgynous Reader: Point of View in the Romance” (1992), though still working from a heterosexual model, complicates Modleski and Radway’s ideas and posits that women read a romance narrative from multiple positions, citing her own experience of writing the texts as well her readers’ insistence on the inclusion of the male point of view. While again this argument is stymied by the insistence on a heterosexist frame of analysis, it does open up models of interpretation.

Andrea Wood (2008) goes further in her interrogation on the possibilities of “queering” the romance novel, noting that,

By and large, scholars persist in studying and defining romance according to heteronormative paradigms that ignore or relegate LGBTQ texts and their readers to the margins as exceptions to the rule. In part, this tendency has been fuelled by feminist focus on mass-marketed texts like Harlequins and problematic assumptions about the gender and sexuality of readers. While some of this work on romance provides relevant insights into certain kinds of texts and reader demographics, they consistently ignore queer theoretical possibilities and queer texts themselves. (12)
Wood’s larger project intersects with mine in her examination of LGBTQ texts of various kinds published online that, connected to participatory reading practices, challenge the heterosexist definitions of the romance genre. She also questions the “studious” (24) differentiation between the categories of romance and pornography that most analysts on the genre reify. However, it is her contention about the always already existing readers of normative romance novels that I find most interesting here. She cites Stephanie Burley (2009) to support her argument that the homosocial world of romance reading already queers simplistic formulations of reading practices. Burley maintains, “When we find the heroines irresistible, love our favourite authors, and experience close personal relationships to our fellow readers of erotic literature, we are in fact engaged in a homoerotic practice” (quoted in Wood, 24). Building on this, Wood argues that, “Ignoring obvious possibilities for queer identifications with or desire for the heroine on the part of female readers is a rather telling and problematic omission” (24). I would go further here, maintaining that connecting point of view with reader identification and further reader gender and sexual identity is a process fraught with the possibilities of rupture. Wood goes on to examine certain published romance and graphic novels featuring gay and lesbian protagonists respectively, whose very existence disrupts normative ideas about how a romance novel works.

It is of little surprise then that slash fanfiction theorists like Penley (1992) have also noted the possibilities of rupture, particularly in line with Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis’ 1986 essay “Fantasy and Origins of Sexuality.” She locates the importance of the essay particularly to film studies, where it has allowed the idea that “unconscious identification with the characters or the scenario is not necessarily dependent on gender” (quoted in De Lauretis 1994, 140). Penley’s theorisation of slash fanfiction itself is not unproblematic, and I will interrogate it further in my examination of the kinkmeme.
however her intervention here is key. Indeed, Modleski herself in a new introduction to the 2008 edition of *Loving With A Vengeance* rather grudgingly notes that, “[W]ere I to write *Loving with a Vengeance* today, in light of the essay by Laplanche and Pontalis as well as of work by gay and lesbian scholars, I would have to acknowledge the possibility of cross-gender and cross-sexuality identifications” (14).

What has surprised me is that Penley’s work, and that of other analysts of fan writing, especially slash fanfiction, remains the most likely to talk about the masturbatory potential of written sexually explicit material. As I have noted earlier, the possibilities of Internet publishing has led to a boom in sexually explicit textual materials of all kinds, from the gay- and lesbian-centred narratives that Wood examines, to increases in the circulation of more ‘conventional’ novels driven by the advent of e-readers. Also to be considered along with these is the presence of amateur writers on sites like Xnxxx.com, as I mentioned earlier, as well as platforms such as Literotica.com and Asstr.org. Susanna Passonen’s (2010) examination of the Literotica.com in “Good Amateurs: Erotica Writings and Notions of Quality” in *Porn.com: Making Sense of Internet Pornography*, draws on theorisation of fan writing by Penley (1992) and Driscoll (2006) to analyse notions of amateur writing, the community that these texts are embedded in, as well as the intersections of the categories of “romance” and “erotica.” Passonen further traces the lack of engagement with how erotica affects readers to a general “scholarly unwillingness to address bodily reactions to texts.” She points out that this,

[… J has posed interesting challenges for considerations of pornography and erotica. If acknowledged at all, their sexual dynamics have, for the most part, been analysed on the general level of “experience” detached from actual reading bodies, even though these sensations are obvious motivation for reading such texts. However the sensations and experiences conveyed in Literotica feedback and reviews are decidedly personal and intimate. (147)
Indeed, the nature of feedback on Internet forums—in the form of textual descriptions of emotional and bodily responses—does make this “unwillingness” rather stark. Reading communities, like those found on sites like Goodreads.com, now offer the possibility of examining reader responses to sexually explicit material without placing them in environments like focus groups or interviews, where they may feel pressured to give studied answers about their responses to such writing. The romance novel section, or virtual “shelf,” as it is termed on Goodreads.com, is illustrative of the well-documented variety of the genre with *Fifty Shades of Grey* being listed alongside *Romeo and Juliet* and *Sense and Sensibility*, along with contemporary romances which feature heterosexual, gay and lesbian protagonists. Books are rated by readers on a five-point scale, with an additional option to leave more detailed reviews. Readers are observed to use a wide range of media to communicate their feelings about a novel, from casting characters by providing pictures of how they conceive of them, to using animated gifs to communicate feelings of arousal or disgust.

In my survey of the top heterosexual, gay and lesbian novels rated on the site, I found that reviewers used a variety of strategies to communicate their bodily responses to a particular text. For instance, one user, identified as Tough Critic Book Reviews, responded to the heterosexual romance novel *A Mighty Storm* (2012) by Samantha Towle in a highly descriptive fashion.

They exclaimed,

**WARNING:** You will need to hydrate yourself before you read *The Mighty Storm*. You are going to sweat from the sweltering heat between Tru & Jake, the physical intimacy will leave you damp and dripping, the emotional heart-ache will have you in tears! (Tough Critic Book Reviews 2012)
This was also seen in reviews of books with gay and lesbian protagonists. For instance, another reader, J Riverina Romantics, responded to gay romance *Hot Head* (2011) by Damon Seude saying,

Holy sex on a stick Batman, these guys had me panting… Do yourself a favour and pick up this book...and if you are home alone—stock up on batteries first. (~E~Riverina 2012)

In the case of lesbian romance novel *Better Off Red* (2011) by Rebekah Weatherspoon, a reviewer commented,

And the sex scenes were sizzling hot; I did not expect that they would be so, uhm, INTERESTING, to a person who doesn’t swing that way. They are. *fans self, gets cold drink* (Diehl 2012)

Clearly then, many readers wish to communicate their very physical responses to the romance texts listed and often cross presumed dividing lines based on gender and sexual identificatory positions.

Most often in analyses of such texts, there is a tendency to maintain that the sexual aspects are just not that important to readers, and it is the emotional engagement with the characters that is the true secret of their success (K. J. M. Baker 2012). As I have demonstrated through the above examples, to insist on this rather tired binary between the so-called ‘emotional’ and the ‘physical’ aspects of texts is reductive. Women readers clearly use these texts for physically expressed arousal, responding most volubly to those that use both sexually explicit and non-explicit material to heighten the experience. To insist that one is somehow more important than the other, or to ignore the very blatant sexual aspects of a text, is to collapse into reductive models of how the category of the ‘pornographic’ may be conceptualised.
It is also vital here to talk about the ways in which readers’ racial identities have largely been subsumed within this theoretical discourse. As Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey noted in their introduction to *Romance Revisited* (1995),

As in other areas of feminist work, white agendas have dominated discussions of love and romance. Despite the centrality of colonial and postcolonial ‘others’ (countries, cultures, religions, races, ethnicities and skin colours) to romantic discourses, there has been a stunning silence about such issues within standard feminist debates about romance. [...] This lacuna could be said to have reinforced the universalising power of romantic discourse which would have us believe that romantic love is an inevitable product of the ‘biological fact’ of sexual difference. (22)

This was interrogated to some extent in that particular volume of essays with Kathryn Perry, Inge Blackman, Helen (charles) and Felly Nkweto Simmonds making critical interventions around axes of sexuality, race and class, but the larger normalisation of the romance novel as essentially centred on white women characters as a genre has persisted within broad-based interrogations of how the genre works for a universalised audience. As Belinda Edmondson (2007) pointed out when analysing specific imprints such as *Arabesque* (launched in 1994 and eventually acquired by *Harlequin*) within a larger history of romance writing aimed at Black readers in the U.S.A and the Caribbean, the aims and histories of these texts were intrinsically connected to both the personal and the political. Edmondson’s observation of the intermingling of the romantic/erotic divide in this context also echoes my larger concerns quite astutely.

She notes,

My conflation of the romantic with the erotic bears some explanation here, since central to my argument is the point that for the black communities of the United States and the Caribbean, it is precisely the eroticism of the conventional romance that must be recovered and highlighted, because it is the black erotic that has long been taboo in the conventional black romantic script. (194)
This analysis once again points to the differential ways in which the emotional/physical divide is problematised across reading positions. However, such specificity is held to be an exception to the (white, heterosexual) norm and considerations of how such readers may also participate in reading outside these particular imprints has not been considered.

This is not to say that issues of race within the romance novel have not formed the focus of analysis at all. There has been a welcome diversification in scholarship in recent times but these efforts have centred mainly around the depictions of othered, ‘dangerous’ masculinity accruing around figures like the orientalised ‘Sheikh,’ especially with regard to the U.S.A’s continuing fraught relationship with the Middle East and its associations with terrorism (Teo 1999; J. Taylor 2007; Jarmakani 2015). In terms of diverse audiences there has also been some attention given to postcolonial ones located in India with regard to their relationship to reading English-language romance novels (published by companies such as Mills and Boon and Harlequin). These relationships have mainly been analysed around readers negotiating ideas of love and intimacy through texts disconnected from their own social realities (Puri 1997; Parameswaran 2002). This has had the effect of once again placing them as discrete audiences, bracketed off from mainstream reading publics through geographical and cultural distance.

This bracketing off also extends to the actual marketing and shelving of “multicultural romance,” as it often referred, to in the current moment. If film critic Celine Parreñas Shimizu (2007) once noted that, “porn shelves are organized by race” (140), this also has resonances for the ways in which romance novels are categorised in bookstores (Faircloth 2015). This is being remedied to some extent due to the effects of internet-enabled publishing platforms and e-reader-based audiences that have, in some cases, allowed independent authors to break out of such prescribed niches. As much as these
changes have affected reading habits and the possibility of queer storylines, as I have previously traced, they have also allowed individual authors to include more racially diverse characters in traditionally white-centric genres like the historical romance, from whom risk averse publishers have shied away in the past.

As stated before, my aim in tracing these specific trajectories in both pornography and romance novel studies is to show how the slippages between the discrete categories of romantic/erotic have been shored up and how such formulations have not allowed for a flexibility and fluidity in reading/viewing positions across gender, sexuality and racial identity. I now move on to my analysis of the fanfiction kinkmeme to highlight how the interactions of fan communities are particularly useful in illuminating how these splits in theorisation are further undermined. I will locate this discussion within considerations of the recorded knowledge of the diversity of demographics of these communities with regard to gender and sexuality. I will also interrogate the limitations of these formulations specifically with regard to racial identity.

Come on! How is that a kink? Kinkmemes and constructions of Desire

Implications of fluid identity positions within fanfiction communities

I would first like to situate myself within the larger field of fanfiction studies. As I have noted before, the field is a broad one and fanfiction is one of the most studied genres of fanwork with foundational texts establishing it as one of the most identifying features
of media fandom participation. It has been approached from an equally broad variety of
theoretical standpoints, the most influential of which have coalesced around it as a kind
of literary writing, produced by a community of ‘women,’ which functions as a critique
and expansion around the axes of gender and sexuality in popular cultural texts (Russ
1985; Lamb and Veith 1986; Bacon-Smith 1992; Penley 1992; Pugh 2005; Derecho 2006;
Coppa 2006; Lackner et al 2006; Busse and Lothian 2009).

The communitarian underpinning of these texts has also been theorised as a key
aspect of their production, circulation and reception. As I have noted earlier as well, the
focus on fanfiction as a democratised form of writing—by women and for women—has
remained central to how scholars approach these spaces. As such, these analyses have
repeatedly underlined the value of such writing as the genre routinely comes under attack
from mainstream commentators who often see it as a form of plagiarism or
underdeveloped writing by adolescents or as evidence of disturbing erotic adventuring
(Jamison 2013; Coppa 2014).

This must be seen in the larger context of the interest feminist and gender studies
have had in highlighting the historical prejudices women’s writing and leisure activities
have faced in the patriarchal mainstream from their interest in novels in the 1800’s to
their love of pop music in the contemporary moment (Henderson 1989; S. M. Shaw 1994;
Driscoll 1999; Fairclough 2015). As I have detailed in chapter four, perhaps more than
anything else, it has been the subversive potential of fanfiction as writing against
hegemonic popular cultural narratives surrounding conceptualisations of gender and
sexuality that has interested scholars in this genre. As Anne Jamison argues in her
introduction to Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking over the World (2013),

Fanwriting communities enjoy and consume commercial culture voraciously,
celebrate it, even as they challenge and transform its products for their sometimes
radical purposes. […] Persuaded by the presence of favorite characters, even the
least adventurous readers sometimes embrace stories featuring alternative sexualities and genders or enjoy more stylistically and thematically challenging material than they would otherwise have turned to. (22)

It is this interest that has also motivated a concentration around the category of slash fanfiction, which pairs two (usually cisgender) male characters together in a romantic/sexual relationship. Again, as I have noted in chapter four, early theorisation focussed on why (then presumed) heterosexual women would read and write such material. The perceived shockingness of the disjuncture between who these women were and what sexual/romantic pairings in which they were interested therefore follows in the same assumed correlations that I have also traced in pornography and romance novel studies. I have already queried the limits of subversion as articulated in theorisations around slash fanfiction, but here I would like to talk about this aspect in a slightly different fashion.

As noted earlier, Penley’s (1992) theorisation of slash fanfiction involved the notion of multiple points of identification within a given text. With regard to stories about the characters of Kirk and Spock in the Star Trek fandom, she used a psychoanalytical model to posit, “In the fantasy one can be Kirk or Spock (a possible phallic identification) and also still have (as sexual objects) either or both of them, since, as heterosexuals, they are not unavailable to women” (7). Of course today, as knowledge of the participants of media fandom has diversified, it is generally accepted that there is a broad spectrum of identification in terms of both gender identification (though still female-allied) and sexuality in these spaces (Melannen, Dreamwidth 2010; Centrumlumina, Tumblr 2013). This has had the effect of further identifying slash fanfiction as a queer practice, in this case turning around the nature of relationships within these communities as well as the idea of writing through differential embodiment (Lackner et al 2006; Busse and Lothian 2009; A, Rachel 2015).
However, what has not been taken into consideration with such diversification of knowledge is the fact that this paradigm shift affects not just our conceptualisations of slash fandom participants but also those that move between the (largely artificial) generic boundaries between gen, het, slash, femslash and those relationship combinations that overlap these different categories such as genderswap, threesomes and polyamory. As I note in my (forthcoming) co-written study of femslash fandoms,

Since femslash fandoms have been assumed to be dominated by queer women from their inception, there has been very little impetus to examine the motives for their engagement in such activities. In actual fannish practice, particularly with the convergence of fannish activity on shared platforms like Twitter and Tumblr, there has been a noticeable engagement of fans with differing entry points into the common fannish universe. This has lead to a significant disruption of long accepted narratives about what has constituted ‘visible’ or ‘significant’ fan activity. (Moitra and Pande 2017: 2.3)

This is not to say that there is nothing to be gained from paying attention to differences in how fanfiction works with male-embodied and female-embodied characters and tropes, but there is real danger from seeing such trends in isolation, rather than as in a continuum with regard to the larger fannish universe.

Slash has also been theorised as feminist pornography (Russ 1985); as women projecting their desire for “equality” onto male homosexual relationships (Lamb and Veith 1986); and as foregrounding intimacy (Woledge 2006). Camille Bacon-Smith’s (1992) ethnographic approach highlighted the importance of community bonds in slash fandom, while Catherine Salmon and Donald Symon’s (2001) controversial and rather reductive reading was based on an evolutionary biology model. More recently, scholars have moved beyond this pigeonholing of the genre and have explored its links to other modes of writing such as parody (Booth 2014) and commercially published romantic fiction (Morrissey 2014). As I have already traced, none of these analyses have taken into account the effect of racial differences within their theorisations.
The fluidity of participants as they move from one genre of fanfiction to another also informs my approach to these spaces. Individual fans certainly might have certain preferences, entry points, and experiences depending on their fannish engagements, but these are rarely watertight compartments. As my first chapter illustrated, the histories of fan activity are heavily biased towards recording and valuing the activities of white women fans based in the U.S.A. and the U.K. This selective mythmaking has also been seen in the focus on slash fandoms at the expense of other, interconnected, areas of fan interest. A recent instance of this process was seen when the online magazine *Vulture* showcased fanfiction in a lengthy feature (“It’s a Fanmade World: Your Guide to the Fanfiction Explosion” 2015). Part of the feature was a section entitled “A fanfiction Syllabus: Ten classics that cover the history, breadth, and depth of the form, with original custom-designed covers” (Reisman 2015). The fanfiction that was included had been collated through consultation with long-time fans and did indeed list some excellent examples. However, the list was dominated by texts that focussed on cisgender white men, with no femslash text included at all. This erasure was then criticised heavily by both femslashers and non-white fans of other genres, who pointed out how this selective mythmaking and historiography about what is considered ‘noteworthy’ about fan texts perpetuates and reinscribes erasures and biases within fan communities (allofthefeelings, Tumblr 2015).

It is keeping these contexts in mind that I have chosen the site of the fanfiction kinkmeme to ground my analysis in this chapter. It is a space that, in a sense, foregrounds the slipperiness and tension between these generic divisions and the fanwriters and readers than move between them. To explain the functioning of this space briefly—a kinkmeme is generally hosted on either Dreamwidth.org or Livejournal.com, both of whose comment structure allows for specific requests to be put up and responded to in a linked manner. The first kinkmeme was one started on a personal livejournal and was
based around the anime *Bleach* on May 7 or 8, 2007 (“Kink Meme - Fanlore” 2016). It is very possible that it was not initially intended to go beyond that particular user and her friend-circle, but the idea caught on, and soon, other fandoms started to host their own as well. While fans would sometimes host them on their personal journals, common practice gradually became to create separate journals. Kinkmemes function on a prompt-and-respond model where commentators leave a prompt, usually a pairing and a ‘kink,’ though some prompts can get quite long and detailed, and other participants can choose to respond with a story. Requests are often seconded by other commenters to express approval and are seen as signs of encouragement to potential fillers.

Crucially for my argument, kinkmemes are generally open to all pairing permutations and combinations. While there are certainly more and less popular pairings in each fandom with a trend towards slash generating the most volume of writing, there is usually no restriction imposed on the kinds of character pairings allowed. Following this pattern, while quite a bit of the fanfiction I will discuss here will be slash due to its popularity, I wish to show how its ‘uniqueness’ is not so much because it offers something completely different to writers and readers, but about what it makes most *obvious* (to borrow Williams’ ideas on pornography). That is to say, correlations between sexual acts and gender identity depicted in sexually explicit material and those of its viewers/readers are largely unstable. And further, theoretical models that base such identification positions on simplistic hetero-centric and cissexist gender identity formulations are flawed.

While incorporating aspects of more conventional fanfiction communities and modes of production, I argue that the kinkmeme offers a unique opportunity to show the operations of the slippages I have talked about so far. Additionally, through tracing how fan communities have negotiated with the category of kink, I argue that such operations display how binary conceptualisations that divide the romantic and sexually explicit
material are reductive when conceptualising the category of the pornographic, especially as linked to sexual arousal. I will also consider how kinkmemes have impacted larger fandom practices around ideas of anonymity, communication, conflict, and ownership of ‘deviant’ desires.

My broader argument, however, is not focussed primarily on only the taboo as linked to fannish ideas of kink, as that would lead me right back to notions of classification based on greater or lesser ‘subversiveness’ which would be counterproductive. Rather, I wish to show how the larger category of fannish kink has come to encapsulate a whole range of tropes, from HEA (Happily ever After) narratives, to BDSM, to bestiality, to Harlequin style “arranged marriage” shenanigans. To accomplish this, I will focus on the kinkmemes around the U.S.A.-based television shows Supernatural (2005-present) and Glee (2009-2015) as well as the movie Star Trek (2009). Before doing so, however, I first want to contextualise this discussion by considering how other fanfiction communities have engaged more formally with the category of kink, focussing on the “kink_bingo challenge” community in particular.

Have you thought this through? Fan engagements with Kink

When engaging with the possibility of cross-sexuality and gender identity models in reading the romance novel, Modleski (1982) resists the notion that these positions are open-ended, stressing that readers would have to go through significant questioning of their own inner psychological processes before “unearthing” their “true” responses to texts. She points to an example where Biddy Martin, a lesbian critic, examines her reactions to a particular sports figure, working through multiple layers of self-analysis before attaining a new level of self-knowledge (17). In Modleski’s opinion, this level of
self-examination is only available to the highly self-aware, more specifically, only those who have been equipped with the necessary critical tools to analyse such deeply subconscious processes. This is a common script in examinations of popular cultural participants, where the trained critic, who is unmoved by the source text and therefore objective, reads and analyses the reactions of unaware readers to come to a ‘true’ conclusion about their motivations. The critic may turn this gaze upon themselves, but that kind of self-examination is not available to all. I find this a contentious and elitist idea in a broader sense, but certainly when it comes to any discussion of fanfiction communities where the level of self-examination is high and constant. These examinations rarely come to any broadly accepted conclusions and inevitably have their own individual blind spots, particularly regarding the role of racial identity in the ways in which fandom trends are shaped. However, as I have pointed out in my earlier chapters, the polyphonic nature of these spaces do allow for these formulations to be critiqued in turn.

One such example is the “kink_bingo challenge” that has been hosted on Livejournal (and then Dreamwidth) from 2008 to the present. This was initially a fanfiction writing focused challenge (fanwork like art and videos were later also allowed) that was organised around the idea of bingo cards as shown below. The challenge runs every year for about 3 months (from June to September), with various non-monetary incentives being offered for fulfilling challenges.
Participants are encouraged to fill in as many squares as they can, and after the main challenge is over, are encouraged to post their stories to the community even if they have not completed their card. Kink_bingo has always been a highly self-conscious forum, with fan creators engaged in breaking down what various kinks mean to them. Cards initially listed activities that would fit into more conventional ideas of kink as can be seen above, but the community has engaged in significant amounts of dialogue around making the challenge as accessible to as many people as possible. In the 2011 challenge for example, new cards that featured “asexual friendly” categories of kink were introduced and new achievement and incentive categories were announced, with special prizes being earmarked for participants who featured “underrepresented communities.” The kink_bingo moderators introduced the latter by saying that,
We’ve inaugurated the “Underrepresented Identities in Kink” category because—well—many of these identity categories are underrepresented in kink; identity is an extremely important factor in understanding what a kink means to a particular person. *So more diversity in representation of identity, in addition to being a good thing in itself, will necessarily mean more diversity in the representation of kinks and their meanings.*

The goal of these achievements is to a) encourage more kinky fanworks about often-ignored characters and identities, and b) encourage more representation of these minority identities at kink_bingo. For more info on identity and kink, check out the Identity and Kink section of the kink_wiki general resources page. It’s up to you to responsibly decide whether a given character belongs to one of these identity categories. Quite often, it is possible for the fanartist to reimagine characters as, for example, disabled, trans, genderqueer, or asexual, even if they don’t belong to those identity categories in canon. We also happily accept Racebending Revenge-style fanworks to fill prompts for a chromatic characters bingo. (kink_bingo_mods, Livejournal 2011; my emphasis)

The post goes on to discuss modes of writing around other underrepresented categories such as “Fat pornography,” explaining why they choose to use that term as well as providing resources so that participants may gain information about how to write respectfully about those communities. Certainly then, the participants and moderators of kink_bingo are engaged in a highly self-aware and self-reflexive practice, deconstructing their own attitudes towards the category of kink within the boundaries of the challenge. Their tracking of underrepresented identities shows an awareness of their marginalisation within fandom spaces and attempts to create an atmosphere that would encourage participants to engage with them while also providing resources. This is not to frame this community as a perfect or activist space, but to show how fannish negotiations around contested issues can change productively. As I have already argued in chapter four, these negotiations seem to “glitch” more often than work, but I continue to believe that kink_bingo does provide a good template of creating inclusive spaces.

It is to be noted, however, that the kinks tackled in the challenge do continue to fit into conventional framings of the term, even when adapted to alternative models. Also,

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69 This is a reference to characters of colour. The term chromatic has been coined by some fans in an effort to move away from the more U.S.A-centric “person of colour” formulation.
the community is not an anonymous space as participants have to be able to be identified to be awarded incentives and to claim their completed bingo challenges. I will now move on to an examination of the disruption of both those criteria within the framework of the kinkmeme, particularly the effect of anonymity. I want to stress here that these differential modes of fan engagement with the categories of kink have occurred simultaneously.

Anonymity and Kinkmemes

Examinations of kinkmemes are still quite rare, and where they have been undertaken, they remain fandom specific without taking into account the ways in which they have impacted fandom dynamics as a whole (Wall 2010; Ellison 2013). One of the key factors in these exchanges has been the effect of anonymity. While not a feature of initial kinkmemes, anonymity (at least as an option if not a requirement) has now become common to most of them. This has led to a much greater amount of experimentation—in terms of specific prompts if not which characters remain in focus—around what is requested and written. As one fan writes, drawing from her own experience, this has led to a lessening of inhibition around ‘taboo’ sex acts requested and also to a difference in the nature of feedback:

Having written slash pre-kinkmeme and post-kinkmeme, I can tell you one thing that’s changed: writers used to be mainly inhibited by fear that their story might be too outrageous. Now that everyone is able to post outrageously kinky things as Anons, people have instead become more inhibited by the unprecedented number of complaints that are levelled by other fans with the privilege of going Anon. [....] Back in those days [pre-2002], it was a much bigger deal to criticize things you didn’t like in fic, because you didn’t want to be That Fan, who pissed in everyone’s cornflakes. Very few fandoms had fics in the triple digits, so most slash readers would hope that a lousy writer got better over time, rather than criticize her and risk scaring her away entirely. Now that readers can go Anon, complaints are more common (though I wouldn’t go so far as to say ubiquitous). (berlynn_wohl, AO3 2011)
This summary encapsulates several issues that I argue are key to any understanding of contemporary fanwriting communities. Firstly, while the commentator sees this as unique to slash writing practices, this trend is also reflected in het and femslash writing. As Hannah Ellison’s (2011) examination of the *Glee* kinkmeme shows, both the femslash pairings of Rachel Berry (Lea Michele) and Quinn Fabray (Dianna Agron), and Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera) and Brittany Pierce (Heather Morris), prompted a significant volume of requests that placed them in explicitly experimental sexual situations. These included not only common found ‘kinky’ tropes such as BDSM, somnophillia, gangbangs, scat, and body modification, but also variations around genitalia such as the phenomenon of G!P or girl!penis.

I mention this last trope in particular because so far, the academic discussion around the genderplay that fanwriters explore in their writing has concentrated mainly on male-embodied characters, seeing this as unique to slash writing as mentioned in my last chapter (Busse and Lothian 2009). My point in disrupting this formulation is to highlight that the implications of “genderfuck” or “genderbending,” as the practice is referred to in fan parlance, extends beyond just male slash centric spaces. Once again, to see the trend in isolation misses how it links to other tropes that are evolving in the same sites, such as that of the kinkmeme.

Secondly, I’d like to point to the fact that the operation of anonymity has allowed a greater range of expression and commentary than was previously possible within fandom’s intensely social structure. Specifically, an increased level of criticism has been observed across these spaces. As Karen Hellekson (2009) has noted, the “gift economy” that is characteristic of fandom production, whereby fans create content for free, has historically depended on a feedback loop of encouragement from other fans. Though generally framed in celebratory ways, this economy has not functioned without its own
biases as I have pointed out in my discussion of fandom histories in chapters one and two, my analysis of the effects of changes in fandom platforms in chapter three, and my discussion of fan-antagonisms in chapter four. The kinkmeme is reflective of these trends wherein both fanwriters and readers (this line is quite blurred in these spaces) have become more vocal in expressing their opinions about these texts. Kinkmemes have dealt with this increased vocality by disallowing “kink bashing,” or negative reactions to prompts, and encouraged a “Your Kink is not My Kink, And That’s Ok” attitude. The latter formulation has been an approach that has long been a cornerstone of the functioning of fanwriting communities in particular. It encourages individual fans to seek out what they enjoy without declaring that other tropes or pairings are inherently ‘bad’ or ‘wrong.’

It is certainly easy to see the value of such an axiom, or fandom algorithm as I have termed it in chapter four, as it follows on from more general assumptions about the operations of free speech and the wariness about moral policing around fan attachments to certain characters and pairings. Nevertheless, as I have already illustrated, it is also important to note that these tenets have not been uncontested. To give a further example, while most common-use fanwriting spaces such as archival sites and kinkmemes now ask that certain issues (usually rape and sexual assault, but these have expanded) to be flagged or warned for appropriately, this was not a (tenuous) consensus that was reached easily or without considerable acrimony. As I have already discussed in my last chapter, the relationship that these fandom algorithms have with the specific debates around racial identity in fandom has been similarly acrimonious. However, at this stage, what I’d like

70 One of the most influential discussions is known as ‘Trigger Warning Debate 2009.’ Among the issues discussed were the highly personal nature of triggers and to what extent authors’ responsibility to warn extended. Some commentators saw the demands as a form of censorship, especially when multiple issues that ranged from consensual BDSM sex to sexual assault were being grouped together. The pejorative association of warnings with specific ‘morally grey’ areas, such as pairings that revolved around individuals with high age differentials or uneven power dynamics were also discussed. These debates are far from over, though warnings or at least notes that warn readers that the writer specifically chooses not to warn, are now more common (“Trigger Warning Debate (2009) - Fanlore” 2016).
to underline is that this increased vocality has been seen to have an effect on fanwriters even outside the issues of racial representation in fanworks. This has also been remarked upon by Larsen and Zubernis (2012b) in their study of the Supernatural fandom in which anonymity was seen to operate in varied ways including aggression and bullying but also at times facilitating a questioning of established hierarchies (120-121).

Another aspect of anonymity was, and remains, the threat of legal action to fan communities that explore sexually explicit material or alternative sexualities. Fanfiction itself has always had an uneasy relationship to source texts, particularly with creators who are opposed to transformative work. Fanwriters have also been the target of legal action from studios and publishers (Katyal 2006; Tushnet 2007; Schwabach 2009). Indeed, it was partly one such action that led to the establishment to the Organisation Of Transformative Works in 2009. Some fanwriters have also been the target of legal action in their professional lives due to fanwork being classified as obscene. I now move on to show how while more ‘edgy’ modes of kink continue to be relevant to this discussion, fan communities also negotiate beyond these binaries.

Bed-sharing is such a kink of mine! Differential modes of fannish kink

My focus in this section will be on the kinkmeme of the U.S.A.-based television show Supernatural. The show (currently in its eleventh season) has generated an intense amount of fan activity. Its plot focuses on the fate of two brothers, Dean and Sam Winchester (Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki), and their fight against various

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71 In one episode in 2007, now known as Strikethrough, Livejournal caved to pressure from anti-pornography groups and suspended 500 personal journals as well as communities identified as dealing with explicit material. The response to this was one of the impulses behind the founding of the Organisation of Transformative Works, in order to find better, less vulnerable platforms to host fan content. This resulted in the creation of the AO3 (“Strikethrough and Boldthrough - Fanlore 2007” 2016).

72 The fandom currently has 72,465 fanfics listed on the Archive of Our Own. The kinkmeme is one of the longest running and indexed, since 2009.
supernatural forces. While generative of a plethora of fanfiction around a number of pairings, the relationship between the brothers became a major focal point during its initial seasons. At the same time the other popular pairing was the RPF (Real Person Fic), written around the personas of the two main actors of the show, Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki (often called J2).  

While the writing of stories around incestuous relationships was not new in fanfiction—the Harry Potter fandom for instance saw a lot of incest written between the characters of the Weasley twins, eponymously known as “twincest”—it was the first time that it became the main focus of a prolific fandom. This has been analysed in various ways, with Catherine Tosenberger (2008) arguing that such stories were a way for fans to subvert the relentlessly miserable source text, maintaining that the fics “make things happy—a consistent theme of Supernatural slash is that a romance between Sam and Dean will give them a measure of comfort and happiness that they are denied in the series” (1.5). Another view is that of Monica Flegel and Jenny Roth (2010), who propose that dark!fic or fanfiction that shows Sam and Dean in emotionally and physically traumatizing circumstances, while writing them as lovers, provides a truly alternate sexuality to the often “heteronormative” scripts played out in J2 fics.

While I see the force of these arguments, and certainly fandom-specific critiques of fanfiction are very valuable for the nuance they provide, I would also argue that examining this trope in isolation misses out on situating it as a trope, or in my formulation, a kink, that has been present across multiple fandoms. I posit that what was unique in Supernatural fandom’s case was the level of focus it received. This had the

73 It is tempting to see this split as indicative of distaste for incestuous pairings, and some fans certainly did express those feelings. However, as Flegel and Roth (2010) point out, many writers wrote both Sam and Dean slash and J2 RPF. As I will examine further, the kinkmeme hosted both as well, though some negotiations were needed.

It must be noted that as the show progressed the highly popular character of Castiel (Misha Collins) was introduced in the fourth season, which led to a shift in shipping patterns. However, this shift is not relevant to my observations of the evolution of the form of the fandom’s kinkmeme.
result of forcing a broad consideration of incest as a kink, which made fandom communities develop strategies that would facilitate the engagement of fanwriters and readers with it in a way that also minimised judgement. This negotiation occurred in multiple spaces, but it is in the kinkmeme that the discussions remain the most formalised and documented, as its anonymous space allowed for negotiations around a taboo subject in ways not possible on other platforms.

I will now examine some examples of how negotiations around both anonymity and ‘kink’ evolved. The first entry on the Supernatural kinkmeme, dated July 13, 2009 is a simple prompt post. It evidently generated a large amount of activity with four hundred requests and sixty fills written within the first four days. A second post was put up to commend the participants for their enthusiasm, and also clarify some issues. As can be seen below, the moderator was careful to establish that the community was not in competition with other existing communities, such as one called “spn_hardcore.” Further, they noted,

I’ve seen some folks outside of the community saying that they are intimidated to request fics here that aren’t hardcore kink. I really want to reiterate that while the name of the community is “kink” that is a very subjective term. If something gets YOU off, it’s your kink, and it is very welcome here no matter how “vanilla” or tame you may think it is.
This community is for EVERYONE, truly. So please, let your friends know that while there may be some things here that aren't necessarily their cup of tea, if they would like to request a fic—no matter the subject or pairing or genre—they are very, very welcome here. Me and the other two mods are committed to ensuring that above all else this community remains completely free of judgment, and that goes for the most hardcore to the most vanilla request posted. (spnkink_mod, Livejournal 2009, para 5; my emphasis)

There are a number of things indicated in the above quote that I wish to highlight. Firstly, it is clear that this kinkmeme did not spring up only to cater to more “hardcore” of fanwriters, as spn_hardcore was already established, but also to address the need to allow fans the option of anonymity (not everyone took this option of course). Issues
around maintaining that anonymity were therefore kept in mind, even when floating the idea of cross-posting. Secondly, the commentary on the category of ‘kink’ itself, as well the signalled openness to all characters and pairings being featured, follows my previous arguments about the functioning of such spaces. To reiterate, the divisions between ‘vanilla’ and ‘hardcore’ are clearly seen to be along a sliding scale depending on the individual fan—“If something get YOU off, it’s your kink, and it is very welcome here no matter how “vanilla” or tame you may think it is.”

It is also key to see how these definitions are context-specific, and so, I will contrast this to the idea of “hardcore” that the community of spn_hardcore mobilised:

In general, our idea of hardcore is one of “Okay, that was fucked up but intriguing— andmaybealittlehot.” Please note that even though in many corners of the world “incest” may fall into the taboo category, most of the authors in this fandom consider that more or less canon. There are quite a few wonderful SPN communities that can deliver that for you hourly and while incest is more than welcome here, if incest is your only taboo there are better communities to suit your needs. (spn_hardcore, Livejournal 2008)

The notions of ‘kink’ and ‘taboo’ then are seen to be both constantly shifting and quite blatantly relative. It also must be noted that even within the communities that attempt to differentiate themselves as “hardcore,” a scan of used tags reveals categories like “kink: first time” and “kink: cop!Jared,” which again complicate any ideas that specific acts may be deemed inherently more or less kinky as they are generally categorised outside fan spaces. The examples below are also indicative of these trends.
This is a RPF prompt, and seconding, featuring the personas of actors Jensen Ackles and Jeffery Dean Morgan. The framing of the request re-enacts, as it were, the process whereby the prompter came to recognise both that “sub-drop” could be a kink in the context of the kinkmeme, as well as the fact that it was a kink for them specifically.

In another case the prompter sketches out the different kinds of “porn” that could be written in response to their request.

In this prompt, the idea of ‘kink’ is again deconstructed, placing vulnerability at the heart of the desire for a depiction of “broken!Dean” while leaving it open-ended as to whether the fill should include a sexual aspect or not. The fact that this prompt was placed right alongside an explicit rape fantasy only adds to the feeling of dissolution of any
categories that might differentiate the ‘romantic’ from the ‘pornographic’ with any degree of certainty.

In her analysis of the Star Trek (2009) kinkmeme, Mary Amanda Wall (2010) also examines the category of fannish kink, linking it Audre Lorde’s (1993) ideas of the “erotic” as defined against the “pornographic.” She argues,

Just as kink is a trope or genre that gives a reader a particular and personal satisfaction, the erotic for Lorde “is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire” (340). Just as fans can declare their satisfaction with the phrase ‘this is my kink,’ Lorde might use the considered phrase, “It feels right to me,” (341) [to] acknowledge the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge. (12)

This is a slightly utopic formulation of the ways in which fanwriters and readers interact with the category of kink—certainly Lorde was highly aware of the intersectional forces of race and gender that combine at the site of desire. Nevertheless, I agree with Wall’s contention that the category of fannish kink does leverage the idea of the erotic with greater flexibility than has so far been theorised in a sustained fashion.

This flexibility is also evident in the lexical strategies that identify and activate fandom tropes, utilising a shorthand that might seem illegible to those unfamiliar with these spaces. In Figure 3.3, for instance, the prompt line contains the key kink to be considered as “broken!Dean,” with the expectation that the individuals scrolling down the page will have an immediate understanding of what the construction means broadly, even as the explanatory notes provide a more specific description. This conjugation can also instantly create new tropes/kinks/combinations thereof by choosing a specific aspect of a character to magnify. As Wall also points out, this can be a way of an individual fan identifying the, “parts of the whole that bring her pleasure, whether those parts are pairings, body parts, story tropes, or something else, and requests those parts as the kink she wants in her fanfiction” (9). For Wall then, fannish kink emblematises,
A moment of heightened attention (heightened!attention) that makes patterns out of isolated moments and fetishes out of a particular arrangement of the canon. This focus of the attention undoes the restraints of the “otherwise coherent wholes” or source narratives and recombines the fetishized parts. (11-12)

Wall’s analysis here is quite penetrating, but I would also argue that the “canon” here is a nebulous concept as very often prompts will ask for completely unrelated Alternate Universe (AU) set-ups which bring up comparisons to more conventional frameworks of both pornographic and romantic films and novels. For instance, a prompt such as—“Cop!Jared finds hooker!Jensen completely irresistible and buys his time for the night. HEA please!”—does not actually draw much from “canon”74 at all. Conversely, it combines the instant gratification and suspension of disbelief for purposes of sex, connected to theorisations of visual pornography, with the assurance of a tying off of the narrative in a way that fits into the romance novel formula. Indeed, rather than serving to separate these strands, I argue that this framing throws into relief how intermingled the two genres always have been.

Driscoll’s (2006) discussion of fanfiction as located at the intersection of pornography and romance is also useful here, though she does see them as two traditionally separate and separable genres overall. It is also beneficial to track the ways in which her theorisation contrasts to the current usage of fannish terms, as it is quite revealing of the changes that the new platforms I have been discussing throughout this dissertation have effected. One of Driscoll’s key considerations is the difference between attitudes of “canon,” or what events the text under consideration factually contains, and “fanon,” which indicates popularised fan-interpretations of the same. Concerning these

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74 The idea of canon becomes even more complicated in RPF scenarios.
categories, she argues that canon is what is required to engage with a fanfiction community as it provides,

[…] a means of sharing the story—but fanfiction realism is not an agreed degree of accuracy in representation, but rather a registering of affective power. This is one of the most important ways in which fan fiction locates an intersection of pornography and romance. (89)

Conversely, fanon is marked by almost guilty pleasure—“Most fanfic readers will admit to one or more favorite fanon tropes, like Gentleman!Spike or Prostitute!Harry, but hesitantly, because fanon connotes undiscerning identification with an unreal object” (90).

It is then quite startling, in light of the examples from the kinkmeme that I have just listed, to examine how the signification of the (!) has shifted. I argue that this shift has occurred, in part, due to the ways in which the forum of the kinkmeme allows fanwriters and readers to anonymously (re)mix their “canon” and “fanon” desires, without either one being able to take precedence or be marked by the “hesitant” pleasures that Driscoll sees as significant. Larsen and Zubernis’ (2012b) identification of the therapeutic value of such writing is also significant here, though they also identify the continuing operations of “shame,” both as a product of the threat of exposure and as an internalised emotional variable in such operations. Relatedly, and more crucially for my arguments in this chapter, the space of the kinkmeme has also allowed the interrogation of the category of kink itself, foregrounding the core subjectivity of any absolute differential markers of the romantic and pornographic.

At this point I wish to also link back to the nature of embodied reading that I had discussed in relation to romance novels. In this context, the response patterns seen to prompts in kinkmemes also show similar expressions of arousal and excitement. While readers of romance novels have always been suspected of being too easily swayed by
such material, as has been discussed before, that has always been rooted in a particularly heterosexist and gender-essentialist model of reading positions. I have already examined how the reviews complicate this position, but when put into the context of kinkmemes, with fandom’s (documented) queer readers as the participants in these exchanges, I argue that this articulation becomes even more significant.

This contention is also supported by the forms of communication that are observed in these spaces. Since kinkmemes are structured on a prompt-and-response pattern and writers often fill in prompts quite slowly over a period of time, participants often respond enthusiastically to encourage them to continue. An additional effect of anonymity in such spaces is that writers feel less pressured to finish something, and so, encouragement is seen as vital to the functioning of the community. These responses range from singular exclamations of pleasure, to long examinations of possible character motivations, to expressions like “I’ll be in my bunk” or “BRB need a cold shower,” which are understood to indicate sexual pleasure. In this regard, there is some debate about whether these are ‘real’ expressions of ‘actual’ bodily pleasure or whether they are more about following a fannish convention in responses.

Wall, for instance, speculates that kinkmemes lend themselves to a “performance of the erotics of fanfiction” (5) that sometimes has the result of fans distancing themselves from what she contends to be the most powerful aspect of such interaction. Conversely, she finds the most powerful points of exchange to be those,

Moments when fans do not distance themselves from this erotics of genre—one of unearthing and understanding diverse and diffuse pleasures—[which] hold the potential to become what Audre Lorde calls “creative energy empowered,” a shared pleasure that can “lessen the threat of difference. (vii)

This “shared pleasure” for Wall, drawing on Coppa’s (2006) theorisations as well, is rooted in the possibility that individual fanwriters and readers are themselves
participating in sexualised exchange on the kinkmeme, performing both themselves and the characters they are writing out. Following this, any attempt by these individuals to distance themselves from this notion is (for Wall) a lessening of its subversive potential.

While I see the merit in this claim, I posit that once again, this position falls prey to the binaries of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ practice, especially since Wall does not account for the effect that anonymity has on these interactions. It is certainly debatable whether fans (writers or readers) identify with the characters they prompt and write about to the extent that Wall speculates (as she admits). Furthermore, I feel that locating ‘true’ subversive potential only in cases where they do, is counterproductive when looking at the workings of such a broad platform. A consensus emerges around the contention that fanfiction readers express physical arousal to these texts, but do not locate the source of that arousal to specific markers of explicitness. This can be seen in the responses to informal polling as well:

In two informal polls on LiveJournal of 386 and 574 fans, respectively, about 80% of both groups said that sexually explicit fanfiction made them physically aroused at least sometimes, but the majority of these respondents specified that physical arousal occurred only sometimes and that it may not be tied to explicit descriptions of sex so much as stories that “hit their kinks” by using tropes such as hurt/comfort or particular power dynamics in a relationship. (Wall, 16)

What is also crucial here is the spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations that are expressed within media fandom spaces, as evidenced by anecdotal evidence, fannish interaction, and surveys such as the one hosted by a Tumblr user, Centrumlumina, that I have referenced before. The survey, focussing on the usage of the fan-run fanwork archival site Archiveofourown.org (AO3), was conducted 2013 and received around ten thousand responses (Centrumlumina, Tumblr 2013). While open to a certain level of selection bias, it did indicate that a significant number—54% in total—of participants in such fanwriting spaces identified as belonging to a GSRM (gender, sexual or romantic
minority). This is also reflected in my own respondent data. With such a range of participants, it is also important to evaluate what sexual pleasure might mean as expressed by individuals and whether it is indeed useful to interrogate if they ‘really’ all felt bodily arousal in the same way. Indeed, when conceptualising “Netpornography,” particularly on blogging platforms, Nishant Shah (2007) observes,

Self-representation (visual as well as verbal) becomes pornographic because of the address the representation carries and the responses it elicits from the consumers of the representation. The ‘pay off’ moment in netpornography is not in the physical orgasm of the consumer/producer, but in the desired or projected orgasm of the user behind the virtual handle. This disembodiment of pornography and its severe wrenching from the notions of body is definitely a unique characteristic of cyberspatial pornography. (35-36)

While Shah is not talking specifically about fandom practices here, he is talking about interactions on Livejournal, so the comparison of textual strategies being employed is a productive one. Whether using linguistic conventions or a notion of a performance, or, indeed, expressing bodily arousal, the readers of sexually explicit materials quoted here are certainly expressing their pleasure in an embodied way, using a vocabulary that has been historically unavailable to non-cisgender males that I argue is significant (Gordon 1993; Fahs and Swank 2013).

** Infinite Variety in Infinite Combinations? Limitations of Fannish Kink

Up to this point, I have largely dwelt on the potentialities of fannish kink as opposed to its limitations but, as ever, when brought into conversation with the operations of racial identity, these formulations are put under significant stress. Just as with my discussions about the role of racial identity in theorisations of the ‘pleasure’ of pornography/romance, a consideration of how this aspect influences the operations of anonymity, reader
positions and ‘free-flowing’ exchange of ‘erotic potential’ is crucial. This is not to position these interactions as outliers to a somehow neutral norm, but rather to show how the structures that facilitate expressions of fannish pleasure also actively work towards marginalising non-white characters. Once again, this is not to maintain that non-white fans are not present in these spaces, but to emphasise how their pleasures in them are very often contingent and precarious.

Media fandom is a difficult space to navigate in a critical fashion because, as I have argued above, it is one with a significant number of queer and woman-identified participants that are regularly castigated in the mainstream for the ways in which they express their sexuality. However, this does not mean that these same participants do not hold privilege relating to racial/cultural/ethnic identity within these spaces. By concentrating on only certain aspects of media fan identity, scholars often erase the complexity of these interactions in order to arrive at more comforting ‘broad based’ theorisations about intra-fandom power dynamics. This, as I have maintained throughout this thesis, only results in skewed and incomplete analyses about how these spaces function, as well as a further alienation for non-white fandom participants.

Richard Fung’s (1991) examination of the ways in which gay pornography’s treatment of racial difference affects the material ways in which non-white men navigate these spaces is relevant here. By turns desexualised, fetishised and dehumanised, the figure of the ‘Asian boy’ in gay pornography, while generative of pleasure for certain viewers, makes what should be a site of community and acceptance into one of pain.

He points out,
The “ghetto,” the mainstream gay movement, can be a place of freedom and sexual identity. But it is also a site of racial, cultural, and sexual alienation sometimes more pronounced than that in straight society. For me sex is a source of pleasure, but also a site of humiliation and pain. Released from the social constraints against expressing overt racism in public, the intimacy of sex can provide my (non-Asian) partner an opening for letting me know my place—sometimes literally, as when after we come, he turns over and asks where I come from. Most gay Asian men I know have similar experiences. (159)

This is a complex intersection and one which demands a reconsideration of the operations of power, privilege, belonging and desire within queer spaces. This demand becomes even more urgent when spaces—like fanfiction kinkmemes, but also fanfiction spaces more generally—are positioned as welcoming of difference.

This might seem antithetical to the position that I have taken throughout this chapter, that is, the inadvisability of categorising pornographic/romantic/erotic material as either ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ However, I would maintain that being wary of value judgements does not preclude the examinations of what hierarchies persist within these texts. I have argued for the fanfiction kinkmeme to be conceptualised as a space that specifically foregrounds certain qualities that allow for a more fluid idea of how pornographic/romantic/erotic texts are used and by whom. This has been demonstrated by the category of fannish kink, that I have shown encapsulates a very broad spectrum of tropes, acts, bodies, emotional states, and genders, as well as allowing for a much more expansive theorisation of how participants in these spaces identify in terms of their gender and sexuality.

Nonetheless, it is equally vital to see how this fluidity has not enabled a similar reconsideration of which characters are allowed this expansiveness of experience, and relatedly, which participants are excluded from spaces where communitarian sharing of pleasure is seen to be crucial to their successful operation. For instance, I have traced how the operation of anonymity has allowed for a greater amount of experimentation and personal levels of discovery about which sexual acts and emotional states may function
as kinks for participants. But at the same time, equally importantly, it has also allowed the expression of desires that display the operation of racialised tropes that have the effect of dehumanising certain characters.

To go back to Ellison’s (2013) examination of the *Glee* kinkmeme that I have referenced earlier, her analysis showed that it was the character of Santana Lopez, played by Latina actress Naya Rivera (whose canon portrayal also plays heavily on the ‘promiscuous Latina’ trope) who is placed most often in sexual situations that highlight this aspect of her character even more. This is a pattern that is also seen within non-sexual prompts, with non-white characters figuring repeatedly in the role of caretakers for white characters. This was seen in my discussion of the treatment of the character of Sam Wilson (an African American character) in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) in chapter four. These are, of course, very much in line with the stereotypes that I have already discussed in my sections on pornography and romance novels where both hypersexualisation and desexualisation are in evidence. I stress both aspects of these operations because it is key to see racial prejudice in fandom spaces as not just influencing the depiction of characters in sexual situations, but also as foreclosing them from participating in the more broad-ranging notion of ‘kink,’ which I have argued can be generative of thoughtful and nuanced representations of queerness that are not generally available to queer characters in more mainstream texts. It also has the effect of cutting off non-white fans from the benefits of any therapeutic value of these spaces.

In this context, it is tempting to place the responsibility for their perpetuation on larger societal prejudices and institutional discrimination from which fan spaces are not immune. While not dismissing the power of such institutional forces, I am disinclined to follow this line of reasoning as it discounts the fact that fan spaces can and do interrogate the operations of other modes of institutional discrimination, most notably around gender and sexuality. It also displaces the driving force behind these operations as firmly outside...
the mechanisms of media fandom structures themselves. As I have already argued in chapter four, most of the ‘truisms’ concerning fanfiction as a democratized form of writing and fandom communities as subversive spaces must deliberately and repeatedly set aside the role of racial identity played in these interactions for them to remain stable. This has the effect of reframing the white-centricity of fandom’s structures as ‘neutral’ or ‘natural’ and positions the introduction of racial identity as something that ‘disturbs’ that space.

Much like Fung’s feeling of alienation from a community that is meant to be his safe space, it is not as if non-white participants in these spaces have radically different expectations from them. As I have discussed in earlier chapters, these fans have also participated in the formation of these spaces and are well-versed in how they function. This is a crucial point to make as very often, criticism of such trends is said to lead to a vicious cycle which makes authors less inclined to write stories around such characters for fear of being ‘hounded out of fandom.’ It is here that I would like to refer back to my point about the rising vocality of feedback and its increasingly critical bent, which was commented on earlier, as one of the specific effects of anonymity. To then locate this trend in relation to only the ways the depictions of non-white characters are received is, I argue, disingenuous.

**Conclusion**

The scope of this chapter has been a broad one, but one that is justified in order to locate the genre of fanfiction within the various overlapping domains that inform it both as a form of fanwork and as a structure of community. In tracing the multiple trajectories of both pornography and romance novels studies, I have highlighted the slippages they fail to take into account within their assumed viewer/readership correlations. In this
context, I have demonstrated how fanfiction kinkmeme communities (approached not just in terms of slash) may offer one way of interrogating the ways in which ‘women’ approach the categories of pleasure and arousal and how these are informed by the fannish notion of ‘kink.’ By also including an examination of how racial identity in particular interrupts the assumed functioning of all these domains, I have shown that an intersectional frame is crucial when approaching the above categories to complicate the identity positions of participants in fandom spaces. My final two chapters then work in concert to examine the ‘friction’ produced by the consideration of race on ‘truisms’ of how fanworks function vis-à-vis their relationship to an inhospitable canon, the role and meaning of escapism that such fanworks enable, and the related idea of precarious pleasure as a mode of fannish interaction. This has been necessary in order to make my case for grounding the analysis of fanwork communities more broadly within such a frame.
Conclusion

As I put the finishing touches on this dissertation, I am also simultaneously framing panel proposals for both the 2017 conferences of the Society of Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) and the Popular Culture Association/ American Culture Association (PCA/ACA), to be held in Chicago and San Diego respectively, on the topic of “Race in Fan Studies.” It is a somewhat daunting task as I have never proposed or led a panel at such large conferences before this and additionally, I am largely unfamiliar with North American academia. Nevertheless, regardless of the outcome, the experience has already been an intensely rewarding one as it has enabled me to come into contact with other scholars who are interested in the same area but have not yet published their work. It is extremely heartening to see the depth and nuance of this proposed scholarship—from a consideration of racial identity in nationally-bound fan cultures like Brazilian funk music, to an investigation of transcultural anti-blackness in K-Pop fandom, to a consideration of queer futurity in sexually explicit fanfiction.

One of my primary concerns in this dissertation was to balance out the U.S.A.-centricity of the fan texts/spaces that were the focus of my analysis, with an awareness of the complex ways that categories like racial identity operate in different contexts and locales across the global mediascape. In this context, the wide scope of this upcoming scholarship is extremely invigorating and I can be assured that future fandom scholars will have a much deeper well to draw on that I did at the start of this project. It is also exciting to observe that the theoretical and disciplinary boundaries that have so far somewhat curtailed the scope of identity articulation within generalised considerations of the activities of media or participatory fandom are being questioned energetically. It is my position that this is very positive development as it can only be to the advantage of
fan studies as a discipline to engage more critically with its own theoretical biases and blind spots.

It is also heartening to see the same research directions that this project has pushed towards already being reflected in this upcoming work. Primarily, it has been my repeated contention that fan studies needs to take seriously the challenges that have been issued to its most dearly held ‘truisms’ by African American scholars in recent years (Wanzo 2015; Warner 2014; Warner 2015a; Warner 2015b; D. D. Johnson 2015). One of my key questions in this dissertation has concerned how to respond to these challenges, while also expanding the scope of what the operations of racial/cultural/ethnic identity may look like in a globalised, neo-liberal and neo-colonial fan-scape. I continue to believe strongly that part of the answer is a serious commitment towards the diversification of theoretical frameworks, utilising those approaches that foreground the operations of racial identity—including whiteness—explicitly, rather than those that place them in an ‘othered’ space. If equal attention is paid to the racialisation of fannish modes of activity, as the field currently devotes to their gendering, it is my belief that much more nuanced scholarship will result. This will also alleviate concerns that at a time when fans and audiences are more diverse than ever before, fan studies remains a niche, and extremely white, field of study.

One of the areas that I feel this trajectory would be particularly productive is along the lines of complicating the simplistic fangirl/boy binary that is currently a common theme in many conceptualisations of fan activity. The view that male fans participate in more easily monetised and acceptable modes of fannishness, whereas female fans are more likely to be seen as transgressive and unmanageable from a producer/marketer point of view, has gained a fair amount of currency within the discipline in recent years (Scott 2009; Stanfill 2013; Busse 2013a). As I have pointed out before, but have lacked the space to interrogate adequately within the scope of this project, this binary division
completely elides the differential experience of non-white male fans within these shared spaces whether online or in physical spaces like conventions.

For instance, when the Japanese video game company Niantic released an enhanced reality version of the classic game “Pokemon Go!” in July 2016, it seemed to take the world by storm. This phenomenon has naturally been the source of much interest for fan studies scholars, prompting a great deal of immediate commentary discussing its leveraging of nostalgia, its effect of individuals managing depression, its implications for traffic safety, and its transformation of public/private spaces, amongst other aspects of its gameplay and interface (Vaynerchuk 2016; Eadicicco 2016; Needleman 2016; Parkin 2016). A further, more critical layer to these considerations however only emerged as non-white academic commentators and popular culture bloggers began to discuss the very differential experiences of particular players depending on their racialised identities—Black players versus white men and women players who were less likely to be targeted by overzealous neighbourhood watches and police officials for trespassing and other infringements, as well as the game interface’s affiliation to colonialist structures of power (Akil 2016; Subramanian 2016).

Considerations of access to fan spaces, both online and in physical locations, are therefore distinctly different for non-white fans. As other examples of these concerns: What do the recent cases of the fatal police shootings of Darrien Hunt and John Crawford III, two Black American men who were holding a toy sword and gun respectively, mean about the differential experiences of fan practices like cosplay in public spaces (Romano 2014)? What do virulent pushbacks against the castings of Black actors like John Boyega and Zendaya in iconic popular cultural franchises like Star Wars and Spiderman—that are also reflected even within women-identified media fandom spaces—mean for analyses that focus only gendered aspects of these interactions? It is my contention that
it is only by choosing inclusive theoretical frames that demand an awareness of these intersections, can fan scholars engage more critically with these core questions.

As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, the choice of a cybercultural postcolonial framework has worked productively towards this very goal. Such a theoretical framework not only centres race/ethnicity/national identity in our consideration of gender and sexuality but also offers a whole new set of tools to consider the operations of meaning-making within fan communities. Specifically, in chapter four, my deployment of postcolonial cyberculture enabled me to engage with not just individual incidents of racism in fan spaces but rather theorise their underlying enabling mechanism. This lead to my coinage of the “fandom algorithm,” which identifies both the racist underpinnings of the technologies deployed by fandom communities as well as the communitarian ‘norms’ that dismiss racism as sporadic interruptions of a progressive norm. This neologism takes its impetus from postcolonial cyberculture theory’s insistence that all techno-social engagements must be analysed while considering multiple, intersecting operations of representational and communicative power. Thus, while articulating the complexity of individual fan identities and their diverse experiences vis-á-vis engaging with popular cultural texts has been extremely challenging, I am confident that this challenge has made my scholarship more robust and better reflective of the reality of contemporary fan spaces. These is of course much more work to be done, but it is my aspiration that this thesis can go some way in illuminating possible pathways for the field as a whole to move towards more inclusive paradigms.

This shift would also demand a reconsideration of the role and meaning of ‘pleasure’ within media fandom spaces. To recall one of the first questions that was raised in this thesis, borrowing from Sara Ahmed’s (2010) coinage of “feminist killjoys”, I speculated on what it meant to be positioned as a “fandom killjoy” in the context of highlighting the operations of race/racism within fan spaces. As Ahmed’s narration of the
process of alienation from shared pleasure rings remarkably true to the directions this dissertation has taken, I take the liberty of quoting it in full:

We begin with a table. Around this table, the family gathers, having polite conversations, where only certain things can be brought up. Someone says something you consider problematic. You are becoming tense; it is becoming tense. How hard to tell the difference between what is you and what is it! You respond, carefully, perhaps. You say why you think what they have said is problematic. You might be speaking quietly, but you are beginning to feel “wound up,” recognising with frustration that you are being wound up by someone who is winding you up. In speaking up or speaking out, you upset the situation. That you have described what was said by another as a problem means you have created a problem. You become the problem you create.

To be the object of shared disapproval, those glances that can cut you up, cut you out. An experience of alienation can shatter a world. The family gathers around the table; these are supposed to be happy occasions. How hard we work to keep the occasion happy, to keep the surface of the table polished so that it can reflect back a good image of the family. So much you are not supposed to say, to do, to be, in order to preserve that image. If you say, or do, or be anything that does not reflect the image of the happy family back to itself, the world becomes distorted. You become the cause of a distortion. You are the distortion you cause. Another dinner, ruined. To become alienated from a picture can allow you to see what that picture does not and will not reflect. (para 3-4; my emphasis)

This framing, of an interloper at a shared table who ‘ruins’ things because of a lack of knowledge, or concern, for the etiquette that facilitates commonly felt pleasure becomes even more powerful when placed in context of media fandom spaces where the ‘food’ served is placed there within the context of a gift economy. The last line of the quote is particularly relevant to my theorisation about the personal nature of this alienation. As I have demonstrated in both my historical consideration of the flashpoint controversies around racism in fandom spaces in chapter one, as well as in the contemporary functioning of “fandom algorithms” in chapter four, the continued erasure of non-white characters from the ‘picture’ that media fandom (re)presents is productive of an alienation that is keenly felt by participants.
The position of the “fandom killjoy” is also a complex one to occupy, as it brings into focus the tension between media fandom’s simultaneous embrace of and disavowal from the politics of pleasure. By the term the ‘politics of pleasure,’ I gesture towards the anachronistic argument that argues for two oppositional positions at the same time. The first one; that fanwork produced around popular cultural texts is significant because it is evidence of the transformational, transgressive pleasure taken in such texts by women-identified (and often queer) fans whose activities are broadly reviled by mainstream society. The second; that the same fanwork cannot be held accountable for its depiction or erasure of other intersecting marginalised identities (around the axes of race particularly) because its leveraging of pleasure can only work within the biases of the texts themselves.

It is my position that these contradictory positions cannot be left un-interrogated. As I have argued, this valourisation of fanwork on the basis of certain aspects of individual fan identity must then extend to as sustained critique of it as well. To continually defer a consideration of the ways in which whiteness structures modes of fan pleasure is—at this stage of our knowledge about fan communities—to actively participate in furthering the operations of white privilege. Relatedly, it is vital to stop the practice of using universalising labels such as ‘transgressive’ or ‘transformative’ pleasure without explicitly naming exactly who these definitions exclude from their definitions. As I have argued in chapters four and five, the meanings of descriptors like heteronormative, heteropatriarchal, escapism, and even sexual fantasy are all extremely context specific and inflected by different historical considerations. As I look forward to more scholarship in these areas, I am eager to see what other theoretical frameworks that can be brought into the conversation about contemporary fan cultures, including those of Afro-futurism, Critical Race Studies, and of course Postcolonialism.
This is an exciting time to be a fan studies scholar, especially in the context of growing interest in the ways meaning-making occurs with regard to popular cultural texts in the transmedia age, whose effects are now more “glocalised” that ever before. That is to say, multinational entertainment corporations are increasingly adapting to a global marketplace. This can be seen in the specific targeting of local populations by Hollywood studios such as was seen in the massive publicity blitz around the release of The Force Awakens (2015) in China, or in the specialised marketing around Disney’s new iteration of The Jungle Book (2016) in India (Frater 2016). In the case of the latter, as I have argued in my review of the movie, Disney leveraged facets of other locally familiar adaptations of Rudyard Kipling’s original narrative—using the same voice actors and opening jingles—in order to create a remarkably intertextual narrative that interwove a globalised text with elements grounded in localised markers of identity (Pande 2016). As it seems inevitable that other media production houses will also employ such strategies in the near future, it opens up exciting avenues to consider crossover fan audiences in the context of the operations of the socioeconomics of globalisation and neo-colonialism.

There is also some excellent scholarship emerging out of a reconsideration of the changing modes in relations between fans and producers, particularly within the context of the collapsing distance between them due to the influence of social media platforms. Scholars are engaging with these dynamics in multiple ways from analysing the operations of “fan-management” in the context of public relations to considering issues of ethics and privacy while conducting research within these new configurations (Hutchins and Tindall 2016; Bennett et al 2016).

Finally, while the expansion of the scope of fan studies in the “third wave,” to include non-transformational fan activity is a welcome development, I also contest the notion that this broadening must mean the dismissal of the former spaces entirely (Gray et al 2007). As Stein (2015) also argues, there is still much to be learned from the
meaning-making interactions that take place in such spaces, especially with the employment of more inclusive frameworks. Far from being irrelevant or niche audiences, media fandom spaces are more diverse, more mainstream, more vocal, more conflicted, and more articulate about these issues than ever before. While the challenge of encapsulating the complexity of these exchanges around identity articulations, evolving arguments about the nature and function of fanwork, and negotiations around differential modes of fan pleasure, is a daunting one, it is far from insurmountable. This thesis is only one step towards crafting newer, more self-reflexive and more critical approaches towards media fandom spaces. It is my hope that its intervention is judged to be a substantive one.
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Appendix

Interview Schedule:

This project is part of my larger PhD project on fandom communities. It seeks to record the experiences of fandom participants who identify as having a non-white racial, ethnic or cultural background. It is a series of questions that are open-ended and I encourage responses to be as long and rambling or short and succinct as you like. All identifiers will be kept strictly confidential unless otherwise permitted. If you have any queries or problems with any phrasing please don’t hesitate to bring it up with me. My aim is to be as inclusive as I can and I would appreciate any feedback that helps with that!

This project has full ethical approval from the University of Western Australia. All participants are notified that they can withdraw at any time and retract their responses if they so desire. I might also contact you again to ask some follow up questions via email/chat based on your responses here, but all participation remains strictly voluntary.

Thank you!

* Required

Demographic Information

1.1 Name. *
This will be kept confidential and purely for my records. It does not have to be your legal name. A fandom handle would be fine.

1.2 Public identifier. *
Is it acceptable for me to use the name given above in my write up or would you prefer an anonymised marker? For example: Respondent #1.

1.3 Email Address. *
So I can get in touch with you again if required.

1.4 Age. *
Note: All participants must be above 18. If you would prefer not to give me a specific number, an age-range would be very helpful.

1.5 **Sex/Gender.**
If you could let me know your preferred pronouns, that would be great.

1.6 **Sexual Orientation.**
Any terms on the spectrum you'd like to use for yourself.

1.7 **Ethnic/Cultural/Racial/Religious Identities.**
Any labels that might be applied to or self-applied by you.

1.8 **Geographic Location.**
For example, if you’re originally from India but staying elsewhere at the moment.

1.9 **Formal Education.**
Your last/current educational qualification. If your medium of study was a language other than English please do mention it.

1.10 **Socio-Economic status.**
The specifics of income, wealth and class are very locale-specific, so please use whatever criteria makes sense to you.

1.11 **Languages you know.**
If you have differing levels of competencies in the ones mentioned, it would be helpful for me to have that information.

1.12 **What are the sources of the media you consume?**
I’d love to hear about the variety (or not!) in your media consumption.

1.12.1 **As an addendum to the question above, is there a difference in the kinds of media you consume in other contexts and the kinds of media that you choose to engage with through fanworks?**
For instance, you may watch K-dramas but not seek out fic about them.

1.13 **Online presence.**

Fandom and you!
This is where it gets interesting!

2. Fannish history!
Tell me a bit about your personal journey in fandom. What was your first fandom in terms of engaging (reading/creating/lurking) with fanwork? How did you find it? What was your reaction? What other fandoms have you been involved in?

3. How do you choose to engage with issues of Race/Ethnicity/Cultural/Religious identity in fandom? *
Each of us navigates our own particular racial/ethnic/cultural/religious identity in fandom differently and this is where I'd like if you could talk about that. Is fandom purely an escape for you? Do you get annoyed by stereotypical characters/plotlines etc but choose not to engage? Does it depend on the day?

4. As an optional addendum to the question above, are there any specific factors that affect your ability to engage with these issues?
These could be anything: time pressures, social anxiety, access to Internet etc.

5. How/when did you begin to engage with your racial/ethnic/religious/cultural identity with regard to fannish texts and spaces? *
IF you do choose to engage with these aspects of fandom please tell me about a specific instance when you did. For myself, Racefail '09 was quite formative as that was the first time I came into contact with other fans discussing these issues. However, it could be anything! Avatar: The Last Airbender being cast terribly! Or a favourite celebrity doing something culturally insensitive and dealing with the fallout. Anything!

6. As an addendum to the last question, how did you engage? Did you rant on twitter? Or make a blog post? Or sign a petition? Or shake your fist at the computer?

7. Fan of Colour: How do you feel about the term? *
Do you use it? To what extent do you find it a useful term when talking about your own identity? If you do not use it what other terms do you prefer? If you do not like using such labels at all, could you tell me a bit about why?

8. If you’ve been in fandom for awhile, do you find the level of engagement with such issues in fannish spaces has changed? And if so, how?

9. How do you feel about the manner in which such conversations are being currently conducted? Do you have any particular frustrations about how issues like diversity or representation or cultural appropriation (and others) are debated?

10. A question of medium! What do you use when talking about these issues? A lot of fandom is using tumblr as a platform for conversations about representation/diversity/appropriation, while others seem to use twitter (or some use both). If you have participated in or observed such conversations, which platform do you prefer?

11. Anything to say to me? If you have anything else you'd like to say to me, please use this space! If you have any comments, feedback or concerns, you can email me directly or let me know here!

THE END!
I bet you thought it would never come! Thank you so very much for your time!