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WATCHING YOU, WATCHING ME: REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE FANS AND FANDOM IN ACADEMIA, NEWS MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE

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WATCHING YOU, WATCHING ME: REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE FANS AND
FANDOM IN ACADEMIA, NEWS MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE

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by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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SCHOOL OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

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Abstract

This project is a close examination of the representation of female participatory fandom, including scholarly work on fandom from the 1980s to the present, recent news media coverage of fan fiction, and a case study of fan responses to their own representation on the television series *Supernatural*. I will argue that outsider representations treat fans as a convenient Other, in order to normalize 'mainstream' relationships to media texts. This function is gendered, drawing on historical, philosophical and medical discourses which associate femininity with the body and emotion, and masculinity with the mind and reason. I close with a case study of television series *Supernatural*, which features recurring fan characters based on the program's real fandom. Through a survey questionnaire, fans were given the chance to respond to these representations. A much more complex picture of female fan identity emerges from these accounts.

Keywords: fandom, fans, fan studies, online communities, gender representation, feminism, reason vs. emotion, television, *Supernatural*

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Thanks to my mom, for taking me on that bus to see the Backstreet Boys when I was fourteen, and for encouraging me to be academically inspired by the things I love.

Lastly, thank you to fandom for being my favourite place to work *and* to play.

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Introductions

For my fourteenth birthday, my mom took me to see the Backstreet Boys (BSB). This was a pretty big deal because the tour was not scheduled to stop in my hometown, and we'd actually need to cross the border into the U.S. to see the show. Thankfully, someone affiliated with the local radio station had organized a bus tour to transport a group of BSB fans from Winnipeg to Grand Forks and back – meal stop included – and my mom booked us two tickets. She had even negotiated with my father – they'd divorced years before, and they did *not* get along – to pay for part of the trip. Thus my dad got the glory of contributing to the greatest night of my life without actually having to attend the show or make any of the arrangements.

And it *was* the best night of my life to that point, full of all the choreographed dance and sugary-sweet pop music I could have hoped for. More important at the time, and more memorable now, however, was sharing this experience with both my mom and the other, mostly-teenage girls on the bus. Though I was usually painfully shy, I remember that day, and all my subsequent BSB concerts, as moments of rare unselfconsciousness. Over the course of the trip – the drive to the concert, the concert itself, and the trip back in the wee hours of the morning – I made friends easily, and we chatted and sang through the night. It was also the first time I was an expert in something, and my mother the amateur. There was a sort of power in the whole experience for me, and I spent the next few days riding its high.

That is, until I read the *Winnipeg Free Press* editorial review of the show, despite the best efforts of my mom and grandma to prevent me from doing so. I had been

listening to popular music for some time, and I was accustomed to reading less than

stellar reviews of albums and concerts. This review was different, though, not only

because it was of a show I had personally experienced, but also because it didn't seem to

have much to do with the Backstreet Boys at all.

Lindor Reynolds' Now the moms go, too" (2001) was not a concert review.

Instead, it was a scathing attack on the bus trip participants, including my mother and

myself. Reynolds and her teenage daughter had, unbeknownst to us, taken part in the trip

and Reynolds did not share my positive view of the experience.

She wrote:

> These are the excursions you take in the impossible belief your child will
> treasure the moment forever. Indeed, some of the girls on the bus were
> having such moments, causing them to burst into tears, tremble like palsy
> victims and exude alarming amounts of liquid. These were the omigod
> girls, a passel of gals wearing glittery eye shadow, pink lipstick and t-shirts
> suggesting they would like to do possibly illegal things with the band. A
> couple of the mothers looked pretty hot-to-trot as well, raising at least two
> eyebrows. (Reynolds 2001)

The whole of Reynolds' piece was a nostalgic remembrance of the 'good old days' when

parents wouldn't dream of accompanying their children to concerts, when there was no

dancing and the music was 'authentic,' and when there was danger (and suspicious

smoke) in the air. Something is wrong, she observed, with contemporary teenage girls –

and worse! – their mothers.

No mention was made of the music at the concert itself; Reynolds admitted in the

second paragraph that she wore earplugs the whole time. Instead, Reynolds focused her

attention on the audience – on the fans of the band, rather than the band itself. She

commented on their irritating chatter, their shrieking, and their clothing and makeup

choices. Throughout the piece, the girls were referred to as "banshees" wearing "enough strawberry lip gloss to grease a pig" (ibid., 2001). I had grown a pretty thick skin for people insulting my favourite band, but at fourteen I was shocked and profoundly hurt by such venom directed at me, my mom, and my new friends.

It is a credit to my mother's excellent suggestion that instead of spending days crying, my response to the editorial was to write my own, three-page letter to the editor. Even – perhaps especially – as an adolescent girl, I was aware that there was something deeply unfair about both *who* Reynolds' criticisms were actually directed at, and *what* she found so appalling about the women on the bus trip. In a particularly painful coincidence, I actually have mild cerebral palsy and occasionally do 'tremble like a palsy victim,' and thus was literally part of an image Reynolds meant to use as a metaphorical insult. My letter to the editor was considered for publication, but in the end the only part that actually made it to print was my mother's sternly worded addendum about the inappropriateness of that bit of language.

I open with an example from my personal fan history not only because it marks the earliest inspiration for this entire project, but also because it demonstrates some key trends in the representations of female fans by non-fans. It puts emphasis on the female body, on 'irrational' female behaviour, and it represents fans as something less than fully human, as simultaneously pathetic and yet somehow frightening. Most clearly, Reynolds' descriptions of contemporary female fans serve a very particular function; they serve to glorify her own, more 'authentic' experiences as a young person attending concerts. This project will argue that in various, often specifically gendered ways, nearly all representation of female fans by outsiders serves this same purpose. Fans are used as one

side of a binary, as an Other against which more mainstream groups define themselves and validate their own relationship to popular culture.

Participatory Fandom

If Reynolds was shocked and maybe even horrified by her very brief foray into fandom during our bus trip, I cannot imagine how she would react to the rest of what fan communities can involve. Concert trips, those of us who are members of participatory fan communities know, are only the tip of the iceberg. This project is particularly focused on these more involved fan communities, where fans not only consume and admire a popular culture object (book, television show, film, musical act, etc.), but also actively produce their own content based upon or provoked by the original text, and share this production with a like-minded community of other fans. Such fan communities involve fan production including but not limited to: discussion and analysis of media objects, fan fiction, fan art, fan videos, role-playing and various fan activities at conventions and meet-ups. Although fandom began offline with the circulation of fanzines and other printed materials, the availability of online communication and community-building tools beginning in the early 1990's dramatically increased fans' abilities to access the fan-works of others, and to share their own fan production. Additionally, new distribution technologies including VCRs, DVD players and online torrent distribution enabled the repeat viewing of programming central to fan experiences, and facilitated the global spread of media in areas where it was otherwise unavailable.

Even after fandom's move online in the mid 1990's however, fan communities remained semi-private; although they could theoretically be accessed by anyone online,

they remained for the most part 'underground,' spaces created by fans for fans, separate from the producers of the original media objects and outside of, or peripheral to, public knowledge. Increasingly, however, fandom has attracted mainstream attention from outsiders who are both fascinated and horrified by the novelty of these strange 'subcultures.' Fandom's exposure to the mainstream has increased dramatically – researchers working in fan studies represent a growing academic field, journalists increasingly 'discover' and expose fan activities to the wider world, and most recently popular culture – television in particular – has begun to reference fannish activities. These references, in particular, indicate a significant change in the relationship between fandom and media producers, as prior direct contact had often been through attempts to shut down certain fan activities, or to denigrate them. Acknowledgment of fans had previously occurred primarily outside of televisual texts themselves; positively, when producers or actors acknowledge or thank their fans during public appearances, or respond to fan campaigns to 'save' a program on the verge of cancellation, and negatively, when networks or show producers have threatened legal action to shut down fan websites, for example. As I will examine later, in the case of *Supernatural,* fans are actually becoming a part of the show itself. Moreover, the formerly private space of female fandom is increasingly being made public. Such exposure risks significantly altering the communities in terms of both membership and behaviour, as it attracts new kinds of people to fandom or makes existing members feel as if they are under surveillance. It is in these representations of female fans – most often by outsiders and for outsiders – that this project is interested.

Scholars and journalists have been particularly interested in participatory fan communities online because they are composed primarily of women, often writing about sex and sexuality. Most interesting, it seems, has been slash fiction – fan-written stories featuring same-sex relationships, romance and sex. As Hellekson and Busse note, the "history of fan fiction studies, for the most part, is a history of attempting to understand the underlying motivations of why (mostly) women write fan fiction and, in particular, slash" (2006, 17). Of particular interest to scholars and journalists have been attempts to classify slash in relationship to pornography and/or romance fiction. At the root of this classification is the decision to make slash nothing more than an extension of the typical women's genre of romance, or to associate it with pornography, typically a men's genre. A comparison with romance fiction does not challenge stereotypical ideas about women's cultural consumption and production, while a comparison to pornography does. Most fan scholars agree that there is something subversive about slash, but the exact nature of slash's appeal for women readers and writers remains highly contested, as does the extent to which fandom as a 'queer female space' relates to fans' offline identities and behaviours (Busse 2005; Russ 1985). This project places emphasis on slash fandom, therefore, for two reasons: it is by far the most highly studied segment of fandom, and these representations most often address gender and female sexuality.

Fandom Lingo[1]

Like other subcultures or semi-private communities, participatory fandom uses its own specialized language. This language serves to most accurately describe fan activities,

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[1] For a comprehensive explanation of fandom terminology, please see Hellekson and Busse (2005) p. 9-13, or visit the fan-run wiki fanlore.org.

and also helps to separate community members (who understand and speak the language)

from outsiders (who do not). The following is only a brief sample of some of the most

common fan terms which are relevant to this project.

Fan – Fans in the context of *participatory* fandom do more than just consume and appreciate a media text, they also participate in communal activities surrounding this text such as reading or writing fan fiction, reviewing or discussing a text with other fans, creating art inspired the by a text or attending fan meetups and conventions.

Mundanes – Non-fans; people unfamiliar with fandom.

Fandom – Refers to a community of fans with similar interests who interact with one another in a participatory sense. Can be used in general sense, or to refer to more specific segments ("comics fandom," "*Supernatural* fandom"). Different fandoms have their own communities, etiquette and terminology.

Transformative works – Fan-created artistic work which utilizes and transforms the settings or characters of an existing text in order to create something new.

Fan fiction (fic) – Written transformative works which borrow elements of the original media text. There are many genres and categories of fan fic.

Ship (Pairing) – The primary romantic or sexual relation*ship* in a given piece of fan fiction or fan art. When posted, fics are labelled with their ship by the characters full names separated by a slash (Sam/Dean), in an abbreviated form (S/D), or by a nickname (Wincest).

Gen – Fan fic which does not contain romance or sexual content.

Het – Fan fic in which the primary romantic or sexual pairing is heterosexual.

Slash – Fan fic which contains a same-sex relationship, usually not explicitly a part of the original text, and based on fan readings of subtext. Watching for homoerotic subtexts and/or creating transformative works featuring a same-sex pairing is referred to as *slashing*, and fans that do so are *slashers*.

Femslash (Femmeslash) - Subset of slash featuring a romantic or sexual relationship between two female characters.

RPS (Real Person Slash) – Fan fiction which features real people (musicians and actors, for example) as opposed to fictional characters.

Meta – Fan analysis of the original text, or of fandom itself.

Canon – The original program, film, book or other object the fandom is based upon.

Fanon – Interpretations, events or characterizations popular throughout a fandom, despite being unconfirmed or even contradicted by the official canon.

Squee – An expression of excitement and joy. Can be used as a noun ("I am filled with squee") or as a verb ("That episode was so fantastic I squeed").

Common Representations of Fans

In the first chapter of *Textual Poachers* (1992), considered one of the founding texts of fan studies, Henry Jenkins spends time describing the fan stereotypes presented in the media. Jenkins describes seven characteristics held by fans, if the media was to be believed. Fans,

A. are brainless consumers who will buy anything associated with the program or its cast...
B. devote their lives to the cultivation of worthless knowledge...
C. place inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material...
D. are social misfits who have become so obsessed with the show that it forecloses other types of social experience...
E. are feminized and/or desexualized through their intimate engagement with mass culture..
F. are infantile, emotionally and intellectually immature...
G. are unable to separate fantasy from reality... (Jenkins 1992, 10)

Jenkins is primarily concerned, at this point, with male television fans (representations of Trekkies are his case study), but it is easy to recognize many similar traits mapped on to all kinds of devoted fans. Indeed, some of these characteristics need no longer be attached to particular media references or fan examples; they have been naturalized to appear true by common sense. As Jenkins points out, some of these associations are as old as the word itself; fan (from fanatic) carries "connotations of religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness" (1992, 12).

Fans have been represented as frightening and even dangerous. Also in 1992, Joli Jensen examined two types of fans, as represented in media and academic commentary: the obsessed loner type, and the frenzied or hysterical member of a crowd (11). She argues that these images say very little about actual fan-celebrity relations, but instead contain an implicit critique of modernity. Society's deep anxieties about living under modernity are embodied in these two stereotypes of fanship: "the obsessed loner invokes the image of the alienated, atomized 'mass man'; the frenzied crowd member invokes the image of the vulnerable, irrational victim of mass persuasion" (Jensen 1992, 14). Cornel Sandvoss, commenting on Jensen's work, suggests another possible explanation for the popularity of such fan images, arguing that "one may equally argue the opposite: that a critique of the fundamental and complex forces of modern life has been precluded by using fandom as a convenient scapegoat for profoundly disturbing occurrences [such as the Columbine school shooting, often attributed to the influence of Marilyn Manson's music]" (2005, 2). Rather than providing a focal point around which to center discussions of our anxieties, Sandvoss suggests, pinning blame on fans as extreme examples allows us to avoid those conversations entirely, because they do not seem to apply to the rest of us.

Though they may disagree on particulars, Jenkins, Jensen and Sandvoss all agree that in media representations, fan images serve as a convenient 'them,' which by contrast makes 'us' seem normal. Fan scholars have pointed out that academics devoted to particular authors or theorists have much in common with the pop culture fan (Jensen 1992; Pearson 2007; McKee 2007). They collect a particular theorist's work, study it to a degree we might characterize as obsessive, and even attend academic conferences not

unlike fan conventions. Yet we don't typically refer to academics as *fans* of Foucault or Derrida or Butler, and such devotion does not carry negative connotations related to the academic's intelligence or self-control.

Jensen provides two important reasons for this distinction between fans and other, more respected kinds of devotees. First, she notes that the distinction relies on a cultural hierarchy wherein, if a media object is "popular with the lower or middle class, relatively inexpensive and widely available," it has fans; but if it is "popular with the wealthy and well educated, expensive and rare" it has various other kinds of admirers (19). Secondly, fandom is associated with a kind of excessive emotional response and display, as opposed to cool detachment. It relies on "an assumed dichotomy between reason and emotion" that Jensen ties to a presumed difference between the upper and lower classes, and the educated and the uneducated (21). Thus fans differ from film buffs, aficionados and experts both in their choice of admired object, and in the nature of their attachment to that object.

Jensen suggests that this 'othering' of fans allows non-fans to feel safe and normal because, while *some* people may be strongly influenced by media persuasion and mob psychology, *they* are not. Not only does this incorrectly characterize much of fan behaviour, it also has the potential to mask the very real ways in which the media does, in fact, affect non-fans. Moreover:

> It also supports the celebration of certain values – the rational over the emotional, the educated over the uneducated, the subdued over the passionate, the elite over the popular, the mainstream over the margin, the status quo over the alternative. The beliefs evidenced in the stigmatization of fans are inherently conservative, and they serve to privilege the attributes of the wealthy, educated and powerful. (Jensen 25)

Surprisingly little sustained attention has been paid in the existing literature to the ways in which outsider representations of fans are gendered. Jenkins pays some attention to the subject in his discussion of fan representation, noting that male fans are often portrayed as de-sexualized or impotent (think of the paradigmatic geek, who can't find a girlfriend and still lives in his mother's basement). Jenkins notes that the comic fan and the violent, psychotic fan are usually portrayed as male (if not conventionally masculine), but the eroticized fan is always female (15). Female fans are out of control - wildly emotional, completely irrational, and desperate to get as close to the object of their desire as possible. Further, he asserts that in representations of female fans "the female spectator herself becomes an erotic spectacle for mundane male spectators while her abandonment of any distance from the image becomes an invitation for the viewer's own erotic fantasies" (15). It is surprising that Jensen does not make a similar connection; though she connects class and education to the "hot" fans vs. "cool" experts distinction, she does not make a similar connection to gender. Certainly the long and problematic associations between masculinity and rationality, and femininity and emotionality, also play a role in determining acceptable and unacceptable levels of fan investment. Though there is certainly existing work on images of female fans more generally (especially music fans), little work has been done on *representations* of female online participatory fans, despite the fact that female fans (especially slashers) are very often studied by academics and covered by the media.

The stereotyped images of participatory fans studied in this project – particularly in chapter three – do not perfectly resemble either the obsessed loner or hysterical crowd-member type described in the existing literature. Online fandom allows for individual,

solitary reading or viewing (and reading and writing of fan fiction, drawing of fan art, etc.) but is also very much a communal activity (public sharing of transformative work, discussion and analysis of media objects, attendance at meet-ups or fan conventions). A member of an online participatory fandom, then, is *both* an individual and a member of a crowd. This new hybrid fan must be represented differently, and often takes on features of each type of fan simultaneously.

More than a decade after Jensen and Jenkin's critiques of fan representations, Sandvoss argues that "the need for such partisan representation of fandom has disappeared... [because] fandom seems to have become a common and ordinary aspect of everyday life in the industrialized world that is actively fostered and utilized in industry marketing strategies" (2005, 3). In his 2007 afterword to an anthology of essays on fandom, Jenkins agrees. Given the increased popularity of Web 2.0, social networking, self-publishing and do-it-yourself media creation, the media industries have been forced to embrace, encourage and utilize the fan-esque behaviours they used to mock. They may no longer be referred to as fans - the industry prefers to call them 'prosumers,' 'loyals,' 'multipliers,' or 'influencers' – but they have fannish social behaviours and emotional attachments (Jenkins 2007, 359). Fans are less stigmatized now, Jenkins and Sandvoss say, because fan-type behaviours are so common and essential to new media business models.

But is this stigma really gone? A look at the contemporary media landscape indicates that Jenkins may be getting ahead of himself in asserting that "fandom has no future" because it has been so thoroughly normalized and integrated into practices of consumption (2007, 364). Though certain kinds of fandom may be less stigmatized,

outsider perceptions of other kinds of fandom remain curiously unchanged.

Contemporary discussions of Justin Bieber fans are almost indistinguishable from Lindor

Reynolds' 2001 discussion of Backstreet Boys fans, or even panicked press reactions to

Beatlemania (Ehrenreich *et al* 1992). Today's middle-aged *Twilight* fan is treated with as

much disdain as the soap opera viewer or the reader of Harlequin romance novels.

Academics and journalists continually discover, investigate and expose the 'bizarre'

world of slash fiction, despite the fact that the genre is over thirty years old. These

fandoms' associations with female media consumption and female sexuality seem to keep

them from being as quickly normalized, even as masculine or gender-neutral fan

communities and behaviours are no longer treated as deviant. Increased fan-type

behaviour in our everyday lives may not signal the end of fan stigmatization; it may

simply create an even greater need for a convenient scapegoat compared to which non-

fans can reassure themselves they have not fallen victim to media's undue influence.

Female fan communities have apparently been declared the strangest of the strange, and,

as this project will demonstrate, the stigma attached to them is far from gone.

Academic Representations of Fans

There are similarities between fan representations in mainstream media coverage

and fan representations found in early academic work on fan communities. As Sandvoss

notes:

> In both approaches fandom is interpreted as a consequence of mass culture
> needing to compensate for a lack of intimacy, community and identity. If in
> mass-mediated representation the fan is predominantly the perpetrator, then
> here he or she is first and foremost the passive victim. (2005, 2)

Both types of commentary see fandom as "a consequence of psychological or cultural dysfunction" (Sandvoss 2005, 2). Though such representations have far from disappeared – see a 2009 article by Jeffrey Rudski *et al* comparing Harry Potter fandom to chemical addiction – a second type of fan scholarship began to emerge in response to these negative characterizations of fandom.

Beginning in the 1980s, fandom became an object of study for academics interested in examining the ways in which we consume and relate to popular culture. In particular, scholars like Henry Jenkins saw fandom as a challenge to Marxist models of popular culture, such as those of Horkheimer and Adorno. These models saw the products of popular culture as easily reduced to elements in the capitalist equation that offer audiences temporary, superficial pleasure in exchange for, explicitly, their money, and, more subtly, their consent to the capitalist status quo (Horkheimer and Adorno 1940). Because 'the masses' in this equation are seen as passive and homogenous, audience reception of and meaning-making associated with popular texts were not closely examined.

Participatory fandom significantly complicated this model, as the content of fan production often challenged or altered the original text, suggesting that consumption was far from passive within these communities. Jenkins, for example, uses Michel de Certeau's analogy of readers as 'poachers' who scavenge through mainstream media, salvaging the bits they find interesting and putting them together in new and alternative ways better suited to their needs (1992, 24). Stuart Hall's work on encoding and decoding has also been applied to fan behaviours. He emphasizes audience members' abilities to decode any given text in a variety of different ways, and to hold different reading

positions, even those which lead to interpretations of the text oppositional to those

intended by the original producer. In making fan work such as slash fiction, fans can be

seen as holding Hall's negotiated – or perhaps even oppositional – reading positions in

relationship to text producers (Hall 2005). Mark Dery includes fan fiction in his work on

culture jamming as a form of resistance in an 'empire of signs' where influence and

access to information is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the mainstream media

and its owners. Dery borrows the term "slashing" from fandom and applies it more

broadly to "any form of jamming in which tales told for mass consumption are perversely

reworked" (Dery 2004, 4). Named in part for the slash which appears between names in

the romantic or sexual pairing of a fan fiction story (Kirk/Spock, for instance), the term

describes both the productive nature of the genre in making explicit what was implicit or

non-existent in the original text, and also its destructive nature in slashing open or taking

apart (and then rebuilding) the original text. This kind of breaking apart of the original

popular culture text and re-working into something new and different describes fan

fiction more generally as well, but scholarly attention has often focused on slash fiction

in particular because of its relationships to gender and sexuality (Bacon-Smith, 1992) and

it has been interpreted by many fans scholars as an explicitly feminist project, or as a site

of feminist work (Russ 1985; Penley 1997).Work by fans scholars functions not only as

research for its own sake, but also as "a form of political representation: a statement

against the double standards of cultural judgement and the bourgeois fear of popular

culture; a statement in favour of fan sensibilities which gave a voice to otherwise

marginalized social groups" (Sandvoss 2005, 3).

This shift away from the individual fan as pathologized in other accounts of fandom and towards a more structural and explicitly political reading of fandom comes at a cost, however. Fans have become concerned that researchers entering their communities for observation were changing the nature of the communities, or misrepresenting them in their work. Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* (1992) was the first detailed ethnographic account of female fandom published, and fans immediately raised concerns about Bacon-Smith's research techniques, questionable generalization from her small sample to fandom more broadly, and possible dishonesty in representing her own position within the fan community, both to her research subjects and in the published work (Hellekson and Busse, 18-19). This representation sparked broad and ongoing concern among the fan community about the motives and methods of fan scholars, and a justified resistance to academic intervention.

Additionally, many fans expressed concern that their fannish activities were being interpreted as part of a political movement they did not necessarily intend to support. Aggressive reading of fandom as political by early fan scholars left some fans feeling that the personal, affective and emotional sides of fandom were being completely ignored in favour of an overstated political agenda. Slashers, in particular, are often uncomfortable with conclusions about female sexuality or desire drawn from their work. Though many do identify some elements of feminism in their work, others resist having their activities labelled as feminist (Bury 76-94). Most generally, fans express concern that their voices are very rarely directly heard in academic work on fandom, but are instead channelled through the researcher's particular lens. These concerns, and the ways in which

contemporary fan scholars have or have not addressed them, will be described in more detail in the next chapter.

Theoretical Framework

The project takes an integrative approach to the study of representations of female fans, located at the intersections of, and ideally bridging the gaps between, a number of areas of study and theoretical frameworks.

First and foremost, the work is framed by the connections Michel Foucault makes between knowledge and power. He asserts that there is an intimate relationship between power and knowledge, so much that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field or knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" ([1975] 1995, 7). Indeed, Foucault characterizes the relationship between the two as so close that he often uses "knowledge/power," collapsing them into a single term. Intimately related to knowledge/power are the discourses which both transmit and create knowledge/power. Contrary to characterizations of power which locate it in the hands of the state or other institutions and describe its use as purely repressive, Foucault sees power as "the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization" ([1976] 1990, 92). He also stresses the productive capacity of power in addition to its repressive function. This "multiplicity of discursive elements... can come into play in various strategies" in order to create, reinforce, transmit and transform knowledge/power. (ibid., 100). Foucault rejects models of discourse which divide it simplistically into accepted and excluded or dominant and dominated, and

instead notes that "discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also...a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (ibid., 101). Fan work – especially if it challenges aspects of the original text – can be seen in this sense as a resistant counter discourse which uses a mainstream popular culture discourse as a starting point. Representation of fans and fan work, then, are further discourses which construct knowledge/power in a variety of ways. It is this complex model of discourse and its relationship to knowledge/power as potentially both repressive and productive and as in constant flux that this project makes its foundation.

This project recognizes that a text holds a multiplicity of meanings for women and challenges traditional feminist ideas of the media (in advertising, for example) which were concerned with damaging and unrealistic images of women (and men) which audiences were thought to passively absorb. According to Natalie Fenton, the "effects of the mass media were thereby conceived as detrimental to the general population and in particular to women" (2000, 726). Fandom itself, and fan fiction in particular, demonstrates that consumption of popular culture can be much more complex and active. Fenton recognizes a shift in media research from "what images did to women and what women could do with women's images" (ibid., 726). This project, however, acknowledges that both of these media effects can take place – media images can do things to women, but women can also do things back to media. In this project, media consumers are not seen as passive, homogenous or determined by the popular culture they consume, but rather as active, with the agency to criticize, resist, re-read or transform the media they consume to meet their own needs. According to Stuart Hall and others, texts have no single, unitary meaning which predictably affects all consumers in

the same way. However, although all viewers have some capacity to challenge dominant culture and its associated ideas, not all viewers choose or are able to do so to the same extent, nor are they completely immune to its effects. Audience agency, then, is conceptualized as always present but often limited by the social and economic pressures of dominant culture. This project positions fans as holding strong but not unlimited agency in regard to the culture they consume and its owners and producers. Stuart Hall calls this the dialectic of cultural struggle, which he conceptualizes as a "battlefield where no once-for-all victories are obtained but where there are always strategic positions to be won and lost" ([1981] 2002, 187). Where there is the force of dominant culture, there is always also some resistance, and these two forces exist in constant tension. Thus we can expect that representations of fans and fandom – whether in academia, journalism or popular culture – can and do affect fans themselves, and these responses will not be uniform or universal. Fans from different backgrounds and with different experiences might react completely differently to the same representation, so that for some encountering such representations might be a positive experience, for others a profoundly negative one and for still others something in-between.

Natalie Fenton critiques the notion that feminism's 'overriding motivation should be to respect women and women's genres, and to demand respect for them from the world at large', arguing that "such an approach rules out any investigation of the media as an institution that frames, limits and helps to construct choices, pleasures and responses" (2000, 728). This project will attempt to find common ground between the two sides of this coin by simultaneously recognizing, respecting and taking seriously fandom as site of both female cultural consumption and production *and* acknowledging that to respect it

does not mean to make it immune to criticism, or to treat it as if autonomous from social, cultural and institutional power. Indeed, while representations of fans operate at the level of discourse, they do have the ability to affect real women in both their virtual and 'real' worlds. As John Fiske notes, "Fandom is typically associated with cultural forms that the dominant value system denigrates – pop music, romance novels, comics, Hollywood mass-appeal stars... [and] is thus associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race" (1992, 30). Thus treatments of fandom cannot be separated from other discourses around gender, age, race and sexuality which have a profound impact on identify formation and day-to-day life.

Finally, this project is influenced by Donna Haraway's concepts of 'situated' and 'partial' knowledges. For Haraway, "feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object" (1991, 190). The best hope for rational inquiry rests with learning to see from a number of partial perspectives at once, and to see the knowledge(s) gained from this type of inquiry as specific and local, not as universal. In my work in Chapter III with *Supernatural* it will be important not to generalize from my subjects to all of fandom as a whole, recognizing a diversity across and between fandoms that my work cannot hope to accurately represent. I will also self-consciously embrace the position Haraway calls "the split and contradictory self" in my work, as I am both a member of the fan community and an academic (among other things). Haraway argues that "the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see without

claiming to be another" (1991, 193). It will be one of the challenges of this project to pull together the various 'partial perspectives' springing from my research subjects, the writers I analyse and my own subjectivity, contradictory as they may occasionally be, and to consider the challenges of this work, for myself and for other fan scholars.

Methodology

The first chapter of the project examines existing scholarly work on female fans and fandom. Through analysis, I will outline the types of fan representations common in academic work on fans. I will look into the strengths and weaknesses of these representations, and of academic work on fandom in general. The project's second chapter examines four months of contemporary news media references to fan fiction in particular, as collected in LiveJournal community *Fanthropology*. These recent references often conform to negative stereotypes of fans. Additionally, they often draw comparisons between fan fiction and traditional publishing. This chapter will also introduce the case study for the third chapter.

In the first two chapters, the primary method of analysis is discourse analysis. Following Norman Fairclough, the analysis will involve not only a close reading of the academic or news media texts themselves, but will also aim to "transcend the division between work inspired by social theory which tends not to analyse texts, and work which focuses upon the language of texts but tends not to engage with social theoretical issues" (2003, 2-3). Fairclough's critical discourse analysis is concerned not only with the language of particular texts, but also with the social structuring of language and the larger networks and social practices it contributes to. Thus the project will consider the texts

themselves, in addition to their relationships with other texts, their broader social contexts and the variety of discourses they are a part of. Thus it is "concerned with continuity and change at this more abstract, more structural, level, as well as what happens in particular texts" (Fairclough 2003, 3). As Julianne Cheek suggests, discourse analysis is not about finding the single true meaning of a text, but rather "it is about explaining how certain things came to be said or done, and what has enabled and/or constrained what can be spoken or written in a particular context" (2004, 1147). Furthermore, Fairclough imagines discourse analysis as part of a larger project – critical social research – which seeks "a better understanding of how societies work and produce both beneficial and detrimental effects, and of how the detrimental effects can be mitigated if not eliminated" (2003, 203). This approach is therefore compatible with the feminist lens of the project, which seeks knowledge not only for its own sake, but which also links discourse and power and stands as a potential intervention into harmful trends of representation.

The case study which comprises the project's third chapter is of the CW network's horror/fantasy program *Supernatural* (2005 - present). This series is unique in that it includes recurring fan characters based on the program's own fandom. The protagonists meet their own fans - including one slash fan fiction writer – and even attend their own fan convention. This breaking of the 'fourth wall' is further amplified by the decision to name fan characters after show writers or high-profile fans. Thus fans, formerly outside the text, are pulled into the diegesis of the show itself, most often for comedic effect. Episodes of the show featuring these fan characters caused a great deal of controversy within the fandom upon their release. By surveying fans about their

responses to these episodes, I gain insight into the ways in which fans themselves respond to their representation by outsiders.

This third chapter of the project analyses data collected from a survey of *Supernatural* fans. With University of Western Ontario ethics approval, announcements for the survey were posted across several *Supernatural* fan communities on the blogging site LiveJournal.com, where the majority of *Supernatural* fandom is concentrated. These announcements included a hyperlink to the survey, hosted on the website SurveyMonkey.com. Online survey distribution was chosen in order to best access the fan community. The survey was posted to three of the largest *Supernatural* communities to which its content was applicable, with the permission of the moderators of those communities. All information was collected completely anonymously, and no identifying information was requested. After reading the introductory information, respondents answered a series of questions including basic demographic information, descriptions of their fan identifications and behaviours, their responses to representations of fandom on *Supernatural.* All questions were optional and participants were able to answer as briefly or as in-depth as they wished.

The survey was designed to ask as many open-ended questions as possible when soliciting responses to fan representations. These open-ended questions ensured that the participants had the opportunity to participate as fully as possible within the format of an online survey. The survey was designed to accept brief answers while allowing (and encouraging) in-depth response should respondents so choose. Further, every effort was made to allow for participants to include additional comment or explanation to yes or no or multiple choice questions. As written discussion of the television program is

commonplace in fan communities, open-ended responses within the survey may even come naturally to survey participants.

Though this made analysis of data more challenging, leaving room for participants to describe their experiences in-depth and to provide description is important. This type of survey question privileges the voices of survey respondents and allows them the space to develop and discuss their own ideas and responses to representations they have seen. This strategy springs from feminist research objectives which seek equality and collaboration between researcher and research subject, and reduces the risk that fans might be misrepresented in academic work, a tendency which the project aims to observe and not to reproduce.

In total, 338 respondents began the survey, and 247 of those finished it, for a completion rate of 73%. The complete responses – including everyone who clicked through to the final section of the survey, even if they chose to skip questions - were analyzed. Please see the appendix for a blank copy of the survey questionnaire, summary of basic demographic information (including age, gender, sexual orientation, education level, employment) and information on common fan behaviours (including reading and writing fan fiction and slash fiction, and attendance at fan conventions).

The questions in section four, "Fans in *Supernatural*," comprise the primary focus of this project. The unexpected volume of responses necessitated broad coding of data. First and foremost, each of the completed responses was categorized as either a primarily positive reaction to the episodes, a primarily negative reaction to the episodes or a mixed reaction to the episodes. Responses were also coded according to general emotional

categories which emerged from the data during initial review, including positive responses (humour, joy, recognition, interest) and negative responses (shame, anger discomfort). Responses were also categorized according to patterns which emerged in reaction to fan characters and to the changed relationship between fans and show producers. For example, whether they claimed or rejected any personal similarities to the fan characters. In the chapter, fan responses are liberally quoted in order to allow their voices a chance to be heard.

A Word About Me

Critique of ethnographic and interpretive work on female consumption has often focused on its perceived lack of scientific 'objectivity.' Perhaps in anticipation of this criticism, writers have often sought to distance themselves from their research subjects. Media scholar Ien Ang is critical of Janice Radway's studies of female romance readers, for e this reason, and, Hellekson and Busse question the influential work of Camille Bacon-Smith on *Star Trek* fandom because her "methodological self-position intends to assure her reader that she is removed from her object of study and is thus not unduly invested in it, a move that trades fan approval for the academic value of [perceived] objectivity" (2006, 18). A researcher who positions herself as at a distance from research subjects in this way obscures the effects her presence and research has on the community she studies, and also risks re-inscribing the passive masses/enlightened critic binary which audience-focused research often hopes to move beyond. While this project is not strictly ethnographic in nature – relying on discourse analysis and survey results instead –

it is still, in many ways, research for and about fans, even as it focuses on those who write about fans and not fans directly.

Feminist scholar Judith Stacey has written extensively on the risks and benefits of ethnographic research, insights which can be extended to my non-ethnographic work in this case. Although initially attracted to the egalitarian appearance of this research, in the process of conducting her own ethnographic research Stacey found herself "wondering whether the appearance of greater respect for and equality with research subjects in the ethnographic approach masks a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation" (1988, 113). These risks and the various ways fan scholars have (or have not) sought to avoid them will be further explored in the following chapter.

For now, suffice it to say that these concerns are the final – and perhaps most important – reason I chose to open this introduction with an example from my personal experience. I am a member of the fan community, and also an academic studying fandom and its representation. Holding this position - being what Henry Jenkins and others have called an 'aca-fan' - is never simple. I will strive to conduct my research as neutrally as possible, and to support my interpretations with as much evidence as possible, from diverse perspectives and viewpoints. The survey in the project's third chapter was conducted to help ensure a diverse representation of fan voices were present in this work, and to pre-empt any concern that my reactions to *Supernatural*'s representation of fans might overwhelm other fan opinions. In stepping briefly aside to make room for my subjects, however, I do not pretend to be objective, or to distance myself from fandom or from fans. In the survey announcement I posted to *Supernatural* fan communities on LiveJournal, I clearly identified myself as a *Supernatural* fan, and a member of the fan

community. I do not pretend to stand outside the fan community, even as I conduct academic research on it.

In her chapter on method, feminist scholar Valerie Walkerdine describes her experience integrating her own psychological experiences and history into her work. She recognizes that her "own feelings and fantasies must…have some bearing on [her own] and therefore anybody's, interpretation and explanation" (1997, 54). Moreover, she feels compelled to actively include herself in the work, recognizing that "feminist appropriations of empowerment through letting the research subjects tell their story [would not be] enough to deal with the complex issues of power and interpretation" (ibid., 54). Walkerdine speaks not only to the need to acknowledge one's own impact on research, but goes even farther in suggesting that we must actively incorporate it. She describes reviewing interview transcripts with colleagues and finding that, based on personal feelings or histories, they had varying interpretations of the same transcript. Rather than dismissing this as bad data or deciding on a single correct interpretation, Walkerdine and her colleagues decided that these "very different defences, fantasies and preoccupations about the transcript had much to tell the researcher that it would be absurd to even attempt to erase from the research process" (ibid., 69). She concludes that "we should not strive to reduce difference and agree meaning but rather make use of the differences between interpretations to tell a more complex story" (ibid., 70). Far from damaging my research, the honest and careful inclusion of my own subjective responses can actually improve both our results and our relationships to our research subjects.

With that goal in mind, and in an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of academic research past, I approach this project as both an academic and a fan. I joined my first

fandom when I was thirteen years old, and have become increasingly involved since then.

I've dabbled in many fandoms, but my primary allegiances have been – in chronological

order – Backstreet Boys and "popslash" fandom, *Harry Potter* fandom and *Supernatural*

fandom. I've read a great deal of fan fiction, and written significantly less. I happily call

myself a slasher, though I'm not opposed to reading or writing het. I write some meta,

and I've taken part in more than a few heated discussions. I've contributed work to

fandom, but am by no means a well-recognized name. I dress up to go to movie

premieres, last summer I attended my first fan convention (for *Supernatural*) and I will

be going again in August. I consider my involvement in fandom an important part of my

life, and of my identity. I love many of the objects I'll be discussing later in the project. I

do not consider this a conflict of interest; my years in fandom – and my academic training

– have taught me that it is perfectly possible to be critical of things we adore. In fact,

having a connection to an object may give us a unique and important perspective from

which to launch our critiques.

There is a certain anxiety many fans feel about the intersections of their online,

fannish identities and their 'real life' identities. Many fans fear the day their family,

friends or colleagues find out about their fandom involvement because being 'outed'

could have disastrous consequences for their personal or professional lives,[2] or because

they fear judgement. Others simply prefer to keep the two parts of their lives separate

because fandom represents a safe space, well away from the stresses of their offline lives.

This anxiety contributes to fans' frequent resistance to and dislike of outsider

representation of fan communities. Many fans would rather we stay hidden, a semi-secret

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[2] See 'The Slash Closet' in Rhiannon Bury's *Cyberspaces of their Own* (2005), 94-98.

place known only to insiders and growing only through whispered word-of-mouth and lucky Google searches.

I have felt those anxieties, and I'm conscious of that fact that even as I study the problems of outsider fan representation with the best intentions, I run the risk of actually contributing to the problem. If the ultimate goal of this project is to examine problematic types of fan representation in order to find new and more productive ways of discussing fandom, I must do my best to ensure that my work exemplifies those best approaches. Academic fan representation then, seems the best place to begin.

Chapter One: Scholarly Representations of Fans

In August 2009, neuroscientists Ogi Ogas and Sai Gaddam began to circulate a
survey focused on female sexual desire among the online fan community. In a description
of the project no longer available except as archived by fans, they explain that they are
"deeply interested in broad-based behavioral data that involves romantic or erotic
cognition and evinces a clear distinction between men and women" and that "Fan fiction
matches this criteria perfectly."[3] Fan reaction to this survey was swift and
overwhelmingly negative. Fans were concerned with both the goal of the survey –
investigating innate differences in male and female sexuality through fan texts,
particularly slash – and its methodology. When questioned and criticized, the researchers
at first attempted to defend their positions or make minor modifications to the survey, but
ultimately deleted it, though not before many fans had already responded.

One of the first critics of the survey was journaling website Dreamwidth user
Euruthros, moderator of the well-known fan fiction Kink Bingo community,[4] whom Ogas
had contacted to ask for help in distributing the survey. In a widely circulated plea that
fans *not* participate in the project, Euruthros clearly articulates the two major objections
fans held. First, the scientists intended to "use our fannish experience, our erotics and our
desires, to reinforce ideas of universal, hard-wired, biological desire" (Euruthros 2009).
In combination with sexist and heterosexist phrasing used in the survey itself and in

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[3] For detailed, fan-archived histories of this event and fandom's response, see entries at Fanlore
(http://fanlore.org/wiki/SurveyFail) and the Fan History Wiki
(http://www.fanhistory.com/wiki/SurveyFail).

[4] Kink Bingo is an annual multi-fandom fan fiction challenge during which participants write fan-to fill a
bingo card full of kink prompts. For more, see the entry at Fanlore (http://fanlore.org/wiki/Kink_Bingo).

responses to criticism, this emphasis on biological gendered universals went a long way

toward alienating a fan community which often positions itself in opposition to those

ideas. Second, Euruthros argued that two male outsiders to fandom were not qualified to

study it:

> They are outsiders to fandom. They are outsiders to fanfiction. They are
> outsiders to slash. And they haven't tried to learn, or to understand, or to
> think about fannish communities. Instead, they have made assumptions
> about who we are, about what we read, about what we find hot; they
> plan to use those to explain what makes women tick, what our brains
> make us do. (Euruthros 2009)

Ogas and Gaddam's project is a particularly vivid and now infamous example of

some of the pitfalls of conducting research on the fan community. Inquiries made to

Boston University – where Ogas and Gaddam had implied they were affiliated –

confirmed that they did not have research ethics approval, and that their research was

being conducted independently, and, contrary to their suggestion, for mass-market rather

than scholarly publication. Ogas and Gaddam may represent the most extreme example

of fan research gone wrong, but those two major flaws in their project – researchers

holding gendered assumptions about what fandom means, and studying a community

they are not a part of and thus may not be able to understand and so misrepresent – are

present in a great deal of academic work on participatory fandom.

As a result of negative opinion on existing scholarly work on fans and fandom,

the academic study and representation of fans and fandom is often still treated with a

certain amount of anxiety by some members of the fan community. Though many fans

enjoy or appreciate academic work on fandom – or even contribute to it themselves, as

we shall see – others remember encountering academic work they found superficial,

offensive or simply just not representative of their own fan experiences. As part of the survey conducted for use in the third chapter, fan respondents were asked if they had ever encountered academic work on fandom and, if so, to describe their impressions. Fifty-five percent of respondents answered that they had encountered academic work on fandom. One fan summarizes many of the concerns participants mentioned regarding academic work done by outsiders to fandom:

> Usually they are written from an outsider point of view with the intent of dissecting the whys of these strange, weird and not quite normal animals called fans. Most of it is written with a slightly condescending tone and somewhat assuming that all fans are first of all male… When they do acknowledge women fans then the bias is even worse. Either they are young groupie like bimbos who throw themselves at the stars or overweight losers who do not interact with people in any way shape or form. Older women who happen to not be any of those categories don't even fit in their views… the majority of what I've read was written by people who already had a bias and image of what they thought fans [were] and made sure to find only the information they wanted to support those views. (#204)[5]

Focusing on studies of participatory and female fandom, this chapter will trace two major lines of development through nearly thirty years of academic study of fandom. First, it will trace changes in the characterization of fans by scholars, particularly in terms of fan agency, and fanship's position as an emotional and/or rational behaviour. These characterizations are closely tied to gendered discourses around the female body, female psychology and female media consumption. Secondly, it will discuss changes in the ways researchers position themselves in relationship to their research subjects or fan communities. It is around these two central questions that much criticism of fan research

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[5] I will refer to participants by their survey response numbers.

has revolved, and it is around these issues that the methods and positions of fan researchers have most changed.

Reason vs. Emotion

Work on fans and fandom has the potential to reinforce, counter or force us to rethink a long history of thought which associates women with the body, nature and emotion, and men with the mind and 'pure' reason. According to feminist work on the history of philosophy, "the concept of reason has been framed to exclude women" and "correlatively, femininity has been defined so as to exclude the rational" (Harvey and Okruhlik 1992, 1). As Susan Bordo summarizes,

> Reason, for example (and, after the seventeenth century, science) is frequently conceptualized as a distinctively male capacity. In contrast, those faculties against which reason variously has been defined, and which it must transcend – the instincts, the emotions, sense perception, materiality, the body – typically have been coded as female. (1992, 150)

Nancy Tuana points out that philosophers and scientists "have examined everything from the size of women's brains to their role as mothers" in an attempt to answer the question of why women are less reasonable than men (Tuana 1992, 34).

Of particular interest has been the way in which women are perceived as being more closely linked to the passions or emotions than men. Aristotle perceived women's physiology – especially as it relates to reproductive capacity – as responsible for her emotionality, while Plato attributed this to her soul, not her body (Tuana 1992, 35). This association between women and emotionality – very often thought of as antithetical to reason – has persisted. One particular way the idea that women are less inclined to reason and more inclined to emotion is expressed is through discourses of female hysteria.

Nancy Tuana details the way in which 'disorders of the womb' were perceived to negatively affect women's physical health by early medical theorists, and how by the nineteenth century these supposed negative effects had shifted onto women's mental health (Tuana 1993, 93-107). In discourses of female hysteria, women's bodies and their emotions are closely linked, and are opposed to the mind and to reason.

Though the questions of women's problematic relationship to reason has much earlier historical roots, the problem was exacerbated as rationality became the hallmark of Enlightenment thought, especially in the philosophy of Descartes. Descartes' conception of rationality relies heavily on the total separation of mind and matter. According to Descartes, the only true sources of knowledge are science, mathematics and philosophy; the mind and the body are seen as mutually exclusive (Tuana 1992, 37). Unlike some earlier conceptions of knowledge, which saw the body as at least a useful starting point, "for Descartes the body is an impediment to knowledge. One begins the Cartesian journey to truth not through the body, but by learning to overcome it" (Tuana 1992, 37). Moreover, Descartes associated all emotions with the body, referring to them as 'animal spirits' and as distractions, biases, or sources of error in pure mental reasoning. Descartes believed that his method of reasoning was theoretically possible for anyone – including women – as long as the body could be effectively suppressed by the mind. As Erica Harth details, however, women were still marked as gendered and could not fully assimilate into masculine intellectual circles (1992). Marked by her body, a woman was – and often still is – defined by qualities which directly contradict Descartes' requirements. Overall, then, "despite Descartes' protestations that women are capable of reason, the image he presents of the rational person – active, controlling, independent,

transcendent – is in tension with the accepted image of woman, a conception Descartes was not concerned to actively undermine" (Tuana 1992, 41). By positioning the mind and the body, reason and emotion as polar opposites, reason is firmly entrenched as a masculine activity.

This opposition has not only affected women. As Alison Jaggar points out, "Western tradition has not seen everyone as equally emotional. Instead, reason has been associated with members of dominant political, social and cultural groups and emotion with members of subordinate groups. Prominent among those subordinate groups in our society are people of color" (385). This association with emotion is not only gendered but also raced and classed, so that other subordinate groups are also seen as less rational than those with power, the result of which is very often the femininization of supposedly less rational men.

Discussing dualistic binary logic in philosophical thought, Susan Bordo notes that "[f]or example, we see a frequent philosophical identification of Self with mind and body with threatening other" (1992, 149). This othering of women has serious consequences: "it can be seen that, through the consistent philosophical identification of women with the bodily arena of unreason, a powerful ideological support is created for keeping women in their 'material' place, excluded from those activities seen as requiring rationality and objectivity" (Bordo 1992, 154). As Genevieve Lloyd argues:

> There is more at stake in assessing our ideals of reason than questions
> of the relativity of truth. Reason has figured in western culture not only
> in the assessment of beliefs, but also in the assessment of character. It is
> incorporated not just into our criteria of truth, but also into our
> understanding of what it is to be a person at all, of the requirements that

must be met to be a good person, and of the proper relations between
our status as knowers and the rest of our lives." (1984, ix)

Following Foucault, there is an intimate relationship between the belief that women are

less capable of reason and therefore less capable of acquiring knowledge, and their lack

of power. When women are perceived as perpetually irrational it is easy to justify their

exclusion from arenas of power and influence.

It is easy to find such associations carried over into work on women's cultural

production and consumption, particularly in strongly gendered characterizations of the

audiences of mass culture. Studies of female fans and fan communities, therefore, are

heavily influenced by the emotion/reason binary. Academics studying female fans exhibit

a strong tendency to heavily favour one side or the other of what has been called 'the

mind/body problem.' Dependent on their particular viewpoints, scholars writing about

fans tend to represent them as exclusively emotional or exclusively rational.

Fandom as emotional and embodied

The association of women with irrationality, in studies of popular culture, joins

with similar ideas often applied to 'the masses.' In fact, Andreas Huyssen argues that

"mass culture is somehow associated with woman while real, authentic culture remains

the prerogative of men," and points to instances of mass culture described using highly

gendered language, even in work which abandoned explicitly labeling the masses as

feminine. He notes that Adorno and Horkheimer, for example, liken mass culture to

castration, and compare it to the evil queen in a fairy tale (Huyssen 191-2). These kinds

of assumptions can be easily found in representations of female fans. The dominant

model of the female fan characterizes her as out-of-control, irrational, obsessive,

hysterical and without her own agency or capacity for rational thought. It is female fans'

emotions, closely associated with their bodies and completely separate from their minds,

which are thought to be controlling them in their fannish moments.

In one particularly potent example, Barbara Enrenreich et al. discuss fan

characterizations in the critical response to Beatlemania[6], and, in particular, the Beatles'

female fan following. They note that *Times* writer David Dempsey makes a direct

reference to Adorno's diagnosis of jitterbug fans as 'rhythmic obedients' in his claim that

"Beatles, too, are a type of bug...and to 'beatle,' as to jitter, is to lose one's identity in an

automatic, insectlike activity, in other words, to obey" in an article titled "Why the Girls

Scream, Weep, Flip" (Dempsey, in Ehrenreich et al. 1992, 88). A great deal of attention

was paid to the emotional and bodily responses of Beatles fans during the 'mass hysteria'

of Beatlemania. And while Ehrenreich and her co-authors, in retrospect, argue that

Beatles' fans expressed an active, powerfully subversive sexuality, critics at the time

were quick to place all agency elsewhere: with the Beatles themselves for being a bad

influence, with the seductive beat of rock and roll, or even with female reproductive

capacity, as one critic argued that the "girls are subconsciously preparing for motherhood.

The frenzied screams are a rehearsal for that moment" (Ehrenreich et al. 1992, 95).

Nothing about Beatles fandom was seen as in any way reasonable; fandom was not

something fans *did*, but something that *happened to* them, often by taking control of their

bodies so much that it overwhelmed the mind. Beatlemania was described as an

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[6] The term used to describe the explosion of (mostly female) fan enthusiasm for the Beatles during the
1960s.

'epidemic' and the Beatles themselves as 'foreign germs,' who had infected the bodies of otherwise good, calm, All-American *rational* teenage girls (ibid., 87).

Similar conceptions of female fandom as located primarily within the body or emotion can also be found in work on more contemporary female participatory fandom. A recent article appearing in *Addiction Research & Theory*, for example, draws parallels between chemical addiction and fan attachment to the *Harry Potter* series and its fandom. The authors "found evidence linking some people's connection to the [Harry Potter] phenomenon to salience/craving, withdrawal, and disruption/conflict, demonstrating a parallel to other forms of addiction"S (Rudski et al. 2009, 16). Though the authors find no significant difference in their results between male and female participants, the study has gendered implications overall. Of the fans surveyed in the study, 557 were women and only 29 were men (ibid., 262). While the authors acknowledge that the majority of fans they surveyed are probably *not* actually addicted to *Harry Potter*, the application of medical and psychological tests to these fans is telling of the way fan culture is conceptualized by researchers – as a form of deviance caused by the body or by a weakness of the mind. The researchers do not make the case that *Harry Potter* fans are actually addicted to the novels or films; instead, they use addiction as a framing device through which to present fan behaviours. This kind of attempt to diagnose female fans links back to discourses around hysteria. While many of the observations they make may be accurate – for example, fans reporting a feeling somewhat like withdrawal while waiting for a new book to be released – the choice of medical discourse in framing this data is telling.

Fan studies scholar Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* (1992) is one of the earliest and most widely read and referenced ethnographic studies of female fandom. In the book-length study, Bacon-Smith immerses herself in the fan community – primary *Star Trek* fandom – by attending fan conventions, meeting fans, and reading fan fiction. Bacon-Smith devotes particular attention to a fan fiction genre called hurt/comfort, wherein one character is physically or emotionally wounded and another character nurses him or her back to health. Though hurt/comfort is undoubtedly a popular fan fiction genre, it is only one among many, and Bacon-Smith's decision to focus an entire chapter of her study, titled Suffering and Solace, speaks to a tendency to associate women's cultural production with emotion. Though she admits a personal disdain for the physical, psychological and sexual violence common in hurt/comfort, Bacon-Smith argues that the genre is central to the fan community. "I didn't want hurt-comfort to be the heart of the community," she recounts, "I didn't want to accept the fact that pain was so pervasive in the lives of women that it lay like a wash beneath all of the creative efforts of a community they had made for themselves" (Bacon-Smith 1992, 270).

Determined to solve the mystery of why many female fans are so attracted to a genre she finds distasteful, Bacon-Smith expresses frustration that "[w]hen pressed for a more detailed explanation, [a fan] backed away from the emotionally fraught question of hurt-comfort to a mundane level" (1992, 256). Fans present Bacon-Smith with explanations of the genre *not* located within their personal emotions. Some say that they write for the risk and challenge, and others argue that, like most fan-fiction, their efforts are inspired by the original text. Bacon-Smith acknowledges that "[b]oth fans of hurt-comfort and community members who do not like the genre often dismissed my

questions about its origin with assertion that the idea wasn't theirs but came from the screen" (ibid.,, 257). There could very well be a great deal of truth to this claim – after all, fandoms do tend to form around science fiction, fantasy or law enforcement programs that are more likely to contain violence or risk of physical harm. Additionally, especially in the case of very early slash, cases of death or injury were the only times it was acceptable to show affection, care and physical touching between men onscreen. Bacon-Smith, however, does not accept this explanation, arguing that emotion – pain, suffering, and anger – is the reason for hurt/comfort's existence even if fans themselves downplay or reject this explanation. In addition, Bacon-Smith asserts that hurt/comfort is the heart of the entire fan community even as she acknowledges early in her chapter that many fans dislike the genre, or find it problematic. The explanations fans provide her with are not enough for Bacon-Smith, who had been advised before she began her ethnography that "when [she] found the place where the tears fell, [she'd] know [she'd] gotten to the heart of the community" (ibid., 269).

Bacon-Smith asks fan fiction writers what was happening in their lives when they wrote particular stories and finds a relationship between the author's pain and the writing of hurt/comfort, pointing to one fan inspired by her daughter's drug addiction, and another who used writing to cope with a suicidal depression. Bacon-Smith is quick to expand on this idea. Discussing the fan practice of 'talking story' (gathering to discuss or ask for advice on their fan fiction), she notes that it is "far more acceptable to talk story widely in the community than to express feelings of hopelessness and despair" (ibid., 269). Her descriptions of what it means to talk story become almost comically dramatic; fans "move back and forth from the personal to the grammatical, hiding in sentence

structure when the feelings become too intense or when a stranger passes by" and "learn to laugh with friends, to stave off the fearful darkness with potato chips and chocolate ice cream and preposterous exaggerations of their own genre" (idid., 269).

For Bacon-Smith, hurt/comfort "is a complex symbol system for the expression of strong feelings that masculine culture defines as unacceptable" (ibid., 270). It allows its writer to "experience her rage through the character inflicting pain, her empathy and love in the person of the comforter, and her confusion and dread as the victim" (ibid., 271). This emotional release does provide women with a kind of agency that Bacon-Smith characterizes as subversive, allowing women to transform masculine hurt into feminine comfort, to "express pain and suffering so that the reader can share the experience directly, both of the sufferer and of the comforter" (ibid., 279). The problem which arises in this representation of the power located in female fandom is that the fans themselves do not seem to know they possess it. Instead, she states that "[t]o my persistent questions, most fans responded that they didn't know why they liked hurt-comfort. They just did" (ibid., 258). As was made clear early in the chapter, many fans provided Bacon-Smith with non-emotional reasons for hurt/comfort's popularity, or seemed confused by her quest to find the origin of these stories. Though Bacon-Smith begins her chapter by including interviews with fans, as it progresses she loses touch with fans entirely. If she presents her theories about the functions of hurt/comfort to any of her interviewees, their responses are not mentioned.

Fandom as rational and political

Drawing on theorists such as Michel de Certeau and Stuart Hall, other work on fan communities amounts to a concerted effort to complicate or challenge ideas of female fanship as hysterical, obsessive or irrational. These fan-positive studies arise as a direct reaction to negative depiction of fandom, and most often characterize fandom as rational, political and progressive, emphasizing the opposite side of the mind/body and reason/emotion dichotomies.

Henry Jenkins, often considered the founding father of fan studies, dedicates the first chapter of his foundational text on fandom, *Textual Poachers* (1992), to disproving or de-emphasizing negative stereotypes about fans, in both the media and in media theory. He readily admits that this is one of the main goals of his project. Using Michel de Certeau's notion, Jenkins calls fans 'textual poachers' who actively manipulate popular culture. Jenkins emphasizes that fans are meaning-makers, cultural producers in their own right, who re-write texts according to their own needs and with particular strategies. In his chapter on slash in particular, Jenkins stresses the political functions of fan fiction. Slash may be a way for women to explore more equitable relationships, to express their sexualities, or to "fix" texts that do not appeal to them.

The female fans in Jenkins' account of slash communities seem as far from irrational as possible; they act more like cultural critics or a band of political revolutionaries than the typical portrayal of fans. For Jenkins slash is inherently political because it "represents a reaction against the construction of male sexuality on television and in pornography" and "invites us to imagine something akin to the liberating transgression of gender hierarchy" (1992, 189). Moreover, Jenkins uses as examples and informants fans who are very aware of the political ramifications of their work, choosing

political pseudonyms and carefully guarding their real-life identities, for fear of backlash from family or employers. Where Bacon-Smith characterizes the fannish use of pseudonyms as a marker of shame, Jenkins treats it as a symbol of resistance. Jenkins notes that slashers seem to enjoy this secret subversion; even the word 'slash' "evokes an aggressive pleasure in ripping or tearing traditional boundaries" (ibid., 201). A similar observation is made about the term by Mark Dery in *Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs* (2004). Far from weepy, obsessive young women addicted to their fan objects, fans according to Jenkins and Dery are in touch with reality – and are actively trying to change it. Although Jenkins acknowledges that not all slash is progressive and that the merits and flaws of slash are often debated within fandom, he very clearly privileges and celebrates its political potentials (even if they are imperfectly realized). For Jenkins:

> Not all of slash is politically conscious; not all of slash is progressive; not all of slash is feminist; yet one cannot totally ignore the progressive potential of this exchange and the degree to which slash may be one of the few places in popular culture where questions of sexual identity can be explored outside of the polarization that increasingly surrounds this debate. (1992, 221)

And so while Jenkins acknowledges that his reading may not be universal, it is clearly in its potential resistant or transformative relationship to oppressive gender relations that Jenkins is most interested in slash fiction. Not all fan work is resistant, but it is this work which Jenkins is most interested in, and which he chooses to emphasize. Jenkins represents female fans as rational, active political citizens doing political work. His characterization is the polar opposite of other work on fandom or audiences which positions them as mindless consumers switching off their brains or being swept up in a hysterical mob. In later writing, Jenkins acknowledges that this formulation was a tactical

choice, intended to make a point about active audiences, a choice that, as we shall see, fan scholar Matt Hills identifies as simplistic and problematic. Nonetheless, fan representations such as Jenkins' opened up avenues for a critical rethinking of models of fan consumption, and our relationships to popular culture texts.

For feminist scholar Constance Penley, "there is no better critic than a fan" because "no one knows the object better...and no one is more critical" (1997, 3). In *NASA/Trek*, Penley draws on her experiences with Kirk/Spock fans in the mid-1980s in her examination of the intersections of science fiction and NASA. For Penley,

> The fan stance could even be described as the original tough-love approach. The idea is to change the object while preserving it, kind of like giving a strenuous, deep massage that hurts at the time but feels so good afterwards. (Ibid. 3)

In stark contrast with fan portrayals which emphasize obsessive devotion or the heart and body over the mind, it is clearly the tough – rather than the love – that Penley is most interested in. Like Jenkins, she too emphasizes the importance of "secret, marginalized solidarity" (101). She also uses de Certeau's ideas on resistance, characterizing slash writers as spies or underground revolutionaries using guerilla tactics (Ibid 104-5). Writing *Star Trek* slash amounts to a "project of retooling masculinity itself" and challenges – or at least expresses frustration with – oppressive gender roles. In the conclusion of the study, Penley makes the optimistic potential she identifies in slash fandom perfectly clear. *Star Trek* slash, she claims "is an experiment in imagining new forms of sexual and racial equality, democracy, and a fully human relation to the world of science and technology" (Ibid 148).

Thus both Jenkins and Penley characterize slash fandom as more than a private or semi-private source of pleasure for women; it is also a public (albeit often pseudonymous), political act. Fans are people to be admired and celebrated, bravely carving out new ground for themselves and their community. Even if, as Penley admits, many fans "would say they are just having fun" (Ibid 101), the emphasis of these studies is not only how fandom *feels*, but instead on what it *means* and what it can *do*.

These fandom researchers also walked a new middle ground in terms of their position in relationship to fandom itself. Though their work is not formally ethnographic, they do, to some extent take on a participant-observer role, immersing themselves – at least partially – in the communities they study. Though it is clear that they remain scholars first and foremost, they are not without attachment to and investment in their communities of study, and they exhibit more than a few fannish tendencies themselves. In the introduction to *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins acknowledges his indebtedness to new ethnographic methodologies in which "participation is often as important as observation, the barrier between ethnographer and community dissolves, and community members may actively challenge the account offered of their experience" (1992, 4). Jenkins credits his partner with introducing him to fan zines and fan criticism, of which he was initially dubious. Interestingly, he admits that it was "fannish enthusiasm and not …academic which led [him] to consider an advanced degree in media studies" (ibid., 5). Jenkins claims to write as both an academic and a fan. In a declaration which stands in sharp contrast to media critics such as Bacon-Smith who deliberately and disingenuously stand apart from their research subjects, Jenkins says that "if this account is not overtly autobiographical in that it pulls back from recounting my own experiences in favor of

speaking within and about a larger community of fans, it is nevertheless deeply personal" (ibid., 5). Jenkins stresses that "academic distance has…allowed scholars either to judge or to instruct but not to converse with the fan community, a process which requires greater proximity and the surrender of certain intellectual pretensions and institutional privileges" (ibid., 6). He may not, however, completely follow through on these good intentions throughout the book. Introduction aside, there is very little in *Textual Poachers* which explicitly interrogates Jenkins own feelings about the texts or communities he studies. Jenkins himself is undoubtedly present in the work, but his presence is unacknowledged and invisible, lending his work an air of academic objectivity not unlike that of the scholars he criticizes.

Constance Penley describes her experience with fan culture as follows:

> I got back into space and its fictions in the mid 1980s by hanging out with some very interesting women from around the country who write homoerotic, pornographic, utopian romances that take place in the *Star Trek* universe. Fellow academics have insisted that my "hanging out" with these female fan writers was really "doing ethnography," but I cannot bring myself to put the more scholarly grid over the wondrous tangle of experiences and relationships that I found in fan culture. (1997, 2)

While Penley is, throughout the book, complimentary of and familiar with fan culture, she avoids identifying herself as a fan of *Star Trek* (though she does call herself a fan of NASA) (Ibid 4). She 'hangs out' with members of the fan community, but she is not herself a member. Still, Penley's reluctance to superimpose the "scholarly grid" over her experiences with fandom, points to an important moment of conflict. Her reluctance to reduce the fan experience to scholarly research indicates that the two roles may be less than perfectly compatible (though both valuable). Despite her honest attempt to reduce

the distance between herself and her subjects, even Penley occasionally slips, as in the

moment of awkwardness when she acknowledges that:

> This, of course, is my version of it, based on a decade of familiarity with their
> work. The fans (who refer to me as "one of the academic fans") would say
> they are just having fun. (101)

This brief admission hints at a deeper problem which we will address shortly: if many

fans would insist that they are merely "having fun," what is the origin of the political

goals and strategies identified by fan scholars?

Fan reception of scholarly work on fandom which represents fannishness as a

completely rational part of a political agenda has been mixed. In some cases, it depends

on whose political agenda fans are being made a part of. As one example, Rhiannon

Bury asked members of *Due South*'s slash fandom whether or not they felt their fan

writing was feminist. Results were mixed. While all of her participants identified as

feminist, only three unequivocally agreed that the act of writing slash was feminist, and

even they stressed that what was true for them might not be true for other fans. Says one

of Bury's interviewees:

> Yes, I do, though I know that's a controversial belief and some of the slashers
> I know would disagree strongly...Obviously, reading/writing slash doesn't
> make someone a feminist, nor do all feminists read/write slash. However, I
> feel that any practice that strengthens and affirms me as a woman is a
> feminist practice. ("Alain," quoted in Bury 2005, 77)

Another fan is quite clear that although she does not think of her slash writing as a

political gesture, it has been influenced by her feminism:

> On a personal level, I will say that I don't write as an overtly political act (in
> feminist terms), but given that I've been shaped in part by feminist ideology,
> feminism has some sort of impact on how I write and how I interpret what I read.
> ("Jeanne," quoted in Bury 2005, 78)

The rest of Bury's respondents are much more resistant to the idea of slash writing as a feminist behaviour:

> For some people I suppose it is. Not for me. I don't read it out of a political agenda, or because I think it's a cultural study phenomenon. I read it because I like reading about men. Period. Dot it, file it, stick it in a box marked done. I don't want to be a part of anyone's feminist agenda. ("Kenzie," quoted in Bury 2005, 78)

Bury recognizes that Kenzie's final accusation could be directed at her, or at other feminist academics studying fandom. While out of context this remark may seem defensive, it effectively expresses a not uncommon sentiment many female fans feel towards academic fan research. Kenzie expresses frustration at being a part of someone else's project, at having herself represented inaccurately by a relative stranger who has a political agenda. Kenzie's concerns signal a necessary re-thinking of analyses of fandom which make broad generalizations about what fandom means and which attribute political motives to large groups of fans, particularly to slashers. Kenzie's insistence that she reads slash because she "like[s] reading about men" indicates that something might be missing in such work on slashers; quick to search for political *meaning* in slash texts, researchers might minimize or miss out entirely on the emotion, affect, or simple *pleasure* involved in the day-to-day lived experience of slashers.

A return to emotion

Coinciding with the affective turn in cultural studies more generally, there has been a noticeable turn in fan studies away from seeing fandom as a rational, public and political exercise in meaning-making, and back towards the more personal, emotional and affective functions of fandom. Far from being a trivializing term, some scholars argue it is worth putting the 'cult' back in 'cult fandom.'

In *Media Fandom, Neoreligiousity, and Cult(ural) Studies*, Matt Hills defines cult fandom as "a project of the self which is primarily and significantly emotional; cult fans create cultural identities out of the *significance* which certain texts assume for them, rather than out of textual signification and hence out of rationalist or cognitive mechanisms of interpretation" (2000, 73). He emphasizes that fandom has the power to bring meaning to a text, but is not "wholly or primarily about the interpretive construction of meaning" (Hills 2000, 73). His emphasis on emotion challenges other academic accounts of fandom which focus on signification (and resignification) and rational meaning-making in a political or academic sense, to the exclusion of the lived, emotional, neo-religious experience of fandom which often pre-exists - or exists without - the oppositional, interpretive goals attributed to fans by scholars most interested in slash as a feminist project of gender subversion, for example. Work like that of Jenkins and Penley, Hills argues, *over*-rationalizes fans. Returning to Penley's comparison of fan work to "tough-love," Hills would argue that prior scholarly accounts were so focused on the 'tough' that they lost sight of 'love' altogether. For Hills, who reverses the emotion/reason dichotomy of Jenkins and Penley, "cult fandom exists 'beyond reason'" (2000, 73).

Hills is critical of fan scholars who defuse the religious connections of the term 'cult' and instead tend towards "constructing the fan as a rational subject" and others who consider the term a "cultural symptom" attached to fandom from the outside and not as a substantive feature of fan activity itself. We might consider Henry Jenkins a proponent of this approach, in his insistence that fan behaviour is completely rational, and that the emotionality or irrationality associated with fandom stereotypes is written onto fans from

the outside. Instead, Hills advocates paying increased attention to the lived experience of

fandom, and in particular its affective and devotional aspects. In particular, Hills points

to the religiosity of media fandom experience, referencing the way favourite texts are

often consumed ritualistically and repeatedly. Hills worries that earlier scholarly work on

fans and fandom has reduced fandom to "a mental and discursive activity occurring

without passion, without feeling, without an experience of (perhaps involuntary) self

transformation" (2002, 66). Where some research on fans has stressed only the

emotional side of fandom, fan studies has merely presented the other side of the coin,

stressing only the most rational examples of fan behavior.

A recent example from *Transformative Works and Cultures'* special issue on

Supernatural fandom supports Hills' concerns. Laura Felschow begins her article on

Supernatural fandom by establishing why *Supernatural* "is an ideal cult text" with a cult

fan following. Purportedly drawing on Hills' work, she distinguishes cult fans from

ordinary fans based on whether they go above and beyond normal demonstrations of

fanship. Felschow provides an example of 'cult' fan behaviour:

> In other words, a *fan* of television program *Grey's Anatomy* may discuss Meredith
> and Derek's weekly fights during the morning carpool and engage in a brief
> connection over the shared experience of watching the primetime soap.
> Meanwhile, a *cult* fan might log into ABC's online forum, criticize McDreamy
> for his churlish behavior, lambaste creator Shonda Rhimes for utilizing generic
> female stereotypes that he or she finds personally offensive, and then create a
> piece of fan fiction to "correct" the texts to represent their own marginalized
> interests, such as the desire to see "MerDer" break up for all time. (2010)

Though Felschow claims to be using Hills' work, she actually contributes to the problems

he identifies. Felschow's *Grey's Anatomy*-based "cult" fan behaviours all encompass not

the affective, lived experience Hills associates with neo-religiosity, but instead the kind

of rational meaning-making attributed to fandom by other fan scholars. Even those who have read and appreciated Hills' work on the affective, devotional aspects of fandom, then, continue to emphasize its more rational, intellectual potentials. Felschow's example is, in fact, more easily aligned with Jenkins' work on 'textual poaching' than it is with Hills' work on cult fandom. Such an error reflects more than mere oversight; it demonstrates the strong desire among fan scholars to represent fans as rational, even at the cost of neglecting other, perhaps more primary, parts of the fan experience. Felschow, like many fan researchers, is invested in justifying her project by proving that fandom is a worthy object of study.

Hills is quick to claim that his position does not "allege irrationality, as certain pathologizing stereotypes do" (2000, 74). Certainly Hill does not mean to contribute to condescending and pathologizing fan discourses, but it may not be possible to avoid these effects while still using the term "cult." He acknowledges that the term has negative connotations, and that "a strong case has been made for excising the term 'cult' from serious scholarship because of the negative connotations it has acquired" (2000, 75). The word does seem dangerous; it brings to mind people who are irrational, mindless, and so caught up in their feelings and lacking in their own agency that they'll follow any order their leader gives. In short, it seems to completely confirm the negative stereotypes of female fans which Jenkins, Penley and others struggled to disrupt.

It is easy to understand why fan scholars have chosen to emphasize the rational over the affective, even at the cost of neglecting the devotional or neo-religious aspect of fandom. It has taken a great deal of work – and that work appears to be far from over now – to get fans (and the academics who study them) taken seriously at all. Faced with

a powerful and sexist tendency to degrade, ridicule or pathologize fan behavior, fan scholars have compensated by asserting the rational, thoughtful, political and intellectually sophisticated work done by fans. Knowing that she is writing about a fan community of female fans who form around a "primetime soap" already considered overly emotional or trashy, Felschow stresses the rational, intellectual and political fan behaviours they might engage in (2010). She does not address the fans who *want* Meredith and Derek to get together or stay together (and write fan fiction about it), who love or identify with the female characters on the show, or who cry together every time a patient dies, because these types of fan behaviors seem less rational and certainly less political, and fall well in line with established ideas of gendered media consumption.

The gaps Hills points to in the study of fan communities are significant. This privileging of discursive, political meaning over the affective dimension of fandom seriously diminishes our capacity to understand fandom as it is experienced in everyday life. Moreover, by discussing only the aspects of fans which fit well into a rationalist (and masculinist) hierarchy of value, fan scholars actually contribute to or re-inforce the original problem. Instead of challenging the reason/emotion dichotomy which had plagued work on (especially female) audiences, painting fandom as purely rational merely avoids the issue. Ignoring the affective importance of fandom actually provides further support to the case against taking affect, emotion and lived experience seriously. Instead of confronting the problem and arguing that affect and devotion are important and valuable experiences and objects of study, scholars who ignore them effectively sanction their designation as trivial.

Fans vs. Academics

Critiques of ethnographic and interpretive work on female consumption have also focused on its perceived lack of scientific 'objectivity.' Perhaps in anticipation of this criticism, writers have often sought to distance themselves from their research subjects. Ien Ang is critical of Janice Radway's studies of female romance readers, for example, because the "separation between her world and that of her informants becomes progressively more absolute towards the end of the book" (Ang 1996, 102). A researcher who positions herself "at a distance" from research subjects in this way obscures the effects her presence and research has on the community she studies, and also risks re-inscribing the passive masses/enlightened critic binary which audience-focused research often hopes to move beyond.

As a response to some of these concerns, many fan studies scholars stress the importance of carefully defining and accounting for their own subject position in relation to the fan communities they study (Jenkins 1992; Hellekson and Busse 2006). For young fan scholars in particular – who often grew up immersed in and have extensive experience with fan cultures – a researcher's own experiences with fandom may be considered valuable to their research. As Henry Jenkins points out, "it has becomes increasingly possible for people to merge the roles of fan and academic, to be explicit about the passion that drives their research, and to seek collaborations between the two groups that both assert some degree of expertise over popular culture," a position he calls the 'aca-fan' (Jenkins 2006, 4). Such a position may represent one possible solution to the problems of conducting academic research into fan communities. Researchers, emerging from disciplines such as literary criticism, media studies and anthropology, with different levels of involvement in the fan community and different methodological approaches

such as textual analysis and ethnography, take up this complex position in a number of ways, resulting in unique representations of fandom.

The over-rationalization of fandom, Matt Hills argues, does not merely represent the personal interests of particular fan scholars. Instead, Hill critiques the use of 'decisionist' narratives which "hinge on making political decisions as to the 'goodness' or 'badness' of fan cultures" and require a scholar to decide – often in advance of her or his actual research – whether s/he should denigrate fan culture as created by the media industries, or celebrate it as authentic creative expression (2002, xii). Instead, Hills advocates a "suspensionist" position which refuses to see fandom as either 'good' or 'bad' and which "embraces inescapable contradiction" (ibid., xiii). For Hills, academia itself encourages such decisionist fan narratives. He examines academia as a system of values, wherein the 'good' academic subject is "a resolutely rational subject, devoted to argumentation and persuasion" (ibid., 3). Scholarly accounts of fandom which emphasize the critical, rational and political functions of fandom (and neglect its affective dimension) might represent scholars projecting the values of the 'good' academic subject onto fans. By contrast, fandom's own 'good' subjectivity, Hills argues, is far from resolutely rational. Fans themselves value the irrational, the emotional and the unexplainable, and show a certain disdain for the "passionless, hyper-rational, intellectualizing [ideal] subjectivity" of academia. These opposing ideals contribute to the clash between fans and academics, and to the anxieties felt in an attempt to bring the two roles together. Hills uses Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* as an example of an academic celebrating fandom by writing fans to conform to the 'good' subjectivity of an academic. Hills reads *Textual Poachers* as a "rhetorical tailoring of fandom in order to act upon

particular academic institutional spaces and agendas" (2002, 10) According to Hills, Jenkins does not so much study fandom as he does *use* it, albeit with the admirable goal of dispelling negative fan stereotypes.   .

A growing body of work indicates that fans and academics may not operate as differently as once assumed, because neither group entirely lives up to its own ideal subjectivity. Academics, deeply devoted to their particular disciplines, fields of study or favourite theorists may frequently behave more like emotionally-involved fans than objective outsiders (McKee 2007; Pearson 2007) and fans have long been using scholarly techniques and language to study their texts and their own communities. In *Media Academics as Media Audiences,* Hills argues that fan scholars act as a scapegoat for *all* media academics, who are – just like fans – aesthetically and emotionally invested in the texts they study. They can cloak themselves in a protective layer of objectivity, however, when they compare themselves to attendees of a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* conference (Hills 2008, 43). In a sense fans inhabit Julia Kristeva's space of abjection, cast off in order to ensure and enable academia's place as the clean and proper object (1941).

As a partial solution to the problems he identifies in scholarly accounts of fandom, Hills recommends theorizing fandom "through a primary allegiance to the role of 'fan' and a secondary allegiance to 'academia'" (2002, 10). He also investigates the possibility that "the fan and academic identities can be hybridised or brought together not simply in the academy but also outside of it" (ibid., 15). We can see the beginnings of this kind of work in *Transformative Works and Cultures,* which publishes less academically formal pieces, often by authors who are fans writing like scholars as opposed to scholars writing about fans, that share the stage with more traditional

academic pieces. This journal, part of the fan-created and fan-run *Organization for Transformative Works*, represents a scholarly project which is more open to fan (rather than solely academic) voices. In addition, *Transformative Works and Cultures* includes interviews with organizers and creators of fan resources, placing value on fan knowledge as opposed to solely academic knowledge as applied to fandom. Many of the respondents to my project's fan survey seem supportive of this blending of fan and academic roles. Says one fan:

> If it's fans writing about fans, then it's usually really great, interesting to read and makes me feel proud to be part of fandom. On the other hand, I've seen people try to talk about fanfic or what makes fans like slash or something that they find "interesting," when really they have no clue what it's like to be a fan. Those tend to get things wrong or they just don't take us seriously. (#80)

As this fan indicates, a possible solution to these problems is for fan scholars – who are more and more frequently approaching fan studies because they have a background in fandom themselves – to utilize their own experiences in their work. Matt Hills argues that such self-interrogation is fundamental to fan work, advocating an autoethnographic approach with requires ceaseless self-reflexive questioning (2002, 81). An additional benefit of this approach is that it allows a researcher, in the process of charting her or his fandom allegiances and participation over time, to better understand how individuals move between and among different fandoms, an understanding of which is lacking in fan studies which isolate and focus on a specific fan community, often in a specific way.

The risks of re-pathologization

As vital as his observations about the shortfalls of purely celebratory, rationalist work on academic fandom are, Matt Hills is not a female fan. As he describes in his own autoethnography, his "fan tastes are almost unremittingly masculine, developing around male horror writers and male guitarists" and thus allow him "to construct a sense of masculine power and agency" (2002, 84). For Hills, particular fandom choices (the choice of horror over SF, of the alternative over the mainstream) allowed him to move closer to a sort of conventional masculinity, even as male fans are stigmatized. In many masculine fandoms, there is opportunity to develop mastery or niche expertise respected both within the fandom, and outside it. Male comic book experts, sports fans or film buffs all receive at least a grudging amount of respect today. Comic or science fiction fandom occasionally offers the opportunity for professional advancement and financial gain. In short, while there is still undoubtedly negative stigma attached to some forms of male fandom, this stigma may be falling away quickly, as fan-type behaviours become more and more common in everyday life (not least of all because the entertainment industry has found embracing them quite profitable), and also because the competitive skills and knowledges developed in fandom can be viewed as a kind of masculine success.

This stigma has, for several reasons, been much slower to dissipate from female fandom, especially slash fandom. Social stigma against male fans operates quite differently than social stigma against female fans. As Jenkins noted in 1992, negative fan stereotypes often desexualize or feminize male fans (10). Male fans (sports fandom aside) are mocked because of their failure to properly perform masculinity in their devotion to a media text. There may be ways for male fans to mitigate this perception – by mastering a text or fandom skill, by choosing particularly masculine fan objects or by asserting their

masculinity (and heterosexuality) in the way they treat female characters in media texts –
but even if they do not adopt these strategies, the stigma against male fans is still
mitigated by the male privilege the participants are accorded. His attachment to *Star Trek*
may be perceived as irrational, but he is still a man, and men are still perceived as more
rational (and more powerful) than women.

Female fans, on the other hand, are not stigmatized because of their failure to
perform femininity, but because they are seen as performing it excessively. Emotionality
and seemingly irrational devotion are what society has already grown to expect from
women and coded as natural, especially as they relate to popular culture. Not only do
female fans not usually have the same opportunities to earn respect or professional
advancement through their fan activities as do male fans, they are also unable to step
back into the relative safety of male privilege. Moreover, even moving to a fandom less
negatively associated with out-of-control femininity comes at a cost – witness the stigma
female video gamers face from male members of those fan communities (Lee 2010). Of
course, female fandom does not always conform to the norms of femininity, especially in
its frank discussion of sex and sexuality. The stigma against these discussions or stories
has the potential to be even more damaging to individual fans or fan communities,
especially as fan and academic research increasingly weakens the assumption that the
overwhelming majority of female fans are heterosexual. As queer fans use fandom as a
safe space, fans are faced with yet another potential stigma. Whether represented as
excessive conformity to sexual gender norms, or as a violation of them, an association
with irrationality and strangeness will do a female fan little good.

The pathologizing stigma against fandom is already written onto and into women's bodies under the guises of hysteria, obsession, irrationality and emotionality. In participating in fandom male fans may face new kinds of social stigma, but for women this stigma is rarely new, only intensified. Today comic book fans may be almost cool and some video gamers may receive a grudging respect, but Justin Bieber fans are characterized in much the same way as Backstreet Boys fans, Beatles fans, or Elvis fans before them, and contemporary treatment of fans of the *Twilight* franchise (primarily adolescent or middle-aged women) relies on age-old gender stereotypes. The social stigma against female fans is older, stronger, and more persistent than the stigma faced by male fans, a fact that Hills – who spends little time on female fandom, and who mentions slash only once in his book-length *Fan Cultures* – does not acknowledge. A return to viewing fandom as in some ways comparable to cults puts female fandom far more at risk than it does male fandom.

Throughout his work on cult fandom, Hills stresses that fans themselves use the word 'cult' – often as a point of pride - to describe their media objects. This is not a term commonly used in the female fandoms I have experienced, though we do occasionally – playfully – use religious terms or analogy. The term makes me deeply uncomfortable as a female fan, and as a researcher who often needs to justify her work to colleagues or superiors. Perhaps my anxiety actually proves Hills' point. As an academic – admittedly over-invested in rationality – the term is uncomfortable not because Hills' observations about the neo-religiosity of fandom are inaccurate, but because they are embarrassing in their accuracy. Hills' work leaves me feeling deeply divided. On one hand, a return to studying the 'love' portion of Constance Penley's tough-love analogy is exciting because

it has the potential to break down frustrating barriers in media and fans studies – particularly the reason/emotion dichotomy. It is also exciting because Hills' discussion of the affective experience of fandom rings more true to my day-to-day experience as a member of the fan community than do more rationalist accounts. Politics and meaning-making have been and remain an important part of my fan life, especially as I work as an aca-fan, but I am still most deeply invested in how fandom makes me feel, and in how I feel about my fandoms and their media texts. As a fan and an academic, I share Jenkins' instinct to defend myself, my friends, and my community from the judgment of others, even if that means resorting to over-rationalization. After all, if the scales of academic interest are currently overbalanced in favour of rationality, at least this means respecting fans as people with intelligence and agency. I worry that Hills' enthusiastic embrace of 'cult' and the cult-like in fandom risks tipping the scales too far in the other direction and taking a step backward.

Academics studying fandom, then, find themselves in the reason/emotion trap. To represent female fans as primarily emotional risks marking them as 'other,' with all the associated negative gendered associations. To represent fans as purely rational subjects, however, may mean missing on the important affective dimension of the fan experience. Moreover, this kind of compensation for negative historical associations may actually reinforce the reason/emotion binary more than it challenges it. The appropriate choice for fan studies is to strive for a careful balance which recognizes fans – male and female - as falling somewhere between reason and emotion, between culture jammers and cultists. Existing work, however, demonstrates that such a balance has proved difficult to find.

In February 2011, over one year after Ogas and Gaddam initially distributed their survey using slash fandom as a source of data for their book on human sexuality - *A Billion Wicked Thoughts: What the World's Largest Experiment Reveals about Human Desire* - its pre-order page appeared on the Amazon website. Though the book apparently would not contain any of the results collected in the fan survey, the fan community continued to express concern. Amazon allows users to 'tag' items for sale with labels of their own choosing, and immediately tags including "men explaining women," "authors failed research methods 101," and "your sample population hates you now" gained popularity on the page.[7] This gesture of fan dissatisfaction, however, seemed to have little effect on the scientists' credibility. In April 2011, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article titled "The Online World of Female Desire," authored by Ogas. Just as many fans worried when they read the original fan survey, Ogas claims that "[f]an fiction also reveals another fundamental difference between male and female sexuality." Though he pays significant attention to slash fandom in the piece, he makes no mention of his own personal history with the fan community. It is unsurprising, therefore, that many fans approach news media coverage of fans with the same level of skepticism as they do academic research.

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[7] The list of all 143 tags can be found here: http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/tags-on-product/0525952098/ref=tag_dpp_cust_edpp_sa

Chapter Two: Fan Fiction in the News Media and Fans on "Supernatural"

In the introduction, I discussed the ways in which media and pop culture coverage of female fans tended to present them as deviant Other, normalizing and justifying more mainstream relationships with popular culture texts. The first chapter outlined the way the reason/emotion binary contributes to this process. In the following chapter, I will examine recent news media coverage of fan fiction and its readers and writers and find other ways in which representations of fans function to normalize and legitimate some types of media consumption and denigrate others. I will also discuss fan representation on *Supernatural*. More widely distributed than academic work on fandom, these fan images are perhaps more influential in terms of their effect on the popular imagination.

Members of the LiveJournal community *Fanthropology*[8] collect and compile a weekly list of references to fan fiction across all fandoms in the news media, broadly defined. They include newspapers and their online equivalents and additional content – campus, local, national – as well as some arts, media and television blogs with wide readership or appeal, but *not* insider fannish blogs. The weekly link collection at *Fanthropology* lists an average of seven references to fan fiction per weekly post and is a useful source of data on outsider discussion of fan fiction.

Focusing on media discussion of fan fiction here, and not fans more broadly, is useful because this narrower data set allows us to focus on the participatory fan, as opposed to more varied and casual uses of the term 'fan' which might include concert reviews and sports event coverage. As previously discussed, fan fiction is one way that

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[8]Located at http://fanthropology.livejournal.com/

particularly dedicated fans get involved with the original text, and is the most common – and most commonly discussed – form of fannish creative production. As noted by the Organization for Transformative Works, the large majority of fan fiction is also written by women, so representations of its readers and writers tend to be representations of female fans, even if they are not specifically identified by gender ("What We Believe"). Examining media references to fan fiction and its writers, then, will allow us to examine news media attitudes toward female participatory fans, as opposed to broader kinds of fanship.

For this analysis, I examined all the links collected by *Fanthropology* in the first four months of 2011, January through April, inclusive. Each article which referenced fan fiction or its writers was coded according to the gender of its author, the depth of consideration it gave to the topic, its general depiction of fan fiction or its writers as positive or negative, and common themes it dealt with. Overall, the references made to fan fiction in the news media represent fan fiction and its readers and writers as strange, deviant or illegitimate, though seldom directly.

Of 111 mentions of fan fiction or slash fiction collected over the four month period, 86 of the articles mentioned fan fiction only in passing. These references were only one or two sentences long, and served as a brief addition to the piece rather than one of its primary subjects of discussion. Only 24 of the articles (22%) considered fan fiction in any depth, and in very few of those pieces was it the primary focus. Quite often, passing references to fan fiction occurred in articles seemingly unrelated to popular or fan culture. An article from a college newspaper headlined *Facebook: Ruining my education* (Ostrowski 2011) mentions fan fiction archive FanFiction.net as a parenthetical example

of what students are apparently reading instead of great literature, and an article on political news coverage in the student newspaper at Colorado State University argues that "[t]he government has an extensive bit of fan-fiction, pumped out daily by determined networks, that give us the drama we crave and fill our need for entertainment" (Satherley 2011). Bizarrely, a New Zealand news channel reporting on the security settings on local McDonald's restaurants wireless Internet services reports that "[y]ou can't read an encyclopaedic entry about sex, but you can head on over to LiveJournal (a popular blogging site with a sizeable 'slash fiction' community) and read a story about Captain Kirk and Spock going where no captain of the USS Enterprise has gone before – at least on TV" (ibid.).

The very brief use of references to fan fiction and its writers, to add colour or interest or an example to an article on a subject somewhat or even completely unrelated to fan culture, itself demonstrates the way in which fan fiction has become familiar to mainstream readers. Though some of the pieces do include definition-like explanatory notes detailing what fan fiction is or how it works, the vast majority assume that their readers understand the basics or believe it is self-evident. Moreover, at least two articles include the term fan fiction in their headline as a kind of pun, and do not mention it further in the body of the text. A New York article about a special issue of ESPN: The Magazine made up entirely of fictional pieces uses "Fan Fiction" as its standalone title, without making any further mention of the term elsewhere in the piece (Ellis 2011), and a review of a young adult novel about adolescent fans of David Cassidy also borrows the term in its title – "Fan fiction: Pearson's novel triggers a rush of memories of teen crushes" – though actual fan fiction is not mentioned in the article (Burns 2011).

The casual use of the term fan fiction - in titles meant to catch the reader's attention, in lists of supporting examples, or in jokes and puns - proves that the world of fan fiction is not as underground, mysterious, or distinct from the "ordinary" world of popular culture as it might once have been. Authors of these articles assume that readers understand at least the gist of what the term refers to. In these passing references, however, the term is not always applied in the same way it would be used by members of the fan community. Sometimes fannish terms are clearly misused, as in a Comedy Central news item that calls descriptions of an affair between a male blogger and a female governor *slash* fiction, a term correctly applied only to same-sex relationships (Benincasa 2011), or a *New York Press* blog entry which characterizes a self-published book of nude art of a man resembling actor Seth Rogan "as a titillating new chapter to the world of erotic fan-fiction" when it might more accurately be called fan art (Winans 2011). Thus while the writers of these articles clearly know something about what fan fiction is or how it works, they may not be experts.

Both in cases where fan fiction was represented positively and negatively, the majority of the articles used it as a source of humour. In articles which mentioned fan fiction only in passing, it was often used as one half of a witty comparison. Where fan fiction was examined in more depth, the pieces tended to be very light in their tone. Over half of the pieces used the reference to fan fiction for obviously comedic effect, or to add some light colour to an otherwise dry or serious piece. An article for a college newspaper promoted a new creative writing program by saying "Whether you've always wanted to write some epic True Blood [sic] fan fiction, or profile the woman you always see on your bus route, or even just write a damn good astrology paper, looking into the

University's new Writing Certificate may be worth your while" (Wilkinson 2011). And a *Screenology* piece headlined "Robert DeNiro/Bradley Cooper Slash Fiction Happening" joked that "*Limitless* co-stars Robert De Niro and Bradley Cooper just can't seem to quit. Each other" (Breslaw 2011), to give only two examples.

As is apparent in many of the above examples which compare fan fiction to dramatic real-life events or poorly written novels, one of the primary ways fan fiction is used in the news media is as one half of a – usually unflattering – comparison. *The Huffington Post* suggested that "the latest royal wedding reports [are], perhaps just a round of fan fiction, but entertaining all the same" ("Prince William's Bachelor Party") and a video game review criticizes the game because its dialogue "is written in the kind of contrived fan-fiction style that's long made most video game storytelling laughable" (Wilcox 2011).

One of the main generators of coverage of fan fiction in the news was the publication of novels which might, by some, be considered closely related to fan fiction. In January, an agreement was reached between the late J. D. Salinger's estate and author Fredrik Colting, writer of *60 Years Later* which he labelled as a sequel to *The Catcher in the Rye.* In a similar case, the estate of JRR Tolkien demanded that author Steve Hillard cease distribution and destroy all existing copies of his novel *Mirkwood: A Story About J.R.R. Tolkien.* Another Tolkien-based novel, *The Last Ringbearer* written by Russian scientist Kirill Yeskov, is commercially available in Russia and parts of Europe, though fear of the legal action from the Tolkien estate has meant the English translation is distributed only for free, online. These three cases were major generators of references to fan fiction in the news media. A great number of writers concerned themselves with

pointing out the similarities and differences between fan fiction and these published works.

Though fan fiction writers themselves might point to differences in the processes through which these novels are produced and distributed when asked to make a comparison, the differences news media writers emphasize were very often differences in quality or literary legitimacy. Summarizing the concerns of many of the writers, the *Guardian*'s David Barnett asked, "And isn't using someone else's characters and situations for your own novels ultimately little more than fan fiction given the legitimising sheen of publication?" (2011). Barnett's answer to the question was an ambivalent "maybe." Others were much less positive. In *The New Yorker*, Ian Crouch offered an unflattering description both of Colting's *Catcher* novel and of the author personally. Halfway through the piece, Colting's work was called a "a bit of fan fiction [given] the kind of free publicity that most writers only dream of receiving" (Crouch 2011). Responding to Barnett's willingness to give derivative novels the benefit of the doubt, Crouch was willing to admit that there may be some value in a few rare gems, but insisted that Colting's work, here compared to fan fiction for the second time, is not one of them:

> Fan fiction is surely not a new phenomenon, nor is it an uninteresting
> one, but it is different in kind and quality from a work like Rhys's[9], or,
> to take a recent example, Cynthia Ozick's remarkable new novel,
> "Foreign Bodies," which reimagines the particulars of "The
> Ambassadors," by Henry James. Not only do these books interpret texts
> in the public domain ("Catcher" will not lose its copyright for decades)

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[9]   Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) acts as a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*.

but they do so with an admirable combination of respect and originality. (2011)

Here Crouch equates Colting's novel with fan fiction as a whole, and carefully distinguishes both from the literary examples he approves of based not only on their content – whether or not the original text is in the public domain - but more importantly, based on their "respect and originality." Many references to fan fiction in the news media serve to clearly separate fan fiction and real, quality literature in this way. The references use fan fiction's perceived flaws to legitimize more mainstream, quality literature. In *The Telegraph*'s book section, Philip Hensher writes that "Nowadays, of course, anyone can write a sequel to anything and post it online for the entertainment of a tiny audience. The scale of some self-published sequels to the Harry Potter series is astonishing, though not their literary quality" (2011). Interestingly, Hensher acknowledges the long literary history of work which is – officially or unofficially – in some ways derivative of another work. He admits that "[a] sequel needn't be inferior to the original in quality," and provides many examples of works which have lived up to or reinvigorated the originals (Hensher 2011). Apparently, his generous assessment does not extend to fan fiction, however.

Of note regarding the media attention paid to these instances of what might be called professionalized fan fiction is the gender and professional standing of its authors. In an entry for journal *Transformative Works & Cultures*' Symposium blog, Helen W, an editor of *Fanthropology,* shares her observations about coverage of *The Last Ring-*

bearer, which, unlike Colting and Hillard's work, was generally well-received by critics and fans:

> I also can't help but wonder how the coverage of *The Last Ring-bearer* would be different if Yeskov was a woman, or had written the novel anonymously so that Yeskov's career in science wouldn't be a legitimizing factor. Or whether there'd be any mainstream notice at all (tens of thousands of *Lord of the Rings* stories on the internet suggest not). (2011)

A *Wired* blog interview with science fiction writer John Scalzi on his "reboot" of H Beam Piper's 1962 novel, *Fuzzy Nation*, seems to support Helen's musings. Scalzi describes his nervous anticipation of the book's early reviews "[b]ecause nobody has done this before, outside of the fan fiction environment, taking a Hugo-nominated work and recasting it. It's just not done" (2011). Here fan fiction is quickly and neatly brushed aside, while the work of a male author well-established in science fiction circles receives critical attention.

Comparisons to fan fiction in coverage of instances of published derivative work suggest that fan fiction can never win. Where the work is considered low-quality (as in the case of Colting and Hillard) it is readily equated with fan fiction as a genre, and thus dismissed as trivial, disrespectful or just plain bad. In cases where the published work is well-received or considered to have literary or parodic value, however, it is quickly set apart from fan fiction as a genre or marked as an exceptional case. In a *Salon* review of *The Last Ring-bearer*, Laura Miller says:

> Some Tolkien fans have dismissed "The Last Ringbearer" as nothing more than fan fiction, although it certainly doesn't conform to the stereotype of fan fiction as fantasies of unlikely romantic pairings among "canonical" characters as imagined by teenage girls. (2011)

She closes her review by declaring that, "if it *is* fan fiction (and I'm not sure I'm in a position to pronounce on that), then it may be the most persuasive example yet of the artistic potential of the form" (Miller 2011). In articles which seek to determine whether or not published work inspired by existing literature should be considered fan fiction or not, criteria such as how or why the piece was written are not considered. Instead, the determining factor seems to be only the *quality* of the finished piece; if the novel is judged as good it is literature, and if it is bad, it is relegated to the category of fan fiction.

Even as writers' casual references to fan fiction indicate an expectation that readers may already be familiar with fan fiction, there is a simultaneous impulse to characterize it as something that is or should be hidden away. Responding to a reader suggestion for an episode of *Castle*, *TV Guide*'s Matt Roush says "Sounds like a great idea… (Also sounds like something that's the stuff of fan fiction, but I'm not opening that door)" (2011). A *TG Daily* blog entry profiling *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk precedes a fairly straightforward description of Kirk/Spock slash fiction by emphasizing that "[o]ne of the most interesting things about the character however happens outside the canon of the series. Way outside" (Droege 2011). Thus even as it is familiar enough to warrant mention, fan fiction is simultaneously something strange, exotic or 'out there,' beyond the limits of how ordinary people interact with media texts. One article even describes the "somewhat shadowy world of fan fiction" (Kumar 2011).

In many of the passing references to fan-fiction and the more in-depth coverage, mention is made of the kind of people likely to read or write fan fiction. *The New York Times*' Ginia Bellafante begins her review of television series *Supernatural* by warning that "If you are neither 15 years old nor the sort of person for whom the term fan fiction

has an ounce of resonance, then chances are that "Supernatural" is not in your DVR

queue or even in your frame of reference" (2011). In some cases writers merely allude to

this mysterious "sort" of people in passing, referring to them as, for example "creepy fan-

fiction types" with no further explanation, apparently, required (Jacka 2011). Such

references leave readers with the impression that only a very specific type of person is

likely to be attracted to fan fiction, making it easier to treat fans as a small group

deviating from the norm.

Where more detail about the type of person likely to read or write fan fiction is

given, the images often rely heavily on stereotypes. An interview on a video game news

website which interviews a male fan fiction author whose work has been noticed and

officially published by the game-maker initially seems to challenge these negative

stereotypes, but in effect confirms them:

> Sadly, fanfiction isn't normally the most respected of creative outlets,
> with many seeing it synonymous to poorly written fantasies of
> highschoolers who have an abnormal obsession with cloud [sic] and
> Sephiroth. However, this isn't strictly true. In amongst the poorly
> written fantasies of highschool girls can lie some literacy [sic] gems and
> Tom Church is the perfect example. (Bennett 2011)

Presenting Tom Church's work as a rare exception does nothing to challenge the

generalization that fan fiction is merely the "poorly written fantasies of highschool girls"

(or that it would make it unworthy of respect, if it were true), even as the writer laments

fan fiction's poor reputation in her first sentence. Other writers also make mention of the

fact that fan fiction is widely considered to be written almost exclusively by teenage girls.

Much of the academic work on fandom previously examined, and the results of my own

survey, indicate that the majority of fan fiction is *not* written by teenagers.[10]

Characterizing it this way, however, serves to re-inforce the impression that it is juvenile

or underdeveloped. In a less-than-glowing review of the "Sweet Valley Confidential"

book series, a university newspaper remarks that,

> [t]he few sex scenes read like "Twilight" (2005) fan fiction, with
> gasping passion and entire sentences mashed into single–syllable
> gotta–have–you–now utterances. For a book that should be geared to
> the now–adult audience raised and nourished on the drama of Pascal's
> series, "Confidential" seems fresh out of the LiveJournal of a
> melodramatic preteen. (Santiago 2011)

A separate review of the same series opens with the scathing criticism that "…the new

"Sweet Valley" reads less like a sequel and more like fan fiction … Reading

"Confidential" is like stumbling onto the message boards populated by the deluded

people who insist that Harry Potter is in love with Prof. Snape" (Hesse 2011). These

types of descriptions clearly demonstrate that the association between fandom and the

supposedly excessive, highly sexual emotionality of young women remains strong, well

after Beatlemania. Driving this home is a *Rolling Stone* profile of "The 11 Greatest

Superfan Communities" which includes the following description of "Beliebers:"

> Their primary activities include creating giant poster collages with
> photos cut from magazines, Tweeting with handles like "MrsBieber,"
> writing Bieber's name over and over on the back of their notebooks,
> shrieking at the sound of his name and writing fan fiction where he
> dumps Selena Gomez, marries them and never gets rid of that hairstyle.
> (Greene 2011)

A reference to slash fiction in a column on self-publishing in the *Yale Daily News* makes

the gendered nature of fan images even more clear. "Self-publication has always been an

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[10] Though my survey was only open to participants over 18 years of age, the largest age range represented on my survey was 22-30 years, with 35% of the respondents. 20% of participants were between the ages of 18-21, 19% were 30-40, 19% were 40-50 and 7% were older than 50 years of age.

ugly phrase in the American literary world," says Riley Scripps Ford, "A really ugly phrase — one that evoked teenage slash fiction, "romance" novels written by lonely spinsters and escapist fantasies that make Stephanie Meyer look like Jonathan Franzen" (2011). Here Ford makes clear just how much disdain the literary world once had for self-publishing by using comparison to women's cultural production as a shortcut. And while his piece indicates that self-publishing may be on its way to gaining some credibility in the literary world, slash fiction and its associated genres are clearly not.

Some interesting exceptions to the general trend of portraying fan fiction in a negative light do exist. Several news pieces reporting on the successes of local authors include mention of authors' backgrounds writing fan fiction, usually as a stepping stone on their journey to publication. In an interview for the local news, romance author Margie Church explains that she began her writing career with *Days of our Lives* fan fiction (Kentner 2011). A piece about a teenage writing group recommends fan fiction as "doorway to publication" for young writers, and the librarian organizing the group acknowledges having written fan fiction herself (Weikal 2011). Another piece, which appears in Ontario's *Strathroy Age Dispatch,* mentions that eighteen year-old Michael Jones' upcoming self-published fantasy initially started as fan fiction based on a video game (Power 2011). These references to fan fiction as stepping stones to publication tend to be either value neutral or positive, in part because they often appear as quotations from (former) fan fiction writers themselves who have redeemed themselves with professional success. Even in these representations however, fan fiction is represented as a stage writers 'grow out of' on their way to discovering their 'real' writing.

The most striking trend that emerges from the examination of news media coverage of fan fiction is how remarkably few of the pieces examine fan fiction on its own terms. Even among the articles which go into some depth on the subject, fan fiction is almost exclusively discussed in terms of the insight a comparison might give readers into something else, be it the self-publishing industry, other cultural texts, or Wikileaks (Gerstein 2011). Fewer than ten of the pieces considered fan fiction as a set of texts, a community or a cultural practice in its own right. This trend clearly connects to previous observations about how certain images of fan and fandom are popular not because they are interesting in and of themselves, but because their existence serves to normalize or legitimize other people or forms of cultural consumption. Just as a focus on deviant female fans as irrational and overly emotional serves to normalize rationalist and masculinist subjectivities, so too does the frequent mention of 'wacky' poor-quality fan fiction legitimize the traditional publishing industry, for example. Readers and writers of fan fiction are still characterized as Other. As used by the vast majority of the writers considered in this sample, fan fiction's primary function is to serve as a foil, against which other phenomena can be favourably compared.

Negative images of fans are as prevalent in popular culture as they are in academic work and in journalistic coverage. In fact, these kinds of images are even more common, a dime a dozen in literature, on film and in television. These negative images of fans have been noted by Henry Jenkins (1992), Joli Jensen (1992) and Cornel Sandvoss (2005), among many others. Fans appear as dangerous stalkers, pathetic losers or members of hysterical crowds. Representations of members of *online* participatory

fandom, particularly female members, are not as common. One exceptional case occurs in CW fantasy/horror *Supernatural* (2005 – Present).

Fans in Supernatural

> "There are Sam Girls and Dean Girls," Dean Winchester says, hunched over his brother's laptop in their seedy motel room. "And what's a slash fan?"
>
> "As in Sam *slash* Dean," Sam answers. "Together."
>
> "Like, together together?" Dean asks, eyes widening in disbelief.
>
> "Yeah."
>
> "They do know we're brothers, right?"
>
> "Doesn't seem to matter."
>
> "Oh come on," Dean says, slamming the laptop closed and pushing it across the table and away from him. "That's just sick."
>
> (*Supernatural,* "The Monster at the End of This Book")

It reads like an excerpt from a piece of fan fiction. This scene, though, is actually part of fantasy/horror show *Supernatural*'s canon and has been seen by millions. In a

recurring plotline on the show, protagonist brothers Sam and Dean Winchester discover that the events of their lives have been turned into a series of pulp novels with a cult following, written by an unwitting prophet. They meet their fans - including one slash fan fiction writer, enthusiastic super-fangirl Becky who is webmistress of morethanbrothers.net – and even attend their own fan convention. This breaking of the 'fourth wall' is further amplified by the decision to name fan characters after show writers or high-profile fans. Fan characters are not uncommon in popular culture, but *Supernatural* is perhaps the first to so extensively and self-reflexively reference its own fans in this way. Fans, formerly outside the text, are pulled into the show itself.

As of the end of the series' sixth season, there have been three episodes of *Supernatural* featuring fan characters: season four's "The Monster at the End of This Book," and season five's "Sympathy for the Devil" and "The Real Ghostbusters." In the opening of "Monster," ghostbusters Sam and Dean impersonate FBI agents to interview the employee of a comic shop about reports of unusual phenomenon in the building. After a few moments of confusion, a look of comprehension washes across his face.

"I knew it!" the comic shop employee says, "You guys are LARPing, aren't you?"

"Excuse me?" Dean says.

"You're fans," the man insists. When Sam and Dean still do not seem to understand him, he explains that they must be Live Action Role Playing (LARPing), asking questions as if the building is haunted because they are pretending to be well-known characters.

As it turns out, Sam and Dean are the stars of a series of paperback novels titled *Supernatural*. Though the series has been discontinued because it has limited commercial success, the man assures Sam and Dean it has an "underground, cult following" and pulls a copy of the first book out of the store bargain bin to show them. Understandably freaked out, Sam and Dean seek out the author of the books, and thus begin an occasionally harrowing journey into a version of their own fandom.

First, they turn to the Internet and discover that the books have a small – but very dedicated – following online.[11] In their research they discover that fans call themselves "Sam girls" or "Dean girls[12]" and, to their horror and disgust, also stumble upon some of the slash fiction that pairs the two of them together.[13] Next, they meet the publisher of the books, also a fan herself. Though the publisher is not named in the scene, she is listed in the credits as "Sera Siege," a combination of the names of writer and producer for the series Sera Gamble and writer Julie Siege (who wrote the teleplay for the episode). The pseudonym used by the author of the book series is "Carver Edlund," a reference to show writers Jeremy Carver and Ben Edlund. When she discusses the novels, Sera acts very much like the stereotypical female fan, breathless, wide-eyed and nearly overcome with emotion. "The best parts are when they cry," she says on the verge of tears, later lamenting, "If only real men were as in touch with their feelings." In order to earn her trust, Sam and Dean prove that they are also huge fans of the series by answering trivia

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[11]   This mimics the circumstances of the series, which has limited commercial success relative to programs on larger networks and relies on fan support to avoid cancellation.

[12]   In *Supernatural* fandom, fans often identify themselves as a "Sam girl" or a "Dean girl" to indicate which of the brothers they prefer.

[13]   Sam/Dean slash stories are often referred to by fans as "Wincest."

questions about themselves, though Sam has some trouble remembering his own SAT score. Finally, Sam and Dean show her the matching demon-repelling tattoos they have on their chests. "Awesome," she says breathlessly, licking her lips. "You know what?" she says, pulling down her pants and watching them over her shoulder, "I got one too."

As it turns out, Carver Edlund's real name is Chuck, and he's an out of work writer who spends most of his time in pajamas and a bathrobe, drunk. Sam and Dean's online discoveries and publisher/fan Sera Siege are the primary references to fans in this episode. As much time, if not more, is devoted to mockery of the show's own writers. Once convinced that they are actually his characters in the flesh, Chuck apologizes to Sam and Dean for subjecting them to bad writing in some of the series' infamously bad episodes. The episodes use this kind of postmodern self-referentiality heavily, demonstrating a great deal of clever self-consciousness.

Fan characters next appear in the first episode of the series' fifth season, "Sympathy for the Devil," written by show creator Eric Kripke. The episode cuts from a scene where Lucifer attempts to sweet-talk his chosen human vessel in the middle of the night, to a very different kind of bedroom, this one with pink walls plastered with *Supernatural* (the book series) posters. The camera pans to a shot of a young woman typing at her computer and reading her work aloud. "And then Sam touched, no, caressed Dean's clavicle," she says, gasping between every sentence and shaking with excitement. "'This is wrong', said Dean. 'Then I don't wanna be right' replied Sam, in a husky voice." The camera shifts to a shot of her screen, where her word processor is open and we can see the fan fiction she is in the middle of writing. Then a video chat call from Carver Edlund pops onto her screen. The woman frowns as she accepts the call, but then

gasps and covers her mouth when she sees the author of her favourite series on the screen:

> BECKY: Oh...my...god. You. You're...
>
> CHUCK: Carver Edlund, yeah. Hi, Becky.
>
> BECKY: You got my letters. And my marzipan.
>
> CHUCK: Yeah, yeah. Um...yummy. But, uh—
>
> BECKY: I am your number-one fan. You know, I'm samlicker81.
>
> CHUCK: I'm sorry. You're—You're what?
>
> BECKY: Webmistress at morethanbrothers dot net?
>
> CHUCK: Oh. Yeah. No, yeah. You're my...number-one fan.

In this scene, Becky perfectly encapsulates many of the characteristics of stereotypical female fans. She is deeply emotional – gasping with desire as she reads her own pornography and practically squealing with excitement when she speaks with Chuck. Her styles of dress, hair and makeup are significantly plainer than is usual for women on the show, which works to simultaneous make her seem more 'real' than other female characters, but also plays into an association between female fans and plainness. Though Becky herself is not a sexual object, her fanship is highly sexualized, from the Wincest story she is writing to her choice of online pseudonym, samlicker 81. Prophet Chuck asks Becky to help him by delivering a message to Sam and Dean, because he is being watched by sinister angels. Becky, previously thrilled with an intensity that is almost intimidating, sighs and rolls her eyes.

BECKY: Look, Mr. Edlund... Yes, I'm a fan, but I really

don't appreciate being mocked. I know that *Supernatural*'s

just a book, okay? I know the difference between fantasy and

reality.

CHUCK: Becky, it's all real.

BECKY: I knew it!

Here, the show makes reference to fans' awareness of negative fan stereotypes and criticisms. When Chuck asks her to deliver a message to "characters" Sam and Dean, Becky goes on the defensive, irritated, and tries to combat those assumptions, making it clear she has a firm grasp on reality. This brief transformation into the more serious, rational version of fandom is cut short, however, when Chuck interrupts her to declare that *Supernatural* is real. Becky's excited cheer indicates that she had always believed it was real, deep down, and that her rationalist defences were little more than lip service. At their core, this scene suggests, fans *do* believe that their fantasy worlds are real, even if they claim otherwise.

In the next scene, there is a knock on the door of Sam and Dean's motel room. Cautious (and armed), Sam opens the door to find Becky on the other side. Her eyes go wide when she sees him, and she begins to hyperventilate, Overwhelmed, Becky steps closer to Sam and puts a hand on his chest. "And you're so firm," she says, in awe. She introduces herself as their biggest fan, who has even written a few…and trails off with a guilty giggle, before delivering Chuck's coded message. "I memorized every word," she

says with grave sincerity, touching Sam's chest again, "For *you*." Feeling awkward, Sam

glances at Dean and then at Becky:

> Sam: Um, Becky, c—uh, can you...quit touching me?
>
> Becky (firmly): No.

In this scene Becky's fannishness is so powerful it makes Sam and Dean visibly

uncomfortable, especially when she touches Sam (and then refuses to stop). This lack of

awareness or concern for proper, 'normal' social behaviour is also typical of

representations of female fans, as is the fact that they tend to make other people

uncomfortable.

In "The Real Ghostbusters," the last of the reflexive fan-focused episodes, Becky

tricks Sam and Dean into attending a *Supernatural* convention. The attendees are mostly

male, and many of them are dressed up as characters from the show, including as Sam

and Dean themselves. The convention includes some panel discussion (including one on

"The Homoerotic Subtext of *Supernatural*"), but the main event is an organized

LARPing game, where convention attendees work to solve a staged haunting[14]. It turns

out, however, that the haunting is very real. Sam and Dean pretend to be fans themselves

to get rid of the ghost, and team up with a set of LARPers[15], who become increasingly

alarmed by how seriously their fellow "fans" are taking the game. At the end of the

episode – after all the ghosts have been successfully dispatched – the LARPers give Dean

a touching speech about the escapist appeal of fandom, and – to the brothers' surprise -

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[14] Real-life *Supernatural* conventions are attended overwhelmingly by women, rarely in costume. They do not LARP.

[15] The LARPers are named Demian and Barnes. They are named after the moderators of the *Supernatural* forums at website *Television Without Pity.*

that they are lovers in real life, and met in an online *Supernatural* chat room. "The Real Ghostbusters" was nominated for a GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) media award for "Outstanding Individual Episode." The GLAAD media awards "recognize outstanding representations of the LGBT community in the media" ("Glaad Media Awards").

Becky – the only female fan with a speaking part - is relegated to a less central role in this episode. After tricking Sam and Dean into attending the convention, Becky spends the majority of the episode staring dreamily at Sam. At one point, she licks her palm and then blows a kiss at him, winking seductively. Throughout the episode, Chuck is clearly interested in Becky and even attempts to ask her on a date, but she takes no notice of his advances because she is distracted by her fannish affection for Sam. It is only toward the end of the episode, when Chuck's inner hero emerges and he saves a room full of people, that Becky takes any notice of him. She then gently breaks off her completely imagined relationship with the unconcerned Sam in favour of Chuck because "like a monkey on the sun [their 'relationship'] was too hot to live." Sam and Chuck share a knowing look, and Sam humours her by giving the new couple his blessing. Delighted, Becky reminds Sam about an important piece of information from one of the books, a new lead for the major plot arc of the season.

It is significant, in this episode, that Becky is the only female fan with a speaking role. Despite being one of the convention organizers, she spends the entire event lusting after first Sam and then Chuck. Every other female fan who appears in the episode is costumed as a male character. Many male fan characters have speaking roles in the episode as convention participants, but female fans, aside from Becky, are seen but not

heard. And while Demian and Barnes receive significant character development through the episode – and in fact, are transformed into heroes – Becky's subplot is strictly a romantic one. The choice to have Becky and Chuck, the series creator, begin a romantic relationship at the episode's end also plays in to traditional images of female fans as 'groupies' whose fannish motives are always romantic or sexual. It characterizes her as a – heterosexual sexual object exchanged between Sam and Chuck as opposed to a sexual subject in her own right.

On a surface level, these episodes appear to integrate *Supernatural*'s real fans into very common stereotypes about how female fans look or act. The cast and crew of the show, however, consistently refer to these episodes as affectionate tributes to the fandom, and many fans did react positively to them. Others responded quite negatively, and these episodes sparked a great deal of conversation and debate within fandom. The next chapter will examine fan reaction (both positive and negative) to these episodes in detail. It will discuss the various ways fans enjoy, reject or make use of these fan images and relate them to their own fannish identities.

Chapter Three: Fan Response to Fan Representation on *Supernatural*

The relationship between *Supernatural* fandom and its writers, producers and cast is an unusually close one, even when compared to similar series. Since early in the show's run, producers have made it very clear that they pay close attention to fan opinion (Felschow 2010; Gray 2010; Wilkinson 2010). This contact extends beyond online or written interaction. The *Supernatural* cast regularly attend fan conventions and events both in the United States and internationally; current or former cast members have attended or are scheduled to attend fifteen fan conventions in 2011 alone (Supernatural Wiki). As Felschow says, "the comparatively small average audience of 2 to 3 million viewers makes up for its meager size with large amounts of passion and devotion," for which the cast, writers and producers (commonly referred to as The Powers That Be [TPTB]) have regularly expressed their gratitude. However, even this relative intimacy did not prepare the fandom for their extremely public recognition on the show.

The fan-focused episodes of *Supernatural* examined in the last chapter provoked a strong response from the fan community, composed of both negative and positive reactions. From the moment an initial preview clip featuring Sam and Dean looking 'themselves' up on Sam's laptop and discovering slash was released, a powerful storm of fan discussion and debate began. The significance of both this reflexive representation of a program's own fandom and its impact within the fandom has been examined elsewhere. Existing work – primarily in volume four of online journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* which was a special issue devoted to *Supernatural* – examined online fan reaction to the show's assault on the fourth wall. This work measured fan reaction based

on analysis of online posts on message boards or fan communities collected immediately following the episodes' original broadcasts.

I worried that this approach – while valuable – might leave out part of the story. It is common knowledge online that the loudest voices tend to receive the most attention, even if they do not necessarily represent the majority, so I wondered if the conclusions reached by the contributors featured in this special issue might reflect only the most vocal responses to these episodes. I also wondered whether time to more fully digest the episodes in question and to discuss them with other fans might change the way fans may have initially felt about them. Furthermore, the most recent fan-focused episode – "The Real Ghostbusters" (aired November 12, 2009) wherein Sam and Dean go to their own fan convention – was broadcast too late to be included in much of the work featured in *Transformative Works & Cultures*' special issue.

In October 2010, well after the fan-focused episodes of *Supernatural* originally aired, I posted an invitation to participate in an online survey to three *Supernatural*-focused LiveJournal communities.[16] The survey asked participants to share their thoughts and feelings about the fan-focused episodes. By returning to these episodes after time had passed, and using an anonymous survey, I hoped fans who had not participated in the original debates, 'lurkers'[17] or those whose voices had been drowned out in the initial debate would also be heard. I expected to receive thirty to fifty completed responses to

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[16] Please see the appendix for a blank copy of the survey questionnaire, summary of basic demographic information (including age, gender, sexual orientation, education level, employment) and information on common fan behaviours (including reading and writing fan fiction and slash fiction, and attendance at fan conventions).

[17] Fans who observe fandom from the sidelines, but tend to "lurk" on its edges rather than speak up or participate actively.

the relatively time-intensive survey. Instead, I received over two hundred and fifty, most of them within the first twenty-four hours. The volume and intensity of this response speaks to the impact these episodes had, and continue to have, on the community. This eagerness to share their opinions of both the show and its fandom may demonstrate just how silenced some fan voices often are; some respondents even expressed gratitude to me for conducting the survey:

> Filling out this survey helped me clarify within my own mind my feelings on those episodes. In many ways, I've been wanting to have an outlet for this for a while, but haven't really been able to share my thoughts as I am currently on the fringe of fandom (#164).[18]

Others explicitly mention that they appreciate the opportunity to be heard. "Filling out surveys is kind of fun and, well, having your opinion be counted is always kind of...satisfying? "(#35), muses one, and another appreciates the opportunity to speak for other fans like her: "Just loved to get my say as a fan," she says, "an older fan!" (#156).

Existing work on these episodes categorized fan reaction as either negative or positive, and theorizes why fans may have reacted the way they did. My survey results seem to confirm many of these theories; fans who react positively to the episodes feel an increased sense of importance, belonging or influence, while fans who react negatively feel they have been disrespected, mocked or even put at risk (Felschow 2010; Gray 2010; Wilkinson 2010). Fans are concerned with how they are being viewed and represented by outsiders - in this case, the writers and producers of the program. In addition to the push and pull between consumer and producer I had intended to study, however, I was surprised to find another type of conflict – conflict between fans themselves.

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[18] Participants are identified by their survey response number. Minor spelling or typing mistakes have been corrected for clarity; any more substantial change is marked by the use of brackets.

One of the concerns which arose in early fan reaction, particularly to the mention

of slash, was the potential impact these episodes have on fan privacy. As my earlier

examination of both academic and news media coverage of participatory fandom has

shown, fans are justifiably nervous about being represented by outsiders to the

community, in part because it may expose them to unwanted attention from family,

friends or colleagues. Some fans who answered my survey share privacy concerns about

the overlap the show caused between their offline and fannish lives due to the breaking of

the fourth wall, and about being 'outed' as member of fandom:

> I feel like that dividing line has become a lot narrower. Before fandom
> made its appearance on the show it was easier for fans to keep their
> activities under the radar, if they felt it was necessary. But by
> mentioning slash fandom, and Becky-the-fangirl writing it, they opened
> a doorway for non-fans to see in, and for some fans that could be a
> problem (#84).

The "some fans" who were most often concerned with privacy tended to be

readers and writers of slash fiction,[19] around which they feel there is still a

stigma. "Personally," says one such fan, "I could have done without a spotlight

being shone on something that I don't share with family and friends who also

watch the show, but who don't know that I write and post slash fic" (#203).

Another fan makes light of their experience first hearing about the episodes:

> I honestly became a little scared. I remember the first thing that went
> through my mind was "OH SHIT! WE'RE BUSTED" (205).

These concerns were not shared by all the respondents, however. In total, only 22% of

respondents mentioned feeling negatively affected by the episodes in terms of their

---

[19] 70% of respondents read slash fiction regularly, 23% occasionally, and 8% never. 18% write slash fiction
regularly, 33% occasionally, and 50% never.

privacy – either because they were concerned about their fannish participation being exposed to the outside world or because they were not comfortable with being watched by show producers. Aware of the discussion around these concerns that sprung up when they initially aired, one fan made her stance on the issue perfectly clear. "People who make drama about being 'outed' to their real life family or friends by these episodes are pathetic," they say, "Sorry!" (#187).

In addition to concerns with privacy or producer surveillance, many of the fans dissatisfied with fan characterization in these episodes pointed to the negative or stereotypical portrayal of fans. Some seemed personally insulted by portrayals of fans on the show:

> Maybe it's titillating to know [show creator] Kripke is aware of our existence...but the last thing we want is them replying "you're twisted and I want to sit down and draw an unconvincing and insulting portrait of you to insert into my television show." However, this is exactly what they did with Becky. (#8)

Fan response to depictions they interpret as negative ranged from anger to hurt or discomfort, as in the case of one fan who explained that the episodes "still make [her] uncomfortable, as though the creators of the show are laughing at us" (#91). One adamant respondent argued that "[t]he depiction of Becky was a nasty little cliché that the writers came up with for their own amusement. Period" (#111).

Overall, many of the objections to these episodes seemed to centre on their inaccuracy. Many fans struggled with these episodes because they did not see themselves, their friends, or their experiences within Becky's character:

> She's based on a nut-job stalker fan, first of all, so that's pretty fucking offensive. Second, she doesn't have any other aspect to her life BUT

fandom - which reinforces the stereotype that we're all nut-job stalkers. Third, she seemed to have no other interest beyond slash - no meta, no sense of community, no fun. She's this rigid cliché of an image that discounts the rich and varied aspects of fandom, as well as the rich and varied lives of fans. (#139)

In large part because they find Becky's character unrepresentative of their actual fan experiences, respondents expressed concern about how these representations might be interpreted by outsiders to the fan community. "The viewers who aren't really fans might get the wrong impression that the fans are like the ones on the show & think we are just nut cases or whatever but most of us aren't like that," explained one respondent (#212). Discussing how their initially positive feelings about the episodes have changed over time, one fan admitted that, "I feel less tolerant of the show's treatment of fans now I have read more reactions from fans and from outside fandom who think this is what we are all like - that is a) untrue and b) annoying!" (#117).

Another originally optimistic fan recounted that "unfortunately the producers played it safe by portraying a typical mouth-foaming crazy-eyed enthusiac [sic]... I am disappointed that the producers decided to support the negative image many average viewers have about fans when they could have tried to change that image and replace it with [a] more realistic one" (#33). As this fan indicated, those who disliked the episodes were often very aware of negative stereotypes about fans. When asked whether or not they would like to see Becky return to the show in future, another fan answered,

> ...she represented fandom in an unhealthy way so I'm not really interested in seeing her again. Showing [a] "typical fan" like her on screen will only further solidify the belief that Supernatural fans are crazy and unbalanced. (#34)

This inaccuracy has, for some fans, led to an increased sense of embarrassment about their fan participation:

> They [the episodes] haven't directly affected my fannish activity, but they've made me more reluctant to talk about my involvement in fandom. I don't want people to associate me with that exaggerated stereotype Supernatural has present[ed] to viewers. (#129)

Still other fans were aware of the problematically gendered nature of these representations of fan characters, particularly Becky. These issues would be particularly resonant among my respondents, who were 97% female. Some associated Becky's representation with the series' often-discussed poor track record with female characters:

> I shouldn't be surprised because I have a long-standing dislike of how the show deals with female characters but Becky molesting Sam (who, [by the way], doesn't do anything to stop it) was a low point for me. (#100)

Others pointed to the differences in representations between Becky and the male LARPers in "The Real Ghostbusters":

> Considering how sympathetically the male fans were drawn in that same episode, her characterization was almost offensive. (#109)

A third type of gender problem pointed out by fans was related to connections to broader representations of young women:

> She has no reason, no sense, no notice of boundaries. She is the picture perfect of a hysterical female. (#129)

> She was supposed to represent a female fan and I thought "God Kripke and Co, is that what you really think of when you think of your fans? A silly, hysterical girl?" I know it was supposed to be a parody and god knows, I can laugh at myself but I personally thought the idea could have been handled much better and be more respectful. (#161)

Despite these objections to representations of female fans on the show also present in fan criticisms when the episodes first aired, the majority of fans in my study had positive reactions to the show. 19% of respondents had primarily negative reactions,

16% had mixed reactions, and 65% of respondents responded positively to the episodes. As would be expected of these primarily comedic episodes, just over half of the fans survey mentioned that the found the episodes funny, humorous, amusing, or that they made them laugh. Following humour, the next most common emotional response mentioned was positive feelings of recognition or inclusion. A quarter of all survey respondents mentioned this kind of response somewhere in section four of the survey, which asked them about the fan-focused episodes of the show. Many fans interpreted the appearance of fan characters in the show as a warm, affectionate and welcoming gesture from TPTB. Fans often made reference to a sense of love, belonging or family created by the introduction of fan characters into the series. One fan says, "I get the feeling, from these episodes, that the people who make the show love us fans as much as we love their show" (#140). Said another fan:

> "[The episodes] added a sense of family...In most other fandoms, the fans are just...well, there. ... With these episodes I felt like I was being welcomed into the fold, even though I was already a member of the fandom, and had been for quite a while. Like the kind of familial teasing you get from siblings and cousins and so on. It was like my...advancement throughout the different corners of the Supernatural fandom was being acknowledged as 'okay' and as welcome. (#16)

Many fans described a new feeling of closeness with the show or its creators, like they have been able to become a part of it through these fan representations. "It makes the fan feel closer to the show itself," one fan explains, "by involving them in the storyline in a sense with the spokesperson of Becky. Becky is the fandom encapsulated in a character" (#105). "It's not just breaking the fourth wall, it's reaching out and grabbing the audience and dragging them in," one fan enthusiastically describes (#147). Another notes that the episodes are "[l]ike an inside joke that I'm a part of" (#128).

While many of the fans who disliked the episodes expressed shame or embarrassment, for more fans the episodes inspired the opposite reaction. "I still can't believe they addressed fandom inside the series!" one fan exclaims, "I feel it as recognition. We are not something at the side, something to be ashamed of. We are there and we are part of supernatural. Literally!!" For many fans, such public recognition of fandom served to make it something more respectable or worthy of respect:

> I think it is a great way to acknowledge the fans and the fandom. These three episodes give the fandom a little more credibility. (#226)

> The show pretty much validated fandom by referencing it on-screen.

> (#104)

In addition to a sense of validation and recognition, for some of the respondents the episodes were even empowering, giving fans the sense that they have influence over the show or its producers:

> They've made me realise just how much attention the makers of the show pay to the fans, and how what appears on screen is something of a two-way process in that [they] obviously listen to what we like, what we don't like, and amend the show accordingly. Previously I thought fans couldn't really have much influence over the direction a show took. (#186)

For some, this gesture of affection was particularly empowering because it was an honour earned by fans in exchange for their dedication:

> Supernatural has a big fandom, it's basically a cult hit. Without us, the fans, it would not still be on the air. I appreciate them acknowledging our existence not only as actors/writers/directors talking about fans but actually putting us in the show. (#20)

Thus, fans who love these episodes don't characterize them as merely a gift bestowed upon fandom by the higher-ups, but something they actively earned and thus deserved, a

sort of payment for services rendered. This model of an active, mutual relationship between fans and show producers stands in stark contrast to both other fans who found the portrayals hurtful or characterized them as a kind of attack, and to models of fanship which see the relationship between fan and producer as fundamentally one-sided. In addition to information about fans' feelings about their changing relationship with TPTB, however, the survey also, unexpectedly, revealed information about how fans feel about one another.

Fans on Fans

My survey did not refer to the debate which surrounds these episodes, or ask fans to comment on one another in any detail, though I did ask fans whether they believed Becky and the other fan characters to be representative of the "typical" *Supernatural* fan. Rather than focus primarily on characters as I had expected them to, many fans seemed more interested in discussing one another, even if it meant bending or sidestepping the original question. While designing the survey, I had anticipated that fans would be most interested in the ways these episodes affected their relationships with TPTB, for better or for worse. And indeed, many fans did seem invested in the ways they are being represented by outsiders. A significant secondary concern unexpectedly emerged, however. Not only did fans want to discuss themselves, the characters, and the show producers, they also frequently discussed *one another*.

For some respondents, these episodes indicated that TPTB favour particular groups of fans over others. These answers tended to focus on the inclusion of slash fans, or of Wincest fans in particular. When asked about Becky's resemblance to the "typical" *Supernatural* fan, many respondents drew attention to the fact that not all fans are

slashers, or ship Wincest, taking care to distance themselves from this part of fandom. One respondent seemed positively gleeful about what might be read as a targeted attack on slash, recalling their initial thoughts as "Yes! Dean says S/D is creepy and wrong!" Later, they asserted that "slashers must have some kind of porn-induced psychosis" (#19). Perhaps anticipating that this kind of response might exist, some respondents connected their concerns about outing or privacy to slash in particular, arguing that the specific mention of slash as "sick" might not just be insulting, but also damaging to the fans who write it, even in their offline lives.

By sharp contrast, for other respondents, the public acknowledgement of slash fandom was an empowering experience:

> And the negatrons will say that obviously he hates slash fans because he's making such epic fun of them, but a) we got mentioned; [and writers of heterosexual pairings] didn't, and b) Kripke knows that slashers make up 60% of his viewers; he'd be insane to piss us off." (#69)

For this fan and several others, the inclusion of slash in particular served as a kind of seal of approval, or at least a sign of grudging tolerance. Though slash is discussed in academia and the news media with increasing frequency, it is rarely acknowledged by television producers, and some respondents were proud of its inclusion in the show, comparing it to a sort of preferential treatment. "I think," wrote one fan, "that the references proved without a doubt that the creators of the show love their fanbase, especially slash fans" (#85).

Another way these episodes drew attention to tensions within the *Supernatural* fan community itself became clear in fans' descriptions of super-fan Becky and her similarities and differences as compared to fans at large. Even fans who enjoy these

episodes overall often seem to experience some ambivalence about Becky's character. When asked if she accurately represents a typical *Supernatural* fan, 52% of fans answered "no", 43% answered "maybe" and only 5% answered "yes". When asked whether they would like to see Becky return to the show in future, 34% answered "no," 41% answered "maybe" and 25% answered "yes." Lastly, when asked whether or not they read fan fiction featuring Becky, 63% of respondents said "never," 35% answered "sometimes" and only 2% said that they read it "often."

In the open-ended follow-up the question of whether or not Becky represents a typical *Supernatural* fan, three common themes emerged. First, 40% of respondents – both those who enjoyed her character overall and those who did not - observed that Becky represents an exaggerated, extreme, caricatured or over-the-top representation of a fan. Second, 30% pointed out that some fans, but not the majority, do resemble her. Third, just over a quarter of the fans stressed that Becky is not like the respondent personally, or their friends. Becky is variously described by respondents as "nuts," "obsessed," "rabid," "extreme" and "crazy." Few fans chose to whole-heartedly recognize Becky as much like them personally, or much like the majority of the *Supernatural* fandom.

Those who adored the episodes often argued that because Becky can be seen as parody or caricature, it is unfair or unreasonable to interrogate or criticize TPTB's decision to include her, and that fandom should lighten up and learn to laugh at itself. Referencing fandom's strong reaction when the episodes originally aired, one fan said "It was hysterical. Fans take it too seriously. I loved when they got upset" (#131). Being vocal about one's dislike for these episodes was often characterized as one way of being

a 'bad' fan. In response to a question that asked if the episodes had changed the way fans felt about the relationship between show producers and fans, one fan proclaimed,

> Yes, it's made me realize how nuts some of this fandom is, by their over the top negative reaction to these episodes and to the creators. (#232)

As indicated by the over forty percent of fans who indicated that Becky was "maybe" a typical fan, the vast majority of fans did not think Becky represented the majority of *Supernatural* fans, but they often mentioned that they had heard of or know of fans who were like her. One fan argued that "even though she represents what is probably the "loudest" type of fan, she is not the "typical" fan" (#28). Those who acknowledged that fans like Becky do exist in the real fan community connected her behaviour to events at conventions, where fans have occasionally gotten a little too up close and personal with the show's cast. "I personally know several Supernatural fans," one respondent says, "And they are not crazy, aggressive groupies. That being said, I have also been at a con where there WERE many Becky types. It was kind of gross" (#29).

And according to another,

> There are some fans that do behave somewhat like Becky but they are not the majority[...]unfortunately a lot of the fans at the Supernatural conventions are a bit like that (case in point the fan in England that jumped off a staircase to land on [actor] Jensen Ackles). They are not the majority but they do give a lasting impression. (#204)

Becky's 'aggressiveness' seemed particularly disturbing to some fans, especially in a scene where she meets Sam and Dean, and adoringly strokes Sam's chest. "I think that her exuberance doesn't reflect the entire fanbase [...] I know I personally wouldn't pet Jared if I met him, but I know some people who would," said one fan (#11).

In discussing the possibility of Becky's return to the show, another respondent said "And I like to think that if they brought Becky back she would be more calm and tone down the sexual harassment" (#20). The scene in question does not immediately suggest that Becky represents any kind of threat to the brothers[20], and is clearly being played for laughs. Survey respondents, however, often seemed uncomfortable with the uninhibited way Becky expresses her fannish enthusiasm, comparing it to a kind of assault or stalking:

> The people I've met in the Supernatural fandom don't seem as poorly adjusted and out of touch with reality as Becky did. However, I think unfortunately that there are fans like that and that they're the ones creators and actors are more likely to see, as they're more invested and more likely to attend conventions (or stalk people). (#101)

These kinds of responses contributed to a distinction visible in many of the survey responses between appropriate and inappropriate fan behaviour, and between "good" and "bad" fans. Some of the dislike of Becky as character did not seem to be rooted in criticism of the show writers for their portrayal, but in criticism of *other fans,* those who have a great deal in common with Becky. Respondents distanced themselves from Becky and fans like her, stressing that not only does she not represent them individually, but that she doesn't represent their friends either.

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White use the term 'displaced abjection' to describe the way in which "'low' social groups turn their figurative and actual power, *not* against those in authority, but against those who are even 'lower'" (1986, 53). Empowered by

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[20] Each brother is twice Becky's size, and after Becky knocks on their motel door, viewers see Dean ready his gun as a precaution before Sam opens it.

the opportunity to speak through the survey, many fans chose to criticize not TPTB, but

each other instead. They drew very careful distinctions between themselves and Becky

and the real-life fans whom she resembles:

> There are so many different types of fans. Maybe she can be seen as a
> parody of a crazier fangirl. Actually most of my fandom friends are
> very down to earth. We like to discuss storylines and don't go too crazy
> even when we are at a convention. We know actors are just normal
> people and we talk to them like that. We're not like Becky at all. (#108)

> I think there are the rabid fans (mostly con fans) and then the fans like
> me - love the show, write the fic, enjoy the snark, stay distant (#145)

In these cases, fans established that they are down to earth and in control by comparing

themselves to fans who are not, including Becky and the real-life fans they perceive

resemble her. Compared to these more extreme versions – slashers, convention-goers, or

LARPers – respondents were able to establish their own normalcy.

> When thinking about the millions of people that watch this show, I
> believe the vast majority are 'normal' fans. That is to say, they don't
> read/write fanfic, LARP, or go to cons. They just watch the show and
> enjoy it. (#132)

These distinctions can have the effect of confirming, rather than challenging,

negative fan stereotypes. While these fans demonstrated that they, personally,

might not act like the stereotypical fan, many did argue that this kind of fan

exists, and that this kind of fanship is deviant, embarrassing or even dangerous

(to the safety of the actors, for example). Their representation of self, therefore,

uses a strategy not unlike that of fan scholars who present fans as rational

subjects. They do little to challenge derogatory ideas about specific features of

female fanship such as over-emotionality. Instead, they merely distance themselves from these traits.

> The people on my [LiveJournal friends list] … are all professionals or students in demanding fields (two are currently in medical school) and are bright, thoughtful and articulate…Becky is more like a typical Justin Bieber fan then she is like a typical Supernatural fan. At least the ones I know. (237)

The above quotation perfectly demonstrated the pitfalls of this kind of thought in terms of challenging the reason/emotion dichotomy. Rather than assert that there is something wrong with Becky's traits being perceived or presented as negative, the fan merely displaced the negative fan stigma onto a group of 'lower' fans, while simultaneously depicting her friends as appropriately rational, controlled subjects. In criticizing the various kinds of 'bad' fans they had encountered or heard of, respondents were able to confirm their position as 'good' fans. Becky and her real-life counterparts may be irrational, hysterical, obsessive and hyper-sexual, but my respondents made it clear that this did not apply to fandom as a whole.

It is absolutely true that the vast majority of *Supernatural* fans do not behave a great deal like Becky; I do not mean to doubt the truthfulness of those fan statements. I do, however, want to draw attention to my respondents' relative certainty that fans like Becky do exist (even if they've never met them), and to compare these 'extreme' fans to themselves, *though none of the questions in the section asked them to make any comparisons to themselves personally*. Though the question itself – "Is Becky a typical *Supernatural* fan? Why or why not?" –

is fairly open-ended and general, nearly a third of fans chose to explicitly mention that fans like Becky do exist, and over a quarter explicitly stated that Becky did not represent them or their friends. The frequency with which these ideas appeared suggests that this acknowledgement of "extreme" fans and simultaneous distancing of oneself from them performs a specific rhetorical function.

Disheartening as the tendency of fans to legitimize their own fannishness by Othering more extreme fans may seem, some fan responses to Becky and the other fans on the program offer some hope. While few fans readily identified with all aspects of Becky's character, many did acknowledge that she does share some features with many fans.

> I think Becky represents a caricature of a conglomeration of fans, i.e. she is not one person but a synthesis of behavior that [fans] have in fact engaged in. There is a part of her in me, but I am not her... Every facet of her 'character', albeit thin, has some basis in fact. (#95)

Most fans who make this kind of acknowledgement emphasized the most emotional aspects of Becky's personality as they – occasionally somewhat reluctantly – identified these similarities:

> I know that I tend to geek out and get super-excited and really animated when I talk about my fandoms […] It is over-exaggerated for comedic effect but it is the underlying, subtle truth that is at the core of what the character is based on that makes it funny at all. Simply, if it wasn't at least a little bit true than it wouldn't be funny and there would be no point to it. (89)

> Becky is very representative of many fans. We are passionate, immersed in the text, we obsess over the sexual attractiveness of the stars, we run websites and we write slash. She's also smart and sassy

and a girl who gets what she wants - so of course I think we're like that! (#168)

Becky represents the extreme of the extreme fan. There is, without a question, a little bit of Becky inside every Supernatural fan. But I doubt the "average" or "typical" SPN fan is completely Becky. She's made up of everything a fan is - all shoved into one little person. So, no, on the grand scheme, she's not the typical, but an SPN fan would be lying (in my opinion) if they said they were in NO WAY like Becky. There's some part of them that has some bit of "Becky" in them. (#200)

These fans, rather than reject the stereotypical qualities of female fans Becky embodies as being strictly inaccurate, acknowledged or even embraced their existence in the fan community. And while many fans argued that Becky represents a single unrepresentative type of fan taken to the extreme, a few fans argued the exact opposite. "She writes/reads fanfiction, loves the books, thinks one/both the guys are hot, is loyal to creator/writer of the books, she puts a lot of her energy into creating a nice experience for the fans (the convention)," explained one respondent, "[s]he mostly sums up all types of fans into one single person" (#238). For this fan, Becky is not one of fandom's bad apples, but instead a flattering composite of all of us. Roughly ten percent of the survey respondents included some reference to the idea that there may be a little bit of Becky in all of us. As one fan eloquently put it:

And to a large extent [the episodes] expanded the universe the boys live in to include "people like us." Not everyone is a beautiful damsel in distress, or a small-town lower-middle class worker trying to scrape by. Some people spend too much time on the internet, and are really passionate about their hobbies. (#112)

Several fans even made this connection with fan characters personal. "I have met them, I have been them," said one fan (#95), while another acknowledged, "frankly, I see myself in her" (#180). "I feel like Becky represents an aspect of myself," said another fan, "I am

zany, dedicated, I write fic, I love to speculate and would squee all over the boys in just that way" (#166). Imagining themselves in Becky's shoes was a common feature of responses by this group of fans:

> [N]o matter how much people deny it I know that I, for one, would probably be just as embarrassing, if not more, if [show creator] Eric Kripke hit me up on Skype one day and told me Sam and Dean were REAL and I needed to get a message of them to help save the world. (#248)

"I still want to think I'm not really a fan girl, but if I ever saw the boys in real life I'm not too sure I would react much better," another fan reluctantly admitted (#192). These responses demonstrate an interesting conflict as their writers contemplate their own fan identities in relationship to Becky's fictional fan identity; aware of Becky's flaws as well as her attractive qualities, they identified with her, but with some hesitation. After selecting the rare "yes," answer to the question of whether or not Becky is a typical *Supernatural* fan, one respondent illustrated this dilemma:

> I honestly think that is both the best and worst thing about her. She makes a lot of us uncomfortable because she is like holding up a mirror in fluorescent light. But she, like most people, has good and bad qualities. Socially awkward, check. Helpful and Loyal, check. Passionate, check. A little obsessive, check. (#112)

According to this fan, Becky made many fans uncomfortable not because, as many suggest, she does not have enough in common with fans, but because she has *too much* in common with the rest of us. The embarrassment, awkwardness and cringing many fans who reacted negatively to the episodes reported might be caused not only by external observation, but also by internal conflict. Becky, a young woman full of 'squeeful' exuberance, romantic hero-worship, and scandalous porn-writing, embodies some of the most often ridiculed traits attributed to fandom. She is emotional, irrational, occasionally

out of control, obsessive and not shy about expressing her sexuality. Her representation is embarrassing and occasionally insulting, and it is also, at least to some degree, absolutely true. Whether they admitted to having a lot in common with Becky personally or instead displaced those qualities on to other fans, the vast majority of survey respondents indicated that there is a significant grain of truth in Becky's characterization.

In *Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology,* Alison M. Jaggar points out that "people do not always experience the conventionally acceptable emotions" (1997, 396). Conventionally unacceptable emotions – "outlaw emotions" – are very often experienced by "subordinated individuals who pay a disproportionately high price for maintaining the status quo" (Jaggar 1997, 396). I have already established that the emotions experienced and represented by female fans directly contradict normative expectations of emotional expression in a rationalist, masculinist culture. Jaggar explains that experiencing unconventional emotions as an isolated individual can be distressing, but that "[w]hen certain emotions are shared or validated by others...the basis exists for forming a subculture defined by perceptions, norms, and values that systematically oppose the prevailing perceptions, norms and values. By constituting the basis for such a subculture, outlaw emotions may be politically (because epistemologically) subversive" (387). Though its status as politically subversive or progressive is by no means guaranteed, fandom, as a space where women are able to express these unconventional emotions together, may in some cases represent one such space. In fannish spaces, women are able to openly express their love, exuberant joy and sexual interest apparently without fear of being perceived negatively, though as my survey results indicate, this

acceptance, even among other fans is conditional on adherence to certain 'good' fan behaviours. Perhaps this goes some way toward explaining some fans' adamant disavowal of Becky's more traditionally feminine fannish characteristics. When this subculture is exposed to the mainstream via its representation on a network television program, the security of that space is – temporarily, at least – compromised. When asked to reveal even more through my survey, some fans were very careful to guard against negative perceptions of themselves and their affective fannish objects.

As survey responses began to pour in – only minutes after distribution! – I found the respondents' answers fascinating, primarily because so many of them indicated feelings very different than my own. Reading the responses of other fans led me to reconsider my own position on the fan-focused episodes. I first entered the *Supernatural* fandom in the summer of 2009, after the first of the fan-focused episodes had already aired. Through the grapevine of my involvement with other fandoms, I was already aware of the controversy surrounding the first mention of fandom and slash on the show. I knew even before I saw the episode that I would not like it.

In her book *Touching Feeling* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes about the pitfalls of what she calls the paranoid reading position (2003). Sedgwick outlines the way that paranoia became the dominant epistemological and methodological lens through which critical theory seeks to understand and explain the world. Scholars came to expect the worst from their objects of study, framing their work with a defensive cynicism so dominant that "to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious or complaisant" (Sedgwick 2003, 126). And while paranoia is very often justifiable, Sedgwick argues that it is not always productive. After all, "[p]aranoia knows

some things well and other things poorly" (ibid., 130). Paranoia is only one way of knowing, among others which have fallen into disuse as paranoia became the acceptable academic stance.

As I described in the introduction, the earliest roots of this project stretch back to when I was fourteen years old, heartbroken over a humiliating concert review. Since then, I have been keenly aware of the gendered negative representation of female fans, always watching for it out of the corner of my eye with what Sedgwick calls a "process of vigilant scanning" (ibid., 132). Sedgwick classifies paranoid readings as an affective theory of humiliation and fear, which perfectly describes my reaction to the fan-focused episodes, even before I had actually seen them. Many of my survey respondents describe a similar kind of trepidation when news of the episodes first broke. That I approached these episodes with a paranoid stance does not necessarily invalidate my negative reactions, or the negative reactions of other fans. There may be, however, other ways of knowing these episodes. As Sedgwick explains, it is easy to become so intensely focused on blocking out *negative* surprises (by expecting the worst from something) that we may stop actively seeking out positive affect (ibid., 136).

This project, overall, is strongly motivated by paranoia. Since I was a teenager I have been aware that the representation of female fans is a problem, and have sought to protect myself by bracing myself for the worst. More often than not, my worry has been justified; after all, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you. A paranoid critical stance may in many cases be a very useful one, and it does not invalidate my observations thus far. However, it may foreclose other ways of knowing these episodes. The reparative reading approach Sedgwick advocates encourages us to

allow our objects of study to surprise us, because although a surprise can be unpleasant, it can also be a source of joy. Hope, Sedgwick says, "is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates" (ibid., 146).

Though I initially responded to these episodes with cynicism, many of my respondents chose, instead, to read them reparatively. As I mentioned earlier, less than a fifth of respondents responded primarily negatively to the episodes. The rest had either mixed or unequivocally positive impressions. Even if they did not enjoy all aspects of the episodes or did not personally identify with Becky, they were able to take pleasure from their own representation, reading the episodes as an expression of love. And, to some extent, they have taught me to do the same. My feelings about these episodes have changed over time, and during my most recent viewing I found myself thoroughly enjoying them and even recognizing some of the commonalities between Becky and myself.

Laura Felschow makes the following observation about the power involved in fan representation in "Monster at the End of This Book":

> The acknowledgment of fan behavior within this episode is not an overt invitation to participate, but a demonstration that the producers/writers of the program are aware of exactly what their fandom is doing *without* an invitation. Whatever the producers' stated intentions, whether their die-hard fans view this as an inclusive or exclusive act, a compliment or an insult, the end result is the same. The cult fan is reminded that s/he cannot decide what is to be included and excluded, who can be complimented or insulted. Fans may feel a certain way in response to the episode, but they cannot change it. They can post about their anger or their delight, but they cannot create an official episode of their own wherein the cult fan is depicted in a manner of their choosing. (2010)

This characterization of the situation, though it may very well be accurate, is profoundly paranoid. No matter what TPTB intended, or how the fans respond, she states, "the end result is the same." There is no room for surprise or hope here, no possibility that the episode could amount to anything other than an exercise in control. This conceptualization is stiflingly pessimistic, and I want to suggest that insights garnered from fan responses might suggest a way out – perhaps through conceptualizations of power not defined solely by the ability to influence or determine the text of the show, or through the blurring of the sharp distinctions Felschow makes here between producers and consumers. Some of my respondents indicate that the boundary between these categories may be more permeable than Felschow suggests. "I'm fonder of Kripke as a result [of the episodes]," says one fan, "[h]e knows he's one of us," opening up the possibility that show producers might not even be considered outside of fandom (#74). These types of comments offer us refreshing new insights into the relationship between fans and producers, and into the representation of fans.

Those brutally honest fans willing to acknowledge, grudgingly accept or maybe even embrace the part of Becky in each of us offer us a possible way out of the reason/emotion trap. They implicitly make the argument that yes, fans are occasionally irrational, definitely emotional and even a tad obsessive. By their words or by their continued participation in fandom, they also tell us there is nothing wrong with that. After all, as one fan said, bridging the two sides of the dichotomy, "[w]e're knowledgeable about what we love" (#148).

Conclusion: The Functions of Female Fans

I opened this project with a personal anecdote about a trip my mother and I took to see the Backstreet Boys for my fourteenth birthday, and my reaction to the scathing editorial later printed in my local paper. The article focused not on the concert itself, but instead on its audience of teenage girls and their mothers; Lindor Reynolds painted vivid images of fans as shallow, obsessive, hysterical and naïve – the prototypical fan stereotype condensed into less than seven hundred words (2001). As a teenager I was deeply upset by reading this piece, not only because Reynolds had so completely misunderstood what it meant to be a fan as I experienced it, but also because, as a journalist, she had been tasked with the responsibility of telling the story of this trip, and of Backstreet Boys fans, to the wider world, and she had gotten everything so terribly wrong. Lindor Reynolds was an outsider, someone who knew nothing about what this trip meant for me in terms of my relationship with my mother, with the fan community or with the five pretty dancing boys on stage, yet her version of the story would be the only one many readers of the *Winnipeg Free Press* would hear.

Ten years later, some fan scholars have begun to argue that the stigma against fans has nearly evaporated. As I examined in the introduction to this project, fan scholar Henry Jenkins, who was instrumental in early academic work which challenged negative fan stereotypes, asserts that this kind of fan work may no longer be necessary. In the age of Web 2.0, active consumption and niche marketing, Jenkins argues, the entertainment and technology industries rely on consumers acting like fans, even if they choose to call them "loyals," "influencers," "multipliers," or "early adapters" instead:

> None of these commentators on the new economy are using the terms
> "fan," "fandom," or "fan culture," yet their models rest on the same
> social behaviors and emotional commitments that fan scholars have
> been researching over the past several decades. The new multipliers are
> a less geeky version of the fan – fans who don't wear rubber Spock
> ears, fans who didn't live in their parents basements, fans who have got
> a life. (Jenkins 2007, 359)

Jenkins argues that "fandom is everywhere and all the time, a central part of the everyday lives of consumers operating within a networked society" (1997, 361). He goes so far as to suggest that the stigma against fans is as good as gone, that everyone may now be a fan, because there may "no longer be a 'normal' way of consuming media" or "a centralized or dominant culture against which subcultures define themselves" (1997, 364). Optimistically or ominously, depending on your perspective, Jenkins ends his essay with the declaration that maybe "fandom has *no* future" (1997, 364).

In June 2011, a decade after that birthday concert, I took another bus trip to see the Backstreet Boys. This time the show was in Toronto, not Grand Forks, and I went with my best friend instead of my mother. The Backstreet Boys were down one member (though contrary to the predictions of nearly every music critic of the nineties, the band had never broken up, and had never stopped making new music or selling out tours) and this tour was a joint lineup with 80s super-boyband New Kids On The Block. In other ways, though, surprisingly little had changed. I dressed up for the show (and yes, I wore lip gloss), spent the bus ride bouncing in my seat, filled with the fannish glee those in the know refer to as 'squee,' and had the time of my life singing along and screaming my lungs out. On the bus ride home in the wee hours of the morning my friend and I whispered back and forth, reliving the magic of the show. I found it deeply reassuring

that despite how much had changed in my own life over the past ten years, going to a Backstreet Boys show felt pretty much the same.

Disappointingly, the show itself wasn't the only part of the experience that echoed the past. Though recent reviews of the New Kids on the Block/Backstreet Boys (NKOTBSB) tour might be called begrudgingly positive, as reviewers give the bands credit for successfully graduating from Boys and Kids into grown men and seasoned performers, characterizations of their fans have been far less generous. Appearing one day after the Toronto concert, a Toronto.com review of the show by Nick Krewen reads eerily like a blast from my teenage past.

The review's opening and closing paragraphs are composed of a single word, repeated several times throughout the article: putty. Krewen spends only a cursory number of words describing the show itself; as was the case for Lindor Reynolds in 2001, he seems much more interested in the audience than in the performers. The metaphor he chooses to represent fans is as putty in the hands of the nine boyband members:

> Yes, those globs of human protoplasm the Air Canada Centre cleanup crew have to scrape off the floor prior to tonight's second NKOTBSB extravaganza are unquestionably of female origin, the result of being transformed into emotional mush at the hands of a mutant strain of *boybandus irresistiblus (Krewen, 2011).*

In a single sentence, Krewen manages to vividly exemplify a startling number of the features of the classic female fan stereotype. In this description, fans are so emotional Krewen jokes that they may have actually become mushy. Female fans are creatures of their emotions, completely devoid of all reason. This emotionality, it is even implied, may have its origin in the female body, in fans' infection with some kind of virus which turns them into merely "globs of human protoplasm" "unquestionably of female origin"

(ibid.). This comparison removes even the smallest possibility of agency from the experiences of these female fans. They have been so effectively melted by the capable hands of boyband members that they have completely lost control of both their minds and their bodies, so much so that they apparently can't get themselves home after the show and need to be "scrape[d] off the floor" by the cleanup crew.

The review goes on. Krewen describes how fans screamed and cried, then "screamed and cried some more." Like Lindor Reynolds a decade before him, Krewen emphasizes fans' "shaking and quivering," though in these slightly more enlightened times he, at least, doesn't make a tasteless joke about "palsy victims" (Reynolds 2001). Krewen uses an extended sexual metaphor, crediting the NKOTBSB with "teasing" the crowd, and engaging in "aural foreplay" (2011). Krewen closes with a quotation from one fan, whose age and dress he carefully describes. "[New Kids On The Block members] *Jordan* and Donnie were soooo dreamy!" said 22 year-old Elaine Ortega, "I can't believe they were right in front of me!"

This declaration must have been said with a touch of irony, with a hint of self-mockery and the edge of laughter – no one says "dreamy" anymore without that kind of awareness (and maybe they never did). Krewen, however, breezes straight by Ortega's cleverness, or maybe he never noticed it at all. "See what I mean?" he asks in the review's last line, "Putty." Ortega and her fellow fans aren't really people to him, just putty in the hands of either the New Kids On The Block or the Backstreet Boys, depending on band preference. Additionally, they are putty in Krewen's own hands; Ortega isn't really allowed to speak for herself. Her quotation, Krewen as good as admits, is included solely to prove *his* point.

Popular images of the female fan – in 2011 as much as in 2001, and long before that – are as they are for exactly this reason. They are tools to prove *someone else's* point. In numerous ways female fans serve as the deviant, unnatural Other by comparison to which the rest of us are supposed to feel normal. These over-the-top images of female fandom function in two ways. First, they make non-fans look positively subdued, as if there's nothing emotional or a little bit obsessive about watching golf on television, or playing the stock market, or devoting one's life to the study of Shakespeare, or Derrida, or quantum physics. Second, the deviancy of fans reinforces the idea that emotionality and irrationality are wrong in the first place, that the best (or even only) way to live one's life properly is to conform to normative notions of controlled, autonomous rationality. And, as the history of the philosophy of the reason/emotion and mind/body binaries demonstrates, this translates by association and in effect into a preference for the traditionally masculine over the traditionally feminine, for men over women.

Academic studies of fans have often struggled in their taking up of this binary. Many studies of female fans seem to confirm pathologizing stereotypes of women as hysterical, irrational, or dominated by their emotions, characterizing fandom as an addiction (Rudski et al 2009) or as deeply rooted in emotional or physical trauma (Bacon-Smith 1992). Another set of scholars, on the other hand, is so concerned with counter-acting these stereotypes that its members focus purely on the rational, political parts of fandom, missing out on important aspects of the lived fan experience. This characterization does not challenge the reason/emotion problem as it applies to fans; it merely positions them on the opposite side. Scholars such as Matt Hills advocate a return to studying the affective dimension of fandom, but his use of neo-religiosity and

emphasis on the cult-like qualities of fandom risks similarly re-inscribing negative stereotypes.

News media images of the predominately female fan-fiction community serve as convenient Other in a more specific way. Many of these articles feature fan fiction as a wacky hobby for creepy, slightly pathetic teenage girls, distinguishable from real literature by its poor quality and its fixation on sex, romance and the way its characters *feel*. Fan fiction most broadly defined is a story that borrows plots, settings or characters from an existing work and re-works it into something new. The news media, however, operates using a much more specific definition, as evidenced by the fact that some derivative novels are considered real literature, while others merely bits of polished fan fiction. For them, fan fiction is mentioned most often as one half of a comparison to "real" literature, as the other side of the coin necessary to establish traditional publishing's legitimacy. Without something like fan fiction to represent the bad, it would be impossible to decide what is really good.

In my case study of *Supernatural*, too, we see elements of the reason/emotion binary which positions female fans as the Other against which so-called 'normal' relationships with media define themselves. First, this othering may be present within the show itself, which features super-fan and slash fiction writer Becky as a textbook case in stereotypical female fandom. Second, in responses from fans themselves there are instances of what Stallybrass and White call 'abject displacement', where a subordinated group uses its power not against the dominant group but against an even lower group. These fans use examples of more "extreme" fans to normalize their own fanship. By comparison to Becky, whom some fans claimed actually molested the object of her

affection, and to that one fan who jumped one of the actors at convention, after all, everyone else seems fairly normal.

This project's data – including academic work, news media and popular culture images and fan representations of their own community – has shown that female fans continue to be stigmatized despite Jenkins' protestations to the contrary. I do not dispute Jenkins' most general observations. New models of entertainment and technological distribution and communication *do* strongly resemble or rely on active, community, and loyalty-based consumption that forms the foundation of the fan community, and has done for decades. In no large part because fan-like behaviour is now vital in order to turn a profit, it has become more widespread and in some ways more accepted. Accordingly, some of the stigma against certain fans has lifted. Nerdy fanboys are even occasionally being celebrated on television, and it sometimes seems as if the blockbuster film industry would collapse entirely without the support of comic book fans who have made successes out of films based on X-Men, Batman, and Spider-Man, to name only a few.

So where do I think Jenkins went wrong? Put most simply, he's failed to account for *female* fandom. Those areas of fan-behaviour commonly associated with masculine pursuits, including sports, cars and comic books, most clearly correlate to Jenkins' conclusions. His essay appears in a collection titled "Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World" (2007) which includes essays on sports fandom, academic fandom, kung-fu fandom and video game fandom, but nothing on fan-fiction or slash fiction. This expansion to include a wider range of fan communities and objects is undoubtedly valuable, but there are still improvements to be made in the representation of

female participatory fandom. *Female* fandom remains highly stigmatized for three interrelated reasons.

First, images of female fandom have a long history of gendered discourse behind them. Though male fans often faced stigma (and sometimes still do) in their association with mass or low-brow culture, female fans also bear the additional burden of gendered discourses around emotion and the female body, ideas which have incredibly deep historical and philosophical roots. The changes in the technological and economic models that have facilitated or necessitated more mainstream acceptance of fan-type behaviour have not forced us to re-think ideas of *gendered* consumption in any significant way. This goes a long way toward explaining why comic or horror fans lining up to see a new film are not considered newsworthy while *Twilight* fans are ridiculed or scorned.

Second, female *participatory* fandom in particular, is simply not profitable. While the entertainment industry can – and does – make a profit from casual female fan activity, capitalizing on the activities of participatory fandom has proved much more difficult. One of the principle tenets of fan fiction or fan art, after all, is that it be distributed for free. And, as the Organization for Transformative Works makes explicit, this is "a predominantly female community" (What We Believe). Female fan communities concern themselves with the open expression of female sexuality still considered taboo, often through the production of queer texts which are seen as even more controversial. Because of the attached stigma of queer sexuality, these communities are not an easy group to publically acknowledge or commercially exploit. I cannot even begin to imagine a world which produced official merchandise targeted at slashers. Additionally, when corporate interests have stepped in and attempted to profit off of the work of female fan

communities they have been very strongly opposed by their members. For-profit online fan fiction archive FanLib was highly criticized by the fan community upon its appearance in 2007, and lasted only fourth months before it was sold to Disney for its code, not its fan fiction application. In June 2011, web entrepreneur Keith Mander purchased *Lord of the Rings* and *Twilight* fan fiction archives intending to leverage them for ad-based profit, and has announced that his plans are on hold due to strong objections from the fan community. Jenkins' argument regarding the de-stigmatization of fandom is a fundamentally an economic one: the stigma against fan-type behaviour has been reduced because it has become more common since the industry has found it profitable to encourage and embrace those behaviours. The same cannot be said for primarily female fan communities, and many members of the fan community, quite frankly, might prefer stigma to commercialization.

Finally, I believe that the stigma of female fans may remain firmly in place precisely *because* the stigma of other more masculine fan behaviours or communities has been reduced. I suggest that the continued stigmatization of female fans has been necessary in order for male fandom to gain more mainstream acceptance. As discussed earlier, Jenkins argued in 1992 that stereotypical representations of male fans were often emasculating. In 2007 he sees the fact that "geeky" traits such as wearing rubber Spock ears or living in one's parents' basements are no longer associated with all forms of fandom as a sign that the stigma against fans has diminished or even disappeared. I would argue that this is true because playing 'dress up' or being dependent on one's parents is associated with femininity. By shedding these behaviours, male fans gain considerable respect. The increased acceptance of male fandom has, in many ways, been made

possible by an increased association between fanship and features of 'proper' masculinity, including technological mastery, rational intelligence and the capacity to make (and spend) money within the marketplace.

In this final way, female fandom continues to serve as Other. Some forms of fanship –typically more traditionally masculine – may currently be considered acceptable precisely because female fandom is the abjected other which is constitutive of the clean and proper object of masculine fannish attachment. In Joli Jensen's model of fandom as Other, fandom becomes representative of our anxieties about the state of contemporary life (Jensen 1992, 14). In Cornel Sandvoss' opinion it could act as a scapegoat, precluding a more complex examination of society (2005, 2). It is unlikely that the apparent need for either of these forms of Othering has significantly diminished, even as certain fan activities become more acceptable. Instead, the effect has been to simply shift these functions away from fan behaviour as a whole, and more firmly onto the shoulders of female fans.

My concern with the stigmatization of female fans is not motivated merely by the question of accurate or inaccurate representation. As Genevieve Lloyd, Allison M. Jaggar and others have argued, the association between women and devalued emotionality versus men and glorified rationality has far-reaching consequences. These associations determine *whose* knowledge is considered worthwhile, and *which* ways of knowing are credible. Given the close connection between knowledge and power, this epistemological problem also becomes a political one. The characterization of women as irrational, hysterical, over-emotional and defined by their bodies as opposed to their minds has been used as justification for women's exclusion from areas of public life, including politics

and academia. As long as femininity is perceived as oppositional to reason, and reason is seen as the only legitimate way of knowing, women – marked as Other and as less than fully enlightened – will find themselves subordinate. It is not enough, however, to simply *re*-represent women as fully rational beings. This strategic move treats the symptom of the problem, not its cause, as the attempt to distance oneself from emotionality actually re-inforces its perceived illegitimacy. Moreover, this distancing still requires an even lower class of Other against which a community must define itself.

The representation of female fandom is a salient example of this epistemological problem. The various outsider representations of fandom I have examined illustrate both the traditional association between women and emotion, *and* the benefits and costs of combating this association by disavowing emotion all together. Additionally, images of female fans and fan communities are a powerful discursive force. The popularity of representations of female fans in academia, the news media and popular culture demonstrates that scholars, journalists and television producers find them an effective carrier of meaning, of creating and distributing knowledge to readers and viewers. Because images of irrational, hysterical, out-of-control women are so omnipresent, they take on the appearance of truth.

This project represents an attempt to intervene in this self-perpetuating problem, both by exposing its flaws and, in the spirit of reparative work, by pointing to some potential solutions. I have argued that, contrary to the declarations of some fan researchers, very little has changed in the representation of female fans by outsiders in nearly three decades. According to this highly paranoid reading, the future looks somewhat bleak. In my research, however, there are also signs of hope. Choosing one

side of the reason/emotion binary or the other will not solve the problem. Instead, it is productive to challenge the existence of the binary in the first place. It is necessary that reason and emotion be seen as two ways of knowing which may coexist and even complement one another. Some recent developments in female fan communities indicate promising movement in that direction.

There are possibilities in the new generation of aca-fans – scholars and researchers who have had extensive lived experience with fandom prior to studying it and who combine their rational training with their affective lived experience as fans. These writers bring new insight to the study of fandom as they study what they love or have loved. The fan-run journal *Transformative Works & Cultures'* publication of both peer-reviewed academic work *and* fan-written meta analysis quite literally allows these two ways of knowing to sit side by side. Also promising are the few journalists and bloggers who identify themselves as fans themselves. Most importantly, there is potential in fans themselves to challenge restrictive binaries as they recognize and value *both* their rational sides and their Becky-like emotionality. As one survey respondent matter-of-factly points out,

> Can Supernatural fans be giddy, over-emotional, and obsessive? Sure.
> But they can also be logical, introspective, and compassionate. (#235)

The similarity between all these people is this: they are not really outsiders to fandom. And given all the promise they show, perhaps it might be time to hand over the responsibility of representing fandom to fans themselves. Judging by some of their survey responses, many of them are enthusiastic about the idea. "I love [writing on fandom] when it's done by fans," quips one respondent, "but when random researchers

try to do it I mostly rage and want to beat my head into a wall. (Or theirs)" (#248). This project has detailed the ways in which images of female fans have functioned as tools used by outsiders to fandom; perhaps it is time for fans themselves to take over.

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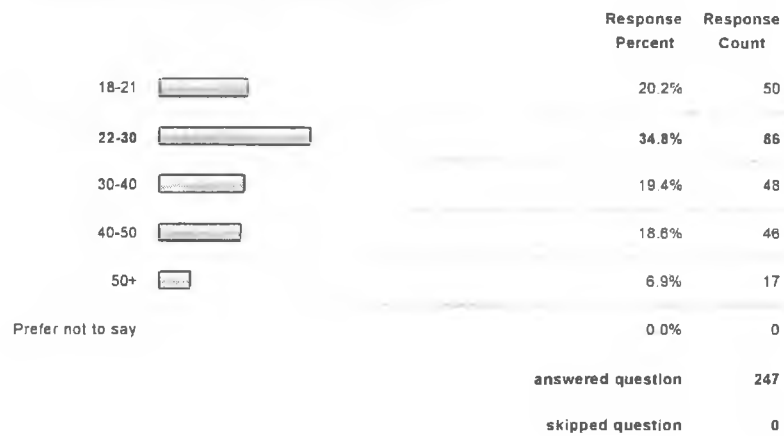Russ, Joanna. 1985. *Magic mommas, trembling sisters, puritans & perverts*. Crossing Press.

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APPENDIX A – Survey Results

Supernatural Fan Survey

SurveyMonkey

1. Your age is:

		Response Percent	Response Count
18-21		20.2%	50
22-30		34.8%	86
30-40		19.4%	48
40-50		18.6%	46
50+		6.9%	17
Prefer not to say		0.0%	0
	answered question		247
	skipped question		0

2. You identify as:

		Response Percent	Response Count
Female		96.7%	237
Male		1.6%	4
Transgendered		0.4%	1
Gender queer		0.4%	1
Prefer not to say		0.8%	2
Other (please specify)			3
	answered question		245
	skipped question		2
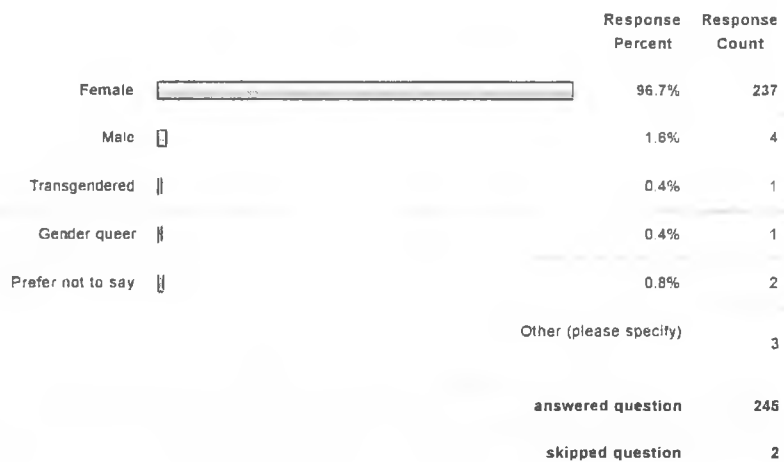
APPENDIX A – Survey Results

3. What term best describes your sexual orientation?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Heterosexual		65.4%	157
Gay		1.7%	4
Lesbian		2.1%	5
Bisexual		20.0%	48
Queer		2.5%	6
Asexual		5.0%	12
Two-Spirited		1.3%	3
Prefer not to say		2.1%	5
Other (please specify)			8
answered question			240
skipped question			7
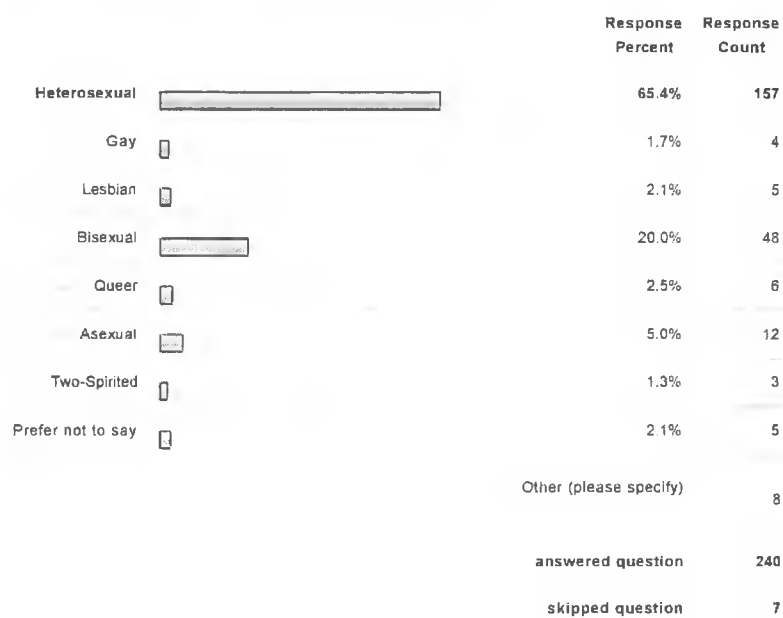
APPENDIX A – Survey Results

4. Your education background is:

		Response Percent	Response Count
Some high school		0.8%	2
High school graduate		9.2%	22
Some university/ college/ post-secondary		25.8%	62
University/ college/ post-secondary degree		33.3%	80
Some post-graduate (Masters, PhD)		12.1%	29
Post graduate degree (Masters, PhD)		17.9%	43
Prefer not to say		0.8%	2
Other (please specify)			8
	answered question		240
	skipped question		7

APPENDIX A – Survey Results

5. You are currently (select all that apply):

		Response Percent	Response Count
Employed		58.6%	139
Unemployed		16.5%	39
Student		32.1%	76
Unpaid caregiver		1.3%	3
Prefer not to say		2.5%	6
	Other (please specify)		12
	answered question		237
	skipped question		10

6. Do you consider yourself a fan of *Supernatural*?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		100.0%	247
No		0.0%	0
	Why or why not?		207
	answered question		247
	skipped question		0

APPENDIX A – Survey Results

7. Do you consider yourself a member of the *Supernatural* fandom?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		89.8%	219
No		10.2%	25
	Why or why not?		208
	answered question		244
	skipped question		3

8. Do you read fan fiction?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Never		1.6%	4
Occasionally		18.2%	45
Regularly		80.2%	198
	answered question		247
	skipped question		0

9. Do you write fan fiction?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Never		35.9%	88
Occasionally		40.4%	99
Regularly		23.7%	58
	answered question		245
	skipped question		2

APPENDIX A – Survey Results

10. Do you read slash fiction?
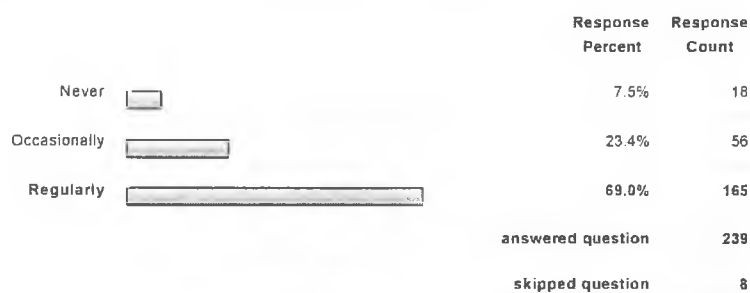
		Response Percent	Response Count
Never		7.5%	18
Occasionally		23.4%	56
Regularly		69.0%	165
	answered question		239
	skipped question		8

11. Do you write slash fiction?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Never		49.0%	121
Occasionally		33.2%	82
Regularly		17.8%	44
	answered question		247
	skipped question		0

12. Have you attended a fan convention?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		38.2%	94
No		61.8%	152
	answered question		246
	skipped question		1
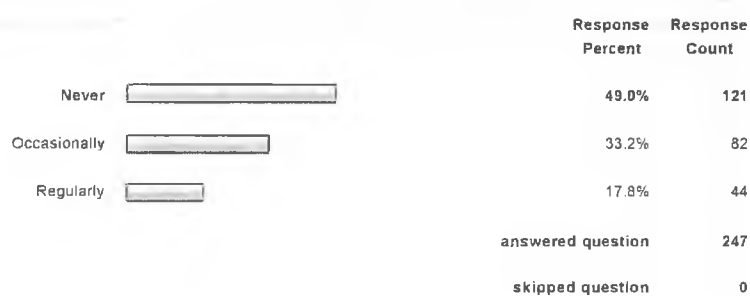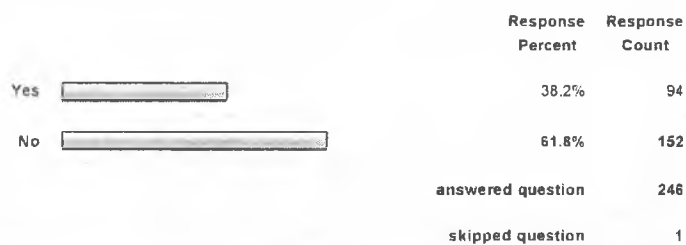
APPENDIX A – Survey Results

13. Do you consider yourself a member of other fandoms? (Of television shows, films, books, musicians, etc.)?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		72.8%	179
No		27.2%	67
	If yes, what are they?		172
	answered question		246
	skipped question		1

14. Have you seen or read any academic work (books, articles, etc.) about fans or fandom?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		54.5%	134
No		45.5%	112
	What are your impressions of this work?		122
	answered question		246
	skipped question		1

APPENDIX A -- Survey Results

15. Have you seen or read any journalistic coverage of fans or fandom in the news, in magazines, online or on television?

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	78.0%	192
No	22.0%	54
What were your impressions of this coverage?		168
answered question		246
skipped question		1

APPENDIX B - Questionnaire

Supernatural Fan Survey

1. Information

Purpose of this Study

You are being invited to participate in a research study for my M.A. thesis project. It is the intention of this study to collect fan responses to the television show *Supernatural*'s depiction of fans and fandom. Your responses will contribute to part of a larger project examining representations of female fans and fandom in academia, journalistic coverage and popular culture.

I am a fan of *Supernatural* and a member of its fan community. I have also participated in other fandoms for a number of years, and consider fan communities an important part of my life. Thus it is a priority of mine to take fans seriously and to treat them with respect in this project.

You are free to skip any question you prefer not to answer by leaving it blank, and your answers are completely anonymous. If you have any concerns about this survey, please feel free to contact me.

Who is eligible to Participate?

You are eligible if you are eighteen years of age or older.

Research Procedures for this Study

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete an online questionnaire. The survey is estimated to take approximately 15-30 minutes, though you may comment in whatever length or depth you choose. You can complete the questionnaire at a time and location of your convenience.

You may chose not to answer any question be leaving it blank, or selecting "Prefer not to say."

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this survey is voluntary. You may close the survey at any time, or leave any question blank. Your answers may be as brief or as in-depth as you like

Benefits from the Study

Your participation will help to gain insight on representations of fandom and the relationship between fans and show producers. For your interest, a summary of results will be posted to the communities invited to participate upon the project's completion.

Confidentiality of Information

All information you provide will remain confidential and anonymous. If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used and no information that indicates your identity will be released or published.

Compensation

You will not be compensated for your participation in this study.

Consent to Participate

You consent to participating in the present study by completing the questionnaire.

Contact

APPENDIX B - Questionnaire

Supernatural Fan Survey

If you have questions about this study, please contact Breanne Armstrong (Researcher) at ████████████ or Dr. Susan Knabe (Supervisor) at ████████████

2. Demographics

This page will ask for some basic demographic information. Answer as briefly or as in-depth as you'd like. **You may also skip any question, or choose the "Prefer not to say" option.**

1. Your age is:

- 18-21
- 22-30
- 30-40
- 40-50
- 50+
- Prefer not to say

2. You identify as:

- Female
- Male
- Transgendered
- Gender queer
- Prefer not to say

Other (please specify)

APPENDIX B - Questionnaire

Supernatural Fan Survey

3. What term best describes your sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Queer
- Asexual
- Two-Spirited
- Prefer not to say

Other (please specify)

4. What is your nationality?

5. How would you describe your racial or ethnic background?

6. Your education background is:

- Some high school
- High school graduate
- Some university/ college/ post-secondary
- University/ college/ post-secondary degree
- Some post-graduate (Masters, PhD)
- Post graduate degree (Masters, PhD)
- Prefer not to say

Other (please specify)

APPENDIX B - Questionnaire

Supernatural Fan Survey

7. You are currently (select all that apply):

- Employed
- Unemployed
- Student
- Unpaid caregiver
- Prefer not to say

Other (please specify)

[ ]

8. What is / are your primary occupation(s)?

[ ]

3. Fan history and activities

The following questions will ask you about your fan history and fan activities. Answer as briefly or as in-depth as you'd like. **You may also skip any question by leaving it blank.**

1. How long have you been watching *Supernatural*?

[ ]

APPENDIX B - Questionnaire

Supernatural Fan Survey

2. Do you consider yourself a fan of *Supernatural*?

○ Yes

○ No

Why or why not?

3. Do you consider yourself a member of the *Supernatural* fandom?

○ Yes

○ No

Why or why not?

APPENDIX B - Questionnaire

Supernatural Fan Survey

4. If yes, how long have you been a member of the *Supernatural* fandom?

5. How did you find out about or join *Supernatural* fandom?

6. Do you read fan fiction?

- Never
- Occasionally
- Regularly

7. Do you write fan fiction?

- Never
- Occasionally
- Regularly

8. Do you read slash fiction?

- Never
- Occasionally
- Regularly

9. Do you write slash fiction?

- Never
- Occasionally
- Regularly

10. Have you attended a fan convention?

- Yes
- No

APPENDIX B - Questionnaire

Supernatural Fan Survey

11. Do you consider yourself a member of other fandoms? (Of television shows, films, books, musicians, etc.)?

- Yes
- No

If yes, what are they?

12. How long ago did you join your first fandom?

13. Have you seen or read any academic work (books, articles, etc.) about fans or fandom?

- Yes
- No

What are your impressions of this work?

Supernatural Fan Survey

14. Have you seen or read any journalistic coverage of fans or fandom in the news, in magazines, online or on television?

○ Yes

○ No

What were your impressions of this coverage?

4. Fans in Supernatural

The following questions relate to seasons four and five of *Supernatural*. specifically to the episodes depicting the series of cult books written by the prophet Chuck, about Sam and Dean. and their devoted fan following

These episodes are: 4x18 "The Monster at the End of this Book" (wherein Sam and Dean find out about the book series and it's fans, including fan fiction writers), 5x01 "Sympathy for the Devil" (wherein Chuck asks Becky, a female fan, to deliver a message to Sam and Dean) and 5x09 "The Real Ghostbusters" (wherein Becky tricks Sam and Dean into attending a *Supernatural* fan convention).

Feel free to answer as briefly or as in-depth as you'd like. **You may also skip any question by leaving it blank.**

1. What was your reaction when you initially heard about or saw *Supernatural* making reference to fans and fandom in this way?

2. Have your feelings about these episodes changed with time? How so?

APPENDIX B - Questionnaire

Supernatural Fan Survey

3. Do you think Becky represents a typical *Supernatural* fan?

◻ Yes

◻ No

◻ Maybe

Why or why not?

APPENDIX B - Questionnaire

Supernatural Fan Survey

4. Do you read or write fan fiction where Becky is a character?

- Never
- Sometimes
- Often

Why or why not?

APPENDIX B - Questionnaire

Supernatural Fan Survey

5. Would you like to see Becky return in future episodes of *Supernatural*?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Why or why not?

APPENDIX B - Questionnaire

Supernatural Fan Survey

6. Do you think the other fans Sam and Dean encounter (the publisher in 4x18, the LARPers in 5x09, etc.) represent typical *Supernatural* fans?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Why or why not?

7. In your opinion, what did these episodes and characters add to the show?

8. Have these episodes and characters made you any more or any less likely to take part in fan activities? Why or why not?

9. How have these episodes and characters changed the way you feel about the relationship between fans and viewers of the show, and its producers?
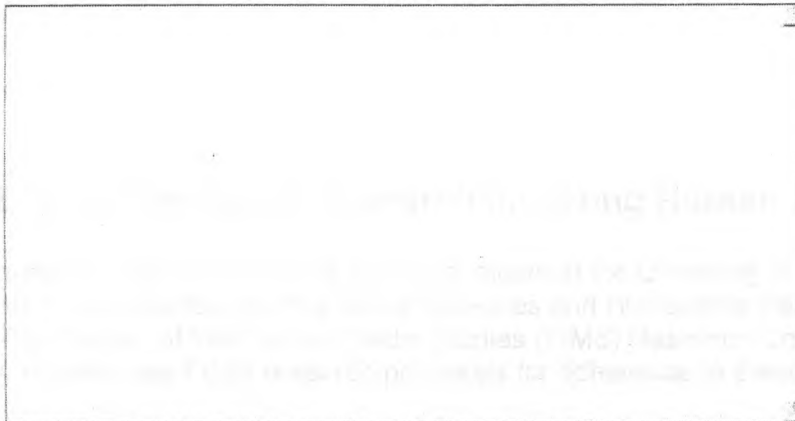
APPENDIX B - Questionnaire

Supernatural Fan Survey

10. Do you have any other thoughts you would like to share about this set of episodes?

5. About this survey

The following questions relate to how you experienced the process of filling out this survey.

Feel free to answer as briefly or as in-depth as you'd like. **You may also skip any question by leaving it blank.**

1. Do you have any comments about what the process of filling out this survey made you think or feel?

APPENDIX B - Questionnaire

Supernatural Fan Survey

2. If you skipped any questions(s) or chose "Prefer not to say," why did you do so?

6. Survey complete!

Thank you for completing this survey.

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Media Studies*

Office of the Dean

Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Subjects

All non-medical research involving human subjects at the University of Western Ontario is carried out in compliance with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Guidelines (2002). The Faculty of Information Media Studies (FIMS) Research Committee has the mandate to review minimal-risk FIMS research proposals for adherence to these guidelines.

2010 – 2011 FIMS Research Committee Membership

1.	J. Burkell (alt)		6.	P. McKenzie (Chair)
2.	G. Campbell		7.	D. Neal
3.	C. Farber*		8.	K. Sedig (alt)
4.	H. Hill		9.	L. Xiao
5.	V. Manzerolle*			

Research Committee members marked with * have examined the research project **FIMS 2010-015** entitled:

Watching You, Watching Me: Representations of Female Fans and Fandom in Academia, Journalism and Popular Culture

as submitted by: Susan Knabe (Principal Investigator / Supervisor)
Breanne Armstrong (Co-investigator / Student)

and consider it to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects under the conditions of the University's Policy on Research Involving Human Subjects. Approval is given for the period **September 14, 2010 to August 31, 2011**.

Approval Date: September 14, 2010

Pamela McKenzie, Assistant Dean (Research)
FIMS Research Committee Chair