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"Get Your Geek On": Online and Offline Representations of Audiotopia within the GeekyCon Community

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"Get Your Geek On": Online and Offline Representations of Audiotopia within the GeekyCon

Community

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Music

Degree

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Sarah Frances Holder

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to

Nicole Kathryn Victoria Vä Shrembek,

who encouraged both continued passion

for music and all things geeky.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the musical community of GeekyCon, a convention centered around popular media, such as *Harry Potter,* Broadway, and Disney. The GeekyCon community results from the connection between the unofficial convention Facebook group and the yearly physical event. This interconnectivity allows both the live and mediated space of GeekyCon to function as a heterotopia, a concept first conceived by Foucault (1967) as a separate space outside of the dominant society in which ideas and identities can be freely explored. Through ethnographic research, including participant observation as well as interviews, I present the music of GeekyCon as an audiotopia, a sonic realization of heterotopia theorized by Josh Kun (2005). The musical experiences present at GeekyCon, both virtual and physical, provide members of the community with a means to negotiate personal as well as group identities and to decide what it means, as the convention slogan says, to "Get Your Geek On.

I divide the thesis based on several overarching musical themes important to the GeekyCon community. After my initial introduction, the second chapter, entitled "Why are the Wiggles Performing at GeekyCon?" elaborates on the concept of audiotopia. This chapter draws on examples from the Facebook group to demonstrate the way in which music found at the convention creates a site for group identity formation and negotiation, thus demonstrating iterations of audiotopia. The third chapter, "Yes All Witches," further analyzes the inclusive and feminist environment found within this community. Drawing from the previous chapters' discussion of audiotopia, I argue that the music at GeekyCon, specifically wizard rock, functions as an aurally enacted safe space. The next chapter, entitled "We're All in This Together," describes the participatory and performative practices at GeekyCon. The musical theater sing-alongs found at the convention blur the line between participatory and presentational music and help establish a sense of community at the convention. I furthermore connect the performative musical practices to a larger discussion of performativity within feminist scholarship. Finally, I conclude with a summary chapter placing my thesis within the larger fields of ethnomusicology and fan studies.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter I
Coming Home: An Introduction

At the end of July, 2016 in Orlando, Florida, instead soaking up the sun and enjoying the many

surrounding tourist attractions, I find myself standing inside the Orange County Convention

Center in an overly crowded room surrounded by at least a hundred people. Despite my mild

claustrophobia, I feel ecstatic to be here. After waiting a year, I'm finally back at GeekyCon, a

convention that caters broadly to those interested in media and literature fandoms by

encouraging attendees to "Get Your Geek On," as the official slogan proclaims. Though I've

kept in touch with many of my GeekyCon friends via the GeekyCon Facebook group, I'm

excited to finally see them "IRL," or "In Real Life." Inside the tightly packed room I wait in

anticipation for the scheduled Broadway sing-along to begin. I knew from participating in the

discussions in the Facebook group that this program would be one of the most popular events.

Therefore, I arrived about fifteen minutes early to ensure a good seat close to the front. That way

I would have a clear view of the GeekyCon special guests who were leading the event, many of

whom are professional singers themselves.

From my place in the room I notice several people cosplaying, or wearing costumes, in

the style of 18th-century clothing, not the typical outfits one would expect to find knowing that

GeekyCon was originally focused on the *Harry Potter* series. However, within the past few years

the convention's focus has broadened to encompass many different areas of interest, and the

people dressed in clothing popularized over two hundred years ago are visually proclaiming their

love for the hit Broadway musical, *Hamilton*.

Before the next song starts the special guests at the event encourage attendees dressed in

Hamilton garb to come to the small platform currently being used as a stage to show off their

costumes and help lead the song. As the pounding drum opening to *Hamilton*'s "The Schuyler Sisters" emanates from the speakers, about fifteen people climb onto the tiny stage, creating a small wall of revolutionaries. Everyone in the room starts rapping along with the recording to Aaron Burr's opening lines, "There's nothing rich folks love more/Than going down town and slumming it with the poor" (Miranda, 2015). Though the GeekyCon special guests stay on stage the entire sing along, the line between audience and performers is severely blurred. With this song, especially, the number of audience members on stage far outweighs the number of special guests. Regardless of their musical ability everyone in the room sings the same songs together, and as I sing along my voice becomes indistinguishable from that of the of the crowd.

As the song continues, the audience applauds as a gender-swapped Burr jumps off the stage to sing directly to those dressed as the sisters. Both in the song and at the sing-along the sisters shun Burr's advances, and the Burr cosplayer jumps back on stage while everyone continues to sing the sisters' next lines, "We hold these truths to be self-evident/That all men are created equal'/And when I meet Thomas Jefferson…I'm 'a compel him to include women in the sequel!" (Miranda, 2015).

At that moment I'm briefly torn from the shared excitement of the sing-along to consider, once more, *Hamilton*'s massive presence at GeekyCon. Throughout the year, the number of *Hamilton* posts were growing so large that many of those in the GeekyCon Facebook group formed another subgroup devoted solely to *Hamilton*. Until I heard those lyrics, though, in the context of the GeekyCon sing-along, the reason behind such intense passion for the musical never really made much sense to me. While the musical centers around a male protagonist, the show also features strong female leads who question their subservient place in 18th-century life. It makes sense, then, that those who attend GeekyCon, a convention that actively attempts to

foster an atmosphere of gender and sexuality inclusivity, would enjoy such a musical, and both songs that we sang from *Hamilton* were from the perspective of women.

After the Broadway event and a few hours spent at fandom centered panels led by GeekyCon attendees, I'm now headed to the main stage for this evening's concert. Unlike the Broadway sing-along earlier, the musicians appear on stage performing their original songs. Almost all of the musicians playing tonight sing wizard rock (wrock for short), a genre of music with lyrics centered around the Harry Potter universe. It's one of my favorite parts of the convention experience and one of the main reasons I'm back this year for a fourth time.

As I walk into the concert venue and look around, the space seems bigger than last year. The room hasn't increased in size; instead, GeekyCon's attendance numbers have decreased recently. The drop is largely due to the name change from LeakyCon to GeekyCon and the confusion that accompanied it. The name LeakyCon references both a pub in the *Harry Potter* series, The Leaky Cauldron, and the popular fan site of the same name. When the convention was named LeakyCon it had a clear focus on the *Harry Potter* series. However, after the last *Harry Potter* movie was released in 2011, the con became increasingly open to more fandoms, such as *Dr. Who* and Broadway. In 2014 the convention staff announced the rebranding. The name change left many people confused as to the specific focus of the con, for geek seemed like an overly broad category. Adding to the groups' apprehensions, in 2015 GeekyCon staff announced that they were reviving LeakyCon and that it would be a convention separate from GeekyCon. This left many loyal attendees, myself included, conflicted as to which convention to attend. I felt like I was being torn between my first love, Harry Potter, and a family at GeekyCon that I had grown loyal to over the years. Scanning the room now, I see this conflict represented in the number of people present. I'm not exactly pleased that attendance has dropped, but the

smaller size makes it feel more intimate and enhances the community environment of the convention.

Walking into the concert venue, I find a spot near the back of the audience as Tonks and the Aurors begins to play her last song. Though the name implies that the band is comprised of multiple people, it's really just one person, Steph Anderson, who named her wizard rock persona after her favorite *Harry Potter* character, Nymphadora Tonks. Like many wizard rock bands, she draws musical inspiration from the DIY ethos of punk subculture, which is quite different from the show tunes I heard earlier today. Additionally, as one of the few well-known women in wizard rock, she brands her music as specifically feminist. As the song comes to an end, she strums her electric guitar while singing the last verse "If you wanna be a bad ass witch/Become a feminist" (Anderson, 2015). Though the three repeated power chords she plays, drawn from metal music, have come to signify overt masculinity, here they take a subservient position to the feminist message, and as the chorus repeats for the last time I join the audience in yelling out "Yes All Witches!" (ibid).

After Tonks and the Aurors ends, the next performer, singer-songwriter Lauren Fairweather, makes her way to the stage. The crowd applauds, and as she begins to play her acoustic guitar I find my hotel roommates in the middle of the audience. I reach into my purse and pull out a hand carved wand that I made five years ago before I went to my first LeakyCon and join many other audience members in waving our wands in the air like lighters. The song Lauren plays, "Home," (2012) has become an unofficial anthem of GeekyCon, and many people in the audience, including myself and my roommates, sing along with her; "J.K. Rowling once said/ Hogwarts will always be there to welcome you home; Just like magic, it seems/ These books can make you/ Feel like you're never alone." Unlike most wizard rock songs, Lauren's

"Home" takes the perspective of a *Harry Potter* fan rather than a character. Throughout the year, especially as the convention grew closer, attendees would frequently post lyrics to this song on the GeekyCon Facebook group as a reminder of the community felt at the convention and to heighten the excitement of returning. And tonight, as I sing "Harry, I'm coming home," I know that I've already reached my destination.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The three examples above offer a glimpse of the musical practices of GeekyCon. While the music differs markedly throughout the convention, from show tunes to wizard rock, the involvement with the Facebook group serves as one major aspect binding the community together. The intermingling of online and offline social practices helps foster the sense of community not often present in other popular media conventions and allows the group to maintain itself even after the convention ends. As I was writing my first draft of the thesis conclusion, after two years of research, I learned that GeekyCon would cease to exist. Though other conventions by the same company, Mischief Management, continue to thrive, GeekyCon could not compete in a market saturated with other multi-fandom conventions. GeekyCon failed largely because it could not find its corporate niche; however, the convention succeeded in many ways in that it created a conduit for community building. Though the convention has ended, a majority of the GeekyCon Facebook groups remain active. This community organization activity demonstrates that the convention attendees possessed a level of agency and are not simply buying into corporate control. Though the community is sustained through Facebook and based around corporate media, such as *Harry Potter* and Disney, the attendees have and continue to use these media products to form meaningful relationships.

Throughout the above descriptions, as well as within this thesis, I describe of the use of the Facebook page as smoothly integrated into my physical experience of being present at the convention, thus demonstrating that the corporeal presence of GeekyCon in Orlando is not simply a manifestation of the online community, or vice versa. The community, instead, results from the interconnectivity that permeates both realms. This interconnectivity allows both the live and mediated space of GeekyCon to function as a heterotopia, a concept first conceived by Foucault (1967) as a separate space outside of the dominant society in which ideas and identities can be freely explored. Through ethnographic research, including participant observation as well as interviews with select participants, I present the music of GeekyCon as an audiotopia, a sonic realization of heterotopia theorized by Josh Kun (2005). The musical experiences present at GeekyCon, both virtual and physical, provide members of the community with a means to negotiate personal as well as group identities and to decide what it means, as the convention slogan says, to "Get Your Geek On."

Scope and Methodology

My research with GeekyCon spans from May 2015 through April 2017. I attended GeekyCon 2015 (July 29 – August 2) and 2016 (July 28 – 31), in Orlando, Florida, and while these two weekends mark my physical ethnographic work, I conducted virtual ethnographic studies throughout the remainder of the time period. During my research I participated in the unofficial GeekyCon Facebook group. This group is run completely by GeekyCon attendees, and while the GeekyCon staff acknowledge the group as a community space for convention goers, they nonetheless stress that they have no official affiliation. The live GeekyCon event usually hosts about 3,000 attendees, while the main online group has between 500 and 1,200 members at any given time. Because my ethnography deals specifically with the online/offline relationship, I do

not claim to represent all attendees, but instead a significant portion of GeekyCon participants who have found a way to virtually incorporate the convention community into their everyday lives.

In addition to the main Facebook group, there exist GeekyCon subgroups on Facebook for those with specific interests. For instance, to find my roommates for the 2015 convention, I joined the GeekyCon room search. There also exist other GeekyCon Facebook subgroups of which I am not a part, such as the cosplay group for those who dress as fan characters during the convention. The main Facebook group and the subgroups together constitute the continuation of the GeekyCon community outside of the convention, and while I primarily focus on the main GeekyCon Facebook group throughout my discussion, I occasionally draw upon the subsidiary groups as part of my ethnographic research.

As my opening examples make clear, the various types of music present at GeekyCon may, upon first glance, seem arbitrarily combined. However, the music found at GeekCon does not simply represent mass consumerism gone amok. Instead, it reflects the attendees' differing interests and their negotiation of both group and personal identities. Nightly concerts have become a yearly tradition at GeekyCon. Due to GeekyCon's days as a *Harry Potter* themed convention, these concerts predominantly feature wizard rock. In addition to the nightly concerts, GeekyCon features programs centered around musical theater. The first form of musical theater popular among GeekyCon attendees was the Chicago based group Starkid, whose parody of the *Harry Potter* series, *A Very Potter Musical,* went viral in 2009. The embrace of this musical, then, created the space for fans of Broadway and Disney musicals to express themselves. When asked about the extreme variety of music present at GeekyCon, almost all of my interviewees

described the music as a natural progression, for as the *Harry Potter* series ended, those who attended the convention began to group around other shared interests.

I choose to present my work detailing the musical practices of GeekyCon as a reflexive ethnography based on participant-observation. Following the work of scholars such as Aaron Fox (2004) and Matt Sakakeeny (2013), I acknowledge that this ethnography directly reflects my position within the community as both scholar and fan. Furthermore, like Daniel Cavicchi (1998), who studied the lives of Bruce Springsteen fans, I am an insider within the GeekyCon community. I consider myself a fan on par with the rest of those attending GeekyCon, and I have been actively involved in fandoms through online participation for the majority of my life, with the *Harry Potter* series holding a place of particular importance. Attending GeekyCon was not an entirely a new experience for me either. As described earlier, I have attended four previous *Harry Potter* themed conventions run by the same company that plans GeekyCon. I also fall within the most visible demographic of convention participants. While at GeekyCon, I easily observed that the typical attendees were white females in their late teens or twenties, and I, as a white woman in my mid 20's, fit in quite well. This contrasts with other conventions, such as the San Diageo Comic Con, which are known for their masculine and sexist atmosphere (Kirkpatrick, 2015). Furthermore, while I initially joined the GeekyCon Facebook group specifically for the purpose of finding willing interviewees, it has since taken on greater meaning within my life. I make frequent posts on the main group, some of which are related to my research, but many of which are not. Like many within the Facebook group, I describe those within the GeekyCon community as my "geeky family," and I share a bond with them that will undoubtedly last beyond this period of research.

Overall, my status as an insider aided me greatly. Matt Hills (2002) explains the benefits of research inspired by personal experiences within fandom, which he labels as an autoethnography. He cautions that when non-fans engage in fandom research, fans sometimes attempt to justify their status as fans in order to "ward off the sense that the fan is 'irrational'" (p. 67). As both fan and scholar, I do not place the fan as a distant "other." This enables me to move into deeper issues within my research that affect both myself and others. Additionally, sharing many of the same cultural values as those who attend GeekyCon allows me to meaningfully interpret what it means to be a part of the GeekyCon community. Cavicchi (1998) states that "fandom is an intensely personal thing; that I practiced similar activities and had knowledge similar to the people I studied helped me to ask intelligent questions and to better understand their points of view" (p. 11). Though I had not met any of my interviewees in person prior to GeekyCon 2015, our shared passions created a bond between us, and we interacted as if we had known each other for much longer. My interviews often felt like casual conversations, and I was able to discuss larger issues that I do not believe an outsider would immediately recognize. Ultimately, I feel my insider knowledge enriches my ethnography and allows me to deliver a more nuanced portrayal of the people of GeekyCon and their musical practices.

My position as an insider, however, was not without its drawbacks. While I did not experience the same resistance by fans to my status as an academic that Cavicchi (1998) sometimes encountered, I instead faced problems articulating fan practices within academia. At times, I found it difficult to explain certain practices or ideas regarding fandom that I felt were obvious because I had been enmeshed within the culture for so long. Furthermore, when I first began my study I had trouble understanding whether or not there should be a clear boundary between researcher and participant. This reflects a larger phenomenon within the field of

ethnomusicology, for Bruno Nettl (2015) notes that there no longer exists the strict division between the researcher and the subjects of study. He states that "in the shifting relationship between ethnomusicological investigators and their subjects, the specialness of the fieldwork experience has gradually receded" (p. 190). While I recognize that an insider studying within their own group can, at times, be problematic, I believe I have reached a balance that allows me to portray GeekyCon in a way that reflects my position as both a fan and an academic.

This ethnography also falls within a specifically feminist framework. Due to the reflexive nature of my study, I find it impossible to divorce my personal feminist views from my research, and as such, my thesis acts as a response to Ellen Koskoff's (2014) call for specifically feminist ethnomusicology. She states, "for me, a feminist ethnomusicology has been the primary way I have, at different times, discovered, sustained, and shared myself and core values with others, and fieldwork has been the most direct and honest way I have found to do this" (p. 189). As previously iterated, the majority of those who attend GeekyCon are female, and the convention actively seeks to create an inclusive environment for all people across the spectrum of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, a large part of the convention involves performativity in both musical acts and appearance. Echoing Judith Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, GeekyCon attendees frequently dress as fictional characters, and through this performance they enact their own expressions of self. Fans regularly diverge from the original portrayal of characters to create their own interpretations. Many convention attendees, including myself, gender bend characters by altering the character's originally portrayed gender, and use cosplay as a way to experiment with their own gender performance. Therefore, GeekyCon creates a rich and intellectually productive environment in which to study feminism within fan practices. By crafting a feminist ethnography, I believe, like Koskoff, that this approach allows me to express

both my own feminist views and the overarching feminist atmosphere of the convention in a more personal format.

Throughout my study, I draw on traditional research methods as well as newer, virtual based practices. Describing traditional ethnographic processes, Harris M. Berger (2008) states that by employing "observation at rehearsal or performances, and participant observation, ethnographers can get a sense of the differing musical forms that are experienced by people taking part in these social worlds" (p. 71). During both conventions, I followed Berger's ethnographic advice by attending the majority of musical events and video recording several of them for later analysis. Additionally, I attended several talks led by musicians; most did not explicitly deal with music, but instead with issues of gender and fandom. I also, on occasion, witnessed impromptu musical activities by GeekyCon attendees. For example, at GeekyCon 2015 I saw my roommate and a few other fans act out a scene from *Le Misérables* by stacking all of the chairs together in an unused room to form a barricade mimicking the end of the musical. Though the official convention staff did not organize this event, members of the GeekyCon community found out about its occurrence through posts on the Facebook group, and as such, this unplanned event represents a legitimate object of ethnographic analysis.

Throughout my time at GeekyCon, I did not limit my ethnographic research to observation, but actively participated as well, and my past convention experience afforded me knowledge of some of the ritualized musical practices present. For instance, during their regular concerts the band Harry and the Potters often performs Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" but replaces all of the lyrics in the chorus with the words "Harry Potter" and the verses with material related to the books. This tradition is not advertised by the convention, and I was only aware of it because I attended past GeekyCons. When I attended GeekyCon during the years of my research,

however, prior knowledge of this tradition allowed me to join the crowd by raising my wand, head banging, and singing along.

In addition to participation in such events, I also draw a great deal of my information from formal interviews with GeekyCon attendees, which I audio recorded and later transcribed. These interviews typically lasted between twenty minutes and an hour, during which time I discussed participants' involvement with the convention, the online community, and fandom more broadly. Like Cavicchi (1998), when recruiting interviewees, I "allowed myself to follow the paths fans opened up to me and move from fan to fan" (p. 15). I made contact with the majority of those whom I interviewed through the main GeekyCon Facebook group. I created an online post before both conventions asking for volunteers, and interviewed most who replied. The Facebook group facilitated a bulk of my interactions, and the contacts I met online opened pathways to meet other convention attendees. I also interviewed a select few performers, most notably Steph Anderson of the band Tonks and the Aurors, whom I contacted through their personal social media page. Throughout my paper, I identify community members by their first name only, while I discuss actively performing musicians at the convention using their first and last names. Although I arranged my interviews using social media, all of them were conducted in-person. Therefore, citations to these interviews follow APA citation style for personal commutations. To distinguish in-person communication from private Facebook posts, I make a slight modification to the APA form; I employ a speaker signaling phrase prior to the quotation and cite the source of the quotation with the word "posted" followed by the date of the post.

Most of my interviewees fall within the typical GeekyCon demographics, in that the majority are white, female, and in their mid-teens to late twenties; however, some deviate from the norm. Some of the key interviewees come up multiple times throughout this thesis, and Mia

and Katie appear the most often. I noticed when I began my involvement with the GeekyCon Facebook group the summer before the 2015 convention that Mia was one of the more active people in the community. She attended both GeekyCon 2015 and GeekyCon 2016, and I was able to formally interview her during both settings. Unlike the majority of attendees, Mia identifies as non-white, and she is in her early thirties. I was also introduced to Katie through the Facebook group. She attended the 2015 convention; however, we became friends when we realized we both lived in the same city after chatting over the Facebook posts. Katie, unfortunately, was unable to attend the 2016 convention; yet, she still remains active in the group. Katie stands as one of the few people I had the opportunity to interact with physically outside of the convention space, and our interviews were conducted at a local bar in Knoxville, TN. I also interacted a great deal with Madeline and Jeremy, my 2016 GeekyCon roommates. I met Madeline when she volunteered for an interview during the 2015 convention, and the following year she asked if I would like to share a hotel room with her and her boyfriend, Jeremy. Madeline, like myself, is a white woman in her mid-twenties. Jeremy is about the same age, but is a black male.

Other members of the community with whom I did not conduct formal interviews have also shaped my understanding of the GeekyCon community. Two attendees with whom I frequently engaged in conversation with online were Emily and Danny. Both individuals are white and in their twenties. Danny is a trans male, while Emily is a cisgender female. For about a year of my research, however, Emily identified as male. She used male pronouns and was called by a stereotypical male name. While I was writing this thesis, though, she publically announced that her gender identification had changed. When asked via online communication how the GeekyCon community reacted to her news, she stated that the group was "far more supportive

than anyone could have asked for or expected. Whether it was Alex [her male name] or Emily people automatically accepted it and nobody asked why or batted an eyelash at it" (personal communication, May 17, 2017).

My use of social media plays additional roles in my ethnographic research. Angela Cora Garcia et al. (2009) "suggests that 'virtually all' ethnographies of contemporary society should include technologically mediated communication, behavior, or artifacts…in their definition of the field or setting for the research" (p. 57). Though many scholars within media studies have conducted virtual ethnographies, there still exists few within ethnomusicology. However, Eun-Young Jung (2014) states in his study on YouTube and Korean musicians that "as social media usage soars worldwide, and very often with musical content, it is incumbent upon ethnomusicologists to grapple with the particular relevancies of these media in shaping contemporary musical culture" (p. 55). Over the course of my study, I regularly checked the main Facebook group for new posts, took screen shots of posts that I felt were relevant to this project, and also created posts of my own.

Throughout this thesis, I follow Clifford Geertz's (1973) assertion that "ethnography is thick description" (p. 9-10). Geertz describes ethnography not as simply a list of activities, but instead "an interpretive one in search of meaning" (p. 5). I find thick description especially vital within the field of fan studies, for fans have long battled negative stigma within the eyes of the general public. Approaching fan ethnography with a Geertzian mindset allows scholars to detail the deeper and personal meanings that fan practices involve. By employing thick description throughout my research I describe how the musical practices both serve as reinforcements to the existing community and offer potential spaces of contestation.

Theoretical Framework

Those who attend GeekyCon broadly describe themselves as "fans." Because the term fan

derived from the word "fanatic," it initially carried with it a similarly negative meaning. Henry

Jenkins (2013[1992]) describes the word fan as loosely connected to its origins in "religious and

political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness" (p. 12). Traditionally

within popular discourse, fans were seen as outcasts and as deviant members of society due to

their interest in what many considered juvenile hobbies, such as science fiction and fantasy

series. Today, however, the term fan has shed much of its derogatory connotations, and instead

refers to any collection of people who share an interest in a certain subject, be it anything from

cars, to fantasy literature, or sports. The rise in popularity of media-centric fan conventions, such

as the San Diego Comic Con, has also moved the term "fan" into the realm of acceptance,

making participation within fandoms a more commonplace activity within the dominant culture.

Cavicchi (1998) notes that "On the whole, fandom is not an obscure and insignificant realm of

culture. It deals with fundamental questions about who we are and how we understand ourselves

and our relationships to others in this modern, mediated world" (p. 6). The items fans choose to

"geek out" over provides a commentary on fan identity, for as Henry Jenkins (2013) asserts, fans

choose these items "precisely because they seem to hold a special potential as vehicles for

expressing the fans' pre-existing social commitments and cultural interests" (p. 34).

Like fan, the term "geek" initially denoted someone who was not accepted within the

dominant culture due to an overzealous interest outside of the hegemonic norm. J. A. McArthur

(2009) states that recently "self-proclaimed geeks have captured the once derogatory term and

put it to use as a term of power" (p. 69). Shows, such as CBS's *The Big Bang Theory* (2007 -

2017), and fashion trends, such as "geek chic" have repositioned the previously pejorative term

to a place of acceptance and even praise. When discussing the connotations of the term geek in my interviews, many referenced a quote by John Green, a past GeekyCon guest author whose books *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) and *Paper Towns* (2008) have now been made into major films. In a popular YouTube video dealing with his experience with the *Harry Potter* movies and media products more generally, Green states that geeks are "allowed to be unironically enthusiastic about stuff…[they] are allowed to love stuff…. When people call people [geeks], mostly what they're saying is, 'You like stuff,' which is just not a good insult at all" (2009). Many of those with whom I spoke mentioned this quotation because Green, who many admire, validates their experience as geeks and encourages them to feel uninhibited passion toward specific media items, such as *Harry Potter* or Broadway shows.

GeekyCon, both the event and the Facebook page, offers many fans a space to celebrate their personal interests in a way in which they would not normally be permitted within everyday life; thus, the convention provides a space to reaffirm their sense of self. There is no one single fandom targeted by GeekyCon. Rather, the mutual appreciation and understanding of fandom acts as one of the main similarities binding fans together. The "About" section of the GeekyCon website states,

> All Fans. All Fandoms. Welcome Home. Are you a Potterhead? A Disneyphile? A supernatural fan, a Whovian, Sherlockian, Gleek, Avenger, or a proud member of any other awesome fandom? Do you love wearing your love of fandom on your sleeve (or your whole outfit)? If you get a kick out of cosplay, have read your fair share of fanfiction, or just feel passionately about stories, then you have to check out GeekyCon. (2015)

Though GeekyCon started as a *Harry Potter* specific convention, it now represents a plethora of other fandoms, as the above quotation illustrates.

The music at GeekyCon, in turn, reflects the diversity of fandoms found at the convention and serves as a common expression of fan involvement. As Cavicchi (1998) argues in his study of Bruce Springsteen fans, "fandom is a phenomenon of public performance" (p. 5), and engaging with fandom through music allows fans to publicly display and perform their emotional investment in their items of interest. Therefore, the music found at GeekyCon acts as fundamentally tied to the expression of fandom, such as the wizard rock concerts and sing-alongs described in the opening section of the chapter. While the music found at GeekyCon emerges from a wide variety of sources, fans often come to the convention already knowing a majority of the music present, largely due to discovering the music through online sources, such as the Facebook page.

The multiple fandoms present at GeekyCon result from the practice of cyclical fandom, as theorized by Matt Hills (2005). Hills notes that within fan studies, scholars tend to focus a specific item of fandom, yet neglect to describe how fans migrate from one item of fandom to another. He describes this overlooked transitionary period through the process of cyclical fandom, which combines "affective 'intensity' and activity with cyclical shifts away from discarded fan objects and toward newly compelling objects" (p. 803). When a fan has seemingly run out of material for one item, after a period of extreme fervor, they move onto the next item in a continuous cycle. I witnessed this process of fandom within the GeekyCon community. For instance, GeekyCon Facebook group member, Riley posted "Anyone got any TV recs? I need something to binge but I can't watch anything I've already watched because all my shows have horrible things happen to my favs [favorite characters] so I need to watch something I've never

seen before so I don't know what's coming" (posted, Dec. 11, 2016) Riley asked for group

advice for a specifically new program to continue their cycle of fandom

Despite the strict periods of excitement and boredom described by Hills, however, I

position cyclical fandoms as potentially overlapping. Cavicchi (1998) notes that fans of

Springsteen still consider him to be a part of their lives, even if they do not listen to his music on

a regular basis, for "fandom shapes and maintains a continuous self by acting as a map or overlay

with which to mark the passage of time and organize one's perception of oneself in it" (p. 150).

Therefore, even within the process of cyclical fandom, when a fan enters into a new fandom,

they do not simply abandon their old items of interest. Instead, according to Jenkins (2013) fans

tend to "use individual series [such as *Star Trek* or *Doctor Who*] as points of entry into a broader

fan community, linking to an intertextual network" (p. 40). Many of those within the GeekyCon

community described experiences of overlapping cyclical fandom during my interviews. For

instance, the GeekyCon Facebook group facilitated several members' introduction to the musical

Hamilton. Over time I saw posts by Mia, both a friend and research collaborator, range from

asking about the musical, to telling the group that she finally listened to the soundtrack, to

enthusiastically expressing her love of the musical and encouraging others to listen to it.

However, in addition to *Hamilton*, Mia also frequently posts about other fan materials she

enjoys, such as the ABC series *Once Upon a Time* or *Harry Potter*. Therefore, though members

of the GeekyCon community participate in cyclical fandom, their overlapping interests form a

broader web of fan engagement.

Both the online space and the physical site of GeekyCon constitute an audiotopia, a

musical space where ideas and identities can be both free negotiated and affirmed. Several

underlying concepts provide a foundation for my understanding of audiotopa. The web of
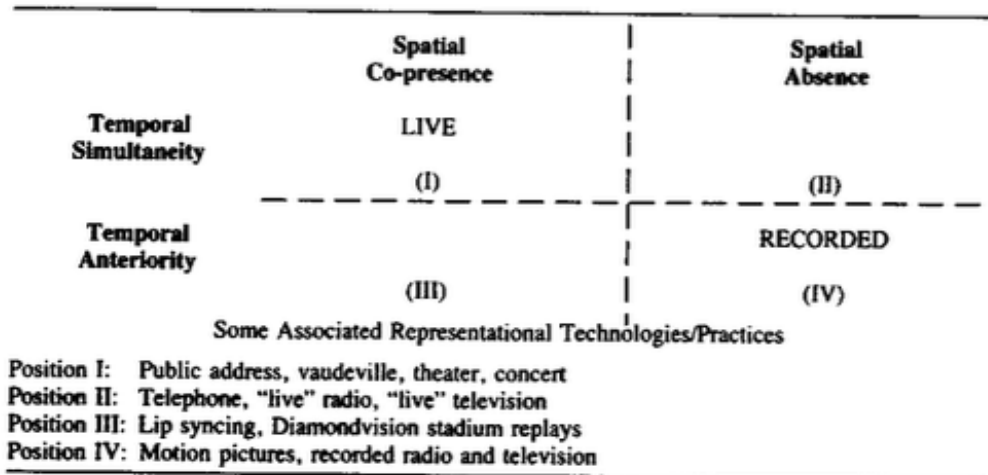
engagement resulting from cyclical fandom is engendered by what Jonathan Sterne (2012) theorizes as mediality. Sterne defines mediality as a term that "indicates a general web of practice and reference" and is "used to evoke *a quality of or pertaining to media* and the complex ways in which communication technologies refer to one another in form or content" (p. 9, italics in original). Sterne employees the word to describe the multifarious relations of both sound equipment and human interaction that led to the development of the standard MP3 file. Similarly, I use mediality to describe the web of human relationships engendered by the use of social media sites that structures the GeekyCon community. The GeekyCon Facebook group allows members of the community to connect with one another and form relationships before the convention begins and sustain these relationships well after it is over. Though the connections are among people, they are nevertheless created, in part, by networks of technology.

Expanding upon Sterne's concept of mediality, I further call into question notions of live and mediated performance to better understand the complex interactions often produced through the use of technology. As Paul Theberge (2005) notes, "the online and offline lives of music fans offer an example of a greater integration, or at least a balancing, of the two realms" (paragraph 41). As it is not possible to sustain the convention year-round, the GeekyCon Facebook page allows for the continuation of the community and musical practices throughout the rest of the year. While the study of integrated online/offline communities is still relatively new within ethnomusicology, there have been other cases of this within fan studies. For example, Matthew Guschwan (2016) discusses the online/offline relationship of soccer fans that make up a specific group of soccer. Guschwan states that the network of fans "blurs any lines of distinction between in person and virtual communities as it encompasses imagined, virtual and local face-to-face communities" (p. 355). Additionally, Lori Kendall (2000) argues for the connection between

online and offline life in her analysis of the BlueSky chat room, for she demonstrates that user's perception of masculinity and femininity remained tied to their real-life social interactions. I argue, like Gushwan and Kendall, that the GeekyCon community blurs the lines between online and offline distinctions, for the community is inherently tied to both the physical convention as well as the online group.

Similarly, GeekyCon blurs the lines between live and mediated performance. While the categories of live and recorded performance have traditionally been categorized in strict opposition, Steve Wurtzler (1992) notes that these "socially constructed categories…cannot account for all representational practices" (p. 90). To better understand the complex points that media inhabits, Wurtzler positions live and mediated performance on a four quadrant graph (see figure 1.1). The first quadrant represents temporal simultaneity and spatial co-presence and encompasses events such as theater or concert performances, whereas quadrant two describes events spatially absent but temporally simultaneous, such as a live radio broadcast. The third and fourth both feature temporal anteriority, in which the event has previously been recorded. The third quadrant deals with spatial co-presence and includes events like lip synching, while the fourth features spatial absence and includes cinema and most television.

Though this model offers more fluidity than the previous binary, even Wurtzler's categories do not encompass many of performances engendered by today's technologies, as seen within the GeekyCon community. For instance, the music played during the Broadway sing-along featured recordings of the original Broadway casts. Though these singers gained notoriety for performing their songs on Broadway, the GeekyCon audience could only hear them through technological mediation. To further complicate matters, both the special guests and the attendees at the at the event sang over the recording. Unlike karaoke, in which the voice of the original

	Spatial Co-presence		Spatial Absence
Temporal Simultaneity	LIVE		
	(I)		(II)
Temporal Anteriority			RECORDED
	(III)		(IV)

Some Associated Representational Technologies/Practices

Position I: Public address, vaudeville, theater, concert
Position II: Telephone, "live" radio, "live" television
Position III: Lip syncing, Diamondvision stadium replays
Position IV: Motion pictures, recorded radio and television

Relationship of spectator-auditors to the "event" posited by representation.

Figure 1.1

Wurtzler's Live vs. Mediated Graph (Retrieved from Wurtzler, 1992, p.89)

performer is removed, the voice of the Broadway stars remained; however, their voices were covered by those of the participants. Employing pre-recorded music makes the event temporally anterior and spatially absent; yet, the group singing also allows it to be categorized as temporally simultaneous and spatially present. Therefore, the event would not fall clearly within any of Wurtzler's quadrants, but would instead stretch uncomfortably across the entire graph, effectively blurring the line between live and recorded music. This reconceptualization of live and mediated recordings is important to understanding how music functions within the GeekyCon community, just as the concepts of physical and mediated space are important to understanding the network of relationships among community members.

The music of GeekyCon additionally distorts the strict binary of participatory and presentational music, as theorized by Thomas Turino (2008). Within his study, Turino defines participatory performance as music in which "there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles" (p. 26). In contrast presentational music refers to a situation in which "one group of people, the artists, prepare and provide music for another group, the audience, who do not participate in making the music" (p.26). However, during almost every musical event at GeekyCon, even those described in the official convention program as strictly presentational, there exists some form of audience participation. Those who attend the GeekyCon concerts engage with the music on a deeper level than typical rock concerts. Not only do the audience members at the GeekyCon concerts often arrive knowing many of the songs, but the musicians also encourage them to sing along. I even recall points within the concerts in which the sound of the collective audience superseded that of the performers, which in turn, reinforces the sense of community at the convention. Furthermore, through years of performance, some of the songs have developed audience enacted rituals. For

example, during the band Harry and the Potters' song "The Weapon [We have is Love]" (2004) the audience joins hands, forms a giant circle, and collectively rushes towards the middle of the floor at a specific point in the song that is only known to those who have either attended a prior concert or seen a video of the ritual online. While the concert was advertised as a presentational event, it takes on aspects of participatory music making. It does not fall easily within either of Turino's categories but instead inhabits a liminal space open to all forms of musical fan expression.

My understanding of audiotopia draws upon the concept of community. Though I have already employed the term community numerous times, Kay Shelemey (2011) notes that within musicology the term community "has been frozen at the juncture of competing theories…becoming in the process so ambiguous that to use the term is to be confronted with the necessity to argue for its use" (p. 9). Thus, to avoid such vagueness in referring to the GeekyCon community, as it exists both online and off, I follow Paul Booth's (2010) definition of fan communities as, "the social grouping of individuals with shared interests, joined together through some form of mechanism of membership" (p. 22). This description, unlike many others, does not classify membership based on place, an important factor when considering the community of GeekyCon. The mechanism of membership, in this case, is online participation and physically attending GeekyCon at least once. René Lysloff (2003) affirms the idea of an internet centered community, stating "communities are, after all, based on social relationships, not necessarily on physical proximity" (p. 28). In fact, I have often seen Facebook posts encouraging those who are not able to attend GeekyCon multiple years in a row to remain a part of the Facebook group because of the closeness of the community.

Members of the GeekyCon community regularly use the Facebook group as a type of support system, confirming Nancy K. Baym's (2010) assertion that "the supportive exchange of resources is often implied when people use the term 'community' in digital contexts" (p. 82). In Baym's discussion of online personal connections, she details several types of support that virtual communities offer. The first, network support, allows those with a common interest to feel like they are part of a group. This type of support system ties in with J.A. McArthur's (2009) statement concerning internet subcultures that the "internet, like music [subcultures], creates a meeting ground for groups of like-minded youth" (p. 61). The GeekyCon Facebook group enables those who possess a shared interest in the convention and the material it celebrates to join together in discussion. Additionally, Baym asserts the existence of both emotional support and esteem support. These allow those within the community to boost other member's self-confidence through positive feedback, which I have often witnessed. Frequently members post statuses with the heading "Not Geeky Related" to denote an issue in their personal lives that they felt like sharing. Furthermore, if a member posts about a negative experience in their lives, others will often write that they are sending "lumos" (or type "/*" to denote "lumos" pictorially). Drawn from the *Harry Potter* books, lumos is the spell that creates light; accordingly, for GeekyCon fans, this symbol means that they are sending the original poster positive thoughts. Baym also describes informational support, in which group members offer fandom based knowledge to those in need, as was the case with the Mia who learned about *Hamilton* through online participation. The support of the Facebook group enables the community to thrive throughout the year, despite the fact that most of the participants only see each other once a year at the convention.

Such a support system engenders the creation of a heterotopia. Michel Foucault (1967) describes heterotopias as "real places…that are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites…are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (paragraph 11). Foucault further delineates heterotopias as a place of difference and deviation from society and notes that, while these spaces lie outside of the dominant society, they are nevertheless found in reality.

GeekyCon functions as a heterotopia that lies outside of the dominant patriarchal society. Several members of the community with whom I spoke described GeekyCon's environment as much more accepting than that of other large fan conventions they have attended, which they recalled as having a masculine and heteronormative atmosphere. Those in charge of running GeekyCon actively strive to create an inclusive environment accepting of all genders, sexualities, and physical and mental disabilities, and they employee multiple tactics to achieve this inclusivity. For instance, the GeekyCon staff ensures gender neutral restrooms are available on the convention site and provide space on the convention nametag to write preferred pronouns. Furthermore, after the 2016 GeekyCon, those in charge of running the convention held an open discussion in which attendees could voice any concerns. This type of question and answer session is rare at any large convention, and those who attended took the opportunity to voice ideas about how to make GeekyCon more accessible to those with disabilities. This inclusive environment then carries over to the Facebook group. For example, a few months after GeekyCon 2016, an administrator reminded the group of the importance of trigger warnings, saying:

> Just wanted to post a little something about trigger warnings in case there was any
> confusion. Trigger warnings are so important and valued by a lot of people--especially in

this group! They are a heads up to those with PTSD, anxiety, etc. that the post you're

making may contain some information or images that could potentially be upsetting.

We're trying to keep this group as much of a safe space as we can so everyone is

comfortable sharing their love of all things Geeky! If you have any questions or concerns,

please feel free to message me or any of the other members of the Admin Team and we'd

be very happy to address them privately with you! (2016).

The heterotopic space of GeekyCon's Facebook group allows members to negotiate what it means to act as an inclusive space. Unlike utopias, which are inherently imaginary, the heterotopia resides within reality and necessarily includes contestation of meaning among its participants. Though members occasionally disagree in how exactly to achieve this goal, as I will discuss later, the physical convention and virtual space enables room for negotiation.

Drawing from Foucault, Josh Kun (2005) conceives of a specifically musical enactment of heterotopia, which he labels audiotopia. I employ this concept as my primary theoretical framework to structure the musical practices of GeekyCon. Kun describes an audiotopia as "the space within and produced by a musical element that offers the listener and/or the musician new maps for re-imagining the present social world" (p. 22-23), as well as musical contact zones where differences coexist. Like virtual communities, the audiotopia does not necessarily inhabit a physical location, yet its lack of physicality does not make it any less real.

The music present at both the physical location as well as on the Facebook group acts as an audiotopia for those within the GeekyCon community and allows members to aurally express and negotiate their values within a safe space. Take, for instance, the Broadway sing along described in the opening of this chapter. Everyone at the event was equally invited to sing along. Though the special guests leading the event remained on the stage most of the time, their voices

were not often more prominent and usually blended in with the other participants. Furthermore, the attendees, who were dressed as characters from several Broadway musicals, took turns sharing the stage with the special guests. This group participation during the singalong reflects the values of inclusivity held by the community. The music at GeekyCon acts as an audiotopia, providing a space for both confirmation and contestation of ideals, and throughout the subsequent chapters, I explore the idea of audiotopia as it functions at GeekyCon and examine in depth how it affects the gender relations and participatory music making.

Literature Review

My study of the musical practices of GeekyCon extends the existing body of literature dealing with fan and "geek" music. The book *Geek Rock* (2014), edited by Alex DiBlasi and Victoria Willis, currently exists as the singular collection dealing with musical representation of nerds or geeks. However, the authors never clearly define what qualifies as geek rock other than mentioning in passing that it is a "subgenre rife with references to comic books, science fiction, and other cultural artifacts that are considered geeky" (DiBlasi, p. 1). While this book discusses several offbeat and eclectic bands, such as "The Mountain Goats" and "They Might Be Giants," it does not include music that focuses around media fandom, such as wizard rock. Furthermore, the authors do not consider the practices of fans involved with the music. This thesis, in contrast, takes an ethnographic approach like that of Daniel Cavicchi's (1998) *Tramps Like Us*, as I have discussed earlier. Though Cavicchi does not serve as the singular authority on music fans, his work remains the most thorough and personal of any within ethnomusicology. Yet, because it was published almost two decades ago, it does not reflect the current state of fan studies, which largely depends upon online mediation.

More recently, musicological studies have paid an increasing interest to online music cultures. René Lysloff (2003) details his experience studying an online community devoted to digital music modules, or mods. Throughout his study, as discussed earlier, he compares his online work with the mod community to traditional ethnography. Other studies, such as those found within Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson's *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual* (2004) detail several online musical communities. The book positions music festivals as dependent upon online mediation. Richard A. Peterson and Steve S. Lee's chapter details the way in which online messaging boards have resulted in the physical event of a music festival. They state that "on a listserv…where people usually know each other's real names and identities, not surprisingly, many want to meet" (p. 196). This mirrors how people who have met at GeekyCon wish to continue their relationships online after the brief period of the convention. However, the essays found within this book, along with the majority of musicological literature examining online practices, were written prior to the explosion of social media within popular culture, and are therefore not entirely relevant to the current state of online musical practices. Kiri Miller's *Playing Along* (2011) serves as the most up-to-date study dealing with music and online participation. Her focus on YouTube as a teaching tool demonstrates how virtual settings can act as a conduit to personal relationships, and I have used her ideas to shape my own understanding of social media within this thesis.

Much of the literature dealing with both fan studies and musical communities today can be grouped under the larger umbrella of subcultural studies. Dick Hebdige was among the first scholars to theorize subculture within academia, and his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) remains a seminal text. However, recent scholars recognize his work as somewhat problematic, for he considers all expressions of subculture to be inherently resistant to a

dominant culture; therefore, his model could not apply to a popular media convention, such as GeekyCon. Sarah Thornton's book *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (1996) presents a portrayal of subculture that forms from a mutual interest, which Thornton describes as a taste cultures, or subcultures of affinity. Paul Willis's book *Common Cultures: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young* (1990), although published earlier than Thornton's, theoretically bridges the gap between the two aforementioned ideas of subculture. Willis challenges the strict binary of music production and consumption, arguing that most music producers started as consumers themselves. Willis describes the concept of symbolic creativity, in which people choose to engage in popular music, based on the personal meanings that music holds for them. Willis notes that the cultural meaning of mainstream music does not simply result from manipulation by the record industry, but from consumers "us[ing] commodities and symbols for their own imaginative purposes and to generate their own particular grounded aesthetics" (p. 60). The concept of symbolic creativity echoes the commonly held belief among fan scholars that items of fandom are not simply banal object, but instead reflect a deeper and more personal meanings.

The internet has significantly changed the landscape of subculture since the publication of these earlier works, and more current scholarship, such as J. Patrick Williams' (2006) study of straightedge subculture, reflects this shift. He notes that "internet forums simultaneously function as a subcultural resource, a form of subcultural expression, and a medium for subcultural existence for young people outside [physical proximity of] music scenes" (p. 194). Within his work, Williams also describes how online forums provide a space to negotiate what it means to be a part of the straightedge subculture, similar to how music aids in the formation of GeekyCon community values. Moreover, Louisa Ellen Stein's book, *Millennial Fandom: Television*

Audiences in the Transmedia Age (2015), notes the crucial role of the internet in modern fandoms. Throughout the text, she explores multiple fandoms that are of interest within the GeekyCon community, such as *Glee* and *Supernatural*. Significantly, as part of her conclusion, she also details her experience at the 2013 LeakyCon (the name of GeekyCon prior to 2015). Stein's book serves as one of the sole academic works to focus on LeakyCon and was of great use to my research. She states "in its celebratory multifannishness (and, in the broadest sense, queerness), LeakyCon gives the impression of being both unifying and extremely varied" (p. 172). However, Stein wrote about LeakyCon in 2013 before LeakyCon was separate from GeekyCon, and at that time the convention still primarily focused on the *Harry Potter* series. This differs from the two GeekyCons I attended in which *Harry Potter* was just one of the many fandoms present. Furthermore, while Stein did discuss internet mediation within her analysis of the YouTube video of the closing ceremonies, she did not consider the online community of attendees on which my thesis focuses.

Though the field of fan studies has existed for a relatively short period of time, there exists a rich body of literature, which I have already addressed to some extent. Henry Jenkins's seminal work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (2013 [1992]) legitimized fan studies as an area of academic interest. Jenkins draws on his own personal experiences of fandom participation to offer the reader insights into how fans view themselves. While this text was influential in shaping my approaches to fandom, I find it to be defensive in that it positions fans as often in conflict with the larger media corporation that produce their items of interest, in much the same way that Hebdige described subcultures of resistance. Since initially publishing *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins has written several other books on the subject of fandom, with *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006) most relevant to

my work. Here Jenkins describes how the internet has created new ties between fans and the media industry. He notes that fandom is not a static subject, but instead changes with the introduction of new technologies and forms of storytelling.

Though I have primarily discussed ethnographically centered studies, I also draw from a body of work concerning critical theory as it relates to the field of fandom. Matt Hills' book *Fan Cultures* (2002) presents an analysis of modern fandom through his engagement with predominantly Marxist scholars. Hills offers a portrait of modern fandom as constantly operating between oppositional theoretical constructs, such as consumerism/resistance and fantasy/reality. While my thesis focuses on a specific community of fans and their involvement with music, my theoretical framework echoes that of Hills' by constructing fandom as a liminal space between live and mediated. However, unlike Hills, my thesis does not focus on fans' interaction with the media industry; rather, I consider how fans employ media products to help establish community. Cornell Sandavoss also explores fandom through critical theory within his book *Fans: A Mirror of Consumption* (2005). While he tackles similar issues to Hills, such as understanding the place of fandom as it relates to creativity and consumerism, Sandavoss also approaches fan studies through the lens of psychoanalysis and performativity, which helped frame the way I approach fandom as it relates to issues of gender and sexuality.

Chapter Overview

I divide this thesis based on several overarching musical themes important to the GeekyCon community. The second chapter, entitled "Why Are the Wiggles Performing at GeekyCon?" elaborates on the concept of audiotopia. This chapter draws on examples from the Facebook group to demonstrate the way in which music found at the convention creates a site for group identity formation and negotiation. My examples in this chapter demonstrate iterations of

audiotopia and opportunities for the GeekyCon group to define community values through the use of discussion surrounding music.

The third chapter, "Yes All Witches," further analyzes the inclusive and feminist environment found within this community through a discussion of wizard rocks. Drawing from the previous chapters' discussion of audiotopia, I place GeekyCon within the larger political debate surrounding the concept of safe spaces. I then discuss the ways in which wizard rock as a whole works toward social justice and detail specific examples from the concerts that facilitate the establishment of an aurally enacted safe space. Finally, I examine Steph Anderson's "Yes All Witches" campaign and song, featured at GeekyCon, that aims to encourage female empowerment within wizard rock.

The penultimate chapter, entitled "We're All in This Together," describes the participatory practices at GeekyCon. As noted in my discussion of theoretical framework, the music found at the convention blurs the line between participatory and presentational music, and throughout this chapter, I further problematize this division. I connect the performative musical practices found during organized sing-alongs to a larger discussion of performativity within feminist scholarship, arguing that these practices strengthen the bond among those within this community. This chapter is then followed by the conclusion, in which I reflect upon my research and the impact the GeekyCon community has had upon my life.

Chapter II
Why are the Wiggles playing at GeekyCon?: Online Negotiations of
Audiotopia

"This entire post has been one massive discussion…Not everything said has been negative and

not everything said has been positive. Merely a place to reflect and talk."

– Emily (posted; May 1, 2016)

Like the concept of heterotopia, the GeekyCon Facebook group exists as essentially spatial. It

serves as a place of gathering for people to discuss shared topics of interests, and group members

often hold in-depth conversations surrounding music and its use within the community. While

this space often functions as a support system for members, conflicts still occur, and these often

serve as crucial points of negotiation in defining group identity. Though I ultimately aim to

integrate both the online and in person experiences of the GeekyCon community, this chapter

focuses predominantly on the Facebook group to establish a foundational understanding of

music's functions within the community. I theorize the GeekyCon Facebook group as a

heterotopia, a place outside of the dominant society where normative ideologies have been

suspended, and I understand the musical discussions that occur within the group as constructing

an audiotopia, a musical enactment of heterotopia where community members continue to

explore individual and group identities even after the convention has ended.

GeekyCon as a Heterotopia

The idea of audiotopia derives from Michel Foucault's (1967) concept of heterotopia, in which

Foucault describes heterotopias as real sites where the dominant culture can be "represented,

contested, and inverted" (paragraph 11). Heterotopias represent sites between utopias and

hegemony. Unlike utopias, heterotopias exist as real places, not simply as an imagined society in

a perfected state. Foucault lists several spaces that function as heterotopias, such as museums, cemeteries, churches, and hospitals. He notes that such spaces are usually reserved for those either in a state of crisis of deviance. However, Rhiannon Bury (2005) writes that defining heterotopias in terms of deviance alone refuses agentive power to those within them. In her book dealing with female-only cyberspaces, Bury argues that it is crucial to understand heterotopia as "a space in which active consent to normative practices is suspended" (p. 17). GeekyCon acts as heterotopia. Not only does the convention welcome overt and extreme expressions of fandom and nostalgia not commonly found within the space of the general public, but the multiplicity of fandoms also represents a blending of ideas within a single environment.

Internet sites, especially private message boards or Facebook groups, serve as prime examples of heterotopias. In her discussion of the online community known as Nerdfighters, Lili Wilkinson (2012) notes that "The internet, and all the millions of sites it contains, is profoundly heterotopic – it operates under different rules and exists outside the established order of things" (paragraph 24). In describing heterotopias, Foucault (1967) lists several qualifying factors, three of which are particularly relevant to the ways in which internet communities function. Foucault notes that "the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several real spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (paragraph 18). As examples, he lists the cinema and live theater, where disparate worlds unfold in a single setting; I argue this qualification also describes internet communities, including that of the GeekyCon Facebook group. Internet communities bring together people from across the world who would otherwise not be able to meet on such a regular basis, thus juxtaposing various cultures in a single space.

Additionally, heterotopias contain different regimes of time than those of the outside world. These spaces either slowly accumulate time, like a library or a museum, or seem to be

faster moving and essentially transitory, like a festival. Robin Rymarczuk and Maarten Derksen (2014) state that "like a museum, Facebook accumulates time. Fragmented bits of personal information, supposedly reflecting a particular present moment, are uploaded to construct a kind of linearity – like a narrated story" (paragraph 8). Though the physical GeekyCon event seems to last for only a moment, the Facebook group serves as an archive for participants. When I visit the group's page, I am not only able to see posts as they are uploaded, but I am also able to revisit past posts, a technique I often employed throughout my ethnographic documentation. This accumulation of time allows me to relive favorite moments or help me better understand the current group dynamic.

Finally, heterotopias regulate participants with a system of openings and closings that, according to Foucault (1967), "both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (paragraph 21). Rymarczuk and Derksen (2014) note that Facebook fits this qualification, stating that "a user can only enter into the world of Facebook when registration and identification (self-disclosure) has been completed" (paragraph 6). The closed Facebook group takes this process of opening and closing even further. Access to group posts is only available to those who are members. Before joining a person must first be approved by a group administrator, who was chosen through a group election. Once approved, a member has access to all current and past group posts. However, to remain a part of the community, members must abide by the discussion guidelines established by the administrators. This process of selective membership helps ensure that the GeekyCon Facebook group functions as a safe space for those who are part of the community.

Heterotopic online sites can serve as a form of refuge for women and minority groups, as markers of identity remain visible in the virtual world. Through a Butlerian concept of performativity, users make visible their personal gender. Early scholarly research investigating

online interaction posited what Rhiannon Bury (2005) describes as "the dream of disembodiment" (p. 3), in which the internet would render gender obsolete. However, more recent authors, such as Bury and Nancy Bayum (2000), understand that markers of identity, notably race or gender, do not simply disappear when one logs onto the internet. Bury draws on Judith Butler's concept of performativity to elaborate on virtual markers of identity. Butler (1990) argues that a person's gender does not stem from an essential biological trait or essence; rather, it results from the ways in which people unconsciously enact their gender based on a hegemonic social framework. Gender is effectively performed through the ways in which people present themselves, such as dress, speech, and movement. Because gender exists through a set of signifying practices, it can be transferred into an online environment. Bury notes that "In an online context, the body continues to signify gender intelligibility *linguistically*. Language in this sense is the linchpin that connects bodies to their online identities" (p. 8; italics in original). Visual images, moreover, allow those online to further perform their gender. The message boards that Bury details rarely contain users' self-portraits. However, social media sites, such as Facebook, enable users to incorporate images into their online profiles with ease and encourage them to post pictures they feel are accurate representations of themselves. Thus, within the realm of social media, gender performance becomes potentially an even more deliberate act than in the physical world. Far from rendering gender irrelevant, these sites, enhance the extent to which a person purposely portrays their gender to compensate for the lack of bodily representation.

Given the visibility of personal identity online, closed online sites, such as the GeekyCon Facebook group, offer a safe space for those outside of a normative power structure. Many popular websites are known for their rude and threatening comments, or "trolling," and still operate under patriarchal cultural norms. Karla Mantilla (2013) describes a type of internet

persecution geared specifically towards females, which she labels as "gendertrolling." Mantilla states that this type of cyber bullying "has much in common with other offline targeting of women…the harassment is about patrolling gender boundaries and using insults, hate, and threats of violence and/or rape to ensure that women and girls are either kept out of, or play subservient roles in, male-dominated arenas" (p. 568). Conversely, the internet can also function as a place of acceptance for women and minorities. Jessie Daniels (2009) notes that "many individual women outside of any formal political organization experience the Internet as a 'safe space' for resisting the gender oppression that they encounter in their day-to-day lives offline" (p. 108). Therefore, heterotopic online spaces possess the opportunity to subvert the dominant cultural norm. Because these spaces have a strict system of opening and closing, they are more easily regulated and provide a safer space for non-hegemonic users to express themselves.

Both those who attend and organize GeekyCon understand the positive impact a safe online environment can have on women, a fact that is made clear by the multiple panels at the convention dealing with online participation. For example, one of the organized discussions I attended in 2015, entitled "Internetting While Female," included the following description: "Join these tough, inspiring women as they discuss their experiences online, handling misogynist trolls, and how to address the evergreen challenge of being female online." The talk featured multiple women (figure 2.1) who have made careers out of creating and producing online media, such as the video blogger (vlogger) and musician Meghan Tonjes, and Hilly and Hannah Hindy, sisters who are known for their online musical parodies of popular television shows. During the panel, several women in the audience asked questions concerning the best ways to spread their own online media content while dealing with gendertrolling. After the panel ended, Tumblr user cardinaleyes reflected on the event through the blog site. She described how the Hindi sisters'

advice, comparing internet trolls to cockroaches, resonated with her:

> what do cockroaches do when a light is turned on? Scatter and run away. That light is
>
> each and every person that has imagination and feeling; each and every person that has an
>
> idea, a thought, a brainstorm, and/or a message that s/he wants to convey. These lights
>
> are us. The minute we shine bright is the minute the under dwellers and trollers run for
>
> cover.[1]

This metaphor supports Jessalynn Marie Keller's (2012) assertion that viewing "the Internet as a space of opportunity, public engagement, and feminist activism for girls allows us to productively rethink of girls as active agents, cultural producers, and citizens rather than passive victims and cultural dupes in the online world" (p. 440). Those on the panel used their platform to offer first-hand advice for others encountering hateful and misogynistic comments online, while simultaneously stressing that the internet can also be a place of community and creativity.

Those who participate in the GeekyCon Facebook group understand the need for a safe online space and, therefore, attempt to translate the convention's ideals into practice. Many view the group as a support system, as described in the previous chapter. Members frequently post statuses both asking for and offering encouragement to others. These posts, moreover, are usually not directly related to the convention, but instead to member's personal lives. For instance, Keeli posted "Lumos request, I applied for a Ph.D program and I have an interview on Friday. Hella scared but hella excited as well. Love and lumos would be greatly appreciated:)," to which I responded, "GOOD LUCK! I'm going through the same process so I understand" (posted January 18, 2017). When I first joined the group, I found the high number of such posts

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[1]Retrieved from: https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/thank-you-for-talking-to-me-afterwards-while-i-helped-you-get-to-your-booth

Figure 2.1

GeekyCon 2015 Internetting While Female Panel. (From left to right: Meghan Tonjes, Leigh
Lahov, Tessa Netting, Hannah Hindy, Hilly Hindy)

perplexing. However, when I asked my friend and fellow GeekyCon attendee, Katie, why these posts appear, she stated "I guess just because it's a fandom centric group, and people know they can safely post things in there and not be judged because they know that there's people in the group who also like the things that they like." She then further elaborated that to her,

> [GeekyCon] is kind of like a family. And that's cheesy. But the people in there are very close to each other…so they'll post [for example] 'Hey, my house caught on fire' or 'My dad lost his job' or 'My aunt has cancer can you please help or send good thoughts or something.' So it's just a safe environment with a lot of close people (Personal communication, June 15, 2016).

The GeekyCon Facebook group acquires a heterotopic status due to the many people who feel comfortable posting personal information, and this closeness ensures that voices outside of the hegemonic social structure will likely be welcomed.

Theorizing Audiotopia

The feeling of safety within both the online and in-person spaces of GeekyCon, in turn, enables the musical practices of the community to function as an audiotopia. As the name implies, Kun derives audiotopia from Foucault's heterotopia, describing it as a way to understand the diverse blend of music found within American culture. Frederick Moehn (2007) notes that Kun is primarily "concerned with the way music is intertwined with the problems of race and identity in an America that has often struggled with its own multiculturalism" (p. 184). Kun portrays music in the United States as demonstrating utopian potential that possesses the "ability to show us how to move toward something better and transform the world we find ourselves in" (p. 17).

Yet, I find Kun's description of audiotopia overly romanticized, for it glosses over many of the stark racial imbalances embedded within the history of American popular music. For

instance, Kun employs Peete Seeger as an example of an artist who understood the power of an audiotopia, for he often drew together distinct musical cultures that would not otherwise meet. Kun unironically describes Peete Seeger and The Weavers as "a button-down folk quartet…who first made it big singing the songs of black folk-blues singer Leadbelly, translating their accounts of black life into musical languages accessible to socially conscious, protest-oriented whites" (p. 3). Kun neglects, though, to mention that Seeger was also entangled in multiple battles over song-royalties, as detailed by Rian Malan (2000) and Peter Manuel (2006) concerning the songs "Wimoweh" and "Guantanamera" respectively. While Seeger attempted to pay the original artists, the recording industry nevertheless privileged Seeger's status as a white musician over the people of color who composed the songs Seeger performed. Many of the initial artists received little monetary compensation. Though Kun attempts to positively represent American popular music as having a "post-nationalist formation" (p. 20), he ignores the lopsided power dynamics that usually accompany these transnational flows. As Javier F. León (2014, p. 133) describes, in attempting to locate potential utopias within a global capitalist economy, Kun repackages Adornian ideas of musical transcendence within the framework of neoliberalism. Unlike Kun, I do not employ the concept of audiotopia within a global, or even national, frame. Instead, my reading broadens the concept of audiotopia as well as focuses attention onto individual queer and female groups outside of the dominant patriarchal society in which music plays a key role in community formation.

Audiotopia, for me, designates an aural enactment of heterotopia in which music plays a key role in the negotiation of group and individual identities. Like Kun, I understand audiotopias to be inherently spatial. Kun notes that theorizing audiototpias requires scholars to "think of music in terms of space and in terms of its spaces – the spaces that music itself contains, the

spaces that the music fills up, the spaces that the music helps us to imagine" (p. 21). Within both the physical convention and the GeekyCon Facebook group, music offers a space for negotiation and affirmation of identity. Kun furthers elaborates upon the spatial elements of audiotopias, noting that they are "sonic spaces of effective utopian longings where several sites normally deemed incompatible are brought together" (p. 23). Though I agree with Kun's assertion, it is important to keep in mind Foucault's (1967) distinction between heterotopias and utopias, which Foucault calls "fundamentally unreal spaces" (paragraph 10). Though audiotopias can provide a place to imagine utopian possibilities, analysis of the dissonance within these spaces must not be neglected.

Additionally, like Kun I am concerned with "the critical process of listening to music, of how we – fans and critics alike – might listen differently to the music we hear" (p. 25). I do not privilege the creation of music over the act of listening, rather I center my analysis around the ways in which fans engage with music. I follow John Blacking's (1973) assertion that "the importance of creative listening is too often ignored in discussions of musical ability, and yet it is as fundamental to music as it is to language" (p. 10). I view the concept of audiotopia as not only pertaining to the music found within GeekyCon, but also in a metaphorical sense. Within this thesis, audiotopia represents a pervading sense of dialogue and a figurative soundscape constantly sounding within the community and largely enabled through attendee's use of social media.

The juxtaposition of disparate music types and practices at both the physical convention and the GeekyCon Facebook group begins to illustrate its function as an audiotopia. When I attended GeekyCon in 2015 for the start of my research, the amount of musical diversity struck me as incredibly unusual. Because of my previous experience at LeakyCon, the *Harry Potter-*

centric convention from which GeekyCon originated, I knew to expect wizard rock. However, I was not anticipating many of the other musical events or performers, such as the Broadway and Disney sing-alongs. The musical diversity present can be, in part, attributed to Hills' (2005) concept of cyclical fandom, as demonstrated by the answer Katie gave me when I asked about the plethora of music present at the convention. She stated:

> The people who run it, the people who go to it are just a bunch of nerds[2]….they're like
>
> 'Well, *Harry Potter*'s cool, and also *Buffy* is cool, and also *Supernatural* is cool, and all
>
> of this other stuff is really cool. So how about just…focus on everything geek? And so I
>
> think it was just a natural progression. (Personal Communication; June 15, 2016)

She describes both those who run GeekyCon as well as the attendees as experiencing cyclical fandom, a "natural progression" in which they move from one item of interest to another. This move from one fandom to another creates an audiotopic space in which many musical styles and genres are simultaneously juxtaposed and celebrated.

The atmosphere of acceptance found within the GeekyCon community also aids in the creation of an audiotopic environment in which members feel at ease to discuss matters that carry great personal meanings, both in terms of fandom and individual life experiences. Cornel Sandavos (2005) notes that "the object of fandom, whether it is a sports team, a television programme, a film or pop star, is intrinsically interwoven with our sense of self, with who we are, would like to be, and think we are" (p. 96). Those within the GeekyCon community attempt to foster environment of open discussion, and because objects of fandom are inherently linked to

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[2] The term "nerd" here is meant to reclaim the once derogatory term and is employed in a positive sense.

a fan's sense of self, fans feel at ease discussing more intimate details of their lives. For instance, a month after the 2016 GeekyCon convention ended, Melanie posted:

> I was listening to my Leaky/Geeky playlist to celebrate the first day of classes and obviously I was feeling nostalgic…Before this community came into my life I felt like I was lost in a muggle world with very few people in my life and then I discovered LeakyCon, it was like getting my [Hogwarts] letter and having a new world open up before me, it has changed me and I am forever grateful (posted September 1, 2016).

Within this post, Melanie details her personal feelings toward the GeekyCon community by incorporating elements of fandom to express her intense emotions. She describes the nostalgic feelings evoked by songs, such as perhaps "Home" by Lauren Fairweather or "Shut Up and Dace" by Walk the Moon, that remind her of the convention. Additionally, she uses metaphors of the *Harry Potter* series (i.e. "Hogwarts letter" and "muggle") to denote community meaning. This atmosphere of acceptance, in which community members feel comfortable sharing intimate details of their lives, fosters an environment in which it is acceptable to talk about issues that frequently lie outside of heteronormative society, such as LGBTQ+ representation or disabilities.

Unlike the imaginary space of the utopia, audiotopias represent a real space in which disagreements among members often occur. These skirmishes arise partially because both fandom and music are experienced differently by individuals, and not everyone within the community interprets meaning uniformly. Jess, for instance posted "I keep hearing things like 'it's about friends, not guests!' But not everyone experiences the con in the same way" (posted May 2, 2016). This creates points of contention that cause members to renegotiate group identity and values.

"Almost Like…A Koo D'etat"

Music acts as a tool of both inclusion and contestation within the GeekyCon community, thus reinforcing its status as an audiotopia. Since beginning my study, one of the largest arguments within the GeekyCon Facebook group erupted over the announcement that the band Koo Koo Kanga Roo (abbreviated KKR) would be performing as special guests during one of the nightly concerts at GeekyCon 2016. Many felt that the band did not live up to the standard set by previous GeekyCon musical guests. Furthermore, many felt as if KKR catered to an audience much younger than the average attendee, perceived by most to be at least in their late teens. Conversely, a few community members adamantly supported the band's announcement. The debate over the band spanned hundreds of comments on various discussion threads over multiple days. As Claudia put it "koo koo kanga roo has caused such a ruckus in this group. almost like… a koo d'etat" (posted May 2, 2016). Because this debate resulted from the announcement of a musical group, it, therefore, created an environment in which music played a key role in negotiating personal and group identity.

The debate centered around Koo Koo Kanga Roo functioned as part of a larger discussion surrounding the identity of GeekyCon as an event. This contestation first arose because many people within the community felt as if KKR was meant to serve as a consolation prize for the absence of the musical theater group Starkid. This group, Starkid, first gained notoriety in 2009 after its musical theater parody of the *Harry Potter* series, *A Very Potter Musical*, was uploaded to YouTube. In the years since, Starkid has continued producing musicals with upbeat, funny, and memorable lyrics, most of which are also fan parodies, such as their musicals based on *Star Wars* and Disney. For several years, Starkid has routinely performed at Geeky/LeakyCon, either entire shows or a mix of numbers from their various musicals. The group consistently draws

large crowds, and I have heard many people express that Starkid influenced their decision to

attend the convention; in fact, Starkid's appearance was one of the key reasons I decided to

attend my first *Harry Potter* convention in 2010. During the summer of 2016, though, several

core members of Starkid were involved in their new musical production, *Firebringer*, and

announced on the show's Kickstarter page that no one involved would be going to GeekyCon.

While disappointed, members of the GeekyCon Facebook group initially seemed to accept

Starkid's absence, and members quickly planned a fan-led Starkid a sing-along for the

convention. Trouble started, however, when it was announced that the band Koo Koo Kanga Roo

would be performing at GeekyCon, rather than Starkid.

Many GeekyCon community members felt Koo Koo Kanga Roo represented a

downgrade in quality of performers featured at the convention and that they were nothing more

than a poor consolation prize for Starkid's absence. KKR's musical aesthetic greatly differs from

those who have performed in the past. The bands that attendees are accustomed to hearing

usually possess musical qualities similar to rock, like Harry and the Potters, or

singer/songwriters, like Lauren Fairweather. Additionally, at the convention GeekyCon

performers normally feature lyrics based around either the *Harry Potter* series or fandom more

broadly, and these songs often had a deeper meaning of acceptance or inclusion. However, KKR

differed in both of these respects. The group consists of two men whose music lies somewhere

between rapping and singing. Mia described them as a band that "kind of tries to have that fun

and young at heart vibe" (personal communication, July 29, 2016). Many participants liked their

comic and catchy music. Additionally, as revealed in a video chat that appeared on the Facebook

group, the members of KKR knew the members of Harry and the Potters, a popular wizard rock

band who have performed at GeekyCon for years. However, most of the members of the

Facebook group did not know of this connection. Furthermore, their lyrical content was

perceived by many to be incredibly juvenile. KKR had songs about various random objects, such

as fanny packs, cats, pizza, and bubble wrap. When speaking of the online reaction to KKR,

Katie stated:

> Even though some people who were going do genuinely like them, 90 percent of the
>
> people were like 'Who the eff are these people?' and didn't know what was going on and
>
> were just really upset…And I think the big thing was immediately after Starkid
>
> announced that they weren't going, Koo Koo Kanga Roo was announced. And that, I
>
> think, is the big thing. It was seen as a consolation prize for Starkid not coming. (personal
>
> communication; June 8, 2016)

> Moreover, within the GeekyCon Facebook group, Koo Koo Kanga Roo came to

symbolize a larger shift in quality of the guests and the convention as a whole. Throughout my

interview, Katie referred to KKR as "The Wiggles," an Australian musical group with a similar

aesthetic and a popular television show aimed at very young children. Within the Facebook

group, many people employed this reference as a way to denigrate the band. In fact, one of the

main posts discussing KKR, began with "Can't wait for Geekycon to announce their next guest:

The Wiggles!!" (posted May 1, 2016).

> However, not everyone agreed with this assessment, and the audiotopic environment

provided a space to dissent. As a comment to the aforementioned post, one Facebook group

member wrote,

> GeekyCon provides MANY different experiences including those for children because
>
> it's a FAMILY FRIENDLY convention. The fact that you're 'insulted' by a children's
>
> group being invited means that you're missing the point of the convention as a

whole. Other people in this group are excited about Koo Koo Kanga Roo coming, and

what's good for the goose is good for the gander. (posted May 1, 2016)

By stating that this is a family friendly convention, this posts acknowledges the multiplicity

reasons attendees might have from going to the convention, thus also acknowledging the inherent

multiplicity of identities within an audiotopia.

This multiplicity of ideas articulated within the debate surrounding Koo Koo Kangaroo

momentarily left the GeekyCon community without a stable sense of identity, and this confusion

was directed towards the convention leadership, Mischief Management. Many felt as if the

company was neglecting GeekyCon in favor of the other conventions they manage, such as the

newly established BroadwayCon. Another one of the main posts in which members debated the

announcement of KKR read:

I feel like there's a trend of people being afraid to criticize [GeekyCon]…but I know a lot

of people feel the same about this and if I bring it up I won't be alone. I feel insulted by

the most recent special guest announcement. Some of their songs give me a weird

vibe…I know some people like them in here and it's definitely not weird if you do, but

BroadwayCon – a start up convention – got Hamilton and Darren Criss and people from

Supergirl/The Flash and [Mischief Management] give[s] us a random kid's band that no

one was begging for? I just feel really insulted, like that's all they think of us. (posted

May 1, 2016)

Though the original poster does not explicitly mention KKR, the phrase "recent special guest

announcement" signifies the band. This indirect reference to KKR was a tactic used by many

community members to move the discussion from specifically dealing with the band's sound to

talking about larger issues surrounding GeekyCon. In stating that she felt insulted by Mischief

Management's decision to feature KKR in the lineup of musicians, the poster focuses the idea of convention ownership onto the fans, rather than the corporate leadership. Within this statement, the poster eschews the Adornian top-down model of fandom, in which fans represent nothing more than mindless pawns controlled by the media industries. Rather, to her, GeekyCon represents a fan-led community environment in which fans can celebrate their interests with other like-minded individuals.

Mischief Management founder Melissa Anelli, however, juxtaposed this fan-centric view of convention ownership once she made her voice clear within the arena of the Facebook group. While the Facebook group is meant as a place for attendees to congregate, the convention staff remains informed of any major debates occurring within the group, for some of the staff are personal friends with group members. However, within my time as a member of the Facebook group I did not witness a direct staff post until the debate surrounding KKR. Melissa Anelli momentarily joined the group to inform the members of the reasoning behind booking guests, specifically KKR, and describe the business model that she employs to run the convention. Melissa compared GeekyCon to other similar conventions, writing:

> We don't retrieve appearance fees the way other conventions do. And guests frequently turn us down even if we are able to make the fee they would ask of another convention, because what would be a flat fee to us is just minimum elsewhere. Why come for $2000 when you could make $8000 elsewhere? That's a legitimate question, not a gripe; actors and other special guests have to pay bills too and have to look out to make the most of their time. It just makes us appreciate those who work with us even more. (posted May 1, 2016)

GeekyCon, unlike many other large conventions, does not charge extra for celebrity autographs or photos as a way to keep the convention costs down for fans, and this pricing tactic impacts the level of fan celebrity GeekyCon is able to afford. Despite the fact that many GeekyCon attendees view the convention predominately as a facilitator of community, this post forced the Facebook group members to acknowledge that GeekyCon is indeed a business. Many scholars, beginning with Henry Jenkins (2013[1992]), have privileged the notion of fan creativity and agency over the idea of fan manipulation by the media industries; yet, media fandom nevertheless exists within a capitalistic framework that fans must also acknowledge. The discussion of KKR brought to the community's attention the business workings of GeekyCon that attendees do not often discuss.

However, in keeping with the ideals of the convention attendees, Melissa's post later reinforced the idea of a community convention. She stated:

As for Koo Koo Kanga Roo, they are a very fun addition to what is a huge night of Geeky music, so I don't understand the negativity…I hope they feel the warmth and love that all our guests have always gotten on our stage…To do what we do at GeekyCon, we have to prove that it's a model that can work. We have to slowly make people realize that it's worth their time to get there, even if they don't get paid as much, to be a part of this fantastic community that has made each and every event special. (posted May 1, 2016)

In order to calm the heated arguments surrounding KKR, Melissa evoked the idea of community values among GeekyCon attendees, suggesting that the behavior towards KKR was atypical and should not be continued. While this appeal to community values could potentially be seen as a corporate appeal to emotionality, Melissa has for years established herself as a fan, especially

within the *Harry Potter* fandom. Therefore, this post ultimately attempts to represent GeekyCon as a place where the idea of a fan centered community can co-exist with capitalistic convention business models.

Because of the audiotopic nature of the discussion, Melissa's post did not put an end to the debate over Koo Koo Kanga Roo; instead, it created a space "merely to talk and reflect," as described by Emily in the epigraph to this chapter. Within the larger discussion of group identity, many individuals made it clear that their personal reasons for attending GeekyCon were not contingent upon the musical guest list. Several used the posts centered around KKR's announcement to discuss what they labeled as "FriendCon," (Figure 2.2) which denotes the value they placed on GeekyCon as an opportunity to physically reunite with friends whom they have kept in contact with throughout the year via the internet. Though many negatively viewed the announcement of KKR, fans also used the discussion surrounding the group to consider their overall reason for attendance. One user posted:

> Remember that the guests are just one part of the con; friends and panels and good times are just as, if not more important. You're not required to go to anything, and one disappointment isn't going to ruin absolutely everything. Keep your chin up and get through till July! (posted May 2, 2016)

This comment, along with many others like it, signaled the importance of a fan-centered experiences. In addition to the celebrity led events at GeekyCon, such as the Broadway sing along, the convention is also filled with several fan led panels. For example, my friend and interviewee, Mia, gave a talk about female representation within the Disney princess movies, and my convention roommate, Madeline, lead a *Harry Potter* centered dance workshop entitled "Dance Against the Dark Arts." To many guests, like the above commenter, the debates

Manja Netter
March 29 · Wicklow, Ireland

Hey kids....120 days for #FriendCon

Briana Michelle Meyer, Mia Hrabosky and 23 others

Like   Comment

Mia Hrabosky
March 21

If in addition to attending GeekyCon, you're attending FriendCon 2016 as a special guest, announce yourself here! FriendCon runs Wed July 27 - Mon Aug 1 at the OCCC (fortuitously concurrent with our beloved Geekycon) and it's your chance to see all your online friends IRL!

FRIEND
Geeky
Con®
2016
SPECIAL GUEST
ANNOUNCEMENTS

You, Manja Netter, Briana Michelle Meyer and 66 others   40 Comments

Figure 2.2

Friendcon (Retrieved from the GeekyCon Facebook group)

surrounding KKR offered a chance to express their view that community, more than celebrity, lie at the heart of GeekyCon.

Community members, furthermore, used the debate surrounding Koo Koo Kanga Roo as a means to describe GeekyCon's function as a safe space. While these community members did not necessarily applaud Mischief Management's decision to feature KKR as a performer, they nevertheless appreciated the personal security GeekyCon offered them. A month after the initial debate of KKR, Danny, a trans and disabled individual, revived the discussion. While he never explicitly mentions KKR, they are, once again, implied when he mentions "guests" in the following post:

> A lot of people have said they don't like the guests or don't feel the guests justify the cost of the con, and I totally feel you and understand you. I haven't been super excited about most of the guests either…Leaky/Geeky is the only con I'd even consider attending at this point outside of a very few niche cons, and there's a huge reason for that. I feel safe at Geeky. I don't have that opportunity at other mainstream cons. Most (not all) other cons have minimal if any policies for LGBTQIA+ attendees. Some cons have disability policies, but rarely as open and as personable as Geeky's. I don't actually know of any other con that has gender neutral restrooms or pronoun training for volunteers or staff. This is the only place I feel safe. This is the only place I feel 100% welcome. This is the only place I feel relatively safe having critical discussions on race, sexuality, representation, and other serious issues. (posted July 11, 2016)

While one previous commenter negatively compared GeekyCon to Comic Con, as discussed earlier, Danny asserts that for him the difference is positive. Many fans understand Comic Con to possess a misogynistic atmosphere, and this has started to gain the attention among academics as

well. For instance, Ellen Kirkpatrick (2015) notes the harassment female cosplayers often face while attending this event. In contrast, members of the GeekyCon community understand the convention and the online Facebook group to act as a safe space where they are free to examine issues of personal importance, such as gender, sexuality, and fandom. Though the general debate was framed around Koo Koo Kanga Roo, the online discussion came to symbolize the much larger topic of convention identity.

Chapter Conclusion

The audiotopic negotiations of identity within the Facebook group surrounding Koo Koo Kanga Roo were largely relegated to the online realm. Most of my interviewees stated that they did not think that the debate surrounding KKR would noticeably impact their concert reception, despite the fact that many followed, participated in, and had opinions regarding KKR. I was surprised to hear that they did not believe it would impact the band's reception, and even more surprised to find that this was actually the case. For instance, when I asked Katie if the debate will affect the audience at the concert, she replied.

> I don't think so. I mean, I'm sure there won't be like a huge crowd watching them at the concert, but they're not doing a whole big set. They're not the only ones performing that night. So I'm sure people may not stand there and jump around and pay a whole lot of attention to them, but I don't think people will like throw stuff at them. At least I hope not. I hope we're more mature than that. I think at worst people will just ignore them. (personal communication, June 15, 2016)

Katie was correct in that not many people attended KKR's portion of the concert. However, I assert that the debate did in fact influence their reception. For those who did attend, GeekyCon provided a safe and welcoming atmosphere, and I this was largely resulted from members of the

community being allowed a medium to voice their opinion before the concert began. The audiotopic space of the Facebook group offered members a chance to voice their heterophonic opinions and negotiate their understanding of the convention identity before the physical event occurred.

During the concert, I saw there was a small but enthusiastic group of attendees in the front near the stage dancing along to the upbeat and energetic music. They jumped up and down as Koo Koo Kanga Roo gave the audience members high-fives and sang about the wonders of wearing a fanny pack: "Fashion over function is what they say/ When you rock a fanny pack you can have it both ways" (Atchison, Olstad, 2014). There were also a handful of people, including myself and my roommates, who sat near the back of the room to observe the concert. For those who chose not to attend, there were also alternative options provided during the time of the concert, such as a gathering for attendees to play board games organized by Mia. Though critiques of KKR's performance aesthetics came up within casual conversations among my friends, it was nowhere near the level of heated debate that surrounded them on the Facebook group.

The audiotopic atmosphere of the Facebook group helps outline music's role within the GeekyCon community. Music served as a focal point during major moments of debate for the community. Fans' interactions with music within both the physical and online convention environments functions as an audiotopia and signifies larger issues of community identity, as was the case with Koo Koo Kanga Roo. Because members of the Facebook group were allowed an outlet for their frustrations in advance, KKR's was received positively by enthusiastic fans, unaffected by the heated debates of previous months. Though the next two chapters will largely focus on the fans' musical experience at the convention, the idea of audiotopia remains integral

to my framework and exploration of gender relations and participation within the GeekyCon

community.

Chapter III
YES ALL WITCHES!: Inclusionary Musical Practices of Wizard Rock

"Is there a gender neutral word for wizard/witch?

Do we need to make one?"

-Michelle (posted; September 1, 2016)

As first day of GeekyCon 2016 begins, I'm filled with excitement. I've started heading over to the convention center an hour before the first event I plan to attend, entitled "Creating Safe Spaces," so that I have enough time to confirm my registration to the convention. Before heading to the workshop, which is geared towards helping attendees create inclusionary spaces in group environments outside of the convention, I put on my bracelet that will let me into the Saturday night dance. I then start to fill out my convention nametag (Figure 3.1):

"Name: Sarah Holder;

Fandoms: Harry Potter, Doctor Who, Avatar the Last Airbender, Stephen Universe;

Pronouns: She/Her/Her's."

These questions represent an aspect of performativity rooted within the convention. While the first two questions, name and fandom interest, are typical for a multi-fandom convention, it is rare to encounter complex understanding of gender identity embedded into the design of the event. Yet, both the GeekyCon management and attendees actively attempt to ensure the convention functions as a safe space for all genders and sexualities. While I have already touched upon this topic within the context of the GeekyCon Facebook group, this chapter positions the discussion within current political debates surrounding issues of female and LGBTQ+ rights. I argue that these safe spaces, enacted and sustained through the musical practices at GeekyCon, specifically, facilitate the audiotopic environment of the convention.
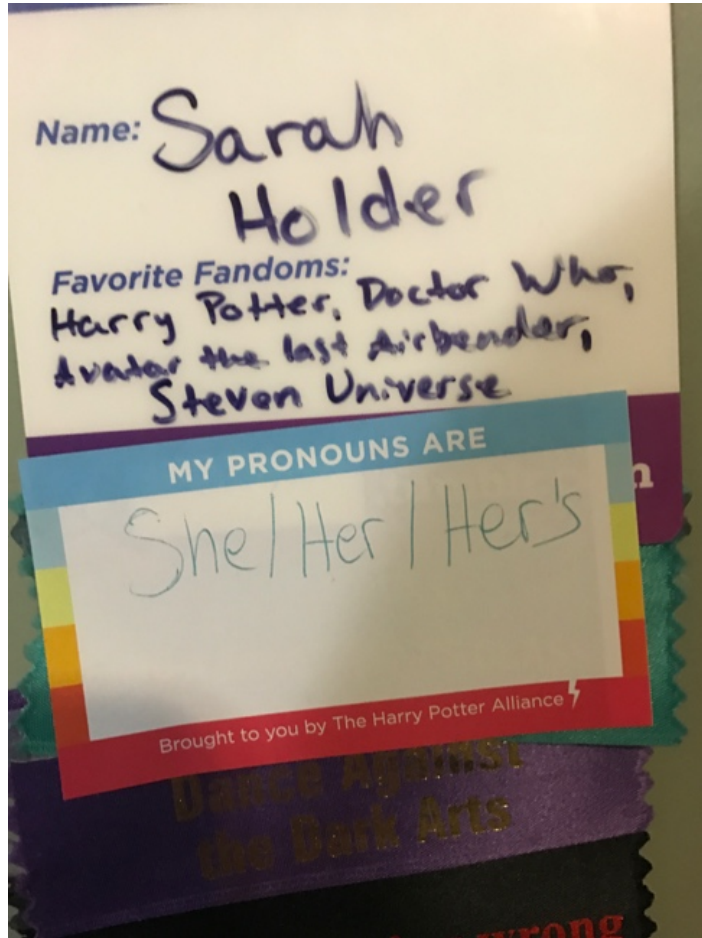
Figure 3.1

GeekyCon 2016 Name Tag

Transfiguring Safe Spaces

The term "safe space" denotes a place where females, LGBTQ+ identifying individuals, and other marginalized groups can freely express their identities without fear of potential consequences, such as harassment or even violence. Within public discourse over the past few years, the phrase "safe space" has become more widespread, leaving the idea open for misrepresentation. For instance, a 2015 New York Times op-ed stated "safe spaces are an expression of the conviction, increasingly prevalent among college students, that their schools should keep them from being 'bombarded' by discomforting or distressing viewpoints" (Shulevitz, 2015, paragraph 5). This misconception positions them as a way for overly sensitive people, namely college students, to avoid encountering new ideas. However, Rosenfeld and Noterman (2014) note that safe spaces are "not merely an attempt to create an abstract sense of equality, to smooth over differences, or to step outside of and ignore the dangers and injustices of the world" (p. 1355). Rather, these spaces acknowledge the power dynamics inherent within a heteronormative society and offer a chance to exist without feeling a constant threat of judgement or violence.

Feminist scholars classify safe spaces as either separatist or inclusive. Separatist environments construct membership around a shared marginalized identity, only allowing those members to enter the space. For instance, McConnell, et al., (2016) give the example of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, a week-long festival held between 1976-2015 centered around women's music making. They note that the festival has largely been considered a lesbian separatist space because it was not open to men and many of those who attended identified as lesbians. While separatist safe spaces offer refuge for those who share a common identity, they have also been criticized for their lack of intersectionality. Similar to much of the criticism

surrounding second wave feminism (see Butler, 1990), separatist safe spaces potentially

overlook other identities, such as race or class, in its search for a unified membership. Inclusive

safe spaces, unlike its separatist counterpart, provide a space for those of diverse backgrounds

and identities to congregate and share ideas. While these spaces welcome individuals from all

backgrounds, they simultaneously ensure that participants are aware of the power dynamics and

privilege found within a hegemonic environment. McConnell et al. (2016) note that to achieve

the desired safety, these spaces "presuppose a concurrent awareness of the ways in which these

identities are associated with relationships to power, which in turn, shape safety, engagement,

and discourse within these settings" (p. 476). This awareness, then, ensures that those within

inclusive safe spaces are not merely replicating the power structures of the dominant society.

GeekyCon, both the physical convention and the online group, function as an inclusive

safe space. As previously noted, the demographics consist largely of females in their late teens

and early twenties. However, those who run GeekyCon make an effort to craft a space open to all

genders, sexualities, and (dis)abilities. For instance, Mischief Management guarantees that the

convention space includes gender neutral restrooms, spaces for preferred pronouns on the name

tags, and preferred seating during main events for those with disabilities. This focus on inclusion

has earned GeekyCon a reputation as a safe space for fans. Multiple news outlets, such as the

Orlando Business Journal (2015) and BuzzFeed (2015) note the feminist and intersectional

environment present at the convention. BuzzFeed contributor Danielle Henderson, who describes

GeekyCon as "the most feminist convention I'd ever attended" (paragraph 17), contrasts

GeekyCon with other male-dominated sci-fi conventions, many of which she states "still struggle

to accept that women constitute a huge percentage of pop culture consumption, forcing an

antagonistic point of view where there doesn't need to be one" (paragraph 18). Henderson

further describes her conversation with GeekyCon founder Melissa Anelli, explaining that "her desire for inclusion felt like a natural – and necessary – aspect of planning an event where everyone could enjoy themselves" (paragraph 21). Though Anelli did not construct GeekyCon as a specifically subversive space that actively campaigns against hegemonic norms, she nevertheless understood the need for a welcoming environment that would allow fans to feel comfortable and openly embrace the nostalgia that the convention offered.

Those who attend GeekyCon understand the importance of inclusionary safe spaces. Multiple panels at the convention were sponsored by activist organizations centered around fandom, such as The Harry Potter Alliance, and employed fan knowledge as a tool to help others develop inclusionary practices. For instance, Jackson Bird, an openly transgender male, gave a talk entitled "Transfiguring Safe Spaces." Based on a form of magic from the *Harry Potter* series known as transfiguration, this talk discussed concepts of gender identity and tactics for transforming every day spaces into safe zones. Members of the Facebook group consider safety a key issue when deciding to attend the convention, as demonstrated in the previous chapter. For many, GeekyCon offers one of the few chances to express their identity. For instance, Riley posted to the Facebook page:

> I'm so grateful for this safe space, geeky '16 was the first time I was publicly out and
> introduced myself with my real honest pronouns (they-them) and name (Riley). Today on
> coming out day I want to remember all of you for letting me be who I really am even if it
> was only for a short time, it gave me strength and hope to hold onto while I'm back in the
> real world where I'm not out (posted October 11, 2016).

Members of the GeekyCon community constantly attempt to craft an inclusive environment, even considering small details, such as in the epigraph above when Michelle inquired about a gender neutral word for witch or wizard.

The focus placed on creating a safe and fandom-centric environment allows those within the GeekyCon community to practice a type of subversion by discussing how negate the destructive stereotypes typically associated with female fans. The concept of fandom has recently become more accepted, and even celebrated, within mainstream culture, as discussed in the opening chapter; however, many negative associations about specifically female fans still linger. Lousia Ellen Stein (2015) notes that "Understandings of fandom have always been heavily shaped by gendered assumptions" (p. 9). In particular, female fans are depicted in popular culture as hysterical "fan girls" obsessed with their idols, as Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs (1992) describe in their discussion of Beatlemainia. Many of those with whom I have spoken described the negative reputation that female fans often receive, yet the safe space of GeekyCon negates the stereotype "fan girl." In fact, one of the panels I attended in 2016 was entitled "Taking Back 'Fangirl,'" and included the following description:

> For a while it seemed like the terme [sic] "fangirl," "gamer girl," and "geek girl" were only used in jest or in derision—no one wanted a gendered descriptor attached to their name. Let's talk about taking back "fangirl" and why it's not only okay but encouraged to wear that girly modifier with pride. (GeekyCon 2016 schedule).

During the panel, attendees discussed how fan work deemed feminine, such as writing fan fiction, was often viewed as possessing a lower status than that of work considered masculine, such as memorization of specific canonical facts about a series. Throughout the panel, participants discussed specific ways to raise the status of females within fan communities while

still remaining inclusive to males, thereby demonstrating GeekyCon's status as an inclusive safe space.

Inclusionary safe spaces, such as GeekyCon, create an environment in which people of multiple backgrounds and identities can safely congregate and, thus, function much like heterotopias. Both lie outside of the dominant society and offer those who do not fit within the neat box of heteronormativity a chance to speak without fear. Rosenfeld and Noterman (2014) note that "the work of producing safe spaces entails continually facing, negotiating, and embracing paradoxical binaries: safety/danger, inclusivity/exclusivity, public/private, and so forth" (p. 1355). Just as with heterotopias, inclusionary safe spaces allow juxtaposing viewpoints to coexist, illustrated in the previous chapter with debate surrounding Koo Koo Kanga Roo. Though members of the GeekyCon community carried opposing viewpoints, the community as a whole attempted to make sure everyone's voice was heard equally. Moreover, just as Foucault discusses the inherent placeness of heterotopias, so too are safe spaces located within a lived reality. Rosenfeld and Noterman state that safe spaces could be understood "as the opposite of etymological utopia – rather than being 'placeless', they are very much products of particular places and situations" (p. 1361).

Wizard Rock and Performance of Safe Spaces

The safe space found within the convention community is most prominently musically demonstrated through the practices surrounding wizard rock. For many within the community, the genre serves as a reminder of the convention. After GeekyCon 2015, I asked members of the Facebook group to name their favorite musical event, and multiple people named wizard rock. One member, Claudia, stated

Wizard rock (not just the bands and their kickass performances, but the community

surrounding the music) is what makes LeakyCon and GeekyCon what it is. This year was

so special because the crowd was markedly smaller but offered a very concentrated

enthusiasm. Every single person was giving their all (posted October 1, 2015).

Though the event was smaller than previous years, the high level of audience participation

strengthened the feeling of community among the audience.

Wizard rock exists as a thriving genre outside of mainstream attention, yet its

development was almost accidental and entirely dependent upon social media platforms popular

in the early 2000's. Joe and Paul DeGeorge began the genre in 2003 when they formed Harry

and the Potters, a concept band they based around the idea of the character of Harry Potter time

traveling and playing in a band with himself (see Rohlman, 2010). While they were not the first

band to release songs about *Harry Potter*, a status that goes to the band Switchblade Kittens (Do

Rozario, 2011, p. 268), they founded the genre as it exists today and provided the mold upon

which other bands in the genre based their acts. In the early 2000's, the band made their music

available online via the then-popular websites Live Journal and, soon after, Myspace. The

popularity of Myspace at the time helped wizard rock gain a large fan base, and, in fact, that is

how I first discovered the genre. This popularity inspired more bands to form, and networks of

wizard rock bands, such as Draco and the Malfoys and Tonks and the Aurors, developed during

this time. While there have been questions about wizard rock's staying power after the *Harry*

Potter books and movies were released, bands continue to make music and encourage others to

join (see Terrell, 2011)

Songs fall into the category of wizard rock based on lyrical content, not on stylistic

features; therefore, this music ranges widely, from rock, like Harry and the Potters, or singer-

songwriter, like Lauren Fairweather. This multiplicity of styles within a single genre

demonstrates an audiotopic quality and makes the genre especially suited for GeekyCon. Most wizard rock songs are original in that they usually do not take pre-exiting lyrics or music from the *Harry Potter* books or movies. However, a small number of songs are parodies, such as Draco and the Malfoy's "This Land is My Land" (Ross, 2009), based on Woody Guthrie's song "This Land is Your Land" (1956) but with lyrics from the perspective of one of the antagonists in the *Harry Potter* series. Often, wizard rock musicians write original songs from a character's view point. Harry and the Potters, for instance, have a song called "Save Ginny Weasley" (Joe DeGeorge, Paul DeGeorge, 2003), which describes Harry Potter's quest in the second book to save Ginny Weasley from Voldemort, the main villain in the series. Additionally, as Do Rozario (2011) notes, "like much fan fiction, Wizard Rock is particularly active in those spaces that Rowling's narratives elide over, or that exist outside the novels" (p. 270). Many artists sing about events from the Harry Potter series that are not discussed in great detail within the books. For example, all of the relationships within the books are heterosexual, leaving queer fans disappointed. Wizard rock, like fan fiction more generally, provides a space to imagine queer possibilities. Take, for example, the Whomping Willow's song "In Which Draco and Harry Secretly Want to Make Out" (Maggiacomo, 2007). Sung from the perspective of a tree found on the Hogwarts school campus, the song portrays the imagined gay relationship of Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy, two characters that are portrayed as enemies throughout the series.

While the style of music varies widely within wizard rock, as noted earlier, as a whole it carries a D.I.Y., or Do It Yourself, aesthetic (see Griffin, 2015). This atmosphere can be attributed to the ways in which wizard rock developed. It is a largely grass-roots movement that encourages others to participate, regardless of their level of musical ability. Furthermore, as a genre rooted in a fantasy series, wizard rock largely appeals to self-proclaimed geeks or nerds

who are well versed in other forms of fan-made creative works, such as fan fiction. Wizard rock's D.I.Y. aesthetic allows the genre to engage in what Blaney, et al. (2010) describe an overarching philosophy common in the punk genre in which members of the community "disregard and refuse the social repercussions that typically materialize as a result of one's rejection of the externally and socially imposed demands for conformity" (p. 146). Though the genre does not necessarily sound like the bands many associate with 1970's and 80's punk, they nevertheless adopt the many of the ideals found within the subculture. Wizard rock fans, such as those who attend GeekyCon, reject the negative stereotypes sometimes associated with fandom and, as the popular author and past LeakyCon guest John Green has described, embrace the genre with a spirit of "unironic enthusiasm" (2009).

The DIY ethos associated with wizard rock encourages participation in grass-roots social change movements. Kelli Rohlman (2010) notes, "wizard rock music itself is also reflective of a charitable spirit as well as a socio-political agenda" (p. 51). Many artists within the genre frequently partner with organizations aimed at social change. Most often this partnership comes in the form of The Harry Potter Alliance, a charity founded by fans and centered upon the ideals found within the *Harry Potter* series, such as literacy and equal rights for all genders, sexualities, and races. Currently Matt Maggiacomo, of the wizard rock band The Whomping Willows, serves as the president of The Harry Potter Alliance. While not all wizard rock songs are explicitly political, artists often partner with the Harry Potter Alliance by fundraising through CD releases. For instance, The Harry Potter Alliance released *Hex the Patriarchy* (2016), an album of songs entirely about female heroines in popular literature, to benefit the construction of a library in Uganda.

Several wizard rock songs also carry a message of social activism and acceptance

embedded within the surface level descriptions of the Harry Potter series, and the lyrics to these songs help to establish an aurally enacted safe space within the wizard rock concerts at GeekyCon. For instance, one of the most literal enactments of safe space come in the form of Harry and the Potters' combination of two songs "Dumbledore" (2006) and "The Weapon" (2004). Since 2009, the band has played these as the last two songs of the GeekyCon concerts. Harry and the Potters wrote "Dumbledore" as more of a ballad than most of their songs. While still rock, it lacks their usual abrasiveness, with Paul DeGeorge strumming between two different chords on the guitar in an almost lullaby-like rocking pattern. "Dumbledore" also features a considerably slower tempo than most in the band's repertoire; albeit the song does increase speed during its second half. Lyrically, "Dumbledore" describes the death of the Hogwarts headmaster in the sixth Harry Potter book. While still including light hearted lyrics, such as "I wish…we could go bowling just like we used to/ Back when Hogwarts Bowling Club was cool," the song also portrays the loss felt by the students in the *Harry Potter* series when their professor and role model died. "Dumbledore," furthermore, tells of the continued fight for justice that the characters in the *Harry Potter* series faced in defeating the dark wizard, Voldemort, with lyrics such as, "Dumbledore/We all fight for you tonight/In our hearts we'll never let you die/ Your love is keeping us alive." Within the context of the concert, these lyrics actively recall the wizard rock's partnership with The Harry Potter Alliance and speak of the need for love and compassion in the fight for social justice in the real world.

The connection between wizard rock and real-life social activism is especially apparent when considering the final song of Harry and the Potters' set, "The Weapon [We Have is Love]" (2004), which serves as the motto of the Harry Potter Alliance. Musically, "Dumbledore" (2006) transitions smoothly into "The Weapon," for the ending tempo of the former is near the same as

beginning of the latter. Throughout the *Harry Potter* books, the idea of love as a powerful force is one of the most prevalent themes; it was love that saved Harry Potter from the villain of the series as an infant and that continues to provide him safety throughout the series. Referring to love, the lyrics of this song state:

> And there's one thing that I've got/ One thing that you've got inside you, too/ One thing that we've got/ And the one thing we've got is enough/ To save us all/ The weapon we have is love.

In the song's inclusionary reference to love as a tool for social justice that all possess, "The Weapon" becomes an aural safe space.

Beginning in 2009, a GeekyCon an audience ritual developed alongside these two songs, which adds a visual and spatial element to the already present aural safe space. As Paul DeGeorge strums the first few opening major chords on his guitar, he signals the audience to leave their place in the crowd. By the time Joe DeGeorge begins playing the accompanying chords on the organ patch of his keyboard, the entire audience has joined hands and formed a giant circle encompassing the entire dance floor. With locked hands, the audience members sway from side to side matching the slow tempo of the song and singing the lyrics, "You were the best we ever had." About halfway through "Dumbledore" (2006), after the circle has been established for multiple verses, the tempo and dynamics increase considerably. The drum set then begins to play and the guitarist adds more distortion to the song, thus creating, once more, an upbeat rock sound. At this point in "Dumbedore," the circle breaks and the audience rushes back into the floor in front of the stage, repeatedly singing the final verses "Dumbledore/We'll fight for you tonight."

Once the penultimate song concludes, Harry and the Potters begin playing "The

Weapon" (2004). In unison, the audience begins to sing the opening lyrics describing the main

characters' continuing fight against evil, "We may have lost Sirius Black/ But we're not turning

back/ We will fight till we have won/ And Voldemort is gone." Underneath the audience, the

sound of Joe DeGeorge's ballade-like keyboard can be heard, and this serves as the only

instrumental accompaniment until the drums and electric guitar quietly enter during the second

verse. The GeekyCon audience continues singing throughout the song. The collective voice

proves powerful as the entire audience sings the words "love" a capella on a descending major

arpeggio. Finally, as the song ends the GeekyCon attendees wave their wands, cell phones, or

fists in the air and sing "The weapon we have is love."

This tradition cultivates an environment of community and inclusion among the

convention attendees. Often concert goers will join hands and voices with people whom they

have not met, as has been my experience on multiple occasions. Those who have attended

Leakycon or GeekyCon in the past anticipate this yearly ritual as it only happens within the

space of the convention; for instance, my roommate, Madeline, excitedly exclaimed that this was

the "circle song" when we heard the opening chords. For those who have not previously attended

the convention, the ritual serves as a way in which to establish a sense of community

membership by engaging in an event that only happens in the space of GeekyCon. Furthermore,

coupled with the song's lyrical content, the formation of the circle serves as a visual enactment

of an inclusionary safe space.

Yes All Witches

Steph Anderson's song "Yes All Witches" (2015), along with its related social activism

campaign, serves as another, more explicit, enactment of a feminist inclusionary safe space

within the GeekyCon community. The song's importance, however, must be understood within

the larger context and history of gender within wizard rock. Rohlman (2010) notes that "For a community comprised primarily of women and young girls, wizard rock and the Harry Potter Fandom can display very contradictory attitudes toward sexism and gender equality" (p. 66). Historically, the most well-known wizard rock bands have been cis-gender, heterosexual, males, which stands in contrast to the overwhelming number of females within the Harry Potter fandom. This ratio is reminiscent of the masculine atmosphere found within rock as a whole (see Bayton; 1997), and echoes the large female followings of boy-bands, such as the Beatles (see Ehrenreich et al., 2002). Steph Anderson noted the apparent gender disparity within wizard rock, especially in the early years of the genre. When talking about wizard rock fans, she stated that,

> I hate to say it, but we're talking about an age of young women, who are, a fairly large group of them, are heterosexual. And they are experiencing indie rock music after only having what has basically been fed to them at this point so…[the fan demographic] is not super surprising (Personal Communication, July 29, 2015).

Within this quote Steph implies that many of female fans were attracted to the male performers partially because of their shared interests, which could be the reason why so many males rose to the top of the genre.

Issues of gender within wizard rock came to a fore in 2014 when multiple female fans and musicians active within the community publically posted on their tumblr blogs[3] accusations of inappropriate sexual relations from prominent male musicians Alex Carpenter and Luke Conrad, of the Remus and the Lupins and The Ministry of Magic, respectively (c. 2014). While

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[3] For the original blog posts see: http://italktosnakes.tumblr.com/post/79898322770/the-truth-about-all-caps-yes-another-post-about and http://sunnywilliamsla.tumblr.com/post/80012039179/i-started-a-tumblr-because-of-alex-carpenter.

those particular musicians were ostracized from performing soon after the allegations became known, the information caused a momentary crisis within the world of wizard rock, as many wondered how the genre would move forward. However, when considering how the incident affected wizard rock, Paul DeGeorge stated that "I think it presented a real opportunity to the community to take ownership over who is elevated to a status, and I think the community feels…more of a sense of agency now and feels empowered to speak out and speak up" (Personal communication; July 29 2015). Since 2014, both Paul DeGeorge and Steph Anderson have described how they have seen more women than men begin playing wizard rock. Furthermore, soon after the allegations became public, Steph Anderson launched her "Yes All Witches" campaign.

Anderson based "Yes All Witches" on the social media hashtag YesAllWomen. The hashtag originated on Twitter in the aftermath of mass shooting in Isla Vista, CA on May 23, 2013 and was partially fueled by the shooter's misogynistic beliefs (Thrift, 2014). The hashtag also served as a critique of the hashtag NotAllMen, in which males argued that feminism was unnecessary because not all men are misogynistic or would go to the extremes of the shooter. Writing about the YesAllWomen hashtag, Thrift states that it "asserts a counter-narrative to exceptionalist discourses by insisting that these spectacular tragedies are logical manifestations of a system of oppression which condones and facilitates male domination by normalizing gender violence and sexual entitlement" (p. 1091). YesAllWomen provided a way for females on social media to express common ways they have had to deal with sexism within everyday life; While the hashtag was used to point out every day acts of sexism, Steph Anderson created "Yes All Witches" as a way to express female solidarity. Initially, this campaign was the name of a talk Steph gave at the Granger Leadership Academy, a summit hosted by the Harry Potter

Alliance aimed at fostering skills for community leadership and activism. Anderson noted that when planning the first discussion, she "want[ed] to talk about being a woman, and I want[ed] to talk about being a young person in activism and being, you know, politically minded but also just in wizard rock" (Personal Communication; July 29, 2015). Soon after she gave the talk, Anderson wrote the accompanying song and launched a larger activist campaign of the same name.

Just as wizard rock as a whole borrows aesthetically from the DIY ideals found within punk subculture, Steph Anderson's Yes All Witches espouses a DIY feminist-centric ethos similar to the riot grrrl movement. Writing of the Riot Grrrl's objectives, Marion Leonard (2007) states, "Rather than railing against a general conception of mainstream culture, riot grrrls tended to focus their activities, targeting the perceived sexism of the indie rock music scene and working towards specific feminist goals" (p. 130). Similarly, Anderson employees Yes All Witches as a way to target sexism within a specific fandom-focused environment. She lists her goals on the web page as: "build equality in the world through classic feminist ideals," "encourage female empowerment through role models and positive messaging," and "partner with feminist fandom artists, musicians, and creators to promote work that helps illustrate our mission" (accessed March 19, 2017). Primarily through her talks, such as the one given at GeekyCon, and performances Anderson fosters an environment within the wizard rock community in which more women feel comfortable picking up instruments and making music.

Musically, the song Yes All Witches exists as an overt display of feminism within the genre of wizard rock. Like those within the riot grrrl movement, Tonks and the Aurors asserts her presence through her use of electric instrumentation. Though there currently exist several well-known women performers within the wizard rock scene, most tend to employ acoustic

guitars or ukuleles, thus reinforcing the electric/masculine and acoustic/feminine binaries (see

Marsh & West, 2003). Anderson's choice of instrumentation is deliberate, and one that she

brought up within her Yes All Witches talk given at Geekycon. She stated that when she began

playing wizard rock, she asked herself if "the male dominated wizard rock bands would even

welcome me into the community, and then I had to wonder even more than that, if the female

audience was going to buy what I had to produce" (Talk given Aug. 1, 2015, GeekyCon,

Orlando, Fl).

During the GeekyCon concert, as is customary with many wizard rock shows, singers

from other bands take turns playing backup instruments to the lead singer, for most wizard rock

bands consist of only one or two regular members. During the Tonks and the Aurors concert, this

setup translates into Anderson playing her guitar while standing in front and center stage with an

all-male backup band comprised of other wizard rock musicians standing behind her. While

Anderson's music sounds less abrasive than the style of music commonly associated with riot

grrl, she brings a similar level of enthusiasm to her concerts. She opens the song playing power

chords on her guitar that rhythmically articulate the phrase and sings the chorus "Yes All

Witches." An audience of almost entirely females simultaneously chants along with her and fist

pumps their hands in the air as they yell each word. During the second to the last chorus, before

the lyrics "It's not about world domination/Just equal representation," a large pink banner drops

in the back of the stage with the words "YES ALL WITCHES" (Figure 3.2) emblazoned in the

background in a darker shade of pink with black shading around the words. As the banner drops I

hear the sounds of screaming women cheering for this overt act of feminism.

The lively feminist environment of Tonk's and the Auror's Friday night concert

transferred easily into the Saturday morning talk given by Anderson, which focused on helping

Figure 3.2

Steph Anderson Performs in front of the "Yes All Witches" Banner

women build strategies to achieve their goals, both within fandom and throughout their daily lives. This talk, also entitled "Yes All Witches," was aimed at putting the message of the song into action within fans' everyday lives. Describing the campaign, Anderson stated, "It's always my mission to make Yes All Witches something you can carry with you, so that it comes down to empowerment" (Talk given Aug. 1, 2015, GeekyCon, Orlando, Fl). Throughout the talk, she drew from the failures and eventual successes of well-known women, such as Oprah Winfrey and J.K. Rowling, to discuss techniques of breaking through patriarchal boundaries. She further used her experience in wizard rock to demonstrate the importance of perseverance. As one of the few females in the genre who plays an electric guitar, she described instances where men did not believe her competence in dealing with stage equipment, despite the fact that she has a BFA in stage management. She noted during the talk that wizard rock "should be a safe space" and that her goal as a musician was to "make a space in wizard rock so that women don't feel pressured to make music a specific way" (Talk given Aug. 1, 2015, GeekyCon, Orlando, FL). After Anderson finished speaking, the room transformed into an open forum for discussion. Many women shared their own stories of overcoming challenges they have faced due to their gender or sexuality, especially within their careers, and others within the room responded by offering advice. The audiotopic safe space created at GeekyCon, exemplified through the diversity of musical styles of wizard rock, enables a sense of comfort among the attendees and encourages involvement within participatory practices, discussed in detail within the next chapter.

Chapter IV
"We're All in This Together": Performative and Participatory GeekyCon
Sing-Alongs

"I don't care how ridiculous you feel or look when you're rapping along [to *Hamilton*]. It

becomes the most empowering thing ever" – Caroline (posted July 1, 2016)

On the Saturday morning of GeekyCon 2016, the first event I planned to attend was the

Broadway sing-along; yet, I awoke over three hours before it was scheduled so that I would have

enough time to apply the enormous amount of makeup my cosplay required. In the weeks before

the convention, my roommates told me they were planning a group *Harry Potter* themed

costume and asked if I wanted to join. Madeline dressed as a student from Beauxbatons, the

French school of magic, while her boyfriend, Jeremy, dressed as race-bent Sirius Black, Harry

Potter's godfather (Figure 4.1). I took the opportunity to dress as a gender-swapped Voldemort,

the villain of the *Harry Potter* series (Figure 4.2), and this was the first time I ever cosplayed. I

liked the idea of dressing as a powerful antagonist, and portraying a convincing Voldemort while

still displaying my femininity added an extra level of challenge and fun. I spent the weeks before

the convention researching which brand of body paint would offer the best coverage and

purchasing all of the elements of the costume, including the character's wand and a floor length,

low-cut, black dress, and now I am finally ready to show off my work.

I arrive at the Broadway sing-along about thirty minutes before it is scheduled to start,

and already there is a line to get into the event. The majority of the people waiting are also

dressed in costumes. Several women wear regalia from the *Hamilton* play, and as I wait for the

doors to open, another attendee, dressed as Eliza Schuyler, compliments me on my Voldemort

makeup. Behind me stands a gender swapped Elphaba, from *Wicked*. This marks the first time I

have seen a male gender swap a female character. His deep green makeup is distributed so evenly across his face so that it looks like his natural skin color. He's clearly ready to embody the character on stage when the group sings along to songs from the musical.

The organized sing-alongs discussed throughout this chapter are one of the newer events of the convention. They were added to the schedule as the GeekyCon grew to encompass more fandoms than just *Harry Potter*; however, sing-alongs have always been a core element of the convention. As early as my first LeakyCon in 2011, I can remember standing in line with hundreds of people, many of whom were dressed as *Harry Potter* characters, and singing songs from Starkid musicals and wizard rock. Now, these organized sing-alongs for Broadway, Disney, and Starkid, serve as one of the main performative events of the convention, both in terms of musical style and gender presentation. These events also function as a key means of community building, due to both the participatory and presentational environment of the performances, and, ultimately, help to reinforce the audiotopic nature of the GeekyCon group.

Performativity through Gender and Fandom

The ways in which fans visually present themselves at the GeekyCon sing-alongs connect with Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity. Butler states that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (p. 34). Butler offers parody through drag as a way to consciously object to prescribed societal notions of gender. She states, "just as bodily surfaces are enacted *as* the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself" (p. 200, italics in original). Purposefully making the decision to display oneself as the opposite sex exposes the fragility and constructedness of gender roles. Yet, presenting drag as the only opportunity to destabilize

Figure 4.1

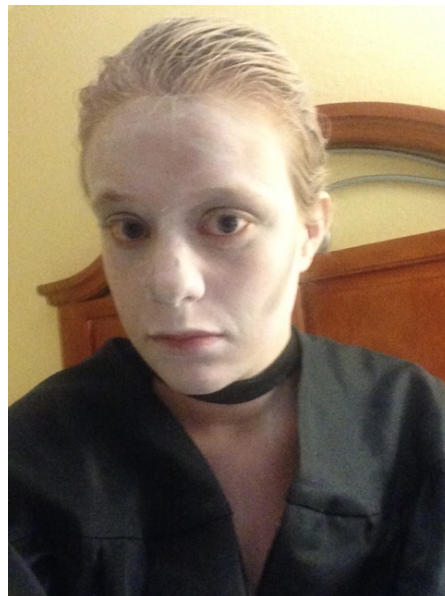My GeekyCon 2016 Roommates'*Harry Potter* Themed Cosplay

Figure 4.2

Applying Makeup for My Voldemort Cosplay

societal gender binaries limits the possibilities for subversion. Other instances of purposeful performativity, such as cosplay, enable individuals work around socially imposed gender constructs.

Cosplay offers participants the ability to queer their gender presentation by dressing as characters from fictional series. While not everyone who attends the sing-alongs choose to cosplay, the act nevertheless represents an important facet of the event. Those who cosplay mold their appearance to fit within the world from which they derive their costume. Importantly, the ways in which cosplayers choose to present their characters' genders do not always line up with canonical representations from the original sources. For instance, cosplayers often alter the character to fit their own gender, as was the case with my Voldemort costume, or characters shift their usual gender presentation to fit that of their character, as was the case with Chelsea who dressed as Alexander Hamilton from the Broadway musical (Figure 4.4). Those who cosplay not only alter their appearance through clothes but also through bodily presentation, such as gestures, facial expressions, or posture. Nicolle Lamerichs (2011) notes that "cosplay is centrally concerned with embodying a character accurately. Because of this, cosplayers often develop an increased awareness of their own bodies or choose a character that matches their own posture, identity, or social role" (paragraph 22). When I dressed as Voldemort, I immediately became aware of how, in order to convincingly portray the character, I needed to alter my typical stance to fit the bold and snake-like movements. Furthermore, those who cosplay are not limited to dressing as human characters. For instance, during GeekyCon 2016, Mia dressed as Judy Hopps, the main character from the Disney film *Zootopia* (2016) (Figure 4.3). When speaking to Mia she told me that when she was putting the costume together her now four-year-old daughter told her, "Mommy, you can't dress as Judy. She's a rabbit, and you're a person" (personal

Figure 4.3

Mia Cosplays Judy Hops from Disney's *Zootopia*

Figure 4.4

Cosplays of Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr from the Musical *Hamilton*

communication, July 30, 2016). Her daughter's response, while adorable, demonstrates the extent to which cosplay offers convention attendees a chance to dress outside of society's prescribed notions of appearance.

GeekyCon's functions as a female and LGBTQ+ inclusionary safe space allows attendees to feel comfortable about experimenting with their appearance. For instance, when I interviewed Kalia during GeekyCon 2015, she was dressed as Lexa, a queer, female, lead character and warrior from the television series *The 100* (2014-2017). Kalia mentioned that though she was not as skilled at creating costumes as others, she nevertheless was encouraged by those within the community to cosplay anyway (personal communication, July 30, 2015). Writing about performance art, Jane Wark (2006) notes that "The idea of the performative is thus important to feminism and feminist art…because it underscores the possibility of the performative act as an instantiation of political change" (p. 87). While most cosplay is not explicitly political, for females and those within the LGBTQ+ community, simply presenting one's self in a manor not dictated by heteronormative standards become an act of rebellion against the patriarchy.

The sing-alongs serve as an ideal setting in which to express the performativity of cosplay, for, as Stacy Wolf (2011) notes, "as a genre, musical theatre is insistently, exuberantly performative, always already aware of itself as a performance" (p. 11). In choosing to participate in the sing-alongs, both those engaging in cosplay and those dressed in everyday clothes use these events to express performative aspects of their identities within the safe space of the convention. Though the sing-alongs take material from larger media corporations, such as Disney and Broadway, they nevertheless offer opportunities for attendees to express themselves on a personal level. Paul Willis (1990) describes this practice of using popular media to draw individual meaning as symbolic creativity. He states "whilst the media invite certain

interpretations, young people have not only learnt the codes, but have learnt to play with interpreting the codes, to reshape forms, to interrelate the media through their own grounded aesthetics. They add to and develop new meanings from given ones" (p. 30). For those who attend GeekyCon, the sing-alongs offer the chance to draw meaning from the music and create bonds with others who share their same love and nostalgia for the musical materials.

Sing-Along Structure and Content Overview

The structure of GeekyCon's organized sing-alongs fall under two main categories. The first type, including the Broadway and Disney sing-along, is led by special guests, while the second is led by fans, like the Starkid event. GeekyCon 2016 was the first time a sing-along occurred that fell into the latter category. While there have been fan-led sing-alongs during past conventions, they have been spontaneous and usually occurred while attendees were waiting in line or during down time in the convention center lobby. The Starkid gathering represented the first time a sing-along led by fans was incorporated into the official convention programming. This event had fewer attendees than those led by special guests. Despite the fact that several GeekyCon community members stated that the guests were not a high priority in influencing their attendance, I attribute to this difference in numbers at the sing-alongs to the different song leaders. Many of those who attended GeekyCon in the past were used to Starkid performing, as noted in chapter two, and because the sing-along was led by fans this caused the attendance to decline. The overall structure of the sing-alongs was the same for both categories. In each there was a makeshift stage-like area at the front of the room for those who led the event. During each song, those who were dressed as a character from the number being performed were invited on stage to perform with the sing-along leaders. As noted in the first chapter's introduction, this invitation meant that often there would be more fans on stage than song-leaders, and not

everyone designated to lead songs would perform throughout the entire sing-along. Though the room was filled with chairs for everyone, most remained standing throughout the event and danced along to the songs while singing (figure 4.5). The Starkid sing-along lasted twice as long as the other two, and in between songs those leading the event would ask a question to the audience about memories of the theater troupe and ways it has impacted their lives. For instance, fans spoke of the first time the remembered viewing on of the group's musicals, and this shared narrative of discovering Starkid further strengthened the community environment felt during the sing-along. Though the other two sing-alongs did not contain this discussion portion, they nevertheless fostered an atmosphere community through encouraging group involvement from all of the participants.

The source material of the sing-alongs reflects the attendees' interests. In an interview, Mia noted that "Musicals have a huge fandom, but they're also kind of frowned on" (personal communication, July 30, 2016). She described how musical theatre is often denigrated within male-dominated fandoms and convention spaces. GeekyCon, she asserted, offers attendees a chance to be openly enthusiastic about musical theater without being belittled. She further elaborated on the ways GeekyCon served as ideal space in which to freely express these fandoms, noting that "when everybody's here, it's like a school of fish. Sharks don't attack schools of fish. There are too many…when you're here…it's ok to show off a little bit and really enjoy those things fully rather than keeping them tampered down" (personal communication, July 30, 2016). In this quote she described that when attendees are at GeekyCon they do not face the stigma usually associated with fandoms typically deemed feminine, such as musical theatre, due to the number of fans present in one place.

Figure 4.5

The GeekyCon 2016 Disney Sing-Along

The attendees' invested interest in Broadway musicals stems, in part, from Broadway's connection to feminist ideals. Stacey Wolf (2011) notes that "gender – the performed, embodied, and envoiced difference between women and men – is foundational to the very genre of musical theatre" (p. 6). While many shows feature a heteronormative romance, Wolf describes ways in which musical techniques, such as the female duet, create feminist spaces which prioritize the relationships between females. She argues "for the need to understand girls and women's homosocial affiliations and affective practices facilitated by musical theater in a generative, expansive, creative, and nuanced way" (p. 18). The musical relationship between women in Broadway shows allows female fans an outlet to both enjoy and express positive relationships among women.

The majority of musicals featured in the sing-along include specifically feminist messages. In an interview Katie stated "a lot of the Broadway music is definitely friendly towards a lot of the Geeky demographic, the LGBT community," and she specifically noted "Like, all of *Rent* is like that" (personal communication, June 15, 2016). *Rent*, based on the opera *La Boheme,* details the lives of bohemians living in the East Village, New York in the late 1980's and early 1990's. It includes multiple openly gay characters, and stands as one of the most popular musicals among GeekyCon attendees. A song from the musical, "*La vie boheme,*" was included in the 2016 sing-along. The song's lyrics are centered around giving a toast to living an eclectic life that goes against the grain of hegemonic society. With lyrics such as, "To days of inspiration/ Playing hookey, making/ Something out of nothing/ The need to express-/To communicate/ To going against the grain" (1996), *Rent* has been firmly established within the culture of GeekyCon. During LeakyCon 2013 a fandom parody of the same song was incorporated into the opening ceremonies of the convention, and a few weeks after the 2016

convention Chelsea posted a video of the performance to the Facebook group describing it as one of her favorite moments from any of the past conventions. Louisa Ellen Stein (2015) references this performance in her discussion of the various ways fandom is publically enacted. She states, "the adaptation is from *Rent*'s depiction of a multifaceted, subcultural queer collective to LeakyCon's depiction of a multifannish community connecting online and off…The musical number celebrates the multifannishness as queer in its multiplicity (p. 173). By incorporating the musical *Rent* into the fan programming at GeekyCon, the community embraces the ideas of inclusivity and individual eclecticism that the musical espouses.

Wicked, another musical extremely popular among GeekyCon attendees, also espouses an explicitly feminist message. Wolf (2008) states that "What sets *Wicked* apart is that it aligns with the musical's 'preferred' reading in accordance with musical theatre's conventions and expectations. In this case, one would need to read *Wicked* 'against the grain' to enunciate a straight interpretation" (p. 5). Because the plot of *Wicked* centers around a friendship between two females, a queer relationship between the two characters can be easily discerned despite the fact that neither character in *Wicked* is openly homosexual. This stands in contrast to many Broadway shows in which locating a queer relationship between two females would require the viewer to read against the heterosexual romantic plotline. *Wicked's* "For Good" was one of two songs from the musical featured during the 2016 Broadway sing-along. This slow ballad serves as an affirmation of friendship between the main characters, with lyrics such as "So much of me/ Is made of what I learned from you/ You'll be with me/ Like a handprint on my heart/ And now whatever way our stories end/ I know you have re-written mine/ By being my friend" (2003). *Wicked* offers a model for female friendship not often prominently featured within media today. This emphasis on relationships between females, along with its fantasy setting in the land of Oz,

makes it a popular choice for those within the GeekyCon community.

Another musical extremely popular among GeekyCon attendees, *Hamilton* (2015), also espouses a feminist message, albeit in a less overt way than *Wicked*. In its casting choices the musical promotes racial equality, for all major characters fall within racial minorities, despite portraying people who were historically white. Though the musical features a male lead character, American founding father Alexander Hamilton, it also includes two prominent female characters, sisters Angelica and Eliza Schuyler. Throughout the musical, both sisters express a romantic interest in Hamilton, as described in the song "Satisfied"; however, when Eliza marries Alexander, Angelica remains supportive of her sister. This reaction stands in contrast to the usual trope often portrayed in the media of females fighting over a male love interest. Furthermore, *Hamilton* endows the women with a considerable amount of agency. One of the main themes of the musical deals with how the characters will be remembered throughout history, and Alexander's main motivation throughout the show is to control how he will be perceived through his writing. Yet, his wife Eliza also asserts agency in regards to her own historical portrayal. After Hamilton publishes a document exposing an affair he had with another woman, Eliza burns all of the letters between herself and her husband, as described in the song "Burn." The song, a slow ballad with underlying broken minor chords, states "I'm erasing myself from the narrative/ Let future historians wonder how Eliza reacted when you broke her heart…I'm burning the memories/ Burning the letters that might have redeemed you/ You forfeit all rights to my heart/ You forfeit the place in our bed" (2015). In stating this, Eliza takes control over her historical representation in a way not often afforded to women during that time period. Catherine Strong (2011) states that "There is trend within contemporary society for women to become invisible and be forgotten when the past becomes 'history'" (p. 400). Though this erasure does occur

within the musical, it is done so intentionally by the female character herself so that she is not trapped within the narrative written by her husband.

Disney animated musicals reflect feminist community values, and the sing-along fosters an atmosphere of communal nostalgia. A majority of Disney films feature female protagonists, and since the early 1990's Disney has been actively striving to create a more active and agentive heroine. However, many of the female leads still exemplify problematic feminist viewpoints. Many films include plotlines that position the female's safety as dependent upon the prince; furthermore, racial stereotypes abound within the representations of non-white princesses (see Sarita Gregory 2012). Yet, those within GeekyCon do not embrace the portrayal of women in these films blindly. Most within the community acknowledge the problematic nature of female Disney protagonists. For instance, during GeekyCon 2016, Mia gave a presentation entitled "From Snow White to Moana: The Animation of the Disney Heroine" (GeekyCon 2016 Schedule), in which she gave a brief history of the Disney princesses and described the ways they have both accomplished and failed to accurately portray feminist protagonists. This talk was so popular that Mia actually gave it a second time after the convention ended via a webchat, thus reinforcing the mediality present within the GeekyCon community. Because her talk conflicted with another, I accessed her lecture once I got home. I was able to watch the presentation live and interact with others from the convention who were also watching the presentation through comments on the video. Within the GeekyCon community the Disney sing-along also presents the opportunity for a collective celebration of nostalgia. Mia noted that during the Disney sing-along,

> We had like what 2-3 Lion King songs? That was my jam when I was a kid! Like, I was
> nine when that movie came out, and that was my movie. And I grew up with that movie. I

hold it so close to my heart. And to see how many people – there were like what 200 to

300 people? – and all of them know every word just like I do! I was like 'these are my

people. This is my tribe' (personal communication, July 29, 2016).

Like the Broadway sing-along, the Disney event offers those who participate a chance to sing

with a very large group of people who share their same interests and nostalgic experiences.

Starkid represents another important musical theater type present at the GeekyCon sing-

alongs, in addition to Broadway and Disney. Starkid first became popular in 2009 when their

musical parody of the *Harry Potter* series, *A Very Potter Musical*, was uploaded to YouTube, as

noted in the second chapter. This genre falls under the larger category of geek theatre, as

described by John Patrick Bray (2014). Though all of the musical genres that appear at

GeekyCon could arguably fall under the banner of geek theater, Bray posits that "plays that can

be considered Geek Theatre appropriate popular narratives found in the (geek defined) genres"

(p. 125). The majority of Starkid musicals are parodies of subjects GeekyCon attendees greatly

enjoy. In joking about subjects such as *Harry Potter*, Disney, and Batman, through their musicals

A Very Potter Musical (2009), *Twisted* (2013), and *Holy Musical B@man* (2012) respectively,

Starkid demonstrates to GeekyCon attendees that they appreciate the same media materials fans

enjoy. Importantly, Starkid was the first type of musical theater embraced at GeekyCon because

of the groups' connection to the *Harry Potter* series. In 2011, when GeekyCon was still known

as GeekyCon, the group attended the convention for the first time and performed a selection of

musical numbers from their various shows. Since then, with the exception of GeekyCon 2016,

members regularly performed at the convention. Once Starkid became a musical mainstay at the

convention, they opened the door for fans to embrace other genres of musical theater, such as

Broadway and Disney.

Participatory and Presentational Music

The sing-alongs found at GeekyCon demonstrate a blend of both presentational and participatory music, as theorized by Thomas Turino (2008). According to Turino, musical performances typically fall within one of the two aforementioned categories. He describes participatory music broadly as "a special type of artistic practice in which there are no artist-audience distinction, only participants and potential participants performing different roles. Participatory music making, Turino notes, appears less commonly than presentational music within in American society; however, examples, such as a bluegrass jam session or a drum circle, still exist. Contrastingly, Turino describes presentational music, as "the situations where one group of people, the artists, prepare and provide music for another group, the audience, who do not participate in making the music or dancing" (p. 28). While these categories prove useful in understanding the roles music-making plays in the lives of individuals, not all categories of music fit within these classifications, as exemplified by the GeekyCon sing-alongs.

The goals of presentational and performative music making differ greatly. Presentational music emphasizes the performer/audience distinction. This type of music making requires rehearsal, and its ultimate goal is to execute skillfully a performance at a concert for an audience knowledgeable about the genre of music being played. Turino (2008) notes that "in rehearsing for a presentational performance, musicians expect that the audience will be attentive to the details of what they play. They also know that if their performance is to be successful they have to make the music interesting and varied for the audience" (p. 53). Those who perform this type of music within groups together are generally on the same level of skill, and this ensures that they will be able to perform the music to the standards of everyone in the group. Participatory music, contrastingly, cultivates an environment in which community building serves as the main

goal of music making. Within this type of music there exist no audience/performer distinctions, for everyone is welcome to play regardless of their skill level. This means musicians do not rehearse towards a final concert; rather, attention is placed upon how the music is being produced in the moment. This focus, Turino (2008) notes, creates a "need to pay attention [that] results in a kind of heightened, immediate social intercourse…At such moments, moving together and sounding together in a group creates a direct sense of *being* together and of deeply felt similarity and hence identity, among participants" (p. 43, italics in the original). Thus, within participatory music making the experience of playing music with other members of the group supersedes the need for a technically accurate performance.

The sing-alongs largely possess qualities associated with participatory music making. There exists no membership restriction. All attendees are welcome, regardless of musical ability. While it is assumed that a person would have a knowledge of the type of music being performed, even that is not a requirement. I knew very little about Broadway until after I attended my first GeekyCon sing-along, and the environment of excitement I felt at the event inspired me to learn more. The sing-alongs are so popular among the GeekyCon attendees that usually the only limit to participation appears when the room becomes too full to hold any more people. For example, when I attended the Disney sing-along in 2015 I had no idea how popular the event would be. The room was filled to capacity, and I was only allowed to enter because I was working on academic research.

The events strive to create an atmosphere of inclusivity and group involvement, rather than focusing on an ideal portrayal of the songs being sung. Take, for instance, the performance of "The Time Warp" from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), the first song played during the 2016 GeekyCon Broadway sing-along. After everyone had found their place in the room, the

special guests turned on the speaker system to denote the start of the event. We could hear the

first bit of dialogue over clock-like rhythmic pulsations on two pitches on the electric guitar.

Those who knew the words spoke along with the recording, "It's astounding/ Time is fleeting/

Madness takes its toll," and everyone in the room clapped along with the beginning of every

two-beat measure. As the main chorus began, almost everyone in the room started to sing in

unison "I remember!" However, the sound equipment cut out immediately after that first line. An

audible sigh of disappointment was heard throughout the room, yet many people kept singing,

"Doing the Time Warp!/ Drinking those moments when/The blackness would hit me/ And the

voice would be calling." As a few of the special guests worked to fix the sound system, one

pointed his microphone at the audience, now singing a capella: "Let's do the Time Warp Again!"

The act of pointing the microphone at the attendees symbolically demonstrated the importance of

group participation. Though the mic was not working, it denoted that the important voices were

those emanating from the crowd.

During the sing-alongs, participants often experienced a sense of flow. Turino (2008)

states that flow "refers to a state of heightened concentration, when one is so intent on the

activity at hand that all other thoughts, concerns, and distractions disappear and the [participant]

is fully in the present" (p. 4). The state of flow is usually found within participatory music

making and serves to strengthen the bond between the group members. During the sing-alongs, I

experienced this sense of flow. I am not usually one to sing or dance in public, and I am

generally very reserved and self-conscious. However, during many of songs at both the Disney

and Starkid sing-alongs I felt a sense of community belonging that allowed me to focus on the

group singing without regard to my own self-presentation. For example, from the moment I

heard the five descending whole steps played on the piano opening "Gotta Get Back to

Hogwarts," the first song in *A Very Potter Musical* (2009), I instantly lost my sense of self-consciousness. I started singing along with everyone else in the room the opening somber and angsty lines "Underneath the stairs I hear the snares and feel the glares of my cousin, my uncle, and my aunt." As we continued, the song developed into an exciting and up-tempo musical number that described main character's anticipation of returning to their magical school once more. The entire room sang in unison, "Back to witches, and wizards, and magical beasts/ To goblins and ghosts and magical feats/ It's all that I have and it's all that I need/ At Hogwarts! Hogwarts!" Singing with so many others who shared my interests engendered such a sense of belonging that all other thoughts seemed to fade away. No longer was I worrying about scheduling interviews or thinking about my outfit for the dance that night; instead I could only think of performing my love of the musical with the others in the room.

This sense of flow found at the sing-alongs engenders a larger sense of community among those singing. In her discussion of audience practices at area concerts, Nicola Spelman (2015) states that "Singalongs allows fans to actively express their fandom; not only their knowledge of songs and lyrics but what it means to them" (p. 242). Those who attend the GeekyCon sing-alongs feel passionately about the songs and stories from which they came, and sharing the experience of singing with others who feel the same fosters a sense of community building. When talking to Mia about the events, she stated "So I think when you're here and you're at a sing-along singing along everyone else is having fun and you also know that they love the things that I love, and that creates a sense of bonding" (personal communication, July 29, 2016). This experience of community building was most evident in the final song of the 2016 Disney sing-along, "We're All in This Together" from *High School Musical* (2006). Within the context of the film, the song describes those in the high school play and basketball team working

together, yet within the GeekyCon sing-along it served as a way to express the community engendered by the event. As the song opened with the sound of a high school drumline, everyone in the room began to clap along. Multiple special guests jumped off stage and started dancing around the room encouraging everyone to participate. Many attendees moved from their place in front of their seats and started dancing with one another in the aisles, sing "Together, together, together everyone/ Together, together, come on let's have some fun." As the song progressed, several began performing the choreography that accompanies the song in the movie, which is reminiscent of a high school cheerleading team. When this upbeat and energetic song finally came to an end the entire room burst in applause for the inclusionary atmosphere we had created.

Despite the importance of participatory music making at the GeekyCon sing-alongs, these events nevertheless include aspects of presentational performance. The divide between fans and special guests represent the events' most noticeable presentational quality. The special guests performing at GeekyCon consist primarily of professional actors and singers who are paid to attend the convention. For instance, one singer present at both the Broadway and Disney sing-alongs was Tessa Netting, a professional actor and a popular YouTube star who formerly worked as a chorus member in multiple Broadway shows. Another was actor Maxwell Glick, who has appeared on multiple online shows of which many of those who attend GeekyCon are fans, such as the web series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012), based on the Jane Austin book *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). The sing-alongs featuring special guests as leaders attracted a substantially larger crowd than the fan-led Starkid musical. As mentioned previously, I believe this disparity in attendance was heavily influenced by sing-along leaders. For presentational music, Turino notes

People go out to concerts and clubs because they like to be with other like-minded

people, to see and be seen, to socialize, and to meet new people….The presentation of a

given musical style creates a fulcrum around which given identity groups can form or be

maintained (p. 61).

Many attended the sing-alongs led by special guests because they wanted to see the song

leaders. Furthermore, the division of stage and non-stage areas further exacerbated the divide

between special guests and attendees. Though the attendees dressed in costume were welcomed

onstage to sing, they were only allowed to do so when their costume matched the song. This

stands in contrast to the song leaders who remained on the stage the entire time. These features

of the event demonstrate the presentational qualities of the GeekyCon sing-alongs.

Additionally, many of those who attended the GeekyCon sing-alongs used online

technologies as a way to learn the music featured. Though such practices do not represent the

type of rehearsal discussed by Turino within presentational music, online mediation nevertheless

serves as a way to prepare for the event. Discussing audience interaction at large concerts,

Spelman (2015) states "The past decade has seen a growth in singalong entertainment in general"

(p. 240). Several people used the GeekyCon Facebook group to learn of the songs that would

most likely be performed during the events. For instance, Katie described to me her process of

discovering *Hamilton*. She stated

the GeekyCon Facebook group is part of why I wanted to listen to *Hamilton*. Because

people just wouldn't stop talking about it! And so I was like 'ok, I got to figure out what

this is.' And so I was like 'ok, I just need to listen to this.' And I happened to run into

someone in person who knew what *Hamilton* was, and she was like 'Alright I'm giving

you the CD's' (personal communication, June 15, 2016).

Within this quote, Katie describes the mediality found among herself, the *Hamilton* CD's, and

those who participate on the GeekyCon Facebook group that drew her to the music and allowed

her to rehearse for the sing-along. This online involvement, along with the other participatory,

presentational practices found at GeekyCon, allow for the creation of community through the

tradition of collective singing. The performative elements of the events allow attendees to

express messages, such as feminism, nostalgia, and love of geek culture through song. The

community environment created through these sing-alongs ultimately fosters the establishment

of an audiotopia, a safe and inclusive environment in which all members felt free to express

themselves through music.

Chapter V
Leaving Home: A Conclusion

As I started to write my concluding chapter, I learned that GeekyCon had ceased to exist. For the past year, every morning before I began writing I ritualistically checked my Facebook account. When I went online today I saw a notification that someone had posted on a private GeekyCon subgroup. The text simply read "Oh no" (posted April 7, 2017). Curious as to what could be causing the trouble, I scanned the comments. At the end of the 2016 convention, the person who made this post had signed up to be a part of the GeekyCon Ambassadors, a group of liaisons between the convention management and the attendees, and he received an email stating that GeekyCon would not return in 2018, as had been previously advertised. This news was ultimately due to the fact that attendance had decreased consistently and considerably since GeekyCon split from LeakyCon in 2014. The staff largely attributed it to the lack of concrete focus, as the term "Geek" is a broad and ambiguous adjective, and therefore the convention was unable to attract as many attendees as other competing cons. Additionally, GeekyCon was unable to compete financially with the other multi-fandom conventions. GeekyCon offered autographs and signings from special guests through a convention lottery. This ensured that attendees would not have to pay an exorbitant fee, as is customary in many other conventions. However, this also meant that the GeekyCon was not able to pay many guests the fee they demanded, and, in turn, GeekyCon could not attract big-name guests, as discussed in chapter two. While I have stressed multiple times throughout the thesis that many people attend GeekyCon not because of the guests, this lack of well-known guests acted as a deciding factor for some. The staff noted in the email that creating GeekyCon was a learning process for them, and that hopefully the lessons learned from this failure contribute positively to their other conventions.

That this announcement was made on the day I intended to write my conclusion feels dripping with dramatic irony. My sense of accomplishment at finishing this lengthy document mixes with a feeling of mourning as I lose the event that has facilitated many of my close friendships. I, like so many others who attended GeekyCon, wonder what will happen to the community so near to our hearts.

Many in the GeekyCon community have had a difficult time putting into words the emotions felt due to this loss, yet music allowed us an opportunity to express ourselves within the context of our online community. One of the most striking Facebook posts contained a link to the song "To Have a Home" from the Starkid musical, *A Very Potter Sequel* (2010). Within the musical, this song describes Harry Potter's reaction at finally being accepted and loved within the magical community after spending years trapped in an abusive home. The song's slow piano accompaniment of pulsating major chords presents a contemplative yet positive atmosphere. The chorus declares "I've finally found it/ A place where I'm wanted/ This must be what it's like to have a home." For many, including myself, the convention was viewed as a safe space, and the song represented the feelings GeekyCon attendees experienced upon entering into this community. When I reflected upon "To Have a Home," I could barely hold back tears. I commented on the post "But what do you do when you can't visit your home anymore?" (posted April 7, 2017) to which the original poster responded,

> I'm right there with you. ❤️ At the very least Geeky introduced us to an amazing group of people, friends, and memories. Any interaction with our friends, whether it be online or in person will always be home to us ❤️ (posted April 7, 2017).

This response emphasizes the connectedness of online and in person community relationships that I have described in this thesis. Though the convention was based around popular media

materials, these items of interest provided a chance for attendees to practice symbolic creativity. Popular culture products, such as *Harry Potter*, Broadway, and Disney enabled those who attended, to create new personal meanings and facilitated important and lasting interpersonal bonds for those who were part of the GeekyCon community.

The GeekyCon community represent an audiotopia, as theorized by Josh Kun (2009). Audiotopias serve as aurally enacted heterotopic spaces, as described by Foucault (1967), that allow for the suspension of beliefs and practices that characterize the dominant society. Thus, these sites allow voices from marginalized communities to be heard. The audiotopic environment of GeekyCon results from the use of both online and offline practices to sustain the community. Though the convention only lasted a few days out of the year, attendees nevertheless remained in contact through the use of social media. During both the convention and throughout the year, music played a key role in negotiations of group identity, as evidenced by the discussion surrounding the band Koo Koo Kanga Roo. The announcement that the duo would be performing at GeekyCon 2016 fostered a larger group debate questioning and conceptualizing community meaning for those who attend GeekyCon. Despite this heated discussion, when the group performed at the convention, they were treated respectfully with no overt displays of dissatisfaction. This respectful reception further demonstrated GeekyCon's role as an audiotopia, for it created room for all voices to be heard, including that of Koo Koo Kanga Roo.

The musical practices of wizard rock also helped create an aurally enacted safe space, or audiotopia. Those involved with GeekyCon, both the attendees and staff, place a high importance on inclusivity, as evidenced through accommodations, such as the availability of gender neutral bathrooms, and the numerous panels dealing specifically with the creation of safe spaces. These inclusionary practices carry over into the songs performed in the nightly concerts, especially

those found within wizard rock. Many songs within this genre present overt messages of acceptance, especially for those within the LGBTQ+ community. Furthermore, the rituals developed by fans to accompany performances of these wizard rock song, such as "Dumbledore" (2006) and "The Weapon" (2004), visually demonstrate the importance of inclusionary safe spaces, as discussed in chapter three. Additionally, the Yes All Witches campaign and song, created by Steph Anderson, enables the iteration of a specifically female-centric space in fandom.

The safe spaces found at the convention facilitate the participatory practices within the GeekyCon sing-alongs. Because attendees feel comfortable within the convention community, they are more likely to experiment with their performance of identities, as demonstrated through the many cosplays found at the convention. Additionally, the performative fan traditions surrounding Broadway, Disney, and Starkid musicals have come to embody the ideals of GeekyCon, including as feminism, acceptance, and positive portrayals of fandom. Fans perform at these sing-alongs through a blend of presentational and participatory music making, and their experiences are inextricably linked to the technological mediation that allowed them to learn of these fan materials. The group singing shared within these events strengthens the participants' bond and encourages them to participate and be heard, regardless of gender, sexuality, or any other element of identity. Ultimately, the musical elements within both the online and in-person convention environments allows the GeekyCon community to function as an audiotopia and thrive year-round.

Though GeekyCon has come to an end, there still exists other related areas of research upon which I would like to expand. Most styles of music found at GeekyCon can also be found in other fan spaces. Wizard rock bands, for instance, often tour throughout the United States and

have a broad fan base throughout the world. Additionally, the scope of this project did not allow me to discuss other major ideas important within fandom. Further examination of fan spaces, could productively allow for a more thorough examination of racial representations. Additionally, while I stress the agency of fans within this audiotopic space, more work could be completed describing the relationship between convention attendees and the larger capitalistic culture industries.

This thesis contributes to ethnomusicology and fan studies, for it serves as one of the first academic writings to detail the online continuation of convention communities through social media. Moreover, my work contributes to the growing body of literature concerning online music ethnography. As noted in the opening chapter, most online ethnographies of music communities were written before the widespread popularization of social media. Since beginning this thesis, I have witnessed other convention communities similarly sustaining themselves through online practices. Moreover, this study allowed me to closely examine the disparate types of music found within a single convention space. A majority of academic works dealing with fandom tend to focus on a single item of interest. My study of GeekyCon, however, describes the ways in which fans embrace several musical genres in their performance of fandom

When I first began researching the music of GeekyCon, I had no idea where my ethnography would take me. I had not been to the convention since its days devoted strictly to the *Harry Potter* series, and I did not know any of current members of the community. However, after joining the Facebook group I was welcomed quickly into the inclusive and safe space of these fans. I geeked out with friends who shared my interests, participated in the audiotopic discussions, and performed my fandom for all to see. I do not know the next time I will see my

friends from GeekyCon in person. However, I remain in touch with them through social media, and I know that through them I have found a home.

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